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# Sibling Relationships in the Context of Birth Order

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**Sibling Relationships in the Context of Birth Order**

by  
Carolyn S. Potvin

FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS IN LIBERAL STUDIES

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## Abstract

All of the research contained in this thesis is a collection of different methodologies and theoretical approaches on the subject of birth order and sibling relationships. Perspectives on the influence of the framework of family on personality development have been summarized, with an emphasis on empirical data related to communication patterns of siblings to each other. This paper is not so much an exploration into birth order as it is about the interactions of siblings in relation to family dynamics.

The first part of this paper probes into the consequences of birth order on individuality, in the context of the family environment. The second part of this paper investigates a variety of factors such as gender, parental influence and family dynamics, and how they interact to determine personality characteristics.

## Introduction

How can people from the same family be so very different? Perhaps it is due to the ever-changing family. Families change with the addition of each new child, so each child is born into a “different” family and a person’s position in the family may have consequences for his or her direction in life. Ever since Sigmund Freud opened the gates of research on parental influence on children, this relationship—as well as the relationship of sibling to sibling—has been carefully studied by social scientists and psychologists.

Freud said, “A child’s position in the sequence of brothers and sisters is of very great significance for the course of his later life” (Richardson, 1990:12). Freud has also postulated that a person may generalize an experience within their family to social situations outside the family (Toman, 1976:4). The usefulness of this idea suggests that family experience and family interaction provide a basis from which children develop a more defined social framework. In particular, a child’s ranking and gender in the family will deeply alter this framework.

I want to suggest in this paper the functionality of investigating whether and how gender and birth order (particularly of first and later borns) impacts the social framework of the individual. Does the body of research hold up to the patterns exhibited by first and later borns? How do communication patterns develop and differ from sibling to sibling? Finally, how does gender impact these patterns of communication?

The notion of birth order itself brings up several points for consideration. It is a factor for differences in age, size, power and, oftentimes, privilege within the family. For this rationale, birth order provides a tool for decoding the basic principles that influence both childhood patterns and assigned roles within the family.

Human lives are made up of shared histories with colleagues, friends, teachers and family. However, it is family that exerts more influence than any other institution in America. Consider this fact: the sibling relationship is the longest lasting of any relationship, often outlasting that with our parents and spouses by twenty or more years (Leman, 1998:24). Additionally, Toman's research is predicated on the assumption that a person's family "exerts its influence more regularly, more exclusively and earlier in a person's life than do any other life contexts" (1976:5). The researchers of birth order readily admit that a person's order in the family cannot explain everything about human behavior nor is one single influence decisive, however, it does provide a framework toward better understanding individual behavior.

Beyond birth order differences, consider the genetic difference among siblings. Certainly, siblings differ dramatically in physical characteristics—with each sibling sharing only half of each other's genes (Sulloway, 1996:86). For all this, genetics has a role in the differences in personality between siblings as well. In sharing half of our siblings' genes, why are personalities oftentimes so different? What other factors confound the personality development process? This paper will explore those factors—primarily the effects of family constellation on individual development. Cicirelli notes that within the family constellation, there exist different "subsystems" (1995:40). These "subsystems" include parent-child, sibling-sibling—both of which should be considered within the larger kinship context.

The research contained in this paper will explore many facets of birth order and gender. It will concentrate on first, middle and lastborns in three and four sibling families in the body of research. In addition to this, it will account for gender issues, which impact communication patterns of siblings to each other.

It is important to note that many of these birth-order trends hold true in recorded history, not just in the research done in the field of family and personality psychology; however birth order is certainly only one of many environmental factors involved in creating and maintaining life and family niches. In this paper, I shall support the notion that it is not the ordinal position of birth that is of consequence but rather the experiences with parents and siblings as an effect of being the firstborn, middle or youngest child.

In summary, this paper supports the notion that certain characteristics of a person's sibling position and his family grouping are meaningfully associated with certain forms of social behavior. I shall also argue, throughout this paper, that famous first, middle and lastborns are perfect examples of the many tenets of birth-order and gender related issues within the family unit.

## Research methodologies

### Theoretical approaches

The research gathered in this paper is representative of different research methodologies and a variety of theoretical approaches on the subject of birth order. Standard scientific procedure would likely dictate that ideas about causal processes should be put to experimental tests whenever possible. Yet, this can be a difficult task when the focus is the interactions of young children with each other in familial situations.

Different research methodologies used by theorists on birth order include: 1) a comparison of sibs within the same sibship; 2) a comparison of unrelated individuals, with birth order as a dependent variable, are compared with a control group, 3) a comparison of data collected from observations and interviews in case histories of individuals—with birth order as a variable.

A tested research methodology applied by birth order researchers is the personality test, in which different variables are set and meanings are gathered from existing correlations. This format involves observation, interviews and questionnaires and is commonly used among researchers. The questions used are both structured and open-ended. Some critics have taken issue with the observation method as it raises concern over whether the mere presence of the observer changes the behavior of the subject/s.



Utilizing a personality test, Sulloway notes the correlation between birth order and the support for innovation is roughly .40 (a .0 correlation means there is no relationship between two variables; while a correlation of 1.0 represents a perfect linear relationship). In using this computation, Sulloway determines that lastborns are twice as likely to support new ideas than are firstborns. Sulloway admits throughout his research that although “correlation is not causation,” correlations can provide a temperately reliable guide to causation (1996:371-372).

Some of the most current, extensive and fertile research gathered to date has been by Frank Sulloway. Sulloway spent twenty-six years accumulating considerable statistical evidence to show the distinct differences between siblings in accordance with their family niche. Certainly, Sulloway concentrates much of his analysis on the work of Charles Darwin, particularly Darwin’s emphasis on evolution and natural selection—which Sulloway believes is proven by birth order examples. In addition, Sulloway’s massive amount of research has significant scientific validity when considering patterns of behavior of firstborns and laterborns.

Sulloway summarized 196 studies, which met the properly controlled requirements of Ernst and Angst (birth order critics whose research will be discussed later). This meta-analysis type of study allows researchers to gain statistical reliability—allowing a more accurate determination of results. Of the 196 studies, 72 assuredly confirmed his “big five” personality dimensions of: openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism and extraversion. According to Sulloway, the possibility that 72 out of 196 birth order studies would support these five personality aspects by mere chance is less than one in a billion billion (Sulloway, 1996:68-72).

Both Richardson and Forer, two birth order researchers whose work will be noted throughout this paper, used observations from their extensive work as practicing clinical

psychologists as well as a myriad of data from research and writings of many authorities in the field of birth order research. This type of research may be of particular significance because the discipline of the psychotherapist deals with real and earnest psychological problems of clients. Much of Richardson's observations and determinations in case studies are based on the work of Walter Toman, an Austrian psychologist who conducted well-controlled studies on thousands of families. Throughout Toman's research, family constellations are viewed as systems that are influenced by preceding generations and affected by interactions with subsequent generations. Although Toman used controlled studies for much of his research, he does not discount the importance of psychotherapy and case studies in the birth order research paradigm, "The psychotherapist, educator and social worker keeps in touch with real life, with fate and family histories" (1976:303). Toman's purpose throughout most of his research is to define the most important and most easily distinguishable effects of various social and family environments.

