

Sarcasm as Verbal Rough-and-Tumble Play in Adolescents' Interactions with Siblings and Friends

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ABSTRACT

An exploratory study of adolescents' use of sarcasm during interactions with siblings and friends suggests that sarcasm may function in ways similar to physical rough-and-tumble play, particularly for boys. Sarcasm allows adolescents to experiment with language that appears on the surface to be verbally aggressive but that can serve a range of social functions other than intentional harm. Both gender and partner seem to make a difference in how sarcasm is used and what social functions it serves.

Sarcasm can serve a variety of communicative functions for adolescents, many of them similar to the social functions of physical rough-and-tumble play observed in younger children. It can be used aggressively or playfully, to mitigate or intensify utterance impact, and for various communicative purposes. Research on sarcasm in adolescence has focused mainly on judgments about meaning and intent in hypothetical situations; less is known about how adolescents use sarcasm in naturally-occurring conversations, or how gender and interaction partner may make a difference.

METHOD

As part of a longitudinal study of sibling and friend relationships, we conducted an exploratory analysis of adolescents' use of sarcasm.

- ◆ Forty-eight white, middle-class 17-year-olds from western New York were videotaped at home in separate cooking sessions with siblings and with same-aged, same-sex friends, making pizza with one partner and brownies with the other.
- ◆ Half of the adolescents were male, half female; roughly half were taped with a same-sex sibling, half with an opposite-sex sibling.
- ◆ The videotapes were transcribed, and transcripts were coded for instances of sarcasm.
- ◆ Each instance was further coded for intent (aggressive vs. playful), impact (mitigation vs. intensification), and communicative function (dominance, affiliation, distancing).

RESULTS

All pairs of siblings and friends in the study used sarcasm, though there was considerable variability in frequency of use. There were substantial gender differences in rate, intent, impact, and function of sarcastic utterances:

Rate (Figure 1)

- ◆ Boys used more sarcasm than girls during interactions with friends, but not with siblings.
- ◆ During sibling interactions, both girls and boys used more sarcasm with brothers than with sisters.

Intent (Figure 2)

- ◆ Both boys and girls were more likely to use sarcasm playfully than with genuinely aggressive intent. However, boys used more aggressive sarcasm with siblings than girls did, whereas girls used more aggressive sarcasm with friends than boys did.
- ◆ Boys used more aggressive sarcasm with siblings than with friends.
- ◆ Girls with sisters were equally likely to use aggressive sarcasm with siblings and friends; girls with brothers used more aggressive sarcasm with friends than with siblings.

Impact (Figure 3)

- ◆ Both boys and girls used sarcasm to intensify utterance impact more often than to mitigate it.
- ◆ Girls were more likely to use sarcasm for intensification with friends than with siblings. Boys with sisters followed that same pattern, but boys with brothers used more intensification with siblings than with friends.

Function (Figures 4-5)

- ◆ During sibling sessions, boys used sarcasm mainly to express dominance. Girls with sisters followed the same pattern, but girls with brothers used sarcasm primarily to express affiliation.
- ◆ During friend sessions, both boys and girls with brothers used sarcasm to express affiliation more than to express dominance. Girls with sisters used it to express dominance more than affiliation, and boys with sisters used it about equally for the two purposes. Boys with brothers were more likely than anyone else to use sarcasm for distancing purposes.

DISCUSSION

Gender of both target adolescents and their siblings, as well as interaction partner (sibling vs. friend), seemed to influence both the rate of sarcasm and the ways in which it was used. During sibling interaction, boys used sarcasm for aggressive purposes more than girls did, but during friend interactions, girls used more aggressive sarcasm than boys. The gender differences in playful vs. aggressive use of sarcasm with friends suggests that boys may be using sarcasm in ways analogous to rough-and-tumble play with their friends, whereas girls may be using it as a means of more genuine aggression. A more complete analysis of impact and communicative functions, especially for playful sarcasm, will reveal more about the extent to which sarcasm is analogous to physical rough-and-tumble play.

