

Research Article

Prodigal Children: Why Older Mothers Favor Their Once-Deviant Adult Children

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Abstract

Objectives: Past research suggests that adult children who reform their deviant behaviors (i.e., problems with drugs/alcohol or the law) are more likely to become favored by their mothers, yet the reasons underlying this phenomenon are unclear. This study employs a longitudinal, qualitative approach to explore why adult children's behavioral reforms shape changes in maternal favoritism.

Method: Analyses are based on qualitative interview data collected at 2 points 7 years apart from older mothers regarding their adult children in 20 families. Each of these families had a “prodigal child”—a child for whom desistance from deviant behaviors between the 2 waves was accompanied by newfound maternal favoritism.

Results: Findings revealed 2 conditions under which mothers came to favor reformed deviants over their siblings. First, this occurred when adult children's behavioral reformations were accompanied by mothers' perceptions of these children as having grown more family-oriented. Second, this occurred when mothers came to see reformed deviants as exhibiting a stronger need and appreciation for maternal support, relative to their siblings.

Discussion: Mothers' perceptions of children's behavioral reformations as being accompanied by greater dedication to family or reflecting a need for their mothers' support offer 2 explanations for why previously deviant adult children may become mothers' favored offspring. These findings contribute to a growing body of scholarship on the complexity of intergenerational relations by shedding new light on changing patterns of favoritism in families with a history of parental disappointment, conflict, and strain.

Keywords: Family sociology, Intergenerational relations, Qualitative methods, Within-family differences

In recent decades, studies of intergenerational relations have broadened from focusing on solidarity to exploring dimensions of parent–adult child ties that are more complex and often problematic (e.g., [Polenick et al., 2020](#); [Sutor et al., 2018](#)). Furthermore, life-course scholars have increasingly called for a greater consideration of parent–child

relationships as dynamic social ties that change with age ([M. Gilligan et al., 2018](#); [Reczek et al., 2017](#)). In this article, we use longitudinal qualitative data to explore a pattern of change with a long history in popular culture and religion—the prodigal child. The parable of the prodigal son illustrates how, upon ceasing their troublesome

behaviors, some children who previously deviated from family norms are embraced by parents with even greater delight and compassion than are their nondeviant siblings. Although substantial research has documented the impact of adult children's behavioral problems on older parents' well-being, this literature cannot explain the "prodigal child" phenomenon. That is, existing literature does not address how children's desistance from deviant behaviors may strengthen parent-child ties previously weakened by children's norm violations.

In a longitudinal study of maternal favoritism, [Suito and colleagues \(2013\)](#) found that offspring's desistance from deviance was a strong predictor of changes in favoritism. Adult children who stopped their deviant behaviors between the first and second wave of the study had nearly twice the odds of being favored compared to adult children who had never engaged in deviance ([Suito et al., 2013](#)). However, this study cannot speak to why offspring's desistance of such behaviors coincided with mothers' newfound favoritism for these children. This omission is notable given that we might expect these children to have a particularly long journey toward becoming favored, given that parents' ties to adult children with problems are characterized by notably greater conflict, strain, and disappointment ([Birditt et al., 2010](#); [Fingerman, Cheng, Birditt, et al., 2012](#); [M. Gilligan et al., 2013](#); [Greenfield & Marks, 2006](#); [Pillemer et al., 2017](#); [Suito et al., 2016](#)). Thus, focusing specifically on families with previously deviant adult children can help illuminate processes around maternal favoritism and intergenerational solidarity that can be theoretically generalized to other families with previously troubled parent-child ties. Examining processes underlying positive changes in intergenerational relations is of practical and theoretical importance, given that relationship quality between older parents and adult children is linked to the health and well-being of both generations ([Birditt et al., 2015](#); [Umberson & Thomeer, 2020](#)).

In order to better understand why adult children's desistance from deviance can shape changes in maternal favoritism, we use qualitative interview data collected at two points 7 years apart from older mothers regarding their adult children in 20 families, as part of the Within-Family Differences Study. Each of these families contains a "prodigal child"—a child for whom changes in deviant behavior between the two time points were accompanied by changes in mothers' favoritism, or feelings of emotional closeness. Longitudinal qualitative analysis allows a deep and detailed look into mothers' relationships with these children ([Fingerman et al., 2020a](#); [Gilgun, 2005](#)), strengthening our ability to understand the processes and explanations underlying changes in favoritism.

