Brotherly love I: The experience of closeness in the fraternal dyad

KORY FLOYD
University of Arizona

Abstract
The present research explicates the experience of closeness in dyadic relationships between brothers. A total of 160 respondents comprising 80 intact brother dyads described situations or events in which they felt particularly close to each other. Phenomenological analyses identified five themes characterizing the experience of closeness among brothers: shared conversation, solidarity, companionship, shared perceptions and memories, and surviving shared adversity. Some of these themes confirmed prior research on siblings or male-male relationships, whereas others have not emerged in previous studies. Results are discussed in relation to contemporary appeals for a more inclusive theoretical approach to the study of close relationships.

Who can fathom the relations of brothers? To this day I consider my life as tied to yours as to anyone else's in the world, to my wife's or to my son's, to our sister's or to our mother's. You are more a part of me than any of them.

Ethan Canin, Blue River (1991)

Brotherhood is a dynamic and complex union. Brothers may be at once drawn to each other through their familial connection and pulled apart by masculine role proscriptions against male-male intimacy. In an ongoing relational tension, brothers often experience intense loyalty, solidarity, and closeness with each other, despite equally intense feelings of competition, jealousy, and rivalry. The present study explicates the ways brothers experience and express closeness in their relationships despite such tensions.

This literature review examines previous research findings on closeness in the fraternal dyad, highlighting conceptual and methodological disfluencies that limit our scholarly understanding of this relationship. This discussion reveals the need for a qualitative approach to the study of closeness between brothers.

Scholarly Accounts of Fraternal Closeness
Empirical research on fraternal closeness is sparse and severely limited in scope. An even cursory perusal of the studies reveals, however, that compared to sororal or brother-sister dyads, fraternal relationships are consistently described as the least positive. In a study of sibling relationships among senior citizens, Gold (1989) reported that brother dyads were significantly less likely to be intimate or even congenial than were sibling pairs involving at least one female. Troll and Smith (1976) likewise found, in a small sample of university graduate students, that sisters were rated more positively than brothers on measures of attachment (for additional examples, see Cicirelli, 1982, 1989).
There is reason to believe that this scholarly picture of brotherhood is incomplete, at best. For one, previous approaches to conceptualizing closeness have introduced a number of potential confounds. One approach, common among earlier studies, is to ask subjects to indicate how close they feel to their siblings by marking a response on a fixed-choice scale. This approach was used in at least two published studies (Adams, 1968; Bowerman & Dobash, 1974). Both studies reported that sisters were closer than brothers. Adams (1968), for example, had respondents indicate that they were either “extremely close,” “quite close,” “fairly close,” “somewhat close,” or “not too close” to their siblings. Treating answers of “extremely” or “quite” close as indicative of close relationships, and all others as indicative of nonclose relationships, Adams found that closeness characterized nearly twice as many sororal dyads as fraternal ones.

In addition to the reliability concerns associated with a single-item measure, this approach is problematic because of its lack of specificity. It is impossible to know how subjects defined “closeness” when responding to the question. As Berscheid, Snyder, and Omoto (1989a) noted, “the yardstick the participant is using to make the discrimination is not yet know” (p. 68). Indeed, as suggested below, closeness may take very different forms and have very different meanings in fraternal or sororal relationships, which would make comparisons of brothers’ and sisters’ scores dubious. This lack of construct specificity also makes it difficult to interpret the response options; that is, the real difference between relationships that are “quite” close and “somewhat” close is unknown. As a result, this approach generates precious little information with which to judge the validity or reliability of the results. This lack of rigor may be partially due to the age of the research. It is worth noting, however, that although these studies are both over 20 years old, they are still widely cited in contemporary research on sibling closeness.

The more common approach has been to measure sibling closeness according to some standard set of referents. Pulakos (1989), for example, asked siblings how often they engaged in a series of activities that she proposed were characteristic of close relationships, including spending holidays together, talking about family or friends, sharing concerns about health, money, or school, and doing various activities. This approach is problematic because a priori definitions of closeness are inherently vulnerable to conceptual bias (Parks & Floyd, 1996). That is, they assume a commonality in the way closeness is experienced for all participants.

Such an assumption is open to challenge on at least two fronts. First, a number of scholars have recently questioned whether the experience of closeness is the same for men as it is for women. The common finding across studies on gender and closeness is that women’s relationships are closer than men’s because women are more disclosing and verbally expressive (e.g., Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Williams, 1985). Although empirical support for sex differences in verbal orientation is slight (Dindia & Allen, 1992), researchers have tended to magnify their importance (Wright, 1988). As a result, men’s relationships have come to be regarded both in academic accounts and the popular press as less intimate, less satisfying, and more emotionally deficient than those of women (Naifeh & Smith, 1984; Swain, 1989).

An alternative perspective suggests that women’s relationships are not inherently closer than men’s, but that men simply define and express closeness differently from the way women do. Work by Cancian (1986), Seidler (1992), Sherrod (1987), Wood and Inman (1993), and others has posited that, rather than measuring their relational closeness by the level of verbal interaction, many men look instead to shared interests and mutual activities as ways to become close. Many scholars have tended to ignore such instrumental referents for closeness because of ideological belief that disclosure is the proper and most meaningful measure of close relationships (Parks, 1982).
Empirical support for gender-specific ways of experiencing closeness is growing (Fife, 1994; Floyd, 1994, 1995, in press-a; Floyd & Parks, 1995; Inman, 1993; Swain, 1989). If men and women do indeed define closeness differently, then a measure that uses the same referents for closeness in male and female relationships is potentially invalid. In an extension of Pulakos's 1989 research, Floyd (1994) asked respondents to rate a series of affective and behavioral items on their relative contribution to relational closeness. Using this methodology, Floyd found that items dealing with disclosure and affective expression contributed more to women’s closeness and, likewise, that items representing mutual activities and shared interests were more important to closeness between men. This finding represents a clear sex difference in valid referents for relational closeness.

