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## Communicating Closeness Among Siblings: An Application of the Gendered Closeness Perspective

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*Relational research has suggested repeatedly that women's relationships are closer and more meaningful than men's. This conclusion is often defended with empirical reports that women self disclose more intimately than men do. Wood and Inman (1993) and others have suggested that men's relationships are not inherently less close than women's, but that men manifest closeness in ways that are more instrumental and less verbally oriented. The present paper refers to this position as the "gendered closeness perspective." While this perspective has been tested empirically within the context of close friendships, this research examines the relationships of same- and opposite-sex siblings to determine how the perspective applies in a familial context. Results indicate limited support for the "gendered closeness" perspective, primarily in same-sex relationships.*

Few relationships are as unique as the sibling bond. Friendships are often transitory and context-specific, marital unions fail nearly as often as they succeed, and relationships with parents or children wax and wane as other commitments interfere. Siblinghood, however, remains reassuringly constant. As Bedford (1993) noted, siblinghood endures longer than perhaps any other relationship in a person's life, covering most of the lifespan of each member. It is a relationship that at least 80% of Americans share (Secret World of Siblings, 1994). For some, siblings comprise the closest, most important bond in life; for others, they can be a source of frustration, rivalry, and ambivalence.

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## THE NATURE OF SIBLINGHOOD

Siblinghood is uniquely situated within the family social structure. It is the most egalitarian relationship in the immediate family (Scott, 1983), and because of its near-peer nature, it often resembles friendship more than it does a kin relationship (Bedford, 1993; Floyd, 1994). In adulthood, the sibling relationship is particularly unique because of the high level of mutual knowledge siblings share (Goetting, 1986). In virtually no other relationship do the members have such an extensive understanding of each other's personal history. At times, such privileged information gives siblings leverage for hurting each other emotionally; however, it can also create a strong and unique sense of empathy (Sandmaier, 1994).

Like most significant relationships, siblinghood is subject to gender influences. Differences in masculine and feminine gender socialization can translate into differences in the ways male and female siblings interact. It bears noting, however, that the majority of social psychological research on sibling relationships has focused on variables such as birth order or the impact of handicapped or chronically ill siblings, rather than on the influence of gender. Sandmaier (1994) lamented this as a critical oversight, "for it is *within* our childhood families that we learn, first and most deeply, the meaning of being female and being male in our culture, and our bonds with sisters and brothers both reflect and help to shape that primary education" (p. 68).

Among studies that have examined the influence of sibling gender, a notable trend has emerged. Pulakos (1989), for example, reported that female siblings were significantly more likely than males to engage in self-disclosive and emotionally expressive behaviors in their relationship (see also Brubaker, 1985; Connidis, 1988). As noted below, findings such as this have also been identified in studies of other peer relationships such as friendships, and have been interpreted as evidence that women's relationships are closer or more intimate than men's. The purpose of the study reported here was to test a competing view *the gendered closeness perspective* that suggests that men's relationships are not necessarily less close than women's, but are simply close in different ways.

## THE GENDERED CLOSENESS PERSPECTIVE

No variable seems to appear in research on closeness or intimacy more often than gender. The consensus for the last several decades has been that women's relationships are closer than men's. This claim has been defended repeatedly by reports that women self-disclose more intimately than men do (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Griffin & Sparks, 1990; Williams, 1985).

A number of scholars have recently suggested that women's relationships are not inherently closer than men's, but that men simply define and express closeness differently than women do. Cancian (1986), Sherrod (1987), Swain (1989), Seidler (1992), and others have posited that instead of measuring the closeness of their relationships by the level of verbal interaction, many men look to shared interests and mutual activities as ways to become close. Such instrumental referents for closeness have thus far been virtually ignored in social scientific research, however, because of a widespread belief that self-disclosure is the proper and most meaningful measure of close relationships (Parks, 1982).

While rhetorical advocacy for the *gendered closeness perspective* is growing, few studies have tested it empirically. Swain (1985) asked a sample of male and female undergraduates 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. 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 did not perceive their relationships to be significantly closer, more committed, or more satisfying than did men, suggesting equal value in both approaches to closeness.

Although the *gendered closeness perspective* has received some empirical support, the extent to which it applies in a familial context is yet unclear. As Floyd (in press; Floyd & Parks, 1995) has noted, siblinghood is subject to gender role influences, as are most personal relationships. However, because of their inherent similarity and presumed level of closeness, siblings may be affected differently by gender role influences than are relationships among non-kin. Examining the relationships of same- and opposite-sex siblings from the GCP would undoubtedly further understanding of the ways gender affects communication and interaction among kin.

### RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESES

In order to make a meaningful comparison between men's and women's styles of manifesting closeness, it is necessary first to ensure that the relationships being described are indeed equally close. Without such a comparison, it would be difficult to tell whether differences that emerged were due to sex differences in approaches to closeness or simply to varying levels of closeness. Thus,

RQ: How do men and women compare in terms of how close they report their siblings relationships to be?

