

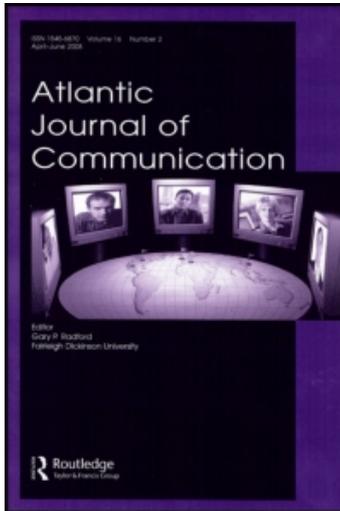
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### Investigating Elderly Sibling Types, Relational Maintenance, and Lifespan Affect, Cognition, and Behavior

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## Investigating Elderly Sibling Types, Relational Maintenance, and Lifespan Affect, Cognition, and Behavior

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The purpose of this study was to examine elderly sibling types' use of relational maintenance behaviors and their impact on relational quality (i.e., the frequency and positivity of sibling affect, behaviors, and cognition). Participants were 184 individuals older than 65 years of age who reported on their relationship with a living sibling. Results indicated that (a) elderly siblings use (in descending order) the positivity, tasks, conflict management, assurances, advice, networks, and openness relational maintenance behaviors with their siblings; (b) elderly sibling types differ in their use of relational maintenance behaviors and (c) most of these behaviors are related positively to perceptions of relational quality. Future research should examine elderly sibling types from multiple sibling perspectives.

The sibling relationship is a lifelong and involuntary relationship characterized by changes over the lifespan (Goetting, 1986). As Goetting noted, the sibling relationship is unique because members share a genetic and cultural heritage as well as early childhood experiences. However, a shared history of lifetime experiences makes the sibling relationship inimitable in old age (Campbell, Connidis, & Davies, 1999; Gold, 1987). Although younger siblings may detach themselves from the relationship to establish their own life and independence (Banks & Kahn, 1992), siblings in old age may attempt to reconcile past differences (Moyer, 1992) and create stronger emotional bonds (Gold, 1987). Furthermore, as communication patterns change when siblings become older, the quality of the relationship may change as well (Gold, 1989a; Myers & Goodboy, 2006).

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Accordingly, Gold (1989b) proposed that sibling relationships among the elderly can be classified as intimate, congenial, loyal, apathetic, or hostile. *Intimate* sibling relationships are characterized as being emotionally interdependent, caring, psychologically involved, accepting, and assisting. Negative affect toward each other tends to be transitory because intimate siblings are psychologically close. *Congenial* sibling relationships are similar to intimate sibling relationships, except that they are not as empathic and emotionally close. They consider their siblings to be a good friend, with negative affect toward their siblings labeled as fleeting. *Loyal* sibling relationships are based on family allegiance rather than personal experience. They are tied to one another by their family bond rather than by psychological closeness, communication tends to be infrequent, and siblings neither are psychologically or physically close. *Apathetic* sibling relationships are characterized by indifference. Communication tends to be a rare occurrence because the siblings were never psychologically close. These siblings share little time together, they do not share responsibility for one another, and there is little to no psychological involvement and social support. *Hostile* sibling relationships experience high levels of negative affect and resentment toward each other. This relationship is characterized by envy and rivalry, a lack of social support, and avoidance.

Based on these differences of psychological closeness, it is probable that these sibling relationships are further differentiated by siblings' use of relational maintenance behaviors. Relational maintenance behaviors refer to actions that sustain a relationship in a desired state (Dindia, 2003). Stafford, Dainton, and Haas (2000) identified seven relational maintenance behaviors: assurances (i.e., indicating continuation of the relationship), openness (i.e., discussing feelings), conflict management (i.e., addressing and understanding conflict), tasks (i.e., jointly performing family tasks), positivity (i.e., communicating in a positive manner), advice (i.e., giving counsel), and networks (i.e., spending time with mutual relatives and friends).

