

## ORDINAL POSITION AND SUCCESS IN ENGAGEMENT AND MARRIAGE

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The importance of ordinal position in the family as a personality determinant was systematically formulated by Adler (1, pp. 376-382). Studies by Helen Koch (4, 5, 6), McArthur (7), and Sears (9) have emphasized the importance of the interaction of variables relevant to family background. More recently Schachter (8) has demonstrated experimentally that individuals from different ordinal positions react differently to induced anxiety, and exhibit different degrees of the "need for affiliation." Hall and Barger (3) investigated the differences between older and younger siblings in a two-child family.

The present study attempts to demonstrate that family size and position in the family are related to success in engagement and marriage. It was hypothesized that individuals who had grown up in situations which presumably had afforded them the most experience in roles and attitudes later utilized in marriage would be more likely to have successful engagements and marriages.

### METHOD

The data were gathered from the original schedules used in the longitudinal study of marriage by Burgess and associates at the University of Chicago (2). There were 1,000 couples in the original panel, at the engagement period. Of these, 131 couples subsequently broke their engagement. Of the remaining couples, the marital status of 742 was known after 15 to 20 years of marriage (1959). Eighty of these couples were known to have become separated or divorced.

It was thus possible to classify by ordinal position and family size the couples who were still married after 15 to 20 years, the divorced couples, and the couples who broke their engagements. These distributions were then compared by chi square for males and females separately.

Various questions answered at the time of engagement were also selected for analysis. These included 9 questions from the Thurstone Personality Inventory, and 10 questions regarding (a) the organizations or groups to which the subjects belonged, (b) the activity they were most interested in, (c) their attitudes toward the approaching marriage, (d) the appraisal of their parents' marriage, and (e) the extent to which they desired children. Other questions selected concerned the number of (f) other "steadies," (g) friends, and (h) previous engagements, if any. In addition, questions concerning (i) attachment to sibling and (k) appraisal of present state of health were included.

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## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results for birth order and family size with regard to broken engagements, and divorces or separations are shown in Table 1. The outcomes of corresponding chi-square tests are presented in Table 2.

Regarding *broken engagement* it is most notable that both men and women who were only children have the highest rates.

Regarding *divorces and separations*, men who were only children again have the highest rate. But women who were only children have the lowest rate. On the other hand men who were oldest children have a relatively low divorce rate, while women who were oldest children have a relatively high divorce rate.

TABLE 2. CHI SQUARES OF BROKEN-ENGAGEMENT AND DIVORCE-OR-SEPARATION FREQUENCIES FOR BIRTH ORDER AND FAMILY SIZE, ACCORDING TO SEX. 3df

		Broken engagements		Divorces or separations	
		$\chi^2$	p	$\chi^2$	p
Birth order	men	8.9	<.05	10.5	<.02
	women	16.0	<.01	9.6	<.05
Family size	men	9.5	<.05	7.3	<.10
	women	19.4	<.001	5.1	n.s.

Interaction between family size and ordinal position is evident in the decreasing divorce rate for oldest men as a function of family size. It would seem that the larger the family, the better did the oldest boy become prepared to assume the responsible role of husband and father in the marriage. Oldest women not only have a relatively high divorce rate, but for them the interaction with family size shows essentially the reverse outcome from men. The role of greater responsibility and dominance which the oldest girl is likely to assume may be appropriate for the later role of mother, but is perhaps less appropriate for the role of wife, and this "handicap" would increase with family size.

Youngest children have the highest divorce rate in the case of women. In men their divorce rate is second to that for only children, while breakdown for family size shows that youngest boys in a family of two actually have the highest rate of any group. When we analyzed this finding further for sex of the older sibling, we found a divorce rate of 14% in the case of an older brother and a divorce rate of 23% in the case of an older sister.

