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Sibling Conversations about Dating and Sexuality: Sisters as Confidants, Sources of Support, and Mentors

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Abstract

Using an observational methodology to examine sibling communication, sisters ($N = 28$ dyads) were videotaped discussing their ideas about dating and sexuality. Social provision theory was used as a framework for the examination of roles enacted by sisters during these conversations. Inductive thematic analytic procedures were conducted and three roles were identified: sisters as confidants, sources of support, and mentors. Older and younger sisters both served as confidants and sources of support for one another, whereas, older sisters were more likely to be mentors for their younger sisters than vice versa. Findings indicate the potential importance of sisters in the formation of adolescent girls' ideas about romantic relationships and sexuality, sibling communication as a socialization mechanism of sisters' similarities in romantic experiences and sexual behaviors/attitudes, and the inclusion of older sisters in prevention intervention programs focused on reducing adolescent sexual risk behaviors and promoting healthy romantic relationships and sexuality development.

Keywords

Adolescence; romantic relationships; sexuality; sibling communication; sibling relationships

Involvement in romantic relationships and sexuality development are normative aspects of adolescence (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Tolman & McClelland, 2011) and the development of sexuality primarily occurs within the context of a romantic relationship (Furman & Schaffer, 2003). Fifty-five percent of adolescents (ages 12–18 years) have experienced a romantic relationship (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003) and, notably, 75% of adolescents' first intercourse occurs with a romantic partner (Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2000); therefore, examining both romantic relationship involvement and sexuality development is important. This is particularly true for adolescent girls as researchers have found that they believe it is normative to engage in sexual behaviors *within* the context of a romantic relationship and it is non-normative to engage in sexual behaviors *outside* the context of a romantic relationship (O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2003). Given the benefits of engaging in healthy romantic relationships (e.g., development of social competencies such as communication and conflict resolution skills; Barber & Eccles, 2003) and the harmful effects associated with risky sexual behaviors (e.g., sexually transmitted infections), gaining a greater understanding of the roles and functions of socialization agents of adolescent girls' romantic relationship experiences and sexuality development is critical for the design of prevention and intervention programs promoting healthy relationships and positive sexuality.

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Older siblings are important socializing agents of adolescent girls' sexuality (East & Jacobson, 2001; McHale, Bissell, & Kim, 2009; Rodgers & Rowe, 1988), but less attention has been given to siblings as socializing agents of adolescent girls' romantic relationships. Communication between siblings is an understudied mechanism by which siblings may socialize one another's romantic relationship involvement and sexuality development. The purpose of the present study was to investigate dating and sexual communication between adolescent sisters using an observational methodology. Specifically, as a first step to understanding sibling communication about romantic relationship experiences and sexuality, we were interested in the roles enacted by sisters during these conversations.

According to role provision theory, individuals seek social provisions from one another (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Weiss, 1974). Put another way, individuals seek certain types of social support from specific relationships. Extant research has shown that siblings self-disclose (e.g., Howe, Aquan-Assee, Bukowski, Lehoux, & Rinaldi, 2001), provide support (e.g., Tucker, McHale, & Crouter, 2001), and give advice (e.g., Tucker, Barber, & Eccles, 1997) to one another. With regard to romantic relationship and sexuality development, adolescent girls may seek opportunities for intimate/confidant (e.g., disclosure), nurturance/social support (e.g., support), and guidance/mentorship (e.g., advice) provisions from their older sisters.

Although older brothers may play important (and potentially different) roles in their younger sisters' romantic relationship experiences and sexuality development, there are several reasons why adolescent girls' relationships with their older sisters are important to highlight in studies of romantic relationships and sexuality. First, adolescents may be more comfortable talking with their sisters than their parents (or brothers) about issues related to dating and sexuality (Kowal & Blinn-Pike, 2004) because parents' hierarchical role could lead to punishment and the mixed-sex nature of brother-sister relationships may make such conversations awkward or even taboo. Second, because romantic relationships (Collins et al., 2009) and sexuality development (Tolman & McClelland, 2011) are significant issues during adolescence older sisters may be important sources of support, advice, and information about this topic because of their more recent experiences. Further, older sisters are likely more experienced than same-age peers (Tucker et al., 1997). Third, adolescent girls with older sisters report receiving more advice from siblings and experiencing greater influence than those with older brothers (Tucker et al., 1997), likely due to warmer, more intimate relationships that typically characterize sister-sister dyads. Thus, it is likely that older sisters are salient socialization agents in regards to younger sisters' romantic relationship and sexuality development.