If men's and women's relationships are found to be equally close, then the GCP would hypothesize the following effects:

H1: Women will consider self disclosure to be more important to the closeness of their sibling relationships than will men.

H2: Men will consider mutual activities to be more important to their relational closeness than will women.

Some researchers (e.g., Fitzpatrick & Badzinski, 1994; Gold, 1989) have suggested that gender effects in sibling dyads are intensified in same-sex dyads. This finding has also appeared in research on other peer relationships, such as friendships (Rose, 1985). This suggests that the gender configuration of the relationship (male same-sex, female same-sex, or cross-sex) may affect the ways in which closeness is manifested. Thus, the following additional hypotheses:

H3: Female same-sex siblings will consider self disclosure to be more important to their relational closeness than will male same-sex siblings or cross-sex siblings.

H4: Male same-sex siblings will consider shared activities to be more important to their relational closeness than will female same-sex siblings or cross-sex siblings.

### METHOD

#### Participants

Participants were 103 male and 132 female undergraduate volunteers from introductory communication courses at a large West coast public university. At the time of the study respondents had completed an average of 2.50 years of college, ( $SD = 1.39$ ), and the median age was 20 ( $M = 20.47$ ,  $SD = 3.51$ ).

## Measures

*Overall relational closeness* was measured with an eight-item Likert-type scale adapted from Floyd (1995). Items addressed perceptions of closeness, comfort and satisfaction with the relationship, and expectations that the relationship would continue. Respondents reported their level of agreement with each item using a seven-point scale on which higher values indicated greater agreement. The scale was found to be internally consistent ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

*Manifestations of closeness.* To determine manifestation of closeness, participants were presented with a checklist of 42 items and asked to indicate on a seven-point scale how important each item was to the closeness of the target relationship. (A complete list of the items is available from the author.) A higher value indicated that the item was of greater importance. Items included both behaviors (e.g., going to the movies, having a personal conversation, helping to solve a problem), and global relational states (e.g., trust, acceptance, mutual respect). The list was compiled by reviewing items used as indicators of closeness in previous studies of siblings and other peer relationships, including Pulakos (1989), Monsour (1992), Parks and Floyd (1996), and Swain (1989), and was augmented after a pilot study in which 20 undergraduates were asked to indicate what made their sibling relationships close. Items were selected for inclusion so as to make the list as representative as possible of original sources, without duplicating essentially similar items.

## Procedure

Participants completed a questionnaire with instructions on the first page that indicated whether they were to report on a same- or opposite-sex sibling. Fifty men and 62 women anonymously reported on a same-sex sibling, while 62 men and 61 women reported on an opposite-sex sibling.

## RESULTS

The research question asked how men and women would compare in terms of how close they reported their sibling relationships to be. Scores for closeness were compared by sex and relationship type (male same-sex, female same-sex, cross-sex) using one-way analyses of variance, and nonsignificant differences emerged both for sex, ( $F = .44, p > .05, df = 1,147$ ) and relationship type, ( $F = 1.38, p > .05, L, df = 2,147$ ). In this sample, therefore, men's relationships were equally as close as women's, allowing for meaningful comparisons in how that closeness is manifested.

Forty-two items were offered as potential manifestations of relational closeness. The items were subjected to a principal components factor analysis using varimax rotation<sup>1</sup>. Three factors had eigenvalues greater than 1 and collectively accounted for 68% of the variance (Table 1). (Bartlett test of sphericity was significant at  $p < .00001$ .)

The first factor included items assessing talk about personal issues and talk about the relationship, and was labeled *disclosure*. The second factor included activities such as attending events and participating in sports, and was labeled *activity*. The final factor included general affective states such as trust, comfort, and acceptance, and was labeled *affect*. Respondents' scores for each factor represent the mean of the items that loaded onto that factor and have a theoretic range of 1 to 7.

Main effects of sex and relationship type (male same-sex, female same-sex, or opposite-sex) were identified with two 2 X 3 ANCOVAs to test the hypotheses. The covariate was the age difference between respondents and their target siblings. Some prior research has suggested that differences in age between siblings may affect the closeness of their relationship (see Cicirelli, 1980).

Hypothesis one suggested that women would consider self disclosure to be more important to

TABLE 1  
Factor loading for three closeness factors

Item	Factor 1: Disclosure	Factor 2: Activity	Factor 3: Affect
Engage in personal conversation	.837	.193	-.146
Tell secrets	.699	.328	.172
Talk about own relationship	.737	.122	.120
Talk on a deep level	.809	.334	.034
Talk about fears	.806	.222	.073
Do things outdoors	.144	.891	.090
Attend events together	.011	.853	.159
Participate in sporting events	.009	.855	.126
Trust	.325	.027	.682
Comfort	.230	.150	.774
Acceptance	.211	.080	.752
Knowing we are close	.091	.121	.775
Being able to say anything	.376	.198	.654

the closeness of their sibling relationship than would men, but the hypothesis was not supported. The covariate in this test was significant,  $b = -.10$ ,  $t = -2.03$ ,  $p < .05$ , indicating that the age difference between siblings affects how important they view disclosure to be to the closeness of their relationship. However, the main effect for sex was not significant,  $F = .12$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $df = 1, 137$ .

