

COMPLEMENTARITY IN MARITAL ADJUSTMENT:  
RECONSIDERING TOMAN'S FAMILY CONSTELLATION  
HYPOTHESIS<sup>1, 2</sup>

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There is ample evidence that *similarity* in a number of different characteristics is predictive of a successful marital relationship, such as similarity in residence, socioeconomic background, religious affiliation, education, and attitudes and values (2, 8, 10). But *dissimilarity* also has been proposed as a source of marital success. Most prominently, Winch and his associates (20,21) have attempted to show that certain complementary need patterns among the partners of dating or married couples have a beneficial effect on the relationship, such as a high need for dominance in one partner, and a low need for dominance in the other partner. Despite various critical assessments (e.g., 6, 11, 13, 14), this dissimilarity hypothesis of a complementary relationship remains of interest.

All of the above studies of relationship complementarity use ahistorical evidence, i.e., they investigate only the current similarities of, or contrasts between, the partners; they do not consider similarities or dissimilarities in the partners' distant past.

Toman has recently made explicit the idea that a person's "family constellation" in his childhood has an effect on his current adjustment to interpersonal relationships (15, 16, 17, 18, 19). Considering marriage, Toman has suggested that partners in normal marriages are more dissimilar in birth order than partners in disturbed marriages; also, that partners in normal marriages are more likely to come from opposite-sexed sibling constellations than partners in disturbed marriages.

The underlying assumption made by Toman is that the role a person has had in early intra-familial relationships, will be carried over into adult relationships, which follows some earlier thinking of Adler (1). Thus marriages which duplicate the spouses' earlier sibling constellations are more likely to be considered satisfactory.

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Toman theorizes that marital partners of similar birth order will conflict over the rights which both had received in their early family constellation, and which, by implication, only one can now possess. Thus, two eldest-sib spouses, married to each other, would be prone to get into conflicts over seniority rights. This would not occur for a senior-junior alliance. Similarly, an individual from a like-sexed sibling constellation is likely to experience more difficulty in accepting an opposite-sexed partner than an individual from an opposite-sexed sibling constellation who is "used to the other sex."

To test these hypotheses, Toman and Gray (19) and Toman (18) compared "normal" and "disturbed," and "normal" and divorced marriages, respectively, with regard to sibling constellation. The findings supported the hypotheses: normal marriages were found to have a higher degree of birth-order complementarity and of sex complementarity.

This paper presents a test of Toman's hypotheses. The following questions will be examined: Comparing normal and disturbed marriages, do the normal (*a*) show greater birth-order complementarity, (*b*) show greater sibling sex complementarity, (*c*) show greater combined birth rank and sex complementarity?

We shall also pursue two other questions, to illuminate the assumption that senior-born persons have a greater desire for seniority rights than do junior-born persons: Do senior-borns have a greater need for dominance? Are they higher than junior-borns in their perceived actual and in their desired decision-making influence in the couple's relationship?

#### METHOD

The basic sample consisted of 60 married couples who took part in a larger study (7). They all had children, and were married 4 to 22 years. The average couple was in its late thirties, had been married about 14 years, had three children, and came from the upper part of Class III on Hollingshead's (4) occupational-educational index, i.e., most husbands had some college education and a managerial or professional occupation. The "disturbed" group, 24 couples, were clients at a family service agency. This criterion was similar to that of having a "child in therapy" which was used by Toman and Gray (19) for their "disturbed" category. The 36 "normal" couples were parents at an elementary school, and were roughly comparable to the agency sample in social background.

Using Toman's formulas (18, 19), we gave each couple a score for rank disposition ( $d_r$ ), sex disposition ( $d_s$ ), and total conflict disposition ( $d_t$ ).  $D_r$  indicates a spouse's birth order, with a plus indicating senior-born and a minus indicating junior-born position. The formula is:

$$d_r = \frac{n_{jun} - n_{sen}}{n - 1}$$

$n_{jun}$  = number of siblings junior to  $S$   
 $n_{sen}$  = number of siblings senior to  $S$   
 $n$  = number of children in  $S$ 's family

$D_s$  indicates the proportion of a spouse's same-sex versus opposite-sex sibling configuration. Scores of 0 to .49 indicate more siblings of opposite sex, .50 indicates equal number of male and female siblings, and .51 to 1.00 indicates more siblings of same sex. The formula is:

$$d_s = \frac{n_s}{n - 1}$$

$n_s$  = number of siblings of same sex as  $S$   
 $n$  = number of children in  $S$ 's family