Figure 1. Rates of Sarcasm per Engaged Minute

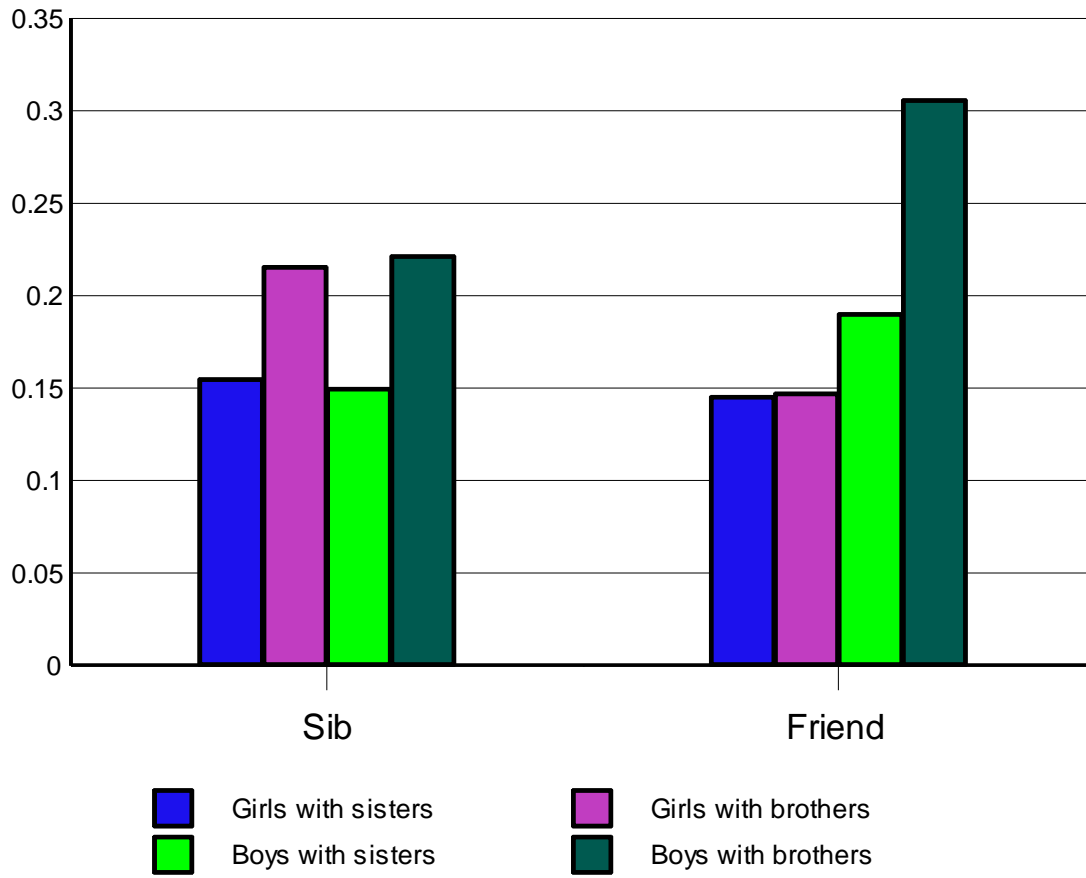


Figure 2. Percentage Aggressive Intent

