Identical Twins and Birth Order: An Exploration of the Effects of Birth Order on Identity Formation

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Abstract

This paper will look at the identity formation of identical twins in the context of Adler’s birth order theory and is intended for Adlerian therapists who are already familiar with birth order. This paper will exclusively consider the birth order position of first born as the focus of its exploration and is intended to expand on what Adler has already theorized about birth order by exploring whether or not each twin identifies with the first ordinal position or with the first and second, respectively. Further research and the development of treatment protocols may be guided by the two hypotheses proposed concerning the implications of both scenarios for identity formation.

*Keywords:* Adlerian therapy, birth order, identity formation, identical twins, siblings
To my twin, Jamie
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Introduction to the Problem

When initially looking at birth order and the characteristics that accompany each birth order position, it can be fascinating to think the idea that one’s position in the birth order can have a profound effect on his or her personality. According to Adler, it is not just the order in which a child is born that influences his or her character, but the situation in which one is born and how one interprets that situation (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Birth order is also an extensively researched and controversial concept in the literature (Eckstein, Aycock, Sperber, McDonald, Wiesner, Watts & Ginsburg, 2010). There are opposing views and criticisms to current birth order research, and the amount of birth order research can be overwhelming. Nonetheless, the overall consensus is that looking at birth order can be a useful tool when examining one’s understanding of the world.

There are many exceptions to the birth order theory, such as a death of a sibling, adoption and age gaps. One exception that often does not get recognized is being a twin. After a review of the literature, one will find minimal material about how identical twins fall in the birth order. Research on identity development with twins is likewise very minimal; therefore, the intent of this paper is to provide Adlerian clinicians with two hypotheses concerning this unexplored area of birth order theory and how it relates to twins and identity development.

Statement of the Problem

There is a gap in the literature concerning the factors that are typically included as influences of ordinal position on identity development including age difference, large families, extra-familial competitors, gender difference, deaths in the family and special siblings (Shulman
& Mosak, 1977). Perhaps one reason why there is lack of research is because when Adler introduced his theory of birth order, twins were not as prevalent as they are now. According to Friedman (2014), a January 2012 report by the National Center for Health Statistics showed a 76% increase in the birth of twins from 1980 to 2009. In 2009, one out of every thirty births was twins. This steady increase of twin births means that more families will be “exceptions” to the birth order theory leaving an area of study that still needs to be explored. When looking at this population from a clinical view, there are unique factors that tie into a twin’s development that would be pertinent to know when working with this special population. Treating a client who is an identical twin may not be as effective if the clinician does not take into account the factors that could have affected this client’s development. It would be advisable for clinicians to understand their unique developmental variables in order to provide effective services.

**Purpose of the Study**

Adlerian clinicians who conduct therapy with identical twins do not have adequate resources available to assess the effects of birth order on identical twin’s identity formation. The clinician could take their generalized knowledge of birth order theory and try to apply it the twin’s situation; however, that may not yield the most effective outcome. The intent of this paper is to expand this professional literature and offer clinicians an additional resource to conceptualize the unique developmental journey of identical twins. Specifically, this paper will provide an overview of the identity development of identical twins and how birth order can affect their identity development. Being a twin is unique experience that requires a specific clinical understanding in order for clinical therapy is to be effective.
Significance of the Study

By exploring the possible theories about how birth order affects identical twins and their identity development, clinicians and researchers will have a better idea about how to treat this client population. Also, it provides implications to conduct further research. This paper will assist in expanding services that will help with the unique needs of this population. As the percentage of identical twins increases in the population at large, Adlerians will require the foundation for an addition to birth order theory to inform their clinical work and increase interest in research that applies to Adlerian practice in particular.

Identity Development: What the Literature Says

Sibling Relationships

Research on siblings has shown that siblings are central in the lives of individuals and families around the world and throughout the lifespan (Whiteman, McHale & Soli, 2011). Siblings serve as confidants, companions and role models throughout childhood and adolescence. According to Whiteman, McHale and Crouter (2007), children and adolescents spend more time with their siblings than with their parents or peers outside of school. Recognizing how siblings influence each other is imperative in order to understand their unique identity development within their family constellation.

Social learning theory. There are several theories that help explain the influence siblings have on one another. One of the more prominent theories is Social Learning Theory. According to social learning theory, individuals acquire behaviors, attitudes and beliefs through two key mechanisms: reinforcement and observation of others (Whiteman et al., 2011). Siblings shape their own relationships within the context of their social exchanges. This happens through the reinforcement of positive and negative behavior, and by imitating and observing one another.
The tenets of observational learning suggest that members of the family are significant models for social learning (Whiteman et al., 2011). According to Bandura (as cited in Whitman et al., 2007), “individuals are most likely to imitate models who are warm and nurturing, high in status, and similar to themselves”. This implies that a family’s interactional style is an important source of learning. According to Whiteman et al. (2007), similarities among siblings across many domains have been demonstrated including: sexual behaviors, health risk behaviors, smoking, drug use, aggression and delinquency. As a result of their shared experiences siblings may be more aware of each other’s strengths and weaknesses (Azmitia & Hesser, 1993). Additionally, siblings have been shown to be similar in personal qualities such as empathy, gender identity and social competencies.

Observational Learning Theory suggests that imitation is more likely when models possess three characteristics: power, nurturance, and similarity to the observer (Whiteman et al., 2007). Siblings who are closer in age will most likely imitate one another (Whiteman et al., 2011). If there is an age gap, the older sibling will most likely serve as a model for behavior for his or her younger siblings. Research conducted by Azmitia and Hesser (1993) demonstrated that siblings provided more guidance than peers and that in an unstructured building context, young children were more likely to observe, imitate and request from their siblings than from their peers. Other research has shown that through the older sibling’s leadership role as tutors, managers, and caregivers, they provide younger siblings with models and direction on how to behave. The younger siblings then function as learners and supervisees.