Perhaps two of the strongest critics of birth order research have been the Swiss psychologists, Cecile Ernst and Jules Angst. In a comprehensive critical summary of more than a thousand publications on related literature (1946-1980), they cite a potential source of error in many studies surrounding birth order. Ernst and Angst note that such research does not adequately account for background variables such as social class and sibship size. They contend that without adequate controls for these variables, the detection of any birth order trend may merely be due to differences between families (1983:3-5). In essence, they conclude: "Birth order influences on personality and IQ have been widely overrated" (1983:242).

However, it should be noted that many birth order researchers, including Sulloway, have responded to these methodological concerns by collecting data on variables such as social class and sibship size. Sulloway found that family size is not a confounding factor. In his sample,

“the tendency of laterborns to be overrepresented among adopters of new ideas is observed within every sibship size from two to twenty” (1996:49). In addition to family size, Sulloway also stratified his research by social class and found, “laterborns are more likely to endorse new theories at every socioeconomic level, from aristocracy to manual labor” (1996:49).

In addition to the different methodologies mentioned above, I will also include some anecdotal data--collected from my employment at Glaxo Wellcome Inc., a research based pharmaceutical company. The data composed from my surveys may appear somewhat anecdotal relative to the methodologies utilized by the researchers noted in this paper; however, it still bears mentioning. While at a district sales meeting a few years back, having just finished reading Kevin Leman’s book on birth order, I thought it might be interesting to pose a question to my colleagues: “By a show of hands, who among us is the youngest in their family?” After eight hands went up (of ten sales representatives in the group), my exceptional interest in birth order emerged. Thus, I wanted to incorporate some of my own research into this thesis project.

In the fall of 1998, I posed a series of questions to colleagues—all of whom were pharmaceutical sales representatives. In total, thirty-six representatives were interviewed (sixteen women and twenty men), varying in sibship size from two to six. The questions related to their family birth order, interactions with physicians, and various experiences as a sibling. I collected data over the course of a morning meeting (approximately three hours), in which three districts were present (consisting of twelve sales representative per district). Each representative was asked a series of written questions, to which they responded on paper.

Additionally, I listed the traits inherent to different birth orders on a series of flip charts throughout the meeting room. Representatives were asked to choose and list on paper the traits which best described their personality. This exercise proved very interesting, as most colleagues

chose personality traits most often associated with their particular birth order position (e.g. youngest: lighthearted, carefree). Of the data I collected, I found an overwhelming trend of emergent features of personality traits associated with different family positions. This data was consistent with the prevailing tendencies noted by social scientists and psychologists surrounding birth order influences on personality traits.

For example, a majority of my colleagues were overrepresented as the youngest of their families (twenty-five out of thirty-six). Sulloway, Richardson and Leman note that lastborns often choose sales as a profession because of their inherent knowledge of what captures people's attention and their natural ability to socialize. When asked why they chose sales as a profession, responses covered a broad range, from: "I'm not certain as to why I chose sales," to "I love interacting with people."

Perhaps the question to be asked at this juncture is whether significant trends surpass mere "chance" expectations. As noted in recent research, there exist numerous well-controlled studies which fit the criteria for Ernst and Angst. It is unlikely that the trends from this empirical data reflect mere generalizations, but significant results in behavioral research. Each methodology mentioned in this paper examines how family organizations and attitudes modify human behavior. This research attempts to explain what is known and what is inquired about the significance of the position into which a child is born within the framework of the family.

## Patterns of Siblings

### The Oldest

In order to gain a strong understanding of the behaviors associated with birth order, it is important to analyze the behaviors of the older siblings in contrast to younger siblings. The firstborn child holds a relationship with the parents, which can never be duplicated by siblings to follow. The oldest receives the undiluted love of his or her parents (Richardson, 1990:44).

Most cultures concede to the Darwinian logic that links birth order to reproductive success and attribute higher status to firstborns. Take for example the two British sons of the Prince Charles and Princess Diana, oftentimes referred to as the “heir” and the “spare.” A survey of 39 non-Western societies found that in every culture firstborns received greater status and respect than laterborns (Sullo way 1996:65). Or consider that in ancient Japan, the youngest is often referred to as “cold rice,” a name obtained from the Japanese custom of feeding them leftovers after the parents and firstborn had eaten.

While new parents are often more anxious and tense with their first, they are also more indulgent with them as well. Schachter writes, “Mothers respond more quickly to the distress of their first child, while with later children they are less easily alarmed” (1959:43). They set high expectations for the oldest child. A particularly interesting hypothesis from Sears suggests that



inconsistent treatment by unseasoned parents may make firstborns more anxious, and consequently less willing to take risks than laterborns (1957:53).

Why is it that the oldest child tends to identify so closely with parents' values? Why does the oldest work so hard at meeting their parents' expectations? Richardson proposes that since the oldest spends more time in the exclusive presence of parents, they spend more time observing and imitating their behavior (1990:50). This supports the idea that firstborns, more than any other sibling rank, resemble their parents' ideology. The social consequences of this are many. For example, this may predispose firstborns to identify more closely with adults than their peers (unlike their younger siblings). To the oldest child, there is the ever-present threat of replacement by ensuing siblings. Dittes refers to this as "dethronement," and that it may make firstborns more fearful and dependent (1961,16:358). Thus, the oldest child tends to work hard at being good—so their parents will continue to love and adore them.

Based on Sulloway's analysis (whose birth order research is based extensively on the Charles Darwin perspective on human evolution), firstborns are more amenable to their parents' wishes due to their unique position in the family. Sulloway terms this as "conscientiousness," one of his proposed "big five" personality dimensions. One effective way of holding onto parental approval is by abetting in child-rearing tasks, thus being regarded as the "responsible" child in the family constellation (1990:68-69). As a result, firstborns score higher on the "conscientiousness" dimension.

This close identity with adults may make firstborns more protective and nurturing of others. Richardson noted that oldest siblings tend to handle responsibility well and assume leadership roles more so than their younger siblings. Interestingly, more than one half of the American presidents (fifty-six percent) have been the oldest male children, George Washington

included (Richardson, 1990:52, Leman, 1998:16). A number of our presidents were laterborns as well, however, in all cases they were the firstborn males in the family. Moreover, oldest males were over-represented among those on the cover of Time Magazine's honoring of distinguished persons during a twelve year period (Toman, 1976:293).

Overall, they tend to excel academically and are better students in the process. In a study of firstborns and their parents, Ernst and Angst found that firstborns do receive more verbal stimulation as well as earlier attempts at toilet training versus their siblings (1983:92). This greater degree of provocation from the parents may support the notion that firstborns are good abstract thinkers and propitious students as well. In a study of three-year olds, White et al found that nearly all the firstborn children tested in language and intelligence were more competent than in different ordinal circumstances (1979:179). A possible reason for the early language and cognitive development of the firstborn may be due to the increased time spent between mothers and firstborns. In addition to this, one must consider that while in the company of their firstborns' early years, mothers involve considerably more language interaction.

In a study of twenty-eight mothers and their children, White noted a striking finding in the data on interchanges between mothers and their infants. White described, "firstborn children receive markedly different input from their mothers than do laterborn children," both in the quality and quantity of the interaction (1979:88).

Harris notes the distinct difference of the oldest to their siblings. Firstly, they are humanized and principally socialized by a parent, while their siblings tend to be principally socialized by each other. This is noted in Piaget's research. Harris states, "Piaget was saying that the greater the parent-child interaction, i.e., the more the child is exposed to an adult mind which thinks in terms of cause and effect, the sooner the child will think in those terms"

(1964:10). Generally, Harris contends, there is a more intense parent-child interaction when the child is the firstborn. Harris supports this hypothesis with evidence from extensive research on first sons and only sons, versus males who are later sons.

