Jealousy Expression and Communication Satisfaction in Adult Sibling Relationships

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Though sibling rivalry and jealousy is a prevalent research area in psychology and family studies, few scholars have explored how adult siblings expressed jealousy and how satisfied they were with their jealousy expression. To link the research areas of developmental and social psychology with family communication, the present study employed communication satisfaction and Guerrero, Andersen, Jorgensen, Spitzberg, and Eloy’s (1995) communicative responses to jealousy in the context of adult sibling relationships. The current findings revealed that avoidance/denial was the most frequently reported form of jealousy expression by adult siblings. In addition, avoidance/denial, distributive communication, and violence were negatively related to communication satisfaction, whereas integrative communication was positively related to communication satisfaction. Each finding is discussed in relation to sibling interaction patterns.

Keywords: Communication satisfaction; Jealousy expression; Sibling relationships

The sibling relationship is one in which children have perhaps their “most intense social experiences” (Foote & Holmes-Lonergan, 2003, p. 46), and sibling interactions can be a major factor in one’s personality formation (White & Mullen, 1989). As such, two current research areas reflect sibling relationships’ unique impact on individuals in childhood and beyond: rivalry and jealousy (e.g., Miller, Volling, & McElwain, 2000) and communication satisfaction (e.g., Martin, Anderson,
The conflict and competition that arises out of involuntary, lifelong sibling relationships can place a great deal of stress and strain on siblings and lead to unsatisfactory relationships and communication. Combining these research areas is thus important and should be valuable for two reasons. First, the literature on communication satisfaction and conflict (Canary & Cupach, 1988) suggests that applying communication satisfaction to jealousy expression (which is typically negative) will enhance the potential outcomes of a jealousy interaction, which involves the active communicative engagement or avoidance of one’s partner regarding a threat to the relationship. Second, the sibling jealousy literature will be extended to include understanding of how adults (rather than children) express sibling jealousy. As such, we examine jealousy expression in relation to communication satisfaction in adult sibling relationships.

**Sibling Jealousy Expression**

Jealousy is “a protective reaction to a perceived threat to a valued relationship, arising from a situation in which the partner’s involvement with an activity and/or another person is contrary to the jealous person’s definition of their relationship” (Hansen, 1991, p. 213). Sibling jealousy represents the “complexity of family dynamics in contributing to and explaining emotional expression and its regulation” (Volling, McElwain, & Miller, 2002, p. 581). Aune and Comstock (2002) found that 48% of adults with siblings recalling recent family jealousy indicated that a sibling was the jealous target. Similarly, late adolescent participants reported moderate sibling competition and rivalry (Moser, Paternite, & Dixon, 1996). Further, Gold (1989) observed constructive to aggressive jealousy expression between elderly siblings. To systematically determine how adult siblings express jealousy, we adapt Guerrero et al.’s (1995) communicative responses to jealousy (CRJ) typology.

**Communicative Responses to Jealousy**

Few studies have examined sibling jealousy communication, and the studies that have been conducted typically involve child siblings. However, the aforementioned findings encourage extending the study of adult siblings jealousy to include the communicative manner in which it is expressed. To do this, we turn to the communicative response to jealousy (CRJ) typology. CRJs are interactive and behavioral responses to jealousy that can fulfill individual and/or relational goals (Guerrero et al., 1995) that have been instrumental in understanding jealousy expression in romantic (e.g., Guerrero & Afifi, 1999) and friend (e.g., Bevan & Samter, 2004) relationships.

Though CRJs have yet to be specifically applied to sibling jealousy expression, similarities do exist. Avoidance (Aune & Comstock, 2002) corresponds with avoidance/denial, defined as passive strategies. Discussions (Aune & Comstock, 2002) represent integrative communication, defined as constructive, direct responses. Negative affect (Miller et al., 2000; Volling et al., 2002) is similar to negative affect
expression, which is a nonverbal display of emotion. Sarcasm (Aune & Comstock, 2002) represents distributive communication, defined as direct, aggressive communication. Finally, verbal aggressiveness and violence (Rafaelli, 1992) corresponds with violent communication/threats (i.e., physical harm or threats to the sibling) and violence toward objects (i.e., anger release actions occurring in private or in view of the sibling. Due to these similarities, applying the established CRJ typology to adult sibling jealousy expression will provide a systematic understanding of how adults communicate jealousy to their siblings. As such, RQ1 asks:

