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The Role of Perceptions of Sibling Maintenance Behavior in Ratings of Relationship Satisfaction

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This study explored how reports of individuals' own maintenance behavior and perceptions of their siblings' maintenance behavior influence relationship satisfaction. Given the nonelective and long-lasting nature of the sibling relationship, the impact of maintenance behavior and perceptions of maintenance behavior on relationship quality may differ from that in romantic relationships. Based on data from adults on their sibling relationships, results indicated that perceptions of sibling maintenance behaviors were significantly associated with relationship satisfaction in a positive direction, but the participant's own behaviors were not. When all variables were included in the model, the positive correlation between participants' own maintenance behavior and relationship satisfaction became nonsignificant or reversed direction. Reasons for the reduced impact of self-maintenance behaviors are discussed.

Keywords: Family Communication; Relationship Maintenance; Relationship Satisfaction; Siblings

Communication behaviors are absolutely essential to the maintenance of all relationships (Dindia, 2003). Discovering how siblings communicatively navigate the relational work needed to maintain a close and satisfying relationship deserves further scholarly attention, as siblings who stay close throughout the lifespan experience benefits to both their physical and mental health (Cicirelli, 1989, 1991). Siblings

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remain an important, unique relationship to study because they are long lasting and involve shared family history (Connidis, 1992). The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of maintenance strategy use on sibling relationship quality.

Although current literature offers insight into how sibling relational maintenance works (e.g., Myers, Brann, & Rittenour, 2008; Myers et al., 2001; Myers & Weber, 2004), gaps still remain. For example, it is unclear which matters more in terms of satisfaction with the sibling relationship: people's perceptions of their own maintenance behavior or of their siblings' use of maintenance behaviors. An understanding of this distinction would allow family scholars and practitioners to better identify and address challenges in the sibling relationship. Work in this area would also contribute to the literature on maintenance strategies by ascertaining whether a person's own behaviors or their relational partner's behaviors are more influential in creating a satisfactory relational climate. To fill this gap, we propose a model (see Figure 1) to test the relationships among peoples' perceptions of their own maintenance behavior use, their siblings' maintenance behavior use, and relationship satisfaction.

Relational maintenance can be conceptualized as a process (Dindia, 2003) in which various communicative strategies are used to "sustain desired relational definitions" (Canary & Stafford, 1992, p. 243), such as satisfaction and stability. Through exploratory studies on romantic relationships, five maintenance strategies have been identified: (a) positivity, or optimistic and cheerful interactions; (b) openness, or direct discussion of the relationship; (c) assurances, or interactions that stress the importance of the relationship to the individuals involved; (d) social networks, or sharing friends and family; and (e) sharing tasks, or the fair delegation of responsibilities (Stafford & Canary, 1991).

Previous research on romantic relationships has shown that relational characteristics like satisfaction are associated with individual's own maintenance strategy use. Stafford and Canary (2006) found that satisfaction interacted with perceptions of equity in the relationship to inform maintenance strategy use. In a longitudinal study of maintenance behavior and satisfaction in marital relationships, Weigel and Ballard-Reisch (2001) found that current perceptions of satisfaction are associated with maintenance behaviors self-reported a year prior, demonstrating that communicative behaviors like maintenance strategies contribute to relationship quality.

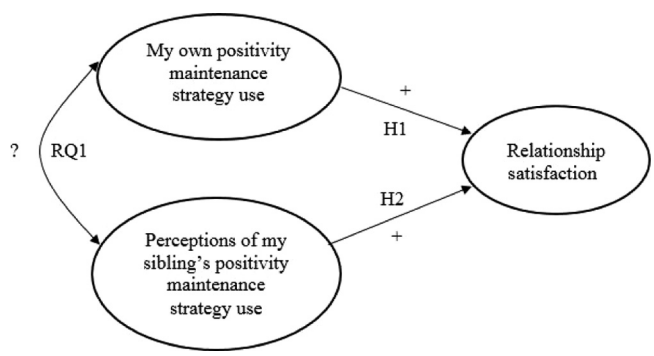

Figure 1 Example model of hypotheses and research question for sibling positivity.