Harris hypothesized, “firstborn children are inclined to be more studious than are laterborn children” (1964:16). However, Harris counterpoints that there was no noticeable relationship to “quantity of genius.” In effect, it is impossible to measure the degree of genius to see, for example, first sons Newton and Shakespeare had more or less genius than laterborns Descartes or Dostoevski. Ernst and Angst would agree with Harris on this point. Although firstborns may be smarter than laterborns, the small difference in IQ has little constructive significance for individuals (Ernst and Angst, 1983:128).

What of the notion of firstborn’s incessant desire to meet expectations, mentioned above? It has been proposed that this greater emphasis on high achievement may make the oldest more tense and serious, constantly seeking reassurance (Richardson, 1990:53). Parents tend to have an “overestimation” of the capabilities of their firstborn. Take into account, the sheer delight over pregnancy decreases precipitously from first to last. This delight carries over onto the expectations the parents have for the child. Ernst and Angst propose consequences of “overestimation” which are twofold; the first born may become an overachiever, which may lead to low self-esteem in viewing the goals as unattainable (1983:85).

Harris suggests that a reason for the firstborn’s better school performance may be tied to the greater maturity expected of the child. Specifically, it is because parents often expect more of a firstborn child, which may account for the intense drive toward academics. However, it is important to note that Harris noted no difference seen in intellectual endowment between firstborns and laterborns—strictly school performance.



In his observations of firstborns, Richardson noted their difficulty in accepting constructive criticism as well as problems in admitting when they are wrong (1990:53). Perhaps this is reflective of their greater interest in leading others than in empathizing with them. Again, parents exhibit their influence here as well. Overall, parents have a tendency to give firstborns more responsibility than laterborns. In effect, firstborns tend to act like parental surrogates toward their younger siblings, which their siblings interpret as “being bossy” (Stotland, 1971:52).

Helen Koch, a psychologist from the University of Chicago, did extensive research on the influence of birth order on many psychological traits. In her research, she looked at five and six-year olds (n=354) in Chicago schools, each from two-child families. She found that the firstborns were judged to be more self-confident, competitive, and emotionally intense (1955:26-27). However, due to their competitive nature, firstborns were significantly more upset by defeat than laterborns. This inquest is consistent with other research to support the notion that firstborns are more antagonistic and oftentimes use their physical superiority to exert power over their younger siblings.

Certainly, firstborns do not become a surrogate for the parent; however, they take on characteristics consistent with this notion. They are “in charge” when mom or dad are not around (oftentimes this authority placed on them by the parents). Richardson suggests that this accounts for a disproportionate number of firstborns existing in unhappy marriages, when married to another firstborn. Their desire of power and inability to control overbearing behavior leads them to frequent quarrels. However, they do quite well when married to someone who was a middle or youngest sibling (1990:56).

Sutton-Smith suggests that there is strong evidence to support the idea that firstborns accept parental authority more readily than their younger siblings (1970:113). In a study of high school and college students, firstborns identified more closely with adults and parents versus laterborns. Ernst and Angst did suggest however, that these findings were not consistent (1983:99). On the other hand there is a strong indication that power relations do exist between the oldest and their younger siblings. Aggressive behavior is more likely to be a trait found in the oldest child, yet this aggressive behavior (oftentimes directed at the younger sibling) is more likely due to age differences and not directly to birth order (Ernst and Angst, 1983:98).

Another trait that deserves merit in analyzing personality differences in family order is Sulloway's "Openness to Experience." This is another one of his "big five" in personality dimensions, keeping in mind that these five dimensions emerge consistently in personality tests administered in countries around the world. His hypotheses take the form of a question, "In competing for parental investment, what strategies are children most likely to employ, given differences in their birth order?" (1996:68) Taking into account his "Openness to Experience," laterborns should score higher than firstborns on this dimension. Sulloway proposes this is due to the more creative and rebellious nature of laterborns. This dimension is associated with being somewhat audacious and adventurous, thus, the cautious nature of the firstborn would not predispose them to experience unconventional, perhaps risky situations.

Interestingly, this correlation can be made to mere age differences as well. Take for example, Sulloway's example of age and risk-taking in the field of science. He notes that older scientists are less likely to embrace new ideas as are younger scientists. In taking this one step further, this occurrence offers a measurement for the effects of birth order. For example, a twenty five-year old firstborn is about as open to new ideas as an eighty-year old laterborn

(1996:36). The same can be said for the field of medicine. Sales representatives for Glaxo Wellcome Inc. noted that older physicians are less likely to try a new medicine than are their younger counterparts. This circumstance again provides a measuring stick for the influence of birth order--in that a young physician who is a firstborn may have the same inclination to try new therapies as a veteran laterborn.

Certainly, the firstborn can be seen as the grand experiment. Mothers and fathers are still perfecting the art of parenting while working through the learning process. The majority of research shows that some of the differences seen between firstborns and laterborns are attributable to parents mellowing with age--and ensuing children. What conclusions, if any, can be made from the information gathered from observing the habits and characteristics of firstborns? Their traditional ideology is often formed from their strong identification with parents and adults. Unlike their younger siblings, they spend more time alone with parents in their early years. Most researchers of birth order and child rearing agree that the first three years of life may have the most impact on personality traits. In this crucial time frame, firstborns spend more time identifying and imitating parental habits.

Alfred Adler was a follower of Freud and had a strong interest in studying the psychological significance of birth order in children; however, in later years Adler parted from the Freudian school. For Adler (a middle child), adapting to the external society is essential, whereas Freud (a firstborn) sees coming to terms with an inner moral authority as prerequisite for self-preservation. Adler, a physician, psychiatrist and psychologist, was the first to hypothesize that birth order inscribes characteristic imprints upon the life of the individual.

Adler, like Dittes (mentioned prior) subscribed to the notion of "dethronement" with regard to firstborns. That is that firstborns often have a difficult time adjusting to the birth of the

next sibling. Adler deduced, “Sometimes a child who has lost his power, the small kingdom he ruled, understands better than others the importance of power and authority” (1956:378-379).

This connection with power and authority may lead to an overemphasis on the importance of law and order, and power on the part of firstborns.

There are certainly mixed characteristics of this birth position. Some firstborns may epitomize the different characteristics discussed in this chapter, yet others may remain consistent with only a few of the personality traits of this pressurized family position. Generally, firstborns would do themselves a favor by lightening their load. Compulsive traits and emphasis on high achievement tend to make the oldest more tense, driven and less playful with others--- perfectionists to the core. It is the notion of underachievement, which may lead to uncomfortable feelings of vulnerability.

## The Middle Child

What can be said about the classic middle child? More than any other order, the middle child has been the smallest focus of research and the most difficult to pin down. Richardson notes that middle children are often confused about their identity and may vacillate between trying to be grown up (like their older sibling) or cute (like their younger sibling), oftentimes without a true sense of their own uniqueness (1990:140).

Much of the research that does exist on middle children notes their capabilities at negotiation. Firstly, their ordinal position places them in the “middle” of things. Sulloway describes this position in the family as the “embodiment of minimum personal power” (1996:303). The middle child does not hold a distinct position relative to the other siblings. In other words, the more definitive roles of oldest and youngest have been assumed by his/her brothers and sisters. Toman notes that for middle children, “their position seems to be ambiguous” (24). That is, the middle child is more prone to a position of obscurity.

