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THE EFFECTS OF BIRTH ORDER UPON PERSONALITY

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the relationship between birth order and personality with particular attention paid to the first born as opposed to other children. Familial differences in the early socialization of various ordinal positions are explored. Their impact upon first borns calls for a study of the needs and social characteristics of oldest children. Differences in sociability from early childhood through adulthood are also investigated as are birth order effects within mentally ill populations. Finally, the methodological problems in birth order research are explored.

## THE EFFECTS OF BIRTH ORDER UPON PERSONALITY

Man has long hypothesized about the way one's position in the family affects his being. As far back as the ancient Greeks, thinkers have been pondering this question. In the past sixty years, however, psychologists have begun to investigate this area in a scientific manner. Many studies have been conducted and much data gathered. The results, though somewhat unclear seem to indicate a positive relationship.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the relationship between birth order and personality with particular attention paid to the first born as opposed to other children. Familial differences in the early socialization of various ordinal positions are explored. Their impact upon first borns calls for a study of the needs and social characteristics of oldest children. Differences in sociability from early childhood through adulthood are also investigated as are birth order effects

within mentally ill populations. Finally, the methodological problems in birth order research are explored.

The first man to systematically look at the effects of birth order was Alfred Adler in the 1920's. According to Adlerian theory, there is a certain type of personality associated with each possible position in the family. These characteristics stem from the types of problems unique to each position, with which every person in that position must deal (Greene, 1970). Interaction between the individual and his perception of the situations in which he finds himself determines birth order effects (Rhine, 1983). Adler expected the oldest child in a family to be more oriented toward both achievement and affiliation, to be more nostalgic and pessimistic and to be more serious. The younger one will be more relationship oriented and carefree.

Adler also believed that siblings see themselves as different on various personality traits, that the psychological position a child possesses does not always correspond to the ordinal position into which he is born, and that the traits each person possesses relate more to the perceived position than to his actual position (Lohman, 1982). The effects of birth order are likely

to be strongest when the gap between children is narrow, and weaker when they are widely spaced (Kidwell, 1981).

Adler noted that first and last borns are more likely to have problems later in life (Sutton, 1977). The needs and special problems of the oldest are hypothesized to stem from the fact that the birth of a younger sibling "dethrones" the first child from his position of unchallenged and undivided parental attention. For the rest of his life, says Adler, this first child will be trying to reestablish his place of preeminence and importance in his parents view (Adams, 1972). The last born child, unfortunately, is subject to feelings of inferiority because he is weaker and less experienced than his older siblings (Schwab, 1978). He is, however, more likely than are his older brothers and sisters to receive indulgent pampering treatment by his caretakers (Conley, 1979).

Parental care is an area which contributes to the differences between siblings. First borns are generally subject to intensive though inconsistent care from inexperienced parents, which tends to lead to increased social responsiveness and possibly dependency (Yando, 1975). They also, unless they are only children, experience

a dramatic reduction in attention from their parents after the birth of younger siblings. The greater the number of these siblings, the greater will be the loss of attention to each child (Kidwell, 1981). In smaller families, parents are more able to spend lots of time with each child individually, whereas in a large family, demands on parental time, energy, and resources may be such that the parent cannot give each child the amount of one-to-one attention he feels he should (Kidwell, 1981).

One study found that mothers of second born infants were less likely to respond to their children or to initiate interaction with them than were mothers of first born children. If parent-child interactions are an indicator of peer directed behavior, this decrease in attention could negatively affect the child's future relations with his peers (Vandell, 1981). After the birth of the second child, mothers tend to continue to vocalize to the level of the eldest child and to exert pressure upon them to excel in a variety of situations. This stimulation may contribute to the achievement orientation of first borns (Vandell, 1981).

Siblings may also affect each other's development.

Regardless of how a person is treated by his parents, sibling interactions are intrinsically responsible for many sibling behavior and personality differences (Adams, 1972). Most children feel that they are significantly different from their siblings. While first born children tend also to be psychologically first, younger children may feel psychologically ahead of their older brother or sister and middle children may feel squeezed by the siblings surrounding them in age (Lohman, 1982).

Investigators have found observation of sibling interaction to be of value in understanding birth order effects. In a study of seven and eight year olds, Minnett, Vandell, and Santrock (1983) found significant interactions. The children, all of whom had older or younger siblings of either sex, were studied in pairs in several social situations: unstructured, cooperative, and competitive. The results indicated that first born children were more likely to praise, teach, and dominate their siblings than were laterborns. Second borns, on the other hand, were more joyful, cooperative, and self-depreciating than were the first born children. Negative behaviors, such as cheating and aggression appeared more in same sex dyads than it did in mixed sex dyads. First borns



who were also widely spaced demonstrated more affection and positive behavior, while their counterparts, second born widely spaced children, showed more self-depreciating behavior.

