Sister Sister: Interpreting Intimacy in Sibling Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Research on family communication is significant because family is the first culture humans are exposed to. Sibling relationships are extremely important throughout one's life, and the relationship between two sisters in particular is unique. Understanding sisters through the phenomenon of intimacy or closeness provided a framework of study. The purpose of this research was to explore the following questions: (1) What constitutes intimacy in sister relationships? and (2) How do sisters communicate intimacy? This research was inductive in nature, therefore requiring a qualitative methodology. Females with sisters were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. Data was analyzed with a thematic approach, specifically employing the Constant Comparative Analysis Method. Following data analysis, conclusions of this study included that sisters share a unique relationship, that sisters use their relationship to develop as an individual and that being an individual is important to the relationship, and that the intimate nature is highly reliant on their upbringing and family life. Results and conclusions from this research will be of particular interest to family communication, relational and gender scholars.

INTRODUCTION

Sister relationships can be among the most meaningful within the family, yet still are among the least researched. The purpose of this study was to delve into the relationships of sisters and analyze them in terms of their intimacy and communication. Therefore, this research was done in an attempt to discover factors that comprise intimacy in these relationships, as well as the ways in which this intimacy is communicated between the sisters. This research used past research in the fields of family communication and intimacy in order to introduce new and original research on the more specific topic of intimacy in sister relationships. This study will help fill a gap within family communication research by providing information specifically about communication between sisters. It also serves as a basis for future research to be done on sister relationships and will be of interest to both communication and psychology scholars.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Family relationships are highly important to communication scholars. Specific relationships within the family are beginning to be researched more frequently, but there are still areas lacking the necessary research. This literature review will demonstrate the importance of research on family members and more specifically siblings. It will also show the lack of current research in the more focused area of sister relationships and communication. The following will review literature and research done in the area of family communication. This will be done by beginning with the broad topic, then narrowing to sibling communication, and finally sister communication and the notion of intimacy.

Family Communication

The development of family culture is derived from our communication and relationships within the family. As Kellas (2005) mentions, "The family is our first culture, and like all cultures it wants to make known its norms and mores" (p. 366). Because of the important role our family culture plays in our lives, there is great worth in researching family communication. Communication within the family has become an important area of research in recent years. Kellas (2005) examined how family identity develops through joint storytelling. This important research is just one example of the crucial role communication plays in family research.

Another example comes from a study that examined on the role of social support from the families of stroke survivors. While collecting information from the stroke survivors, Egbert, Koch, Coeling, and Ayers (2006) found that "family members were mentioned in nearly every interview as providing instrumental and emotional support" (p. 50). Friends and family members proved to be key helpers in the recovery process for stroke survivors (Egbert, et al., 2006). Even in situations outside of this, the development of individuals is greatly influenced by their family (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997).

There has been an attempt to make a jump from the general topic of family communication to more individualized relationships within the family. One study presented a goal of their research as "an effort to extend the literature on linkages between the family and children's peer relationships" (Lindsey, Colwell, Frabutt, & MacKinnon-Lewis, 2006, p. 47). According to Lindsey et al (2006), the data was to be collected by using multiple family relationships to determine characteristics present in the children's friendships. This study also includes that recently "researchers have moved away from global descriptions of parenting style to focus on more specific indices of parent-child interaction" (p. 48). Interactions and communication in relationships have become increasingly important in research on families.

Another logical direction to take research of this nature is towards the more specific topic within the family of sibling relationships. The next section includes an extensive review of research on this topic.

Sibling Communication

Within the broad area of research done on family communication, there has been a great deal of research done that focuses on the more specific area of communication between siblings. According to Fitzpatrick and Badzinski (1994), 80% of all individuals spend at least one third of their life with their sibling. Myers (1998) adds that "[S]iblings forge communication relationships with one another that are unlike any other relationship" (p. 309). There is no doubt that sibling relationships are a significant part of a person's life. In addition to this, unity within the family is also assisted in part by sibling interaction, by providing one another with emotional support (e.g. Brody, 1998). According to Stocker, Lanthier, & Furman (1997), siblings also provide support through intimacy within their relationships. The communication exchanges between two siblings can increase satisfaction in sibling relationships (Martin, Anderson, and Rocca, 1997).

In past research, sibling relationships have been viewed as one of the most important in the family. According to Bedford (1993), one's relationship with their sibling will quite probably be the longest enduring relationship of their life. The sibling relationship has been found to be constant and contain a unique bond. As Floyd (1996) notes, "Friendships are often transitory and context-specific, marital unions fail nearly as often as they succeed, and relationships with parents or children wax and wane as other commitments interfere" (p. 27).

Clearly, communication with a sibling is a very significant part of a person's life. "Sibling relationships can be quite important in later life and their shared early life seems to provide the basis for continued interaction" (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993, p.226). Myers and colleagues (2001) found that although siblings are in an involuntary relationship, most report a commitment to the relationship that far exceeds involuntary obligations. Arliss (1993) identifies that siblings have been researched in many ways, including siblings as teachers, as rivals, and in terms of emotional attachment.

To further delve into the idea that sibling communication is very important in a person's life, a study done on sibling relationships using the reinforcement theory can be reviewed. Simply put, "feeling good about a sibling is, in itself, a rewarding experience" (Myers, 1999, p. 340). According to Cicirelli (1995), this could partially be due to the fact that a sibling relationship is one of the longest many people experience as well as that it is continuous. Siblings reinforce one another in many ways throughout their lives including providing companionship and acting as confidants (Goetting, 1986).

People with siblings often turn to each other to help fill personal needs, including companionship, comfort, affection, friendship, and intimacy (Buhrmester, 1992). Communication is used to further satisfy these needs. "People communicate with their siblings in order to feel closer to them" (Martin, Anderson, & Mottet, 1997, p. 332). Lee, Mancini, & Maxwell (1990) found that siblings who feel close emotionally to their siblings have a tendency to communicate more frequently and intimately with them. This further illuminates the positive portion of a sibling relationship as well as the major role communication plays in these meaningful relationships.

