

## ***Mothers' Beliefs in Birth Order and Academic Attainment: Implications for the Psychological Wellbeing of Siblings in Nigeria***

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### **Abstract**

*It is the thinking of the authors that while academic attainment is influenced by a variety of factors, certain difficulties connected to birth order are likely to have an impact on children's overall performance, owing to beliefs held by Nigerian mothers. They may get pushy with their firstborn at times, emphasizing the importance of their studying harder than others and setting a good example for the younger children in the family. This article discusses the relationship between birth order and academic attainment, noting that, aside from religious implications, it also has cultural relevance in child rearing and, as a result, the well-being of siblings. This research goes on to analyze the cultural attributions to birth order. It highlights the importance mothers attach to ensuring that their firstborn children live up to customary standards. Counselling therapy such as the Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy was suggested, among others, to help mothers overcome irrational beliefs about birth order and educational attainment which do not have any scientific bases.*

**Keywords:** beliefs, birth order, counselling, educational attainment, mothers

### **Introduction**

Mothers are the most influential personalities as far as childcare and training are concerned; it is important to note that their roles are as important as what their children become in life. The average Nigerian mother is involved in exploring every area of a child's life, knowing his/her strengths and weaknesses, offering the necessary support in his/her area of needs.

The birth order of a child has a lot of significance in both religious and traditional belief systems. Whereas the Bible emphasizes that the firstborn's position is very important as compared to the other siblings, it clarifies that the firstborn son is accorded double portion of the inheritance (Deuteronomy 21:17). Similarly, the tradition of the Nigerian people dictates that the firstborn child has a lot of rights, and he/she is accorded much respect, making him/her to play the role of the second mother/father in the house, and this therefore explains the reason why the first born enjoys a lot of parental time than the later-born (Reyes-Bay, 2018).

An average Nigerian parent places a lot of premium on their firstborn, from taking care of their parents, siblings and meeting up with the cultural rites of the family (Ukpabi, 2024). In other words, they must also be good examples to their younger siblings, exhibit sound academic abilities, be spiritually strong, ensure discipline in the younger ones, carry the family's legacy, study hard to become successful, shun childish ways, among others. In view of the foregoing therefore, the firstborn child exerts a lot of authority on the younger siblings which may eventually cause a strain in their relationship, especially when the younger siblings perceive them to be domineering.

Academic attainment is related to students' ability to achieve success after an academic experience. The term is all encompassing, and for the purpose of this study, it includes students' academic achievement and overall academic performance in school. For example, academic achievement was perceived to be related to the most important outcome of formal education alone, although there is a reservation on the role it plays in any individual's later life (Moore, 2019). Other factors which were considered important in determining students' academic achievement include, among others, parental attitude, peer influence and the students' learning skills (D'souza & Magre, 2021).

### **Concept of birth order and academic attainment**

Birth order is the position of a child among the other children within the family. A child could be the first born, middle born or last born, just as in the order he/she was given birth to by his mother. Some people believe that birth position is capable of shaping the personality of an individual. As a result, the position of children within the family has a lot of implications as far as the culture of the Nigerian people is concerned. For instance, firstborns tend to benefit a lot from their parents due to the special care and attention they receive before other children arrive in the family. In the same vein, parents expect a lot from them; and in most cases, may be stricter with the firstborns because they are expected to become good role models to their younger siblings. The middle born are supposed to be peace keepers who enjoy negotiation and compromise because they are neither the

firstborn nor the lastborn; and could be in competition with the firstborn in terms of achieving good grades in school (Brennan, 2021).

According to Brennan, the lastborn or youngest child is considered to be the 'baby' of the family, and he or she may become avoidant, lack confidence, but enjoys more freedom than the other children due to the fact that parental restrictions have become relaxed in his time. Therefore, the lastborn may be more creative and outgoing. Literature suggests that siblings were unlikely to receive equality in the quality of education each parent gives the child mainly owing to their birth order, and that the shares decrease with birth order (Booth & Kee, 2009). In other words, the resources expended on each child decreases as he goes down the birth ladder. Obviously, experience have shown that mothers in particular spend a lot of money buying books, toys and other educational materials for their firstborn, probably for two important reasons. One being the excitement of ensuring that as the first child, he or she deserves the best due to the special love the mother has for him/her, and secondly because the child was her only responsibility at that moment. To this extent, most mothers go as far as buying even what the child does not need. Therefore, with all the available educational materials at the child's disposal, his/her academic achievement should be good. This is different for a later-born due to his/her mother's limited resources. He/she may end up inheriting the books already used and perhaps mutilated by his/her older sibling, giving rise to poor academic achievement.

