The relationships between siblings in old age have not received much attention in social science literature. However, some researchers suggest that a reawakening of interest in and contact with siblings occurs for many people during the last part of life. Different kinds of sibling relationships that exist between older people and the ways in which each type meets or ignores the social and psychological needs of older people were examined in this study. Five types of sibling relationships emerged from data collected in open-ended interviews with 30 men and 30 women over the age of 65 who had at least one living sibling. The relationship types included Intimate (17%), the Congenial (28%), the Loyal (35%), the Apathetic (10%), and the Hostile (10%). Each type reflects a discrete pattern of instrumental support, emotional support, and contact as well as a different degree of closeness, envy, resentment, approval, and involvement with the sibling. The distribution of same-sex and cross-sex dyads among the types suggests gender differences in sibling interactions. According to the responses of the participants in this study, although the sex of the respondent did not significantly affect the position of the dyad in typology, the gender composition of the dyad did. Examining sibling relations across the life span would increase our understanding of the social and cultural contexts in which life-long sibling loyalties are fostered. Tables and a three-page reference list are provided. (Author/ABL)
SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS IN OLD AGE: A TYPOLOGY

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Paper presented at the 39th Annual Scientific Meeting
of the Gerontological Society of America
Chicago, Illinois
November 19-23, 1986

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ABSTRACT

The relationships between siblings in old age have not received much attention in social science literature. However, some researchers suggest that a reawakening of interest in and contact with siblings occurs for many people during the last part of life. This paper focuses on the different kinds of sibling relationships that exist between older people and the ways in which each type meets or ignores the social and psychological needs of older people. Five types of sibling relationships emerged from data collected in open-ended interviews with 30 men and 30 women over the age of 65 who had at least one living sibling. They were the INTIMATE (17%), the CONGENIAL (28%), the LOYAL (35%), the APATHETIC (10%), and the HOSTILE (10%). Each type reflects a discrete pattern of instrumental support, emotional support, and contact as well as a different degree of closeness, envy, resentment, approval, and involvement with the sibling. The distribution of same-sex and cross-sex dyads among the types suggests gender differences in sibling interactions. According to the responses of the participants in this study, although the sex of the respondent does not significantly affect the position of the dyad in typology, the gender composition of the dyad does.
Investigators interested in the sociology or psychology of aging have given little research attention to the significance of sibling relationships in the lives of older people. Sociologists have examined parent-child and spouse-spouse interactions more frequently and have suggested that these relationships have greater salience in the lives of older adults than do those between sisters and brothers (e.g., Bild & Havighurst, 1976; Shanas, 1960; Shanas & Streib, 1965; Streib & Beck, 1980; Tamir & Antonucci, 1977; Treas, 1977). Only a few have examined the interactions between adult siblings and the possible effects of those interactions (e.g., Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg, 1970; Rosenberg & Anspach, 1973; Suggs & Kivett, in press.)

Psychologists have examined sibling relationships as well, although they have focused more on childhood than on later life. These studies tend to assess the effects of sibling rivalry, birth order, or other variables on individual personality development (e.g., Schachter, 1964). Investigations of late-life sibling relationships have often covered a single psychological dimension like closeness rather than examining the quality of the relationship as a whole (e.g., Allan, 1977; Ross & Milgram, 1980; Cicirelli, 1980).

Although there has been little empirical research on relationships between older adult brothers and sisters (Irish, 1964), those who have conducted such research acknowledge the importance of these relationships. Allan (1977), in a qualitative study of older adult siblings, found that interest in the activities of brothers and sisters continued in old age even in the absence of regular contact. He also concluded that sisters shared a stronger affectional tie than did brothers or cross-sex pairs, a finding supported by other investigators as well (e.g., Troll, 1971). Cumming and Schneider (1961), in their study of 220 older adults, found sibling solidarity to be second in strength only to that between parent and child and more emphasized, especially among sisters, than the spouse bond in middle and old age.
There is no consensus, however, among investigators about the meaning of or desire for later-life sibling relationships. For example, some researchers (e.g., Laverty, 1962; Leigh, 1982) suggest that positive interest in siblings declines with age. Others (e.g., Allan, 1977; Cicirelli, 1985; Reiss, 1962; Ross & Milgram, 1982; Sussman, 1976) contend that older people desire more kin contact including contact with their siblings. Schvaneveldt and Ihinger (1979) suggest that sampling problems and lack of sound theoretical underpinnings have led to inconsistencies in the findings of these investigators. Although these difficulties certainly exist, it is also important to remember, as George (in press) comments, that different kinds of relationships fill different needs for older people.

