

The effect of birth order on personality



The overarching tenet of this research is the effect of birth order on the personality of individuals in a family. This research recognizes the fact that the development needs of a first born differs from the last child in a family. In order for children to gain access to the resources of the family, they have different developmental strategies by establishing their own niche and these strategies are manifested by behavioral and personality differences between siblings. This proposal will highlight the origin of personality differences between siblings. This will be followed by relevant theories that will explain the forces that are at play in shaping the development of an individual which will shed light on the possible reasons that drive sibling interactions. After the evolutionary niche model of Alfred Alders (1996) in this chapter, key issues and research goals and the application of the results will be laid out.

In the field of behavioral genetics, numerous research have been published that explored the genetic influence of personality citing that it accounts approximately 40% of variances in individual personalities while environmental factors contribute only to 35% for non-shared and 5% for shared environments while the remainder or 20% is attributed to sampling and measurement errors (Eid & Ider, 1999, 2001; Eid & Ider, 1999, 2001; Turkheimer & Waldron, 2000). Most notable of these results is the small influence of shared experience on personality development. It was observed that a fair proportion of personality transpired early in a person's lifetime. Thus, a brief, shared family experience seemed to exert little effect on the person of an individual's personality (Turkheimer & Waldron, 2000).

This small influence of shared family experiences in personality formation has led to criticism and subsequent refinements in the methods employed in behavioral genetics (McEuffitt, 2005). For instance, recent reviews have suggested that estimates on variance contributed by shared environment should be increased in order for the significant gene-environment interaction to become apparent (McEuffitt, 2005), and the concept of “shared environment” has been shown to be simple and straightforward.

When this last feature is taken which is the concept of shared family environment, it has been argued by DeFries (2001) that the within-family environment in which siblings live together does not necessarily result in shared sibling experiences. In other words, the experiences that two or more siblings have in common, which are termed shared experiences, have numerous differentiating factors. This is illustrated by this example. Siblings are likely to differ in age and gender leading to variations in size, strength, and cognitive maturity. These differences in cognitive maturity result in dissimilar interpretations of experiences and shared events leading to differing effects on development. Morales (1994) believed that position of the child in the family has an effect on the behavior of the child inside and outside of the confines of the home. He pointed out in his studies that it is the first born who is more responsible, more self-confident, and shows higher self-esteem. He added that older children in the family were provided more opportunities to teach their younger siblings thus encouraging them to become leaders and more intelligent. According to Zajonc and Markus (as cited in Bianchi & Robinson, 1997) birth order had an inversely relationship

with academic performance which theorizes that more children result in lower intellectual stimulation in the family.

Moreover, as there are differences in the specific needs and wants of individual siblings, so should their interpretation of the shared environment. Indeed, varying responses to shared is beneficial to siblings within the same family environment. This is apparent in the competition among siblings in their access to family resources. At an early age, majority of resources that an individual sibling wants are in the form of parental attention and care. While it is encouraged in modern societies to distribute resources equally within the family, the unequal allocation of resources in the family can be traced in history and contemporary tribal societies. It is the practice of investing heavily on the eldest and youngest. The parental allocation of resources to children is determined by the availability of the resources at any given time and gaining access to these resources is the predicament all the siblings face.

Romeo (1994) asserted that a child's position in the family is a great influence in shaping the personality of the individual. He added, " The influence of the family constellation is so strong that the lifestyles of the youngest children of two different families are more similar than those of the youngest and middle child of the same family." According to Travis and Kohli (1995) said that the intellectual ability of siblings depends on birth order.

Olszewski-Kubilius (2000) asserted that birth order is not merely a superficial variable but one that is instrumental and crucial that can affect how families behave and provide resources to their child. The proponent of this research

is interested in establishing the effect of birth order on the personality of Grade 9 students at a middle school in the area. In this study, personality will be classified using two of five personality dimensions in the Big Five. When the personality of the respondent is evaluated using the Big Five it is consistent with the predictions of family dynamics.

For this study, the convenience sampling will be used and therefore conclusion could not be generalized to reflect the overall view of Grade Nine students in the nearby middle school. Another assumption will be that the respondents will truthfully answer the items in the questionnaire ensuring a high external validity.

