Sarcasm, Jocularity, and Prosocial Behavior in Adolescent Sibling and Friend Relationships

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Abstract

Verbal irony is common in adolescent interactions with siblings and friends but little is know about how it is related to other characteristics of social interaction. We found that sarcasm and jocularity are related to different types of adolescent prosocial behavior toward siblings and friends.

Introduction

Sarcasm and other forms of verbal irony are common in adolescent interactions with siblings and friends. It may seem that verbal irony is used primarily as a subtle form of aggression, but upon closer examination, it appears that verbal irony serves a range of social functions, some of which are affectionate and prosocial. In addition, the social understanding needed for effective prosocial behavior may also be implicated in the use of verbal irony.

As part of a longitudinal study of sibling and friend relationships, we examined connections between adolescents' observed prosocial behavior and their use of various forms of verbal irony in interactions with siblings and friends. Verbal irony includes both sarcasm--ridicule aimed at a specific target that appears to be hurtful, and jocularity--humorous teasing that is not overtly hurtful.

We expected that prosocial behavior would be related to verbal irony in complex ways, and that partner, gender, and social symmetry would be involved in the connections between verbal irony and prosocial behavior. Specifically, we anticipated that forms of verbal irony used to express affection (for example, jocularity) would be positively correlated with at least some forms of prosocial behavior and that sarcasm might be associated with more socially asymmetrical forms of prosocial behavior.

Methods

Participants

- Forty-five Caucasian 17-year-olds from middle-class families in Western New York, approximately half female and half male, were observed interacting with a sibling and with a same-age friend. With two exceptions, targets were observed interacting with a same-sex friend.
- Half of the target adolescents were observed with a sibling who was 15-30 months younger, half with a sibling who was 15-30 months older.
- Twenty-five of the adolescents had a same-sex sibling; twenty had an opposite-sex sibling.

Procedure

- Each target adolescent was videotaped at home in two separate cooking sessions (making pizza and brownies), one with the sibling and one with the friend.
- The videotapes were transcribed, and the participants in each dyad were separately coded for prosocial behavior (behavior intended to benefit another party) and verbal irony (utterances in which the speaker intentionally says one thing and means another).
- Prosocial behavior was further coded for social symmetry. Each behavior was categorized as complementary dominant (dyad members have asymmetrical roles, with the target in a position of greater control or knowledge), complementary subordinate (dyad members have asymmetrical roles, with the target in a position of less control or knowledge), or reciprocal (dyad members have symmetrical roles).
- Verbal irony was further coded as sarcasm (ridicule aimed at a specific target that appears to be hurtful) or jocularity (humorous teasing that is not overtly hurtful).
- The videotapes were coded for social engagement at 10-second intervals. Social engagement was collapsed into three categories: engaged (partners mutually participating in an activity or engaged with each other), semi-engaged (one partner watching or trying to engage the other), and unengaged (partners not socially engaged with each other).

Analysis

- For the purposes of this poster, analyses focused on prosocial behavior and verbal irony produced by the target adolescents in the study; partner behavior was not analyzed.
- To establish gender, partner, and age effects on prosocial behavior, 2 (partner) x 2 (target child gender) x 2 (sibling gender) x 2 (age group) ANOVAs were conducted.
- To examine connections among aspects of prosocial behavior and aspects of verbal irony, bivariate correlations were conducted separately for sibling and friend interactions using rates of prosocial behaviors, social symmetry, jocularity, and sarcasm. Because gender and relative sibling age were expected to make a difference in type of prosocial behavior, separate correlation matrices were also generated for male and female target children and for target children with older siblings and those with younger siblings.

Figure 1. Overall rates of prosocial behaviors.