Spacing is an important factor to consider in the study of birth order effects. Wider spacing creates more "breathing room" for both children and In theory, at least, both should benefit because the extent to which children are spread over the developmental cycle should lesson tensions and frustrations should be lessened since parents and children have a chance to be more relaxed and enjoyable (Kidwell, 1981). In a study of tenth grade boys, Kidwell (1981) found that as family size increases, perceived parental reasonableness and supportiveness decreases and perceived punativeness increases. However, as average spacing increases, these effects are diminished. This data rests in support of the theory that greater spacing allows parents to devote more psychic energy and individual time to each child, causing more relaxed disciplinary style and a more positive affective relationship (Kidwell, 1981). A spacing of about five years apparently frees the parent from having two preschoolers at the same time and allows for more parent child inter-

action. This wide spacing is especially helpful for the first born as it allows him the opportunity of being an only child for a long period of time, the positive effects of which should last into adolescence. Testing indicates that after five years the positive effects of wide spacing remain stable.

Interestingly, very closely spaced children (one year or less) seems to produce positive results also. These children never realized they enjoyed the luxury of having undivided parental attention; in their own minds, they have always had to share their parents with their siblings and so do not realize what they have lost.

Overall, as the wider the children are spaced, the more birth order effects will diminish.

Need for affiliation, need for achievement, and stress, are all factors on which first borns rank high. Compared with later borns, they appear to be more responsive to social pressure. They tend to show high responsiveness to situations arousing affiliation needs and to those arousing achievement needs (Rhine, 1983). Stagner (1982) found significant evidence for a birth order effect with regards to these needs in a study in which he administered the Rorschach Ink Blot Test and the Thematic Apperception

Test to fifteen pairs of sisters.

First borns show more attitude change under stress than do later borns, according to a study done with Navy recruits under stressing and non-stressing situations (Helmreich, 1968). They are also more likely to seek affiliation with others when under stress producing conditions. However, when stress is not a factor this phenomena becomes less evident. A study of twenty professional weight lifters indicated that a greater percentage of lifters are first borns and that they have demonstrated a significantly greater need for achievement (Hall, 1980). In 1959, Schacter asserted that first borns are more anxious and fearful in anxiety arousing situations and that when in these situations, they are more likely to seek the company of other people. This assertion has not been universally accepted but the bulk of data evidences its verity.

In a study to determine whether first borns tend to seek affiliation with others who are in the same stressful situation and whether they are more highly socialized, MacDonald (1966) studied pregnant women. He found that significantly more first born women attend pre-natal classes when pregnant than do later born women, supporting

the argument that first borns seek affiliation with others in the same condition. Also, hypothesizing about the achievement orientation of first borns, he hypothesized that more first born women would plan their weddings so as not to interfere with their schooling. The overrepresentation of first born June brides supported his hypothesis that first borns will act in accordance with the norms of an achievement oriented society.

A study by Diamond and Munz (1967) indicated that later born individuals tend to disclose more about themselves to others than do first born. These data were interpreted to mean that while first borns have a greater need for affiliation, they are less able to disclose themselves to others than are later borns. This finding would suggest that first borns would tend to have more shallow relationships with others in terms of making themselves known to the other person. Within the female population, first borns and sometimes later borns seem to be more socially conforming and will orient themselves toward other people and pleasing them.

Because of their strong achievement and affiliation needs, first borns as a whole tend to conform more to social norms. The interaction of situation and person-

ality, rather than a personality trait per se, determines whether or not the individual will conform in a given situation; a set of actions which may be conforming in one instance may be nonconformist in another. Because of the stronger needs for affiliation and achievement in first borns, they will tend to choose the plan of action which most closely approaches society's ideals. MacDonald (1966) found that first borns have a much lower rate of interfaith marriage than do later borns. First born males married earlier than later borns, while first born women wanted to marry earlier than did later born women. Both of these pieces of information indicate a high level of conformity on the part of first borns with regard to marital practices.

Stemming from their strong need for affiliation, is a tendency among first borns to be dependent. The large amount of succorance they receive from their parents encourages adult orientation and dependence. Consequently, first borns are more easily influenced by socializing agents. Hardy's (1978) study of leadership styles in four year olds indicated that while the peer influenced later borns are more likely to become relationship-oriented, dependence on adult authority leads first born children

to become more task-oriented (Hardy, 1978). The heightened conformity of the first born can be attributed to unsatisfied dependency needs and to his typical socially responsible role as guardian of family property and values (Helson, 1968).