While some researchers have examined positive aspects of sibling communication in the relationship, the general trend seems to focus more on the negative trends. According to Farinelli and Mikkelson (2005), "More focus on emotional and instrumental benefits of sibling relationships is needed, especially in light of the focus on negative dimensions in some sibling research" (p. 9). Stocker and McHale (1992) provided research in the area of sibling rivalry and its continuation throughout one's life-span. In addition to this, sibling conflict has also been the focus of much research in this area. This is demonstrated in Merill (1996)'s study of conflict and cooperation between adult siblings. One fifth of participants interviewed in this study claimed that a conflict that was occurring at the time of the study "would have long-lasting implications for their relationships with siblings" (p. 410).

In December 2005, the *Journal of Family Psychology* released a special issue concerning sibling relationships in hopes of inspiring further research on siblings' contributions to one another throughout their lifetime. In introducing this issue, Kramer (2005) states that "[a goal] of the special issue is to promote empirical and theoretical

interest in sibling relationships by providing researchers with excellent models of how to conduct research with complex family systems" (p.484).

Sister Communication

While there is existing research on siblings in general, rarely does this research focus on gender. There are likely differences between sibling relationships between two males and between two females. In recent research it is difficult to encounter more of anything on the specific topic of sister relationships within the broad area of family communication. A recent study considered communication variations among different sets of twins, however, its results lacked division by gender. Hazel, Wongprasert, & Ayres (2006) suggested that "this difference should be addressed in future studies with fraternal and identical twins" (p. 54). There is clearly much more research to be done on the concentrated topic of sister relationships within the family.

Although any sibling relationship has the potential of being significant throughout life, the relationship between two females may result in an unrivaled and unique relationship. The relationship between sisters is one of the most intriguing within the family, so it is unusual that there is little research in this area. According to research done in the late 1980's, "women seem to be more effective in their sibling relationships and to be more aware of their underlying feelings toward their sisters" (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993, p. 224). In addition to this, "Sisters are also more likely to make a positive contribution to each other's well-being" (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993, p. 225). Clearly, relationships between sisters are unique and there is much to be learned about what makes this so distinctive.

This notion of a strong bond between two sisters is further discussed in a study done looking at interactions and closeness of siblings. While both genders have the ability to form strong relationships with siblings of either gender, Floyd and Parks (1995) found that females may display closeness more in their sibling relationship. It has been discovered that both men and women share closeness, but that they do it in different ways. In their previously mentioned study, Floyd and Parks found that "Women may simply have a broader range of meaningful outlets for the expression of closeness than do men" (p. 74).

Intimacy in Family Relationships

A phenomenon that may illuminate sister relationships is the experience of intimacy. According to Connidis (1989), adult sibling research has been focused in large part on closeness. Intimacy has received much attention in recent relational research. Many researchers have made connotations between *intimate relationships* and romantic or sexual relationships (Cross and Gore, 2004). However, given the Reis and Patrick (1996) definition, this study aims at using intimacy to characterize a family relationship. Prager (2000) includes that "Research has shown intimacy to be positively related to levels of love, trust, satisfaction, commitment, and partner understanding in close relationships" (p. 236). In some cases, intimacy is measured through related terminology such as closeness and cohesion. Prager (2000) also suggests that scholars conceptualize intimacy as an interaction or a process. An overview of intimacy research reveals that the phenomenon can be conceptualized through behavior, feelings, and perceptions (Prager, 2000).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

While there continues to be a great deal of recent communication research done on families, little has been done on siblings and even less on sisters. There have been a few studies done on siblings' interactions in their adolescence, but there is nothing that depicts the bond between sisters and how it varies from other family relationships. Sister intimacy is a very important part of family research and this project will contribute a great deal to the communication field. According to Frey, Botan and Kreps (2000), "Communication refers to the processes by which verbal and nonverbal messages are used to create and share meaning" (p. 28). Clearly, interpreting communication of intimacy between two sisters fulfills this definition and will add a great deal to the area of communication research. More specifically, Littlejohn (1999) discusses the different levels of communication, including the interpersonal level which "deals with communication between people, usually in face-to-face, private settings" (p. 17). This study was based on face-to-face interviews with females whom have close sisters in order to understand their relationship throughout their entire lives, therefore providing a basis for communication research.

In response to the lack of research on communication between sisters, this project attempted to increase knowledge of family and sibling relationships. At the same time, an understanding of sisters and the unique culture they share resulted. Using the notion of intimacy as a way to conceptualize the relationship drove this study. The following research questions were addressed:

RQ_1: What constitutes intimacy in sister relationships?

RQ_2: How do sisters communicate intimacy?

Intimacy is a phenomenon that has not often been used in sibling research, however, has received a great deal of attention in recent literature (Prager, 2000). Moving this to the context of sisterhood, the researcher feels that while all sisters share some level of intimacy, the actual experience of intimacy between sisters is likely as unique as each pair of sisters. Therefore, the experience of intimacy can be used as a springboard into understanding the relationship between two or more sisters. Using intimacy as a way to conceptualize sister relationships did not only provide original research, but also made use of a flourishing trend. In addition to this, the ways in which this intimacy was communicated was important because it showed the uniqueness of sister relationships.

METHOD

This study was qualitative in nature. Strauss and Corbin (1998) share that "Qualitative methods can be used to obtain the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought process, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through conventional research methods" (p.11). Qualitative research was the best choice for this study because understanding participants' inner feelings and thoughts about intimacy and family was imperative. This study was also interpretive and an inductive approach was used, as the observations came prior to formulation of a theory (Miller, 2002). This allowed for results to emerge from the data rather than entering the interviews with a preconceived protocol of what the participants' responses should include. Also assisting in this study was the use of semi-structured interviews to collect data. The researcher used these interviews to ask primary questions while still allowing room to probe when necessary and as was beneficial to each individual interviewee (Frey, Botan, Friedman, & Kreps, 1993). The following sections further explain these methodologies that have been used in the presented research.

Participants

The participants for this study were females who have a sister with whom they are close to and were at least 18 years of age at the time of the study. Participants included nine females with sisters ranging from 18-60 in age, with interviews ceasing when data saturation was reached. Data saturation occurs when the researcher recognizes that while new stories are presented, the same themes are being repeated. Because the interviewee was required to define her sister relationship as close or intimate, nonrandom sampling was used to choose participants. In fact, randomization is not a concern for interpretive research since there is no attempt to generalize. More specifically the researcher used the method of convenience sampling. According to Reinard (2001), through convenience sampling, the researcher chooses participants based on who is most readily available to them. The researcher solicited volunteers from her network of friends and family to participate in the study.