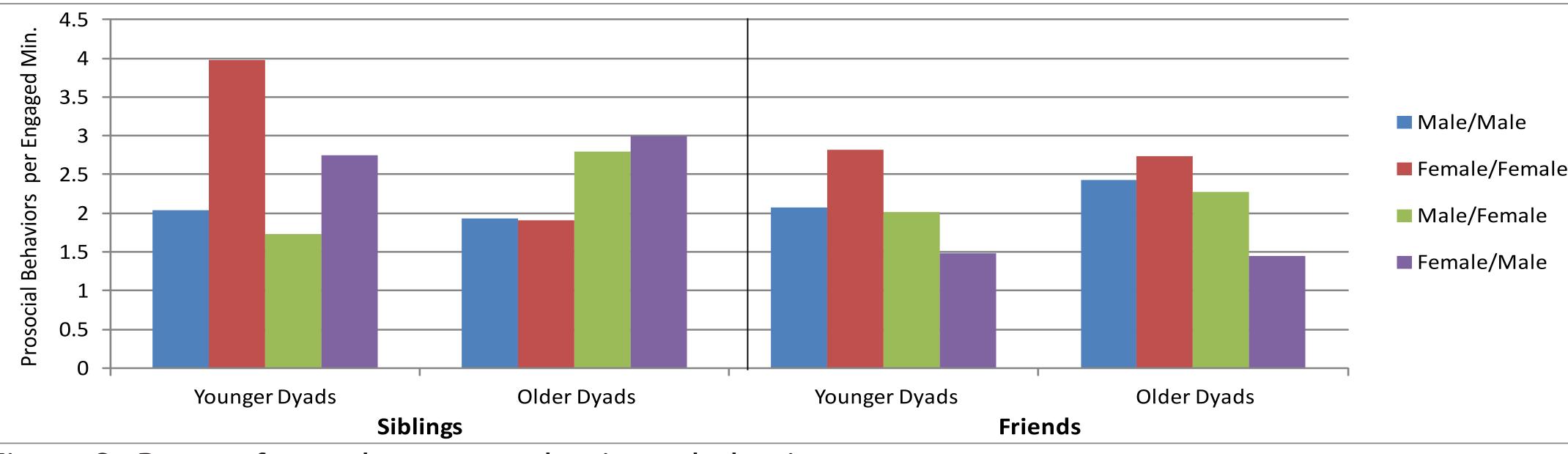


Figure 2. Rates of complementary dominant behaviors

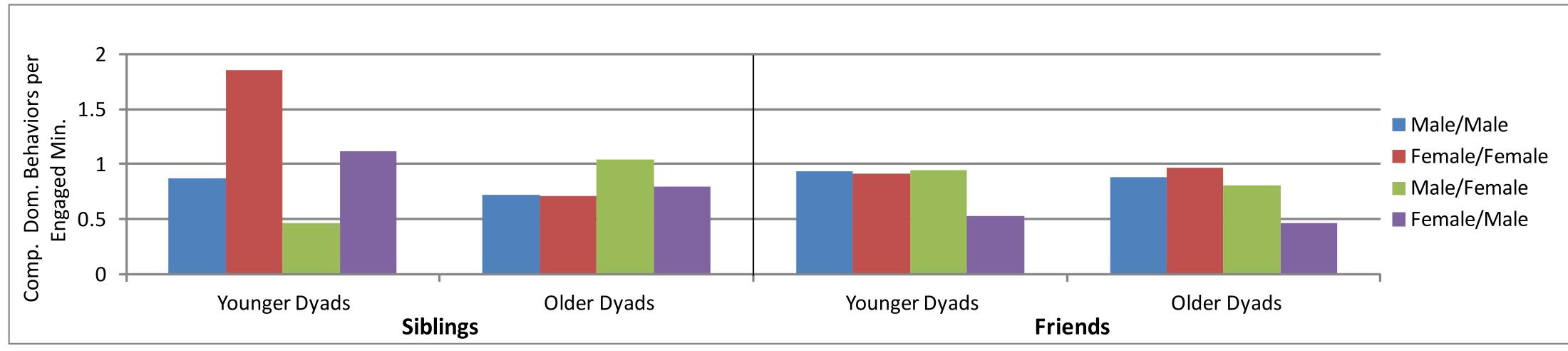


Figure 3. Rates of complementary subordinate behaviors.

