

Perceived Sibling Use of Verbally Aggressive Messages Across the Lifespan

Scott A. Myers & Alan K. Goodboy

The purpose of this study was to examine perceived siblings' use of verbally aggressive messages across the lifespan and the impact of these messages on liking, trust, and commitment. Participants were 272 individuals who reported on their relationship with a sibling. Results indicated that (a) the perceived sibling use of verbally aggressive messages decreases across the lifespan in that verbally aggressive messages are used more frequently in young adulthood than in either middle adulthood or late adulthood and (b) perceived use of some of these verbally aggressive messages are related indirectly to sibling liking, trust, and commitment. Future research should examine how siblings respond to these verbally aggressive messages and whether their response is mediated by liking, trust, and commitment.

Keywords: Siblings; Verbal Aggressiveness; Liking; Trust; Commitment

For most people, the longest lasting relationship in which they will engage is the sibling relationship (Ponzetti & James, 1997). Unlike romantic relationships, platonic relationships, or work relationships, the sibling relationship is marked by several unique qualities such as a common biological and social bond, a history of shared experiences, and repeated exposure during childhood and adolescence (Cicirelli, 1995; Goetting, 1986). Moreover, Mikkelson (2005) posited the sibling relationship is differentiated by a paradoxical nature not common to romantic, platonic, or work relationships. He suggested that unlike romantic, platonic, or work relationships, the sibling relationship is one in which the participants express liking and loving for each

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other while simultaneously engaging in antisocial relational behaviors such as physical aggressiveness, competition, conflict, and rivalry (Felson, 1983; Kahn, 1983; Rinaldi & Howe, 1998).

Another antisocial relational behavior in which siblings engage is verbal aggressiveness. Verbal aggressiveness, which is defined as a message behavior that attacks a person's self-concept in order to deliver psychological pain (Infante & Wigley, 1986), often results in the recipient of the verbally aggressive message feeling embarrassed, humiliated, or rejected (Infante, 1995). Not surprisingly then, perceived verbal aggressiveness is associated generally with negative relational outcomes such as decreased relational quality (Kinney & Segrin, 1998) and relational satisfaction (Venable & Martin, 1997) as well as decreased liking (Myers & Johnson, 2003) and social attraction for the relational partner (Martin & Anderson, 1995). For siblings, these negative relational outcomes include decreased communication satisfaction, trust, and credibility (Martin, Anderson, Burant, & Weber, 1997; Martin, Anderson, & Rocca, 2005; Teven, Martin, & Neupauer, 1998).

What is missing from this research, however, is siblings' use of specific verbally aggressive messages across the lifespan and the impact these messages have on their relational outcomes. Unlike romantic, platonic, or work relationships, the sibling relationship progresses through three stages, which begin at birth and culminate with death (Goetting, 1986). During these three stages, events associated with life development occur. These events include vying for both real and imagined resources, marriage, children, divorce, health issues, retirement, mobility issues, and geographic distance (Avioli, 1989; Bank & Kahn, 1982; Connidis, 1989, 1992). As such, the breadth, depth, and frequency of sibling communication not only changes during these stages, but has a differential effect on the emotional closeness experienced by siblings (Connidis, 1989b; Connidis & Campbell, 1995; Rocca & Martin, 1998). To contribute to the paucity of research already conducted on sibling communication across the lifespan, the current investigation was undertaken.

Review of Literature

Goetting (1986) identified and labeled three stages through which sibling relationships evolve: childhood and adolescence, early and middle adulthood, and old age. In the first stage, siblings provide each other with companionship and emotional support, delegated caretaking, and aid and direct services (e.g., dealing with parents, helping with homework, lending money, protecting each other). In the second stage, siblings continue to provide each other with companionship and emotional support, cooperate in the care of their elderly parents and other relatives, and provide aid and direct services as necessary in the forms of babysitting, helping each other through illness, and lending money. In the third stage, siblings resolve their rivalries, validate their relationships by engaging in shared reminiscence and intensifying their emotional bond, and continue to provide the aid and direct services they provided during early and middle adulthood.

