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## To what extent does Birth Order affect our personality?

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### ABSTRACT

The approach to investigating the following research question “To what extent does Birth Order affect our personality?” was the examination of the different factors in which an individual’s personality can be affected by the sequence of their birth in the family. The paper begins with the examination of the birth order theory suggested by Alfred Adler in the 1900s which agrees with the common notion that the first born is often the conscientious leader, the second born is the outgoing mediator and the youngest is the most charming and affectionate of the siblings who receives and enjoys the attention from the parents. The various researches undertaken to test the validity of the common stereotypes created over the years by society (Jacobs and Moss, 1976) have also been looked into. The discussion leads to questioning the basis of stereotypes and criticisms to the widely presumed birth order theory (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956).

Another factor, such as cultural traditions that make the birth order theory inapplicable have been elaborated. For example, in countries such as India, the birth of a male child is always celebrated and he most likely to receive the treatment and accept the role that a first -born would.

The conclusion was that despite the widely accepted pre- conceived characteristics that we give to children based on their birth order, this debate will never entirely come to rest as there is always a contradictory research accompanying one that supports the birth order theory. Also, there is no biological or genetic proof, which can give these studies a scientific backing. However, the assumed roles and personalities of children in a family according to their birth order are not entirely baseless and must hold some truth due to the overwhelming number of researches carried out, investigating this topic.

**KEYWORDS:** Birth Order, Personality

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### INTRODUCTION

*“In families children tend to take on stock roles, as if there were hats hung up in some secret place, visible only to the children. Each succeeding child selects a hat and takes on that role: the good child, the black sheep, the clown, and so forth.”*

**Ellen Galinsky, US author and researcher.**

Does birth order really shape us into who we are? Research has thrown up widely varying results. Birth order is defined as the ‘sequential position of a person among his/her siblings in respect of birth’ (Adler, 1979). He believed that parent’s responses to their children were affected by the order of each child’s birth into the family (Adler,1927). This differential treatment of each child based on birth order position was believed to influence the child’s developing personality.

The influence of birth order has long intrigued psychologists. The sheer volume of research on birth order can be overwhelming. Since the inception of Adler’s theories, more than 1,700 journal articles and dissertations have been written about birth order and its relationship to a wide variety of psychological topics.

Alfred Adler, the founder of individual Psychology, formally raised the issue in the 1900s. A number of theories have also been proposed regarding birth order and its effects on individuals. These theories are widely accepted due to their easy explanations for personality differences between siblings. Why are siblings so different? They have the same parents, grow up in the same environment and yet seem unlike each other.

The interest in the research in this field was stimulated by a fascinating article in the TIME magazine by Jeffrey Kluger –The Power of Birth Order. The aim of this investigation is to seek a deeper understanding of the topic –Does Birth Order Affect Our Personality? At first, this was a daunting task as an overwhelming amount of research has been done for as long as 134 years. In 1874, Francis Galton noted that first born sons and only sons were overrepresented among scientists, making birth order one of the first concepts studied in psychology. He gave a practical explanation –“they are more likely to become possessed of independent means, therefore able to follow the pursuits that have most attraction to their tastes...and their independence of character, a result of having been treated more as companions by their parents.” So far no consensus has emerged.

The primary goal of this study is to make sense of the broad amount of information and come to a deeper understanding of the topic by comparing and contrasting various studies. An additional aim was to look at gender in the birth order. Most research is from a Western point of view. More cross -cultural studies are needed because a pronounced gender bias exists in most of the

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countries of South Asia. This preference for sons over daughters leads to the son being treated as a first born, no matter what his position is in the birth order.

### **DEVELOPMENT**

#### **Theory of Birth Order**

Birth order is defined as the 'sequential position of a person among his/her siblings in respect of birth' (Adler, 1979). According to Adler, each child is born into a predetermined class of birth order and is attributed different characteristics due to their position and the family environment. He suggests these characteristics are learned and maybe responsible for many behaviors throughout their lifetime. So being the oldest child, the middle child, or the youngest may impact our personal development. For this essay we consider a common, three-child family.

The influence of birth order has long intrigued psychologists. Alfred Adler, the founder of individual Psychology, formally raised the issue in the 1900s. Why are siblings so different? They have the same parents, grew up in the same environment and yet seem unlike each other. Awareness of these traits may help us as individuals to interact more effectively with each other. Burton (1968) discovered that among a sample of 88,000 high school students there was, "A slight superiority in intelligence of first born over last born." This was supported by Adams and Phillips (1972) who also highlighted the superiority of first born children. They compared their educational performance of 370 children and found that the eldest children scored significantly higher than others in terms of verbal scores, non-verbal scores and teacher's academic grades. This was attributed to first borns having a higher level of school motivation along with a desire to meet their parent's expectations to do well academically. The findings from both studies clearly demonstrate that birth order does have an impact on an individual. This is further reinforced by the findings of Glass, Neulinger and Brim (1974) who studied birth order amongst 2500 children within 1 to 3 child families. The result showed a regression in performance as ordinal position decreased.