Interview

The researcher used a developed interview protocol, or a predetermined set of questions, to guide the research, allowing for probing questions and additional information as necessary (Frey, Botan, Friedman, & Kreps, 1993). The interviews used a semi-structured format. In semi-structured interviews, the interviewer "establishes a general direction for the conversation and peruses specific topics," allowing participants to answer and expand on what is most important to them (Baxter & Babbie, 2004, p. 191). By using semi-structured interviews, the researcher encouraged participants to disclose information about their relationship without supplying them with ideas or pre-conceived assumptions about intimacy. This method of data collection also allowed for unique questions and probing that is uniquely relevant to each pair of sisters.

Procedures

The researcher interviewed participants from her personal network of acquaintances. The interviews occurred in either the home of the participant or home of the researcher, depending on availability and convenience. The researcher began the interviewing process upon receiving IRB approval. Participants were first informed of what will be discussed, the purpose, that there were no known risks, and the projected length (one half hour per interview). They were each also informed that the interviews were to be tape-recorded and pseudonyms were to be used in the written portion of the report. Each participant then signed an informed consent form before engaging in the interview. The interviews lasted anywhere from 20-30 minutes. Participants were given a gift certificate at the end of their interview for their participation in this study. Questions were asked from the interview protocol and probing questions often followed based on each individual participant's answer. Time was also allowed for the participant to ask questions and/or comment at the end.

Data Analysis

Once the process of interviewing and data collection was completed, the data was analyzed using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) Constant Comparative Method of analysis. Because this research was inductive in nature, a thematic analysis was most important and allowed for emergent theory. The constant comparative analysis systematically reduced the possible explanations of data to a small, but exhaustive, set of themes. The themes, taken together, effectively told the story of the research participants' experiences, while insuring that the researcher actively engaged in illuminating the data, rather than simply "reporting" participants' accounts. For this study, every comment that occurred in the interviews that was found relevant to the research was written down. Once all of the comments were collected, they were grouped together with like labels. These labels were then combined into smaller categories. They were then narrowed down one more time, at which point 5 categories emerged for each research question.

RESULTS

The presented results emerged as categories during the final phases of the constant comparative analysis. A total of 274 messages were analyzed. Each of these messages was combined with similar comments into 50 groups that were further subcategorized into emergent categories. Based on participants' experiences in a self-defined close sister relationship, each of these categories represent an important factor of the phenomenon of intimacy in sister relationships. These also provide answers to the questions that ground this research project. Table one answers RQ1, and identifies the categories of contributing factors to intimacy in sister relationships.

Table 1. Derived categories of what constitutes intimacy in sister relationships

1. Embracing core values and influence of the family
2. Having a unique relationship
3. Sharing similar attitudes and perspectives
4. Maintaining differences and developing a sense of self
5. Passing milestones and sharing a future

Each of the individual categories described here emerged as highly significant comprising factors of intimacy in sister relationships. As a way of fully describing participants' experiences and perspective, while also maintaining confidentiality, each contributor has been provided a fictional name. These factors begin with the shared values and family influence on the sister relationship.

Embracing core values and influence of the family

A major theme that occurred in every interview in one way or another was the idea of the participant and her sister sharing similar values. As will be further discussed, this was due to having an equally similar upbringing and largely influenced by their family life. This is especially important in what comprises the unique intimacy between sisters because it's what sets them apart from close relationships with friends.

Each of the nine participants made reference to shared values as having a major influence on their closeness. Most declared that their shared values were a result of knowing each other for so long and seeing each other through everything. While discussing values, Carrie said, "If we wrote them down on paper they'd probably be almost exactly the same." When asked about why she goes to her sister for advice, Jenny said, "Because our values are similar it's usually right on. I usually come away from the conversation thinking about things differently and having direction on where to go with the problem that I'm talking to her about." Along these same lines, Lindsay found that as the older sister, she influenced Erin in terms of values:

I think we share similar values. I think as an older sister you influence your little sister completely. You look up to your older sister so much and moreso as we're growing up because she'd follow whatever I'd do. So I think values definitely get influenced in that way. Growing up now as a college students I can see her saying things that I would. It's like myself saying it but the words are coming out of her mouth.

This message explained how the family greatly influences one's values, but more importantly, how these values can increase a sense of intimacy between sisters.

In her interview, Sara describes how having different values can keep two sisters from developing the same intimacy as two sisters with similar values. Sara is very close with her sister Rebecca and the two of them share the same core values. However, their other sister Nicole has grown away from their family's values. Referring to herself and Rebecca, Sara claims that "We look at what Nicole does sometimes and just don't agree with the choices she makes." She goes on to explain that Nicole calls her a lot and wants to be close, but Sara simply does not feel the same sense of closeness as she does with Rebecca. She attributes this to their differing values.

The main contributer of similar values leading to closeness was, in fact, family. While reflecting on why she is so close with her sister, Jessica shared, "I think it's just your roots, your heritage. My parents valued family above anything and believed that family should be a cherished possession." Likewise, Mary found that "The closeness of our family contributed to our closeness." A lot of participants revealed that the fact that they grew up together was a large factor in their closeness. Lindsay shared "We grew up in the same way and with the same people so we have a lot to talk about obviously." Jenny felt the same and attributed it to the fact that she and her sister have the same core upbringing. Jenny also contributed the uniqueness of her sister relationship to knowing the same people and sharing a family life. She said "Even when you think about your husband: He knows his family very well and I know my family very well, but it takes a lot of time to get to know someone else's family. But with a sister, it's an automatic." This shows how a relationship between two sisters can be one of a kind, even as compared to other intimate relationships. The next section further demonstrates this idea of the uniqueness of a sister relationship.

Having a unique relationship
Examples of the unique relationships that sisters share were plentiful throughout the interviews. Each female interviewed about their sister claimed that they share an exceptionally unique relationship. This special bond between the two is certainly a contributing factor in their close relationship.

First of all, the sister relationship appears to be unconditional. Megan summed this up when she said, "It's just knowing that your sister's that one friend that will be there no matter what. Like an unconditional friendship." She also added to this, "I think it goes back to just knowing that she's the one person that you know you can always trust and is always going to be there. She's stuck with you because she's your sister." Ashley found that because of differences in schedules, she and her sister could go a month without talking on the phone, and then talk everyday for a while. This didn't affect their relationship at all though. Sara had a similar realization as she shared, "Even though we don't call each other a lot we're still the same. Whereas if you don't call a friend you kind of lose touch."

