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Manifesting Closeness in the Interactions of Peers: A Look at Siblings and Friends

KORY FLOYD and MALCOLM R. PARKS

The present study examines the manifestation of relational closeness in the interactions of friends and siblings. Two hundred thirty-three volunteers reported on three interactions with a target other during the two-week period of study. For each interaction, respondents indicated the extent to which disclosive behaviors and shared activities contributed to their overall relational closeness. Analyses by gender and relationship type revealed that verbal behaviors were more important to the closeness of women's relationships than men's, but that shared activities were not more important to men than to women. Verbal behaviors were also more important to the closeness of friendships than they were to sibling relationships. The results are discussed as they relate to current theory and practice in the study of relational closeness.

■ Closeness is a critical component of the human experience. Of all the relationships one forms in a lifetime, it is often the close, personal ones by which a person measures the quality of life. Whether it be called bonding, intimacy, unity, or interpersonal connection, closeness is at the heart of one's most significant life partnerships. Research efforts to explicate the nature of relational closeness have drawn on a loosely connected set of common themes. In some studies, researchers have conceptually defined closeness themselves and imposed their definition on their subjects. For example, Kelley et al. (1983) conceptualized closeness as a function of four relational properties: *frequency* of contact, *strength* of mutual impact, *diversity* of activity, and *duration* of the relationship. Later, Berscheid, Snyder, and Omoto (1989) retained these emphases on frequency, diversity, and strength in constructing their Relationship Closeness Inventory. Other studies have defined closeness more loosely, as a spatial measurement or as a function of related constructs such as intimacy (e.g., Helgeson, Shaver, & Dyer, 1987). Still others have taken a more grounded theory approach to defining closeness. For example, Parks and Floyd (in press) asked respondents to choose a close friend and indicate what made the friendship close. Their research produced a typology of closeness referents that included disclosure, reciprocal support, affective exchange, frequency and duration of interaction, and mutual interests. Women in their

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study were more likely to mention verbal interactions as referents for closeness than were men.

This variation in the way closeness has been studied makes it difficult to compare studies and findings, and may be of particular detriment when studying gender effects in close relationships. Such problems have not gone unnoticed. One recurring critique of this research is that it has focused too strongly on the verbal components of closeness, such as disclosure and affective expression, which may be inherently more indicative of women's relationships than men's (Cancian, 1986; Sherrod, 1987; Swain, 1989). Wood and Inman (1993) argued that as a result, women's relationships have inaccurately been depicted as closer than men's. They posited a perspective of "gendered closeness," suggesting that women's relationships are not necessarily closer than men's but that women and men may simply define closeness differently. Women, they contended, are more likely to measure closeness by the depth or intimacy of disclosure, while men will look instead to the level of shared interests or mutual activities as referents for closeness.

While this perspective has clear theoretical importance for research on relational closeness, few studies have tested it empirically. Swain (1989) asked men and women to describe their close same-sex friendships and to indicate what made them close. From these descriptions, he identified a number of referents for closeness that were unique to male respondents, such as shared activity, joking, instrumental assistance, and comfort of interaction. These themes recurred in later research by Inman (1993), who also noted that interdependence, having fun together, and assuming relational significance were important referents for male closeness.

Similarly, Floyd (1995) found that women were significantly more likely than men to consider talking about fears and personal problems, saying that they like or love each other, hugging, and sharing on a deep, personal level as important to the closeness of their relationships. Likewise, men were more likely to value drinking together, shaking hands, and talking about sexual experiences as ways to manifest closeness. However, women's relationships were not significantly closer than men's, suggesting equal value in both approaches to closeness.

One shortcoming of this research is that it has relied almost exclusively on subjects' descriptions of their relationships as a whole. That is, participants have reported on the global characteristics of their relationships, but there as yet has been no attempt to test the "gendered closeness" perspective within the context of day-to-day relational interaction. The present study is designed to assess how disclosive and activity-sharing behaviors within dyadic interaction contribute to perceptions of relational closeness. Given the premises of the "gendered closeness" perspective, support should emerge for the following hypotheses:

- H1: Women will report more than men that verbal interactions contribute to their relational closeness.
- H2: Men will report more than women that shared activities contribute to their relational closeness.

Despite possible differences in the ways men and women express closeness, some have suggested that women may be more sensitive to the relational importance of their interactions than are men (see Hays, 1984; Rawlins, 1992). As a result, we hypothesized two gender effects with regard to how satisfying and how important the individual interactions were. Specifically,

H3: Women will be more satisfied with their interactions than will men.

H4: Women will report that their interactions contribute more to their overall relational closeness than will men.