**RQ1**: Which CRJs are reported as most frequent in adult sibling relationships?

**Communication Satisfaction**

In concert with recent research examining outcomes of partner jealousy expression (e.g., Bevan & Hale, 2006), understanding outcomes of one’s own jealousy expression can increase an individual’s awareness of how his/her jealousy responses impact the self, the partner, and the relationship. This self-awareness may increase competent communication in future interpersonal exchanges, and one useful tool for assessing competence in interpersonal interactions is communication satisfaction (Hecht, 1978). Communication satisfaction is the “positive effect received from a communication event that fulfilled expectations” (Myers, 1998, p. 309) and is a growing aspect of sibling research (e.g., Martin et al., 1997). Myers et al. (1999) noted that positive relational dimensions might enhance positive communication such as self-disclosure and reduce negative communication like verbal aggression. Extending this reasoning, sibling communication satisfaction may also be related to the valence of CRJs.

No known research has linked CRJs and communication satisfaction. However, communication satisfaction should be related to the distributive, integrative, and avoidance/denial CRJs in a manner similar to conflict strategies because both conflict and jealousy expression are primarily negative in nature. Specifically, communication satisfaction was positively related to the integrative conflict strategy and negatively associated with distributive communication (Canary & Cupach, 1988). Further, conflict avoidance (Morley & Shockley-Zalabak, 1986) and sibling verbal aggression (Teven et al., 1998) were negatively related to communication satisfaction. The following two hypotheses thus extend these relationships:

**H1**: Adult siblings’ reported use of integrative communication to express jealousy is positively related to communication satisfaction.

**H2**: Adult siblings’ reported use of distributive communication, avoidance/denial, and violence to express jealousy is negatively related to communication satisfaction.

The final research question investigates the potential relationship between communication satisfaction and the remaining jealousy responses reported by adult siblings:

**RQ2**: Will the other communicative responses to jealousy be related to communication satisfaction?
Method

Participants and Procedure

Communication students (n = 212) with siblings at a large, southwestern university completed written questionnaires in class. Only the 162 respondents who answered items about their most recent jealousy incident were included. The jealousy situation occurred approximately 350 days ago (SD = 889, range = 1–6,205). Most respondents were female (n = 105) averaging 23 years of age (range = 18–49, SD = 5.62). Respondents self-identified as white/European American (n = 103), black/African American (n = 15), Hispanic (n = 15), Asian American (n = 11), other (n = 10), bi/multiracial (n = 4), and Native American (n = 1).

Participants considered the one sibling closest in age to them, whether older or younger, and recorded the sibling’s initials on the survey. Respondents averaged two siblings (M = 2.23, SD = 1.28, range = 1–7); these sisters (n = 103) and brothers (n = 99) averaged 23 years of age (M = 23.21, range = 1–50, SD = 7.72) and were full siblings (n = 126), half-siblings (n = 22), adopted siblings (n = 3), and stepsiblings (n = 3). Using a six-item semantic differential emotional jealousy experience scale from Bevan and Hale (2006) (α = .77, 1 = Not sad at all, 7 = Very Very sad), participants reported moderate sibling jealousy (M = 3.17, SD = 1.27).

Measures

Communicative responses to jealousy

Items from Guerrero et al.’s (1995) CRJ scale that were relevant to sibling jealousy measured sibling jealousy expression via a seven-point, Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Item wording was also revised to assess participants’ sibling jealousy (i.e., “When I felt jealous toward my sibling, I expressed it by...”). Though the CRJ scale was initially extensively tested for validity and reliability (Guerrero et al., 1995) and has been successfully employed in studies of romantic (e.g., Guerrero & Afifi, 2004) and friend (Bevan & Samter, 2004) jealousy expression, it has yet to be utilized in a sibling context. Thus, an exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation was conducted. Five CRJs were retained for analysis: negative affect expression (e.g., appearing sad and depressed; three items, M = 2.09, SD = 1.41, α = .86), integrative communication (e.g., explaining my feelings to my sibling; five items, M = 2.65, SD = 1.52, α = .85), avoidance (four items, M = 3.02, SD = 1.67, α = .87), distributive communication (e.g., quarrelling or arguing with my sibling; five items, M = 2.38, SD = 1.61, α = .90), and violence (e.g., using physical force with my sibling; violent communication/threats and violence toward objects; five items, M = 1.73, SD = 1.24, α = .93).

Communication satisfaction

Communication satisfaction with the last sibling jealousy interaction was assessed via 19 items (Hecht, 1978). Items (e.g., I would like to have another conversation like this one) were measured on a seven-point, Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree,
7 = strongly agree). Higher values indicated greater communication satisfaction ($\alpha = .86, M = 4.43, SD = 1.10$).