The Role of Siblings in Romantic Relationships and Adolescent Sexuality

The study of sibling influence in dating and romantic relationships is growing. Recently, Doughty and colleagues (2013) found significant associations among sibling and romantic relationship qualities and revealed the importance of examining sibling gender and gender constellation. For instance, there was a negative association between sibling conflict in adolescence and romantic relationship intimacy in late adolescence for girls, but not boys. Additionally, mixed-gender siblings reported greater intimacy with romantic partners than did same-gender siblings. From these findings, we see that siblings are important in romantic relationship development and more research needs to be done to discern the role of siblings.

The importance of older siblings for adolescents' sexual outcomes is more established than for adolescents' romantic relationship experiences. Extant research based on social learning principles (Bandura, 1977) suggests that sisters are important socializers of adolescent

sexuality (e.g., McHale et al., 2009), and that older sisters can sometimes play a role in increasing younger sisters' problematic sexual engagement. Specifically, researchers have found that adolescents with sexually active older siblings are more likely to have engaged in sexual intercourse than are adolescents with non-sexually active older siblings (Rodgers & Rowe, 1988). East and colleagues' work on sisters' influence on teen pregnancy has revealed that having an older sister who is a teen mother is associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in sexual intercourse at an early age (East, Felice, & Morgan, 1993), and greater likelihood of becoming pregnant (East, Reyes, & Horn, 2007). Despite these negative associations, it also is plausible that some older sisters may behave in ways that mitigate risk. Thinking about these findings from a different perspective suggests that older sisters who abstain from sex may decrease the likelihood of sexual risk for their younger sisters. Moreover, it may be that even some sexually active older sisters carry attitudes (e.g., about contraceptive use) that could positively influence their siblings. As will be discussed below, the potential positive influence of siblings has been understudied.

As noted, in the studies listed above, social learning processes (Bandura, 1977) were used to explain similarities. That is, younger siblings' sexual behaviors are similar to older siblings' sexual behaviors because younger siblings observe and imitate their older siblings. Social learning theory is a broad framework within which the findings fit, but the specific mechanisms of socialization (e.g., conversations) remain unexplored, compromising our ability to intervene. Communication between siblings is another process that may explain similarities in sisters' sexual behaviors, yet the role of communication (e.g., content and quality) as a mechanism linking sibling similarities in sexual outcomes has been overlooked. Additionally, there has been little attention given to how sibling communication may reduce adolescents' involvement in risky sexual behaviors given the strong research focus on pregnant and sexually active teens.

Family Communication about Romantic Relationships and Sexuality

Research on parent-adolescent communication about romantic relationships and sex has focused on promoting healthy relationships (Akers, Yonas, Burke, & Chang, 2011), and further, has been linked to positive sexual behaviors (e.g., later age at first sex, fewer risk taking behaviors; Dutra et al., 1999; Hutchinson, 2002). Hence, dating and sexual communication is also a likely mechanism by which siblings shape one another's romantic and sexual behaviors/attitudes and reduce risky sexual behaviors. Few studies have investigated sibling communication about romantic relationships and sexuality (for an exception see Kowal & Blinn-Pike, 2004) and it is important to recognize that sibling relationship dynamics differ from those of parent-adolescent relationships (Tucker & Updegraff, 2009). Sibling relationships in adolescence are characterized as a combination of complementary roles, similar to parent-child relationships, and reciprocal roles, similar to peer relationships (Tucker et al., 2001; Tucker & Updegraff, 2009). For example, Tucker et al. (2001) found evidence of reciprocity when siblings were providing support about family issues and of complementarity when giving support about issues regarding social life and risky behavior. The combination of reciprocal and complementary roles in the sibling relationship highlights the potential of siblings as effective disclosure partners about sensitive issues, such as dating and sexuality.

