Parents’ Differential Treatment as a Family Process: The Role of Parent and Offspring Gender

Alexander C. Jensen, Uma Senguttuvan, & Shawn D. Whiteman

INTRODUCTION

• Parents’ differential treatment (PDT), or the unequal treatment of offspring, is a complex family process involving at a minimum three people, and often more.
• Unfavored treatment has been linked to poorer adolescent outcomes, such as maladjustment (Feinberg & Hetherington, 2001) and delinquency (Scholte et al., 2007).
• Extant literature suggests that the implications of PDT may differ for boys and girls (Shanahan et al., 2008).
• Yet little research has considered the combined influence of maternal and paternal PDT, or the possibility of parent gender typing (McHale et al., 1999) in the context of differential treatment.

METHOD (continued)

• Measures (continued)
  - Parent-Adolescent Intimacy (Blyth et al., 1982). 8 items on a 5-point scale.
  - Differential treatment. Maternal and paternal differential conflict and intimacy were computed via difference scores subtracting younger siblings’ treatment from older siblings’ treatment. Using these difference scores, we computed a dichotomous variable indexing favoritism (favored = 0; unfavored = 1). Favored offspring reported comparatively less conflict/more warmth (i.e., ± SD below/above the mean). Unfavored offspring reported more conflict/less warmth (i.e., ± SD above/below the mean).

STUDY GOAL

• Examine the implications of maternal and paternal differential treatment on adolescents’ adjustment, with attention to the moderating effects of parent and offspring gender.

METHOD

• Participants
  - Parents and two adolescent 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.

• Procedure
  - Data were collected via telephone interviews from one parent and two adolescent siblings. Interviews were conducted separately and privately and lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes.

• Measures
  - GPA. Average grades across 4 subjects, math, history, science, and English, on a 4-point scale.

RESULTS

• Analytic Strategy
  - Multi-level modeling was used to account for the nested structure of the data. Analyses were run for sibling pairs where treatment was not equal from either parent (N = 252). Presented results reflect fixed effects only.

• Differential Conflict
  - Sons reporting more conflict (unfavored) with their mother and less conflict (favored) with their father compared to their sibling reported the most delinquent behavior \((\gamma = -.75, \ SE = .25, p < .01; \text{see Figure 1})\).
  - Sons reporting more conflict (unfavored) with one parent (either mother or father) and less conflict (favored) with the other parent compared to their sibling had the lowest GPAs \((\gamma = 1.23, \ SE = .51, p < .05; \text{see Figure 2})\).

• Differential Intimacy
  - Offspring reporting less intimacy (unfavored) with their mother compared to their sibling reported more delinquent behaviors \((\gamma = .18, \ SE = .05, p < .001)\).
  - Daughters who reported less intimacy (unfavored) with their mother compared to their sibling had lower GPAs than unfavored daughters or favored offspring \((\gamma = .46, \ SE = .21, p < .05; \text{see Figure 3})\).
  - Sons who reported less intimacy (unfavored) with their father compared to their siblings had lower GPAs than unfavored daughters or favored offspring \((\gamma = -.33, \ SE = .22, p < .05; \text{see Figure 4})\).

DISCUSSION

• Overall, findings contribute to the current literature by suggesting that beyond offspring gender, parent gender plays an important role in differential treatment processes.

• To understand the associations of PDT it is necessary to examine the entire family system, including potential interactive effects of treatment from mothers and fathers.

FIGURES

Figure 1. Differential Conflict

Figure 2. Differential Conflict

Figure 3. Differential Maternal Intimacy

Figure 4. Differential Paternal Intimacy