Communication Comfort between Adult Siblings: Relationship Implications and Age and Gender Differences

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Why Study these Relationships?

- These are the longest running relationships most of us have with the most shared history
- Siblings can be close and supportive—best friends—or the source of great distress and life long pain
- As we live longer, siblings play an increasingly important role in parent and fellow sibling care when ill or infirm
- Under studied ands attended to clinically
- Lewis (1990) suggested our sibling relationships are both our first peer relationships and our first spousal relationships
Our Research

• Three waves, 2011-2014, 105 item survey of 262 adults with living siblings (representing 704 relationships)
• Limitations: convenience sample, one sibling surveyed, retrospective reports on childhood experiences
• Sibling relationships very Affectionate, but also fraught with Ambivalence and Ambiguity
• Sisters close across generations; younger brothers looking more like sisters in terms of closeness; parenting practices impact sibling relationships; older siblings less comfortable talking about difficult issues; but report less arguing, jealousy, or competitiveness
Research on Adult Sibling Relationships

  - Sisters report more closeness with each other, and brothers report more closeness to sisters;
  - Closeness to siblings, and in particular attachment to sisters, is associated with better mental health;
  - Loss of a sibling is a very distressing loss, on par with the death of a spouse or close friend;

  - Ambivalence – mixed feelings across the lifespan (2012);
  - Fair and equal treatment by parents (2001);
  - Challenges and conflicts lead to developmental (2000);
  - Reappraising past relationships benefits current relationships (2001).
Research on Adult Sibling Communications

• ASs report that *communicating* and having *shared values* are vital to the relationship (Ross & Milgram, 1982)
• ASs who are emotionally close value communication and display more frequent *affectionate communications* (Myers, 2015)
• Sisters motivated by comfort and intimacy; younger adult siblings motivated by control or escape (Fowler, 2009)
• Emotionally close siblings report communication as *key* and display more frequent *affectionate communications* (Myers, 2015)
• AS communication patterns of *openness* in childhood extend into adulthood and predict relationship quality (Hall & McNellie, 2016)
• When include verbal aggression relationships had lower levels of trust and satisfaction (Martin, Anderson, & Rocca, 2005)
Sample

• Convenience sample
• 262 adults - survey and interview
• 150 females, 112 males
• Number of siblings: 25% one, 30% two, 16% three, 16% four, 5% five, 7% six or more
• Representing 704 adult sibling relationships
• Age: mean: 54, range: 40-90
• Income: 1% low, 11% low-middle, 48% middle, 35% upper-middle, 3% upper
• Race or Ethnicity: 69% White, 17% African American, 6% Hispanic or Latino, 4% Asian American, 1% Native American or Pacific Islander, 1% Other
Methods

- 105 item Self-report Survey, across 3 waves 2011-2014
- Exploratory Factor Analysis of Communication Comfort Scale
  - 9 dichotomous items
  - Comfort talking with sibling(s) about: Sex, Money, Health, Children, Family, Politics, Religion, Friends, & Work
- Group means comparisons across gender and age in terms of communications comfort
- Structural Equation Model
  - Communications comfort scales
    - Family Discussions
    - Life Discussions
  - Riggio (1990) Lifespan Sibling Relationship Scales
    - Three subscales: Feel, Think, and Behave toward adult siblings
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Item</th>
<th>Factor 1</th>
<th>Factor 2</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td></td>
<td>.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td></td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td></td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td></td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Principal Components Extraction, Oblique Rotation; Factor 1 Eigenvalue 4.44 and captured 49.8% of variance, Factor 2 Eigenvalue of 1.13 additional 12.6% of variance.
### Descriptive Statistics by Age and Gender Groups on Communications Comfort Subscales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Age M(SD)</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Health M(SD)</th>
<th>Family M(SD)</th>
<th>Work M(SD)</th>
<th>Children M(SD)</th>
<th>Religion M(SD)</th>
<th>Politics M(SD)</th>
<th>Friends M(SD)</th>
<th>Money M(SD)</th>
<th>Sex M(SD)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Older Brothers (n=33)</td>
<td>67.2(7.0)</td>
<td>White = 30, Black = 2, Other = 1</td>
<td>.83(.39)</td>
<td>.69(.47)</td>
<td>.67(.48)</td>
<td>.70(.46)</td>
<td>.67(.48)</td>
<td>.73(.45)</td>
<td>.53(.51)</td>
<td>.57(.50)</td>
<td>.28(.45)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Younger Brothers (n=34)</td>
<td>42.1(1.6)</td>
<td>White = 25, Black = 4, Other = 5</td>
<td>.93(.25)</td>
<td>.93(.25)</td>
<td>.97(.18)</td>
<td>.88(.33)</td>
<td>.90(.30)</td>
<td>.83(.38)</td>
<td>.93(.25)</td>
<td>.86(.35)</td>
<td>.64(.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older Sisters (42)</td>
<td>66.7(6.7)</td>
<td>White = 30, Black = 9, Other = 3</td>
<td>.87(.34)</td>
<td>.82(.39)</td>
<td>.85(.37)</td>
<td>.78(.41)</td>
<td>.85(.37)</td>
<td>.69(.47)</td>
<td>.74(.45)</td>
<td>.51(.50)</td>
<td>.25(.44)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Younger Sisters (33)</td>
<td>42.4(1.7)</td>
<td>White = 20, Black = 5, Other = 8</td>
<td>.84(.37)</td>
<td>.94(.25)</td>
<td>.81(.40)</td>
<td>.79(.41)</td>
<td>.74(.45)</td>
<td>.74(.45)</td>
<td>.70(.47)</td>
<td>.67(.48)</td>
<td>.45(.51)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Health** and **Family** issues highest comfort across groups
- **Sex** and **Money** lowest comfort levels
- Patterns hint at *age and gender differences* at the item level
# Age Comparisons on Communication Patterns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Group Comparisons</th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Older M(SD)</td>
<td>Younger M(SD)</td>
<td>Mean Difference</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>p</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brothers</td>
<td>Family Discussions</td>
<td>3.04(1.72)</td>
<td>4.21(1.35)</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>.01</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Life Discussions</td>
<td>2.60(1.54)</td>
<td>3.63(.81)</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sisters</td>
<td>Family Discussions</td>
<td>3.33(1.36)</td>
<td>3.70(1.49)</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Life Discussions</td>
<td>3.16(1.17)</td>
<td>3.00(1.39)</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>-0.50</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Younger brothers significantly more comfortable communicating than older brothers across both subscales.
- Sisters show similar comfort across both age groups and subscales.
- Younger brothers looked more like sisters, in fact higher reported comfort levels (significant for *World* but not for *Family* discussions).
Adult Sibling Communications Comfort and Relationship Dynamics

- Feelings about siblings strong predictor of Communications Comfort
- Communications Comfort about Life issues strong predictor of both how Siblings Thought about and Behaved toward siblings
- While comfort with Family discussions not predictive of behavior and predicted more negative thoughts about sibling

Note: *=p<.01; Chi-square=1,008.44, df=467; RMSEA=.07, c.i.-.06-.07, CFI=.91, IFI=.91
References