

Within-Family Differences in Parent–Child Relations Across the Life Course

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ABSTRACT—Despite a powerful social norm that parents should treat offspring equally, beginning in early childhood and continuing through adulthood, parents often differentiate among their children in such domains as closeness, support, and control. We review research on how parent–child relationships differ within families, focusing on issues of parental favoritism and differential treatment of children. We begin by examining within-family differences in childhood and adolescence and then explore differentiation by older parents among adult children. Overall, we find considerable similarities across the life course in the prevalence, predictors, and consequences of parents’ differentiation among their offspring.

KEYWORDS—within-family differences; parental differential treatment; parental favoritism; parent–child relations; intergenerational relations

Literature and history abound with stories of parental favoritism, beginning with the Biblical story of Israel favoring his last-born son Joseph and continuing to Pat Conroy’s novel *Beach Music*. In the early 20th century, both Sigmund Freud, who was his mother’s favorite, and Alfred Adler, who was not, noted the potential consequences of such favoritism for children’s development. Despite the attention that these two eminent psychoanalysts gave to this issue, scholars showed little interest in the topic until the early 1980s. In fact, according to Harris and Howard (1983), who published one of the earliest pieces on differential treatment, neither *Psychological Abstracts* nor the *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* contained any references to parental favoritism in the preceding 20 years.

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Since that time, within-family differentiation among offspring has gained widespread attention across a range of disciplines including evolutionary biology, psychology, sociology, and economics. Although much of this work has emphasized the ways in which birth order affects characteristics such as intelligence, personality, and social attitudes, an increasing focus has been on within-family differences in parent–child relationships. In this article, we explore the patterns and consequences of such differentiation in parents’ relationships with their offspring across the life course, drawing upon a review of more than 120 articles and books.

We examined literature on both “parental favoritism” and “parental differential treatment” (PDT), given that the study of within-family differences encompasses these closely related areas of research. The primary distinction between these two phenomena is that favoritism generally refers to parents’ differential affect and preferences among their children, whereas PDT typically describes ways in which parents differentiate among their children behaviorally, such as displays of affection, discipline, and the distribution of other interpersonal and instrumental resources. The literature on the early stages of the life course has included studies of both favoritism and PDT, whereas scholarship on within-family differences after children have entered adulthood has focused primarily on favoritism.

WITHIN-FAMILY DIFFERENCES IN CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

Parents are commonly exhorted not to favor some of their children over others, yet beginning in early childhood they often differentiate in terms of closeness, support, and control. Although the exact figures vary widely across studies, reports suggest that, in one third to two thirds of families, parents favor one or more of their children in at least one domain (Shebloski, Conger, & Widaman, 2005; Volling & Elins, 1998).

There is obviously considerable variation in reporting of PDT. One of the most important sources of this variation can be attributed to the diversity of methodologies. For example, studies of families with preschoolers often include some combination of in-person interviews with the parents, videotaping of interactions between family members, and parents' completion of written questionnaires. In studies in which offspring are of school age or older, interviews are frequently conducted with the children.

Researchers have also examined whether reports of parental differentiation vary by the structural position of the family member responding. For instance, children tend to report favoritism more frequently than do their parents (Feinberg, Neiderhiser, Howe, & Hetherington, 2000), consistent with Bengtson's (Bengtson & Kuypers, 1971) argument that parents have a greater stake than children in portraying their intergenerational relations as harmonious. Although there is often overlap between parents' and children's perceptions, there is also substantial incongruence, highlighting the importance of collecting data from multiple family members. For example, in one recent investigation (Kowal, Krull, & Kramer, 2006), only about 60% of parents' and children's reports agreed about whether parents differentiated regarding affection.

Even across studies using subjects in the same structural position in the family and the same mode of data collection (e.g., interview), the measurement of PDT varies considerably. Few studies ask parents directly to differentiate among their children, instead typically asking the same questions about each child and using those data to create difference scores. No single measure of parents' reports of PDT has become standard, although a large number of investigations have used the Parent-Child Relationship Survey (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). When studying children's perceptions of PDT, scholars have increasingly used the Sibling Inventory of Differential Experience (Daniels & Plomin, 1985), which asks subjects to compare their experiences directly to those of one of their siblings.

Explaining Differentiation: The Role of Family and Individual Characteristics

The literature provides a rich body of findings regarding which children are most often favored, the forms that favoritism takes, and the conditions under which particular patterns occur. We provide an overview of those findings that are the most uniform across studies.

