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Sibling Conflict in Early Adolescence

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This study examined sibling conflict and relationship qualities in early adolescence. One hundred four 10- to 15-year-olds (mean age 11.7 years) completed questionnaires assessing the quality of their relationship with their closest sibling, and were interviewed about a recent, specific conflict with that sibling. Analysis suggests that sibling conflict fulfills several functions in early adolescence, including reinforcing family and relationship rules and delineating interpersonal boundaries. Few differences attributable to age or gender constellation of the sibling dyad emerged, and rivalry did not appear to be a primary impetus to conflict during this age period. Instead, sibling conflict appears to create a context where age-appropriate issues of individuation and differentiation are played out.

Interpersonal conflict has recently become a focus of developmental theory and research. Social conflict is defined as the opposition between two individuals that occurs when "one person does something to which a second person objects" (Hay, 1984, p. 2), and encompasses the squabbles individuals engage in during daily life as well as more serious clashes. A growing body of research shows that episodes of interpersonal conflict between peers can foster cognitive, social, and individual development (e.g., Piaget, 19321 1965; see Shantz & Hobart, 1989, for a review). To date, sibling conflict has not been the focus of systematic investigation, despite a renewed interest in sibling relationships (e.g., Bank & Kahn, 1982; Dunn, 1985; Goetting, 1986; Lamb & Sutton-Smith, 1982; Tsukada, 1979).

Conflict is a defining feature of the sibling relationship (e.g., Schvaneveldt & Ihinger, 1979), and is common during childhood and adolescence (e.g., Furman & Buhrmester, 1985a, 1985b). However, the possibility that sibling conflict results from anything other than rivalry, or that it may contribute to development, has only rarely been considered (e.g., Dunn, 1988; Dunn & Munn, 1985), and little is known about the structure and process of sibling conflict (Shantz & Hobart, 1989), particularly in adolescence (Montemayor & Hanson, 1985). The present study attempts to integrate siblings into the larger domain of conflict research, obtaining descriptive information about sibling conflicts and examining how gender, age, relationship qualities and family variables influence fights between adolescents and their siblings.

The model for this study is based on Hay's (1984) description of conflict as an "extended series of dyadic events" (p. 5), each representing a phenomenon to be investigated in and of itself and as part of an interdependent sequence. Specific variables were drawn from theory and research (e.g., Berscheid, 1986; Hay, 1984; Shantz, 1987), and fit into a framework embodying both behavioral and emotional aspects of conflict episodes. Each episode is viewed as a series of linked events that fall into three stages: what is happening when conflict erupts ("onset"), what happens during ("process"), and what happens after ("aftermath"). Different aspects of conflict episodes have been studied within the sibling relationship.

The onset of conflict encompasses the precipitating issue and the social and interactional context in which conflict occurs. Most research with adolescents has focused on the precipitating issue, or "cause" of conflicts; personality issues and disputes stemming from sharing home life ac-count for most sibling quarrels (e.g., Montemayor & Hanson, 1985; Roscoe, Goodwin, & Kennedy, 1987). The process of conflict encompasses emotional reactions, negotiation strategies, and resolution strategies. Montemayor and Hanson (1985) reported that withdrawal was the most common resolution strategy, followed by "authoritarian" procedures. Fifth and sixth graders reported a range of tactics to get their way with siblings, including physical force, reasoning, bribing, shouting, harassing, and crying (Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg, 1970), and similar tactics were reported in the Roscoe et al. (1987) study. Other aspects include the role played by outsiders and emotional reactions, which have not been studied systematically. The aftermath of conflict includes relationship repair and emotional reactions, neither of which has received much attention. Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg (1970) reported that half their sample said they would ignore the fight, and about a third said they would use some "make-up" procedure.

Age and gender constellation of the sibling dyad and family variables are thought to influence conflicts between siblings. It is hypothesized that same-sex and closely spaced siblings will experience greater rivalry and engage in more or more intense quarrels than opposite-sex and widely spaced siblings. The evidence is equivocal, however, and does not uphold a rivalry hypothesis (e.g., Abramovitch, Corter, Pepler, & Stanhope, 1986; Bowerman & Dobash, 1974; Dunn & Kendrick, 1981; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985b; Minnett, Vandell, & Santrock, 1983; Montemayor & Hanson, 1985; Robb, Mangelsdorf, & Fury, 1987). These studies suggest that differences between dyads may outweigh structural effects of age and gender. Family variables that may influence sibling conflicts include divorce (Lamb & Sutton-Smith, 1982; MacKinnon, 1989; Montemayor, 1984), family size (Bossard & Boll, 1956), and levels of family violence (Martin, Schumm, Bugaighis, Jurich, & Bollman, 1987).