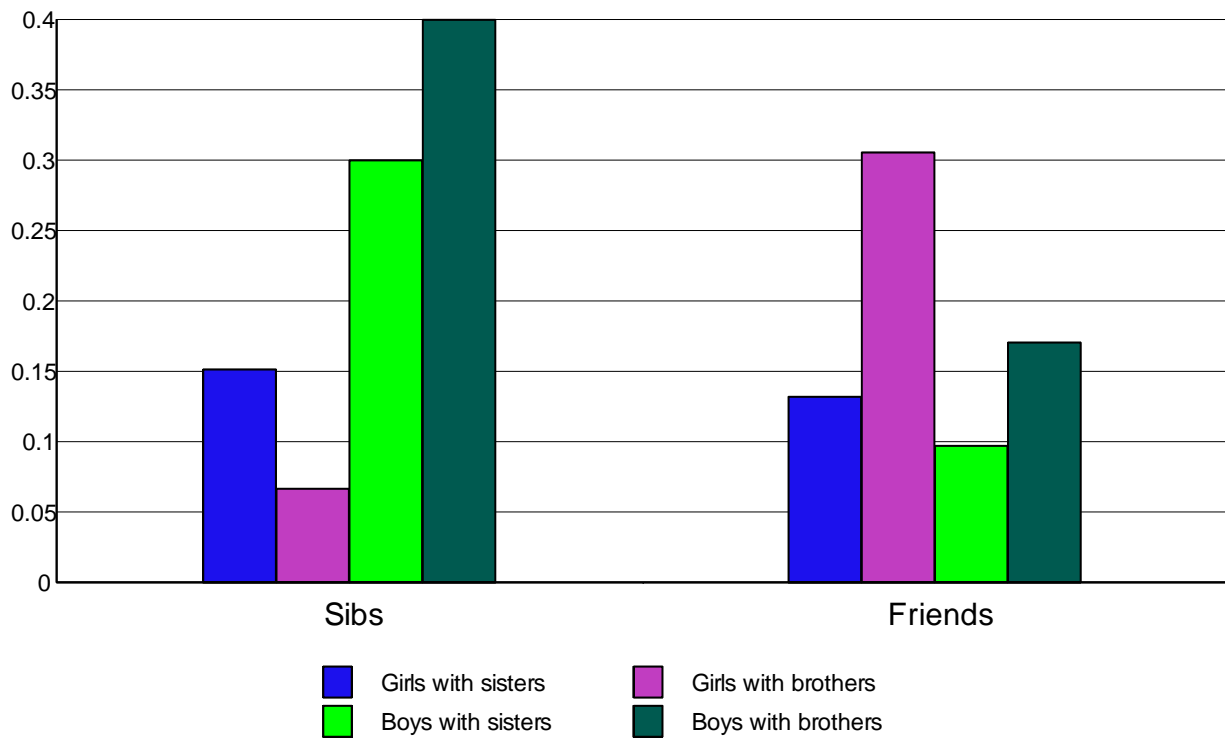


Figure 3. Percentage Intensification of Impact

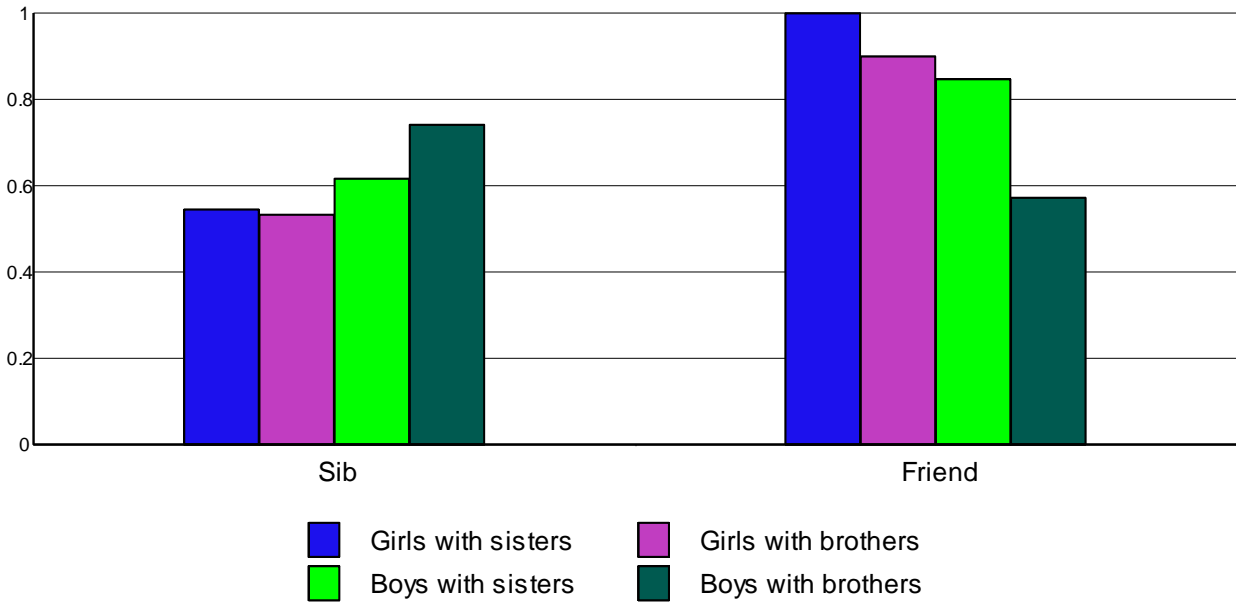


