

## A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF MIDDLE SIBLINGS

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### ABSTRACT

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The following study is a qualitative investigation of the development of personality and relationships within the family constellation as it relates to the birth order of the middle child. The investigation involved triangulation—a written essay, focus group, and individual interview with each participant—employing open ended questions to explore the temporal development of sibling/parent relationships, certain aspects of sibling interaction, and perceived role within the family. Results indicated the involvement of many confounding factors in the development of familial relationships. There was also little support for previously accepted middle child stereotypes. The main conclusion drawn from this study was an understanding of personality and relationship development as a dynamic process.

### INTRODUCTION

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Birth order is thought to influence many aspects of an individual's development. Oldest children are said to be more articulate, more dominant, more power-oriented and conservative, to make good leaders, and have a higher perceived need for achievement or approval; middle children typically display less certainty about their abilities, are more sociable, feel "caught in the middle," have high regard for fairness and justice, and tend to make good mediators; and youngest children, we are told, are often spoiled or pampered, may feel like the smallest or weakest, and may try overly hard to excel past their older siblings (Lemire, 2001). Eickstein (2000) reviewed 151 empirically based articles—all of which used a quantitative approach—whose results indicated statistically significant birth-order-related differences in siblings. According to Eickstein's review, the six qualities most frequently attributed to oldest children are: highest achievement, highest IQ, greatest academic success, highest motivation, most overrepresented in learned groups, and most composed in times of stress. The three qualities most frequently attributed to middle children are: fewest problems with acting out, sociability, and greatest feeling of not belonging. The three most frequently occurring attributes in youngest children are: overrepresentation of psychiatric disorders, empathy, and tendency toward alcoholism.

Many assume that such birth order related characteristics are at least somewhat present across all families. In a study conducted by Stewart (2004) groups of clinicians were presented with a description of a client that differed only in the client's birth order. Stewart found that once a specific birth order was attributed to the client, the clinicians' prognoses were so distinguished. It has also been shown that people with higher birth ranks are expected to achieve greater occupational prestige because of this assumption. Firstborns are thus generally rated as more intelligent and less creative than later-borns (Herrera, Zajonc, Wiczorkowska, & Cichomski, 2003).

Adler argues that it is not necessarily a person's biological birth order, but rather the person's psychological birth order, that works to shape a person's personality. For example, a middle child whose older sibling(s) is much older may experience him- or herself as the oldest child and develop the associated personality traits. However, there is also evidence that biological factors may play a larger role than anticipated in the development of birth-order-related characteristics. In a study examining two adoption cohorts, in which biologically first-born children were raised in various ordinal positions within their adoptive family constellations, Beer and Horn (2000) theorized that biological birth order effects, resulting primarily from intrauterine influences on personality, may in fact account for differences in

personality between siblings. Whether it is regarded as primarily psychological, biological, or some combination of the two, birth order seems at least modestly tied to the development of personality.

Birth order effects do not depend solely on the ordinal status of siblings. Rather, they encompass a wide variety of interactions among variables, such as the number of siblings, age differences between siblings, gender, and socio-economic status (Lemire, 2001). Baer, Oldham, Hollingshead, and Jacobsohn, (2005), for example, demonstrated that the effects of gender and age differences may play an important role in the development of creativity. By comparing peer evaluations of the creativity of 359 undergraduates in problem solving with each of the participants' familial demographics, Baer, et al. (2005) were able to infer that first-borns from large families are most creative if they have many siblings that are either relatively close in age or of the opposite sex.

Interactions among family members also play a large role in the development of personality and relationships. In a 3-year longitudinal study of 198 first- and second-born siblings, Helms-Erikson & Crouter (2001) suggested that older siblings develop in a way that make them different from their siblings, while later born siblings develop in a way that make them more similar to their siblings. Rodhe, Atzwanger, Butovskaya, Lampert, Mysterud, Sanchez-Andres, & Sulloway, (2003) found that a child's closeness to his or her parents is dependent upon the age of the parents when the child is born, as well as the number of siblings. In addition, gender plays a role in whether or not a child turns to a parent for emotional support. It has also been shown that parents encounter less conflict with later born children, and are more familiar with their daily activities, suggesting that they learn from parenting experiences (Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2003). Thus, relationships with parents and siblings vary depending on a number of factors.

