

The Role of Gender and Partner in Adolescents' Use of Assertive and Affiliative Language in Interactions with Siblings and Friends

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Abstract

As part of a longitudinal study, we examined adolescent girls' and boys' use of affiliative and assertive language with siblings and friends. Although some of our results replicated previous findings, others suggested greater complexity in the roles of gender and partner in adolescents' assertive and affiliative language use. For all forms of assertive language, target and sibling gender seemed to matter more than partner; for affiliative language, however, partner seemed to matter more than gender.

Introduction

Research on gender differences in children's and adolescents' use of affiliative and assertive language has focused primarily on interactions with same-sex peers. Based on these studies, researchers (e.g., Leaper & Ayres, 2007) have long suggested that boys use more assertive language than do girls, and girls use more affiliative language than do boys. In addition, girls of various ages have been found to mitigate expressions of negative affect and self-assertion during interaction with friends more than boys do. There is also some evidence that elementary school-aged boys mitigate expressions of positive affect and affiliation during interaction with friends (e.g., Bryant & DeHart, 2005).

However, these gender differences may be specific to same-sex peer interactions. Sibling relationships provide a very different social context for language use and emotional expression than peer relationships do and may offer different opportunities for the use of assertive and affiliative language. In particular, sibling relationships provide a setting in which naturally occurring mixed-sex interactions can be readily observed.

In past studies of early and middle childhood, we have found different patterns of gender differences in sibling interactions than in friend interactions during early and middle childhood (Laudico et al., 2010; Rabinowitz et al., 2009; DeHart et al., 2007). In addition, we have found that the gender of a child's sibling made a difference in his or her interaction with a friend as well as with the sibling. Finally, gender differences depended somewhat on the valence of assertive utterances (positive/negative) and on the presence or absence of mitigation.

In the current study, we extended our past research to examine girl's and boy's use of affiliative and assertive language with siblings and friends in adolescence. We were particularly interested in examining the role of mitigation, possible differences between positive and negative uses of assertive language, and the impact of partner gender.

Method

Participants

- 30 white, middle-class 17-year-olds living in western New York.
- Target adolescents were each paired with a sibling and with a same-age, same-sex friend.
- Half of the siblings were 15-30 months older and half were 15-30 months younger than the target adolescent; half were the same sex as the target adolescent, and half were of the opposite sex.

Procedure

- Sibling and friend dyads were videotaped during 15-to 25-minute sessions during which they were asked to either bake brownies or make a pizza together.
- Videotapes were transcribed and then coded for the use of assertive and affiliative language.
- Assertive utterances were those used primarily to influence or control others' thoughts or behaviors in order to accomplish a goal (e.g, directives or assertions of desires, intentions, opinions, or rules).
- Affiliative utterances were those used primarily to establish or maintain social interaction with others (e.g, showing support, expressing agreement or inclusion, seeking contact or approval).
- Assertive and affiliative utterances were further coded as mitigated or unmitigated. Mitigated utterances were those that softened the impact of the utterance—that made it appear less assertive or affiliative (e.g., indirect requests, tag questions, subjunctive forms, sarcasm or jocularity, use of play voice). Some examples are: "You're so ridiculous, I love you!" "Let's just use the square pan, okay?" "How about you go wash the dishes?"
- Assertive utterances were further coded as positive or negative. Negative utterances were those that had negative affect or tone, or displayed opposition (e.g., disagreements, negative intonation, frustration). Positive utterances were those that lacked negative affect and were said either neutrally or with positive affect (e.g., simple requests or commands, telling stories, friendly utterances).

Analyses

Relative rates of various types of assertive and affiliative utterances were analyzed using 2 (partner) X 2 (target gender) X 2 (partner gender) repeated measure MANOVAs.

Results

Assertive Language

As in past research, boys showed a higher level of total assertive utterances/minute than girls did (F = 6.17, p < .05). There was also a target gender x sibling gender interaction; both boys and girls with same-sex siblings produced more

Table 1

Target Child Use of Positive and Negative Assertive Language by Gender and Partner

Positive Assertive Utterances Per Minute		Negative Assertive Utterances Per Minute	
<u>Sibling</u>	<u>Friend</u>	Sibling Friend	
2.42	2.90	0.90 0.60	
2.98	2.99	0.93 0.59	
1.94	1.40	0.76 0.08	
2.01	2.13	1.47 1.10	
	Sibling 2.42 2.98 1.94	Sibling Friend 2.42 2.90 2.98 2.99 1.94 1.40	

