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The Role of Perceived Maternal Favoritism in Sibling Relations in Midlife

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Abstract

Data were collected from 708 adult children nested within 274 later-life families from the Within-Family Differences Study to explore the role of perceived maternal favoritism in the quality of sibling relations in midlife. Mixed-model analyses revealed that regardless of which sibling was favored, perceptions of current favoritism and recollections of favoritism in childhood reduced closeness among siblings. Recollections of maternal favoritism in childhood were more important than perceptions of current favoritism in predicting tension among adult siblings, regardless of age. Taken together, the findings from this investigation are consistent with childhood studies showing that siblings have better relationships when they believe that they are treated equitably by their parents.

Keywords

Adult siblings < Sibling Relations; Mother-child relations < Parenting < Parenting and Parenthood; Parental favoritism; Within-family design < Method

Literature, history, and popular culture abound with stories of siblings vying for their parents' favor, from the Biblical account of jealousy among Jacob's sons to the rivalry

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between Ray Romano and his brother Robert in the sitcom “Everybody Loves Raymond.” Such rivalry is fueled by a concern that some children receive an unfair share of their parents' emotional or instrumental resources. Parents' differential treatment of their offspring in childhood and its effects have received substantial attention by scholars across an array of disciplines (for a review see Suitor, Sechrist, Plikuhn, Pardo, & Pillemer, 2008). In contrast, there has been a dearth of attention to within-family differences in parents' relationships with their children during adulthood.

In the present paper, we extend the study of within-family differences by examining the consequences of perceived parental favoritism on sibling relations in adulthood. Specifically, we investigate whether siblings' closeness and conflict are affected by adult children's perceptions of mothers' current favoritism or their recollections of favoritism in childhood. To address these questions, we use data collected from 708 adult children nested within 274 later-life families as part of the Within-Family Differences Study.

The Role of Parental Favoritism in Sibling Relations

The literature on within-family differences in childhood has demonstrated convincingly that parental favoritism has consequences for children's lives. For example, consistent with classic arguments by Freud (1961) and Adler (1956) empirical evidence has shown that being the disfavored child in the family is associated with decreased well-being, whereas being the favored child is associated with increased well-being under some circumstances (Suitor et al., 2008). Favored children are also more likely to garner their parents' interpersonal and financial resources, increasing their likelihood of success as adults over that of their siblings (Hertwig, Davis, & Sulloway, 2002; Steelman & Powell, 1991).

In contrast to most consequences of within-family differentiation in childhood, in which some siblings reap benefits whereas others incur losses, the effects on sibling relations appear to be deleterious for both the favored and the unfavored offspring. Studies of young children have demonstrated that siblings feel and express less warmth and more hostility toward one another when parents favor one child over others in the family, regardless of which child is favored (Brody, Stoneman, & McCoy, 1994; McHale, Crouter, McGuire, & Updegraff, 1995). The findings regarding this relationship are remarkably consistent, regardless of whether the data were collected from parents or children, or whether the siblings were preschoolers or adolescents (cf. Suitor, et al., 2008).

It is not known whether similar processes occur across the life course because there has been little attention to parental favoritism in adulthood. Theories of both equity and social comparison can be used to argue that mothers' favoritism is disruptive to siblings' relationships in adulthood as well as childhood; however, the two theories predict different patterns.

Theories of equity suggest that parental favoritism reduces the quality of sibling relationships, regardless of which children in the family are favored. Equity theory proposes that individuals who receive excessive benefits in relation to their significant others experience guilt, whereas persons who feel under-benefitted feel disappointment and anger (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). This theory suggests that when adult children perceive that their parents exhibit favoritism toward any children in the family, the offspring will experience discomfort in their relations with one another, leading to less closeness and greater conflict. Based on this perspective, we hypothesized that there is less closeness and greater conflict among siblings when they believe that their parents favor any children over others.

Alternatively, theories of social comparison can be used to argue that the effects of parental favoritism on sibling relations vary depending on which child in the family is favored. Social comparison theories (Festinger, 1954; Suls & Wheeler, 2000) posit that individuals engage in comparisons with others as a way of gathering information about and evaluating their social position. Further, these theories suggest that perceptions of one's position, relative to others, result in differential behaviors, depending upon whether the individual believes that she has greater or fewer resources than those to whom she compares herself (Salovey, 1991). Specifically, when an individual feels that she is underbenefitted, she is likely to exhibit hostility or withdraw from the relationship (Salovey, 1991).

