Proposal For Testing the Correlation Between Parental Favoritism and Adolescent Narcissism

Submitted to
The Interdisciplinary Center for Innovative Theory and Empirics (INCITE)
at Columbia University

by
Jiawen Yu
XiaoQi Huang
Claire Xiong
Jack Zhong

July 2017
Abstract

It is recognizable that parenting exerts a profound impact on shaping adolescent personality when they experience a transitional stage with physical maturation and psychological development regarding their individual identities. The distinct parental treatment differentiates the thinking as well as behaving patterns of the adolescents. In consequences, this paper is designed to investigate the hypothesis that the parental favoritism has a tendency of developing the narcissism of the adolescents. In order to test its correlation, the study is conducted by the relevant survey which examines narcissistic characteristics of adolescents with siblings and their exposure of parental predilection separately. Practically, we take advantage of the snowball sampling to reach out the participants of the survey (N=25). At the same time, the approach would combine the findings from the previous research to provide a comprehensive vision on the rearing style of parents and its empirical effect on the character cultivation of adolescents. The entire study is expected to prepare for the further study on the adolescents and their growth under the parental nurturance.

Background and significance

Historical Context of Adolescence, Parental Favoritism, and Narcissism

Adolescence is notified as a period of physiological and psychic transformation between the age of 10 and 19 originating in Latin with the connotation of “growing up” (World Health Organization). Even though the word “adolescence” was invented as early as the 15th century, its concept and significance was never clarified by scholars until G. Stanley Hall the first president of American Psychological Association raised the interest in adolescent society in 1904. The uprising of the study related to adolescence was promoted by the sociocultural change regarding how the social position of adolescents altered over centuries. However, Hall judged that
adolescence was a period of “storm and stress” which referred to the rebellious attitude against parents, the emotional reactivity, and the risky behaviors without consideration (Hall, 1904). While it is normally coined as the period of self-centeredness, it raises a question whether the narcissism of adolescents is intensified by the parental indulgence. By examining their correlation, the study is set up to offer a thorough explanation on the narcissistic characteristics of the adolescents. Narcissism refers to the interests of the self-absorption and admiration. As early as 1914, Sigmund Freud the founder of psychoanalysis connected the theory of narcissism with the parental love and wrote:“If we look at the attitude of affectionate parents towards their children, we have to recognize that it is a revival and reproduction of their own narcissism, which they have long since abandoned.”(Freud, 1914). Parental favoritism occurs when parents show more concerns and cares on one child than the other. However, the unequal treatments are either intentionally or subconsciously. Based on the Birth Order Theory, parents highly expect the elder child to be the role model, while they offer more permissiveness to the younger child. In contrast, middle siblings feel ignored and unconcerned by their parents (Toman, 1993). However, the theory is controversial when most of parents are unwilling to recognize or admit their practice of favoritism.

Parental Differential Treatment & Family Relationships

The potential impacts of parental favoritism and narcissism on adolescents are often ignored or unrecognized by the parents and our society. As defined in the previous writing, parental favoritism occurs either intentionally or subconsciously. As parents treat an adolescent differently than his or her siblings in an unintentional matter, such transparency would make it more difficult for the parents to diagnose the cause when it comes to problems that are likely originated by parental favoritism. Studies has shown that disparities in parents’ warmth toward different adolescents in the family negatively affects the quality of sibling relationship during adolescence for it provokes violence, coercive, and frequent conflicts among the siblings. (Boer, Goedhart, & Treffers 1992; Brody, Stoneman, & McCoy, 1992; Feinberg, Reiss, Neiderhiser, & Hetherington, 2005; McHale, Crouter, & McGuire, 1995; McHale et al., 2000). There may also
be low self-esteem and behavioral problems for the adolescent that receives less parental affection or more negative discipline than his or her sibling (Boll, Ferring, & Filipp, 2003; Brody, 1998; Shebloski, Conger, & Widaman, 2005). Receiving parental differential treatment also shapes the adolescents’ perception of both themselves and other people. When parental favoritism is perceived, the unflavored adolescent would likely have negative emotional impacts such as depression, anxiety, and unattractiveness. Whereas the other siblings are more likely to develop positive and healthy family relationships (Sheehan & Noller (2002)).

**Previous Studies**

The previous researches about the relation between parental favoritism and adolescent narcissism exhibit a prospective outcomes. Robert S. Horton, an associate professor in the Social Sciences at Wabash College, constructed a small scale of investigation with 26 middle school children who took the narcissism and parental behaviors assessment twice, and he found that the narcissistic traits of adolescents and the parental treatment have a mutual effect on each other. To be specific, parental affection with excessive attempts of monitoring encourages the narcissism by promoting the scene of self-worth, while the adaptive and maladaptive narcissism of adolescents could be the predictor for the increase of parental psychological control (Horton). In his study, the narcissistic traits of adolescents were stimulated by giving more attention on their behaviors.
Design and procedure

**Hypothetical theory** - There would be a positive relationship between parental favoritism and narcissism. The higher the parental favoritism is exposed on an adolescent the more likely it is for the adolescent to develop narcissism.

**Techniques** - We will approach the topic by conducting a survey according to the indicators of parental favoritism and narcissism. The survey data will be collected from 25 samples and the questions used in data collecting are generated in reference to the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI). The first part of the questionnaire will be focusing on how self-centered the samples are, then the first part of questionnaire will determine the samples’ experience on parental favoritism. Ultimately we will analyze the data to find the correlation among the two variables and the reason for such phenomenon.