One limitation is that the data will be based on the self-report of the respondents based on their perceptions towards how their position in the family affected their personality and conformity in family communication. Only the perceptions of the middle school students will be determined and only the variables conscientiousness, openness to experience, and conformity in family communication will be studied. Therefore views of their teachers, parents, or siblings are beyond the scope of this study. Although self-reports obtained from self-administered questionnaires serves its advantage since scoring could be done with relative ease, validity and reliability must first be established. Another possibility is that some students might not fully understand the items in the questionnaire considering that the respondent pool will be composed of different racial backgrounds whose English facility is not excellent. To remedy the language barrier, the questionnaire will be translated into their native tongue. To allay any anxiety

during test administration, the investigator will emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers.

Problem statement

The main question this research hopes to answer is Does birth order have any kind of effect on personality? The roles of family members in the family govern the responsibilities and expectations placed on children by parents and siblings. How children perceive their place in the family affects their feelings and perceptions about themselves and the quality of their interaction with others (Kottman & Johnson, 1993 as cited in Nims, 1998). During the child's formative certain elements in the family structure which reflect affiliation and emotional security greatly affect the coping and relationship styles and the psychological status of mature individuals (Fullerton et al. 1989).

Despite the influence of genetics and the environment, behavioral differences of siblings could be due to birth order (Claxton, 1994), defined as the child's rank in the family according to age (Steelman, 1985 as cited in Claxton, 1994). An individual's status in the family which is the first social structure the child is exposed to is implicated as one of the major factors that contribute in shaping personality (Gould, 1997), and subsequent social relationships outside the family.

Though there is wide acceptance on the belief that birth order is the single most important factor of development across a person's lifetime, the individual's birth order could potentially influence the quality of child-parental and sibling-sibling interaction affecting personality and social

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behavior (Buckley, 1998). Differences on the experiences of socialization among individuals by virtue of birth order result in explicit variations in personality and behavior. When there are no siblings, those who were first born are likely to be socialized by adults while those who were later born become exposed to the socialization of their older siblings (Claxton, 1994). Thus it was theorized that the first born or the oldest child in the family is more leaned towards achievement while the rest of the siblings tend to be more sociable and gain more satisfying and pleasurable experiences (Claxton, 1994). However, these observations are generalized and imprecise (Claxton, 1994).

Research questions

With the birth of a child, the individual enters into a world different from the child born before him or her. Since parents have learned a great deal from nurturing the first child, the coming of the second child will be easier to deal with, however the second child must compete with the first child to gain access of family resources such as food, clothing, attention, love and many others (Zanjonc 2001). The 2004 US census revealed that the average size of the family is 3. 18. In other words, the typical American family is composed of an three children- the eldest or first born, middle child, and the youngest or last born. Differences in the type of environment the children are exposed to may have a significant effect on them. Various methodologies have looked primarily on the influence of family size and birth order on child development.

Stereotypes surrounding the personality of the eldest versus the middle child and the last born are ever present in society. The study of Herrera and Zonjanc (2003) established the beliefs underlying the various personalities associated with the first born, middle child, and so forth. Their research revealed that those who were born first showed both positive and negative traits. They were regarded to be most successful in their academic performance, very responsible, exhibit conformist attitudes, enjoy greater stability while not being in touch with one's emotions and not imaginative. In addition, middle children are stereotyped to be the most envious while the youngest is usually the most innovative, expressive, demonstrative, defiant, negligent and conversational. The only child is most often considered to display unpleasant behaviors. Differences were also noted as to the type of occupation study participants perceived among children varying in birth orders. They had the belief that the first born pursue courses like Accountancy, Aeronautics, Architecture, Education, Law or Medicine among others. Conversely, last borns are likely to take Visual Arts, Music, Performing Arts, Photography and many others.

This qualitative study is aimed to determine the effect of birth order on the personality of ninth grade students in the area. Specifically, it will provide answers to the following questions:

What is the effect of birth order on personality?

What is the contribution of personality differences among siblings?

Does the family and the influence of birth order on personality have a significant effect on the personality of the individual?

