Older v. Younger Siblings:

Differences in Obtaining, Desiring, and Negotiating for Behavioral Autonomy

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Abstract

The present study examined differences between older and younger adolescent siblings' expected and actual behavioral autonomy, as well as parent-child conflict frequency. A study of 118 mostly white, lower-middle class families with adolescent sibling pairs and one of their parents was conducted. Findings suggest that while older siblings may actually obtain greater behavioral autonomy, younger siblings expect autonomy at a faster pace than their older siblings or parents would expect or allow. Additionally, younger siblings, regardless of age, reported more frequent conflicts with parents than older siblings. The present study extends previous research by examining individual differences within behavioral autonomy development based on sibling differences within families.

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Research on adolescent autonomy development has focused on the parent-child relationship and the necessary negotiation process involved. This research generally shows that adolescents consistently want more behavioral autonomy, at earlier ages, than parents are willing to grant (Feldman & Quatman, 1988; Feldman & Wood, 1994). In addition, a large body of research from the social domain theory (Smetana 2006; Turiel, 1983, 2006) has shown that both parents and adolescents distinguish among different domains of autonomy, such as *prudential* issues (involving comfort, safety, and potential harm to the self), *conventional* issues (involving social norms, such as manners), *personal* issues (e.g., personal choices regarding control over one's body, privacy, and choice of leisure activities, friends, and tastes), and *multifaceted* issues (involving overlap between personal and other types of issues) (Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Daddis, 2004; Smetana, Crean, & Campione-Barr, 2005). Also, while too much behavioral autonomy too early leads to academic and adjustment problems (Dornbusch et al., 1990; Lamborn et al., 1996), adolescents must gain greater behavioral autonomy throughout adolescence (Smetana et al., 2004), as being held back leads to greater internalizing and externalizing problems (Holmbeck & O'Donnell, 1991).

Despite this wealth of knowledge about the development of autonomy, as family systems researchers have highlighted, it is not only interactions among individual family members that affect relationships and development, but also the interplay between several relationships in the family (Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1985). The process of negotiating greater autonomy may be influenced by prior experience or relationships. Parents may view the process differently after their first child (Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2003), while younger siblings may construct expectations regarding the content and timing of their autonomy after interacting with older siblings.

A recent study by Campione-Barr (2007) examined differences in first- and later-born adolescents' actual family decision-making, expectations for future autonomy, breadth of the personal domain, and amount of parent-adolescent conflict when compared cross-sectionally at the same age (7^{th} and 10^{th} graders). The study found that later-born adolescents reported earlier expectations for autonomy and greater conflict with parents than first-borns during both early and middle adolescence. Additionally, autonomy in family decision-making was greater among later-born than first-born 10^{th} graders. These findings suggest that when compared between families, later-born adolescents (as a group) expect to obtain autonomy earlier, actually obtain more autonomy (by middle adolescence), and have more conflicts with parents over these autonomy-related issues than first-born adolescents (as a group). However, few studies have compared siblings' desiring, negotiating, and obtaining behavioral autonomy within families.

One notable exception is that of Bumpus, Crouter, and McHale (2001). These researchers studied White families with two adolescent children (first-borns, mostly middle adolescents, and second-borns, mostly early adolescents) to investigate the influence of parents' gender role attitudes and sibling dyad sex composition on adolescents' decision-making input. They found that first-borns were granted more autonomy than second-borns (which would be expected developmentally, as the first-borns were older), especially in families with first-born girls and second-born boys.

These findings are intriguing, however, Bumpus et al. (2001) focused on parents' expectations for autonomy, but research consistently has shown that adolescents' and parents' perceptions of autonomy-granting differ. In light of findings by Campione-Barr (2007), research assessing adolescents' perceptions of their autonomy, while also examining sibling ordinal status is also necessary.

