

IDENTICAL TWINS WITH SIBLINGS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE POTENTIAL EFFECTS OF THE TWINSHIP ON TWINS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER SIBLINGS

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ABSTRACT

In this exploratory study of the experience of being an identical twin, the association between the identical twin relationship and sibling relationships was investigated through semi-structured interviews with 94 identical twins ages 18 to 69 years of age. Results indicated that the twinship can put a strain on sibling relationships. Approximately one-half of the participants noted that the emotional closeness of their sibling relationships was negatively affected by their status as an identical twin. According to the participants, issues of jealousy and feeling excluded from the twinship were main factors. One-half of the participants believed that their sibling relationships were unaffected by their status as an identical twin. Age difference was believed to be more responsible for the distant sibling relationships. The evolution of sibling relationships is also discussed. These findings speak to the need to understand how an identical twin relationship can potentially affect sibling relationships.

KEYWORDS: Adult Sibling Relationships; Identical Twins; Qualitative Methodology; Siblings; Sibling Relationship Quality; Twinship

While identical twins are viewed as a phenomenon and often used to tease out the nature and nurture question, there is a scarcity of research on the effect of the identical twin relationship on other personal relationships including romantic relationships, other sibling relationships, and friendships. The current study investigated the association between the identical twin relationship and other sibling relationships, focusing on whether or not the emotional closeness and sibling relationship quality were affected by the twin's status as an identical twin. While there has been previous research that has focused on the special bond shared by identical twins, there is a lack of studies that investigate the ways in which other sibling relationships can be affected, positively and negatively, by the experience of having identical twins in a family.

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BACKGROUND

Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Identical Twins in the Context of the Family

Most research that has focused on the twinship utilizes attachment theory (Bowlby 1969) to understand the relationship shared by twins, including both fraternal and identical twins. Less common is the application of sociological theories or frameworks to understand not only the twin relationship but the ways in which other personal, familial, and romantic relationships may be affected by the dynamics of a twinship. A review of recent research that has employed both sociological and psychological theories in order to understand identical twin relationships is provided below.

Symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism offers a potential starting point for studying the effects of the twinship on other familial relationships, including those between identical twins and their non-twin siblings. There are few studies (Bacon 2010; Ncube 2018; Sadri and Sadri 1994; Stewart 2000) that have employed such an approach; however, they are an important foundation for the current study. According to the symbolic interaction framework, actors play crucial roles in the construction and interpretation of social situations (Stewart 2000). Meaning is thus constructed through the interaction of the individuals in groups (Stewart 2000). Given the rarity of identical twins in our society, some researchers have argued that identical twins are a marginalized group—individuals whose unique status constantly needs to be achieved (Sadri and Sadri 1994). Similarly, Stewart (2000) refers to twins as a “distinctive minority,” individuals who are often singled out because of their unique status. In studies of twins and their relationships, the twins and siblings can be viewed as competent social actors who have a role to play in the family. As such, meanings attached to the statuses of “identical twin” and “sibling” are built up through the course of everyday social life (Bacon 2010). Stewart (2000) explains that these interactions with others stresses and reinforces the idea and meaning associated with “twinship.”

Goffman’s (1959) work on dramaturgy is a particular derivation of the symbolic interaction framework that can provide the tools to aid in our understanding of the “twinship” as not only a status or position, but how it can affect interactions with others such as siblings. Specifically, in the case of identical twins, the twins are actors who perform face-to-face interactions, create impressions, and manipulate perceptions and seek to control their audience (Stewart 2000). As such, identical twins, who are well aware of their unique status as an identical twin, surrounded by non-twins, will often present or attempt to present an idealized image of the twinship. Ncube (2018) made a similar argument to Stewart (2000), explaining that the actions of identical twins are not necessarily expressive of their unique individual personalities, but are rather expressive of their expected social roles as identical twins—one part of the unit. Considering all of the aforementioned studies and their applications of symbolic interaction theory to understand twins’ experiences of the twinship, I argue that symbolic interaction theory can aid the understanding of how and in what ways the experience of being an identical twin can affect identical twins’ relationships with their non-twin siblings. Specifically, if identical twins are constantly performing as identical twins—according to societal expectations that they be alike, have similar interests, have a strong bond with each other, and spend a majority of their time together “paired-up” as twins—then one could argue that a result of such performances on a daily basis might lead to relationships with non-twin siblings that are not as close as their twinship. The close relationships of identical twins who spend a majority of their time interacting with their identical twin—performing as an identical twin—may be at the expense of other relationships such as those with their non-twin siblings. An evaluation of the

applicability of this framework to the current study's results is provided in the Discussion section. I now turn to a discussion of attachment theory.

Psychological framework: Attachment theory. Most research that focuses on the identical twin relationship utilizes attachment theory, as opposed to sociological theories. Given the unique characteristics of the identical twin relationship, such as sharing age and sex as well as DNA, along with experiencing a similar home environment, attachment theory (Bowlby 1969) serves as a potentially strong framework for this current study. Although Bowlby was focused primarily on understanding the nature of the infant-caregiver relationship, he believed that the attachment characterized the human experience from birth to death. According to Bowlby (1969), an attachment relationship is one in which a person uses the other as a target of proximity maintenance, experiences distress during separation from the other, uses the other as a safe haven during times of distress, and uses that person as a secure base from which to explore the world. A contrasting theoretical explanation, put forth by Neyer and Lang (2003), proposes that identical twins have a special regard for one another because they share more of their genetic makeup than do fraternal or non-twin siblings. Based on a review of previous research that has utilized attachment theory to understand familial and personal relationships, I argue that attachment theory is a useful theoretical framework to understand the identical twin relationship.

Starting in the 1980s, researchers began to discuss the possibility that other kinds of adult relationships, including friendships (Fralely and Davis 1997), romantic relationships (Hazan and Shaver 1987), and relationships with other family members (Ainsworth 1989) could serve as attachment relationships. Pertinent to the current study, there has been qualitative and quantitative research suggesting that twins may serve as attachment figures for one another across the lifespan.