Second, there are theoretical reasons to question whether brothers experience closeness in the same way as do men in other male-male relationships. Brothers are more egalitarian than are fathers and sons, and they usually have more frequent interaction and more intimate shared knowledge than do male relatives outside the nuclear family, such as cousins or brothers-in-law (Scott, 1983). Beyond the family, brotherhood often resembles a male-male friendship in terms of companionship and voluntariness. Compared to friends, however, brothers have a more extensive shared history, usually expect greater and more unconditional social support from each other, and are more likely to expect permanence in their relationship and to maintain contact at least for its own sake (Bedford, 1993; Walters, 1982).

Role theory suggests that characteristics of social and relational roles will influence behavior within those roles (Heiss, 1968). Given the many unique characteristics of brotherhood, it is theoretically likely that brothers experience closeness differently from that of men in other same-sex relationships. This variation within gender-specific relationships has been virtually ignored in research on dyadic closeness; instead, studies comparing relationship types, like Pulakos (1989), have relied on a common set of referents. Comparing friends and siblings, Floyd (1995) found that siblings were more likely to associate closeness with dependability, whereas friends associated it with similarity. This finding, coupled with men's general disposition toward inexpressiveness (Swain, 1989), suggests that mutual assistance and solidarity may be more salient features of closeness among brothers than among men in other male-male relationships.

As this discussion demonstrates, there is clearly need for a more precise understanding of how closeness is experienced between brothers. Existing conceptualizations have largely failed to account for variation in gender-specific and relationship-specific approaches to the closeness experience. Given that, it seems most fruitful to examine fraternal closeness inductively.

A Qualitative Approach to Studying Closeness

Although closeness is among the most common variables used in the study of personal relationships, its definition remains rather ambiguous. Operational measures, such as those devised by Kelley et al. (1983) and Bercheid et al. (1989b), have focused on referents such as the frequency and variety of interaction and the strength of relational interdependence. Although widely used, the extent to which such measures reflect normative meanings for closeness has been questioned (Parks & Floyd, 1996). Indeed, researchers taking a qualitative approach to studying closeness have identified a number of referents not reflected in these frequently used instruments.

Most such work has focused on platonic friendships. In a recent example, Parks and Floyd (1996) asked men and women to describe a close same- or opposite-sex friendship and to indicate what made it close. Their study identified 13 referents for closeness, which included self-disclosure, affective expression, the provision of help...
and support, mutual interests, and the duration of the relationship. Although the typology was constructed with data from both men's and women's friendships, women mentioned referents such as self-disclosure and mutual support significantly more often than did men.

Other studies have focused specifically on male relationships. Swain (1989) asked a sample of male and female undergraduates to describe their close same-sex friendships and to indicate what made them close. From respondents' descriptions, Swain identified a number of referents for relational closeness that were unique to male respondents. The most prominent was sharing activities, such as camping, participating in sports, or helping each other on tasks. He also identified joking behaviors and a sense of ease and comfort around each other as referents for male closeness. These themes recurred in later research by Inman (1993), who found that interdependence, having fun together, and assuming relational significance were also important referents for closeness in male same-sex friendships.

Collectively, these studies provide an important base of knowledge about participant meanings for closeness in personal relationships. Some studies have focused on male-male dyads; however, all have limited their samples to close friendships. Although brotherhood shares some characteristics of male same-sex friendship, it differs in theoretically important ways. Thus, it is likely that brothers' experiences of closeness will be related to, but somewhat different from, those of nonrelated male friends. A specific account of how closeness is experienced in fraternal dyads is the goal of the present study.

The present inquiry is framed in the theoretic tradition of symbolic interactionism (Becker, Geer, & Hughes, 1968; Blumer, 1969; Hughes, 1958). Part of the phenomenological perspective, symbolic interactionism purports that situations gain meaning only through people's interpretations of them, and that people's actions follow from this meaning. Understanding one's actions in a given context or relationship, then, requires an understanding of how one has interpreted the situation. Working from this perspective, the present study attempts to account for extant reports of relational behavior in fraternal dyads by uncovering a part of these men's interpretations of their relational situations—namely what closeness means in those relationships.

Previous research on all sibling relationships has been limited in scope and structure. With few exceptions (e.g., Matthews, Delaney, & Adamek, 1989), data on sibling dyads are rarely collected from both siblings. Rather, the perceptions and experiences of one sibling are assumed to apply to the relationship as a whole, sometimes mistakenly so (Ciirelli, 1985). At times, it may even be unclear whether same- or opposite-sex relationships are being described (e.g., Pulakos, 1989). Many studies have also assumed that siblings are the offspring of the same two parents (Weisner, 1989). This approach disregards the biological and social variation inherent in relationships among half-siblings (those who share only one biological parent), step-siblings (those with no shared biological parentage whose parents have married), and adoptive siblings (one or both of whom may have no biological connection with the nuclear family). To address these limitations, intact fraternal dyads were used in the present sample, with data collected from both brothers in each dyad, and the nature of the sibling configuration was identified.