Whiteman et al. (2007) suggests that sibling similarity is more likely to occur when the relationship is nurturing. Similarly, additional research shows that sibling similarity is more likely to occur when the sibling’s relationships are warm and close. Such findings, coupled with
literature on sibling relationship quality, suggests that same-sex sibling dyads tend to be more warm and close; therefore, imitation processes should be more evident in same-sex sibling dyads than in mixed-sex dyads.

**Sibling deidentification.** Despite the research regarding how siblings model for one another (therefore, making them similar), opposing research suggests that two siblings growing up together can be no more alike than two unrelated children (Whiteman et al., 2007). One suggestion is that although two siblings grow up in the same home, there is a significant part of their environment that they do not share (Milevsky, 2012). They have their own individual peer groups, different teachers at school, different friendships and other aspects of their lives that differ.

Originally proposed in the writings of Alfred Adler, sibling deidentification refers to the tendency for siblings to consciously or unconsciously define themselves as different from one another (Whiteman et al., 2007). Siblings may actively choose to follow a path strikingly different than the path pursued by their siblings in order to avoid sibling rivalry (Milevsky, 2012). Additionally, sibling deidentification helps siblings establish their unique identity within the family and gain their share of parental love and attention (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956).

Although theorists have offered different explanations as to why sibling deidentification occurs, there is a common theme: siblings protect themselves from social comparison and rivalry by defining themselves differently from one another (Whiteman et al., 2007). Sibling rivalry can be a natural part of sibling life; however, if it becomes too severe it can cause a multitude of problems within the family including loss of self-esteem, marital problems and physical violence (Badger & Reddy, 2009). In order to reduce competition, sibling deidentification processes are
more evident when siblings are more similar, thus, it is suggested that sibling differences should be most evident when siblings are the same age and the same sex (Whiteman et al., 2007).

The Nature of Twins

Furman and Buhrmester state that siblings can be considered a special subsystem within the family network, whereas twins are considered a special subgroup amongst siblings in general (as cited in Watzlawik & Clodius, 2011). Twin relationships have been hailed as “one of the most unique and intimate kinds of relationships” (Tancredy & Fraley, 2006). Despite the popular attention and interest in twins, the literature is sparse regarding the interpersonal nature of twin relationships (Tancredy & Fraley, 2006; Siemin, 1980).

Attachment. It is argued that Attachment Theory provides a valuable framework to understand how twins can relate to one another (Tancredy & Fraley, 2006). Like all infants, twins use a variety of behaviors such as locomotion and vocalization in order to get their needs met. According to Ainsworth, Blehar, Water and Wall, these behaviors result in “clear-cut attachment” around the age of 6-8 months (as cited in Tancredy & Fraley, 2006). In the case of twins, the mother must simultaneously meet the needs of two infants. Yutton (1977) suggested that twins almost always receive less individual attention from their mothers (as cited in Tancredy & Fraley, 2006). During the first couple years of life, twins appear to be relatively uninterested in the co-twin until the age of 36 months when they start to interact with one another in a relationship-oriented way. Tancredy and Fraley (2006) discussed attachment relationships between twins across the lifespan with respect to five key features and functions: proximity seeking, separation distress, the use of the other as a safe haven, and the use of the other as a secure base.
Proximity seeking. In a large study conducted by Koch (1966), it was found that preschool-aged twins were more likely than nontwins to spend time together and share playmates (as cited in Tancredy & Fraley, 2006). The twins would prefer to be together and expressed the desire to be in the same classroom as the co-twin. Less is known about proximity-seeking behaviors in adult twins, but there is evidence to suggest that twins are interested in keeping the cotwin nearby. A study done by Neyer found that twins contacted each other more frequently and were psychologically closer than nontwin siblings (as cited in Tancredy & Fraley, 2006).

Separation distress. Some twins can be easily distressed when separated from one another. An example where this becomes evident is when one twin dies. Segal and her colleagues conducted extensive research that showed bereaved twins experience more intense grief over the loss of their cotwin than for other people (as cited in Tancredy & Fraley, 2006).

Safe haven. Twins appear to place a higher priority on offering support, comfort and protection to their cotwin in times of need and say that the comfort of having their cotwin is irreplaceable. Lassers and Nordan suggest that “the twin relationship is an enduring attachment and that the twin naturally retreats to the twinship for safety and security” (as cited in Tancredy & Fraley, 2006, p.81). Further research has shown that twins seem to be able to soothe one another when needed and that twins feel they can “fall back” on their cotwin for security.

Secure base. There is very little research determining how twins use one another as a safe base throughout the lifespan. Some research has suggested that twins may use one another as a secure base as an infant if they become psychologically separated from their mother. One twin may become more of a “transitional object” that takes the place of a doll or blanket. It is suggested that this may inhibit exploration as the twin focuses less on the territory to be explored and more on the secure base. Other research says that exploration does not need to be inhibited.
Kock found that when twins reported feeling close they were less apprehensive socially (as cited in Tancredy & Fraley, 2006). Other research shows that a twin finds comfort in having their cotwin nearby and becomes distressed when separated. More research needs to be conducted in order to support any conclusions.

**Societal reinforcement.** Twins seem to fascinate people across the globe due to their uniqueness and distinctiveness (Cassell, 2011). Friedman (2011) refers to it as the “twin mystique”, which holds that twins are mysterious, inseparable, and magical. Society seems to have developed schemas for twins that influence the perceptions of being a twin and the roles that twins are supposed to fill. Twins are assumed to be each other’s predestined life partner and to feel lost without the other (Friedman, 2014). They are often thought of as reading each other’s minds and knowing what the other is thinking and finishing each other’s sentences. These assumptions can mislead others regarding what the twin experience is actually like.

