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When Mothers Have Favourites: Conditions under Which Mothers Differentiate among Their Adult Children*

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RÉSUMÉ

La recherche démontre que, dans beaucoup de cas, la mère ne voit pas ses enfants adultes sur un pied d'égalité s'agissant de l'intimité et du soutien, sans avoir toutefois étudié pourquoi des mères affichent des préférences parmi leurs enfants et d'autres pas. Pour cerner ce qui fait que des mères ont des préférences et que d'autres n'en ont pas, nous avons examiné les données d'une étude intrafamiliale dans le cadre de laquelle 553 mères âgées ont été interrogées à propos de chacun de leurs enfants. Ces mères considèrent presque toutes leurs enfants différemment des points de vue de l'intimité émotionnelle, de l'inclination à la confiance ou de la préférence dans la dispensation des soins. Des analyses multivariées révèlent que les valeurs de la mère et la proximité entre la mère et ses enfants sous l'angle des valeurs sont des indicateurs prévisionnels de l'expression d'une préférence à l'égard d'enfants concernant l'intimité et la propension à se confier, alors que les caractéristiques démographiques de la mère et des enfants permettent de cerner les mères qui expriment une préférence en matière de dispensation des soins. Les mères noires sont moins enclines que les mères blanches à préférer un enfant plutôt qu'un autre pour se choisir un confident, tandis que la race n'a aucune influence sur la probabilité que la mère s'estime plus proche de certains de ces enfants des points de vue de l'intimité émotionnelle ou du rôle d'aidant naturel. Somme toute, ces constatations indiquent que l'expression d'une préférence de la mère à l'égard de certains de ses enfants adultes est courante; en outre, les indicateurs familiaux du favoritisme maternel reflètent les schémas qui ressortent des analyses dyadiques.

ABSTRACT

Research has shown that mothers often differentiate among their adult children in terms of closeness and support; however, studies have not addressed why some mothers report preferences among children and others do not. To distinguish between mothers who do and do not report favouring some of their adult children, we used data from a within-family study in which 553 older mothers were interviewed about each of their children. Almost all of the mothers reported differentiating among their children regarding emotional closeness, confiding, or preference among caregivers. Multivariate analyses revealed that mothers' values and mother-child value similarity predicted which mothers differentiated among their children regarding closeness and confiding, whereas mothers' and children's demographic characteristics predicted which mothers differentiated regarding preferred caregivers. Black mothers were less likely than white mothers to differentiate when seeking a confidant; however, race played no role in mothers' likelihood of differentiating regarding emotional closeness or help during illness. Taken together, these findings indicate that differentiating among adult children is common; further, family-level predictors of mothers' differentiating mirror the patterns shown in dyad-level analyses of mothers' favouritism.

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For more than 30 years, gerontologists have explored the nature and dynamics of parent-child relations in later life. A large body of research has demonstrated the continuing importance of intergenerational relationships as both parents and their offspring grow older (Bengtson, 2001; Fingerman, 2001a; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Considerable empirical effort has been devoted to describing the structure of parent-child relations in later life and the number and type of interactions and exchanges between the generations (cf., Davey, Janke, & Salva, 2005; Lye, 1996). Recent attention has turned to the development of new conceptual and empirical approaches to studying older parents and their aging children. In particular, scholars have begun to employ models designed to capture the complexity of intergenerational relationships (Connidis, 2001; Fingerman, 2001b; Lye, 1996; Pillemer & Luescher, 2004). In this article, we apply concepts derived from the developmental psychology literature on younger families—specifically, within-family differences and equal treatment of children—to intergenerational relations in later life.

In many areas in family life, discrepancies emerge between an idealized version of kin relationships and the daily reality in which such relationships are lived. One such idealized image is equal treatment of children. Parents are commonly exhorted not to show favouritism (Cleese & Bates, 2001; Cohen & Cohen, 1997; Faber & Mazlish, 1987), yet research has shown that mothers often differentiate among their children in terms of closeness and support in both early and later stages of the life course (Aldous, Klaus, & Klein, 1985; Brackbill, Kitch, & Noffsinger, 1988; Brody, Stoneman, & McCoy, 1992; McHale, Crouter, McGuire, & Updegraff, 1995; Ryff, Schmutte, & Lee, 1996; Suitor & Pillemer, 2000, 2006, 2007; Suitor, Pillemer, & Sechrist, 2006). Family scholars have identified characteristics of adult children that lead them to be preferred by their older parents. For example, mothers are most emotionally close to

daughters, to last-borns, and to children who share the parents' values and live in closer proximity (Aldous et al., 1985; Suitor & Pillemer, 2000, 2006, 2007). Further, mothers are most likely to provide support to daughters, to children who have provided the parents with support, and to those who have health problems (Suitor et al., 2006).

Thus, there is evidence both that mothers favour some adult children over others and that predictors of differentiation can be identified. However, one key question is thus far unanswered: What distinguishes between mothers who profess equal preference among their offspring and those who report favouritism toward a specific child? In the present article, we address this question, using a within-family design in which 553 older mothers were interviewed about each of their adult children. Specifically, we explore whether mothers' differentiating among their children can be explained by characteristics of the mothers or by characteristics of the adult children.

