Advice About Life Plans and Personal Problems in Late Adolescent Sibling Relationships

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ABSTRACT

This study examined older adolescents’ perceptions of the following sibling relationship characteristics: advice about life plans and personal problems, satisfaction with support, and sibling influence on interests and goals. Little is known about late adolescent sibling relationships and siblings’ role in the identity formation process. Differences between first- and secondborns, males and females, and opposite- and same-gender sibling pairs were explored. Participants were 223 adolescents (M = 17.5 years old) who filled out a survey in their senior year of high school. All adolescents were from always-married families and had one sibling between the ages of thirteen and twenty-three. Analyses revealed that both secondborns and females report receiving more advice, more satisfaction with support, and more sibling influence than firstborns and males, respectively. In addition, those in female-female sibling pairs received more advice from their siblings than those in male-male and mixed gender pairs. Findings revealed that adolescents do sometimes rely on their siblings as a source of advice about life plans and personal problems. Though sibling relationships become more egalitarian with age, with issues of developmental significance a hierarchical structure may exist. The results also suggest that females have more intimate relationships with siblings, particularly female siblings, than males.
The nature of sibling relationships changes as children and adolescents grow older. At present, most of the information on sibling experiences has come from younger children's relationships (e.g., Bryant & Crockenberg, 1980; Dunn & Kendrick, 1982; Dunn & Munn, 1986) or later in the lifespan (e.g., Cicirelli, 1982). More recently, researchers have begun to focus on sibling relationships in adolescence (e.g., Stocker & Dunn, 1994). However, research on adolescent sibling relationships has focused predominantly on early and middle adolescence, and, therefore, little is known about sibling experiences in late adolescence.

Much of the information on late adolescent sibling experiences has derived from studies examining the changing nature of sibling experiences from childhood through adolescence. Investigations have found that as children grow older, the amount of affection and companionship between siblings decreases (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Buhrmester & Furman, 1990). Buhrmester (1992) proposes that a decrease in warmth and disclosure between siblings in adolescence parallels the developmental course of teenagers' relationships with their parents and their increased involvement outside the family. However, this decrease should not be interpreted as meaning that siblings do not remain important in each other's lives during adolescence. Reports of the absolute levels of disclosure and companionship with siblings reveal that these remain relatively high (Buhrmester, 1992; Stocker & Dunn, 1994) and that siblings are still primary sources of emotional support in late adolescence (Lamb, 1982).

Adolescent siblings play an important role (Buhrmester, 1992). During adolescence, identity formation is an ongoing process. Older adolescents must make important job, family, and education plans. At present, we know something about parent-adolescent discussion of life plans
(Hunter, 1985; Barber, 1994). However, we know nothing about the role of siblings in the identity formation process. Because adolescence is a time when parents and children may have difficulty communicating about emotionally-laden issues, an adolescent may find it easier to talk with a sibling than with a parent (Lamb, 1982). Adolescents may want advice from someone with whom they have a long and established relationship, someone who may hold similar values, and someone who can serve as a testing ground for ideas before they are discussed with parents.

Sibling experiences may vary by the gender of the adolescent, birth order, or sibling gender constellation. Past studies focusing on the impact of these status variables on sibling relationships in preschool or early childhood have shown few links or inconsistent results (Dunn, 1988; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Stoneman, Brody, and MacKinnon, 1984). It is not known, however, whether gender of the adolescent, birth order, and gender composition of the sibling dyad increases in importance with development. Buhrmester (1992) has criticized the research on sibling relationships, arguing that the importance of sibling constellation variables as important predictors of sibling experiences has not been emphasized. To address this, the present study examined whether older adolescents’ perceptions of three sibling relationship characteristics: (1) advice about life plans and personal problems; (2) satisfaction with support from sibling; and (3) siblings’ influence on interests and goals, differed by adolescent gender, birth order and gender composition of the sibling dyad.

**Birth Order and Sibling Relationship Characteristics**

The experience of a relationship with a sibling is not a uniform one. Older and younger siblings likely have different perceptions of their relationships (Dunn, 1992). Buhrmester (1992)
provided preliminary evidence that older and younger siblings' perceptions of the level of conflict in their relationships differed, with increased divergence in adolescence. Older siblings viewed their younger siblings as an annoyance, while younger siblings reported greater intimacy and more admiration for their older sibling. In addition, older siblings’ reports of antagonism with their younger siblings showed a slight increase, whereas younger siblings perceived the rate of conflict as declining.

