

**THE RELATIONSHIP OF BIRTH ORDER
AND SELF CONCEPT**

BY

LINDA THOMPSON WARREN

THE RELATIONSHIP OF
BIRTH ORDER AND SELF CONCEPT

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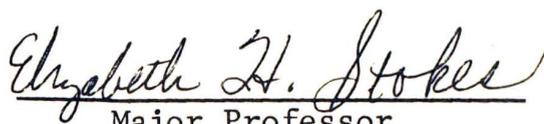
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Linda Thompson Warren

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Linda Thompson Warren entitled "The Relationship of Birth Order and Self Concept." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Psychology.


Major Professor

Accepted for the Council:


Dean of the Graduate School

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Review of the Literature

The term self concept refers to the individual's sense of his own identity, worth, capabilities, and limitations. The individual's self concept has been demonstrated to be highly influential in his behavior, general personality and state of mind. Fitts (1972) saw self concept as being related to performance in two ways, indirectly as a correlation or index of self actualization; and directly, in that the person with a clear, consistent, positive and realistic self concept will generally behave confidently, constructively and in effective ways.

Coopersmith (1967) believes that self is an abstraction that an individual develops about the attitudes, capacities, objects, and activities which he possesses and pursues. The basis for the abstractions are the individual's observations of his own behavior, and the way other individuals respond to his attitudes, appearance, and performance. It is an abstraction that is formed and elaborated in social intercourse, private reactions to himself,

mastery in solving developmental tasks and competence in dealing with life situations.

Rogers (1961) sums up the concept of self as the individual's consistent picture of himself as he sees himself from personal evaluations of direct experience, as related to his own awareness and those individuals with whom he interacts. Self theory holds that man's behavior is always meaningful and that we could understand each person's behavior if we could only perceive his phenomenal world as he does (Fitts, 1972). Our closest approximation is to understand the individual's self concept. Self theory holds that the self concept is the frame of reference through which the individual interacts with his world; thus the self concept is a powerful influence on human behavior and knowledge of the self concept can advance one's understanding.

The first and most basic concept of self is born from family relationships. The child first learns to interact with the people in his family, where the first views of life are formulated. As the child relates to his parents and siblings, he discovers how to live effectively within the family atmosphere, which fosters attitudes and values that develop his life style (Adler, 1970). Adler (1970) believes if the children are encouraged to be independent,

they acquire faith in their own abilities. This would also help to build a positive self concept. In summing this up, Adlerians believe that all of a child's behavior is a result of this life style, which is based upon an evaluation of self and society (Adler, 1970). The child's evaluation of himself and his position gives unity to his personality. From the early formative years, the style of life works through experiences that eventually develop into a characteristic pattern of evaluations and reactions. The interpretation of these experiences eventually form the guidelines for all of his psychological activity (Adler, 1970).

If the child can obtain both satisfaction and security, he gains a sense of mastery or power; hence he begins to experience a higher evaluation of himself (Sullivan, 1964). Self-attitude is determined by the attitude of others toward him in the process of acculturation (Sullivan, 1964). Self-attitudes seem to facilitate the attitudes which he has toward others. The self concept is developed from the reflected appraisals of significant others in the child's life (Sullivan, 1964).

According to Coopersmith (1967), during the early years a child develops a concept that the parts of his body, the responses of others to him, and the objects he

receives have a common point of reference. Young children have relatively vague, simple, haphazard abstractions of themselves. They are highly localized to specific parts of their bodies (Coopersmith, 1967). As experience and incoming information is gained, the self-attitude becomes more precise and complex (Coopersmith, 1967).

Because of the close nature of the family relationship, the basis of emotional stability is very influential on patterns of life. When strong and intimate affective relationships are produced, an individualistic responsibility is enhanced, and a sense of personal distinctiveness develops. When a sense of wrong doing is established, guilt and anxiety about behavior may exist even in the absence of others. This might happen because of the child's failure to live up to the models presented by his parents; he often is punished by real or threatened withdrawal of love (Baller & Charles, 1968).