The parent-child, spouse-spouse, and sibling dyads of older people should be viewed as unique and complementary rather than as similar and substitutable. In accepting this premise, we also accept that each kind of late-life relationship requires a unique set of terms to describe its characteristics. Yet researchers interested in the nature and meaning of sibling relationships in adulthood and old age have no language that allows them to describe or group those interactions as distinct from others that occur in the lives of older people.

Social scientists have examined dimensions of interactions between parents and children, between spouses, and between sisters and brothers, yet they have drawn no distinctions between the kinds of interactions within these different relationships. These examinations have been inadequate and, in some cases, misleading in assessing sibling relations because, as Hochschild (1973) suggests, intergenerational and intragenerational relations are qualitatively different and meet different intrapsychic and instrumental needs. For example, it has been widely reported that spouses and adult children meet more of the instrumental needs of the elderly than do their siblings (cf. Stoller & Earl, 1983; Hays, 1984). This, however, does not diminish the importance of the self-validation role that sisters and brothers often play for each other in old age (cf. Gold, 1986), a role
that spouses and children cannot play to the same extent because relationships with them lack the same long history.

Additionally, investigators have applied intergenerational models of helping behaviors to intragenerational relationships and found that the factors that contribute to parent-child helping do not contribute to helping between older adults and their siblings (Suggs, 1985). Clearly, new theoretical bases for describing and assessing older adult sibling relationships are needed.

Sibling relationships are complex and paradoxical, and it is clear that no classification system could account for all individual differences. Nevertheless, it would be useful to have a means of classifying these relationships along a continuum so that we might better understand the importance of these relationships in individual lives.

Several earlier investigators attempted such classifications. One identifies three predominant kinds of sibling interactions: mutual apathy, exceptional closeness, and enduring rivalry (Cicirelli, 1982). However, these categories exclude the kind of sibling relationship based primarily upon norms of family loyalty and brotherhood and not on feelings about a specific individual (Gold, 1986). Another attempt at classification identifies dimensions of separation, affiliation, and conflict within these relationships (Bedford, 1986). These dimensions describe general attitudes expressed by sisters and brothers toward each other, but levels of affiliation or intensities of conflict are not reported. No study of which I am aware has combined psychological and sociological approaches in an attempt to understand the quality of sibling relationships in the lives of older people as well as the quantity of that interaction.

The purposes of the present study were to examine the meaning of sibling relations in the lives of older people, to look for patterns of these relationships, and to see if any such patterns were dependent upon the gender of the siblings.
involved in the relationship. The paper begins with a description of the types of sibling relationships in old age, an examination of the characteristics of each, and quotations illustrating the attitudes of the people in each type. These descriptions are followed by a discussion of the differences in the gender composition of the dyads by type. The paper concludes with a discussion of the application of attachment theory in explaining the hierarchy of types and the possible uses of this typology in future research on the sibling bond in old age.

Method

Sample. This exploratory study was an analysis of interview data from thirty men and thirty women aged sixty-five and older living in Chicago and its suburbs. The mean age of respondents was 74 years, and all lived either with a spouse or alone. All respondents were white, middle class, and healthy. For the purposes of this study, potential respondents were excluded if they had no living siblings, were twins, had never been married, or were childless. Most participants were contacted through suburban senior citizen centers and a health maintenance organization. The demographic characteristics of this sample are presented in Table 1.

