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**Psychological separation from parents in firstborn and laterborn
late-adolescents**

Weinberg, Isabelle, Psy.D.

Pace University, 1991

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

PSYCHOLOGICAL SEPARATION FROM
PARENTS IN FIRSTBORN AND LATERBORN
LATE-ADOLESCENTS

by

Isabelle Weinberg

A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology
in the Department of Psychology at Pace University.

NEW YORK

1991

(Please type all information)

NAME: Isabelle Weinberg

TITLE OF PROJECT: PSYCHOLOGICAL SEPARATION FROM PARENTS
IN FIRSTBORN AND LATERBORN LATE-ADOLESCENTS

DOCTORAL PROJECT COMMITTEE:

PROJECT ADVISOR: Jack L. Herman, Ph.D.
(Name)
Assoc. Professor, Pace University
(Title) (Affiliation)

PROJECT CONSULTANT: June F. Chisholm, Ph.D.
(Name)
Asst. Professor, Pace University
(Title) (Affiliation)

FINAL APPROVAL OF COMPLETED PROJECT:

I have read the final version of the doctoral project and certify that it meets the relevant requirements for the Psy.D. degree in School-Community Psychology.

Jack L. Herman
(Project Advisor's Signature)

May 6, 1991
(Date)

June F. Chisholm
(Project Consultant's Signature)

May 15, 1991
(Date)

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It has been a long and arduous journey and I revel in its completion.

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the relationship between birth order and psychological separation from parents in late-adolescent undergraduate college students. Studies of young children had generated findings that firstborn children behaved more dependently than laterborns. Recent reports from university counseling centers suggested that many of the common presenting problems were manifestations of separation difficulties. This study sought to determine whether the firstborn child's greater separation difficulties persisted into adolescence.

It was hypothesized that, compared to laterborns:

- (1) firstborns would be more independent in managing their practical affairs (functional independence)
- (2) firstborns would be less independent, in their need for approval and support (emotional independence)
- (3) firstborns would be less independent, in experiencing excessive guilt, anger, anxiety (conflictual independence)
- (4) firstborns would be less independent in failure to develop their own values and beliefs,

separate from their parents (attitudinal independence) and (5) firstborns would have higher grade point averages.

Sixty students participated. They completed a demographic sheet, a self-report Psychological Separation Inventory (PSI), and wrote a 5-minute spontaneous description of each of their parents (OR).

A discriminant analysis of the data revealed that the birth order function had little discriminating power. T-tests, as well, revealed no significant differences between firstborn and laterborn subjects. None of the 5 hypotheses were supported by the data.

An additional analysis was performed, based on family mobility. No significant results were obtained here. Another analysis related to divorce, death, or illness within the family found a significant result: higher emotional independence scores in relation to mother were achieved by those subjects who had experienced divorce, death or illness within the family.

Future investigation of differences between firstborn and laterborn psychological separation from parents would require more intensive intrapsychic

inquiry in order to counteract inflated independence scores due to defensive maneuvers, as well as a subject pool that has a greater intellectual capacity for abstract reflection and introspection on interpersonal relationships.

PREVIEW

Chapter I

Introduction

The present study seeks to explore the relationship between ordinal position and psychological separation from parents, in late-adolescent college students.

It has been suggested that many of the common presenting problems of students at university counseling centers--such as depression, anxiety, interpersonal difficulties, academic problems, substance-abuse problems--are related to separation difficulties (Bragan, 1980). It is the contention of this author that firstborns experience significantly greater separation difficulties than their laterborn peers.

Psychological separation is the culmination of the separation-individuation process. Mahler, Pine and Bergman (1975) postulated that within the first three years of life, a child's crucial intrapsychic task is to separate from the parent and gain a sense of identity as a separate person. Blos (1979) proposed that adolescence is a time of renewed separation-

individuation. The adolescent must disengage from his parents and embark on a search for new objects. The struggle for detachment from parental authority is fraught with conflict but critical to healthy personality development. This process of individuation remains active throughout the life cycle, generating new derivatives of the earliest processes at all stages of life.

Developmental psychology (Piaget, 1954) and psychoanalytic theory (Mahler, 1968) suggest that from the time of birth onward, certain cognitive and affective structures develop within the individual, as mental representations of important interpersonal interaction and experience. These internalized experiences then serve to direct, organize and give meaning to subsequent interactions with the environment.

