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The Relationship Between Psychological Birth Order and Romantic Relationships

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While the significance of the correlation between psychological birth order and personality has been long recognized, only recently was a standard developed to assess this perspective. The White-Campbell Psychological Birth Order Inventory (PBOI) was developed in 1991 to address this need (Campbell, White, & Stewart, 1991). Focusing on psychological birth order rather than ordinal birth order allows this concept to be applied to any type of family, regardless of the numerous variables on which families may differ, including, but not limited to, family size, spacing of siblings, family atmosphere, and sex of siblings (Shulman & Mosak, 1977).

Individuals with the same psychological birth order often have similar personality characteristics (Manaster, 1977). Similarity is a predictor for a successful relationship; however, the potential connection between psychological birth order and romantic relationships has yet to be studied (Gonzaga, Campos, & Bradbury, 2007). This paper will discuss previous research on psychological birth order, relationship beliefs, and

relationship quality in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of their connection to one another, followed by discussion of the current study and its application to the counseling field.

Psychological Birth Order

Alfred Adler was the first researcher to identify the significance of birth order, and more importantly, he emphasized the essential element as psychological birth order rather than ordinal birth order. Adler (1956) states “it is not the child’s number in the order of successive births which influences his character, but the situation into which he is born and the way in which he interprets it” (p. 377). This is the definition of psychological birth order used in the current research.

It is possible for individuals to identify with more than one birth order category, as all first born children have been only children, along with middle children having once been the youngest child (Oberst & Stewart, 2003). Concurrently there are advantages to identifying with a particular birth order role because “observing and experiencing the self in the process of repeatedly portraying a role cultivates a sense of role identity that embodies internalized standards for that role” (Oberst & Stewart, 2003, p. 150). When these psychological roles emerge, it is likely due to “a symbolic interactionist variant of role theory” (Oberst & Stewart, 2003, p. 150).

Role theory is a popular idea in the social sciences and “explains roles by presuming that persons are members of *social positions* and hold *expectations* for their own behaviors and those of other persons” (Biddle, 1986, p. 67). Role theory posits “that expectations are the major generators of roles” (p. 69) and if an individual’s perceived psychological position is partially formed by expectations placed on that individual, it stands to reason that it may be beneficial for individuals to align with a particular psychological birth order position.

If an individual cultivates a strong sense of role identity by aligning with a particular psychological birth order position, what impact would this have in a clinical setting? Stewart (2004) conducted a study to investigate if a clinician’s perceptions of a client were affected by knowledge of the client’s birth order. The results revealed that “once clinicians developed perceptions of Paul [the client in the case study] as a first, middle, youngest, or only child, their counseling-related impressions of him and their prognostic estimates differed according to birth order and in the hypothesized directions” (Stewart, 2004, p. 173). Furthermore, Stewart (2004) suggests clinical reasoning could be biased based on birth order, similar to clinical biases based on age, gender, or race. While these conclusions are from a single study, the results imply that continuing to research psychological birth order is important and relevant to the counseling profession.

Relationship Beliefs

Birth order impacts the experiences an individual has within his/her individual family, and “the distinctive characteristics possessed by individuals from each birth-order position are rooted in the different sets of relationship-related cognitions they tend to

acquire” (Sullivan & Schwebel, 1996, p. 56). The cognitions individuals develop from their perspective as children form the foundation for future interactions with others, and result in a “birth-order related set of cognitions and personality characteristics” (Sullivan & Schwebel, 1996, p. 56). The position of being an only child was not included in this study, and the positions studied were based on ordinal birth order positions, rather than psychological birth order positions. It is important to replicate this research with psychological birth order because many people do not have the same ordinal and psychological birth order position (Campbell et al., 1991).

Relationship beliefs play a role in developing what an individual’s ideal relationship looks like (Holmberg & MacKenzie, 2002). The ideal relationship provides insight about a person’s actual relationship in three ways: an estimation and evaluation of quality, regulation and accompanying adjustments, and enhanced understanding of events of the relationship (Fletcher, Thomas, & Simpson, 2000; Fletcher & Simpson, 2000). Previous research has demonstrated that the more closely an individual’s ideal standard of a relationship matches their perceptions of their current relationship, the more likely they are to evaluate their relationship positively (Fletcher et al. 2000; Fletcher & Simpson, 2000).