There is also a level of comfort that was found to be unique to a sister relationship. Megan said, "I think that I would feel comfortable being 100% myself around her and I think she feels the same way." Other participants claimed that even with major differences such as a large age gap, or one having kids and the other not, their comfort level was not affected. To further this idea of a unique comfort level, Sara showed the difference between her sister and friends. She said that "When you have a friend it's kind of uncomfortable sometimes because they get tired of hearing about your husband and your kids because she wants to be married and have kids, but Rebecca isn't like that at all."

Carrie and her sister have lived quite close throughout their entire lives, with the exception of one year when she was at college and Emily was still in high school. Their closeness in location of course plays a part in their close relationship in general, however there is definitely something more than just that. When asked what she thought would happen to her sister relationship if they lived farther apart, Carrie replied, "I don't think it would change. We wouldn't talk as much maybe, but we would still have the strong bond that we do. It's kind of hard to break."

A distinctive characteristic of a sister relationship that occurred in the interviews was a special emotional connection. Mary helped shed light on this topic by sharing, "What makes our relationship so neat is that we can actually feel our emotions coming before they are even presented." She added, "Another thing is that we are so easily drawn to each others' feelings and emotions that we can accept that if someone wants to just cry all of a sudden or if someone is suddenly sad." Jessica shared a similar realization when she said "We both are just very emotional people about similar things." Sara contributed a different perspective to this idea of an emotional connection because she is 12 years older than her sister. She recalled, "When I was 12 and Rebecca was born, I would be the one taking care of her when we had a babysitter because she would stop crying when I held her. We've always been connected like that." Another example of this connection occurred in Jenny's interview while she was sharing a story about the difficulty of her transition into motherhood:

> After Elizabeth was born, I was having a heck of a time transitioning into being a mom. I was a mess. I complete postpartum mess. My sister came over without calling, she just stopped over with her daughter and said, 'She's going to stay with the baby. You and I are going to get out of here for an hour.' It sounds really little but it was like she knew exactly what I needed. I didn't even know what I needed.

Mary contributed another comment that further exemplifies the emotional factor within the uniqueness of a sister relationship as she shared, "This may sound goofy, but when I get together with my sisters, I come back with real energy." Not many people in a person's life can emotionally connect to another the ways presented here, but it was a common occurrence in sister relationships during this research.

Another example of the unique relationship between sisters occurs in their ability to talk about anything. Lindsay described this perfectly when saying, "Being able to talk brings us closer." This was a repetitive theme throughout the interviews as each participant claimed that she was able to talk to her sister about almost anything.

Ashley found that this was a key part of their relationship early in life. She said that "I think that I've always naturally told her everything and gone to her." Even in a case of one of the sisters being a fairly shy and reserved person, they were still able to share a lot. Carrie claimed that "She is quieter and she doesn't express her feelings and opinions right away, but we have a very open relationship." The idea of being able to talk to one's sister about anything proved to be a large factor in the uniqueness of their relationship.

Sharing similar attitudes and perspectives

Many examples of similarities arose during interviews. Each participant found many things to be the same in their thoughts and ideas in general. This seemed to help the sisters understand each other and further lead to and expand the closeness of their relationship.

Some participants found that they thought in extremely similar ways. Carrie stated that "We do think the same on a lot of things. There aren't a whole lot of things that she thinks one way on and I think the other." Others simply found that having similar thoughts and perspectives was a comfort. This is proved in Jessica's comment when asked about the difference between her relationship with her brother and her relationship with her sister: "The relationship with my brother is just very different. Sometimes females are just so different in the way we think about things that makes you value a sister." She also stated, "I do have good relationships with a couple of my brothers, but guys are interested in fishing and property in the north woods. She and I talk more about kids and recipes and art, which generally you can't talk about with guys."

Most participants found that a very important part of their relationship was that they shared a similar sense of humor. Jenny exemplified this point as she said, "The uniqueness really has something to do with the humor we have about our other family members…We might be the only two that think something's funny if we're talking about relatives or something" She also pointed out the fact that "Nobody else in the whole world would understand some of the things that we think are funny." Another participant found that she and her sisters used their sense of humor to help each other through hard times. Mary declared that "We can take life and it can be traumatic and it can be serious and within 20 minutes, one of us will set humor to it. I think that's what keeps us going."

Lindsay found that "having the same interests contributes to our closeness." Each of the other participants had the same insight. Carrie furthered this understanding by recalling, "We've pretty much done the same stuff growing up and I think that we're so close in age." Age was not always a factor in the closeness between two sisters, but the fact that they shared similar interests was definitely a main contributor.

Because of a 13 year age difference, Jenny claimed that "Even though we didn't grow up together, our perspectives now are very similar." She found this similarity in perspectives to be a major contributing factor to their closeness. She added that "It wasn't until I got married and moved back to the area and started my family that we really began to bond as adults. We didn't have a lot in common; I was running around with my friends and she was a mom. Now that we have more things in common our relationship has really grown."

Many participants found that sharing a similar network of people contributed to their closeness. Jenny noticed that "We both click with the same people." Others found that simply knowing a lot of the same people was a factor in their intimacy and closeness. Lindsay stated that "We grew up with the same people so we have a lot to talk about."

These similarities in so many different things help the sisters understand each other and further contribute to their closeness. Lindsay said "Because we're similar, she understands things from my point of view. She can see things through my eyes." Sara added "We know little things that only each other know." Similarities were a common factor in sisters' closeness and intimacy, and were present in each participant's interview.

Maintaining differences and developing a sense of self

Although similarities between sisters contribute to intimacy in their relationship, it was found in the interviews that differences were also needed to maintain closeness in this relationship. Differences between two sisters have proved to be contributing factors to closeness in a number of different ways.

One way of how differences have led to closeness in the participants' relationships with their sisters is in their different paths. In Ashley's case, she had an older sister who became a mother at the age of 18. She recalled, "I think her situation and she also helped inspire me to go after other opportunities. Maybe she didn't know she did." While Ashley took a different road than her sister, they eventually ended up on the same track. She claimed that "We've had different paths but now that we're older they're more common than we think." Jenny too found that she and her sister have certain uncontrollable differences. She said, "We were dealt different cards." Jenny pointed out that while she struggles with her perfectionism and more inner-issues, her sister struggles more with weight problems. These differences increase their closeness because they are able to help each other out with their specific problems.

