Sibling Secrets, Conspiracies and Collaborations: Dialectical Tensions and the Relational Effects of Sibling Alliances in Families

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Accounts when siblings worked together (sibling alliances) were examined to determine the impact of sibling alliance attempts on family relationships. Two hundred alliance attempts comprised the data, including one hundred successful and one hundred unsuccessful alliance attempts. Respondents indicated that engaging in the reported alliances was approximately as likely to have a positive effect on the relationship among siblings as to have no effect at all. Negative effects of sibling alliances were found in under 5% of cases. Most of the reported alliances had no effect on the relationships between targets of the alliance and the sibling allies. In those accounts when family alliance outsiders were aware of the alliance attempt, they were likely to respond favorably to the alliance attempt. Respondents indicated that managing competing dialectical tensions was a significant part of some sibling alliances.

Sibling relationships are part of more than 80% of Americans' lives (King et al., 2010 as cited in McHale, Updegraff & Whiteman, 2012), and they often extend from earliest childhood through old age. Siblings are regularly among the most central figures in one another's lives until young adulthood, and even adults consider their sibling relationships to be important (Van Volkom, 2006). Dunn (1996) calls sibling relationships "the first society" into which we are immersed with peers, and they are often the longest lasting relationships one will manage and experience. Most people grow up with siblings, care for or are cared for by siblings, and fight and play with siblings. Siblings are resources for social and relational knowledge, experience, and reinforcement, and perhaps most importantly, they are resources for understanding and relating within the family. Siblings often share a broad range of experiences, a commonality of experience, and a depth of shared understanding that may surpass nearly every other relationship across the lifespan (Floyd, 1996).

It is, therefore, surprising that research on sibling relationships has been comparatively limited, especially given the rise of family communication research as a whole. While more and more research explores marital dyads, it is not supplemented by research on siblings, and as a consequence, our understanding of the family is limited and skewed. According to Nicholson and Duck (2012), "sibling relationships have been under-studied in family

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communication, and when studied, they are often examined from a parental perspective" (p. 308). The family communication literature is dominated by a reasonable but partial understanding of family life as viewed through the lens of parent-centered experiences and events. Families are regularly represented as marital dyads with children (siblings) cast as ancillary, second-rank players (Nicholson & Duck, 2012). For example, Milevsky (2005) explores how sibling relationships respond to shortcomings in parental and peer relationships, rather than exploring the compensation that may be necessitated in other relationships because of attributes of sibling relationships. This perspective on sibling relationships unfortunately minimizes and obscures the substantial, persistent, and essential contributions and influence that sibling relationships have on the life-long and everyday experiences of family relationships and relating.

When sibling relationships have been studied, research has historically examined siblings as rivals, often emphasizing jealousy, conflict, and abuse in sibling relationships (e.g., Bevan & Stetzenbach, 2007; Dunn, 1996; e.g., Kiselica, M. S., & Morrill-Richards, 2007; McHale, Updegraff, & Whiteman, 2012; e.g., Stocker, Burwell, & Briggs, 2002). Siblings are often presented as independent and adversarial people who frequently view one another as hindering their attainment of individual goals, rather than as interdependent contributors within a larger system (Nicholson & Duck, 2012).

More recently, research has begun to show a more complete picture of sibling relating, including both positive and negative events, behaviors, and sibling influence on social and individual development (McHale, Updegraff, & Whiteman, 2012). Myers and his associates, for instance, have recently produced multiple studies of siblings that examine positive behaviors and dimensions of sibling relationships, including relational satisfaction, liking, commitment, and emotional closeness. Myers, Brann and Rittenour (2008) showed that both sibling commitment and sibling closeness tend to be stable across the lifespan, while Mikkelson, Myers and Hannawa (2011) showed that relational maintenance behaviors among genetically related siblings as well as step-siblings are important in describing and shaping sibling relating. Other recent research demonstrates the importance of sibling relationships, showing that adult siblings use affectionate communication as a strategic routine relational maintenance behavior (Myers, Byrnes, Frisby & Mansson, 2011).

Through such research, a richer and more elaborated understanding of sibling communication and relating has begun to emerge. However, according to Fowler (2009), "there is a long way to go if we are to achieve the depth of understanding of the sibling relationship that has been achieved for other family relationships" (p. 63).

