EFFECTS OF BIRTH ORDER ON AGE OF LEAVING HOME

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Alfred Adler (1954) referred to the sibling rivalry between the first and secondborn when he said,

> The striving for power in the case of a secondborn child also has its especial nuance. Secondborn children are constantly under steam, striving for superiority under pressure: the race-course attitude which determines their activity in life is very evident in their actions. The fact that there is someone ahead of him who has already gained power is a strong stimulus for the secondborn. If he is enabled to develop his powers and takes up the battle with the firstborn he will usually move forward with a great deal of elan, then while the first born, possessing power, feels himself relatively secure until the second threatens to surpass him (p. 126).

The comprehensive review of the literature on the family constellation by Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg (1970) provided some tenuous evidence that parents may contribute to the jealousy of the non-firstborn by giving special treatment to the firstborn. They also found that some of the most consistent research findings related to the secondborn brothers with older brothers and secondborn sisters with older sisters. The studies reviewed showed the secondborn male with an older brother to be low on dependency, affiliation, and conformity. The secondborn female with an older sister was just the opposite, scoring high on dependency, affiliation, and conformity.

One might conclude from these studies that the secondborn male being less dependent and conforming would rival more with his older brother than a highly conforming and dependent secondborn female would with her older sister.

Competition between the siblings could contribute to various behavioural patterns. The age that a sibling leaves home is one variable that has received little if any attention from research. The purpose of this paper is therefore to investigate the effects of birth order on age leaving home.

Method

Procedures

Eighty-four subjects were administered a written questionnaire which solicited information about themselves and their siblings (i.e. the age they left home, their highest education level, and their birth order and sex). The subjects resided in four residential areas in Brisbane, Australia, representing a cross section of socioeconomic levels.

Subjects

The subjects included in the study fell within the following parameters:
1. had at least one other sibling in their family that was no more than 6 years older or younger than another sibling in the family;

2. were from families with no more than six siblings;

3. were Australian Caucasians;

4. left home within the last 15 years (i.e. lived away from home to go to school, a job, etc. for 6 or more months);

5. was either a firstborn or the first laterborn with the same educational level as the firstborn (three educational levels were set as

follows: (a) did not graduate from high school, (b) completed high school but did not attend any other formal education, (c) completed high school and did attend some other formal education).

Results

One-tailed **t** tests were used to test the following four hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The first laterborn with the same comparative educational level as the firstborn will leave home at a significantly younger age than the firstborn.

Hypothesis 2: The first laterborn with the same comparative education level and sex as the firstborn will leave home at a significantly younger age than the firstborn.

Hypothesis 3: The first laterborn male with the same comparative educational level as the firstborn male will leave home at a significantly younger age than the firstborn.

Hypothesis 4: The first laterborn female with the same comparative educational level as the firstborn female will leave home at a significantly younger age than the firstborn.

Hypothesis 1. Of the 84 questionnaires received, 45 were deleted due to the controls, leaving 39 sibling pairs matched on education (i.e. 39 firstborns paired with 32 secondborns and 6 thirdborns, and one fifthborn). A one-tailed **t** test comparing the firstborn to the next sibling with a similar educational level showed the laterborn to leave home at a significantly younger age (**t** — 1.878, **df** — 38, **p** .05). The mean ages for leaving home were 19.04 and 18.44 for the firstborn and laterborn respectively.

Hypothesis 2. Another one-tailed **t** test was done to control for the sex of the sibling pairs. Ten of the 39 sibling pairs analyzed in Hypothesis 1 were mixed sex sibling pairs. They were therefore deleted, leaving 29 sibling pairs matched on educational level and sex (i.e. 15 firstborn-laterborn male pairs and 14 firstborn-laterborn female pairs). One of the 15 firstborn-laterborn male pairs was randomly deleted to balance for sex, leaving 14 firstborn-laterborn male pairs and 14 firstborn-laterborn female pairs matched on education. Twenty-three of the 28 sibling pairs were firstborns compared to secondborns with the remaining five pairs being firstborns compared to thirdborns. A one-tailed **t** test again showed the laterborn to leave home significantly earlier than the firstborn (**t** — 1.7679, **df** 27, **p** .05). The mean ages for leaving home were 19.17 and 18.57 for the firstborn and the laterborn respectively.

Hypothesis 3. Nine secondborn males and five thirdborn males were compared to 14 firstborn males with the same comparative educational levels. A one-tailed **t** test showed the laterborns to not leave home at a significantly younger age at the .05 **p** level.

Hypothesis 4. Thirteen secondborn females and one fifthborn female were compared to 14 firstborn females with the same comparative educational levels. A one-way **t** test showed the laterborns to leave home at a significantly younger age (**t** 3.86, **df** 13, **p** .05). The mean ages for leaving home were 20 and 18.64 for firstborn females and laterborn females, respectively.

Discussion and Conclusion

Adler (1954) indicated that the secondborn child is under pressure to compete with the firstborn to obtain some of the power associated with the firstborn position. Adler's sibling rivalry theory appears to be supported by the results of this study which showed the first laterborn with the same educational level as the firstborn leaving home at a significantly younger age than the firstborn.

From the research cited by Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg (1970) one might have expected the largest distance in age leaving home to occur between the independently oriented secondborn male and his older brother. Such a result did not occur. Perhaps this secondborn male affiliates and conforms more than was previously expected. Perhaps even more surprising was the laterborn female with a firstborn sister leaving home at an earlier age than the firstborn. Again such results contradicted the studies cited by Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg which showed the secondborn female with an older sister to score high on dependency, conformity, and affiliation.

Additional research could be done with a much larger sample to enable a comparison of the ages leaving home for firstborns and natural secondborns. Family size could also be evaluated as an independent variable for possible interaction effects with birth order as they relate to the age leaving home.

References

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