

## BIRTH ORDER AND ORDINAL POSITION:

### TWO ADLERIAN VIEWS

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Adler understood child development in terms of its social context. The social field of the child included not only its parents but also its siblings and other people who occupied the same life space. Birth order and ordinal position provided a reference point for locating the child in relation to siblings as well as to adults. Thus, when Adler spoke of the pampered or rejected child, he was focusing on the parent-child relationship, but when he spoke of birth order it was the sibling relationships that he was examining. Birth order is a fact, a *given*, of the child's existence, a location in a social structure. This location, Adler felt, leaves an imprint which is often recognizable even in adult life; it affects the adult personality.

#### PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS AND BIRTH ORDER

Adler's classic description of the effects of birth order contains the following features: 1) Children of the same family are not born into the same environment. The second child is born into a different psychological situation than the first. 2) It is not the actual order of the birth, but the psychological situation which is important. If the eldest is feeble-minded, the second may assume the role of a first-born. 3) Marked difference in age between siblings tends to reduce competition between them. 4) Birth order is not an absolute determinant, only an influence. The reaction of the parents to the child is at least as important. (Adler, 1964, pp. 96-120).

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*Ordinal position* refers to the actual order in which the child was born; i.e., first, second, third...tenth, eleventh and so on. *Birth order* refers to five basic positions that Adler described which tend to have recognizable characteristics later on in life. These are the *firstborn, second, middle, youngest* and *only*. In our discussion of these positions, it is important to remember that *psychological* position is the important determinant. One child may be an only child for several years and may then find himself in the position of being a firstborn. He may be overrun by the younger sibling, who then becomes, in some respects, like a first born. The oldest may then function like a second born. By reason of physical illness or frailty, an older child may actually function like a youngest.

Shulman and Mosak, while they primarily agree, do not agree totally. The point, or points, on which they disagree follow, first Shulman's view, with the remainder of the article again representing their shared position.

#### *Shulman's View*

Each of these five basic positions tends to have certain characteristics related to the unique early experience of each position. No position is better than another. Each has its good and bad points. Each has its tasks and the adult traits reflect how these tasks were answered in childhood. The characteristic experience of each ordinal position in a normal family structure is as follows:

1. Only child – never had a rival. Peers tend to be curiosities rather than competitors. However, he may have been pampered and never learned to share.
2. Firstborn – he once had it all to himself and would still prefer to be the first and foremost. He tends to feel entitled to rank.

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3. Second child – started late and has to catch up. Someone seems to be ahead of him, a standard bearer against whom he measures himself.

4. Middle child – there is a standard bearer in front and a pursuer in the rear. He is surrounded by competitors. He may feel squeezed into a small area in his search for significance.

5. Youngest child – the trail is well broken and the guidelines are clear. He is never dethroned. On the other hand, he has a lot of ground to cover in order to catch up.

Certain adult traits can often be found in these ordinal positions. The first born is often “a great believer in power and the laws” (Adler, 1964, p.102). He tends to be conservative toward change, perhaps somewhat elitist in his views. The second child is a “runner,” looking for some area of success, more revolutionary in outlook, more willing to follow another’s lead. The middle child tends to be sensitive to mistreatment or unfairness. He is afraid he will miss out on his share. The youngest sets out to catch up to the others, and will be very ambitious. If he has decided not to pursue, he continues in a dependent role. The only child is usually congenial and charming. His social behavior is intended to please rather than to outdo

There are also characteristic variations in these traits, depending upon whether the child experiences himself as “successful” or not. A “failed” first born tends to give up completely. A second child who does not feel able to catch up to his pacemaker switches to an area of endeavor in which he does not have to compete with the eldest. A failed middle child is embittered because he was squeezed out of significance. Life is unfair. The failed youngest remains baby-like—assuming dependent and helpless roles. The failed

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only child is like the failed baby. All of these so-called characteristics are probabilities only, and each case is an individual matter.

*Social role* theory offers another useful way of viewing these ordinal positions. Role is an *organized set of behaviors that belong to an identifiable position in the social structure and these behaviors are activated when the role is occupied* (Sarbin & Allen, 1968, p.54). The psychological position of the child is his role *location* – the way the child locates himself in family structure. Each role carries with it a set of *expectations* about behavior and a set of *demands* for *enactment* of that role. How well the child enacts the role (*role skills*) and how satisfied he is with the role (*self-role congruence*) become important in influencing the relationship between ordinal position and adult traits.

