



Personality and life satisfaction in China: The birth order effect under the influence of national policy [☆]

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ABSTRACT

Individuals' development is a multilayered affair. The influence of family relationship on personality, such as *Sulloway's model* (1996, 2001) focusing on birth order, is subject to influence from other social systems in which the families are situated. The current research examined the relation of birth order to personality and life satisfaction in China, where only children have become the majority because of national policy. Across two studies with both between-family data ($N = 1468$) and within-family data ($N = 171$), onlyborns and laterborns surpassed firstborns on openness to experience. In addition, only-child participants were more satisfied with their own lives than were sibling participants, especially laterborns. The results offer new insights into the dynamic relations between ecology and personality.

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1. Introduction

A series of systems impact the development of individual personality. The microsystem, such as the family, is the innermost system that gives children their first direct, personal, formative experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Although other systems such as exosystems (e.g., parents' workplaces) and macrosystems (e.g., cultural contexts), also play a role by influencing the microsystems, studies have mainly focused on microsystem influences. For example, Sulloway (1996, 2001) focused on the family microsystem by showing that birth order is associated with personality traits through sibling competition over parental resources. Many new but inconclusive findings have dealt with Sulloway's theory, which integrated evolutionary perspective into personality psychology (e.g., Beer & Horn, 2000; Paulhus, Trapnell, & Chen, 1999).

Regarding the birth order effect, Sulloway (1996, pp. 23 and 99) also suggested future research should examine only children as a control group outside the influences of sibling competition. However, in most cultures, only children are rare. Their families are usu-

ally unique in that the parents are likely to be more highly educated or to be single parents (Falbo, 1982). Consequently, past research has usually excluded only children (Beer & Horn, 2000; Dixon, Reyes, Leppert, & Pappas, 2008; Healey & Ellis, 2007; Marini & Kurtz, 2011; Michalski & Shackelford, 2002; Paulhus et al., 1999) or has categorized them as firstborns (Jefferson, Herbst, & McCrae, 1998, Studies 2 & 3; Sulloway, 1996). In contrast, China has a unique macrosystem in that its national policy has created an unusual default situation in which only children are the norm. Following an ecological systems framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and echoing other researchers (Falbo & Poston, 1993; Mancillas, 2006), we argue that in China the birth order effect, which is based on the microsystem (i.e., family), may demonstrate different patterns.

In addition, the birth order effect may be found in domains beyond personality such as the relationship between birth order and life satisfaction. For example, research has shown middleborns to be less religious than firstborns (Saroglou & Fiasse, 2003). Thus we examined whether the same effects would hold true in China.

1.1. Personality, life satisfaction, birth order, and China's one-child policy

In 1979, China instituted its one-child-per-family national policy to counter the negative effects of overpopulation. In 2002, the policy was consolidated as the Population and Family Planning

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Law. Each province formulates the regulations. For urban families, exceptions are families that have disabled firstborns, that have adopted a child because of previously diagnosed infertility, that have parents who were both onlyborns, that are blended families in which one parent has no biological offspring, and that have parents who were previously permanent residents or citizens of another country or area. In addition to these exceptions, some rural families may have another child, depending on their locations, professions, firstborn gender, and duration after the birth of the firstborn. For those families who do not meet any of the exceptions and choose to have only one child, they are rewarded with benefits such as bonuses and housing privileges. The policy has drastically altered Chinese family structure. Now members of most urban populations under 30 years-old are only children. Both laypersons and experts have expressed concerns about their social development.

Regarding social development, the few existing studies have suggested that only children are comparable to sibling children in most aspects (Falbo, 1982; Mottus, Indus, & Allik, 2008). For instance, Polit and Falbo's (1987) comprehensive meta-analysis across various age groups, mainly high school students, found the only difference was that only children were more highly motivated to achieve than were sibling children. However, studies in China were inconclusive. Some found no difference in the personality traits important in Chinese traditional culture (e.g., being cooperative) among only, firstborn, and laterborn preschool and school-aged children (e.g., Falbo & Poston, 1993; Poston & Falbo, 1990) and general personality traits among college students (Edwards et al., 2005). Others found that sibling individuals reported more neuroticism–anxiety and aggression–hostility, but higher psychological well-being than onlyborns (Wang, Du, Liu, Liu, & Wang, 2002). The finding of greater psychological well-being among sibling children is counterintuitive considering that they encounter social and economic penalties. In addition, it is inconsistent with another study, which found that Hong Kong Chinese only adolescents, including migrants from mainland China, had greater psychological well-being (Kwan & Ip, 2009). Thus we feel a need to clarify the issues of personality and life satisfaction among Chinese individuals with different birth orders.