Scant research exists on siblings' use of relational maintenance behaviors. To date, two general preliminary findings have surfaced. First, siblings (ages 18–81) use the tasks relational maintenance behavior the most frequently with each other and the openness relational maintenance behavior the least frequently with each other (Eidsness & Myers, 2008; Myers, Brann, & Rittenour, 2008; Myers & Members of COM 200, 2001). Second, the positivity, openness, assurances, tasks, and networks behaviors are associated positively with sibling liking, relational closeness, relational satisfaction, commitment, trust, liking, and solidarity (Eidsness & Myers, 2008; Mikkelsen, 2006; Myers & Members of COM 200, 2001; Myers & Weber, 2004). In addition, there is ample reason to believe that elderly siblings may differ substantially from their young and middle-age counterparts. It is nearly axiomatic that elderly people experience a significant contraction in the size of their social networks as well as a decrease in social contact. It is argued elsewhere that elderly persons experience a degree of identity loss as their occupational and parental roles change and as a result, elderly persons tend to shift their social focus to their families, including their siblings (Nussbaum, Pecchioni, Robinson, & Thompson, 2000; Patterson, 2007).

Bedford and Avioli (2001) suggested that old age is the ideal time to strengthen original sibling bonds and researchers should examine factors that produce the valued intimate qualities of sibling relationships in old age. Moreover, Van Volkom (2006) noted that "as people live longer, have fewer children, remain single, or choose not to have families, their social networks

may decrease and the sibling bond often emerges as a vital source of support” (p. 165). Given the paucity of research conducted in this area and considering the fundamental and important differences among elderly siblings in old age versus adolescence or early and middle adulthood siblings, the following two research questions were proposed:

- RQ1: To what extent do elderly siblings report using relational maintenance behaviors with their siblings?  
 RQ2: How do the elderly sibling types differ in their use of relational maintenance behaviors?

In addition, the relational characteristics of any given relationship are particularly important in terms of how individuals maintain their relationship. Several studies have revealed that control mutuality, commitment, liking, and satisfaction were moderately to strongly correlated with positivity, openness, networks, assurances, and tasks (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Dainton, Stafford, & Canary, 1994; Stafford & Canary, 1991). Although these relational characteristics are salient in romantic relationships, a more specific assessment of characteristics in the sibling relationship may be warranted. Riggio (2000) argued that extant research has failed to examine the wide range of feelings, beliefs, and behaviors associated with elderly sibling relationships. Accordingly, Riggio suggested that researchers should assess the frequency and positivity of behaviors toward the sibling, affect toward the sibling, and beliefs about the sibling and relationship. Considering that relational maintenance is associated with positive relational characteristics, the following hypothesis was predicted:

- H1: A positive relationship will exist between elderly siblings’ use of relational maintenance behaviors and relational quality (i.e., frequency/positivity of sibling affect, behavior, and cognition).

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were recruited by students enrolled in several introductory communication studies courses at a large northeastern university. Students were instructed to distribute a survey to an individual 65 years of age or older who had a least one living sibling. After several weeks of recruitment, 193 completed surveys were returned. Participants were 61 men and 132 women whose ages ranged from 65 to 90 years ( $M = 73.03$ ,  $SD = 5.62$ ). The participants reported on 77 brothers and 116 sisters whose ages ranged from 47 to 96 years ( $M = 70.30$ ,  $SD = 9.03$ ).