Hypothesis two predicted that men would consider mutual activities to be more important to their relational closeness than would women. This hypothesis was not supported. The second ANCOVA tested the main effect of sex on the activity factor. The covariate was nonsignificant, and so was the main effect,  $F = 1.88$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $df = 1, 137$ .

Hypothesis three suggested that female same-sex siblings would consider disclosure to be more important than would opposite-sex siblings or male same-sex siblings. This hypothesis was supported. The first ANCOVA identified a significant main effect of relational type on the disclosure factor, ( $F = 3.07$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $df = 2, 137$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ ). (As noted above the covariate was also significant.) Post hoc t-tests revealed that mean scores for female same-sex siblings ( $M = 5.00$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ) were significantly higher than those for opposite-sex siblings ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ),  $t = 2.39$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $df = 115$ . Female same-sex siblings also scored higher than did male same-sex siblings ( $M = 4.29$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ),  $t = -2.06$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $df = 716$ ).

Hypothesis four proposed that male same-sex siblings would consider shared activities to be more important to their relational closeness than would opposite-sex siblings or female same-sex siblings. This hypothesis was supported. The second ANCOVA identified a significant main effect of relational type on the activity factor,  $F = 3.95$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\zeta^2 = .05$ ,  $df = 2, 13$ . (As noted above the covariate was nonsignificant.) As hypothesized, mean scores for male same-sex siblings ( $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ) were significantly higher than those for opposite-sex siblings ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ),  $t = 2.39$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $df = 98$ . Male same-sex siblings also scored higher than did female same-sex siblings ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ),  $t = 2.10$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $df = 71$ .

## DISCUSSION

The *gendered closeness perspective* suggests that in close relationships, women and men will manifest their closeness in inherently different ways. It proposes that women, on the whole, will be more likely to value the amount or intimacy of self disclosure and verbal interaction as manifestations of closeness, while men will look instead to shared interests and mutual activities as referents. Previous research has provided some empirical support for the perspective within the context of close friendships.

Levels of overall relational closeness were similar for men, women, and all gender configurations of the sibling relationships, indicating that it was appropriate to compare the ways in which closeness was manifested. It was hypothesized that women in the present study would report, overall, that disclosure is more important to the closeness of their relationships than would men, and that men would report activities to be more important to their relational closeness than would women. These main effects were not significant. Certainly, this finding does not mean that women and men do not define closeness in these respective ways; rather, it indicates that these definitions of closeness are not significantly gender-specific.

One possible reason why the expected pattern failed to emerge is suggested by the inherent similarity that siblings share, as compared to other personal relationships. Besides a striking genetic similarity, siblings share a level of mutual experience that surpasses that of nearly every other relationship in the life course. This shared understanding may, in sibling relationships, outweigh the socialized effects of gender role prescription when it comes to defining what makes the relationships close. It may also be the case that familial relationships are characterized by a level of assumed closeness that is not highly dependent on disclosure or mutual activity to sustain. Floyd (1995) reported that, compared to friendships, closeness in sibling bonds was more likely to be founded on the dependability of the relationship and a shared awareness that one's siblings will always be one's siblings.

Although the two main effects were nonsignificant, the same effects were significant for the gender configuration of the relationship. In both instances, the gendered closeness perspective was supported for women and men reporting on their same-sex siblings. Thus, sisters considered disclosure to be more important to their closeness than did brothers or sister-brother dyads. Likewise, brothers reported activities to be more important to their closeness than did sisters or sister-brother dyads. This focus on same-sex dyads may be reflective of prior research suggesting a greater emotional intensity in the relationships of same-sex siblings than opposite-sex siblings (see Fitzpatrick & Badzinski, 1994; Gold, 1989).

Present findings suggest that although siblings, on the whole, may be more influenced by their familial ties and the endurance of their relationships than by their gender roles when defining what makes their relationships close, they are not completely immune to the effects of gender role prescription. Indeed, it appears that gender effects are simply more context-specific with siblings than with other relationships in which the gendered closeness perspective has been studied, emerging only with same-sex others.

Future studies may shed light upon two apparent limitations in this study. First, given that the respondents were undergraduate students, primarily in their early 20s, it is difficult to generalize findings much beyond this group. Similar comparisons with siblings in other age groups may illuminate how these patterns covary with one's place in the life cycle. Secondly the self-report format of the data collected may be influenced by participants' misperceptions of their own relationships. This possibility may be mitigated in future studies by collecting data with experimental or observational methodologies.

A fuller understanding of gender effects in the familial context may also be gained in future research by examining the application of the *gendered closeness perspective* in other family sub-systems. Additional research in this area could contribute to a growing understanding of the family as a social and gendered institution.

#### NOTE

1. The decision rule for inclusion in the final factor structure was that an item have a factor loading of at least .60 on its own factor and less than .40 on every other factor.

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