

## BIRTH ORDER AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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Many aspects of the social environment differ for children in different places in the family. Dimond and Hellkamp (1) suggested that because of their special experiences, later-borns have a closer relationship with others. The authors found impressively more self-disclosure among later-borns than eldests in two-child families. In the extensive literature on birth order there is also evidence of last or later-borns of nuclear families having greater expressive and dramatic interests (6), preference for a strategy of power (5), and a desire for identity (4), factors that seem somehow related to self-disclosure. Harris (2) has noted concern of the later-born with avoiding situations of social inferiority, following Adler's views. Wohlford and Jones (8) found that later-born women were more disturbed by stigmatizing experience and recovered less than others, though the level of reaction declined with age.

It seems then that repeated experience of being the inferior member of a group might make later-borns, and especially the last-born, concerned <sup>with</sup> over achieving and demonstrating equality and identity, and that self-disclosure arises from this rather than from "closeness." A more "distant" form of self-disclosure is an autobiography. This would not apply to autobiographers with a more general interest in writing. For them the autobiography might merely be a utilization of available data as material for writing, rather than primarily a means for telling the world about themselves.

It is known from experiments on groups that pressure towards conformity increases with the size of the group up to 3 or 4, and then increases little more or may decline (3), and it is reasonable to suppose that the amount of stigmatization for being the odd one out varies similarly. The prestige of the eldest and pressure on him to distinguish himself might change similarly. Thus, if the present views are correct, we would expect the hypotheses to hold particularly in families of 3 or more, and that the children in families of 2 may show less marked effects. The position of the only child might resemble that

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of the last-born rather than the eldest, in that he may see himself as inferior to his parents, whereas the eldest may see himself as having a position of some importance in a hierarchy.

Thus we arrive at the hypotheses that in families of 3 or more (*a*) autobiographers who have also done some other writing are over-represented among eldests, as is generally the case in eminence and achievement, (*b*) autobiographers who have done no other writing ("pure" autobiographers) are over-represented among last-borns and, possibly, intermediates, and (*c*) only children should resemble last-borns. The present study was undertaken to test these hypotheses.

#### PROCEDURE

The autobiographies readily available in the University of London Library, 280 in all, were searched for birth-order data. Complete data were found for 77 autobiographers, born mostly between 1850 and 1900. Of these 30 were "pure" autobiographers (15 men and 15 women), while 47 were writer-autobiographers (32 men and 15 women). Birth-order data were also gathered for 37 persons (34 men and 3 women) about whom biographies were written by someone other than themselves, the biographees.

#### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented in Table 1. They show:

1. Among writer-autobiographers there tends to be a preponderance of eldests and relatively few intermediates. Combining the data for men and women in families of 3 or more, the number of eldests, 13, is fairly reliably greater than the number of second-borns, 4 ( $p < .05$ ) and last-borns, 4 ( $p < .05$ ). This gives reasonable support to the first hypothesis.

2. On the other hand among the "pure" autobiographers in families of 3 or more, only 1 eldest male appeared as compared to 3 male and 9 female last-borns. The data for males and females combined strongly support the second hypothesis ( $p < .005$ ). Intermediates tend to be generally under-represented among "pure" autobiographers, except possibly with males in large families. An interesting reversal of this general trend also appears in three-child families. Although the numbers are small the relative frequencies of second- and last-born appear to be reliably different for three-child and larger families ( $p < .01$ ).

3. With two-child families where less marked results might be expected, the data seem too small to indicate any trends opposing those for larger families.

TABLE I. BIRTH ORDER OF WRITER-AUTOBIOGRAPHERS (N = 47), "PURE" AUTOBIOGRAPHERS (N = 30) AND BIOGRAPHEES (N = 37), BY SEX AND FAMILY SIZE (NUMBER OF CHILDREN)

	Men					Women				
	1	2	3	4 or 5	6 or more	1	2	3	4 or 5	6 or more
<i>Writer-Autobiographers</i>										
First-born	5	3	2	4	3	2	1	1	3	0
Second-born	—	—	3	1	0	—	—	0	0	0
Later intermed.	—	—	—	1	3	—	—	—	0	4
Last	—	4	2	1	0	—	3	0	1	0
<i>"Pure" Autobiographers</i>										
First-born	2	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
Second-born	—	—	2	0	0	—	—	2	0	0
Later intermed.	—	—	—	0	6	—	—	—	1	0
Last	—	1	0	2	1	—	1	1	5	3
<i>Biographees</i>										
First-born	4	2	2	4	1	0	1	0	0	0
Second-born	—	—	2	3	4	—	—	0	0	1
Later intermed.	—	—	—	2	6	—	—	—	0	0
Last	—	1	2	1	0	—	0	1	0	0

4. The presence of 4 "pure" autobiographers amongst onlies tends to suggest that they may often be under the same kind of pressure as last-borns.

5. The biographees were mainly male and tended to show a low incidence of last-borns. Thus the relatively high incidence of "pure" autobiographers amongst last-borns seems unlikely to be accounted for by their actual eminence.

The data for eldest and last-borns of families of 3 or more seem well in accord with our hypotheses. The greater incidence of "pure" autobiographers among last-born women would fit in with the original hypothesis. At the time that the autobiographies were written, society was dominated by males, and females may have been more sensitive to stigmatization. On the other hand it is conceivable that there may have been role expectations that females should record the family history. The higher relative incidence of "pure" autobiography

among the second of three, as compared to second-borns of larger families, could be due to a similarity of interest tending to develop between the first and the third child (7). This may force the second child into the non-conforming position.

#### SUMMARY

An examination for the birth order of the writers of 77 books of autobiography lent support to the hypothesis that in families of three or more children (a) autobiographers who also did other writing are over-represented among eldests, (b) those who did no other writing are over-represented among last-borns, and, tentatively, (c) only children resemble last-borns in their inclination towards writing autobiography. These hypotheses were formulated from a consideration of the pressures on the child for either conformity or distinctiveness in the sibling or family group.

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