Segal (1999) found that identical twins showed greater physical closeness than fraternal twins (in support of the proximity seeking feature). Specifically, Segal (1999) found that identical and fraternal twins state a preference for being in each other's company, whereas non-twin siblings report being happier when their siblings are not around. Other research on adult twins (Tambs, Sundet, and Berg 1985) found that identical twins were psychologically closer to each other and lived together longer than fraternal twins. Fralely and Tancredy (2012) found that both identical and fraternal twins were more likely to be attached to one another than non-twin siblings, with identical twins more likely to be attached to one another than both fraternal twins and non-twin siblings. Furthermore, Fralely and Tancredy (2012) suggested that twin children (both fraternal and identical twins collectively) rely more heavily on their co-twin for safety and security than do non-twin siblings.

Similarly, Neyer (2002) found that identical twins contacted each other more frequently and lived in closer geographical proximity than fraternal twins generally. Moreover, identical twins reported providing more support to their twins and feeling emotionally closer to their twins than the fraternal twins in the study. Previous research, especially qualitative studies such as the work of Ainslie (1997), has shown that twins can easily be distressed when separated from one another and this is even more obvious and intense when one twin dies (Woodward 1998). Tancredy and Fralely (2006) investigated the usefulness of attachment theory and found that twins (both fraternal and identical) are more likely than non-twins to use their sibling as an attachment figure. Twins also look to their co-twin as a safe haven, placing a high priority on offering support, protection, and comfort to their co-twin in times of need (Tancredy and Fralely 2006). Moreover, although there is some research that has shown that twins use their co-twins as a

secure base from which to explore the world, it is limited in that these studies focus on early childhood and not across the lifespan (Tancredy and Fraley 2006).

While many of the aforementioned studies focus on the positive effects related to the strong attachment between identical twins, others have taken a different approach. In her book *Twins in Session: Case Histories in Treating Twinship Issues* (2018), Joan Friedman, twin expert and psychologist, explains how the attachment between twins affects and is affected by the attachment between the parent and child (twin). Friedman (2018:16) explains, "A twin's attachment to a parent is inevitably complicated by the presence of a second same-age child, and it should be assumed that a twin not only has a unique connection to his twin brother or sister but has not had the normal parent-child relationship." In addition to the research on attachment theory as it pertains to identical twins, studies that have investigated the sibling relationship quality of identical twins also inform the current study.

Sibling relationship quality. There has also been research that has investigated the association between behavioral genetics and sibling relationship quality. Mark et al. (2017) relied on parental reports of sibling relationship quality for their children, utilizing a quantitative approach. Contrary to expectations, no mean level differences emerged when identical twin pairs, fraternal twin pairs, and non-twin pairs were compared on their sibling relationship quality. Fortuna, Goldner, and Knafo (2010) also relied on parental reports of sibling relationship quality and found that compared to same-sex fraternal twins, identical twins were perceived to be closer and more co-twin dependent. Case (1991) specifically found that identical twin sisters tended to form the closest emotional bonds compared to fraternal twins and identical twin brothers. Other researchers, such as Bank and Kahn (1997) investigated not only gender, but age as a factor, and found that the closer the siblings are in age and gender, the more intense their relationship.

Other research has relied on twins' self-reports of relationship quality. In the research of Pietila, Bjorklund, and Bulow (2012), based on 35 life stories of identical and fraternal twins aged 70 years and older, they explored the evolution and emotional closeness of twins over the course of their lives. The majority of participants (24/35) were categorized as having a "nurturing twin relationship." Their results indicated that twins seem to be emotionally closer to each other than non-twin siblings. In addition, they concluded that these twin relationships showed that relationship patterns (nurturing, draining, or superficial) remained much the same throughout life, emphasizing the importance of relationships in the early years of life. Last, their results showed that the twin relationship is important in later life, emotionally, socially, and in practical matters of daily living (Pietila et al. 2012). The aforementioned research studies provide evidence that the relationship shared by identical twins is an example of the most intense and emotionally close relationship, compared to other sibling relationships.

The Current Study

The current study builds upon the aforementioned existing research on identical twins and their co-twin relationship. Previous research (Tancredy and Fraley 2006) has investigated the bond shared by identical twins and the applicability of attachment theory to understand the nature of the twin relationship, especially compared to fraternal twins. All of the aforementioned studies come to the same conclusion that identical twins tend to be closer than fraternal twins and non-twin siblings. However, previous research is limited in that there are no studies that investigate the potential effect of the twin relationship on their non-twin sibling relationships; thus, the current study fills that gap.

In addition, while there are studies that have investigated the usefulness of attachment theory and symbolic interaction theory (separately) in understanding the identical twin relationship, this study assesses the potential of both of these theories. The current exploratory study is based off of in-depth qualitative interviews of a *large* sample of identical twins, providing the “voice” and perspectives of identical twins themselves—an opportunity for identical twins to reveal to “outsiders” what it is like to be an identical twin having to maintain other sibling relationships. Since I was most interested in understanding *if* and *how* the relationship between identical twins affects the emotional closeness and quality of their other non-twin sibling relationships, qualitative interviewing was the best methodology. The findings are a compilation of common themes that were revealed during the interviews.

METHODS

The primary goal of this exploratory study was to understand *how* and *in what ways* a twinship can affect an identical twin’s other non-twin sibling relationships. Specifically, I was interested in gaining the perspectives of identical twins regarding their relationship with their twin and their other siblings over time. Thus, conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews with identical twins was necessary to gain the best understanding of their personal experience. This type of information was gained by asking the twins to share their stories with me by discussing the evolution of their twin relationship and discussing their relationships with all of their siblings over their lifecourse. An interview guide was used to establish consistency across all interviews and to make certain key questions were asked of the participants. The following research questions thus guided my research: Does the experience of being an identical twin affect other sibling relationships? If so, how and in what ways? Do identical twins develop a codependence on one another in terms of personal relationships?