How, then, does the middle child form any allegiances with their older or younger siblings? Some research indicates there is a tendency on the part of middle children to switch allegiances between older and younger siblings. In some instances it may be beneficial to side with older brother, while at other times it may advantageous to cohort with little sister. In any case, negotiation skills are required. Richardson notes there is a certain sensitivity of middle children of being “left out” (1990:141). Likewise, Toman sees the middle child “in danger of

being ignored and isolated” (1976:24). Richardson suggests that this may foster negotiation skills in the middle child, so as to arrive at a fair settlement.

Unlike the firstborn, the middle child may be more realistic, in part due to his/her unspoiled nature. Although they are not as driven as the typical firstborn child, neither are they as compulsive.

Alfred Adler, a secondborn himself, considered middle children to be more cooperative than their older siblings. Middle children put forth more effort, he deduced, because they are always in pursuit of the older sibling—always playing catch-up (Sulloway, 1996:380). They are not afforded the throne of the firstborn title and must work hard to gain acknowledgment and respect. For Adler, feelings of inferiority of middle children are paramount in a child’s development. Harris notes, “This emphasis arises from Adler’s noncomplex view that human behavior can be explained by a drive for power which compensates for feelings of inferiority” (1964:35). Additionally, in accordance with Adler, Harris contends that the middle child strives upwardly to “unseat the firstborn from the throne,” in an effort to rebel in an emphatic way at the firstborn’s supremacy (1964:72).

Although Adler thought being a middle child was a fairly harmless position, he did admit that he often felt “put in the shade” by his older brother (1956:379). As is the tendency of firstborns to outdo other siblings, Adler’s older brother consistently made efforts to outperform his younger brother.

In efforts to gain attention, acceptance and recognition, middleborns often go outside the family unit. Leman describes, “Middleborn children often hang out more with their peer group than does any other child in the family” (1998:154). This may explain why middle children have



more friends than firstborns—they are, in some ways, forced to be social to feel “special” or “unique.”

Toman notes that, to some extent, there may be a tendency of middleborns to feel overlooked or excluded. Toman suggests this may result from feelings of inadequacy on the part of the middle child, “They think they notice that they matter the least among their siblings” (1976:22). This theory is supported by Sulloway, who continually refers to Darwinian principles in his research of birth order. Sulloway looks to evolutionary psychology to shed some light into sibling differences, “especially the tendency for parents to favor firstborns and lastborns over middle children” (1996:305). Sulloway describes the oldest as having an advantage in wooing parental attention—simply due to their ordinal favor; while the youngest never fears the parental attention lost to ensuing siblings. Thus, Sulloway concludes, “the losers in this Darwinian calculus are often middle children” (1996:305).

Unlike the militant, headstrong reputation of the firstborn, middleborns are more adaptable and prefer diplomacy. Being more compliant and uninterested in confrontation or conflict may have its advantages in creating an individual who is mentally tough and independent. Leman also describes the diplomatic nature of the middle child, “because they couldn’t have Mom or Dad all to themselves and get their way, they learned to negotiate and compromise” (1996:156). In addition to this, any aggression the middle child directs toward the lastborn may be thwarted or stymied—merely because the “baby” of the family is oftentimes protected. This intervention merely adds to the compromising nature of middleborns.

Are middleborns significantly different than lastborns? Sulloway’s research on many famous first and middleborns has shown significantly different patterns between the two birth orders. Sulloway notes, “being a middle child appears to foster considerable willingness to

compromise” (1996:303). Sulloway cites Martin Luther King, Jr. as a classic example of the middleborn’s tendency for compromise and diplomacy through nonviolent means. King was the second born son of three children. His political protests in the Civil Rights movement always favored change through non-militant persistence (Sulloway, 1996:301).

One area in which differences appear by birth order seems to be social attitudes. Whereas the research has shown that firstborns are more socially conservative in nature, Sulloway notes that middleborns tend “to occupy the middle of the family spectrum in social attitudes” (1996:224). They are neither highly conservative or highly liberal. However, Sulloway reports that birth order is just one of many factors that cause siblings to differ in their social attitudes. Sulloway suggests, “multiple predictors—including age gaps between siblings, parent-offspring conflict, gender, and parental loss” are employed in predicting social attitudes (1996:226).

One researcher remarked that middle children are much more willing to share power with others. In terms of negotiation, Sulloway observes that middleborns do well to cultivate alliances among other siblings (1996:303). In doing so, Sulloway suggests, they are better equipped to deal with various expedient restraints that arise in family situations. However, Leman notes that the compromising efforts of middleborns may be to a fault, suggesting that middleborns “can be seen as willing to have peace at any price; others may try to take advantage of them” (1998:165).

Learning to live in peace with different personalities may be the art form of the middle child. According to Toman, the middle child “is prepared for all types of relationships” (1976:22). Researchers interpret this result as suggesting that middleborns become adept at dealing with different people later in life. Toman suggests that this would include relationships



that transcend age and sex as the middleborn is accustomed to dealing with older brothers and younger sisters, older sisters and younger brothers.

Leman contends that middle children are more independent thinkers. In efforts to escape the frustrations of being an “outsider,” middleborns are “willing to do things differently, take risks, strike out on their own” (1998:165).

Much of the research gathered in this paper reflects birth orders of three and four sibling families. But what of middle children of larger families? Obviously, families with many children have many middleborns. In this situation, it is important to note their position in relationship to the rest of the siblings. For example, middleborns in the upper end of a large family may act as surrogate firstborns to the younger siblings and assume roles of leadership and responsibility (Toman, 1976:22). They may even identify more closely with their parents, much like their older siblings. Toman identifies this unique group of middleborns as “older middle siblings or younger middle siblings.”

Richardson adds to the research surrounding life as a middleborn in larger families, stating that “life is better for middle children if they come from a larger family with siblings of both sexes” (1990:150). He interprets this statement as intimating that there seems to be less rivalry and jealousy due to the subgroups which form in large families. This, he implies, may secure a more favorable environment for middleborns.

In the future, data on middle sibling positions may be more difficult to gather and interpret simply due to our changing society. Toman notes that urbanization and industrialization have led to a shrinking family size in this country. Women are waiting longer to start families. Two-child families have increased in number (as have multiple births), while families with three and four children are becoming increasingly rare. In Toman’s research,

nearly 60% of the families studied in his sample population were from one and two-child families. Clearly, families with many siblings are on the decline. Bond cites that the family size is shrinking, “today the average child has one sibling in the typical two-child family,” which is different from the four to five sibling household of a family in 1900 (1982:12).

Again, the middle child’s position is the subject of the least amount of research on birth order. Since middle children find it difficult to compete with the oldest, they may often learn to explore new territory. As Richardson suggests, middle children oftentimes, “try out new behaviors, and seek a different route for getting affirmation and recognition” (1990:7).

### The Youngest

Unlike the siblings before them, the youngest are never displaced by a newborn, or as Adler would suggest, they are never subject to “dethronement.” They remain the perpetual baby of the family. Richardson notes that the youngest child in the family is more often less disciplined and overindulged, in part, because the parents have so often mellowed by this time—suggesting there is less pressure on the child to walk, talk, or toilet train early. Richardson further notes that older siblings often have an innate feeling of responsibility for taking care of the youngest (1990:95). If the family has been too solicitous, Richardson contends that rules have less meaning for the youngest, which may lead to a manipulative style of getting what they desire (1990:99).

