

# Birth Order and Couple Satisfaction

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## Abstract

*The effects of birth order in marital satisfaction and intimacy were investigated using a national sample of 10,000 married couples who had taken the PREPARE/ENRICH Inventory. Birth order pairs studied were first, only, second-, and third-born. It was hypothesized that couples of the same birth order would have a less satisfying relationship than those who were not married to someone of the same birth order. It was found that birth order does not have an effect on marital satisfaction—so the hypotheses were unsupported.*

Birth order has been a tricky subject in the field of psychology. Many researchers have tried to typify specific personality traits based on birth order, but there still has been no clear agreement on a relationship. There has been some research on how birth order affects partnership and marriages (Hartshorne, Salem-Hartshorne & Harshorne, 2009). There also has been some research that has tried to determine if similarity in personality traits influences relationship satisfaction, but still nothing has been concretely determined (Shiota & Levenson, 2007; Gattis & Berns, 2004; Dyrenforth et al, 2010).

## Birth order personality types

There are many different positions that one can hold in the sibling constellation; the most common that are typified in birth order personality types are: first born, second born, middle or later born, and last born. Each of these places in the sibling constellation have traits that a majority of researchers have somewhat agreed upon. As explained by Paulhus, Trapness, and Chen (1999), Sulloway's thesis that birth order effects "derive from a competition among siblings as they fight for a family niche" (p. 482) clearly explains effects of birth order among children in a family.

The firstborn child is often typified as of being "responsible, competitive and conventional" (Jefferson, Herbst & McCrae, 1998, p. 498). The firstborn child has no niche to compete for in their family. Most commonly found, the first child's niche includes an attempt to please their parents in a traditional fashion through scholarly success and responsible behavior (Paulhus, Trapnell & Chen, (1998) who found that family members rated each other on a range of traits. These traits included Costa & McCrae's Big 5, rebelliousness and scholastically achieving. Firstborns are perceived as more intellectually achieving. A study by Michalski and Shackelford (2002) further indicates that the firstborn placement in a family predicts scores on Agreeableness.

Second-born children are often characterized as the rebel, but perhaps this is a misinterpretation of their personalities and they are just characterized as more "open to

experience” than their firstborn siblings, so they seem to be more rebellious. Bossard and Stoker Boll (1955) explain that this may have to do with the fact that second-borns “find the post of responsibility pre-empted...(and) proceeds to gain recognition and self-esteem through personal charm rather than personal power” (p.73). This can be related to Darwinian theory in that this could be the second-child’s niche to be charming and popular because the firstborn sibling has taken the niche of responsibility. While some personality stereotypes are aimed specifically to second-born children, these descriptors can be attributed to later-born siblings in general.

Similar to their second child peers, later-born children have been found to be labeled as social butterflies, being not only popular with their other siblings, but with those outside of the family (Bossard & Stoker Boll, p. 73). In accordance with this, later-borns tend to identify less with their parents and not be as close to them. As cited by Sulloway, Salmon and Daly (1998) state the competition for attention from parents prompts middle children in general to become peer oriented due to their Darwinian handicap (p. 192). Middle children are most inclined to diplomacy and cooperation, perhaps do to the fact that they may be caught in the middle of disputes in their home life while growing up. Similar to their specifically second-born counterparts, later-born children score higher than last-borns on some personality scores, particularly those associating with agreeableness (Sulloway, 1999). Other positive emotions that later-born children have scored higher on include sociability facets of extraversion such as warmth and gregariousness (Jefferson, Herbst & McCrae, p. 505).

Studies have shown that last-born children rate fairly similar to their middle-born counterparts but are also attributed more negative descriptors similar to their spoiled stereotypes. Some of these negative descriptions include being “spoiled, dependent, irresponsible, rebellious, and immature” (Nyman, p. 55). The last-born child is also associated with being sociable and thoughtful, but these children, being the babies of the family, are often seen by most as the most spoiled child in the family, despite the similarities to middle children

In one-child families, the child does not have any siblings to compete for parental attention with and due to this may have closer bonds with the parents that can be evaluated by psychologists. Also, due to the lack of siblings, Polit and Falbo (1987) state, “personality development of only children is uncomplicated by such confounding factors as spacing and sex of siblings” that allow their personalities to develop in a way that is unique. Results of some studies suggest that the close nature of the parent-child relationship is a strong determinant of developmental outcomes as a whole. According to this theory, only children have an advantage over their peers with siblings because parents have more time to devote to interactions with their child in order to promote development. Since the only child is around their adult parents so much, this seems to have an effect on their personalities. These children are more motivated and better adjusted in comparison to children with siblings and their higher motivation remains fairly stable as time progresses (Polit & Falbo, 1987).

