

Differential Effects of Perceptions of Mothers' and Fathers' Favoritism on Sibling Tension in Adulthood

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Objectives. We examine the differential effects of perceived maternal and paternal favoritism in adulthood on sibling tension in adulthood.

Method. Data used in the analysis were collected from 341 adult children nested within 137 later-life families as part of the Within-Family Differences Study.

Results. Adult children's perceptions that their fathers currently favored any offspring in the family predicted reports of tension with their siblings, whereas perceptions of mothers' favoritism did not. Fathers' favoritism was a stronger predictor of daughters' than sons' reports of sibling tension.

Discussion. These findings contribute to a growing body of research demonstrating the consequences of parental favoritism in adulthood. Equally important, they demonstrate that perceptions of fathers' current favoritism plays an even greater role in shaping their adult children's sibling relations than do mothers' favoritism.

Key Words: Adult siblings—Parent-adult child relations—Parental favoritism—Within-family differences.

RESEARCH on within-family differences has demonstrated that parental favoritism has detrimental effects on offspring's psychological well-being and relationships with their siblings in childhood and adolescence (Feinberg, Neiderhiser, Simmens, Reiss, & Hetherington, 2000; McHale, Updegraff, Jackson-Newsom, Tucker, & Crouter, 2000). Studies of the consequences of such within-family differentiation on children in adulthood have revealed similar patterns (Pillemer, Suito, Pardo, & Henderson, 2010; Suito et al., 2009). However, with the exception of Boll, Ferring, & Filipp's work (2003, 2005), investigations of the effects of within-family differences on adult children's sibling relations have focused exclusively on favoritism by mothers (Suito et al., 2009). As a result, little is known about the consequences of fathers' favoritism on their adult children. However, there may be marked differences in the effects of fathers' and mothers' favoritism on relations among siblings, given the important role that parents' gender plays in family processes.

To address this question, we test alternative hypotheses regarding the relative role of mothers' and fathers' perceived current favoritism in adulthood on sibling tension, using data collected from 341 adult children nested within 137 later-life families as part of the Within-Family Differences Study (WFDS). Further, we examine whether the effects of mothers' and fathers' perceived favoritism differ by child's gender.

Parental Favoritism and Sibling Relations Over the Life Course

Parental favoritism has been shown to influence the quality of sibling relationships over the life course. In particular,

the literature has demonstrated that in both childhood and adolescence, siblings feel and express less warmth and more hostility toward one another when either parent favors one child over others (Brody, Stoneman, & McCoy, 1994). However, comparisons do not provide consistent evidence regarding which parents' favoritism is the most consequential for sibling relations in childhood (McHale et al., 2000). This question has also not been answered fully in studies of adult siblings. Only one investigation has compared the effects of maternal and paternal differentiation on sibling relations in adulthood, revealing that both parents' differentiation had consequences on closeness and conflict among offspring (Boll et al., 2003, 2005). However, the findings are based on reports of only a single dyad, as opposed to the full sibship, therefore providing an incomplete picture of the patterns of favoritism for any but two-child families.

Thus, taken together, the evidence does not provide a clear basis upon which to anticipate that the effects of mothers' and fathers' favoritism on sibling relations would have similar or different effects on sibling relations. We, therefore, propose two alternative hypotheses regarding differential effects of favoritism on sibling tension by parents' gender. Both hypotheses draw from the broader literature on gender and parent–adult child relations.

Classic arguments developed by Chodorow (1978) and Gilligan (1982) regarding girls' socialization have often been used to explain both girls' and women's stronger emphasis on interpersonal relations across the life course, relative to those of their male counterparts (Suito, Sechrist, Gilligan, & Pillemer, 2011). In particular, these

perspectives have highlighted the important role of early childhood socialization in women's greater investment in their relationships with their children, relative to those of fathers. Such higher investments have been found to result in closer ties between mothers and children in adulthood, as well as childhood. Mothers generally are more positive, supportive, and affectionate toward their adult children than are fathers and interact and exchange support with them more frequently (Buist, Dekovic, Meeus, & van Aken, 2002; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Suito et al., 2011; Umberson, 1992).