This study has two goals. The first is to examine the relation between frequency of conflict and qualities of the sibling relationship and family structure variables. The second is to conduct a detailed analysis of descriptions of specific quarrels with siblings to serve as a basis for exploring possible functions and meanings of sibling conflict during adolescence. The present study differs from prior research in three main ways. First, youngsters were asked about recent actual conflicts, not hypothetical conflicts. Second, they were asked to talk about specific quarrels, not to summarize across fights. Third, youngsters were asked to discuss their relationship and interactions with their closest sibling, rather than the target sibling being selected according to age or gender.

METHOD

Sample

Respondents were 51 girls (mean age 11.6 years) and 53 boys (mean age 11.8 years) who took part in a larger study. Participants in the larger study were fifth to ninth graders from two midwestern communities. One is a middle class suburb on the edge of a large metropolitan area. Residents are of primarily European origin, and most have moved from the city within the last decade. The majority of fathers commute to white-collar jobs in the city, and two thirds of the mothers also work. The other community is an urban working-class neighborhood close to the city limits with a similar ethnic background. Fathers work in blue-collar occupations, and nearly two thirds of mothers are employed (see Larson & Richards, 1989).

The larger study was carried out over two years, with one wave of data collection each season. At each wave a randomly selected sample of students, stratified by grade and gender, was invited to participate. The subsample for the conflict study was drawn from two waves of data collection (fall of 1986 and winter of 1987). One hundred forty-four students were invited to participate in these waves; 28 refused to take part, leaving 116 students (80%) who completed the study. Four participants had no siblings, and 8 claimed they never quarreled with their sibling. The final sample of 104 represents 72% of the original randomly selected students. Respondents were classified as preadolescent (10-11 years old; 43%) or young adolescent (over 12 years old; 57%); sibling dyads were classified as same (64%) or mixed (36%) gender, and as closely (within 2 years; 28%) or widely (3 or more years apart; 72%) spaced.

Procedures

Groups of randomly selected students met during school hours with a research team member who described the study and invited them to participate. Interested students were given written information and a consent form to take to their parents, who were subsequently contacted by telephone. Only students who returned the consent forms signed by themselves and at least one parent participated. To ensure confidentiality, each participant was assigned a number used to identify project materials. After completing the study, each participant received a check for $8.

Measures

In addition to demographic information, two sets of measures were obtained for the conflict study: scales assessing qualities of relationships and descriptions of specific conflict episodes. Comparable information on the closest sibling and best friend was obtained (see Raffaelli, 1991).

Relationship quality ratings. Three instruments were used to assess respondents' perceptions of the sibling relationship (see Table 1):

1. Interpersonal Relations Questionnaire (Blyth, 1982). The IRQ is a 13-item scale yielding four variables: emotional closeness (6 items; standardized item alpha = .78); shared time (6 items; standardized item alpha = .74); importance of sibling; and relationship satisfaction (single questions).

2. Interview Measures of the Relationship. Participants were asked about two aspects of the sibling relationship: frequency of fighting ("About how often do you and [sibling] get into fights or arguments?"); and voluntary association ("How often do you spend time with [sibling] by choice?").

3. Family Environment Scale (Moos, Insel, & Humphrey, 1974). Two of the FES 10-item sub-scales were administered: family conflict, which assesses the degree to which open expressions of anger, aggression, and conflict typify the family (standardized item alpha = .65); and family cohesion, which assesses the degree to which family members are committed to, and supportive of, each other (standardized item alpha = .66).

Descriptions of conflict. The conflict interview was developed for the present study. Respondents with only one sibling answered questions with reference to that sibling. For youngsters with two or more siblings, interviewers asked if there was one sibling they felt closest to. If no sibling was identified, the sibling that was closest in age was selected. All further questions were made with reference to the selected sibling, and only questionnaire ratings for that sibling were used in the analysis.