Method

Respondents

The study consisted of 160 males comprising 80 intact brother dyads. Ages ranged from 7 to 68; the mean age was 24.08 years (SD = 9.63). The age difference between brothers ranged from zero to 10 years, with the mean age difference being 3.30 years (SD = 2.07). Brothers in 74 dyads were full biological brothers, while there were three dyads of half brothers, two dyads of stepbrothers, and one dyad of adoptive brothers.
Closeness in fraternal dyads

There were seven sets of twins whose zygosity is not known. In the respondents' families of origin, the number of children ranged from two to nine; mean number was 3.37 ($SD = 1.45$). The greatest percentage of respondents (36.5%) were first-borns; 32.5% were second-borns, 20.1% were third-borns, and the remaining 10.9% were born fourth or later. Just over half of the brothers had at least one sister (51.9%). Only one sibling dyad came from each family. At the time of the study, 27.0% of the respondents had a high school education or less, 49.0% had completed some college, and 24.0% had completed a baccalaureate and/or graduate degree.

Procedure

Undergraduate communication students received course credit for soliciting brother dyads to participate in the study. Male students who had at least one brother had the option of participating themselves, and they were given credit if both they and their brothers completed the questionnaire. To prevent student fabrication of responses, students were asked to provide the telephone numbers of the brothers to whom they gave surveys. Random follow-up calling revealed that all of those called had indeed completed the survey. This method has been used with similar success by other researchers (e.g., Dainton, Stafford, & Canary, 1994; Dindia, 1989).

Each respondent independently completed a written questionnaire and returned it anonymously to the investigator in a postage-paid envelope. Brothers were asked to report on their relationship with each other and to write a one-page narrative in response to the following: “Think of a time or situation in which you felt particularly close to your brother, and describe it below. Describe what you were doing, what was said, etc. What about the experience made you feel especially close?” This is a modified version of Swain's (1985) Meaningful Times Questionnaire, which asked respondents to describe a “meaningful” experience with a friend and to indicate what made it meaningful.

Data analysis

The research question asked how brothers experience closeness in their relationships. The goal in analyzing these data, then, was to identify themes and create a typology reflecting ways in which fraternal closeness was experienced. Respondents' narratives were content-analyzed with this goal in mind. Although data were collected from dyads, the individual was retained as the unit of analysis because brothers in only five dyads described the same event or situation in their narratives.

Content analysis was done independently by two coders, who were advanced graduate students, one of whom was blind to the research design and unaware of previous findings on fraternal closeness. At least two methodological options were available. The coders may have elected simply to code narrative responses into an existing typology generated by research on closeness in other types of relationships, such as friendships (for examples, see Monsour, 1992; Parks & Floyd, 1996). This method was rejected out of concern that it might mask patterns of interaction unique to fraternal relationships. Rather, an inductive approach akin to phenomenology was employed, whereby the language compris-

1. The range of sibling configurations sampled raises the question as to whether differences inherent between full-, half-, step-, and adoptive brothers affect the experience of closeness in their relationships. Patterns of thematic use for each of the four relationship types were compared informally to determine whether half-, step-, or adoptive brothers experienced closeness differently from that of full biological brothers. These relationships did not differ from the modal group in any important way. Although cell sizes for these relationships were too small to conduct meaningful statistical comparisons, the relative frequency with which each category was cited by each relationship type followed a pattern substantially similar to that of full biological siblings. Thus, it is unlikely that the inclusion of these three configurations contributed significant error variance to the overall analytic design.
ing each category is induced from respondents’ comments and the thematic scheme is allowed to emerge from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

A phenomenological approach aims to describe, illustrate, and classify themes of human experience in an inductive, exploratory manner. Unlike other methodologies, it is not designed to test specific hypotheses or to generate results that are meant to be widely generalizable. Rather, the purpose of this research was to describe the experience of closeness for the particular sample of brothers studied. Although generalizeability was not an explicit goal of the study, as Register and Henley (1992) noted, there is no reason to assume that the experiences delineated by respondents in this study would not be similar to those of other brothers with similar demographic characteristics.

The narratives were analyzed in a method similar to that utilized by Register and Henley (1992) and later by Inman (1993). Data analyses, or reductions, proceeded in a sequential manner, with several iterations to ensure rigor. The first perusal of the narratives involved the deletion of words deemed to be inconsequential to the situation being described, such as filler words. No words, or their order, were changed; rather, the narrative was simply condensed into a shorter, more workable form. As a reliability check, the coders then compared the reductions they had independently made. Agreement was reached in the most conservative fashion by retaining any details marked by either coder in the final condensed narrative. Coders then informally compared the condensed narratives with the originals to be sure that no significant detail or meaning had been lost in the reduction.

In the next iteration the thematic scheme began to develop. Thematic analysis is akin to quantitative factor analysis in that the objective is to identify the underlying structure or design organizing the data. The first step in the thematic reduction involved the identification of significant statements, which Register and Henley (1992) defined as elements serving a central or critical role in subjects’ accounts of their experiences (p. 470). In the identification of significant statements, coders looked for details in respondents’ accounts that were suggestive of how closeness was experienced, paying particular attention to respondents’ indications of why the event described made them feel especially close. Significant statements eventually serve as markers for the resultant thematic scheme, and so attention must be directed at ensuring their reliability. Intercoder agreement in the identification of significant statements was .96. Again, however, the most conservative measure was used, with coders’ individual compilations of significant statements combined into a master list that included any statement marked by either coder. The final list included 244 significant statements.