Effects of being positive in a relationship have been repeated in recent research on marriages. It has been found that couples heading for divorce have a 0.8:1 ratio of negativity to positivity, compared to stable marriages that have a 1:5 ratio of negativity to positivity (Gottman, Driver, & Tabares, 2002). Furthermore, research has found more couples divorce when partners gradually grow apart from one another, than due to severe and intense fighting (Gottman et al., 2002). These relationship interactions are generally void of positive affect, which leads the partners to emotionally disengage from one another (Gottman et al., 2002). Contrary to popular myth, this lack of positive affect is often more detrimental to a relationship than the presence of negativity (Gottman et al., 2002). Fletcher et al. (2000) also notes the importance of being optimistic in a relationship, “there is evidence that people who have positive ideals and perceptions of their partners and relationships tend to produce positive shifts in their partner’s self-perceptions over time” (p. 939). Moreover, the more positively an individual perceives their relationship, the more likely it is they will be satisfied in the relationship (Davis & Oathout, 1987).

Relationship Quality

Individuals who hold dysfunctional relationship beliefs tend to be unhappier and less satisfied in their romantic relationships (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Sprecher & Metts, 1999; Sullivan & Schwebel, 1996). “Our beliefs influence the way we feel and guide our responses to situations, which, in turn, influences the degree of satisfaction we feel with our lives and relationships” (Cobb, Larson, & Watson, 2003 p. 222). Gonzaga, Campos, and Bradbury (2007) found that couples who continue to be similar in personality maintain marital satisfaction, while those couples whose personalities became dissimilar underwent a significant decline in marital satisfaction. Gonzaga et al. (2007) also discuss that their finding is congruent with previous research that indicates

similarities, rather than differences, in a relationship are a significant predictor of higher relationship quality. Based on these suggestions about the importance of similarities in a relationship, it is likely these similarities include psychological birth order.

This study hypothesizes that psychological birth order will have a significant, positive relationship with both relationship quality and relationship beliefs in romantic relationships. Specifically, three predictions are made: (a) couples with the same psychological birth order will have higher relationship quality, when compared to couples with dissimilar psychological birth order positions; (b) couples with the same psychological birth order will have similar relationship beliefs, when compared to couples with dissimilar psychological birth order positions; and (c) couples with similar relationship beliefs will have higher relationship quality, when compared to couples with differing relationship beliefs.

Method

Participants ($n=70$) included 35 heterosexual couples (i.e., married, engaged, or dating for a minimum of one year and considered to be in a serious, committed relationship). Relationship status of the couples included 78.79% married, 9.09% engaged, and 12.12% dating. The participants ranged in age from 22-58 years, with a mean age of 34.5 years.

The investigator conducted descriptive research using self-report surveys. These surveys were comprised of the following instruments: the White-Campbell Psychological Birth Order Inventory (PBOI; Campbell et al., 1991), the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976), and the Relationship Belief Inventory (RBI; Eidelson & Epstein, 1982). The surveys had identifying numbers to indicate matched couples within the sample and to protect anonymity of participants.

Results

Based on scoring criteria from Stewart and Campbell (1998), 41 participants had a dominant psychological birth order position. With only eight participants in the same position as their partner, statistics were not calculated as any results found would not be generalizable data. A Pearson Correlation was conducted between relationship beliefs, as assessed by the RBI, and relationship quality, as assessed by the DAS. There was no significant correlation found between these two measures, $r(64) = -0.14, p > 0.05$.

A correlation revealed the relationship between the PBOI “youngest” and total RBI scores was significant, $r(64) = 0.26, p < 0.05$. Pearson Correlations between each psychological birth order position and each relationship belief revealed two significant correlations. The first was between the PBOI “youngest” and the RBI belief “mindreading is expected”, $r(64) = 0.30, p < 0.05$. The second was between the PBOI “only” and the RBI belief “disagreement is destructive”, $r(64) = 0.26, p < 0.05$.

The data revealed a significant, negative correlation between age and the belief “mindreading is expected”, $r(64) = -0.27, p < 0.05$. An independent samples T-test revealed a significant difference between males ($M = 22.85, SD = 3.52$) and females ($M = 20.77, SD = 3.68$) for the RBI belief “sexual perfectionism”, $t(64) = 2.37, p = 0.021, r^2$

= 0.08. A Pearson Correlation between age and the DAS scores revealed a significant negative correlation, $r(64) = -0.41, p < 0.01$.