The question of whether allowing respondents to select a target sibling resulted in biases was addressed. No systematic differences in relationship qualities were found linked to which sibling was chosen, or between respondents with one as opposed to

TABLE 1. CONFLICT FREQUENCY AND RELATIONSHIP QUALITIES: MEANS AND INTERCORRELATIONS

	n[a]	M	SD	Pearson Correlation Coefficient
Interview				
Fight frequency[b]	104	3.3	1.1	—
Voluntary association[b]	103	4.2	1.3	.15
IRQ variables				
Shared time[b]	94	3.1	.97	.18
Emotional closeness[c]	94	2.6	.89	.00
Sibling importance[c]	92	4.4	.93	.10
Relationship satisfaction[c]	89	4.0	1.1	−.13
Family environment scale				
Family cohesion[d]	102	.78	.21	.00
Family conflict[d]	103	.37	.24	.23

[a]Numbers vary due to missing data for some variables.
[b]Possible values range from 1 ("never") to 5 ("more than once a day").
[c]Possible values range from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("very much").
[d]Possible values range from 0 to 1.

two or more siblings. However, 9 of the 45 boys with two or more siblings claimed there was no sibling they felt closer to. These boys were compared to the 36 who did name a closest sibling on the dimensions of gender and age constellation, parental marital status, family size, and relationship quality ratings. Two differences emerged: Boys who did not name a closest sibling were more likely to have only two siblings as opposed to three or more (78% vs. 36% of boys who named a closest sibling; $\chi^2 = 4.7$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$), and were less satisfied with the relationship ($M = 3.1$ vs. 4.0; $t = 2.0$, $df = 7$, $p < .05$). No differences in frequency of sibling conflict were found, so this small group of boys was not separated in subsequent analyses.

During the interview, youngsters described a recent fight or disagreement with the target sibling. Standardized instructions, probes, and follow-up questions were used to ensure comparable information across interviewers. These descriptions were coded for 12 aspects of the onset, process, and aftermath of conflict. Content codes were derived from responses, grouped into theoretically driven categories, and applied independently by the author and a colleague to half of the interviews. Differences were discussed and reconciled, the codes were finalized, and another 40 interviews were coded. A final reliability check showed an overall inter-rater agreement rate of over 90%. The author then coded the remaining interviews.

Results

Two sets of analyses were carried out. First, the interplay between frequency of conflict and relationship qualities and family variables was examined; then descriptions of conflicts were analyzed. When considering these results, the limitations of the data must be kept in mind. One major limitation is that data about dyadic interactions were obtained from single informants using self-report methods. Ways to circumvent these limitations are outlined in the discussion.

Dyadic Conflict and Relationship Qualities/Family Structure Variables

Mean ratings and intercorrelations between frequency of dyadic conflict and relationship qualities are presented in Table 1. Frequency of dyadic conflict between siblings was positively (but nonsignificant-

ly) associated with spending time together and family conflict but not emotional qualities of the relationship. Frequency of fighting was unrelated to either the respondent's or target sibling's gender and age.

Associations between frequency of conflict and parental marital status, number of children, and sharing a bedroom were examined. No significant differences were found in ratings of frequency of conflict by the 89 youngsters with intact families as compared to the 15 youngsters with nonintact families. Youngsters with one ($n = 29$), two ($n = 34$), or three or more ($n = 41$) siblings were compared; those with two siblings reported significantly more conflict than those with three or more ($M = 3.78$ vs. 2.9; $F [2,103] = 4.1$, $p < .02$). Youngsters who shared a bedroom ($n = 36$) did not report different levels of dyadic conflict than those who did not ($n = 70$).

Descriptions of Sibling Conflicts

In this section, descriptions of specific conflicts will be used to build up an overall picture of sibling conflicts.

Onset of conflict. Five aspects of the onset of conflict were examined:

1. Precipitating issue. The focus of each conflict was classified into one of four main categories (see Table 2). Log-linear analysis revealed no differences in the distribution of the four main issues attributable to age and gender constellation effects or to whether the dyad shared a bedroom or not.

Power issues were the most frequently described cause of conflict. Fights centering on behavioral control were common:

> I get paid for my work, so anyway I had $50 in my wallet, and my sister, who's going to be a financial wiz, kept riding me to put the money in the bank. I wanted to buy speakers and she kept egging me on about what I should do so we got into an argument about what I should do with my money.

