Relationship Satisfaction between Parent-Child and Child-Sibling

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Abstract

Study examined the affective status of the relationships between child and mother, child and father, and child and sibling. 80 participants answered items measuring their satisfaction with 14 aspects of their relationship with each parent and the sibling furthest in age. Independent variables included the sex of the participant, sex of the sibling, and birth order. Dependent variables reflected their relationship satisfaction with each of 14 items for each parent and their sibling most different in age. Participants were more involved, more intimate, and felt closer to their mother than their father, and females felt closer to both parents than did males. Birth order had no effect. Attitudes depended on the similarity in the gender of the participant and the sibling. Both males and females, cooperation and intimacy was greatest for female siblings, and conflict was greatest for male siblings, i.e., same sex/opposite sex sibling relationships produced opposite results.

*Keywords: relationships, satisfaction, parent, sibling*
Research on relationship satisfaction within families has revealed them to vary from positive to negative and from close to distant. This paper examines the factors of birth order, sex of the participant, sex of the parent, sex and relative age of the sibling and relationship satisfaction. The purpose of this study is to determine how these factors affect the perceptions of mother-child relationships, father-child relationships, and how this varies for males and females.

The first family relationship an individual has is with their parents. In the past, studies of the intergenerational bond between parents and their children focused on the gender relationship of the parent and child. Family members tend to value and expect a level of closeness and connection between daughters and mothers more so than between fathers and sons (Proulx & Helms, 2008).

Research that has examined parent-child relationships is quite broad focusing on such characteristics as parental nurturance, closeness, discipline, and the consequences of the family relationship on the parent and child (Starrels, 1994). Relationship satisfaction in these parent-child relationships has been found to vary according to the gender of child and the parent. Starrels (1994), for example, reported that fathers are much more involved with their sons and tend to concentrate more on active aspects of support, (e.g., coaching, doing homework), whereas mothers tend to be more supportive for both their sons and daughters in the traditional affectionate sense. These gender differences show how fathers tend to have a much closer and more positive relationship with their sons than with their daughters. Starrels (1994) had expected to find that mothers would be closer to their daughters and younger children, while fathers would be more involved with their sons and their older children. It was also predicted that fathers’ closeness to daughters would be greater when they had brothers. Results from Starrel’s (1994) study did not bear out these hypotheses; rather they showed that mothers tended to be more
constructive in the traditional, affective sense for sons and daughters, whereas fathers were much more involved with their sons.

Another study that explored feelings within families of adolescents (Phares, Renk, Duhig, Field & Sly, 2009) found that both boys and girls reported significantly higher levels of positive affect and lower levels of negative affect towards their mother than their father. Still another study revealed that both positive and negative affect was positively correlated for mother-son, father-son, and father-daughter relationships, but this was not the case for mother-daughter relationships. Parent's also demonstrated significantly less negative affect with their same sex child (i.e., mothers and daughters, fathers and sons) than they did with their opposite sex child. Boys showed more positive behavior and less negative behavior than girls toward their mothers and fathers. (Duhig & Phares, 2009)

Russell and Saebel (1997) also examined sex differences in parent-child relationships during childhood and adolescence, reporting that fathers differentiate between sons and daughters to a greater extent than mothers. They concluded that gender indeed has a powerful and pervasive influence on relationships within a family but they conceded that other factors such as parenting style may also contribute to the parent-child relationship (Russell & Saebel, 1997).

Researchers have also examined various aspects of adult sibling relationships within the family. Spitze and Trent (2006) measured the affective closeness, contact and helping among adult siblings, concluding that gender is an important variable mediating their relationships. They reported that siblings are typically central to the lives of adults and that most sibling relationships involve frequent contact and positive feelings. Sisters are more often willing to
exchange advice to one another than other sibling pairs, (i.e., brothers and opposite sex siblings). Sisters talked more on the phone, felt closer, and were able to share emotions more readily than other sibling pairs. Overall, the conclusion from was that women are more likely than men to report feeling close and able to get along with their siblings.