Parents have less time with many children than a smaller number of children (Coopersmith, 1967). Baller and Charles (1968) have suggested that close relationships enhance high self concepts. Following this logic, perhaps children in smaller families will have higher self concepts than children in larger families. According to

Coopersmith (1967), children in smaller families are no higher in self-esteem (the feeling of personal worth) than those in larger families. This suggest that if family size does have an influence upon self-esteem, in this instance, family size per se is unrelated to self-esteem.

Concerned with the evaluative attitude the individual holds toward himself, the findings lead us to believe that these self-attitudes are intertwined with positive and negative states and are likely to have marked motivational consequences. Analysis (Fitts, 1972) indicates that attitudes produce a readiness to respond to particular stimuli along predetermined lines. For example, a negative attitude reflects the individual's conviction that he is weak and inferior. This may lead him to conclude that his opinions are not worth stating and that he cannot affect the course of group action. Self-attitudes may reflect an individual's expectancies as to what will occur to him in a new situation. Expectations of success or favorable experiences are likely to result in a confident posture, but expectations of failure and rejection are likely to result in apprehension, anxiety, and lack of persistence (Coopersmith, 1967).

It would be reasonable to assume that persons with negative self-attitudes would place different values on social participation and enterprise than would persons who held a favorable view of their worthiness. One who regards himself negatively, will be inclined to be introvertive and passive in adapting to environmental demands and pressures (Fitts, 1972). Those who place a higher value upon themselves will adopt a more active and assertive position (Coopersmith, 1967). Fitts (1972) also found that the person who is rated high in personal effectiveness is likely to have an optimal self concept. Such persons who are more secure, confident, and self-respecting have less to prove to themselves and others. Since they are less threatened by difficult tasks, people, and situations, they work with others more comfortably and effectively (Fitts, 1972). Fitts (1972) has also concluded from his research that persons with negative self concepts act less positively and with more apprehension; ones with unrealistic self concepts tend to approach life and other people in unrealistic ways; and very deviant self concepts tend to lead people to behave in deviant ways.

A negative self concept appears to impair initial school adjustment and subsequent academic progress. High

self concepts have also been found to be positively related to academic accomplishment, and low self concepts to academic and learning difficulties (Mussen, Conger, & Kagan, 1969).

The self concept of the only child has not been researched at much length. Hillinger (cited in MacDonald, 1971) and MacDonald (1971) found in their own studies, that only children and first borns have been reported to be more introverted than later born children. MacDonald (1971) investigated birth order and personality, and determined that later borns from two children families were more external than only children or first borns from two children families; only children and first borns were more socially responsible than later borns; first borns were more rigid than the only child and later born subjects; and only children who were females manifested a higher need for approval than male only children.

According to Zajonc (1976), only children show a distinct discontinuity with family size effect. They tend to score below the level of intelligence that would be expected if intelligence increased with decreasing family size. He theorizes that only children do not usually have the chance, as do children with siblings, to serve as an

intellectual resource. Zajonc (1976) believes that the benefits of small families are apparently counteracted by the lack of opportunities to serve as teachers to younger children.

Baller and Charles (1968) stated that the experience of living in a group and having easy access to playmates is rewarding to most children. The only child is at a disadvantage because he has less experience in a group situation and has had a greater contact with adults than his own peers. Since he spends time among persons larger and more proficient, he tries to develop skills which gain adult approval (Pepper, 1972). Pepper (1972) points out that the only child sometimes may feel insecure because of the anxiety shown by his parents who may be concerned with having or not having other children.

Rosenberg (1965) researched self-esteem and ordinal position. His results indicate that high self-esteem is more common among only children, but that other ordinal positions are unrelated to feeling of worth. Whether one is the first, second, or third child is of less importance than whether one has any siblings at all. This result applies only to male children and not to females in the same position. Rosenberg (1965) believes that it would appear

that emotional investment rather than relative attention accounts for the differences in self-esteem of persons in different ordinal positions. Accounting for the difference in males and females, he believes that traditionally the male is heir to family aspirations and maintains the family name which results in greater attentiveness, concern and deference, and that the females are treated differently (Rosenberg, 1965).

