Birth Order and Romantic Relationships

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By:

Sarah Helgeson

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Abstract

There are many things that make up who a person is and behaviors or beliefs that they have based upon many factors within the family. One type of circumstance, posed by Alfred Adler, is birth order within the family unit. Individuals around us encounter troubled relationships, broken marriages, break-ups and fights within adult romantic relationships. This thesis will examine the birth orders and characteristics originally posed by Alfred Adler and then looked upon by others interested. This thesis will also cover some popular questionnaires used in marital satisfaction and the conclusion of what birth order is in comparison to romantic relationships.
Dedications

To my Parents, Family and Friends, thank you for supporting me through my graduate school experience. Your love, support and encouragement when I most needed it has helped me grow into the person I am today and set me sailing on the person I am yet to become.
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Birth Order and Romantic Relationships

Intimate relationships and marriages don’t always last. A variety of factors impact a relationship with another adult and some of these things come from our own personal lives prior to meeting the individual we have chosen to be with either for the moment or for the rest of our lives. The make up of who we are and our personalities begin to take shape as a young child with birth order and amongst other things as well. Relationship troubles whether they are in marriage or outside of marriage should be studied to assist adults in relationships with factors of themselves that negatively and positively influence their relationships to be better able to have fulfilling relationships with others and to help individuals in the helping profession be able to dissect someone’s personality and what they are doing in their relationship, how it affects their partner and ways to mesh with their partner of choice in a more fulfilling way.

**Statement of the Problem**

There are various forms of factors that relate to relationship satisfaction and in adults in romantic relationships. Different birth orders of individuals have different characteristics that may not fulfill the factors of individuals in relationships leading to failed marriages, failed relationships, or dissatisfaction in their current relationships.

The consequences of failed marriages can be devastating factors to individuals, to families and also monetary stress and so on. Having an idea of some of the factors to look for when seeking out a relationship partner could potentially help individuals have more satisfying relationships and also eliminate divorce situations by better knowing about the different points that each birth order is coming from.
Research Question

Does birth order of an adult individual have an affect on the quality of romantic relationships?

Significance of the Study

This literature review aims to answer how birth order affects romantic relationships among adults. The goal of finding the outcome of this research is to be able to better help individuals in the helping field of psychology in working with couples regarding their relationships. Also, there are hopes of professionals being able to educate clients on their birth orders and also to be able to point out challenges that may be faced when different or similar birth orders are involved in romantic relationships together.

Assumptions

- It is typical for marriages and intimate relationships to encounter some problems.
- Birth order is an important factor in the creation of a person’s personality and behaviors.
- Individuals could improve their relationships with more information on their own personality either by themselves or with the help of a therapist.

Limitations

This thesis is limited to a quantity of 30 references including but not limited to academic journals, books and online references. Some sources were not current but explained more fully the teaching of Alfred Adler on birth order.

Definition of Terms

Duplication Theorem- Relationships resembling “the earlier and earliest (intrafamilial) social relationships of the persons involved” (Toman, 1976, p. 80).

Dethroned- To be moved from current position in the family into a less hierarchical position.
Life Lines- “The lines of talk we feed ourselves and learn to believe about ourselves. All life lines begin with “I only count (am valuable or worthy) when I…”” (Leman, 1985, p.112).

Style of life/Life Style- “Our perception of how we fit in the world” (Leman, 1985, p.113).

“Comparable to the psyche, personality. It is what we are, who we are, what we want to be. It is involved in the uniqueness of each person, and that person’s unique way of striving for superiority” (Daniels, 2014, Style of Life section para 1).

Birth Order: Introduction

The study of birth order started with the psychologist Alfred Adler in 1918, when he began his focus on dethronement. The dethronement of the first-born child in the family happens when another child is brought into the family and the oldest child now has to share their home environment and essentially their attention with their new sibling. (Hartshorne, Salem-Hartshorne & Hartshorne, 2009) “Of course, children in the same home share certain conditions, but the psychic situation of each child differs because of the order of their birth” (Adler, 1937, p. 244). Each position has adult attributes and undertakings that emulate how these undertakings were carried out when individuals were young adults (Kalkan, 2008).

Alfred Adler came up with different birth orders for individuals within a family unit. “It has been theorized that each birth order position carries with it a set of personality traits” (McGuirk & Pettijohn, 2008, p. 37). The birth orders that Adler came up with are first born, middle, youngest and only child. Each birth order is characterized with specific characteristics that tend to be common within a group of individuals. Also, “the nature of the family environment experienced by each family member differs” (Sullivan & Schwebel, 1996, p. 54). Personality traits that people acquire and their different exposure in the world will develop other traits not related to birth order (Tharbe & Harun, 2000).
Individuals can perceive their position differently than what it is in an ordinal position (Nelson & Harris, 1995). Not everyone will take on the roll that they were born into with their position in the family. This could be the fact that possibly each child experience different treatment from the parents based on their birth orders and that they also receive this treatment differently. Children will be asked to give to the family in different ways as well. Due to these unique situations and different experiences, these children will develop different strengths and weaknesses that differ from their siblings (Sullivan & Schwebel, 1996). It is thought based upon evolitional models that parents are likely to treat their children respectfully. However, this is also based upon variables such as the parent’s age, the children’s ages, the children’s position in the family, and the sex of the individual children. Parents whom are older in age have been seen to have more of an investment in their children in comparison to younger parents (Salmon, 20003). The different birth orders tend to attain different understanding about how relationships work and how others should interact with them. In addition they attain ideas about how they are supposed to relate to others as well (Sullivan & Schwebel, 1996). “The development of such a family role marks a significant milestone in the journey to fulfill the basic human need to belong and to play a meaningful part in the family, work, and community groups” (Stewart, Stewart & Campbell, 2001, p.363).

**First Born**

First-born children start out in life as the only individual in the family. They are the sole receivers of attention and love from their caretaker(s), much similar to the only child. This start in life leaves the first born to start out in this world as a spoiled child. Once the family decides to add another sibling to the family, the first-born child becomes dethroned from their position as the one and only child and also therefore does not become the sole receiver of love and attention.
by being the only child in the family (Adler, 1937). The oldest has been described as being the one in the family that feels dethroned. As a result of being dethroned this is the child that needs to battle to attain his or her significance. The aftereffect of this leaves a child who is aiming for power and acceptance (Perlin & Grater, 1984). The first born child then sets out to regain the love and attention that has been lost to the new sibling in the family.