One other factor that has not received much attention is birth order. Birth order has been reported to impact family relationships but the findings are mixed. For example, one study by Feinberg, Mchale, Crouter & Cumsille (2003), interviewed first and second born siblings who reported on their family relationships. In this study, there was no evidence that age spacing and sibling gender played any significant role in their relationships. However, as the children got older, the parent-child relationship changed. When the children were very young, parents invested more time and affection in them compared to when they were older. The authors concluded that this was consistent with the idea that increasing differences between siblings over time in parent-child warmth were linked to the increasing warmth and closeness and decreasing conflict in the sibling relationship. The affection and closeness with a parent diminished as affection and closeness with a sibling increased.

Birth order had influence on relationship satisfaction is previous research that examined the nature and correlates of adolescents’ perceptions of sibling influence. Both first born and second born children’s perception of sibling influence was measured. Older and younger siblings reported different influence patterns whereas firstborns illustrated as being more of a role model and second borns illustrated as modeling after firstborns. Personal qualities also factored into the reports of influence of sibling (Whiteman and Christiansen, 2008).
Another study of birth order that did not find significant results began with the assumption (based on literature) that middle born college students commonly report worse family relationships than students with other birth orders. In this study, researchers examined association between birth order and self-reported family and friend relationships. It was found that middle borns did not differ from other birth orders in relationships with their father, mother or sibling. Middle born children did not prefer a friend over their father, mother or sibling any more than children from other birth orders. First born children were more likely to report very good sibling relationship and they preferred a sibling over a friend. (Pollet and Nettle, 2009)

Other research on the role of birth order focused on mothers’ choices of children as sources of support and closeness (Suitor and Pillemer, 2000). They wanted to determine if birth order plays a role in the mother’s consideration of child relations. It was found that last born children were more likely to be named by their mothers as the child they were most emotionally close with. First borns were most likely be chosen as those to whom they would turn in a crisis. Birth order had no effect on which mothers selected to provide care if they became sick or handicapped. Middle borns were neglected in mothers’ choices and underrepresented which researchers would have thought otherwise, due to the actual number of middle borns that exceeded first and last born. (Suitor and Pillemer, 2000)

It can be assumed that from these literature reviews that birth order, sex of the participant- sex of the parent, sex and relative age of the sibling and relationship satisfaction. These factors affect our perceptions of mother-child relationships, father-child relationships, and how this varies for males and females, which I furthered in my research.
In this current study of relationship satisfaction between parent-child and child-sibling, it was hypothesized that, females will have a closer and more positive relationship with their mother than with their father, males will have a closer and more positive relationship with their father than with their mother, females will have a more distant relationship with their male siblings, males will have a more distant relationship with their female siblings, participants’ relationship with their opposite sex siblings will be more negative as they are further apart in age, participants who are first born will have a closer and more positive relationship with both mother and father than will their siblings, and participants who are last born will have a more distant relationship with both mother and father than will their siblings.

Method

Participants

Participants in the study included 80 people from Monmouth University in the east coast. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 28, with the mean age of 19.6. 46% were freshman, 22.5% were sophomores, 20% were juniors, and 11.3% were seniors. The sample in this study were participants from the undergraduate participant pool (SONA Systems). These participants received course credit for their involvement in this study.

Materials

The questionnaire created for this study is called the Relationship Satisfaction Questionnaire. Its purpose is to determine the affective status of the relationships between child and mother, child and father, and child and sibling furthest in age. The Relationship Satisfaction Questionnaire, shown in Table 1, includes fourteen items answered using a 5 point rating scale where A=Not at all and E=A great deal. The same items are used for measuring the relationship satisfaction of the participant and participant’s mother, father, and the sibling furthest in age.
from the participant. The questionnaire was modified from the works of Hendrick (1988) and Miller and Lefcourt (1982). The demographic questionnaire, shown in Table 2, asked the participant to list themselves and each of their siblings according to birth order, age and sex and indicate their self with an (x). Additional demographic information included the participant’s ethnicity and year in school.

Procedure

Participants signed up for this study using a web based participant pool called SONA. Participants met the researcher at a designated room where the study took place. When seated, participants were given an informed consent statement that was read aloud by the researcher, signed and returned to the researcher where it was filed in a separate folder to ensure anonymity. The participants were then provided a copy of the Relationship Satisfaction Questionnaire and instructed to answer the questions for mother, father, and furthest sibling in age. Upon completion, the demographic questionnaire was filled out. The participant was asked to list themself and each of their siblings according to birth order, provide the sex and age for each person, and then indicate themselves with an (x). After completed and collected, the participants were debriefed by the researcher who read the debriefing form aloud. The participants were also given a debriefing form to take with them for any further questions or concerns that they may have had for this study.