Birth-order studies have evaluated many different facets of personality. Some suggest that middle-born children are more rebellious, less conscientious, less religious, and demonstrate lower school performance than their firstborn siblings (Eickstein, 2000; Saroglou & Fiasse, 2003). Studies also suggest that middle siblings are more impulsive, as well as more innovative than their older siblings, who are more likely to conform to the status quo (Saroglou & Fiasse, 2003; Saad, Gill, & Natarajan, 2005). Saad, et al. evaluated the openness of siblings to novel ideas, and found that later born siblings have a greater need to stand out from their parents' perspective, which perpetuates a higher acceptance of innovation. This notion was supported in their study on attitudes toward consumer products (2005).

A quantitative study by Gfroerer, Gfroerer, Curlette, White, & Kern, (2003) found that middle siblings, who have difficulty finding their place within their family and may feel squeezed in between their siblings, have a more difficult time developing feelings of belonging or social interest. Thus, they may also have more difficulty getting along or working with others. They also found that middle children may perceive circumstances as not being within their control, and may have a more negative view of childhood.

A study using the Almost Perfect Scale found that adaptive perfectionists exhibited fewer characteristics attributed to middle children, such as difficulty fitting in and developing feelings of belonging, than maladaptive perfectionists or non-perfectionists. This seemed to support Adler's assessment of the middle sibling because adaptive perfectionism has been shown to contribute to self-esteem, and adaptive perfectionists have lower levels of inferiority than maladaptive perfectionists. All of these – low self esteem, feelings of inferiority, and diminished need for achievement – are typical traits associated with the middle sibling (Ashby, LoCicero, & Kenny, 2003).

In a study by Salmon (2003), students were given a questionnaire about their attitudes toward friends, family, and sexual partners. Middle children were shown to be much less family-oriented and much more invested in friendships. They were also shown to have high regard for fidelity in sexual relationships. Salmon suggests that these deep extra-familial relationships may indicate that many middle children receive less family support and parental investment, and thus seek support in their friendships and relationships.

In our review of previous literature on birth order, we found that most of the existing information focuses on discovering ways to measure personality quantitatively, leaving little room to account for confounding factors (e.g. age, gender, number of siblings, age gaps, ethnicity, socio-economic status, etc.) that exist within every family. In addition, these studies often do not consistently measure the

same thing, leaving little assurance that their findings are generalizable. The literature pertaining to middle siblings often fails to consider the great variety of middle siblings. Studies variously define what a middle sibling is (e.g. second-born of three vs. four; third-born of four; middle of five; second-to-last in a large family with many siblings; etcetera), and often resort to grouping middle siblings into "later borns," which makes no effort to separate them from youngest children.

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of birth order from the perspective of the middle child, as they pertain to the development of personality and relationships within the family. The study was conducted using the qualitative method of grounded theory and employs triangulation, specifically, an essay, a focus group, and an individual interview. This insures that the data collected does not merely reflect the systematic biases or limitations of any one method, and also permits a broader array of data, and thus, a deeper understanding of the topic (Maxwell, 2005). The open-ended questions were designed to allow the researchers to examine several key areas and themes within the temporal development of sibling/parent relationships, including sibling rivalry/competition, similarities and differences between siblings, parental expectations, and perceived role within the family. Demographics including age, number of siblings, age differences between siblings, and the marital status of parents were also considered. The chief goal was to examine the extent to which birth-order-related personality traits are shared by middle siblings who grew up under different circumstances, as well as the extent to which these traits play a role in and/or interact with relationship development within the family.

## **METHOD**

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### **Participants**

A convenience sample of five participants was obtained from a population of undergraduates at a mid-Atlantic college. Participants were recruited through an online research participation registration site and offered six class credits to take part in the study. All participants were middle children, with at least two siblings (one older and one younger).

### **Materials**

The materials used for this study include a series of ten open-ended questions designed to obtain rich data from the participants regarding their birth order and their relationships with their parents and siblings. We used an essay question, six focus-group questions, and four individual-interview questions. A demographics form was also used. Responses to the essay question were recorded using Microsoft Word. An audiotape recorder was used to record the focus-group and individual interviews. In order to protect the participants' privacy, data was stored in a locked office to which only the researchers had access. In addition, pseudonyms were used in place of the participants' names, and all audiotapes were destroyed upon completion of the study.

### **Procedure**

In the first part of the study, participants met in a computer lab and answered a question in short essay format. The participants first completed an informed consent form, which was collected and put in an envelope. Then they were given thirty minutes to answer the essay question in Microsoft Word on a computer. When finished, the participants printed a hard copy of the essay, submitted it to a researcher, and emailed an electronic copy to the head researcher.

