

**HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY STUDIES**

**DISSERTATION DEFENSE FOR**

**SUSAN E. DOUGHTY**

**TITLE: SIBLING DIFFERENTIATION IN ACTIVITY INTERESTS: LONGITUDINAL LINKAGES TO SIBLING RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AND SELF-WORTH**

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**DATE:** July 28, 2015

**TIME:** 1:00pm – 3:00pm EST

**PLACE:** 114 North Henderson (SSRI conference room)

**Areas of Specialization:** Family Studies and Intervention

**ABSTRACT**

Although the emergence of sibling differences has long been a subject of interest, little empirical work has examined the development of sibling differentiation over time, or the ways in which sibling differentiation is linked to relational and individual outcomes. This study focused

on sibling differences in self-rated activity interests (e.g., the extent to which siblings differ in their level of interest in sports, reading, hobbies), with the goal of examining associations between sibling differentiation and both sibling relationship quality and youths' self-worth over time. Specifically, this study addressed the following research aims: (1) to describe the trajectory of sibling differentiation from middle childhood through adolescence, (2) to assess linkages between sibling differentiation and sibling relationship quality, and (3) to assess linkages between sibling differentiation and youths' self-worth.

I began by charting the developmental trajectory of differences between siblings' self-reported activity interests from middle childhood through late adolescence. Based on deidentification theory and existing work in behavioral genetics, it was anticipated that siblings would become increasingly different over time. Sibling dyad gender constellation was also examined as a potential moderator of change patterns, given its importance to sibling differences from both the deidentification and gender socialization perspectives. Multi-level modeling (MLM) was then used to examine the longitudinal linkages between differentiation in siblings' activity interests and their reports of sibling intimacy and conflict. Existing perspectives offer conflicting hypotheses: Grounded in Adlerian theory, a deidentification hypothesis holds that becoming more different will reduce rivalry and conflict between siblings, allowing for a more harmonious relationship. Principles of homophily suggest the opposite—that the more siblings have in common, the more likely they are to report close relationships with one another. To address the third aim, MLM was used to assess linkages between sibling differences in activity interests and a measure of siblings' individual adjustment—self-worth. Here again, there are competing predictions: An Adlerian perspective predicts that greater differentiation will be linked with positive self-worth. Self-affirmation theory, however, predicts the opposite, as similarity between siblings serves as a source of personal validation and self-worth.

Results for Aim 1 revealed a cubic increase in sibling differentiation over time, partially supporting the deidentification prediction that sibling differences accumulate over time. Gender constellation emerged as a significant moderator of the cubic trend, such that mixed-sex sibling dyads showed higher average levels of differentiation, as well as a greater increase over time. For Aim 2, support was found for the homophily perspective, as higher levels of differentiation between siblings were linked to lower levels of sibling intimacy at both the within- and between-family level. No association, however, was found between sibling differentiation and sibling conflict. With respect to Aim 3, support was found for self-affirmation theory: Sibling similarity was linked positively to self-worth at the between-family level, such that youths from sibling dyads who were more similar reported higher levels of self-worth. At the within-family level, a significant interaction with gender constellation emerged, such that at times when youth from same-sex sibling dyads were more similar, they reported higher levels of self-worth—an effect not seen in youths from mixed-sex sibling dyads. Discussion focuses on implications of the findings for existing sibling theory and directions for future study.