Assertive and Affiliative Language Use in Adolescents' Conflicts with Siblings and Friends

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Abstract

As part of a longitudinal study, we examined 17-year-olds' use of assertive, or goal-oriented, and affiliative, or socially interactive, language use in both conflicts and averted conflicts during sibling and friend interactions. Our results suggest that the relative percentages of assertive and affiliative language used in these contexts are significantly influenced by partner (sibling or friend), gender composition (same-sex or mixed-sex pairs), sibling gender (male or female), and conflict type (conflict or averted conflict).

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 that girls use more affiliative language than do boys. Recent research, however, proposes that the relationship between language use and gender is more complicated (DeHart et al. 2011). Relatively little is known about how adolescent boys' and girls' use of affiliative and assertive language may change with different partners across varying contexts.

Sibling relationships also provide a very different social context for language use and emotional expression than do peer relationships, as they may offer different situational opportunities for the use of assertive and affiliative language. Specifically, sibling relationships provide a setting in which naturally occurring mixed-sex interactions can be readily observed.

Previous research on language use suggests simply that there is greater use of assertive language and lesser use of affiliative language in conflicts. However, due to recent findings (DeHart et al. 2011), there is reason to believe that this view, as well as the simplistic view of gender and language addressed, do not accurately describe the complex and variable characteristics underlying language use.

In the current study, we extended past research to examine adolescent boys' and girls' use of affiliative and assertive language with siblings and friends, within conflicts and averted conflicts. Specifically, we were interested in better understanding how this language use was influenced by gender, partner gender, relationship, and conflict versus averted conflict context.