In conjunction with these stages, the ways in which siblings communicate with each other evolve. As youngsters and adolescents, siblings yell, argue, fight, and insult each other over issues such as conflicts over property and division of labor (Bedford, 1998; Felson, 1983); by old age, the number of conflicts and arguments significantly decreases in frequency and intensity (Bedford). Interestingly, Kahn (1983) found that siblings consider fighting, arguing, and even physical aggressiveness as ways to relieve frustration, as ritual exercises for making physical contact, and as forms of reassurance that the relationship is important. As siblings age, their communication becomes more egalitarian (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990), the relationship becomes more voluntary (Floyd & Parks, 1995), and they remain emotionally involved with each other, even if their interaction is infrequent (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Gold, 1989). Moreover, as siblings enter old age, their contact with each other increases for many reasons, including a renewed sense of responsibility to each other (Gold, 1987).

Based on these qualitative differences, siblings' perceived use of verbally aggressive messages is likely to decrease over the lifespan. Based loosely on Infante's (1987) identification of verbally aggressive messages, Martin et al. (2005) identified 10 types of verbally aggressive messages siblings use with each other. These messages include, among others, attacking the sibling's intelligence, calling the sibling uncomplimentary names, and threatening to get the sibling in trouble. To examine the possibility that perceived sibling use of these 10 types of verbally aggressive messages decreases over the lifespan, the first hypothesis is posited:

H1: Perceived sibling use of verbally aggressive messages will decrease across the lifespan.

It also is possible siblings' perceived use of verbally aggressive messages is associated with decreased feelings of positive affect. Three behaviors which reflect positive affect and are tied to attempts made by siblings to maintain their relationships are liking, trust, and commitment (Myers & Weber, 2004). Liking is conceptualized as the degree of favorable evaluation and respect directed toward another individual (Rubin, 1973), trust is conceptualized as the extent to which an individual is considered to be honest and benevolent (Larzelere & Huston, 1980), and commitment is conceptualized as a psychological attachment through which an individual intends to continue in a relationship indefinitely (Canary & Stafford, 1994; Rusbult, 1980). Because liking, trust, and commitment are integral to the success of any close relationship, it is likely the same is true for sibling relationships. As such, when siblings use verbally aggressive messages, liking, trust, and commitment may decrease because the locus of any verbally aggressive message is an attack on an individual's personal failings, relational failings, or group memberships (Kinney, 1994). To examine this possibility, the second hypothesis is posited:

H2: Perceived sibling use of verbally aggressive messages will be related indirectly to sibling liking, trust, and commitment.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited for this study in one of two ways. Approximately 45% of the participants ($n = 124$, ages 18–25) were students enrolled in an introductory communication course at a large Mid-Atlantic university. The remaining participants ($n = 148$) were recruited by the students enrolled in the same course who were instructed to distribute one questionnaire packet to an individual between the ages of 26–54 and one questionnaire packet to an individual over the age of 55. Prior to questionnaire distribution, the students were provided with questionnaire distribution guidelines and participated in a discussion regarding research ethics. The questionnaire distribution guidelines stated that (a) potential participants had to have at least one sibling and (b) only one sibling per family could participate in the study. Each student was then instructed to find one individual to voluntarily complete a questionnaire.

Together, 272 completed questionnaires were returned. Participants were 97 men and 175 women whose ages ranged from 18 to 87 years ($M = 37.83$, $SD = 19.09$). The participants reported on 136 male and 136 female siblings, with the ages of the targeted sibling ranging from 18 to 97 years ($M = 37.25$, $SD = 18.93$).

Procedures and Instrumentation

Participants completed the Measure of Sibling Verbal Aggressiveness (Martin et al., 2005), the Liking scale (Rubin, 1970), the Dyadic Trust scale (Larzelere & Huston, 1980), and the Measure of Commitment scale (Stafford & Canary, 1991) in addition to providing demographic data. Participants were instructed to identify a sibling (by initials) and to complete the scales in reference to the identified sibling. No further directions were provided in regard to the identified sibling.