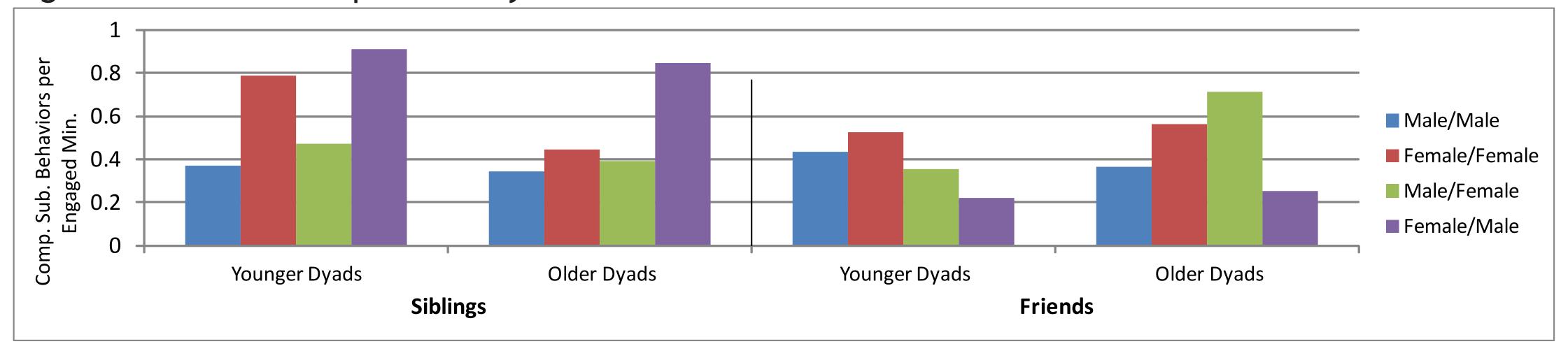
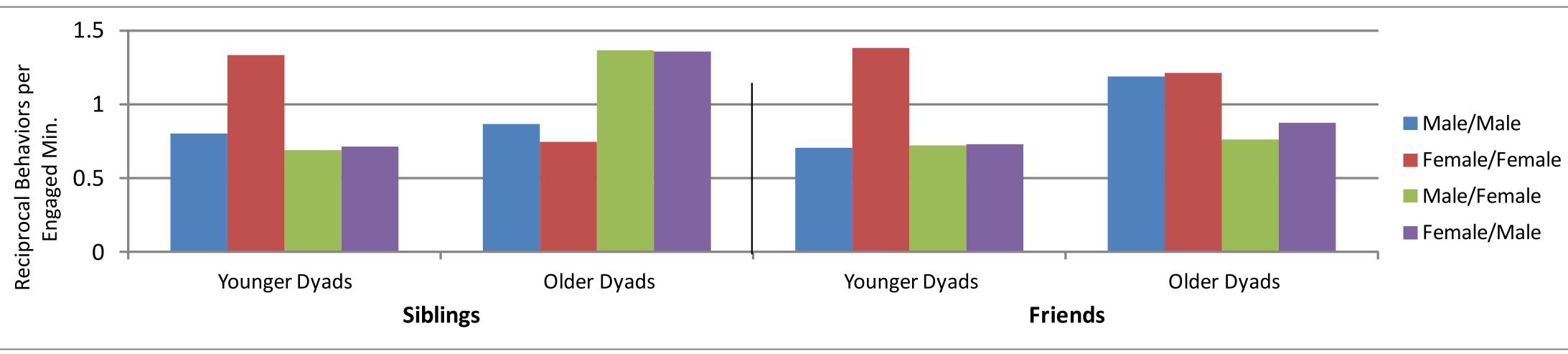


Figure 4. Rates of reciprocal prosocial behaviors.



Results

Target child gender, sibling gender, partner, and age group all made a difference in the overall rate and type of prosocial behavior observed.