The excitement and love showered on the firstborn child remains with the belief that if the child performs exceptionally well academically, the rest of the children will do likewise, emphasizing the role of hard work and mentorship. In like manner, if the firstborn is well behaved, the others would do likewise. Unfortunately, there is no scientific evidence to prove that this is correct, although the younger siblings may copy the lifestyle of the older.

Academic achievement connotes the performance of children especially as regards to their grades at the end of an examination. Whether or not a child passes an examination is dependent on his efforts, that of the teachers and the provision of the necessary materials required in addition to a conducive home or school environment. It is the amount of academic contents a student learns in a specific period of time; and it involves testing and assessments which are performed to gauge a student's academic achievement (Barowski & Carter, 2021). Moreover, the student's performance may be affected by the classroom instruction or learning disability. A study revealed that after removing siblings' average grades and prior performance, parents' opinions about sibling variations in academic aptitude predicted differences in siblings' skills (Jensen & McHale, 2015).

### **Birth order theory** (Alfred Adler, 1964)

Scientists formulate theories to help to explain why people behave the way they do, which in most cases enable the understanding from the standpoint of behaviourists that man is a product of the way he thinks and feels; and this invariably affects his or her total attitude and perception of issues. For example, the Africans believe that an individual's experiences and the environment he finds himself make or mar his output at school and work.

According to Alfred Adler (1964), the proponent of the birth order theory, the position of a child at birth, whether a child is the first, second or last born has a relationship with both positive and negative life experiences and outcomes. Similarly, the position at birth has an impact on the child's personality. Adler (1964) contended that birth order consists of five categories of individuals namely an only child, first born, second child, and middle children at least comprising three, and youngest excluding seconds. This implies that birth order categorization is dependent on family size.

Thus, several researchers have contributed to understanding a child's birth position and how it affects his/her behavioural disposition (Black, 2017; Holtz & Pantano, 2015; Breining et al., 2017). They believe that personality is shaped by biological, social, cultural, physical, environmental and situational capabilities. The biological factor consists of the inherited characteristics and traits from birth such as intelligence, courage and physical features; the social factor is related to the ways by which children form their opinion and develop thought patterns from their interactions within a social circle; and the cultural factor represents the beliefs a child has imbibed from the environment where he/she resides. Others are the physical environment comprising the influence that personalities surrounding the child have on him, and the situational involves the various situations the child is faced with, and which influence their personality, such as meeting new friends, or welcoming another member of his/her family (Dean, 2020).

### **Birth order and academic attainment**

Several studies have investigated the relationship between birth order and academic attainment (Ositoye, 2010; Faniyi, 2014; Combs-Draughn, 2016; Ibeawuchi & Ekechukwu, 2017; Schwefer, 2018; Sanni, 2019). Ositoye (2010), in his study on the relationship between birth order and academic performance using 240 respondents, concluded that there exists an inverse relationship between birth order and academic performance. He emphasized that parents should encourage their children and not undermine their position. Furthermore, a study of the impact of psychological birth order on academic achievement and motivation was carried out by Combs-Draughn (2016),

using 183 students in community, public and private colleges. It found that in terms of psychological birth order, the first born, middle born, youngest and only child predicted students' motivation in the area of fun-seeking; and that the firstborn, middle born and youngest child predicted students' motivation in the area of reward responsiveness.

Another study on relationship between birth order, family size, parental involvement and secondary school adolescents' academic underachievement was examined. The results showed that there existed a low relationship between birth order, family size, parental involvement and academic underachievement (Ibeawuchi & Ekechukwu, 2017). Again, Schwefer (2018) examined birth order effects and educational achievement in the developing world, using data from 4,362 siblings, and he found a negative birth order effect among biological siblings. He opined that there were inferior outcomes for later-born, suggesting that three sources of heterogeneity such as extreme hardship, parental gender preferences and tutoring between siblings were identified as moderators of birth order effects. In a separate study on birth order and students' academic achievement, it was found that the females had higher mean scores in sciences than males, suggesting a substantial difference. However, there was no significant variation in mean Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) across the birth order groups. In the same study, the mean score of the middle-born male had a CGPA of 4.31, in contrast to the last born male. (Albarkheel et al., 2019).

Similarly, Sanni (2019) examined birth order, learning styles and academic performance of senior secondary school students in Osun State, Nigeria; using the students' scores in the core science subjects. He found that a positive significant relationship exists between birth order and learning styles especially in favour of an only child on one hand, and a significant relationship between birth order and academic performance of students in the sciences on the other hand. Lastly, the study also noted a positive significant correlation between visual kinesthetic learning styles and academic performance in Biology and Physics; but an insignificant positive correlation between auditory and academic performance in Biology, Chemistry and Physics. All the reviewed studies, like the present study, highlight the importance of birth order as it relates to the academic performance of siblings in Nigeria. The studies further underscore the fact that birth order is an important area of focus in the academic success of siblings.