The child will try and regain this from the family by re-doing behaviors that had previously attracted the attention of the parents in the past before the new sibling had arrived. If the behavior that used to elicit attention from the family does not work the child may resort to behaviors that are not considered good but that will elicit a response and attention from the family. Some children in the first-born position resort to acting like a baby to gain attention from the parent, acting helpless at times and mimicking the behaviors of the new baby. First-born’s that have been “dethroned” may also prolong illness or play sick to get the attention that they feel they have lost (Adler, 1937).

The first-born child has to take on new responsibilities once the new child is brought into the family and the parents will no longer treat the first-born child the same way as they did before. The first-born will suddenly become more mature in the parents eyes and is expected to do more for himself/herself going forward. The parents may not be as tolerable of less mature behavior and will put expectations on the child for them to grow up so that they do not need to assume additional responsibilities of caring for younger children together. Sometimes the oldest becomes the child that is target of anger and frustration and will often unfairly be scrutinized for not performing tasks at a higher level to the standard of the parent. There is a chance that the child can develop feelings of inadequacy as a child and into adulthood if the child takes their scrutiny to heart or the first-born can become angry with this and rebel (Forer, 1969).
In some cases the first-born child doesn’t lose their spot as the center of attention and therefore may not develop the same response as a child with the situation that typically happens. “By virtue of his native endowment and development, or because the second child’s inferiority, ugliness, organic handicap, or bad behavior, the eldest child may be so firmly fixed in his parent’s favor that he cannot be supplanted” (Adler, 1937, p. 247).

The only child tends to be close to their parents more so than the children that follow. This is said to happen because even though the oldest child has younger siblings, they still look up to the next rank in their family, which is the parents (Forer, 1969). They have a more difficult time in forming friendships with their peers more so than other birth orders. “The effect of emphasizing achievement, competition, and authority may lead to a less attractive personality” (Forer, 1977, p. 126). Oldest children tend to be less concerned with social interactions with peers than the other birth orders. Sometimes this can be seen by other peers as acting superior and better than the rest of the people around you leaving the oldest child to sometimes be alienated for their personality (Forer, 1977).

First Born Adult

“Firstborns are often achievers because they are driven toward success and stardom in their given fields” (Leman, 2009, p. 81). Some of the qualities of a first born are “perfectionist, reliable, contentious, a list maker, well organized, hard driving, a natural leader, critical, serious, scholarly, logical, doesn’t like surprises and a techie” (Leman, 2009, p. 81). It is also noted “firstborns feel more pressure to please others. They tend to be more sensitive, anxious, and want to know the rules, so they can follow them. They hesitate to share their feelings and thoughts because they worry others may not find them acceptable” (Sullivan & Schwebel, 1996, p. 55).
They tend to seek approval and “are susceptible to social pressure, and have a tendency to change opinions to agree with others” (Forer, 1977, p. 43).

Oldest children tend to do well both vocationally and educationally compared to their younger siblings. They tend to have higher grades in school and tend to go on to colleges and graduate schools. Oldest born adults tend to set high achievements and responsibilities for themselves (Forer, 1969).

“The experiences of the oldest child often make him seem old beyond his years and often more serious than other children” (Forer, 1969, p. 100). The experiences of the oldest child in childhood transfers into adulthood this way due to their additional responsibilities and the caretaking that they often times assume or are expected to assume. Also, the fact that they have to grow up much more quickly than other siblings once the second child is born is a large influence on this aspect. Along with their push to grow up the child is often under stricter pressure from their parents and therefore has more of a stricter outlook on themselves (Forer, 1969).

Adlerians talk about the life style or the style of life and the life lines that we say about ourselves. For those who are first born, a typical life lines that could come from them would be, “I only count when I’m perfect.” Another life line could also be “I only count when I’m in control.” For the first born adult who has grown up in a world that could possibly be trying to lead the pack of children and to succeed and by perfect to gain attention back from the family members that came along and took away your standing as the only person in the family. Showing perfectionism and control in the family gained respect and what was possibly taught through the behaviors of the family members including the siblings in the family and the race that was on within the family (Leman, 1985).
Middle Born

The middle born child has never had the opportunity to experience being an only child like the first-born child has. The middle child has always had to share the attention and the love of the family from the beginning. They are born into a very different situation than the first-born and therefore establish different objectives in life.

The middle child has parents who have already experienced being parents and therefore more experienced than when the first child came around. This leads the middle child to be a more relaxed child and not as driven as the first-born child in the family. The middle child for a time frame is the youngest child in the family with no younger children below him/her. At some point in time the middle child no longer is the youngest child and becomes the middle child. The middle child doesn’t experience the same dethronement as the oldest does because the middle child has always had to share their attention with their older sibling and therefore the situation of the dethronement is not as traumatizing as it is to their older sibling (Forer, 1969).

The birth order of middle born children is not as predictable as the other birth orders because they can go either way, meaning that they tend to take the opposite role of the oldest child in their family. “The bottom line is that the middle child is “iffy”- the product of many pressures coming from different directions. More than any other birth order, you must look at the entire family to understand a particular middle child” (Leman, 2009, p. 153). It is described that the middle child is stuck in between older and younger children within the family and therefore accentuate their competence in accommodation and tactfulness (Perlin & Grater, 1984). “The middle child often is more excitable, demanding, attention getting, and undependable than the older and younger children are” (Forer, 1977, p. 51). This can be described as happening because they have a feeling of being stuck in the middle and needed to make themselves known. Children
in the middle birth order position may feel slighted and out of place, and may take longer to find their role within the family” (McGuirk & Pettijohn, 2008, p. 38).

“The characteristics which the middle child may develop as a result of being in his place in the family, and his general comfort with his position positions seem to depend on the following four conditions: 1) the sex of the middle child, 2) the sex of the siblings, 3) the number of children in the family, and 4) where the middle child stands within a group of middle children in his family” (Forer, 1969, p.113). If the middle child is the same sex as the rest of the family members, then the difficulty of that position increases in the family. If the oldest and the middle are of a different sex, they will tend to be more cherished by the family member of the same sex. The next factor has to do with the following sex of the children that follow that determine the type of situation and environment that the middle child grows up in (Forer, 1969).