Overall Prosocial Interactions (Figure 1)

For overall prosocial behavior, there was a significant target child gender x sibling gender x partner x age group interaction effect for overall prosocial behavior (F = 5.07, p < .05).

Social Symmetry (Figures 2-4)

- For complementary dominant behavior, there was a significant partner x target child gender x age group interaction effect (F = 5.15, p < .05). Girls showed more dominant behavior toward younger siblings than boys did, whereas boys showed more dominance toward older siblings than girls did; there were no gender or age differences in dominant behavior toward friends.
- For complementary subordinate behavior, there was a significant partner x target child gender effect (F = 6.84, p = .013). Girls showed more subordinate behavior toward siblings than boys did; there was no gender difference in subordinate behavior toward friends.
- For reciprocal behaviors, there was a significant target child gender x sibling gender x partner x age group interaction effect (F = 5.48, p < .05). For boys and girls with younger siblings there were no partner effects. Targets with older same-sex siblings showed more reciprocal behavior toward friends than toward siblings; targets with older opposite-sex siblings did the opposite.

Results (continued)

Correlations between prosocial behaviors, sarcasm, and jocularity

Overall, in friend sessions, complementary dominant behavior and total jocular utteran- ces were positively correlated (r = .65, p < .01), while in sibling sessions reciprocal behaviors were marginally correlated with total jocular utterances (r = .39, p = .07).

17-Year-Old Target Child with Older Siblings

- Complementary dominant behavior was positively correlated with total jocular utterances in friend sessions (r = .67, p < .05).
- Complementary subordinate behavior was positively correlated with total sarcastic utterances in sibling sessions (r = .76, p < .05), and with total jocular utterances in friend sessions (r = .63, p = .05).
- Reciprocal behavior was marginally correlated with total jocular utterances in friend sessions (r = .59, p = .076).

17-Year-Old Target Child with Younger Siblings

There were no significant correlations between prosocial behavior and sarcasm or jocularity in the sibling sessions. However, in the friend sessions, complementary dominant behavior was positively correlated with total sarcastic utterances (r = .62, p < .05) and with total jocular utterances (r = .60, p < .05).

Gender-Specific Correlations

- For female targets, complementary dominant behavior was positively correlated with total jocular utterances in sibling and friend sessions (r = .53, p < .10; r = .86, p < .001).
- For male targets, complementary dominant behavior was negatively correlated with total jocular utterances in sibling sessions (r = -.51, p = .11).
- For female targets, reciprocal behavior was marginally correlated with total sarcastic utterances and positively correlated with total jocular utterances in sibling sessions (r = .54, p = .08; r = .75, p < .01).

Discussion

Our expectations that jocularity would be positively correlated with prosocial behavior and that sarcasm might be associated with more socially asymmetrical forms of prosocial behavior were partially confirmed, but the picture seems to be more complex than we had expected. Partner interaction, as well as age and gender composition of the sibling dyad, influenced the associations between prosocial behavior and verbal irony.

As expected, jocularity was positively correlated with some forms of prosocial behavior, but the connections varied, depending on partner, gender, and sibling dyad age composition. Surprisingly, jocularity was often associated with dominant prosocial behavior, suggesting that adolescents may use jocularity to mitigate assertions of dominance. The exception was during boys' sibling sessions, when there was a negative correlation between jocularity and dominant prosocial behavior. Boys may feel less need to mitigate assertions of dominance toward their siblings, and those who regularly behave dominantly may be less likely to have positive, humorous interactions with their siblings.

Prosocial behavior showed fewer connections to sarcasm than to jocularity, but most of the connections involved socially asymmetrical interactions. For example, younger siblings' use of sarcasm was associated with complementary subordinate behavior, suggesting interactions in which they were at a disadvantage relative to their partner. However, during sibling sessions girls' use of sarcasm was associated with reciprocal behavior, suggesting that girls may feel more free to use sarcasm when they are on a relatively even footing with their partners.