Commitment and Emotional Closeness in the Sibling Relationship
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This study explored commitment in the sibling relationship by examining whether sibling commitment (a) varies across the lifespan and (b) is associated with siblings’ use of affectionate communication and communication-based emotional support. Participants were 448 individuals ranging in age from 18–92 who completed the Measure of Commitment scale (Stafford & Canary, 1991), the Affectionate Communication Index (Floyd & Morman, 1998), and the Communication-Based Emotional Support scale (Weber & Patterson, 1996). Results indicated that sibling commitment (a) remains stable across the lifespan and (b) is associated with communication-based emotional support, the supportive communication dimension of affectionate communication, and sibling birth order.

Commitment, considered to be a psychological attachment through which an individual intends to continue in a relationship indefinitely (Canary & Stafford, 1994; Rusbult, 1980), is integral to the success of any close relationship. According to Johnson (1999), commitment emerges in the form of an individual expressing a personal desire, feeling obligated, or feeling forced, due to external social pressures, to remain involved in the relationship. To date, the study of commitment largely has centered on romantic and platonic relationships (Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2002), with the idea that participants commit to these relationships based on a mutual desire to remain actively involved in the relationship (Rusbult, 1983). As such, not surprisingly, commitment is related directly to marital and relational satisfaction, liking and loving, trust, relational closeness, and investment and is related indirectly to...
quality of relational alternatives and inequity (Johnson, 1999; Lin & Rusbult, 1995; Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; Sprecher, 1988; Stanley, Markman, & Whittton, 2002). Furthermore, when commitment is evident in close relationships, relational partners spend more time with each other and express more positive emotions toward each other (Frank & Brandstatter, 2002).

Yet, commitment remains relatively understudied in other close relationships. One such close relationship is the sibling relationship. This is surprising, given that the sibling relationship is considered not only to be the longest lasting relationship most individuals experience (Ponzetti & James, 1997), but 80% of all individuals are estimated to spend at least one-third of their lives with their siblings (Fitzpatrick & Badzinski, 1994). Moreover, due to the involuntary nature of the sibling relationship, sibling commitment may occur due to obligation or force rather than by choice. In addition to this involuntary nature, Mikkelson (2006) posited that the sibling relationship is differentiated by a paradoxical nature not common to voluntary relationships; as, unlike romantic or platonic relationships, the sibling relationship is one in which the participants express liking and loving for each other while simultaneously engaging in antisocial relational behaviors. Such behaviors include physical, relational, and verbal aggressiveness; competition; conflict; and rivalry (Felson, 1983; Kahn, 1983; Martin, Anderson, Burant, & Weber, 1997; Myers & Goodboy, 2006; Updegraff, Thayer, Whitman, Denning, & McHale, 2005). This paradoxical nature further stems from characteristics unique to the sibling relationship such as its longevity, a shared biological and relational history, and exposure to the same social and emotional contexts in which all siblings grow and develop (Brody, 1998; Cicirelli, 1991, 1995), although it should be noted that not all siblings from the same family share the same familial experience (Ross, Woody, Smith, & Lollis, 2000; Tucker, Barber, & Eccles, 1997).

The purpose of this study was to examine commitment in the sibling relationship. To do so, we first examined whether sibling commitment varies across the lifespan. As Myers and Weber (2004) established, sibling commitment is linked positively to sibling use of relational maintenance behaviors, reinforcing the notion that siblings are committed to maintaining their relationships across the lifespan (Scott, 1990). At the same time, however, sibling interaction becomes more voluntary as siblings become older (Floyd & Parks, 1995; Goetting, 1986), suggesting that commitment may waver based on how actively involved siblings are in each others’ lives at any given time period. We then explored whether sibling commitment is predicted by their emotional closeness with their siblings, conveyed through their use of affectionate communication and communication-based emotional support. Because emotional closeness is one factor that differentiates sibling relationships from other relationships (Scott, 1990) and because providing affection and emotional support are the two primary ways in which individuals behaviorally express relational commitment (Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2002), sibling commitment is likely predicted by their use of affectionate communication and communication-based emotional support.
The sibling relationship is the most pervasive of all close relationships. Beginning at birth and culminating with death, siblings exert a powerful presence in each others’ lives. Goetting (1986) identified three stages through which sibling relationships progress. The first stage, which is childhood and adolescence, begins when the sibling is an infant and lasts well into a sibling’s teen years. In this stage, siblings provide each other with companionship and emotional support, delegated caretaking, and aid and direct services that emerge in the form of sibling coalitions (e.g., dealing with parents) and situational services (e.g., helping with homework, lending money, protecting each other). During this time, siblings are not regarded as the most important emotionally supportive figure in each other’s lives (Moser, Paternite, & Dixon, 1996), although they do rely on each other for advice about a multitude of issues (Tucker et al., 1997). The second stage, early and middle adulthood, begins when siblings no longer live with their parents and become actively involved with a family of their own, whether through marriage, cohabitation, or economic reasons. In this stage, siblings continue to provide each other with companionship and emotional support, to cooperate in the care of their elderly parents and other relatives, and to provide aid and direct services as necessary in the forms of babysitting, helping each other through illness, and lending money, although Wellman and Wortley (1989) established that lending money is the least likely service siblings provide for each other. The third stage, old age, begins when siblings generally are no longer responsible for their offspring and may have entered into retirement from their vocations. In this stage, siblings resolve their rivalries, validate their relationships by engaging in shared reminiscence and intensifying their emotional bond, and continue to provide the aid and direct services they provided during early and middle adulthood (Goetting, 1986).