#### MOSAK'S VIEW

Many years ago a man introduced himself to me at a party with “I’m John Doe. I’m a middle child.” We both laughed. Later, as a student of humor (Mosak&Hahn, 1977), I asked myself why I had give way to mirth. True, the manner of introduction was unexpected, and in the unexpected lies one of the foundations of humor. Yet, there was more, His introduction was a spoof of the Adlerian interest in sibling constellation. Akin to our contemporaneously popular interest in astrology, tarot cards, and the like, it promulgated a view which violated the basic assumptions of Adlerian psychology. It preached a narrow determinism – if you were born in a certain family position, then you would turn out thus and so. Those who spoke of a *typical* middle child compounded the violation. The view propounded sounds quite similar to that expressed by the astrologer – if you were born under a certain sign, you would turn out thus and so and you need only

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consult the daily newspaper to receive a minimal description of what you were fated for by the star. If our fate is indeed determined by birth into a certain birth order, we eliminate the freedom of choice of the individual and cast him in the role of victim of his fate, a model of man which Adlerians reject. Even if birth order and ordinal position are held to be important, the individual's perceptions of his position and role and his conclusions about them, rather than the position itself, would constitute the subject of the Adlerian's study.

Adlerians and non-Adlerians alike who conduct diagnoses and research often speak of ordinal position, which we define as describing sibling position as "first," "second," "third," and so forth. Thinking in terms of ordinal position invites several thorny problems. While we have seen descriptions (whether they are accurate is beside the immediate point) of the first child, the second child, and the third child, we have never seen or heard descriptions of the fourth, the seventh or the eleventh child. How are we to understand them? To further complicate the issue many, of these descriptions do not take into account the variable of family size. For example, the second child in a family of two may be (I would say "is") quite different from a second child in a family of eight.

Appreciating these difficulties, many investigators have shifted their terminology from "ordinal position" to "birth order." Rather than speak of first, second, and third children, they speak of oldest, middle, youngest, and only children. Accompanying the new phraseology are several improvements over the ordinal position taxonomies. The second child no longer needs to be described monolithically. In a two-child family, he is

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the youngest in a three-child, he is the middle child. While eliminating some of the problems related to ordinal position, the birth order description raises problems of its own.

What do we do with large families? We can divide them into subgroups and in each subgroup characterize the siblings in terms of birth order. After accomplishing the subgrouping and birth order designation. We must be careful not to attach “typical” descriptions to the siblings or we again violate the Adlerian assumptions. If we do, we may be required to conclude that the several “oldest children,” when we subgroup in large families, share the same traits, e.g., all the “oldest children” in a single family are conservative. Clinical observation runs counter to such a hypotheses.

Even with small families, the problems exist. Take a family of four siblings – A, B, C, & D – which does not lend itself to subgrouping. A is the oldest and D is the youngest, but who are B & C? Are they both middle children and therefore describable in middle child terms? Are they an older middle and a younger middle sharing some middle child characteristics, yet differing on some dimensions or traits because they are older and younger? Or are older middle and younger middle unlike? Or is the older middle more like the oldest and the younger middle more like the youngest? Or is neither B or C a middle child? We do not know. These children might conceivably all function as only children, and as three different kinds of only children, especially since C may use A, and possibly B, as parent surrogates.

If in all these situations they are treated in diagnosis and for research purposes as an older, middle, and younger, then our life style assessment will be in error and our

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research results will confirm no hypotheses other than that many researchers do meaningless experiments.

In summary:

1. The concepts of birth order and ordinal position, as generally employed, violate basic Adlerian postulates.
2. Ordinal position assessment does not permit the treatment of many kinds of data, especially that concerning children after the first three.
3. Birth order assessment, to the extent that it speaks in terms like “the typical only child,” is deterministic and therefore is not consonant with basic Adlerian tenets.
4. Birth order assessment and research is often faulty because it fails to recognize that it is the *psychological* position of the child within the family which is crucial. This can only be understood for each subject idiographically and not through nomothetic laws or other statements of generalization. The criteria explicated in the major portion of the paper provide helpful clues toward the understanding of the uniqueness rather than the typicality of the individual.
5. Trait names which correlate with birth order possess connotative differences. Conservatism, for example, conveys a number of meanings.