The present study was undertaken to illuminate sibling alliances and to examine the influence of sibling interaction and cooperation on both sibling relationships and the larger family system. Sibling alliances include those times when siblings combine their efforts in pursuit of a shared, family-centered goal, such as throwing a surprise party for their parents' anniversary or helping a family member in need. The purpose of an alliance is to accomplish some goal, and an alliance may or may not be formed against someone else, called a "target" of the alliance. However, when one enters into an alliance with a target involved, one enters *with* others and *against* others simultaneously. This makes family alliances (sibling alliances, more specifically) interesting and potentially-consequential events in relationships among siblings and within the larger family system.

Family Alliances and Multivocality

Researchers have explored the importance and influence of *coalitions* and *alliances* in families, and the two terms have been used interchangeably. Bank and Kahn first mentioned coalitions in families in their 1975 study. Vuchinich, Wood, and Vuchinich (1995) and Vuchinich and Angelelli (1995) identified coalitions as valuable resources within families. Gilbert, Christensen, and Margolin (1984) looked at alliances in non-distressed versus multi-problem families, and Larson and Richards (1994) discussed cross-generational alliances involving mothers and their children. Myers, Smith, and Sonnier (1998) specifically point to the need for research into sibling alliances, and Nicholson and Duck (2012) have demonstrated the importance of sibling alliances in the face of family crises.

As is the case with family communication research in general, alliance research presently under-represents alliances involving children and siblings, and it subordinates them to parental/marital alliances (Nicholson & Duck, 2012). Children are shown to use sibling relationships to compensate for deficiencies in parent-child relationships, or they are shown to develop sibling relationships that reflect parent-parent and parent-child interaction patterns (Noller, Feeney, Peterson, & Sheehan, 1995). There is no research that discusses the circumstances under which siblings will ally among themselves or for what purpose(s). In further contrast with existing research, siblings in the present study are conceptualized as interdependent people who are negotiating roles, responsibilities, and goals within family systems that include other siblings, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and others.

Relational Dialectics

The complex nature of the family and of sibling relationships within families draws attention to the web of

relationships and tensions that siblings must manage. Sibling alliances provide a view into these webs of relating and relationships, and Relational Dialectics serves as a theoretical frame through which sibling and family relating practices may be understood. Baxter (2006) highlights and explains the multi-vocal nature of family interactions and relating practices through the application of a dialectical perspective.

Relational Dialectics allows the complexity of family interaction, the "both/and" nature of family life, to be explored by examining how relating in families is a complicated series of effects that can simultaneously be *both* positive *and* negative on multiple family relationships. Thus, it is not as useful to ask what (singular) effect a family interaction or event has on the family. Rather, researchers should explore the effects of an interaction, such as a sibling alliance attempt, on the various family relationships, considering both independence as well as interdependence.

Baxter (2006) highlights the dialectical flux that characterizes relating from a relational dialectics perspective. It is within the "flux" that relationships are negotiated, maintained, and sometimes changed. The constitutive nature of relating from a dialectical perspective encourages research dedicated to exploring interaction events in order to uncover the web of relationships and relating that illuminate the ongoing constitutive processes that characterize relationships and relating—including family relationships and family relationship patterns. Baxter (2006) notes that "family members exist in webs of meaning spun through communication with others" (p. 133). The current study is designed to explore the webs of meaning and complexities of managing multiple ongoing relationships. Sibling relationships, and sibling alliances specifically, are uniquely positioned to highlight the competing dialectical tensions that must be managed as a normal part of family life.

The following research questions were developed to explore the possible impact of sibling alliances upon siblings' relationships with one another and with other family members during and after the alliance attempt(s):

RQ1a: Do alliance efforts affect the relationships among sibling allies?

RQ1b: If the sibling relationships are affected, how are they affected?

Alliance attempts are presumed to have an impact on family members beyond the sibling allies themselves. The *targets* of an alliance are those persons identified by the siblings/allies as the focus of the alliance. Targets may be those upon whom some honor or benefit is bestowed, such as having a surprise party thrown on their behalf. A target may also be the object of deception, such as having

children hide a keg party from a parent's awareness. Targets may become aware of the alliance against them, or they may never become aware or informed of the alliance. The interdependence of family members leads to the next research questions:

> RQ2a: How do targets of a sibling alliance respond to alliance attempts?
>
> RQ2b: How do alliance attempts influence the relationships between sibling allies and the alliance targets?