A social comparison argument suggests that perceiving oneself as unfavored by parents, relative to one's siblings, would translate into lower feelings of closeness and greater feelings of hostility toward more favored siblings. In contrast, perceiving oneself as being favored over one's siblings might lead one to feel more warmth and less hostility toward siblings, because favored siblings would fear no threat to their position in the family. Thus, on the basis of social comparison theory, we hypothesized that the effects of parental favoritism vary depending upon which adult child is favored; favored children report greater warmth and less conflict with their siblings, whereas unfavored children report less warmth and greater conflict.

In summary, we suggested that theories of both equity and social comparison can be used to hypothesize that perceived parental favoritism affects the quality of sibling relationships in adulthood. However, these two competing perspectives can be used to develop alternative hypotheses regarding these processes. Based on equity principles, we anticipated that perceived parental favoritism reduces the quality of sibling relations in adulthood, regardless of the particular pattern of favoritism. Alternatively, based on social comparison theories, we expected that children who perceive themselves as favored report more positive sibling relations than do those who believe that they are unfavored.

To date, only one study has examined the effects of perceived parental favoritism on sibling relationships in adulthood (Boll, Ferring, & Filipp, 2005). Boll and colleagues found that adult children in Germany reported the greatest closeness and least tension in relations with their siblings when parents treated them equally, compared to favoring either the respondent or their sibling. Thus, their findings suggest that the effects of parental favoritism on adult sibling relations can be best explained by equity principles. However, it is difficult to know whether the present investigation will replicate Boll and colleagues' findings, given differences in interaction patterns, including conflict, among family members in Germany and the United States (Oetzel et al., 2003).

Up to this point, we have focused on the effects of parental favoritism without taking into consideration whether these patterns might change as individuals progress through their lives. However, theory and research on interpersonal relations across the life course provide a basis upon which to argue that there may be age differences in the consequences of parental favoritism; specifically, that favoritism may play a diminishing role in sibling relations as the offspring advance through adulthood. First, it appears that as individuals move across the life course they increasingly attempt to reduce or avoid conflict and emphasize harmony in their relationships (Charles & Carstensen, 2008; Coats & Blanchard-Fields, 2008; Lefkowitz & Fingerman, 2003). Second, as individuals age, their perceptions of control in relationships increase, and they appear to regulate their emotions more effectively within relationships (Coats & Blanchard-Fields, 2008; Hay & Fingerman, 2005; Lang & Carstensen, 2002). In the case of siblings' recollections of favoritism from childhood, age may play an additional role because time moves individuals further from having experienced this form of favoritism. Based on this line of reasoning, we hypothesized

that parental favoritism plays a stronger role in sibling relationships among younger than older adults, particularly in the case of siblings' recollections of maternal favoritism in childhood.

In summary, we posed two alternative hypotheses: (a) perceived parental favoritism is associated with decreased closeness and increase conflict among adult siblings regardless of the pattern of favoritism; and (b) closeness and conflict among siblings are affected by the particular pattern of perceived favoritism, with greater closeness and less conflict reported by favored siblings. Further, we hypothesized that the influence of favoritism declines with age, regardless of whether the findings are consistent with principles of equity or social comparison.

Method

Design Goals

Data for this article were collected as part of the Within-Family Differences Study (WFDS). The design of the WFDS involved selecting a sample of mothers 65 - 75 years of age with at least two living adult children and collecting data from mothers regarding each of their children. A further decision was to recruit only community-dwelling mothers to reduce the likelihood that the women would be in need of extensive assistance, thus, allowing us to study relationships outside of the context of caregiving. The mothers who participated in the WFDS served as the conduits through which we obtained contact information on the adult children who are the focus of the present paper.

Sampling

Massachusetts city and town lists were the source of the sample of mothers. 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 to randomly select 20 communities from the available 80. With the assistance of the University of Massachusetts, Boston, we drew a systematic sample of women ages 65 - 75 from the town lists from 20 communities in the greater Boston area; an equal number of women in the target age group was selected from each community. The study design called for interviewing 550 mothers (400 White, 150 Black).