Is there a demonstrated relationship between birth order and personality in large families well?

Application of results

The results that will be obtained in the proposed study will be beneficial to the field of counselling. Research has proven that the hypotheses of counsellors regarding their clients are considerably affected by the birth order of the client in his or her family (Stewart, 2004). Thus it is relevant to educate counsellors on the significance of discriminating two concepts of birth order, psychological and ordinal. It is also necessary for counsellors to have a good understanding on the relationship between psychological and ordinal birth orders on the relationships the clients have established whether in their respective families or outside the confines of the home. With this information in hand, clinicians are able to come up with strategies in treating any dysfunctional behavior that may surface during counselling. In addition, it is an important step for clinicians to support that in a successful social relationship, there should be optimism. Likewise, clinicians should also take into account other variables or factors in their assessment of the clients' quality of human interaction. If for instance, birth order emerged to affect personality and relationship quality, then it should be utilized during the assessment of clients in the clinical setting.

Are the earlier cited stereotypes founded in research? How does an individual's birth order affect the personality and behavior of the individual?

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Understanding the influence of birth order on the personality of a child can aid in making the family particularly parents and the community to be more responsive to the uniqueness of situations and circumstances every child is exposed to during and after birth. It would also provide helpful information that will be utilized by parents in molding and improving their care giving strategies tailor fit to satisfy the needs of the child.

Theoretical framework

During the past 150 years, Alfred Adler became prominently known in the field of psychology by exploring the relationship between birth order and personality. In the book entitled, “*Born to Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics and Creative Lives*”, Adler examined prominent names in history, their birth order, and views towards scientific innovation. He mentioned that first borns who have significantly etched their mark in history are more defiant to change compared to their siblings who are more welcoming towards radicalism.

Utilizing evidence from clinical observations and verbal testimonies, Adler (1928) implied that various personality patterns should be related to the individual's birth order. As suggested by Adler, it is the firstborn that would receive most of familial nurturance, attention and love until the second sibling arrives leaving the former becoming resentful for the loss of his or her special place in the family circle. There is in a sense of feeling of dethronement on the part of the first born which he predicted would be more neurotic, likely to be institutionalized, and abuse drugs and other illicit substances. Adler added that the youngest child is likely to be spoiled and

overindulged rendering him or her emotionally ill-prepared for human interactions outside of the home. Since the middle child or children has not experienced the negative effects of dethronement and parental overindulging, they are the most successful, secure, and functional. The weakness in Adler's perspectives is his failure to test his assumptions therefore regarded in the scientific community as mere speculations.

Birth order implies differences in size, age, and power distribution in the family unit. Essentially, a sibling's birth order is considered an independent variable representing the factors affecting competition and the amount of strategies the sibling can explore or adopt to gain access of family resources. Those siblings, who have not successfully adopted strategies in the face of stiff competition especially when other siblings have grown stronger and bigger, will more likely be unable to survive crucial developmental stages. This implies that siblings should apply strategies that enable them to increase their access to family resources without resulting to sibling misunderstanding or rivalry (Adler, 1996, 1999, 2006).

For the first born, there is no direct competition because there are no siblings to compete against and only the parents will decide whether or not to give the child access to family resources. This would be an opportune time for the first born to please his or her parents. However most parents interviewed admitted that they do not deprive their only child access to attention, clothing or food despite his or her failure to please the parents. Thus, this situation suggests that the only child needs to submit to his or her parents' demands to easily access resources in the family. Regardless of whether the parents, particularly the mother asks the child to behave

properly in school, get good grades, or cleans the bedroom, conformity to the expectations of the parents would mean that any available resources will be provided without hesitation. Thus, one would observe that the first born execute strategies that warrant approval of parents by completing assigned tasks and conforming to the demands of parents (Adler, 2007). The strategies which are required by virtue of the birth order is made manifest as personalities leading to the conclusion that first borns are conformists (Adler, 1996, 2007).