Theoretical Perspectives

Life-course perspectives on intergenerational relationships emphasize behavioral patterns, role changes, and other processes related to aging ([Bengtson & Allen, 1993](#); [Elder et al., 2003](#)). Understanding how older parents are affected

by their adult children calls for a life-course approach in order to consider how family members share enduring linkages to each other's lives ([Bengtson & Allen, 1993](#); [Elder et al., 2003](#); [M. Gilligan et al., 2018](#)). Rooted in the life-course perspective, the intergenerational solidarity model offers theoretical insight into how these linkages may be weakened by adult children's deviance and as such, strengthened by desistance from deviance.

Intergenerational Solidarity

The Intergenerational Solidarity Model has influenced scholarship on parent-adult child cohesion for several decades ([Bengtson, 2001](#); [Bengtson et al., 1976](#); [Bengtson & Roberts, 1991](#)). This model considers the parent-adult child bond multidimensional, involving six interrelated components: contact frequency, support exchanges, norms of obligation, similarity in values/beliefs, affect, and geographical proximity ([Bengtson & Roberts, 1991](#); [Silverstein et al., 1995](#); [Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997](#)). These facets offer ample reason to expect that adult children's deviance could impede intergenerational solidarity. For example, deviant offspring may be seen as violating parents' values or may be less available to exchange support due to their behaviors. Conflict and disappointment from parents (e.g., [Fingerman, Cheng, Birditt, et al., 2012](#); [Suito et al., 2016](#)), as well as stigma around drug/alcohol problems, may also deter deviant children from engaging with family.

Adult Children's Deviance and Mother-Child Relationships

Empirical findings suggest that adult children's problems are associated with detrimental consequences for parents, including worse psychological well-being ([Fingerman, Cheng, Birditt, et al., 2012](#); [Green et al., 2006](#)), lower parental marital quality when struggling children coreside with parents ([Davis et al., 2018](#)), and more strained parent-child relationships ([Birditt et al., 2010](#); [Greenfield & Marks, 2006](#)). Parents also experience more disappointment and conflict with children who fail to attain normative adult statuses or encounter problems with drinking/drugs or the law ([M. Gilligan et al., 2013, 2015](#); [Greenfield & Marks, 2006](#); [Suito et al., 2016](#)), and having an adult child with these types of problems has also been associated with fluctuations in parents' stress hormones ([Birditt et al., 2016](#)). Moreover, whereas mothers largely find it rewarding to help their adult children, they find it less rewarding to help adult children who maintain serious problems ([Bangerter et al., 2018](#); [Fingerman, Cheng, Wesselmann, et al., 2012](#)). Problems perceived as attributable to children's own choices may be especially troublesome for parents compared to physical or emotional problems, which parents may feel are less attributable to poor choices ([Suito et al., 2006](#)). The perception that the problems are within the children's control, however, also provides a basis for why reforming these

problems may have uniquely positive effects on parents' perceptions of children, in that improvement may be largely attributed to children's decision-making and value priorities. For example, to the extent that the disappointment parents experience toward deviant children reflects parents' perception that these children have deviated from parents' values, correcting deviant behaviors may signal a return to such values. Just as deviance may weaken solidarity between parents and children by interfering with contact frequency, support exchanges, and perceptions of value similarity, children's behavioral reforms may revitalize these facets of solidarity and even cultivate favoritism toward these children.

Distributive Justice and Parental Investments

Distributive justice perspectives offer an additional framework through which to understand how behavioral reformations may improve parent-child relationships, particularly if parents provide emotional support to children throughout their reformations. Distributive justice perspectives on family relations speak to how parental resources are allocated and how such allocations are evaluated by family members (see Sabbagh & Golden, 2020). The allocation principles of distributive justice suggest that perceived need is a key way by which parental investment in children is determined (Sabbagh & Golden, 2020). Deviant children may be seen as in greater need of parental investment in the form of parents' emotional support. Indeed, past research suggests that parents give more support to children with problems (Fingerman et al., 2009; M. Gilligan et al., 2017). Continued investment in children whose behavioral problems persist may foster feelings of imbalance and frustration, especially given that children with problems may not appreciate unsolicited parental help or advice (Wang et al., 2020). However, restorative justice principles suggest that balance is restored to the extent that offspring can reaffirm a shared value-consensus with parents (Dette-Hagenmeyer & Reichle, 2016). As discussed, reforming deviant behaviors may help children demonstrate shared values. Parents' perceptions of relationship balance may also grow stronger through a perceived link between their provisions of support and children's improved behavior; in other words, parents may interpret children's behavioral reforms as a parenting success commensurate with the level of support they invested. Therefore, offspring's desistance from deviance may help to rebalance bonds, thus improving relationship quality (Sabbagh & Golden, 2020).