Design

This study was a 2 x 2 x 4 x 2 Mixed Design. The independent variables were (1) the sex of the participant with two levels, male or female, (2) sex of the sibling with two levels, same sex and opposite sex, (3) birth order with four levels (only child, first born, middle child, and last born), and (4) comparison between parents with two levels (mother, father). The dependent
variables were the relationship satisfaction with each of parent (mother, father) and the relationship satisfaction with their sibling. The statistics used to analyze these data was an ANOVA.

Also, the analyses of a Factorial Design MANOVA was performed in determining how positive or negative the relationship between mother and sibling and mother and participant with factors such as independent variables of sex of participant, sex of sibling, and sibling age.

Results

Participants generally were more involved, more intimate, and felt closer to their mother than their father, and females felt closer to both parents than did males. Birth order had no effect. Several Sex X Sibling-Sex interactions revealed that attitudes about mother, father and a sibling depended on the similarity in the gender of the participant and the sibling. For both males and females, cooperation and intimacy was greatest for female siblings, and conflict was greatest for male siblings, i.e., same sex/opposite sex sibling relationships produced opposite results.

An analysis of a Mixed Design ANOVA was conducted for each of the fourteen questions comparing mother and father for each. For questions 1-4 and 7-12 there were significant results between mother and father. The results are shown in Figure 1. There was a sex difference of how often the participant feels judged by, how much they like to spend alone time with and a marginal trend of how much damage is caused by atypical disagreement in their relationship.

Reaction to Mother

The analyses of a Factorial Design MANOVA was performed in determining how positive or negative the relationship between mother and sibling and mother and participant with factors such as independent variables of sex of participant, sex of sibling, and sibling age.
RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

There was a significant finding for the (IV) sex of participant. The results showed that females would spend more of their leisure time with their mother than males would, $F(1, 66) = 6.83; p < .011$. There are more females that would confide personal information to their mother than males, $F(1, 66) = 5.13; p < .027$. There are more females that would spend time alone with their mother than males, $F(1,66) = 7.00; < .010$.

Also, significant findings of interactions of (IVs) sex of participant X sex of sibling and sex of participant X sibling age. The results showed that males and their same sex sibling have more problems in their relationship with their mother than females and their same sex sibling, and males and their opposite sex sibling have less problems in their relationship with their mother than females and their opposite sex sibling, $F(1, 66) = 4.24; p < 0.43$. Results show that males and their older sibling have more problems in their relationship with their mother than females and females with their younger sibling have more problems in their relationship with their mother, $F(1, 66) = 5.13; p < .027$.

*Reaction to Father*

The analyses of a factorial Design MANOVA was performed in determining how positive or negative the relationship between father and sibling and father and participant with factors such as independent variables of sex of participant, sex of sibling and sibling age.

There was significance of sex of participant and reaction to father. Males often feel judged by their fathers than females, $F(1, 66) = 7.14; p < .010$. There is more damage caused by atypical disagreement between females and fathers than males and fathers, $F(1, 66) = 3.89; p < .05$. Younger siblings often confide very personal information to their father than older siblings, $F(1, 66) = 4.17; p < .045$. 
Also, significant findings of interaction (IVs) sex of sibling X sibling age and sex of participant X sex of sibling X sibling age. Results showed that males and their opposite sex sibling confide very personal information to their father than females and their opposite sex sibling and females and their same sex sibling confide very personal information to their father than males, F(1, 66) = 4.84; p < .031.

There is a marginal trend that females for both with same sex and opposite sex siblings report that it is more important to them that their father understand their feelings than males, F(1, 66) = 3.71; p < .059. Males and their same sex sibling and opposite sex sibling have more problems in their relationship with their father than females, F(1,66) = 7.73; p < .007.

Results shown for sex X sex of sibling X age of sibling show that females that have a younger same sex sibling feel it is more important that their father understands their feelings vs. males. Males that have an older same sex sibling feel it is more important that their father understands their feelings vs. females. Males that have a younger opposite sex sibling feel it is more important that their father understands their feelings than females. Females who have an older opposite sex sibling feel it is more important that their father understands their feelings that males, F(1, 66) = 4.04; p < .049.