The interviewers began contacting potential respondents and continued until they had completed interviews with 566 mothers, which represented 61% of those who were eligible for participation. Comparison of responders and nonresponders indicated that Blacks were slightly more willing to participate than were Whites (64% versus 60% respectively). The interviews were conducted between August, 2001 and January, 2003. Each mother was interviewed in person for between one and two hours using a combination of closed-ended and open-ended items.

Approximately 63% of the mothers provided contact information for their children. Approximately 70% of the children who were contacted agreed to participate. These procedures yielded a total of 774 adult child participants nested within 299 families. Analyses comparing mothers who provided contact information for their children and those who did not provide contact information revealed no differences between these two groups in terms of race, marital status, education, age or number of children. Further, mothers who chose a specific child to whom they felt most emotionally close were no more likely to provide contact information than were mothers who did not choose. Analyses comparing children who were and were not interviewed indicated that daughters, marrieds, and those with higher education were slightly more likely to participate, consistent with other studies with multiple generations (Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

The proportion of siblings participating from each family varied by family size. In 66% of two-child families both siblings participated in the study; in 44% of three-child families all of the siblings participated; in 25% of the families with four or more children, all of the siblings participated.

For the present analysis, we used the subsample of 708 adult children nested within 274 families, for which there were no missing data on the variables of interest. All siblings who provided data on the variables of interest were included in the present analysis, regardless of the number of participating siblings in the family.

We conducted telephone interviews with the children; using this procedure allowed us to maintain a single mode of data collection despite the fact that many of the children lived in distant parts of the country. Interviews with the children were conducted between January, 2002 and August, 2003.

Sample Characteristics

Mothers' Characteristics—Although the unit of analysis is the adult child, because mothers served as the conduits for recruiting the children, it is important to provide demographic information on the subsample of mothers from the WFDS whose adult children participated in the study. The mothers were between 66 and 75 years of age ($M = 70.9$, $SD = 3.2$). Twenty-two percent were Black, 78% were White. We omitted four Hispanic, three Asian, and one Native American family from the analysis because the literature on kin relations indicates that these families should not be combined with either of the larger subgroups and there are too few cases to justify creating further ethnic subgroups (Trent & Spitze, 2006; White & Riedmann, 1992).

Fifty-two percent of the mothers were currently married, 37% were widowed, and 11% were divorced or separated. Nineteen percent of the mothers had completed less than high school, 33% had completed high school, 8% had attended post-high school vocational school, 18% had completed at least some college, 10% were college graduates, and 13% had completed some graduate school. Seventy percent were not employed. The number of living offspring ranged from two to thirteen ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 1.8$). Although the mean number of living adult children in this subsample is higher than would be found in a nationally representative sample of women ages 65 - 75, it is important to remember that this is 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 subsample is similar to that found in national samples (Sweet & Bumpass, 1996), when comparing specifically to mothers in the same age group who have two or more children.

Adult Children's Characteristics—The adult children ranged from 23 to 61 years of age ($M = 42.5$, $SD = 5.8$). Fifty-six percent were daughters. Sixty-one percent of the adult children were currently married, 8% were cohabiting, 12% were divorced or separated, 19% were never married, and 1% was widowed. Six percent of the adult children had completed less than high school, 23% had completed high school, 6% had attended post-high school vocational school, 14% had completed some college, 31% were college graduates, and 20% had completed graduate school. Eighty-five percent of the children were employed. Seventy percent were themselves parents.

Measures

Dependent Variables—To measure sibling relationship quality, each adult child was asked: “How often do your siblings make you feel loved and cared for” and “How often do your siblings create tensions/arguments with you?” Response categories for both questions

ranged from (5) *very often* to (1) *never*. Because only 2% of the respondents reported the lowest category of closeness and less than 4% reported the highest level of conflict, these categories were combined with those of the adjacent category. We conducted separate analyses for positive and negative relationship quality.

Although single-item measures of relationship quality are common in the family literature, including studies of adult siblings (Akiyama, Elliot, & Antonucci, 1996; Connidis & Campbell, 1995; Spitze & Trent, 2006; White & Reidmann, 1992), we acknowledge that there is general agreement that multi-item scales are preferable. Such measures, however, were not available in the WFDS data set.