Another way in which sisters differed was in their views on certain minor issues. Jenny mentioned that "At times I've challenged her way of thinking and vice versa and we bring each other back to reality." Jessica furthered this idea by saying "We do a lot of 'Have you ever seen it this way?'" This helps the sisters grow and makes the relationship meaningful and useful in their lives. Another example of this came from Sara when she said "We've had political issues that we just don't' agree on, but we can also see the other's side."

Along with the idea of differing views on certain issues, some differences in personality also contribute to the closeness in a sister relationship. Carrie pointed out that "We practically do everything together but at the same time we do have our own lives and our own personalities. Our personalities are very different but at the same time I think that's what makes us really close." Jessica shared a similar perspective when she said, "We were very much individuals." There seemed to be a consensus between a few of the participants that if it weren't for differences between them, their sisters would drive them crazy.

When Ashley talked about the way she and her sister work together, she shared that "We're like the yin and yang. Between us we'll get it all taken care of. We work well together because deep down we both value the same things, and we may take different paths to get there but the end result is common." This difference proved to be very important in accomplishing things together.

Passing milestones and sharing a future

Sisters undoubtedly experience a great deal of milestones together. This study found that important milestones that two sisters pass through contribute a great deal to their intimacy. What also seemed to develop while passing through these important times together was a vision of passing through more together in the future.

Ashley summed up this idea as she said, "I think as the milestones of life occur our relationship grows every time. The more of those you get under your belt, the stronger your relationship is automatically." The fact that sisters go through things such as aging parents and deaths in the family, they are given more opportunity to grow. Lindsay said "The more obstacles there are in your life, the more you'll have to talk to your sister about." Carrie, who is only 14 months older than her sister, found the same thing and said that their closeness continued to grow as they went through stages of life together.

A couple of participants who were further apart in age with their sister found that they were closer when they entered a similar stage of life. For both Jenny and Ashley, this stage was motherhood. Jenny said, "Motherhood has been a huge reason that our relationship has grown. As kids were entering my life, her kids were leaving." Jenny and her sister helped each other through these important events in the other's life and by doing this, increased their closeness. A different example of motherhood contributing to intimacy in her sister relationship came from Ashley's interview. Unlike her sister who was a teenage mother, Ashley went to college and began her family afterwards. She said, "When I went to college it was a period of time when my sister and I didn't have a lot in common. I noticed that it really picked up when I had my first baby." Ashley found that she was able to talk to her sister about this major milestone in her life and they could both relate to one another.

Along with this idea of helping each other through milestones, a number of participants discovered that they became closer through troubling times. Ashley alluded to this by discussing her sister's journey through a rough period with religion. She found that she and her sister talked more and had deeper conversations during this time. Jessica said "We became very close during the time of my divorce." For a few participants, the idea of caring for and dealing with the difficulty of aging parents was a major troubling time that increased closeness. When asked about how their relationship continued to grow, Ashley said "This part of life scares me, but I think as we work out how we're going to care for aging parents." Jenny also felt this way and added, "Then we think about how they're getting older and how weird it'll be when they're gone. I think we help each other out in that way." Each participant found that through giving or receiving help from or for their sister during a hard time helped them grow closer.

Each of the participants knew that they would share the same intimacy with their sister in the future because they found their relationships continuing to grow. As she and her sister have been caring for their aging parents, Jenny realized that they would continue to care for them and help each other out with the difficulty of that task in the future. Lindsay discussed their future relationship and said "It continues to grow because we'll always have new things to talk about and be able to build on that. I see us staying within reach of each other."

Sometimes, participants shared what they see for their future as they had always jokingly talked about. While laughing, Mary said "We talk about how we're going to be like the 'Golden Girls' and end up living together, still helping each other out. We see each other always being there and doing things for each other always." Megan talked about her growing relationship with her sister and shared, "We're just becoming more of what we talked about way back when. She would come to my dorm room and we would talk about how we were both going to get married and get houses right next door to each other and our kids would play together and be best friends. It hasn't happened yet,

but you can see it coming into reality." Through these interviews, it was discovered that although future plans were unique to each pair of sisters, each participant desired a future relationship.

The following categories explain recurring emergent themes about communicating intimacy that arose throughout the interviews. Table two answers RQ2 by providing the resulting categories of ways in which intimacy is communicated in sister relationships.

Table 2. Derived categories of how intimacy is communicated in sister relationships

1. Providing a support system
2. Maintaining a mutual respect and trust
3. Sharing a desire to interact and involve one another
4. Moving past rivalries and conflict
5. Developing a sense of self

Each category explained here proved to have a large affect on the communication of intimacy in sister relationships. Once again, pseudonyms have been used in this portion to ensure participants' confidentiality. The theme that came up the most often was the idea of sisters providing a support system for each other.

Providing a support system
Life can get very hard at times and everyone needs someone to help them through it. Each participant in this study shared the fact that their sister was an important support system, not just during hard times, but all the time. They found that this was one of the major ways in which they communicated their closeness within their relationship.

Ashley realized that she was always there for important events and said, "She's always there in crunch time and she says she will be and she delivers." A few other participants claimed that they show they care in the same way, just by being there for their sister. Knowing that her sister was looking for a job, Megan would always check the paper for jobs she thought she'd be good at. Megan shared a way that she shows her sister she cares: "I think just always having her in my head and looking out for her."

One way that sisters use support to communicate their closeness is through standing up for one another and being there during important things. Megan stated, "I feel that if I wasn't able to speak up for myself that she'd do it for me." Lindsay made a similar claim when she said, "Erin's definitely the first person I think of to stand up for me no matter what. Even if she didn't agree with something going on in my life she would stick up for me." Lindsay first made this realization when her mother told her that her sister defended her all the time, without Lindsay even knowing it. In response to this, Lindsay said, "That was my trigger that I know she cares about me a lot." Carrie added that "She supports me in every last thing I do. I sing in church and she comes every week to hear me. She's incredible that way." Ashley also said in regards to ways she and her sister show they care, "We're there for each other through the valleys of life when you need that extra support." Knowing that sisters will stand up for each other and support one another through everything is a major way that they communicate their intimacy to one another.