An example of parents contributing to the schemas of being a twin is when they take the twinship into consideration when deciding on names. Often the names will rhyme or use the same alliteration or letter to signal that they are the same unit. This automatically reinforces to the twins and to society that twins are two parts which make a whole. Reinforcement from society acts like a guide by which people shape their behavior, which then contributes to identity. According to Stewart, once twins perceive that they are indeed two separate units that make one whole unit, there can be pressure to maintain that role (as cited in Cassell, 2011).

According to Friedman (2014), “twins are conditioned by their families and by society into believing that being a twin is a privilege and a benefit, that it bestows a spiritual connection that will last a lifetime” (p. 8). Parents can idealize twins to such an extent that they offer no space for normal sibling rivalry, competitiveness, and jostling for attention that most brothers
and sisters often have. Parents may admit that their children fight but do so with a sense of surprise that their twins are not best friends who cherish each other. Such pressure to act “like best friends” can cause twins to feel shame, pain or embarrassment and keep their negative feelings suppressed.

**The Process of Separation**

In line with the function of separation distress in Attachment Theory, there is other literature which discusses the process by which twins separate. There are negative and positive aspects to the relationship between twins. According to Siemon (1980), “support, companionship, and security of the twin bond may compensate for lack of individual identity” (p.390). Although twins are often looked at as one unit, they can **be one unit.** It is important for twins to develop their own identity in order to be able to function independently. Magagna (2007) argues that when a twin makes the cotwin their primary attachment figure it can lead to developmental problems, particularly those linked with avoiding separation. Some of those frustrations may include possessiveness, rage, and anxiety.

**Twinning.** Jarrett created the word “twinning” to refer to the “fusion of object and self-representation in which two merge, leading to a loss of ego boundary” (as cited in Cassell, 2011, p. 5). Stemming from Object-Relations Theory, twins who use each other as a transitional object can make the process of ego differentiation quite challenging. Instead of detaching from the mother, learning how to self-soothe and creating an independent identity, twins have the capability of using each other as self-soothing objects. This can be seen even when twins are infants. Jarrett recalled a time when he witnessed a pair of twins who would cry until they were placed together. He concluded that because twins are not always forced to differentiate from
each other, the twins do not have individual identities and need to be together in order to feel “whole”.

**Twin yearning.** The term “twin yearning” has been used in the literature to refer to the projection of the twinship onto other relationships (Cassell, 2011). Numerous case studies have shown this pattern in which twins latch onto another individual in order to mimic the close relationship they once had with their twin. This can be seen in this quote by a twin named Ray: “There’s something comforting about having someone who’s that close to you, and who you can trust that much. So, yeah, that’s something I still crave” (Cassell, 2011).

Cassell (2011) states that twin yearning can often be the result of a lack of boundaries. A twin exhibiting this will want someone to fill the role their twin occupied in order to feel whole again. Twin yearning can often be seen in romantic relationships, friendships and in how twins treat their children. This indicates that twins may have a hard time forming relationships without attempting to find another twin.

According to Friedman (2014), a twin’s struggles with relationships can sometimes be traced to the unconscious need to replicate the twinship. If a twin feels dependent on their cotwin and needs that dependency, he or she may start to become dependent on friends, roommates and co-workers (Friedman, 2014). If twins have a close relationship, they will expect that level of closeness with other people only to be disappointed when it does not feel the same. According to Siemon (1980), desperately needing to cling to another unit may remain if the twin relationship was a defense against insecurity. If that is the case, the association that strength comes from being with another person develops; therefore, the twin will needs to bond with someone else in order to feel whole. This drive derives from early learning experiences of being regarded as “the twins” in which identity is being a pair rather than an individual. According to Cassell (2011),
the continuous longing for another twin is a maladaptive behavior that causes a strain on the relationship between the twins and needs to be overcome in order to create their own identity.

**Stages of separation.** According to Siemon (1980), without the individuation process usually reached by most children, twins will reach adulthood without satisfactory ego and social development to function independently. The severity of the reaction to separation depends on multiple factors: the age at which it occurs, the degree of interidentification, the perceived advantages of twinship and what the twinship symbolizes. Siemon (1989) describes four reactions that typically occur when twins must separate.

The first is separation anxiety. When a twin is separated from the cotwin, the loss of the accompanying personality traits can cause anxiety over not being able to function properly alone. There is much social adjustment that needs to take place as the twin must learn about social relationships as a single person. According to Siemon (1989), “being alone may be intolerable because it has never been experienced” (p. 391). The self-identity is fragile and the twin may experience sadness, depression, confusion and anxiety.

The second reaction is denial. Grief can be an expected reaction to the separation due to the twin’s interidentification with the other twin. Just like any other loss, the twin similarly is experiencing a loss. Twins may keep up a pattern of symbiosis as they try to find their own identity. They may continue to use plural pronouns such as “we” or “us”. Additionally, dependency on other people such as a roommate or co-worker may develop.

The third reaction is anger. Separation can lead to anger if rejection is experienced. An example would be if the separation is caused by one twin getting married. The twin that is left may feel alone or abandoned. Once individualization starts, the twin may start to feel anger over having missed the experience earlier in life. According to Seimon (1980), “Each person wants to
be an original” (p. 391). The core of the resentment is that no one wants to be a copy of someone else.

The fourth reaction is mourning and grief. The distinction between self and twin becomes blurred. There develops a need for another person to provide identity of self. In the case of identical twins, it is not the loss of the identical person, but the loss of shared personality traits. The feeling of being two parts to complete a whole is no longer valid.

According to Siemon (1980), the resolution to the dilemma of separating is for each twin to recognize and accept the loss. This involves letting go of the twin unit and accepting that no other relationship will feel the same way or be as intimate as the twinship. Encouraging and reinforcing the positive aspects of intimacy, companionship and security may be helpful.