Procedure. All participants were interviewed individually, with most of the interviews occurring in their homes. Two of the women expressed anxiety about having a stranger enter their homes, and those interviews were conducted at senior citizen centers. The interviews ranged in length from 1 1/2 to 4 hours and traced the respondents' memories of their sibling relationships across the courses
of their lives. Much of each interview was spent reminiscing about feelings about and interactions with siblings across the entire life course. Current sibling interactions were discussed in depth twice -- at the beginning of the interview and again at the end. Most respondents commented that their sisters and brothers played a unique role in their lives and that the following emotions and behaviors were important in later-life sibling relationships: closeness, envy, resentment, instrumental support, emotional support, acceptance/approval, psychological involvement, and contact. Transcripts of the interviews were coded using four-point Likert-type scales to assess the perceived importance of these feelings and actions in each relationship. A score of "1" indicated that the variable was not perceived as important and a score of "4" indicated unusual strength of that variable.

A measure of rater reliability was obtained. A second reader coded and rated a randomly selected sample of twelve transcripts. In the 480 judgements involved, there was 96% agreement between the two raters, and no judgement differed more than one point on the scale. Agreement on the ratings in old age was 100%.

Respondents were then compared on the basis of these ratings, and five types of sibling relationships in old age were identified from the patterns of ratings on the variables.

Results

Description of the typology. Although some overlap exists between these types, the differences were sufficiently distinct so that separate kinds of relationships could be defined. The types are called here the "INTIMATE," the "CONGENIAL," the "LOYAL," the "APATHETIC," and the "HOSTILE."
Table 2 shows the mean ratings on each variable for those respondents in each of the five types.

The first type, the "INTIMATE," is characterized by ardent devotion and psychological closeness. These brothers and sisters enter each other's inner lives, confiding their most personal thoughts and feelings. They share a relationship based upon mutual love, concern, empathy, protection, understanding, durability, and stability. They willingly respond in situations of trouble and share times of joy. They often identify the other as "best friend" as well as brother or sister, and their closeness transcends a sense of family obligation. Contact is consistent and frequent, sometimes as often as once a day, and includes visits, telephone calls, and letters.

"INTIMATE" siblings exchange emotional and instrumental support. Although other siblings may pay lip service to such support, "INTIMATE" siblings provide assistance whenever necessary, often anticipating each other's needs. They express a strong sense of emotional dependence, yet physical proximity is not a necessary element of these relationships. Neither is geographical closeness sufficient for establishing or maintaining intimacy as Rubin (1985) notes. In this group of respondents, fewer than half of the "INTIMATE" siblings lived within a day's drive of each other; more than half lived over a thousand miles apart.

A long history of shared positive interaction allows these siblings to accept one another without reservation. They report intense positive psychological involvement, even during separations, and "INTIMATE" siblings report feeling incomplete when an expected contact is not made.
Some expressions of jealousy occasionally occur in these relationships, but these are not destructive or hateful. Rather, they express admiration for certain traits such as, "I envied her beauty," or "I was jealous of his business acumen." The vocabulary of these relationships does not include resentment. Anger and hurt may occur, but they are transitory and situational emotions.

An "INTIMATE" brother commented about his sister:

We’re kindred souls. She is very caring and loving with me. When she felt she should go into a nursing home, she didn’t have enough money and asked if I could give her $25,000. And the answer was immediately, "Why, of course!" We go places together and have a ball. I can tell her anything. She’s my favorite character in the whole world right now. She’s part of me; she’s my best friend.

"CONGENIAL" siblings also feel strong friendship and caring, but these brothers and sisters do not achieve the empathy of "INTIMATE" siblings. Their emotional tie lacks the unusual depth and reliability of the "INTIMATE" relationship although intimacy may temporarily be achieved during times of crisis or stress. Most of those in "CONGENIAL" relationships call their sibling a good friend but not a "best" friend, and they name a spouse or child as the person to whom they feel closest.

Consistent contact occurs, but on a weekly or monthly rather than a daily basis. Support is willingly provided at all times, but such support must usually be solicited and would not be given at the expense of the sibling’s family of procreation.

These siblings approve of and accept one another, yet they do not exhibit unreserved approbation. They occasionally express disapproval and may argue and disagree, albeit without great frequency. Although other people and activities may take precedence in their daily lives and thoughts, these siblings still share a great deal; their psychological involvement is quite strong and
positive. Should trouble occur, they offer solace and understanding; should a 
happy occasion arise, they join in the celebration.