A large majority of participants found that being able to vent or listen to their sister vent about stressful things was a way that they communicated intimacy. Carrie and Emily both claimed that when they were having a difficult time with a big project in school that they felt they needed to be able to vent to their sister. In Sara's case, she found it important that she was able to vent to her sister about another sister or other family members. Jenny said, "We're both good listeners to each other." She found this to be extremely important. Many of the participants found that they used the fact that they could share most anything with one another to communicate their closeness.

Participants disclosed that when their sisters were going through a difficult time, they would be there and vice versa. Mary said, "My sister had brain surgery and when she first told me, I had to go to see her right away, no matter what was going to happen. I had to be there." She drove 2 hours to see her because she felt her sister would need physical and visual contact with her during such a hard time. Jenny shared a similar situation when her sister was having a major surgery. She knew that her sister would be nervous and anxious so she took the day off work and went to the hospital to spend it with her. Jenny shared, "I think we know where each other struggle and I think we can pick up the slack because we know when we're needed the most." Mary also discussed this the other way when she said, "When I was in a car accident both my sisters came up to see me. Anytime something comes up, they're always there. They just want to take the time to listen." Carrie said, "I tell her I love her and I try to do little things for her when she's stressed out." These are each examples of ways in which sisters provide support during hard times and show they care.

It was also found that sisters give advice to one another to show that they care. When Jenny was struggling with a difficult decision and was torn between work and spending time with her family, her sister gave her very practical advice. Jenny said, "I share with her because I like her perspective and the advice that she gives is always very insightful and has been very helpful." When asked why she and her sister talk to each other and seek advice about things going on in their lives, Sara said, "We're not as condemning and we're more accepting of the other. We'll give advice that's not so crisp." Lindsay also added that she gives her sister advice and shares general concerns about her sister's life that other people might not care about. Emily said that during hard times, "My sister will call me and say little things. It's kind of hard to explain, but she'll tell me encouraging things and that she went through the same thing."

Participants shared that sometimes they understood that their sister didn't need someone to give them advice, but instead, needed someone to listen. Sara said, "We might give each other more ideas, or we'll just listen and not make any judgments." Mary found the same things to be true in her sister relationship and said, "One thing about us sisters, we just don't judge each other on issues that we are confronted with in life. To someone else something small might seem frivolous, but no matter what it is in my or her life, we remember to make it important." Taking an interesting in seemingly insignificant things is a way that sisters show respect and earn trust. Both respect and trust are ways in which sisters communicate intimacy, and these ideas are further explored in the following section.

Maintaining a mutual respect and trust

In this study, it was found to be imperative to the sister relationship that the two showed a great deal of both respect and trust. Each of the participants contributed thoughts about each of these issues and made reference to how important they both are.

First of all, the idea that sisters communicate intimacy through showing a mutual respect arose many times in the interviews. While describing her sister, Jenny said, "She's very Christian-hearted. I have a high level of respect for her and I think she probably respects me too for different reasons." Jenny also found a big factor in their relationship to be that "I respect how she has chosen to raise her family." Jessica claimed, "We became close when I had a kid because there was a new found respect." Jenny summed up the role of respect in the sister relationship in terms of viewing her sister as a role model. She said, "I think I respect the choices that she's made in her life and the things she's done so I view her as a role model. When I'm not sure what to do, I think 'What would Michelle do?' and that gives me direction."

Furthermore, Jenny found that though her sister may not have understood all of her decisions for doing the things she did, she still respects them. Ashley discovered this type of respect very early in her life when her sister was faced with a large amount of adversity. Ashley had this to share about it:

She's beat all the odds as a young mother. I was right there to help with the baby. I struggled with the idea at first because my parents and grandparents were so against it, but once the baby came along I just started to side with her. I think her situation, and she also, helped inspire me to go after other opportunities. Maybe she didn't know she did, but I could see how being young parents and starting out at 18 is no fun. You grow up instantly. She never got to leave town or go to college or just have the opportunities that I've been able to have.

Though Ashley struggled with the idea of her older sister becoming a mother at the age of only 18, she respected the way she handled it. Even though she was only 13 at the time, she realized this respect for her sister on a very deep level. She communicated this respect to her sister by helping her with the baby and helping her overcome this adversity.

Along with the idea that each of the sisters respects the other, they also found that they could trust one another. Each of the nine participants claimed that there are things that they share with their sister that they have never shared with anyone else. Mary said, "I can always confide in her. If anything is going on or anything's wrong, she hears about it." When asked why she chose to share these things with her sister, Lindsay said "Because I can confide in her and I know for sure she won't tell anybody." Lindsay also added that "I know I can confide in her and she won't judge me. She also won't think anything different about me." Emily affirmed "I share with her because I can trust her more than anyone else. She's not going to tell everyone, whereas my friends, I don't know. They might." While thinking about why she confides in her sister, Carrie had this to share:

The reason I share with her comes down to the whole trust thing. I think you really need to trust your sister because if we get in this huge fight and she wanted to get back at me, she could easily tell my parents a lot of things. But I think it's a level of trust that no matter how bad it gets, she would never do that. It's kind of taken me awhile to share things that I do with her and vice versa but as we've gotten older, that trust has definitely developed.

This comment truly exemplifies the high level of trust that two sisters need to have.

Sharing a desire to interact and involve one another

Some participants found that they showed their desire to interact by talking to each other all the time. Megan claimed "We talk at least every other day. We're really close that way." Lindsay found that she and her sister talk three or four times a week, even though the conversations might not be long or very deep. They talk so often more to just show each other that they care.

Many sisters shared this desire to involve one another in their lives by doing nice things for the other. A few sisters who were close in distance as well said that they left notes for each other during stressful times just to let them know they were thinking about them. Mary, who is far apart from her sisters in location, said "I write to them just to tell them I'm thinking about them. I'll just write and say what's going on in my life, say 'I'm thinking of you', and tell them that I love them."