During the second part of the study, which took place the next day, participants engaged in a focus group discussion. Four researchers introduced themselves and advised the participants that two of them would be conducting the interview, while the other two observed behind a two-way mirror. The participants were instructed that the interview was going to be audiotaped, that the questions were personal in nature and might elicit emotional reactions, and that the entire session should last no longer than 90 minutes. The participants were also instructed to answer every question as completely as possible. Once the tape recorder was turned on, the participants responded to six questions pertaining to their birth order and their relationships with their siblings and parents.

The final portion of the study was an individual interview by a researcher of a participant. Each participant was advised of the personal nature of the questions, and that the interview would be audio recorded and would last 30 and 60 minutes. Each researcher instructed her participant to answer each question to the best of her ability. Once the tape recorder was turned on, the researcher asked four

questions about birth order and role in the family. After the interview, each participant completed a demographics form and signed a debriefing form.

The researchers transcribed audio recordings of the focus group and individual interviews for analysis, coding the transcriptions and essays to find recurring themes. Coding of the transcriptions was collaborative in order to extract the most meaningful interpretations from the data and included analysis of participants' demographic information.

## RESULTS

All five of the participants involved in this study were female, ranging from 18 to 20 years of age. Two participants were the middle of three siblings, one was the middle (third) of five, and the remaining two participants were the second of four. All participants were raised by both parents, with the exception of one, Irma, who was raised by her father. Table 1 lists the details of each participant's demographic information. Essay completion times varied, while the focus group and individual interviews were much shorter in than originally anticipated, lasting approximately 45 minutes out of an allotted 90, and 10 to 15 minutes out of an allotted 30 to 60 respectively.

Name	Ashley	Nelle	Eileen	Karen	Irma
Age	19	20	18	19	20
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
Ethnicity	White / Caucasian	Asian / Pacific Islander	White / Caucasian	White / Caucasian	Black / African American
Year in College	Sophomore	Junior	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior
Major	Business	Biology	Psychology	Fine Arts	Nursing
Minor	Psychology	—	—	—	—
Number / Age of Siblings	1 sister (15) 2 brothers (21, 13)	2 sisters (24, 14)	2 sisters (20, 14) 1 brother (12)	3 sisters (26, 22, 17) 1 brother (11)	2 sisters (22, 17)
Raised by Parents?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Raised by father
Marital Status Of Parents	Married	Married	Married	Married	Separated
Changes in Family Structure	None	None	None	Two older sisters have moved out.	Raised with older sister by father. Younger sister raised by mother.

**Table 1.** Participant demographics.

The coding of the focus group, individual interviews, and written essay revealed several trends, which were grouped into two major themes: family bond and "best of both worlds"; and three minor themes: attention, expectations, and communication. The two factors that seemed to have the greatest impact on all or most of the themes were the number of siblings and age differences of siblings.

### Major Themes

The first major theme, family bond, was evident throughout all data provided by the participants. For most participants, familial warmth and closeness was prevalent in all accounts. All participants consistently expressed a feeling of importance for family, and stressed the strength of the bond with family members. One participant, Ashley, explained, "Family has always been, and will continue to be a huge part of my life." The data indicated that the participants enjoyed a high level of support from their parents, as well as a comfortable level of trust and mutual respect. Karen, for example, spoke during the focus group about her growing relationship with her father:

I'm very close with both of my parents, um, I... I think the turning point was when I went away to college, and I somehow just realized that I could talk to my dad about anything I wanted, and... I mean, on our drives back and forth to college, we talk about everything.

Participants also claimed to have very positive relationships with their siblings, in which companionship, trust, and dependability were highly valued.

Irma: I love hanging out with them because there is always a sense of [comfort]; like you can fall as far as possible and hit a cushioned ground instead of concrete. I love them because with them, I am myself, and they do not expect anything out of me.

In addition, relationships within the family generally grew stronger and closer over time. Here, Nelle describes her relationship with her sisters as improving with age:

I used to have fights with both of them at certain points. Like, it would be me and my younger sister or me and my older sister, but as I'm getting older, I'm getting closer to my older sister. But I'm closer to my younger sister also, but not as much as my older sister.

Nelle, like most of the participants, clearly demonstrates this trend. Both she and her older sister have outgrown their bickering, while the youngest sibling still has a way to go.

Besides the family bond, the other major theme that all participants addressed was having the "best of both worlds." All expressed satisfaction with having both an older sibling(s) to look up to and depend on, as well as a younger sibling(s) who looked up to and depended on them:

Karen: I liked, well, I like that, I have someone to look up to and talk to when I have problems and I have someone who looks up to me. So I feel as though I get the best of being the oldest and youngest at the same time. I mean, I'm able to experience everything that everyone else does because I'm a middle child.