Family members beyond the sibling allies and targets (family alliance outsiders) may become aware of alliance attempts. The sibling allies and targets must manage those relationships, making the family alliance outsider responses potentially significant as well. Thus the following research question was posed:

> RQ3: How do family alliance outsiders respond to alliance attempts?

Methods

Participants were asked to electronically complete a questionnaire that used open-ended questions to solicit details of one successful and one unsuccessful intra-familial sibling alliance. A sibling alliance was defined for participants as "a time when you and one or more of your siblings worked together to accomplish a family-centered goal." A larger study (of which this study is a part) also included a section to gather information about the rules operating in alliance formation and execution and a comparison of sibling and friendship relationships. Those data and results are not included here, so that we may focus explicitly on the effects of these alliances.

Participants

Participants were enrolled at a large Midwestern university. Students were offered extra credit for their participation. One hundred respondents comprised the convenience sample. Seventy-eight subjects were female, and twenty-two were male. The average age of respondents was just under 22 years (M=21.99, SD=4.61), with a range of 19 years to 48 years. Ninety-six percent of all respondents were 24 years old or younger. When asked to indicate all of those people they considered to be part of their family, ninety-two subjects indicated that they had two parents (including natural parents, step-parents, and foster parents), (M=2.11, SD=.40). Respondents had an average of 2.12 siblings (including natural siblings, step-siblings, and foster siblings). No other demographic data were collected, and research questions were not designed to compare such issues as sex differences and race.

Analyses

Typologies in all categories were derived through the analytic induction method (Bulmer, 1979; Dey, 1993). Existing research and typologies served to sensitize the researcher to certain issues or potential categories in the data. However, using this method, no a priori scheme was imposed. Rather, a coding scheme was created through an iterative process between the data and the coding scheme at all stages.

The author completed the coding of all of the data. A second coder was given a coding manual and received training on how to apply the coding scheme. The second coder then coded a 5% random sample of accounts to establish preliminary reliability. Based upon the preliminary reliability results obtained with the 5% sample, an additional 15% of the accounts were randomly selected and coded by the second coder. Inter-rater reliability for coding the data was assessed using the 20% random sample of the data. The absolute agreement was 85% with (kappa = .74), above the standard .70 level of acceptability.

Results

Alliance Attempts and Allies

Research Question 1a asked whether alliance efforts affect the relationships among sibling allies. In more than half of the accounts (54.5%), respondents indicated that the particular alliance attempt they recounted did not affect their relationship with alliance members/siblings. In 43.0% of the cases, the respondents indicated that the alliance attempt did affect their relationship with their allies/siblings. Once it has been established that in a significant number of cases (n=86/200, or 43%) the allying efforts affected the relationships of allies, the next question asks how it affected the relationships.

Accordingly, research Question 1b sought to determine how alliance efforts among siblings affect their relationships. Because responses were not limited to a single characterization of how the alliance effort affected alliance members' relationships with one another, the percentages provided for Research Question 1a differ substantially from those provided here. However, the category indicating that the alliance effort had no effect on the alliance members' relationships still had the largest number of responses (n=106) and the largest percent of responses (43.3%). In a typical response indicating that the alliance attempt had no effect on the relationship, one respondent wrote, "I don't think it changed anything [among sibling allies]" (Respondent #151-Unsuccessful). (Hereafter, quotes from respondents are cited with respondent #-S for successful alliances, respondent #-U for unsuccessful alliances. No corrections were made to respondents' grammar or spelling errors.) Another

respondent wrote, "This wasn't that big of a deal at all. We did it. It worked and that was that. We [allies] didn't really talk about it much after that night at all" (150-S).