### Procedures and Measurement

Participants were asked to identify a sibling and to respond to the questionnaire items based on their relationship with the identified siblings. They then were provided with representative

descriptions of the five elderly sibling types<sup>1</sup> based on Gold's (1989b) sibling typology. These descriptions were sequenced in a randomized order on each survey to minimize systematic response bias. After reading each description, participants were instructed to indicate which sibling type best exemplified their relationship with their sibling. Sixty-five ( $n = 65$ ) respondents indicated their relationship was intimate, 80 participants indicated their relationship was congenial, 39 participants indicated their relationship was loyal, 5 participants indicated their relationship was indifferent, and 4 participants indicated their relationship was hostile. (Because of the low number of indifferent and hostile relationships, these two relationship types were excluded from data analysis, resulting in a usable sample size of 184 participants). Once they chose a description, participants completed the Relational Maintenance Behaviors Scale (Stafford et al., 2000) and the Lifespan Sibling Relationship Scale (Riggio, 2000) in reference to their identified sibling.

The Relational Maintenance Behaviors Scale is a 31-item scale that measures seven maintenance behaviors: assurances, openness, conflict management, tasks, positivity, advice, and networks. Responses are solicited using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Previous reliability coefficients for the seven relational maintenance behaviors have ranged from .70 to .92 (Stafford et al., 2000). In this study, Cronbach's alphas ranged from .84 to .90: assurances ( $M = 42.05$ ,  $SD = 10.04$ ,  $\alpha = .90$ ), openness ( $M = 31.08$ ,  $SD = 8.87$ ,  $\alpha = .87$ ), conflict management ( $M = 28.82$ ,  $SD = 5.55$ ,  $\alpha = .88$ ), tasks ( $M = 28.83$ ,  $SD = 5.56$ ,  $\alpha = .87$ ), positivity ( $M = 12.08$ ,  $SD = 1.95$ ,  $\alpha = .86$ ), advice ( $M = 10.26$ ,  $SD = 3.14$ ,  $\alpha = .89$ ), and networks ( $M = 9.10$ ,  $SD = 3.28$ ,  $\alpha = .84$ ).

The Lifespan Sibling Relationship Scale is a 48-item scale that measures relational quality between siblings in childhood and as an adult. It consists of six subscales that assess both childhood and adult emotions toward the sibling, beliefs about the sibling relationship, and their behavioral interactions with siblings. Because we were only interested in adulthood, only the three subscales assessing affect, behavior, and cognitions in adult relationships were used in this study. Responses are solicited using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Riggio (2000) reported reliability coefficients ranging from .84 to .96 for the six subscales. In this study, Cronbach's alphas obtained for the three subscales

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<sup>1</sup>*Directions:* The following are descriptions from 5 different siblings about their relationship with their brother or sister. Please read each description carefully. After reading all 5 descriptions, please circle the one that is the most similar to your current relationship with your brother or sister. Please only circle *one* description. (a) I am really involved in my sibling's life. I love my sibling very much and would almost do anything to make him/her happy. We are very emotionally dependent on each other. He/she is one of my "best friends". I try to keep contact as much as possible to see how my sibling is doing. We share a very close bond. I almost never resent my sibling. (b) My sibling and I are close. I would say my sibling is a "good friend". We talk at least every month to see how each of us is doing. We care about each other although I am not overly dependent on him/her for my emotional needs. I rarely resent my sibling. (c) My sibling and I are tied by our family bond. Although we do not talk too often, we are committed to one another because family members stick together. We tend to see each other during family occasions such as holidays or birthdays. Although we have separate lives, we will always remain connected because of family. (d) I rarely talk to my sibling. It's not because I dislike him/her but because we were never really close to begin with. We are not really committed to each other because we are not close. We live our separate lives and do not depend on each other for help or support. I feel indifferent about my sibling. (e) I resent my sibling. We do not rely on each other for emotional support. In fact, I avoid talking with my sibling at all costs. There is not much I could do to establish a meaningful or close relationship, nor do I want to. Overall, I really do not like my sibling and do not desire him/her to be a major part of my life.

ranged from .84 to .93: adult affect ( $M = 33.85$ ,  $SD = 6.21$ ,  $\alpha = .91$ ), adult cognitions ( $M = 33.13$ ,  $SD = 6.82$ ,  $\alpha = .93$ ), and adult behavior ( $M = 26.27$ ,  $SD = 6.74$ ,  $\alpha = .84$ ).