Explaining Maternal Favouritism: The Role of Mothers' and Children's Characteristics

Based on the literature on within-family differentiation in both younger and older families, we suggest that mothers' favouritism can be explained by a combination of mothers' own characteristics and those of their children. The characteristics that we believe are the most salient in this regard are mothers' stress, mothers' resources, mothers' values, children's resources, parent-child similarity, and the history of children's support.

Mothers' Characteristics and Favouritism

Stress, Resources, and Favouritism

Studies of group processes across a wide array of contexts have shown that stress experienced by group members generally produces high levels

of interpersonal conflict, often leading to differential treatment of group members. The literature suggests that such processes are common within families as well as other social groups. For example, the literature on younger families has shown that mothers differentiate among their children during times of marital distress and instability (Almeida, Wethington, & Chandler, 1999; Belsky, Rovine, & Taylor, 1984; Brody et al., 1992; Deal, 1996; Easterbrook & Emde, 1987; Quinton & Rutter, 1998). One explanation for differentiation under these circumstances may be the scarcity of mothers' interpersonal resources when experiencing high levels of distress, a scarcity that reduces their ability to provide adequate resources to all of their children. Specifically, changes in labour force participation and psychological well-being often lead mothers to be less available and responsive to their children in the period following separation and divorce (Bruce & Kim, 1992; Sun, 2001; Williams, Takeuchi, & Adair, 1992). Under such circumstances, mothers may differentiate because they can no longer adequately meet all of their children's needs for attention.

Perhaps mothers also differentiate in later stages of life, when stressful circumstances render their resources inadequate to meet their adult children's needs. If this is the case, mothers will be more likely to differentiate when they have inadequate financial, social, or psychological resources. Thus, mothers will be more likely to differentiate when they have lower educational attainment and income, are unmarried, or have lower well-being. Further, when mothers have a large number of children, their ability to distribute interpersonal resources equally among their offspring is likely to be reduced.

Values

Thus far, we have emphasized the role of stress and insufficient resources in predicting when mothers will favour some children over others. However, we suggest that mothers' values also play a role in explaining differentiation. One dimension of values that we believe will be particularly predictive of mothers' favouritism is religiosity. Virtually all religions emphasize family cohesion (Abbott, Berry, & Meredith, 1990; Marks, 2004; Pearce & Axinn, 1998), and equitable treatment of family members is a basic tenet of family cohesion. Further, individuals who report high religiosity tend to hold more traditional family values (Christiano, 2000; Marks, 2004), including an emphasis on family cohesion and solidarity (Marks, 2004). Thus, we hypothesize that women who report high religiosity will be less inclined to favour some children over others in the emotional or instrumental dimensions of their relationships.

Race

Finally, we believe that race may play a role in parental favouritism. Race has been virtually ignored in studies of within-family differences; however, the discussion presented above suggests that black mothers may be substantially more likely than white mothers to differentiate among their children due to greater resource limitations. Black women have, on average, lower incomes, lower educational attainment, and higher rates of being single (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003a, 2003b, 2004). Thus, based on the resource scarcity argument above, we might expect black mothers to be more likely to differentiate among their children, particularly regarding preferences for instrumental support.

Alternatively, however, it can be argued that cultural differences may override the tendency to differentiate in response to lack of resources. Specifically, black families have been found to have higher levels of familism and filial responsibility than white families and are more likely to believe that children and parents should provide assistance to one another (Burr & Mutchler, 1999; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004). Further, there is evidence that such strong feelings of familism lead to higher levels of intergenerational support (Lee, Netzer, & Coward, 1999). These normative patterns may counterbalance the tendency to differentiate in response to scarce resources. Thus, rather than developing a single hypothesis regarding race and favouritism, we will explore these alternative hypotheses.

In sum, we suggest that mothers who will be the most likely to differentiate will be those who have (a) more limited economic and social resources; (b) higher religiosity; and (c) a larger number of children among whom to allocate resources. We test competing hypotheses regarding the role of race in maternal favouritism.

Children's Characteristics

Mothers' differentiating may also be influenced by children's characteristics. The literature on younger families suggests that in the early years mothers are most likely to favour daughters (Apter, 1990) and last-borns (Brody et al., 1992; Brody, Stoneman, & Burke, 1987; Bryant & Crockenberg, 1980; Tucker, McHale, & Crouter, 2003). The limited literature on parental favouritism in the middle and later years shows the continuation of some of the patterns found in studies of younger families as well as some additional factors that emphasize similarity between parent and child and adult children's attainment of normative adult statuses. As noted above, previous within-family analyses of later-life families have

shown that mothers are particularly likely to favour daughters, last-borns, children who share the mothers' values and provide their mothers with support, and children who live nearby (Aldous et al., 1985; Suito & Pillemer, 2000, 2006, 2007; Suito et al., 2006).

We suggest that these factors may, at a family level, affect mothers' likelihood of differentiating among their children at all, in addition to affecting which children mothers favour when they do differentiate. For example, mothers report being most emotionally close to daughters and having strong preferences for daughters as caregivers (Aldous et al., 1985; Suito & Pillemer, 2000, 2006, 2007); thus, in a family in which all of the children are daughters, we hypothesize that mothers will be less likely to differentiate than in a family with both sons and daughters.