Nearly half (45.7%) of the reported alliances effected a change in the sibling relationship. Of those, over two-thirds indicated that the alliance attempt had a positive effect on these relationships (70.9%). In these cases, respondents indicated that they had grown closer with their allies and that they had better communication, more trust, or generally improved relationships. In one example where the allies grew closer, the respondent wrote, "Tim [brother/ally] and I are closer after going through this together and talking about this subject together so often in the past year" (85-S). Another respondent wrote of changes in the ways in which the sibling allies communicated with each other as a result of an alliance:

> Jody [sibling/ally] and I became closer. Our plan was a bonding experience. I felt that I could talk to Jody about anything now. I felt as if we, together, could solve anything. I think she felt similar because, after, she would tell me what went on with her and her friends at school. I really felt important. (89-S)

Respondents indicated that the alliance attempt had a positive effect on future alliances in 14.2% of the accounts where a change was indicated. In these cases, respondents indicated that the allies/siblings learned how to ally together better and could use that in the future, that they had to trust their sibling(s)/allies and such trust was rewarded (or at least not violated), or that the alliance simply succeeded. Thus, they were more likely to ally in the future. One respondent indicated the following:

> I think that working together on a common goal brought Zac and I [sibling allies] a little closer since it was such a success. I am just relieved that it was a success and not a failure because if it had been a failure I know we would have fought the whole time and that would have brought us farther apart. I don't think that it had any drastic changes at all to our relationship but it made us aware that we could work together and be successful, something that we had never really been aware of before (151-S).

So, in total, over 85% of the time when sibling relationships were influenced by alliance efforts, those changes were positive.

Of those sibling/ally relationships that were affected by an alliance effort, slightly more than 12% were affected negatively. Those negative effects included decreases in communication and increased tension between siblings, although some of those changes may only be temporary. One respondent wrote, "For a while it did make us [sibling allies] communicate less but after a few weeks we realized how silly it was to remain upset about the situation and we

ended up laughing at the whole situation" (11-U). Another respondent wrote, "Yes, the alliance actually caused my brother and I [sibling allies] to become more tense and irritated with each other than we had been before the alliance was formed" (20-U).

In 3.6% of the responses where a change was indicated, siblings/allies were less likely to ally at all, as much, or in similar circumstances in the future. Negative consequences were frequently the result of a critical failure by one ally to behave appropriately or as expected. That sibling's failure to do what was promised led to the failure of the alliance and to the anger of the sibling ally, as well as a subsequent lack of trust and an unwillingness to form an alliance with that sibling in the future. One respondent reported the following:

> I was so mad at my sister [sibling ally] for forgetting [to unlock the front door to allow her sister, the respondent, to sneak in the house after curfew], and I did not talk to her for three days or so. I did not ask her to do me a favor like that for a very long time. (52-U)

In one unusual example, a respondent characterized how alliance success and failure was likely to affect sibling ally relationships. That respondent wrote:

> No, Chris and I [sibling allies] always related the same after our adventures. If we were successful our bond got stronger and if we weren't successful our relationship would weaken until the next time. Overall we stayed a team. (13-S)

Although the above response was the only such response in the data, it highlights the probability that (if an alliance does effect the relationship between siblings) a successful alliance will likely have positive effects, and an unsuccessful alliance will likely have negative effects. While this is intuitive, the relational effects between siblings and targets that follow are much less intuitive or predictable. It should be noted that in the accounts, respondents (siblings/allies) saw some benefit in executing the alliance. And, while there were cases in which the respondents indicated some obligation to execute an alliance (where they "ought" to perform the alliance for the benefit of someone else), alliances were always formed for *someone's* benefit. Therefore, the response to an alliance attempt (by an ally, a target, or a family alliance outsider) may be connected with the degree to which they (or someone they support) benefited from the alliance.

Alliance Attempts and Targets

Research Question 2a asked how targets of a sibling alliance respond to alliance attempts. The results indicate that alliance targets were almost as likely to have a positive response (to be pleased, impressed or thankful for the alliance attempt), 23.5%, as they were likely to have a negative response (to be angered, disappointed, or

hurt by the alliance attempt), 20.8%. Deception was an integral part of many of the reported alliances. At first glance, one might think that if targets had been deceived, they would be predisposed to having a negative response to the alliance attempt. However, deceiving targets did not automatically bring about a negative response from the targets toward the alliance or the allies. In many of the alliances, the alliance effort was formed to benefit the targets of the alliance. Especially in those situations when allies were trying to throw surprise parties, deception of the targets was a critical element for the success of the alliance. It may be inferred that as many of the reported sibling alliances were established to benefit the targets as were established to "get one past" the targets. The defining characteristic between those alliances that pleased targets and those alliances that angered the targets seems to be the desirability of the alliance goals to the targets.