Participants

The current study is part of a larger study that included a total of 113 identical twins who were at least 18 years of age at the time of the interview. The target number of participants for the larger study was 120; however, after approximately 100 interviews, the point of saturation was met. Only 94 of the 113 reported having siblings other than their twin, so only data from these 94 are included in this study. The first interviews were with 39 participants recruited and interviewed between November 2013 and March 2014. These participants were recruited through the posting of advertisements on Craigslist and Facebook (Identical Twins Groups), along with State Twins Associations’ websites. Snowball sampling was used as well; once I established contact and completed the interviews with participants, I asked participants if they had contact information for other identical twins who might be interested in participating in the study. The last 55 participants were recruited at the 41st Annual Twins Days Festival held in Twinsburg, Ohio in August 2016—the largest gathering of identical twins in the United States. The first 39 participants received \$10 as a token of appreciation for their participation. The additional 55 participants received a \$10 gift card.

Participants self-identified as identical twins; thus, since DNA analysis nor a standard physical resemblance questionnaire was not used, it is possible that some of the participants might not have

actually been identical twins, as they had thought. Nonetheless, since the twins had grown up believing they were identical twins and self-identified as such, they were included in the study.

The average age of participants was 41 years of age, with a range of 18 to 69 years of age. A majority of the participants were female ($n = 73$); males ($n = 21$) comprised the remainder of the sample. In terms of race and ethnicity, the overwhelming majority of participants self-identified as White ($n = 69$), other races/ethnicities represented included the following: African American or Black ($n = 11$); Hispanic ($n = 7$); African ($n = 1$); multi-racial ($n = 2$); other ($n = 4$). It was not necessary for both twins to participate in the study, although the majority of participants' twins participated as well. Seventy-six of the participants were matched-pair twins, in that both twins participated. Eighteen of the participants were "solo" identical twins, who participated but whose twin did not participate. The average number of siblings, excluding their twin was 1.9; only five of the 94 participants had more than six siblings other than their twin. Pseudonyms are used to mask the true identity of the participants.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by myself and my research assistant and took one of two forms: in-person or over the phone. In addition to receiving individual instruction regarding interviewing best practice for qualitative interviewing, my research assistant completed an online research ethics and compliance training course prior to the start of the interviewing stage. Interviews lasted between 20-80 minutes, with the majority of interviews lasting around 30 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded, if permission was granted by the participants. The first 39 interviews were done over the phone. The next 55 were done in-person, on-site at the Twins Days Festival or conducted over the phone, drawing from the list of participants who signed up at the festival to be contacted at a later date. I remained fully receptive to new themes emerging from the interviews and interviews were conducted until the point of saturation when no new themes were emerging, consistent with a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

An interview guide with demographic questions and key questions was used as a tool to assist the interviewers, including my research assistant and myself. Since this study is part of a much larger exploratory study on identical twins and their overall personal experience, the interview guide contained general questions about the identical twins' personal, familial, and romantic relationships. Specifically, the twins were asked to discuss their relationship with their identical twin throughout their lifetime; they were also asked to talk about their relationship with their twin in childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, and at the present time.

Demographic questions were included at the beginning of the interview. Participants were asked their current age, race/ethnicity (self-identified), occupation, whether or not they have other siblings (and ages), and marital status. In the first part of the interview, the participants were asked to talk about their relationship with their twin. This was an open-ended question, although, additional questions included the following: How would you characterize your relationship with your twin? Tell me about your relationship with your twin during childhood; Tell me about your relationship with your twin during adolescence; Tell me about your relationship with your twin during adulthood. Have you ever been separated (physically/geographically) from your twin? If so, did this affect the closeness of your relationship?

Participants were asked to discuss their relationships with siblings (as they were growing up and currently). Participants were asked to discuss all sibling relationships. Questions pertaining to this topic included the following: Describe your relationships with your other siblings. Do you believe that having a twin had an effect on the closeness of your relationship with your siblings? How would you characterize your relationship with your sibling(s) at the present time? Are your siblings equally close with your twin? If not, why?

Coding and Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed by the Principal Investigator. Transcriptions were read by the Principal Investigator and analyzed via MAXQDA software. Coding of the data was done by the Principal Investigator and aided with the use of MAXQDA software. MAXQDA software is an efficient data-handling tool for textual data such as transcribed interviews. The software allows the researcher to explore documents such as transcriptions and memos, create categories and coding texts, manage, and organize the data in a way that can save the researcher a lot of time. The software was used to generate themes that illustrated patterns throughout the interview data. Specifically, the frequency of keywords and phrases was determined by a thorough search of all transcriptions. For example, the Principal Investigator came up with a list of key phrases related to the research questions, such as “sibling” and “jealousy.” All transcriptions that included the key words/phrases were highlighted. The key words/phrases that had the highest frequencies were then added to a list. The themes were then analyzed by the Principal Investigator and all of the content associated with a certain theme was reviewed. The list of themes was then narrowed down to the ones discussed in the next section.

RESULTS

One of my guiding research questions was the following: “Does the experience of being an identical twin affect other sibling relationships? If so, how and in what ways?” Thus, I set out to discover whether or not identical twins felt that their relationships with other siblings were affected (positively or negatively) by the fact that they were an identical twin. Nearly all of the twins in this study reported that they were much closer emotionally to their twin than their non-twin siblings. About one-half noted that they did believe that their other sibling relationships were affected in some way, especially negatively, by their status as an identical twin. Specifically, many twins talked about how it was “different” from other sibling relationships; many also described their non-twin sibling relationships as “close, but not nearly as close as with my twin.”