The middle born establishes more of a race with their first-born sibling. The first-born decides how fast or how slow the race is going to be and then the middle child sets out to surpass the first-born child in whatever way possible. Depend on the courage of the child, the child may chose to try to surpass the oldest in something that the oldest is good at or the child if he/she has less courage will opt to surpass the oldest child in another field or way (Adler, 1937). When seen within a childhood interaction, the oldest and the middle child will be contradicting what the other sibling wants from things such as who wants the door open and who wants it closed and so on (Adler, 1937).

“The second boy or girl may meet social contacts with devious methods of gaining and objective or with unusual aggression” (Forer, 1977, p. 128). Sometimes this leads to acting out in the classroom and at home to gain attention from those around them. Some children will resort to pinching and hitting other children as well (Forer, 1977). If they are later middle children,
meaning that they have at least 2 old siblings above them but are also not the youngest, they tend to adjust better than the child that is in the middle of three children. “They are more likely to accept quarrels and anger as passing, rather than permanent, features of their lives” (Forer, 1977, p. 129). They also tend to be more easy going and be able to do things on their own, which helps them socially in school peer interactions and initiating those types of friendships (Forer, 1977).

**Middle Born Adult**

Later on in the life of the middle child, they have troubles with being able to accept leadership. “He will be much more inclined to believe, rightly or wrongly, that no power in the world is invincible” (Adler, 1937, p. 250). Some qualities of the middle born child are “mediator, compromising, diplomatic, avoids conflict, independent, loyal to peers, many friends, a maverick, secretive and unspoiled” (Leman, 2009, p. 153). “Middle birth position children are often peacemakers in the family” (McGuirk & Pettijohn, 2008, p. 38). The middle child adult tends to exhibit ambitious and competitive characteristics. They have learned indirectly to be competitive with others by watching those in their families. Often referred to as sneaky individuals they use personal charm to get things that they desire. Sometimes their tendency to be competitive is hard to control in adulthood in many of the situations they will encounter, such as schooling, work environments and their friendships (Forer, 1977).

Middle children would do well in “occupations where personal charm, ability to arbitrate, and the ability to manipulate rather than to take direct action involving others” (Forer, 1969, p. 121). Being in sales positions or in politics are good career paths for middle adults to find their spot in. In fact, many of the more successful politicians in the United States have been middle born adults (Forer, 1969).
Typically friendly when it comes to social groups, middle children are used to being intermixed with people and are not used to have much privacy. They enjoy staying busy and having things going on around them and being involved in activities. They were never the focus of attention for long periods of time in childhood and are therefore comfortable with sharing the spotlight with other people around them (Forer, 1969).

In their futures when they think about getting married, they tend to not be as picky with whom they decide to marry. They tend to be flexible in meeting the needs of their potential partners especially with a woman who is a middle child. They tend to be more comfortable as parents and enjoy the parenting experience more so than other birth orders (Forer, 1969).

As far as the life line of the middle born child it is said that in most cases the thought process of the middle child is “I only count when I avoid conflict.” The middle child whom has become an adult has grown up in an environment where they needed to be peacemakers and to please others, which then carries on into adulthood (Leman, 1985).

**Last Born/Youngest Child**

The last-born child never has to experience dethronement and therefore develop captivating, approachable and reliant behaviors (Perlin & Grater, 1984). However, these children do have parents that may have averted attention to accommodate the other children in the family and not just the newest born child, the youngest (Sullivan & Schwebel, 1996). The last-born is in a better position because in most cases the family is in a better state financially and also with experience in raising children. Therefore the last-born child usually has a better chance of being better educated than the previous siblings before him/her. The child ends up being spoiled by the whole family in most cases including being spoiled by the older siblings. The last born somewhat assumes a position of the middle born child in the case of striving and racing against his/her
siblings. In most cases the last-born child will not be able to out-do the oldest child and will therefore take on a different task of excelling in something completely different than the rest of the family (Adler, 1937).

The last born child is born to a family who is experienced in raising children and is comfortable with doing so as the previous children have been a sort of practice for the last and final child in the family. The last-born tends to be less disciplined than the previous siblings in the family and they don’t receive as many conversations regarding achieving in the world. Due to this upbringing the youngest child is found to be “more spontaneous, original and creative than children from earlier ordinal positions” (Forer, 1969, p. 124).

“The youngest child, too, may develop a habit of tattling on others as a way of establishing his position as being on the side of the parents and, at the same time, utilizing his strength in competing with the siblings” (Forer, 1969, p. 126). Tattling on the other siblings, screaming and tears are used as a form of manipulation to the parents. “As he grows older the youngest child may be more likely to use pleading, whining and complaining to get what he wants rather than temper tantrums or direct, aggressive actions” (Forer, 1969, p. 126).

A negative consequence could be that the youngest child could end up being too overly stimulated by those older than him/her. This type of experience can lead to the child who grows up wanting and needing to be supported by others. The last born may not develop the skills needed in providing or taking care of themselves on their own and always want to rely on the help of others around them in getting through life successfully. Although this is factor, it is determined that the satisfaction of the youngest child role based on the size of the family and that a family size of 6 or larger yields more positive responses to being a youngest child (Forer, 1969).
“Youngest children join the social network according to the way they are treated by older members of the family” (Forer, 1977, p. 131). If they are treated kindly by their family members and are played with gently, they will tend to do the same with others and other younger children than them. They will make excellent caregivers to a family pet. If they are teased, beaten up by their older siblings they may have issues in developing trust and confidence in relation to the kindness of others. They may also develop a fixation on a particular sibling of their choosing (Forer, 1977).

**Last Born/Youngest Adult**

“Many of the most successful men of our time were youngest children” (Adler, 1937, p. 253). Some qualities of the last-born child are charming, people oriented, tenacious, affectionate and engaging, uncomplicated and attention seeking (Leman, 2009, pp. 187-188). “Youngest children are viewed as spoiled or babies and tend to be more free spirited, social and cooperative than firstborns” (McGuirk & Pettijohn, 2008, p. 38). They tend to be “a most pleasant companion, one with whom it is possible to relax and enjoy oneself” (Forer, 1969, p. 133).