In 16.9% of the cases, the targets never became aware of the alliance. One respondent wrote, "My parents [targets] didn't seem aware of the alliance, but they also didn't seem aware that we needed to form an alliance in the first place" (26-U). Because of the complex nature of intra-familial alliances, it is difficult to determine if targets would be pleased or angered if they were made aware of the alliance. For example, in one reported alliance, a pair of sisters became aware of a recently deceased uncle's homosexuality. The sisters allied to keep this information from everyone, including other family members. It is unclear how other family members would react in this situation. Some members might be glad to remain ignorant of his sexual orientation, while other members would be angered by the sisters' attempts to keep this information from them.

It is worth noting that at least 1 in 6 of the reported alliances were intended to be kept secret from the targets, thus making secrecy and deception significant factors or elements of many alliances. Allies deceived others, targets and non-target family alliance outsiders, by (a) hiding or concealing activities, (b) telling lies, (c) feigning sincerity or orchestrating responses, and (d) concealing the fact that there was an alliance. Many alliances involve concealing or hiding activities, as in the following example:

> My sister…wanted to go to a concert in Minnesota, and I found out that she was going to the concert from one of her friends. She did not want me to tell our parents [targets] that she was going to this concert because she goes to school at Purdue and it is a twelve hour drive from West Lafayette to Minneapolis. We [sibling allies] both decided that we would not tell out parents (even though I really wanted to) I stuck by my word. I felt that she needed a "freshmen adventure" and I thought that she also really wanted to visit her old friends. If my parents were to call (they call every weekend)

and ask about if I knew anything about the whereabouts of Emily, I would tell them that she was somewhere studying. (130-S)

The previous example also calls attention to the telling of lies. Lying seems to occur in the performance of many alliances. One respondent wrote of an alliance in which lying was central to the success of the alliance:

He [sibling ally] told me some information about something he had done [gotten a fake ID] that my parents were suspicious of. Since I knew this secret I was automatically drawn on his side, because I would expect the same from him. My parents [targets] never found out. But my brother and I had to lie. They questioned me more because they knew they could get me to talk by feeling guilty if I was lying. I did feel guilty, but I still protected my brother from getting in trouble. (52-S)

In addition to telling untruths or lies, allies sometimes orchestrated responses to targets or planned actions and affect that would mislead the target. This is characterized as false sincerity or feigning responses. One respondent reported the following:

I knew that, with the help of my sisters [sibling allies], we could convince our parents [to take us to a theme park]. I told them to "make mom feel bad" for not taking us. My sisters were both very experienced at looking sweet and they knew that if they pulled it off well, my mom wouldn't be able to resist …. they did what we discussed—they used the guilt trip. It must have worked because mom felt bad and asked them if they would like to go the next week. My sisters came back to me (I wasn't involved in the conversation) and told me the good news. We went back into somebody's bedroom and laughed at how we fooled mom. (59-S)

The previous examples demonstrate that in many cases, the practice of deceiving others and allying with siblings accompany one another, with some alliances having the deception of others as the expressed goal of alliance.

When a target became aware of an alliance, and responded negatively to it, these negative responses to alliance attempts were not restricted to sentiments. In 15.4% of the cases, targets foiled or thwarted the alliance. In a typical example, a parent found out that siblings were planning to persuade them (the parents/targets) to allow the siblings to go on an unsupervised excursion, and the parent foiled the alliance by blocking the allies from their goal. Targets were more likely to act to thwart an alliance (15.4%) than to support it (6.2%). However, these numbers may be misleading, as many of the secret alliances were, as mentioned above, designed to benefit the targets.

In 5.4% of the cases, the targets were reportedly aware of the alliance attempt but did not care or did not act in response to the alliance.

In some situations, the targets were reportedly unsure of how they felt about the alliance attempt (3.8%). In such situations, targets may have been pleased with the result of the alliance, but they may have been uncomfortable with the means employed. In other cases, the target may have been pleased that the siblings/allies worked together, but may have been unhappy with the goal that they pursued. In one of the more amusing cases, the respondent wrote of their parents' response after they became of an alliance formed to surprise the family with a holiday visit of an aunt and her family, "We talked about it with the rest of our family afterwards. They were so surprised that we could keep such a secret and pull off such a scam. My dad jokingly asked what other scams we have pulled" (30-S). In this case, the parents were pleased about the alliance. What these parents learned, however, was how skilled their children were in deceiving them. In this case, while the children gave no evidence of doing anything the parents would not have wanted them to do, the parents became aware of the very real possibility that their children could use these same skills for less laudable purposes. Thus, the respondent indicated that their parents' response to this alliance was "pleased and nervous" (30-S).