The participants generally seemed to appreciate the benefits associated with having an older sibling, such as having someone who could offer advice, serve as a protector, and pave the way when dealing with parents. Furthermore, they liked being entrusted with some responsibility for their younger siblings:

Eileen: Um, it's nice to be in between my two sisters because my older sister can help me with things she's already done, and I can do the same for my little sister. So it feels good to be a supporter for someone, but also to be supported.

This sense of playing a "double role" generally contributed to the participants' overall contentment with their birth order. Generally, the participants expressed satisfaction with their birth orders, and did not indicate any major desire to occupy a different position.

### **Minor Themes**

The issue of attention appeared repeatedly throughout the data; however, it was not as for participants as the two major themes above. Generally, they agreed that they do not receive as much attention as their siblings:

Irma: Yeah, like no one knows me, every time the phone rings, I pick up and it's like, 'Yeah, how's your older sister? How's your younger sister?' It's like, 'Who are *you*?' So it's like, I don't know, no attention.

However, they did not express any strongly negative attitudes about the issue, nor did they seem to feel as that their siblings were strongly favored over them. At times, in fact, some of the participants agreed that less attention worked to their advantage. "You don't get too much attention, but then you know you don't get ignored either, so its just like if I want something, oh, ok I'll get it, like not too much attention," explained Nelle. Aside from Irma, the only participant who seemed particularly bothered by the lack of attention she was paid, the issue of attention was generally portrayed as very minor, a nuisance at worst.

Another minor concern participants shared was parental expectations. This theme was more significant than attention. Generally, all participants perceived their parents' expectations of them as very high, particularly with regard to school or their future, and often they were quite certain that their parents expected more from them than their siblings. For instance, Ashley noted during the focus group, "Uh, I think I'm very close with my parents, and, um, I think that they expect more from me than

anybody else." Speaking about her parents expectations of her in relation to her sister, Nelle added, "They definitely have more expectations for me than for her." Generally, parental expectations for each sibling reflected that sibling's personality, and thus, their history and pattern of behavior. Karen observed, "They just know me, so they're sort of... they expect certain things from how, you know, I've acted in the past." As with attention, none of the participants expressed any negative attitude toward their parents' expectations, nor did they give any indication that they felt they were expected to do more than they could handle.

Communication is a theme made up of several components in our study, including getting along and resolving arguments with siblings. Our participants agreed that communication is the basis of positive sibling interaction. For example, Karen considers herself the family mediator, which contributed to the maintenance of order between her siblings:

They'll want to ally, you know, against one of them, and make her do something, or stop doing something, and usually I tend to be the mediator ... I mean, usually they're right to gang up, I guess, but at the same time I feel like I have to defend the one that they're ganging up against.

In addition, participants valued communication as a positive aspect of sibling relationship. Ashley, for example, values the giving of advice to her younger brother; "Ryan, my 13 year old brother, relies on me for all of his girl advice. He thinks that because I am older and have a boyfriend, I must know everything about that kind of relationship." While it is utilized in different ways, communication was a common tool used by the participants in developing relationships within their families.

### **Important Variables**

While the participants share a number of attitudes and outlooks, the unique variables of each one's particular family structure are also important. The age difference between siblings was especially salient. For example, a large difference in age may affect the closeness of the relationship between two siblings, as with Karen and her oldest sister. "Um, my oldest sister is seven years older than I am.... But now she's married and has a baby so her life is completely different. And it's harder to talk to her because our lives are so dissimilar". In addition, the number of siblings was also significant. Some participants spoke of pairing off or ganging up that sometimes occurred with middle siblings. Eileen remarked, "Well, we're all middle siblings, so there's always that, like, pairing off that happens, so like if there's a fight going on it's like two people ganging up against you." In addition, Ashley offered insight into how the effects of age differences and the number of siblings in a family influence relationship development.

I think, um, it would be ideal to be in the middle if there's three children, because the, like, you're the closest in age with the both of them, so you could probably relate with both of them better, so you get like everything. But, when, since we have four, its like ... the two of us have always been closer and the two of them have always been closer, so, um, I guess when its like an even number you still get like left out sometimes.

Thus, Ashley's comments support the hypothesis of a changing dynamic between birth order and relationship development within families.

## **DISCUSSION**

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All participants often addressed the two major themes identified by this study. Moreover, they did so in all three venues: the essays, focus group, and individual interviews – thus reflecting a common middle sibling experience. The importance of family complements the theme of having the best of both worlds. The need for a role model may contribute to the development of strong bonds, perhaps produced by a certain level of vulnerability that accompanies dependence. Identifying with role models may also develop a middle child's sense of empathy. Indeed, some believe that sibling interactions profoundly influence relationship development (Helms-Erikson & Crouter, 2001). However, the existence of sibling bonds, which seem to deepen over time, contradicts the claim that middle siblings are less family oriented and compensate for lack of family closeness with intimate friendships and/or sexual relationships (Salmon, 2003).