## RESULTS

The first research question investigated the extent to which elderly siblings use relational maintenance behaviors with their sibling. Based on mean scores for each reported behavior (in descending order), elderly siblings used the positivity ( $M = 6.04$ ,  $SD = .97$ ), tasks ( $M = 5.77$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ), conflict management ( $M = 5.76$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ), assurances ( $M = 5.26$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ), advice ( $M = 5.13$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ), networks ( $M = 4.55$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ ), and openness ( $M = 4.43$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ) relational maintenance behaviors with their siblings. A series of paired  $t$  tests uncovered five significant differences in usage among these seven relational maintenance behaviors. First, positivity was used more frequently than assurances  $t(190) = 10.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ; openness,  $t(190) = 17.59$ ,  $p < .001$ ; conflict management,  $t(191) = 3.98$ ,  $p < .001$ ; tasks,  $t(191) = 3.06$ ,  $p < .001$ ; advice,  $t(192) = 7.82$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and networks,  $t(191) = 12.26$ ,  $p < .001$ . Second, tasks was used more frequently than assurances  $t(191) = 5.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ; openness,  $t(190) = 12.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ; advice,  $t(191) = 5.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and networks,  $t(190) = 10.05$ ,  $p < .001$ . Third, conflict management was used more frequently than assurances  $t(191) = 6.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ; openness,  $t(189) = 15.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ; advice,  $t(191) = 5.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and networks,  $t(190) = 10.45$ ,  $p < .001$ . Fourth, assurances was used more frequently than openness,  $t(190) = 12.03$ ,  $p < .001$ , and networks,  $t(190) = 6.47$ ,  $p < .001$ . Fifth, advice was used more frequently than openness,  $t(190) = 6.57$ ,  $p < .001$ , and networks,  $t(191) = 4.68$ ,  $p < .001$ . Tasks was not used significantly more than conflict management,  $t(190) = .04$ ,  $p = .97$ ; assurances was not used significantly more than advice,  $t(192) = 1.08$ ,  $p = .97$ ; and networks was not used significantly more than openness,  $t(189) = .76$ ,  $p = .45$ .

The second research question inquired if elderly sibling types differed in their use of relational maintenance behaviors. Using a multivariate analysis of variance (where the three elderly sibling types—intimate, congenial, and loyal—served as the independent variable and the seven relational maintenance behaviors—assurances, openness, conflict management, tasks, positivity, advice, and networks—served as the dependent variables), a statistically significant model was achieved, Wilks's  $\lambda = .75$ ,  $F(14, 344) = 3.77$ ,  $p < .001$ . Univariate effects were significant for assurances,  $F(2, 178) = 15.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ; openness,  $F(2, 178) = 16.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ; conflict management,  $F(2, 178) = 8.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ; advice,  $F(2, 178) = 6.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and networks,  $F(2, 178) = 10.30$ ,  $p < .001$ . An examination of the mean scores using Scheffe post hoc tests (see Table 1) revealed that intimate siblings used the assurances, openness, and networks relational maintenance behaviors at a higher rate than both congenial and loyal siblings; intimate and congenial siblings used the conflict management relational maintenance behavior at a higher rate than loyal siblings; and intimate siblings used the advice relational maintenance behavior at a higher rate than loyal siblings. Univariate effects were not observed for tasks,  $F(2, 178) = 2.91$ ,  $p = .06$ , or positivity,  $F(2, 178) = 1.82$ ,  $p = .17$ .