Interestingly, though, in 3.5% of the accounts the targets were amused by the alliance attempt. Such situations may be ones where the target(s), often parents, are entertained by what they perceive to be feeble attempts by the siblings/allies or by the perceived outlandish nature of the goal pursued. In one case, the parent targets were amused when they found that the two sibling allies were trying to get their parents to bring them along on a trip to Europe. The amusement of the parents seems to emphasize the impracticality of the goal, given financial implications, set by the sibling allies. Also, the means employed by the allies seemed to be perceived to be innocuous. It is possible, and perhaps likely, that the targets would have been angered if they felt that the siblings were "causing trouble" in their attempt, or "playing dirty."

In 3.8% of the accounts no targets were identified. An example of a target free alliance could include a time when siblings planned a family vacation together. Such accounts were rare in this data.

Research Question 2b sought to determine how alliance attempts among sibling allies influence relationships with alliance targets. The results indicate that in nearly two-thirds of the responses (61.5%), the alliance attempt had no effect on the relationships between siblings/allies and targets. One respondent wrote, "My parents [targets] know we do this kind of stuff all of the time, they just laugh at us and tell us if they thought we were good at it" (12-U).

Responses indicated that in approximately one third of the alliance attempts (32.7%), there was some change in or effect upon the relationships between allies and targets. In the alliances where a change in the relationships between allies and targets was reported, the change was considered negative in 45% of the cases. One respondent wrote the following:

> For a couple of days I noticed that Brian [target] was short with James and me and didn't bother trying to include us in his days, but this faded back to normal within three days. Then the three of us got along like we always did—good. (57-U)

Still another respondent provided the following response:

> Tony [target] resented us for doing what we did to his social life and our mom learned not to trust us anymore. Eventually our deceptions diminished because everyone caught on to our acts. It was harder to talk to either one of them because they didn't believe anything we said anymore. (13-S)

The data indicate, as with allied relationships, that the negative effects of an alliance on the relationships between targets and allies may be short or long term.

Targets and allies relationship changes were considered positive in 40% of the cases. In one situation, siblings allied to help their brother with a perceived drinking problem by organizing an intervention to get him to deal with his alcoholism. The respondent wrote:

> Yes, I was somewhat closer to my brother [target] after all of this. Since our encounter, he always hugs me and says, 'Hey Sis, How's school.' It's as if he is trying to let me know that he is looking out for me like I looked out for him … He also told me I could always call him for anything, even a loan. I think our 'encounter' brought us closer together. (6-S)

Although no data were collected to determine the magnitude of the impact on the relationships between allies and targets (or among allies), many responses indicated that relational effects experienced as a result of the alliance were slight, temporary, or both.

Alliance Attempts and Family Outsiders

Research Question 3 asked how family alliance outsiders respond to alliance attempts. Family alliance outsider status was conferred upon any significant person identified in accounts that was not a target of the alliance or an ally. Family alliance outsiders often included such members of the extended family as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, as well as other siblings not involved as members of the alliance or as targets. Respondents indicated who

was considered a "significant family alliance outsider." Like target responses, family alliance outsiders' responses to alliance attempts can be significant. Family alliance outsiders can be affected by alliance outcomes, and their relationships with siblings/allies and their perceptions of siblings/allies can be colored by their awareness of alliance goals, means, and outcomes.

The results reveal that in approximately one-third of the cases (34.1%), there were no family alliance outsiders involved. In 13.7% of the responses, family alliance outsiders were not even aware of the alliance. This number is significant, because it highlights the "layered" or "clustered" nature of some alliance efforts, where one alliance prompts or necessitates another or where alliances overlap. In some cases, for example, a sibling who is not an ally or a target may be significant in an alliance attempt. The sibling allies may, for example, try to persuade the parents to let them (the children) stay home unattended. The allies are secretly planning a party, but know that if a younger, non-ally sister finds out, she will tell the parents, and the alliance will fail. So, the primary alliance prompts a second alliance in which the family alliance outsider (younger sister in this case) is, in fact, a target.