Independent Variables—To create the perceived favoritism measures we asked each offspring whether he or she thought that there was a particular child to whom his or her mother was currently most emotionally close: “To which child in your family do you think your mother feels the most emotional closeness?” For this analysis, we created a set of dummy variables based on the child’s perception: (a) mother is closest to the respondent (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*), (b) mother is closest to another child (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*), and (c) mother is equally close to all of her children (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*). Thirty-nine percent of the respondents believed that they were currently the closest to their mothers, 45% believed that their mothers were closest to other siblings, and 13.8 % believed that their mothers were equally close to all of the children. For the multivariate analyses, “mother closest to the respondent” and “mother closest to another child” were entered into the equation; “mother was equally close to all children” was the referent category.

To measure recollections of parental favoritism in childhood, adult children were asked to what extent they agreed with two statements: “When you were a child: (a) Your mother tried to be fair with each of you,” and (b) “Your mother tended to play favorites.” Response categories ranged from (1) *very true* to (3) *not true at all*. These two items were combined to create a childhood favoritism scale which ranged from 2 to 6 ($\alpha = .63$).

Control Variables

Family-level characteristics: We believe that race and family size are important to include as controls. Adult children with a greater number of siblings report closer relationships, both currently and in their recall of their earlier relations (Riggio, 2006). The broader literature on kinship suggests that controlling on race is also important (Aquilino, 1997; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004); thus, even though studies of sibling relations have been inconsistent regarding differences by race and ethnicity, we have controlled on this characteristic. Race was measured by asking the mothers to select from a card listing several races and ethnicities (e.g., White, Black or African-American, Hispanic or Latina, Asian.). They were instructed that they could choose more than one race or ethnicity. Children whose mothers identified themselves as Black or White were included in the analysis; those whose mothers identified themselves as Asian, Hispanic, or Native American were omitted from the analysis.

Sibling characteristics: Gender has been a consistent predictor of sibling relations across virtually all studies (Connidis & Campbell, 1995; Riggio, 2006; Spitze & Trent, 2006; White & Reidmann, 1992; Von Volkum, 2006); therefore we included it in the present analysis. We also included child’s age because the preponderance of studies has reported greater closeness and less conflict as siblings mature (Bedford, 1989; Carstensen, 1987; Cicirelli, 1995; 1996; Stewart et al., 2001). Further, the broader literature on interpersonal relations has shown age to be one of the most important factors explaining conflict across relational contexts (Birditt & Fingerman, 2005; Suitor, Pillemer, & Straus, 1990). Some

studies have found education (Connidis & Campbell, 1995; White & Reidmann, 1992), marital status (White & Reidmann, 1992), and parental status (Connidis & Campbell, 1995) to predict sibling closeness; thus, we included these characteristics as well. Because proximity to mothers is likely to affect contact among siblings, we also included it as a control.

Child's age was a continuous variable ranging from 23 - 61. Child's gender was coded 0 = *son*, 1 = *daughter*. Child's education was coded (a) less than high school, (b) high school graduate, (c) post-high school vocational, (d) some college, (e) college graduate, or (f) completed graduate school. For the present analysis, child's marital status was measured by whether the adult child was currently married, 0 = *child not married*, 1 = *child married*. Parental status was measured by whether the adult child had any children, 0 = *no children*, 1 = *had child*. Finally, proximity was measured in distance the child lived from the mother in terms of travel time by ground transportation. Categories were: (a) same house, (b) same neighborhood, (c) less than 15 minutes away, (d) 15-30 minutes away, (e) 30-60 minutes away, (f) more than an hour but less than two hours, and (g) two or more hours away.

Analytic Strategy

Each of the 708 adult children is nested within one of 274 families; thus, the observations are not independent. To address this concern we conducted multilevel analyses, which accounts for non-independence and allows for correlated error structures. Due to the nature of the dependent variables, we used multilevel models for ordinal dependent variables using M-plus software (Muthen & Muthen, 1998). The tables presented reflect random-intercept models predicting sibling closeness and conflict. Because previous analyses of these data have shown that children's characteristics influence parental favoritism but mothers' characteristics do not (Suitor, Sechrist & Pillemer, 2007) we are focusing the analyses primarily on the level-one variables of recalled and perceived current parental favoritism.

Results

Table 2 displays the distribution of the variables of central interest in the analysis. As shown in Table 2, the majority of adult children reported high levels of positive affect and low levels of negative affect with their siblings. Adult children reported low levels of maternal favoritism in childhood; however, more than 85% believe that their mothers are currently closer to one sibling.

