



PERCEIVED PARENTAL FAVORITISM AND ADULT SIBLING DYNAMICS AMONG BLACK AMERICAN ADULTS

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Abstract

Parental favoritism can disrupt a child's developing sense of dignity, emotional safety, and belonging, shaping the relational environments in which trust, empathy, fairness, and communication are learned. Within Black American families, these early relational imbalances intersect with cultural norms, structural stressors, and communal resilience, yet little research has explored how such experiences influence adult relational capacities. Guided by family systems theory, ecological systems theory, and humanistic principles, this qualitative study examined how Black American adults interpret the long-term impact of childhood parental favoritism on sibling relationships and adult relational development. Semi-structured interviews with 12 participants across the United States were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. Five themes emerged: navigating closeness and distance, cultural resilience and adaptation, long-term relational impact, communication and conflict resolution, and relational evolution over time. Findings reveal that favoritism shapes adult relational capacities involving trust, empathy, fairness, communication, conflict resolution, and relationship-building. These relational patterns also suggest implications for human-centered leadership, particularly leadership practices grounded in empathy, equity, relational trust, and emotional awareness. Participants also described cultural institutions, such as church and school, as protective environments that fostered resilience and humane relational values despite early inequities. These insights highlight the need for culturally responsive, humanistic, family-centered interventions that promote equitable parenting, emotional attunement, and relational integrity across generations.

Keywords: parental favoritism, Black American families, sibling relationships, relational development, human-centered leadership, qualitative thematic analysis

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Introduction

Parental favoritism is a subtle yet powerful relational dynamic that can shape a child's developing sense of dignity, emotional safety, and belonging within the family system. When children perceive unequal treatment, they often internalize messages about their worth, relational visibility, and the conditions under which affection or attention are granted. These early experiences form the foundation upon which humanistic relational capacities, such as trust, empathy, fairness, communication, and ethical decision-making, are learned. Although sibling relationships are among the longest-lasting bonds across the lifespan, favoritism can distort these connections, transforming potential sources of support into sites of comparison, competition, or emotional distance (Finzi-Dottan & Cohen, 2011; Plamondon et al., 2018).

Background Literature

Existing research has documented the behavioral and psychological consequences of parental favoritism, including heightened sibling rivalry, diminished self-esteem, and long-term interpersonal tension (Rehan et al., 2016). However, far less attention has been given to how these early relational imbalances shape adult relational competencies. Childhood experiences of favoritism may influence how individuals approach conflict, establish trust, interpret fairness, and navigate relational responsibility. Because these capacities are also central to relational and human-centered approaches to leadership, understanding their developmental foundations may offer important implications for leadership scholarship. Some adults may struggle with vulnerability or emotional expression, while others may develop heightened empathy and ethical awareness precisely because they experienced inequity early in life. These humanistic outcomes underscore the need to examine favoritism not only as a childhood phenomenon but also as a formative relational context that shapes adult development.

This gap is particularly pronounced within Black American families, where cultural norms, structural stressors, and communal resilience intersect to shape family dynamics in unique ways. Many Black American parents navigate systemic pressures, including racial discrimination, economic constraints, and demanding work schedules, that may limit emotional availability or inadvertently contribute to perceived favoritism (Solmeyer & McHale, 2017). Additionally, cultural expectations surrounding discipline, birth order, and sibling caregiving roles may influence how children interpret parental behavior. Despite these contextual factors, the emotional impact of favoritism remains significant, especially when children feel unseen, unsupported, or compared to siblings. Yet Black American families also possess rich cultural traditions, such as church involvement, community engagement, and extended kin networks, that can buffer relational distress and foster resilience, empathy, and communal responsibility.

Research on sibling dynamics has historically relied on European American samples, limiting cultural relevance and overlooking the diverse ecological contexts that shape Black American family life (Whiteman et al., 2010). Furthermore, much of the existing literature has focused on quantifiable behaviors rather than the deeper relational meanings individuals assign to their experiences. Qualitative inquiry is needed to capture



how adults interpret childhood favoritism, how they understand its long-term impact, and how they integrate these experiences into their relational identities and humanistic development.

Grounded in family systems theory and ecological systems theory, this study explores how Black American adults perceive the long-term impact of parental favoritism on sibling relationships and adult relational capacities. By centering participants' lived experiences, the study examines how favoritism influences the development of empathy, trust, perceptions of fairness, conflict resolution, and relationship-building across the lifespan, while considering the implications of these relational capacities for human-centered leadership. Through a humanistic lens, the study seeks to illuminate how individuals navigate relational wounds, cultivate resilience, and intentionally break generational cycles through equitable parenting and mindful communication. These insights aim to inform culturally responsive, human-centered interventions that promote emotional attunement, relational integrity, and equitable family practices across diverse cultural contexts.