Last-born adult would excel in a position of authority due to the fact that they have had practice in childhood getting what they want from others. They tend to be comfortable in a position. They are more likely to become demanding as adults if in their childhood they were put it situations where they were controlling their older siblings (Forer, 1969).

Last-born adult will likely marry and the choice of mate is typically an older individual who fits the ordinal position of middle or oldest child in the family. However it has been noted that this may not be the best combination if the youngest adult feels overly dominated by the older ordinal position (Forer, 1969). “It is very important for the youngest child to continued to feel loved and cherished by the spouse” (Forer, 1969, p. 135).
When it comes to being a parent, “the youngest child may sometimes compete with the children for the attention of the spouse” (Forer, 1969, p. 136). When they are now in the position of being the adult figure in the family they are sometimes in awe at the fact that they need to take care of another human being instead of being the one that is being taken care of by others (Forer, 1969).

The last-born adult typically follows this life line, “I only count when I’m noticed.” Last-born’s like to have others be of service to them, manipulate others, and to just have fun in life (Leman, 1985). The last born children turned adults now never had the battle with a younger sibling and therefore because the notice of all the people around them in their family and therefore had practice in being noticed and made it a life line that they live with and can struggle with in adulthood. This also can lead to quick moments of anger due to the fact that they were picked on possibly as a child by their older siblings (Forer, 1969).

**Only Child**

The only child never encounters having to deal with dethronement or being in a race with other siblings. The only child therefore maintains the center of attention within the family and does not have to put forth any effort to be in this position (Adler, 1937). “Only children are also viewed as spoiled because they are the only focus of the family” (McGuirk & Pettijohn, 2008, p. 38). The only child “forms a style of life based on being supported by others and at the same time ruling them” (Adler, 1937, p. 256). Although they are the only ones in the family, only children often think about having a sibling and wishing that they did have one (Stein, 1999). They often more than any other birth order feel lonely because there are not other siblings to talk to, noise in the home or quarreling over what the children need to share together. Only children tend to show fewer amounts of jealous feelings than other children in a family unit that have to
share attention with others. Also, because the only child doesn’t have to share with other family members, they tend to receive more material things than other children their age (Forer, 1969).

The only child tends to grow up in a sheltered environment based on possible fear from the parents of wanting to have more children, not able to have more children or possible medical reasons for not being able to have another child (Adler, 1937). The only child is “influenced by the fact that they are living in a world of adults most of the time” (Stein, 1999, Influence of Siblings, para 2). The only children tend to fall somewhere between the first born and the last born children as far as their personality goes, they tend to be closer to first-born’s in the fact that they are willing and accepting to experiences due to the fact that a majority of their time is spent with people in the adult world and they also identify with authority figures as well (Sulloway, 1996). Only children tend to excel in school and tend to be intelligent, with a potential explanation that only-children more often come from families that have parents with higher grade levels, smaller families and a better socio-economic environment (Forer, 1969).

Only children tend to have only a couple really close friends that they spend a lot of time with and invest a lot of their time in. They tend to form close relationships with the few people that they choose. Sometimes causing concern for the parents thinking that their child will get hurt if one of the friendships doesn’t work out well (Forer, 1969).

Individuals tend to see only children as “sweet and affectionate”. They do usually develop a closer relationship to the parent that tends to give them more and may become hostile towards the other parent that doesn’t give them as much (Adler, 1937).

**Only Child Adult**

“Later in life (only children) may develop charming manners in order to appeal to others, because they have trained themselves this way” (Adler, 1937, p. 257). Only children as adults
tend to like time to themselves and time to sit in quiet as well because they grew up in an environment where they were used to being by themselves and being in environments that weren’t frequently associated with loud children. They tend to feel left out easily due to the fact that they sometimes felt left out as children in regards to doing things with their parents. They weren’t always invited to be included in activities with their parents and therefore that feeling on being left out transfers into adulthood (Forer, 1969).

Only children have some qualities, such as they are “little adult by age seven, very thorough, deliberate, high achiever, self-motivated, fearful, cautious, voracious reader, black and white thinker, talk in extremes, can’t bear to fail, has high expectations for self, more comfortable with people who are older or younger” (Leman, 2009, p. 133). Also, they can be “dominant, verbal, and a perfectionist” (Forer, 1977, p. 9). They tend to have high self-confidence especially if male. They have learned to do things for themselves and are content with doing projects by themselves and are good at solving problems by themselves (Forer, 1977). However due to the fact that the parents tend to baby the only child, even when coming into adulthood it sometimes takes an only child some time to mature and to take on additional tasks and responsibilities (Forer, 1969).

They tend to have unusually close relationships with one or both of their parents. Only children, especially female only children as adults tend to be the ones that will give up their own careers and obligations in life to take care of a sick parent, to help a parent if there is a death of another parent, or in the account of a divorce between the parents. They tend to be called on and relied on more for help within the family when it comes to an aging parent and maintaining their homes and their ability to live in their home (Forer, 1969).
Along with having close relationships with their parents, in adulthood, only children are also like just as they were as children to have a few close friends that they invest a lot of their time in. Females more so than males will rely on their friends to help them make important decisions, to plan events and to run errands with them. They tend to use these adult female friendships as way to fill the role of what their mothers did with and for them when they were younger. The friends that the only adult child tends to pick are usually older than them and sometimes younger but not typically a part of their peer group. Although having close friends in their peer group is also probable (Forer, 1969). They tend to be people pleasers in aspects of their lives from friendships to employment situations and anyone in authority. However interactions that are hostile or affectionate from social interactions in later life may cause distress to the only child adult. Based on the factor that as children they never had to deal with sibling interactions that were of similar nature (Forer, 1977).

Adult only children males tend to marry younger and to not date as many people. Sometimes even having their first sexual encounter be with the person that they end up marrying. If a partner is found that is similar to the mother in the areas of qualities and behaviors, the only child adult male will usually not hesitate to marry her (Forer, 1969).

The lifeline that the only child turned adult typically associates with is, “I only count when I am on control.” Also sometimes seen by the first born adult, the same concept comes into play for the fear of rejection if someone they knew really got to know them and who they really are (Leman, 1985).