Similarly, we suggest that in families in which all of the children have graduated from university, mothers will be less likely to differentiate regarding which child they prefer to turn to for help with care or in the face of a crisis; this is because all children who completed university are likely to have similarly high levels of financial and informational resources and the time flexibility generally associated with professional occupations (Luckey, 1994; Merrill, 1997). We believe that the same processes will lead mothers to be less likely to differentiate in families in which all of their children are employed.

Given the importance of value similarity in predicting which children mothers will select as sources of closeness and support (Pillemer & Suito, 2006; Suito & Pillemer, 2006, 2007), we also posit that mothers' perceptions that their children share their values will affect favouritism. Specifically, mothers will be less likely to differentiate in families in which all of the children in the family share the mothers' values.

Lastly, the literature on birth order can be used to suggest that the degree to which the children are clustered by age may affect mothers' likelihood of differentiating. As already noted, studies of families in both the early and later years of the life course have found that mothers tend to be closest to their last borns (Brody et al., 1992; Bryant & Crockenberg, 1980; Suito & Pillemer, 2007; Tucker et al., 2003); further, in the case of adult children, mothers are more likely to turn to their first-borns for support (Suito & Pillemer, 2007). Thus, it appears that mothers often differentiate among their children on the basis of birth order. It is not possible to have an aggregate measure of birth order; however, the closer spaced the offspring, the more they are likely to be developmentally similar in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The literature

on within-family differences in younger families has shown that such similarity in developmental stage among siblings reduces parents' likelihood of favouritism (Reiss et al., 1994). Given the importance of the history of family relationships in determining current relationship quality (Rossi & Rossi, 1990), such patterns, set in the early years, may continue into adulthood. Further, adult children who are closely spaced are more likely to occupy the same social-structural positions at any one point in time. Thus, we anticipate that mothers whose children are closely spaced will be less likely to differentiate because many of the bases for differentiation will be muted.

In summary, we hypothesize that children's aggregate characteristics affect mothers' likelihood of differentiating among their children. When there is variation in the family regarding children's socio-demographic characteristics, values, and age-spacing, mothers will be more likely to differentiate than when there is greater homogeneity among their children.

Relationship Context

Finally, we suggest that the factors explaining mothers' likelihood of differentiating may vary by relationship context. For example, mothers with fewer economic resources may be especially likely to differentiate regarding sources of instrumental support because they are less able to purchase formal assistance. Therefore, scarcity of economic resources should play a greater role in predicting which mothers differentiate regarding sources of assistance during illness than in predicting which mothers differentiate regarding emotional closeness and confiding. In contrast, mothers' interpersonal resources, such as psychological well-being, should play a more important role in emotional closeness and confiding.

We also anticipate that the importance of children's specific aggregate characteristics will vary by relationship context. In particular, we anticipate that the characteristics that have been found to predict which children mothers select at the individual dyad level will also affect whether mothers differentiate among their children. For example, as already noted, we have found that, at the individual mother-child dyad level, mothers tend to be most emotionally close to daughters, last-borns, and those who share their values (Suito & Pillemer, 2006, 2007). However, for help in illness, children's educational level, as well as their gender and value similarity, predict which offspring mothers prefer (Suito & Pillemer, 2006, 2007). Therefore, we hypothesize that gender composition and value similarity will be important in explaining when mothers differentiate across all three relational contexts, whereas aggregate educational

level will explain differentiation only for help during illness. Further, we anticipate that children's age spacing will predict mothers' likelihood of differentiating regarding emotional closeness but not regarding confiding or help during illness. Thus, we anticipate that the effect of children's aggregate characteristics will closely follow the pattern we have found in the way mothers differentially favour children across the contexts of emotional closeness, confiding, and preferences for help during illness.

In summary, we hypothesize that mothers' differentiating will be predicted by a combination of (a) socio-demographic characteristics, stress, resources; (b) values; and (c) degree of homogeneity in adult children's characteristics. We also hypothesize that resources will affect mothers' differentiating regarding the instrumental more strongly than regarding the emotional aspects of the parent-adult child relationship.

Methods

Design Goals

The project was designed to provide data on within-family differences in parent-adult child relations in later life. The research plan was similar to those that have been used by developmental psychologists such as McHale et al. (1995) in studying within-family differences in earlier stages of the life course. The design involved selecting a sample of mothers 65–75 years of age with at least two living adult children and collecting data from them regarding each of their children. A further decision was including only community-dwelling mothers in the sample to reduce the likelihood that the women would be in need of extensive caregiving, thus allowing us to study relationships outside of the context of caregiving.

Sample

Massachusetts city and town lists were the source of the sample. Massachusetts requires communities to keep city/town lists of all residents by address. Town lists also provide the age and gender of residents. The first step was randomly to select 20 communities from the total of 80 that were available. With the assistance of the University of Massachusetts, Boston, we drew a systematic sample of women ages 65–75 from the town lists of 20 communities in the greater Boston area, specifically the census-designated Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area (PMSA). Once communities were selected and appropriate town lists obtained, an equal number of women in the target age group was

selected from each community. We then sent a letter of introduction to each woman describing the study and explaining that an interviewer would contact her from the centre for Survey Research to screen her to determine her eligibility for participation and attempt to schedule a face-to-face interview if she met the study criteria.

