

Role of birth order on career choice might have been overestimated in previous research

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New UH study finds little-to-no evidence to suggest that firstborns vs. younger siblings are destined for specific careers. Credit: University of Houston

In a new study that could turn what we know about birth order upside down, a University of Houston researcher has found that the role of birth order on career types, occupational creativity and status attainment might have been overestimated in previous research. The only finding that replicated previous research was a small effect of birth order on educational attainment, reports Rodica Damian in the *European Journal of Personality*. Damian is assistant professor of psychology and director of the Personality Development and Success Lab at UH.

"The little evidence there is for a possible link between [birth order](#), education, and status attainment points more to unexplained causal mechanisms rather than traits and abilities attributed—but not necessarily scientifically supported—to specific [birth](#) orders," said Damian. "Thus, rather than assuming that firstborns are destined for success due to their birth order and presumed associated qualities, it might be better to direct our attention to the social expectations, practices, or even parenting books that may be biasing our investments into the future of children based on their birth order as opposed to their observed individual characteristics."

Damian used data from Project TALENT, a longitudinal study conducted on a representative sample of U.S. [high school students](#) in 1960 and then again from the same participants 50 years after the original assessment. She examined the data to test birth order effects on career types (scientific vs. artistic), occupational creativity and status attainment (including [educational attainment](#), job prestige and income).

In the study of birth order, two models dominate. Based on these models, firstborns should be more likely to pursue scientific careers, attain higher levels of education, more prestigious careers, and a higher income, whereas later-born individuals should be more likely to pursue artistic and more creative careers.

The niche-finding model proposes that siblings develop competing strategies to maximize parental investment by filling different family niches. Firstborns fill the more "traditional" niche being more achievement-oriented, responsible, self-confident and dominating. Later-borns fill the more "rebellious" niche being more risk-taking, creative, easy-going and sociable. Also, according to niche-finding, personality traits should explain links between birth order and careers, whereas according to the confluence model, intelligence should explain such links. The confluence model proposes that firstborns have slightly higher levels of intelligence, because, with each child subsequently added to the family, the intellectual environment of the family becomes diluted, leaving those born later with less intellectual stimulation.

According to the niche-finding model, Damian found modest support for the confluence model, but no support for the niche-finding model.

Birth order effects on occupational prestige and educational attainment were aligned with the confluence model, although the lack of a statistically significant effect on income was not. Birth order effects on career types (scientific vs. artistic) and occupational creativity did not support the niche-finding [model](#), and the effect on creativity was in the opposite direction than predicted, with firstborns selecting slightly more creative careers.

"Our findings suggest that the role of birth order on [career](#) types, occupational creativity and status attainment might have been overestimated in previous research, and the only finding that replicated previous research was a small effect of birth order on educational attainment," said Damian. "We found that firstborns selected into more creative careers and attained higher job prestige and education."

"In practical terms, there is little-to-no evidence here to suggest that first- vs. later-borns are destined for specific careers, so parents should

not be surprised if their [firstborn](#) wants to become an artist," said Damian.

More information: Rodica Ioana Damian et al. Negligible effects of birth order on selection into scientific and artistic careers, creativity, and status attainment, *European Journal of Personality* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0890207020969010](#)

Provided by University of Houston

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