Across these three stages, events associated with normal lifespan development occur. In the childhood and adolescent stage, siblings vie with each other for a host of resources from their parents, including time, money, involvement, and attention. During this time, siblings form alliances with each other (Nicholson, 1999) as a way to express their solidarity and loyalty and engage in conflict over issues such as belongings, household chores, and objectionable behavior (Felson, 1983). As siblings enter early and middle adulthood, they face a multitude of new experiences such as marriage, the arrival of children, and divorce (Connidis, 1992) that can affect whether and how siblings communicate with each other. In many cases, unmarried and/or childless siblings have more contact with and rely more on their siblings (Connidis & Campbell, 1995) for social and instrumental support (Miner & Uhlenberg, 1997) than married siblings or siblings with children. As siblings enter old age, they face issues such as declining health and functional status, widowhood, and the deaths of their relatives, friends, and even each other (Connidis, 1992). And at any time during their lives, variables such as geographic proximity, socioeconomic status, and changes in social networks impact sibling involvement with each other (Avioli, 1989; Campbell, Connidis, & Davies, 1999).
Yet, we do not know whether sibling commitment remains stable or fluctuates across the lifespan. On one hand, Kahn (1983) asserted that siblings remain actively involved with each other throughout their lives, regardless of any crises that occur, and are committed to helping each other emotionally, morally, and financially. Cicirelli (1991) echoed this assertion, positing that siblings likely remain committed to each other simply due to sharing a biological bond. Bank and Kahn (1997) reported that adult siblings remain emotionally involved with each other, even if interaction is minimal and is facilitated through a third party (Allan, 1977). Conversely, at any point during the lifespan, sibling commitment may be influenced by changes in their relationships due to age. For instance, during childhood and adolescence, young adults perceive their friendships as more intimate and important than their sibling relationships (Pulakos, 1989). As some siblings enter early and middle adulthood, having a spouse and/or children takes precedence over their relationships (Connidis, 1992), which may be compounded further by the geographic distance separating siblings (Connidis, 1989a). To investigate whether sibling commitment remains stable or fluctuates across the lifespan, the following research question was posed:

RQ1: Does sibling commitment remain stable or fluctuate across the lifespan?

Undoubtedly, sibling commitment is realized through emotional closeness. Emotional closeness refers to “the sense of shared experiences, trust, concern, and enjoyment of the relationship” (Lee, Mancini, & Maxwell, 1990, p. 433). According to Folwell, Chung, Nussbaum, Sparks-Bethea, and Grant (1997), siblings experience emotional closeness with each other due to participating in family functions, enduring family hardships, having common interests, and experiencing age-related issues. As such, siblings who feel emotionally closer with their siblings tend to confide in them, to do favors for each other, to help each other in an emergency, to visit often, and to talk with them frequently across a breadth and depth of topics (Connidis & Campbell, 1995; Floyd, 1995; Rocca & Martin, 1998). Siblings who are emotionally close also perceive their relationships as more cohesive (Pulakos, 1990) and report feeling less lonely (Ponzetti & James, 1997).