## **The effect of birth order on happiness**

In their article that describes a study that investigated the differences on happiness scores among first born, second born, middle born, and last born children, while controlling for sex and family size, Allred and Poduska (1988) report similar findings for males and females who are last-born children. They appear to be less happy than other birth orders. Last-born males scored consistently lower than all other male birth orders except in the area of “in-laws”, where they scored slightly above second-borns (other areas included health, current marriage, current family, extended family, friends, religion, financial security, employment and life in general). This finding was repeated with last-born females scoring lower than the other birth orders except in “marriage”, where they scored slightly above firstborns. These results suggest that “last-born males and females from families of four or more children are unhappier than their firstborn, second-born, or middle-born sibling of the same sex” (p. 350). Could this have an effect in their marriage and have a less satisfying relationship with their spouse?

Another possibly important finding in this study is the difference between male and female firstborns. Firstborn females displayed a similar pattern to last-born females; they scored lower than second-borns and middle-born females. In contrast, male firstborns scored much higher than the other birth orders on five of the ten happiness scales, including “life in general”.

Finally, second- and middle-born females scored consistently higher than last-born or firstborn females on the happiness items, including “life in general”. Only children were excluded from the study.

## **Birth order effects on forming long-term relationships**

Hartshorne, Salem-Hartshorne and Hartshorne (2009) investigated how birth order affects the forming of long-term relationships. Using a long-term, stable behavior (the formation of close relationships) birth order effects are tested rather than using a personality assessment. The long-term relationships that are studied in two surveys include romantic as well as platonic.

The first survey was given to undergraduates. The results from the question asking the birth order ranks of the undergraduates’ parents, found that people are more likely to form a romantic relationship with someone of the same birth rank (first, second, third, etc), although these results were not statistically significant when using birth order (oldest, middle, youngest, only). There were similar results in the formation of long-term friendships.

The second survey was web-based. Results from this study reported strong effects of birth-order for friendship as well as romantic relationships. The correlational analyses on birth rank were significant for both information on the participant’s parents, as well as their own information, suggesting that there was not enough power in the first survey to obtain significant results. Survey 2 “confirmed that oldest-oldest, middle-middle, youngest-youngest,

and only-only relationships, both among friends and mates, are significantly more likely than expected by chance” (p. 169).

A dissertation by Torri Lynne Griffin (2001) explored the effects of being an only child on marriage. One analysis found that more than half of the 2722 only-children investigated in the study were in marriages with middle- and last-born spouses. The smallest percentage of marriages was two only children married to each other. In a second analysis, Griffin found that the marital satisfaction of only child/only child, only child/ first born and only child/ second born, and middle born/ youngest born groupings scored in the moderate satisfaction range. Griffin concluded that factors other than birth order contribute to marital satisfaction for only children. Finally, it was found that only children seem to be more like the general population and do not choose their spouses differently in relation to birth order positions. It was found that both males and females seemed to select from the second born, middle, and last born categories more frequently than from the first and only groups.

