



## Links between nonshared friendship experiences and adolescent siblings' differences in aspirations

Tina Kretschmer\*, Alison Pike

Department of Psychology, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9QH, United Kingdom

### ABSTRACT

#### Keywords:

Siblings  
Aspirations  
Friendships  
Nonshared environment

Using a sibling design, this study examined the association between adolescents' friendship experiences and their aspirations for self-acceptance, affiliation, and financial success. We hypothesized that adolescent siblings would differ in their aspirations and that unique experiences in friendships would be associated with these differences. Within our sample of 102 same-sex sibling pairs (mean age older sibling 16 years, younger sibling 14 years), only a small degree of sibling similarity was found for aspirations as well as friendship experiences. Self-acceptance and affiliation were positively linked to general friendship positivity as well as to positive features of the adolescents' closest friend. Bivariate model-fitting techniques revealed that nonshared processes (i.e., unique to each child in the family) explained these links between friendship experiences and aspirations. The results indicate that growing up in one home and being socialized by the same parents does not make adolescent siblings similar in their aspirations but rather that nonshared experiences like those with close friends are related to aspiration dissimilarity of siblings.

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Aspirations are personal values that imply an individuals' desired state of being and guide his or her behavior towards that state. The development of these personal values is assumed to unfold mainly within the family context, with parents being regarded as highly important agent of socialization of values (Whitbeck & Gecas, 1988). This would imply that two children brought up in the same home by the same parents should resemble each other regarding their aspirations. However, sibling studies have usually revealed that children from one family are largely dissimilar with regards to personality traits, psychopathology, and cognitive ability (for a review see Plomin, Asbury, & Dunn, 2001). This indicates that there must be nonshared effects, such as nonshared genes or unique environmental influences that make siblings in the same family different from each other. Experiences and social interactions from within and outside of the family are nonshared environment candidates, with peer group and friendships certainly being of particular importance for cognitive and moral development, which act as foundations for aspirations in adolescence (Bukowski & Sippola, 1996; W.H. Hartup, 1996; W.W. Hartup, 1996).

Behavioral genetic research has found impressive evidence for the significant impact of nonshared environmental factors on differences between siblings. As mentioned above, normative, i.e., non-twin sibling pairs are less similar in their personalities and cognitive abilities than sharing approximately half of their genes as well as growing up in the same family would imply. In addition, sibling resemblance in these areas is mostly due to shared genes rather than shared environment. From the early 1980s on, scholars concentrated on identifying those factors that are experienced differently by children within one family (i.e., factors that are nonshared) and are related to differences in outcome measures such as adjustment and psychopathological disorders in childhood and adolescence (for a review see Turkheimer & Waldron, 2000).

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 1273 678594.

E-mail address: [t.kretschmer@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:t.kretschmer@sussex.ac.uk) (T. Kretschmer).

The primary focus of this research has been the family, and especially (perceived and real) differential parental treatment. Results from these studies have shown that differences between siblings in some outcome measures are indeed related to child-specific parenting (e.g., Boyle et al., 2004; Sheehan & Noller, 2002). It is noteworthy that similar findings have been reported regardless of informant (for reviews on the topic as a whole and especially on applied measurement techniques see Plomin, Chipuer, & Neiderhiser, 1994; Turkheimer & Waldron, 2000). However, parental differential treatment only accounts for a small percentage of children's and adolescents' outcomes, leaving other factors worth examining.

There is consensus that, not only is the within-family environment (i.e., the parent-child and sibling relationships) not perceived equally by siblings, but that the nonshared experience of extrafamilial networks is also related to sibling differences in outcomes (Dunn & Stocker, 1989; Pike & Plomin, 1997; Plomin & Asbury, 2005; Plomin et al., 2001). Pike and Plomin (1997), for example, suggested that friendship quality in adolescence in particular might be a candidate for nonshared environment that is linked to differences in outcomes. In their review of literature on friends and peer groups as nonshared environmental influences, Rowe, Woulbroun, and Gulley (1994) suggested that although the selection of friends is itself a nonshared process driven by genetically or environmentally influenced differences between siblings, friends also reinforce differences. Rowe and colleagues concluded that friends and peers are an effective nonshared environment in that they produce (to a lesser degree) but also amplify (to a greater degree) sibling differences in personality and behavior. Although there is evidence of genetic influences on aspects of adolescents' social relationships, most of the variation in friendship quality is ascribed to (nonshared) environmental components (Iervolino et al., 2002; Manke, McGuire, Reiss, Hetherington, & Plomin, 1995). Thus, the scope of the current study was to examine friendship experiences in adolescence as a measure that is likely to have unique aspects for each sibling. We examined friendship quality in adolescence as a possible nonshared source of differences in siblings' aspirations; an outcome measure that has not yet been studied using a sibling design.

