MOTHERS' AND ADOLESCENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SIBLING AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS IN RELATION TO VERBAL IRONY

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Abstract

As part of an ongoing longitudinal study of sibling and friend relationships, we explored connections between (1) adolescents' observed use of verbal irony and (2) qualitative aspects of their sibling and friend relationships, as measured by maternal and adolescent questionnaires. Playful use of verbal irony was associated with positive aspects of relationships, but the picture for aggressive use of verbal irony was more complex.

Introduction

Verbal irony—utterances in which a speaker intentionally says one thing but means another—is a common feature of adolescent discourse. Adolescents regularly make use of verbal irony, for both playful and aggressive purposes. Observational research has revealed that both gender and interaction partner make a difference in the rate and purpose of adolescents' verbal irony use. However, relatively little is known about how qualitative aspects of adolescent relationships, such as asymmetry, intimacy, harmony, conflict, and level of relational aggression, may be associated with their use of verbal irony.

As part of an ongoing longitudinal study of sibling and friend relationships, we explored connections between (1) adolescents' observed use of verbal irony and (2) qualitative aspects of their sibling and friend relationships, as measured by maternal and adolescent questionnaires. We expected that playful use of verbal irony would be associated with more positive relationship qualities, such as intimacy and harmony, and that aggressive use of verbal irony would be associated with less positive relationship qualities, such as conflict and relational aggression. We expected verbal irony use to be associated with relationship asymmetry in different ways for sibling and friend relationships because asymmetry may be less adaptive in friendships than in sibling relationships.

Method

Participants

- 54 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 pairs were videotaped separately making brownies or pizza at the target adolescent's home.
- At the time of the visit, the target adolescent, the sibling, the friend, and the sibling dyad's mother completed questionnaires concerning their perceptions of the sibling and friend relationships. All questionnaires used 5-point rating scales to assess four relationship dimensions: asymmetry, intimacy, harmony, and conflict, as well as the prevalence of relational aggression in the siblings' or friends' interactions (Table 1 provides examples of questionnaire items).
- Videotapes were transcribed and coded for instances of verbal irony, which were further coded for aggressive or playful intent.

Analyses

- Bivariate correlations were used to examine the relationships between playful and aggressive use of verbal irony and the mothers' and adolescents' perceptions of sibling and friend relationship asymmetry, intimacy, harmony, conflict, and relational aggression.

Table 1. Examples of questionnaire items

Asymmetry	Harmony	Intimacy	Conflict	Relational Aggression
When [target child] and [sibling/friend] do things together, [target child] tends to take charge. [Target child] tells [sibling/friend] what to do and tries to take control. If someone picks on [sibling/friend], [target child] protects or sticks up for him.	[Target child] and [sibling/friend] get along well with each other. [Target child] helps [sibling/friend]. [Target child] shares things (for example, food or belongings) with [sibling/friend].	[Target child] and [sibling/friend] enjoy spending time together. [Target child] is physically affectionate to [sibling/friend]. [Target child] and [sibling/friend] understand each other's feelings.	There is a lot of conflict between [target child] and [sibling/friend]. [Target child] and [sibling/friend] compete with each other for mother's attention. [Target child] and [sibling/friend] get into physical fights.	[Target child] won't talk to [sibling/friend] when s/he's mad at her/him. When [Target child] is mad at [sibling/friend], s/he tells other people [sibling/friend]'s secrets. [Target child] tells [sibling/friend] s/he won't like her/him any more unless s/he does what [Target child] says.

Table 2. Significant correlations between verbal irony (VI) use and sibling relationship qualities

	Target Adolescent (TA)		Sibling	
	VI Playful Intent	VI Aggressive Intent	VI Playful Intent	VI Aggressive Intent
TA Perception of Relational Aggression	$r = -.26, p = .07$	ns	ns	ns
Mothers' Perception of Intimacy	$r = .27, p = .07$	ns	ns	$r = .33, p = .02$
Mothers' Perception of Symmetry	ns	$r = .36, p = .01$	ns	ns

Table 3. Significant correlations between verbal irony (VI) use and friend relationship qualities

	Target Adolescent (TA)		Friend	
	VI Playful Intent	VI Aggressive Intent	VI Playful Intent	VI Aggressive Intent
TA Perception of Symmetry	ns	$r = .30, p = .04$	ns	ns
TA Perception of Harmony	ns	$r = -.25, p = .09$	ns	ns
Mothers' Perception of Harmony	ns	ns	$r = .30, p = .05$	$r = .30, p = .09$

Results

Playful and aggressive use of verbal irony was associated with various aspects of the sibling and friend relationships, as perceived by the mothers and adolescents.

For sibling interactions (*Table 2*):

- Target adolescents' playful use of verbal irony was positively associated with sibling intimacy (mother questionnaire) and negatively associated with sibling relational aggression (target questionnaire).
- Target adolescents' aggressive use of verbal irony was positively associated with sibling asymmetry (mother questionnaire).
- Siblings' aggressive use of verbal irony was positively associated with sibling intimacy (mother questionnaire).

For friend interactions (*Table 3*):

- Target adolescents' aggressive use of verbal irony was positively associated with friendship asymmetry (target questionnaire) and negatively associated with harmony (target questionnaire).
- Friends' playful use of verbal irony was positively associated with friendship harmony (mother questionnaire).
- However, friends' aggressive use of verbal irony was also positively associated with friendship harmony (mother questionnaire).

Discussion

As predicted, playful use of verbal irony seems to be associated with positive aspects of relationships, as perceived by both adolescents and their mothers—intimacy and a relative lack of relational aggression in sibling relationships, and harmony in friend relationships.

The picture for aggressive use of verbal irony is more complex. In accordance with our predictions, adolescents who used high rates of aggressive verbal irony with friends viewed their friendships as less harmonious. Aggressive verbal irony was associated with perceptions of asymmetry in both sibling and friend relationships—not entirely surprising, given that, in adolescence, well-functioning sibling and friend relationships would be expected to be reasonably symmetrical. However, aggressive verbal irony use was also associated with mothers' perceptions of higher sibling intimacy and friend harmony—both positive relationship qualities. Aggressive verbal irony was not associated with adolescents' or mothers' perceptions of conflict or relational aggression, both negative relationship qualities.

Some past research suggests that mothers' perceptions of adolescents' relationships may be less accurate than adolescents' perceptions of their own relationships, which may account for the counter-intuitive findings for mothers' perceptions of sibling intimacy and friend harmony. However, it is also possible that intimacy and harmony provide a setting in which adolescents feel free to use aggressive verbal irony.

This study suggests that observational measures of verbal irony paired with questionnaire measures of relationship quality can provide insight into adolescents' use of verbal irony in close relationships. Future research directions might include examining the specific interaction contexts in which adolescents use playful and aggressive verbal irony with siblings and friends.