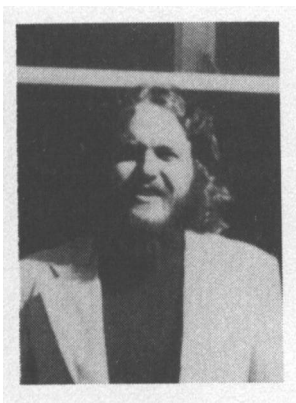


The Effects of Birth Order and Family Size on Self Concept



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Abstract

The present study presents an evaluation of the effects of birth order and family size on the self-concept as measured by the 29 scores of the Tennessee Self Concept Scale (TSCS). One hundred and seventeen middle and upper class 18 to 22-year-old female American university students were administered the TSCS and divided into the following birth-order groups: only, first, middle, and last; and family-size groups: subjects that came from two-child families,

three or four-child families, and five-or-more-child families. Analysis of variance and *t* test statistical procedures showed the only-born to have the most favored birth-order position in terms of self-concept and tendencies to avoid the characteristics associated with pathological disorders. The most favored family size (in terms of self-concept and tendency to avoid the characteristics associated with pathological disorders) was three or more children with the least favored being a family with two children.



The Effects of Birth Order and Family Size on Self Concept

As early as 1918, Alfred Adler (1958) theorized that an individual's personality was in part a function of his birth order in the family. For example, he proposed that the only child fears having a brother or sister, because he enjoys the position of being the centre of attention. He therefore believed that the only child would have many difficulties later in adult life when he would no longer be the centre of his parents' attention. From Adler's theory, it would appear that the only-born would tend to have a lower self-concept than siblings of other ordinal positions.

Birth Order Research

In the last decade there has been a renewed interest in research that has tested Adler's ideas relating to birth order. Vockell, Felker, and Miley (1973), for example, listed 272 studies published between 1967 and 1971 that evaluated the effects of birth order on a variety of dependent variables. A summary of these studies shows a confused relationship between birth order and self-concept or self-esteem. One series of studies by Stotland and Dunn (1962), Purpura (1970), Curry, Manning, and Monroe (1971),

Bartelt (1972), Nystul (1974), and Nystul (1976) did not show birth order to have a significant effect on self-concept or self-esteem.

Another Series

Another series of studies by Sears (1970), Platt, Moskalski, and Eisenman (1968), Coopersmith (1967), and Rosenberg (1965) indicated that birth order does have a significant effect on self-concept or self-esteem with first and/or only-borns having significantly higher self-concept or self-esteem than later-borns. In these studies, sex appeared to be a variable that influenced the birth-order effects. Platt et al. (1968), for example, found only-born males to have the most positive attitudes towards their future and female only-borns to have the most negative attitudes towards their future as compared to first or later-born males or females. The study by Rosenberg (1965) tended to support the findings of Platt et al. (1968) by showing only-born males to have significantly higher self-esteem than the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, or later male or female child. The only-born female had no self-esteem advantage over the other sibling positions.



Family Size Research

Reviewers of birth-order research such as Sampson (1965) and Schooler (1972) note that conflicting birth-order findings, as reported above, are apparently due to the fact that the investigators did not control for such intervening variables as sex, family size, age, and socio-economic status. Fischer and Hayes (1941), Oberlander, Jenkin, Houlihan, and Jackson (1970), and Sears (1970) noted that family size was one variable in particular that may obscure or interact with a potential birth-order effect. Coopersmith (1967) and Sears (1970) theorized on the influences of family size on self-concept when they said that parents have only so much time and energy to give to their children. As a result, the larger the family the less the parents will be able to promote conditions that facilitate the self-concept developments of their children. Therefore, the larger the family the lower the self-esteem of the children in those families. Coopersmith (1967) and Sears (1970) concluded that since the only and first-born would, for a period of time, be the centre of their parents' attention, they should have higher self-esteem than those born after the first. Actually, a study by Coopersmith (1967) contradicted the "only so much time and energy" theories by showing children from smaller families having self-esteem which were no different from those of children from larger families. A study by Nystul (1976) supported Coopersmith's finding, also showing family size to have a non-significant effect on self-concept as measured by the 29 scores of the Tennessee Self Concept Scale (Fitts, 1965).