**Five couple types from PREPARE/ENRICH**

**FIVE TYPES OF MARRIED COUPLES**

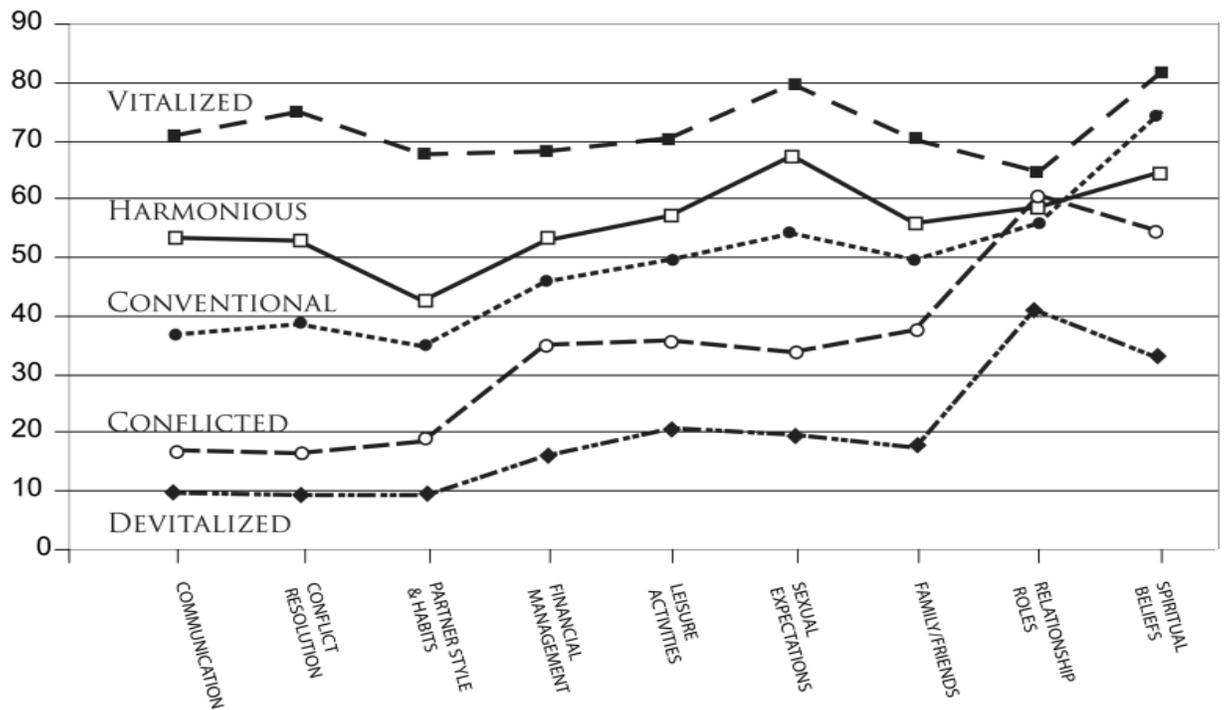
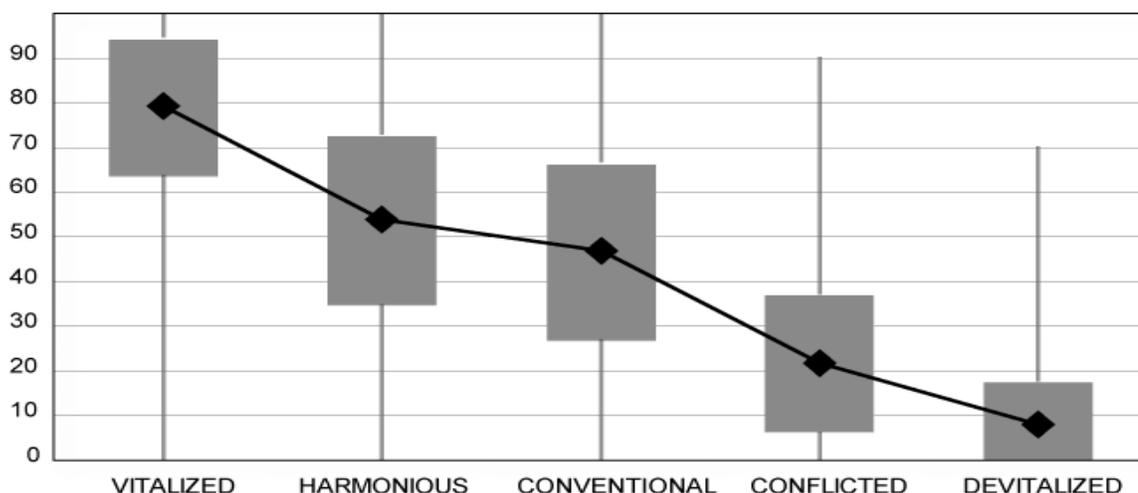


Figure 1 PREPARE/ENRICH Five Types of Married Couples

## COUPLE TYPES & MARITAL SATISFACTION

### MEAN AND RANGE FOR PCA SCORES



**Figure 2 PREPARE/ENRICH Couple Types and Marital Satisfaction**

PREPARE/ENRICH is a premarital and marital assessment that identifies the couple strengths and growth areas to work on in their relationship. It also categorizes their relationship into a typology called the Five Couple Types. The ENRICH couple types are categorized for married couples. These types include two types that are “more intimate” couples: Vitalized and Harmonious; a “moderately intimate” couple type: Traditional; and two “less intimate” types: Conflicted and Devitalized (see Figures 1 and 2).

