How Do Maternal Perceptions Relate to Observed Prosocial Behavior in Adolescent Sibling and Friend Relationships?

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Abstract

We examined relationships between adolescent siblings' and friends' prosocial behavior and maternal perceptions of the relationships. We used coded data from recorded cooking sessions of 47 Caucasian, middle-class 17-year olds, and maternal questionnaires that measure perceptions of sibling and friend relationships across 5 dimensions. We found that maternal perceptions of Intimacy were positively correlated with Reciprocal behavior in siblings. The lack of other significant correlations suggests that either mothers are not able to accurately assess their adolescent children's relationships at that age, that the taped sessions and the coding scheme used tap into different aspects of the relationships than the maternal questionnaires do, or that the taped sessions do not provide a fully representative snapshot of the adolescents' ongoing relationships.

Introduction

Relationships between adolescent siblings and friends are often dynamic and complex. Previous research has mainly focused on either behavior observed during their interactions, or on parents' perceptions of their interaction. As part of a longitudinal study, we examined connections between prosocial behaviors and maternal perceptions of relationships. Our research utilized both sources of information in order to determine the correlation between maternal perceptions of adolescent sibling and friend relationships, and observed prosocial behavior during their interactions.

Maternal perceptions were measured for five relational dimensions: Asymmetry, Intimacy, Relational Aggression, Prosocial/Harmony, and Conflict. *Prosocial behavior* was defined as any voluntary behavior intended to benefit the other party. We hypothesized that maternal perceptions would correlate more strongly with siblings' observed behavior than with friends.

Method

Participants

- The sample consisted of 42 Caucasian, middle-class 17-year-olds from western New York State. Approximately half of the target children were male, and approximately half were female.
- Approximately half of the target children were observed with a same-sex sibling, and approximately half were observed with an opposite-sex sibling.
- Approximately half of the siblings were 15-30 months older than the target child, half 15-30 months younger.
- A same-sex, same-age friend of each target children also participated.

Procedure

- Adolescents were videotaped at home in separate sessions with their siblings and friends in which they were given materials and instructions to prepare either a pizza or brownies.
- Videotapes were transcribed, and each session was coded separately for prosocial behavior .
- Prosocial behavior was further categorized as *complementary dominant* (child producing the behavior is in a position of superior status or power), *complementary subordinate* (child producing the behavior is in a position of subordinate status or power), or *reciprocal* (interactions in which the partners' status or power is similar or interchangeable), depending on the relative symmetry of the interactions.
- Mothers completed questionnaires rating sibling and friend relationships separately on five dimensions: Asymmetry, Intimacy, Relational Aggression, Prosocial/Harmony, and Conflict, using 5-point Likert scales.
- Videotapes were coded for social engagement at 10-second intervals. Social engagement was separated into three categories: *engaged* (partners mutually participating in an activity or engaged with each other), *semi-engaged* (one partner observing or trying to engage the other), and *unengaged* (partners not socially engaged with each other).

Table 1. Correlations Within Maternal Questionnaire Responses for Siblings

Subscale	1	2	3	4
1. Asymmetry				
2. Intimacy	-.26			
3. RelAgg	.17	-.19		
4. Pro/Har	-.23	.73*	-.28	
5. Conflict	.18	-.12	.45*	-.56*

*Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

Table 2. Correlations Within Maternal Questionnaire Responses for Peers

Subscale	1	2	3	4
1. Asymmetry				
2. Intimacy	-.21			
3. RelAgg	.44**	-.16		
4. Pro/Har	-.48**	.59**	-.54**	
5. Conflict	.46**	-.13	.81**	-.34*

*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)
**Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

Analyses

- Analyses focused on dyadic data, and did not examine target and partner behaviors separately.
- To examine connections among prosocial behavior and the 5 dimensions of the maternal questionnaire, Pearson bivariate correlations were conducted separately for sibling and friend interactions, using frequencies of various types of prosocial behavior and mean scores on the 5 maternal questionnaire scales.

Results

Correlations within Maternal Perception Questionnaire – Siblings

- Intimacy is positively correlated with Prosocial/Harmony ($r = .726$, $p < .01$)
- Conflict is positively correlated with Relational Aggression ($r = .454$, $p = .001$)
- Conflict is negatively correlated with Prosocial/Harmony ($r = –.563$, $p < .01$)

Correlations within Maternal Perception Questionnaire – Friends

- Asymmetry is positively correlated with Relational Aggression ($r = .438$, $p = .004$) and Conflict ($r = .459$, $p = .002$), and negatively correlated with Prosocial/Harmony ($r = –.481$, $p = .001$)

Correlations between Maternal Questionnaire Dimensions and Prosocial Behaviors – Siblings

- Intimacy is positively correlated with Reciprocal behavior (r=.332, p=.031)
- No correlations were found between either Dominant or Subordinate behavior and any of the dimensions on the maternal questionnaire

Correlations between Maternal Questionnaire Dimensions and Prosocial Behaviors – Friends

- No correlations were found between dominant, subordinate, or reciprocal behavior and the dimensions of the maternal questionnaire

Discussion

Correlation analysis revealed that within the Maternal Questionnaires for sibling relationships, Intimacy is positively correlated with Prosocial/Harmony, and Conflict is positively correlated with Relational Aggression and Prosocial/Harmony. For friends relationships, Asymmetry is positively correlated with Relational Aggression and Conflict, and negatively correlated with Prosocial/Harmony. These correlations are expected and suggest that the questionnaire is indeed an accurate assessment of maternal perception.

Our results showed that for sibling adolescent relationships, Intimacy is positively correlated with Reciprocal behavior. This is reasonable, as the underlying social structures that support a reciprocal social symmetry could also result in a higher semblance of intimacy within a relationship. In addition, a relationship in which behaviors are based on an equal power balance may lend itself to the perception of intimacy.

The lack of significant correlations between the Maternal Questionnaires and prosocial behaviors could suggest that mothers are not able to accurately perceive their adolescent children's relationships with their siblings or friend. It is also possible that due to observer effects, or the small window of observation time, the adolescents' behavior was not representative of their true relationship with their sibling or friend

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