The minor themes of the study shed light on common middle-sibling experiences, though they also called attention to differences based on individual family structures and situations. The issue of attention, for instance, elicited different responses from participants. Ashley, for example, seemed perfectly content with the attention she received from her family, whereas Irma was indignant. By contrast, all participants indicated that their parents had high expectations for them, because the participants, as middle siblings, had earned their parents' trust and confidence.

These two themes of attention and parental expectations offer insight into past research. First, both themes support the hypothesis that interactions within the family – between siblings and between siblings and parents – play a role in the development of relationships and personality (Erikson & Crouter, 2001; Rodhe, et al., 2003; Whiteman, et al., 2003). Positive interactions between siblings and parents are conducive to the development of well adjusted individuals, as Ashley's example attests. The interactions with her family encouraged her unique personality traits – responsible, goal oriented, dependable – which in turn influenced the interactions with her family – including the development of high parental expectations. Her relaxed attitude about attention, as well as the obvious closeness of her family, suggests a history of positive sibling-parent interactions. These findings contradict the claim that middle siblings have difficulty finding their place within their family and may feel squeezed in between their siblings (Gfroerer, et al., 2003), and generally experience low self esteem, feelings of inferiority, and diminished need for achievement (Ashby, LoCicero, & Kenny, 2003).

Communication, the third minor theme, varied in importance according to each individual's situation and personality. For example, those participants who described themselves as mediators, such as Karen and Eileen, also reported substantial fighting between their siblings. During the focus group, Karen mentioned a fiery younger sister who frequently yells, and Eileen admitted to instigating arguments she later needed to mediate. Indeed, Eileen's behavior suggests some rebelliousness, which correlates with past research conclusions that middle children are inclined to be rebellious and outspoken in order to make their presence felt in their families (Gfroerer, et al., 2003). Those with fewer rivalry problems, such as Ashley, used communication as a tool for strengthening the bond between siblings. These findings also uphold the notion that middle siblings value fairness and make good mediators (Eickstein, 2000; Lemire, 2001).

The qualitative approach to this study provided richer, more meaningful subjective data than can usually be obtained by quantitative methods (Maxwell, 2005). This leaves the study open, however, to certain questions about its validity and reliability. While such issues were controlled for using methods such as triangulation and the collaborative effort of several researchers, the number of participants in this study was so small that the results are not generalizable. Also, the length of time spent with the participants was very short, which could bias the results. For example, researchers may have made snap judgments about the participants or harbored preconceived biases.

Furthermore, because all the participants were female, no gender-based analysis of birth order was possible. Men and women develop, interact, and form relationships very differently (Baer, et al., 2005; Helms-Erikson & Crouter, 2001), which leaves many questions about the prevalence of birth order effects in personality development between genders unanswered. The study also did not control for race or socioeconomic status, which is not heavily accounted for in previous birth order research either, but no doubt plays an important role in development, and therefore may also influence the inferences we are attempting to make.

Age and number of siblings were not controlled for either. The influence of such factors was evident, as it had large effects on the interactions between siblings, and the development of relationships between siblings – as Ashley's reflections on relationship differences between sibships of three and sibships of four indicate. That the number of siblings and the age differences between them influence development is also evident in birth order literature (Baer, et al., 2005).

Last, the participants in this study were self-selected. This may have caused biased results. The participants signed up for the study knowing that they would be interviewed about their family lives, and therefore, most likely entered the study feeling sufficiently comfortable with their experiences to speak openly about them. They all seemed to have a relatively positive view of their family lives, unlike those with negative family experiences.

## CONCLUSION

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One of the conclusions of this study is that, contrary to conventional wisdom, middle siblings are often quite family-oriented and generally content with their position in their families. No evidence was found supporting the idea that middle siblings are any less confident, happy, self-assured, motivated, or goal-oriented than their older or younger siblings. The study does make clear, however, that many variables – not just the “middle” label – influence the development of personality and family relationships. The role of the middle sibling is not as strictly defined as that of the youngest – always last – or the oldest – always first. Middle siblings occupy a number of different positions within the family depending on the number of siblings, thus offering numerous perspectives on personality and relationship development. Future research might usefully focus on middle siblings from one specific position in their families in order better to adequately define commonalities and compare subtle distinctions among groups of different middle children.

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