The Measure of Sibling Verbal Aggressiveness is a 10-item scale that asks respondents to indicate the extent to which the identified sibling uses each of the 10 types of verbally aggressive messages. Following the procedure used by Infante, Riddle, Horvath, and Tumlin (1992), siblings were asked to recall the number of times the identified sibling used each message type during a four week period prior to questionnaire completion.

The Liking scale is a 13-item scale that asks respondents to indicate their general feelings of liking toward a targeted partner. Responses for all items were solicited using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly agree* (7) to *strongly disagree* (1). Previous reliability coefficients ranging from .92 to .94 have been reported for the scale (Myers & Johnson, 2003; Myers & Members of COM 200, 2001; Myers & Weber, 2004). In this study, a coefficient alpha of .93 ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 1.14$) was obtained for the summed scale.

The Dyadic Trust scale is an eight-item scale that asks respondents to indicate their level of trust toward a targeted partner. Responses for all items were solicited using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly agree* (7) to *strongly disagree* (1).

Previous reliability coefficients of .88 and .89 have been reported for the scale (Myers & Weber, 2004; Weber, Johnson, & Corrigan, 2004). In this study, a coefficient alpha of .87 ($M = 5.34$, $SD = 1.27$) was obtained for the summed scale.

The Measure of Commitment scale is a six-item scale that asks respondents to indicate their level of commitment toward the targeted partner. Responses for all items were solicited using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly agree* (7) to *strongly disagree* (1). Previous reliability coefficients of .83 and .89 have been reported for the scale (Myers & Weber, 2004; Rittenour, Myers, & Brann, 2005). In this study, a coefficient alpha of .72 ($M = 6.10$, $SD = .91$) was obtained for the summed scale.

Data Analysis

Participants were placed into one of three age categories based loosely on Goetting's (1986) three stages of sibling relationships. These categories were labeled subsequently as young adulthood (ages ranging from 18–25 years, 124 participants), middle adulthood (ages ranging from 26–54 years, 72 participants), and late adulthood (ages ranging from 55–87 years, 76 participants). The first hypothesis was explored using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with each of the 10 verbally aggressive messages serving simultaneously as the dependent variable and the sibling age category serving as the independent variable. Significant findings were explored using analysis of variance (ANOVA) and, when appropriate, Sheffe post-hoc analysis. The second hypothesis was explored using a series of Pearson Product-Moment correlations.

Results

The first hypothesis posited that perceived sibling use of verbally aggressive messages would decrease across the lifespan. This hypothesis was supported, Wilks' $\lambda = .70$, $F(10, 520) = 5.15$, $p < .001$ (see Table 1). Univariate effects were significant for nine of the 10 verbally aggressive messages: attacks my intelligence, $F(2, 269) = 18.85$, $p < .01$; teases me about my relationships with others, $F(2, 269) = 21.35$, $p < .01$; calls me uncomplimentary nicknames, $F(2, 269) = 29.29$, $p < .01$; makes fun of my physical appearance, $F(2, 269) = 8.05$, $p < .01$; threatens to get me into trouble, $F(2, 269) = 13.34$, $p < .01$; makes fun of the way I talk, $F(2, 269) = 4.67$, $p < .01$; tells me that I lack common sense, $F(2, 269) = 13.57$, $p < .01$; embarrasses me in front of others, $F(2, 269) = 4.40$, $p < .05$; and points out my faults to me, $F(2, 269) = 13.38$, $p < .01$. Of the nine verbally aggressive messages, follow-up analysis (Sheffe) revealed that perceived sibling use of seven of these verbally aggressive messages occurs more frequently in young adulthood than in both middle adulthood and late adulthood, and two of these seven verbally aggressive messages occur more frequently in young adulthood than in middle adulthood.