$D_t$  indicates a couple's disposition toward conflict based on the combination of their  $d_r$  and  $d_s$  scores. The higher the numerical value, the greater the disposition to conflict. According to Toman, a score of 0 indicates ideal rank complementarity. The formula is:

$$d_t = \frac{|d_{r_m}| + |d_{s_m}|}{2}$$

$d_{r_m}$  = rank conflict disposition (combination of  $d_r$  of both spouses)  
 $d_{s_m}$  = sex conflict disposition (combination of  $d_s$  of both spouses)

Some spouses from the basic sample could not be included in the data analysis because they were only children, twins, step-siblings, came from broken homes, or the information about them was incomplete.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the rank-disposition results. It parallels Table 1 of Toman and Gray (19, p. 94). The normal couples had a greater proportion of senior-born individuals than the disturbed couples, 59% versus 35%, but the difference was not significant.

TABLE 1. BIRTH RANKS OF HUSBANDS AND WIVES IN NORMAL AND DISTURBED COUPLES

Birth rank of wife	Birth rank of husband		
	Junior	Middle	Senior <sup>b</sup>
Normal couples (N = 28) <sup>a</sup>			
Junior	1	0	7
Middle	2	0	1
Senior <sup>b</sup>	7	2	8
Disturbed couples (N = 20) <sup>a</sup>			
Junior	3	3	2
Middle	1	0	4
Senior <sup>b</sup>	6	0	1

<sup>a</sup>In 8 normal and 4 disturbed couples at least one spouse had either one or more step-sibs, half sibs, adopted sibs, dead sibs or twins, making for serious irregularity in evaluating birth rank. Thus, only 48 of the initial 60 couples were used for this analysis.

<sup>b</sup>Includes both oldest and only children.

Toman's hypothesis that normal couples would exceed disturbed couples in *dissimilar* birth rank was not confirmed. On the contrary, including middle-born spouses, 64% of the normals and 80% of the disturbed had dissimilar birth ranks. Excluding the middle-borns,

61% (14/23) of the normals and 67% (8/12) of the disturbed couples had dissimilar ranks. But these findings were not statistically significant by Fisher's Exact Test.

TABLE 2. SEX DISPOSITION OF MEMBERS OF NORMAL AND DISTURBED COUPLES

Subjects	Sex of Siblings					
	More other-sex		Equal number		More same-sex	
Females						
Normal (N = 25)	10	40%	2	8%	13	52%
Disturbed (N = 21)	10	48%	6	28%	5	24%
Males						
Normal (N = 30)	9	30%	1	3%	20	67%
Disturbed (N = 20)	5	25%	3	15%	12	60%

Table 2 shows the data on sex disposition. More than half of the spouses (50 out of 96) had more same-sex than opposite-sex siblings. There was no significant difference between the normal and the disturbed couples in their other-sex disposition ( $X^2 = .51$ , n.s.). In fact, the only group with more opposite-sex than same-sex sibs were the disturbed females, a trend contrary to Toman's hypothesis.

TABLE 3. TOTAL CONFLICT DISPOSITION OF COUPLES CLASSIFIED (a) DISTURBED VERSUS NORMAL ACCORDING TO STATUS IN MARITAL COUNSELING AND (b) LOW SATISFIED VERSUS HIGH SATISFIED ACCORDING TO A MARITAL SATISFACTION INDEX<sup>a</sup>

Conflict disposition		Disturbed		Normal		Low satisfied		High satisfied	
low	0- .99	10	55%	10	43%	8	40%	12	57%
high	1-1.99	8	45%	13	57%	12	60%	9	43%
total		18		23		20		21	
$X^2$		.21, ns.				.62, n.s.			

<sup>a</sup>The data pertain to 41 couples. For the remaining 19 at least one spouse did not have a valid  $d_r$  or  $d_s$  score.

Table 3 presents data concerning the total conflict disposition scores, computed according to Toman's formula which sums the effects of rank and sex similarity. The higher the score, the greater the marital conflict disposition.

Table 3a shows that the normal and disturbed couples did not differ significantly. Toman's hypothesis that the disturbed couples would have the greater proportion of high conflict disposition was not supported.

