

Communication Between Siblings

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Abstract

Sibling relationships are considered to be one of the longest because they are literally a from “birth to grave” relationship. Because of this consideration, it is important to understand how sibling relationships function. Research found that the main motives for communication between siblings are intimacy and comforting. Research related these motives to commitment, along with stating that communication and commitment do not change over time. A study also found that different relational dyads (brother-brother, brother-sister, and sister-sister) were slightly different when regarding the strength of the relational bond, where sister-sister relationships tend to be stronger. Each of these findings can be applied to various other types of relationships, and should be done so, since a sibling relationship is one of the longest types known.

Communication Between Siblings

Not many people in life can have a relationship with another person from childhood through adulthood, with one exception being a sibling. Being the longest time a person could have a relationship with another human, the concept of sibling communication is important to research and understand. Learning how and why siblings communicate could perhaps open a door to better understanding of communication in other relational dyads, since sibling communication grows and is present throughout a person's life. To understand sibling communication, the motives of communication have to be evaluated; when communication occurs and how it changes throughout a person's lifespan also needs to be addressed. Sibling communication contains a high level of intimacy and comfort, which does not change over time, and is slightly affected by gender. The main motive for sibling communication is intimacy and comfort, which can also be related to how committed a sibling is in the relationship (Fowler, 2009). Sibling commitment and communication does not change throughout the life span, but rather it remains very stable (Rittenour, Myers, & Brann, 2007). Gender dyads have somewhat of an impact on the strength of the relationship, such that sister-sister relationships are reported to be a stronger bond than brother-sister or brother-brother, although further research should be done to conclude stronger results (Spitze & Trent, 2006). Communication between siblings can be observed and used in almost every type of relationship.

The motivation for communication between siblings must be determined, whether it is an act done out of obligation or out of love. Fowler (2009) conducted a study to find the most important reason siblings communicate. He found that the most noticeable motives for communication between siblings were considered to be relational in nature, such as intimacy and comfort (Fowler, 2009). A cause for this could be that there are many reasons that involve

communication through comfort or intimacy such as births, deaths, divorces, and even parent-child conflicts. Situations like these tend to cause people to come closer together in order to overcome the ordeal. In correlation with this, Myers and Bryant (2008) researched how siblings behaviorally indicate commitment for each other. They would define such comforting and intimacy behavior's that Fowler recorded to be along the lines of social support, which come in many types such as tangible, emotional, informational, esteem, and network (Myers & Bryant, 2008). These social supportive behaviors show commitment to the relationship, meaning that the relationship is based not on obligation, but on a more personal field (Myers & Bryant, 2008). Intimacy and comforting can also be shown in affectionate communication. Myers, Byrnes, Frisby, and Mansson (2011) define affectionate communication, showing love towards another person, as being done in two forms; routinely and thoughtlessly, or strategically, which is much more thoughtful when trying to comfort. Rather than being used unconsciously, affectionate communication is used strategically, or consciously, for comforting and maintaining the sibling relationship (Myers et al, 2011). Intimacy and affectionate communication can relate to building a relationships bond, as Alder and Proctor state. They define intimacy as "a state of close union, contact, association, or acquaintance", and as having four dimensions: Physical, Intellectual, Emotional, and Shared Activities (Alder & Proctor, 2013). Each dimension has its own form of making a relational bond stronger, both in sibling relationships and friendly ones. For a person to maintain or even acquire a relationship as strong as a sibling relationship, following the same motivations such as comforting and supporting like siblings do could produce such results. While not all relationships last a life time, sibling relationships generally do, therefore it must be looked at whether the effects of time result in changes in sibling commitment and communication.

Research shows that communication and commitment between siblings does not change over the relationships lifespan. Fowler (2009) found, through a survey study, that although siblings of an older age generally felt responsible for each other, siblings at each life stage were motivated primarily by intimacy mentioned before. Since intimacy is the primary motive for communication, regardless of age, the commitment of the relationship should correlate with that. Rittenour, Myers, and Brann (2007) conducted a study to find whether sibling commitment varies across the lifespan. Results showed that commitment between siblings remained stable across the lifespan, which could be due to the fact that siblings characterize their relationships as being loyal. Not only is the commitment stable, the study also showed that the commitment was centered on communication-based emotional support and use of affectionate communication, tying back to the motives of sibling communication to intimacy and comfort (Rittenour et al., 2007). Rittenour and colleagues (2007) suggest that emotional support comes in a variety of forms, for example that the relationship gets stronger when the passing of a parent occurs. Behaviors like these are considered to be strategic affectionate communication, and are used to comfort and strengthen the relational bond. Alder and Procter (2013) discuss relational commitment as involving a promise to remain in a relationship and make it successful, saying that commitment is important in every type of relationship. Commitment and affection can be used in all relationships, not just sibling, strengthening it accordingly. To understand more specifically how different relationships could be, it should be looked at whether different relational dyads change the commitment and closeness of the relationship, such as brother-brother, sister-brother, and sister-sister relationships.

Research shows that women are more open in regards to their relationship (Alder & Procter, 2013) and that sister-sister bonds tend to be more satisfying than the other relational

dyads (Spitze & Trent, 2006). Alder and Proctor (2013) report that communication of same-sex friendships differ between genders, such that women tend to disclose more personal information in the relationship, whereas men express closeness through shared activities. Cross-sex friendships offer other benefits like a view in a different perspective (Alder & Proctor, 2013). While friends can be chosen, siblings cannot, therefore researchers conducted studies to find relationship was stronger: sister-sister, sister-brother, or brother-brother? They also asked if the relational dyad changed the way the relationship communicated or showed commitment. Spitze and Trent (2006) stated that along with previous research, they found that the bonds between sisters tend to be stronger, and is shown in acts like talking on the phone more often, exchanging advice more often, and the siblings even feeling closer (Spitze & Trent). However, when respondents were asked if their sibling would be considered to be one's closest friend or if they got along together well, it did not depend on the relational dyad but rather the gender of the respondent (Spitze & Trent). While not all data matches up, it could be concluded that same gender relationships are easier to acquire and maintain, especially after understanding the characteristics of the longest relationships to take place.

After reviewing how sibling communication occurs, it can be concluded that there is correlation between sibling communication and almost every other type of relationship. It should be noted that sibling communication contains a high levels of intimacy, which is not affected over time, but is slightly affected by gender. Understanding sibling relationships helps in understanding and maintaining other relationships when these relationships lack in a form of communication that a sibling relationship contains. The results listed throughout this paper are not conclusive however, implying that it would be beneficial to the understanding of these relationships if further research was done on investigating into the subject. Future research

should include a more in depth understanding of how gender differences affect the relationship. It would also be beneficial to note the differences based on birth order and/or age in regards to gender differences. The mixed gender relationship should also be researched closer, in regards to age, such as when the sister is older than the brother and vice versa. However, even without further research being done, sibling communication can still help in regards to maintaining and assisting in other relationships.

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