**Functional Birth Order**

Instead of just looking at birth order as what you are born into and what is your spot in the family, some choose to look at birth order based on the environment that you are raised in
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growing up. There are some cases where biological and functional birth order actually comes out the same and some instances that they do not (Sulloway, 1996). You see marriages that have not worked that end up in marriages to other individuals, possibly with a spouse with kids of their own and that will shake up the family environment to re-establish birth order positions that the family had already established with the siblings they were born into and not the siblings that they acquire. This position can also be seen in single mothers or fathers who have not been married who have had children and enter into new relationships as well. It may be years of not having a sibling and then having a sibling again (Forer, 1969). This same environmental look can be seen with a family has a death of the child and the new re-establishing of how the family is following the death of the family member. All situations such as stated above can change the family environment and potentially change the birth order of the individual children in the family.

However, age is going to be a difference depending on how old the child is and how much time they spend in the environment growing up with their new siblings. If a child is a lot older and doesn’t spend much time with the family or a potential family member doesn’t have custody of the child then there may be resilience to joining a new birth order rank and the previous birth order that has been established by the child remains somewhat the same (Sulloway, 1996).

In some families, the children are born with larger gaps in between the siblings. In such cases, using first-born’s as an example, “firstborns whose closest siblings are six or more years younger as functionally similar to only children” (Sulloway, 1996, p. 22). It is said that the birth order then re-sets as well with not only just first-born children who have a six plus year gap but also within the different birth orders as well. For example if the last born child thought they were the last born and a family had a baby after than with a six year gap or larger, most likely the last
born would still keep their established birth order and the new child would possess characteristics of an only child.

Chance circumstances such as getting to do something really important that other siblings have been unable to do which affect greatly your experience and development can affect your birth order characteristics. Another topic discussed is parental favoritism to a specific child in the family and the type of sibling relationship that the children in the family have (Sulloway, 1996). Children have a keen sense on if they think someone is favored over other children in the family and also are keen on their sibling relationships and the bonds between the individuals.

**Summary**

The birth orders (first, middle, last/youngest, and only) are examined in this thesis by examining each birth order position and the characteristics and details associated within each birth order. This is done so by examining both the childhood experiences and the adulthood experiences of each birth order. Also examined are alternatives to the ordinal birth order positions and the changes in family to bring about functional birth order within families.

First-born children start out as only children and become dethroned by another sibling who is added to the family. The first-born has to take on new responsibilities as being an older sibling and therefore learns characteristics and lifestyles that follow into adulthood. They aim to maintain power in childhood by doing things to be noticed by their family members whether it is positive or negative attention. These things lead the first-born adult to become a high achiever, perfectionist, a leader, critical of themselves and others, set high achievements and responsibilities, and like to please others. Sometimes pleasing others by changing their own thought process to agree with the others around them.
Middle children are the least precise of all the birth orders because their birth order characteristics depends on criteria such as the sex of the middle child, the sex of the other children in the family, the number of children in the family and where in the group of middle children the middle child stands. If it is a family size of three, then this position as middle is more easily able to understand and therefore more precise. The middle child always has had to share the attention with other siblings in the family. Middle children tend to be easy-going, conflict avoiding, loyal, sneaky competitive, and demanding.

Last/youngest are the last in the family and tend to be spoiled by the entire family. They are often babied, which can continue into adulthood when other family members still refer and treat them as young. They tend to exhibit control over the family members and continue to seek roles in which they are of authority in adulthood to continue the control over others that they learned in childhood. They tend to be spontaneous and charming as well and like to feel loved and cherished by others.

Only children are brought into a family and remain the only for one in that position. This can be due to medical reasons, by choice or various other reasons. Only children are viewed as spoiled to others and they never need to share their parents’ love and affection with another sibling. They do however share the attention of the parents within the parents themselves and their own relationship. Only children are supported by others and have control over their parents. They take this characteristic into adulthood where they are charming to gain control. Only children are content with doing things on their own as they entertained themselves through their childhood and are used to having to find their own entertainment. They do however sometimes feel left out in regards to not having a sibling and being left out of parent activities that they are
not included in and that transfers into adulthood where they are easy to assume the feeling of being left out.

Functional birth order happens when the typical ordinal positions of birth order do not happen in sequence as stated above in the birth orders. The change in the position in the family that a person has may happen due to various circumstances and therefore the child is now put into a different birth order position. These types of changes in birth order can come about with divorce and the re-marrying into a blended family, the death of a child in the family, adoption of a child into the family that disrupts the age difference of the current children and last but not least a larger gap between the ages of the children.

All the birth orders and the circumstantial chances in your position in the family can make up who a person is and the characteristics that they possess. Although not all characteristics are finite to making up whom someone is, they are a starting point to understanding personality characteristics that can be associated with a position in the family, reasons for thoughts and behavior and actions associated with relationships within the family and into adulthood.

**Relationships: Introduction**

Research demonstrates that there are several ways of looking at successful relationships and marriage. Marital satisfaction is explored and examined but not limited to these in the forms of assessments and research include; measure of conflict formula, Dynamic Adjustment Scale (DAS), Marital Stability Scale (MSS), Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (LWMAT) and SCOPE (social, change, organized, pleasing and emotional stability). Some common things that these relationship questionnaires look at are the following: happiness, role performance, finances, recreation, demonstration of affection, friends, behavior, philosophy of life, in-laws,
problem solving, outside interests, leisure time, trust and marital satisfaction. Some of these categories of relationship satisfaction can cross over into birth order and the characteristics associated with each birth order, however not all are applicable.

**Questionnaires on Relationships Satisfaction**

While there are numerous relationship questionnaires and studies, not all are researched based. Individuals are able to take quizzes online from websites for entertainment purposes and then there are questionnaires that are backed up with reliability and validity in their studies and used to come up with information that is helpful in the process of practical therapy. For the purpose of this research, the following individuals and their research related to the following studies have been used in relation to the topic of relationships for the reliability of validity of the research and for the purpose of its use in therapy and the satisfaction of the relationships.