The socialization of aspirations as personal values that define a desired future state is traditionally ascribed to parents, suggesting that siblings share aspirations. Value transmission research has shown that values of parents and their children are correlated to a modest to moderate degree (usually around  $r = .20-.30$ ; see, for example, Albert & Trommsdorf, 2003; Schönplflug, 2001). Studies of family impact on adolescents' educational and occupational aspirations confirmed parental impact, but also showed that the family environment does not explain all of the variance in adolescents' aspirations and values (e.g., Davies & Kandel, 1981; Hitlin, 2006; Teachman & Paasch, 1998). Biddle, Bank, and Marlin (1980) have argued that the impact of parents versus peers depends on the topic. Social domains theory (Smetana, 1997, 1999) supports the view that individuals gain and apply different kinds of knowledge in changing social contexts. Certain values might therefore be transmitted from parents (i.e., within the family), whereas others might be a result of social interaction with peers and friends. It has been shown that interactions within friendships facilitate various developmental tasks in childhood and adolescence (W.H. Hartup, 1996; W.W. Hartup, 1996) and the impact of friends on risky health and deviant behavior (Prinstein, Boergers, & Spirito, 2001) and school adjustment (Berndt, Hawkins, & Jiao, 1999; Wentzel, Barry, McNamara, & Caldwell, 2004; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997) has been well-documented. However, links between perceived quality of friendships and adolescents' aspirations, values, or goals has thus far only been examined with regard to academic and school-related social goals, revealing a significant link between positive friendship experiences and social goals that enhance intimacy with peers (Summers, 2002).

A major shortcoming of these studies is that only one child per family has been studied. This leaves unanswered whether siblings share values to a greater or lesser extent than do parents and children, and whether the link between friendships and aspirations is mediated by shared or nonshared processes. One child per family designs make it impossible to trace shared and nonshared effects although a growing body of literature on parental differential treatment and sibling differences in outcome has shown that parents and parent-child relationships are not the same for all children in a family (e.g., Dunn, Stocker, & Plomin, 1990) and differentiating effects on values and aspirations are likely. We propose that relationships originating outside the family are likely to provide even greater differentiation of siblings than are within-family relationships.

It is, of course, also possible that sibling differences in extra-familial relationships linked to sibling differences outcome may be due to nonshared genes rather than, or in addition to, nonshared environment. That is, specific genetically influenced traits of the child might explain variance both in friendship quality and also in aspirations. Such genetic – similarly to environmental – mediation can be shared or nonshared by siblings. The model proposed in the current study combines genetic and environmental effects in decomposing variance into shared and nonshared proportions. Although it is not possible to infer genetic versus environmental effects, this model is particularly useful for “garden-variety” sibling studies, which are far more common (and arguably more generalizable) than twin or adoption studies. Prior to testing whether the association between friendships and aspirations is mediated by shared (genetic and environmental) or nonshared (genetic and environmental) processes, we examined whether friendships are indeed experienced differently by siblings. Similarly, sibling resemblance in aspirations was explored, and variance attributed to shared and nonshared factors.

To sum up, the current study addressed the question of whether differences in siblings' close friendship experiences act as an extra-familial nonshared environmental correlate of differential sibling aspirations during adolescence. A sibling design was applied to test the hypotheses that 1) aspirations are mainly nonshared by siblings, and 2) that friendships in adolescence are a nonshared social context that is associated with siblings' unique aspirations.

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