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# Mothers', fathers', and siblings' perceptions of parents' differential treatment of siblings: Links with family relationship qualities

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## ABSTRACT

A family systems perspective directs attention to the potentially different experiences and perspectives of family members. This study examined parents' differential treatment (PDT) of siblings, discrepancies between parent and youth reports of PDT, and their links with relationships between adolescents and their mothers and fathers across three years. Participants were first- (Time 1 *M* age = 15.71, *SD* = 1.07) and secondborn (Time 1 *M* age = 13.18, *SD* = 1.29) siblings from 381, predominately white, working and middle class families. Analyses revealed that siblings' perceptions of being favored predicted less conflict with and greater warmth from both mothers and fathers, primarily for secondborn adolescents. Larger discrepancies between maternal and youth reports of differential affection were linked to more maternal conflict and less warmth for firstborns. These findings may suggest a hierarchy within families: parents may serve as referents for firstborns and firstborns as referents for secondborns.

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## 1. Introduction

For the more than 82% of youth who grow up with one or more siblings (King et al., 2010; McHale, Updegraff, & Whiteman, 2012), their relationships with their parents are interpreted in the context of how their siblings get along with their parents (Shanahan, McHale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2008; Shebloski, Conger, & Widaman, 2005). This process, labeled parental differential treatment (PDT), has the potential to influence youth development (Kowal, Krull, & Kramer, 2006; Richmond, Stocker, & Reinks, 2005; Scholte, Engels, de Kemp, Harakeh, & Overbeek, 2007). Grounded in social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999), research has linked PDT to higher rates of youth risky behavior and poorer sibling relationships, such that PDT tends to have negative implications for youth who receive less favorable treatment than their siblings (Jensen & Whiteman, 2014; Kowal & Kramer, 1997). Another line of research on differences between family members' experiences has examined discrepancies between parents' and adolescents' reports of their shared experiences. This work has shown that parent-youth differences—for example, in reports of parental warmth or conflict in their dyadic relationship—are linked to youth adjustment problems (Abar, Jackson, Colby, & Barnett, 2015; Berg-Nielsen, Vika, & Dahl, 2003; Berger, Jodl, Allen, McElhane, & Kuperminc, 2005).

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A family systems perspective provides a framework for both of these lines of research. An understanding of how families operate as socializing systems requires moving away from a focus on the experiences and adjustment of one individual to take into account the perspectives and experiences of multiple family members: A focus on the implications of *differences between family members'* experiences does just this. In the current study, we aimed to advance understanding of how families operate as systems by examining the implications of differences between family members' experiences by integrating findings from the PDT and parent-youth discrepancies literature. We addressed three study goals. First, we examined the longitudinal links between PDT and dyadic parent-child relationship qualities, specifically parental warmth and parent-youth conflict in adolescence. Second, we assessed whether discrepancies between parents' and youth's perceptions of PDT were linked to these dyadic parent-child relationship qualities. Finally, based on tenets pertaining to social comparison accuracy and cumulative risk (Perkins, Luster, & Villarruel, 1998; Rutter, 1979; Wills, 1991; Wood, 1989), we examined whether parent-youth discrepancies in perceptions of PDT moderated the effects of PDT on youth's dyadic parent-child relationship qualities. For the main effects of PDT and discrepancies in perceptions of PDT as well their interaction, we examined whether patterns varied by birth order.

### 1.1. Implications of PDT for youth well-being

Social comparison processes (Festinger, 1954; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999) have been invoked to explain links between PDT and youth's individual and relational outcomes (Feinberg, Neiderhiser, Simmens, Reiss, & Hetherington, 2000; Jensen, Pond, & Padilla-Walker, 2015; Shebloski et al., 2005). From this perspective, siblings who receive favorable treatment form "downward comparisons," and as a result of their favored status, they have enhanced self-concepts and well-being. Siblings who perceive that they are less favored, in contrast, form "upward comparisons" relative to their favored sister or brother, with correspondingly negative implications for their self-concepts and well-being. Past work on PDT provides support for these social comparison tenets. For example, relative to less-favored siblings, youth who experience favored treatment exhibit better academic performance (Barrett Singer & Weinstein, 2000) and mental health (Shanahan et al., 2008), as well as lower levels of risky behavior (Scholte et al., 2007) and substance use (Jensen & Whiteman, 2014). Siblings who perceive favored treatment also report more positive sibling relationship quality (Tamroui-Makkink, Dubas, Gerris, & van Aken, 2004).