Studies from the children's perspective also reveal stronger bonds between offspring and their mothers than their fathers (Suito et al., 2011). The stronger bonds between mothers and children could cause favoritism from mothers to have stronger consequences on sibling relations than that from fathers because such differentiation would threaten the receipt of mothers' highly valuable interpersonal resources.

Alternatively, these theoretical arguments could suggest that fathers' favoritism would be more detrimental to sibling relations than would mothers' because the father-child tie is more tenuous. Not only are mothers typically more supportive and tolerant of their children than are fathers, but fathers are more likely than mothers to be actively critical of their adult children and to express feelings of ambivalence toward them (Pillemer, Munsch, Fuller-Rowell, Riffin, & Suito, 2012). The more fragile ties with fathers than mothers is also demonstrated by the pattern that mothers and children tend to remain close even in the face of divorce and widowhood, whereas the father-child tie is often strained by these life events (Kalmijn, 2007). Further, theories of family processes and identity formation argue that fathers hold greater power than do mothers, thus increasing the "value" of their socioemotional resources (Gecas, Calónico, & Thomas, 1974). For these reasons, when adult children perceive their fathers as engaging in favoritism, there may be greater concern about competition for his affection and support, resulting in higher levels of sibling tension.

Child's Gender and the Effects of Parental Favoritism

Theory and research on gender and family provide a basis upon which to expect that child's gender, as well as parents' gender, would shape the consequences of parental favoritism in adulthood. As already noted, feminist theory posits that through the process of socialization, daughters are encouraged to place highest value their socioemotional roles in the family, whereas sons are encouraged to pursue instrumental achievements outside the family (Chodorow, 1978; Coser, 1991; Gilligan, 1984), a pattern that has been confirmed by empirical research (Suito et al., 2011). Based on such gender differences in the emphasis placed on interpersonal relations, particularly within the family, we expected that perceptions of parental favoritism would be more consequential for daughters than sons. Specifically, we hypothesized that perceptions of both mothers' and fathers' favoritism would be stronger predictors of daughters' than sons' reports of sibling tension.

Other Factors Affecting Sibling Tension

Based on the literature, the quality of sibling relations in adulthood is shaped by several demographic and family-level characteristics, including family size, race, children's gender, age, marital and parental status, and gender composition of the family (Connidis & Campbell, 1995; White & Riedmann, 1992). Some, but not all, of these factors have also been found to predict patterns of favoritism by either mothers or fathers in adulthood (Suito et al., 2011; Suito & Pillemer, 2013). Thus, it is important to take these factors into consideration to reduce the likelihood that any apparent effects of favoritism on sibling relations could be accounted for by the association among these factors.

METHOD

The data used in the present analyses were collected as part of the WFDS. The design of the WFDS involved selecting a sample of community-dwelling mothers 65–75 years of age with at least two living adult children. Mothers were interviewed between 2001 and 2003; in 2008, the original study was expanded to include a second wave of data collection. The variables of central interest in this article were collected at T2 only.

Procedures

With the assistance of the Center for Survey Research at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, Suito and Pillemer drew a probability sample of women aged 65–75 with two or more children from the greater Boston area (see Suito & Pillemer, 2006 for a more detailed description of the sampling procedures for T1). The T1 sample consisted of 566 mothers, which represented 61% of those who were eligible for participation, a rate comparable to that of similar survey strategies in the past decade (Dixon & Tucker, 2010).

Data collection for the second wave of the study occurred between 2008 and 2011. The survey team attempted to contact each mother who participated in the original study. At T2, 420 mothers were interviewed. Of the 146 mothers who participated at only T1, 78 died between waves, 19 were too ill to be interviewed at T2, 33 refused, and 16 could not be reached. Thus, the 420 represent 86% of mothers who were living at T2. Comparison of the T1 and T2 samples revealed that the respondents differed on subjective health, educational attainment, marital status, and race. Mothers who were not interviewed at T2 were less healthy, less educated, and less likely to have been married at T1; they were also more likely to be Black. Comparisons between the mothers alive at T2 who did and did not participate revealed that they differed on only education and subjective health.