Reaction to Sibling

The analyses of a factorial Design MANOVA was performed in determining how positive or negative the relationship between sibling and participant with factors such as independent variables of sex of participant, sex of sibling and sibling age. Results show that there was a significant sex difference where males are more often to confide personal
information to their sibling than females, F (1, 67) = 5.46; p < .022. Males feel closer more often their sibling than females do with their siblings, F(1, 67) = 5.47; p < .022.

Sex of sibling (same or opposite showed significant results. Participants with same sex siblings spend more leisure time with than opposite sex sibling, F(1, 67) = 6.37; p < .014. Participants with opposite sex siblings often keep more personal information to themselves and not share with their sibling than participants with same sex siblings, F(1, 67) = 5.29; p < .025.

The interaction between the variables sex of participant X sex of sibling showed significant findings that males with same sex siblings have many more problems than females with same sex siblings and females with opposite sex siblings have many more problems than males with opposite sex siblings, F(1, 67) = 6.54; p < .013. Another interaction between the variables sex of sibling X age of sibling was found significant, where same sex sibling confide personal information to their older sibling more than their younger sibling, and opposite sex siblings confide personal information to their younger sibling more than older sibling, F(1, 67) = 7.38; p < .008. Results showed a significant finding for variables sex X sex of sibling X sibling age that males with same sex younger sibling spend more leisure time together than females would on the other hand females with same sex sibling whom are older spend more leisure time together than males would, and males with opposite sex sibling younger and older spend more leisure time together than females would, F(1,67) = 4.10; p < .047.

Birth Order

The analyses of a Mixed Design ANOVA was done to analyze four questions with the variables sex X birth order X parent to determine if birth order is a factor of relationship satisfaction mother vs. father. The results show that participants feel closer to their mother than
their father, F (1, 73) = 10.51; p < .002. Significance results for sex, that conclude that females are more likely to spend time along with their parents than males, F(1, 73) = 5.87; p < .018.

When it comes to how satisfying the relationship is more participants were likely to report a more satisfying relationship with their mother than father, F (1, 73) = 10.69; p < .002. In reporting how many problems there are in their relationship results showed that there is significance in the interaction sex X birth order condensed; males who are later born (2\text{nd}, 3\text{rd}, etc.) have more problems in their relationship than 1\text{st} and only born and females whom are 1\text{st} born and only child have more problems in their relationship than later born (2\text{nd}, 3\text{rd}, etc.) females, F(1, 73) = 5.65; p < .020.

**Discussion**

This study examined the relationship satisfaction within one’s family. The overall purpose was to see the affective status of the relationships between child and mother, child and father, and child and sibling. I predicted that females will have a closer and more positive relationship with their mother than with their father and males will have a closer and more positive relationship with their father than with their mother. The results indicated that participants generally were more involved, more intimate, and felt closer to their mother than their father, and females felt closer to both parents than did males. Also, I predicted that participants who are first born will have a closer and more positive relationship with both mother and father. Participants who are last born will have a more distant relationship with both mother and father. Results indicated that birth order had no effect.

Lastly, I predicted females will have a more distant relationship with their male siblings, males will have a more distant relationship with their female siblings, and participants will have
a negative relationship with their opposite sex siblings who are further apart in age. Results concluded several sex X sibling-sex interactions revealed that attitudes about mother, father and a sibling depended on the similarity in the gender of the participant and the sibling. For both males and females, cooperation and intimacy was greatest for female siblings, and conflict was greatest for male siblings, i.e., same sex/opposite sex sibling relationships produced opposite results.

Some confounds for my study could be if the person just got into a fight with either their mother, father or sibling before they walked into the study could have altered their responses to the questions. If I were to do this research study or related study again I would try to get a more equal sample ration male: female. It would be ideal for determining if there are gender differences in relationships between child and mother, child and father, and child and sibling to have more items in my questionnaire. This would help to get a better understanding of the participants’ relationships of satisfaction within their family.
Reference


Figure 1. Means comparing relationship satisfaction to mother and to father.
Figure 2. Means of how many problems there are in the relationships between participant and mother, participant and father and participant and sibling.