Although no other studies appear to have related family size to self-concept, there are two studies reported over thirty years ago that related family size to social acceptability. (These studies unfortunate-

ly did not control for sex.) First, Bonney (1943) ranked children from various family sizes according to their social acceptability (as measured by sociometric testing and teacher-ratings) — the only child ranked highest, followed by children from family units of four or more, with children from two or three-child families last. Another study by Bonney (1944) again related social acceptability (as measured by socio-metric testing) to family size and showed only children to again rank highest, followed by children from family units of six or more children, then children from family units of two or three, and children from four to five-child families last.

Other Trends

The other trends reported by Bonney (1943, 1944) showed that (aside from the only child) children from larger families tended to be more socially acceptable than children from smaller families. These findings again contradicted the "only so much time and energy" theories of Coopersmith (1967) and Sears (1970) and the studies of Coopersmith (1967) and Nystul (1976).

Conflicting

Again, the conflicting trends could be due to the absence of control variables in these studies. For example, the study by Nystul (1976) did not control for socio-economic status. An evaluation of the only child also was not included in the Nystul (1976) study. The purpose of the present study is to implement the controls suggested by Sampson (1965) and Schooler (1972) to determine if birth order, family size, or the interaction of birth order and family size affects the self-concept as measured by the 29 scores of the Tennessee Self Concept Scale (TSCS) (Fitts, 1965).

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects in this study fell within the following parameters:

1. Students in courses offered by the Department of Psychology, Family Life, and Education at Oregon State University.

2. Upper, upper-middle, and middle-class Caucasians as determined by Hollingshead's (Hollingshead & Redlich, 1958) "The Two Factor Index of Social Position" (type I, II, and III).

3. Females between the ages 18 and 22.

4. Any sibling six or more years older or younger than another sibling was not considered when determining the number of siblings in the family since such siblings tend to grow up like an only child (Toman, 1969).

5. Eleven Subjects who were six or more years older or younger than another sibling were considered "only-borns". Four subjects who had no siblings were also classified as only-borns. A *t* test comparing these two groups of only-borns showed them to be no different (.05 level) in their self-concepts as measured by the 29 scores of the TSCS.

6. All middle-born subjects had at least one other female sibling in the family.

7. All subjects were non-paid volunteers.

Procedures

Two hundred and seventeen subjects were administered the TSCS. Out of this sample, 37 subjects were deleted from the study because of their false positive TSCS scores. Fitts (1973) established the criterion for false positive TSCS scores as subjects whose Defensive Positive TSCS scores were 65 or above, or whose Self Criticism were 28 or lower. Sixty-three subjects were also deleted as a result of the controls imposed on the study.

The remaining 117 subjects made up the sample. These subjects were divided into the following eight groups which represented the subjects' birth order and family size.

- A. Group 1: 15 only-borns
- B. Family Size: Two Children
 - Group 2: first-borns (N = 15)
 - Group 3: last-borns (N = 15)
- C. Family Size: Three and Four Children
 - Group 4: first-borns (N = 15)
 - Group 5: middle-borns (N = 15)
 - Group 6: last-borns (N = 15)
- D. Family Size: Five or More Children
 - Group 7: first-borns (N = 8)
 - Group 8: middle-borns (N = 19)

The following three statistical procedures were then conducted to determine if birth order, family size, or the interaction of birth order and family size affects the self-concept as measured by the 29 scores of the TSCS:

1. A 2 X 2 analysis of variance on the above mentioned Groups 2, 3, 4, and 5.
2. A one-way analysis of variance on Groups 4, 5, and 6.
3. t test comparing Groups 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Two by Two Analysis of Variance

A 2 X 2 analysis of variance was performed on Groups 2, 3, 4, and 5 to investigate possible birth order, family size, or birth-order/family size interaction effects.

A. The Birth-Order Effects

There was a birth-order effect on TSCS score variable 21 (count of the No. 2 responses) which showed last-borns to make significantly more No. 2 responses on the TSCS answer sheet than the first-borns, $F(1, 56) = 5.253, p \ll .02$. Since responses of "1" or "5" can be seen as less absolute than responses of "2" or "4", the last-born could be considered more likely to qualify her self-descriptions than the first-borns.

B. The Family-Size Effects

A family-size effect emerged showing subjects from families with three or four children to have higher self-concepts on three TSCS scores than subjects from families with two children — moral ethical TSCS score, $F(1, 56) = 8.508, p \ll .005$; personality disorder TSCS score, $F(1, 56) = 8.463, p \ll .005$; personal self, $F(1, 56) = 8.463, p \ll .005$; personal self, $F(1, 56) = 4.113, \ll .04$. These results showed subjects from families with three or four children to have a more positive feeling about their personal and moral-ethical self and to have less of a tendency towards personality disorder than subjects from families with two children.