Following the interview, mothers were asked for contact information for their adult children; 81% of the mothers provided contact information—a rate higher than typically found in studies of multiple generations (Rossi & Rossi,

Table 1. Demographic Information on Adult Children

Adult children (N = 341)	
Family size (mean, SD)	3.29 (1.97)
Race	
White	86
Non-White	14
Age in years (mean, SD)	48.55 (5.58)
Daughters (%)	56
Married (%)	68
Parents (%)	77
Employed (%)	87
Educational status	
Less than high school	4
High school graduate	20
Some college	11
College graduate	65

1990; Kalmijn & Liefbroer, 2011). Seventy-five percent of the adult children for whom contact information was available agreed to participate, resulting in a final sample of 833 children nested within 277 families. Three hundred and fifty six of the adult children had both parents living at T2, 42 children had no living parent, 415 had only a living mother at T2, and 20 had only a living father. For the present analyses, we used data collected from adult children whose parents were both alive at T2 and who provided complete information on all the variables of interest. The resulting analytic sample consisted of 341 adult children nested within 137 families. Table 1 presents demographic information for the adult children.

Analyses comparing mothers with no participating children and mothers who had at least one participating child revealed no differences between these two groups in terms of race, marital status, education, age, or number of children, but that daughters, marrieds, and those with higher education were slightly more likely to participate, consistent with other studies with multiple generations (Kalmijn & Liefbroer, 2011; Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

MEASURES

Sibling Tension

To create the measure of sibling tension, we combined three items: (a) How often do your siblings create tensions/arguments with you? (b) How often do your siblings make too many demands on you? and (c) How often do your siblings criticize you? The response categories for the three variables were very often (5), fairly often (4), sometimes (3), rarely (2), and never (1). The range of the sibling tension scale was 3–15 ($M = 6.02$; $SD = 2.27$); Cronbach's $\alpha = .76$.

Independent Variables

To create the perceived parental favoritism measures, each offspring was asked the following question regarding their perceptions of their mothers' and fathers' favoritism:

“To which child in your family do you think your mother/father feels the most emotional closeness?” The questions regarding mothers and fathers were asked at different points in the interview. We created a set of variables for each parent: (a) mother/father is closest to the respondent (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*), (b) mother/father is closest to another child (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*), and (c) mother/father is equally close to all of her/his children (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*).

Thirty-one percent of the adult children reported that their mother was closest to them, 58% reported that their mother was closest to a sibling, and 11% reported that their mother was equally close to all of her children. Thirty-seven percent reported that their father was closest to them, 49% reported that their father was closest to a sibling, and 14% reported that their father was equally close to all of his children.

Control Variables

Family-level characteristics.—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. Based on the literature on later-life families, which has shown closer intergenerational ties in Black, Asian, and Hispanic than White families (Suitor et al., 2011), we coded race as White (0) or non-White (1). Family size was the number of living offspring at T2. Gender composition was coded as 0 = *same sex siblings*, 1 = *mixed sex siblings*.

Sibling characteristics.—Child's age was a continuous variable. Gender was coded as 0 = *son*; 1 = *daughter*. All demographic characteristics were specific to T2.

Plan of Analysis

Because the adult children were nested within families, we used multilevel analyses, which account for nonindependence and allow for correlated error structure. The analyses were conducted using SPSS version 20. Listwise deletion was used to handle missing data because there were no more than 5% missing on any variable in the analysis (cf. Allison, 2010). To examine differences in the effects of perceptions of mothers' and fathers' favoritism on sons' and daughters' reports of sibling tension, we included an interaction term in the equation. To determine whether the differences between coefficients within the same models were statistically significant, we calculated an F value. This allowed us to compare the magnitude of the effects of mothers' and fathers' favoritism on sibling tension.

RESULTS

Table 2 displays the results of the clustered regression models predicting adult children's tension with siblings.