In sum, distributive justice perspectives suggest that offspring's need for their mothers' support, along with the opportunity to restore balance in the relationship and demonstrate that such support has been well invested, offer reformed deviants one path to mothers' newfound favoritism. The intergenerational solidarity model reinforces this prediction through its focus on support exchanges and value similarity. However, intergenerational solidarity

perspectives also highlight children's strengthening of or re-engagement in family-oriented behaviors once weakened by deviance as a complementary path through which reformed deviants may become favored. Together, these frameworks help guide our analysis of processes underlying the prodigal child phenomenon.

Method

Data

Data were collected as part of the Within-Family Differences Study. Massachusetts city/town lists were used as the source of the original sample. From this list, a probability sample was drawn of women aged 65–75 with two or more children in the greater Boston area. The T1 sample included 566 mothers, representing 61% of those eligible for participation, a rate comparable to similar surveys (Marsden & Wright, 2010). For the follow-up study 7 years later, the survey team attempted to recontact each mother and at T2, 420 mothers were interviewed by telephone. Of the 146 mothers who participated at only T1, 78 had died between waves, 19 were too ill, 33 refused, and 16 were unreachable. Interviews lasted 45–120 min. Through both closed-ended and open-ended questions, mothers described relationships with each of their children. Interviews were audio-taped in almost all cases and transcribed by a team of research assistants.

At both timepoints, mothers' favoritism was captured by asking to whom among their adult children they felt most emotionally close. At T1, mothers were asked whether any of their children had experienced any problems with drugs/alcohol or had gotten in trouble with the law at any point in adulthood. At T2, they were asked whether any child had experienced these problems in the previous 5 years. Following past research (Suito et al., 2013), we coded adult children as "deviant" if mothers reported any of these problems. Our focal sample was first restricted to families with "reformed deviants"—families with adult children whom mothers reported as having engaged in deviant behaviors at T1 and having desisted from those behaviors by T2. We then differentiated between families with "prodigal children"—families with reformed deviants who were chosen by their mothers as the children to whom they felt emotionally closest at T2 but not T1—from families with reformed deviants who were not chosen by mothers at T2. The focal analytic sample consisted of 20 families in which 20 prodigal children were nested. Table 1 presents T2 demographic information for the focal sample. Prodigal children were 50.6 years old on average at T2 and 45% were daughters, 45% were last-borns, 70% were married, and 50% were parents. Fifty percent had high-school educations or less, 5% had some college, and 45% were college graduates. On average, they came from families of 3.9 children composed of 54% daughters. Sixty-five percent of families were White and 35% were Black. At

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for 20 Prodigal Children Nested in 20 Families (Analytic Sample)

	Prodigal children
Family characteristics	<i>N</i> = 20
Family size, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	3.9 (1.65)
White, %	65.0
Proportion: daughters, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	0.5 (0.29)
Mother, married, %	15.0
Mother age at T2, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	78.0 (2.90)
Has multiple reformed deviants, %	
1 RD child	50.0
2 RD children	40.0
3 RD children	10.0
Child characteristics	<i>N</i> = 20
Age at T2, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	50.6 (4.26)
Daughters, %	45.0
Youngest, %	45.0
Married, %	70.0
Child is parent	50.0
Educational attainment	
High school or less	50.0
Some college	5.0
College graduate	45.0

Notes. RD = Reformed Deviant.

T2, mothers were 78 years old on average and 15% were married. Of these families, 50% had only one reformed deviant, 40% had two, and 10% had three.