**Toman and Birth Order Relationships**

Walter Toman, who has done studies in the past on the subject of birth order and relationships used a measures of conflict formula in determining the amount of conflict based upon the ranks about the sibling position of the spouse (Gold & Dobson, 1988). This formula has been replicated again as well in other studies to prove their own hypothesis on the subject as well. Other scales that have been used in some studies to account for the quality of the relationship include the dyadic adjustment scale (DAS) and the marital stability scale (MSS). These questionnaires and scoring tools aimed to measure the level of happiness, look at role performance to understand the marriage as a whole together and to also look at some factors that are seen as instable in relationships, such as separation and divorce (Gold & Dobson, 1988).
Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test

An alternative questionnaire that was given to couples was the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (LWMAT). “The Marital Adjustment Test contains the various components that make up a harmonious relationship; happiness, finances, recreation, demonstration of affection, friends, behavior, philosophy of life, in-laws, problem solving, outside interests, leisure time, trust and marital satisfaction” (Bloser, 1993 p. 33). This questionnaire had more questions and more areas covered in regards to relationships than the other studies that have been looked at. Also, this questionnaire has been used for other studies besides just relationship satisfaction, such as with weight loss assistance with couples (Bloser, 1993).

Prepare/Enrich

A popular version of pre-marital and post-marital relationship satisfaction that was started in Minnesota is Prepare and Enrich inventory. This is a research-based inventory that looks at couples that are planning to get married and couples who are already married but that are seeking some guidance in their relationships. The relationship inventory looks at multiple areas of satisfaction including: communication, conflict resolution, roles, sexuality, spiritual beliefs and more (PREPARE ENRICH). Also looked at are the 5 SCOPE personality scales that consist of social (extraversion), change (openness), organized (conscientiousness), pleasing (agreeableness), and emotional stability (neuroticism) (Kaufmann, 2011). The Circumplex model is also taken into consideration in Prepare/Enrich, which looks at cohesion and adaptability from high to low making up sixteen different combinations (Maynard & Olson, 1987).

Adrienne Kaufmann did research on prepare and enrich and marriage and relationship satisfaction and found that “people most often tend to choose partners who have different personalities than themselves” (Kaufman, 2011, p. 8). Which would correlate to individuals
choose relationships where they are not the same birth order (Kaufmann, 2011). Also reported by Kaufmann was that, “in general there is no relationship between personality similarity and marital satisfaction” (Kaufmann, 2011, p. 9). Also, that “couples and individuals with differing personalities reported higher average satisfaction scores than those couples who both scored low on the personality dimensions” (Kaufmann, 2011, p. 10). This finding could be correlated to birth order in the fact that different birth orders show different personality traits and therefore different levels of satisfaction based on the relationship between different birth orders.

**Birth Order and Relationships**

“Adlerian’s propose that there are certain learned, yet almost inherent qualities about an individual’s birth order that determine whether a particular relationship will endure and whether the partners will be happy” (Bloser, 1993 p. 4). As far as the findings of how birth order effects romantic relationships, Walter Toman, a researcher on this topic from 1976 hypothesized duplication theorem, meaning that a marriage that duplicate sibling pattern in each of their own families of origin will have the best chance of long term success and happiness (Gold & Dobson, 1988). He was saying, for example, in a typical heterosexual marriage that if the husband was the oldest child in the family and had a younger sibling that the success would stand in this husband marrying a woman who would fit the role of the younger sibling in the family and vice versa. It is said that where the birth order positions compliment each other completely and in which each spouse in the relationship uses complementary approaches to accumulate self-worth (Vanderkooy & Hayden, 1985). Also, that “the closer the new relationships come to kind the old ones…the better will the person be prepared for the new ones, and the greater the likelihood to last and to be happy and successful” (Bloser, 1993 p. 4).
A study that duplicated the work of Toman conducted by Kemper did a study with husbands and their satisfaction in the relationship. It was found that “men with younger sisters married to women with older brothers are more satisfied than men with older sisters who are married to women with younger brothers” (Bloser, 1993 p. 24). These findings concur with the findings of Toman’s research. Also found was that “men with younger sisters and no older sisters who are married to women with older brothers are more satisfied than men with older and younger sisters who are married to women with older brothers” (Bloser, 1993 p. 24). Kemper derived his conclusion based on “a man’s power, dominance, and a unique American culture. He assumed that dominance leads to satisfaction” (Bloser, 1993 p. 24).

A different study based off the work of Kemper was done by Weller, Natan and Hazi that had to do with research based on women instead of just men from Kemper’s study. The conclusions of this were that “later-born women who married first-born males reported the highest degree of marital satisfaction” (Bloser, 1993 p. 24). This can also be looked at as comparable to the research of Toman and Kemper as it duplicates the way the individuals were raised in their family growing up as children.

The results of the study done by Gold and Dobson concluded, “a significant correlation was not demonstrated between birth order complementarily and marital quality. Therefore, the analysis failed to demonstrate a statistically viable path between these variables of Toman’s theory for either spouse group” (Gold & Dobson, 1988, p. 360). As discussed by Vanderkooy and Hayden, “marital adjustment, as measured, was not found to vary with complementarily of birth-order positions” (Vanderkooy & Hayden, 1985, p. 724). The results failed to display a positive correlation between birth order and marital adjustment (Vanderkooy & Hayden, 1985).
Evidence has found was that it was more typical for husbands and wives to have birth orders similar to each other and for individuals to seek out and be attracted to those with similar birth orders are themselves (Ward, Castro & Wilcox, 1974). “Evidence confirms that like attracts like in terms of environment and socioeconomical status” (Forer, 1977, p. 166). Although it has also been studied that individuals do not have a strong desire for a partner to have the same birth order as himself or herself, couples tended to admire the similarities between each other, more so than the differences (McGuirk & Pettijohn, 2008). The tendency to be attracted to someone who is similar to you is more pronounced as far as answering what first attracted that person to his or her mate. It was hypothesized that finding a mate with a similar personality might be more valuable towards the beginning of a relationship in development than further on in the relationship (McGuirk & Pettijohn, 2008).

“Dr. William Altus did reveal a connection. He found a tendency for firstborns to marry firstborns and laterborns to marry laterborns among the parents of 452 undergraduate students at the University of California in Santa Barbara” (Forer, 1977, p. 166). Dr. Walter Toman found that “oldest brothers of brothers tend to choose youngest sisters and youngest brothers of brothers choose oldest sisters … The theory is that we all learn roles in relation to the age and sex of brothers and sisters and may wish to continue in marriage the roles that correspond to those of childhood” (Forer, 1977, p. 167).