Results

For RQ1, one-sample t-tests explored significant differences between the CRJ composite means. Avoidance/denial was reported significantly more than all other CRJs. Further, all CRJ frequency means significantly differed from one another.

Hypotheses one and two were tested via one-tailed, partial correlations controlling for recency of jealousy situation. RQ2 was examined via a two-tailed partial correlation. As H1 predicted, there was a positive relationship between integrative communication and communication satisfaction, partial $r = .39$, $p < .001$. For H2, significant relationships were found for communication satisfaction and distributive communication (partial $r = -.21$, $p < .01$), avoidance/denial (partial $r = -.28$, $p < .01$), and violence (partial $r = -.26$, $p < .01$). For RQ2, negative affect expression was not related to communication satisfaction, partial $r = -.03$, $p = .83$.

Discussion

The goal of the present investigation was to explore adult sibling jealousy expression in relation to communication satisfaction. Each finding will be discussed in more detail below.

Jealousy Expression Frequency

More than 75% of participants could recall a sibling jealousy interaction and reported moderate sibling jealousy experience. Thus, though not hypothesized, this study adds to previous findings (e.g., Aune & Comstock, 2002) that adult siblings do experience jealousy. RQ1 found that avoidance/denial was the most frequent response, followed by integrative and distributive communication, negative affect expression, and violence. This finding is consistent with previous observations of sibling jealousy expression via avoidance (Aune & Comstock, 2002). However, the moderate use of integrative communication runs counter to prior research. Though Aune and Comstock (2002) noted that individuals reported discussing their jealousy with family members, the percentage of siblings engaging in this behavior was not noted. Integrative communication is fairly frequent in cross-sex friendships (Bevan & Samter, 2004) and romantic relationships (Guerrero et al., 1995), but integrative communication is unique here because it may occur after siblings engaged in negative jealousy expression in their youth. Though a preliminary finding, it is certainly encouraging and should be explored by longitudinal analyses tracing sibling jealousy expression throughout the life cycle. Overall, we tentatively suggest two things: that adults seem to experience moderate sibling jealousy; and that
adults prefer avoidant sibling jealousy tactics. Of course, these preliminary conclusions must be refined in future sibling jealousy research.

**Communication Satisfaction**

Communication satisfaction in relation to a jealousy expression situation was related to distributive communication, avoidance/denial, violence, and integrative communication. These findings are consistent with previous research examining communication satisfaction and conflict (Canary & Cupach, 1988) and family violence (Martin et al., 1997; Teven et al., 1998). Further, these findings extend the relevance of communication satisfaction to sibling jealousy expression. Future research should continue investigating this link, perhaps also in relation to jealousy expression between romantic partners and friends.

Negative affect expression was not related to communication satisfaction, likely because it can be an ambiguous, indirect form of communication (Guerrero et al., 1995). Thus, individuals may be unable to gauge their communication satisfaction upon use of negative affect expression because it may be difficult to isolate that jealousy response from other forms of jealousy expression.

**Limitations and Conclusions**

One primary limitation is our adaptation of Guerrero et al.’s (1995) CRJ scale to sibling jealousy. In other words, unique forms of sibling jealousy expression may have been overlooked. Further, only one member of the sibling pair was examined. Future research might qualitatively explore how adult sibling pairs express jealousy to delve into specific interaction characteristics.

In conclusion, the present study is significant for communication scholars for two reasons. First, in accordance with previous research (e.g., Aune & Comstock, 2002), our findings continue to provide evidence that sibling jealousy is experienced and expressed in adulthood. Second, sibling jealousy expression can also be used to better understand the presence and fluctuation of communication satisfaction in this unique, lifelong relationship.

**Notes**

[1] Rivalry and jealousy are very similar concepts, and a recent study on sibling jealousy (Miller et al., 2000) found that such an experience could be managed and regulated much like previous research findings on rivalry (e.g., Masiuch & Kienapple, 1993). Thus, to allow for comparisons with general jealousy experience and expression research, sibling jealousy (rather than rivalry) will be the focus of this investigation.

[2] Percentages do not add up to 100% because a handful of participants did not answer some or all of the demographic items.

[3] All tests for hypotheses and research questions were also run with only those participants who reported on full siblings. The tests only on full sibling relationships did not produce results that differed from those for the full data set; thus, the full data set results are reported.