In their study of sibling sexual communication, Kowal and Blinn-Pike (2004) investigated the associations among sibling communication about sexual issues, sexual attitudes, and condom use self-efficacy using a self-report methodology. They found that girls with older sisters were more likely to discuss sexual issues and to perceive their older sisters as having safer sexual attitudes than were adolescents in other gender-constellation dyads. In addition, supportive sibling relationships were associated with greater frequency of sexual

discussions. Finally, the frequency of sibling conversations about sex (in concert with parent-adolescent conversations about sex) was related to adolescents' greater condom use self-efficacy (e.g., buying condoms). Taken together, these findings emphasize the importance of focusing on sisters when investigating sexuality-related issues and the salient role of sibling conversations in adolescents' feelings of self-efficacy regarding safe sex practices. Our proposed study expands this work by using an observational methodology to provide an in-depth understanding of the nature of sisters' communication about dating and sexuality.

Researchers examining parent-adolescent communication have used an observational methodology in which mothers and adolescents were videotaped discussing dating and sexuality (Lefkowitz, Kahlbaugh, & Sigman, 1996; Romo, Lefkowitz, Sigman, & Au, 2002). Lefkowitz et al. (1996) found that in comparison to mother-adolescent conversations about conflict, conversations about dating and sexuality included less turn taking, fewer number of words spoken, and greater dominance by mothers than adolescents. These findings highlight the unique characteristics of conversations about dating and sex between mothers and their offspring. Conversations between sisters may reveal complementary roles similar to conversations with mothers (e.g., advice giving by older siblings), but also reciprocal roles (e.g., sisters are working together to figure out their ideas about romantic relationships) that are unlikely to be seen in conversations with mothers.

Present Study

In the current study, we build on the sibling and romantic relationship, adolescent sexuality, and family sexual communication literatures by using an observational methodology to assess sibling communication and by investigating the roles of older and younger sisters during conversations about dating and sexuality. Specifically, researchers have shown that adolescents' perceptions of the frequency of sibling conversations about sexuality were related to adolescents' sexual outcomes (Kowal & Blinn-Pike, 2004), but how sibling interactions during these conversations are related to adolescent romantic relationship experiences and sexuality is still unknown. In this study, we take a first step in addressing this relation by exploring the types of roles that sisters enact in conversations about dating and sexuality.

Method

Participants

As part of a larger study focused on the role of communication as a socialization mechanism of sibling similarities in romantic relationship and sexuality experiences/attitudes, sister dyads ($N = 28$) were recruited from community organizations (e.g., Planned Parenthood, youth centers, and health clinics), community-sponsored events (e.g., girls' leadership conference), and through the use of convenience sampling procedures in a southwestern state. Eligibility requirements were that younger sisters were in high school and had an older sister who wanted to participate in the study. On average, older sisters were 19.03 years ($SD = 3.25$) and younger sisters were 15.76 years ($SD = 1.06$). The average age gap between sisters was 3.28 years ($SD = 2.71$ years). Fifteen sister dyads were European American, twelve dyads were Latina (11 dyads were of Mexican descent), and one dyad was Asian American. Mothers' mean level of education was 14.29 years (equivalent to 2 years of college; $SD = 3.55$ years) and fathers' mean level of education was 13.79 years (equivalent to slightly less than 2 years of college; $SD = 4.15$ years). Nineteen of the dyads reported that their parents were married and 9 dyads reported that their parents were divorced. Fifty-five percent of older sisters and 28% of younger sisters were in a romantic relationship. Additionally, 66% of older sisters and 24% of younger sisters had ever had sexual

intercourse. The mean age of sexual intercourse was 16.84 years ($SD = 1.77$) for older sisters and 14.57 years ($SD = 1.40$) for younger sisters. Older sisters had an average of 1.58 ($SD = 1.02$; range 1–4) and younger sisters had an average of 1.33 ($SD = .81$; range 1–3) sexual partners in the last 12 months. Five older sisters (and no younger sisters) reported ever experiencing a pregnancy.

Procedures

We collected observational and survey data from participants. To collect the observational data we followed procedures developed by Romo and colleagues (2002) for mother-adolescent dyads. Specifically, sisters were videotaped in a room by themselves for two sessions, with each one lasting seven minutes. The two sessions focused on sibling relationships and ideas about dating, respectively. Only the second session focused on dating was coded for the present study. Similar to procedures by Romo et al. (2002), participants were told ‘For the next seven minutes, I want you to discuss your ideas about dating’. Although they were given the topic of dating, all of the sister dyads discussed aspects of sexuality. Informed consent was obtained from parents for youth under 18 years of age and by youth who are 18 years or older. Youth under 18 years of age gave assent to participate. Each sister received \$20 for participating in the interview. All names have been changed to protect participants’ confidentiality. For ease of distinguishing between older and younger sisters, all older sisters’ names begin with an ‘E’ (i.e., earlier born) and all younger sisters’ names begin with an ‘L’ (i.e., later born).