Analytic Plan

Our analyses examined processes that explain why mothers' favoritism changed when previously deviant children reformed their behaviors. We conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of mothers' transcripts at T1 and T2, focusing foremost on mothers' responses to open-ended questions regarding several different dimensions of parent-child relationships including support exchanges, emotional closeness, and perceptions of similarity. We focus exclusively on the mothers' perspectives, rather than juxtaposing different family members' perspectives, for two reasons. First, given the subjectivity involved in favoritism, mothers' own perspectives, not those of other family members, shape these processes. Second, previous research has shown that children's perceptions of both who mothers favor and why mothers favor particular offspring generally do not reflect mothers' own stated preferences (Suitor et al., 2006, 2019), thus making it unlikely that either the prodigal children or their siblings would accurately report mothers' motivations.

Our analytic process employed both inductive and deductive techniques (Charmaz, 2006; Deterding & Waters, 2018). The first four authors independently read transcripts several times to ensure understanding. The first author served as the primary data analyst. The use of one primary analyst is standard within qualitative methodology

(Silverman, 2006) and considered a highly reliable and valid approach to qualitative research (Kissling & Reczek, 2020; Roy et al., 2015).

Throughout coding, the first author developed analytic memos to further explore the themes identified and the second, third, and fourth authors independently reviewed the codes and memos and circulated feedback as a group. Initial coding was data-driven and sought to identify general themes related to mothers' perceptions of prodigal children at both time points. Given the relative prominence of two particular themes (discussed below) and based on group discussion following initial coding, more precise analytic codes were then applied. As a final step in coding, we selected two theoretically relevant "non-prodigal" comparison samples with which to cross-check our codes' prevalence. To examine whether our themes were broadly characteristic of children who desisted from deviant behaviors or if they were uniquely prominent among those whose desistance corresponded with newfound favoritism, we analyzed mothers' transcripts regarding reformed deviants who were never favored ($n = 76$). To examine whether other children would be chosen over reformed deviants for the same reasons reformed deviants were chosen over their siblings (in other words, whether nondeviant children have similar paths to favoritism or whether these paths were more uniquely connected to children's behavioral reforms), we analyzed mothers' transcripts regarding never-deviant children favored at T2 from families that had at least one reformed deviant ($n = 24$). Throughout the writing phase, the first four authors independently reviewed selected quotes and stories and discussed the developing argument until consensus was reached. Our analysis is based on the most salient themes; thus, the stories and quotes presented below represent larger patterns in the data. Pseudonyms were used to protect anonymity.

Results

Of the 20 prodigal children, 16 (80%) fit within two distinct yet not mutually exclusive themes, with four of the 16 fitting both themes: (a) mothers' perceptions of reformed deviants growing more family oriented, which emerged in nine cases (45%) and (b) mothers' perceptions of reformed deviants' stronger need for their mothers relative to their siblings, which emerged in 11 cases (55%).

For comparison, our analyses cross-checking these themes against reformed deviants who were never favored ($n = 76$) revealed that Familism fit only 11 and Neediness fit only eight cases (14% and 11%, respectively). Cross-checking these themes against never-deviant children who were favored at T2 from families that had at least one reformed deviant ($n = 24$) indicated that Familism fit only seven cases and Neediness fit only one case (29% and 4%, respectively). That these themes were far more common among prodigal children suggests that reforming one's deviant behaviors is not a sure path to favoritism on its own;

similarly, strengthened family solidarity and perceived need rarely explain mothers' favoritism toward children who were never deviant. In other words, these paths to maternal favoritism seem to be unique to reformed deviants, and reformed deviants rarely become "prodigal children" without them.

Familism

This theme focuses on mothers' views that adult children had grown more family-oriented as they reformed problematic behaviors. This involves the mother's recognition of how an adult child exhibited dedication to family or to her specifically. Children may have metaphorically "returned" to families of origin after desisting deviant behaviors, paralleling the prodigal son parable. However, children's strong family solidarity may have also become more distinguishable due to changes in other siblings' ties to home. The unifying thread among these cases is that whereas other siblings may have become more focused on their own independent lives, mothers felt that these reformed deviants exhibited unique commitment and connection to their families of origin and in particular, their mothers.