Quarrels about sharing or turn-taking focused on achieving a fair distribution of family resources, whether the disputed resource was a closet, the front seat of the car, or the television set.

The second most common category of conflicts was personal property disputes, typically resulting from one sibling's unauthorized use of the other's be-

TABLE 2. PRECIPITATING ISSUES OF CONFLICTS

	n	Percentage
Power issues	**40**	**38.5**
Control behavior or ideas	22	21.1
Give orders/influence	(14)	(13.5)
Criticize	(3)	(2.9)
Factual dispute	(5)	(4.8)
Sharing/turn-taking	18	17.3
Joint activity/resources	(7)	(6.7)
Use of household property	(6)	(5.8)
Chores/privileges	(5)	(4.8)
Personal property	**27**	**26.0**
Use without permission	13	12.5
Invade space	7	6.7
Try to obtain	4	3.8
Damage	3	2.9
Abusive behavior	**22**	**21.1**
Psychological abuse	15	14.4
Unintentional	(6)	(5.8)
Intentional	(9)	(8.6)
Physical abuse	7	6.7
Unintentional	(3)	(2.9)
Intentional	(4)	(3.8)
Relationship betrayal	**15**	**14.4**
Untrustworthy behavior	9	8.6
Neglect	6	5.8
Total	**104**	**100.0**

longings or space. Fewer youngsters described conflicts resulting from abusive behavior.

Psychological abuse usually involved one sibling teasing, harassing, or bugging the other, either unintentionally or intentionally:

> Yesterday, I had a few friends over and he wouldn't leave me alone. He kept coming in my room, picking on me, saying I was going to get in trouble for having people in the house, and he turned off my radio once or twice.

Physical abuse typically occurred unintentionally during physical activities or roughhousing. In contrast, intentional violence could occur whenever one sibling felt like indulging in it:

> He was being an instigator. Throwing shoes at me, hit me in the head, having fun trying to get me mad.

A small group of youngsters described quarrels centered on *relationship betrayal,* including untrustworthy behavior and neglect:

> ● She was on the phone with my friends talking about me.
> ● He was sick and wanted me to stay inside and play with him, and I wanted to go outside and he was angry.

2. Specific versus habitual. Eighty-two percent (*n* = 85) of the conflicts were specific (one-time events) and 18% (*n* = 19) were habitual (recurrent). Girls were more likely to describe recurrent conflicts than boys (33% vs. 4%; partial χ^2 =16.8, *df* = 1, *p* < .001), with more property disputes being habitual (69%, compared to under 30% of conflicts in each of the other categories). More girls who did not share a bedroom with their sibling described a habitual fight (15 out of 37, or 40%, compared to 2 out of 15, or 13%; χ^2 = 2.46, *df* = 1, *ns*); over half the habitual fights described by girls who did not share a bedroom involved personal property issues.

3. Social context. The majority of conflicts occurred in the presence of family members (63%), 32% took place when only the dyad was present, and fewer than 5% occurred in the presence of nonrelated peers (figures are calculated based on 87 cases). Because one or both parents were present at 45% of fights, an examination of their role was possible and is presented later.

4. Prior activity. The majority (57%) of fights described did not erupt during an ongoing activity, 18% occurred during interactions (e.g., sports, games, conversations), 6% during TV watching, 9% during chores or shopping, 6% when one sibling was babysitting the other, and 4% during other activities. Power struggles were most likely to occur during ongoing activities (60%), particularly chores, interactions, and TV watching. In contrast, over 90% of all property conflicts were not grounded in a prior activity, and abusive behavior and relationship betrayal fell in the middle.

Preadolescents and young adolescents differed in the activity reported prior to the outbreak of conflict (partial χ^2 = 8.2, *df* = 3, *p* < .05). More of the younger children reported fights occurring during TV watching (11% vs. 2%; *z* = 2.0, *p* < .05) or interactions (24% vs. 14%; *ns*), rather than during other activities (11% vs. 25%; *z* = 1.9, *p* < .10). No gender differences in activities reported prior to conflict emerged.