The present study examined differences between older and younger adolescent siblings' expected and actual behavioral autonomy, as well as parent-child conflict frequency, which has been seen in previous research as the process by which autonomy negotiations between parents and children take place (Smetana, 1988; 1995; Smetana & Asquith, 1994), within the same families. Given the results of Campione-Barr (2007), it was hypothesized that younger siblings would report greater conflict with parents than older siblings (with similar results for parents' reports) and that younger siblings would report earlier expectations for future autonomy than older siblings (differences not expected to be evident in parents' reports) . However, it was also expected that younger siblings (and parents) would report less actual decision-making autonomy than older siblings given that parents would be less likely to relinquish more autonomous control to their younger children than their older children.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 118 sibling pairs, generally within 1-4 grade levels of one another (although two of the participating pairs were about six years apart) and one parent (111 mothers and 7 fathers). Older siblings in the dyads ranged in age from 12.08 – 20.38 years (M = 15.59, SD = 2.01 years); younger siblings ranged in age from 6.90 –

16.57 years (*M* = 13.02, *SD* = 2.06 years). The mean age difference was 2.57 years (*SD* = 1.06). Sibling pairs were divided into three age cohorts: pre – early adolescents (*n* = 26), early – middle adolescents (*n* = 64), and middle – late adolescents (*n* = 28). Age groupings reflected the way siblings were originally recruited, as 7th and 10th graders, half with older and half with younger siblings, as part of a larger study. The preadolescent-early adolescent cohort consisted of 7th graders with younger siblings, the early-middle adolescent cohort consisted of 7th graders with older siblings and 10th graders with younger siblings, and 10th graders with older siblings made up the middle-late adolescent cohort. Sibling pairs were examined in terms of four possible gender compositions: sister-sister (*n* = 32: 4 pre-early, 21 early-middle, 7 middle-late), brother-brother (*n* = 30: 6 pre-early, 14 early-middle, 10 middle-late), older sister-younger brother (*n* = 27: 8 pre-early, 15 early-middle, 4 middle-late), and older brother-younger sister (*n* = 29: 8 pre-early, 14 early-middle, 7 middle-late). Age cohorts did not differ significantly by sex composition, mother's education, or family income; however, middle – late adolescent pairs were more likely than early – middle adolescent pairs to reside in non-two-parent biological households.

The sample was primarily European American (88%), with the remaining participants reporting African American (9%) or other (3%) ethnicities. Most siblings lived with two biological parents (69%), with the remainder residing in stepparent (9%) or single-parent families (21%). Family structure (examined as two-biological parent families versus all else) and ethnicity (examined as European American versus all else) did not differ significantly by age cohort. The median yearly family income was between $55,000 and $69,999, and most parents were college-educated. Mothers' age was, on average, 42.47 (*SD* = 4.69) years, and fathers' age was, on average, 43.92 (*SD* = 5.65) years.

Measures

Parent-adolescent conflict. A shorter, 11-item version, of the Issues Checklist (Prinz, Kent, Foster, & O'Leary, 1979; Robin & Foster, 1989), based on content analyses from previous research (Smetana, 1989), was used to assess parent-adolescent conflict frequency. Parents and adolescents rated (separately for each parent) how frequently they discussed each issue with their mother or father (or child) on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (often). Alphas were .82 for parents' ratings, .78 for adolescents' ratings of conflict frequency with mothers, and for adolescents' ratings of conflict frequency with fathers. Correlations between older and younger siblings' ratings of conflict frequency with mothers and fathers were high (.68 and .65 respectively), therefore, mean scores of conflict with both parents were used in analyses.

Expectations for behavioral autonomy. This 20-item measure, adapted from Feldman and Quatman (1988), assessed the ages children and parents believe a child should be able to decide different issues for themselves. The original scale values ranged from 1 (indicating that the child could decide that issue before the age of 14) to 5 (indicating the child could decide at 20 years or older). There was also an additional scale choice of "never," indicating that the child would never be able to decide that issue for themselves. Because the early adolescents in this study were 12-13 years, the scale was modified to reflect that the parent or child believes a particular issue could be up to the child before 12 years of age (scored as 1), could be decided by the child between 12 and 14 years of age (2), could be decided by the child between 15 and 17 years of age (3), could be decided by the child between 18 and 20 years of age (4), and could only be decided by the child after 20 years of age (5). The "never" scale choice was dropped due to the confusing nature of this response. Means of parent ($\alpha = .79$) and adolescent ($\alpha = .84$) reports were used in analyses.