In this study, we compare two relationship types: friends and siblings. We chose to examine these relationships because of their conceptual similarity. Both are peer-like relationships among relative status equals (Bedford, 1993). The line dividing friendship and siblinghood is easily blurred; one often counts siblings as friends ("my sister is my best friend") and friends as siblings ("he's like a brother to me"). In young adulthood interaction between siblings, as between friends, is mostly voluntary, which may enhance the perceived value of that interaction (see Adelman, Parks, & Albrecht, 1987).

Despite their similarity, friendship and siblinghood differ in ways that caused us to hypothesize two relationship-type effects. Floyd (1995) found that compared to friendships, closeness among siblings was much less dependent on verbal reinforcement and shared disclosure (see also Pulakos, 1989). While this finding was based on participants' global assessments of their relationships, we hypothesized that the effect would emerge in interaction as well:

H5: Friends will report more than siblings that verbal interactions contribute to their relational closeness.

The relationships also differ in their permanence. Friendships are entered into by choice and can be terminated at will. Siblinghood, however, is imposed and permanent. The choice involved in establishing and maintaining friendships caused us to hypothesize that interactions between friends would be more satisfying:

H6: Friends will be more satisfied with their interactions than will siblings.

METHOD

Respondents

Respondents were 98 male and 135 female undergraduate volunteers from a large public university on the West Coast of the U.S. Median age was 20 years ($M = 20.47$, $SD = 3.51$). At the time of the study, respondents had completed an average of 2.50 years of college ($SD = 1.39$).

Procedure

Respondents were randomly assigned to report on their relationship with either a same-sex friend ($n = 63$), an opposite-sex friend ($n = 72$), a same-sex

sibling ($n = 48$), or an opposite-sex sibling ($n = 50$). Sixty-three men and 72 women reported on a friendship, while 35 men and 63 women reported on a sibling relationship. Those assigned to report on a friend were instructed to choose someone of the specified sex whom they considered a close friend, rather than a casual acquaintance or a best friend (see Monsour, 1992). Those reporting on a sibling were instructed to choose one sibling of the specified sex; if they had no sibling of the specified sex, respondents reported back to the investigator for reassignment into another category. All participants were asked to select a target with whom they could reasonably expect to interact at least three times during the two-week period of the study.

Respondents were asked to report on three interactions with their target. Following Duck, Rutt, Hurst, & Strejc (1991), an interaction was defined as any occasion when respondents spoke to or did something with their target others for at least ten consecutive minutes. For each interaction, respondents were presented with a 40-item checklist of specific behaviors and asked to report which of those behaviors they engaged in during the interaction and, on a six-point scale, how much each of those contributed to the closeness of the relationship (a complete list of the items is available from the first author). Higher scores indicated a higher contribution to relational closeness. The items were selected to represent either a verbal behavior, such as sharing secrets or talking about a particular topic, or a shared activity, such as having a party or working on a joint project.

The list was compiled by reviewing items identified as indicators of closeness on previous research on friends and siblings, including Monsour (1992), Parks and Floyd (in press), Pulakos (1989), and Swain (1989). In selecting items to include, the authors tried to make the list as representative of previous research as possible without duplicating essentially similar items. The list was augmented after a pilot study of 20 undergraduates who were asked to indicate what things they did and talked about with their friends and siblings that made those relationships close.

Respondents were also asked to indicate how satisfied they were with each particular interaction and how much they believed each interaction contributed to their overall relational closeness. Scores on these measures were based on two single-item, seven-point scales used by Duck et al. (1991), wherein higher values indicated higher contributions.

RESULTS

Respondents' scores on each of the 40 items ranged from zero to five; higher values indicated that the behavior contributed more to the closeness of the relationship. A score of zero indicated that the behavior was not engaged in during that particular interaction. As the unit of analysis was the relationship rather than the individual interactions, the scores for each item were summed across the three interactions to create a composite score for each of the 40 behaviors. Scores of zero were dropped because they

represented a behavior that did not occur; thus, each resulting score had a theoretical range of 1 to 15.

For purposes of testing the hypotheses, the items were then grouped according to whether they represented a disclosive behavior or a shared activity. Internal reliabilities for each construct were computed using Cronbach's (1951) *alpha*. One item was deleted from each scale to achieve the greatest internal reliability. The disclosive behavior scale (*alpha* = .83) included 13 items with a total score in a theoretic range of 1 to 195. The shared activity scale (*alpha* = .81) included 24 items with a total score in a theoretic range of 1 to 360.

The effects of gender and relationship type on disclosure and shared activity were initially tested with two 2×2 analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs). The covariate was the gender of the target friend or sibling. Some research has suggested that gender effects in sibling and friend relationships are intensified in same-sex dyads (Gold, 1989; Rose, 1985). The covariate was nonsignificant in this case, however, so simple factorial analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were used.