Results from my study are also consistent with the findings of Case (1991), who found that identical twin sisters tended to form the closest emotional bonds as compared to fraternal twins and identical twin brothers. Similarly, Bank and Kahn (1997) found that the closer the siblings are in age and gender, the more intense their relationship will be. For example, in response to the question, “How would/do you explain what it is like to be an identical twin to a non-twin?” Nicole (age 43, three siblings) noted, “I don’t know how to explain it to you. But when I think about my relationships with my other (siblings)...it’s definitely different...with your twin, it’s like you have a sibling, but you also have a best friend.”

Other themes that emerged from the twins' experiences included the perception that siblings felt left out or excluded or that they experienced jealousy of the twin relationship—the classic “third wheel effect.” It is important to note that not all twins felt that being an identical twin negatively affected relationships with other siblings. The other half of the participants in this study felt that their non-twin sibling relationships were not affected by their status as an identical twin, although they attributed the “not as close of a relationship as with their twin” to other factors such as age differences or different interests and hobbies. Nonetheless, it is important to note that we are only getting one perspective—that of the identical twin—only one part of the dyad in terms of the sibling relationship. Thus, the twin is expressing how they think the other sibling felt, rather than relying on a direct report from the sibling. In this section, I provide examples from the twins' interviews to support the theme of sibling relationships being negatively affected as well as examples of how twins did not feel that their relationships were affected negatively. It is important to note that when I indicate the number of siblings a twin had, I am referring to their non-twin siblings, since I was specifically asking them to discuss those relationships.

Twinship Affected Sibling Relationships

When asked whether they thought having an identical twin had an effect on the closeness of their relationships with their other siblings, about one-half of the 94 twins with siblings other than their twin stated that it did. For example, Caitlin (age 35, four siblings) responded, “Yes, absolutely! Our older brother and sister understood our relationship. We were never as close with our other siblings.” This response was typical of others who also argued that being an identical twin affected their other sibling relationships.

Paul (age 69) had three siblings other than his twin brother. He had an older sister and brother and one younger brother. He described his older sister as a “protector” and his older brother as an “antagonizer.” As for his younger brother, who is now deceased, Paul stated that he did not have a “real close relationship with him.” Although Paul seems to imply that his relationship with his younger brother was affected more by the age gap, his response to my question asking whether he believed that having a twin had an effect on the closeness of his other sibling relationships, revealed other factors. He responded, “(Older brother) thought we were an irritation. (Younger brother) felt threatened by us, I believe...two against one.”

Crystal (age 55, two siblings) also explained that her relationships with her siblings were not as close as her relationship with her twin. She explained, “I love them because we are siblings. [But] I have a different bond with my siblings...I can tell my twin secrets.” When I asked her if she believed that having a twin had an effect on the closeness of her relationship with her siblings, she responded, “Well, my twin and I were always together.” Thus, Crystal was implying that it did have an effect; however, she noted that the relationship is getting closer as they get older.

Marina (age 37, three siblings) spoke at length about her relationships with two of her siblings. She explained how her status as an identical twin with other siblings played out in family life. According to Marina:

I was closer to my brother who is deceased now because he did stuff with us. But, we just never were close with...our older sister. (She) kind of just stayed in her room and kept to herself. We were always outside. (Twin) and I had each other, so we didn't have to have a relationship with her. We would gang up on her.

Thus, according to Marina, she and her twin actively antagonized their sister, resulting in a more distant and strained relationship. And, in her own words, Marina (and presumably her twin sister, as well) were well aware of the advantage they had over their siblings, in that they “had each other” and did not need to seek other non-twin relationships.

An interesting pattern emerged in that of the identical twins in this study who reported that their relationships with their siblings were negatively affected by the experience of being an identical twin, it was most likely to be sister-sister non-twin sibling relationships that were affected. Furthermore, in the same family dynamic, the sister-brother relationships were fine or unaffected by the twinship. Hillary (age 30, four siblings) reported that she and her twin experienced a strained relationship over time with their younger sister while her relationships with her brothers were not negatively affected. When I asked Hillary if she believed that having a twin had an effect on the closeness of her relationship with her siblings, she responded, “Yes, with our younger sister, for sure. It did not seem to affect our relationship with the boys.”

Similarly, Lauren (age 32, one sibling) explained that her relationship with her older sister has been strained. She notes that the closeness of the relationship changes over time, which is typical for many siblings. However, what was interesting is that she believes that being an identical twin has definitely affected her relationship with her older sister. She explained:

We have an older sister who is three years older. It goes from extreme strain to really good friends. As adults, we get along better. We still go through phases where one will be talking to her and the other is handling it...I believe it definitely had an impact on the closeness because it's been (sister) and the twins.

In Lauren's description about her relationship with her older sister, she hints at the negative effects of a triad—the two against one effect. By saying “(sister) and the twins,” the implication is that the twins are the assumed unit against the older sister. This is further evidenced when she referred to times when both twins were not on speaking terms with the older sister and the other twin was “handling it.” However, Lauren does note that the relationship is better as adults which is typical of adult sibling relationships.

Jake (age 62, one sibling) talked about his relationship with his older brother. While he attributes not having a super close relationship to factors such as age differences and different interests, he noted that perhaps being an identical twin had an effect. He explained, “We have an older brother. We are probably closer now than growing up. There are the age differences and different interests...we may have been closer if my twin was not there.”

Helen (age 30) has four siblings and stated that she is not close with any of them—two older brothers and a younger sister and brother. When I asked if she thought being a twin had anything to do with the lack of closeness, she responded, “I think so. We were so close with each other...we were not needing and wanting to be close with other siblings...My twin feels the same way...we've talked about it.” Like Helen, many of the twins in this study were well aware of the role that the twinship played in affecting other sibling relationships and used the word “distant” to describe their non-twin sibling relationships especially when they were comparing their sibling relationships to their twinships.