**Instruments**

*Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI)*

Narcissistic Personality Inventory is a survey designed by Ruskin and Hall (1979) that measures narcissistic traits and levels of narcissistic development based on an individual’s self evaluation, group cooperation, leadership, and arrogance. The NPI-14 items are drawn from across the dimensions of Raskin and Terry’s (1988) 40-item measure. It has a high liability ($\alpha = .86$, and $\alpha = .87$; Emmons, 1984, 1987), and many studies have accessed this inventory for research purposes. Each question in the inventory is provided with a narcissistic answer and a non-narcissistic answer, depending on the answers for each question the subject would receive a overall score. For several limitations we selected 14 most case representative questions out of 40 total questions in the formal NPI. For choosing each narcissistic term, the subject receives 1 point and for electing an non-narcissistic term the subject receives 0 point. The overall score
ranges from 0 to 14 and it is used for this research. The higher the score the more narcissistic traits are reported by the subject.

**Parental Differential Treatment Questionnaire**

The parental differential treatment questionnaire is designed by our group which measures the amount of favoritism an adolescent receives from the parents in relation to his or her siblings. The survey consists of 2 structural questions (e.g., How many siblings do you have?; What is the birth order among your siblings?) that defines the potential influential factors on parental favoritism as a variable, and 9 questions describing jealousy (e.g., How often are you jealous of your siblings?), comfort (e.g., To what extent do you agree that you feel comfortable to be with your parents and siblings?), support (e.g., To what extent do you agree that you are more likely to be criticized by your parents than your siblings even though both of you misbehave?; How often do your parents listen to your opinions?), modelization (e.g. To what extent do you agree that your parents tell you to look up to your siblings?; To what extent do your parents tell your siblings to look up to you?;), material rewarding (e.g., When was the last time that you received presents from your parents? What was it for?), and sibling affection (e.g., To what extent do you agree that you like to spend leisure time with my siblings?).

Two scales of measurements are used for this questionnaire. The frequency scale consists of five terms that could describe the frequency of the occurrence of an event. (Always, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Never). The agreement scale has four terms ranging from **Strongly agree**, **agree**, to **disagree**, **Strongly disagree**. The total score is used for this study, it is calculated by adding up all the points the subject receives from answering each individual question. The higher the total score the more parental favoritism the subject is experiencing. For answering each question a score of 0–6 is applied, the stronger the indicator of parental differential treatment the more score is accounted for each question.
Results

There were 25 adolescents who participated in the small-scale survey with an average age of 17.72. Similar to our original hypothesis, the parental favoritism was highly correlated with the development of the adolescent narcissism ($CC = 0.8106$). The favored child in the family tends to develop the narcissistic characteristics compared with the child who rarely received more concerns than others. In the meantime, the data also prove that the birth order matters and affects parental favoritism. Parents show more favoritism to the eldest child in a family than others reaching to the average point 29.611. The middle child ($\mu=20.25$) received less favoritism than the youngest child ($\mu=24.893$) and have a higher dissatisfaction on the unequal treatment of parents. It reflected the Birth Order Theory which stated that parents valued the eldest child more than the youngest one while the middle one normally felt unloved or neglected. Another interesting phenomenon we found in the survey was the contradictory perception on how the adolescents considered the fairness of their parents. Although most participants had different degree of discontent on how their parents practiced favoritism, roughly 90% believes their parents were fair.

Limitation

The quality of our research proposal is limited by several factors. Our group was required to structure the research outline within a week, some informational details of the topic are likely not
captured. The preliminary research samples are collected through snowball sampling at a specific location in the New York City, which qualifies our theory but may not be the most ideal representative of our population. In further studies the samples will be randomly selected. Our research is majorly designed for the relationship among the parental differential treatment and narcissism, further statues collection is needed to determine the impact of other social factors such as social classes, financial situation, and race on the two variables in order to make the study more universal. The preliminary sample size is 25 adolescents. In order to generate a more reliable observation and analysis, it is necessary to increase the sample size, but unfortunately that is impossible for time restrictions. Around 84% of our preliminary respondents are females. For a less gender-biased result, more male participants are needed to be taking into account in future studies.

As a variable, narcissism is not perfectly constant. There are possibly external factors that could affect the development of adolescent narcissism such as peer admiration and school leadership. According to our result, the correlation among parental favoritism and narcissism still shows significance, but the actual relation may be less observable than the nominal data which we are presenting. Narcissism is usually considered as a negative and sensitive term in American society, the participants of our data gathering process would likely notice the purpose of our questionnaire and therefore refuse to answer the questions candidly, which would cause inaccuracy of the survey outcome.

Parental favoritism is a relatively vague concept, our measurements indicating this behavior may not be commonly adopted by some families that have non-traditional ways of showing differential treatments towards their children. Meaning some adolescents are under the exposure of parental favoritism but they are unaware of the situation for their parents’ unique favoring expression. More questions directed to the parents themselves have to be asked for potential relationships and future outcomes among these different types of parenting methods.
People that have developed narcissism tend to show self-admiration traits. Therefore it is difficult to ascertain whether the parental favoritism has an influence on the formation and level of narcissism, or the narcissistic perception led to the illusion which the parent preferred the participant over his or her siblings.

Conclusion

The research is designed to study the relationship between parental favoritism and narcissism with structural analysis such as birth order taken into consideration. The result implies certain correlation between parental favoritism and adolescent narcissism despite the gender-biased and unpopulated samples might make the outcome inaccurate. At the same time, the result shows the study of the relationship between parental favoritism and adolescent narcissism might be prospective. Parents not only give the material support to the adolescents but their practise of favoritism would mold adolescent personality. In order to improve our investigative process, it is necessary to apply the survey to a large-sized sample and make it more gender-balanced.
References