Blatt (1974) has formulated five stages in the development of these mental object representations. Initially the object representation is amorphous and global and based primarily on action sequences associated with need gratification, as sources of pleasure or pain. With further development, object representations become increasingly differentiated; the

object is experienced as a concrete, literal, fixed, perceptual totality, separate from the need-gratifying experience; emphasis in this stage is often on physical properties or external characteristics of the object. In the next stage, there is focus on the object's functional activities, ones that are not related to need-gratification. With further evolution, the object is perceived in terms of its thoughts, feelings and values, with limited recognition of subtlety or integration of contradictions. The highest level of representation involves an appreciation of the object in a variety of dimensions. The person is perceived, understood and experienced in an integrated, cohesive and complex manner. These stages of object representation evolve as the individual progresses in identity formation and differentiation.

Alfred Adler (1931) believed that a child's ordinal position within a family had a profound influence on his personality development. He attributed differences in the personalities of the oldest, middle, and youngest child to distinctive experiences each child had as a member of the family group. He described the firstborn as the center of his parents' world until he is dethroned by the birth of

the second child. Adler postulated that this sudden loss of love, attention and appreciation resulted in a strong sense of deprivation, which could mold a lasting style of life. He believed that the firstborn's sudden dethronement could condition the child to behave in various ways, such as hating people, protecting himself against sudden reversals of fortune, and feeling insecure. He thought that oldest children showed greater interest in the past, admired the past and were pessimistic about the future. Adler (1956) hypothesized about the firstborn's concern about power and authority as well:

Sometimes a child who has lost his power, the small kingdom he ruled, understands better than others the importance of power and authority. When he grows up, he likes to take part in the exercise of authority and exaggerates the importance of rules and laws. Everything should be done by rule, and no rule should ever be changed; power should always be preserved in the hands of those entitled to it. Influences like these in childhood give a strong tendency towards conservatism. (p. 378).

Freud (1938, p. 182) commented on the influence of birth order, "A child's position in the sequence of brothers and sisters is of very great significance for the course of later life, a factor to be considered in every biography."

Jones (1953, p. 14) in his biography of Freud, alluded to some of the features that distinguished his circumstances from those of the average child. "He was the eldest child, at least of his mother, and for a time therefore the center of what may be called the inner family. This is in itself a fact of significance, since an eldest child differs, for better or worse, from other children. It may give such a child a special sense of importance and responsibility."

Studies Involving Parents and Young Children

A number of research studies point to the differential parental attitudes and childrearing behaviors affecting the firstborn and the tendency of these practices to promote greater dependency.

The birth of a first child is an unprecedented event in the life of a couple. "The establishment of family structure, environment and system begins with

commitment of the marriage but takes a quantum leap in increased complexity and changing of individual psyche and interpersonal relationships with the birth of the first child" (Johnson, 1985, p. 310).

It is an event fraught with expectation, conscious and unconscious, and anxiety. Westbrook (1978) found that first-time mothers experienced more anxiety during pregnancy than mothers of second and succeeding children. In another study performed on the second day after the delivery of their child, mothers of firstborn infants reported significantly higher anxiety than mothers of laterborn infants (Kochanevich-Wallace, McCluskey-Fawcett, & Meck, 1988). The firstborn thus enters an anxious world.

Many studies have presented evidence of contrasting parental behaviors toward firstborn and laterborn children. One Harvard study of parent-child interactions involving infants and toddlers (White, Kaban, & Attanucci, 1979) found a vast difference, quantitatively and qualitatively, between parent-firstborn and parent-laterborn interactions. Parents responded much more quickly to an overture by the firstborn; verbal input by parents was dramatically different; parents of firstborns spent more than twice

as much time interacting with them than did parents of laterborns. The results of this study revealed that the firstborns surpassed the laterborns by a huge margin in intellectual and linguistic development. Of relevance to the present study is those authors' conclusion that firstborn infants and toddlers are treated differently by their parents and have different patterns of experience than laterborn children, to a significant degree.

In another study comparing parent behavior toward first and second children, Lasko (1954) reported parents verbalizing their anxieties, their ignorance, and their frustrations in caring for the first child. She hypothesized that the adjustment problems that the mother experiences with the first child would contribute heavily to emotional ambivalence; that when she perceived herself as committing errors in her handling of the child, whether from inexperience or misconceptions about child development, the guilt engendered was likely to produce hostility in its turn; and Lasko concluded that, with or without such hostility, there was the likelihood that the mother would be less spontaneous and consistent in her expression of warmth to the first child than she would

be in her attitude toward subsequent children. She also pointed out the unfamiliarity of the parent of a first child with children's capacities and limitations and the tendency to influence him toward conformity with adult stereotypes to an unrealistic degree.