Table 2

Target Child Use of Mitigated and Unmitigated Assertive Language by Gender and Partner

	Mitigated Assertive Utterances Per Minute		Unmitigated Assertive Utterances Per Minute	
	<u>Sibling</u>	Friend	Sibling Friend	
Target Child/Sibling				
Female/Female	1.49	2.05	1.78 1.44	
Male/Male	1.49	1.52	2.42 3.02	
Female/Male	0.81	0.80	1.79 0.68	
Male/Female	1.23	1.55	2.27 1.68	

Table 3

Target Child Use of Mitigated and Unmitigated Affiliative Language by Gender and Partner

	Mitigated Affiliative Utterances Per Minute		Unmitigated Affiliative Utterances Per Minute	
	Sibling	Friend	Sibling Friend	
Target Child/Sibling				
Female/Female	0.53	0.57	2.75 4.59	
Male/Male	0.48	0.77	3.62 3.59	
Female/Male	0.60	0.30	3.72 6.42	
Male/Female	0.54	0.32	2.27 3.79	

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assertive utterances/minute than boys and girls with opposite-sex siblings, regardless of whether they were interacting with their sibling or with their friend (F = 6.51, p < .05). There were no partner effects for total assertive utterances/minute.

The picture becomes more complex when the valence of the assertive utterances is considered (see *Table 1*):

- There was no main effect of gender for positive assertive utterances. However, there was a target gender x sibling gender interaction; boys with sisters produced more positive assertive utterances than boys or girls with same-sex siblings, and girls with brothers produced the fewest positive assertive utterances (F = 9.69, p < .01).
- Overall, boys produced more negative assertive utterances than girls (F = 5.73, p < .05).
- Regardless of gender, target adolescents with sisters produced more negative assertive utterances than target adolescents with brothers (F = 5.65, p < .05).
- There were no overall partner effects for positive or negative assertive utterances.

Considering the presence or absence of mitigation sheds further light on the gender effects for assertive utterances (see *Table 2*):

- Regardless of partner, boys used more unmitigated assertive utterances than did girls (F = 4.97, p < .05).
- Regardless of partner, target adolescents with same-sex siblings, especially girls, used more mitigated assertive utterances than did target adolescents with opposite-sex siblings. For mixed-sex sibling dyads, boys with sisters used more mitigated assertive utterances than girls with brothers (F = 4.71, p < .05).
- There were no partner effects for mitigated or unmitigated assertive utterances.

Affiliative Language

There were no gender effects for total affiliative language; however, there was a partner effect. Adolescents used more affiliative utterances/minute with friends than with siblings (F = 13.05, p = .001).

When the presence or absence of mitigation was considered, however, gender effects emerged for affiliative language (see *Table 3*):

- Regardless of gender, target adolescents used more unmitigated affiliative language toward friends than toward siblings (F = 16.97, p < .001).
- Overall, girls used more unmitigated affiliative language than boys did (F = 4.00, p = .056).
- There was also a gender x partner interaction effect; girls used more unmitigated affiliative language than boys only with friends; no gender differences were seen in interactions with siblings (F = 4.24, p < .05).
- No significant effects were seen when assessing mitigated affiliative utterances.

Discussion

Some of our results replicated previous findings. However, others suggested greater complexity in the roles of gender and partner in adolescents' assertive and affiliative language with siblings and friends, with noticeable differences in the behavior of adolescents with same- and opposite-sex siblings.

For all forms of assertive language, target and sibling gender seemed to matter more than whether the target was interacting with a sibling or with a friend. Perhaps most surprisingly, sibling gender was related to both boys' and girls' use of some forms of assertive language with friends as well as siblings. Concordance between sibling and friend gender heightened the rate of assertive utterances overall and mitigated assertive utterances in particular. For both boys and girls, having a sister seemed to foster the use of positive, negative, and mitigated assertive utterances. For overall affiliative language, partner seemed to matter more than gender; gender effects emerged only when partner was also considered.

These findings suggest that partner influences on adolescents' use of assertive and affiliative language are more subtle than simple modeling of gender-typical behavior; interactions with same- and opposite-sex partners most likely create different social contexts and place different demands on adolescents' social skills. In addition, cross-relationship influences appear to be significant. Understanding these mechanisms will require further analysis of the interactions in which assertive and affiliative language is used and the larger relationship contexts in which these interactions occur.