These sisters and brothers usually do not express strong envy or resentment in 
their relationships; they may feel a twinge of jealousy or anger, however, when 
something good happens to their sibling. These feelings are neither invidious nor 
lasting, and frequently the sibling feels ashamed of such emotions. Resentment is 
also unusual; mild annoyance or anger occurs, then passes. Life events such as 
parental death, division of parental property, marriage, and divorce usually do 
not evoke resentment in these relationships.

A sister in a "CONGENIAL" relationship said of her brother:

We call each other every week and take turns, even since 
Mother died. We often go on vacations together, and we 
talk about most of our problems. Sometimes he does 
things I don't like, but we usually get over that quickly. 
He can afford to help me if I need it, and I would help him 
if he asked and if I could. I'm proud to be his sister and 
his friend.

The cliche, "Blood is thicker than water," best describes what is called here 
the "LOYAL" sibling relationship. This bond is based upon shared family 
background rather than upon shared personal involvement, and the allegiance of 
these brothers and sisters is to the norm of "brotherhood" or "sisterhood" rather 
than to the individual sibling. "LOYAL" siblings see their role as a unique set of 
carefully defined responsibilities and rewards, always governed by a strong sense 
of family obligation. They may verbalize deep closeness but, when questioned in 
depth, reveal that this closeness is idealized rather than actual. These sisters and 
brothers frequently have little or no contact regardless of proximity, but they 
appear upon request at important family occasions like weddings, funerals, 
reunions, and holiday celebrations. Their presence at these times testifies to their 
commitment to the concept of being a "good" sister or brother.
These siblings respond when asked for help during periods of illness or disability, times of financial difficulty, and in other instrumental crises. They give and receive emotional support less frequently than do "INTIMATE" or "CONGENIAL" siblings because they often operate on different emotional planes. Physical proximity is much more important to psychological involvement in the "LOYAL" relationship because these brothers and sisters do not share on a deep emotional level.

Acceptance and approval are less consistent and intense in this type of relationship. These brothers and sisters may dislike each others' spouses, occupations, or life styles and may openly express this disapproval; in fact, such disapproval may reduce contact between these siblings. They may temporarily disregard their negative feelings in times of crisis but renew them when the acute trouble has passed. Even when "LOYAL" siblings disagree completely, they feel inextricably bound by their roles and would never let their disagreements lessen their sibling ties. They show no signs of intense psychological involvement and often comment that they do not contact the other as often as they "should" -- again, a sign of the normative nature of this type of relationship -- but they also do not anticipate doing so more frequently. Certain circumstances arouse strong feelings of family solidarity; a return to normalcy causes those intense feelings to ebb.

Envy and resentment play a minor but consistent role in many of these relationships. Frequently such emotions are said to originate in childhood events that still arouse strong feelings. However these siblings show no destructive or vengeful attitudes toward each other. Their envy and resentment are ultimately transcended by the importance of maintaining their sibling bond, and by extension, their family ties.
A "LOYAL" sister says of her brother:

He's still my baby. I haven't seen him for years, but he's still my brother. I see anything that reminds me of him, I think of something he did when he was little, he's still there for me.

Being next to the oldest, a lot was expected of me and I had to take care of the younger kids. I still resent him a little for that. But he's my brother. Being brother and sister is more important. It's a two-way street. We don't bother each other and we don't hang on each other's words and we don't need each other every second. But we have each other for life because we're brother and sister.

The fourth type, the "APATHETIC" siblings, display indifference toward their sisters and brothers. They show no signs of solidarity with or responsibility for their siblings, not even because of shared family background. The most characteristic comment made by these siblings is, "We were never close, not even as children." Contact is minimal regardless of physical proximity; some of these brothers and sisters may not talk to each other for years, not because of anger or disagreement but because of indifference. Occasionally news may be passed along through other family members, but these siblings do not attend family reunions or write letters to their sisters or brothers. They do not accept and live up to the norms of "brotherhood" and "sisterhood" that are so important to "LOYAL" siblings.