These findings correspond with patterns found in Adler’s research on birth order, in which lastborns are perceived as spoiled by nature. Adler states, “A spoiled child can never be independent” (381). Suffice it to say, this hypothesis is viewed as somewhat anecdotal by some birth order researchers (including Sulloway). Although it may be a tendency, it requires statistical testing.

Forer also describes a tendency for lack of independence in youngest children. In her research, she illustrated a possible explanation for this dependence on others, “if the family is overly protective, the youngest may grow up lacking courage and independence” (1976:77). In her work as a practicing clinical psychologist, Forer

sampled three lastborn men of varying family and economic backgrounds. Forer cited these case studies as especially interesting, in part because all three men “developed similar behavior and personality limitations due to their place in the family,” despite different social, economic and cultural backgrounds (1976:79). Second, since the men had been considered as insubstantial and small as children, they continued to retain this image of themselves into adulthood.

Leman contends that much of the negative self-perceptions of lastborns emanate from the authoritative nature of their older siblings. In terms of sibling manipulation according to birth rank, Leman notes that: “No matter that the older kids are often totally incorrect in their dogmatic pronouncements to the baby of the family—the baby perceives they are right because they are so much “smarter, stronger, and bigger” (1998:331).

Richardson suggests that, unlike firstborns, lastborns are more likely followers than leaders. Whereas one half of this country’s presidents were firstborns, only four American presidents were the youngest of their respective families (Richardson, 1990:104).

This type of finding resonates with the lastborn child’s tendency to capitalize on his or her “smallness,” in which the child often expects help and uses personal contacts to reach a goal. Forer contends that this characteristic may lead to levels of high achievement in the youngest child. The youngest has grown up observing parents and siblings and learning from their mistakes. “The youngest child receives everything the parents have learned, and also the wisdom of brothers and sisters who have already tested the outside world” (1976:242).

However, Forer also contends there is negativity to the excessive dependency, alluded to by Adler. If the child uses tattling and crying to elicit responses and accomplish goals, “these practices may develop into lifelong and limiting methods of relating to others” (1976:243).

Harris suggests that like middle children, lastborns can suffer from feelings of deficiency as well, “the lastborn’s inferiority stems largely from feelings of inadequacy over being treated like the baby, a role he compares disadvantageously to the role and rank of older siblings” (1964:72). This type of suggestion resonates with the propositions made by Adler, which would imply that intense feelings of inferiority on the part of lastborns acts as a catalyst for rebellion.

In terms of findings related to the rebellious nature of laterborns, birth order compounds the influence of social attitudes. Sulloway suggests that the likelihood of supporting new and liberal ideas is much higher in laterborns versus firstborns. However, in the battle for women’s rights, firstborn women are overrepresented. This finding delineates a seeming disapproval of Sulloway’s thesis regarding rebellion in laterborns. Sulloway suggests that among the determinants for resistance to authority, the obvious injustice of women made it easier for firstborn women to rebel over this issue (1996:157).

Sulloway further notes that even though siblings may share the same core of morals and beliefs, they often differ in their styles of social thought, “Because laterborns are more open to experience, they are more willing to revise what they have been taught by their parents” (1996:217). Charles Darwin, a laterborn, became a clergyman with the

aid of his religious father and sisters, yet he died an agnostic with no religious convictions remaining.

Sulloway also describes laterborns as more likely to take risks. In his sample of laterborn men, they were more likely to participate in dangerous contact sports such as boxing, football and rugby. By contrast, firstborns preferred noncontact sports such as swimming, tennis and golf. Sulloway concludes, "Risk taking is a useful strategy in the quest to find an unoccupied niche..." (1996:112). Richardson also notes, "youngests are likely to take on dangerous jobs or invest in high-risk financial ventures" (1990:105). Lastborns appear to be more open to experience new and different situations. Leman cites, "laterborns want to act now, not later, ... (babies) are typically spontaneous and impetuous" (1998:204).

Richardson also comments on the risk taking behavior of lastborns, suggesting that teasing and bossing from older siblings may spur rebellious behavior in lastborns. This type of behavior may be an attempt to "prove themselves strong and capable" in the eyes of their siblings (1990:105).

Most researchers on birth order have agreed with the notion that lastborns crave social interaction and attention. Forer suggests, "youngest children are usually relaxed in relations with other people." (1976:93).

They may often do this by being cute or funny; however, Richardson notes that this tactic can result in an inability to be taken seriously by their siblings. In research gathered from Glaxo Wellcome Inc., pharmaceutical representatives were surveyed from district to district. Each district consisted of ten to twelve representatives per district. Of the representatives surveyed, a predominate number were lastborns. On average, over



seventy percent of each district represented the youngest of their families. This finding resonates with similar patterns found by psychologist Kevin Leman—himself a lastborn. While awaiting service in a car dealership, he ascertained the number of lastborn employees working in the sales department--only to find that almost every salesperson in the agency represented the youngest in their families (1998:182). Interestingly, in reference to lastborns, Richardson notes, “they often go into sales work because of their innate knowledge about what hooks people’s attention and their ability to out-talk others” (1990:103).

According to Sulloway, lastborns tend to be the most diversified when it comes to career strategies. Faced with limited resources within the family unit, laterborns resort to diversity. Sulloway contends, “the greater number of rivals for parental investment, the more lastborns responded by developing diverse interests” (1996:108). Richardson also observes this pattern in lastborns, suggesting that most youngest “know from the beginning that their parents are shared, and they try to get attention by being different from their other siblings” (1990:103).

In terms of accepting responsibility, the youngest may be willing to do so, yet not a position of top command (although a partly subordinate position may suffice). Richardson suggests that youngest represent “the least career-oriented of the birth orders (1990:102). This includes clinging to work which is not too demanding. He interprets this result as a lack of self-confidence in their ability to be successful. Richardson notes that although not often articulated, “they often have difficulty making decisions since there was always someone older and wiser around to take care of things for them” (1990:104).

In studies focused on quality of life issues, patterns of the youngest become manifest. Toman observes that material things do not matter as much to the youngest as do humors and strains; and the meaning of their own existence (1976:157).

Regardless of their reasons, parents often have fewer expectations of the youngest throughout childhood, thus less pressure is put on them to achieve great things. This may be seen as a subliminal message to remain carefree; in essence, that the youngest position in the family precludes serious exertion in the ways of life.

In conclusion, Leman offers some suggestions in parenting the lastborn child. Firstly, in terms of discipline, rules that apply to older siblings should apply to the youngest. Secondly, parents should acknowledge the small accomplishments of the youngest, just as they did for their oldest. Finally, the responsibilities of the house should be shared across sibling ranks—this may become essential in keeping harmony in sibling interactions (1998: 336).



## Communication Patterns of Siblings

### Family Dynamics

Due to its many influences in developing individuals, the family unit may be viewed as a psychosocial organization in itself. The multiplicity of personalities and family niches greatly impacts the individual, relative to his/her siblings. Equally important are the connections of the individuals who make up the family—the ties that bind each sibling to the other (and parents to their children). This chapter will examine the texture of sibling relationships and uncover some of the issues that enter into their formation. Additionally, this chapter will explore what bonds link siblings to each other.