The following alliance is especially interesting, because there are actually two alliances operating simultaneously. Two sisters allied to get their two older brothers in trouble. The plan was to provoke the two boys into hitting one of the allies and having the younger ally go crying to the mom, in order to then have the boys be punished by the mom. The two alliances, or the two parts of the alliance, have different targets. The original targets were the brothers, then the target became the mom. In each alliance, the non-target others are affected by the alliance and the alliance outcome. The respondent wrote of the alliance targets' reactions:

> My parents didn't find it too funny [the episode itself - the parents were not aware of the alliance at that point], but to Donald and Luke [older brothers/targets] we looked back on the experience and told them how much more mom and dad loved the girls and how we were smarter than them and childish stuff like that. My mother told me that that was "a rotten thing to put your sister up to and a rotten thing to do to your brothers." No one else really commented on it because it really wasn't any of their concern. (81-S)

The previous example demonstrates the difficulty in identifying who is a "family alliance outsider" in an alliance situation. An alliance can have outcomes that include, involve, or affect many family members (intra-familial targets, allies, or in some cases, family alliance outsiders).

In 29.9% of the responses, family alliance outsiders were pleased, impressed by, or thankful for the alliance. Alliances that

were established to buy presents and throw surprise parties often prompted positive responses from family alliance outsiders. Sometimes these family alliance outsiders may have had a minimal role in the alliance by attending the surprise party and maintaining the secrecy surrounding the event. However, those people who were not central to the planning of an event were often not considered allies by the respondents. In other alliance situations, the family alliance outsiders may not be involved in the alliance but may be aware of the alliance. In one example, siblings allied to get their mom to quit smoking. The alliance succeeded, and afterwards others in the larger extended family became aware of the alliance effort. The respondent indicated the following:

> My other family members were amused and impressed at our group effort to end our mother's bad habit. I can remember one comment in specific, made by my uncle. He said 'those kids must really love their mother…or really hate the smell of smoke.' (89-S)

In 8.1% of the accounts family alliance outsiders were angered by, upset by, or hurt by the alliance attempt. This is less than half the rate (20.8%) at which targets were upset by alliance attempts. Two possible reasons for this seem most likely: (a) family alliance outsiders were not as upset because they were not targeted by the alliance and (b) family alliance outsiders were more likely to remain unaware of the alliance, perhaps especially if it reflected badly on one or more family members. Family members may "close ranks" and maintain secrecy around alliances that they perceive to be negative, while calling attention to alliances that reflect well upon the family or family members. In one example, a respondent wrote about an alliance she and her brothers formed to protect each other from their physically abusive father. She wrote, "Since our 'success' is of a highly personal nature … it is not something that we openly discuss with members outside the alliance. You aren't really eager to broadcast that your dad is beating on your brother" (57-S). Obviously, some situations involve behaviors and activities that could be classified as not only secret alliances but also family secrets.

Remaining responses from family alliance outsiders to alliance attempts include (a) laughter and amusement (4.3%); (b) indifference (3.8%); (c) assistance (2.8%); (d) uncertainty (1.9%); and (e) attempts to foil or thwart the alliance goal (.9%). While most of these remaining responses from family outsiders to alliance attempts are similar to responses from targets, one differs dramatically. In 15.4% of the alliances, targets foiled the alliance or thwarted the alliance goals, compared to only .9% of the family outsiders. This difference may emphasize a principle of "keep your nose out of other people's business," even though the outcome could influence that outsider. It may also demonstrate that if you are not an

ally, or a target, then you are not/should not be a player. Further, outsiders may not be privy to enough information to make a reasonably well-informed decision to interfere, and are therefore less likely (one would hope) to decide to thwart or foil the alliance attempt.

Discussion

Based on the data, deception appears to be an integral part of many alliances. From a dialectical perspective, revelation and concealment operate as a unity of opposites (Baxter, 2006) in which openness among sibling allies and concealment from alliance targets and family alliance outsiders operate simultaneously. The management of the dialectics within alliances and within the larger family serves to highlight the complexity of family relationships and to highlight family relationship constellations that are ongoing, interdependent, and complicated. An alliance is an alliance to the insiders and quite possibly a conspiracy to the targets or family alliance outsiders.