Figure 4. Sarcasm Functions–Sibling Sessions

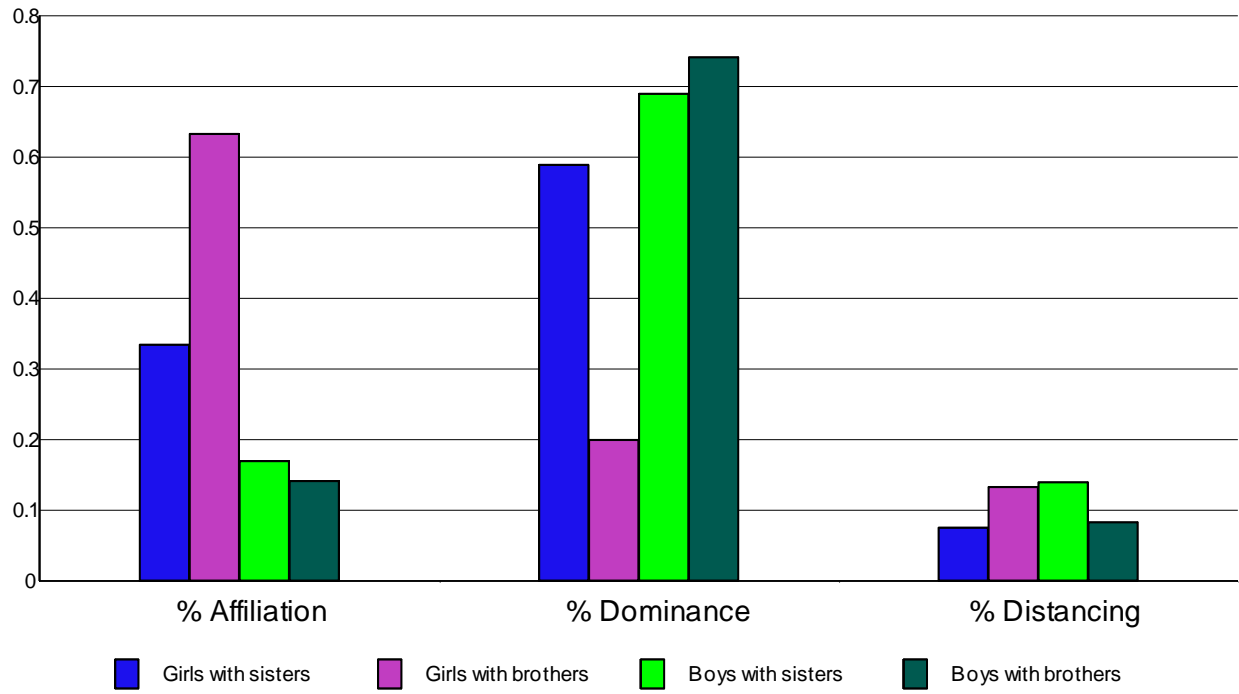


Figure 5. Sarcasm Functions–Friend Sessions