Many psychotherapists have researched the effect of siblings in human development. Bond proposes that although parental influence is a determinant of a person's identity, it is not the principal determinant. Bond suggests that a sibling bond is a marriage of two people's identities—sometimes warm and favorable, yet it can also be detrimental. Although Western culture celebrates meaningful changes between parents and children, husband and wife: "There are no rituals of church or synagogue that celebrate sibling bonds, nor legal means to make or break them" (1982:5).

Forer suggests, "the family is a child's first social group," a rehearsal of sorts for the stage of maturity (1976:127). Today, the family experience helps to eliminate the frustration of learning about life through personal experimentation while living in a myriad of subcultures.

The family acts as a surrogate classroom for learning how to behave in the world. Richardson notes the influence the family has on an individual, “family experience is so powerful in your early life that you may grow up with the firm conviction that the way things are in your family is as natural as water to a fish—and that anything else is deviant” (1990:13).

According to Forer, adolescents often tend to accept the ideas of peers rather than their parents. This may provide greater validity to birth order’s role in determining how a child learns about the social network—suggesting that siblings may tend to influence an individual to a larger degree than do parents.

Handel and Hess describe the interaction of family members to each other, “Living together, the individuals in a family each develop an image of what the other members are like” (1994:7). Each child or sibling carries the imprint of their experience with each other—which helps create his/her image of family. Each member of the family has a role to play in this larger configuration. Handel and Hess suggest an individual’s role in the family is “complexly determined as is every role—in some measure assigned by others, in some measure self-created” (1994:12). Siblings conceptions of one another may serve to direct and form one’s treatment of the other, which may become a fundamental element for the interpersonal relationship. Richardson also notes the profound influence of family, “all members of a family define themselves in relation to other family members” (1990:11).

In studies focused on emotional closeness in sibling dynamics, the constructs of family play a vital role in determining levels of solidarity of siblings to one another. In relation to the framework of the family, Handel observes that: “The sense of belonging to the family, and of being close to particular siblings was permanently affected by experiences shared in childhood”

(1994:503). In essence, subjects who feel close to their siblings remember an accentuation on family unity and acceptance of individual aptness—absent of overt favoritism by the parents.

In the parameters of emotional closeness in sibling relationships, perceptions of sameness and difference become influential factors. Bond observes that sameness is associated with feelings of closeness and standards of affinity; while difference creates feelings of divergence and patterns of alienation (1982:69). Identity recognition heightens during early adolescence, although Bond notes that self-concepts of “being different” subside as siblings become older. Bond also suggests that sibling relationships are developmental and influenced by the changing dynamics of the family.

These types of implications resonate with patterns found in Sulloway’s work on family roles, suggesting that sibling differences arise from cultivation of distinct, varying niches (1996:95). This may suggest that niche selection is a sibling’s offensive effort to be different and cultivate different skills—a fundamental Darwinian perspective. While some children may try to establish their identity by imitating a favored sibling, a more common practice is to find something which will distinguish the individual from other siblings. Oftentimes, niches are a combination of self-perception and family perception. In terms of defining one’s purpose in the family, younger siblings tend to define themselves according to whatever territory has previously been claimed by the older sibling (Richardson, 1990:7).

In terms of sibling bonds, few would argue that brothers and sisters exert a uniquely profound effect as well. As mentioned earlier, the sibling relationship is one of the longest lasting relationships in an individual’s life—oftentimes outlasting that with a spouse. Siblings are able to fill the need of individuals to be known by someone consistently throughout a lifetime. Certainly, siblings are bonded by family roots and traditions as well as a deep knowledge about

each other. Modern research has found the emotional health of men at age 65 is strongly connected to close relationships with their siblings (Richardson, 1990:242).

Yet every relationship (including the sibling bond) progresses through phases, from conception, to maintenance, and finally—disunion. It has been well documented that the sibling relationship changes over time. Bank theorizes that for a sibling bond to truly develop and exert a formative influence on personality, there must be access of siblings to one another void of parental observation (1982:19). Although Bank has examined strong positive bonds between siblings based on his research, Handel cites concerns that Bank's work is based entirely on patients in therapy. Thus, Handel suggests that this work has revealed only an underpinning for enduring sibling ties, not the universal foundation (1994:504).

In terms of early childhood, Cicirelli notes that older siblings initiate efforts at communication with younger siblings. In addition to this, older siblings are more often able to interpret what the infant is saying than are the infant's parents (1995:42). This lends credence to the notion that children communicate effectively with their own language, oftentimes merely a modified version of adult language.

This communication pattern between siblings is an early example of the tenacious bonds which form in early childhood. It may be of significance then to ask whether the degree of attachment among siblings affects personality development. To this point, little research has been devoted to this hypothesis. However, according to such a hypothesis, siblings who are closely attached ought to illustrate greater unity and hence fewer sibling conflict effects.

In research focused on sibling age spacing patterns of sibling attachment are clearly evident. Forer suggests that span of years between siblings may create distinctions in the way an individual experiences their place in the family: "The explanation for this seems to be that both

the firstborn and the widely spaced laterborn are protected by older persons in the family from contact with peers” (1976:30). Much of the research up to this point acknowledges the rivalry for parental care and attention, which is exhibited when new sibling arrives into the world of the firstborn child. The question becomes whether age differences alter the level of rivalry or degree of sibling bonding.

Sulloway cites evidence to suggest that close age spacing promotes increased sibling rivalry. Yet, conversely, significantly older siblings—no longer contingent on parental care—do not experience this degree of rivalry to additional siblings of substantial age gaps. In his collection of data, siblings who are closely spaced “increase the competition for parental investment” (1996:133). Under such circumstances, older siblings tend to minimize their younger rivals, which may foster conflict and rebellion.

The Darwinian approach would suggest that survival is most threatened by siblings who are close in age. Sulloway observes that sibling contrast is strongly evident in closely spaced sibling due to laterborns response to the dominant nature of firstborns. That is, younger siblings tend to diverge their interests so as to minimize direct analogies with their older siblings. Generally speaking however, Toman’s research reveals that, “small age distances tend to bind siblings more strongly to each other...this is true even when they cannot resolve their conflicts” (1976:34). Wahlroos adds that power struggles which exist between siblings are often unconscious resistances, which may be evident to those outside the family but not evident to family members themselves (1974:88).

In terms of the transitional phases, sibling relationships become modified from early childhood to middle childhood—younger siblings go to older siblings for advice when they find



it difficult to confront their parents about adolescent issues (Cicirelli, 1995:44). Cicirelli concludes that sibling rivalry and conflict peak in early adolescence, then drop off in adulthood.

As siblings transcend through the phases of their relationship, accessibility levels change with maturity and age. Through childhood and adolescence, siblings pursue their own personal associations with peers outside the dynamics of family. Handel notes that siblings often seek out their brothers/sisters' attention in times of need or urgency, "availability is desired for support in a particular situation, for advice, or, particularly among younger children, for companionship and play" (1994:514).

In studies focused on sibling influence, patterns by age spacing are once again manifest. In terms of influence, Toman observes that immediate siblings, that is, those close in age, "are likely to influence each other more strongly than nonadjacent siblings" (1976:35). Toman contends that older siblings tend to determine the character of the sibling relationship to a greater extent than do younger siblings. Although the arrival of the younger sibling alters the family configuration by his/her mere presence, it is the older child who continues to interpret and shape the direction of the relationship (Toman, 1976:36).