The design called for interviewing 550 mothers. The interviewers began contacting potential respondents and continued until they had reached the target number of cases. Because interviews were conducted simultaneously by several individuals who coordinated only once daily, a slightly larger number of interviews was completed than originally planned. Data were collected from 566 mothers, which represented 61 per cent of those who were eligible for participation. The interviews were conducted between August of 2001 and January of 2003.

Each of the mothers was interviewed for between 1 and 2 hours. More than 90 per cent of the interviews were taped and fully transcribed. Field notes were prepared for each interview that was not fully taped.

Sample Characteristics

Mothers' Characteristics

Seventy per cent of the mothers were non-Hispanic white, 28 per cent were black, 1 per cent were Asian, and 1 per cent were Hispanic. Because we compared blacks and whites, women who identified themselves as Asian only or Hispanic only were excluded from the analysis; thus, the sample used in the analyses presented here was composed of 396 white and 157 black mothers.

The mothers were between 65 and 75 years of age ($M = 70.9$; $SD = 3.1$). Forty-six per cent were currently married, 36 per cent were widowed, 17 per cent were divorced or separated, and 1 per cent had never been married. Twenty-four per cent of the mothers had completed less than high school, 43 per cent had completed high school, and 33 per cent had completed at least some years in university. Eighty-two per cent were not employed; 18 per cent were employed. Eighty-eight per cent of the respondents were willing to report their income for the previous year; of these, 34 per cent had a total family income of less than \$20,000, 26 per cent had an income between \$20,000 and \$29,999, 12 per cent had an income between \$30,000 and \$39,999, 8 per cent had an income between \$40,000 and \$49,999, and 21 per cent had an income \$50,000 or greater. Forty-six per cent of the women were Catholic, 45 per cent were Protestant, 5 per cent were Jewish, and 4 per cent reported another religion or said that they had no religious affiliation. The number of living children of women

in the sample ranged from 2 to 13 ($M = 4.4$; $SD = 1.7$). Although the mean number of living children in this sample was higher than would be found in a nationally representative sample of women ages 65–75, it is important to remember that this was due primarily to the criterion that all participants must have at least two living adult children. The mean number of children of women in the sub-sample was similar to that found in national samples, such as the National Survey of Families and Households (Sweet & Bumpass, 1996), when comparing specifically to mothers in the same age group who had two or more children.

Adult Children's Characteristics

The adult children ranged from 20 to 61 years of age ($M = 42.8$; $SD = 5.9$). Forty-nine per cent were daughters. Fifty-seven per cent were currently married, 6 per cent were cohabiting, 14 per cent were divorced or separated, 21 per cent were never married, and 1 per cent were widowed. Forty-four per cent of the adult children had completed high school, 13 per cent had completed some years in university, 28 per cent were university graduates and 15 per cent had completed graduate school. Eighty-one per cent of the children were employed. Seventy per cent of the adult children were themselves parents (mean number of children = 2.3; $SD = 1.2$).

Measures

Dependent Variables

To determine parental preference, we asked the mothers a series of questions that required them to select among their adult children, the method most commonly used in the literature on parental favouritism in childhood and adolescence. Specifically, each mother was asked to select which child: (a) she would be most likely to talk to about a personal problem; (b) she would prefer help from if she (the mother) became ill or disabled; and (c) she felt the most close to emotionally. Each child was coded as 0 for each item for which he or she was not chosen, and 1 for each item for which he or she was chosen. In cases where respondents were initially unwilling to differentiate among their children, the interviewers were instructed to prompt the mothers with a follow-up question (e.g., "But is there one child whom you are most likely to talk to about personal problems?"). Analyses of the data revealed that fewer than 5 per cent of the mothers were moved by the prompt to select a child and that there were no differences between mothers who did and did not respond to the prompt.

We asked several other questions regarding differentiation among adult children. The three relational contexts we have chosen to focus on in this paper

are similar in their emphasis on preferences regarding support; items exploring other relational dimensions, such as conflict and ambivalence, are beyond the scope of the present paper (for discussions of these issues, see Pillemer, Sutor, Mock, Sabir, & Sechrist, in press).

Independent Variables

The independent variables we included in the analysis were those for which there was theoretical justification. Specifically, these were measures of (a) mothers' socio-demographic characteristics, stress, and resources; (b) mothers' values; and (c) homogeneity in adult children's socio-demographic characteristics and similarity of adult children's values to those of their mother.

Mothers' Characteristics. Mothers' characteristics that were included in the multivariate analysis were educational attainment, marital status, age, race, number of living children, physical health, depression, and religious values. Mothers were asked into which category their education fell: (1) *less than high school*, (2) *some high school*, (3) *high school graduate*, (4) *post-high school vocational*, (5) *some university*, (6) *university graduate*, and (7) *completed graduate school*. We chose to include only education, rather than both education and income as measures of resources because approximately 12 per cent of the respondents refused to report their income, whereas fewer than 1 per cent failed to report their educational level. Marital status was measured by whether the mother was currently married (0 = *not married*; 1 = *married*). Age was calculated by subtracting the year the mother reported she had been born from the year in which she had been interviewed. Race was measured by asking the mothers a series of questions regarding their race and ethnicity. Women who identified themselves as black and Asian or black and Hispanic were coded as black. Women who identified themselves as Hispanic ($n = 8$) or Asian ($n = 5$) only were excluded from the analyses involving race. Each mother was asked how many children she had living. Depression was measured using the seven-item version of the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale CES-D (Ross & Mirowsky, 1984). Mothers' physical well-being was measured using a single item on subjective health: "Would you say that your physical health is *excellent* (5), *very good*, *good*, *fair*, or *poor* (1)?" Finally, religious values were measured by asking the mothers, "How important are your religious or spiritual beliefs to you—are they *very important*, *somewhat important*, *a little important*, or *not important at all*?" Because more than half of the women reported that their religious beliefs were very important,

we transformed the variable into two categories—*very important* (1) and *less than very important* (0).