Differences in birth order and how individuals deal with stress also differs. Stress can come up in relationships and different birth orders have been found to handle them differently, which could cause some conflict, differences, or misunderstanding for some couples. It has been shown that firstborns who are females tend to have more demand for affiliation when they are
under stress, and that it in particular does not effect males significantly enough to report (Nelson & Harris, 1995).

Another aspect of relationships that has been studied with regard to birth order has to do with how family oriented a person is. A factor in regards to this has to do with the sex of the individual. It has been found that middle born individuals are likely to have diminished family-orientation compared to first born and last born children. Women also tend to be more family oriented than men (Salmon, 20003).

Infidelity in relationships can lead to many different avenues depending on the couple, such as seeking counseling, going through a separation, going through a divorce, etc. Found was that mating approach was affected by birth order of individuals. The middle born individuals seem to have been the least likely to cheat on a partner that they were involved with sexually (Salmon, 20003).

Based upon a current person in the field of counseling, he stated: “Over the years as I’ve counseled thousands of couples, the most competitive, most volatile, and most discouraged are combinations where both spouses are firstborns or, worse, both are only children” (Leman, 2009, p. 207). Leman also said

But a marriage between two middle children can be destructive too, and so can a match with two babies, the first principle (not a rule) for a riskier kind of marriage: marry someone in your own birth order. If you’re not married yet, and you want better odds for a happier marriage, marry out of your birth order. (Leman, 2009, p. 209)

Leman (1985) mentioned that often times these life lines that the different birth orders tend to possess can often times be detrimental to a relationship. Leman (1985) even referred to the life lines that people believe as weapons in a marriage. In working with couples in a marriage
during his time being a therapist he said that there he works with couples in getting to the bottom of their life lines and helping the other partner in the relationship understand the other and understand their own life lines that they live by. In working on this, it often helps the other partner understand what is important to the other partner and so on.

Leman (1985) said, “many of the first born or only child couples that I see are “one” only in the sense that they have locked horns over something and neither one will back off” (p. 98). During his time as an acting therapist in relationship therapy has come to some of his own conclusion on his own in regards to birth order. Just because a typical birth order has more potential to have problems in the relationship doesn’t mean that someone who is married or in a relationship already should end their relationship. Sometimes just because a birth order is not one that is going to have it easier doesn’t mean that the couples cant learn ways to work through their own birth orders, similar to the life lines mentioned earlier in this paper. Leman (1985) explained that from his personal work in working with couples that first-born’s and only children tend to disagree about everything because they are by nature, “perfectionist flaw finders and nit pickers” (pp. 98-99). Insinuating that dealing with first-born’s and only children tend to be more complicated and need to be made aware of their potential behaviors that could cause conflict in their relationships. Only children consequently tend to “marry with even more idealistic and sometimes unrealistic expectations about what the marital relationship is to be like than the average person does” (Forer, 1969, p. 87). The only child in a relationship is looking for a marriage that doesn’t leave them feeling lonely and will satisfy that need along with making sure that they feel secure in their relationship and life (Forer, 1969).

In 1997, Siegal came up with a chart of how your birth order plays out in your marriage for women readers. If the wife was a first born/only child and she was married to a first
born/only man then “you’re both responsible and strong-willed but compete over who wears the pants. Better to take turns making the big decisions” (Siegel, 1997, p. 38). If you are a first born/only wife with a middle child husband then, “you love to run the show, and he lets you. But he may not speak up for what he needs. Learn to ask and he’ll stop stewing” (Siegel, 1997, p. 38). If again with the same first born/only wife but this time with the youngest child man, “you’re serious and conscientious and his humor can pull you out of a funk. But you wish he’d be more reliable’ he’d do better if you’d stop acting like his mom” (Siegel, 1997, p. 38). If the wife is a middle child and she is married to a first born/only male, then “his take charge attitude is a comfort, but you’re such a people pleaser you give without getting. Learn to stand up for your own needs” (Siegel, 1997, p. 38). For the middle woman with the middle man said that “you’re both flexible, but you avoid conflict, so the tough issues get shoved under the rug. Schedule time to talk over problems” (Siegel, 1997, p. 38). For the middle woman with the youngest man, “he gives you the affection you crave; you’re his ballast. His play-now/play-later attitude may cost you, tough, so learn to put your foot down” (Siegel, 1997, p. 38). With the youngest being the wife with the first born/only husband, “you take care of the social stuff; he’s the decision making. Compared to you, he may seem unemotional, but help him open up” (Siegel, 1997, p. 38). For the youngest wife and the middle husband, “he loves that you’re so open; he gives you stability. Although you’re used to getting your way, encourage him to weigh in too” (Siegel, 1997, p. 38) And last but not least on suggestions for birth order mates, the youngest with the youngest, “You’re both fun-loving, but your impulsiveness can put you in a financial hole. Work on communication in order to protect your future” (Siegel, 1997, p. 38). These suggestions are all based on the woman’s perspective and made as quick statements but you can see how they quickly address the points to watch out for which match with some of what has been said before.
Divorce

Divorce can come about for various reasons and in various marriage situations. Not all marriages last as can be determined by the divorce rates and the need for marriage counselors, divorce attorneys and so on. Although birth order is not a single entity in a divorce situation, there is information regarding some of the divorce rates from 1977. Although this is not the most current divorce statistics related to birth order, this is one of the only studies found that combined the two criteria together. Found was that, “the highest rate of divorce and separation occurred among the men who were only children. Next highest were the youngest men. Male oldest’s had a relatively low divorce rate, as did middles of three or four children” (Forer, 1977, p. 171). As far as women and divorce rates amongst birth orders it was found that the highest was for youngest children, lower for firstborns, followed by middle children and leaving the only children to have the lowest (Forer, 1977).

Summary

Alfred Adler’s birth orders examined were first born, middle born, youngest/last and the only child. Adler had specific thoughts regarding the birth orders, how individuals perceived their order in the family and the things that they learned from those experiences in their position in the family. Neither of birth orders has the same experiences or the same perceptions within a family. Although the experiences amongst the sibling positions across different families has resulted in the study of birth orders and the general conclusions that have been publicized today.