Measures

For the larger study, sisters completed surveys and reported on demographic information (i.e., race/ethnicity, parents’ educational background and marital status), romantic relationship and sexual experiences, and sibling relationship qualities. To describe their romantic and sexual experiences, sisters were asked single-item questions including current romantic relationship status, ever had sexual intercourse, age of first sexual intercourse, number of sexual partners in the last 12 months, and ever experienced a pregnancy.

Data Analysis

All videotaped conversations were transcribed verbatim and the data were analyzed using inductive thematic analytic procedures specified by Braun and Clark (2006). This included familiarizing self with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes (grouping codes together), reviewing themes (match of codes to data), and defining and naming themes. Specifically, three female coders read the transcripts of the sisters’ conversations about dating and sexuality to become familiar with the data. Once the coders were familiar with the transcripts, they began to code the ‘actions’ of each sister during the conversation. Examples of the initial codes were asking a question, sharing an opinion, and giving advice. Once all segments of the transcripts were coded in this manner, coders searched for themes. Each theme was composed of several of the coded actions. After the creation of the themes, coders went back to the data to ensure that all of the initial codes fit into at least one of the themes. At each stage of the data analytic process, the coders met to discuss all codes and final coding was agreed upon by all 3 coders. When there was a disagreement, the coders discussed their reasoning for selecting a particular code and discussion ensued until a consensus was reached; therefore, we established internal reliability by discussing the coding among members of the research team to assess the degree of consistency (Gibson & Brown, 2009).

Results

Three key themes were identified and the results section is organized from most frequent theme to least frequent theme. These themes revealed the important roles that sisters play for one another during conversations about dating and sexuality. The first theme, titled *Sisters as Confidants*, revealed the levels of intimacy between sisters through the disclosures made during the conversations (see Table 1 for the actions composing the themes and the frequency of each action). The second theme, titled *Sisters as Sources of Support*, described how sisters encouraged one another's ideas about dating and sexuality. The third and final theme, titled *Sisters as Mentors*, captured the multiple ways that sisters guide and advise one another about dating and sexuality issues. In comparing themes, it is possible to see that older and younger sisters were not equally represented within each role.

Sisters as Confidants

The first and by far the most frequent role displayed by sisters during conversations about dating and sexuality was that of confidant. Sisters displayed this role by giving information about themselves and by asking for more information about their sisters' lives. Specifically, the actions composing the confidant role were disclosing information to one another, sharing their opinions, asking for their sisters' opinions, and asking about their sisters' experiences and future plans. Acting as a confidant was the most common role of both sisters during their conversations. Beginning with the most frequent action, sisters disclosed information about many topics including their romantic relationship and sexual experiences, their peers' romantic relationship and sexual experiences, and how comfortable they feel talking to one another about these issues compared to talking to their parents. In one European American dyad, younger sister, Leslie (15 years of age and in 10th grade) tells her older sister, Erin (22 years of age and a recent college graduate) that she has been in a relationship with her current boyfriend for three years.

Erin: Wow. That's a long time for somebody your age. Do you ever think it's a bad thing?

Leslie: Occasionally. I think about maybe getting out there and see what it's like not to have a boyfriend for a while. But I did have the time when I wasn't with him. I got to see how different it is.

Erin: I think that's kind of interesting to watch because I never had a serious relationship in high school. And at the time, it really upset me. Cause I think there is a lot of peer pressure, especially when you're that age to have someone, but I think it goes away for a little bit and then I think people start getting married and having serious relationships.

Another aspect of the confidant role was to share opinions and ask sisters for their opinions. Erin was interested in her sisters' thoughts about long-term relationships for girls in high school. Leslie confided that she believes that a three year relationship could be negative, but it was not negative in her situation. In addition to discussing dating in high school, sisters also shared their opinions about public displays of affection ("Seriously, it's so annoying when they do that"), the course of a relationship ("I would say it takes like a year to get to know a person pretty well to know if you'd want to get married"), and how individuals view their high school sexual experiences ("Cause like ten years down the road when you're married you're like 'oh I did it with that guy in high school' like it's meaningless then").