A study by Burke (1977) of first born girls aged eight to twelve, indicated via questionnaire, that by age five the girls were rated by their parents as being higher in emotionality-tension than were later daughters. Their teachers also rated these girls as more anxious to achieve adult approval and more dependent. The first born, accustomed to receiving a large degree of social reinforcement, is motivated to continue interacting with an unresponsive adult in the hopes that he will soon be reinforced. Later borns, on the other hand, are accustomed to situations in which they are not receiving reinforcement and will consequently not become frustrated when faced with an adult who is not as reinforcing as they might like (Yando, 1975). The adult orientation of the first born contributes to his susceptibility to undergo stress when interacting with a stranger (Yando, 1975).

One of the most noticed places where birth order

effects are evident is in the area of sociability. Adler expected that the later born should be more sociable than the first born. Miller (1976) also believed this assertion for the reasons that

if later born children are to obtain even a modicum, if not a fair share of positive outcomes, they must develop their interpersonal skills - powers of negotiation, accomodation,

tolerance, and a capacity to accept less favorable outcomes - to a degree not typically found in first born children. On the other hand, by virtue of the higher status implicit in age

grading, first born children possess greater power and may simply take or achieve what they want quite arbitrarily.

First born children simply do not need to develop their interpersonal skills to the degree that later children do. Because he has never had as close a relationship to his parents as his older sibling, the later born child will seek more varied relationships. His experience, even in the home will a greater number of relationships, due to the presence of older brothers or sisters. The later born sibling is forced to relate in a sociable manner because he has not the access to his parents that his older siblings had (Diamond, 1967).

Studies of very young children have demonstrated that the effects of birth order may be seen even in babies.

Vandell (1981) postulated that while one may expect differences between first and second born babies the direction these differences will assume is less than clear. Second born children spend less time with their mothers who could serve as prime social instructors, yet they are exposed to older siblings who may serve as a role models and facilitators in social interaction. In a study of infants six and nine months of age, Vandell found that second born children engaged in social interactions shorter in duration and fewer in number than did first born babies. First borns were more likely to gesture, approach, use objects socially, and to engage in antagonistic acts than were second borns. There was a difference between children who had been around preschoolers often and those who had not. Even within the first born population, it seemed that the less exposure to preschoolers, the greater the interest in and skill with infant peers. Perhaps the contact with older children, particularly if it is not pleasant, depresses the desire to interact with peers.

A study of 36 infants aged nine to thirteen months by Collard (1968) indicated that an infant's willingness to accept a stranger depends, in large measure, upon the opportunities he has had to experience a number of



different people. Infants who were not exposed to many people during the first six months of life tended to show a greater fear of strangers than would infants who had known lots of people. First borns would tend to show more fear than would later children who had been constantly in contact with at least one older sibling. In this study, first borns and widely spaced infants tended to make fewer play and exploration efforts and to respond more slowly to a strange person and toy. They also tended to cry more, and laugh or play less than did their second born counterparts. Factors causing these results could be the number of persons to whom the first borns were exposed, the frequency and length of exposure, the level of the infant's development, and the amount of reward he has experienced in past encounters.

Conversely, Snow (1981) demonstrated in her study that at thirty-three months later borns are not any more sociable than first born children or only children. In a study of the social interaction of children and unfamiliar peers, she found a significant linear trend in which only children were the most social, first born children the next and later borns the least social. This finding held over her two component measures, positive

behavior and assertiveness-aggression as well as over the composite score. Snow argues that birth order and sibling spacing differences are a combined result of differences in children's interpersonal communication styles and biological differences which are present at birth.

A study in which 47 female undergraduates were paired in unstructured interviews with male counterparts whom they did not previously know, was done by Ikkes (1983) to investigate birth order differences in the area of sociability. The data were analyzed by sex as well as birth order, and indicated that last born dyads tended to verbalize more, ask more questions of each other and had more eye contact than did first born dyads. The women in last born dyads tended to smile more and give more verbal reinforcers than did the first born women, evidence that the last borns enjoyed their interactions more. Last born men were also more talkative than their first born counterparts and required less personal space. The data indicated strongly that those persons with older, opposite sex siblings are most likely to enjoy involving and rewarding initial interactions with strangers of the opposite sex. This phenomena was most evident with

males, who seemed more willing to engage in conversation with their female partners. The men were the first ones to sit down and were likely to initiate the interaction. It is possible that these results indicate a hesitancy on the part of the women to speak with strange men, rather than a difference in willingness to interact socially.

Later born men were able to evoke more responsiveness and liking from their partners than were firstborn men because they asked more questions and tried to over-compensate for their partner's failure to take the initiative in conversation. This behavior and their wider repertoire of social and role-playing skills, caused the later born men to be perceived by their partners as significantly more self-assertive, exciting, and friendly than were the first born men.