A later child starts with a potential disadvantage having to compete with other siblings. Although he may be compensated for this in other ways and treated equally by both parents, children born earlier in the series tend to have higher self-esteems than those in the middle or later positions (Coopersmith, 1967).

The middle child lies between the extremes of older siblings, being more emotional, shy, withdrawn, and younger siblings being more ambitious, outgoing, and competitive than older siblings (Cobb, cited in Baller & Charles, 1968). The middle child of three has an uncertain place in the family group and may feel neglected, because the first born has social advantages and the third born is the baby (Pepper, 1972). He may feel unloved, abused, discouraged, have less confidence, and be prone to be a problem child (Pepper, 1972).

Ansbacher and Ansbacher (1956) suggest that the second born is under full steam to surpass the older sibling. They have also found that he is often more talented and more successful than the first (1956). This behavior is attributed to the second born training and pushing himself more (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). With the prevailing feeling of having been slighted, he may set his goals too high and may suffer from not reaching them and losing his confidence (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956).

Intellectually, a child with older and younger siblings scores higher than the only or younger child (Zajonc, 1976). Zajonc (1976) attributes this to the middle child learning from the oldest and being able to use the learned information to teach the younger sibling. Zajonc and Markus (1975) found in their study on birth order and intellectual development, if the earlier children are dependent, the younger children are forced into a situation which requires independence. This situation causes them to strive for status needs and dominance behavior over the older sibling. If the earlier children are independent, assertive behavior is developed in older children since they are treated as teachers by the younger children (Zajonc & Markus, 1975). This would foster the development of

leadership skills on the part of the older children (Zajonc & Markus, 1975). Zajonc (1976) also hypothesizes that spacing between siblings is an important factor of intellectual development.

The only child has the tendency to be over protected and have more personal things than one with siblings (Baller & Charles, 1968). It would be reasonable to assume that the child in the larger family, who shares his things with siblings, would have more opportunity to learn social give-and-take and to acquire skills in dealing with people (Baller & Charles, 1968). Fitts (1972) found that the person who can deal with people easily, tends to have a positive self concept. With these findings perhaps children with siblings may tend to have more positive self concepts.

If a child is treated differently from his siblings, hostility between the child, his parents and siblings may hamper the development of a positive self concept. Being one with others with less attention from parents, a child could develop an emotionally insecure concept (Baller & Charles, 1968.)

Mussen, Conger and Kagan (1969) suggest that sibling position is an important psychological variable because it duplicates many of the significant social interactions

experienced by adolescences and adults. The situation of having siblings or not, is not the decisive factor, but how the child interprets this position is. The interpretation contributes to the person's personality, self concept, and mental health.

Purpose of the Study

The preceding evidence supports the proposition of birth order having a significant influence on individuals. There appears to be a need of further study on the effect of birth order on self concepts of children.

The present study was undertaken to measure the relationship of the self concepts of only children and middle children with one older and one younger sibling. The hypothesis for the study was that birth order of middle children and first born children, who were also only children, would be significantly related to the measured self concepts.

CHAPTER II

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were selected from a high school in the Clarksville-Montgomery School System. The author decided to use juniors and seniors in the study. In their English classes, the students filled out information sheets containing the student's name, the total number of siblings, the total number that are older, and the total number that are younger.

The subjects for the study were selected from the information sheets. The sheets were divided into two categories, only children and children with one older and one younger sibling. There were 8 senior students (5 females and 3 males) who were the only children in their families. With 8 in the preceding group, 8 senior middle children (5 females and 3 males) were selected at random from a pool of 33 who were in this category. On the junior level, there were 14 only children (7 females and 7 males). Fourteen middle children (7 females and 7 males) were selected

at random from a pool of 37. The total number of subjects was 44. The selected students were then contacted and asked to participate in the study.