In addition to asking about their sisters' opinions, many girls (79% of dyads) were curious about their sisters' romantic and sexual experiences. European American sisters, Emily (19

years of age and in her second year of college) and her younger sister, Layla (15 years of age and in 9th grade), were having a discussion about Layla's dating history.

Layla: I've never actually been on a real date.

Emily: On a real date. Yeah, they don't do that anymore either, trust me.

Layla: I mean, it's fun. I'm game...

Emily: What exactly does that mean? What does that translate into? Is there a lot of pressure?

Layla: Nah, I don't listen to anyone really. 'You need a boyfriend. You need this.' No, I don't. I'm okay.

Emily: Have you ever been pressured by guys to do anything?

Layla: No, cause they know I say no.

It is important to note, that in this excerpt, Emily's protective nature over Layla is revealed. Sisters discussed the need for boyfriends to treat them right and that there would be consequences if that did not occur.

Another dimension of the confidant role (and the least common) was asking about sisters' future plans. We considered this to be part of the confidant role because disclosure usually followed these questions. Older sister, Elizabeth (18 years of age and in her first year of college), has been dating since she was 12 years old. Her younger sister, Lauren (15 years of age and in 11th grade) has never been in a romantic relationship. The sisters are of Asian descent and Elizabeth asked Lauren if she will date in college and what her dream guy is like. Lauren responds that she may date in college and that her "dream guy is someone just like me." Older sisters were equally likely as younger sisters to ask about future plans. The majority of these future plans were about dating and not sexual experiences. Sisters asked one another about their future relationships in college, standards of dating in college, and if their high school relationships will last after graduation.

Sisters as Sources of Support

During conversations about dating and sexuality, sisters served as sources of support by agreeing with one another and by providing encouragement. Sisters were most frequently supportive by validating one another's ideas about dating and sexuality. Overall, the main topics that sisters agreed about were the difficulties of being in a relationship, the pressure they have experienced from their peers about dating, the qualities they look for in a partner, the importance of trust in a relationship, and the necessity of being an independent person even when in a relationship. In the following excerpt from Mexican American sisters, Elaina (17 years of age and in 11th grade) and Leah (16 years of age and in 10th grade), are engaging in a discussion about the "rules" of dating.

Leah: Don't date someone way older than you.

Elaina: Oh yes, that's a big one.

Leah: Like if you're 16 and he's like 27, don't do that.

Elaina: Ummm...have your parents meet them. In case anything happens.

Leah: Have your parents approve them.

Elaina: Don't get pregnant at a young age.

Although older sisters had more romantic relationship and sexual experiences, both sisters contributed their own ideas about dating and sex. In fact, during conversations about their

dating ideas, younger sisters were more supportive of older sisters than older sisters were of younger sisters. This is mostly due to younger sisters agreeing with what their older sisters had to say than actually showing encouragement or support for their older sisters.

In another conversation between a pair of Mexican American sisters, the younger sister, Lucia (15 years of age and in 10th grade), revealed support and encouragement for her older sister, Ella, an adolescent mother. Ella (18 years of age and a senior in high school) had two young children and was pregnant with her third child. The sisters began their conversation by listing their sexual experiences. Ella talked about her first kiss, her first time having sex, and her pregnancies. Lucia discussed her first kiss, the only sexual experience in which she had engaged. When Ella was Lucia's age, she was already pregnant. Lucia noted that Ella was "crazy" for having so many children and said that she was not going to become a mother as a teenager. Although Ella was a young mother, she was determined to finish high school and earn her degree. Ella said "But I'm still in school and I'm graduating in May." To which Lucia responded, "She's [Ella] the only girl, the only grandchild in our family that's graduating and that is still in school and has kids." From this conversation, it was clear that Lucia was impressed by Ella's determination to finish school despite the challenges associated with being an adolescent mother, and was very encouraging of Ella's educational goals.

Sisters as Mentors

The final role was that of mentor and the mentoring role included giving advice and learning from sisters' experiences. In this role, sisters served as role models for one another. The most frequent action of the mentoring role was giving advice. Overwhelmingly, the advice was given by the older sister to the younger sister. To illustrate, Mexican American sisters, Elyse (20 years of age and in college) and Lynne (17 years of age and in 12th grade), are discussing the "pasts" of Elyse's boyfriends, including their drug and alcohol use and their sexual experiences. Elyse is advising her sister to give potential dating partners a chance, even if they have a past. Elyse's other piece of advice for Lynne is to know who she is in a relationship and that it is important to not change because of who a partner wants her to be.