Adult Children's Aggregate Characteristics. The adult children's aggregate characteristics that were included in the multivariate analyses were gender; educational attainment; similarity of mother-child outlook; provision of support to the mother during the previous year; proximity; and age distance from other siblings in the family. All of the information on adult children's characteristics used in the present paper was provided by the mothers.

Mothers were asked into which category each of their adult children's educational attainment fell: (1) *less than high school*, (2) *some high school*, (3) *high school graduate*, (4) *post-high school vocational*, (5) *some years in university*, (6) *university graduate*, and (7) *completed graduate school*. Mothers were also asked whether each child was currently *working for pay*, *unemployed*, *disabled*, *retired*, *taking care of (his/her) family and home*, or *something else?* For the present analysis, children were categorized as *employed* (1) or *not employed* (0). Child's gender was coded 0 = *son*, 1 = *daughter*. Perceived value similarity was measured by the item: "Parents and children are sometimes similar to each other in their views and opinions and sometimes different from each other. Would you say that you and [child's name] share very similar views, similar views, different views, or very different views in terms of general outlook on life?" To measure support provided by children to the mothers, the women were asked: "In the past year, has [child's name] given you: (1) help during a personal crisis, (2) help during an illness, or (3) help with regular chores, such as shopping, yard work, or cleaning?" The responses to these three items were pooled to create a single dichotomous measure of support for each child.

Proximity was measured by how far away the child lived in terms of travel time by ground transportation. Categories were (1) *same house*, (2) *same neighbourhood*, (3) *less than 15 minutes away*, (4) *15–30 minutes away*, (5) *30–60 minutes away*, (6) *more than an hour but less than 2 hours*, (7) and *2 or more hours away*. Mothers were asked the actual age of each of their children.

Because our argument focused on the variability of adult children's characteristics within the family, aggregate measures of each child's characteristics were created. These measures were all designed to distinguish between families in which the children were the same on each characteristic and those in which there was variation within the family. The way in which these characteristics have been found to affect maternal favouritism at the individual mother-child dyad level dictated how the measures were created. The "positive" value (1) for the variables that were included in the analyses were (1) *all daughters*, (2) *all university graduates*, (3) *all employed*, (4) *all children shared the mother's outlook*, (5) *all children provided mothers with support*, and (6) *all children lived within thirty minutes of the mother's home*. The referent category for each variable was *some other combination* (0). Average age difference among siblings was calculated by aggregating the average number of years between each sibling within the family.

Results

Rates of Mothers' Differentiating

The findings presented in Table 1 indicate that mothers' differentiating among their children is common. Few of the mothers did not differentiate in at least one of the three contexts in which we asked them to name a child (7 per cent) and nearly half

Table 1: Mothers' differentiating by relationship context (in percentages) (N = 553)

	% of Mothers Who Named a Particular Child
Overall Rates of Differentiation	
Did Not Differentiate in Any Context	6.8
Differentiated in One Context	18.6
Differentiated in Two Contexts	32.0
Differentiated in Three Contexts	42.7
Rates of Differentiation within Contexts of Mother-Child Relations	
Child Mother Most Emotionally Close to	61.6
Child Mother Would Most Likely Talk to about Personal Problem	78.6
Child Mother Prefers Provide Help if She Is Ill or Disabled	71.3

differentiated across all three contexts (43 per cent). Mothers were very willing to name a particular child to whom they would talk about a personal problem (79 per cent); they were somewhat more reluctant to name a child whom they would prefer provide them assistance if they were ill or disabled (71 per cent), and substantially more reluctant to name a child to whom they were most emotionally close, although nearly two thirds did so (62 per cent).

Explaining When Mothers Differentiate

Emotional Closeness

Table 2 presents the findings of the logistic regression analysis of mothers' likelihood of differentiating among their children regarding emotional closeness. As shown in Model 1, only mothers' values regarding religion helped to distinguish between mothers who did and did not favour one of their children over others in the family. Specifically, the odds of mothers' being closest to a particular child were less than half as great for women who reported that their religious

beliefs were very important to them than for women whose religious beliefs were not that important.

