BIRTH ORDER AND PERSONALITY: A WITHIN-FAMILY TEST OF CULTURAL LORE
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INTRODUCTION

• Assumptions about the effects of birth order on personality abound in popular culture, self-help books, and the scholarly clinical literature.
• The most prominent theory of birth order1 proposes that siblings occupy different niches to compete for parental investment, such that firstborn children follow the status quo (are more rule-bound and conscientious) and later-born children rebel (are more unconventional).
• Although between-family designs have consistently failed to find effects of birth order2, a modified within-family design has documented predicted effects.3,4 That is, when one sibling compares him/herself to their siblings, birth order predicts who is the most conscientious and who is most open or rebellious (unconventional).
• However, directly comparing oneself to one’s sibling encourages contrast effects. We employed a true within-family design that uses independent self-report data from both a firstborn and later-born adult from each family (in addition to parent reports of both siblings). In accord with Harris’ theory of personality development,5 we expected that neither adult siblings’ independent self-reported personality traits nor parents’ reports of those siblings’ personality traits would differ by birth order.

METHOD

• The original sample included 79 female and 22 male undergraduates who were recruited for a study of personality similarities and differences in siblings’ personality.6 They participated in small group sessions, and completed the 44-item Big Five Inventory via paper and pencil questionnaires. Participants’ mean age was 21.30.
• Participants provided the name and contact information of a sibling with whom they had been raised. We requested the sibling be within five years of their own age, but allowed for exceptions as necessary. Most siblings were within five years of the original participant’s age; siblings’ mean age was 22.23. Via email, we contacted siblings and invited them to complete an online version of the questionnaire about themselves. A total of 78 siblings (85% response rate) provided complete personality data.
• The original participants also provided the name and contact information of a close same-sex friend who could serve as a “peer informant” about the original participant. Via email, we contacted friends and asked them to complete the personality inventories, but not about themselves. Instead, they provided an evaluation of the original participant’s personality. A total of 79 peers (86% response rate) responded and provided complete personality data on the original participant who had nominated them.
• We later contacted original participants and told them we were interested in their parents’ perceptions of their children’s personality traits and requested contact information for one or both parents. A total of 56 participants complied with the request. We mailed parents a personalized BFI about each of their two children and received data from parents of 44 different sibling pairs.

VALIDITY OF THE DATA

• Prior to testing for birth order differences in personality, we conducted analyses to establish the reliability and validity of our data on Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. First, internal reliability coefficients for self, peer, and parent reports were high. Second, as shown in the table below, self-reports and peer reports converged, as did self-and parent-reports. Moreover, siblings showed moderate similarity on three of five factors, which we expect from biological relatives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Openness</th>
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<th>Extraversion</th>
<th>Agreeableness</th>
<th>Neuroticism</th>
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<tr>
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</table>

Figure 1 displays the results of within-family sibling comparisons (69 pairs). Birth order was not related to personality. Among these sibling pairs, first-borns did not feel more achievement oriented (Conscientiousness) than later-born siblings perceived themselves to be; Harris, later-borns did not report any higher levels of Openness or Agreeableness than first-borns did. All paired-sample t-tests were ps > .05.

Figure 2 displays parents’ ratings of their adult children’s personality traits, by birth order. Parents’ perceptions of their children varied (as shown in Table at lower left), but parents’ perceptions of their children did not differ systematically as a function of birth order (all paired-sample t-tests were ps > .05).

Figure 3 displays parents’ ratings of their adult children’s personality traits. Peer ratings: Parents’ perception of their children’s personality traits did not differ systematically as a function of birth order (all independent-samples t-tests were ps > .05).

REFERENCES


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