The hypothesis predicted that a positive relationship would exist between elderly siblings' use of relational maintenance behaviors and the frequency and positivity of sibling affect, behaviors, and cognition. This hypothesis was partially supported (see Table 2). Sibling affect, behaviors, and cognition were correlated positively (range = .19–.52) with the seven relational

TABLE 1  
Results of Analyses of Variance Between Elderly Sibling Types and Relational Maintenance Behaviors

	<i>M Score</i>			
	<i>Intimate</i>	<i>Congenial</i>	<i>Loyal</i>	<i>F</i>
Assurances	46.98 <sub>ab</sub>	42.25 <sub>a</sub>	38.62 <sub>b</sub>	15.08*
Openness	35.91 <sub>ab</sub>	30.72 <sub>a</sub>	27.24 <sub>b</sub>	16.88*
Conflict Management	30.38 <sub>a</sub>	29.76 <sub>b</sub>	26.70 <sub>ab</sub>	8.22*
Tasks	29.97	28.96	27.38	2.91
Positivity	12.54	12.18	11.92	1.82
Advice	11.40 <sub>a</sub>	10.28	9.38 <sub>a</sub>	6.08*
Networks	10.49 <sub>ab</sub>	9.10 <sub>a</sub>	7.84 <sub>b</sub>	10.30*

*Note.* Intimate = 65 participants; Congenial = 80 participants; Loyal = 39 participants. Means sharing subscripts across each row are significantly different from each other; \**p* < .001.

maintenance behaviors with three exceptions: affect and tasks (*r* = .11, *p* = .15), affect and advice (*r* = .12, *p* = .10), and behavior and positivity (*r* = .01, *p* = .86).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine elderly sibling types' use of relational maintenance behaviors and their impact on the frequency and positivity of sibling affect, behaviors, and cognition. The first research question asked the extent to which elderly siblings report using relational maintenance behaviors with their siblings. Based on these findings, it appears that siblings have distinct preferences for the types of maintenance strategies they use. In descending order of preference, siblings reported using positivity, tasks, conflict management, assurances,

TABLE 2  
Correlations Between Variables

<i>Variables</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i>
1. Assurances	—								
2. Openness	.70 <sup>†</sup>	—							
3. Conflict Management	.44 <sup>†</sup>	.43 <sup>†</sup>	—						
4. Tasks	.32 <sup>†</sup>	.24**	.32 <sup>†</sup>	—					
5. Positivity	.39 <sup>†</sup>	.31 <sup>†</sup>	.45 <sup>†</sup>	.26 <sup>†</sup>	—				
6. Advice	.22 <sup>†</sup>	.42 <sup>†</sup>	.19**	.15*	.12 <sup>†</sup>	—			
7. Networks	.34 <sup>†</sup>	.30 <sup>†</sup>	.23**	.27 <sup>†</sup>	.08 <sup>†</sup>	.36 <sup>†</sup>	—		
8. Affect	.40 <sup>†</sup>	.32 <sup>†</sup>	.41 <sup>†</sup>	.11	.39 <sup>†</sup>	.12 <sup>†</sup>	.30 <sup>†</sup>	—	
9. Behaviors	.31 <sup>†</sup>	.41 <sup>†</sup>	.19**	.28 <sup>†</sup>	.01	.29 <sup>†</sup>	.52 <sup>†</sup>	.29 <sup>†</sup>	—
10. Cognition	.45 <sup>†</sup>	.41 <sup>†</sup>	.48 <sup>†</sup>	.19*	.35 <sup>†</sup>	.22**	.38 <sup>†</sup>	.62 <sup>†</sup>	.53 <sup>†</sup>

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. <sup>†</sup>*p* < .001.

advice, networks, and openness. With the exception of tasks over conflict management, assurances over advice, and networks over openness, significant differences were found between each of the remaining 18 pairings. From these data, it appears that elderly siblings prefer to communicate along positive lines and attend family functions rather than provide counsel or socialize with mutual friends. The finding that socializing with mutual friends is least used should not be surprising. Further, the finding that being positive, socializing with family, and conflict management round out the top three is perhaps indicative of the unique circumstances of elderly siblings. The contraction of social networks and the preference for family relationships means that there are fewer friends available with whom to socialize and even fewer mutual friends. As Rawlins (1995) noted, elderly friends typically play a minimal role in maintaining older adults' autonomy while family members prove to be more instrumental and altruistic. Given the lack of available relationships and tendency to gravitate toward family, elders can ill-afford to damage their family relations. Similarly advice giving is a risky undertaking insofar as advice may be neither solicited nor wanted. There is a noted tendency for elders to be more cautious in their communication with others so as not to risk the loss of scarce and otherwise stable relationships (Nussbaum et al., 2000).