Table 3 displays the results of the analysis of respondents' reports of feeling loved and cared for by their siblings. The findings shown in Model 1 indicate that both perceptions of mothers' current favoritism and recollections of favoritism in childhood predicted the extent to which respondents felt that their siblings made them feel loved and cared for. Specifically, offspring who perceived their mothers as currently favoring some children or as having favored some children earlier in the life course reported feeling less loved and cared for by siblings. It is important to note that the analyses provided support for the equity rather than the social comparison hypothesis. This is shown by the finding that both "child perceived mother favored respondent" and "child perceived mother favored another sibling" predicted sibling closeness. In other words, sibling closeness was lower when respondents believed that their mothers were currently closer to any children, regardless of whether the respondent or another child was favored. Further, with the exception of child's gender and family size, perceptions of mothers' current favoritism and recollections of favoritism in childhood were the only factors that helped to explain adult children's reports of closeness to their siblings.

Model 2 in Table 3 includes interaction terms for age and both perceived current favoritism and recollections of favoritism in childhood. We hypothesized that we would find stronger effects of favoritism on sibling relations among younger than older respondents. The findings presented in Model 2 do not provide support for this argument; none of the interaction terms predicted siblings' reports of closeness.

Next, we examined the predictors of adult children's reports that their siblings created arguments and tensions in their relationships. As shown in Model 1 of Table 4, recollections of maternal favoritism in childhood were associated with reports of greater conflict among siblings, whereas perceptions of current favoritism were not. Consistent with the literature, age also predicted reports of conflict, with lower levels as siblings matured. The interaction terms presented in Model 2 in Table 4 indicate that neither the effects of recollections of early favoritism nor the effects of current perceived favoritism were greater among younger offspring, contrary to our hypotheses.

In sum, respondents' perceptions that their mothers favored any children in the family, in either adulthood or childhood, reduced feelings of being loved and cared for by their siblings. Recollections of favoritism from childhood also predicted conflict with siblings, whereas perceptions of current favoritism did not. There was no support for our hypotheses regarding stronger effects of favoritism on sibling relations among younger than older offspring.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings we have presented provide evidence that mothers' favoritism, as perceived in adulthood and recalled from childhood, affects the quality of sibling relations in adulthood, similar to studies of sibling relations in childhood (Brody et al., 1994; McHale et al. 1995; Suitor et al., 2008). In fact, recollections of favoritism from childhood was the only factor that affected both closeness and conflict among siblings. Despite the fact that individuals tend to avoid conflict and increase harmony in their relationships as they move across the life course (Charles & Carstensen, 2008; Coats & Blanchard-Fields, 2008; Lefkowitz & Fingerman, 2003), siblings appear to have difficulty ignoring their mothers' favoring particular siblings in the family. Further, mothers' favoritism appeared to reduce closeness regardless of which child was favored, suggesting that siblings' relationships are shaped more by principles of equity than by social comparison. The analysis also indicated that recollections of favoritism from childhood had more consistent effects on sibling relations than did perceptions of current favoritism; current favoritism predicted only closeness, whereas recollections from childhood affected both closeness and conflict.

Although additional research is needed to explain this pattern, there may be two related processes that can explain the differential effects of current and childhood favoritism. First, adult siblings may attempt to maintain harmony, despite negative feelings emanating from perceptions that their mothers currently favor another child. As we have discussed at several points in the paper, as individuals move through adulthood, they place greater emphasis on maintaining harmony in their relationships. However, this does not mean that they are not affected emotionally by the perception that their mother is closer to another child. Second, recollections of favoritism in childhood may be more difficult to ignore despite attempts to maintain harmony, a pattern consistent with Bedford's (1989) findings regarding favoritism and parent-child relations. This may be because childhood favoritism is more pronounced and visible to all of the siblings because they coreside and interact frequently. Under such circumstances, it is likely that siblings develop a shared perception regarding favoritism, thus reinforcing the individual child's perceptions. In contrast, when mothers favor some children in adulthood—particularly regarding emotional closeness—siblings may not be

aware of or have an accurate assessment of such patterns. In other analyses, we have found that adult children's perceptions of their mothers' current favoritism are often inconsistent with the mothers' own reports (Suitor, Sechrist, Steinhour & Pillemer, 2006). If these processes are occurring, we should not be surprised either that current favoritism predicts only closeness, or that recollections of favoritism from childhood have broad and enduring effects on both closeness and conflict.

