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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BIRTH ORDER, PERSONALITY AND ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION AMONG UTAR UNDERGRADUATES

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Abstract

There are many debates on how birth order (only born, first born, second born, middle born, and last born) can have an effect on personality. Equally important, McGlade (2008) suggested that there is a moderate relationship between personality and romantic relationship satisfaction. Thus, to put in other words, birth order might lay either a direct or indirect effect on romantic relationship satisfaction. Nevertheless, romantic relationship satisfaction cannot be predicted efficiently based on the birth order of a particular partner, for a romantic relationship is undeniably a mutual relationship that involves two parties. Therefore, birth order combination of a couple should be given emphasis (Leman, 2009). Hence, the current study attempts to study the relationship between birth order, personality, and romantic relationship satisfaction. A sample of 100 participants from UTAR was recruited to conduct this study. The present study found that there was no significant difference in personality among participants of different birth order. Likewise, no significant difference in romantic relationship satisfaction was found among participants with various birth order combinations. However, there were significant weak to moderate correlations between certain Big Five personality traits and romantic relationship satisfaction.

Keywords: *birth order, personality, romantic relationship satisfaction, birth order combinations*

INTRODUCTION

Adler (1931/2013) first proposed birth order could influence one's personality. To date, there have been suggestions and theories that how birth order might have influences on personality, and how personality might have influences on romantic relationship satisfaction. Based on the premise that birth order might have influences on personality, it could imply that birth order might lay either a direct or indirect effect on romantic relationship satisfaction. However, birth order of a spouse alone is not a determinant of romantic relationship satisfaction as a romantic relationship is a mutual relationship that involves two persons. Thus, researchers are interested in how birth order combination of a couple can influence romantic relationship satisfaction.

To summarize, the three parts of this study include (a) birth order and personality, (b) personality and romantic relationship satisfaction, and (c) birth order combination and romantic relationship satisfaction. Further details of them are discussed in subtopics followed.

BIRTH ORDER AND PERSONALITY

Birth order (first born, second born, last born) is the chronological sequence of the birth of children and siblings born into a family (Strickland, 2001; Montes de Oca & Stewart, n.d.). Over the past century, it generates

much interest among researchers and most notably, Adler has proposed the importance of birth order and its influences on personality. This idea has been debated among researchers till now and still, no conclusive evidence is found.

To date, some of the researches suggest that first borns are predicted to be more conscientious and neurotic; middle borns to be more agreeable, extraverted, and open to experience; and last borns tend to have similar characteristics as middle borns since previous researches tend to code middle borns and last borns as later borns (Paulhus, Trapnell, & Chen, 1999; Badger & Reddy, 2009; Healey, 2008; Michalski & Shackelford, 2002; McCartin, 2004; Sulloway, 1999; Stansbury, 1993; Gordon, 2012). Even within these studies, the results are contradicting. For instance, Michalski and Shackelford (2002) suggested that first borns are actually more open to experience compare to others.

The idea of how birth order might influence personality is further challenged as some other researchers argued the effects of birth order on personality are hallucinations, delusions, or even mirage; and some studies show no significant difference in personality among people of different birth order (Sulloway, 1996; Marini & Kurtz, 2011; Michalski & Shackelford, 2002; McCartin, 2004; Gordon, 2012).

Thus, the first aim of this study is to examine the association between birth order and personality. The results might serve as an effort to validate "halo effect" based on one's birth order. It is important to note that general public tends to hold the belief that birth order can influence personality (Herrera, 2001). It is important to note that only borns are omitted from this study because they possess both the characteristics of first born and last born (Blair, 2011).

PERSONALITY AND ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

McGlade (2008) suggested that there is a relationship between personality and relationship satisfaction. In the light of the divorce rate in Malaysia is rising, this study is interested on how personality can have influence on relationship satisfaction (Goh, 2013; OnIslam.net, 2013). Speaking in Big Five Personality traits, previous researches showed that couples with higher level of neuroticism predict lower level of relationship satisfaction (Mead, 2005; Charania, 2006; Samaneh et al., 2012; Esmat, Alireza, & Hamdolla, 2012; Abbas, Bahman, & Rouhangiz, 2012). Researches also found that relationship satisfaction is significantly correlated with the other four traits of personality (Kaufman, 2011; Charania, 2006; Samaneh et al., 2012; Slatcher & Vazire, 2009; Mead, 2005; Abbas et al., 2012). However, the results from previous studies are mixed, for instance some studies suggested the higher the level of openness to experience, the higher the relationship satisfaction; while some disagree with that and suggest the negative of it (Charania, 2006; Kaufman, 2011).

