Parental Differential Treatment, Temperament and Youth’s Delinquency: A Moderation Model

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INTRODUCTION

- In the US, it is generally expected that parents treat all of their children equally; however, parents often indicate that it is not feasible given differences in age, developmental abilities, and personal qualities.
- Parental differential treatment (PDT), whether intentional or not, is related to youth’s (mal)adjustment.
- Although the link between PDT and youth’s (mal)adjustment is well documented, less work has considered potential moderators of those effects.

STUDY GOAL & HYPOTHESES

- To test whether youth’s personal qualities (e.g., dimensions of temperament) exacerbate or mitigate the associations between PDT and individual and relational adjustment.
- Accounting for absolute differences in siblings’ personal qualities, we expected that more positive temperamental qualities, perhaps siblings’ dyadic interactions are less influenced by their personal qualities.

METHOD

Participants
- Participants included 652 consecutively-born siblings from 326 families.
- Older siblings (51% female) averaged 17.17 (SD = .94) years old. Younger siblings (56% female) averaged 14.52 (SD = 1.27) years old. Dysads were fairly equally divided among the four possible gender constellations.
- 71% of families were White (not Hispanic); 23% were African American; 4% Latino; 1% multi-ethnic.
- Families ranged from working to upper class

Procedure
- Data were collected via telephone interviews with one parent (87% mothers) and each sibling separately and privately. Interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes.

Measures
- Parental Differential Treatment (PDT; McHale, 2006). On a 5-point scale, youth rated how frequently they were disfavored by their mothers and fathers (separately) across 4 items. Higher scores denote that youth perceived more disfavored treatment from mothers/fathers as compared to their siblings.

RESULTS

- The dimensions of temperament were moderately correlated, with (absolute value) r’s ranging from .24 to .67.
- Net of controls, maternal disfavored treatment was positively associated with delinquency (β = .25) as well as sibling conflict (β = .21); maternal disfavored treatment was negatively linked to sibling intimacy (β = -.14).
- For delinquency, the main effect for maternal disfavored treatment was qualitatively different across birth order (see Figures 1-3).
- For sibling conflict, an interaction between maternal disfavored treatment and birth order revealed that the negative implications of maternal disfavored treatment were stronger for younger siblings.

DISCUSSION

- In general, maternal disfavored treatment was related to poorer individual and relational adjustment. The association between disfavored treatment and individual adjustment (but not relational) was moderated by youth’s personal qualities.
- Consistent with hypotheses, for delinquent behaviors, more positive temperamental qualities (i.e., higher approach, higher positive mood, less rigidity) buffered the negative associations from maternal disfavored treatment. Three-way interactions with birth order further revealed that the protective effect of more positive temperamental qualities was especially evident for younger siblings.
- Given that younger siblings often receive more preferential treatment in terms of time and closeness with parents, perhaps they are more reactive to disfavored treatment; thus, the protective effects of positive temperamental qualities are more relevant.
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- Future studies should examine the implications of paternal differential treatment as well as whether youth’s other personal qualities such personality (e.g., conscientiousness, extraversion) moderate the links between parents’ differential treatment and youth’s adjustment.