

BIRTH ORDER AND SIBLING DIFFERENCES IN INTERESTS¹

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The purpose of the present study was to test certain hypotheses derived from Adlerian formulations regarding birth order (1, pp. 376-382). More specifically, we attempted to ascertain (a) whether a given birth order position is related to differences in interests among siblings, and (b) whether such differences are related to differences in interests between the parents.

The rationale for *a* is a series of assumptions based on Adlerian theory: There is a competitive striving between siblings of a family for a place of significance and success. According to Dreikurs, "If children are competitive, then each will move in the direction where the other fails or encounters difficulties, and in turn will shun activities where the other excels;" and, "The strongest competition is between the first and second child" (4, p. 252). On the other hand, siblings also form alliances. "The first and the third child very often form an alliance against their common competitor. Alliance between children is always expressed in similarity of character, temperament, and interests, as competition leads to fundamental differences in the personalities" (2, p. 47). Thus, "similarities and differences . . . indicate alliance and competition," respectively, among the children in a family (3, p. 11).

The rationale for *b* rests on two assumptions, which must be made simultaneously. The first, again according to Dreikurs, is that, "The relationship between father and mother establishes the pattern for all interpersonal relationships within the family. If they are competitive with each other, the spirit of competition will characterize all the family relationships" (3, p. 9). The second assumption is that differences in interests indicate competition also in the case of the parents, and that therefore a competitive relationship between parents is reflected in differences in interests between them.

On the basis of these assumptions we expect that while greater differences in interests between parents are reflected in greater differences between the first and second born siblings, they are

¹This paper is based on a doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Oregon (5). Dr. R. N. Lowe was the adviser. Many of his suggestions, as well as those of Dr. Rudolf Dreikurs, are in evidence in the research design of this study and are gratefully acknowledged.

reflected in greater similarities between the first and third born siblings.

From the above, four specific hypotheses were postulated and tested:

1. Differences in interests between first and second born siblings (pairs 1-2) are greater than between the first and third siblings (pairs 1-3).
2. The distinction between pairs 1-2 and 1-3 is positively related to the difference in interests between the parents.
3. Amount of difference between pairs 1-2 is positively related to the extent of parental differences.
4. Amount of difference between pairs 1-3 is inversely related to the extent of parental differences.

METHOD

Subjects. Seventy families composed of the two parents and the three oldest siblings were employed, 350 Ss in all. The three siblings were of the same sex, and adjacent siblings were not more than 4 years apart from each other. To insure sufficient reading ability for the interest questionnaire no child below the sixth grade was included.

Interest measure. All 350 Ss were administered the Kuder Preference Record, Vocational, Form CH. This is scored for outdoor, mechanical, computational, scientific, persuasive, artistic, literary, musical, social service, and clerical interests.

In the case of the children, the primary interest of the first born was taken as the common interest for measuring the differences between him (or her) and the next two siblings, in terms of Kuder percentile scores.

In the case of the parents the procedure was different because Kuder raw scores must be converted on appropriate sex norms. Thus a rank-order rather than percentile comparison was made. Further, all ten interest areas were utilized.

To examine the relationship between parental interest differences and siblings' interest differences, results from children of the 25% of parents ranking lowest in interest differences were compared with the results from children of the 25% of parents ranking highest.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are shown in Table 1.

Hypothesis 1, that differences in interest are greater among pairs 1-2 than among pairs 1-3, is tentatively accepted, at the .10 level of confidence. The mean percentile difference for pairs 1-2 was 44.4, for pairs 1-3 it was 37.6.

Hypothesis 2, that the distinction between pairs 1-2 and 1-3 is positively related to differences in interests between the parents, is accepted. With low-difference parents the mean percentile difference for pairs 1-2 was 37.06, for pairs 1-3 it was 41.88. Thus pairs 1-3 actually exceeded pairs 1-2 in interest differences; this finding,

TABLE I. MEAN PERCENTILE DIFFERENCES IN INTERESTS (KUDER PREFERENCE RECORD) BETWEEN SIBLING PAIRS 1-2 AND 1-3 IN THE GENERAL SAMPLE, AND BETWEEN SUCH PAIRS FROM PARENTS LOW AND HIGH IN INTEREST DIFFERENCES

Sibling pairs	General sample	Parents Interest Differences			t-score	
		low	high	difference between high and low		
1-2	N	70	17	17	+16.29*	1.66
	M	44.4	37.06	53.35		
	SD	29.3	33.2	23.4		
1-3	N	70	17	17	-9.12	1.06
	M	37.6	41.88	32.76		
	SD	26.5	27.9	21.6		
Difference between 1-2 and 1-3		+6.8*	-4.82	+20.59**		
t-score		1.44	.46	2.67		

* Significant at the .10 level.

** Significant at the .01 level.

however, is not reliable. With high-difference parents the mean percentile difference for pairs 1-2 was 53.35, for pairs 1-3 it was 32.76. This difference of 20.59, the largest of the present study, is significant at the .01 level.

Hypothesis 3, that differences between pairs 1-2 are positively related to parental differences, is tentively accepted, at the .10 level of confidence, the mean difference for children of low-difference parents being 37.06, and for high-difference parents being 53.35.

For hypothesis 4, that an inverse relationship exists between parental interest differences and differences between pairs 1-3, the results are in the predicted direction, 41.88 versus 32.76, but are not significant.

Supplemental analysis revealed that neither the sex of the siblings, nor the occupation of the father, nor the intensity of interests in general are related to interest differences.

However, it was found that much of the interest difference among parents could possibly be accounted for by one factor—a masculine interest pattern of the father, as reflected by three selected Kuder scales. When the three scales which most sharply discriminate between male and female responses were used to compare the high and low difference parents, little, if any, difference occurred between the women of the two groups; but there was a decided difference

between the men. The men of the high difference group ranked fourteen percentile points above the men in the low difference group in masculine pursuits.

The findings suggest two possible explanations for the relationship between this diversity and the pattern of sibling differences and similarities. The first is that the masculinity of the father helps to intensify a competitive relationship among the siblings, and does so independently of the relationship between the parents. This provides an alternate hypothesis to the initial rationale which stated that sibling competition is a reflection of parental competition.

The second explanation is that masculinity of husbands is related to parental competition, which in turn sets an example for the siblings. This would be in line with the initial hypothesis.

CONCLUSION

In toto, the findings tend to confirm the first three specific hypotheses, and lend a measure of support for the fourth. These hypotheses were developed from observations by Dreikurs based in Adlerian theory. The findings suggest that birth order is related to interests because of sibling competition and alliances. Birth order pits adjacent siblings against each other and, to a lesser extent, makes allies of alternate siblings. Interest similarities occur because the allies tend to be like each other; the competitors tend to be different, in that the second to arrive seeks out a noncontested area for himself.

Although birth order helps to shape the pattern of sibling alliances and competitions, this, according to our results, does not manifest itself in terms of differences and similarities in interests unless it develops in a climate where diversity of interests exists between the parents.

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