One factor that predicts families in which parents differentiate is high levels of stress, particularly in the lives of parents. For example, favoritism is more common when parents experience marital problems and when children have serious health problems (Singer & Weinstein, 2000).

A second set of factors associated with PDT involves family structure and composition. Birth order is one of the structural

factors that has received substantial attention in the study of PDT. The preponderance of evidence regarding comparisons of first- and last-borns suggests that youngest children are advantaged in terms of parental affection (Tucker, McHale, & Crouter, 2003), supporting theories that last-borns develop more sensitive social skills in an attempt to create a special position in families (Sulloway, 1996). However, the findings of other first-versus last-born comparisons are less consistent. In contrast, the literature is quite uniform regarding middle children, who are much less likely to be favored than are their eldest and youngest siblings across multiple domains (Hertwig, Davis, & Sulloway, 2002). Another important family-composition factor is the presence of both biological and nonbiological children, particularly in blended families (O'Conner, Dunn, Jenkins, & Rasbash, 2006). Parents in such families, especially mothers, tend to favor their biological children.

Finally, studies show that parents' differential responses reflect variations in the children's behaviors and personalities. In particular, mothers and fathers have been found to direct more control and discipline toward children whose behaviors are disruptive or aggressive, and express more warmth toward children who show greater positive affect toward their parents (Tucker et al., 2003). Perhaps because of the tendency for boys to display more aggression and for girls to show more warmth, studies have often found greater differential treatment in families with mixed offspring than in families with single-gender offspring (O'Conner et al., 2006; McHale, Updegraff, Tucker, & Crouter, 2000), particularly regarding affection and time spent with children. In some studies, this gender difference has been reduced by controlling for children's aggression and affection (Tucker et al., 2003).

Consequences of Within-Family Differentiation in Childhood and Adolescence

From the review we have presented, it is clear that parents often favor one or more of their children in childhood and adolescence—but does such differentiation have any consequences? Research has shown that least-favored children experience lower levels of self-esteem, self-worth, and sense of social responsibility, and higher levels of aggression, depression, and externalizing behaviors (Feinberg et al., 2000; Singer & Weinstein, 2000).

The evidence for effects of being most favored is less clear than for the effects of being unfavored. Although being favored has been shown to produce positive outcomes under particular sets of circumstances (McHale, Crouter, McGuire, & Updegraff, 1995; McHale et al., 2000), in most cases, it appears that regardless of which child is favored, PDT is problematic for the well-being of all offspring in the family (Singer & Weinstein, 2000). Findings regarding the effects of PDT on the quality of siblings' relationships are among the most consistent in this body of research. With few exceptions, the literature indicates that

siblings express less warmth and greater hostility toward one another when parents show favoritism (McHale et al., 1995).

One important line of inquiry involves the role of children's perceptions of fairness. The evidence suggests that perceptions of fairness moderate the relationship between PDT and both well-being and sibling relations. In some cases, perceptions of fairness have positive consequences. For example, children express less hostility toward siblings who receive more attention if they believe the other children are needier. However, perceptions of fairness can have detrimental consequences as well, such as when these perceptions lead unfavored children to feel that they deserve less affection from their parents than do their siblings (McHale et al., 2000).

It might be tempting to interpret these findings as evidence that difficult children increase parents' differentiation and sibling tensions, rather than differentiation affecting children's outcomes. Although it is clear that children's behaviors and temperaments affect these patterns (Tucker et al., 2003), our review leads us to believe that offspring characteristics alone cannot adequately account for the association between PDT and children's outcomes. First, as noted above, the literature demonstrates that PDT, regardless of the form it takes, typically increases hostility among siblings (McHale et al., 1995). Second, the findings of longitudinal investigations suggest that, over time, being unfavored by parents produces behavior problems in children (Richmond, Stocker, & Rienks, 2005).

WITHIN-FAMILY DIFFERENCES IN ADULTHOOD

There is a vast literature on the quality of relationships between parents and their adult children; however, with few exceptions, this work is based on studies using between-family designs. In this review, we restrict our discussion to findings from studies that have used within-family designs and are therefore comparable to investigations of PDT in earlier life-course stages. Unlike research on children and adolescents, there are fewer than 20 articles on within-family differences in adult child–parent relations, about half of which are based upon only one study; thus, it is impossible to answer questions about PDT in adulthood as fully as those about earlier stages of the life course.

Do Parents Continue to Differentiate Among Adult Children?