Ikkes (1983) hypothesized that because firstborns interacted more exclusively with adults during their early years they tend to become more adult oriented. The effects of this socialization are greater tendency to conform to authority, greater educational attainment, greater achievement and intelligence, higher status as a function of age, greater tendency to be perceived as dominant in sibling interactions, and more pride in themselves

and higher self-esteem. These patterns are consistent with the predictions and results of most earlier empirical research. Development of interpersonal skills should ease a child's interaction with his peers and thereby increase his popularity. Miller (1976) postulated that first born children may develop autocratic interpersonal styles and other negative personality traits because of their higher status in the family. These characteristics, not acquired by later borns, should diminish their popularity relative to later born children. The key to ascertaining the veracity of this claim is the only child. If these negative traits are a function of familial power, then the only child, having no younger siblings, should not develop them and the popularity of only children should equal that of last borns.

Comparisons of school children indicated differently. Only children were essentially similar to first born children and like them, less popular than later born children. Later borns were clearly more popular than their first born peers from the time they entered school until the end of their grade school years. The absence of any interaction between the child's year in school and the interpersonal styles developed in the preschool

years indicate that these behavioral patterns are maintained at least through the elementary school years. Differences in the home setting and in interactions between earlier and later born children seem to best account for these results. During their early years, later borns evidently develop superior interpersonal skills which aid them in their interaction with peers for years to come.

Birth order effects are also evident among the mentally ill. In a sampling of people given the Eysenck Personality Inventory, an over-representation of only born males and first born females and an under-representation of first born males and middle born females fell into the highly neurotic grouping (Sutton, 1977). It appears, from several studies, that early born males and later born females are more likely to be maladjusted, delinquents or troublemakers (Adams, 1972). Conley (1979) found significant over-representations, which appeared to be real rather than artifactual, of last and only borns among alcoholic populations for subjects who were forty years of age or older and who came from the lower socio-economic classes. There appeared to be no significant birth order differences in the alcoholic population with regard to treatment results.

There have been several studies in which the researcher failed to find any significant results. A study of 123 high school students from intact nuclear families yielded negative results on the questions of whether or not there were birth order similarities in personality as measured by the California Psychological Inventory as a whole or when individual items were considered (Sampsel, 1983).

In another study, it was hypothesized that first borns would show greater susceptibility to influence than other birth position groups, as measured by an increase in the number of self-evaluative statements uttered when these responses were reinforced (Babladelis, 1972). The study provided negative results since the number of both positive and negative self-evaluative statements did not differ from one birth order group to another, in either a single interview or a series of them.

Due to the complicated nature of the subject and the fact that there are so many factors relevant to birth order, there have been many criticisms of the existing research. These factors, some of which are more commonly controlled than others, include sex of subject, sex of siblings, spacing, number of siblings, and socioeconomic status. Greene (1970) suggested that the influence of

birth order over personality is much more general than Adler theorized, and that age differences between siblings are far less important than is the actual presence of the brothers or sisters. Many of the contradictory findings which pester the research can be eliminated by proper control of the confounding variables such as socioeconomic status (Miller, 1976).

The manner in which birth order is defined will have a significant effect upon the obtained results. Different sampling methods will also have an influence on the results achieved in birth order studies. McCall (1980) found that the more narrowly bounded an age sample is, the more likely it is to be sensitive to changes in the population growth rate and consequently, unrepresentative of the broader population. Definition of the cohort by which the samples are taken, such as grade in school, does not always correlate with the events being studied, which are generally the family history of the subject (Adams, 1972). The fact that families from lower socioeconomic ranks tend to have more children than do other groups would lead to an over-representation of later born children in that group (McCall, 1980).

An article by Shooter (1972) explains away many birth order effects with long-term population trends. In a culture where there has been long term trend toward a greater number of new families being started each year, there should be more first born than last born individuals, and in a population where the average family size is decreasing there should be more last born than first born individuals from large families. Biases in birth order research may occur when these trends are not controlled. When they are accounted for, claims Shooter, the evidence for birth position effects in the United States middle classes virtually disappears. The overabundance of some social class linked populations, such as college students, is due to differences between the classes and consequently, socioeconomic status of subjects should be controlled whenever possible.

Birth order effects have been demonstrated to have an effect upon the personality of the individual. Many of the theories postulated by Adler in the late 1920's have held true. First borns receive more parental stimulation in their first years because there is no competition for attention. The manner in which siblings relate to each other indicates that oldest are more likely to behave



in a patronizing manner to their younger siblings. The amount of time between children affects the intensity of the birth order effects. First born children tend to demonstrate high needs for affiliation and achievement and high susceptibility to stress and conformist behavior. In the area of sociability, later borns tend to be more outgoing and popular, however, the data is not totally conclusive. The consequences of birth order may even be seen in mentally ill populations. There have been studies in which negative results were obtained. Methodological problems in the definition of birth order have caused some seemingly contradictory results. Overall, it may be hypothesized that an individual's personality may be to some extent determined by his position in his family of origin.

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