Statement of the Problem and Purpose

Parental favoritism represents a subtle yet deeply consequential relational imbalance that can shape how children understand their worth, belonging, and emotional safety within the family system. When children perceive differential parental treatment, these experiences can contribute to jealousy, diminished self-esteem, sibling rivalry, and emotional distance that persist into adulthood (Thorpe et al., 2024). Although sibling conflict is often viewed as a normal part of childhood, parents may minimize behaviors associated with favoritism rather than recognize their potential for lasting emotional and relational harm (Relva et al., 2019). Over time, these early relational experiences may influence how individuals establish trust, navigate conflict, communicate emotional needs, and form close relationships.

For Black American families, experiences of parental favoritism occur within broader cultural and structural contexts. Parents may navigate systemic stressors, economic constraints, demanding work schedules, and culturally informed expectations surrounding discipline, birth order, and sibling caregiving. These conditions may influence parental availability and how children interpret differences in parental attention or treatment. At the same time, Black American families draw upon cultural and communal strengths, including extended kin networks, religious communities, and other sources of collective support that may foster resilience and relational adaptation. Despite these important contextual influences, research on parental favoritism and sibling dynamics has historically relied heavily on European American samples, limiting understanding of how Black American adults interpret these experiences and their long-term relational consequences.

The problem addressed in this study is the limited culturally grounded research examining how Black American adults understand the long-term relational impact of childhood parental favoritism. Existing research has primarily emphasized behavioral and psychological outcomes rather than how individuals make meaning of these experiences across the lifespan and how they may shape relational capacities involving trust, empathy, perceptions of fairness, communication, conflict resolution, and relationship-building. These



capacities are important not only within families and intimate relationships but also within broader relational contexts in which individuals assume responsibility for, influence, and interact with others. Understanding these developmental experiences may therefore offer important implications for human-centered leadership, particularly approaches grounded in empathy, relational trust, fairness, ethical care, and respect for human dignity. By centering the lived experiences of Black American adults, this study seeks to address this gap while illuminating the culturally embedded strengths that may support healing, resilience, and relational growth across the lifespan.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how Black American adults perceive and make meaning of the long-term impact of parental favoritism on sibling relationships and adult relational capacities. While existing research has documented the behavioral and psychological consequences of favoritism, far less is known about how these early relational imbalances shape the development of humanistic competencies across the lifespan, such as empathy, trust, perceptions of fairness, conflict resolution, communication, and relationship-building. Collectively, these relational competencies provide a basis for considering how formative family experiences may have implications for later human-centered leadership practices. This study sought to address this gap by centering the lived experiences of individuals whose childhood environments were shaped by differential parental treatment and culturally specific family dynamics.

Grounded in family systems theory and ecological systems theory, the study aimed to understand how favoritism disrupts or reshapes the relational contexts in which children learn core interpersonal values. Family systems theory suggests that favoritism alters sibling subsystems, emotional roles, and relational expectations, while ecological systems theory highlights how cultural, institutional, and community environments influence how children interpret and adapt to these experiences. By integrating these frameworks with a humanistic lens, the study examined how participants' childhood experiences informed their adult relational identities, including their capacity for emotional presence, fairness, and humane connection.

The study also aimed to explore how cultural resilience, communal values, and institutional environments, such as church, school, and extended kin networks buffered or intensified the effects of favoritism. By examining these culturally embedded experiences, the study sought to provide a more nuanced understanding of how Black American adults navigate relational wounds, develop humanistic strengths, and intentionally break generational cycles through equitable parenting and mindful communication. Ultimately, the purpose of this study was to generate culturally grounded, humanistic insights that can inform family counseling, parenting education, and community-based interventions. By centering participants' voices, the study aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of how childhood favoritism shapes adult relational development and how individuals cultivate empathy, fairness, and humane leadership across the lifespan.



Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design using inductive thematic analysis to explore how Black American adults interpret the long-term impact of childhood parental favoritism on sibling relationships and adult relational capacities. A qualitative approach was selected because it allows for deep exploration of subjective meaning-making, emotional nuance, and culturally embedded relational experiences—elements essential for understanding humanistic constructs such as trust, perceptions of fairness, communication, conflict resolution, and relational development. The design was grounded in family systems theory and ecological systems theory, which provided a conceptual foundation for examining how relational patterns, cultural environments, and systemic stressors shape humanistic development across the lifespan. These frameworks supported an exploration of how childhood favoritism influences adult relational identity, emotional presence, and interpersonal behavior. These findings were subsequently interpreted for their relevance to human-centered leadership.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants who could provide rich, relevant insight into the phenomenon under study. Inclusion criteria required participants to:

1. Identify as Black or African American.
2. Be at least 18 years old.
3. Have grown up with at least one sibling in the same household.
4. Have perceived parental favoritism during childhood.

Twelve participants from diverse regions across the United States were recruited through professional networks, social media, and community outreach. The sample reflected variation in gender, age, family structure, and cultural background, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how favoritism is interpreted within different Black American contexts. The sample size aligns with qualitative standards for thematic saturation in homogeneous groups, where additional interviews are unlikely to yield new conceptual insights.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through individual, semi-structured interviews conducted virtually using secure video conferencing software. This format allowed participants to engage from familiar, emotionally safe environments, which supported openness and reduced potential distress when discussing sensitive childhood experiences. The interview protocol included open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives about: Childhood experiences of favoritism, sibling closeness or distance, cultural and community influences, adult relational patterns, trust, empathy, fairness, and conflict resolution, and intentional parenting and cycle-breaking



The semi-structured format ensured consistency across interviews while allowing participants to guide the conversation toward experiences most meaningful to them. Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and were transcribed verbatim. The study captured rich narratives that illuminate the development of leadership, trust, empathy, conflict resolution, and relationship-building within Black American families.

Interviews were conducted virtually using secure, password-protected video conferencing software. This format allowed participants from diverse geographic regions to participate while maintaining privacy and comfort. Virtual interviews also enabled participants to choose familiar, emotionally safe environments, such as their homes, which supported openness and reduced potential distress when discussing sensitive childhood experiences. Questions were open-ended and intentionally framed to invite reflection on both childhood events and adult relational patterns. For example, one question asked, “How did cultural or community environments shape how you understood favoritism?” and “In what ways do you believe these childhood experiences influence your relationships today?” The researcher began with a grounding introduction that emphasized confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the humanistic goal of honoring participants’ lived experiences. This relational approach helped establish trust and rapport, which were essential for eliciting authentic narratives about family dynamics, emotional experiences, and relational development.

The researcher adopted a humanistic stance throughout the data collection process, emphasizing empathy, nonjudgment, and relational presence. Active listening techniques—such as reflective responses, gentle prompts, and validation of emotional experiences—were used to support participants in exploring difficult memories. This approach helped participants feel safe discussing sensitive topics such as emotional neglect, sibling rivalry, parental invalidation, and long-term relational wounds. The researcher also remained attentive to nonverbal cues, pauses, and emotional shifts, which provided additional context for understanding participants’ relational experiences. When participants expressed distress, the researcher offered breaks, grounding techniques, or the option to skip questions, reinforcing the humanistic priority of emotional safety.

With explicit consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in capturing participants’ narratives. Recordings were transcribed verbatim using automated transcription software, followed by manual verification to correct errors, capture emotional nuance, and ensure fidelity to participants’ voices. Transcripts included not only spoken words but also meaningful pauses, emotional expressions, and shifts in tone when relevant. These elements were important for interpreting humanistic constructs such as vulnerability, relational pain, and emotional resilience.

Data Management and Confidentiality

All data were stored on encrypted, password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher. Identifying information was removed from transcripts, and pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to



protect confidentiality. Participants were reminded that they could withdraw at any time without penalty, reinforcing autonomy and respect—key humanistic values.

The semi-structured interviews yielded rich, multilayered narratives that extended beyond descriptions of favoritism. Participants discussed childhood emotional experiences, sibling alliances and rivalries, cultural and community influences, adult relational patterns, trust, empathy, ethical decision-making, and intentional parenting and cycle breaking. This depth allowed the researcher to trace how early relational environments shaped humanistic competencies across the lifespan.

Coding and Data Analysis

Coding and data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, using an inductive, humanistic orientation to capture the depth and complexity of participants' lived experiences. The analytic process was iterative, reflexive, and grounded in both family systems theory and humanistic relational principles. The goal was not only to identify patterns of favoritism and sibling rivalry but also to understand how participants made meaning of these experiences in ways that shaped their adult relational capacities.