**Importance of Having Identities**

One study completed by Barbara Prainsack and Tim Spector (2006) showed that although twins share a unique bond, the preconceptions of nontwins in their lives could create a drive to seek out and claim a unique identity from their twin (Manly, 2011). According another study done by Bacon, one of the only ways for twins to be recognized as different is to “work together to eliminate as much personality development as possible” (Manly, 2011, The science of identity, para. 10). Bacon states that twins actively engage in “identity” work and try to utilize one another to manage other people’s perceptions of them in order to avoid social stigma.

Friedman (2014) stated “When you haven’t had the opportunity to experience life as an individual, you don’t have the chance to form a secure sense of who you truly are” (p. 85). The constant presence of having a twin by one’s side can be either an irritant or a security blanket. According to Friedman (2014), every person wants to feel like a unique individual. Twins have
the ability to experience a unique closeness and bond with one another; however, without the experience of separateness, neither twin will be able to feel comfortable as a unique individual.

Through her research Friedman (2014) concluded that there is no “right” way a healthy twin relationship should be. Some twins are close, others are not. Some twins can live right next door to each other; other twins are fine living across the country from one another. Some twins argue more than others. Some twins may feel they are on the same page on matters while others have opposing viewpoints. All twin relationships are different. What makes them healthy is when both twins know who they are as individuals and can appreciate their twinship while maintaining their own sense of identity.

**Birth Order**

**Introduction**

Psychologists have been studying birth order for more than a century (Sulloway, 1996). In *Born to Rebel*, Sulloway argues that birth order explains the differences between siblings (Eckstein, 2000). Sulloway claimed that, over time, strategies perfected by first-borns give way to counterstrategies by later-borns. What resulted was what Sulloway referred to as the “evolutionary arms race” played out in the family.

Childhood and family are central to the story of human behavior because they provide the immediate causal context for these developmental scenarios. Childhood is about the search for a family niche. The first rule of the sibling road is to be different from one another’s brothers and sisters, especially if one happens to be a later-born. Sibling diversity is testimony to the powerful role that the environment plays in personality development. Although evolutionary principles guide this process, the story is one of
seamless interactions between genetic potentials and environment opportunities (as cited in Eckstein, 2000, p. 481).

Ever since Adler stated that the birth position of the child must be understood to understand a personality, there have been extensive research on various aspects of birth order and its relationship to many variables (Pulakos, 1987). There has also been much criticism that has followed birth order research, such as lack of control on variables such as sex, socioeconomic status, marital status, age spacing, the consideration of ordinal position versus psychological position and the importance of collecting data from the whole family (Shulman & Mosak, 1977). Despite the amount of criticism, the use of birth order as an influence on personality development is still considered valid in today’s literature.

Adler described five basic birth order positions: firstborn, second, middle, youngest and only (Shulman & Mosak, 1977) Shulman describes the characteristics experienced by each ordinal position:

1. Only child- never had a rival. May have been pampered and never learned to share.
2. Firstborn- he or she once had it all to him or herself and would prefer to still be first. He or she tends to feel entitled to rank.
3. Second child- stated late and has to catch up. Someone always seems to be ahead of him or her.
4. Middle child- there is a standard bearer in front and a pursuer in the back. He or she is surrounded by competitors. He or she may feel squeezed in a small area in his search for significance.
5. Youngest child- He or she is never dethroned. He or she has a lot of ground to cover in order to catch up to other siblings.
These characteristics are what is typically seen in a normal family. So what about exceptions? Mosak and Shulman (1977) state factors that influence ordinal position include: age difference, large families, extra-familial competitors, gender differences, death and survivorship, special siblings and roles available. Sulloway (1996) lists what he refers to as “interaction effects” to include sibling size, gender, age gap between siblings, age at parental loss, social class and temperament. In his book *The Birth Order Book*, Leman (2009) includes similar variables to birth order but adds the following variables: physical, mental or emotional differences, adoptions, the birth order position of each parent, the relationship between the parents, the critical eye of a parent and divorce.

**Birth Order and Identical Twins**

Looking at the available literature on birth order, Adler does not address twins. Leman (2009) does offer some insight into how twins fall into the birth order. According to Leman (2009), twins are usually aware of who is the first born. This is often reiterated by the commonly asked question: “Who is older?” He goes on to say twins usually wind up as something of a firstborn and secondborn combination and are usually competitor and companion. The firstborn will often become the assertive leader and the secondborn follows along. It is also common place to find a role reversal with twins.

Early literature by Toman (1969) states that twins will not have a real “senior or junior” since they are born together; although, parents may sometimes use the “who was born first” reasoning to account for differences such as intelligence and looks. If the twins are the only children they will behave like two sisters or two brothers depending on the gender. According to Toman (1969) “they are of the same age and the same rank. Hence, the character portraits of the oldest and the youngest brother will blend for each of the twins boys, and that of the oldest sister
and the youngest sister for the twin girls” (p.122). If the twins do have other siblings they will portray characteristics belonging to their ordinal position. For example, they will both lead their siblings if born first, or if born last, they will both act like younger siblings.

Other birth order experts agree that twins tend to organize themselves according to their position in the family (Fierro, 2014). For example, if they are firstborns they will exhibit characteristics of firstborns. If they have an older sibling they will exhibit characteristics of a secondborn. This is supported by Shulman and Mosak (1977) who state that the family is an ecological unit. One small patch of grass can hold many different species of one animal provided they do not intrude on one another. The family has many different roles that need to be filled. Shafer (2007) agrees: “Children decide for themselves what role they play in the family, parents reinforce those choices”.

According to Shafer (2007), siblings want to differentiate themselves from their other siblings. The more similar siblings are, the more they will want to differentiate themselves, and clearly twins are more similar than non-twin siblings. In relation to birth order, Shafer states that it is the psychological birth order, not the ordinal birth order that is more important. Twins will want to differentiate themselves by choosing a role in the family not taken by another. Any child is free to choose which role and attributes with that role he or she would like to assume.