C. The Birth-Order/Family-Size Interaction effects

There was no birth-order/family-size interaction effect (p level = .05).

One-Way Analysis of Variance

A second statistical procedure was then carried out utilizing a one-way analysis of variance to analyze possible birth-order effects of subjects from families of three or four children (Groups 4, 5, and 6). On the TSCS score variable 19 (count of the No. 4 responses), the middle-born made significantly more No. 4 responses on the TSCS answer sheet than the first or last-born, $F(2, 42) = 4.047, p \ll .02$. On the TSCS

score variable 22 (count of the No. 1 responses), the last-born made significantly more No. 1 responses on the TSCS answer sheet than the first or middle-born, $F(2, 42) = 3.484, p \ll .038$.

Since the responses on the TSCS answer sheet of "1" or "5" can be seen as less absolute than responses of "2" or "4", the middle-born from a three or four-child family could be considered to be more likely to qualify her self-descriptions than the first or last-borns.

Tests

The final statistical procedure involved 16 group comparisons as set forth in Table 1. Each group comparison involved 29 t tests for each of the 29 TSCS scores.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The only-born is an interesting variable which can be conceptualized both in terms of birth order and family size. Regardless of how the only-born was analyzed, she consistently had significantly more positive TSCS scores than any other birth order or family size. There were other birth-order and family-size effects that did not include the only-born.

A family-size effect emerged from the t tests statistical procedures which did not relate to the only-born but did support the family-size findings reported in the 2 X 2 analysis of variance procedures. Subjects from families with three or four children as compared with subjects from families with two children had a more positive feeling of their moral-ethical self and less of a tendency towards the characteristics associated with personality disorders.

Table 1

Group Comparisons	t Tests t Values	TSCS Scores
(1) Group 2 ◀ Group 3	t(28) = 2.32, p ◀ .05	No. 2 responses on the TSCS answer sheet
(2) Group 2 ▶ Group 5	t(28) = 2.61, p ◀ .05	Total Distribution
Group 2 ▶ Group 5	t(28) = 2.86, p ◀ .01	No. 1 responses on the TSCS answer sheet
Group 2 ▶ Group 5	t(28) = 2.82, p ◀ .01	No. 5 responses on the TSCS answer sheet
Group 2 ◀ Group 5	t(28) = 2.92, p ◀ .01	No. 2 responses on the TSCS answer sheet
Group 2 ◀ Group 5	t(28) = 2.44, p ◀ .05	No. 4 responses on the TSCS answer sheet
(3) Group 3 ▶ Group 5	nonsignificant at .05 level	—
(4) Group 1 ▶ Group 2	t(28) = 2.27, p ◀ .05	Total Positive (Self esteem)
Group 1 ▶ Group 2	t(28) = 2.74, p ◀ .05	Self Satisfaction
Group 1 ▶ Group 2	t(28) = 2.12, p ◀ .05	Personal Self
Group 1 ▶ Group 2	t(28) = 2.39, p ◀ .05	Family Self
Group 1 ▶ Group 2	t(28) = 2.66, p ◀ .05	Personality Disorder (inversely scored)
Group 1 ◀ Group 2	t(28) = 2.08, p ◀ .05	Total Variability
(5) Group 1 ▶ Group 3	t(28) = 3.38, p ◀ .01	Total Positive
Group 1 ▶ Group 3	t(28) = 3.87, p ◀ .01	Identity
Group 1 ▶ Group 3	t(28) = 2.38, p ◀ .05	Behavior
Group 1 ▶ Group 3	t(28) = 4.33, p ◀ .01	Personal Self
Group 1 ▶ Group 3	t(28) = 2.05, p ◀ .05	Family Self
Group 1 ▶ Group 3	t(28) = 2.58, p ◀ .05	Social Self
Group 1 ▶ Group 3	t(28) = 3.09, p ◀ .01	General Maladjustment (inversely scored)
Group 1 ◀ Group 3	t(28) = 2.04, p ◀ .05	Psychosis
Group 1 ▶ Group 3	t(28) = 2.56, p ◀ .05	Personality Disorder (inversely scored)
Group 1 ▶ Group 3	t(28) = 2.88, p ◀ .01	Neurosis (inversely scored)
Group 1 ◀ Group 3	t(28) = 2.66, p ◀ .05	No. 2 responses on the TSCS answer sheet
Group 1 ◀ Group 3	t(28) = 2.52, p ◀ .05	No. 1 responses on the TSCS answer sheet
Group 1 ◀ Group 3	t(28) = 2.45, p ◀ .05	Defensive Positive
(6) Group 1 & Group 4	nonsignificant at .05 level	—
(7) Group 1 ▶ Group 5	t(28) = 2.77, p ◀ .01	Total Positive
Group 1 ▶ Group 5	t(28) = 3.18, p ◀ .01	Identity
Group 1 ▶ Group 5	t(28) = 2.08, p ◀ .05	Behavior
Group 1 ▶ Group 5	t(28) = 3.01, p ◀ .01	Physical Self
Group 1 ▶ Group 5	t(28) = 2.85, p ◀ .01	Personal Self
Group 1 ▶ Group 5	t(28) = 2.26, p ◀ .05	Social Self
Group 1 ▶ Group 5	t(28) = 2.72, p ◀ .05	Total Distribution
Group 1 ▶ Group 5	t(28) = 3.45, p ◀ .01	General Maladjustment (inversely scored)