Jealousy/suspected jealousy on the part of the siblings. Whereas some twins focused on the overall negative effect that being an identical twin had on other sibling relationships, specifically not being as emotionally close with them as with their twin, others were quite vocal about what they believed to be the source of their “not so close relationship” with their non-twin siblings—jealousy. Steven (age 34, one sibling) explained that he has never had a good relationship with his older brother and chalked it up to jealousy. According to Steven, “The guy was kind of jealous...most of our family was jealous of my relationship with my twin brother. We never really had a good relationship...[at present time], I really don’t have a relationship with him.”

Russell (age 69, two siblings) noted that while age certainly was a factor that led to his sibling relationship that was not very close, he did suggest that his close relationship with his twin may have contributed to the more distant relationship compared to the one he shared with his twin. He explained, “(brother) is five years older. Five years is a big difference...[however],(brother) was probably jealous because (twin) and I always had each other.”

Timothy (age 69, two siblings) also had an older brother who was very jealous of the twinship and the closeness associated with it. He explained, “It was not a very good relationship. He was very jealous of us. It made the relationship with our older brother very strained...We healed some of that strain over time. I think we were threatening to him...because he lost his kingship.” At least for Timothy and his twin, the strained relationship with their older brother while continuing throughout adulthood, did heal a bit over time, providing support that some strained sibling relationships mend over time.

The women in this study were more likely to report having a strained relationship with siblings, especially older ones, than male twins in this study. Julia (age 41, two siblings) talked specifically about her relationship with her sister who is older by 11 years. She explained that they currently are not speaking. I asked her if she thought it was associated with her having an identical twin. She answered, “Yeah, I think there might have been some jealousy.” While it is quite plausible that there are other factors that led to the more distant relationships when compared to their twinships, one cannot rule out the role of the twinship and its potential to negatively affect other sibling relationships, especially since there was jealousy involved, as reported by the twins. I turn now to discuss the theme of siblings feeling excluded from the twinship, as perceived by the identical twins.

Siblings felt left out. While some twins attributed strained or “not so close” relationships with non-twin siblings to jealousy on the part of the siblings, others had been told or believed that their non-twin siblings felt excluded and left out from the identical twin bond. An interesting theme emerged in relation to the number of siblings and whether or not the non-twin sibling felt left out, as perceived by the twin(s). Specifically, twins who only had one other non-twin sibling, resulting in a triad of siblings, were more likely to report that their non-twin siblings felt left out. Given that the majority of twins in this study stated that their relationship with their twin was closer than with their non-twin siblings, it is no surprise that these third non-twin members of the triad often felt left out, as perceived by the twins in this study. In the following paragraphs, I provide examples of twins’ descriptions of their relationships with their non-twin siblings that have been affected by the inevitable effect of growing up with identical twins for siblings—feeling excluded.

Peter (age 51, one sibling) believed that his older sister felt excluded by his twin and himself. He talked about his current relationship with his sister who is four years older than him. According to Peter, “we’re not overly close, but it’s a good relationship.” When I asked if he believed that having a twin had an effect on the closeness of his relationship with her, he responded, “Probably. It was always about ‘the twins’...she probably felt left out.”

Vicki (age 20, one sibling) also has an older sister who feels excluded. She explained, “We have an older sister who is 4-5 years older than us. We have a good relationship, but we butt heads a lot. She feels out of the loop a lot.” Like Vicki, Parice (age 52, one sibling) also has a strained relationship with her younger sister that has been that way since childhood. Although Parice stated that she has a close relationship with her younger sister, they tend to be very different. She explained,

With our younger sister...all three of us are very close, but she and I are like oil and water. We can clash. My mother used to say, ‘A pair and a spare.’ ‘In childhood pictures...none of me.’ This was a quote from my younger sister...I still argue that when we were kids, it was always two against one—and it wasn’t always us against her. She has felt left out.

Despite qualifying her relationship with her younger sister as “very close,” Parice explained that it is different than the one she shares with her twin, citing factors such as frequency of contact and geographical distance between them. She elaborated, “We are not as close as with (twin) and I. We have a different relationship. I don’t talk to my non-twin every day. She lives 45 minutes away.”

Faith (age 34, one sibling) spoke at great length about her relationship with her older brother and shared both her and her brother’s perspective about their relationship. She explained:

We have a brother who is four and a half years older...I am not nearly as close with him as with my sister. I want to be, but it’s hard to be close to him, so I have this constant feeling of guilt. My twin and I were constantly leaving him out. He actually revealed this recently.

Thus, it was interesting that Faith not only acknowledged that she has had a more distant relationship with her older brother, but also shared that she and her brother have talked about their relationship over time and reasons why they were not as close as she is with her twin.

It is clear that in addition to jealousy, feeling left out or excluded by identical twin siblings, at least as reported by the twins in this study, was believed to be an effect of growing up in a family with identical twins. Although not all twins in this study reported their non-twin sibling relationships being characterized by jealousy or exclusion, many did, making it an important theme. Another important theme was the role of age differences between and among siblings which was believed to be, as reported by the participants in this study, a contributing factor to sibling relationships that they described as “not close” or “not as close as with my twin.”

Age Difference More Important Factor

Based on the aforementioned experiences of the twins, one might assume that if an identical twin’s non-twin sibling relationships were negatively affected by the experience of being an identical twin, it must have been due to jealousy of the twins or feeling excluded due to the triad effect. However, a number of the twins in this study mentioned that they were not very close—or not as close as with their

twins—with their older and younger siblings; when I asked for reasons why they were not very close, they noted the difference in age as a more important factor than having a twin with whom they shared a very close relationship.

Take Greta, for example, who grew up in a family of nine. Greta (age 42, seven siblings) explained, “Because of the age difference between us, our relationships are at different life stages and, therefore, we don’t have much in common.” Oriana (age 49, six siblings) also came from a large family and stated that age was the biggest factor for the more distant relationships with her non-twin siblings. She explained, “They were a lot older. Our closest brother is seven years older. We weren’t close in age. Our oldest brother got married when we were 4 years old...Age was the biggest factor.” Thus, especially for twins who have large families of origin, they reported that they are not as close with their non-twin siblings due to the large age difference and not necessarily due to the fact that they had a close relationship with their twin.