Thus, this study aims to examine the relationship between personality and relationship satisfaction in Malaysia context (among students at Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Perak Campus). It is essential to know how personality might influence relationship satisfaction and the findings could be applied in the field of marital counselling. The essence is to have an established connection between personality and romantic relationship satisfaction so that people can be enlightened with a better insight and awareness regarding their own relationship in order to create a fulfilling, satisfied and sustaining long-term relationship.

BIRTH ORDER COMBINATION AND ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

Birth order combination in relationship is how couples of their own birth order in their respective family meet. The possible birth order combinations in this study include first born to first born, first born to middle born, first born to last born, middle born to middle born, middle born to last born, and last born to last born. Only born combinations are excluded for mentioned reasons.

There were previous researches that studied how birth orders might influence romantic relationship satisfaction and its formation (Raetz, 2011; Hartshorne, Salem-Hartshorne, & Hartshorne, 2009). However, these studies are not efficient in predicting how birth order can influence the satisfaction as Leman (2009) proposed the crucial aspect is actually the birth order combination between partners. In his book, he suggested that certain birth order combinations are the best mix and some others, the worst. For example, he mentioned that first born-first born is one of the worst combinations. Lyngstad and Skirbekk (2006) research that found that first born-first born relationship is unstable supported Leman's suggestion.

To date, there are limited studies focusing directly on how different birth order combinations among partners can affect the romantic relationship satisfaction and more researches should be conducted in that area (Raetz, 2011; Murphy, 2012). Thus, this study aims to examine how birth order combinations affect romantic relationship satisfaction. If a significant result is found, the result could be employed in future premarital

counselling as guidance for both the counsellors and their clients to improve relationship satisfaction; which will aid in reducing the divorce rate in Malaysia.

HYPOTHESES

The three hypotheses of the present study were:

- a. There is a significant difference in Big Five personality traits among all participants of different birth order, at least the Big Five personality traits of one particular birth order is different from the orders.
- b. There is a significant relationship between Big Five personality traits and the level of romantic relationship satisfaction.
- c. The level of romantic relationship satisfaction among all participants of different birth order combinations in relationship is not the same, at least the level of romantic relationship satisfaction of one particular birth order combination in romantic relationship is different.

METHODOLOGY

This study was a quantitative research and it focused on survey research design. Convenience sampling and purposive sampling were employed to recruit 102 participants from Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Perak Campus. Convenience sampling was used to select participants who were available and willing to respond; while purposive sampling to select participants who were currently in a romantic relationship and to exclude only borns and potential participants who have only born as romantic partner. Later, two of the participants were dropped due to incomplete responses in the questionnaire.

Instruments

Big Five Inventory (BFI). The study utilized BFI to assess Big Five Personality traits of the participants. BFI is a 44-item self-report inventory and it has eight to ten items to measure each Big Five Personality traits (John & Srivastava, 1999). BFI has an internal consistency score of 0.80 to 0.83 and has a corrected convergent validity with Trait Descriptive Adjectives and NEO Five-Factor Inventory ranges from 0.83 to 0.95 (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991). The cronbach alpha value of BFI for each trait in this research ranged from 0.46 to 0.76.

Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS). The study utilized RAS to measures global relationship satisfaction of the participants. RAS is a seven-item self-report inventory and a higher score in it indicates higher level of romantic relationship satisfaction (Hendrick, 1988; Renshaw, McKnight, Caska, & Blais, 2011). RAS has an internal consistency score of 0.88 and has a moderate to high correlations with instruments of martial satisfaction (Downing, 2008; Hendrick, Dicke, & Hendrick, 1998; Andreas & Friedrich, 2005). The cronbach alpha value of RAs in this research is 0.76.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Based on the result that shown in Table 1, the participants scored highest in openness to experience ($M=33.51$, $SD=4.02$) and lowest in neuroticism ($M=22.50$, $SD=5.71$). Among the six types of birth order combination, last born to last born combination has highest romantic relationship satisfaction ($M=29.0$, $SD=4.84$) whereas middle born to middle born combination has lowest romantic relationship satisfaction ($M=26.62$, $SD=3.75$) (see Table 1).