The second hypothesis posited that perceived sibling use of verbally aggressive messages would be related indirectly to sibling liking, trust, and commitment. This hypothesis was partially supported (see Table 2). Six of the 10 verbally aggressive messages were correlated negatively with sibling liking, eight of the 10

Table 1 Perceived Sibling Use of Verbally Aggressive Messages Across the Lifespan

Message	Mean scores			
	1 ^a	2 ^b	3 ^c	F
Attacks my intelligence	1.63 _{ab}	.33 _a	.36 _b	18.85**
Teases me about my relationships with others	2.13 _{ab}	.31 _a	.42 _b	21.35**
Calls me uncomplimentary nicknames	3.33 _{ab}	.65 _a	.43 _b	29.29**
Makes fun of my physical appearance	1.19 _{ab}	.28 _a	.43 _b	8.04**
Threatens to get me into trouble	1.27 _{ab}	.07 _a	.05 _b	13.34**
Complains to other people about me	2.21	1.73	.25	1.56
Makes fun of the way I talk	.78 _a	.14 _a	.42	4.67**
Tells me that I lack common sense	1.50 _{ab}	.11 _a	.11 _b	13.57**
Embarrasses me in front of others	1.48 _a	.29 _a	.40	4.40*
Points out my faults to me	1.90 _{ab}	.74 _a	.47 _b	13.38**

Note: 1^a = Young adulthood, 124 participants. 2^b = Early and middle adulthood, 72 participants. 3^c = Late adulthood, 76 participants. Means sharing subscripts across each row are significantly different from each other. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

verbally aggressive messages were correlated negatively with sibling trust, and six of the 10 verbally aggressive messages were correlated negatively with sibling commitment.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine siblings' use of verbally aggressive messages across the lifespan and the impact of these messages on liking, trust, and commitment.

Table 2 Correlations between Verbally Aggressive Messages and Liking, Trust, and Commitment

Message	Liking	Trust	Commitment
Attacks my intelligence	-.18**	-.24**	-.13*
Teases me about my relationships with others	-.11	-.17**	-.03
Calls me uncomplimentary nicknames	-.16**	-.20**	-.08
Makes fun of my physical appearance	-.25**	-.25**	-.22**
Threatens to get me into trouble	-.08	-.14*	-.06
Complains to other people about me	-.29**	-.25**	-.25**
Makes fun of the way I talk	.06	-.01	.14*
Tells me that I lack common sense	-.02	-.08	-.01
Embarrasses me in front of others	-.13*	-.12*	-.14*
Points out my faults to me	-.15*	-.24**	-.17**

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

The first hypothesis, which was supported, predicted that perceived sibling use of verbally aggressive messages would decrease across the lifespan. There are two possible explanations for this finding. The first explanation may be siblings' perceptions of the importance of their relationships change over time. Pulakos (1989) found that young adults often perceive their same-age friendships as more important than their sibling relationships; it isn't until siblings reach late adulthood that their sibling relationships are deemed important, in part because their relationships are the only familial relationships that still exist (Gold, 1987). Thus, this sense of "shared survivorship" (Gold, 1987, p. 209) may impact (or inflate) the perceived importance of the sibling relationship, which in turn would lead to a decrease in perceived siblings' use of verbally aggressive messages. Alternatively, because adolescents' and young adults' sibling relationships are riddled with rivalry, envy, and jealousy (Felson, 1983), younger siblings may be more inclined to use verbally aggressive messages with each other as a way to address these issues. Interestingly, Daniels and Plomin (1985) reported that over half of their respondents perceive their family environment as differential, meaning they believe their siblings are the recipients of preferential treatment by their parents. As such, siblings' use of verbally aggressive messages may be used by young adults in retaliation toward their siblings. Once siblings enter middle adulthood (e.g., leave home, begin their careers and families), their use of verbally aggressive messages may decrease because their primary interactions no longer center on their siblings.