Although Ginny (age 28, three siblings) did not come from as large of a family as Greta and Oriana, she thought that the age gaps between her twin and her and their siblings was the reason for their distant relationships. She spoke for both her twin and herself, stating, “We’re not really close to them. (Brother) is twelve years older. (Sister) played Barbies with us. (Sister) was older, so she wanted to be with boyfriends, not us. Now all three are married with kids, so we don’t see them often. It was more of an age issue.” Even though she discussed the important role that age differences played, it is also possible that there were other factors involved as well. For example, she noted that all three siblings are now married, unlike herself, so it might be that she cannot relate to that stage of life or they may not live close to one another, which could affect the closeness of their relationships.

Sue (age 49, three siblings) also spoke about her relationships with her two older siblings and told me that they are very distant—one could even argue that they are strained—based on the descriptions she provided. For example, she described her relationships with two of the siblings in the following way:
Our older brother is...older. It’s a casual relationship. He’s an acquaintance. I see him at family reunions. I’m much more tolerant (of him) than (twin). Our older sister was (much) older. It was a mother-daughter kind of relationship. We have gone fifteen years without contact.

Considering that Sue refers to her own brother as an “acquaintance” and has gone 15 years without speaking to her sister, one can infer that age may be a factor for the more distant relationships, but there are also probably other factors that played a role.

Even though there is the possibility that the experience of being an identical twin could have potentially impacted the lack of closeness in the non-twin sibling relationships for some of the twins in this study, they felt strongly that the large age gaps were the main reason for the lack of closeness in their sibling relationships. It is important to remember that being a twin is all they have known for their entire lives and they may thus be unaware of the potential impact it can have on sibling relationships. I argue that both the gap in ages and the fact that they are an identical twin were main factors in the lack of closeness in their sibling relationships. Nonetheless, this study relied on the experiences and perspectives of identical twins and they had the opportunity to discuss their non-twin sibling relationships over their lifecourse, since I asked about these relationships from childhood through the present time. If they had

become closer over time, as they got older and age differences mattered less than they did when they were younger, this would have been revealed during the interviews. For some twins in this study, the age differences mattered less as they aged; for others, they mended once strained sibling relationships over time.

Sibling Relationships Not Affected

Although there were about one-half of the twins in this study who said that their sibling relationships were affected by their status as an identical twin and the resulting family dynamics, there were just as many who said that their relationships with their siblings were either not affected at all by their experience as an identical twin (i.e., they considered them to be “good” or “normal”) or they believed that other factors, such as a large age difference between their siblings and them was the main factor.

Judy (age 36, two siblings) talked about her relationship with her brother who is seven years older. Although she mentions a number of factors that potentially could affect the closeness of their relationship, such as an age gap, geographical distance between them, and dissimilar interests, she does not think being a twin affected her relationship with him at all. She reported, “It is distant and not very close. I have to force myself to be in contact with him. We don’t have anything in common.” According to Judy, her twin has a very similar relationship with him. She stated, “It’s pretty much exactly the same. He lives five hours away.”

Alexis (age 36, two siblings) also had a brother, although an older one. Alexis reported that she is not as close with her brother as she is with her twin, although she does not think that having a twin had an effect on the closeness of her relationship with him. Even though she only sees him once or twice a year, she referred to her current relationship with him as “great.” Kaylee (age 59, one sibling) did not report having a positive relationship with her brother, as did Alexis. Instead, Kaylee described their relationship as “not good—very distant.” However, when I asked her if she thought the lack of closeness was related to having such a close relationship with her twin, she said that it did not. Furthermore, she reported that her twin had a very similar relationship with their brother, in terms of closeness, describing it as “identical.”

While it is difficult to ascertain whether or not Kaylee’s and Alexis’ relationships with their brothers was actually affected by their status as an identical twin, I argue that perhaps if they were singletons, they may have been closer to their brothers; they may have sought the companionship and emotional closeness with their brothers that they had become accustomed to with their sisters. Nonetheless, from their perspective and the perspectives of other twins who said their other sibling relationships were not negatively affected by their status as an identical twin, they did not believe that being a twin was the main or even a contributing factor in determining the closeness of other sibling relationships.

James (age 58, two siblings) described his relationship with his older sister as “close, but not as close as with my twin.” He explained, “We are not as close as I am with my brother. I’m not too crazy about her husband, though. We talk, but not a lot.” When I asked if he believed having a twin had an effect on the closeness of their relationship, he responded that he did not think so.

Owen (age 51, one sibling) also spoke about his relationship with his older sister who was older by four or five years. Owen described her as “somewhat of a mother-figure” and described their relationship in the following way: “It’s somewhat distant...she works third shift and is quite a homebody.” He did not believe their relationship was affected by him being an identical twin. An interesting observation is that in the two aforementioned examples, the two male twins offered alternative explanations to justify the lack of closeness characterizing the sibling relationships. For James, he mentioned that he did not really care for his sister’s husband; for Owen, he seemed to imply that their work schedules and social lifestyles were different.

As evidenced by the aforementioned experiences, there were just as many twins in this study who believed that their non-twin sibling relationships were unaffected by the fact that they were an identical twin as those who felt that being a twin and the resulting family dynamics had an effect on their other sibling relationships. Furthermore, it should be noted that a pattern emerged in that participants who reported that their sibling relationships were “unaffected by their status as an identical twin” did so when discussing their opposite-gender sibling relationships; thus, gender may be an important factor that affects the sibling relationship. This point is elaborated on in the Discussion section. In the following section, I discuss the experiences of twins who were unsure about the role of their identical twin status on sibling relationships.