"APATHETIC" relationships do not operate on an exchange basis and involve no actual or potential emotional or instrumental support. Many "APATHETIC" siblings might consider helping a sibling if asked, but they feel quite strongly that such a request will not be made. They focus on their families of procreation for assistance, and many even state that they would go to social welfare agencies for help before they would ask a brother or sister.
These siblings show no signs of psychological involvement. They rarely think about each other and, if they do, it is usually because someone else has mentioned the topic. Even times of great distress or happiness do not evoke the "united against the world" response of the "INTIMATE," "CONGENIAL," and "LOYAL" siblings. "APATHETIC" sisters and brothers do not verbalize regret over the lack of affective involvement with their siblings. They believe that the vicissitudes of life have separated them, and they make no conscious effort to overcome either physical or psychological distance. For them, no sibling bond exists (Bank & Kahn, 1982).

One "APATHETIC" brother commented about his brother:

I don't feel at all close to him. Most of the contacts now would be by order. Funerals. Things like that. We never have intimate conversations; we don't really talk at all. Our relationship has stayed quite even. Not involved. I would never in the world ask him for help and can't envision that he would come to me.

Our interests are different. It's just something I haven't given too much thought to. Both of us are in our groove and it's just that simple.

Resentment, anger, and enmity characterize "HOSTILE" sibling relationships. These siblings denounce each other and declare that nothing can ever create or reestablish any meaningful, positive relationship. No closeness exists, and contact is non-existent except when it occurs inadvertently. Some "HOSTILE" siblings state that they deliberately avoid situations in which they might see their brother or sister; others state that they will be delighted when their sibling moves out of town or finally goes into a nursing home.

These brothers and sisters not only provide no support for each other, they also state that they would immediately reject requests for support. The acceptance and approval evident in "INTIMATE" relationships turn into
rejection and disapproval for those in "HOSTILE" relationships. They feel
disdain of the sibling, disgust with the sibling's chosen lifestyle or occupation,
disapproval of the sibling's child-rearing methods, and humiliation at being
related to "that awful person." Yet these brothers and sisters are as
psychologically involved with each other as "INTIMATE" siblings. Most of them
indicate that they expend psychological energy hating the actions of their sibling,
remembering past slights, or anticipating future ones.

Resentment governs these relationships and is usually overtly precipitated
by an isolated critical event like a dispute over an inheritance or a perceived
social snub by a sibling. These incidents stand as incarnations of negative
feelings that have lasted for a long time. Envy also plays a major role in many
of these relationships and is often attributed to parental favoritism or rivalry.
"HOSTILE" siblings willingly comment on the envious feelings of their brothers
and sisters; however, their own envy seems to operate at a more subconscious
level. The aggression they display toward their siblings may be a continuation of
earlier envy or rivalry as suggested by Laverty (1962).

A "HOSTILE" brother said of his younger brother:

I don't talk to him at all. He is a very crude individual; profanity is his language. You can just see the hatred there. I don't care if I never see him again. I really hate him. He's ridiculous, and it's all out of jealousy.

I feel this contempt and this dislike and this anger very strongly. I wouldn't go to his funeral, and I'd rather starve than ask him for help. If he came to me, I wouldn't bend one iota for him. I'd walk away. I don't want to see him; I don't want to talk to him; I don't want to shake his hand.
Gender differences. An initial analysis of distribution of dyads in the typology suggests that gender does not significantly influence the kind of relationship that exists between siblings in late life. The distribution differences in the typology based upon the respondent's sex alone are not significant \( \chi^2 = 4.19, \text{df} = 4, \text{n.s.} \).

However, further examination shows that dyads that include a sister fall into the typology differently from brother-brother dyads. As shown in Table 3, those dyads that include a woman tend to cluster in the more positive types and those that have no female member fall into the types that represent less sibling involvement. The gender composition of the dyads assigned to specific types supports earlier findings about gender differences in sibling relationships (cf. Adams, 1968; Cicirelli, 1982; Cumming & Schneider, 1961). These investigators have found that sisters are the "closest" sibling pairs and brothers the most distant. While consensus has not been reached about the interactions of cross-sex siblings, these data suggest that cross-sex dyads resemble sisters more than they do brothers.