The second explanation is perceived sibling use of verbally aggressive messages across the lifespan may occur simply as a by-product of the intensity of sibling contact. During young adulthood, siblings engage in intimate daily contact with each other (Cicirelli, 1995), in part due to their living together and in part due to the demands imposed on siblings by parents. At this time, siblings also are forced to engage in delegated caretaking (Goetting, 1986) and are more likely to resolve their disagreements with physical force (Felson, 1983). As siblings enter middle adulthood, both the frequency and intensity of contact is influenced by other relationships (e.g., spouses, children), obligations (e.g., jobs, careers), and relational events (e.g., divorce, widowhood) (Connidis, 1989, 1992; Miner & Uhlenberg, 1997). As siblings enter late adulthood, they resolve earlier sibling rivalry and engage in shared reminiscence as a way to validate the role earlier events and issues have played in their relational development (Goetting). Thus, as siblings progress through the lifespan, the nature of their contact becomes less hurtful and hostile, which may be reflected in both the amount and type of verbally aggressive messages they use with each other.

The second hypothesis, which was partially supported, posited that perceived sibling use of verbally aggressive messages would be related indirectly to sibling liking, trust, and commitment. There are two ways to interpret this finding. The first interpretation is that five of the 10 verbally aggressive messages—"attacks my intelligence," "makes fun of my physical appearance," "complains to others about me," "embarrasses me in front of others," and "points out my faults to me"—are all correlated negatively with liking, trust, and commitment. A closer examination of these five messages reveals these messages are more intense in their hurtfulness

than the other five messages. According to Young (2004), message intensity is central to assessing the appraisal of any hurtful message. For many people, derogatory statements made about their intelligence or physical appearance are perceived as hurtful as are negative characterizations made about their behavior (Young, Kubicka, Tucker, Chavez-Appel, & Rex, 2005). Consequently, the use of hurtful messages affects relational quality (Vangelisti & Sprague, 1998), resulting in greater dislike, mistrust, and relational distancing (Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998; Vangelisti & Young, 2000). The remaining five verbally aggressive messages appear to be less hurtful, which may explain why four of these messages are not all correlated significantly with liking, trust, and commitment and why one message (i.e., "tells me that I lack common sense") is not at all correlated with liking, trust, or commitment.

The second interpretation is because the correlations, albeit significant, are rather low in magnitude, the use of verbally aggressive messages may not exert much influence on sibling liking, trust, and commitment due to the involuntary yet loyal nature of the sibling relationship. Gold (1989) identified five types of sibling relationships (i.e., intimate, congenial, loyal, apathetic, hostile), all of which are differentiated by dimensions of emotional closeness and psychological involvement. Of these five types, she found the most common type to be the loyal relationship, which is conceptualized as a sibling bond realized through shared family experience, obligation, and allegiance rather than through personal involvement. Loyal siblings provide help and support when needed, but for the most part are not emotionally close (Gold). If Gold's findings are applied to the results obtained in this study, it is possible the relationship between perceived sibling use of verbally aggressive messages and relational outcomes is mediated by how siblings classify their relationships. Future researchers should apply Gold's sibling typology across the lifespan. It also is possible that the use of verbally aggressive messages is attributed to the sibling's personality rather than the sibling's perception of the relationship. As such, siblings may not pay much attention to the use of such messages, particularly when it comes to liking, trust, and commitment, because these messages are not viewed as threats to relational demise. Unlike other relationships, verbal aggressiveness is not heavily sanctioned in family relationships (Infante, Myers, & Buerkel, 1994), which may minimize the impact of its use.

One limitation of this study is that only one sibling's perspective was solicited. Future researchers should strive to incorporate both siblings' perspectives of their relationships. Additionally, future researchers should strive to identify the reasons behind why siblings engage in verbal aggressiveness. Because individuals use verbally aggressive messages for a host of reasons (Infante et al., 1992), the interpretation of message use may be attributed by siblings to the sibling's personality, the nature of the relationship, or the situation.

In sum, the results of this study indicate that although perceived sibling use of verbally aggressive messages decreases over the lifespan, sibling use of some of these verbally aggressive messages is correlated negatively with sibling liking, trust, and commitment. What these results imply is that although the use of verbally aggressive

messages is related indirectly with relational outcomes, the use of these messages decreases with age. For siblings, then, these findings suggest that their communicative behaviors are central to their relationships across the lifespan.

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