*Vitalized Type.* Vitalized couples are “the most intimate and skilled of the types...the most successful in preventing stressors from interfering with their relationship” (Kouneski & Olson, 2004). They are the most emotionally connected and are flexible in adapting to stress and transitions in their relationships. They both have high levels of self confidence. They also are the most satisfied and have the lowest risk of divorce (see Figure 2).

*Harmonious Type.* Harmonious couples are “somewhat skilled in communication and conflict resolution...have moderate to high levels of intimacy...[and] tend to experience more sexual and social, than spiritual and recreational, intimacies”. Often, they do not agree on children and parenting. They are nearly as close but not as flexible as vitalized couples, which suggests that harmonious couples may have difficulties resolving issues. Harmonious couples also have a strong sense of togetherness, but need to increase flexibility in the relationship.

*Conventional Type.* Traditional couples are “moderately skilled in communication and conflict resolution...experience high levels of spiritual and social intimacies...[and] are highly compatible on values related to children and parenting”. Traditional couples have social support from friends and family, but support within the relationship is unclear; they experience

closeness but not much flexibility. Assertiveness is low, and they are not highly responsive to each other's needs.

*Conflicted Type.* Conflicted couples “are much less skilled in communication and conflict resolution” than the previous three types (p. 124). They experience low levels of intimacy in every form and are much less emotionally connected and flexible than the more intimate types. The most problematic stressors appear to be personality issues (moodiness, stubbornness, jealousy). Spiritual intimacy ranks highest above all others.

*Devalitized Type.* Devalitized couples are “discouraged, either unmotivated or unwilling to develop communication and conflict resolution skills for the relationship...they experience the lowest levels of intimacy and have less capacity to deal with stressors” than the four other types (p. 124). Major stressors include personality issues, financial management, and children and parenting. Devalitized couples are the least close (disengaged) and the least flexible (rigid). They are the most likely to avoid communication and perceive disrespect from their partner.

### Hypotheses:

There are different ideas that are used in everyday life about how one can attain relationship satisfaction. The most prominent two are “opposites attract” and “birds of a feather flock together”. These concepts claim that the best partnerships are either those in which both partners are either very similar or very different. The current study investigates if the birth order combination in partners has an effect on relationship intimacy according to the Five Couple Types from PREPARE/ENRICH. The hypotheses testing couple pairing include:

1. The most common pairing will be same birth order couples.
2. The most uncommon pairing will be homogenous only-child couples.

Is intimacy related to how similar or different a couple is from each other? Those who marry someone who is of the same birth order may be more volatile. According to Leman (1998), “the most competitive, most volatile, and most discouraged are combinations where both spouses are first borns, or worse, both are only children” (p. 207). This may suggest that all same-birth order couples have a less intimate marital relationship. The hypotheses testing intimacy according to the PREPARE/ENRICH marital typology and satisfaction include:

3. Couples who are of the same birth order will have a less intimate marital typology.
4. Couples who are of the same birth order will have a lower individual and couple (PCA) satisfaction scores than heterogeneous couples.

As described by Allred and Poduska (1988), birth order and gender may have an effect on a person's happiness. The following hypotheses will try to determine if the same affects will be found in marital satisfaction as were found in happiness:

5. Second-born females will be more satisfied in their marriage than firstborn females.
6. Males will be more satisfied in their marriage than females.

## Method

### *Participants*

The data analyzed in the study was provided by 10,000 anonymous married couples who have taken the PREPARE/ENRICH couple inventory. From a national data-base of over 10,000 married couples, the sample was stratified categorically by marital type (2,000 couples in each of the five categories). A total of 9,875 males, and 9,885 females participated. The age range for participants was broad; 50% were between the ages of 26-40, 36% were between 41-60 years of age, 9% were under the age of 25, and 4% were over the age of 61. The majority of participants were firstborns (40.3%), 29.6% were second-borns, 15.9% were third-borns, 7.1% were fourth-borns, and 6.8% were fifth- or more-borns. Of these couples, almost half (46%) had been married between 1-10 years, one-third (33%) had been married between 11-30 years, and 7% had been married 31 years or more.

The majority of the population studied was Caucasian (77.7%), while African Americans consist of 7%, 2.4% Asian Americans, 6.9%, Hispanic-Latino Americans and 5.5% other populations. Couples lived in all different types of cities; 44.1% live in suburban areas, 24.6% live in small towns, 18.7% live in large cities, 12% live in rural areas. In terms of religious affiliation, a majority of the sample were Protestant (67.2%); the rest of the sample was 14.3% Catholic and 17.3% identified themselves as "other" (Jewish, Hindu, etc).