Unsure of Effect

There were some twins, such as those mentioned in the previous section, who were adamant that their non-twin sibling relationships were not affected by their status as an identical twin. However, there were also those who were not quite sure about the potential effect of being a twin. Other twins, when asked about the potential role of the twinship affecting other non-twin sibling relationships were not quite sure if that was the main reason for the more distant relationship, when compared to their twinship. Although they agreed that their relationship with their twin was much closer than their relationships with other siblings, they were not as convinced that it was due to being an identical twin. In the following paragraphs, I provide examples of these twins and their more ambivalent responses about the connection between being an identical twin and the closeness of sibling relationships.

When asked if she thought her twinship was responsible for her more distant sibling relationships, Polly (age 18, four siblings) hesitantly responded, “Yeah, it could because I’m way closer with my twin. They understand that...they view us as one person, when we’re really not.” Maya (age 46, four siblings) responded, “I guess there’s a possibility because (twin) and I always had each other...no true need to reach out to other siblings.” Rich (age 34, two siblings) reported that he was not very close with his older brother, but was vague in the reasons for the distant relationship. According to Rich, “It [our relationship] is not good. Our older brother is significantly older, but he’s the opposite of me.” As a follow-up, I asked him if he thought having an identical twin affected the closeness of his relationship with his non-twin brother and he responded, “Not really. There were definitely other things...He’s not such a nice person. There is a little jealousy on his part, but there are other reasons too.” Interestingly, he reported that his twin brother had the same relationship with their brother. He stated, “Both of us are not close at all.”

Carrie (age 36, two siblings) spoke about her relationship with her older brother, who is six years older. When I asked Carrie to talk about her relationship with him, she responded, “Our relationship is OK. We are not as close and he lives five hours away.” When I asked if she believed being a twin had an

effect on the closeness of the relationship, she answered, “It’s possible.” She also went on to say that her twin has the same relationship with their brother.

Gene (age 26, one sibling) spoke about his relationship with his older sister who is two and a half years older than him and his twin. He does not think that having a close relationship with his twin brother affected his relationship with her. He explained:

We have an older sister. We are pretty good friends. We get along well. We fought a lot when I was 10 or 12. We are not quite as close as I am/was with (twin)...I don’t think she ever felt excluded—not that I know of anyhow.

In addition to those who were not quite sure about the potential impact of their identical twin status on other sibling relationships, there were some who on the one hand, described a sibling relationship that was qualitatively different in terms of closeness than with her twin, but on the other hand, state that they did not believe being an identical twin affected the sibling relationship. For example, Ralph (age 26, one sibling) described his relationship with his sister in the following way:

Our sister is two and a half years older. It’s pretty close...she’s married now too. It’s different...a different category than with my twin. I don’t see her as part of myself. We don’t share as much as me and my twin do.

When I asked if he thought being a twin negatively affected his relationship with his sister, he responded, “I don’t think so—I don’t think she ever felt left out.”

There is the possibility that these twins had never really thought about the factors affecting their sibling relationships or perhaps they did not want to admit to their twinship having a negative effect on other areas of their lives. Nonetheless, there emerged a theme whereby when the twins were asked about the role of the twinship, they answered in an ambivalent way—unwilling to commit to a “yes” or “no”—or responded in a hypocritical way as evidenced by Ralph. Future research is warranted to better understand the role of the twinship in affecting the closeness of other sibling relationships. I turn now to discuss the evolution of sibling relationships as described by a number of twins.

Evolution of Sibling Relationships

Researchers assessing the adult sibling relationship have found that, in general, sibling relationships change over time. Specifically, compared to sibling relationships during childhood or adolescence, sibling relationships during adulthood are characterized by a decrease in conflict (Riggio 2001; Stewart et al. 2001). In addition, sibling relationships become a source of friendship and social support during adulthood (Riggio 2001, 2006). Since I specifically asked the participants to talk about their relationships with their siblings over time, in addition to a particular question asking them to describe the status of their current sibling relationships, I was able to gain an understanding of how their sibling relationships had evolved and changed over time for this group of identical twins. Most interesting was the finding that for those who had strained sibling relationships, especially those that had been negatively affected by the experience of being an identical twin, many of the relationships improved over time in terms of emotional closeness. Research has consistently shown that adult sibling relationships certainly evolve over time and the finding that strained relationships can and often do improve over time has been well documented in the literature (Cicirelli 1995). In the paragraphs below, I provide examples of identical

twins who shared stories of how and in what ways their relationships with their non-twin siblings changed and evolved over time.

Pat (age 69, three siblings) has four siblings, but spoke at length about his relationship with their older brother. He explained that he and his twin were never really close to their older brother who is five years older; however, he spoke about how their relationship has been evolving over time. According to Pat, "We were never close to older brother who is five years older. He was the athlete and he marched to his own drum. There was not much jealousy. But, in high school, we twins were compared to (him), the older brother." When I asked Pat if he thought having a twin had an effect on the closeness of the relationship with his older brother, he responded, "Yeah, especially the closeness. We [twin and I] got each other. Perhaps there was sibling jealousy. Our older brother has torn down barriers in past years as he is getting older and making amends."

Like Pat, Megan (age 26, one sibling) spoke about how her relationship with her older sibling, a sister, has evolved over time, resulting in a close relationship as young adults. She explained:

Our sister...is two years older. Growing up, we were close, but not as close as with my twin. Our older sister didn't have a companion like us. Our relationship grew...it got a lot stronger when she went to college. It is much stronger now because we don't have to see each other all the time.

Similarly, Jamie (age 55, two siblings), also attributed the "not so close" relationship with her older sister to her experience as an identical twin; however, Jamie pointed out that one of the main factors was the caretaking responsibility that was expected of the older sister. She explained, "there is a lot of resentment, especially because our older sister was our built-in babysitter....[now] my older sister lives 40 minutes away from me...we're getting back on track."