A relationship with an older sibling may have important consequences for a younger sibling. Studies have demonstrated that older siblings often serve as guides or teachers for younger siblings (Dunn & Kendrick, 1982; Klagsbrun, 1992; Vandell, et al., 1987). In late adolescence, older siblings may act as a guide and give advice about life plans and personal problems to younger siblings. Older siblings may be seen as an important source of support and knowledge to younger siblings and have influence on younger siblings’ goals and interests. Older siblings generally make decisions regarding school, family and career plans before younger siblings, and therefore may be viewed as an influential resource about these types of decisions. Older siblings are often more likely to influence younger siblings than to be influenced by them (e.g., Bryant, 1982; Newman, 1991; Rogers & Rowe, 1988). This hierarchical quality, or complementary feature (Dunn, 1983), of sibling relationships may be true with issues of developmental significance, particularly with older siblings experiencing developmental tasks before younger siblings do.

Adolescent Gender and Sibling Relationship Characteristics

How the gender of the adolescent influences sibling relationship experiences is often not
emphasized or is ignored (see Buhrmester, 1992). Buhrmester (1992) found a trend suggesting that adolescent girls report greater intimacy with siblings than do boys. Findings from another study, suggest that girls viewed their sibling relationships as more supportive than boys (Furman and Buhrmester, 1992). This difference is consistent with social psychologists’ research findings that females may be more competent at exchanges involving intimate disclosure (Reis, 1986; Wheeler, Reis & Nezleck, 1983). Adolescent gender may influence adolescents’ perceptions of the three sibling relationship characteristics: advice about life plans and personal problems, satisfaction with support, and siblings’ influence on interests and goals. For example, females may report more satisfaction with support from their siblings than males.

**Sibling Gender Constellation and Sibling Relationship Characteristics**

Sibling gender constellation may have an increasing developmental importance for sibling relationships. In preschool and early childhood there is little evidence of a association between gender constellation and the quality of sibling relationships. Recent studies of middle childhood, however, reveal that the gender composition of the sibling dyad is linked to the exchange of intimate disclosures. During middle childhood intimate disclosure is most common in same-gender sibling dyads (Buhrmester, 1992; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). Similar results have been found in studies of young adolescents’ perceptions of the sibling relationship (Bowerman & Dobash, 1974; Buhrmester and Furman, 1990). This pattern is likely to continue into late adolescence and the content of intimate disclosure may include developmentally relevant issues such as seeking advice about life plans and personal problems. Adolescents from same gender-sibling dyads may receive more advice from their siblings than adolescents from opposite-gender
sibling dyads. Also, it may be that the greater self disclosure between same-gender sibling pairs may be associated with adolescents reporting more satisfaction with support from their siblings than adolescents from opposite-gender sibling pairs.

At present, there is no evidence regarding the differential influence of opposite- or same-gender siblings on older adolescents’ interests and goals. Similar findings, however, to adolescents’ reports of satisfaction with support are expected, with adolescents from same-gender dyads reporting more sibling influence on their interests and goals. The relationship between advice and sibling influence may be stronger in same-gender sibling pairs because same-gender sibling pairs may relate to each other more easily and may expect similar life experiences.

**Summary**

The sibling relationship is an important one and the nature of sibling experiences changes as children grow older. Little is known, however, about older adolescents’ sibling experiences. Older adolescents may rely on their siblings for advice concerning decisions about career, family and education plans, and personal problems. Birth order, gender of the adolescent and the presence of a same- or opposite-gender sibling have all been linked to children’s and adolescents’ perceptions of particular domains of the sibling relationship. However, these potential moderators of siblings’ experiences have generally focused on younger children’s sibling relationships. Different birth orders, gender of the adolescent and the presence of an opposite- or same-gender sibling may be associated with sibling different experiences in areas such as sibling influence and satisfaction with support from a sibling.

**METHODS**
Data were drawn from the sixth wave of the Michigan Study of Adolescent Life Transitions (MSALT). These data were collected in 1990 when participants were seniors in high school. MSALT began in 1983, when the students were making the transition from the sixth to the seventh grade (for recruitment and attrition information, see Eccles, et al., 1989). The study was designed to investigate normative and nonnormative transitions during adolescence.

Participants

The participants were from nine predominately white middle- and lower- middle class school districts in southeastern Michigan. The sample's socioeconomic characteristics were representative of the families in the selected school districts. The ethnic diversity of the sample was limited; 87% identified themselves as Caucasian, 7% as African American, 1% as Asian, 1% as Latino, and 2% as Native American (Clark & Barber, 1994). The ages of the participants at the sixth wave ranged from 16 to 19; the modal age (47% of the sample) was 17.