In Phase 1: Data Familiarization, the researcher engaged in repeated, immersive reading of each transcript to develop a holistic understanding of participants' narratives. During this phase, attention was given to emotional tone, relational nuance, and humanistic expressions of dignity, empathy, and self-worth. Early analytic memos captured initial impressions related to leadership development, trust formation, communication patterns, and relational resilience. These memos served as a foundation for deeper interpretive work. Phase 2: Initial Coding included line-by-line open coding to identify meaningful units of data. Coding remained grounded in participants' accounts of relational experiences, including perceived fairness, emotional safety, caregiving responsibilities, communication, conflict, and interpersonal relationships. Coding captured both explicit content (e.g., "strict father," "forgotten middle child," "performing for attention") and implicit humanistic meanings (e.g., "conditional worth," "emotional invisibility," "relational vigilance"). Codes were also tagged for humanistic constructs such as empathy, ethical decision-making, conflict resolution, leadership roles, and relationship-building, allowing the researcher to trace how these competencies emerged across narratives.

In Phase 3: Searching for Themes, codes were organized into preliminary clusters that reflected broader relational patterns. During this stage, the researcher examined how childhood experiences of favoritism intersected with cultural contexts, emotional development, and adult relational behavior. Analytic clustering revealed early versions of the five final themes: closeness/distance, cultural resilience, long-term relational impact, communication strategies, and relational evolution. Humanistic subthemes, such as emotional safety, fairness, dignity, and relational maturity, were also identified and mapped within each cluster. Whereas in Phase 4: Reviewing Themes, these themes were refined through a systematic comparison of coded extracts with the full dataset. The researcher evaluated whether each theme demonstrated internal coherence and external distinction. Particular attention was given to ensuring that themes reflected both the



structural aspects of favoritism and the humanistic dimensions of relational development. This phase included peer debriefing, where another qualitative researcher reviewed theme boundaries to ensure analytic rigor and reduce interpretive bias.

In Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes, the themes were finalized and defined with clear conceptual boundaries. Each theme was named to reflect both the descriptive content and the humanistic significance of participants' experiences. For example, "Navigating Closeness and Distance" was defined not only as a structural sibling dynamic but also as a humanistic struggle involving trust, vulnerability, and relational courage. Theme definitions explicitly incorporated humanistic constructs such as empathy, ethical awareness, relational leadership, and emotional presence. The final phase, Phase 6: Producing the Report, involved selecting vivid, representative quotes and integrating them into a coherent narrative that reflected participants' lived experiences. Themes were contextualized within family systems theory, ecological systems theory, and humanistic relational development. The analytic narrative emphasized how childhood favoritism shaped adult capacities for leadership, trust, communication, conflict resolution, and relationship-building, which are core humanistic competencies that emerged organically from participants' stories.

Trustworthiness, Credibility and Ethical Safeguards

The research design incorporated multiple strategies aligned with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, in order to support methodological rigor and honor participants' lived experiences with dignity and care. Ethical considerations were central to trustworthiness. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained prior to data collection, and all participants provided informed consent. Confidentiality was protected through pseudonyms and secure data storage. The researcher's humanistic approach, prioritizing emotional safety, respect, and relational presence, also contributed to ethical rigor. Participants were reminded that they could pause, skip questions, or withdraw at any time. This relational sensitivity supported honest disclosure and reduced the risk of emotional harm.

Trustworthiness and credibility were strengthened through several procedures designed to ensure that the findings accurately reflected participants' experiences and relational interpretations. First, member checking was used to validate the accuracy of interview transcripts and clarify participants' intended meanings. Participants were invited to review their transcripts and offer corrections or elaborations, ensuring that their voices were represented authentically. This process also reinforced humanistic values by positioning participants as collaborators rather than subjects. Second, prolonged engagement occurred through in-depth, semi-structured interviews that allowed participants to explore complex emotional experiences, cultural contexts, and relational histories. The researcher used active listening, open-ended prompts, and nonjudgmental responses to facilitate discussion of sensitive family experiences. Third, peer debriefing was used to enhance analytic credibility. A qualitative research peer reviewed emerging codes, theme boundaries, and interpretive decisions, helping to identify potential blind spots and reduce researcher bias.



Transferability, Dependability, Confirmability

Transferability was supported through thick, rich description of participants' contexts, cultural environments, and relational experiences. Detailed accounts of childhood dynamics, sibling interactions, cultural influences, and adult relational patterns allow readers to determine whether the findings may be applicable to other settings or populations. By providing vivid participant quotes and contextualizing experiences within Black American cultural frameworks, the study offers insight into how favoritism shapes humanistic development, such as empathy, ethical awareness, and relational maturity, in ways that may resonate across diverse family systems.

