

Parental Differential Treatment, Temperament and Youth's Delinquency:

A Moderation Model

Emily P. Rolan and Shawn D. Whiteman

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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 (i.e., positive mood, approach, and persistence) would buffer the associations between PDT and individual and relational maladjustment.

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. Dyads 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.

METHOD (continued)

Measures (continued)

- **Temperament** (DOTS-R; Windle, 1992; Windle & Lerner, 1986). On a 4-point scale, parents' reported how true 20 different characteristics were of each of their children. Four different dimensions were assessed (i.e., approach, positive mood, and persistence, rigidity). Scores ranged from 1 to 5 with higher scores indexing a greater degree of each temperament dimension.
- **Delinquent Behaviors** (Dishion et al., 1991; Eccles & Barber, 1990). Youth reported the frequency in which they engaged in 16 different risky/delinquent behaviors on a 4-point Likert scale. Scores ranged from 0 to 3 with higher scores denoting greater delinquency.
- **Sibling Intimacy** (Blyth & Foster-Clark, 1987). On a 5-point scale, youth reported on their relational intimacy with their sibling across 8 items. Scores ranged from 1 to 5 with higher scores indexing greater intimacy.
- **Sibling Conflict** (NRI; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). On a 5-point scale, youth rated 5 items denoting the frequency of conflict with siblings. Scores ranged from 1 to 5 with higher scores denoting greater conflict.

ANALYTIC STRATEGY

- A series of hierarchical regressions models were tested using SAS Proc SurveyReg with the cluster option to account for the clustering of older and younger siblings within families.
- Current analyses focus on maternal differential treatment and tested each dimension of temperament separately.
- Hierarchical models included: (1) main effects; (2) lower order two-way interactions between maternal differential treatment, temperament, and birth order; and (3) a higher order three-way interaction.
- Control variables included youth's age, birth order, gender, and the absolute difference in siblings' temperament qualities.

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 ($\beta = .25$) as well as sibling conflict ($\beta = .21$); maternal disfavored treatment was negatively linked to sibling intimacy ($\beta = -.14$).
- For delinquency, the main effect for maternal disfavored treatment was qualified by multiple three-way interactions (see Figures 1-3).
- For sibling conflict, there was a significant maternal PDT X birth order interaction (see Figure 4).

FIGURES

Figure 1. Association between Maternal Disfavored Treatment and Youth's Delinquency as a Function of Youth's Approach/Withdrawal and Birth Order

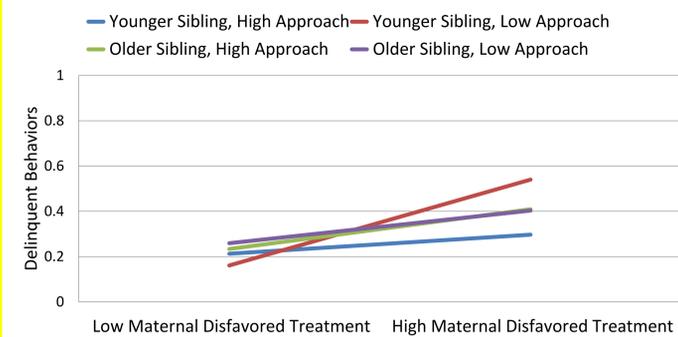


Figure 2. Association between Maternal Disfavored Treatment and Youth's Delinquency as a Function of Youth's Positive Mood and Birth Order

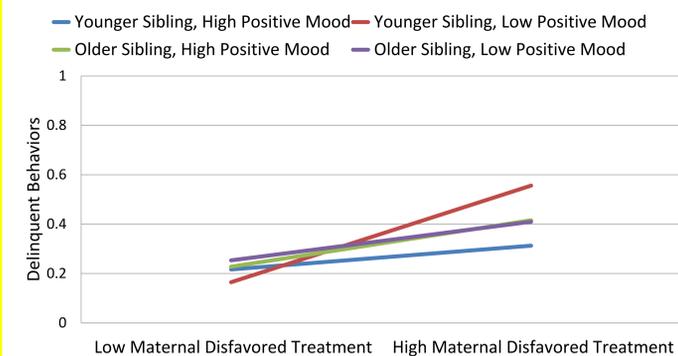


Figure 3. Association between Maternal Disfavored Treatment and Youth's Delinquency as a Function of Youth's Rigidity and Birth Order

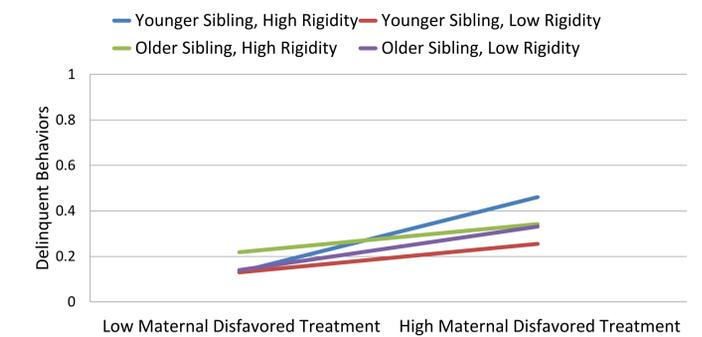
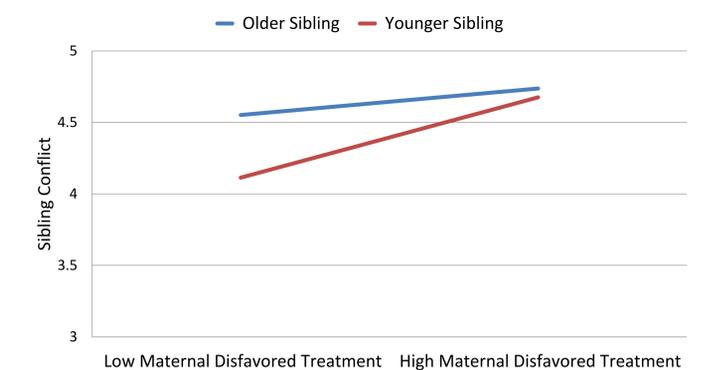


Figure 4. Association between Maternal Disfavored Treatment and Sibling Conflict as a Function of Birth Order



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.
- ❖ For sibling conflict, an interaction between maternal disfavored treatment and birth order revealed that the negative implications of disfavored treatment were stronger for younger siblings.
- ❖ Given that youth's personal qualities did not moderate associations between maternal disfavored treatment and sibling relationship qualities, perhaps siblings' dyadic interactions are less influenced by their personal qualities.
- ❖ Future studies should examine the implications of paternal differential treatment as well as whether youth's other personal qualities such as personality (e.g., conscientiousness, extraversion) moderate the links between parents' differential treatment and youth's adjustment.