One way that siblings enact emotional closeness is through affectionate communication, defined as “an individual’s intentional and overt enactment or expressions of feelings of closeness, care, and fondness” (Floyd & Morman, 1998, p. 145) and consists of three dimensions. The first dimension is verbal expressions, which siblings convey through statements that convey liking or loving or comment on the state of the relationship. The second dimension is nonverbal expressions, which siblings convey through nonverbal behaviors such as touch, space, or eye behavior. The third dimension is social supportiveness, which siblings convey through compliments, self-disclosure, or praise.

According to Floyd and Voloudakis (1999), affectionate communication is critical for the development, definition, and maintenance of personal relationships. Thus, not surprisingly the expression of affectionate communication is related directly to relational satisfaction, relational closeness, relational involvement, self-disclosure,
and psychological affection, but it is related indirectly to psychological distance (Floyd & Mormon, 1998, 2000, 2001; Floyd, Hess, et al., 2005; Morman & Floyd, 1999). At the same time, engaging in affectionate communication enhances both an individual's well-being and the quality of an individual's social interactions. Floyd (2002) reported that on an individual level, high affectionate communicators are happier, have higher levels of self-esteem, are less depressed and stressed, and report greater mental health than low affectionate communicators; on a social level, high affectionate communicators are more socially outgoing and receive more affection from others.

Another way that siblings can communicate emotional closeness is through the provision of emotional support. Although definitions vary, scholars agree that emotional support (as it is labeled in the field of psychology) and social support (as it is labeled in the field of communication) involves the expression of empathy, sympathy, concern, compassion, validation of feelings, and encouragement (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984; Campbell & Wright, 2002; Cohen & Wills, 1985). Weber and Patterson (1996) developed the construct of communication-based emotional support incorporating the messages themselves and their emphasis on communicating care or concern as well as the communication networks from which messages were created. When individuals engage in communication-based emotional support, they are perceived to use messages that stress immediacy, similarity, equality, and receptivity (Campbell & Wright, 2002).

According to Weber and Patterson (1996), communication-based emotional support is one way that relational partners enhance the well-being and closeness of their relationship by communicating caring messages regardless of the outcome. Thus, not surprisingly communication-based emotional support is related directly to trust, relationship satisfaction, and perceived understanding, but it is related indirectly to evoking jealousy and stress (Cayanus, Martin, & Weber, 2004; Weber, Johnson, & Corrigan, 2004; Wright, 2002). At the same time, emotional support is vital to the maintenance of personal relationships. While investigating the role of emotional support within dating relationships, Merolla (2004) found that communication-based emotional support was correlated positively with commitment and relationship satisfaction. Other researchers have found that romantic partners are more committed and highly satisfied when they receive some form of emotional support from their partner, friends, and family (Lewis, 1973; Parks, Stan, & Eggert, 1983; Sprecher, 1988).

Because commitment is communicatively constructed (Ballard-Reisch & Weigel, 1999; Weigel, 2003), affectionate communication and emotional support (acting as indices of emotional closeness) should be tied to commitment in part because siblings use affectionate communication behaviors with each other (Myers, 2004) and provide more emotional support to each other than they provide to other family members (Wellman & Wortley, 1989). However, not all siblings consider their relationships to be intimate (Folwell et al., 1997; Scott, 1990) due to childhood experiences such as rivalry, jealousy, or perceived inequity carrying over into adulthood (Aune & Comstock, 2002; Cicirelli, 1982; Felson, 1983). To investigate the role
affectionate communication and communication-based emotional support play in sibling commitment, the following research question was posed:

RQ2: To what extent is sibling use of affectionate communication (i.e., verbal communication, nonverbal communication, supportive communication) and communication-based emotional support associated with sibling commitment?

Method

Participants

Participants were students enrolled in either undergraduate or graduate communication courses or were solicited by students enrolled in the same courses, resulting in a total of 448 participants. The participants included 198 men and 250 women whose ages ranged from 18 to 92 years ($M = 35.84$, $SD = 17.74$). Of these respondents, 165 (37%) were married, 242 (54%) had children (range = 0–6 children), and they lived, on average, 392 miles ($SD = 992$) from their sibling. The participants reported on 233 male siblings and 214 female siblings (one respondent did not identify sibling sex) whose ages ranged from 9 to 88 years ($M = 35.14$, $SD = 17.78$). Of these siblings, 191 (40%) were married and 246 (55%) had children (range = 0–8 children).

Procedure and Instrumentation

Each participant completed the Measure of Commitment scale (Stafford & Canary, 1991), the Affectionate Communication Index (Floyd & Morman, 1998), and the Communication-Based Emotional Support scale (Weber & Patterson, 1996). Because the instruments were completed in this sequence, order effects among the instruments could not be assessed. Participants were instructed to identify a sibling (by initials) who was the closest in age and to complete the instruments in reference to the identified sibling. The identification of a sibling was required to ensure that participants would complete all instruments in reference to the identified sibling.