Similarly, Isaacson states that it does not matter what order the twins are born in. He explains, ”The organization seems to result from one of the twins being dominant, resulting in that one having the older Birth Order. It does not seem to have much relevance to the order in which they were actually born. The Birth Order personalities of twins are often more intense than in normal Birth Order. Because they are the same age and capability, the dominant one has to
work harder at being dominant thus reinforcing the Birth Order personalities of both” (as cited in Fierro, 2014, What the experts say, para. 2).

There is more research that needs to be pursued in order to come to any final conclusions on how twins fall into the birth order. At this point in time, one can only speculate about how twins are affected by birth order. Could it be that the ordinal position does affect how the twins develop? Does only the psychological birth order matter? The following section will explore the possible theories about how birth order affects twins and their personality development.

**Exploration of Ordinal Positional Theories**

Twins occupying two different ordinal positions. In order to narrow down the scope of how twins fall into birth order, the birth order position of first born will be used as an example. The oldest children are perceived as the responsible role (Pulakos, 1987). Other characteristics associated with firstborns are as follows: high achievers, highly motivated, most influenced by authority, highest self-esteem, self-disciplined, competent, higher narcissism, pampered, mature behavior, conformist to parental values, most likely to be a leader, ice breakers, conservative, creative, low anxiety levels and vulnerable (Eckstein & Kaufman, 2012, Sullivan & Shwebel, 1996, Allred & Poduska, 1988, Eckstein, 2000, Eckstein et Al., 2010, Nyman, 2001).

In theory, individuals born first are welcomed by parents who have no one else demanding their attention (Sullivan & Schwebel, 1996). Adler claimed that the firstborn experiences the only-child life and is the parent’s center of attention until the secondborn arrives, causing anger and frustration (Badger & Reddy, 2009). Clearly with twins they are already coming into an environment that has competition. According to Sullivan and Schwebel (1996), as firstborns hold the central attention from their parents they often experience a painful “dethronement” accompanied by diminished parental attention when the next sibling is born.
One possibility is that one of the twins becomes dethroned as the other twin steps up into the firstborn position and the other twin falls back into the second born position. Schafer shares an example of this with a family with triplets: “I had a mom of triplets who tell me how when they walked to school one would race ahead, one would lag behind and the third would stay by her side” (Schaefer, 2007, Baby, para. 3).

Leman (2009) discusses parenting two-child families. According to Leman, it starts with dethronement of the first born once the second born comes along. Rivalry will become an issue, especially if the siblings are two boys. The older sibling will become the leader, picking up on mother and father’s values and practicing them faithfully and being the protector of the younger sibling. The younger sibling will typically branch off and go in a different direction, although it could still lead to rivalry between the two siblings as the younger sibling tries to surpass the first born in achievements. In the typical American family, role reversal does not typically happen. The secondborn will not cheat the firstborn out of their birthright. Instead, the younger child can “take over” from the older sibling from areas such as prestige, achievement, assuming responsibility and pleasing the parents.

It is possible that this situation could happen in the case of twins when the twins are the firstborn. The situation they are coming into is different than the typical firstborn; however, keeping in mind that each twin will need to take a role in the family, it is possible that one twin will step up into the leadership opposition while the other twin falls back into a secondborn role. Just like with nontwin siblings, the twins could show rivalry as they both compete for mother and father’s attention. This can be related to each twin trying to develop their own individual identity by purposely choosing two different roles within the family; therefore, feeling a sense of their own unique identity.
Twins occupy same ordinal birth order position.

Sharing firstborn position. Perhaps twins who are born first do not fall into a firstborn and secondborn position. A second possibility is that the twins hold the same birth order position. What would it look like for twin to jointly “first-born” positions within the family? Thinking about first born position, the child holds all of mother and father’s attention for a period of time, causing him or her to develop feelings of being an important person (Forer, 1969). The first born will most likely hold a close relationship with the parents. It is possible for twins who are born first to receive much of mom and dad’s attention to the extent that they feel important despite the fact that they are sharing mom and dad’s attention. Also, because they are first born they will still have parents who are anxious and inexperienced thus causing the parents to have high expectations for their first children (Forer, 1969). This could cause both twins to become emotionally volatile and strong-willed.

Another important factor that affects the characteristics of the first born is that when the second child is born the first born feels abandoned (Forer, 1969). The first born will try to regain the attention of the parents once the second child is born by behaving favorably or by rebelling. If both twins were to hold the first born position, neither would experience the sense of abandonment by having the other sibling there thus contradicting this consideration of first borns. Also, if another sibling were to be born after the twins, it would not cause the same effect since the twins have already experienced having a sibling. Overall, it seems less likely that twins who are born first would both hold the position of first born thus developing characteristics of a first born since it would be difficult for the circumstances surrounding a first born to apply to both twins.
Sharing secondborn position. If twins cannot both occupy firstborn positions, then perhaps they both occupy a secondborn, or middle position. Looking at the middle child position further, one could see how twins could both take on the role of a middle child since they both have a sibling that they need to compete with. Middle children are less well understood as there is not as much research on middle children as there is on firstborns and secondborns (Leman, 2009); however, there are basic understandings of how the middle child functions. Because middle children are used to not getting their own way they become savvy (Griffin, 2012). They are also willing to compromise, are flexible, team-builders, independent and social. Relating this position to twins there are several connections that can be made.

First, according to Leman (2009), the secondborn will play off the firstborn, a phenomenon that Leman refers to as the “branching-out” effect. The middle child will size up the older sibling and patterns his or her life according to what he or she sees. Sometimes the secondborn will branch off in a different direction than the firstborn or the secondborn may decide he or she can compete with the firstborn. Applying this situation to twins, it is possible that a twin may “size up” his or her cotwin and determine whether or not he or she wants to compete with the cotwin or branch off in a completely different direction in order to avoid competition.