1.2. The present studies

We explored whether onlyborns, firstborns, and laterborns differed in the five-factor model (FFM) of personality dimensions (Costa & McCrae, 1992) in the context of the Chinese one-child policy, testing the hypotheses based on Sulloway's (1996) theory. Sulloway proposed that firstborns, striving to meet parental expectations, are likely to be more conscientious; that is, more responsible and organized, and neurotic than laterborns. Laterborns, on the other hand, strive to acquire parental investment by finding some unoccupied niches within the family, and are thus more likely to be open. Laterborns are also more likely to be agreeable in their efforts to reduce conflicts with their older siblings. Sulloway stated that extraversion has two sub-facets: dominance and sociability. Firstborns were hypothesized to be higher in dominance and laterborns to be higher in sociability. Our research focused only on conscientiousness and openness because of problems associated with the other three traits: the original model receives little evidence regarding emotional stability, extraversion has multiple sub-facets, and studies of agreeableness have yielded inconsistent findings. For example, Jefferson et al. (1998) found agreeableness in peer ratings but not in self and spouse ratings. Interestingly, the relatively consistent results on conscientiousness and openness all emerged from within-family designs (Healey &

Ellis, 2007; Paulhus et al., 1999; Saroglou & Fiasse, 2003). In addition to testing the generalizability of the theory in the Chinese context, we wondered whether we could replicate the results in a between-family design as well. Accordingly, we hypothesized:

Hypothesis 1a. Firstborns are more conscientious than laterborns.

Hypothesis 1b. Laterborns are more open than firstborns.

Family context serves as a filter for larger social contexts influencing children's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Chinese national policy, a macrosystem effect, might moderate the birth order effect (a microsystem effect). According to Sulloway (1996, 2001), in the typical context of families with one child, only children are raised similarly to firstborns: both the parents and the only children may expect the coming of younger family members, and the only children may expect to confront future sibling competition. Therefore, onlyborns may naturally adopt the same strategy as firstborns, identifying themselves with the parents to obtain parental favor. Consequently, onlyborns should be more conscientious and less open than laterborns. However, Chinese national policy enforces the family's decision to have one child among families who do not meet any of the exceptions for a second child. Everyone is aware that no more children will be born. Thus the macrosystem may alter family dynamics proposed in Sulloway's theory. Specifically, Sulloway (1996, p. 105) said that laterborns will be open to experience to increase their opportunities for success. In China, the likelihood of success of the only child is equal to that of the whole family. To succeed in the future life competition, the Chinese family may encourage only children to be open to novel experiences, similar to laterborns in other cultures. In addition, the same motivation for only children to excel may compel them to be responsible and academically successful (Falbo & Poston, 1993; Polit & Falbo, 1987; Poston & Falbo, 1990); that is, to be conscientious like firstborns in other cultures. We thus offer the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a. Onlyborns are more conscientious than laterborns.

Hypothesis 2b. Onlyborns are more open than firstborns.

For the other traits, we wanted to explore the potential birth order effects in China. Regarding life satisfaction, considering that only children are very likely to outperform siblings academically (Falbo & Poston, 1993; Mancillas, 2006; Poston & Falbo, 1990), and that one-child families are rewarded for following national policy.

Hypothesis 3. Onlyborns are more satisfied with their lives than are siblings.

2. Study 1: between-family design

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Participants were 1468 freshmen, 779 men and 689 women in different disciplines from a national comprehensive research university in China, ages ranging from 16 to 20 years ($M = 18.34$). They came from all provinces and were representative of students of similar academic performance in China. Following previous practice (e.g., Beck, Burnet, & Vosper, 2006; Beer & Horn, 2000; Michalski & Shackelford, 2002), we dichotomized the birth-order status among sibling participants into firstborns and laterborns. The sample consisted of 1107 onlyborns, 156 firstborns, and 205 later-

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