There are many different questionnaires and tests that can be given to individuals to capture what seems to be some of the factors in relationships that lead to relationship satisfaction amongst couples. Although the ones examined have their differences, they also incorporate some similarities as well. All of them aim to satisfy the aspects of a relationship that are deemed
important to others. Some of the things that are covered within the questionnaires are topics such as; happiness, finances, recreation, demonstration of affection, friends, social, behavior, organization, pleasing, philosophy of life, in-laws, problem solving, change, outside interests, leisure time, trust and emotional stability (Blosner, 1993; Maynard & Olson, 1987).

The findings of Toman, Kemper, Weller, Nata and Hazi all justified the findings of Toman who said that relationships are more successful to individuals if it follows duplication theorem (Gold & Dobson, 1988). This stating that individuals will have higher relationship satisfaction if they marry someone in who fits their sibling pattern in their own family than if they married someone out of their sibling pattern. Kemper’s study justified that in particular men who were in a more dominant position of power, such as the older sibling with the power over the other siblings, that this person tends to rate their relationship satisfaction higher than other couple combinations (Bloser, 1993). Weller, Nat and Hazi took a different approach than the others as they did their research based on women instead of men like the other ones did. Even with switching the angle of the research, the findings of their study followed closely to the duplication theorem of Toman.

Although many have duplicated the studies of Toman and his duplication theorem, and got similar results, Gold and Dobson did not get the same findings as the previous research had stated. They said that the relationship correlation between birth order and satisfaction was not a significant correlation. Making this theory not necessarily a foolproof answer to relationship satisfaction.

Also discussed was the tendency for individuals to be in a relationship with someone who has similar birth orders as themselves. Dr. William Altus found that last-born’s tended to marry last-borns and first-borns tended to marry first-borns (Forer, 1977, p. 166). Meaning that
individuals are attracted to someone who is like them and who is similar to what they know best, which is themselves. However, it was found by McGuirk and Pettijohn (2008) that individuals don’t tend to desire someone who has the same birth order as themselves.

Although relationship tend to flock towards being with someone who has a similar birth order as the individual, it has been found that some of the worst combinations seen by a practicing marriage and family therapist has been with couples who had the same birth order. (Leman, 2009, p.201) Leman found that some of the worst combinations are between first-borns married to first-borns and only children married to only children (Leman, 2009, p. 201).

Each person’s life line, that each birth order tends to gravitate towards, can be detrimental in a relationship between two individuals. Learning the life line that each birth order tends to gravitate towards and knowing your own life line can help you see some of the ways that you look at the world and things around you and ways in which you look at relationships and how they are supposed to be.

**Methodology**

Numerous journals and other resources were assessed for this research. These included the EBSCO website, six outside books related to birth order and family constellations and online articles and videos from the Henry T. Stein website on classic Adlerian materials. It was found that most of the in depth information about birth order is and the characteristics of birth order were from the 1970s and the 1980s and some prior to that was well dating back to the original who first brought up the concept, being Alfred Adler.

The largest group of information used regarding birth order and the characteristics associated with each birth order was from the personal experiences of marriage and family therapy from Leman and from Forer. Work from Alfred Adler was also used in this thesis in a
great deal to explain birth order as Alfred Adler was the individual who first brought up birth order with individuals and was the one who started looking into it and finding different things about each birth order in the family.

Solloway had the most information on the functional birth order of families and looked into different variations to a typical family set-up, adding in other factors that were possible and that would affect the standings of the individuals in their functional birth order positions.

The greatest amount of information in relation to birth order and relationships was taken from the works of Leman, Toman, Kemper, Weller, Nata and Hazi. Their work on birth order and relationships fit the question being asked in regards to this thesis. Some of the other research done was not related to birth order and romantic relationships but more so geared towards more specifics such as birth order and other familial issues not in correlation to the romantic relationship aspect.

Conclusions

As far as relationship compatibility, “much has to do with the sibling rank and gender” compared to birth order itself (Forer, 1977, p. 169). However, Dr. Theodore found is his research that those marriages in which couples expressed greater satisfaction include: Husbands with younger sister(s) and wife with older brothers, husbands with older sister(s) and a wife with younger brother(s), and husband youngest married to wife who is oldest. Less preferred marriages are: Husband with older and younger sisters married to a woman with older brother(s), husband with older sister(s) married to wife with older and younger brother(s), both husband and wife oldest, and both husband and wife youngest. (Forer, 1977, p.169)
A greater compilation of research examined in this thesis found that a significant amount of people replicated the work of Toman and his duplication theorem. Thus coming up with the conclusion that the individuals who had greatest relationship satisfaction were the ones that married someone who would fit into their own family of origin birth pattern. Specifically meaning that if a male was an oldest sibling and had youngest sister that he would be better off marrying someone who was a youngest female who had an older brother. This bringing in the stipulation that not only does birth order matter in who you are in a relationship with but also the sex of the siblings and the position that they are in within the family. However even though this was a larger grouping of individuals with the same finding it still does not take into play those that did duplicate the same study and did not find the same answers making some of their findings mesh with the feelings that, “research does not agree where birth order and sex of siblings in concerned” (Forer, 1977, p. 166).

A general understanding of the research in this thesis seemed to support the fact that many individuals seemed to be attracted to people who were like them meaning that initial attraction to a person was based on the fact that their birth orders were similar therefore making them compatible in some ways knowing that they understand each other. This tends to be the coupling that a lot of people gravitate towards however according to research and personal experience from therapists this may not be the best combination as far as relationship combinations are concerned.

**Recommendations**

The study of birth order extends back to Alfred Adler in the 1930’s. Since Adler’s time, there has been additional work and research done on birth order and the different characteristics
and aspects associated with each birth order. A significant number of publications on birth order
appeared in the 1970’s and 1980’s, with less research being conducted since then.

It would be interesting to find if current and future research replicates the
findings from the 1970’s and 1980’s. Along with this, it would be helpful to have future evidence
of the links to birth order and relationship satisfaction. Also research and studies related to birth
order and relationship satisfaction and what birth orders are the most compatible together.

There was limited information regarding situations that did not follow the work of Toman
and his duplication theorem. For example, only children do not have as much information in
regards to how to duplicate a sibling pattern. Most of this has to do with individuals who have
siblings and with a sibling pattern that can be duplicated in a relationship. Although the past
research is a good start to understanding birth order and romantic relationships, additional
research could be conducted on birth order and romantic relationships to better be able to help
counselors and clergy members in aiding individuals with learning about their birth order and
how that works in couple relationships.
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