Limited previous research has explored how everyday relationship maintenance is experienced in the sibling relationship, but what has been done confirms both the existence of maintenance behavior and patterns of impact on relational outcomes similar to patterns found in romantic relationships (e.g., Myers et al., 2008; Myers et al., 2001; Myers & Weber, 2004). Stafford and Canary's (1991) claim that "all on-going relationships require maintenance" (p. 220), and Stafford and Canary's five relational maintenance strategies are commonly used in work on the sibling relationship (e.g., Myers & Rittenour, 2012). Sibling maintenance behaviors have been linked to outcome variables such as liking, commitment, and satisfaction in multiple life stages of the adult sibling relationship (Myers & Rittenour, 2012). Myers et al. (2001) found individuals' use of the five maintenance behaviors is positively correlated with their own reports of sibling liking, which is a component of relational quality. As such, the model predicts that people's perceptions of their own maintenance behaviors may be linked to higher perceived relationship quality (Figure 1):

> *H1: Individuals' reports of their own use of relationship maintenance strategies will be positively associated with their own ratings of sibling relationship quality.*

The proposed model also holds that perceptions of siblings' maintenance behavior will influence relationship quality. Perceptions of a partner's maintenance strategies have been explored in previous interpersonal research (e.g., Canary & Stafford, 1992; Canary, Stafford, & Semic, 2002; Stafford & Canary, 1991); it has yet to be done in sibling research. In romantic relationships, spouses can recognize the behaviors their partners performed to maintain the relationship (Canary & Stafford, 1992). Canary et al. (2002) documented that perceptions of maintenance behaviors in married couples add a significant amount of explained variance for relational characteristics such as liking, love, and commitment above personal beliefs about these characteristics. Similarly, Canary and Stafford (1992) found that in the context of marriage, self-reported use *and* perceptions of partners' maintenance predicted commitment and liking on behalf of the partner reporting perceptions.

In the proposed model, self- and other perceptions are thought to contribute separately to relationship quality because people hold different perceptions of their own motivations and actions when compared to how they view others (Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004). In part, these differences emerge because people can be introspective about their own behavior but are forced to rely on observations in forming perceptions of others (Pronin et al., 2004). For instance, people may understand that there are external reasons, such as work, school, or family demands that explain why they might sometimes fail to engage in maintenance behaviors but attribute the lack of maintenance behavior in their partner to not caring about the relationship. Because the perceptions of self and others come from different areas, both are thought to contribute to relationship satisfaction. Perceptions of maintenance behavior in sibling relationships have yet to be explored, but based on previous research on perceptions and relational characteristics within other interpersonal domains, it can be hypothesized that:

> *H2: Individuals' perceptions of their siblings' use of relationship maintenance strategies will be positively associated with their own rating of sibling relationship satisfaction.*

The model posits a third set of associations between people's perceptions of their siblings' maintenance behaviors and that person's own maintenance behavior. Scholarship informed by the norm of reciprocity provides an initial prediction for this relationship, which suggests that if a person perceives his/her sibling is using certain behaviors to maintain the relationship, that person likely feels s/he should reciprocate those efforts (Roloff, 1987). In addition, as H1 and H2 propose, own and partner maintenance strategy use are expected to be positively associated with relationship satisfaction. If these assertions are correct, it is unlikely that own and partner strategy use are negatively related to each other, thus:

> *H3: Individuals' reports of their own use of relationship maintenance strategies will be positively associated with their perceptions of their siblings' use of maintenance strategies.*

Methods

Participants and Procedures

Participants ($N = 327$) were recruited through Facebook and Amazon mTurk to answer a 20-minute computer-based survey.[1] In order to qualify for participation, individuals had to be over the age of 18 and have at least one sibling (e.g., adopted, step, biological). Participants were asked to report on the sibling whose birthday (month/day) was closest to their own (Mikkelson, 2006). Participants were 63% female, 79% White, and varied in age from 18 to 71 ($M = 30.76$, $SD = 11.52$). First-born children made up 47% of participants, 34% were second born, and 19% were third born. The participants' siblings were 53% male and 29 years old on average ($M = 28.6$, $SD = 14.26$). They had a mean age difference of 5 years ($M = 5.17$, $SD = 2.99$). Female participants reported on sisters 49.5% of the time ($n = 102$) and brothers 50.5% of the time ($n = 103$), whereas male participants reported on brothers 57% of the time ($n = 70$) and sisters 42.6% of the time ($n = 52$).