Based on the experiences of identical twins in this study, there is evidence that strained non-twin sibling relationships are resilient and even malleable, in the sense that a strained relationship in childhood, adolescence, or even adulthood does not necessarily translate into a doomed relationship that will remain strained forever. Of particular interest were the relationships that were said to have been strained due to the effects associated with growing up in a family where the identical twins shared such an emotionally close relationship with one another that they did not work on their relationships with the non-twin siblings.

DISCUSSION

Based on the results of this study, the experience of being an identical twin and the resulting close attachment between the twins, has the potential to negatively affect the closeness of non-twin sibling relationships. Specifically, about half of the 94 twins in this study believed that their status as an identical twin (especially with the very close relationship of their twinship) did affect the closeness of their non-twin sibling relationships. Some twins were unsure of the role of their twinship, while about one-half adamantly believed that being a twin had nothing or little to do with the lack of closeness characterizing their other sibling relationships. However, it is important to note that gender could be an important factor that affects the perceived closeness of the sibling relationship between identical twins and their non-twin

siblings. Research on sibling relationships has found that sibling contact and closeness is greater between sisters than in brother-brother or brother-sister dyads (Cicirelli 1991; Riggio 2000). Thus, it is no surprise that a majority of the identical twins in this study (with many more female than male participants) reported being closer to their twin than their non-twin siblings. Furthermore, gender may play an important role in whether or not non-twin siblings felt excluded or jealous, at least as perceived by the identical twins. Future research is warranted to investigate the influence of gender on sibling relationships with identical twins.

I argue that since nearly all of the twins in this study reported a very close relationship with their twins, attachment theory (Bowlby 1969) can help explain why twins may not characterize their non-twin sibling relationships as close as their relationship with their twin. Specifically, based on the results of this study, I argue that the identical twinship is an example of an attachment relationship. Applying the principles of Bowlby's theory (1969) to the identical twinship, I argue that identical twins use their twin as a target of proximity maintenance, experience distress during separation from the other, use the other as a safe haven during times of distress, and use that person as a secure base from which to explore the world. As such, if the identical twinship serves as the attachment relationship, then twins may not feel a need to seek out an attachment relationship in other siblings. Certainly, future research investigating the applicability of this theory is needed.

In addition to attachment theory, symbolic interaction theory can also aid our understanding of why identical twins' non-twin sibling relationships may be affected by the very close twin relationships. Specifically, a majority of the twins in the current study reported being very close with their identical twin. Given the societal expectation that identical twins be alike, look alike, have similar interests, etc., one could argue that identical twins have become so used to performing as an identical twin in their daily interactions—so much so that it is a factor that is responsible for the close relationship shared by the twins. Moreover, one-half of the twins in this study reported that their non-twin sibling relationships were negatively affected by the closeness of their relationship with their identical twin. The negative effect may be an unintended effect of their performance as an identical twin throughout their lives. Future research investigating the performance of identical twins in their interactions with their twins and others and especially the effect it has on their relationships with others is certainly warranted. Nonetheless, sibling relationships are the longest lasting familial relationships, so it is important for identical twins, family members of identical twins, and even professionals such as family counselors who may work with identical twins and their family members, to realize the potential effects of growing up in a family as an identical twin or as the sibling of an identical twin.

Limitations of the Current Study

Although the results of this study contribute to the literature on identical twin relationships, there are a few limitations of this study. However, these limitations point to potential areas for future research. As mentioned previously, only the twins were interviewed for this study; any "feelings" of the non-twin siblings was reported by the twins. In addition, there is no comparison group to which identical twins, as a unique group, are compared. Since this was an exploratory study of the identical twin experience, only identical twins were included. Data were not collected from fraternal twins, so comparisons could not be made between the two groups. Another limitation is that I relied on volunteer participants for this research project. As stated in the Methods section, participants were recruited through various venues, including Craigslist, Facebook, identical twins websites, and the Twins Days Festival in Twinsburg, Ohio. I

cannot be certain that those who volunteered to be interviewed are indeed representative of identical twins nationally or internationally.

In terms of sample demographics, there are limitations of this current study as well. Specifically, the majority of the sample self-identified as non-Hispanic white (69 out of 94). In addition, there were a greater number of females than males (73 females; 21 males). In terms of age, the sample could have been more diverse as well, with a majority of the participants in the young to middle adulthood range (age range 18-69, average age 41.1). Despite these aforementioned limitations, this research is a potentially fruitful starting point for future research on the identical twin relationship.

CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Results of this study suggest that the status of being an identical twin and the close attachment between the pair can affect other non-twin sibling relationships. One-half of the identical twins in the current study believed their relationships with their non-twin siblings were negatively affected due to their closeness with their identical twin; however, for the other half, they did not believe their status as an identical twin affected their non-twin sibling relationships. Instead, their relationships seem to be influenced more by other factors such as age and gender. Still others were unsure of the effect of the family dynamics associated with being an identical twin.

Although the results of the current study contribute to the literature on the identical twin relationship in the context of family life, there are ways that future research could better address some issues. First, it would be interesting if future studies were able to interview both members of the dyad—the twins and the non-twin siblings. In addition, future research on the identical twin relationship could interview both identical twins and fraternal twins to see if there are similarities and differences between the two groups. Specifically, researchers could try to determine if there is indeed something unique about the *identical* twin relationship or if fraternal twin relationships share some of the same characteristics. In addition, future researchers could seek to determine if perhaps some other factor is at play, such as gender, in that maybe fraternal twin pairs (such as two girls) share similarities with identical twin sisters. While the answer to this question is unknown, it would be interesting to find out; more importantly, having a comparison group would allow more persuasive conclusions to be drawn while creating new interesting research questions about sibling relationships in general.

Another suggestion would be for future researchers to include additional specific questions about the sibling relationships over time, including ones about strain or conflict as well as resolution of any issues over the lifecourse. Last, future researchers should strive for more diversity in terms of age, sex, and race/ethnicity. This study, along with future studies on this topic will provide a better understanding for family researchers, family counselors, and others such as family members, spouses, partners, and friends whose own personal relationships are influenced by identical twins.

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