5. Instigator. Respondents started the fight in 31% of cases, siblings were instigators in 56%, both were at fault in lo%, and the offender could not be identified in the remaining conflicts. Log-linear analysis revealed no variations attributable to age or gender of the respondent or the sibling.

Process of conflict. Four aspects of the process of conflict were examined:

1. Duration. The modal quarrel between siblings was resolved within 5 minutes (42% of the 77 conflicts for which this information is available), and another 46% lasted between 6 minutes and one hour.

No gender differences were found, but preadolescents described shorter quarrels than young adolescents. Half of all conflicts described by preadolescents lasted under 5 minutes (compared to 28% of young adolescents' conflicts), another 37% (vs. 50%) lasted between 6 minutes and one hour, and 15% (vs. 22%) lasted over an hour (partial χ^2 = 11.6, df = 3, p < .01). Preadolescents tended to resolve fights more quickly regardless of the precipitating issue, perhaps because they described conflicts during activities with a definite goal.

2. Trajectory. Nearly half of the 76 respondents who gave information about the conflict trajectory spontaneously reported that verbal (28%) or physical (21 %) aggression occurred after the precipitating action. Boys did not report more violence than girls; however, differences between narrowly spaced (n = 21) and widely spaced (n = 55) dyads emerged. More youngsters from widely spaced dyads reported verbal aggression (35% vs. 10%) and fewer physical aggression (16% vs. 33%) (partial χ^2 = 6.4, df = 2, p < .04). Fights that lasted longer were no more likely to escalate to violence and no association between precipitating issue and level of violence emerged.

3. Emotional reactions. Feelings during the conflict, intensity of feelings, and explanations for feelings were examined. Of the 94 respondents who provided this information, 66% felt angry, 21% unhappy, and 13% indifferent, positive, or mixed. Most respondents did not report intense reactions; 82% described average, 8% intense, and 10% mild emotions. When asked to discuss the causes of their reactions, respondents gave reasons that varied according to the emotion. Most of the 52 youngsters who reported anger referred to the sibling's refusal to give in or comply (92%). In contrast, most of the 17 youngsters who reported unhappiness or emotional upset attributed their feelings to a dislike of fighting with the sibling (65%) or to fear of negative consequences (23 %).

Why youngsters experienced different emotions could not be identified. No age or gender differences were found in emotions or explanations for emotions, fights over different issues were not linked to different emotions, and no differences in relationship qualities were reported by youngsters who reported anger as opposed to sadness.

4. Resolution strategy. How siblings ended the immediate conflict was classified into four categories (see Table 3).

The most common resolution strategy was in fact *no overt resolution.* Youngsters described withdrawing either physically (e.g., leaving the room) or psychologically (e.g., ignoring each other); withdrawal could be either voluntary or the result of an institutional event such as bedtime or suppertime. Other respondents indicated that the siblings had ceased interacting but did not give more precise details. These strategies share the common thread of resolution by avoidance. Another strategy that did not require the siblings to work out their differences was *outsider intervention*.

In most cases where the dyad achieved a resolution, one sibling gave in to the other; *capitulation* could be either peaceably achieved, or brought about by violence:

- She finally gave up. She said, "Go ahead and do what you want."
- I threw her on the ground.

A small number of youngsters described a *compromise* solution:

- He said, "We'll both do it together." I had to clean the kitchen, but he helped me. Then I helped him.
- We both watched a different program.

There were no age differences in how conflicts were resolved; however, log-linear analysis revealed a three-way effect for strategy, gender of respondent, and gender of sibling. No significant differences between sister-sister and brother-brother dyads emerged,

TABLE 3. CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGY

	n^a	Percentage
No overt resolution	**38**	**37.3**
Withdrawal	15	14.7
Voluntary withdrawal	(10)	(9.8)
Institutional event	(5)	(4.9)
Ignore dispute/each other	8	7.8
Cease interaction/time lapse	15	14.7
Outsider intervention	**27**	**26.5**
Parent intervenes	23	22.6
Other intervenes	4	3.9
Capitulation	**29**	**28.4**
Self yields	10	9.8
Other yields	19	18.6
Compromise	**8**	**7.8**
Joint solution	6	5.9
Separate solution	2	1.9
Total	**102**	**100.0**

^aData not available for all respondents.

but girls and boys from mixed-sex dyads reported different resolution strategies. More girls reported capitulation (42% vs. 11 % of boys; $p < .05$), and fewer compromise (5% vs. 56%; $p < .05$). Because no other differences emerged in how conflict was conducted or experienced, it is difficult to interpret this finding.