Also of note is that open communication is the least preferred strategy. Although there may be some irony in this finding, it may suggest that elderly sibling relationships bear some resemblance to long-term marriages. They are, after all, the longest running relationships most people have over the life span. Research has shown that elderly married couples openly talk to each other less than young or middle-age couples (Mares & Fitzpatrick, 1995). This is explained in terms of communication efficiency. Given the duration and familiarity of the relationship, overt communication becomes less necessary. Indeed, silence may serve as an important form of communication and couples rely on well-known cues to assess the status of their significant others instead of verbal communication. The same might well be true of elderly siblings (Nussbaum et al., 2000).

The second research question inquired how the elderly sibling types differ in their use of relational maintenance behaviors. Collectively, the findings suggested that intimate siblings use the most relational maintenance behaviors, followed by congenial and loyal siblings. Consequently, Gold's (1987) typology was supported by the results of the current study. Intimate siblings have frequent contact with each other because their closeness exceeds familial duty. Considering that intimate siblings have a long history of shared positive interaction (Gold, 1987), it is not surprising that these sibling types use more assurances, openness, and networks than congenial siblings. The only relational maintenance behavior that significantly differed between congenial and loyal siblings was conflict management. Because congenial siblings have a strong friendship and high level of caring for one another, they may have stronger needs to resolve conflict than loyal siblings, who are merely tied by family bonds and do not possess the same level of psychological closeness. It appears that congenial and loyal siblings may have more in common than congenial and intimate siblings.

The hypothesis was partially supported as most of the sibling relational maintenance behaviors were associated positively with the positivity and frequency of affect, behaviors, and cognition. These results suggest that the more elderly individuals try to maintain their sibling relationship, the more they feel, act, and think positively about the relationship. However, sibling affect was not significantly related to tasks or advice. Unlike romantic couples that are typically studied in relational maintenance research, it is probable that most elderly siblings

do not cohabit and therefore, the sharing of tasks may not increase affect. In addition, although advice appears to increase positive behaviors and thoughts about a sibling, it may not elicit more positive feelings because advice is sometimes perceived as hurtful or unsolicited (Vangelisti, 1994), which can affect relational quality (Vangelisti & Sprague, 1998).

One limitation to this study was the lack of indifferent and hostile sibling types in the sample. It is possible these sibling types are not particularly common because siblings in late adulthood typically resolve former rivalries (Goetting, 1986) and use less hurtful communication (Myers & Goodboy, 2006). Although the indifferent and hostile sibling types were unable to be represented in this study, research suggests that these types of siblings are rather rare (Gold, Woodbury, & George, 1990). In fact, Scott (1990) stated that 95% of elderly sibling types fall into the intimate, congenial, and loyal categories (which is identical to the results in the current study). Or considering the negative nature of the indifferent or hostile types, perhaps participants responded in a socially desirable manner because of the self-report method used in this study. Another limitation involves the lack of random sampling of elderly participants. Future research would benefit from life-span-oriented methodologies. Specifically, cross-sectional, longitudinal, and (ideally) hybrid designs would help determine if the attributes discovered here differ from other age groups. It would further help to determine if these effects are cohort induced or the result of some genuine social developmental process.

Despite these limitations, the current study provided an initial examination of sibling maintenance and communication as a function of sibling types. Indeed, the emotional and psychological bonds that elderly siblings form and sustain in old age have important implications for relational communication. Such bonds should be examined further to develop a more complete assessment of elderly sibling relationships and functioning.

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