Although work on PDT has established links with adolescent behavior and sibling relationships (Kowal & Kramer, 1997; Tamroui-Makkink et al., 2004), less is known about links between PDT and parent-child relationships (Kowal, Krull, & Kramer, 2004). Given the implications of parent-child relationships for youth development (Kerr, Stattin, & Özdemir, 2012; Steinberg, 2001), it is critical that sibling scholars consider the ways in which PDT is linked to parent-child relationship qualities. Adolescents who perceive themselves as favored may develop better relationships with parents over time, at least in part due to the links between favored status and youth positive self-concepts. In contrast, less favored siblings may perceive their parents as unfair (Kowal & Kramer, 1997) and experience greater emotional distance and tension in their parent-child relationship.

Tenets of social comparison theory further suggest that effects of comparisons, and as a result, PDT, may vary based on individuals' personal characteristics (Suls, Gastorf, & Lawhon, 1978; Wood, 1989). Recent work on social comparison and siblings suggest that birth order may play a particularly salient role. For example, Litt, Stock, and Gibbons (2015), found that younger siblings who engaged in more social comparison were more likely to use alcohol if their older sibling did. Jensen et al. (2015) more specifically found that younger siblings engaged in more social comparison of their siblings than did older siblings and that PDT was linked to youth outcomes, but only for younger siblings who engaged in more comparisons. Thus, links between PDT and parent-youth relationships may be more salient for laterborn siblings.

### 1.2. Parent-youth discrepancies in perceptions of family experiences

Past work suggests low to modest agreement between parent and youth reports of family patterns, processes, and parenting, with correlations typically ranging between 0.04 and 0.41 (Abar et al., 2015; Berg-Nielsen et al., 2003; Berger et al., 2005). Although discrepancies raise concerns about reporter bias and measurement reliability, from another perspective, the level of disagreement between parents and youth may be substantively meaningful. For example, Abar et al. (2015) found that youth reports of parental monitoring were more closely tied to their risky behavior than were the reports of parents. The discrepancy between youth and parent reports, however, was uniquely predictive of youth adjustment; larger discrepancies were linked to higher levels of risky behavior. Similar patterns have been found in relation to parent and youth reports of family conflict (Ehrlich, Richards, Lejuez, & Cassidy, 2015) and adjustment (Ohannessian & de Los Reyes, 2014; Ohannessian, Lerner, Lerner, & von Eye, 1995; Skinner & McHale, 2016).

Discrepancies may also be important in regard to PDT. When youth and parents disagree about the amount of PDT in the family it may cause tension in their relationships; as a result, parents and youth may feel less close to each other and may have more conflict. Essentially, discrepancies may be a risk factor for parent-youth relationship quality. Beyond main effects, discrepancies between youth and parent reports of PDT may have a cumulative impact on relationship outcomes (Perkins et al., 1998; Rutter, 1979). Youth who perceive themselves as less favored may be at risk for poorer parent-youth relationships, and a discrepancy in the perception of PDT may elevate that risk.

Alternatively, greater discrepancies may diminish the main effects of PDT. Past research on social comparisons (Wills, 1991; Wood, 1989) suggests that accurate comparisons are more closely linked to outcomes than inaccurate comparisons. Although parent reports of PDT are not necessarily more or less accurate than those provided by youth, agreement between parent and child about PDT may provide confirmation for youth that their perceptions are accurate or at least shared. Thus,

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