The next iteration involved the further reduction of significant statements into a thematic scheme. In some such reductions, only a percentage of the responses are initially used to construct a categorical scheme, and then the rest are coded into that scheme. In the present analyses, however, all of the significant statements were used from the beginning. At this point in the analysis, a third coder was added, a postgraduate who was naive to the research literature and who had not previously been involved in the study.

The process of identifying themes began by noting the frequency of recurrence across significant statements of similar words and phrases to describe experiences of closeness. Each significant statement was compared to each of the others to assess whether it was independent or illustrative of a common theme. As they proceeded through the significant statements, coders formed groups of similar statements that were suggestive of themes. Each statement that did not fit into an already established group formed the basis for a new group; thus, the process was continually dynamic and iterative.

Analysis of all 244 significant statements produced an initial scheme of nine catego-
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ries, or themes, in the explication of fraternal closeness. They included: shared conversation, shared humor, solidarity, companionship, competitiveness, comfort and ease, shared perceptions and memories, shared careers, and surviving shared adversity. Following Monsour (1992), only categories that represented at least 10% of the data points were retained in the final structure, with at least 24 significant statements having to be coded into a category for it to be retained. This criterion eliminated four categories, leaving five in the thematic scheme: shared conversation, solidarity, companionship, shared perceptions and memories, and surviving shared adversity. Collectively, these five remaining categories accounted for 185 significant statements, or 76% of the total.

This scheme of five categories was presented to two new coders, who were advanced graduate students not previously involved in the study. Each coded the same random sample of significant statements into the five-category scheme. Although phenomenology is a qualitative data analytic method, statistical reliability measures were performed at this stage to ensure that individuals not previously involved in the data analysis would reliably verify the five-theme typology. Intercoder reliability was assessed with Cohen’s Kappa. Overall κ = .91 (individual κ ranged from .86 to .96). Thus, the inductively derived five-theme typology was found to meet quantitative standards for reliability and was retained as the final categorical scheme.

For illustrative purposes, Table 1 portrays the complete method of reduction for one original narrative.

**Results**

Analyses of respondents’ accounts identified five themes categorizing the experience of closeness among brothers. These included (1) shared conversation; (2) solidarity; (3) companionship; (4) shared perceptions and memories; and (5) surviving shared adversity. Following is an explication of each theme and an analysis of its use and significance, including verbatim responses pertinent to each. Themes are presented in descending order of use. The ef-

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<th>Table 1. Complete reduction for one narrative</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Original narrative</strong></td>
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<td>The event I will describe is one night while we were getting ready for bed, we got into this discussion late at night around 12:30. We ended up talking for about 2–3 hours. We ended up going to bed at 2:30 in the morning. We talked about all kinds of things, our personal life, things that were going on in our life. We discussed his relationship with our father and how he never felt that he could live up to his expectations. I feel that discussion really made my brother and I [sic] close.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Condensed narrative with inconsequential materials removed</strong></td>
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<td>We got into this discussion ... we ended up talking for about 2–3 hours. We talked about ... our personal life, things that were going on ... We discussed his relationship with our father and how he never felt that he could live up to his expectations ... That discussion really made my brother and I close.</td>
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<td><strong>Significant statements identified</strong></td>
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<td>We got into this discussion</td>
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<td>That discussion really made my brother and I close</td>
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<td><strong>Themes represented by significant statements</strong></td>
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<td>All four statements represent the “shared discussion” theme.</td>
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fect of respondent age on the use of the five themes is also analyzed.

**Companionship**

The most commonly cited element in respondents’ descriptions of closeness was companionship, with 59 significant statements, or 24% of the total. This category included references to closeness as a function of shared interests, mutual activity, and including the other in one’s own activities, plans, and social networks. One man, 21, recalled his feelings of closeness during a shared sports activity:

My brother and I have a long history of soccer together. I think the time I felt particularly close to him was when I was a freshman in high school playing varsity with my senior-in-high-school brother. Later in our life we played indoor soccer together, and this is where the overlap of friendships probably began. I’m so confident in thinking of soccer as our major relationship builder that he will probably say the same thing.

Another man, 24, described the end of a shared sports activity as an experience of closeness with his brother: “Playing our last college game together, 1993 Rose Bowl. Walking off the field together, maybe for the last time. It was very emotional.”

Others described similar activities. A 21-year-old man recalled: “[We] were skiing in Utah together. Nothing special in particular was said, but I just felt an unspoken closeness and bond between us.” Another man, 28, echoed this sentiment: “Many weeknights up on the slopes together skiing, just the two of us. The feeling of closeness when we both had a great ski. Most of the time nothing was said, it was just a feeling.”

Finally, a 21-year-old man remembered: “My best memory with him was playing in the woods in Colorado. We could escape to another world out there. It wasn’t so much what was said that mattered. What mattered was that we were both there, together. I guess it’s about companionship.”

Some men described shared activities that involved travel and being together in a different environment. A 21-year-old recalled: “When we went on a fishing trip together to Alaska. We were always together, either fishing or exploring the area.” Another man, 20, indicated he felt close to his brother “recently, on a trip to Mexico. We had a great time snorkeling and exploring the city.”

In the “shared conversation” category below, it was notable that a number of conversations described were incidental to some type of shared activity. In the shared activities category, however, several respondents indicated that their activities brought them closer despite a conspicuous lack of meaningful conversation. A 22-year-old man recalled: “[We] were skiing in Utah together. Nothing special in particular was said, but I just felt an unspoken closeness and bond between us.” Another man, 28, echoed this sentiment: “Many weeknights up on the slopes together skiing, just the two of us. The feeling of closeness when we both had a great ski. Most of the time nothing was said, it was just a feeling.”