Dependability was ensured through a comprehensive audit trail documenting all methodological decisions, coding processes, theme development, and reflexive notes. This audit trail included: Raw transcripts, initial and revised codebooks, analytic memos, theme refinement notes, and documentation of peer debriefing sessions. This systematic record allows external reviewers to trace the evolution of the analysis and understand how constructs were identified and interpreted. Additionally, the use of a consistent semi structured interview protocol ensured that all participants were asked comparable questions while still allowing flexibility for personal narrative depth.

Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive journaling, where the researcher documented personal reactions, assumptions, and interpretive decisions throughout the study. This practice helped distinguish participants' voices from the researcher's perspectives and ensured that findings were grounded in the data rather than personal bias. The researcher continually examined how personal values related to empathy, fairness, and relational integrity might influence interpretation, ensuring that participants' meanings, not the researcher's assumptions, guided the analysis. Furthermore, the use of verbatim quotes throughout the findings provides transparent evidence for each theme, allowing readers to see how interpretations were derived from participants' own words.

Results

Five themes emerged: navigating closeness and distance, cultural resilience and adaptation, long-term impact of childhood experiences, communication and conflict resolution, and relational evolution over time. Thematic analysis revealed five interconnected themes that illustrate how childhood experiences of parental favoritism shaped participants' relational development across the lifespan. These themes highlight not only the emotional and cultural contexts of sibling relationships but also the humanistic competencies, leadership, trust, empathy, ethical decision-making, conflict resolution, and relationship-building that participants learned or struggled to develop as a result of these early experiences. These humanistic competencies were shaped not only by parental behavior but also by cultural environments, sibling dynamics, and participants' reflective growth in adulthood.



Theme 1: Navigating Closeness and Distance

This theme reflects the tension participants experienced between longing for sibling closeness and protecting themselves from emotional harm. Favoritism created relational distance, yet the permanence of sibling bonds encouraged efforts to maintain connection. Participants described learning early lessons about trust and emotional safety through these dynamics. When favoritism made closeness unpredictable, siblings learned to assess relational risk, anticipate rejection, or rely on selective vulnerability. These childhood experiences shaped adult trust patterns, with some participants becoming cautious in relationships and others becoming highly intentional about building secure connections.

“Even though we may not be as close right now... we’re still close.”

Leadership development also emerged within this theme. Participants who assumed caregiving roles or mediated sibling conflict learned responsibility, initiative, and relational stewardship. However, these leadership skills were often forged under emotional strain, creating a complex blend of resilience and burden. This quote illustrates how participants learned to hold dual truths, maintaining connection while navigating emotional distance, a foundational humanistic skill for adult relational leadership.

Theme 2: Cultural Resilience and Adaptation

Participants emphasized that Black American cultural environments, such as church, school, extended kin networks, played a significant role in shaping relational values. These institutions provided alternative spaces where empathy, communal responsibility, and ethical behavior were modeled, often compensating for relational deficits at home. Cultural norms around discipline, respect, and collective identity influenced how participants interpreted favoritism. For example, strict paternal expectations were often understood as culturally informed rather than personally targeted, which helped participants contextualize their experiences and develop adaptive relational strategies.

“A lot of their behaviors are probably community-learned.”

These cultural environments also served as early training grounds for ethical decision-making. Participants learned fairness, accountability, and moral responsibility through community interactions, even when these values were inconsistently modeled within the home. This recognition reflects a humanistic understanding of relational development as embedded within broader cultural ecosystems.

Theme 3: Long-Term Impact of Childhood Experiences

Participants described how favoritism shaped their adult relational capacities, including self-worth, emotional regulation, and interpersonal confidence. Many internalized the belief that attention must be earned, leading to patterns of overachievement, people-pleasing, or emotional withdrawal. These experiences directly influenced empathy and ethical decision-making in adulthood. Participants who felt overlooked as children became highly attuned to the emotional needs of others, often striving to ensure that no one in their



adult relationships felt invisible or undervalued. Their childhood pain became a moral compass guiding their adult relational choices.

“I always felt like I had to do more so I would have attention.”

This quote illustrates how conditional worth learned in childhood shaped adult relational behavior, often motivating participants to create more humane environments for others. Participants also described how triangulation, parents aligning with one sibling against another, created long-term challenges in relationship-building. These early alliances taught children to anticipate exclusion or competition, complicating adult intimacy and trust.