Second, Leman (2009) states that there is no way to predict which way a middle child’s personality will develop. According to Forer (1969) the characteristics of a middle child tend to depend on four conditions: the gender of the middle child, the gender of the siblings, the number of children in the family and where the middle child stands within the middle group of siblings. Characteristics of a middle child tend to be an inconsistent paradox. For example, they can be shy and quiet yet sociable and friendly. They can be impatient and frustrated easily yet laid-back.
They could be the rebel of the family or the peacekeeper. It is important to look at the overall family in order to determine how a middle child will develop. Looking at the development of twins there is equally an inconsistent paradox. The twins can be similar to one another or they may different. One twin could be the “black sheep” of the family or he or she could be the leader. It is important to look at the overall family constellation in order to determine how a twin’s personalities will development in regards to birth order.

Third, the middle child can become a good mediator or a good manipulator (Leman, 2009). Because the middle child exclusively gets all of mother and father’s attention, they learn to negotiate and compromise. This can backfire if the middle child is compliant and avoids confrontation or conflict. Being a “people-pleaser”, this can cause the middle child to become the victim. On the other hand, the middle child could use their negotiation skills in an aggressive manner and become a skilled entrepreneur. Twins need to learn to negotiate and compromise, perhaps to a greater extent because they are twins; therefore, things always need to feel “fair” or “even”. Similarly, they have to share mother and father’s attention. It seems likely that twins could develop the characteristics of strong negotiator or manipulator through their experience of being a twin thus exhibiting characteristics of a second born.

**Identical Twins in the Media**

As mentioned previously, there is a “mystique” about the nature of twins. Many people have an idea about how twins should act or behave based upon how they are portrayed in the media. According to Fierro (2013), there is a fascination with twins that makes them ideal for characters in movies, books and television shows. Society generates certain stereotypes about twins that can often lead to misconceptions about the actual nature of the twin relationship. The
media tends to reinforce these negative stereotypes. Fierro identified three types of negative twin stereotypes often represented in the media:

- **Tantalizing Twins.** Twins, especially identical twins, are used as a sexual fantasy in the media. An example of this is the Asian twins in the movie *Austin Powers Goldmember*.

- **Threatening Twins.** In some movies twins are represented in a sinister and menacing matter. An example of this can be seen in the movies *the Matrix* and *The Shining*.

- **The Evil Twin.** The popular idea of the good versus evil twin can often be seen in soap operas. Often the good twin is blamed with the doings of the evil twin and must redeem him or herself. An example of this was in the soap opera *All My Children*.

Friedman (2014) agrees that cultural references further embellish the romantic notion of “hyperconnected, indivisible twins” (p.12). An example she uses is the movie *The Social Network*. In the movie, identical twins Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss go up against Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg for allegedly stealing their idea. Before going to a lawyer, the twins consider “punching out” Zuckerberg. In order to convince his brother that defeating Zuckerberg will be easy, one twin says “I’m six-foot-five, 220 pounds- and there are two of me”. The intent of this line is to generate a laugh from the audience, but also it reinforces the notion that twins are clones or exact copies of one another. Friedman (2014) furthers her point by explaining how the actual kinship between the Winklevoss brothers was embellished in a *Washington Post* article, in which the writer stated “The real Winklevosses have recently completed matching MBAs at Oxford”. According to Friedman, it is as if the author purposely wanted to illustrate
how identical the twins are when in real life there are probably many differences between the two. The reinforcement of this stereotype could lead to negative consequences. Perhaps a twin could feel as though they should have more in common with their cotwin leading to feelings of guilt or shame.

The media also portrays twins as an “awesome duo”, a stronger force than just a singular character (Friedman, 2014). Whether they are good or evil, twins are thought of as delivering twice the punch, thus making their characters in books and movies exotic and thrilling. One charming set of twins is used in the popular children’s series *Harry Potter*. Fred and George Weasley are mischievous and creative, using their sense of humor and sense for adventure to fight tyranny. Their personalities are described as very similar, and their younger sister, Ginny, states in the book “The thing about growing up with Fred and George is that you sort of start thinking anything’s possible if you’ve got enough nerve.” The idea is that having two of them provides much more fun and laughs than if there were just one.

An example of the “bad versus good” twin stereotype is portrayed in the television series *Friends*. One of the main characters, Phoebe, has an identical twin named Ursula whose “outrageous, bad girl behavior is mistaken for Phoebe’s” (Friedman, 2014, p. 13). In one episode, Ursula sells Phoebe’s birth certificate to a Swedish runaway. In a different episode, Phoebe gets unwanted male attention which leads her to discover that her sister was making pornographic films using her name. Such portrayal of this twin relationship reinforces the idea that having a twin provides the perfect opportunity for deviousness and trickery. It is reinforces the “good twin versus bad twin” stereotype which is popular in the media.

Identical twins are also used in advertisements. Recently a popular beauty brand Oil of Olay started a campaign for their Pro-X anti-aging skincare products which features a twin’s
study where one twin uses the products and one twin does not. They then showcase the difference in a picture with the idea being that the twin who used the products has better looking skin. While it can be useful to use identical twins in studies, the idea of using identical twins in a national campaign that portrays one twin as being more beautiful over their sibling could have negative implications. Again, it reinforces the stereotype that identical twins should look exactly the same. Also, it may be sending a negative message that one twin should not “look better” than her identical twin. While it could be a harmless and possibly good way of showcasing the effectiveness of a brand’s products, the advertisers may not consider the already instilled stereotypes that identical twins grow up with when using twins in their advertisements.