Measures

The 29-item Relational Maintenance Strategy Measure (RMSM, Canary & Stafford, 1992) was modified to evaluate the participants' maintenance strategies and their perceptions of their siblings' maintenance strategy use. For example, "show myself to be faithful to him/her" was altered so that "faithful" was changed to "reliable." Also, "I" or "my sibling" was added to the beginning of each item stem. Participants filled out the 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) once for their own maintenance behavior and once for perceptions of their siblings' maintenance behavior. After conducting confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) for each maintenance behavior in AMOS 21, all original scales were used in the final analyses except for the "positivity" scale due to poor model fit. Positivity was reduced from 10 to six items by iteratively removing items with poor component fit (see Table 1 for reliability scores and model fit statistics of the final scales).

Table 1 Relationship Maintenance Strategies Means, Standard Deviations, Alphas, and Confirmatory Factor Analyses Model Fit

Participant relationship maintenance									
	M	SD	α	χ^2	*df*	*p**	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Positivity	4.90	1.40	.90	26.70	9	.002	.98	.97	.078
Openness	3.94	1.50	.90	14.90	9	.094	.99	.98	.074
Assurances	4.87	1.54	.86	2.57	2	.276	1.00	1.00	.030
Network	4.28	1.39	.81	2.36	2	.307	1.00	1.00	.024
Tasks	5.03	1.37	.88	18.86	5	.002	.98	.95	.092
Perceptions of sibling relationship maintenance									
	M	SD	α	χ^2	*df*	*p**	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Positivity	4.52	1.62	.93	25.47	9	.002	.99	.97	.075
Openness	3.85	1.57	.93	14.02	9	.122	1.00	.99	.041
Assurances	4.51	1.69	.91	7.51	2	.023	.99	.98	.092
Network	4.12	1.55	.89	7.68	2	.021	.99	.96	.093
Tasks	4.53	1.70	.96	20.03	5	.001	.99	.97	.096

*Nonsignificant *p* values are desired when testing model fit.

The Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS, Hendrick, 1988) was modified to apply to sibling relationships by substituting "sibling" for "partner" and changing from a question format to a statement format so that the same scale anchors could be used. An example item was "my relationship with my sibling meets my expectations," rated on the Likert-type scale anchors (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Initial CFA analyses revealed poor model fit for the full seven-item scale, so poor-fitting items were removed to create a five-item scale with acceptable fit, $\chi^2(4) = 15.84$, $p = .003$, CFI = .989, TLI = .972, RMSEA = .095. Cronbach's alpha for the final five-item scale was .86 ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.55$).

Results

Descriptive statistics for participant reports of their own and siblings' use of maintenance strategies appear in Table 1.[2] Using AMOS 21, latent models were constructed for each of the maintenance strategies that included the sex composition of the sibling dyad as controls,[3] the participant ratings of self- and sibling maintenance as exogenous variables, and relationship quality as the endogenous variable (Figure 1). Even though the chi-square results were significant for each model (see Table 2), other model fit indices fall within the acceptable bounds (e.g., CFI and TLI > .90, RMSEA < .10; Bollen, 1989). Additionally, the chi-square test's power to detect small differences increases with larger sample sizes, which may cause a significant statistic. Thus, the models were accepted based on the other model fit indices, and factor loadings could be examined.