In view of these negative findings, we decided to employ one additional criterion of "marital disturbance." This was a composite index of marital satisfaction, derived from a factor analysis of 15 separate satisfaction indices (7). There was a high inverse association between the criteria of agency attendance and marital satisfaction, but six agency couples had higher satisfaction scores than several of the least satisfied normal couples. Table 3b indicates that this time the tendency was in the direction expected from Toman's hypothesis, although the results again were statistically not significant.

On the basis of this last outcome the birth-rank similarity data and sex-disposition data were broken down separately for high and low marital satisfaction, in analogy to Tables 1 and 2. The birth-rank results did not support Toman's prediction. The results on sex disposition were in the direction predicted by Toman but were not significant. It appears then that the tendency of the results of Table 3b, if it were significant, would be more attributable to sex disposition than to birth order, again giving no support to the birth order argument.

Failure to find support for Toman's hypothesis led us to re-examine his basic assumptions. One implicit assumption, which can be tested in our data, is that older-born individuals have a greater need to dominate and to exercise control over decisions than individuals with other birth-rank positions.

TABLE 4. NEED FOR DOMINANCE (MEAN SCORES) AS RELATED TO BIRTH RANK<sup>a</sup>

Birth rank	(N)	Men		(N)	Women	
		General n Dom	Marital n Dom		General n Dom	Marital n Dom
Senior <sup>b</sup>	14	13.07	13.42	17	9.64	8.11
Middle	5	10.80	11.60	6	7.83	10.50
Junior <sup>b</sup>	18	14.16	13.33	14	8.57	7.78

<sup>a</sup>49 of the original 60 couples took both the general and the marital revisions of the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule. Of these, 12 husbands and 12 wives were eliminated because they either were only children or came from broken homes, leaving 37 of each.

<sup>b</sup>Means of senior- and junior-born spouses were compared by *t*-test. For husbands,  $t_{\text{general}} = .91$ ,  $t_{\text{marital}} = .08$ . For wives,  $t_{\text{general}} = .59$ ,  $t_{\text{marital}} = .36$ . None of these *t*'s approached even the .20 level of significance.

Table 4 shows the mean scores of senior-, middle-, and junior-born men and women on two separate indices of need for dominance: dom-

inance toward others in general, and dominance with regard to the marriage partner. The measures of "need Dominance" were two separate adaptations of the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule (3) developed by Barbara Allan. While men expressed a greater desire for dominance than did women, there were no significant differences between senior-borns and junior-borns on any of the four comparisons (the largest  $t$  was .91).

Our final analysis deals with the spouses' decision-making influence as measured on a set of ten representative family decisions, such as what home to take, what appliance to buy, where to go on vacation, etc. A 5-point scale of frequency with which either partner made the "final decision" was used, in which "husband always or nearly so" = 1, and "wife always or nearly so" = 5, while "both equally" = 3. Each spouse reported how much influence his partner *does have*, and subsequently, how much influence husband and wife *should have*. It was thus possible for each spouse to express (a) *actual* and (b) *desired* greater, equal, or less influence than his partner.

TABLE 5. MEAN ACTUAL INFLUENCE IN MARITAL DECISION MAKING OF HUSBAND AS RELATED TO BOTH SPOUSES' BIRTH RANK<sup>a</sup>

Husband's birth rank	Wife's birth rank	
	Senior	Junior
Senior	2.75 (N = 4)	2.83 (N = 3)
Junior	2.89 (N = 7)	2.86 (N = 4)

<sup>a</sup>42 couples had to be eliminated from this analysis. Of these, 16 had an only child spouse, 5 had a middle-rank spouse, 11 disagreed about the partners' relative influence by .50 or more, and 10 had step-siblings or other childhood disturbances.

Table 5 shows the mean *actual influence* scores of husbands for the 18 couples where both partners were senior- or junior-born *and* agreed closely on the amount of the spouse's influence. It would be hypothesized that seniors married to juniors would have the greatest influence. But the differences obtained are of little substance and do not approach statistical significance.

When the actual influence scores of all senior- and junior-born spouses were averaged, again no differences were found. For husbands, the mean of seniors was 2.71, and of juniors, 2.76. For wives, the mean of seniors was 2.74, of juniors, 2.64. These differences were also not significant.