Bank and Kahn (1982) attempt to explain these findings "It has long been observed that the academic attainments of earlier born children tend to be higher than those of later born ones. This is presumably because of the greater value and attention given to the eldest child both economically and psychologically."

Jacobs and Moss (1976) found that mothers spent less time with second borns particularly so if the child was a female. This behavioral pattern is attributed to the fact that the novelty and excitement of rearing a second child is less attractive, the experience gained already with an earlier child has increased baby management in terms of confidence and reduced anxiety and finally the competition from an older child now causes the mother to divide her attention between the two of them.

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The extent to which heredity, the quality of the environment, integration amongst family members, the status and the role of siblings, parental expectations and teacher expectations have a cumulative effect upon the development of siblings, appears to be unclear.

### **The Ordinal Positions and their general characteristics:**

#### ***Variables***

Dr. Kevin Leman, the author of 'The Birth Order Book-Why you are the way you are,' believes that birth order can help provide clues to our personality. But he points out the variables affecting this theory.

- Spacing (the number of years between children)-if the children are more than five years apart in age, birth order characteristics may not apply. Here the family may have two 'firstborns.'
- Gender- the sex of the children can have a great impact. The first son may be treated as the firstborn even if he has an elder sister. The youngest boy with three older sisters would be treated differently from the youngest boy with three elder brothers.
- Physical differences, disabilities, or medical needs- siblings of children with disabilities are known to resent the extra attention to the special child. They are more at risk for behavioral problems.
- Family structures- any blending of two or more families because of death, divorce can influence the birth order pattern. When both parents bring children from previous relationships to the union, there is a disruption of the hierarchy of birth order.

Here then is an outline of the three birth order groups without regard to these variables:

#### ***The First Born***

It is easy to understand why the first-born has a special status in the family. Everything the child does is recorded, applauded and documented. Parents typically spend more time with the first child. They try to do everything right. Their attention is not divided among other children. They have time to play and interact with their firstborn. The child is used to being the center of attention. The encouragement the parents give the eldest child may increase his desire to receive praise, but it may also raise the pressure to succeed. The child often becomes skilled at knowing what the parents want (and later teachers and bosses) want, and then doing it. He becomes very rule conscious and goal-oriented, with strong attention to detail.

The family later on may leave him in charge of younger siblings-this makes him more responsible and dependable. The younger siblings view him as their leader and so his leadership ability and confidence increase. They are often described as ambitious, determined and organized.

It also has certain disadvantages. According to Sue Flannagan and Patty Morrison of West Virginia University, on their research into 'Does Birth Order Really Matter?'-the desire to please

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can cause some firstborns to fear failure to such an extent that they set even higher standards. There is more pressure and higher expectations from them.

Dethronement, a first-born's experience upon the birth of a younger sibling has become a popular concept. Distress caused by this experience causes the older child much jealousy and bitterness, which are often repressed and may manifest as adulthood insecurity (Falbo, 1984). Subsequent offspring may also experience some distress when another child is born into the family (Ernst and Angst, 1983).

First-born individuals may experience more inconsistent treatment because of parental inexperience, anxiety or incompetence. This is thought to be detrimental to formation of a stable self-concept (Hilton, 1967).

First, an only child may seek out personal interaction as a response to distress more than individuals of other birth order positions (Schachter, 1959). This was attributed to more attentive response to the child's distress. New mothers generally respond more quickly to the distress of a first child and are slower to respond to later born children.

The reports of greater academic achievement attained by first borns have led to questions about the effects of parental expectations and the pressure to succeed. This may instill a greater drive to achieve in the child, and anxiety of inability to live up to parental expectations. If internalized, this chronic anxiety may alter habitual response to stress. Alternatively, realization that parental expectations are unattainable may result in compromised self esteem (Ernst and Angst, 1983). Laterborns, who strive for more attainable models, set by their older siblings may have less conditioned self esteem (Sampson, 1965). They may become more flexible and open to change, as they must compete for parental attention. This could foster an innovative strategy for coping with stress (Gould, 1997).

Birth order characteristics may manifest differently for males and females. Parents tend to be more restrictive with the first child due to the anxiety of not knowing how to deal with a new baby.