When alliances are intended to be kept as secrets, siblings/allies are required to be loyal to their allies and to deceive other family members. Such situations highlight the tensions experienced while maintaining a complex web of relationships (Baxter, et al., 1997), perhaps especially within a family and across familial relationships. The demands of sibling loyalty in such situations can be profound. The sibling ally who is asked to protect another sibling can be placed in an uncomfortable state, which they may perceive as a no-win situation.

In the data, one primary dilemma or dialectic became apparent. Many respondents expressed some frustration over (a) their desires to maintain connection with a sibling with whom they were allying and to succeed in the alliance existing in tension with (b) their desire to maintain connections with other family members who are targets of the alliance, who are excluded from the alliance, or who are impacted by the alliance. In such situations, to succeed is to alienate some family members but accomplish some goal. To fail in the alliance is to suffer those consequences that accompany alliance failure and to also alienate other family members. Alliances against someone else in the family bring with them the complex, competing tensions of success-failure and of connection-alienation to allying members and to those outside the alliance. These tensions were quite apparent in previously cited cases where a sibling/ally/child was forced to lie to their parents in order to fulfill obligations to his or her sibling and the alliance.

These tensions also become quite evident in moments when a sibling is invited into an alliance but resists the invitation. The reasons for the maintenance of distance (or the creation of distance)

certainly vary. Given this study's focus on the impact of sibling alliances on sibling relationships and other relationships inside the family, those times when a sibling refuses to join or create an alliance because of some apprehension about the influence of the alliance on the family or other family relationships are particularly interesting.

This tension that exists as an integral part of allying in an intra-familial situation contributed to the failure of some alliances. Siblings would form alliances, sometimes reluctantly, then "bail" as one respondent put it, when another family member was being hurt or distressed over the situation. Those siblings were labeled "traitor" in some respondents' accounts. In those situations, they were betraying their sibling, but being loyal to or protective of another family member (often a parent), resulting in tensions that cannot be eliminated, only negotiated (Baxter et al., 1997). How siblings negotiate the tensions that accompany many intra-familial alliances remains unexplored. However, one respondent indicated that they dealt with what they described as a "no-win situation" by doing their part as an ally but executing that role with little finesse or enthusiasm. Thus, they "sabotaged" the alliance, but in such a subtle way that they were never "found out" by their sibling ally.

Siblings are defined as such in relation to one another. Simultaneously, they are children of their parents. As young children, they are reliant upon their parents for many things. This "disempowered" position makes it necessary for children to rely upon the kindness, generosity, and goodwill of their parents. It also encourages children to develop their skill at getting things from their parents. Parents make rules, grant permission, and are a source of necessary resources and funding for siblings/children. Thus, siblings benefit from being proficient at lobbying for rule changes, for permission, and for support (financial or otherwise).

Children/siblings may, in a very real sense, enjoy tremendous benefits as a result of being expert manipulators of their parents, and sibling alliances may be an important resource that siblings can access and a strategy that siblings may employ. The data in the current study also indicate that siblings' aptitudes were considered when assigning roles in an alliance, and that those aptitudes and abilities varied among siblings and over time as siblings matured and developed as alliance strategists and as those who enacted sibling alliances.

Conclusion

This study (and the larger study of which it is a part) makes a useful contribution to communication literature by identifying a rich site where relationships are tested, developed, and sometimes proven. From an interdisciplinary perspective, what is offered is the insight that sibling alliance performance, from start to finish, is a

fundamentally communicative activity, with sometimes profound relational consequences for allies, targets, and non-allied or targeted family members. While this study was not conceived as being the final word on sibling alliances, it has served to begin to map this rich and largely overlooked domain of family life and the under-studied sibling relationship. The richness and complexities of family life are often on display during sibling alliance attempts. Further research should include the actual communication of siblings as they conduct alliances, accounts of alliances from more than one sibling, and generalizable descriptions of the frequency of sibling alliances across the population and across the lifespan. Siblings matter in one another's psychological and social development, in their everyday lives, and in their families. Sibling alliances serve as a logical site through which communication research can elaborate the importance and impact of siblings and the importance of sibling relating practices on siblings and upon family systems and family life.

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