Aftermath of conflict. Three aspects of the aftermath were examined:

1. Repair strategy (see Table 4). The most common repair strategy was *no overt repair,* occurring when the siblings had worked out a satisfactory resolution or when they simply resumed normal relations:

> We don't usually make it up—by next morning, everything is forgotten. That's what we did this time.

In a few cases, repair was prompted by *parental intervention.* These strategies are similar in that siblings did not do anything to repair the relationship. Other youngsters described using some form of active repair; usually, *one initiated repair* by making a direct or indirect overture:

> ● She came in and said, "Sorry about the disagreement".
> ● She came to my room and asked me if I wanted to play a game.

Only three youngsters described *mutual repair,* including discussing the situation that prompted the conflict or acting together to remedy the problem.

An examination of age and gender differences revealed no significant main effects: however, youngsters in same and mixed-sex dyads described different repair strategies (partial $\chi^2 = 9.3$, $df = 3$, $p < .03$), with youngsters in mixed-sex dyads being more likely to report outsider intervention than those in same-sex dyads.

2. Time lapse. Thirty-eight percent of the respondents said that relationship repair occurred within an hour after conflict ended, and 62% said it took over an hour. No variations attributable to age or gender constellation were found.

3. Emotions after conflict. Of the 95 respondents who provided this information, 28% reported negative feelings (sad, mad), 19% felt indifferent (OK, not bad), 18% felt "better," and 36% reported positive feelings (happy, good). Emotions were accompanied by different patterns of explanation. Most youngsters who felt better or positive attributed their feelings to

the restoration of status quo or the cessation of conflict (67%):

> ● Better because we weren't mad at each other anymore.
> ● Happy because it was stupid to fight at all.

Other youngsters said the outcome of the conflict caused their positive emotions; for them, "winning" the fight made them feel good (33%).

Youngsters reporting negative feelings were most likely to mention ruminating, or continued thinking about the conflict (50%):

> Mad. Because she didn't want to do what I asked her to do.

Others referred to fears of relationship damage (30%):

> I thought my brother was upset with me.

The remaining youngsters (20%) explained their negative emotions with reference to the outcome of the fight, particularly the other's triumph.

Log-linear analysis revealed no variations attributable to age or gender, but feelings after conflict differed depending on whether youngsters reported anger ($n = 61$) or unhappiness ($n = 19$) during the fight. Youngsters who felt angry during conflict were more likely to report negative feelings (34% vs. 11 % of those who reported unhappiness) or indifference (20% vs. 5%) and less likely to report feeling better or positive (46% vs. 84%) after the fight ($\chi^2 = 8.6$, $df = 2$, $p < .025$). Youngsters who were angry focused on their inability to attain a goal, and the end of conflict was linked to continued thinking about the failure. Those who were unhappy during the fight were likely to be thinking about the relationship, and were relieved that it had been repaired.

TABLE 4. RELATIONSHIP REPAIR STRATEGY

	n[a]	Percentage
No overt repair	49	53.3
Resolved	24	26.1
Ignore dispute/let it slide	25	27.2
Outsider intervention	7	7.6
Parent initiates repair	7	7.6
One initiates repair	30	32.6
Verbal overture	14	15.2
Indirect overture	16	17.4
Mutual Repair	3	3.3
Made up; no details	3	3.3
Total	92	100.1

[a]Data not available for all respondents.

External Influences on Sibling Conflicts

To explore possible sources of variation in the structure of sibling conflicts, analyses focusing on three sets of variables were carried out: family structure, relationship quality ratings, and parental presence during conflicts.

Family structure variables. No differences in the onset, process, or aftermath of conflict were found related to number of siblings living home or parental marital status.