### **Perspectives on birth order and cultural beliefs in Nigeria**

The firstborn is simply the first child that comes out from the womb of the mother, as opposed to other children, He/she is thought to make a way for the other siblings to excel and become well behaved. In Africa, it is believed that they may either bring good luck or bad luck depending on their behavioural dispositions, namely their attitude, taking responsibilities, ensuring that the home is clean, teaching the other siblings how to behave and exemplifying it by their own behaviours at home and in school.

As the first to open the womb of their mothers, parents tend to read more to their firstborn and focus on their academic studies, and this has a long-lasting impact on them, making them confident and academically sound (Black, 2017). They are also believed to possess an IQ that is higher than their younger siblings who perform poorly in school. Black (2017) argued that cognitive ability varies by birth order, and that biology, environment and parental input plays significant roles in the first years of life especially in skill formation, concluding that firstborn children have the full attention of parents. It is also important to note that parents are also strict on parenting practices towards the first born in order to instill discipline and induce good behaviour among later-born (Holtz & Pantano, 2015).

The expectations of women concerning their first-borns and the way they are socialized is basically the same among the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. To this end, it is expected that more is required from the first-borns because at the demise of their fathers, they are expected to take over the affairs of the family. For example, it is believed by the Yoruba ethnic extraction that a child not properly brought up will certainly become indigent in later years when he is supposed to be creative (Aladesanmi & Ogunjinmi, 2019).

### **Mothers' traditional beliefs and attributions of birth order in Nigeria**

Nigerian mothers have a lot of attachment to their first-born in comparison to the later-born. Sometimes, families look up to the first-borns who are usually saddled with so much responsibilities to the extent that they are overwhelmed by the weight of expectations in some cases. As far as the parents are concerned, they are helping the first-borns to stand on their own so that they can take up the training of the younger siblings when they become adults. This demand on the first-borns makes them mature faster than they should. According to Amos (2013), African parents help the child to also imbibe the cultural values, customs and traditions which help them to become responsible adults. More often than not, the bulk of bringing up the child is the mother's responsibility, especially in Africa (Amos, 2013). The remaining part of this discourse is concerned with the factors

that makes women to be more particular and sometimes over demanding of their first-borns.

Every family in Nigeria is unique and represents the hopes and aspirations of the people from where they originate. There are specific customs and traditions within the family that requires children to play significant roles. For example, depending on the children's heritage, they may have been born into a royal/ruling family within a community; and being first, the role of inheritance of property, farm lands and decision-making often lies squarely on their shoulders especially if they are males. First-borns were expected to play prominent roles during burial ceremonies, land sharing, as well as representing their immediate families in any matter pertaining to contributing finance; and upholding certain traditions of the people such as the yam festival being practised by the people in Southeast Nigeria, wrestling contest by the Ikwerre speaking people of South-South Nigeria, 'Ojude' festival by the Yoruba speaking people of South-West Nigeria, and so on. Sometimes, it may be perceived as shameful if the first-borns relegate their responsibilities. The first-born may seek permission for the other siblings to fall into his position in order not to lose the family ties, and women always ensured that their firstborns were indoctrinated to retain their position and family name within the community.

Among the people of Nigeria, families may be patrilineal or matrilineal, and inheritance depends upon recognizing the legitimacy of a child. Nigerians are patrilineal, meaning that a child has full rights of inheritance of the family property on his father's side and may also be given full right to inheritance on the mother's side where the customs and traditions of his mother's family allow it. Literature also lends support to this, noting that the male members of the family are more recognized due to their rights to both family inheritance and perpetuating family lineage and name (Labeodan, 2005).

Family ties, customs and traditions are closely knit to the extent that women are more comfortable within the family when they have a male child. Women believe that their positions within the immediate and extended families as well as the community is secured because the male child has a say much more than the female in matters concerning the family. Moreover, in sharing family land or other benefits, it is usually done based on the number of males a family has; and this makes it unfair when a woman does not have male children. It means that her right of inheritance could be transferred to her husband's brothers. Therefore, when the first-borns are not living up to expectation, it may be attributed to bewitchment from extended family members or some pre-ordained forces.

### **Birth order and educational attainment**

Literature has documented evidence linking birth order with educational attainment. For example, it was noted that birth order is related to educational attainment, with an emphasis that both may determine an individual's social status, health and economic power (Black et al., 2005; Harkonen, 2014; Barclay & Kolk, 2015). Similarly, birth order was found to have a strong negative effect on educational attainment (Harkonen, 2014). Specifically, the study carried out by Harkonen reported that birth order will not ensure better educational attainment on the German women. De-Haan (2010) also reports that significant effects, based on family size, was not found on the educational attainment of the first-born. This means that family size has no major importance as far as the educational attainment of the first-born is concerned.