TABLE I. BIRTH ORDER, FAMILY SIZE, AND MARITAL STATUS, 15-20 YEARS AFTER ENGAGEMENT

Birth order	Family size (N of children)	Total N studied	Broken engagements		Divorces or separations		N still married
			N	brok. engag. total	N	divorces tot. — brok. eng.	
Men — Only	1	97	24	24.7	13	17.8	60
Oldest	2	137	24	17.5	11	9.7	102
	3	87	11	12.6	4	5.3	72
	4+	73	8	11.0	4	6.2	61
subtotal		297	43	14.5	19	7.5	235
Middle	3	67	6	9.0	5	8.2	56
	4+	174	24	13.8	14	9.3	136
subtotal		241	30	12.4	19	9.0	192
Youngest	2	93	12	12.9	15	18.5	66
	3	59	10	16.9	6	12.2	43
	4+	66	8	12.1	7	12.1	51
subtotal		218	30	13.8	28	14.9	160
Total <sup>a</sup>		853	127		79		647
Women — Only	1	106	28	26.4	3	3.8	75
Oldest	2	167	34	20.4	14	10.5	119
	3	87	10	11.5	12	15.6	65
	4+	52	5	9.6	7	14.9	40
subtotal		306	49	16.0	33	12.8	224
Middle	3	70	6	8.6	5	7.8	59
	4+	154	17	11.0	11	8.0	126
subtotal		224	23	10.3	16	8.0	185
Youngest	2	97	13	13.4	14	16.7	70
	3	57	6	10.5	6	11.8	45
	4+	61	8	13.1	8	15.1	45
subtotal		215	27	12.6	28	14.9	160
Total		851	127		80		644

<sup>a</sup>Totals for men and women differ somewhat because a few subjects, ordinarily single members of couples, had to be excluded for lack of birth-order and family-size data.

Regarding 9 questions from the *Thurstone Personality Inventory* no notable subgroup differences were found.

Regarding the 10 *additional questions* the following was found. It should be kept in mind that these questions were answered prior to marriage.

*a.* In reference to organizations or groups, in the case of men, belonging to athletic or social clubs differentiated the groups at the .005 level, with the onlys, and the oldest of three and four, being the high joiners, and the youngest of three and the middles of four, the low joiners. Belonging to business or professional associations differentiated the men at the .01 level, with the onlys and the oldest of three being the high joiners, and the youngest of two and three, and the middles of four, the less frequent joiners. Belonging to a political party differentiated the groups at the .05 level. Again the onlys were the high joiners and the middles of four the low joiners.

The groups of men were also differentiated, at the .005 level, by the response of belonging to no organization. As might be expected from the foregoing, the middles of four and the youngest of three had the highest frequency of not joining any organization.

In the case of the women, the only response in which the groups differed concerned athletic and social clubs, the difference reaching the .0005 level. The high joiners were the oldest of two and the youngest of three, and the low joiners, the middles of four.

*b-d.* In reference to "best interest" no significant differences were found for men or women. This holds also for attitudes toward approaching marriage and for appraisal of one's parents' marriage.

*e.* In reference to desire for children, among men, the oldest and middles of four often responded "desire children very much," while the onlys and the youngest of two and three made this response relatively infrequently. It should be recalled that the oldest and middle men also had the low divorce rates, while the onlys and youngest, who before marriage expressed little desire for children had the high divorce rates. There would seem then to be among men a negative correlation between desire for children and divorce rate.

*f-h.* The questions concerning number of "steadies," of friends, and of previous engagements did not differentiate either among men or women.

*i.* The question concerning special attachment for a sibling

differentiated among men at the .05 level. The youngest of four indicated a high frequency of special attachment, the oldest of three and four, a low frequency.

k. The health question differentiated among women at the .05 level. The oldest of two and the middles of three saw themselves as healthier than the average woman, and the youngest of three and the middles of four saw themselves as less healthy.

#### SUMMARY

Participants in a longitudinal study of marriage (1,000 couples) were classified according to their ordinal position and family size, and also according to the outcome of their engagements or marriages (15-20 years later). Divorce and broken-engagement rates fairly significantly differentiated the family constellation subgroups. The greatest departures from expected frequencies were found for only males (high divorce and broken-engagement rates), and only females (low divorce and high broken-engagement rates). Interaction between ordinal position and family size was found for engagement and divorce rates, and also for frequency of joining organizations. Of the attitudinal questions, the one probing desire for children differentiated the male subgroups significantly; a relatively strong desire before marriage for children was found among those subgroups of men who had the lower divorce rates.

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