Relationship qualities. The only difference in the onset of conflict was that youngsters who described fighting over relationship betrayal reported significantly more shared time with their sibling ($M = 3.9$, $n = 12$) than those who fought over property issues ($M = 2.8$, $n = 23$) ($F [4,100] = 3.1$, $p < .02$). Several differences in the process of conflict were found. Youngsters who did not report violence rated their relationship significantly higher on emotional closeness ($M = 2.9$, $n = 34$) than those reporting verbal or physical aggression ($M = 2.3$, $n = 33$) ($t = 2.7$, $df = 65$, $p < .01$). Additionally, youngsters who took over an hour to resolve conflicts spent more time voluntarily with their siblings ($M = 5.1$, $n = 10$) than those who took under an hour ($M = 4.1$, $n = 66$) *(t = 2.2, df = 74, p < .05)*. Finally, youngsters who reported that over an hour elapsed between resolution and repair had significantly higher emotional closeness ratings ($M = 2.7$, $n = 33$) than those who took under an hour ($M = 2.1$, $n = 20$) ($t = 2.4$, $df = 51$, $p < .05$). It appears that siblings with more positive relationships fought about different issues and conducted conflict differently than those with less positive relationships.

Parental presence. A number of respondents reported that one or both parents were present when conflict began, permitting a naturalistic test of assumptions about the parental role in sibling conflicts. If youngsters are competing for parent-controlled resources, love, and attention (e.g., Chafetz, 1982; Faber & Mazlish, 1987; Freud, 1955; Ihinger, 1975), fights in parental presence and absence should differ, as parental presence influences the possibility of attaining these goals. In addition, parental interventions should be more common when youngsters are fighting over parent-controlled resources. To investigate these issues, respondents were split according to parental presence (45%; $n = 39$) or absence (55%; $n = 48$) at the time of conflict (17 respondents were excluded due to missing data) and two sets of analyses were carried out. First, conflicts where parents were present were compared to those where parents were not present. After this, when and how parents became involved was examined.

No overall differences were found in the distribution of cause of conflict by parental presence; however, parents were present at fewer power struggles (13% vs. 35% in parental absence; $z = 2.4$, $p < .05$) and more property disputes (23% vs. 10%; $z = 1.6$, *ns*). There were no significant differences in the duration of conflict or level of violence by parental presence, but conflicts in parental presence were more likely to be resolved by outsider intervention ($\chi^2 = 17.3$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$); parents intervened in 54% of fights they witnessed. No effects on the aftermath of conflict emerged.

Conflicts that took place in parental presence were classified by whether the parent became involved ($n = 21$) or not ($n = 18$), and differences in the course of conflict were explored. Parents intervened in 82% of the property disputes and in 80% of conflicts over shared resources they witnessed, but were less likely to intervene in quarrels centered on power issues (17%), chores (33%), or abusive behavior (37%). Aggressive acts were more common in conflicts where the parent intervened ($\chi^2 = 6.4$, $df = 2$, $p < .05$); 41% encompassed verbal aggression (vs. 31% where no intervention occurred) and 35% physical aggression (vs. 6%).

How parents intervened was examined next. In 6 cases, parents simply told children to stop fighting or curtailed access to the disputed object. Parents took sides in 12 fights; half of these were property disputes, and parents enforced the rights of the sibling who owned the property. In three cases, parents provided a solution to the problem by arbitrating between the siblings. Although it is impossible to know what parents were actually doing during these fights, it appears that they simply wanted the fighting to stop. If siblings are fighting with an eye towards gaining positive attention from parents or to garner scarce re-sources, they are not particularly good at it.

DISCUSSION

Conflict is a common and accepted feature of the sibling relationship for the middle-class white teenagers who participated in this study. Most respondents willingly described quarrels that related to daily concerns and were characterized by some degree of anger and aggression. Comparable findings have been reported in previous research (e.g., Felson, 1983; Roscoe, Goodwin, & Kennedy, 1987; Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg, 1970). The fact that siblings fight is well known; what is less well understood is what conflict means in the sibling relationship and what its possible developmental implications are.

This study takes a step in addressing the question of how sibling conflict fits into adolescent development. As discussed earlier, there are limitations to the study, including the small sample size, sample composition (e.g., all white respondents, few children from divorced families), and design of the study (e.g., only one member of each sibling dyad interviewed, only one example of conflict obtained from each respondent). Some of these limitations are due to the preliminary nature of the study, and to its being embedded in a larger study. Other limitations stem from the methodology, which utilized interviews to obtain behavioral self-reports, a method that yields data of uncertain reliability. Although these limitations restrict the generalizability of the findings and the conclusions that can be drawn, this study provides new information and identifies areas for further research.