Involving each other in events throughout life was very important to a lot of participants as well. Sara said, "It's important to me that she's there for important things." Jenny felt the same way and also described how important it is that her sister is there for important things in her kids life, such as the first day of kindergarten. Sara thought back on her involvement with her sister and said, "As soon as we see each other we bear hug. She gets excited to visit. I could talk her into coming to visit at any times and I think she could do the same. We just make each other feel welcomed and we get very glad to see each other." Jessica shared a similar view and stated, "I think the biggest way I know she cares comes out through her children. I call her kids 'my little pets'. I get invited to all the birthdays and receive a lot of invitations to join them socially." This was found to be extremely important to their continued relationship. Jenny claimed that, "Our relationship continues to grow because there is a desire to extend invitations; whether it's traveling together or trying to merge plans somehow."

Sometimes, even something as simple as showing interest in what's going on in one's sister's life is very important. Mary said, "She asks about things when other people wouldn't care. She shows she's interested. To somebody else it wouldn't be anything. Just the fact that she cares means so much." When asked about how she knows her sister cares about her, Jenny shared, "I think just by calling and seeing what I'm doing. She asks the questions and asks about the day to day things that a lot of times you don't talk about with others."

Each participant declared that one of the reasons they had a desire to interact was because they have so much fun together. Sara believed that this was one of the reasons that her sister Rebecca, who is 12 years younger, was closer to her than to her other sister. She said, "I guess I was always the fun one. Lauren was always proper and independent and I was still fun and kind of childish in my own ways." Ashley said, "She encourages me to do fun things."

Finally, another way that participants communicate their intimacy is by thinking of each other first. Ashley said, "We're always the first one each other goes to if there's something big going on, whether it's good or bad. She'd be the first person I'd turn to and call at any time of the night or day." Jessica mentioned the same things and said, "If something happens in the family or with friends, be it good or not good, we think to call each other just to keep the other in the loop." Jenny added, "She's probably the first person I call when I'm overwhelmed. She's such a good listener." By involving each other and thinking to share things with the other first, sisters further communicate their intimacy.

Moving past rivalries and conflict

Differences between two sisters are undeniably present. Sometimes these differences are small, but there are also times when they can be overwhelming. What was found in this study was what makes these differences bearable in a sister relationship is that they move past these things without missing a step.

Being so close in age and spending so much time together, rivalries between sisters undoubtedly occur. Megan summed this up in her interview by saying, "There's always a little bit of jealousy between sisters. In my case, she was younger so she always got away with more. I was always mad about that." As the younger sister, Jessica had a different situation:

> My oldest sister was sort of a threat to me growing up because she was on honor role, she was the cheerleader, she was the one with the best job and she won every contest that she entered. Then I came along and I didn't care as much about school as she did. And although I did fine, I always had this benchmark. So now that we're closer, we laugh about it.

This type of jealousy and feeling of rivalry seemed to mostly occur earlier in the relationship. However, Ashley felt a type of jealousy even as an adult. She said "My sister would bring her daughter-in-law to lunch sometimes and I would just feel like a third wheel. I finally told her about it and we began to make time just for us. It sounds so juvenile to say 'I just want Ashley and Anne time, I don't want anybody else to come along.' But I was a little jealous."

Megan shared a story that exemplified moving past fighting and differences and maintaining a strong relationship:

> The main thing that really sticks out in my head about us is that we were just at each other's throats in our childhood. When we were very young, I pushed her off the bed and she broke her arm. But it just goes to show that before I was breaking her arm, and now we're best friends. I just would never have foreseen that we would be this close I guess. I'm glad it turned out the way it did.

Not all interpersonal relationships could survive some of the things sisters do to each other. Most participants who were close in age to their sisters said that while growing up they would do little things to bug each other and that they fought all the time. Emily said that sometimes she and her sister would even blackmail each other with information that they knew about the other. Emily said, "We fight but we never hold anything against each other." She found that with her sister, she could move past fights within minutes, whereas with friends, they might be relationship-ending. Carrie felt the same way and said, "We fight but at the end of the day we know that we can live with each other. It's livable." She also shared, "Growing up, and still to this day, we'd bicker and fight. But we could be sitting together and have a fight, and 2 seconds later we can be laughing about it."

Developing a sense of self

Because sisters are so close in age, and often so similar, at times they can become too close and lose sight of who they are as an individual. Whether it's because of distance, discovering differences, or simply time, all sisters need to develop a sense of self. When each sister does this though, it seems to increase the closeness in their relationship.

Moving away to college was a main factor in developing a sense of self for a number or participants. Lindsay said,

> I think moving away makes you realize how close you are with your sisters. When you live with her all the time you take it for granted and once you're out you don't get to see her as much and you miss each other and it definitely makes you stronger. When I went to college it made us stronger because the petty things we fought about stopped and when we did communicate it was positive.

Emily said that "Our year apart strengthened our relationship. At the same, it was nice to have my own life and be away from living in her shadow." Carrie felt the same way about her younger sister and said, "I think when I was in college and she was still in high school, she grew and developed into her own person. Now we can talk a lot more because she's more outgoing." Mary too describes how being apart from her sister increased their closeness: "My sister moved to Colorado, but was very good about writing. Even though it was a long-distance sibling relationship, we remained close. She wanted to prove her independence but she still had to keep contact with the family."

Sometimes differences between two sisters help each develop a sense of self, while still using these to maintain closeness. Carrie found that "We definitely have boundaries and have our own lives, but I think that's what makes it unique." Ashley discovered that the differences with her sister stemmed from being different in age. "We weren't always close just because of circumstances. I can remember being a close-knit playmate of hers when we were young children, but then when she was in middle school, she had boyfriends and that put us on two different playing fields." During this time though, Ashley was able to develop as her own person. Ashley was also able to develop on her own as she took a different path in life than her sister. She went to college and experienced everything that goes with that, while her sister became a mom at the age of only 18. These differences, though, allowed them to both help each other out and show that they cared.

At times, sisters simply need time to develop on their own in order to communicate their intimacy to each other. Jessica provided a great example of this: "When I was growing up, I can't say I felt a whole lot of desire to be with my family. My friends were so important to me. After I got married and especially started to have children the family started to mesh again." Carrie discovered that her sister needed time as well to grow on her own. She said, "Now that she's independent, she's creating her own person and it's so much fun being with her. It's definitely changed the dynamics of our friendship within our sister relationship." She also stated, "I normally would have to control our conversations but now that she's in college and having her own identity it's becoming easier."

