The Changing Nature of Power, Control, and Influence in Sibling Relationships

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Abstract

The sibling relationship is unique in that it transforms across development from hierarchical in early childhood, to egalitarian by adulthood. The present article reviews the previous theorizing and research literature regarding how and why power, control, and therefore sibling influence, change over the course of the first couple of decades, and introduces the goals and advancements made by the new research presented in this issue. © 2017 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.
he sibling relationship is unique in comparison to other close relationships in several ways, but it is the developmentally changing nature of power dynamics that are likely the most salient. In other familial relationships, younger generations are generally expected to defer to older generations, regardless of age. Friendships and romantic relationships, in contrast, are generally equal in power, control, and decision making across time. Therefore, sibling relationships are unique because they change from hierarchical in early and middle childhood, to more egalitarian by adulthood. Additionally, such evolving power dynamics have an impact on how control and influence are exerted within the dyad. Therefore, the objective of this issue is to examine the processes and consequences of sibling relational power, to understand better how sibling relationship dynamics change and develop throughout the life course, how such dynamics may be similar or different cross culturally, and how they influence both the quality of the sibling relationship, as well as the well-being of youth.

This issue also both builds upon, and differs from, the 2009 New Directions issue edited by Kramer and Conger, and the last time New Directions focused on the role of siblings in child and adolescent development. That issue emphasized the ways siblings serve as socializing agents for both prosocial and antisocial behavior in youth. Although the control and influence siblings hold over one another are largely due to the power dynamics present within each dyad, and may also serve as a mechanism by which siblings serve as socializing agents, power differentials between siblings are also important for the quality of the relationship, youth social development, and adjustment. Therefore, further investigation into this mechanism, which changes dramatically over two decades, is important for improving our understanding of this relatively understudied social relationship. In addition, the present issue engages several early career researchers, in concert with well-known experts in the field, as a reflection of the growth of the field of sibling relationship scholarship. Thus, the present article reviews the role of power in sibling relationships specifically, and the following ones expand on the examination of the development of relational power, control, and influence from early childhood through young adulthood.

How Is Relational Power in Sibling Relationships Different From Other Relationships?

Laursen and Bukowski (1997) contend that three discrete dimensions can aid in distinguishing different close relationships from one another: permanence (i.e., voluntary vs. obligatory), power (i.e., hierarchical vs. egalitarian), and gender (i.e., same-sex vs. mixed-sex). Sibling relationships are obligatory in their permanence, and can be either same-sex or mixed-sex in their makeup, but it is the role of power within the sibling relationship that is the primary focus of the present issue. Although the relational dimension of power within close relationships can typically be described in terms
of whether or not a relationship is “hierarchical or egalitarian, vertical or horizontal, authoritative or mutual” (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997, p. 753), sibling relationships are unique in that they can be described by all of these features.

Sibling dyads are hierarchical in that, with the exception of twins, the age difference and order of appearance in the family dictate a formal rank ordering. Therefore, older siblings are considered to be physically, socially, and cognitively advantaged over their younger siblings. However, sibling relationships also become more egalitarian with age and development. As younger siblings become more equally matched in these capacities with their older siblings, the expectation that interactions will become more equal increases (Dunn, 2002; Fiske, 1992; Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). Sibling relationships are also vertical in that they are complimentary; more capable older siblings are often responsible for the caretaking of less capable younger siblings. Even from an early age, however, these relationships are also horizontal in that they are reciprocal. This particularly occurs through sibling play interactions, where turn-taking and equal participation is expected (Dunn, 2002; Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). Finally, authoritative relationship structures assume that the direction of influence between members is typically one-sided (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). In the case of sibling relationships, much of the research on sibling socialization and influence has found that older siblings are typically more influential on younger siblings than the reverse. However, mutual interactions, in which collaboration and bidirectional influence occur, are also frequent between siblings (Kramer & Conger, 2009; Whiteman, Bernard, & Jensen, 2011; Whiteman, Jensen & McHale, this issue).

Power dynamics within sibling relationships can be complicated, and much more so than those with parents (which are typically hierarchical, vertical, and authoritative) or with peers (which are typically egalitarian, horizontal, and mutual). Therefore, the unique blend of complimentary and reciprocal interactions between siblings likely influence the broader dynamic and quality of the relationship more so than with other close relationships where the power dynamics are more consistent and stable. Such volatility in power dynamics, and changes in power processes over the course of development, however, have an impact on how siblings handle conflicts, attempt to control one another, and influence each other’s behaviors.

Sources of Power in Sibling Relationships and Their Impacts

Based on the French and Raven (1959) typology of social power, Perlman, Siddiqui, Ram, and Ross (2000) identified five sources of power during youths’ conflictive interactions. Given the relatively high level of conflict that occurs among siblings throughout childhood and adolescence (Kim, McHale, Osgood, & Crouter, 2006), sibling posturing for power and control likely occurs most often during conflict (and is further examined in
The ability to coerce or reward social partners likely comes with maturity; so older siblings are more effective in this regard than younger siblings. Older siblings are more likely to use their power to win conflicts, most frequently by use of aggression or rewards, particularly when siblings are younger, and when the age difference between siblings is larger. Dyads with smaller age and power discrepancies, however, lead to more frequent conflict (Vandell & Bailey, 1992). Because of older siblings’ greater physical prowess and intellect over their younger siblings, particularly at earlier ages and when greater age differences are evident, older siblings are more likely to win arguments or control interactions by expert power (e.g., when one dyad member has superior ability or knowledge over the other; Perlman et al., 2000).