Some responses in this category described situations in which brothers felt close because they spent a great deal of time together or experienced social network convergence. One man, aged 21, pointed to high school as one such experience:

The time when I felt the most particularly close with my brother was the beginning of my senior year in high school, which was his sophomore year. Being a three-year high school, it was really the first time we attended the same school (besides early elementary). I guess it was mostly
because I realized then how well he got along with almost all of my friends as well as I with his.

Others recalled similar experiences from their college years, as did a 20-year-old man: "During my first year in college, my brother and I lived in the same residence hall. We shared all the same friends and spent a great deal of time together. We used to eat and drink, party together and sleep in the same room." Another man, 33, recalled a similar experience:

My brother was initiated into the fraternity that I belonged to. I was the rush chairman that had signed him the previous summer, and it was the same fraternity that our father belonged to in his college years. It was a good feeling to have my brother around again, knowing we would enjoy a couple of our college years together.

The common theme among responses in this category was that brothers feel close to each other because of the time they spend together and the activities they share. This emphasis on companionship is reflective of a number of studies explicating "masculine" referents for closeness, including Sherrod (1987), Swain (1989), and Wood and Inman (1993).

**Shared conversation**

Despite reports of "the inexpressive male" (Balswick & Peek, 1976), talking and sharing conversations emerged as a method for brothers to express closeness in their relationships. This category was the second most frequently cited of the five, having included 42 significant statements (17% of total). A 20-year-old man described an especially close conversation with his brother: "We began to discuss how we've changed over the years. I talked about how college made me more confident and open-minded, and he said how high school football toughened him up." A 22-year-old described a similar experience with his brother, aged 32: "We met for dinner and a rental movie at his house. His wife was gone and we had a good talk about their relationship. He shared the stresses he finds in his marriage. It felt good to know that he could come to me comfortably."

Indeed, many respondents cited particular conversational situations as the times they felt closest to their brothers. One man, 20, wrote: "One night after a party we sat in my room and talked. We talked about how we feel about many topics, such as each other, religion, society, family, our youth, and friends. I felt good and closer to him. After that talk I understood him more than anyone I know. It will be that way the rest of our lives." Another respondent, 18, described a situation in which his 20-year-old brother took him for a ride the day before he left for college:

It took most of the day and we had lots of time to talk about our relationship. My parents had recently divorced and my brother and I had different reactions to that, so we discussed it and came to understand each other's views. We talked a lot about growing up, and childhood experiences. It was clearly the closest I'd felt to my brother.

What was perhaps most noteworthy about this category, however, was the number of respondents who cited conversations of a less personal nature as expressions of closeness. Indeed, a number of the conversations described in this category would be classified as nonintimate in many coding schemes for conversational intimacy (e.g., Davidson & Duberman, 1982), as they centered on external topics such as work or sports rather than topics of a more personal nature. For example, a 28-year-old man recalled conversations with his younger brother: "We would talk for hours about when we were young and about school, work; it seemed to last the whole night."

Another man, 20, described a conversation in which he felt particularly close to his 22-year-old brother: "We were driving home from a party and we were talking about girls and stuff. It was the first time we had done so." Still another, 22, recalled, "We talked about women, sports, and school. I really felt close to him."
These conversations of a less personal nature were often incidental to a mutual activity. A 31-year-old man described such an instance: “We oftentimes visit our parents together and drive over to eastern Washington together. We usually talk about everything under the sun, and it is very easy for us to catch up on what is going on with each other.” Another man, 19, remembered a situation with his 22-year-old brother: “We were camping once, and we talked about life in general. It was deep.” Descriptions such as these were included in this category when it appeared that the conversation, rather than the activity, was of primary relational importance. (Narratives in which the activity itself was emphasized were included in the “companionship” category, explicated above.) These emphases on conversation as a component of a larger shared activity are indicative of Swain’s (1989) discussion of activity as a means of validating conversation or other forms of expressing closeness that are difficult for men to engage in overtly.

**Solidarity**

Included in this third most frequently cited category were descriptions of closeness as a function of brothers caring for each other and seeing to each other’s needs, both instrumental and emotional. Thirty-three significant statements, or 14% of the total, were coded in this category. One man, 20, indicated that sticking up for each other is what makes him and his brother close: “In general, when others cut one of us, the other bro [sic] stands up for the other.” Another respondent, 17, described such a situation involving his 12-year-old brother: “We were playing football and my best friend and brother got in a fight, and I wanted to beat the crap out of my best friend.”

At times, descriptions of brothers looking out for each other were function specific, as in the case of an 18-year-old man’s response: “We cover for each other oftentimes when we’re in trouble. We can sense each other’s thoughts in what to say next to keep the story straight. I generally start most excuses to get us out of trouble.” In other instances, however, the description was more general. One man, 18, described a time when he felt particularly close to his brother: “When out camping on a long trip, the first time separated from parents for that long of a time. We both basically looked out for each other. That’s all.”

For some brothers, solidarity was expressed through the sharing of emotional support and the provision of advice. A 31-year-old man recalled the support he received from his younger brother: “When my daughter was born, she was born with Down’s syndrome; he was very supportive and I felt touched by his emotional support.” Another man, 20, remembered his brother’s support: “When I was leaving for college, I was extremely scared, but he was there for me and made me feel much better.” Still another man, 23, described a similar instance: “When we were in Hawaii and I was having some tough problems he was there for me for support and advice. He really made me feel good.”

