



# The Association between Sibling Relationship Dynamics and Empathic Abilities in Young Adulthood

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Studies concerning empathy development has primarily focused on the role of parents, culture, and education but has overlooked the role of siblings. This current research investigated sibling relationship quality and cognitive and affective empathy in young adults to address the question of whether siblings influence young adults' empathy processes. A total of 205 young adults participated in the study and completed questionnaires about the quality of their sibling relationships and cognitive empathy (i.e., understanding another person's viewpoint) and affective empathy (i.e., sharing other people's inner states). Strong positive relationships were observed between affective empathy and sibling relationship quality, which suggests that siblings may play a unique role in shaping each other's affective empathy development. Young adults with a sibling who made a positive impact on them had higher sibling relationship quality and affective empathy scores. Additionally, female participants showed higher affective empathy and quality relationship with their siblings than male participants.

## Participants

A total of 205 (119 female, 86 male), young adults (age  $M=19.37$ ,  $SD=1.63$ ; R: 18-25 years) participated in the study.



## Method

### Assessment

1. The Demographic Questionnaire
2. The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1983)
3. The Lifespan Sibling Relationship Scale (LSRS; Riggio, 2000)

## Data Analysis

To address the research questions, Pearson product-moment correlations MANOVAs, ANOVAs and Bonferroni alpha corrected t-tests were computed.

## Results

1. The major finding was that all sibling relationship subscales were significantly and positively related to empathic concern, indicating that affective empathy is related to sibling relationship quality in young adulthood (See Table 1).
2. An independent full factorial 2x3x3 MANOVAs with a follow up ANOVA and Bonferroni t-tests revealed that female participants have higher affective empathy than male participants, and participants whose siblings have a positive impact on them have greater affective empathy.
3. Additionally, female participants have higher quality relationship with their siblings than male participants, and young adults received higher sibling relationship quality scores when their siblings have a positive impact on them. (See Table 2).