It is possible that the differences in the effects of current and recalled favoritism on sibling conflict might also be attributed, in part, to the ways in which we conceptualized and measured favoritism at these two points in the life course. Our measure of favoritism in adulthood focused on perceived emotional closeness; in contrast, our measure of childhood recollections asked siblings to recall favoritism in a more generalized manner, which might elicit memories of preferences regarding both emotional and instrumental resources.

One might question whether current perceptions of favoritism did not predict sibling conflict because both current and recalled favoritism were included in the same models. This does not appear to be the case. First, current perceptions and recollections of favoritism from childhood were correlated weakly (.10), Second, we conducted separate analyses in which we omitted childhood favoritism from the models; these analyses also revealed no association between current perceptions and sibling conflict.

Based on theories of personal and interpersonal development across the life course (Charles & Carstensen, 2008; Coats & Blanchard-Fields, 2008; Lefkowitz & Fingerman, 2003; Erikson, 1980, 1997), we hypothesized that the effects of both current and recalled favoritism would be greater among younger than older individuals. However, our hypothesis was not supported for either closeness or conflict. These findings are surprising; as we just noted, individuals tend to emphasize positive aspects of their relationship, as well as regulate their emotions more effectively within relationships, as they move across the life course (Charles & Carstensen, 2008; Coats & Blanchard-Fields, 2008; Lang & Carstensen, 2002; Lefkowitz & Fingerman, 2003). We believe that these findings suggest that mothers' favoritism, particularly in childhood, may have much more intense and lasting consequences on sibling relationship quality than has been demonstrated by previous studies examining only current favoritism. Such a pattern would be consistent with Bedford's (1992) findings that perceptions of earlier maternal favoritism shaped adult daughters' closeness and affectional solidarity with their mothers.

It is interesting to note that we found no effects of race on the quality of sibling relations. Although the literature on race and family often reports greater intergenerational closeness among Blacks than Whites (Aquilino, 1997; 1999; Lawton, Silverstein, & Bengtson, 1994; Umberson, 1992), this pattern has not been mirrored in studies of siblings. In fact, our nonfindings are consistent with the few other studies that have examined this issue (Spitze & Trent, 2006; White & Reidmann, 1992). Thus, it appears that race may play a smaller role in relationships among siblings than between parents and adult children.

Our findings regarding the effects of gender, age, and family size also are congruent with other studies of sibling relations in adulthood. Specifically, sisters tended to report closer relationships than did brothers, as typically found in studies of siblings in adulthood (Connidis, 1989; Connidis & Campbell, 1995; Riggio, 2006; Spitze & Trent, 2006; White & Riedmann, 1992). Further, although siblings' age did not affect closeness, it was a strong predictor of conflict, consistent with the preponderance of studies of sibling relations (Bedford, 1989; Cicirelli, 1995; 1996; Stewart et al., 2001) and the broader literature on conflict and age (Birditt & Fingerman, 2005; Carstensen, 1987; Suitor et al., 1990). Finally,

similar to other studies of sibling relations in adulthood (Riggio, 2006), respondents with a greater number of siblings reported greater closeness.

It is worth noting that our findings are very similar to those of Boll and colleagues' (2005) study of German families. Both our findings and those of Boll and colleagues demonstrate that sibling relations are closest when mothers do not favor any children in the family, suggesting that the effects of favoritism on closeness are similar across Western industrialized societies, despite other cross-cultural differences in family interaction (Oetzel et al., 2003). The present study expands this line of work by demonstrating the important role of recollections of favoritism. Further, the age range of the adult children in the present study is substantially greater than that of Boll and colleagues' study; in fact, 42% of the siblings in the present study are between 23 and 41 years of age, whereas the youngest sibling in Boll and colleagues' study was 42. Thus, the present findings also show that the effects of maternal favoritism are not restricted to the middle years.