In a related study to ascertain if there was any relationship between birth order and academic achievement of the second year students of a university in Philippines, it was reported that there was no significant relationship between the two (Reyes-Bay, 2018). However, this finding contradicts another researcher's finding that 63.1% of the firstborn are sounder intellectually than the others (Kuba et al., 2018). This may probably be because they were born earlier when mothers were in their prime but the later-born were delivered when the women were older. This thinking suggests that the age of a woman at the time she had her baby may be a determinant of the child's intellectual ability. This could mean that if a mother had a baby in her early twenties, he/she may be more intelligent than the one born in her forties. However, a recent study posits that first-borns have only 1-point IQ advantage on the average over the other siblings. It also reported that this could be so because the first-borns are surrounded by adults from the beginning of their existence (Brennan, 2021). Finally, Brennan suggests that certain factors are capable of influencing birth order, notably parental attitudes and culture, age difference, twins and confidence.

### **Birth order and psychological wellbeing of siblings**

Psychological wellbeing is a state of inner peace and an expression of stability inside out. It gives the individual a feeling of satisfaction especially in his or her dealings with others. In this instance, it refers to having a positive state of mind enabling good interaction with members of the same family. Psychological wellbeing is referred to as a factor supporting a person's future happiness, which is brought about by his/her learning in dealing with problem or environment (Ryff, 2014). Similarly, the indices of such wellbeing as emphasized by Ryff include, among others, self-acceptance, establishment of quality ties with others, a sense of autonomy in thought and action, and the ability to manage complex environments to suit personal needs and values.



In Nigeria, some of the cultural beliefs on birth order may have psychological effects among siblings in terms of their emotional characteristics and relationship with one another. One of such beliefs on saddling the first-born with so many responsibilities and expectations may sometimes cause them to believe that except they are present to make a decision, other siblings are not capable of doing so in their absence. While this assertion puts a lot of pressure and stress on the first-borns, the later-born have the notion that they are not responsible to undertake any decision and as such are free to do as they wish. In particular, when problems arise within the family, when properties are to be shared and when finances are required for a project, the first-borns are sought after to execute judgment and resolve the problems without involving the other siblings. Although this may sound like according so much respect to the first-born, it leaves him/her believing that without him/her, no decision can be made and nothing moves. Therefore, pride sets in and if he does concentrate on having the problems solved, he or she may neglect his/her spouse and the responsibilities he/she is expected to fulfill. This brings unrest and a break in the relationship, and eventually, chaos and family issues emanate. On the other hand, his/her siblings may assume that he is now the centre of attraction which brings about jealousy and a cycle of problems resulting in emotional breakdown. The problems in their immediate and extended family could deteriorate into hatred and plotting to overthrow him/her, which may result in absence of peace; the target becomes a nervous wreck, suffering from high blood pressure and depression due to so many issues to be resolved.

### **Counselling implications for the psychological well-being of siblings in Nigeria**

Although mothers expect so much from the firstborn in the family, it is not enough reason for putting undue pressure on them. This is the area where a lot of sensitization and awareness is required. When a lot of pressure is placed on the firstborn, it might be mistaken for harshness; and without knowing, mothers may end up pushing their first-borns to seeking other negative and irresponsible ways of pleasing them. This may include their involvement in examination malpractices such as paying money or exchanging sex for grades, especially if the first-borns are females. Counsellors should employ family counselling and the Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy to assist parents, especially mothers and other members of the society to disabuse their minds of such unnecessary traditional attachment to birth order and academic attainment. This is an irrational behaviour that could cause a breakdown in communication and disaffection among siblings within the family. In other words, by employing rational emotive behaviour therapy, counsellors should help mothers to replace their erroneous beliefs since there is no scientific justification for such belief. Therefore, mothers should be sensitized to understand that being a first-born does not mean that the child has more superior

intelligence than the others, because every child is unique and distinct, and should be allowed to go at his or her own pace.

### Conclusion

As much as it is important as identified by the scriptures and in the literature, birth position should not be followed too strictly in determining the educational outcome of children. Although children need good examples to follow in attaining the best height educationally, the Nigerian traditional beliefs should be flexible. Parents should be sensitized to using motivation to encourage the first-born to model the best behaviour both academically and socially. This also means that the people generally require education, and at the same time not de-emphasizing the role of culture/tradition in the socialization process. Therefore, an integration is encouraged between formal and traditional systems of education, creating a balance in helping children to succeed academically.

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