TABLE 6. NUMBER OF HUSBANDS AND WIVES DESIRING MORE, THE SAME AMOUNT, OR LESS INFLUENCE IN MARITAL DECISION MAKING, AS RELATED TO BIRTH RANK

Birth rank	Desire for influence					
	More	Husbands Same	Less	More	Wives Same	Less
Senior	4 <sup>a</sup>	4	12	7	2	11
Middle	2	0	3	4	0	4
Junior	10	3	9	8	2	7
	N = 47			N = 45		

<sup>a</sup>For the *italicized* numbers only, separate 2 x 2 chi-squares were computed for both husbands and wives. For husbands,  $\chi^2 = 1.73$ ; for wives,  $\chi^2 = .23$ . Neither approaches significance.

Table 6 shows *desire for influence* of spouses according to birth rank. There is no clear difference in this desire across the three ordinal positions, only an indication that the senior-borns desire less influence than the junior-borns although senior- and junior-borns expressed an equal amount of actual influence.

The results shown in Tables 4 through 6 do not support the idea that birth order is associated with either actual or desired social influence or with need for dominance.

#### DISCUSSION

We found no association between birth order of either partner and the adjustment of the marriage. Nor did we find birth order linked to three different measures of actual or desired social influence. While further studies may reverse this verdict, it leads us to re-examine Toman's hypothesis.

Toman has proposed that when a senior-born marries a junior-born there is less rivalry over seniority rights. His evidence, with two exceptions (18, 19), rests on his clinical experience. Yet one might argue to the opposite conclusion from Toman's. Is it not true that sibling rivalry occurs always between an older and a younger child? Do not older and younger sibs build resentments of one another in at least some areas of their relationship? If so, then spouses in senior-junior marriages might well find in the adult partner the reincarnation of some unpleasant memories of earlier sibling relationships. On the other hand, two spouses who are either both older-born or both younger-born would have a more similar orientation toward interpersonal relationships, and would escape the re-enactment of juvenile rivalries found in senior-junior pairs.

A similar argument may be placed against Toman's suggestion

that persons with opposite-sex siblings will make better heterosexual partners. While there may be clear-cut advantages in having had intimate opposite-sex exposure as a child, there may also be some disadvantages. The immature responses that inhere in a childhood situation could well set up certain obstacles to subsequent adult functioning.

We do not wish to imply that sibling rivalry is *necessarily* high in childhood. At the same time, husband-wife rivalry is not necessarily high during marriage. Therefore, whatever the expected transfer might be from one situation to the other, there is ample reason to believe that positive and negative effects could cancel each other.

Our major intention, though, is less to criticize the "family constellation" hypothesis than to call for a wider body of systematic evidence to bear on the entire question. The recent literature on dissimilarity in pair relationships shows that it is very difficult to confirm the existence of simple, straightforward complementary patterns of any kind. Both the theoretical and methodological difficulties are large (e.g., 9). The "family constellation" hypothesis is very intriguing, but needs to be integrated with other research in this area.

Within a larger frame of reference, what is one's conceptual definition of interpersonal complementarity? Simply stated, it is the degree to which two persons are willing or able to fulfill their mutual needs, or to mesh in their mutual actions. It is likely that one's early childhood family relationships would affect one's current capacity for mutual sustenance. The connection, though, seems to hang on a tenuous causal chain. Although recent studies inspired by Schachter (12) are throwing additional light on this dark area, we have not progressed much beyond Jones' review which concluded that studies on birth order are "filled with disagreement" and that "a child's reactions to his birth order may vary in an extremely complex manner" (5, p. 237).

#### SUMMARY

Toman proposed that marital adjustment increases with dissimilarity in the partners' birth orders, and with the proportion of the spouses' opposite-sex siblings. The present study tested Toman's hypotheses in a sample of up to 50 middle-class couples. Neither hypothesis was confirmed. Furthermore, there was no discernible association between birth order and spouses' actual or desired influence in the pair relationship. The implication of these findings are discussed.

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COMPLEMENTARITY IN MARITAL ADJUSTMENT:  
COMMENT

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Regarding the study by Levinger and Sonnheim (1) in which they found no differences in complementarity between normal and disturbed couples, I suspect that the samples were not truly different. If marital counseling was a low-cost community service, and if both