In sum, we believe that the findings we have presented shed new light on the consequences of parental favoritism on adult children's lives. Nevertheless, it is important to note the limitations of the present study. First, as discussed in the Methods section, we used single-item measures of sibling closeness and conflict. Although multiple-item scales are preferable, the findings of the present study give us confidence in these measures. Less reliable measures, including single-item measures, tend to attenuate associations (Lord & Novick, 1968). However, the patterns of findings in the present study were consistent with expectations. Not only were closeness and conflict predicted by mothers' favoritism, as hypothesized, but age predicted conflict and gender predicted closeness, as expected based upon the literature. In fact, given the fact that single-item measures would be expected to attenuate coefficients, the relationships that we found might have been even stronger had we used multiple-item measures with high reliability.

It is worth noting that respondents were asked about their relationships with siblings in the aggregate rather than asked about each sibling individually. Studies of within-family differences in adulthood have demonstrated that there is considerable variation in the quality of relationships among family members (Suitor & Pillemer, 2006, 2007). Thus, we believe that it is highly likely that there is variation within families in the quality of sibling relations. It is not clear, however, whether the effects of perceived favoritism would differ depending upon which measure was used. The fact that perceptions of favoritism reduced relationship quality regardless of which sibling was favored suggests that the effects would be similar for both single-dyad and aggregate measures. This is an issue we hope will be pursued in future studies of sibling relations.

A limitation imposed by the cross-sectional nature of our data is the ability to ascertain causal direction. Although we hypothesized that perceptions of favoritism affect sibling relationship quality, we recognize that mothers' favoritism is not necessarily causally prior to sibling relationship quality. Without longitudinal data we cannot rule out this possibility; however, panel studies of young families have shown both that children's behaviors affect parental favoritism (Tucker, McHale, & Crouter, 2003) and that favoritism produces behavior problems in children (Richmond, Stocker, & Rienks, 2005). Taken together, these studies suggest that, although adult children's behaviors toward one another may affect parents' favoritism, it is also likely that parental favoritism affects children's behaviors.

Finally, the WFDS data were collected in the Boston metropolitan area. Although Boston has been the site of prominent studies of intergenerational relations (Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988; Rossi & Rossi, 1990), we recognize that such regionality might introduce limitations. Our concern regarding this issue is reduced by a recent investigation using NSFH data that

found that the only significant regional differences in intergenerational relations were between Southern and all other families (Sechrist, Suitor, Henderson, Cline, & Steinhour, 2007). These findings suggest that region plays a relatively small role in family processes in the middle and later years.

Future research on favoritism and sibling relations should address several questions we were not able to explore in the present study. First, it is important to devote greater attention to the consequences of fathers' favoritism. Research indicates that fathers and mothers are almost equally likely to favor some children over others (Suitor & Pillemer, in press); however, it is not known whether the consequences of favoritism vary by parents' gender. Future research should also examine the patterns and consequences of favoritism in other ethnic groups, such as Hispanics and Asians, who have received scant attention in studies of within-family differences in later life.

Another set of questions worthy of attention involves the circumstances surrounding parents' favoritism. For example, research on families in the younger years has shown that sibling relations are affected less negatively by parental favoritism when offspring believe that such differentiation is acceptable because the favored child is needier (Kowal & Kramer, 1997; McHale & Pawletko, 1992). Future studies should attempt to take into consideration whether such conditions lead adult siblings to feel that favoritism is warranted and therefore fair. A related issue is whether offspring's shared perceptions of both the existence and patterns of favoritism shape the way in which sibling relations are affected. This question is theoretically interesting because it brings the issue of transitivity (Heider, 1958) into the study of adult siblings relations. To examine this question requires detailed information from each child on his or her perceptions of the specific patterns of favoritism in childhood as well as adulthood. Thus, our data do not permit us to examine this issue. We hope that future studies will take many of these questions into consideration.

In summary, the findings we have presented demonstrate that perceived maternal favoritism plays a role in sibling relations in adulthood that is similar to that found in childhood. The findings also suggest that adult children's recollections of their mothers' favoritism in childhood continue to shape their relations with siblings in adulthood, complementing other studies that demonstrate continuity in family processes across the life course (Bedford, 1992; Connidis, 1989; Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

Most important, this study contributes to a consistent picture of patterns of within-family differences across the life course. Previous work has shown that the existence and predictors of within-family differences are remarkably similar across childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (Suitor et al., 2008). The present study extends this line of research by demonstrating that there is also similarity in the *consequences* of within-family favoritism, at least in terms of the effects on adult sibling relationships.