I do not study either birth order or ordinal position. My interest lies in the psychological position of each sibling I study. For this reason I have dispensed with these terms in favor of the more attractive but unfortunately still misunderstood, phrase, “positional psychology” (Murphy, 1966).

#### FACTORS WHICH INFLUENCE ORDINAL POSITION

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*Age difference.* Competition between siblings is most keen when they are close in age, and it diminishes with age difference. Generally, children who are seven or more years apart are not in competition with each other. In a two-child family with such an age difference between the children, each child will tend to function more as an only child.

*Large families.* The rule that there are only five basic birth order positions holds true for large families as well. The family perceptions tend to classify large groups of children into older and younger groups. Thus, the third child may actually function as the first born of the second group. The technique of eliciting the family constellation information will show how large families can be sorted into groups. Age difference and gender are the two most important sorting factors in normal families.

*Extra-familial competitors.* In some families, children from outside the immediate family may play the role of competitors. A cousin or younger sibling of a parent may live in the house or close by and may be a competitor for the favor of one of the parenting figures. Family rearrangements, as in divorce and remarriage, may throw together children who now begin to compete. Each case is individual.

*Gender differences.* In some families, the division of role demands is so complete that there is little need for siblings of opposite sex to compete with each other. The oldest girl may have her place as a first born and the oldest of the boys may also function as a first born. Each has a different role and can receive positive reinforcement from the parents for this distinction. In families where there is an only girl among a group of boys, or vice versa, the position of the “one and only” is usually unique; he is valued for himself because he is the only one of his kind and need not compete with the siblings.

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*Death and survivorship.* A child who has lived long enough to become a significant sibling in the family and then dies doesn't usually disappear from the sibling constellation. More commonly, such a child is idealized and remains an ever-present standard of comparison. Since idealization elevates the status of the dead child, the surviving sibling often feels inferior by comparison. The dead child may become woven into family myths and thus affect family values and family atmosphere. The survivor may experience a *role demand* to somehow compensate for the death of the sibling.

One man recalled that his older brother had been the favorite child, a good student, obedient and musically talented. The brother died of an acute illness. A relative said to him, "now you'll have to be a good son to your parents." His feeling was, "I'll *never* be able to do all those things my brother did and now I'll always be a disappointment to my parents."

*Special siblings.* Various factors may create a special role for a sibling. Mental retardation, brain damage, physical defect, and prolonged illness are examples of factors which lead to a special role, requiring more attention and concern from parents. The well sibling ordinarily does not feel threatened by the sick one in these circumstances, but may feel somewhat left out when parental attention is focused on the special sibling.

Another special role occurs when a sibling is unusually talented and therefore valuable to the family for that trait alone. Special siblings do not have to compete for place; their status is assured.

*Roles available.* The family is an ecological unit. The values and atmosphere define that available ecological niches in the family. One small patch of prairie can hold

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many different species of animals, provided they do not intrude upon each other too much. The same is true of the family. A family may have room for one good student, one helpful domestic, girl, one black sheep son, etc. If a second child tries to be a good student, or mother's favorite, or whatever, he intrudes upon a sibling's territory and conflict may ensue, which all too often does not satisfy anyone.

The role of black sheep is sometimes one of the most satisfying roles in the family. It is a dramatic attention-getter – a way of being impressive and important in the family – and the choice of this role by a sibling usually means that he is extremely ambitious to impress and has discovered that misbehavior (and perhaps retaliation) are suitable for this purpose.

Some roles are available to more than one sibling. For example, it is usually possible for a family to have more than one black sheep. At other time, however, one sibling may so outshine the others in some way that the others give up and do not compete in this area at all. Some roles are more available to one sex than to the other. One child may be the unselfish, generous and cheerful one; his sib may be the bossy, critical achiever. The roles complement each other and therefore do not lead to significant conflict. Thus, available roles are determined and constructed and they are perhaps the most impressive example of the creativity of the child as he builds his life.

#### RESEARCH ON BIRTH ORDER

Early research on birth order often failed because researchers made no allowance at all for actual ordinal position or psychological position. Later, more sophisticated research has shown some general support for Adler's theories, but even in these studies,

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ordinal position rather than actual birth order is more frequently treated as the variable. Effective research on birth order will have to take into account many more variables: the actual ordinal position, the psychological position, gender of the children, and parental response to them.

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