Various levels of education had been achieved by this sample; 31.3% completed Technical School, 31.2% completed a 4 years of college, 25.5% obtained a graduate or professional degree, 9.4% completed high school, and 2.2% completed some high school. Twenty-nine percent of the sample earned between \$40,000-74,999 yearly, 23.1% earn between \$20,000-39,999 yearly, 19.8% earn \$20,000 or less yearly, and 18.6% earn \$75,000 or more yearly.

### *Survey Instrument*

PREPARE/ENRICH Customized Version. The Customized Version of PREPARE/ENRICH is the fifth version of the assessment. It is taken online and is tailor made to each couple. The program has 10 core scales and over 100 other scales that tap into important aspects of the couple relationship. About 20 of the most relevant scales are selected from the 100 scales. Topics that are covered in PREPARE/ENRICH include Relationship Dynamics, Couple and Family Scales, SCOPE personality profile, and a Stress profile.

This is a self-report and online instrument. The first partner who completes the assessment completes background information on the couple in order for the program to select scales that best suit the couple. Some Customized Scales include Cohabitation Issues, Parenting Expectations, and Health Issues (over 55 years old). Items are answered on a scale of 1 to 5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree). Each scale is comprised of 10 items. Results come in the

form of Revised Individual (REV) Scores (correction based on Idealistic Distortion) for the male and female and Positive Couple Agreement (PCA) Scores to determine the couple's agreement in the various areas of couple functioning.

### *Procedure*

The survey items used for birth order were "What is your birth position in your family" and "Number of children in your family". The second item was used to determine if a person who answered they are a "first born child" was an only child (one child in their family).

Homogeneous couples who were fourth or fifth or more in their birth order were grouped into the "other category" for all analyses, along with heterogeneous birth order paired couples. These birth orders were much less frequent than first-, second-, and third-born children. Same birth order couples who were fourth- or fifth- or more were included in the frequency statistics. Only children and firstborns are mutually exclusive.

The first analysis for hypotheses One, Two and Three was completed by running a frequency analysis to determine how many same birth-order (homogenous) couples were parts of the sample.

The second analysis for hypotheses Four, Five and Six was completed by running a case summary for the mean individual satisfaction scores for males and females, as well as the mean Positive Couple Agreement (PCA) score for couple satisfaction. These were done for homogenous and heterogeneous couples.

## **Results**

### Hypothesis 1

*The most common pairing will be same birth order couples*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid				
Both Only Child	435	4.4	4.4	4.4
Both First Born	1280	12.8	12.8	17.2
Both 2 <sup>nd</sup> Born	933	9.3	9.3	26.5
Both 3 <sup>rd</sup> Born	276	2.8	2.8	29.2
Both 4 <sup>th</sup> Born	48	.5	.5	29.7
Both 5 <sup>th</sup> Born	93	.9	.9	30.7
Other	6935	69.4	69.4	100.0
Total	10000	100.0	100.0	

**Table 1: Frequency of Couple Pairings**

As Table 1 shows, the most common pairing was not same birth order couples. About 70 percent (69.4%) of the total sample was a part of a couple in which partners were not of the same birth order. The most common same birth order pair was first born paired couples (17.2%), followed by homogenous second-born couples (9.3%).

### Hypothesis 2

*The most uncommon pairing will be homogenous only child couples.*

As shown by Table 1, couples made of two only children were not the most uncommon pairing in this sample, disproving the hypothesis. The most uncommon pairing was fourth-born paired couples (.5%).

### Hypothesis 3

*Couples who are of the same birth order will have a less intimate marital typology*

Couple Type	Birth order				Total
	First Born	2 <sup>nd</sup> Born	3 <sup>rd</sup> Born	Other	
VITALIZED					
Count	323	193	52	1432	2000
% within Birth Order	18.8%	20.7%	18.8%	20.2%	20.0%
HARMONIOUS					
Count	337	178	61	1424	2000
% within Birth Order	19.7%	19.1%	22.1%	20.1%	20.0%
CONVENTIONAL					
Count	352	182	55	1411	2000
% within Birth Order	20.5%	19.5%	19.9%	19.9%	20.0%
CONFLICTED					
Count	346	201	58	1395	2000
% within Birth Order	20.2%	21.5%	21.0%	19.7%	20.0%
DEVITALIZED					
Count	357	179	50	1414	2000
% within Birth Order	20.8%	19.2%	18.1%	20.0%	20.0%
Total					
Count	1715	933	276	7076	10000
% within Birth Order	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