Theme 4: Communication and Conflict Resolution

Participants developed diverse communication strategies in response to favoritism. Some learned to confront inequity directly, developing assertiveness and advocacy skills. Others learned to suppress their needs or avoid conflict to maintain family stability. These childhood communication patterns carried into adulthood, shaping how participants approached conflict resolution, boundary-setting, and relational honesty. Those who confronted favoritism described becoming adults who value transparency and accountability. Those who learned avoidance often struggled to express needs or address relational tension.

“When I saw favoritism... I had to ask why.”

This quote reflects qualities associated with humanistic leadership, such as courageously naming harm and seeking understanding. Fragmented communication within the family also influenced adult relational patterns. Participants described aligning with one parent or sibling while distancing from another, creating relational divides that persisted into adulthood.

Theme 5: The Evolution of Relationships Over Time

As participants matured, they developed greater insight into their childhood experiences and the cultural or structural pressures that shaped parental behavior. This reflective process allowed them to reinterpret favoritism, develop empathy for family members, and cultivate healthier adult relationships. Participants described intentionally breaking generational cycles by practicing equitable parenting, emotional presence, and mindful communication. Their childhood experiences became catalysts for humanistic growth, motivating them to create relational environments grounded in fairness and compassion.

“Be mindful... why am I pushing this upon one kid but not the other?”

This quote illustrates how participants transformed childhood inequity into adult ethical awareness and relational intentionality. The evolution of sibling relationships over time also reflected increased relational maturity. Participants described learning forgiveness, setting boundaries, and redefining closeness in ways that honored their emotional needs while preserving familial connection.



Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that childhood experiences of parental favoritism shape the environments in which Black American adults learn leadership, trust, communication, and relational values. Participants' narratives demonstrate that early family dynamics, particularly those involving differential treatment, triangulation, and emotional invalidation, serve as formative contexts where empathy, ethical decision-making, conflict resolution, and relationship-building skills are either disrupted or cultivated.

Participants described childhood environments where they were required to assume caregiving roles, manage emotional tension, or compensate for perceived inequities. These experiences often functioned as early leadership training, though not always under ideal conditions. For example, older siblings who were tasked with caring for younger siblings learned responsibility, initiative, and protective leadership. However, when these roles emerged from favoritism or parental absence, leadership development was intertwined with stress, resentment, or hypervigilance. In adulthood, participants reported that these early experiences shaped their leadership style—often making them more attuned to fairness, equity, and the emotional needs of others. Many described becoming leaders who prioritize inclusion and psychological safety because they understood firsthand the harm caused when these values are absent.

Childhood favoritism disrupted participants' ability to trust caregivers and siblings, creating long-term challenges in forming secure adult relationships. Trust, a core humanistic value, is learned through consistent emotional presence and equitable treatment. Participants who experienced favoritism described developing conditional trust, trust that depended on performance, compliance, or emotional self-protection. As adults, many reported difficulty trusting partners or peers, often anticipating rejection or unequal treatment. Yet others described becoming highly intentional about building trust in their relationships, emphasizing transparency, reliability, and emotional honesty. Their childhood experiences served as a contrast that motivated them to create more humane relational environments.

Participants' narratives revealed that communication patterns learned in childhood, such as avoidance, confrontation, triangulation, or silence, directly influenced their adult conflict resolution strategies. Those who grew up in environments where favoritism was unaddressed often learned to suppress their needs or avoid conflict to maintain family stability. Others learned to confront inequity directly, developing assertiveness and advocacy skills. In adulthood, participants described using these communication strategies in their intimate relationships, workplaces, and parenting practices. Many emphasized the importance of open dialogue, emotional expression, and boundary-setting—skills they intentionally cultivated to counteract the communication deficits of their childhood homes.

Experiences of favoritism heightened participants' sensitivity to emotional pain, exclusion, and injustice. These early experiences often strengthened their capacity for empathy, particularly toward individuals who feel overlooked or undervalued. Participants described becoming adults who are attentive to others' emotional needs, careful not to replicate favoritism in their own families, and committed to ethical decision-making grounded in fairness and compassion. Ethical decision-making emerged as a humanistic



response to childhood inequity. Participants reported being more mindful of how their choices affect others, especially in leadership or caregiving roles. Their childhood experiences served as moral reference points that shaped their adult values.