Actual family decision-making. Decision-making was assessed using the Parental Authority Index (Hasebe, Nucci, & Nucci, 2004). Using the format of the Dornbusch et al. (1985) Family Decision-Making scale but employing domain-relevant items, this measure originally consisted of 33 issues. However, two issues pertaining to sexual behaviors (stay overnight with a boyfriend/girlfriend; watching a movie with explicit sex) were dropped in the present study, due to the young age of some of the participants. Also, separate items about tattoos and body piercings were combined into a single item. Three new items based on previous domain-related research (Smetana & Daddis, 2002) were also added (What I watch on TV, How I decorate my room, and What I write in IM), resulting in 33 items (11 personal items, 4 prudential items, 3 conventional items, and 15 overlapping or multifaceted items).

Family Decision-Making was assessed by asking "who would make the decision on this issue." Parents and adolescents separately rated each of the issues on a five-point scale, with 1 indicating adolescents would be able to decide the issue without discussing it with parents, 3 indicating that adolescents and parents would make this decision together, and 5 indicating that parents would decide the issue without discussing it with adolescents. Alphas for parent and adolescent ratings of personal issues were .85 and .86, respectively, for conventional issues were .64 and .78, for prudential issues were.85 and

.92, and for multifaceted issues were .85 and .90, respectively. Mean scores by domain were used in analyses.

Procedures

Participants were recruited from a Northeastern suburban school district. Letters describing the study were sent to the parents of all 7th and 10th grade students (the target grades for the larger study), and interested parents mailed responses back to the investigators. Researchers also made presentations to students during their "homebase" classes to inform them about the study and encourage their participation. Inclusion criteria were that students had to have a non-twin sibling less than five years apart from the 7th or 10th grader. Older siblings had to be the first-born in their family, and younger siblings could be any later-born status, although most (80 %) were second-born. Families were paid honoraria for their participation. As part of a larger study, families participated in a two-hour visit at the university lab during which they completed questionnaire measures, interviews, sorting tasks, and family interaction tasks.

Results

Parent-Child Conflict Frequency

Hypotheses were tested using a 2 (Child: Older v. Younger) X 2 (Reporter: Child v. Parent) X 4 (Sibling Sex Composition) X 3 (Age Cohort) mixed model ANOVA, with Child and Reporter as repeated measures (see Table 1 for means). Significant main effects of Child, $F(1, 105) = 8.74$, $p < .01$, and Reporter, $F(1, 105) = 6.54$, $p < .001$, were found. Specifically, conflict between parents and younger siblings was found to be more frequent that conflict between parents and older children and parents reported more frequent conflicts with their children than their children report with them.

These main effects were qualified by two significant three-way interactions; Child X Reporter X Gender composition, $F(3, 105) = 3.07$, $p< .05$, and Child X Reporter X Age cohort, $F(2, 105) = 3.37$, $p< .05$. For the interaction by sibling gender composition, parents reported having more frequent conflicts with older sisters in sister-sister dyads ($M = 2.71$, $SE = .18$) and younger brothers in brother-brother dyads ($M = 2.56$, $SE = .12$) than those adolescents reported having with their parents (older sisters: $M = 2.11$, SE = *.14*; younger brothers: $M = 1.99$, $SE = .13$). There were no differences by reported for the other children in the same-sex dyads, or for either of the children in mixed-sex dyads. For the interaction by age cohort, post-hoc analyses revealed that parents reported more frequent conflict with their younger children than the younger siblings reported having with their parents for both the early/middle and middle late cohorts (while there was no difference by reporter for the older siblings' conflict frequency), but in the pre/early cohort, the findings were reversed; parents reported more conflict with their early adolescent older siblings than their older siblings reported having with their parents, but there was no difference by reporter for the younger siblings.

Expectations for Behavioral Autonomy

Again, hypotheses were tested using a 2 (Child: Older v. Younger) X 2 (Reporter: Child v. Parent) X 4 (Sibling Sex Composition) X 3 (Age Cohort) mixed model ANOVA, with Child and Reporter as repeated measures (see Table 1 for means). Results revealed a main effect of Reporter, $F(1, 103) = 103.80$, $p < .001$, such that parents had later expectations for their children's autonomy than their children had for themselves. Additionally, there was a significant interaction of Child X Cohort, $F(2, 103) = 5.98$, $p< .01$, and a marginally significant Child X Reporter interaction, $F(1, 103) = 3.12$, $p < .08$.

