VERBAL IRONY AND AGGRESSION IN ADOLESCENT SIBLING AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

As part of an ongoing longitudinal study, we explored connections between verbal irony and aggression in adolescents' interactions with siblings and friends. Both sarcasm and jocularity were associated with various forms of aggression, but in somewhat different ways for siblings and friends.

Introduction

Verbally ironic statements are defined as utterances in which a speaker intentionally says one thing but means another, a common feature of adolescent discourse. Adolescents regularly make use of verbal irony in interactions with siblings and friends, for both playful and aggressive purposes. Past research in our lab indicates that both partner and sibling dyad gender composition make a difference in the rate, form, impact, and communicative function of verbal irony.

Because verbal irony is sometimes used for aggressive purposes, we were interested in how verbal irony and physical, verbal, and relational aggression might be connected in adolescents' sibling and friend interactions. As part of a longitudinal study, we explored connections between verbal irony and aggression (defined as any behavior intended to hurt or bother a partner) in adolescents' interactions with siblings and friends. We hypothesized that more hurtful forms of verbal irony (e.g., sarcasm) would be associated with higher levels of aggressive behavior, whereas more benign forms of verbal irony (e.g., jocularity) would not.
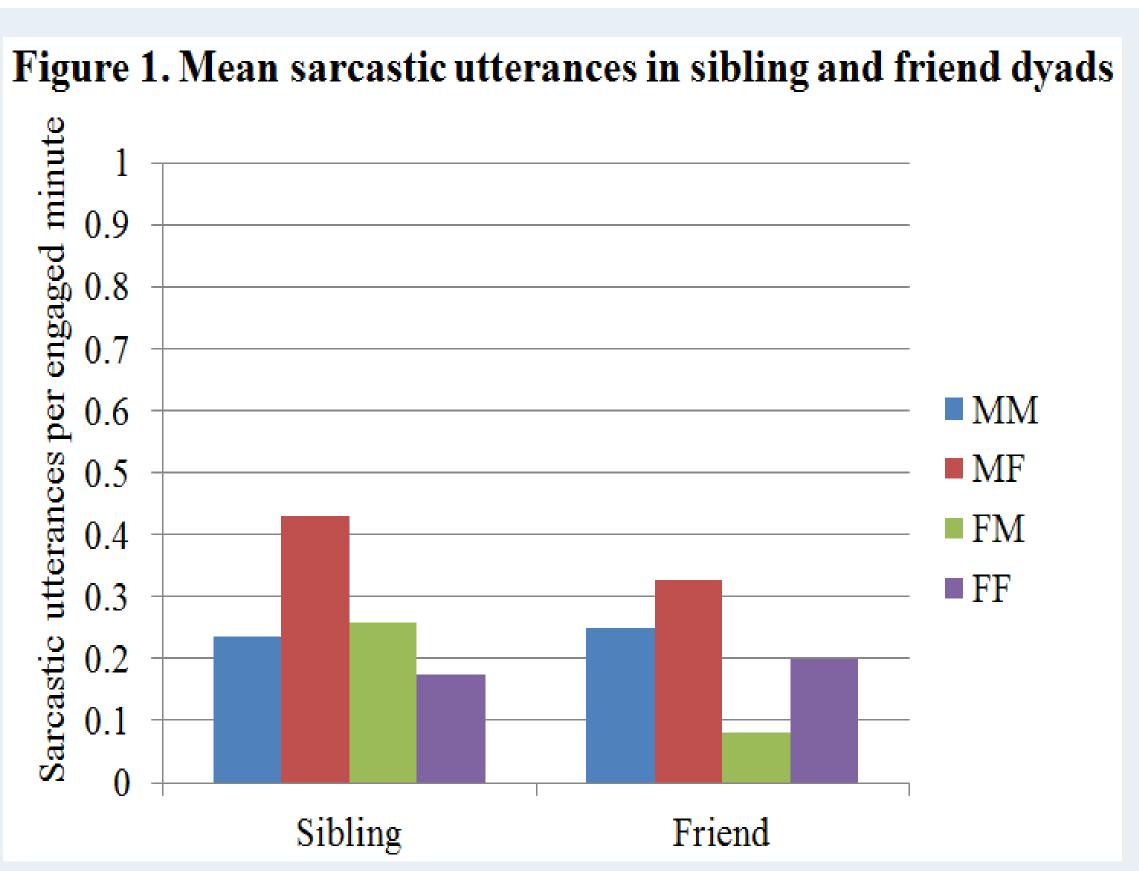
Method