Although a verbal interaction, the provision of advice was included in this category, rather than in the “shared conversation” category, when it appeared that the emphasis was on the advice and support rather than simply on the verbal exchange. A 21-year-old man recalled how providing advice helped him feel closer to his brother:

When he [the brother] was having trouble deciding which path and choices he should take in his relationship, I was telling him of the pros and cons about it and what I would do. The whole ordeal lasted a week and was very tough for him to decide upon. But eventually he took the advice I gave him of ending the relationship and acted on it. I felt good about this because he chose to speak with me and act on my thoughts.

Another male, 17, indicated that receiving advice from his older brother made their relationship closer: “When we talk about advice that he is giving me, whether it be about school, work, sports, or any other reason [sic]. Maybe another time is
when we just encourage each other for various things.” The provision of advice was important even for younger respondents; a 14-year-old recalled an encounter with his 22-year-old brother: “I remember when I told him that I like this girl and that I didn’t know how to ask her out, and he would tell me how he used to do the same things.”

In essence, the responses in this category reflected a mutual commitment to “being there” for each other. Brothers described instances of emotional support, protective-ness, sharing advice, and defending each other as indicative of their relational solidarity.

Shared perceptions and memories

Although this category was cited with relative infrequency (27 significant statements, 11% of total), it embodies a distinct and theoretically useful focus. Responses in this category reflected the notion that brothers are close because of their positive memories, their shared perceptions about their relationship, and because of the exclusivity of those perceptions.

One man, 22, described at length how his relationship with his brother, aged 26, has been profoundly influenced by their grandfather: “He has always been the greatest supporter of both my brother and myself. Every summer, he invested his full energy to filling our lives with all that he could give. He is and will continue to be the quintessential hero figure in our existence.” He continued by describing how his closeness with his brother is based on their shared perceptions of their grandfather: “Without a doubt, every close moment that I have enjoyed with my brother is nothing less than an attempt by both of us to rebuild moments that we shared with our grandfather.” These brothers feel close to one another because of their shared admiration for their grandfather and their positive memories of his participation in their lives.

Others pointed to shared understanding of each other and mutual perceptions of the importance of their relationship as indicators of closeness. A 26-year-old man described his fraternal relationship this way: “Me and my brother are good friends—I mean the best of friends. We both know what the other guy needs, and will give our brother the shirt from our backs.” Another man, also 26, remarked, “My brother and I have very strong feelings for each other. We both consider the other to be our best friend, and very important in our lives.”

Brothers in these relationships indicated that they are close because they both feel close to the other, understand each other, and have a shared perception of how important their relationship is to each other.

Some men indicated that shared perceptions were important not only because they are shared, but because they are exclusive to the specific brother relationship. That is, closeness is based on a unique sense of empathy and understanding that follows from brothers’ shared perceptions. One man, 43, described an experience in which he felt close to his 41-year-old brother: “At a family gathering, talking about common childhood experiences, about fun we’d had together. Felt very happy, content, joyful, proud. Felt close because of shared perceptions and experiences. No one else ‘got it’ [sic].” This respondent indicated not only that he shared positive memories and mutual perceptions with his brother, but also that some perceptions and experiences were unique to his fraternal relationship and could not be understood by others outside that relationship.

Another man, 29, described feeling a unique sense of empathy and shared understanding with his 26-year-old brother during a trip to China with their father when the brothers were teenagers: “It seemed like we were on a foreign planet. He [my brother] was the only person who could relate the same way. We have always seen things in a special way.” This man described feeling close to his brother not only because they were sharing a unique experience and had mutual perceptions about it, but also because they could relate to each other in a way that no one else could.

This category is a theoretic addition to the inductive or phenomenological re-
search on closeness in other relationship types (for examples, see Inman, 1993; Parks & Floyd, 1996, Register & Henley, 1992). This is also true of the final category, surviving shared adversity, which is explicated below.

**Surviving shared adversity**

Included in this fifth most frequently cited category were descriptions of closeness as a function of brothers experiencing or helping each other through a shared crisis or adversity. This category included 24 significant statements, or 10% of the total. In some cases, it was the resolution of the adversity itself that helped brothers feel close to one another.

For example, a 21-year-old man described losing his 11-year-old brother in the crowd at a college football game.

I looked all over and saw a couple college friends so they helped me look for him. We couldn’t find him, and so about 30 minutes later the police were looking for him. I finally went back to my fraternity and was shocked to find him there. A high school friend in the fraternity across the street recognized him and brought him home. I was so scared. I thought he got kidnapped in the crowd. I was so relieved and more happy than almost any time I can remember when I saw he was safe.

Most descriptions in this category, however, involved the provision of mutual support and assistance during a crisis situation. In some cases, the support and assistance went primarily from one brother to the other. One man, 20, described such an occasion with his 21-year-old brother: “We had just seen my grandfather in the hospital who was sick with cancer. I became emotional and broke down in the car. He said the right things and gave me the right kind of comfort, which made the situation a lot easier for myself.” Another respondent, 19, described a situation involving his 17-year-old brother:

He was on an extension bridge that was about 20 feet high. As he threw a bucket over the edge to try and get water, he fell in with it, into about 2 feet of water. I heard him scream and was terrified for his safety. I immediately ran as fast as I could barefoot over sticker bushes and a boulder field to help him. It was then I realized how much he meant to me, because I’m not sure how many people I would have done that for.