However, both of these interactions were qualified by a significant Child X Reporter X Cohort interaction, $F(2, 103) = 4.64$, $p < .05$. Post hoc analyses revealed that parental expectations for their children's autonomy did not differ for older v. younger siblings, or depending on the age cohort of the sibling pair, however, adolescents' expectations did differ based on their status within the pair and their age cohort. Specifically, in the youngest cohort, younger siblings reported later expectations for autonomy than their older siblings; in the middle cohort, younger and older siblings' reports were not significantly different; and in the oldest cohort, younger siblings reported earlier expectations for autonomy than their older siblings.

Actual Family Decision-Making

This time, a 2 (Child: Older v. Younger) X 2 (Reporter: Child v. Parent) X 4 (Domain: Personal, Conventional, Prudential, Multifaceted) X 4 (Sibling Sex Composition) X 3 (Age Cohort) mixed model ANOVA was performed with Child, Reporter, and Domain variables as repeated measures. First, four significant main effects emerged for Child, $F(1, 90) = 34.01$, $p < .001$, Reporter, $F(1, 90) = 25.29$, $p < .001$, Age Cohort, $F(2, 90) = 37.48$, $p < .001$, and Domain, $F(3, 270) = 492.74$, $p < .001$. As is shown by the means reported in Table 1, older siblings reported more decision-making autonomy than younger siblings, children reported having more decision-making autonomy than parents reported their children having, the oldest cohort (middle-late adolescents) of siblings reported having greater autonomy than both of the younger cohorts (pre-early & early-middle adolescents), and across all reporters, adolescents were shown to have the greatest amount of decision-making autonomy over personal issues ($M = 4.03$, $SE = .04$), followed by multifaceted issues ($M = 3.04$, $SE = .05$), then conventional issues (*M* = 2.45, *SE* = .08), and adolescents had the least amount of decision-making power over prudential issues (*M* = 2.05, *SE* = .07).

The Child and Cohort main effects were qualified by a significant Child X Cohort interaction, $F(2, 90) = 5.03$, $p < .01$; however, this two-way interaction was also qualified with a Child X Cohort X Reporter three-way interaction, $F(2, 90) = 6.14$, $p < .01$. Post hoc analyses revealed that parent reports of their older and younger children's actual family decision-making were what would be expected developmentally. Specifically, pre-adolescent younger siblings had the least amount of decision-making power, followed by early adolescent younger and older siblings, then middle adolescent younger and older siblings, and late adolescent older siblings had the greatest amount of decision-making autonomy. According to adolescents' reports, pre-adolescent younger siblings still claimed the least amount of decision-making autonomy, followed by early adolescent older and younger siblings, and late adolescent older siblings still claimed the greatest amount of decision-making, however, while middle adolescent older siblings reported the same amount of actual decision-making as the early adolescents, middle adolescent younger siblings reported more decision-making autonomy than their older sibling counterparts, but less than the late adolescent older siblings.

Finally, the Domain main effect was qualified by two interactions: Domain X Sibling Gender Composition, $F(9, 270) = 1.91$, $p = .05$, and Domain X Cohort, $F(6, 270) = 6.02$, $p < .001$. Post hoc analyses revealed that siblings in sister-sister dyads and older brother-younger sister dyads had greater decision-making autonomy over conventional (*M* = 2.56, *SE* = .15; 2.61, *SE* = .14 respectively) and prudential (*M* = 2.32, *SE* = .14; *M* = 2.11, *SE* = .14 respectively) issues than siblings in brother-brother (conventional: *M* =

2.26, *SE* = .16; prudential: *M* = 1.81, *SE* = .16) or older sister-younger brother (conventional: *M* = 2.39, *SE* = .15; prudential: *M* = 1.97, *SE* = .15) dyads. Additionally, siblings in the middle-late adolescence cohort had significantly more decision-making authority over conventional and prudential issues than siblings in the pre-early or early-middle adolescence cohorts.

Discussion

The present study examined older and younger siblings' expectations for autonomy, actual family-decision making autonomy, and parent-child conflict frequency as compared within the same families. Together, the findings suggest that while older siblings may actually obtain, or be granted, greater behavioral autonomy, younger siblings expect and desire more autonomy at a faster pace than their older siblings or parents would expect or allow. Additionally, the parent-child conflict findings suggest that the younger siblings' faster paced expectations may be creating more frequent conflicts with parents; presumably over negotiations for greater behavioral autonomy.