The Measure of Commitment scale is a six-item scale that asks respondents to indicate their level of commitment toward the targeted partner. Responses were solicited using a 7-point scale ranging from strongly agree (7) to strongly disagree (1). Previous reliability coefficients ranging from .86 to .92 have been reported for the scale (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Dainton & Aylor, 2002). In this study, a coefficient alpha of .83 ($M = 5.90$, $SD = 1.03$) was obtained for the summed scale.

The Affectionate Communication Index is a 19-item scale that asks respondents to indicate the frequency with which they engage in affectionate communication behaviors with a partner using verbal affectionate behaviors (five items), nonverbal affectionate behaviors (nine items), and supportive affectionate behaviors (five items). In this study, participants were asked to indicate the frequency with which they use each of the affectionate communication behaviors with the identified sibling. Responses
were solicited using a 5-point scale ranging from very often (5) to never (1). Previous reliability coefficients ranging from .63 to .86 have been reported for the three dimensions (Floyd & Morman, 2003, 2005). Due to concerns raised by the Institutional Review Board, one item (i.e., “kiss on lips”) was deleted from the set of nonverbal affectionate items, resulting in the use of eight items. In this study, a coefficient alpha of .88 \((M = 2.65, SD = 1.10)\) was obtained for the verbal dimension, a coefficient alpha of .87 \((M = 2.71, SD = .86)\) was obtained for the nonverbal dimension, and a coefficient alpha of .86 \((M = 3.66, SD = .92)\) was obtained for the supportive dimension.

The Communication-Based Emotional Support Scale is a 13-item scale that asks respondents to indicate the degree of agreement with statements showing that they perceive their relational partner to engage in emotional support. In this study, respondents were asked to indicate the frequency with which they use each of the emotional support items with the identified sibling. Responses were solicited using a 5-point scale ranging from very often (5) to never (1). Previous reliability coefficients of .88 and .93 have been reported for the scale (Merolla, 2004; Weber et al., 2004; Weber & Patterson, 1996). In this study, a coefficient alpha of .94 \((M = 3.57, SD = .90)\) was obtained for the summed scale.

**Results**

The first research question inquired whether sibling commitment remains stable or fluctuates across the lifespan. Based loosely on Goetting’s (1986) three stages of sibling relationships, participants were placed into one of three categories based on their age. These categories were childhood and adolescence (ages ranging from 18–23; 197 participants), early and middle adulthood (ages ranging from 24–54; 185 participants), and old age (ages ranging from 55–92; 64 participants). The results of an analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that no significant difference in commitment exists among siblings across the three stages, \(F (2, 443) = 1.38, p = .25\). Summed commitment scores were not significantly different for siblings in the childhood and adolescence category \((M = 35.66, SD = 6.30)\), siblings in the early and middle adulthood category \((M = 35.56, SD = 6.23)\), and siblings in the old age category \((M = 34.23, SD = 5.49)\), thus suggesting that sibling commitment remains stable across the lifespan.

The second research question inquired about the extent to which sibling use of affectionate communication (i.e., verbal communication, nonverbal communication, supportive communication) and communication-based emotional support is associated with sibling commitment. To answer this question, a stepwise discriminant analysis (Mertler & Vannatta, 2002) was conducted using the three dimensions of affectionate communication (i.e., verbal communication, nonverbal communication, supportive communication) and communication-based emotional support as well as the sibling demographics of sex, age, marital status, child status, and geographical distance as the independent variables. These latter five variables were added to the
analysis because researchers have found that sibling-perceived emotional closeness is affected by these variables (Cicirelli, 1989; Connidis, 1989a, 1992; Pulakos, 1989). Sibling commitment served as the dependent variable placing siblings into one of three categories (i.e., low, moderate, high) of commitment based on their score from the Measure of Commitment scale. Using 33rd percentiles, siblings placed in the low commitment category had a mean score of 34 or lower (n = 151), siblings placed in the moderate commitment category had a mean score between 35 and 38 (n = 117), and siblings placed in the high commitment category had a mean score of 39 or higher (n = 171).