In other cases, the provision of support and assistance was two-way, as brothers dealt with crises afflicted on them both. A 21-year-old man recalled such an instance, a time “When my mother was seriously ill in the hospital, on the verge of death. My brother and I had to help each other out to survive. We had to cook and clean the house, handle financial situations, while keeping my dad in line during this tough time. We just basically worked well together to get the jobs done and were there for each other emotionally.”

Another man, 27, described a similar experience: “When our father died, we became the father figure for our family. We were the only males on that side of the family. We became supportive of one another after losing our dad.”

Finally, a 20-year-old man described feeling close to his brother “during our parents’ divorce. We have depended on each other more ever since our parents got separated. Sticking together then got us through a tough time, and although we don’t get to see each other as often now, we still maintain a close relationship.”

**Comparisons by age**

The age range of the respondents allows for comparisons to illustrate whether the experience of closeness is affected by age. Some have suggested that the sibling relationship changes significantly over the life course (e.g., Cicirelli, 1985); consequently, the experience of closeness may also change as the fraternal dyad matures. A simple analysis of this potential effect was conducted. First, respondents were placed into one of four age groups. The “adolescent” group included respondents aged 19 and younger; the “early 20s” group included those aged
20 to 25; the “late 20s” group included those 26 to 30; and the “older adult” group included those over age 30. Frequencies of use for each of the five themes were then compared among age groups using multivariate analysis of variance. Age significantly affected the use of only one category, “shared perceptions and memories,” $F(1,113) = 2.74, p < .05 \eta^2 = .07$. Independent-sample t-tests were used to isolate specific group differences. Results indicated that older adults cited shared perceptions and memories as a component of closeness significantly more often than did adolescents, $t(39) = -2.32, p < .05$, and more often than did those in their early 20s, $t (68) = -2.14, p < .05$. Age did not significantly affect the use of any of the other four categories.

Discussion

Some theoretical perspectives suggest that brothers may experience relational closeness in ways that are unique to their relationship type. According to role theory, for example, behavior in the brother dyad may be influenced by the structural and socioemotional characteristics of that relationship, some of which are unique to the fraternal bond. Similarly, Swain's (1989) perspective of covert intimacy posits that male-male pairs will define and express closeness differently from that of dyads that include at least one female. Considered in concert, these perspectives suggest that the experience of closeness among brothers may not be adequately reflected in existing research on siblings, on male-male dyads, or on relational closeness in general.

The goal of this study was to delineate, using a phenomenological approach, the experience of closeness in the fraternal dyads studied. Systematic analyses of respondents' narratives revealed five themes characterizing the experience of fraternal closeness: companionship, shared conversation, solidarity, shared perceptions and memories, and surviving shared adversity. Some of these themes confirm previous work on closeness in sibling or male-male relationships. In addition, some themes emerged that have not been identified in prior work, and several elements of closeness commonly identified in previous studies did not emerge here.

Elements of fraternal closeness

The literature on self-disclosure is replete with reports that disclosure is less common and less valued in men’s relationships than it is in women’s (e.g., Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Williams, 1985). Hacker (1981) referred to women and men, respectively, as “blabbermouths and clams,” while Balswick and Peek (1976) popularized the term “the inexpressive male” to describe men’s communicative behaviors. These descriptions imply that men simply do not know how to express themselves in an interpersonal context.

Empirical findings have largely failed to support this characterization. In their meta-analysis of over 200 studies on self-disclosure, Dindia and Allen (1992) reported that sex differences in disclosive behavior were slight, less than one-fifth of a standard deviation ($d = .18$) Moreover, verbal interaction has emerged as a form of expressing closeness in most inductive investigations on the topic (e.g., Inman, 1993; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Swain, 1989). Parks and Floyd (1996) did report that conversation was cited as a referent for closeness significantly more often by women than by men. Although some have concluded from such findings that conversation and verbal interaction are simply not valued in men’s relationships, the present findings clearly suggest otherwise. Responses in the “shared
conversation” category indicated that verbal interaction is an important referent for male-male closeness, at least in fraternal relationships.

One important qualifier distinguishes the conversations described in this category from those studied in most research on self-disclosure: Several of them were not particularly personal or intimate. For example, some men recalled conversations about sports, school, or work when asked to describe a time in which they felt particularly close to their brothers. Because conversations on these topics generally do not involve the disclosure of personal information or the exchange of emotional expression, they are often considered non-intimate and of little value in relational maintenance (Davidson & Duberman, 1982).

An alternative explanation is that relational researchers have become biased toward intimate disclosures (Parks, 1994), despite evidence that much verbal interaction in a relationship is mundane and instrumental (Duck, Rutt, Hurst, & Strejec, 1991). The present finding suggests that conversation is a valued referent for closeness among brothers, even if it is not highly personal or intimate. It may be that, because of their level of shared personal history, brothers have less of a need for uncertainty reduction (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) than do other relational partners. As a result, intimate disclosure may not be as necessary a component of meaningful verbal interaction for brothers as for those in other relationship types.

The solidarity and companionship themes also confirmed findings in prior research on siblings and male-male dyads. Floyd (1995) reported that closeness among young adult siblings was founded on dependability and a shared understanding that siblings would always “be there for each other.” Solidarity may be a specific manifestation of this general tendency. Certainly, the provision of social and emotional support is commonly included in scholarly characterizations of siblinghood (Cicirelli, 1985; Gold, 1989). Brothers in the present study also opined that defending or “sticking up” for each other was an important part of solidarity. This finding may reflect ingrained feelings of loyalty shown to be characteristic both of siblings (Bank & Kahn, 1982) and of men’s same-sex relationships (Swain, 1989).