Table 2. Mixed Model Results Predicting Adult Children's Tension with Siblings ($N = 431$)^a

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Family size	0.06	0.08	0.05	0.08
Gender composition	-0.50	0.38	-0.58	0.39
Age	-0.04	0.02	-0.04*	0.02
Non-White ^b	0.83*	0.40	0.86*	0.40
Daughter ^c	0.15	0.24	-1.71*	0.81
Married ^d	-0.62*	0.28	-0.64*	0.28
Parent ^e	-0.17	0.31	-0.11	0.31
Mother chose respondent	-0.20	0.41	-0.15	0.62
Mother chose other sibling	0.03	0.38	-0.44	0.54
Father chose respondent	0.90*	0.37	-0.24	0.59
Father chose other sibling	0.87*	0.35	0.06	0.54
Mother chose respondent × Daughters	—	—	-0.10	0.82
Mother chose other sibling × Daughters	—	—	0.92	0.73
Father chose respondent × Daughters	—	—	1.93**	0.75
Father chose other sibling × Daughters	—	—	1.27	0.69
Model statistics				
AIC	1486.70		1472.34	
BIC	1494.29		1479.91	
Parameters	14		18	

Notes. ^aReferent category is mother or father is equally close to all of her or his children.

^bReferent category is White.

^cReferent category is son.

^dReferent category is child is unmarried.

^eReferent category is child is not a parent.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

As shown in Model 1, sibling tension was predicted by perceptions of fathers', but not mothers' favoritism. Respondents reported higher tension when they believed that their fathers were most emotionally close to any child, regardless of whether the respondent or another child was favored. In contrast, perceptions of mothers' favoritism did not predict sibling tension, regardless of which child was favored. Thus, these findings provide support for our second hypothesis that perceptions of fathers' favoritism would have stronger effects on sibling tension than would mothers' favoritism ($F = 7.00$, $p < .01$ for choosing respondent; $F = 6.02$, $p < .02$ for choosing another child).

Next, we examined whether the effects of mothers' and fathers' favoritism on sibling tension differed by child's gender. We hypothesized that both mothers' and fathers' favoritism would be stronger predictors of daughters' than sons' reports of sibling tension. As shown by the interaction terms introduced in Model 2, perceptions of fathers' favoritism were stronger predictors of daughters' than sons' reports of sibling tension when daughters perceived themselves as favored, relative to perceiving that fathers were equally close to all of their children. The effects of fathers favoring another sibling relative to no favoritism did not differ by child's gender. The effect of mothers' favoritism did not differ for daughters and sons regardless of which child was favored in the family.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This article extends the study of within-family differences by comparing the effects of perceived maternal and paternal favoritism on tension among adult siblings. Based on the broader literature on adult children's relationships with mothers and fathers, we developed and tested alternative hypotheses regarding differential effects of favoritism by parents' gender. Tests of an interaction between parents' gender and perceptions of favoritism indicated that sibling tension was substantially greater when children perceived favoritism by fathers but was unaffected by perceptions of mothers' favoritism.

The findings also provided support for our hypotheses regarding the differential effects of parental favoritism by child's gender. We hypothesized that both mothers' and fathers' favoritism would be stronger predictors of daughters' than sons' reports of sibling tension. This hypothesis was supported in that daughters reported higher levels of sibling tension than did sons when they perceived that their fathers favored them, relative to perceiving that fathers were equally close to all of their children. Perceptions of mothers' favoritism did not predict either daughters' or sons' reports of tension regardless of which offspring the respondent reported was favored.

The literature on parental differential treatment of children based on gender may help to explain the finding that daughters reported higher amounts of sibling tension than did sons when they perceived that their fathers favored them. In particular, this work has demonstrated that in younger families, fathers often invest more resources in their sons than their daughters (Raley & Bianchi, 2006). As a result of this greater investment in sons in early life, both sons and daughters may come to view fathers' greater investment in sons as normative. Thus, favoritism shown toward daughters may violate these norms and result in greater sibling tension.

The most striking finding we have presented is the relative importance of fathers' over mothers' favoritism in predicting sibling tension. Although we hypothesized that perceptions of fathers' favoritism might be more strongly related to sibling tension than would perceptions of mothers' favoritism, we did not anticipate the dominant role that fathers' favoritism played in these processes. This pattern may have occurred because the tie between adult children and their fathers is more tenuous, leading offspring to be more concerned when fathers favor some children over others. We feel that this pattern deserves greater study, and hope that future investigations will provide insight on the mechanisms through which the father-child tie shapes adult children's lives and relationships when fathers remain in their children's lives throughout adulthood.