DISCUSSION

These results represent 10 major messages found to be important in each of the interviews contributing to this study. It is important to note that this study was not done on all types of sister relationships, but rather those who self-defined their relationship as close or intimate. The categories used to answer the previously presented research questions shed light on the comprising factors of intimacy in sister relationships as well as how these sisters communicate intimacy to one another. These results led to further conclusions about the intimate sister relationship.

The results of this study indicate that the relationship between two sisters share a uniqueness that sets them apart from other relationships, even those within the family. There have been a number of qualitative studies done on siblings recently, which show that this relationship is beginning to be recognized as very important in a person's life. This idea is supported by Kramer's (2005) special issue on sibling relationships. The introduction to this issue in the *Journal of Family Psychology* shared an understanding of the importance of researching the effects of sibling relationships in a person's life. The results of this study demonstrate that a sibling relationship, more specifically the sister relationship, can be highly influential and important in one's life.

The reason for the uniqueness of a sister relationship can be attributed to the fact that, in general, females talk about deeper things than males. While two male siblings or a male and a female sibling can most definitely have intimate relationships as well, two sisters can talk about more which makes their relationship unique. Floyd and Parks (1995) discovered that females in a sibling relationship may display closeness more. They also found that men do this as well, but they display it in different ways. "Women may simply have a broader range of meaningful outlets for the expression of closeness than do men" (p. 74). This further exemplifies the findings of this study and indicates that there is something truly unique about sister relationships. One example of this idea that resulted from this study was being connected on an emotional level. The results also showed that sisters are able to talk to one another about almost anything. Another example includes the fact that sisters are able to argue with one another, and rival one another, but come out of these types of adversity even closer than they were before. One final example is that sisters really make sure they include each other in important events throughout life and feel the need to talk to each other *first* about significant things.

Another conclusion of this research is that developing one's own sense of self is highly important to females in an intimate sister relationship and the relationship itself helps members develop as an individual. Because two sisters have so much in common and have been through so much together, they can be so close that they lose their own individual identity. What was presented in this research was that each of the sisters used their intimate relationship to enhance their own person.

Cross and Gore (2004) found that "Close relationships are essential for self-definition, self-expression, and self-enhancement" (p. 233). They further this idea by stating that intimate relationships "serve as the foundation for self-expression, self-verification, and self-enhancement" (p. 233). This shows that intimate relationships enhance the connection between two people, but also allow for a person to develop as an individual. In each of the cases presented in this study, the individuals in the intimate sister relationship emerged while still being able to share a close, and in some cases, a closer relationship. There is a possibility of being *too* close where neither person is an individual, but this study found that each person needed to have a sense of self and this further contributed to the closeness between the two sisters.

The results of this study also indicate that the intimate nature of a sister's relationship is highly reliant on their family life and overall upbringing. While the relationship between the two sisters appears to be important, so does the relationship between those two sisters and their family.

Each of the nine participants in this study said, in one way or another, that their family was a major contributor to their closeness. Koerner and Fitzpatrick (1997) tell us that the development of individuals is greatly influenced by their family. This study takes that idea a step further by demonstrating that families are not only conducive to the development of an individual, but also to the development of strong relationships within the family, specifically that of two sisters. A common factor in each of the interviews was that they had a strong family bond. They were each raised to value family, and while they may not have conformed to this idea right away, it at least came up later in life and they have now formed strong family ties.

Lindsey et al (2006) shares that recent research is shying away from topics such as parenting styles and beginning to focus more on interactions within the family. Another direction in which researchers are moving is focusing on interactions between specific types of family members. This research followed in this light, as it focused on the importance of interactions and communication between two sisters. Past research done on families shows that families have a great amount of influence on a person's life. This includes the Kellas (2005) study that shares that a reason families are so important in a person's life is because it is the first culture in which we are apart. This further explains why the family background of each of the participants was so significant in this study.

LIMITATIONS

This research produced meaningful and insightful results, however, as is the case with any research project, was slightly limited in certain ways. Because this study was qualitative in nature, results cannot be generalized beyond those in which were studied. Also, due to time constraints the ideal number of participants was not feasible, though the number used was sufficient for the study. In addition to this, as a qualitative study, there was no way to measure exactly how close or intimate each participant was with her sister. This could cause for differing results to coincide

with differing levels of intimacy. Another limitation is due to the fact that the topic itself was so personal in nature. The participants might not have felt completely comfortable sharing intimate moments between herself and her sister with the researcher. This research was also biased in the sense that all participants were white and from Wisconsin. It's possible that differing results would occur if this was opened up to other areas and cultures. Finally, the researcher is not seasoned in this type of project.

Future Research

While this study answered the presented research questions, there are more questions to be answered on the topic of intimacy in sister relationships. Further researching this topic will only more greatly enhance our understanding of the phenomenon and its effects on a person's life.

One idea for a future study is to interview pairs of sisters together. This would allow for the sisters to help each other, and the researcher, to better understand what comprises intimacy in their relationship. The researcher could also observe their nonverbal interactions and use this as another way to conceptualize the study. The way the sisters talk together and metacommunicate throughout their interview could also provide further insight into the components of intimacy in sister relationships.

Another thing that could be done in future research would be to use a comparison group. This group could be intimate friends of the participants, or brothers with whom they are close to, or possibly even pairs of brothers. Seeing how sister relationships differ from other intimate relationships could show additional ways in which the relationship is unique and stands out from others.

A third way in which this study could be altered to enhance the study would be to use both qualitative and quantitative methods. By using and analyzing a simple survey about the topic, more in depth and relative interview questions could be found. This would maximize the amount of information that could be gained from the interviews, as well as provide more original research to the study.

CONCLUSION

In sum, this research illuminates an understanding of an understudied relationship within the family—sisters. The sibling relationship in general is one of the most significant because most of one's life is spent with one's sibling(s). This study takes this idea a step further and finds that the relationship between two sisters in particular can be especially important. The qualitative methods used, including the semi-structured interviews of females in a self-defined close relationship with their sister, proved to be sufficient in answering the proposed research questions. Results of these interviews were found and analyzed and a few important themes emerged. Each of the participants in this study have been affected very positively by their sisters and are able to find ways to communicate this to one another. Sisters most definitely have the ability to have a unique and significant relationship, and each of the participants in this study found themselves lucky enough, and proud to be a part of one.

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