The stepwise discriminant analysis generated two functions; however, only the first function was significant, $\lambda = .71$, $\chi^2(6, N = 439) = 160.02$, $p < .001$. Of the nine variables (i.e., verbal communication; nonverbal communication; supportive communication; communication-based emotional support; sibling sex, age, marital status, and child status; geographical distance), only three variables loaded onto the function. These variables were communication-based emotional support, the supportive communication dimension of affectionate communication, and sibling age (see Table 1), which together explained 29% of the variance in sibling commitment. Group means for the function indicated that siblings with a low level of commitment had a function mean of $-0.847$, siblings with a moderate level of commitment had a function mean of $0.152$, and siblings with a high level of commitment had a function mean of $0.644$. Classification results revealed that 55.1% of the sample was correctly classified. These results suggest, then, that siblings who provide more communication-based emotional support, engage in more supportive communication, and evaluate a younger sibling are more likely to be committed to their sibling.

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore commitment in the sibling relationship by examining whether sibling commitment (a) varies across the lifespan and (b) is associated with siblings’ use of affectionate communication and communication-based emotional support. It was found that sibling commitment (a) remains stable across the lifespan and (b) is associated with communication-based emotional support, the supportive communication dimension of affectionate communication, and sibling

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<th>Correlation coefficients with discriminant function</th>
<th>Standardized function coefficients</th>
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<tr>
<td>Supportive communication</td>
<td>.864</td>
<td>.490</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional support</td>
<td>.813</td>
<td>.554</td>
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<td>Sibling age</td>
<td>-.282</td>
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Table 1  Summary of Discriminant Functions
birth order. Together, these results suggest that siblings who are supportive both emotionally and affectionately remain committed despite such barriers as parenthood, geographical distance, and opposing lifestyles.

The results of the first research question revealed that sibling commitment remains stable across the lifespan. This finding may be due to the fact that siblings generally characterize their relationships as being loyal more so than being congenial, intimate, or apathetic (Scott, 1990). In a qualitative investigation of elderly sibling relationships, Gold (1989) found that siblings who classify their relationships as loyal based on a sense of family obligation. Her participants indicated that loyal sibling relationships focus on their shared family background and their allegiance to each other instead of psychological closeness, acceptance, and approval. As such, loyal siblings help each other in times of crisis, attend important family events such as reunions and holiday celebrations (even if contact with each other is minimal at other times) and do not allow their disagreements to weaken their sibling bond, even though siblings “may dislike each others’ spouses, occupations, activities, or life styles and may openly express this disapproval” (Gold, 1989, p. 44). Mutual helpfulness is another characteristic of sibling loyalty (Bank & Kahn, 1982), which occurs independently of sibling envy, resentment, closeness, or acceptance (Scott, 1990). Sibling loyalty, and subsequent commitment, also may be influenced by the biological bond shared by siblings (Cicirelli, 1991). In this case, siblings’ commitment toward the relationship may take precedence over their own feelings or attitudes toward each other.

The results of the second research question revealed that sibling commitment is associated with communication-based emotional support, the supportive communication dimension of affectionate communication, and sibling birth order. Unlike the previous finding suggesting that sibling loyalty lies at the heart of sibling commitment across the lifespan, the findings for the second research question suggest that sibling intimacy is the underlying factor associated with sibling commitment. According to Gold (1989), siblings who classify their relationships as intimate report the highest amount of closeness, instrumental support, emotional support, acceptance, approval, and psychological involvement. A closer examination of the items that comprise communication-based emotional support and supportive communication reveal that individuals who engage in communication-based emotional support listen, offer advice, are nonverbally immediate, and caring (Weber & Patterson, 1996) and individuals who engage in supportive communication help with problems, compliment, and praise (Floyd & Morman, 1998)—all of which imply that these individuals are more psychologically involved in the relationship. Furthermore, Weigel and Ballard-Reisch (2002) found that providing support and affection are linked positively with relationship continuance, desired commitment, and relational satisfaction. Siblings who engage in these behaviors, then, may be committed to each other because use of communication-based emotional support and supportive communication signifies feelings of being understood, a lack of discomfort with closeness, a lack of fear with intimacy, and a lack of relational conflict (Avtgis, 2000; Floyd, Hess, et al., 2005; Weber et al., 2004).
Additionally, in intimate sibling relationships, siblings consider each other as friends in addition to being a sibling (Gold, 1989). Connidis (1989b) reported that 77% of the participants in her sample consider at least one sibling to be a close friend, a finding replicated by White (1994) and White and Riedmann (1992). One reason why siblings consider each other as close or best friends is due to mutual confiding (Connidis, 1989b). Similarly, siblings who are emotionally close talk with and spend more time with each other (Connidis & Campbell, 1995). Although not all siblings consider each other as friends, the sibling relationship does become more egalitarian over time (Cicerilli, 1995), which may explain why sibling relationships tend to be characterized by warmth (Stocker, Lanthier, & Furman, 1997) and affiliation (Bedford, 1989). Thus, when siblings perceive each other as playing an important role in their lives such as being a close friend, their levels of satisfaction may increase, their quality of alternatives may decrease, and their investment size may increase, resulting in a greater level of commitment for the relationship (Rusbult et al., 1998).