Referent power occurs when siblings are invested in the welfare of the other and is less influenced by birth order. Siblings who are warmer and more supportive towards one another are more likely to try to resolve discrepancies. When older siblings care about the internal states of their younger siblings, they are more likely to grant them leverage and power in interactions, which leads to more balanced power between siblings (e.g., Ram & Ross, 2008). Alternatively, information power, or persuasive power, is engaged in with the exchange of information or logical reasoning. Older siblings are more likely to have greater knowledge, or be better at forming a logical argument than younger siblings, because of their more advanced cognitive abilities. However, in an effort to even the playing field, younger siblings are more likely to use teasing to irritate older siblings, or elicit the assistance of parents (e.g., tattling) to gain power in disputes (Perlman et al., 2000).

Finally, legitimate power occurs when opposing parties have rights and obligations to one another based on social norms and moral rules. Perlman and colleagues (2000) suggest this is the most likely form of power to prevail in sibling relationships because of the hierarchical nature of the family and cultural prescriptions that we base power on age. Thus, power may be prescribed by parents (e.g., babysitting) or general social norms that younger members of society should take direction from older members. Therefore, older siblings are generally advantaged in this situation; however, research suggests that ownership trumps birth order in disputes over personal property (Ross, 1996).

Development and Context of Power, Control, and Influence in Sibling Relationships

Early Childhood. The power imbalance between siblings is likely most pronounced during early childhood. This is because of how rapidly
children develop physically and cognitively during this period. Thus, even a couple-of-year age gap between siblings at this stage can lead to large discrepancies between older and younger siblings' size, strength, maturity, communication skills, and knowledge. Parents are also more likely to intervene in sibling disputes at earlier ages, often to support the younger, less-powerful child, and to aid siblings in finding more constructive ways to handle disputes (Perlman & Ross, 1997; Siddiqui & Ross, 1999). In this issue, Della Porta and Howe examined young siblings’ (4- and 6-year-olds) power strategies and power effectiveness during multifamily member observed conflicts. Their findings suggest that power strategies are differentially effective in siblings' attempts to “win” conflicts based on the birth order of the children.

**Middle Childhood.** By middle childhood, siblings spend more time together than with any other relationship partner (Tucker, McHale, & Crouter, 2008). Additionally, by middle childhood, although a power imbalance still exists between older and younger siblings, younger siblings' growing social competence makes them more likely to push back against older siblings' power assertions. Doing so, however, also leads to increases in sibling conflict (until it peaks in early adolescence; Buhrmester & Furman, 1990; Kim et al., 2006). Recchia and Witwit (this issue) investigated how older and younger siblings’ (ranging in age from 4 to 10 years) conflict goal perceptions differed based on the hierarchical nature of the sibling relationship during middle childhood, as well as how these perceptions impacted the quality of the sibling relationship.

**Adolescence and Early Adulthood.** Early cross-sectional work by Buhrmester and Furman (1990; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992) suggested that the relative power imbalance between older and younger siblings significantly decreases over the course of adolescence. A more recent longitudinal study has found that although older adolescent siblings do continue to enjoy more power in the relationship than their younger siblings, this gap is significantly reduced over time (Tucker, Updegraff, & Baril, 2010). More egalitarian relationships are thought to be realized by emerging or young adulthood in order for siblings to function as sources of support for each other and their aging parents (Aquilino, 2006). Therefore, given the importance of developing a more egalitarian relationship by adulthood, Lindell and Campione-Barr (this issue) examined the moderating role of sibling relationship qualities (positive and negative) in the changing dynamics of sibling relative power over the course of adolescence. Additionally, although movement towards a more egalitarian relationship in early adulthood is considered both developmentally appropriate and functional for the family system, it is also possible that the direction of sibling influence, which most typically flows from older siblings to younger siblings earlier in development, may become more bidirectional. As one possible example, Whiteman, Jensen, and McHale (this issue) investigated the
potential bidirectional associations of older and younger siblings’ influence on one another’s risky behaviors.

Cultural Context. The vast majority of studies on sibling relational processes have been examined in Western cultures (and typically, White, middle-class, U.S. families). The minority of studies that examine other cultures suggest that there may be some differences in sibling relational processes and roles cross culturally (e.g., Updegraff, McHale, Killoren, & Rodriguez, 2011), and some similarities (e.g., Buist & Vermande, 2014; Buist et al., 2016). However, cross-cultural examinations of sibling power dynamics specifically have been sparse. Buist and colleagues (this issue) investigated the associations between sibling power dynamics and psychosocial functioning across three different developmental periods (early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence) and from Dutch, Turkish, Indian, and Moroccan samples.

Conclusions

The unique nature of the sibling relationship often gives rise to both positive (e.g., warmth, affection) and negative (e.g., conflict, antagonism) relational qualities. It is important, then, to understand how such an ambivalent relationship can be so influential in shaping the individuals we become (Kramer & Conger, 2009). The present issue suggests that a primary mechanism by which these processes may occur is through the changing nature of sibling relational power, control, and influence throughout development. By gaining a better understanding of the ways in which siblings exert (or claim) power over one another and their interactions, we may also be able to find better targets for relationship intervention to improve sibling and family dynamics, as well as individual youth well-being.

References


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