Table 2 Unstandardized Betas, Standard Errors, Significance, R2 Values, and Model Fit Indices for Latent Models

Strategy	Variable	*B*	*SE*	*p*	R^2	*r*	χ^2	*df*	*p*	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Positivity	Participant	−.057	.111	.609	.616	.816**	478.951	157	.000	.930	.906	.079
	Sibling	.839	.090	<.001***								
Openness	Participant	.053	.127	.677	.319	.833**	465.573	157	.000	.931	.907	.078
	Sibling	.547	.121	<.001***								
Assurances	Participant	−.249	.123	.043*	.679	.845**	312.932	91	.000	.934	.901	.086
	Sibling	1.083	.123	<.001***								
Networks	Participant	−.043	.106	.687	.449	.757**	302.283	91	.000	.934	.901	.086
	Sibling	.730	.101	<.001***								
Tasks	Participant	.022	.031	.714	.476	.444**	304.386	122	.000	.956	.939	.068
	Sibling	.636	.053	<.001***								

***Value is significant at .001 level; **Value is significant at the 0.01 level; *Value is significant at the 0.05 level.
Note. r is between participant and sibling behavior.

H1 posited that reports of one's own maintenance behavior would be positively associated with relationship satisfaction ratings. However, H1 was not supported for any maintenance strategy. For four of the five strategies, the association between participant behavior and relationship satisfaction was not significant (Table 2). When it was significant (within assurances), the relationship was negative. As participants reported higher use of assurances, relationship satisfaction decreased.

H2 explored the relationship between perceptions of sibling behavior and participants' relationship satisfaction, suggesting a positive association. Findings indicate a positive relationship across all five maintenance strategies between the two constructs (Table 2). Participants' reports of relationship satisfaction increased as they perceived their siblings' maintenance strategy use to increase. Therefore, H2 was supported.

H3 posited a positive association between individual maintenance strategy use and perceptions of siblings' maintenance strategy use. The SEM results indicated that the associations were positive and significant across all maintenance strategies, thus supporting H3 (Table 2). As participants' evaluations of their own maintenance increased, so did their perceptions of their siblings' maintenance strategies.

Discussion

The primary goal of the study was to test a model predicting that people's own maintenance behaviors as well as perceptions of their siblings' maintenance behaviors would be positively associated with self-rated relationship satisfaction. Findings indicate that the relationship among the variables is more complicated than originally proposed. Although self-reported maintenance behavior was positively and highly correlated with relationship satisfaction at the zero-order level, thus following patterns established in previous research, the association became nonsignificant or

reversed signs when perceptions of sibling behavior were included in the SEM model (see Table 2). The actions of the participants' siblings seemed to matter more than their own maintenance behaviors. The nonsignificant or negative associations between self-reported behavior and relationship satisfaction found in the full SEM model run contradictory to most previous research on maintenance strategies and relationship quality in both sibling and romantic relationships.[4]

There are a variety of factors that might explain why sibling maintenance behavior was significantly associated with relationship satisfaction and the participant's own behavior was not. One reason may hinge on the amount of time individuals spend reflecting on their own behavior and their contributions to the relationship. Individuals use maintenance strategies to keep the relationship in a satisfied and positive state (Canary & Stafford, 1992). If the relationship is already in that state, individuals may not be very concerned about their own behavior.[5] Thus, individuals may not spend as much time analyzing what they are doing to maintain the relationship.

Instead, they may be looking toward their siblings as an indicator of that relationship satisfaction status. The findings in this study show that the more maintenance behavior the individual participant reported using, the more s/he perceived the sibling was using. Past research in attributions supports the idea of focusing outward rather than inward.[6] Given the perceptual vantage point, people may spend much more time evaluating how their siblings are contributing to the sibling relationship via maintenance behaviors than they do with their own behavior, which would account for the results found in this sample. As such, siblings who are struggling with relationship satisfaction may need to make a specific effort to focus on their own contributions to the state of the relationship and make alterations as they see fit.