Conflict between siblings has been attributed to a variety of factors. Family systems theorists argue that families promote conflict because of intense emotional involvement, amount of time spent together, necessity of integrating a range of activities and interests, involuntary membership, and social norms making conflict acceptable (Gelles & Straus, 1979; Sprey, 1969). The data presented here offer support for these theories. In contrast, rivalry-based theorists postulate that siblings enter into conflict because they are competing for parental love and attention (e.g., Faber & Mazlish, 1987; Freud, 1955; Ihinger, 1975). These theories received less support in the present study; although it is impossible to determine the unconscious motivation from behavioral reports, results suggest that during adolescence conflict between siblings is not primarily parent-oriented. **A** third view of conflict maintains that what individuals disagree about pro-

vides an indication of what is important to them and their relationships (Rizzo, 1989). Starting from this assumption, we can explore the possible meanings of sibling conflict.

Power struggles are thought to permit clarification of family obligations and rules (Vuchinich, 1987); these fights probably have more to do with living together than with being siblings, as is supported by examinations of parent-child conflict (e.g., Montemayor & Hanson, 1985; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Other quarrels, particularly those arising over abusive behavior and relationship betrayal, deal with the issue of how one person should treat another. These interactions test (and violate) the limits of acceptable behavior, and may teach children how far they can go before provoking retaliation or punishment (Bank & Kahn, 1982). Conflicts centered on property issues are regarded primarily as evidence of rivalry between siblings. It has been theorized, however, that possessions are integral to self-definition (Furby, 1978), and control over possessions has been linked to a sense of competence and self-identity (Bettelheim, 1974). Thus, property disputes may reflect not rivalry but rather age-appropriate issues of self-definition and personal boundaries. This is supported by the fact that in this study, youngsters did not describe fighting over ownership but rather over unauthorized use of possessions or personal space.

It has been proposed that "children may often come into conflict about matters they are in the process of mastering, that is, dominant "developmental tasks" (Shantz, 1987, p. 294). A major task of adolescence involves the establishment of a personal identity (Havighurst, 1952/1972). Social relationships form the contexts within which adolescents explore possible identities, and conflict plays a significant role in identity formation, because the articulation of differences between individuals is often situated in moments of disagreement (Shantz & Hobart, 1989). Sibling relationships, though largely ignored in research on individuation (e.g., Grotevant & Cooper, 1986), are characterized by several features identified as significant in this process. Siblings differ in their personalities, capabilities, and goals, acting as a source of social comparison from childhood (Dunn, 1988) into adolescence (Bank & Kahn, 1982) and adulthood (Cicirelli, 1982). Sharing day-to-day life involves constant reminders that each person is an individual with distinct goals, opinions, and desires. Furthermore, the fact that siblings are related means

that conflict need not jeopardize the relationship. Siblings' ability to disagree openly thus creates a context where individual boundaries are clarified and differences articulated.

This study raised a series of questions worthy of further investigation. First, the role of rivalry, which has been used as a facile explanation of why siblings fight, should be clarified. One question that has not been adequately addressed is which characteristics of sibling conflict are unique and which also occur in conflict between roommates, spouses, and other individuals who share space. Second, research is needed to clarify the role of aggression in "normal" sibling relations. Youngsters' self-reports suggest that physical aggression is more common when siblings are close in age, and unlikely to cause each other serious harm. Another question is whether and how negotiating conflict with siblings prepares youngsters for cross-sex peer interactions, which are rare before adolescence; data presented here suggest that conflict in mixed-sex sibling dyads may differ from conflict in same-sex dyads. Fourth, the question of whether sibling conflict carries the same developmental implications as peer conflict, as recent research suggests (e.g., Amato, 1989; Dunn, 1988; Shroff, Bates, Pettit, & Brown, 1990) should be addressed.

In addition to pursuing further research on sibling conflict and its developmental implications, researchers should rely less on self-reports and utilize observational methodologies (e.g., Patterson, Bank, & Stoolmiller, 1990; Smetana, Yau, & Hanson, 1991; Vuchinich, Emery, & Cassidy, 1988). Until we broaden the scope of research and fill in the many gaps in our knowledge about sibling interactions, including conflict, we cannot clarify the role siblings play in each other's development.

NOTE

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