Audrey's change in perception toward her son Mark highlights one example of how a child becoming more family-oriented created feelings of closeness. At T1, Audrey indicated that Mark had encountered trouble with the police and expressed disapproval of choices that she felt violated her values, noting "[Mark and his partner are] living together and not married. He's been doing that about two years. I don't agree with that." Although she described her daughters enthusiastically, saying "they stay in touch with me constantly ... very sweet to me. Always willing to help me and don't have an attitude," her sentiments toward her son were more neutral and focused on his instrumental, rather than emotional, contributions: "[Mark] comes by every day and calls. He keeps the yard cut for me, helps out." In contrast, at T2, Audrey described Mark with the warmth and enthusiasm that had been previously reserved for his sisters: "I only have one son and he's the best! ... *Whatever* he can do to help a person, or anybody, he will do it ... And he's very, very good towards everybody, *especially me*" (emphasis added). Mark's desistance from deviant behaviors corresponded not only with a strong new provision of support to his mother, beyond his previous role of simply checking in and keeping the lawn cut, but also greater perceived dependability. When describing why she felt closest to Mark, Audrey explained, "Because he's my shoulder to lean on. He's my rock." Whereas Audrey may have been more hesitant to rely on Mark while he was engaged in behaviors she deemed troublesome, her reservations dissipated as Mark reformed his behaviors and embraced a more central family role.

Audrey and Mark's story closely parallels that of other families. Mothers who made little mention of prodigal

children's family priorities at T1 described these children at T2 using language such as:

[He's] very family-orientated and always thinking about others other than himself.

He would think of [helping] as ... what you're going through and how can I help you, rather than how it's going to affect him.

Michael is the daughter I never had ... He's the one that's always checking on me more so than the other two ... He calls me every day.

She's like a little mother to me now since ... my husband [died.] ... Kind of like my guardian angel.

Moreover, as Audrey's characterization of Mark as her "rock" suggests, mothers grew to see children as more reliable pillars of their family support networks. For example, Beverly described her son John, who struggled with alcohol abuse, as "different" and having "a mind of his own" at T1, but by T2 when John's behaviors had subsided, she saw him as "a go-to person ... you present him with a problem and he's the fixer." These examples highlight how children can become perceived as more engaged and reliable family members by their mothers as they reform their behaviors.

The pattern of reformation bringing previously deviant children closer to family can be understood further by considering how deviance can create both actual and perceived familial distance. This was best exemplified through families in which there were two or more deviant children, not all of whom reformed their behaviors. In these cases, persistently deviant children provided a counterpoint to prodigal children, helping to shed light on positive changes that accompanied their sibling's reform. A case in point, Faye strongly disapproved of both of her daughters' behaviors in early adulthood: both experienced teen pregnancies, drug issues, and left home over romantic partners whom Faye felt were poor choices. Speaking about Mary at T1, Faye explained:

She started going with somebody not of my religion and I thought it was wrong ... I had said to him also, "Go with somebody your own religion." When she was still a teen ... she moved out and was pregnant. And she has several children by different men ... Put her kids through a life of hell. And put her mother through a life of hell and her father through a life of hell.

Speaking at T1 about Mary's younger sister, Krista, Faye explained:

I gave her a choice to give up the guy she was going with who was treating her wrong. Cause I carried her for nine months and I didn't raise her for some son of a bitch to treat her like that. I gave her a choice: either give him up or leave the house. So she decided to leave ... I think she got herself pregnant too young. And I don't

think her life is going, well, the way a mother wants for her children.

Although both daughters exhibited similarly deviant behaviors as young adults, their paths diverged over time. At T2, Faye described her relationship with Krista in a notably warmer light than at T1:

Krista lives very nearby from me. And we go visit my granddaughter, her daughter, a lot.
I don't think [Krista] realizes this, but I feel close to [her]
... I think it's because she's been living so nearby for all these years and we've been together.

Faye's explanation for why she chose Krista as the child to whom she felt closest (second quote) demonstrates Faye's appreciation of the changes Krista made that resulted in more opportunities to spend time together. The emotional closeness fostered by Faye's appreciation of Krista's changes highlights how contact frequency and geographic proximity can foster solidarity (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991). In contrast to the reconciliation that accompanied Krista's sustained desistance from deviant behaviors and decision to move back nearby, Faye felt alienated by Mary at T2 and saw her continued struggle with alcohol as self-imposed:

I haven't really been involved with my eldest daughter for a long time. But you know, we occasionally, occasionally talk, but I think she alienated herself from me since she's been out of this house.