What it always comes down to is they have to be respectful of me and they have to have friends like I have have to know that they respect them and that they are real good people, inside, even if they do bad things they have to be a good person... I don't really care about pasts ...there's just so many different things that can happen and you can be like a completely different person ...experiences change you and you learn things. I still know guys who don't have a past. They're hard to come by, but, they're there. But you just can't let it change you. You can't let their past dictate who they're going to make you be in the relationship, because if they are on the route to wanting to change your values and your ideas, then you don't want to be with them, because you need to know what you are or else you will give in and you will be who they want you to be and not even realize it.

Sisters gave advice on many issues including encouragement to go on a date if asked (e.g., "if a nice guy comes to you and says I like your face, let's go to a movie, I want you to say yes"), not to have a boyfriend in high school (e.g., "You don't want a relationship. You don't want to get attached"), to find someone who likes you for who you are (e.g., "Gotta find somebody that likes you for you and not just what you look like"), and not to rush into a relationship (e.g., "Getting pregnant at 12 years old, it's not something to joke around it's something for when you're ready, you're ready for having a boyfriend is nothing you should rush into or it doesn't make you older or mature."). From the conversations, it was clear that most of the advice that older sisters were giving came from their own experiences. Specifically, older sisters did not want their younger sisters to make the same mistakes as

they made or to be afraid of dating because of negative relationships that they had experienced.

Learning from older sisters' experiences was another common aspect of the mentoring role. Older sisters had more dating and sexual experiences because of their greater age status and younger sisters reported that they had learned from these experiences. Interestingly, younger sisters were more likely to discuss their older sisters' negative than positive dating and sexual experiences, and state that they wanted to make different decisions than their older sisters made. In a discussion between Luna and Emma, sisters of Mexican descent, Luna (16 years of age and in 11th grade) expresses her gratitude to her older sister, Emma (23 years of age and in graduate school) for giving her advice based on Emma's experiences.

Luna: When we normally talk about it you say that you don't need a guy to make you happy so I think that definitely helped just having you say that to me because you are so much older than me and you have so much more experience. Just telling me that I didn't need to date to have any self-worth or that I didn't need a guy in my life so that has definitely influenced me.

Emma: Yeah that's good cause I definitely, I've kind of always had a boyfriend, well always when I was in high school and I don't think it was the healthiest thing... So I'm glad that I was able to transmit that it wasn't important and wasn't necessarily the best option.

Luna: You know, I think, I don't know if this is true, but it ... it just seemed like your first two years of high school you'd just ditch a lot and stuff like that. And so I think that had to do with the fact that you had a boyfriend. And so it's just like, you always say how much you regretted dropping IB (International Baccalaureate program) and so I'd rather focus on my studies now and not have to worry about a boyfriend and add that on top of everything else and like trying to have a relationship. I just don't see that as something very important in my life.

Conversations similar to Luna and Emma's were common during many dyads' discussions about dating. Many sisters (5 out of 28 dyads) discussed the importance of younger sisters taking a different path than their older sisters for several reasons, including older sisters' poor choice in dating partners, emotional distress relating to break ups, and unintended pregnancy.

Overwhelmingly, older sisters assumed the mentoring role more than younger sisters. They wanted to ensure that their younger sisters did not make the same mistakes that they had and they also showed how protective they were of their younger sisters. Additionally, younger sisters reported that they were going to make different decisions than their older sisters.

Discussion

Using social provision theory as a framework (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Weiss, 1974), we investigated the roles enacted by adolescent sisters during conversations about dating and sexuality. Our study extends research in this area in several ways. First, we used an observational design to assess sibling communication about dating and sexuality. Second, we considered both positive and negative influences of older sisters, given a prior focus on the primarily negative impact of sisters on sexuality (e.g., McHale et al., 2009). Third, our findings add to the sparse literature on siblings and romantic relationships and normative sexuality development. Fourth, we highlighted both similarities and differences in the roles assumed by older versus younger sisters in their conversations about dating and sexuality.