The situation becomes different in the case of the second born. From the time a child is born after the eldest child, he or she has only 3/4 the attention of the parents and access to available resources in the family. The rival is older, has more physical strength, and secured an early advantage on the family resources. In this situation, what Adler called “conditional adaptive strategies” come into play. If the second born will mimic the first born’s strategy, it would bring disadvantage to both. It would result in intense rivalry and competition and because the first born is stronger and older, more often than not, it is the second born who will be defeated. What the second born can do as an adaptive strategy is to “give her own niche”. When the second born is faced with the older sibling, the former should make use of low power strategies which is appealing to the parents who want justice and impartiality in the home or which inhibit competition and rivalry among siblings. Therefore one would find that the second born will employ alternative strategies and methods to acquire family resources. Consequently, the second born is regarded as rebellious, unconventional and a personality style that scores high in the openness to

experience subscale of the Big Five Personal Factor if compared to the eldest sibling (HeD°ley & ElliÑ•, 2007).

Differences between siblings result from the variety of the roles they play in the family due in part to genetic variability, gender, and birth order. Because of these inherent differences among siblings, family roles become diversified which is in conjunction with Charles Darwin's divergence principle. Nature offers competition among species and similar to that, roles among siblings in the family are specialized reducing competition and work responsibilities are equitably distributed. With specialization, parents find it difficult to compare their children's abilities from one birth order to another. The Darwinian divergence principle is one of the significant scientific landmarks in evolutionary biology since it provides the explanation for adaptive radiation which is the diversity of species that are closely related as illustrated by the Galapagos finches (Winkler, & Sulloway 2006). The birth order of an individual in the family is directly linked to age and the chances of engaging tasks that are age appropriate or age specific. Since the first borns are the oldest among the siblings, they take on the role of a surrogate parent which enable them to be more responsible and mimic adult behavioral patterns.

Building on previous studies on personality, Sulloway (1996) organized characteristics of personality into five: Openness, Emotional Stability, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness, (Goldberg, 1982; Norman, 1963).

The hypothesis of Sulloway (1996) stated that first born siblings score high in Surgency which means they are highly sociable and dominant owing to the fact that first born individuals tend to lessen diversion of the investment of parents by exercising their dominance over his or her other siblings.

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Sulloway also hypothesized that first born individuals are less agreeable which indicate higher flexibility, warmth, and selflessness. Since the eldest sibling is the most dominant in the family, those who were born after the eldest child more likely use less confrontive strategies by becoming more agreeable. Sulloway (1996) also said that first borns are more conscientious therefore are more cautious, well organized, and reliable because it is the position of the first born to promote status quo within the family structure. Since the first borns have an earlier benefit over their younger siblings due to enjoyment of parental attention and family resources. Thus the coming of another sibling may cause him or her to be anxious about the likelihood that parental resources will be diverted to the new child. In line with that, Sulloway concluded that first borns may be less emotionally stable. Lastly, Sulloway assumed that being a first born result in scoring low in Openness which would imply that he or she may be less embracing towards the new. Sulloway added that when individuals exhibit high openness it signifies they are more open towards soliciting parental resources using alternative means.

Definition of terms

The following terms will be defined in order to have a better understanding of the problems this research aims to address:

Birth order. This variable refers to the ordinal position of the individual in the family which could classified into first born, second born, third born or last born.

Personality. This variable refers to the type of personality based on the instrument of John focusing on Conscientiousness and Openness to New Experience subscales.

Conscientiousness. This variable refers to the degree that the individual is well organized or follows planned daily activities.

Openness to Experience. This variable refers to the extent that the individuals exhibit traits such as insightfulness, creativity, or wide interests.

Conformity. This variable refers to the level in which the individuals follow norms in family communication.

Outline of remaining chapters

Explained in the next pages are related literature and studies that centrally focus on the effect of birth order and personality among children. The theories that underpin this study will also be cited in the second chapter of this dissertation. The contents of Chapter 3 include problem statement, objectives and their rationale, research plan, participants, instrumentation, data processing, ethical assurances, and summary. Chapter 4 will present the results of the study as well as a thorough and detailed discussion of results. Data will be presented appropriately to ensure that readers have firm grasp of the nature of the results. This will be followed by Chapter 5 which presents the summary of findings, conclusion, and recommendations.