Instrument

The Tennessee Self Concept Scale (Fitts, 1965) was selected to measure the self concept of the students. The scale is designed to measure the individual in nine ways: identity, self satisfaction, behavior, physical self, family self, and social self (Fitts, 1965). Of the 100 statements in the scale 90 are used to determine the self concept. The remaining 10 statements comprise a self criticism scale. The student responds to the statements on a scale of one to five, one being completely false to five being completely true. It requires approximately 20 minutes for administration of the scale.

The reliability coefficient of the total positive concept score is .92 (Fitts, 1965). This is based on test-retest data of 60 college students over a two week period. The author reports that through various types of profile analyses he has demonstrated that distinctive features are still present for most persons a year or more later (Fitts, 1965).

The content validity was established by a panel of judges. Each statement was retained only if there was unanimous agreement (Fitts, 1965). The level of difficulty for comprehension of this instrument was age 12 or higher with a minimum sixth grade reading level (Fitts, 1965).

A high positive score indicates a high self concept and vice versa. Specifically, superior is 450-392; above average is 391-373; average is 372-323; below average is 322-285; and poor is 284-150 (Fitts, 1965; Burrill, no date).

Procedure

The students who agreed to participate were given a letter of permission to take home for their parents to sign. When the letter was returned, the students were given the scale. The students were asked not to sign their names to the answer sheet unless they wanted their own results. The students provided the information of being an only child or a middle child, their sex, and school grade on the answer sheet.

The scales were hand scored. The self concept scores were converted to percentile ranks. Then, these were assigned to a broad classification based on superior, above average, average, below average, and poor. Superior is

equal to anything above the 95th percentile; above average is equal to the 77th percentile through the 95th percentile; average is equal to the 23rd percentile through the 76th percentile; below average is equal to the 4th percentile through the 22nd percentile; and poor is equal to anything below the 4th percentile (Burrill, no date).

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

The mean self concept score of the group of only children is 338.1 which is at the 36th percentile rank. The mean self concept score of the group of middle children is 327.55 which is at the 26th percentile rank. The mean score for the norm population is 345.57 (Fitts, 1965). Both of the groups scored below the norm mean. See Table 1.

Table 1

Comparison of Mean Self Concept Scores and the Relationship of Only Children and Middle Children

Subjects	N	X	S_t^*	r_{pb}^{**}	t^{***}
Only	22	338.1	31.806	0.166	0.753
Middle	22	327.55			

*standard deviation for total distribution

**point biserial correlation coefficient

***test of significance, $df=20$, $p .05$, two-tailed test

The statistic used to compare the results of the scales was the point biserial correlation coefficient (r_{pb}). The

method of correlation is used for measuring the relationship between a dichotomous variable and a continuous one (Meyer, 1976). The direction of the correlation is a function of the two proportions and of the differences between the two means (Meyer, 1976).

The hypothesis for the study was that birth order of middle children and first born children, who were also only children, would be significantly related to the measured self concepts. The correlation of birth order to the self concept scores is 0.166. See Table 1. To test the significance of the correlation, a t distribution was used, and t equals 0.753. Using a two-tailed test of significance with 20 degrees of freedom, at the 0.05 level of significance, the critical value is 2.086. The obtained coefficient is not significant which does not support the hypothesis that birth order of middle children and only children is significantly related to the measured self concepts.

In examining the distribution of the concept scores, it appears that there is a larger proportion of only children with higher scores than middle children. The total results of the broad classifications are superior = 3 (1 only and 2 middle), above average = 3 (3 only and 0 middle), average = 17 (10 only and 7 middle), below average =

19 (7 only and 12 middle), and poor = 2 (1 only and 1 middle). The specific scores and broad classifications are listed in Table 2 (page 20).