Participants described a developmental trajectory in which childhood relational wounds gradually transformed into adult relational wisdom. As they matured, many gained insights into their parents' limitations, cultural pressures, and structural stressors. This reflective process allowed them to reinterpret childhood experiences, develop empathy for family members, and build healthier relationships. In adulthood, participants emphasized relational values such as mutual respect, emotional presence, and equitable treatment. They described intentionally breaking generational cycles by practicing mindful parenting, fostering open communication, and ensuring that each child feels valued.

Human-Centered Leadership Implications

The findings of this study demonstrate that parental favoritism is not only a structural imbalance within the family system but also a formative context in which leadership, trust, communication, and relational values are learned. Participants' narratives reveal how childhood experiences shape adult relational capacities in profound and enduring ways. Family systems theory explains how favoritism disrupts sibling subsystems, creating environments where children must navigate inequity, emotional distance, and inconsistent caregiving. Ecological systems theory further illustrates how cultural institutions, church, school, extended kin networks, provide protective spaces where humanistic values such as empathy, communal responsibility, and relational resilience are modeled.

Participants' adult relational patterns reflect the interplay between these systemic influences and their humanistic development. Childhood experiences of favoritism shaped their ability to trust, communicate, resolve conflict, and lead with empathy. Yet cultural resilience, reflective maturity, and intentional relational practice enabled many participants to transform early relational wounds into strengths. Ultimately, the study highlights that humanistic leadership, defined by empathy, ethical decision-making, relational presence, and equitable treatment, is often learned through navigating and overcoming childhood relational adversity. These findings underscore the importance of culturally responsive, human-centered interventions that support families in fostering emotional safety, fairness, and humane relational development across generations.

Limitations

Limitations include the small sample size, retrospective self-report bias, and the absence of multi-informant perspectives. Taken together, these limitations highlight the complexity of studying humanistic relational development within culturally diverse family systems. These constraints limit generalizability but provide rich insight into humanistic relational processes. Although this study provides meaningful insight into how Black American adults interpret the long-term relational impact of parental favoritism, several limitations must be acknowledged to contextualize the findings and guide future research.



The study utilized a purposive sample of 12 Black American adults. While this sample size is appropriate for qualitative thematic saturation, it limits the transferability of the findings to broader populations. Black American families are culturally diverse, with variations in regional identity, immigration history, socioeconomic status, religious affiliation, and family structure. These nuances may influence how favoritism is experienced and interpreted. As a result, the findings should be understood as reflective of the specific participants in this study rather than representative of all Black American families.

Participants relied on retrospective accounts of childhood experiences, which introduces potential recall bias. Memories of favoritism, sibling rivalry, and emotional experiences may be influenced by current relational dynamics, adult interpretations, or unresolved emotional wounds. Humanistic development is shaped by meaning making across the lifespan, and adults may reinterpret childhood events through their present emotional lens. This interpretive evolution enriches the data but also complicates efforts to distinguish between historical events and contemporary meaning-making.

The study collected data from individual adults rather than entire family units. Without triangulated perspectives from siblings, parents, or extended kin, the findings reflect only one vantage point within each family system. Family systems theory emphasizes interdependence and relational reciprocity; therefore, capturing only one member's narrative limits the ability to fully understand systemic dynamics, parental motivations, or sibling interpretations. This constraint is particularly relevant when examining humanistic constructs such as empathy, ethical decision-making, and relational leadership, which develop through reciprocal interactions.

Although the study centers on Black American families, the cultural contexts represented church-centered communities, immigrant households, and school-based support networks, these may not reflect all Black American experiences. Cultural resilience, communal care, and adaptive parenting practices vary widely across subgroups. Additionally, structural stressors such as economic hardship, racial discrimination, and work demands may shape parental behavior differently across contexts. These cultural and ecological variations limit the generalizability of the findings but highlight the importance of culturally grounded humanistic research.

As with all qualitative research, the researcher's positionality, cultural background, and interpretive lens influence data analysis. Although reflexive practices, member checking, and peer debriefing were used to enhance trustworthiness, the thematic interpretation inevitably reflects the researcher's humanistic orientation and theoretical commitments. This influence is particularly relevant when interpreting themes related to empathy, dignity, and relational leadership, which may be emphasized differently by researchers with alternative theoretical frameworks. While the study interprets participants' experiences through a humanistic lens, constructs such as empathy, ethical decision-making, relational maturity, and leadership development were not directly measured using standardized instruments. Instead, these constructs were inferred from narrative accounts. This approach aligns with qualitative methodology but limits the ability to empirically validate humanistic developmental outcomes. Future mixed-methods research could strengthen these connections by integrating qualitative narratives with validated humanistic or relational measures.



