Assumptions about the effects of birth order on personality abound in popular culture, self-help books, and the scholarly literature. In one popular book, *Born to Rebel*, Frank Sulloway proposed that firstborn children have much to gain from following the status quo and hence should be conscientious and rule-bound; laterborn children, in their unconscious inclination to obtain others’ investment by distinguishing themselves, should be more agreeable and unconventional (open/intellectually curious). In within-family comparisons in which one adult reports on his/her personality and compares it directly with that of his/her siblings, firstborns do tend to be judged as “achievers” and laterborns as “rebels”. However, meta-analytic reviews have suggested that birth order effects on personality do not exist; they certainly do not reveal themselves when comparing children of varying birth orders who come from different families.

Judith Rich Harris⁴ has proposed that, if birth order does affect individuals’ behavior, it does so only within the family context. According to Harris, tactics that may be effective at home for a child of a given birth order are not necessarily going to be effective for that child in other contexts. In fact, in one study that compared teacher reports of two siblings from the same family with parent reports of those two siblings, effects of birth order in the home context did not show up in reports of the children’s behavior at school. For Harris, adult personality is a composite of inherent genetic propensities operating and adapting to experiences across a wide-range of contexts (the family of rearing being just one).

We know of no study that has directly tested Harris’ theory by assessing two adult siblings who were raised in the same home, and comparing their personalities as a function of their birth order. We designed the current study with that specific objective, with the prediction (in accord with Harris’ theory) that adult siblings’ independent self-reports would not differ as a function of birth order.

RESULTS

![Figure 1: Siblings’ Self-Reported Personality as a Function of Birth Order](image1)

Table 1. Sample Descriptive Statistics and Sample Validation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Original Participants’ Self-report (n=78)</th>
<th>Siblings’ Self-report (n=70)</th>
<th>Peers Reports of Original Participants (n=78)</th>
<th>Familial Similarity (n=78 pairs)</th>
<th>Self-Peer Congruence (n=79 pairs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>3.66 (SD=0.77)</td>
<td>3.52 (SD=0.64)</td>
<td>3.40 (SD=0.64)</td>
<td>r = .28* (p = .019)</td>
<td>r = .42** (p = .001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>3.75 (SD=0.58)</td>
<td>3.70 (SD=0.67)</td>
<td>3.51 (SD=0.60)</td>
<td>r = .28* (p = .012)</td>
<td>r = .43** (p = .001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>3.46 (SD=0.76)</td>
<td>3.27 (SD=0.80)</td>
<td>3.11 (SD=0.64)</td>
<td>r = .04 (p = .726)</td>
<td>r = .42** (p = .001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>3.98 (SD=0.95)</td>
<td>3.90 (SD=0.94)</td>
<td>3.81 (SD=0.37)</td>
<td>r = .25* (p = .012)</td>
<td>r = .42** (p = .001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>3.67 (SD=0.73)</td>
<td>3.86 (SD=0.68)</td>
<td>3.76 (SD=0.62)</td>
<td>r = .28* (p = .013)</td>
<td>r = .42** (p = .001)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Internal reliabilities for original participants’ self-reports ranged from .77 to .87; siblings’ self-reports from .80 to .89; and peer reports of original participants from .51 to .68. The siblings were moderately similar in personality and peer reports of the original participants’ personality were congruent with original participants’ reports of their own personality.

REFERENCES


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