Method

Participants
- 37 white, middle-class 17-year-olds living in New York.
- Target adolescents were each paired with a sibling (± 2 years from target adolescent) and with a same-age friend.
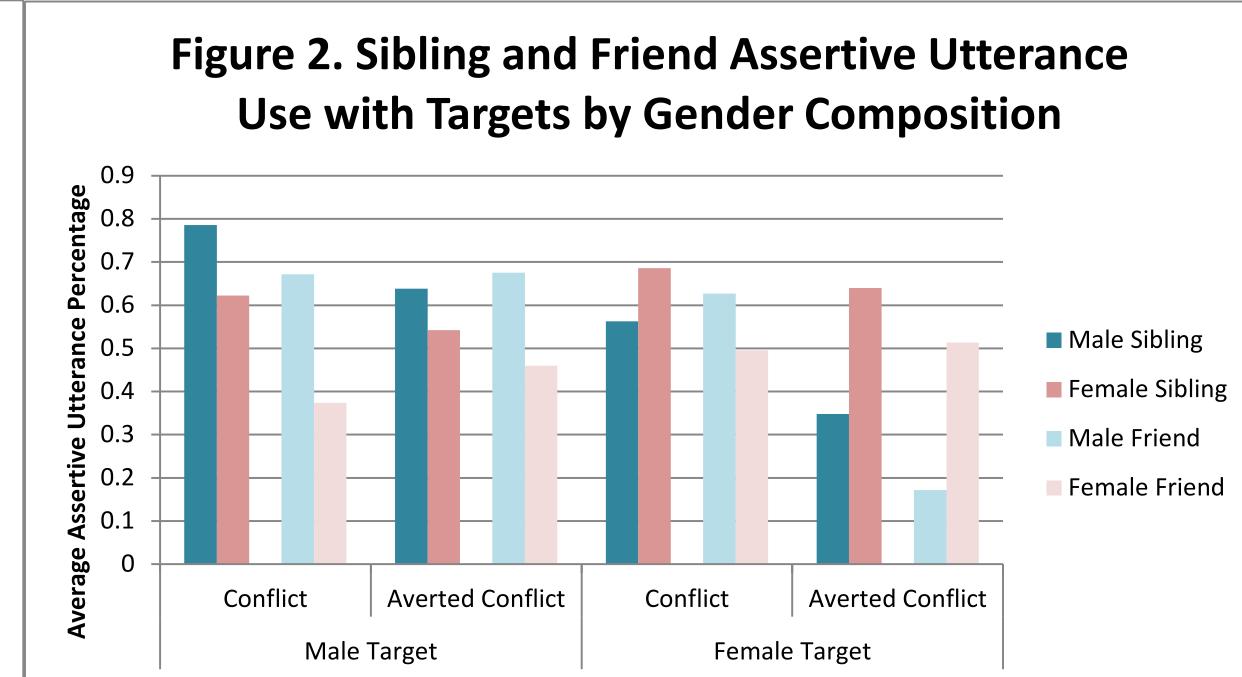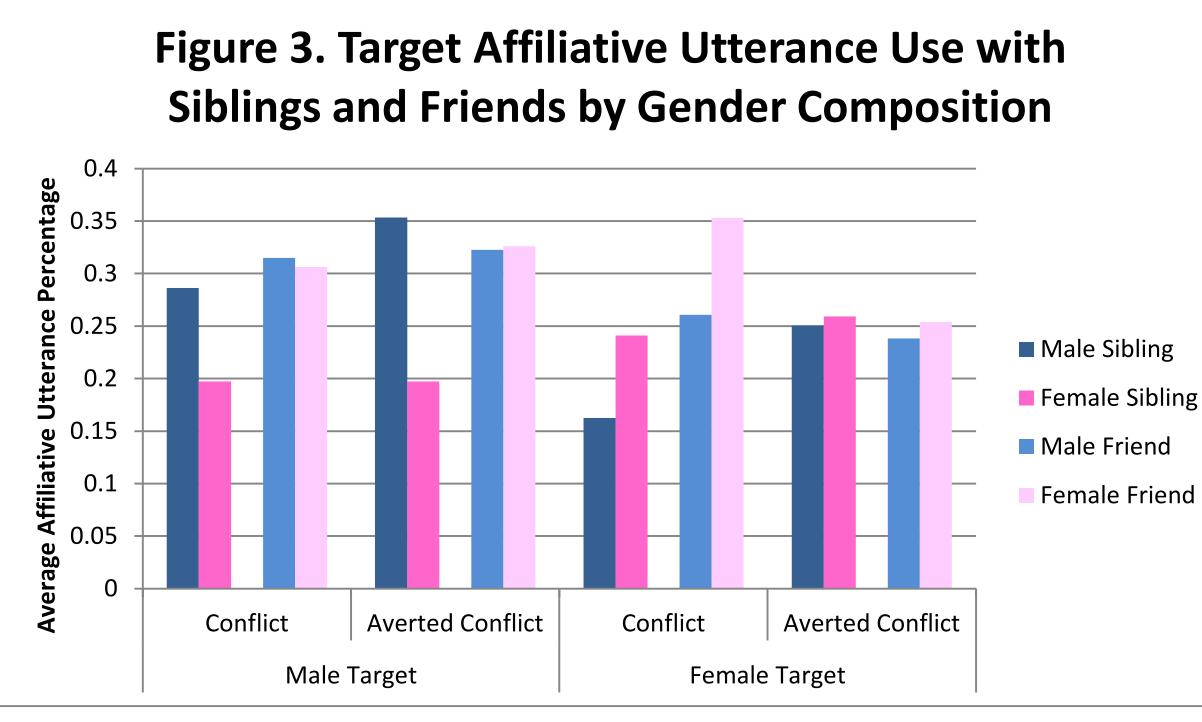
Procedure
- The sibling and friend dyads were videotaped during approximately 15- to 25-minute sessions in which they were asked to cook either pizza or brownies according to provided instructions.
- These video segments were then transcribed and coded for the use of assertive and affiliative language.
- Assertive utterances were those used primarily to accomplish one's own goal or objective (e.g., expressing directives, commands, intentions, opinions, or rules).
- Affiliative utterances were those used primarily to establish or maintain social interaction (e.g., showing support, expressing agreement or inclusion, seeking contact or approval).
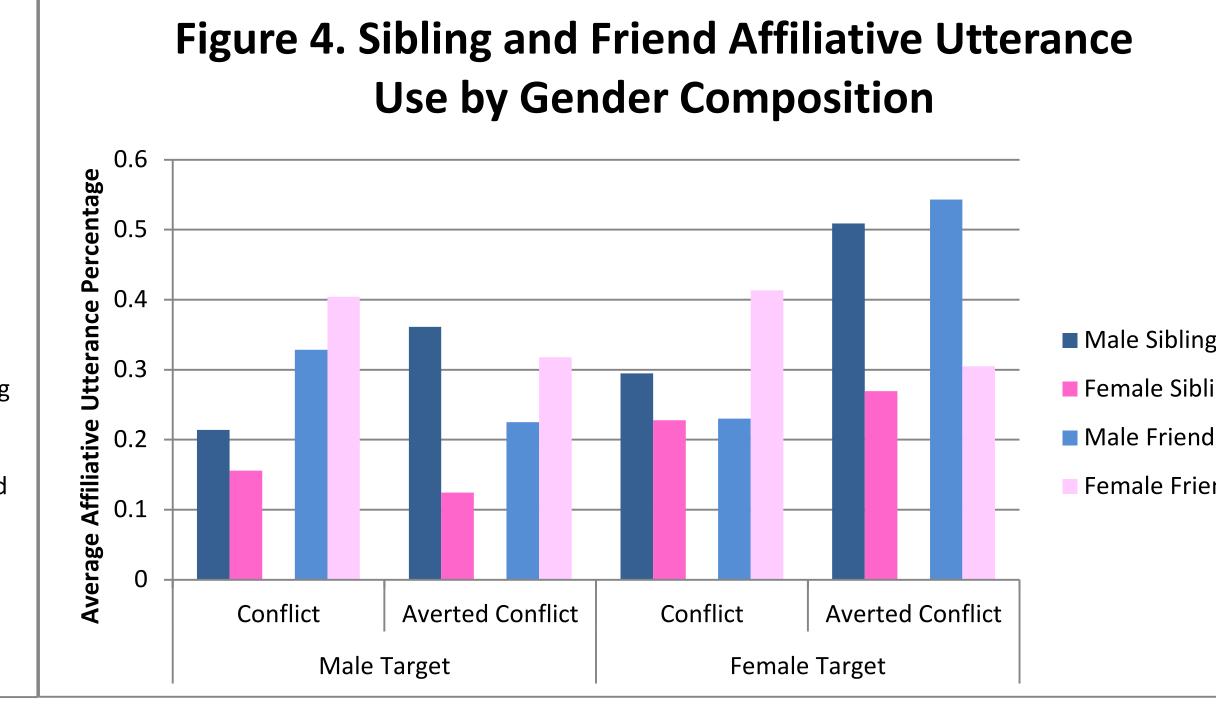- A separate group of researchers coded these transcripts for instances of conflicts and averted conflicts.
- A conflict was any exchange containing mutual opposition, while an averted conflict consisted of oppositional or provocative language that was not immediately reciprocated by the partner.