At the sixth wave, 1,351 adolescents completed the survey. Of the 1,351 students responding at the sixth wave, 966 reported that their parents were married and living together.¹ Twenty-five adolescents in always-married families whose parents had been married less than 15 years were excluded from the sample.

The sample was further limited based on sibling constellation requirements. Those excluded were 227 adolescents with more than one sibling or no siblings. The sample was

¹ Separate analyses revealed no differences between adolescents’ reports from divorced and always-married families. In addition, there were no significant interactions of either birth order or gender by family structure (Jenkins, 1995). The cell sizes in divorced families were too small to conduct analyses for gender composition. To maintain the clarity of the paper, only always-married families were included.
confined to adolescents with only one sibling, because some items used for this study were about all the siblings within the family and not restricted to a particular sibling. Because it was not possible to discern which siblings the adolescents were describing, only adolescents with one sibling were included. Eighty-one adolescents whose sibling was not between 13 and 23 years of age were excluded. The age of the sibling was restricted to about a five to six year interval because the focus of this study was adolescent siblings and the nature of the sibling relationship characteristics being examined. For example, siblings less than thirteen years of age would likely have little or no influence on an older adolescent's life plans. Nine pairs of twins also were excluded because this study examined birth order effects. Therefore, the final sample included 223 adolescents who reported their parents were married and living together throughout the adolescents' lives.

Procedures

Students were asked to fill out a 57 page questionnaire containing approximately 750 items one month prior to the end of the students' senior year of high school. All of the subjects who participated were given ninety minutes to complete the questionnaire in their school cafeterias while research staff members were present to answer questions. Questionnaires and postage-paid return envelopes were mailed to students who had participated in previous waves of data collection but were absent on the day of the survey.

Measures

The questionnaire covered a large number of topics including the students' beliefs,
values, and attitudes about self, and the nature of their relationships with parents, siblings, peers, and adults outside the family.

**Family Structure**

Respondents were asked to check the marital status of their biological ("natural") parents. Students who reported that their parents were “married and living together” and that this had been their parents’ marital status for more than fifteen years were included. Respondents were asked to check the number of siblings living inside and outside their home. Only students who had one sibling were included in this study.

**Sibling Status**

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had a brother or a sister. The respondent’s birth order in relation to the sibling was determined by comparing the birth date of the respondent to the age of the sibling.

**Advice on Life Plans and Personal Problems**

One section of the questionnaire contained a series of seven items about advice from siblings: (1) “My sibling (s) and I talk about my future job and educational plans”; (2) “My sibling (s) and I talk about my future family plans”; (3) “My sibling (s) and I talk about my personal problems”; (4) “Talks with my sibling (s) have helped me to make educational plans after high school”; (5) “Talks with my sibling (s) have helped me to make job plans”; (6) “Talks with my sibling (s) have helped me to make family plans”; and (7) “Talks with my sibling (s) have helped me to solve personal problems”. The response scale for the first three items ranged from 1 (“Never”) to 7 (“A lot”) and the scale for the last four items ranged from 1 (“A little”) to 7 (“A
lot”). A mean of the seven items was computed for an index of advice on life plans and personal problems ($M = 3.13$, s.d. = 1.67). The Cronbach’s alpha for the composite was .95, indicating high internal consistency.

**Satisfaction with support**

Satisfaction with support from a sibling was measured by one item rated on a seven-point scale: (1) “How satisfied are you with the emotional support you get from your sibling(s)?”. The range of the scale for the item was from 1 (“Not at all satisfied”) to 7 (“Very satisfied”) ($M = 4.33$, s.d. = 1.92).

**Sibling Influence**

Siblings’ influence on the respondents’ interests and goals was measured with one item: “How much influence has your sibling had on your interests and goals?”. The response scale ranged from 1 (“A little”) to 7 (“A lot”) ($M = 3.35$, s.d. = 1.86).

**RESULTS**

Multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) were used to examine birth order, gender, and gender constellation differences in the three sibling relationship characteristics: advice about life plans, satisfaction with support and sibling influence. Due to unequal cell sizes, Type III sums of squares were used in all analyses (Lewis & Kiren, 1977). When the overall MANOVA was significant, follow up univariate tests analyzed the source of the multivariate effects (see Tables 1, 2, 3).

The first MANOVA examined birth order differences in the three sibling relationship
characteristics\(^2\). The omnibus test was significant indicating first- and secondborn children have different sibling relationship experiences, (Wilkes criterion = .90), \(F(3, 203) = 7.38, p < .001\). Univariate tests revealed secondborns received more advice, were more satisfied with support from siblings, and they were influenced more by their older siblings (see Table 1).