The perception that children who are closely spaced become emotionally bonded is further supported by the controlled investigations conducted by Helen Koch. In her research, Koch observed that children who were zero to two years apart had communal interests and frequently sought each other's company (1955:26-27). Additionally, they had a more difficult time tolerating detachment from each other. The siblings who were separated by four to six years, however, appeared far less connected. These observations suggest that age proximity during early childhood may influence the degree to which bonds develop between siblings. In

addition to sharing genetic similarities, siblings who are close in age experience the same environment at similar points in time, thus sharing in paralleled family processes.

Bond suggests that the emotional bond between siblings is largely based on the level of “access” between siblings: “Similarity in age and sex promotes access to common life events” (1982:9). Siblings who are close in age share similar time, space and personal histories as well as a general need for each other throughout life. Bond adds that the earlier the “access” begins, the more profound and intense the relationship will be—especially when tested by the issues of distance and social parallels later in life: “High accessibility during the developmentally formative years is the almost routine accompaniment of an influential sibling relationship” (1982:10).

The sibling relationship is ever evolving through different stages of life, changing family dynamics and so on. As each child searches for identity, the relationships with his/her brothers and sisters become increasingly important. Bond notes that in issues of identity for growing children, “they look to their intimate family members for confirmation or disconfirmation of their personal worth and sense of esteem” (1982:49). This type of pattern may be related to the idea that in developing self-concepts, children may look to a sibling as a yardstick to compare oneself.

In studies centered on contact in adult sibling relationships, patterns by age and gender are apparent (gender will be addressed later). Fifty percent of those questioned, admitted seeing or talking to their sibling/s at least once a month. Verbal or physical contact was more often initiated by the older sibling—with distance affecting this number to some extent (Cicirelli, 1995). As Cicirelli suggests that older siblings initiate contact more frequently, Bond cites studies that show “many of the most loyal siblings are the oldest child in the family, and the



majority appear to be older females” (1982:113). In addition to this, Cicirelli notes that older people living with siblings had increased morale and, in general, a stronger sense of well-being.

According to Wahlroos, family members (especially siblings) can give an individual valuable insight regarding behavior. Wahlroos suggests, “in one sense your family members will usually know more about you than a psychologist will” (1972:87). Families spend copious amounts of time with each other, observing everything from changes in voice to mood variations reflected in varying facial expressions. For this reason, Wahlroos contends that observations and advice from siblings must be perceived as valuable information to the individual.

## Parental Influence

Many factors confound the dynamics of the family unit, with parents oftentimes representing the cornerstone of this framework. As noted in an earlier chapter, parents usually develop different parenting styles between children. New parents react differently to their initial child's stages of development (first steps, first words) than they will for the second or third child. Additionally, their anxiety level is much higher due to their uncertainty as new parents.

Certainly, emotional differences must be accounted for as well. Richardson states, "One of the greatest determinants of a child's personality development is the happiness level of the parents" (1990:4). This may suggest that a younger couple still uncovering the trials and joys of marriage presents a very different emotional factor than will a disillusioned couple suffering through years of an unhappy marriage. Bond reports that the demeanor of the father and "the quality of his relationship with his wife determine in major ways how the mother deals with her children" (1982:58). In families where the father works outside the home, the mother is principal caretaker of the children—responsible for much of the orchestration of daily family life and moderation of sibling interaction.

So, what does parenting have to do with the variables of birth order? Leman suggests that one force at work is the tendency for parents to overidentify with the child in the same birth order position as the parent (1998:53). So, mothers who were the babies of their family may pay more attention to their lastborn child—simply because they identify with this particular position.

In terms of parenting, Richardson also contends that the birth order of the parent can affect the parents' impression of their children—thus alter how they raise them. Parents who occupy the same birth order as one of their children may more closely identify with that child, although Richardson notes that more conflicts may occur as well as they collide over assuming that particular role in the family unit (26-27). In essence, a parent may react to their children in much the same way they reacted to their own brothers and sisters, which may suggest that every person experiences his/her own sibling position more immediately and assertively than that of other sibling positions.

An important process of education within a family is the child's understanding and adoption of the behavior and desires of the parents. According to Toman, this process starts within the family. This is evidenced by the fact that parents often rely on their own experiences as children. Parents utilize their frame of reference—what their families taught them on how to deal with children (Toman, 1976:118).

Conflict within the family occurs in parent-offspring interaction as well as interactions between siblings. For this reason, conflict with parents is part of the dynamic that elevates birth order differences. Sulloway suggests that excessive conflict may lead to developmental problems in children. In a study based on biographical and autobiographical accounts of 989 participants, Sulloway found that considerable conflict with parents “increases the likelihood that an offspring will reject authority” (1996:121). Surprisingly, this trend represents more firstborns than laterborns. Predicated on these findings, radical firstborns (a rare combination) are likely to have experienced significant conflict with a parent.

Bond suggests that parents have profound effects on developing sibling bonds. In terms of rivalry, an overemphasis on success may intensify rivalry between siblings. Bond observes that a parent's favoritism of one child "may alienate the siblings from that child" (1982:58).

For all this, parents either relish the accolades for how well their children turn out or they suffer the criticism when a child fails at the trial of life.

## Gender

Many gender differences are specific to the roles which society positions on men and women—with gender referring to the attributes of masculinity or femininity as defined by our culture. It is generally undisputed in history that men in the aggregate present superior physical strength over women. For this reason, it is important to distinguish the importance of gender roles over mere differences in physiology. Sibling interaction should be conceptualized along gender patterns and not just in terms of male or female. One of the first questions asked of new parents is, “did you have a boy or a girl?” From the point of conception, girl infants are treated differently than boy infants. Richardson cites one study in which volunteers were asked to play with different babies. When the baby was dressed as a girl, the volunteers handled the baby more gently and spoke to the baby more often than when the child was dressed as a boy (1990:8).

Differences in a child’s perception of gender roles begin in early childhood development. Children learn about gender roles from their parents and their brothers and sisters; who may encourage, support and validate the development of such roles. Bond notes that although the primary influence on a child’s gender role are the parents, siblings “seriously influence how an individual completes the resolution of his or her sexual unfolding” (1982:147). Adler suggests

that the sex of siblings is an important factor in the way a child adopts his or her gender role (1956:381).

Some psychologists have utilized the gender role theory to explain birth order and conformity. Sulloway cites that “siblings learn gender-appropriate behavior from one another, a process influenced by the model’s gender” (1996:149). The younger of two sisters has a model of feminine behavior in her older sister, thus she learns to take on sisterly, feminine qualities; which includes cooperation and conformity. Although Sulloway agrees that gender roles play a relevant factor in family niches, he contends that for personality traits, “sibling differences dwarf gender differences,” and that gender related traits ideally appear on an individual basis (1996:151).

Some psychological topics relating to gender have outlived repeated scrutiny. Differences such as aggression, assertiveness, conformity and tender-mindedness between the sexes have confounded birth order researchers. This chapter will explore these variables in depth.

Sulloway notes that “siblings face differing behavioral contexts in their different family niches” (1996:149). Sisters within a family are different from each other. In other words, being female does not comprise the same familiarity for a middle child as it does for the youngest. This same principle will apply to brothers as well—whose individual development changes according to family roles. Sulloway concludes: “In the development of personality—including gender-related traits—family niches often override biology, just as they often transcend cultural stereotypes” (1996:149).