Table 1 - Scores of Big Five Personality and Romantic Relationship Satisfaction (N=100)

	n	Mean	SD
Big Five Personality			
Openness to experience	100	33.51	4.02
Conscientiousness	100	29.36	4.63
Extraversion	100	26.80	4.13
Agreeableness	100	32.68	4.09
Neuroticism	100	22.50	5.71

	n	Mean	SD
Romantic Relationship Satisfaction			
First born to First born	20	27.10	4.79
Middle born to Middle born	13	26.62	3.75
Last born to Last born	8	29.00	4.84
First born to Middle born	20	28.80	3.38
First born to Last born	25	27.12	3.21
Middle born to Last born	14	27.86	3.80

Inferential Statistics

Big Five personality and birth order. The result showed that there was no significant difference in personality among all participants of different birth order. More specifically, there was no significant difference in openness to experience, $F(2, 97) = .32, p = .73$; conscientiousness, $F(2, 97) = .85, p = .43$; extraversion, $F(2, 97) = .70, p = .93$; agreeableness, $F(2, 97) = .39, p = .68$ and neuroticism, $F(2, 97) = .47, p = .63$.

Big Five personality and romantic relationship satisfaction. The result revealed that certain traits from Big Five personality have significant correlation ranged from weak to moderate with romantic relationship satisfaction. Openness to experience ($r = .25, p = .012$), conscientiousness ($r = .28, p = .005$) and agreeableness ($r = .41, p = .000$) have significant positive correlation with romantic relationship satisfaction; whereas neuroticism ($r = -.28, p = .006$) has a significant weak negative correlation with romantic relationship satisfaction. For extraversion, it has an insignificant positive correlation with romantic relationship satisfaction ($r = .13, p = .20$) (see Table 2).

Romantic relationship satisfaction and birth order combination. The result showed that there was no significant difference in romantic relationship satisfaction among different birth order combinations, $F(5, 94) = .91, p = .48$.

Table 2 - Correlations of Big Five Personality and Romantic Relationship Satisfaction

Variables	Romantic Relationship Satisfaction
Openness to experience	.25*
Conscientiousness	.28**
Extraversion	.13
Agreeableness	.41**
Neuroticism	-.28**

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATION AND SUGGESTION

For birth order and personality, the result showed there was no significant difference in personality among all participants of different birth order. In other words, it infers that first borns are not more conscientious and neurotic compared to others, and middle borns and last borns are not more agreeable, open to experiences and extraverted than others. One possible explanation for the insignificance of the results was psychological birth order. Some mention that actual birth order does not necessarily to mirror psychological birth order as a number of variables like gender, number of siblings, adoption, and death of siblings can affect (Sulloway, 1996; Richardson & Richardson, 2000; Leman, 2009; Szobiová, 2008; Keller & Zach, 2002). This research did not take that into account as a study by Campbell, White, and Stewart (1991) revealed that there is a significant positive correlation between actual and psychological birth order. Future research might look into that to demonstrate significant differences in personality among people of different birth order. More researches are needed in this area to draw consensus whether birth order influence personality, and to answer whether the influences are intra-family or across families.

For personality and romantic relationship satisfaction, the results revealed that openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism have significant weak to moderate correlations with romantic relationship satisfaction. Although the correlations range from weak to moderate, the combinations of personality traits might have a great impact on romantic relationship satisfaction.

For birth order combination and romantic relationship satisfaction, the insignificance of the result made no surprise because its premise was invalid based on the data in this research. Without the personality differences among individuals with different birth orders, it is almost impossible to expect significant results from birth order combination. However, relationship duration and attachment style combinations might be factors that somehow skew the results (McWalter, 2012; Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2010; Cramer, 2000). It is recommended that future researches consider the factors mentioned. All in all, future studies should include more participants to ensure the sample could better reflect the population and to increase the external validity of the research.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that there is no significant difference in Big Five personality traits among participants of different birth orders. Thus, it is inappropriate to assign certain personality traits on someone based solely on birth order. Factors like gender, number of siblings and others should be considered. It is important to prevent unjustified "halo effect". More studies could be done on this area since Adler (1931/2013) mentioned even siblings are born into the same family, there are vast differences in the rearing environment; which in turn affects the development of lifestyles that include personality.

Besides, current study reveals certain personality traits like openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism have significant correlations with romantic relationship satisfaction. The findings could be applied in marital counselling and other related fields to highlight the importance of certain traits in successful romantic relationship. It is important to realize that, even one cannot change their personality easily; it is always possible to learn the behaviours of other personality traits.

Lastly, there is no significant difference in romantic relationship satisfaction among couples of different birth order combinations. Although the result is insignificant, it serves as a new piece of work in a relatively scarce research field. Future researches could be conducted based on the recommendations mentioned.

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