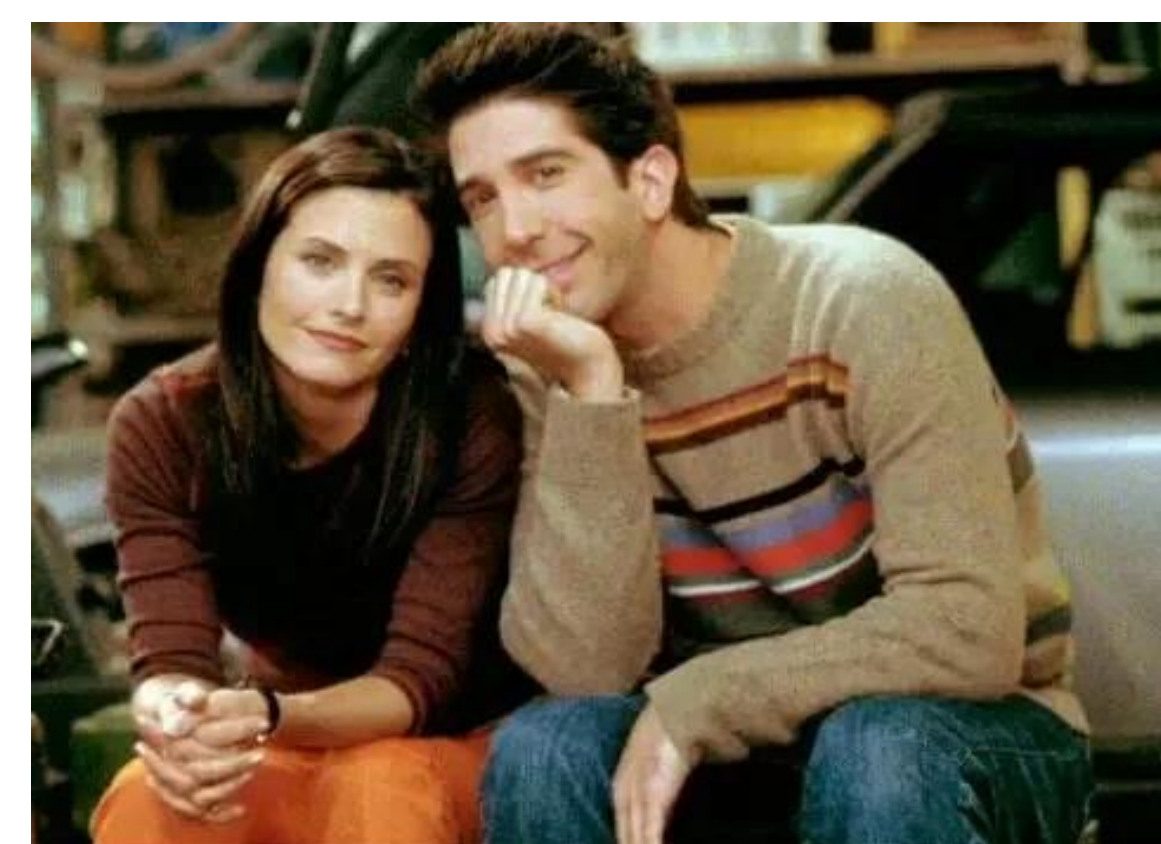


Table 1. Mean, Standard Deviations, and Correlations between Empathy and Sibling Relationships

	Mean	SD	Correlations										
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8			
1. Perspective-taking (IRI)	16.751	5.012											
2. Empathic Concern (IRI)	19.478	4.940	.363**										
3. Adult Affect (LSRS)	33.502	5.788	.025	.246**									
4. Adult Behavior (LSRS)	27.156	7.187	.065	.255**	.676**								
5. Adult Cognition (LSRS)	32.351	6.481	.086	.278**	.759**	.772**							
6. Child Affect (LSRS)	29.097	6.321	.102	.243**	.398**	.315**	.368**						
7. Child Behavior (LSRS)	28.131	6.113	.174*	.202**	.348**	.458**	.432**	.577**					
8. Child Cognition (LSRS)	28.770	6.555	.136	.243**	.456**	.495**	.540**	.750**	.835**				
9. Total LSRS	179.009	30.341	.124	.311**	.765**	.796**	.822**	.716**	.770**	.860**			

Note. N=205, LSRS: Lifespan Sibling Relationship Scale \*\* $p<0.01$ , \* $p<0.05$

Table 2. Means (and standard deviations in parenthesis) and ANOVA for siblings' impact and affective empathy and sibling relationship quality

Variables	Positive	Negative	Both	F	p
Empathic Concern	20.01 (4.74)	16.50 (4.65)	17.81 (5.29)	5.331	.006
LSRS	186.54 (24.92)	92.25 (20.02)	160.00 (28.41)	42.508	<.001

Note: Bonferroni alpha corrected,  $p < .02$ , LSRS: Lifespan Sibling Relationship Scale

## Discussion

The current study has underlined the unique role of siblings in the empathy development process and has shown that sibling interactions provide an important context, one whereby individuals develop concern for others. Affective empathy, that is responding similar to another's emotional response, is associated with sibling relationship quality in emerging adulthood. It is possible that the process that facilitates people to be empathic and the process that creates close sibling relationships are similar (Shortt & Gottman, 1997). In light of the results, researchers, parents, and teachers should focus on children's socialization and moral development by considering the quality of the relationship between young siblings.

### References

- Davis, M. (1983). The effects of dispositional empathy on emotional reactions and helping: A multidimensional approach. *Journal of Personality*, 51, 167-184.
- Riggio, H. R. (2000). Measuring attitudes toward adult sibling relationships: The lifespan sibling relationship scale. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 17(6), 707-728.
- Shortt, J. W., & Gottman, J. M. (1997). Closeness in young adult sibling relationships: Affective and physiological processes. *Social Development*, 6(2), 142-164.

## Questions and Hypotheses

1. Is there a relationship between cognitive and affective empathy and sibling relationship quality in young adulthood? This study hypothesizes that there is a positive relationship between affective empathy and sibling relationship quality.
2. Are there gender differences in cognitive empathy and affective empathy scores for sibling dyads and sibling impact? This study expects that regardless of gender, individuals whose siblings have a positive impact on them would report higher affective empathy.
3. Does gender differentiate the quality of the sibling relationships of sibling dyads? This study expects that regardless of gender, individuals whose siblings have a positive impact on them will report higher sibling relationship quality.