Similarly, companionship has come to be known as a trademark dimension of male-male relationships (Swain, 1985). Because of their more instrumental orientation (Parsons & Bales, 1955), men may place great value on shared activities in their same-sex dyads. Although a focus on activity (as opposed to conversation) has been cited as evidence that men avoid expressing feelings of closeness or intimacy in their same-sex relationships (e.g., Caldwell & Peplau, 1982), recent studies have suggested that companionship may, in fact, be the means by which men express closeness to each other (Wood & Inman, 1993). The present findings clearly support this interpretation, with a number of respondents citing shared activities as instances in which they felt particularly close to their brothers. As noted, several respondents made a point of indicating that their activities were manifestations of closeness even though no particular disclosure or significant conversation accompanied them. This further suggests that, for these men, activities can stand alone as embodiments of a closeness experience.

In addition to shared conversation, solidarity, and companionship, two themes emerged that have not been articulated in previous inductive research on closeness. The first was shared perceptions and memories. In this category, brothers indicated that they felt close to each other because of their shared history, and because of their understanding of each other and the importance of their relationship. Particularly for biological brothers or those raised in the same household from early childhood, the fraternal relationship is potentially the most longstanding and most significant same-sex relationship in men’s lives. Even if brothers do not share a great deal of positive affect—perhaps, especially
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if they do not—they still have a significant shared history that can be invoked when positive relational reinforcement is needed. Some of the respondents in this category also suggested that they felt close because they mutually acknowledged how important they were to each other. This finding may suggest a pattern of affective reciprocity by which people feel positively toward others whom they know feel positively toward them (see Berscheid & Walster, 1974).

The final theme was surviving shared adversity. Responses in this category resembled many in the solidarity category in that they described instances of mutual assistance and support. However, they focused on support during specific adverse situations, such as the illness or death of a family member, rather than supportiveness as a general relational characteristic. This distinction is important because it appears that crises function for these brothers as critical incidents in their relational development (Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985). That is, they are memorable events encountered in the relationship that contribute to a change in participants' perceptions of that relationship, much like the first time feelings of love are verbally expressed (Owen, 1987), or the first time a big fight occurs (Siegert & Stamp, 1994). For the brothers in this sample, a significant crisis may help them feel especially close to each other because it allows for the sharing of social and emotional support beyond that which is characteristic of everyday interaction. As such, the incident may elicit extraordinary displays of support, such as risking one's own safety to help another, and may be particularly memorable for that reason. It may also be that the intense nature of the incident makes one remember the interaction as more grand or dramatic than it really was.

Shared perceptions and memories and surviving shared adversity represent two themes in the explication of fraternal closeness that have not been identified in previous research on closeness, siblings, or male-male relationships. It is worth noting, too, that several themes identified in prior work on these issues did not emerge here, such as frequency of interaction (Berscheid et al., 1989b), joking (Swain, 1989), or global affective expression (Parks & Floyd, 1996). This finding further illustrates the uniqueness of the fraternal dyad and the difficulties inherent in defining and measuring closeness in the same way for all relationship types.

Age differences

The age range sampled raises the question of whether the experience of closeness changes significantly over the life span of the fraternal dyad. Siblinghood itself is not a static relationship, but one that is continually reconfigured throughout the life cycle; it is possible, then, that what constitutes closeness will also change. To assess this possible effect, the frequency of use for each of the five themes was compared among individuals in four age groups (adolescents, early 20s, late 20s, and older adults). These tests revealed that older adults cited shared perceptions and memories more often than did adolescents and those in their early 20s. This finding is an intuitive one, given that older individuals have had a greater opportunity to accumulate memories of their interaction. Age did not significantly affect the use of any of the other categories. This finding suggests that, for the brothers in this sample, conversation, solidarity, companionship, and surviving shared adversity are valued elements of relational closeness at every stage in the developmental cycle.

Conclusions

The present findings have at least two important implications for social scientists and consumers of their work. For one, they contribute to a growing dialogue on the relationship between academic and normative definitions of closeness. Clearly, a conceptual overlap exists between common operational definitions of closeness and participants' own delineations of the construct. Conversational interaction, for ex-
ample, is a common referent for closeness; indeed, many researchers have treated disclosure and closeness as synonyms. Companionship as a referent for closeness may also be reflected, at least partially, in the emphases on shared activities common to closeness measures such as the Relationship Closeness Inventory (Berscheid et al., 1989b).

Differences in academic and normative explications merit scholarly attention, however, because they suggest that some measures ignore characteristics of closeness important to a specific population, while focusing instead on elements that may have no particular value to that population. Certainly this does not mean that all previous research on closeness is without scientific merit. Rather, it suggests that greater attention should be paid to the ecological validity of instruments measuring closeness, and that the relationship between scholarly and native definitions of closeness should be examined within a variety of relational contexts.

Second, these findings provide a new framework for the development of instruments used to study fraternal relationships. One of the benefits of phenomenological research is that it describes specific phenomena as they are experienced by the population being studied; in so doing, it provides an empirically grounded starting point for subsequently developing scales and other instruments to measure and further study the same phenomena. It would certainly be worthwhile to augment this framework with comparable studies on how closeness is experienced in sororal and brother-sister relationships so as to develop a fuller understanding of the nature of siblinghood.

**References**