Participants
- 54 white, middle-class 17-year-olds living in western New York, approximately half male, half female.
- 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.
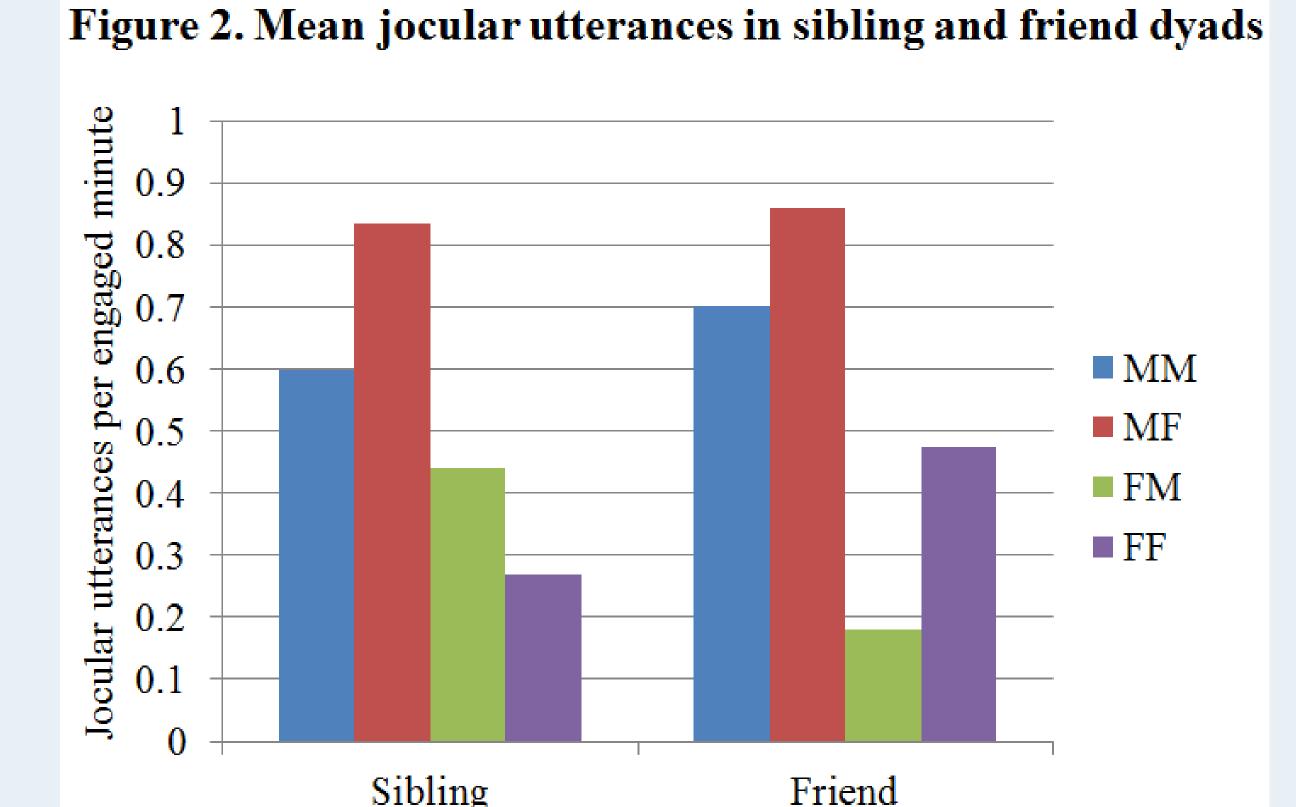
Procedure
- Sibling and friend pairs were videotaped separately making brownies or pizza at the target adolescent's home.
- Videotapes were transcribed and coded for instances of verbal irony and aggressive behavior demonstrated by the target adolescent (TA) and partner.
- Each instance of verbal irony was further coded as *sarcastic* (irony that involves ridicule aimed at a specific target that appears to be hurtful) or *jocular* (irony in which speakers appear to be teasing one another in humorous ways without being overtly hurtful).
- Each instance of aggression was further coded as *relational* (damaging or threatening to damage a relationship), *physical* (physical acts or physical threats of force), or *verbal* (non-relational aggressive utterances).