In fact, her findings were that parent behavior toward first children, as contrasted to second, was on the average less warm emotionally and more restrictive and coercive. Systematic changes also occurred as first children grew older, in the direction of reduced parent-child interaction; parent behavior toward second children did not tend to change systematically as the child grew older. She found, in comparing those children who were displaced by the next child at the age of three with those displaced at four, that the former suffered greater loss of warmth and attentiveness from the mother. Lasko also noted that the first child was subjected to much verbal stimulation and attempts to speed up its development during the first two years of life, whereas no such regimen was imposed on the second child. She observed a tendency for disciplinary frictions to be exacerbated in dealing with the oldest child. As mothers had more

children they seemed to develop warmth combined with a sense of strictness.

In another study, Sears, Maccoby and Levin (1957) concluded that the firstborn showed greater conscience development than the laterborn, and they thought that these differences were probably due to the differential handling of the firstborn by parents; that the firstborn had many more limits set to his behavior and suffered significantly more physical punishment and deprivation of privileges. They noted that the father often participated in the disciplining of the firstborn, a practice he did not usually continue with subsequent children. They observed that firstborns were more likely to show dependency-linked behaviors. Stout (1960) also observed that parental control is more strict with the first child than with the second.

In a similar vein, Martin (cited in McArthur, 1956) concluded ". . . the problem most likely to confront the first child is exploitation. He is the one who will be the victim of excessive parental demands and expectations; the greatest hopes and ambitions are attached to him . . . the child who is a little old man before his time."

Hilton (1967) attempted to identify differences in maternal behavior toward first and laterborn children in such aspects as interference and inconsistency. In her study, each child was given puzzles to complete and the mother instructed to remain unobtrusive while observing him. Then the activity was interrupted and the mother given either a success or failure induction: the child's performance was either praised or it was noted that he did not measure up to his age level. Subsequently, the mother was observed interacting with her child. In this study, firstborns, as compared with laterborns, were found to be significantly more dependent. They were more likely to run to their mothers repeatedly to ask for help and reassurance, despite instructions to remain seated. The mothers of the firstborns were more likely to interfere with and direct the firstborns' behavior despite instructions to participate as little as possible. They were more extreme and more inconsistent in their emotional responsiveness to the child. These mothers showed a significant decrease in their supportiveness following the "failure" comments, whereas mothers of laterborns showed little change. There was a higher level of interaction and greater emotional involvement between a

mother and her firstborn as compared with the interaction with a laterborn. The inconsistency and intemperateness of the mother's behavior may well serve to produce dependency in the firstborn child. Hilton noted that there is considerable mention in the literature of independence training for firstborns. She pointed out the distinction between psychological independence (to thine own self be true) and the physical appearance of independence in the assumption of responsible roles. This physical demonstration of independence may be an internalization of the values of the adult culture--not an expression of what the child wants to do. She noted that the firstborn child who has been trained to go to the mailbox alone may actually be less independent than the laterborn who refuses to go.

Psychological independence involves an awareness of the expectations of the environment, an awareness of one's own needs and feelings and an attempt to integrate the two, giving weight to each, not responding solely to obtain the approval of others--at the sacrifice of the self.

Hilton (1967) noted that interference and inconsistency both undermine the child's opportunities

to develop reference points for internal evaluation. Festinger (1954) has pointed out that when there are no objective or internal standards to use as reference points, one is more likely to be influenced by the attitudes of others. When the parent is inconsistent, there is no stable guideline for internalizing the correct course of action. The child cannot predict outcomes on the basis of past performance, and must continue to ask for evaluation because the same behavior will elicit a varying response.

The effect of excessive interference is to create standards that the child must fulfill. He does not set his own goals, but rather achieves the ones set for him. He learns to ask for praise for his activities, and the evidence on excessive support is that if he achieves, he gets the praise. Because he does not set his own goals, he cannot determine whether they have been adequately met. His satisfactions must come from pleasing others. This pattern of relationship between parent and firstborn seems self-perpetuating; the parent finds himself continuing to interact more strenuously with the first, even after the birth of other children.