Our findings initially appear to be contradictory to those of Suitor and colleagues (2009), who found that perceptions of mothers' favoritism predicted sibling tension. However, this discrepancy may lie in differences in the samples used in the two analyses. Suitor and colleagues'

(2009) sample was almost evenly divided between children whose mothers were and were not married, whereas the present sample was composed almost entirely of children whose mothers were married. Although Suitor and her colleagues did not report what proportion of the children had living fathers, the combination of mothers' age and marital status would suggest that the fathers of many of the children were deceased. The presence of fathers may affect the salience of mothers' favoritism, a phenomenon similar to the way in which mothers' relationships with particular children are affected by their relationships with each of their other children (cf. Suitor & Pillemer, 2006). In particular, because adult children generally have closer and more secure relationships with mothers than fathers (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Suitor et al., 2011), offspring may be more sensitive to fathers' favoritism when both parents are present. However, when they have lost one of their parents, children may be especially sensitive to the surviving parents' favoritism. To test whether this might explain the absence of effects of mothers' favoritism in this article, we conducted a separate analysis using only children whose fathers were deceased and whose mothers were unmarried at T2. Using this subsample, we found that perceptions of mothers' favoritism did, in fact, predict sibling tension. Thus, the inconsistency between the effects of mothers' favoritism in this article and Suitor and colleagues' earlier findings can be accounted for by differences in the presence of fathers in the lives of the adult children in the two subsamples.

We must also note the differences between our findings and those of Boll and colleagues (2003, 2005), who found that perceptions of both mothers' and fathers' favoritism predicted sibling tension. These discrepancies may lie in design differences between the two studies that we highlighted earlier. It is also possible that variations in intergenerational relations across cultures found in other studies (Newman, 2012) might help to account for the discrepant findings; however, this would be difficult to explore, given the variations between the studies.

Finally, whereas perceptions of favoritism affect sibling relationship quality, we recognize that parents' favoritism may not be causally prior to sibling relationship quality. In fact, panel studies have shown both that children's behaviors affect parental favoritism (Tucker, McHale, & Crouter, 2003) and that favoritism produces behavior problems (Richmond, Stocker, & Rienks, 2005). Thus, 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.

There are several possible directions for future research on parental favoritism and sibling relations. First, in this study we focused on sibling tension rather than positive dimensions of sibling relations, due to the limitations of the positive sibling relationship quality measures available in the data set; we hope that this study can be replicated

comparing the relative effects of mothers' and fathers' favoritism on both positive and negative affect among siblings.

Second, the measures of sibling tension we employed ask about frequency of negative feelings and interactions; thus, it is possible that some low scores could be accounted for by infrequency of contact, rather than by the absence of conflict. Although we do not have direct measures of siblings' proximity to one another, we were able to compute the proportion of siblings who lived within 2 h of their mothers' home (and thus likely within 2 h of one another) and found that this factor did not predict sibling tension nor did it change the effects of the primary variables of interest. Therefore, although future research should take proximity into consideration when studying sibling tension, we do not think that it affected the findings we have presented.

Finally, we did not take fathers' marital history into consideration, despite the fact that marital status is an important predictor of father–adult child relations (Kalmijn, 2007; Suitor et al., 2011). In part, we did not address this issue because we did not have fathers' marital history information available. However, the role of fathers' marital history would be difficult to study using data from the WFDS. Nearly 90% of the mothers in the analytic sample used for the present analysis were married at T2 and had not experienced divorce; thus, almost all of the parents had maintained long-term marriages. We hope that the role of fathers' marital histories will be taken into consideration in future studies using younger cohorts in which divorce is more common.

In summary, this study contributes to a growing body of literature examining the consequences of father–child relationships in adulthood. Although fathers often receive less attention than do mothers in the study of affective parent–child relations in adulthood, our findings are consistent with other research demonstrating the important role of fathers in their children's lives in adulthood and in childhood (Amato, 1994; Boll et al., 2003, 2005; Fingerma, Pitzer, Lefkowitz, Birditt, & Mroczek, 2008; Umberson, 1992).

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