Analysis
- Rates of sarcasm and jocularity per minute of social engagement were analyzed using 2 (partner) x 2 (TA gender) x 2 (sib gender) repeated measures ANOVAs.
- Pearson bivariate correlations were used to examine the relationships between sarcastic and jocular instances of verbal irony and aggressive behaviors in adolescent sibling and friend pairs.

Figure 1. Mean sarcastic utterances in sibling and friend dyads

Figure 2. Mean jocular utterances in sibling and friend dyads

Table 1. Significant correlations between sarcastic utterances and aggressive behavior in adolescents

	Sibling		Peer	
	Target Adolescent (TA)	Partner	Target Adolescent (TA)	Partner
Relational Aggression (RA)	ns	ns	ns	ns
Verbal Aggression (VA)	ns	$r = .39, p = .02$	$r = .37, p = .03$	ns
Physical Aggression (PA)	$r = .69, p < .001$	ns	ns	$r = .42, p = .03$

Table 2. Significant correlations between jocular utterances and aggressive behavior in adolescents

	Sibling		Peer	
	Target Adolescent (TA)	Partner	Target Adolescent (TA)	Partner
Relational Aggression (RA)	ns	ns	ns	ns
Verbal Aggression (VA)	ns	ns	ns	$r = .34, p = .05$
Physical Aggression (PA)	$r = .50, p < .001$	$r = .31, p = .07$	ns	ns

Results

Rates of sarcasm and jocularity:
Figures 1 and 2 show rates of sarcasm and jocularity for sibling and friend sessions, by sibling gender category.

- There were no significant partner or gender effects for sarcasm.
- There was no effect of partner for jocularity.
- Dyads with a male TA used more jocularity during both sibling and friend sessions than dyads with a female TA ($p < .001$).
- There was also a significant TA x sib gender interaction effect ($p < .001$); dyads in which the TA had a brother used more jocularity than dyads in which the TA had a sister.

Correlations between sarcasm and aggression:

- During sibling interactions, sarcasm was associated with physical aggression for target adolescents ($p < .001$) and with verbal aggression for their siblings ($p = .02$).
- In contrast, during friend interactions, sarcasm was associated with verbal aggression for target adolescents ($p = .03$) and with physical aggression for their friends ($p = .03$).
- Relational aggression was not related to sarcasm in sibling or friend interactions.

Correlations between jocularity and aggression:

- During sibling interactions, jocularity was associated with physical aggression for both target adolescents and their siblings ($p < .001$, $p = .07$).
- During friend interactions, jocularity was associated with verbal aggression for friends only, not for the targets ($p = .05$).
- Relational aggression was not related to jocularity in sibling or friend interactions.

Discussion

We have found few differences in the *amount* of sarcasm and jocularity used by adolescents with their siblings and friends. However, there seem to be different patterns of connection between verbal irony and aggression in sibling and friend interactions. Whereas sarcasm was related to physical and verbal aggression between both siblings and friends, jocularity was related to physical aggression between siblings but to verbal aggression between friends. Relational aggression was unrelated to sarcasm and jocularity, regardless of partner.

As expected, the more biting form of verbal irony (sarcasm) was associated with physical and verbal aggression for both siblings and friends. Contrary to expectations, the more benign form of verbal irony (jocularity) was also associated with siblings' physical aggression and friends' verbal aggression. It is possible that verbal irony is used for different purposes in sibling and friend interactions. For example, verbal irony can be used either to intensify or to soften the impact of an utterance; it may be that it is used more often to intensify impact with siblings and to soften it with friends. More fine-grained analysis of the specific contexts in which verbal irony and aggressive behaviors occur in sibling and friend interactions will be needed to unravel the exact bases for these correlations.

Acknowledgments