While having twins represented in the media, it is important that actual twins do not feel the pressure of society to behave a certain way. Instead, twins should honor their individual feelings and be comfortable with having an individual life. According to Friedman (2014), honoring one’s own individual feelings may seem straightforward, but for twins it can daunting, especially when the idea of individuality goes against what twins are taught. Many twins believe they must live up to the social expectation that twins only see the best in each other and should be on the same page. With such a high standard, a twin may feel that having any negative feelings toward his or her cotwin will destroy the kinship. It is important for twins to become comfortable with negative feelings toward their cotwin. The more comfortable a twin is with his or her negative feelings, the less guilty he or she will feel when expressing negative emotions and will be able to have a healthy relationship with both themselves and their cotwin.
Case Study

In order to piece together identical twin development looking through the Adlerian lens, more specifically in relation to birth order, it is helpful to examine a case study and analyze how these factors could have contributed to the client’s problems.

Case Synopsis

Magagna (2007) worked with an identical twin named Hanna. She was a 17-year old American Jewish girl living with her family in London where her father worked as a visiting physics professor. Along with her identical twin sister, she also has a 22-year old brother, Joseph and an 11-year-old sister, Mary. Hanna felt like a “twin” and nothing more, with her parents often referring to her and her sister as “the twins”. Her mother described her transition to secondary school as “difficult”. Hanna was first rejected, but later accepted because of her high intelligence. When her brother left for college Hanna refused to write or speak to him. This was linked to the fact that after he left, her mother told Hanna and her sister “she didn’t want to be left home alone with ‘just them’”. Three months after Joseph left home Hanna developed Anorexia Nervosa.

Hanna was always dressed in purple growing up in order to differentiate herself from her twin sister. Her mother admitted it was hard to find individual photos of Hanna because she always wanted to photograph them together. Hanna saw herself as the complete opposite of her sister: Sarah was good, Hanna was evil; Sarah was popular, Hanna was isolated. Additionally, it was later learned that Hanna “froze” rather than cried in the incubator after she was born and rejected her mother for three days rather than suffer the loss of the breast.
Theoretical Case Review

Magagna (2007) decided to focus on three main issues with Hanna: transformation of the individual personality, twinning as a factor complicating the transformative possibilities and transformation of the family dynamics. While it is evident from the case synopsis that there is an identity problems for Hanna, the reasoning as to why that developed could be due to numerous factors.

Focusing specifically on the nature of twins, twins naturally compare themselves to one another (Friedman, 2014). There is an expectation from society that twins should always be the ‘same’ when it comes to their accomplishments and achievements. Obviously, this is rarely the case. Hanna and her twin being treated as one single unit instead of two separate individuals would not have allowed each twin to flourish individually. The expectations could have been higher for each twin to always be doing just as well as the cotwin. In Hanna’s situation, she could have perceived her twin as being more successful than her, such as when Hanna was almost held back in school. Without a strong sense of self, Hanna may have developed a sense of guilt for not living up to the expectations set by her parents.

Using Adlerian terms there may have been sibling competition. Hanna may have felt that she had to compete with her cotwin but could not compete; therefore, she became hopeless and started striving towards the useless side of life. It is possible that when she was a baby in the incubator she developed organ inferiority which prevented her from attaching to her mother. This would have began to create her mistaken beliefs at a young age, such as ‘I am unable to care for myself’ or ‘I am not capable of being taken care of’. Relating that to what we know about twins and attachment, this may have also negatively affected how Hanna attached to her twin. Unable
to form healthy attachment, she could have resentment towards her twin for not feeling a sense of attachment with her.

According to Friedman (2014), “in families where twins have not been given the chance to define themselves as separate from each other, they often grow up in a relationship that resembles a dysfunctional marriage” (p.23). Sometimes parents can subconsciously give up their role as nurturer to the twins, expecting them to take care of one another. Their relationship becomes one that is based on pleasing - focusing solely on pleasing and being pleased by the other twin. The result is neither twin can develop a unique sense of their distinctive likes and dislikes nor to know what it means to be authentically close to someone. The twin closeness then becomes an obligation, not a choice, leaving one or both of the twins feeling resentment or guilt.

It is possible that Hanna and her twin were expected to take care of one another, or perhaps Hanna felt that she was not able to take care of her sister, leaving her with feelings of shame or guilt.

Taking into account societal reinforcement, the expectations set by society could have contributed to Hanna neurosis. If society sees twins as a magical set of siblings who should be the same and have a close relationship, then Hanna may have felt ‘less than’ by her peers or by society in general when she felt she was not achieving as much as her sister. It is interesting to note that Hanna saw herself as “evil” and her sister as “good” because it reinforces the societal myth of there being a “good twin” and a “bad twin”. Perhaps Hanna decided she needed to take one of those roles and chose to be the evil twin. If she was already feeling inferior to her sister, it is likely that the pressures placed by society could have caused her to feel even more inferior.

Finally, it is important to take a look at how birth order may have played a role in Hanna’s neurosis. Hanna and her sister were middle children, with an older brother and a
younger sister. If Hanna and her sister felt more like middle children, they would be the “ignored” ones of the family, which looking at the case synopsis, could be possible. Her parents could have focused on their older brother and then the youngest sibling once she was born, leaving Hanna and her sister to take care of them. Additionally, middle children tend to have the greatest feeling of not belonging (Eckstein, 2000). That feeling of not belonging that comes from being a middle child, paired with the inability to form an identity, could have caused Hanna to feel confused and lost when it came to developing her identity. If twins share a secondborn position they may want to compete with another. As mentioned earlier, Hanna could have tried to compete with her sister only to feel that she could not compete and instead developed feelings of inferiority.

Overall, there may be multiple reasons which caused Hanna’s neurosis. It could have been Hanna’s inability to develop an identity, along with pressures from society to behave a certain way with her and twin or it could have been the family dynamics, including birth order. It is more probable to say that there is a combination of all these factors that lead to her neurosis. The intent of this case study was not to make any definite conclusions, it was to consider how identity development and birth order could play a role in the neurosis of an identical twin.