This quote reflects how Mary's lack of contact with her mother exacerbated Faye's feelings of emotional distance toward Mary by T2. Moreover, whereas Faye enjoyed sharing time with Krista's daughter *with* Krista, she was disappointed in Mary for what she saw as an abandonment of family:

[Mary] didn't do a very good job with her children. [She] decided she wanted to have her life back and ... be on her own. She thought, "well, I'm going out drinking again," and disrupted her [family], and now she's getting ... a divorce and her youngest daughter came to live with me. Nothing to be proud of.

Faye's disappointment in Mary for being more focused on her own desires than her family's well-being underscores how adult children's deviance can negatively influence family solidarity by violating parents' values (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991). Taken together, Audrey's and Faye's stories exemplify a common pattern in mothers' relationships to their prodigal children: mothers felt that by the time these children had reformed their deviant behaviors, family had grown more salient for them. Their stories speak to the emotional value mothers attributed to the greater attention, support, and dedication that reformed deviants showed their families as they reformed their behaviors.

Need for Additional Maternal Support

The second theme reflects a distinct yet closely related dimension underlying emotional closeness: children's need for and receipt of support from their mothers. Prodigal children were often seen by their mothers as needing their support in ways that their siblings had generally outgrown; further, mothers perceived that these children were also highly appreciative of the support. Exemplifying the "neediness" with which prodigal children were seen, mothers at T2 commonly described these children using language such as:

I feel he needs, he needs extra, ah, not extra care ... but he needs extra fortifying.

Alice, she goes and gets, but then she's "Mommy I need [you]." But [my other daughter], she's more on her own ... [Alice] needed more help.

Peter's just my baby; that's all. He comes to me when something's wrong or I go [to him] ... I have to cool him down.

The refrain from mothers that their prodigal children needed them suggests that these offspring's greater needs for support affirmed mothers' roles in their lives, subsequently facilitating favoritism. In other words, mothers may not only care for their children because they love them, but also because they love that their children need them. Whereas other children may have been seen as more "on their own" and may have made their mothers feel unneeded, adult children who continued to confide in their mothers for help and support could validate maternal identities that are often highly salient to women (Simon, 1992). As identity theory would predict, this identity validation strengthened mothers' positive feelings toward prodigal children (Burke & Stets, 2018).

Mothers' relationships to reformed deviants may grow especially close when mothers see their children's behavioral reformations as positive reflections of help they provided in response to these children's greater perceived need. For example, Dorothy's story of patience and persistence illustrates how an adult child's return to a "straighter path" was especially rewarding for a mother who partially credited this change to the support she provided. Reflecting on the drug and alcohol problems that her son Joey developed around age 18, Dorothy disappointedly remarked "Joey was straying back then," but her tone swung quickly into pride as she described his behavioral reformations: "He's come out of it and done a good job. He's living a good life. Got a wife and a step-son that's in the military." Notably, Dorothy emphasized her own role in facilitating the reforms she saw as necessary in order for Joey to "live a good life":

He had some problems in the past and he came out of them *with our help*. And he's been great ever since. He just shows his gratitude a lot ... He shows that he came out of it very well. (Emphasis added)

This example highlights how emotional closeness can emerge not only from feeling needed and investing support, but more specifically, from feeling that one’s investment of support has yielded good returns. If children did not change their behaviors, their ongoing need for help could be depleting, rather than affirming to mothers. But, as Dorothy described, if children showed that they “came out of it well,” their changes could be viewed as gestures of gratitude for their mothers’ support and could restore a sense of balance, which, as distributive/restorative justice perspectives on family relationships would suggest, improved relationship quality (Sabbagh & Golden, 2020).

In some cases, prodigal children’s heightened need for their mothers was in response to particular pivotal events in their lives. Wanda’s experience shows how rescuing a loved one in crisis can instill a powerful sense of attachment, particularly when one’s helping role is validated through expressions of gratitude. At T1, Wanda described a crucial phone call with her daughter through which Wanda guided her daughter to get the help she needed:

She called me and she says to me one time when she was on drugs ... that she wants to die [and] would I let [her] daughter’s father take her [daughter] ... I said “Young lady, just be prepared because the EMS is coming to get you and gonna take you to the hospital right now.” And I called them and I told them that I wanted them to go and pick up my daughter ... She went after that and she got help for herself. She got straightened up. And then after she got straightened up, she said “Oh, Mommy, if it wasn’t for you, I don’t know where I’d be at.”