To determine whether the only children had significantly higher scores, a maximum difference test for small samples was used. This statistical procedure measures the maximum difference between two independent groups (Meyer, 1976). The maximum difference (D) is 5. At $N = 22$, the critical value is 9 (one-tailed test at the 0.05 level of significance). From this additional information, it can be concluded that the only children's self concept scores are not significantly higher than the middle children's scores. See Table 3 (page 21).

Table 2
Specific and Broad Classification
of the Self Concept Scores

	Only			Middle		
	Concept Score	%ile Rank	Classification	Concept Score	%ile Rank	Classification
1	336	33	A	328	26	A
2	389	94	AA	319	19	BA
3	346	48	A	406	97	S
4	306	10	BA	315	16	BA
5	344	42	A	321	20	BA
6	299	7	BA	347	51	A
7	345	48	A	276	3	P
8	384	92	AA	315	16	BA
9	313	14	BA	293	4	BA
10	317	19	BA	352	55	A
11	366	71	A	333	29	A
12	395	95	AA	308	10	BA
13	323	21	BA	296	5	BA
14	342	40	A	315	16	BA
15	269	3	P	312	13	BA
16	315	16	BA	321	20	BA
17	397	96	S	341	40	A
18	332	29	A	399	96	S
19	329	26	A	342	40	A
20	343	41	A	314	14	BA
21	330	28	A	302	8	BA
22	318	19	BA	351	55	A

Note: 1 thru 8 are seniors
9 thru 22 are juniors

Key: S - Superior
AA - Above Average
A - Average
BA - Below Average
P - Poor

Table 3

Maximum Difference of Self Concept Scores
of Only Children and Middle Children

Intervals	Only		Middle		$cf_1 - cf_2^*$
	f_1	cf_1	f_2	cf_2	
Superior	1	22	2	22	0
Above Average	3	21	0	20	1
Average	10	18	7	20	2
Below Average	7	8	12	13	5
Poor	1	1	1	1	0

$$*D = cf_1 - cf_2$$

D = 5, N = 22, $p > 0.05$, one-tailed test

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

The hypothesis for the present study was that the birth order of middle children and first born children, who were also only children, would be significantly related to their measured self concepts. This hypothesis has been rejected by this sample of high school juniors and seniors, because no significant correlation was found between birth order and the measured self concepts. Also, it cannot be stated that birth order affects the measured self concept as examined in this study.

This study disputes Rosenberg's (1965) study that only children have higher self-esteem. Coopersmith (1967), Baller and Charles (1968) are not supported in that middle children have lower self-esteem. Fitts (1972) is not supported in that middle children have higher self concepts because of being around other children. Baller and Charles (1968) are disputed in their point that only children may be at a disadvantage being around adults instead of peers most of the time.

This research only supports one study. Coopersmith (1967) is supported in that children in smaller families are not higher in self-esteem than those of larger families.

Apparently since the hypothesis was not supported, birth order does not have an influence on self concept as examined in this study. Nothing specifically can be pinpointed for the results, but some possible explanations may be suggested.

The study was conducted with a relative small number of students. It may not be a typical sample. The population is also at an age when the self concept may be unstable. The secondary level age student is trying to find himself and where he belongs.

The scale required a sixth grade reading level, and it was assumed that the students' reading levels were adequate to read the concept scale. It is possible that some of the subjects could have marked the answer sheet without reading or understanding the statements.

Zajonc (1976) hypothesized that the spacing of the children and personality of the older children affected the personality of later born children. There was no attempt made in this study to control for the spacing between the middle child and older siblings. The sample of middle

children may be a diverse group as far as the number of years difference in their age and the age of the older sibling. The personalities of the older child in the family, either dependent or independent, could also have been different for the middle children in the study.

It is recommended that the measured self concept of students be explored with a larger number of high school students of only one age. It is also recommended that there be some control over the difference in age spacing between the siblings.

In conclusion, this study has not supported the hypothesis that birth order of middle children and first born children, who were also only children, was significantly related to the measured self concepts. With only one study being supported by this research, there is a definite need for further research on the effect of birth order on the self concept.

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