

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

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## 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.

## 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
  - Delinquency* (Dishion et al., 1991, Eccles & Barber, 1990). 16 items on a 4-point scale.
  - GPA*. Average grades across 4 subjects, math, history, science, and English, on a 4-point scale.
  - Parent-Adolescent Conflict*. Adapted from Smetana (1988). 12 items on a 6-point scale.

## 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., ½ SD below/above the mean). Unfavored offspring reported more conflict/less warmth (i.e., ½ SD above/below the mean).

## 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,  $p < .01$ ; 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,  $p < .05$ ; 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 sons or favored offspring ( $\gamma = .46$ , SE = .21,  $p < .05$ ; 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 ( $\gamma = -.53$ , SE = .22,  $p < .05$ ; 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.
- Differential conflict may be particularly salient for sons when receiving unfavored treatment from one parent only.
- Similar to past findings regarding daughters and mothers, differential intimacy may be particularly salient when parent and offspring share the same gender (Noak & Buhl, 2008).
- Future research would benefit from the inclusion of dyads receiving equal treatment.

## FIGURES

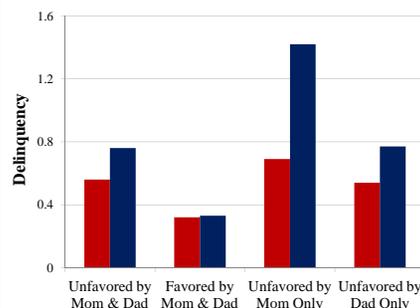


Figure 1. Differential Conflict

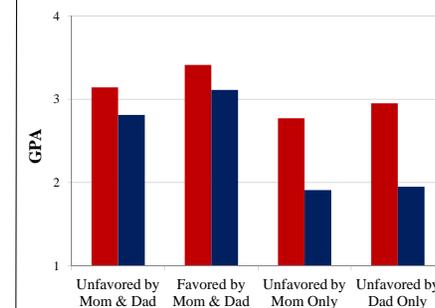


Figure 2. Differential Conflict

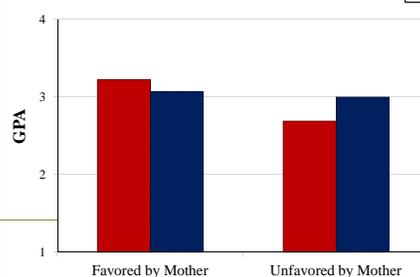


Figure 3. Differential Maternal Intimacy

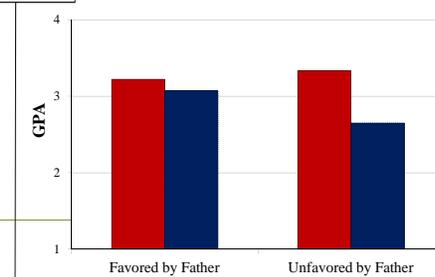


Figure 4. Differential Paternal Intimacy