For Wanda, the experience of not only being the first person her daughter called for help, but also being told that it was *her* role that made all the difference created a unique bond. When one feels that one’s role has been validated and appreciated, one develops more positive emotions toward a relationship (Burke & Stets, 2018). Both Dorothy’s and Wanda’s stories highlight how mothers’ support to children in their times of need, and the behavioral reformations that their support enabled, can validate maternal identities by representing parental “successes” that make mothers’ investments well worthwhile. Thus, deviant children may have given mothers a “run for their money,” but when the greater emotional investments mothers made in their needier children were balanced by children’s resulting behavioral changes and gestures of appreciation, these “returns on investments” cultivated mothers’ closeness toward these children.

The Roles of Social Structural versus Socioemotional Factors in Favoring Reformed Deviants

The findings presented above suggest that mothers’ perceptions of prodigal children’s increased emphasis on family and their increased reliance on their mothers, relative

to their mothers’ other children, played a central role in mothers’ newly developed favoritism toward these offspring. However, it is nevertheless possible that there are also social structural differences between the reformed deviants who became their mothers’ favored children and those who did not. To explore this question, we compared favored and not-favored reformed deviants on the social structural characteristics that previous research has found to most consistently predict maternal favoritism: child’s gender, marital status, and birth order (Suitor et al., 2013, 2016; Suitor & Pillemer, 2006).

As shown in Table 2, our comparison of reformed deviants whom mothers did and did not favor at T2 reveals a very similar pattern to that found in other studies. Specifically, mothers were more likely to favor daughters, last-borns, and married children (The sample of prodigal children reported in Table 2 ($n = 23$) differs from the focal analytic sample ($n = 20$) due to substantial missing data from three mothers that prevented us from including them in qualitative analyses). However, it is worth noting that the magnitude of difference by these social structural characteristics is not as large as is the case for mothers’ perceptions of their children’s familism and need for support. Further, whereas other qualitative studies of favoritism have found that mothers often explained their differentiation on the basis of these structural characteristics (Suitor et al., 2016; Suitor & Pillemer, 2006), none of the mothers who chose reformed deviants as their favored children mentioned these characteristics. Thus, taken together, the findings suggest that both social structural factors and mothers’ perceptions play important roles in determining which reformed deviants become prodigal children. However, mothers’ emphasis on children’s familism and need for support, coupled

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics Comparing Prodigal Children to Reformed Deviants Never Favored

	Prodigal children <i>N</i> = 23	Reformed deviants never favored <i>N</i> = 76
Family characteristics		
Family size, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	3.9 (1.65)	4.9 (1.97)
White, %	60.0	46.1
Proportion: daughters, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	0.5 (0.29)	0.5 (.25)
Mother, married, %	15.0	25.0
Mother age at T2, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	77.8 (3.10)	77.2 (3.00)
Child characteristics		
Daughters, %	45.0	32.9
Youngest, %	45.0	14.5
Married, %	70.0	50.7
Themes from mothers’ descriptions of children		
Familism, %	45.0	14.0
Neediness, %	55.0	11.0

with the absence of these structural characteristics in their explanations, suggests that socioemotional factors played the stronger role in mothers' favoritism toward prodigal children.

Discussion and Conclusion

The central aim of this article was to examine the conditions under which adult children's desistance from deviance shaped changes in maternal favoritism. To investigate this question, we analyzed longitudinal qualitative interview data from 20 families with "prodigal children"—children who became favored by their mothers only after desisting from deviant behavior. Our analysis revealed that mothers began favoring reformed deviants when the mothers perceived that these children had become more family-oriented or had greater need for and appreciation of maternal support relative to their siblings.

Taken together, this pattern of findings can be conceptualized through the lens of Bengtson's intergenerational solidarity model (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991). First, children for whom deviant behaviors may have once impeded their family involvement can re-engage with family and become more reliable sources of support following behavioral changes. The finding that mothers were more likely to favor reformed deviants because they perceived them as more family-oriented also speaks to the importance of value similarity and family obligation in facilitating family solidarity (see Bengtson & Roberts, 1991). Given that family roles tend to be particularly salient for women (Simon, 1992), mothers may favor those children whom they perceive as attributing similar importance to family. Prioritizing family commitments as one desists from deviance may therefore have a particularly positive effect on one's mother to the extent that she perceives it as an evolution toward her values. This interpretation of the family orientation theme is consistent with research framed within the intergenerational solidarity model demonstrating the link between shared values and parent-child relationship quality (Hwang et al., 2018; Kim-Spoon et al., 2012), including maternal favoritism (Suitor et al., 2013, 2016).