These differences must be interpreted cautiously because of the small sample size. However, they suggest that it is the gender composition of the sibling dyad rather than the gender of a sibling per se that influences the type of relationship between brothers and sisters in old age.

Discussion and Summary
This study was undertaken as an exploration of the meaning and significance of sibling relationships in old age, an area that has previously been ignored. Within this framework, two major issues about these relationships emerged.

First, these respondents suggested that siblings play a greater and more meaningful psychological role in old age than has previously been recognized. Most of these respondents indicated that siblings were of great importance to their emotional well-being. The process of shared reminiscence between the respondents and their siblings served to help them achieve a positive resolution to what Erikson (1963) calls the final psycho-social conflict of ego integrity versus despair. Even those few respondents with antagonistic relationships noted that feelings about their brothers and sisters increased in intensity in old age. Hostility, as well as closeness, took on a new meaning and encouraged a high level of psychological involvement that was independent of interaction or contact.

Second, it became clear that certain regularities in sibling relationships emerged from these descriptions of late-life sibling interactions. The typology of sibling relationships in old age described above was developed to bring an order to the data which was not evident from earlier analyses. More importantly, the typology supports the contention that the presence of a sister in the sibling dyad positively affected the perception of sibling relations. However, as it is now constructed, this typology applies only to those relationships in old age. As such, it is impossible to determine if certain combinations of life events and personality characteristics lead to the development of a particular type of relationship. Examining sibling relations across the life course would increase our understanding of the social and cultural contexts in which life-long sibling loyalties are fostered.
The different types are also consistent with attachment theory as described by Ainsworth (1972) and Bowlby (1979, 1980). Although this concept was originally developed to describe the mother-child bond, it can, as Cicirelli (1982) points out, be expanded to explain the sibling bond as well. He comments that, "Attachment can be defined as the propensity for psychological closeness and contact, although this tendency may be only intermittently reinforced with actual physical contact and closeness." (p. 3, 1982)

The term 'psychological involvement' as used in this study is consonant with this application of attachment theory. "INTIMATE" siblings feel a high degree of psychological involvement and are, by their own testimony, the most completely "attached" siblings. The types as presented here follow a descending hierarchy of attachment and involvement through the level of "APATHETIC" sibling.

However, "HOSTILE" sisters and brothers evince high levels of psychological involvement as well, albeit manifested negatively rather than positively. This strong negative affect signals what might be called "inverse" attachment. In other words, attachment originally connotes intense affectional bonds based upon identification, love, and longing for the other person, and "inverse" attachment implies an emotional bond based on hatred, with the positive emotional responses replaced by rejection of and desire for distance from the sibling.

Neither the "INTIMATE" sibling relationship based on strong positive attachment nor the "HOSTILE" relationship based on strong negative attachment requires constant contact or physical proximity for maintenance of these feelings. In fact, it is possible that intimacy and hostility in the sibling relationships of older people may actually be more easily maintained in the absence of regular interaction. The idealization of the other, whether positive or
negative, may be more easily continued if it is not confronted by reality.

Knowledge about the nature of these relationships has implications for those interested in social support systems of older people as well as for those involved with planning caregiving services for the elderly. The findings of this study should also interest those concerned with gender theory as it relates to aging and how gender differences might affect all interpersonal relationships of older people.

Demographic data indicate that, in the future, older people will have fewer adult children upon whom to depend for caregiving and support. At the same time, most members of the "baby boom" generation will have sisters and brothers available as part of their social support networks. This trend suggests that the sibling relationships of older people deserve further research attention from social scientists. A multi-disciplinary approach will help insure that important parameters of the relations between brothers and sisters in old age are not excluded from future investigations.
References


Table 1. The Study Population

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<tr>
<td>Psychological Involvement</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Envy</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resentment</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Percent of Dyads by Type*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Dyads with no female (N=13)</th>
<th>Dyads with a female (N=47)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intimate</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>19.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congenial</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>34.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyal</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>31.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apathetic</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostile</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Numbers do not sum to 100 because of rounding

*($x^2 = 11.14, \, df = 4, \, p = .025$)