Sibling Relationships and Rivalry in Developmental Perspective
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I. Background

Parents of multiple children often treat those children unequally. This differential treatment can weaken siblings' relationships with each other and cause or worsen mental health, behavior, and non-kin relationship problems among offspring. Adults who recall childhood sibling rivalries report adjustment problems and strained relations with their grown siblings. We do not know whether favored children remain favorites as they enter adulthood or whether favoritism in adolescence prospectively predicts later family relationships.

II. Research Questions

Does differential parental treatment during adolescence:

• Affect current sibling relations?
• Predict differential parent-child treatment during adulthood?
• Have lasting effects on sibling relationships?

Does differential treatment during adulthood:

• Affect current sibling relations?

III. Methods

Data: The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health

Self-report data from 1,657 sibling dyads

Waves 1, 2, and 3 (mean ages 15, 16, and 22)

Siblings' own reports of:

• Positive emotional relations with each other
• Wave 2: Parent-child warmth, activities, conflict; parental control; family warmth; whether other sibling is favored
• Wave 3: Parent-child relations, coresidence, financial help
• Wave 1: Parents' report of closeness to each adolescent

Sibling difference scores = degree of parental favoritism

Analyses: Actor-Partner Interdependence Models predicting sibling-level outcomes from own score, sibling's score, and difference on predictor; dyad-level models predicting degree of current differential treatment from past differential treatment

IV. Results

Selected results are shown at right.

R1 Current Parental Favoritism Reduces Adolescent Siblings' Relationship Quality.

This holds for differential parent-adolescent closeness (p<.01), warmth (p<.01), shared activities (p<.10), and conflict (p<.10), and for sibling reports of favoritism (p<.05). Differential treatment coefficients are jointly significant (p<.05).

R2 Parental Favoritism in Adolescence Predicts Emotional but not Instrumental Favoritism in Adulthood.

Parents often treat grown offspring unequally, but few differences are linked to earlier unequal treatment. Exceptions: adolescent differences in parental warmth (p<.001) and overall family warmth (p<.05) predict differences in parent-adult relationship quality. No marker of adolescent favoritism predicts parent-adult coresidence or financial assistance.

R3 Past and Current Parental Favoritism do not Affect Adult Siblings' Current Relationship Quality.

Differential treatment during adolescence does not predict later sibling relationship quality. Associations between current unequal treatment and current sibling relations are stronger but not statistically significant (p>.10 for joint tests of coefficients).

V. Conclusions

Although differential parental treatment during adolescence worsens adolescent sibling relationships, the effects are not permanent. Parents' differential treatment of grown children is not a simple continuation of earlier family processes, and it has little effect on grown siblings' current relationships.

References


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