**Conclusion**

**Restatement of the Problem**

With the rate of identical twin births rising, it is becoming more imperative that clinicians have resources available to help them effectively work with identical twins. Identical twins have a unique experience unlike anyone else; therefore, they may require a more specific therapeutic approach. There is a gap in the literature when it comes to identical twins and identity development. More specifically, there is a gap in the literature when researching how Birth Order
Theory can apply to identical twins. With Birth Order Theory being a prominent tool used by many Adlerian clinicians, it is imperative that these clinicians have research available on how birth order theory applies to identical twins so that identical twins can receive more beneficial treatment.

**Further Questions and Recommendations for Further Research**

This paper provided an overview of the current literature on identical twins and identity formation as well as how Birth Order Theory can apply to identical twins. While this paper explored some possible hypotheses as to how Birth Order Theory can be applied to identical twins, more extensive research needs to be conducted in order to make any final conclusions. Perhaps the theory will need to be expanded to include another position that specifically fits for identical twins, or perhaps identical twins will always have a unique position that will differ according to the family. Only further research on this topic will be able to help answer those questions. Additionally, further research on birth order will help Adlerian clinicians with developing their therapeutic approach, such as how they will do a lifestyle assessment. Twins might need a specific section within the lifestyle assessment in order to account for the unique factors that can attribute to the client’s neurosis when the client is an identical twin as well as help the clinician understand the family atmosphere and family constellation.

Further research looking at identical twins and identity development should be conducted in order to specifically look at how twins emotionally develop. More specifically, research should look at mental illness with identical twins. While there is some research in the issues that can arise for identical twins, such as the effects of separating, there is limited research on the mental health disorders that most often occur with identical twins. Researching mental health issues more commonly seen in twins then exploring why those disorders develop will help
with understanding the development of twins. Research on identical twins and how media and societal pressures add to their mental state would also be useful as technology and social media continues to be a growing presence. Knowing how this could contribute to a mental health disorder would help clinicians in developing the best treatment plan for an identical twin.

Summary and Conclusion

The unique experience shared by twins is unlike any other sibling experience. They grow up having another person next to them from the minute they are born and have to learn to share their environment from an early age. There are many benefits that can come from having this unique experience, such as always having a best friend by one’s side and having a close bond that is unique to their relationship. On the contrary, being an identical twin can also cause one to become confused when trying to figure out “Who Am I”. There can be issues with identity development when a twinship is treated as one unit and both twins are not encouraged to find their own identity. This can lead to feelings of anger, bitterness and guilt later on in life. It is important from a clinical standpoint to understand the twinship when it comes to the relationship itself, and how that relationship impacts the identity formation of each twin. There are specific issues that can arise from being an identical twin; therefore, it should not be treated like a normal sibling relationship.

From what the current research says, there are specific factors that contribute to the identity formation of identical twins. Identical twins do form an attachment starting from a young age. They use each other as a safe haven, or as a place in which they find safety and security. They prefer to play together and share friends. It is evident that identical twins find comfort in one another throughout the lifespan.
After forming an attachment, there comes a time where separation must occur. The separation process involves several stages including anxiety, denial, anger and grief. It can be a difficult time if one twin tries to avoid the separation process and can often lead to feelings of resentment. In order to successfully separate it is important for each twin to accept the loss and be ok with their relationship.

How the family unit functions effects how twins develop their identity. For example, if the mother and father treat the twins as a single unit this will discourage them from developing unique identities. Similarly, some parents unknowingly support twin stereotypes by dressing the twins in the same clothes or giving them rhyming names, thus keeping the twins as single unit. The twin’s relationship with the parent’s also affects attachment. If the mother or father is not present enough in the twins’ life they may attach to each other instead leading to an unhealthy form of attachment.

Each twin will need to be able to have their own identity while establishing the boundaries within the twinship. Throughout this development there is much room for neurosis to develop as a twin may feel confused about who he or she is or may feel pressure to behave a certain way or to have a certain relationship with his or her twin. Regardless of the discomfort finding one’s identity may cause, it is important that each twin find’s his or her unique identity in order to properly function independently as an adult.

When researching Adler’s theory on birth order, there is minimal information that can be found pertaining to identical twins. Hypothetically, each twin may occupy two different ordinal positions. More specifically, one twin would take the firstborn role and the other win would take the secondborn role. This is plausible as research shows with nontwin siblings one sibling can “dethrone” the other causing that sibling to strive in a different direction. Identical twins could
compete with one another for their mother and father’s attention with one twin ultimately taking the leadership role in the family and the other twins finding a different role in the family.

The second hypothetical scenario is identical twins could both occupy the same ordinal birth order position. If they were to both be in the firstborn position, they would most likely hold a close relationship with their parents and experience the high expectations that are often set on firstborns by the parents. Where there seems to be dissonance is if another sibling was born. The sense of abandonment often felt by a firstborn child after a sibling is born would be different seeing that the twins already have a sibling, thus making it seem less likely identical twins would both hold the firstborn position. If the identical twins both held a secondborn position, it is possible that they would “size each other up” and compete. A middle child’s personality could develop in numerous ways, thus it is unpredictable how the twin’s personality would develop. Likely, they would both be good mediators, learning to negotiate and compromise with one another as well as having a need to make things fair.

Overall, conducting further research through an Adlerian lens will further lead to the development of tools that can be used by clinicians to effectively work with identical twins. The framework of Adlerian theory finds importance in the family constellation and family atmosphere which makes it a useful theory when exploring the identity development of identical twins as current research shows that identical twins form their unique relationship from an early age and the family system effects that relational development. Identical twins will therapeutically benefit when clinicians have this framework from which to work from.
References