A nonsignificant interaction effect for gender and relationship type emerged for disclosive behavior, $F(3, 230) = .63, p > .05$. The interaction effect was also nonsignificant for shared activity, $F(3, 230) = 1.46, p > .05$. As a result, main effects are addressed separately below.

Gender Effects

Hypothesis one suggested that women would report more than men that disclosive behaviors contributed to their relational closeness. Scores for the disclosive behavior scale revealed a significant gender difference, $F(1, 209) = 12.08, p < .01$. A subsequent comparison of means revealed a higher score for women ($M = 57.53, SD = 30.89$) than for men ($M = 46.57, SD = 26.68$). Hypothesis one is supported.

The second hypothesis proposed that men would report more than women that shared activities contributed to their relational closeness. This effect was nonsignificant, $F(1, 209) = .14, p > .05$. Hypothesis two is not supported.

Hypothesis three suggested that women would be more satisfied with their interactions than would men. Scores for respondents' overall interactional satisfaction were significantly different, $F(1, 209) = 12.21, p < .01$. Mean scores were higher for women ($M = 4.13, SD = .64$) than for men ($M = 3.91, SD = .60$). Hypothesis three is supported.

Hypothesis four suggested that women would report that their interactions contributed more to their overall relational closeness than would men. This effect was significant, $F(1, 209) = 4.20, p < .05$. Mean scores were higher for women ($M = 1.19, SD = .91$) than for men ($M = .97, SD = .87$). Hypothesis four is supported.

Relational Type Effects

Two effects were hypothesized to result from whether respondents reported on a friend or a sibling. Hypothesis five proposed that friends would report that disclosive behaviors contributed more to their relational closeness than would siblings. This main effect was significant, $F(1, 209) = 4.83$, $p < .05$. Mean scores for disclosure were higher for friends ($M = 57.43$, $SD = 27.61$) than for siblings ($M = 46.96$, $SD = 31.55$). Hypothesis five is supported.

Hypothesis six suggested that friends would be more satisfied with their interactions than would siblings. This effect was nonsignificant, $F(1,209) = 1.08$, $p > .05$. Hypothesis six is not supported.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the value and contribution of day-to-day interactions to the overall closeness of relationships among friends and siblings. Participants reported on three interactions with their target friend or sibling, assessing how much self disclosure and shared activities in each interaction contributed to their relational closeness. They also indicated how satisfied they were with the interaction and how much the interaction contributed to their relational closeness, on the whole.

Some significant gender differences were hypothesized to reflect the perspective that women and men experience relational closeness differently. Research by Swain (1989), Wood and Inman (1993), and others has suggested that women are more likely than men to manifest closeness through self disclosure and that men are more likely to manifest it through shared activities. As hypothesized, women reported a greater closeness value in disclosive behavior than did men. However, a nonsignificant gender difference emerged on the shared activity scale. These findings suggest that while disclosure may be a more important closeness referent for women than for men, shared activities are no less important to women than they are to men. This indicates that instead of men and women having fundamentally different referents for closeness, as some prior research has suggested, women may simply have a broader range of meaningful outlets for the expression of closeness than do men.

Some have suggested that women are more sensitive to the relational significance of their interactions than are men, on the whole. It was therefore hypothesized that women would be more satisfied with their interactions, and that their interactions would contribute more to their overall relational closeness, relative to men. Both hypotheses were supported by the data.

In the respondents' age group, relationships between friends and between siblings are similar in nature. They are both peer-like relationships wherein interaction is mostly voluntary. However, it was hypothesized that disclosive behavior would be more important to relational closeness for friends than for siblings, as the sibling relationship is more permanent and

less dependent on verbal reinforcement than friendship. This hypothesis was supported.

Because friends are chosen and siblings are not, it was hypothesized that interactions between friends would be more satisfying than would those between siblings. Although mean satisfaction scores were higher for friends ($M = 4.13$, $SD = .60$) than for siblings ($M = 3.91$, $SD = .65$), the difference was nonsignificant and the hypothesis was not supported. This finding may be a function of the respondents' age group. Once one or both siblings in a dyad have reached adulthood and left the home, their interaction and the maintenance of their relationship may become significantly more voluntary, to the point that siblinghood nearly equals friendship in voluntariness. Were this the case, it could certainly cause interactions between siblings to resemble those between friends, more than they might otherwise.

Moreover, the age group sampled may also limit the applicability of these findings. Because of their accessibility, college students have been overrepresented in friendship research. However, many suggest that they are ideal subjects for the study of friendship patterns, given the proximity of their friends and the heightened value they often place on friendship at that stage in life (Swain, 1989). Although college students may be overrepresented in friendship research, they are seriously underrepresented in research on siblings. Most existing studies of siblings focus either on children (e.g., Stocker & Dunn, 1990) or on older adults (e.g., Connidis, 1989). Comparable measures with different age groups may further illustrate how such effects vary according to one's place in the life cycle.

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