Table 1 (continued)

Group 1 ► Group 5	t(28) = 2.57, p ◀ .05	Neurosis (inversely scored)
Group 1 ► Group 5	t(28) = 3.63, p ◀ .01	No. 1 responses on the TSCS answer sheet
Group 1 ► Group 5	t(28) = 2.11, p ◀ .05	No. 5 responses on the TSCS answer sheet
Group 1 ◀ Group 5	t(28) = 3.52, p ◀ .01	No. 2 responses on the TSCS answer sheet
(8) Group 1 ► Group 6	t(28) = 2.80, p ◀ .01	True-False Ratio (a measure of response set)
Group 1 ◀ Group 6	t(28) = 2.06, p ◀ .05	No. 2 responses on the TSCS answer sheet
(9) Group 1 ► Group 7	t(21) = 2.21, p ◀ .05	Total Positive
Group 1 ► Group 7	t(21) = 2.30, p ◀ .05	Identity
Group 1 ► Group 7	t(21) = 2.24, p ◀ .05	Self Satisfaction
Group 1 ► Group 7	t(21) = 2.38, p ◀ .05	Personal Self
Group 1 ► Group 7	t(21) = 2.32, p ◀ .05	Social Self
Group 1 ► Group 7	t(21) = 3.05, p ◀ .01	General Maladjustment (inversely scored)
Group 1 ◀ Group 7	t(21) = 2.14, p ◀ .05	No. 2 responses on the TSCS answer sheet
(10) Group 1 ► Group 8	t(32) = 2.25, p ◀ .05	Identity
Group 1 ► Group 8	t(32) = 2.41, p ◀ .05	Personal Self
Group 1 ► Group 8	t(32) = 2.83, p ◀ .01	General Maladjustment (inversely scored)
(11) Group 1 ► Groups 2 & 3	t(43) = 3.15, p ◀ .01	Total Positive
Group 1 ► Groups 2 & 3	t(43) = 2.86, p ◀ .01	Identity
Group 1 ► Groups 2 & 3	t(43) = 2.55, p ◀ .05	Self Satisfaction
Group 1 ► Groups 2 & 3	t(43) = 2.20, p ◀ .05	Moral Ethical Self
Group 1 ► Groups 2 & 3	t(43) = 3.41, p ◀ .01	Personal Self
Group 1 ► Groups 2 & 3	t(43) = 2.50, p ◀ .05	Family Self
Group 1 ► Groups 2 & 3	t(43) = 2.27, p ◀ .05	Social Self
Group 1 ► Groups 2 & 3	t(43) = 2.11, p ◀ .05	Defensive Positive
Group 1 ► Groups 2 & 3	t(43) = 2.66, p ◀ .05	General Maladjustment (inversely scored)
Group 1 ► Groups 2 & 3	t(43) = 3.00, p ◀ .01	Personality Disorder (inversely scored)
Group 1 ► Groups 2 & 3	t(43) = 2.42, p ◀ .05	Neurosis (inversely scored)

Table 1 (continued)