Sibling birth order played an interesting role in this particular study. Although there were no effects for participants’ age, the results indicated that the birth order (i.e., being the younger sibling) of the participants’ siblings affected the participants’ commitment to the relationship. Generally, older siblings often engage in caretaking of their younger siblings (Cicirelli, 1996), in part because these younger siblings feel close to their older siblings (Daniels & Plomin, 1985). This feeling may be particularly evident in later life when there are none or few family members who are able to fill the caretaking role. A longitudinal analysis in which participants are asked to plot the turning points of their sibling commitment across the lifespan may serve as a better means for further study of sibling commitment and the influence of birth order.

Although commitment was considered to be a relational outcome in this study, future research should heed Ballard-Reisch and Weigel’s (1999) advice to discontinue conceptualizing commitment as either an end state or a relational outcome. One way to do so is to identify the behaviors siblings use to indicate their commitment to each other. Researchers have identified several ways in which relational partners behaviorally express their commitment in romantic relationships. These ways include, among others, maintaining integrity, sharing companionship and routine activities, focusing on things important to the relationship, discussing the relationship with a third party, showing respect, creating a positive relational atmosphere, and being supportive, trusting, and accepting (Knapp & Taylor, 1994; Marston, Hecht, Manke, McDaniel, & Reeder, 1998; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2002). It is possible siblings express commitment in similar ways. To gain a more comprehensive picture of the role commitment plays in the sibling relationship, the behaviors siblings use to express commitment should be identified as well as exploring whether these behaviors are indicative of personal, moral, or structural commitment (Johnson, 1999). Another direction for future research investigates the roles of commitment and emotional support in nontraditional siblings such as stepsiblings and siblings-in-law. Results of this study suggest a link between emotional support and commitment between siblings who have a biological kinship. These findings may differ for stepsiblings who are
living in a culture that values biological kinship over affectionate kinship (Jones, 2003). Similarly, commitment and emotional closeness may differ for siblings-in-law who use less affectionate communication than traditional siblings (Floyd & Morr, 2003). In addition, a change in the family structure such as death or divorce may alter the ways that the stepsiblings or siblings-in-law identify and maintain their relationships, thus affecting (and being affected by) their commitment, emotional support, and affectionate communication. Future researchers may wish to investigate the role of commitment across the lifespan of siblings who are not biologically related.

As with any research project, this study had limitations. One limitation that should be considered in future research endeavors is that data were not collected on the frequency, breadth, and depth of sibling interaction. Because a direct relationship exists between sibling contact and sibling emotional closeness (Lee et al., 1990; Rocca & Martin, 1998), it is possible sibling contact mediates the relationships between sibling commitment and emotional closeness. A second limitation is that respondents were instructed to complete the instruments in reference to the sibling who was closest in age rather than referencing a sibling based on, among other things, homophily, psychological closeness, or relational satisfaction. It is possible that the general affective tone experienced by siblings impacts not only their commitment toward each other, but the degree to which they perceive the relationship as emotionally close.

In sum, the results of this study indicate that although sibling commitment remains stable across the lifespan, at a given time sibling commitment is associated with sibling use of communication-based emotional support and supportive affectionate communication as well as sibling birth order. Collectively, these results suggest that sibling commitment is tied to perceived emotional closeness and supports the notion that commitment is communicatively constructed (Ballard-Reisch & Weigel, 1999; Weigel, 2003). Moreover, these results contribute to the growing knowledge base of commitment in close relationships and imply that commitment is just as vital for the sustenance of the sibling relationship as commitment is in voluntary relationships. Rusbult, Wieselquist, Foster, and Witcher (1999) stated that “an individual’s feelings of commitment play a key role in sustaining healthy ongoing relationships” (p. 440). For siblings, this may indeed be the case.

References


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