Though the explanations given thus far are based in theory, it is possible the pattern of results originated from a statistical artifact—multicollinearity. Indicators for multicollinearity include the highly correlated independent variables and participant maintenance behavior not only becoming nonsignificant but switching signs.[7]

Ultimately, more research needs to be done to explore why this pattern of significant sibling and nonsignificant self-maintenance behavior emerged; however, this finding is noteworthy as it draws attention to the very dyadic nature of maintenance. What an individual feels like he or she is personally doing to maintain the relationship matters less to the overall quality of the relationship than what the sibling is perceived to be doing. For sibling relationships, these results hint at the mental processes at play when keeping the relationship in a desirable state.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite the strengths of this study, such as the inclusion of sibling maintenance perceptions and the broad participant and sibling age ranges, at least three limitations exist. First, research has established that long-lasting and satisfying sibling relationships have positive effects on well-being for both partners (Cicirelli, 1989), but scholars do not know whether specific maintenance behaviors influence well-being more than others. Second, sibling relationships are dynamic and fluctuate throughout the

life course, yet this study captures a static picture of maintenance strategy use and perceptions. Future research needs to be conducted to assess changes across time in maintenance behavior and relationship quality. Finally, the reports here are based on one sibling's perception of the relationship. Collecting data from both siblings in order to compare both siblings' maintenance behaviors and perceptions is imperative for future research.

Although exploration of the associations among sibling relationship satisfaction, participant maintenance behaviors, and perceptions of maintenance behaviors contributes unique and important findings to the study of siblings, much work still needs to be accomplished. Scholars should seek to better understand the causal mechanisms behind maintenance behavior through further theoretically driven testing of the maintenance framework across contexts and outcomes. Future research on relational maintenance may benefit from a better understanding of why perceptions of partner maintenance behavior is such a strong predictor of relationship satisfaction within the sibling relationship.

Notes

[1] Amazon mTurk is an online system for collecting data from diverse samples and has been found to be a reliable tool for data collection comparable to traditional samples (see Goodman, Cryder & Cheema, 2012).

[2] Correlations between study variables are available from the first author.

[3] Due to past research on siblings and maintenance strategies stating that maintenance strategy use varies across the sibling lifespan (e.g., Myers, 2011) and tend to be more frequently performed by women compared to men (e.g., Myers & Rittenour, 2012; Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013), age and sex were assessed as potential control variables. Because age did not show any significant correlations, it was not included as a control variable. Sibling sex and participant sex were recoded to assess the sex composition of the dyad. Due to the results of a one-way ANOVA, sibling composition groups were dummy coded and used as control variables for all analyses with sister-sister as the control. No significant results emerged for the sibling sex compositions groups for any of the maintenance strategies.

[4] Previous romantic relationship research has found that both self- and other maintenance behavior independently predict relationship satisfaction (e.g., Canary & Stafford, 1992; Canary et al., 2002), yet, in this study, that relationship disappeared when sibling maintenance behavior was included in the model.

[5] Because Dainton and Aylor (2002) found that "maintenance behaviors are enacted both routinely and strategically" (p. 61), it is possible the maintenance has become routine. The routine nature of maintenance in combination with the high quality of the sibling relationship (i.e., average participant satisfaction score was 4.98 out of 7) and the higher tendencies in this sample to perform maintenance behavior (Table 1) could mean the participants' own behavior is not as salient to themselves.

[6] Attribution theory would suggest that this outward attention occurs due to the perceptual vantage point (Monson & Snyder, 1977). People may more easily see and comprehend the behaviors of others when compared to themselves, especially in routine situations that do not motivate in-depth processing. Because people do not directly see themselves performing maintenance behavior, they may attribute their resulting sibling relationship satisfaction to the focus of visual attention (e.g., what their sibling is doing to maintain the relationship).

[7] Assessing multicollinearity in SEM is not easily done (Grewal, Cote, & Baumgartner, 2004), so analyses were conducted again using multiple regression to obtain the VIF scores. VIF scores for participant and sibling maintenance across all models were acceptable (ranging 1.219–2.499), suggesting that multicollinearity alone does not account for the patterns of results found.

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