As shown in Model 2 of Table 2, mothers' religious values remained an important predictor of favouritism regarding emotional closeness, after children's aggregate characteristics were entered into the equation. Two aggregate child-level characteristics, level of similarity in mothers' and children's outlook and age clustering of children, predicted mothers' favouritism. In other words, as we hypothesized, in families in which mothers reported that all of their children shared their general outlook, mothers were far less likely to differentiate. As shown in the final column of Table 2, the odds of mothers in these families differentiating were only 60 per cent as great as the odds in families in which some or none of the children shared their mothers' general outlook. Also consistent with our expectations, mothers were more likely to differentiate among their children regarding emotional closeness when the average age spacing among children was greater; for each additional year

Table 2: Logistic regression analysis of mothers who named a child they were most close to emotionally (N = 512)

Mother's Characteristics	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	SE	Odds Ratio	B	SE	Odds Ratio
Education	0.02	0.06	1.02	0.04	0.06	1.04
Married	-0.20	0.21	0.82	-0.20	0.21	0.82
Age	-0.04	0.03	0.96	-0.04	0.03	0.96
Race (1 = black)	-0.29	0.25	0.75	-0.32	0.26	0.73
Number of Children	0.07	0.06	1.07	0.05	0.06	1.05
Depression	0.01	0.03	1.01	0.02	0.03	1.02
Health	-0.05	0.10	0.95	-0.04	0.10	0.97
Religiosity	-0.81***	0.24	0.44	-0.81***	0.24	0.44
Aggregate Child Characteristics						
All Daughters	—	—	—	-0.47	0.31	0.63
All University Graduates	—	—	—	0.03	0.25	1.03
All Employed	—	—	—	-0.25	0.20	0.78
All Share Mother's Outlook	—	—	—	-0.51**	0.21	0.60
All Provided Mother Support	—	—	—	-0.04	0.20	0.96
All Live within 30 Minutes	—	—	—	0.07	0.26	0.93
Average Age Difference among Siblings	—	—	—	0.17**	0.08	1.19
Model χ^2/df		16.82**		31.557***		
		8		15		

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

of spacing between children, the odds of mothers' being closest to one of her children increased by 19 per cent.

In sum, values played a substantially more important role than did demographic factors in distinguishing between mothers who did and who did not report that they were closer to one of their children. Mothers were also more likely to differentiate when their children were spaced further apart, a characteristic that increases the degree of distinction among children in developmental stage and birth order.

Confiding

As shown in Model 1 in Table 3, the factors predicting differentiation regarding confiding were mothers' demographic characteristics; mothers who selected a particular child as a confidant were white, less educated, and younger. Contrary to our expectations, mothers' values and psychological and physical well-being played no role in whether mothers chose a particular child as a confidant.

As shown in Model 2 of Table 3, mothers' education, age, and race remained as predictors of mothers' confiding, after children's characteristics were included in the equation. Only two aggregate child characteristics—support provided to the mother and shared outlook—predicted mothers' likelihood of differentiating among their children regarding confiding. Women whose children all held the mothers' outlook and had provided the mothers with support during the previous year were less likely to favour particular children as confidants.

Thus, counter to expectations, the only mother characteristics to predict differentiation were demographic; however, consistent with our hypotheses, the aggregate child characteristics that helped to explain differentiation regarding confiding were values and support.

Help during Illness

As shown in Model 1 in Table 4, only mothers' educational attainment distinguished between mothers who did and did not name a particular

Table 3: Logistic regression analysis of mothers who named a child in whom they would confide about a personal problem (N = 512)

Mother's Characteristics	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	SE	Odds Ratio	B	SE	Odds Ratio
Education	-0.16**	0.07	0.85	-0.16**	0.08	0.85
Married	-0.17	0.25	0.84	-0.21	0.26	0.81
Age	-0.08**	0.04	0.92	-0.08**	0.04	0.93
Race (1 = black)	-0.63**	0.30	0.53	-0.74**	0.31	0.48
Number of Children	0.11	0.07	1.12	-0.01	0.08	0.99
Depression	-0.01	0.03	0.99	-0.01	0.03	0.99
Health	0.01	0.12	1.01	0.01	0.13	1.01
Religiosity	0.16	0.26	1.18	0.16	0.27	1.18
Aggregate Child Characteristics						
All Daughters	—	—	—	-0.47	0.33	0.63
All University Graduates	—	—	—	-0.10	0.29	0.91
All Employed	—	—	—	0.10	0.25	1.11
All Share Mother's Outlook	—	—	—	-0.44*	0.24	0.64
All Provided Mother Support	—	—	—	-0.50**	0.25	0.61
All Live within 30 Minutes	—	—	—	-0.26	0.30	0.77
Average Age Difference Among Siblings	—	—	—	-0.05	0.09	0.96
Model χ^2 df	15.91**			28.62**		
df	8			15		

*p < 0.10; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01

child as their preferred caregiver during illnesses. As was the case for confiding, less educated mothers were more likely to name a preferred caregiver.

Consistent with our expectations, children’s demographic characteristics were more important than were children’s values in predicting which mothers named a particular caregiver. As shown in Model 2 of Table 4, the odds of mothers differentiating were only about 60 per cent as high when all of their children were daughters, and only about half as high when they were all university graduates or had all provided the mothers with support during the previous year. Surprisingly, considering that proximity is usually a strong predictor of mothers’ support preferences, aggregate proximity had little effect on mothers’ likelihood of differentiating. Finally, mothers’ educational attainment continued to predict differentiation in Model 2.