Jeffrey Kluger cites Norwegian study showing that firstborns have an average of a three point IQ over the next child. "In many families", says psychologist Frank Sulloway, who has been seen as the U.S.'s leading authority on birth order, "the first born is going to get into Harvard and the second born isn't."

In a survey of corporate heads conducted by Vistage, an international organization of CEOs, it was reported that 43% of CEOs are first borns, 33% are middle borns and 23% are last borns. According to Stanford University, psychologist Robert Zajonc, a disproportionate amount of

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surgeons and MBAs are the eldest siblings. “We know that birth order determines occupational prestige to a large extent,” says Zajonc.

“There is some expectation that first borns are somehow better qualified for certain occupations.”

### ***The Second Born***

Stuck for life in a center seat, the middle child never gets 100% of the parent’s investment of time. “There is a U-shaped distribution in which the oldest and the youngest get the most”, says Sulloway.

Second born children are often expected to become more successful in innovative endeavors because their position requires competition against the first arrival (Bohmer and Sitton, 1993).

The first-born sets the pace and the second born must labor to keep up. This may instill a constant competitive drive (Bohmer and Sitton, 1993). Their earliest memories may be dominated by older, bigger and stronger siblings. Catching up could become a main goal. Unchecked, competitiveness may develop into restlessness or neuroticism (Richardson and Richardson, 1990).

The second born never expects complete parental attention. It has been suggested that middle children may become the least anxious (Wilem et al., 1972). They may evolve into harmonious, leisurely and extroverted individuals (Konig, 1963).

In their essay, Flannagan and Morrison noted that if you look at a photo album of a family with three children, you would notice that there are many pictures of the first-born and several of the youngest but often few of the middle born. Wilson and Edington (1982) believe that the middle child is too easily ignored. ‘The intermediate child suffers the most within the family unit. They may feel completely by-passed and upstaged by elder and younger siblings.’ Lack of individual attention may make the middle child feel unloved. He may sometimes be the family’s rebel. He may feel ‘squeezed’ by the older and younger siblings. He is not the prized firstborn or the cute baby.

It may seem as if the middle child has the toughest family position.

### ***The Third Born***

Conversely, Sulloway found that later born children are generally more adventurous, altruistic, cooperative, easy going, empathetic, open to experience, popular, rebellious, risk taking, sociable and unconventional.

He does not have the pressures of the oldest child or the ‘left out’ feeling of the middle child. He has two older siblings to learn from.

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Birth order scholars often observe that some of history's greatest satirists –Voltaire, Jonathan Swift, Mark Twain-were among the youngest members of large families.

According to Sulloway, later borns are more willing to take risks. "They don't go out for tennis," he says. "They go out for rugby, ice hockey."

### ***Criticisms of the Birth Order Theory***

"People read birth order books the way they read horoscopes," warns Toni Falbo, professor of educational psychology at the University of Texas. "I'm a middle born, so that explains everything in my life-its just not like that."

Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) stressed that birth order personality implications cannot be generalized. Instead, they are important tools that when coupled with other developmental issues such as gender, family values and ethnicity help to provide a subjective understanding of the world.

A limitation to the findings is that most studies reviewed ordinal rather than psychological birth order. Shulman and Mosak (1977) described ordinal position as the actual order of birth of the siblings. Psychological position refers to the role the child adopts in his/her interactions with others. Adler emphasized that "It is not of course the child's number in the order of birth which influences character, but the situation into which he is born and the way in which he interprets it."

University of Georgia psychologist Alan. E. Stewart wrote what is perhaps the definitive recent work (2012) on the theory and research on birth order. He bases his paper on 529 journal articles published over a 20-year period. Taking his lead from Adler, Stewart distinguished between 'actual' birth order and 'psychological' birth order-that is self-perceived position in the family. He suggested that your actual birth order need not have the same impact on you as the birth order you believe you have. The above brief portraits according to him make up much of the stereotyped mythology about birth order. Psychology goes through periods of alternately accepting and rejecting these myths. Stewart rejects the fact that your character, values, achievement and life success are determined by the family position that fate, and your parents awarded to you. Then there is the fact that it is difficult to measure psychological variables-do we study achievements, if so how do we measure them? Occupational prestige? Income? Education? Should we look at personality, motivation, intelligence, happiness or mental health? For decades researchers found it difficult to validate Adler's birth order theory. That is where the Psychological Birth Order Inventor (PBOI) was developed in 1991 by a research team that included Stewart. The PBOI contains items to assess birth order scientifically.