Using an observational methodology to assess sibling communication regarding romantic relationship and sexual experiences, attitudes, and values is important because we can assess the process (i.e., actions and functions) and content of their conversations. Researchers investigating parent-adolescent communication about sex have highlighted the importance of using observations (Lefkowitz, 2002), such as video-taped conversations. Although Lefkowitz (2002) notes that observations can be used to assess quantitative aspects of the conversations (e.g., frequency and quality), we used both quantitative and qualitative data analytic techniques (i.e., inductive thematic analysis) to determine the roles enacted by sisters when communicating about dating and sexuality. Thus, our study was unique in that we were the first (to our knowledge) to use an observational methodology to assess sibling communication and to use qualitative analysis as a method to analyze observed conversations about dating and sexuality.

During conversations about dating and sexuality, sisters enacted three roles: confidant, source of support, and mentor. The most common role enacted by sisters during conversations about dating and sexuality was that of *confidant*. The role of confidant was displayed by disclosing information, giving opinions, and asking questions about sisters' experiences, opinions, and future plans. Older and younger sisters served as confidants for one another, particularly through self-disclosure. There has been little work on sibling self-disclosure (for an exception see Howe et al., 2001) and the majority of work is based on self-report (e.g., Dolgin & Lindsay, 1999) and interview methodologies (Howe et al., 2001) and was published more than 10 years ago. This work has shown that even in early adolescence, younger siblings reported disclosing information to older siblings (Howe et al., 2001). Additionally, college students disclose information about their romantic partner and sex life to siblings (Dolgin & Lindsay, 1999). These studies, in combination with our findings, revealed that romantic relationship and sexual experiences are issues for which siblings serve as confidants in adolescence and emerging adulthood. Research has shown that siblings are more likely to be confidants when their sibling relationship is characterized by higher (compared to lower) levels of warmth (Howe et al., 2001). Future work should investigate how sibling relationship quality is associated with the frequency and content of self-disclosure about romantic relationship and sexual issues between siblings.

Turning to *support roles*, both older and younger sisters were supportive by agreeing with one another's opinions (e.g., waiting to have sex is important), and offering support and complimenting one another (e.g., saying a sister's romantic partner is awesome). Regardless of birth order, sisters served as a source of support for these adolescent girls. Previous work has shown that older sisters are particularly supportive of younger siblings, especially regarding social life issues (Tucker et al., 2001). These studies, however, focused on older siblings as sources of support for younger siblings and did not assess support that younger siblings gave to older siblings. During adolescence, sibling relationships shift from being hierarchical to egalitarian and researchers have highlighted the importance of taking both top-down (i.e., older to younger sibling) and bottom-up (i.e., younger to older sibling) approaches when studying sibling relationship dynamics (Whiteman, Becerra, & Killoren, 2009).

Interestingly, there is still evidence of a hierarchical or complementary structure when examining the role of *mentor*. Older sisters were more likely than younger sisters to give advice and younger sisters were more likely than older sisters to learn from sisters' experiences. This is in line with previous work in two ways. First, Tucker and colleagues (Tucker et al., 2001; Tucker & Updegraff, 2009) have shown that siblings assume complementary (i.e., similar to parent-child relationships) roles when discussing issues such as dating. Second, the sibling de-identification literature has focused on younger siblings trying to be different than their older siblings (Whiteman et al., 2009). Put another way,

younger siblings learn from their older siblings' experiences and make a decision to act differently. This may be particularly true when looking at the period of adolescence in which these sisters are situated. In our study, younger sisters were in middle adolescence and older sisters were in late adolescence or emerging adulthood. Given their greater age status, older sisters are more likely to have advice to share and have romantic relationship and sexual experiences from which younger sisters can learn. Our quantitative data support this point, showing that older sisters are more likely to have had sexual intercourse and have a higher number of sexual partners (within the last 12 months) than younger sisters. It is important to note that younger sisters only reported learning from their older sisters' *negative* dating and sexual experiences. Possibly, younger sisters only consciously de-identify with their older sisters when they view their older sisters' experiences as something they do not want to go through; therefore, they make the decision to be different from their older sisters. An additional explanation is that older sisters have learned from their own experiences and are advising their younger sisters to make different choices. The notion of learning from experience has been evident in other contexts (e.g., parenting; Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2003) and may be operating similarly for older sisters when they give advice to their younger sisters. As sisters progress into adulthood, it is likely that the mentoring role will be assumed by both older and younger sisters, such that they will both give advice and learn from one another's romantic relationship and sexual experiences.