Mothers’ Explanations for Their Differentiating

Given the role of both mothers’ own values and value similarity between mothers and children, we expected that the mothers’ statements would provide insight into the ways in which values affected the women’s likelihood of differentiating. When mothers named a particular child as the one to whom they were most close, chose as a confidant, or preferred as their caregiver, we asked why they had chosen that child. When discussing *specific* children, mothers often emphasized similarity of attitudes (Suito & Pillemer, 2000, 2006, 2007). We expected that, conversely, mothers who did not differentiate might spontaneously discuss the similarity of their children’s values. However, mothers who provided an explanation for why they had not differentiated focused almost exclusively on the high levels of closeness, rather than similarity, to all of their children: “I just feel close emotionally to all of them. [I am] very, very lucky”; “I love them both the same if you want to know.”

Table 4: Logistic regression analysis of mothers who named a child who they would prefer provide them help during illness (N = 509)

Mother’s Characteristics	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	SE	Odds Ratio	B	SE	Odds Ratio
Education	-0.21***	0.06	0.81	-0.16**	0.07	0.85
Married	0.16	0.22	1.17	0.14	0.23	1.15
Age	-0.03	0.03	0.97	-0.03	0.04	0.97
Race (1 = black)	0.03	0.28	1.03	-0.19	0.29	0.83
Number of Children	0.01	0.06	1.01	-0.11	0.07	0.89
Depression	0.03	0.03	1.03	0.03	0.03	1.03
Health	0.02	0.11	1.02	0.03	0.11	1.04
Religiosity	-0.35	0.25	0.70	-0.42	0.26	0.66
Aggregate Child Characteristics						
All Daughters	—	—	—	-0.55*	0.14	0.58
All University Graduates	—	—	—	-0.72***	0.26	0.49
All Employed	—	—	—	0.09	0.23	1.10
All Share Mother’s Outlook	—	—	—	-0.01	0.23	0.99
All Provided Mother Support	—	—	—	-0.60***	0.23	0.55
All Live within 30 Minutes	—	—	—	-0.25	0.28	0.78
Average Age Difference Among Siblings	—	—	—	0.03	0.09	1.03
Model χ^2 <i>df</i>	15.10*			37.35***		
	8			15		

*p < 0.10; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01

Because of the consistency of the mothers' statements, we re-analysed the data including the average level of mother-child closeness. This analysis revealed no effects of mother-child closeness on mothers' likelihood of differentiating; further, none of the other findings changed with the introduction of mother-child closeness. (Tables not shown.) Thus, although mothers are aware of the role of values in their selection of *particular* children, they do not appear to be aware that this factor plays a role in whether they favour any of their children over others.

In contrast, the comments of mothers who did not differentiate regarding help during illness more closely mirrored the patterns revealed by the multivariate analysis. In particular, mothers who did not select a particular caregiver felt that such a decision was unnecessary because all of their children had been reliable sources of support in the past: "I can't say which one because both the girls would be equally attentive if you know what I mean"; "Any of them, really. They would all pitch in. My kids are always here for me."

In previous analyses of these data, we have found that mothers often explained which child they chose as a caregiver on the basis of gender, education, or occupation; however, the mothers who did not choose a particular caregiver did not focus on the homogeneity of their children's educational level or gender.

In summary, both mothers' and children's aggregate characteristics played roles in predicting whether mothers favoured some children over others. As anticipated, mothers' and children's values were important in predicting whether mothers named a child to whom they were most emotionally close, whereas mothers' and children's resource-related demographic characteristics were more important than were values in explaining differentiation regarding mothers' caregiving preferences. Contrary to expectations, neither mothers' physical nor psychological well-being predicted which mothers differentiated among their adult children. To our surprise, mothers' stated explanations for being unwilling or unable to name a child to whom they were most emotionally close or in whom they confided made no reference to values. In the context of caregiving, mothers' stated explanations for their unwillingness or inability to differentiate among their children focused on the homogeneity of past support but made no reference to the issues of gender or educational attainment.

Discussion

The present study is the first to attempt to determine whether mothers' favouritism in later-life families is fuelled by mothers' characteristics, adult children's characteristics, or the specific relationship context. Our findings show clear patterns of differentiation. More than nine tenths of the mothers in the study differentiated among their children in at least one of the relationship contexts about which we inquired; further, a substantial majority of mothers were willing to name a particular child in each relationship context. Thus, despite powerful norms regarding favouritism, it appears that older mothers differentiate among their children concerning emotional closeness, confiding, and preferences for caregiving.

Based on the literature on stress and favouritism in earlier stages of the life course (Almeida et al., 1999; Belsky et al., 1984; Brody et al., 1992; Deal, 1996; Easterbrook & Emde, 1987; Quinton & Rutter, 1998), we hypothesized that mothers would be most likely to differentiate among their children in the face of scarce economic and interpersonal resources. We also hypothesized that mothers' likelihood of differentiating would be influenced by their values. We noted that these two sets of factors might be in conflict with one another—women with fewer resources might well hold the sorts of traditional family values that would lead them to attempt to avoid differentiating, regardless of the scarcity of economic or interpersonal resources. We also suggested that such countervailing factors might be particularly pronounced for black mothers, based on the combination of scarce resources and strong family solidarity (Burr & Mutchler, 1999; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004).