Furthermore, the present study replicated previous research from the social domain perspective in that parents, older siblings, and younger siblings all reported that adolescents should have the greatest amount of autonomy over personal issues, followed by multifaceted issues, then conventional issues, and that adolescents should have the least amount of autonomy over prudential issues. Additionally, across all three reporters, decision-making control over conventional and prudential issues did not make a significant jump until much later in adolescence (as shown by the finding that siblings in the middle-late adolescence cohort reported more autonomy over those issues than either of the two younger cohorts, but there was no difference between the pre-early and early-middle adolescence cohorts). However, across all issues, parents were not as willing to relinquish decision-making power over these issues as adolescents would prefer.

An interesting and unexpected domain finding, however, was that of the interaction with sibling gender constellation showing that, regardless of age, sister-sister and older brother-younger sister dyads claimed more decision-making autonomy over conventional and prudential issues than brother-brother, or older sister-younger brother dyads. Our previous research (Campione-Barr, 2007) found that later-born females reported more decision-making autonomy (across all domains) than first-born females (compared at the same age), while male adolescents did not differ by sibling ordinal status. This would suggest that it may be the younger sisters in the sister-sister and older brother-younger sister dyads carrying the difference in gender in the present study. However, in the present study, this difference was not across all domains of decision-making, just those (conventional and prudential) that would be generally seen as being under parental control longer than those involving the personal domain or overlapping with the personal domain (i.e., multifaceted).

A few limitations of the present study should be noted. First, our sample was ethnically homogeneous in that the participating families were overwhelmingly European American. However, the sample was heterogeneous in socioeconomic status, ranging from working-class to upper-middle class. Second, while the four sex compositions of the sibling dyads were fairly even across the sample, the dyads were not evenly distributed by age cohort. This was due to the original way in which the siblings were recruited, resulting in about half of the sample falling into the early-middle adolescence cohort, while the other half was divided between the other two cohorts. However, several significant age cohort findings emerged, and mostly due to differences within the two smaller cohorts.

The present study indicates that the amount and timing of behavioral autonomy differs according to ordinal position in the family, but future studies in this area should examine the processes that account for these differences. Younger siblings may use older siblings as a model, as suggested by Whiteman and colleagues (Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2003; Whiteman & Buchanan, 2002), or parents may "loosen up" with the second child due to their experiences with the first child. It may also be that parents' energy and resources are stretched thinner with multiple children, and, therefore, they give in more easily to their later-born children's requests. Because we found differences primarily in adolescents' but not parents reports, differences could be due to child characteristics like differing personalities and goals of the two children, as they interact with parent characteristics and parenting. Previous research by Crouter et al. (1999) has suggested that first-born children may be more focused on parental approval and authority than later-born children. It may be that later-born children are more willing to test the boundaries of parental authority to gain greater autonomy than did their first-born siblings. Future research should examine this process, including assessments of temperament, parenting goals and styles, and in-depth assessments of both the parent-child relationships and sibling relationships as they develop over time.

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Table 1

Means (SDs) of Autonomy and Conflict Variables by Reporter, Child, and Age Cohort.

	Parent						Adolescents					
	About Older			About Younger			Older			Younger		
	Youngest	Middle	Oldest	Youngest	Middle	Oldest	Youngest	Middle	Oldest	Youngest	Middle	Oldest
Conflict	2.69	2.50	2.11	2.43	2.78	2.59	2.22	2.28	2.06	2.47	2.31	2.24
	(.78)	(.88)	(.78)	(.57)	(.66)	(.55)	(.80)	(.65)	(.65)	(.69)	(.66)	(.66)
Expectations	3.14	3.22	3.12	3.21	3.22	3.11	2.70	2.67	2.73	2.85	2.63	2.32
	(.47)	(.39)	(.58)	(.51)	(.39)	(.53)	(.48)	(.51)	(.57)	(.61)	(.45)	(.41)
Decisions	2.69	2.98	3.90	2.45	2.80	3.01	3.21	3.35	4.24	2.72	3.11	3.91
	(.52)	.52)	(.68)	(.69)	(.49)	(.53)	(.59)	(.70)	(.63)	(.58)	(.73)	(.55)

Note. Conflict = parent-child conflict frequency, Expectations = expectations for future autonomy (lower = early expectations, or greater autonomy), Decisions = actual family decision-making (higher = more adolescent input, or greater autonomy).