A second MANOVA investigated sibling relationship differences by the gender of the reporting adolescent. A significant multivariate effect was revealed, (Wilkes criterion = .94), \(F(3, 203) = 4.05, p < .01\). Follow-up univariate tests indicated that females reported getting more advice, being more satisfied with support, and being influenced more by their siblings than males (see Table 2).

A third MANOVA revealed differences by sibling gender constellation, (Wilkes criterion = .92), \(F(3, 203) = 2.69, p < .01\). Univariate analyses showed significant effects for advice and satisfaction with support. Follow-up Newman-Keuls tests indicated that adolescents from female-female sibling pairs received more advice from their siblings than male-male and mixed-gender sibling pairs. No significant pairwise comparisons emerged between different gender constellations of the sibling dyad for satisfaction with support (see Table 3).

**DISCUSSION**

The present study demonstrated that older adolescents sometimes rely on their siblings as a source of advice about life plans and personal problems. For example, adolescents reported mean levels of advice ranging from 2.5 to 4.0 on a 7-point scale. These means are similar to the

\(^2\) Age spacing of the sibling pairs was considered. Analyses of siblings spaced two or less years apart were contrasted with siblings spaced three or more years apart and 2 X 2 ANOVA examining age spacing and birth order effects were not significant.
means reported in Barber's (1994) study of advice about life plans from fathers to older adolescents in divorced and always-married families. The means for receiving advice from siblings, however, are lower than adolescents' reports of advice from mothers (Barber, et al., 1992). Previous findings have demonstrated that adolescent siblings tend to disclose less to each other than at earlier ages (Buhrmester, 1992). These findings, however, suggest that receiving advice about life plans and personal problems is an important dimension of sibling relationships in late adolescence.

This study examined three characteristics of older adolescent sibling relationships in always-married families but future studies could explore if similar patterns for the three sibling relationship characteristics are evident across family contexts. For example, expanding on the work of Barber (1994), an examination of siblings in divorced families could investigate whether adolescents' relationships with their noncustodial fathers are related to adolescents seeking advice from their siblings. Barber (1994) found great variability in the frequency with which adolescents from divorced families had contact with their fathers. It might be fruitful to investigate whether adolescents with little contact with their fathers depended on their siblings more often for advice about life plans and personal problems.

Related to this, Fuligni and Eccles (1993) found that when adolescents were not satisfied with their relationship with their parents, they tended to be more peer oriented and sought more advice about personal and future issues from their peers than from their parents. In addition to increasing peer orientation, unsatisfying parent-child relationships may be related to adolescents' seeking more advice from their siblings. It has been proposed that a poor relationship with an
adult will be compensated for by a close relationship with a sibling (Bank & Kahn, 1982a,b). Bryant and Crockenberg (1980) reported an increase in sibling prosocial behavior between sisters when their mothers ignored them. On the other hand, some researchers have argued that there is a positive association between parent-child and sibling relationships. Studies have found support for a congruence hypothesis, indicating, for example, that positive parent-child relationships are linked to positive sibling relationships (Bryant & Crockenberg, 1980). Bryant and Crockenberg’s study (1980) demonstrated that sibling relationships can have both compensatory and congruent characteristics. Whether adolescents are more or less likely to turn to their siblings for advice when they have a poor parent-child relationship is important area for future study.

**Birth Order and Sibling Relationship Experiences**

A goal of this study was to investigate whether older and younger siblings had different sibling relationship experiences. Buhrmester (1992) has shown that siblings of different birth orders have different perceptions of the level of conflict between them and different tendencies to confide in a sibling. In accord with Buhrmester’s work, differences were found in older and younger siblings’ perceptions of getting advice from siblings, satisfaction with support and siblings’ influence. In all three instances, younger siblings perceived higher levels.

The differences between older and younger siblings’ perceptions of advice and siblings’ influence suggest a power or status structure of the sibling relationship. Past studies indicate that sibling relationships become more egalitarian and less asymmetrical with age (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990; Vandell et al., 1987). Though the present study is not longitudinal, it is clear that for these particular domains a hierarchical relationship between siblings exists in late adolescence.
Buhrmester and Furman (1990) suggest the relative difference between siblings in power decreases as younger siblings become “more competent and independent” (p. 1395) and, therefore, the sibling relationship becomes more symmetrical. Perhaps, with issues of developmental significance younger siblings seek nurturance and direction from older siblings. Younger siblings may rely on their older siblings for advice about life plans and personal problems because older siblings may be more likely to have the experience and resources to provide younger siblings with advice and emotional support. Older siblings may have more influence on younger siblings, because younger siblings view older siblings as an informed source of information about life plans and personal problems.