(12) Group 1 ► Groups 4, 5, 6	$t(58) = 2.13, p \triangleleft .05$	Total Positive
Group 1 ► Groups 4, 5, 6	$t(58) = 2.30, p \triangleleft .05$	Identity
Group 1 ► Groups 4, 5, 6	$t(58) = 2.24, p \triangleleft .05$	Physical Self
Group 1 ► Groups 4, 5, 6	$t(58) = 2.36, p \triangleleft .05$	Personal Self
Group 1 ► Groups 4, 5, 6	$t(58) = 2.07, p \triangleleft .05$	Social Self
Group 1 ► Groups 4, 5, 6	$t(58) = 2.35, p \triangleleft .05$	General Maladjustment (inversely scored)
Group 1 ◀ Groups 4, 5, 6	$t(58) = 2.21, p \triangleleft .05$	No. 2 responses on the TSCS answer sheet
(13) Group 1 ► Groups 7 & 8	$t(40) = 2.32, p \triangleleft .05$	Total Positive
Group 1 ► Groups 7 & 8	$t(40) = 2.45, p \triangleleft .05$	Identity
Group 1 ► Groups 7 & 8	$t(40) = 2.77, p \triangleleft .05$	Personal Self
Group 1 ► Groups 7 & 8	$t(40) = 3.08, p \triangleleft .01$	General Maladjustment (inversely scored)
Groups 1 ► Groups 7 & 8	$t(40) = 2.30, p \triangleleft .05$	No. 1 responses on the TSCS answer sheet
Group 1 ◀ Groups 7 & 8	$t(40) = 2.70, p \triangleleft .05$	No. 2 responses on the TSCS answer sheet
(14) Groups 2 & 3 ◀ Groups 4, 5, 6	$t(73) = 3.00, p \triangleleft .01$	Moral Ethical Self
Groups 2 & 3 ◀ Groups 4, 5, 6	$t(73) = 3.00, p \triangleleft .01$	Personality Disorder (inversely scored)
(15) Groups 2 & 3 — Groups 7 & 8	nonsignificant at .05 level	—
(16) Groups 4, 5, 6 — Groups 7 & 8	nonsignificant at .05 level	—

It is important to note that subjects from families with five or more children did not have significantly different self-concepts as compared with subjects from families with two children. This factor would appear to place the family size of three and four children in a better position for promoting self-concept development than that of the family size of five or more children. Such a conclusion should be drawn tentatively, since *t* tests comparing the self-concepts of these two family-size groups did not show them to be

significantly different at the .05 *p* level.

In summary, it appears that when female U.S. university students were tested by the 29 scores of the TSCS, those subjects that come from family size one (only-borns) have the most positive self-concepts, followed by subjects that come from families with three or four siblings, then subjects that come from families with five or more children, and last subjects that come from families with two children.

Discussion of Results in Relation to the Literature

The findings of the present study directly contradict the majority of the theories and studies presented within this paper. The high self-concept position held by the only-born and her lack of association with pathological disorders did not support Adler's (1958) concept of the only child being prone to having many difficulties later in life.

The birth-order effects that emerged from this study also contradicted studies that did not show birth order to be related to self-esteem or self-concept (i.e., Stotland & Dunn, 1962; Purpura, 1970; Curry et al., 1971; Bartelt, 1972; Nystul, 1974; and Nystul, 1976).

The positive position of the female only-born in the present study did support three studies previously mentioned (i.e., Bonney, 1943, 1944; and Sears, 1970).

Family Size Effects

The family-size effects that emerged showing the family size two to hold an inferior position to family sizes of three or more children did not support the "only so much time and energy" theories of Coopersmith (1967) and Sears (1970). The family-size effects within the present paper also disputed the results of the studies by Coopersmith (1967) and Nystul (1976) that did not show family size to affect the self-concept. The family-size effects reported in the present study were most similar to the early findings of Bonney (1943) which gave the most favored position to the only-born, followed by family units of four or more, and with children from two or three-child families last.

Possible Self concept

The results of this paper provide evidence that the American female only child or female child separated by at least six years from her siblings has the best chance of developing a positive self-concept and avoiding the tendencies towards pathological conditions. The female reared in a family of two children would tend to have the best chance to develop a negative self-concept and would be more likely to have tendencies towards pathological conditions.

These findings tend to place a high value on having one child or children spaced six or more years apart, and a low value on having two children. Obviously, suggestions along these lines are in direct contradiction to the advice usually given by family planning agencies through the Western societies. Perhaps the two-child family is not as ideal as we believed. Additional research could be done to attempt to replicate the reported results. Other studies could also be done to evaluate the birth order and family sizes of males in relation to the self-concept as measured by the TSCS.



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