Discussion

The PBOI may have played a part in this study's inability to align psychological birth order with role theory. While this instrument is currently the only universal measure used to assess psychological birth order and has been utilized in many research studies, it is young in its inception with revisions still being made. This instrument assesses the positions of first, middle, youngest, and only without recognizing other positions, including the second born or second to last (Stewart & Campbell, 1998). "This implies that low scores or the absence of a predominant psychological birth position on the PBOI may stem either from a weakly developed, ill-defined psychological position in the family of origin or from the instrument's lack of sensitivity to particular positions or combinations of positions (e.g. only-first or youngest-middle)" (Stewart & Campbell, 1998, p. 57).

Each PBOI position was compared to total RBI scores (i.e., composite scores of all five relationship beliefs constructs). The PBOI "youngest" had a significant correlation with the total RBI scores. This outcome contradicts Sullivan and Schwebel (1996) who found "firstborns have significantly higher irrational relationship beliefs than last-borns" (p. 59). However, Sullivan and Schwebel (1996) used ordinal birth order in their comparison.

It is important to note that while the "youngest" correlated with total RBI scores, in comparing each belief separately, the "youngest" only correlated significantly with "mindreading is expected". This belief fits with personality characteristics of the "youngest", including feeling as though they are pampered, the baby of the family, and can manipulate others to get their way (Corey, 2005; Oberst & Stewart, 2003). These traits indicate an expectation of others to read their mind during childhood, and subsequently this assumption carries into adult relationships.

One other important finding was a significant correlation between the PBOI "only" and the belief "disagreement is destructive". This result also relates to personality characteristics of an only child, including not learning to cooperate with others and enmeshment with his/her parent(s) (Corey, 2005; Oberst & Stewart, 2003). These personality traits of the "only" may indicate lower conflict-resolution skills due to not interacting with peers as consistently as an individual with siblings.

The data revealed a significant negative correlation between age and the belief "mindreading is expected". This indicates that as individuals age they are less likely to endorse this belief. With younger participants scoring higher on this scale than older participants, it is likely this belief changes with age. Clinicians could use a genogram to address how these beliefs may transform over time.

It was found that males were significantly more likely than females to endorse the belief "sexual perfectionism." If an individual believes he/she needs to be a perfect sexual partner it can lead to relationship distress where sex is viewed as a task, acting as a hindrance to sexual arousal and performance (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982).

The last significant finding of this research was a significant negative correlation between age and the DAS, indicating that as individuals get older, the quality of their relationship decreases. One reason for this is explained by Gottman et al. (2002) in a divorce prediction study which found couples who divorce later in life often suppress affect, including an absence of positive affect in the relationship.

Another possible reason for this finding may be related to the mean age (34.5) of participants. According to Gottman et al. (2002), 67% of all couples experience a steep drop in marital satisfaction in the transition to parenthood. Although participants were not asked whether they had children, it is common in today's society for a couple to delay having children until their 30s or even 40s. The negative correlation may be reflecting this stage of life transition.

Counseling Relevance

The research discussed in this paper is beneficial and relevant to the counseling field. Preliminary research has demonstrated that counselors' hypotheses about clients may be impacted by the birth order position a client has in his/her family of origin (Stewart, 2004). Therefore, educating counselors on the importance of distinguishing psychological from ordinal birth order is warranted.

It is helpful for counselors to understand the correlation between psychological birth order positions and dysfunctional relationship beliefs. Armed with this knowledge, clinicians can challenge distortions that may not have otherwise surfaced in therapy. Moreover, it is important for clinicians to reinforce the relationship benefits of having a positive attitude. Many individuals believe negativity is bad for a relationship, even though research has demonstrated the lack of positivity is worse than the presence of negativity. Clinicians need to consider every possible variable when evaluating and assisting clients with relationship quality. If psychological birth order is indeed a variable that can affect quality, then it should be considered when assessing clients in the therapeutic setting.

Conclusion

While little research exists on the connection between romantic relationships and psychological birth order, this study has taken steps toward bridging this gap. Although the first two predictions of the hypothesis could not be confirmed, the fact that psychological birth order positions correlate with dysfunctional relationship beliefs is an area worthy of additional investigation. These findings will advance future research.

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