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The results showed that your perceived niche in your family plays a larger role in influencing the adult you've become than the actual timing of your birth. Stewart's study shows that we're not fated to live out a life dominated by the accident of the timing of our birth. So you should not feel doomed to a life of middle child insignificance.

The most vocal detractors of birth order research question less the findings of the science than the methods according to Jeffrey Kluger. To achieve any kind of statistical significance, investigators must assemble large samples of families and look for patterns amongst them. But families are very different things-distinguished by size, income, hometown, education, religion and more. The alternative is what the investigators call the in-family studies, which compares every child with every other child in a single family. This process is then repeated with other families.

### ***Response to Criticisms***

*"Human beings are too complex to be stuffed into narrow pigeonholes"*

**-Townsend, 1997**

Although difficult to ascertain, most studies have not considered whether the child was wanted or planned which often affects how the child is brought up (Lieberman, 1972; Baydar, 1995). This essay may provide a useful insight for realizing some strengths and weaknesses instilled in us by being placed at a certain order in the family. However a potential danger is that individuals may become constrained by stereotypes imposed by themselves and others, if they believe that the archetypal roles cannot be transcended. Learned responses can be altered. Children's coping skills can be modified through creative problem solving experiences, conflict management and training at home and in school (Carson et al., 1992).

Zervas discussed views regarding children's self esteem. Children who perceive themselves as the non-favored child may experience feelings of inferiority, anger, depression and incompetence. These findings were supported by Carson et al (1992) who found that the favored child may benefit from greater security and adoration, but may be troubled by sibling jealousy, greater obligations to parents or guilt and empathy depending on the sibling relationship. This was further supported by Zervas(1994) whose research proved that favored children have been found to exhibit lower social self esteem resulting in more frequent peer rejections and less opportunity to socialize due to home support. Furthermore, expression of favoritism is regarded as detrimental to the functioning of the entire family.(Bieber,1977).

It is important for us to understand that in countries where there is great importance associated with having a male offspring, delivery of a female child may be a grave disappointment and compromise the child's physical and emotional care (Kitamura et al., 1998). More cross-cultural studies are needed that factor in the gender bias in the theory of birth order.



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Despite India's substantial economic growth in the past two decades, girls in India are discriminated against in access to preventive healthcare including immunizations.

The past studies have also documented the reasons behind the preference for sons over daughters in the context of Indian subcontinent. They have found that sons are preferred over daughters for a number of economic, social and religious reasons (perceived greater economic, social, and religious utility of sons than of daughters), including financial support, old age security, property inheritance, dowry, family lineage, prestige and power, birth and death rituals, and beliefs about religious duties and salvation. "Parents of girls are socially bound to find grooms for their daughters and often pay all the marriage expenses (including dowry); social customs and norms dictate that parents cannot expect much support (emotional or economic) from married daughters. In contrast, parents expect sons to provide financial and emotional care and regard them as a social security for old age, inheritance laws largely favor sons and sons perform important religious roles, ensure the continuation of the family lineage, and are desired to increase a family's capacity to defend itself or to exercise power.

Amratya Sen, the Noble winning economist believes that the pattern of gender inequality shifted from 'mortality inequality' to what he calls 'natality inequality' due to female feticide after the facility for antenatal sex determination became available.

Disadvantage for girls in India begins with a reduced chance of being born at all, and those who are born face lower access to preventive care and treatment of disease compared to boys. Girls born in India have a 40% greater risk of ill health compared to boys and are less likely to access health care, in particular immunization. Preference for sons in India has been noted to vary across regions, levels of fertility, and order of birth.

Therefore in cultures where the son is venerated, the birth order theory does not apply. The son will be treated as the first born regardless of his ordinal position in the family.

### **CONCLUSION**

The aim of this investigation was to seek an understanding of this debatable issue. This was done by gathering a range of sources from both sides and by analyzing their arguments as well as their evidence.

The moral of the story for parents is to look for their own biases and stereotypes about birth order as they think about what their children are capable of doing. Parents should encourage their children to define their own identities in the family, and to avoid labeling themselves based on their birth order. They shouldn't let the lives of their children be dominated by the random forces that cause them to be born when they were.

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Once we define ourselves, in terms of who we are, and not when we were born, we will be able to open up many more opportunities for fulfillment.

The parental bond is a major source of self-conception and self esteem for most adults. How parents perform the roles associated with their identities of “Mother” and “Father, and how their children respond to them and the quality of the parent child relationship have major implications for both the children and the parent’s self esteem.

Ultimately, the birth order debate will never be entirely settled. Family studies and the statistics they yield are cold and inanimate things. Families are a synthesis of many intangible factors.

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### *Conflict of Interests*

The author declared no conflict of interests.

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