Limitations, Implications for Future Research, and Contributions

The limitations of our study provide directions for future research. First, given the small sample size of our study, we were unable to examine how each role was associated with sibling romantic relationship and sexual outcomes. Future work should include larger sample sizes and focus on links between sibling roles and sisters' romantic and sexual experiences/attitudes. Second, the percentage of younger sisters in our sample (average age of 15 years) who have ever had sex (24%) was lower than the percentage of female 10th grade students in a national sample (Centers for Disease Control, 2011) who have ever had sex (43%). Thus, the conversations may have been impacted by sample characteristics (e.g., potentially fewer discussions about sex in our sample than we may expect in a nationally representative sample). This area of research would benefit by including more representative samples. Third, there was great variability in sisters' ages and we do not know how age gap is related to the enactment of certain roles. Structural features of siblings' relationships, such as age gap and the confound between age and birth order, should be considered in future studies on siblings' roles in romantic relationship experiences and sexuality development. Fourth, it is possible that these conversations would not occur naturally or that sisters would be self-conscious during the conversations. We tried to increase the comfort level of the participants by videotaping them in their homes as opposed to a lab setting and by excluding the word "sexuality" from the directions. Sisters, however, may have been guarded during these conversations (although the content of the conversations suggests this was not often the case). Fifth, we only included sisters in our study. We may learn that brothers and siblings in mixed-gender dyads enact different roles when they discuss dating and sexuality with one another. For instance, younger sisters may look to their older brothers for advice and information about the other sex (Kim, McHale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2006). Future work should examine similarities and differences among the different sibling gender constellations in their conversations about dating and sexuality. Finally, Kowal and Blinn-Pike (2004) found that sibling conversations about sex, in concert with parent-adolescent conversations were associated with more positive sexual outcomes. We did not include parent-adolescent communication in our work and future studies should examine the role of siblings *and* parents in adolescents' sexuality development.

In the face of these limitations, our study contributed to the literature in several ways. This was the first study to use an observational methodology to examine sibling communication about dating and sexuality and to investigate the roles of sisters during these conversations. By using an observational methodology, we were able to determine a) that sisters engaged in many roles during these conversations and b) the frequency with which older and younger siblings assumed different roles. Additionally, we found observational support for previous work showing siblings as sources of support and confidants. Further, through sisters' conversations, we were able to provide evidence for younger sisters' de-identification from older sisters due to older sisters' negative dating and sexual experiences. The findings also show that sisters are protective of one another and do not want to see their sisters experience a negative dating or sexual relationship. In sum, our study reveals that older sisters are important communication partners for adolescent girls regarding romantic relationship and sexual experiences/attitudes and this communication may serve as an important mechanism explaining the influence of older sisters on adolescent girls' romantic relationship experiences and sexuality development.

Implications for Practice

Taken together, the current findings have implications for prevention work aimed at reducing girls' teen pregnancy and sexual risk behaviors and promoting positive romantic relationships and sexuality development. Our findings illuminate the important roles of sisters as confidants, sources of support, and mentors, especially in the development of ideas about dating and sexuality. Additionally, the protective aspect of the relationship between sisters was revealed. These findings point to the importance of including sisters in prevention, an idea that has received support from sibling researchers (e.g., Feinberg, Solmeyer, & McHale, 2012). For example, given that we know older sisters (in particular) serve as mentors for adolescent girls, older sisters can be included and given a leading role in family-oriented prevention programs aimed at reducing adolescent girls' pregnancy and sexual risk behaviors and promoting healthy romantic relationships, positive sexuality development and safe-sex practices. Interventions including a component to strengthen sibling relationships have shown success (i.e., positive sibling relationships and healthy child adjustment) and researchers are acknowledging the need to include siblings in programs to prevent adolescents' behavior problems and promote well-being (Feinberg et al., 2012).

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Table 1

Frequency of Three Themes and Codes Composing Themes Ordered From Most to Least Frequent Theme.

	Younger sisters	Older sisters
Confidant	633	732
Disclose	310	273
Give opinion	243	317
Ask about sister's opinions	38	79
Ask about sister's experiences	32	53
Ask about sister's future plans	10	10
Source of support	204	144
Agree	202	134
Show support	2	10
Mentor	8	69
Give advice	8	41
Sister learned from her experiences	0	28
Total number of codes	845	945