Second, the findings also suggest that mothers may characterize previously deviant adult children as continuing to have greater needs for maternal attention and support. Although parents who perceive that their children need *too much* support or who find helping stressful experience worse well-being (Bangerter et al., 2015; Fingerman, Cheng, Wesselmann, et al., 2012), children who make positive changes with parental help and who show appreciation for such help may make parents feel entrusted, useful, and successful. Consistent with the intergenerational solidarity model's concept of functional solidarity, providing support to family can cultivate cohesion and closeness (Bangerter et al., 2018; Bengtson & Roberts, 1991). This is also consistent with past research showing that supporting family members in need can be a highly rewarding experience and can have positive effects on parents' well-being (Bangerter et al., 2015, 2018).

The findings are also consistent with principles of distributive justice (see Sabbagh & Golden, 2020), in that mothers often devoted disproportionate support and attention to these children because of the greater need they perceived. Moreover, many mothers saw the support they invested as playing an integral role in children's behavioral changes. The sense of satisfaction mothers derived from these changes is consistent with research on parental investment in children, suggesting that parents prefer to help children who exhibit "promise" in order to increase the likelihood of favorable outcomes (e.g., Fingerman et al., 2009; Steelman & Powell, 1991). Thus, our findings contribute to literature on parental investments and distributive justice within families by suggesting that perceptions of "good returns," exemplified in our data by children's behavioral changes and gestures of appreciation, can affirm maternal identities and rebalance relationships, thus facilitating emotional closeness and favoritism.

Although our primary focus is on the role of mothers' perceptions on patterns of favoritism, it is important to consider how these findings fit within the broader literature on within-family differences. Thus, we compared reformed deviants who did and who did not become favored by their mothers on the three social structural factors that have been found to consistently predict favoritism—child's gender, birth order, and marital status. Consistent with previous scholarship, prodigal children were more likely to be daughters, last-borns, and married (Suitor et al., 2013, 2016; Suitor & Pillemer, 2006). However, when comparing favored and not-favored reformed deviants, the differences in these groups' social structural characteristics were small relative to the differences in mothers' descriptions of these children's familism and need for support. The greater salience of these socioemotional factors was also reflected in the qualitative data by the lack of attention mothers gave to children's structural characteristics in their discussions of prodigal children.

The present study points to several directions for future research. First, parent's gender may have played an important role in shaping the findings. In particular, given differences in socialization patterns of women and men across the life course (Fingerman et al., 2020b; C. Gilligan, 1982), fathers might be more likely to view some reformed deviants' neediness as intrusive and demanding, rather than affirming. Thus, future studies should compare mothers' and fathers' responses to their reformed deviant offspring. Second, future research on adult children's problems and intergenerational relations should consider alternative ways of conceptualizing and measuring deviance. Given that our definition of deviance is restricted to trouble with the law and substance abuse, future research should examine how "reforming" other nonnormative behaviors (e.g., problems with supervisors, unemployment, relationship problems, behaviors that parents deem risky or immoral) affect parent-child closeness. Moreover, in recent years, the social context in which both substance abuse and "trouble with the law" occur has become an important consideration when

attributing culpability for these phenomena. For example, opioid dependency following medical treatment for pain may be viewed very differently by parents than children's use of "party drugs." Similarly, perceptions of children's culpability for "trouble with the law" are likely to vary depending on whether the "trouble" is attributed to behaviors by law enforcement versus actions by the adult children themselves. Thus, future research should explore variations in how parents conceptualize deviance and how the contexts in which adult children's problems are embedded affect parent-child relationships.

In conclusion, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship on the complexity of intergenerational relations and their effects on the well-being of both generations. In particular, our findings shed new light on patterns of change in intergenerational relationships with a history of disappointment, conflict, and strain (Birditt et al., 2010; Fingerman, Cheng, Birditt, et al., 2012; M. Gilligan et al., 2013, 2015; Greenfield & Marks, 2006; Suitor et al., 2016). Because poor parent-child relationship quality is associated with worse physical and psychological health for both parents and adult children (Birditt et al., 2015; Umberson & Thomeer, 2020), understanding and explaining positive changes in these bonds is important for promoting family well-being across the life course.

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Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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