Analyses

Relative percentages of assertive and affiliative language used during conflicts and averted conflicts were analyzed using 2 (partner) X 2 (target gender) X 2 (sibling gender) X 2 (conflict vs. averted conflict) repeated measure ANOVAs.

Figure 1. Target Assertive Utterance Use with Siblings and Friends by Gender Composition

Figure 2. Sibling and Friend Assertive Utterance Use with Targets by Gender Composition

Figure 3. Target Affiliative Utterance Use with Siblings and Friends by Gender Composition

Figure 4. Sibling and Friend Affiliative Utterance Use by Gender Composition

Results

Assertive Language Use
Target (Figure 1)
- There was a significant main effect of partner such that targets used more assertive language in interactions with siblings than with friends (F=5.310, p<.05).
- There was a significant interaction between target gender and sibling gender such that same-sex pairs used more assertive language than mixed-sex pairs did when interacting with a female target (F=8.943, p<.05).
- There were no significant differences between conflicts and averted conflicts for targets' use of assertive language.

Partner (Figure 2)
- There was a marginally significant main effect of partner such that more assertive language was directed toward the targets by siblings than by friends. (F=3.015, p=.092)
- There were no significant effects of gender or conflict type.

Affiliative Language Use
Target (Figure 3)
- No significant effects were found.

Partner (Figure 4)
- There was a marginally significant interaction between partner and sibling gender such that friends used more affiliative language toward females but not male targets (F=3.292, p=.079).
- There was a marginally significant interaction between conflict type and sibling gender such that for families where the sibling was male, partners used more affiliative utterances during averted conflicts than during conflicts (F=3.147, p=.085).
- There were no significant effects involving target gender.

Discussion

As predicted, adolescents' use of assertive and affiliative language is more intricate than has been suggested by the majority of previous research. Interestingly, both the relationship between the target and partner (sibling vs. friend) and the gender of the members of the dyad affected assertive and affiliative language use.

Most significantly, these findings build upon past research by suggesting that partner influences on adolescents' use of assertive and affiliative language are more subtle than simple modeling of gender-typical behavior. In other words, these interactions are not simply driven by cultural gender role values. In addition, cross-relationship influences appear to be significant; for example, the gender composition of sibling relationships can influence language use between friends.

In future research, investigation into more detailed aspects of language use, such as the valence of assertive utterances (positive or negative) and the presence or absence of mitigation, would further illuminate the ways in which assertive and affiliative utterances are used in conflicts and averted conflicts. Additionally, more fine-grained analysis of assertive and affiliative language use within conflicts and averted conflicts would reveal just how these language types function in conflict and conflict resolution. In other words, it is necessary to look more closely within each conflict and evaluate language use in order to understand the function that these utterances serve in regards to conflict and conflict resolution.