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Table 1
Demographic Information on Mothers and Adult Children

Mothers	Total (N = 274)
Age in years (mean, s.d.)	70.9 (3.2)
Race (in %)	
Black	22
White	78
Marital Status (in %)	
Married	52
Divorced/Separated	11
Widowed	37
Education (in %)	
Less Than High School	19
High School Graduate	33
Post High School Vocational	8
At Least Some College	18
College Graduate	10
Some Graduate School	13
Employed (in %)	30
Number of Children (mean, s.d.)	3.8 (1.8)
Adult Children	(N = 708)
Age in years (mean, s.d.)	42.5 (5.8)
Daughters (in %)	56
Marital Status (in %)	
Married	61
Divorced/Separated	12
Widowed	1
Cohabiting	8
Never married	19
Education (in %)	
Less Than High School	6
High School Graduate	23
Post High School Vocational	6
Some College	14
College Graduate	31
Some Graduate School	20

Mothers	Total (N = 274)
Employed (in %)	85
Parents (in %)	70

Table 2

Distribution of Central Variables (in %)

Variable	Siblings make respondent feel loved and cared for	Siblings create arguments and tensions in relationship	Recollections of mothers' favoritism in childhood	Perceptions that mothers are currently closer to one sibling
	9.7 Never/Rarely (1) 22.9 Sometimes (2) 25.8 Fairly Often (3) 41.5 Very Often (4)	14.8 Never (1) 43.8 Rarely (2) 30.9 Sometimes (3) 10.5 Fairly/Very Often (4)	54.8 1 (low) 16.7 13.7 8.5 6.4 5 (high)	13.8 No favorite 86.2 Favors a sibling
Mean	3.97	2.41	2.95	0.86
(S.D.)	(11)	(0.95)	(1.3)	(0.35)

Table 3
Mixed Model Results Predicting Adult Children's Reports of Closeness to Siblings (N = 708 in 274 families)

Predictors	Model 1		Model 2	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Family Level Characteristics				
Race	0.26	0.30	0.27	0.31
Family Size	0.12*	0.06	0.12*	0.06
Child Level Characteristics				
Age	-0.01	0.02	-0.05	0.04
Daughter	0.74**	0.18	0.73**	0.18
Education	-0.02	0.06	-0.01	0.06
Married	0.26	0.23	0.26	0.23
Parent	-0.10	0.24	-0.10	0.25
Proximity	-0.03	0.05	-0.03	0.05
Perceived Maternal Favoritism				
Recollections of Favoritism in Childhood	-0.15*	0.07	-0.93	0.52
Child Perceives Self as Favored	-0.48*	0.24	-0.72	1.72
Child Perceives Other as Favored	-0.48*	0.21	1.10	1.54
Moderating Factors				
Recollections of Favoritism × Age	---	---	0.02	0.01
Child Perceives Self as Favored × Age	---	---	0.01	0.04
Child Perceives Other as Favored × Age	---	---	-0.04	0.04
Model Statistics				
BIC	1816.113		1832.319	
AIC	1747.676		1750.195	
Parameters	15		18	

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Table 4
Mixed Model Results Predicting Adult Children's Reports of Conflict with Siblings (N = 708 in 274 families)

Predictors	Model 1		Model 2	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Family Level Characteristics				
Race	-0.13	0.26	-0.13	0.26
Family Size	0.02	0.06	0.01	0.06
Child Characteristics				
Age	-0.04*	0.02	0.02	0.05
Daughter	0.12	0.18	0.12	0.18
Education	0.01	0.06	0.00	0.06
Married	-0.08	0.20	-0.08	0.20
Parent	-0.16	0.22	-0.17	0.22
Proximity	-0.04	0.05	-0.04	0.05
Perceived Maternal Favoritism				
Recollections of Favoritism in Childhood	0.23**	0.07	1.13	0.58
Child Perceives Self as Favored	0.14	0.24	-0.26	1.84
Child Perceives Other as Favored	0.07	0.24	-0.04	1.69
Moderating Factors				
Recollections of Favoritism × Age	---	---	-0.02	0.01
Child Perceives Self as Favored × Age	---	---	0.01	0.04
Child Perceives Other as Favored × Age	---	---	0.00	0.04
Model Statistics				
BIC	1801.883		1817.995	
AIC	1733.446		1735.871	
Parameters	15		18	

* p < .05.

** p < .01.