Studies of the middle and later stages of the life course have shown that parents are more likely to differentiate among their offspring in adulthood than in childhood. For example, in a recent study of 556 families, more than three quarters of mothers named a particular child whom they would choose as a confidant, nearly three quarters named a child whom they would prefer provide them assistance when ill or disabled, and nearly two thirds named a child to whom they were most emotionally close (Suitor & Pillemer, 2007). Fathers' reports closely mirrored

those of the mothers. The majority of mothers also differentiated among their adult children regarding providing emotional and instrumental support (Suitor, Pillemer, & Sechrist, 2006). Studies using smaller and less representative samples (Aldous, Klaus, & Klein, 1985) have shown similar patterns. Such high levels of favoritism are particularly striking given that, in these studies, parents were asked directly to differentiate among their children.

Reports from offspring reveal that adult children often believe that their parents favor some children (Bedford, 1992; Suitor, Sechrist, Steinhour, & Pillemer, 2006). Suitor and colleagues found that 66% of children accurately reported that their mothers differentiated regarding closeness, but only 44% were correct about *which* offspring were favored (Suitor et al., 2006); most children reported themselves as the favorite.

Explaining Differentiation in Adulthood

Intergenerational relationships change as children move into adulthood, bringing with them the history from childhood onto which is superimposed a new set of expectations. Despite this different context, the factors that best explain within-family differences in parent–adult-child relations are related, conceptually, to those from earlier stages of the life course. These are (a) similarity between parents and children, (b) developmental histories, (c) equity and exchange, and (d) family structure and composition. Specifically, parents are more likely to favor daughters, children who share their values, children who have achieved normative adult statuses and avoided deviant behaviors, children who have provided parents with support, and children who are more geographically proximate (Aldous et al., 1985; Suitor et al., 2006). Mothers are also closest to last-borns and least close to middle-borns (Suitor & Pillemer, 2007). Further, these patterns are similar for Blacks and Whites. Thus, these patterns mirror those in childhood in terms of normative societal and parental expectations, positive affect, gender, and birth order.

Consequences of Within-Family Differentiation in Adulthood

There has been less attention to the effects of PDT in adulthood than to its effects in childhood. However, the few studies that have examined this issue reveal patterns similar to those of earlier stages of the life course. For example, adults who perceive that they have been unfavored in childhood or adulthood have less close relations with their parents (Bedford, 1992; Boll, Ferring, & Filipp, 2003). Being slightly favored improves adult children's relations with their parents; however, being highly favored also reduces relationship quality.

Consistent with earlier stages, sibling relations are most positive when adult children are treated equally (Boll et al., 2003). Also similar to studies in childhood, perceptions of fairness moderate the relationship between PDT and relations

with parents and siblings (Boll et al., 2003). Whether PDT in adulthood has consequences for well-being remains to be investigated.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

There is clear evidence that many parents differentiate among their offspring from the earliest stages of childhood through adulthood. Further, several factors explain PDT across the life course, such as children's behaviors, birth order, and gender. Because data do not yet exist to examine whether consistency in differentiation occurs within the same families across several decades, we can only speculate about this possibility. Some patterns we might expect would change over time; for example, comparisons across studies of families with preschoolers, adolescents, and adult children suggest that parents may differentiate more as their children mature. However, several of the factors that play important roles in PDT remain stable within families throughout the life course, perhaps leading some families to be more prone to continued favoritism. Thus, we would expect continued favoritism in families with more than two children, with children of both genders, and with children who engage in deviant behaviors in both adolescence and adulthood.

Another important research question that has yet to be answered is how PDT is moderated by socioeconomic status and race. Only a handful of investigations at any point in the life course have included minorities, and studies of the early life course have relied almost exclusively on middle-class families.

Finally, future research may show that PDT and parental favoritism have long-term effects on outcomes affecting both parents and adult children. An important dynamic in parent-child relations in later life revolves around both the anticipation of and actual provision of care for older parents. Further, most parents have strong preferences regarding which children will provide care to them in the later years (Suito & Pillemer, 2007). It is possible that such expectations will affect both parents' and children's well being. For example, it is possible that greater caregiver stress and burden may result if circumstances require a nonpreferred child to become the primary caregiver. Thus the match between parental preference for caregiving and actual outcomes for both parties is likely to be a fruitful topic for research.

In sum, we know a great deal about the existence and predictors of parental favoritism across the life course and about the consequences of these patterns in childhood. We hope that future research will help us to better understand the ways in which these patterns change across time, are moderated by social factors, and have effects on children's and parents' well-being across the life course.

Recommended Reading

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