Stotland et al concentrate a great deal of research on empathy and birth order. Their research on empathy in sibling gender differences measured physiological changes in palmar

sweating and vasoconstriction (increased blood pressure). In terms of gender and empathy, laterborn females (generally speaking) show empathy toward someone similar to themselves who is in distress, yet they empathize little with someone outside their group. Stotland et al speculate on these conclusions in terms of early family experience, “Since female children are often protected from outsiders, they may tend to perceive outsiders as threatening people with whom they have not learned to relate” (1971:66-67). Conversely, laterborn males show little contrast empathy with someone different from themselves. Again Stotland et al cogitates on these results, “males, as children, are freer to interact with people outside their families, to be bold and adventurous” (1971:67). Girls, on the other hand, are more safeguarded by their parents and have a general tendency to stay closer to familiar surroundings.

As mentioned earlier, gender roles are often confirmed and corroborated by both parents and siblings. Different dyads occur in sibling relationships, which account for a variation on gender roles. For example, Koch suggests that the dyad of a firstborn girl and a laterborn boy often produce masculine traits in the girl (encompassing qualities such as leadership, assertiveness, aggressiveness and competitiveness)—to a greater degree than the boy (1955:35). According to Forer, the combination of an older sister with a younger brother may produce diverging perceptions about gender roles: “The girl may develop easily as a female, but the boy may not have a comfortable feeling about his masculinity” (1976:154). Forer interprets this result as a tendency for the younger boy to visualize the older sister as stronger and more competent.

In the studies focused on child samples of young boys who had only female siblings, Koch found there is a tendency toward less masculine preferences by the boys; however, Ernst



and Angst are swift to point out that this result was not reproducible in sibships of three, only sibships of two (1983:174).

These results suggest significant influences of birth order on gender-related behavior. Based on earlier discussion regarding patterns of siblings, firstborns tend to be more assertive and aggressive. Based on this information, it is not surprising that studies examining gender-related traits, firstborns—both males and females--exhibited more “masculine” traits than their younger siblings. According to Forer, the firstborn female is able to identify with her father’s achievement in addition to her mother’s feminine behaviors, thus she may have a tendency to exhibit both masculine and feminine traits (1976:156). However, Koch does note that the “masculine” tendency is greatest among firstborn males. Just as important as birth order in shaping personality, gender exhibits its influence as well. The research of Koch and Forer affirms the suggestion that gender differences are vital to the history of human development.

The literature surrounding the sexual influence of siblings on human development is noteworthy. Bond notes that sexual influence is pervasive within families and may play a critical factor in the lives of siblings: “The influence of a same-sex sibling can be a potent reference point in the consolidation of one’s sexual identity” (1982:147). Although Bond remarks that brothers and sisters do not determine a sibling’s sexual position; however, they can secure specific behaviors and expressions associated with sexual identity. Same-sex siblings are an overriding and immediate influence, yet opposite-sex siblings can also serve as role models in the sexual identification process (Bond, 1982:147). Bond also notes that this influence is generally progressive, occurring over many years.

Gender emerges as an important factor in areas of sibling contact as well. As mentioned earlier, siblings who share more time, space and personal histories develop a stronger bond

through life. It is this general need for sibling contact that differences appear by gender.

Cicirelli notes that contact between siblings in adulthood is greater between sisters, with cross-sex pairs having the least contact (1995:72). Cicirelli also suggests that the norms surrounding sibling initiated contact may well be a function of societal gender roles. Cicirelli cites research finding that sibling contact initiated by the brother was a motivation of duty (versus desire). Whereas, sibling contact initiated by the sister was a provocation of affection (1995:66).

Perhaps it is the female's role as a nurturer which accounts for much of the gender related issues regarding sibling interaction, especially in adulthood. These evident differences can be attributed to different positions and sibling roles within the family. Toman suggests that girls are allowed to be more friendly and courteous, unlike boys, who are instructed in the practice of being a gentleman (1976:69).

In the abundant research gathered by Cicirelli on sibling relationships, contact with sisters is particularly important in old age (whether same-sex dyad or cross-sex dyad). This may be equated to the considerable interest of women in preserving family ties. Cicirelli suggests it is more likely due to a woman's emotional ability to nurture others (1995:64).

This trend is again made evident when observing siblings as caregivers of elderly parents. In general, sisters provide most of the "expressive and instrumental aspects" of caregiving (Cicirelli, 1995:135). Cicirelli contends that these kinds of patterns may be associated to the "sex role taboos" in our culture, which prevent sons from providing care of a more personal nature to their mothers (1995:135).

In terms of gender roles in sibling interactions, there is much more to sexual differentiation than physical attributes. Boys, girls, men and women balance between society's predetermined expectations of distinctive behavior according to gender and the family's

interpretation of gender roles. The significance of this is that roles relating to gender are constantly forming and changing. The role of men and women has changed significantly in the past forty years. Women work outside the home more often. In this way, children are experiencing changing archetypes for gender roles between men and women—as mother is oftentimes seen as both a financial supporter and a nurturer of the family unit. Forer concludes, “These life roles are learned through both conscious and unconscious pressures of the family group, and birth order plays a prominent part in the development of attitudes and behavior associated with gender” (1976:149).

## Conclusion

There have been hundreds of statistical studies linking birth order with various aspects of behavior and personality. This paper has collected and cogitated on some of this research from both current and timeworn studies. Much of this research is predicated on the notion that sibling relationships and birth order exhibit a profound effect on personality development. By nature, human beings are oriented to group living. Families coexist in a framework of communication and interaction between parents and siblings.

It is out of this framework that individuals learn to interact socially. Yet many psychologists would agree that although siblings grow up together, they are almost always different in their personality development. Although siblings share similar genetic makeup, they do not share identical environments within (and outside) the home. Environmental factors such as age, family position, niche, and gender must be factored into the personality equation.

Firstborns are constantly maintaining their eldest niche, while aligning their interests with that of their parents. Diplomatic middleborns learn the art of negotiation and differentiation—so as to establish their own identity, while continuing to build relationships inside and outside the family unit. Lastborns are typically more likely to take risks and rebel against authority, while remaining open to new experiences. The archetypes of birth order mentioned here offer a reference point for understanding the niches which develop in the family unit. Analyzing niches

across family lines uncovers that these smaller family environments share predictable characteristics that correspond strongly with sibling status.

It remains impossible, however, to predict human behavior. So, there remain exceptions to many of the generalizations and conclusions drawn from birth order research. Still, consistent, multiple forecastings (extrapolated from numerous studies) provide effective means of explaining individual behavior—relative to birth order and family dynamics.

## Appendix

### Worksheet--Exploring Sibling Experiences Relative to Birth Order

#### Family

1. What ordinal number are you in your family (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, etc.)?
2. How many siblings do you have?
3. How would your siblings describe you?
4. What ways did you find to feel special in your family?
5. Did you enjoy your siblings? In what particular ways?
6. How did your parents handle your relationship with your siblings?
7. Did you ever feel protected by, or protective of, one of your siblings? Why?
8. Are such protective behaviors at work in your current relationships?
9. How important was (or is) your sibling relationship in terms of defining your own identity?

#### Career

1. What attracted you to sales?
2. What makes you an effective sales representative?
3. Is anyone else in your family in sales? Are they older, younger?
4. In your opinion, are older physicians more or less likely to try a new medication vs. a younger physician?
5. How would your accounts describe you?

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