Finally, all interviews were conducted virtually, which may have influenced participant comfort, emotional expression, or willingness to disclose sensitive family experiences. Virtual environments can both facilitate openness and create barriers to rapport-building. Additionally, environmental distractions or privacy concerns may have shaped the depth of participants' responses.

Future Research

Future research should continue to explore how childhood experiences of parental favoritism shape humanistic relational development across the lifespan. Several directions can strengthen and extend the insights generated in this study. By expanding inquiry in these areas, future scholars can deepen understanding of how childhood favoritism shapes humanistic development, relational leadership, and emotional well-being across the lifespan. Longitudinal research is needed to examine how favoritism influences the development of empathy, ethical decision-making, trust formation, and leadership capacities from childhood into adulthood. Tracking individuals over time would allow researchers to observe how relational wounds evolve, how resilience emerges, and how humanistic competencies are shaped by changing family dynamics, cultural environments, and life transitions.

Future studies should incorporate multi-informant designs, including parents, siblings, extended kin, and even partners or adult children. Collecting data from multiple members of the same family system would provide a more holistic understanding of how favoritism is perceived, justified, denied, or normalized. This approach would also illuminate how humanistic values, such as fairness, empathy, and relational accountability, are transmitted or disrupted across generations. While qualitative narratives offer rich insight into lived experiences, mixed-methods research could integrate narrative data with validated measures of empathy, attachment security, moral reasoning, conflict resolution, and leadership style. This would allow researchers to empirically examine how childhood favoritism influences adult relational competencies and humanistic development.

Black American families are culturally diverse. Future research should explore how favoritism is experienced within specific subgroups, including: Caribbean and Afro-Latinx families, African immigrant households, Southern vs. Northern regional cultures, and families with strong religious or communal traditions. These studies could examine how cultural norms, migration histories, and community structures shape humanistic relational development and resilience. Research should investigate how structural factors, such as economic hardship, racial discrimination, work demands, and community violence, affect parental availability, emotional presence, and equitable treatment. Understanding these contexts can help clarify when favoritism reflects systemic strain rather than intentional differential treatment, and how families cultivate humanistic values under pressure.

Future research should also evaluate the effectiveness of humanistic-centered family interventions designed to reduce favoritism, strengthen sibling bonds, and promote equitable parenting. Studies could examine: Emotion-focused parenting programs, culturally responsive family therapy, sibling relationship



workshops, community-based resilience interventions. Evaluating these models would help practitioners understand how to foster empathy, fairness, and relational integrity within diverse family systems.

Finally, research should investigate how childhood relational experiences influence leadership in adulthood. This includes examining how individuals who experienced favoritism develop compassionate leadership styles, ethical decision-making frameworks, conflict resolution strategies, and relational intelligence in workplace or community settings. Such studies would deepen understanding of how early family dynamics shape adult leadership capacities and humanistic relational behavior.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that parental favoritism is not only a structural imbalance within the family system but also a formative relational experience that shapes how Black American adults learn trust, empathy, communication, and leadership. Participants' narratives reveal that childhood environments marked by differential treatment, emotional invalidation, or triangulated alliances become early classrooms where relational values are either disrupted or forged. These experiences influence how individuals approach ethical decision-making, conflict resolution, and relationship-building throughout adulthood. Despite the relational wounds caused by favoritism, participants exhibited profound humanistic resilience. Cultural institutions such as churches, schools, and extended kin networks provided alternative spaces where dignity, belonging, and communal care were modeled. These environments helped participants cultivate empathy, fairness, and relational awareness, values that may also inform human-centered approaches to leadership in adulthood. As adults, participants engaged in reflective processes that allowed them to reinterpret childhood experiences with greater emotional clarity. Many intentionally developed communication strategies, boundaries, and parenting practices that counteracted the inequities they experienced. In doing so, their accounts reflected qualities associated with humanistic leadership.

Ultimately, this study highlights that humanistic relational development is deeply shaped by early family dynamics. Parental favoritism can compromise a child's sense of worth and relational safety, yet individuals possess remarkable capacity to heal, adapt, and cultivate humane ways of relating. These findings underscore the importance of culturally responsive, human-centered interventions that support families in fostering equitable treatment, emotional attunement, and relational integrity across generations. By centering human dignity and empathy, practitioners, educators, and families can help ensure that future generations learn to lead, connect, and communicate in ways that honor the humanity of all members within the family system.

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