The conclusions and inferences that can made from the results of this study are limited by the cross-sectional nature of the data. Longitudinal data would provide the opportunity to discern patterns of stability and change that may characterize adolescents’ sibling relationship experiences. For example, analyses of longitudinal data could provide insight into patterns of closeness or advice giving between siblings. It may be that the exchange of advice between siblings may be related to the increasing egalitarian quality of sibling relationships as children get older.

**Adolescent’s Gender and Sibling Relationship Experiences**

Females reported more satisfaction with support, greater sibling influence and more advice from a sibling. Gender differences in sibling relationship experiences may be related to females being more competent at intimate exchanges (Reis, 1986; Wheeler, et al., 1983). Females also report greater intimacy with their siblings than males do (Buhrmester, 1992). Because males are
less skilled at intimate exchanges and are less likely to discuss feelings and issues with their siblings, males may be less likely to seek advice from a sibling. Males also may get lower quality of advice from their siblings. These differences may account for males reporting lower amounts of sibling influence and satisfaction with support from their siblings than females.

**Sibling Gender Constellation and Sibling Relationship Experiences**

Research on gender differences in sibling relationship experiences and research on same versus opposite gender sibling pairs' sibling experiences help explain why female-female pairs were more likely to get advice than male-male or mixed gender pairs. Studies of young adolescent siblings have shown that intimate disclosure is more common in same gender pairs (Bowerman & Dobash, 1974; Furman & Buhrmester, 1990). Similar results have been found for adolescent siblings' feelings of warmth and closeness (Bowerman & Dobash, 1974; Buhrmester & Furman, 1990; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). Perhaps adolescents from female-female sibling pairs are more intimate and, therefore, can relate to the experiences of each other more easily than adolescents from male-male and opposite-gender sibling pairs.

More research should explore older adolescent sibling relationship experiences. Though the intensity of sibling relationships decreases with age (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990; Buhrmester, 1992), siblings still play an important role in each others' lives. Future research, however, on sibling relationships should continue to incorporate a developmental framework. In addition, future examinations of various family processes associated with different sibling relationship experiences should continue to take into account the birth order, gender of the respondent, and sibling gender constellations. Finally, this study examined only one sibling's view
about experiences in the sibling dyad, however, future researchers are encouraged to include both siblings' reports of their relationship. Having each members' report of the sibling dyad would provide opportunities to examine the symmetry/asymmetry of siblings' perceptions of their relationship.
REFERENCES


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Stocker, C., Dunn, J., & Plomin, R. (1989). Sibling relationships: Links with child temperament,


Table 1.

**Multivariate Analyses of Sibling Relationship Characteristics by Birth Order.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Older siblings (n = 106)</th>
<th>Younger siblings (n = 101)</th>
<th>E-stat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advice</td>
<td>2.68 (1.37)</td>
<td>3.66 (1.84)</td>
<td>19.00***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with support</td>
<td>4.11 (1.67)</td>
<td>4.67 (2.04)</td>
<td>4.69*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling influence</td>
<td>2.84 (1.57)</td>
<td>3.89 (2.00)</td>
<td>17.81***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* *p < .05. ***p < .001.
### Table 2.

**Multivariate Analyses of Sibling Relationship Characteristics by Adolescents’ Gender.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>F-stat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 112)</td>
<td>(n = 95)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice</td>
<td>3.52 (1.67)</td>
<td>2.72 (1.61)</td>
<td>12.22***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with support</td>
<td>4.66 (1.89)</td>
<td>4.06 (1.82)</td>
<td>5.32*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling influence</td>
<td>3.65 (1.81)</td>
<td>3.00 (1.87)</td>
<td>6.46**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: * \(p < .05\). ** \(p < .01\). *** \(p < .001\).*
Table 3.

Multivariate Analyses of Sibling Relationship Characteristics by Sibling Gender Constellation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female pairs (n = 47)</th>
<th>Male pairs (n = 33)</th>
<th>Mixed pairs (n = 127)</th>
<th>F-stat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advice</td>
<td>3.96 (1.63)</td>
<td>2.96 (1.74)</td>
<td>2.91 (1.61)</td>
<td>7.36***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with support</td>
<td>5.02 (1.65)</td>
<td>4.36 (1.95)</td>
<td>4.16 (1.90)</td>
<td>3.74*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling influence</td>
<td>3.83 (1.88)</td>
<td>3.36 (2.01)</td>
<td>3.17 (1.80)</td>
<td>2.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Means with different superscripts differ significantly at p < .01 by the Newman-Keuls test.

* p < .05.  *** p < .001.