Our findings provided only mixed support for our hypotheses regarding scarce resources. Less educated mothers were more likely to differentiate among their children regarding confiding and caregiving; however, mothers who were black or older and therefore at greater risk of scarce resources were *less* likely to differentiate regarding confiding. Thus, despite the findings regarding mothers' education, there was no clear pattern regarding mothers' demographic characteristics. Further, neither mothers' physical nor psychological well-being predicted differentiation across any relational context.

The hypothesized role of values in mothers' differentiating was better supported by the findings. As anticipated, mothers' values were strongly related to their likelihood of naming a child to whom they were emotionally close. Specifically, mothers who reported that religion was very important to them were less

than half as likely to favour a particular child as were women with lower reported religiosity. The importance of values in mothers' differentiating was particularly highlighted when examining the effects of children's aggregate characteristics. When all of the children shared the mothers' outlook on life, mothers were substantially less likely to name a child to whom they were most emotionally close or in whom they confided. Thus, consistent with the literature on parent-adult child affect (Bengtson, 2001; Lawton, Silverstein, & Bengtson, 1994; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997; Suito & Pillemer, 2000, 2006, 2007), similarity was important in explaining when mothers differentiated among their children regarding the expressive dimensions of their relationships.

The findings regarding the effect of children's specific aggregate characteristics on mothers' differentiating followed the patterns shown in analyses of mothers' favouritism at the individual mother-child dyad level. Studies by Suito and various colleagues (Suito & Pillemer, 2000, 2006, 2007; Suito et al., 2006) have shown that, in terms of both the expressive and the instrumental dimensions of the relationship, mothers are most likely to favour adult children who are daughters, are last-borns, share their mothers' outlook, and live nearby. Consistent with the arguments of Suito et al. (2006), we hypothesized that similarity of both values and gender would be important at the aggregate level as they had been shown to be at the individual level. Surprisingly, aggregate gender similarity did not affect mothers' differentiating except in the case of preference for caregiving, and even then, the effect was not strong. However, similarity of attitudes was one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of differentiation, in terms both of overall likelihood of differentiating and of favouritism regarding emotional closeness and confiding.

Examination of the mothers' statements about differentiating revealed a surprisingly inconsistent set of findings. Mothers appear to have been aware of the role of their children's past support, leading women whose children had all been supportive to feel that any of their children could and would meet their need for assistance. However, despite the importance of values in predicting mothers' unwillingness or inability to differentiate among their children regarding closeness and confiding, values were ignored in their stated explanations. Perhaps the norms of regarding children with equal affection are so well internalized by women with strong traditional values that they are not aware of the influence of such norms.

The findings presented here shed light on an issue that has received virtually no attention in

the literature—the role of race in understanding within-family differences in parent-adult child relations. To our knowledge, only two other papers have compared within-family differences in black and white families (Suito & Pillemer, 2006; Suito, Pillemer, & Sechrist, 2005). Suito et al. (2005) found that black and white mothers were almost equally likely to differentiate among their children regarding the provision of emotional and instrumental support. The findings presented here also show more similarities than differences by race regarding closeness and parents' preferences as to support from children. Although black mothers were less likely than white mothers to differentiate regarding confiding, race did not predict mothers' differentiating regarding either emotional closeness or help during illness.

Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The findings we have presented indicate that maternal favouritism is common to most families. Further, the characteristics that are associated with mothers' likelihood of differentiating among their children greatly reflect patterns seen when exploring mothers' favouritism at the parent-child dyad level. Finally, the findings suggest that mothers' favouritism among their children in later life is fuelled to a greater extent by the characteristics of their children than by their own characteristics. It is important, however, to note the ways in which the study is limited as well as how these limitations point to potential directions for future research.

Several important limitations of the present study are introduced by the cross-sectional nature of the design. First, we cannot determine the consequences of mothers' differentiating for either the mothers or the adult children. For example, although we know that most mothers prefer particular children as sources of support during illness, the data cannot tell us whether the preferred children actually become their mothers' caregivers. In addition, we cannot determine whether maternal preference matters regarding whether the preferred children actually become their mothers' caregivers. Further, we cannot determine whether there is stability in mothers' patterns of differentiation—without such stability, it is unlikely that the effects of favouritism have important consequences for well-being. Future research using longitudinal designs is needed to explore these important issues.

A second direction for future research results from our concentration on *mothers'* reports of favouritism. It is possible that different patterns, both within and across racial groups, may be found by including data

from other family members. Studies involving members of the same family sometimes show substantial differences (cf. Aquilino, 1999; Fingerman, 1995, 1996; Giarrusso, Stallings, & Bengtson, 1995), especially regarding the provision of support. Thus, to understand within-family patterns fully, it is necessary to collect data from both parties involved in the exchange. Further, within-family patterns may differ by parent's gender; future studies should compare mothers' and fathers' patterns of within-family differences in differentiating.

Finally, another limitation is geographic: The study was conducted in the greater Boston area. It is possible that regional differences exist in the relationships we found; for example, some research suggests that the American South may differ from other regions in attitudes, behaviours, and interpersonal relationship processes (Powers et al., 2003; Suitor & Carter, 1999). Such differences may also affect values and attitudes toward parent-adult child relations. Research replicating the present study with a national sample is necessary to explore this issue.

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