Birth order, conscientiousness, and openness to experience
Tests of the family-niche model of personality using a within-family methodology

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Abstract

We investigated differences between firstborn and secondborn siblings on major dimensions of personality, in the context of the proposal of Sulloway [Sulloway, F. J. (1996). Born to rebel: Birth order, family dynamics and creative lies. New York: Pantheon] that personality is influenced by the specialized niches siblings adopt in the quest for access to parental resources. Using a within-family methodology, we tested two predictions from Sulloway’s model: that firstborns are more achieving and conscientious than secondborns and that secondborns are more rebellious and open to new experiences than firstborns. To test an alternative prenatal hypomasculinization theory proposed by Beer and Horn [Beer, J. M., & Horn, J. M. (2000). The influence of rearing order on personality development within two adoption cohorts. Journal of Personality, 68, 769–819], we also examined the size of birth-order effects in sister–sister versus brother–brother pairs. The hypothesized effects of birth order on personality were found in both Study 1 (n = 161 sibling pairs) and Study 2 (n = 174 sibling pairs) and provided support for Sulloway’s family-niche model. No support was found for Beer and Horn’s hypomasculinization model.

1. Introduction

The influence of birth order on personality is an area of long-standing interest in psychology, generating over 2000 studies in the last 75 years (Beer & Horn, 2000; Sulloway, 2001). On the basis of a major review of 40 years of work on the topic, however, Ernst and Angst (1983) concluded that most birth-order effects on personality were methodological artifacts that disappeared when confounds such as socioeconomic status and family size were taken into account.

Sulloway (1996, 2001) strongly challenged this conclusion by offering a new theoretical perspective on birth order and conducting meta-analyses of the birth-order literature. Sulloway argued that competition between siblings for parental investment leads children to cultivate family niches that are associated with birth order. Firstborns tend to receive greater investment from their parents and have their pick of niches within the family system. They tend to align their interests with their parents and show a strong motivation to fulfill parental expectations, often serving as surrogate parents for their younger siblings. Consequently, firstborns tend to be more amenable to their parents’ wishes, values, and standards than their laterborn siblings, as well as more conscientious, responsible, ambitious, organized, and academically successful, more traditional and conservative, and more likely to endorse conventional morality.

The most pressing developmental challenge for laterborns, according to Sulloway, is to find a valued family niche that is not already occupied by an older sibling. Laterborns tend to identify less with their parents and are often subject to domination or bullying by older siblings, which is hypothesized to make them more open to experience than firstborns, and more likely to empathize with the downtrodden, to be supportive of egalitarian social change, to question the status quo, to resist authority and pressure to conform, and to be the “rebels” in the family.