**Table 2: Frequency of Birth Order Paired Couples within the Five Married Couple Types**

Couples who were of the same birth order did not have a less intimate marital typology than those who were married to couples of mixed birth order pairing as hypothesized (See Table 2). A chi-square value of 6.2 was not significant ( $p > .90$ ). Percentage frequencies for firstborn/firstborn couples across the five typologies ranged from 18.8%- 20.8%. Percentage frequencies for second-born paired couples ranged from 19.1%-21.5%. Percentage frequencies

for third-born paired couples ranged from 18.1%-22.1%. No birth order pairing had significantly more couples in any one of the five marital types.

Couple Type	Birth Order		Total
	Only Child	First Born not only child	
VITALIZED			
Count	84	311	395
% within Birth Order	19.3%	18.9%	19.0%
HARMONIOUS			
Count	85	317	402
% within Birth Order	19.5%	19.2%	19.3%
CONVENTIONAL			
Count	76	343	419
% within Birth Order	17.5%	20.8%	20.1%
CONFLICTED			
Count	81	338	419
% within Birth Order	18.6%	20.5%	20.1%
DEVITALIZED			
Count	109	339	448
% within Birth Order	25.1%	20.6%	21.5%
Total			
Count	435	1648	2083
% within Birth Order	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

**Table 3: Frequency of Only Children vs. First Borns and Couple Type**

When comparing only child paired couples, the results were similar, as shown in Table 3. A noteworthy result, although not statistically significant, is that homogenous only-child couples had a higher frequency of Devitalized couples (25.1%) than the other birth order homogeneous and heterogeneous combinations.

#### Hypothesis 4

*Couples who are of the same birth order will have a lower individual and couple (PCA) satisfaction scores than heterogeneous couples.*

Birth Order	Mean	N
*First Born	46.7	1713
2 <sup>nd</sup> Born	45.7	933
3 <sup>rd</sup> Born	45.9	276
Other	45.8	7073
Total	45.9	9995

**Table 4: Male Independent Satisfaction Score**

Birth Order	Mean	N
*First Born	45.2	1717
2 <sup>nd</sup> Born	44.7	933
3 <sup>rd</sup> Born	43.2	276
Other	45.9	7079
Total	45.5	10005

**Table 5: Female Independent Satisfaction Score**

Birth Order	Mean	N
*First Born	39.7	1715
2 <sup>nd</sup> Born	38.8	933
3 <sup>rd</sup> Born	38.7	276
Other	39.9	7076
Total	39.7	10000

**Table 6: Mean Couple Satisfaction (PCA Score)**

Married couples who both are of the same birth order do not have a lower mean individual satisfaction score or PCA Score, as indicated by Tables 4, 5 and 6. (Satisfaction scores are scored on a continuous scale from 0.0-100.0). Table 6 compares the PCA scores of homogeneous firstborn, second born, third born and heterogeneous birth order paired couples.

#### Hypothesis 5

*Second-born females will be more satisfied in their marriage than firstborn females.*

As shown in Table 5, second-born females (44.7) are not any more satisfied in their marriage than are firstborn females (45.2). In fact, across the birth orders, there was no statistically significant difference in mean satisfaction scores for females.

#### Hypothesis 6

*Males will be more satisfied with their marriage than females*

As can be seen by comparing Table 4 and Table 5, gender does not have a significant affect in satisfaction scores (male, 45.9; female, 45.5).

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\* Includes Only Children

## Discussion

The current study examined a random sample of 10,000 married couples to test if birth order has an effect on marital satisfaction at the individual and couple level. It also attempted to discover if couples of the same birth order had a higher level of marital satisfaction than those who did not have a spouse of the same birth order, as well as the general question that people are attracted to those who are similar to themselves. The hypotheses tested regarded individual and couple satisfaction and the five types of married couples from PREPARE/ENRICH.

This study found that birth order has no significant effect on marriage intimacy and satisfaction. The stratified sample illustrates that homogenous birth order couples do not fall into a more or less satisfied PREPARE/ENRICH marital type than heterogeneous birth order couples. In contradiction to Allred and Poduska (1988), birth order does not have an effect on marital satisfaction. While this study looked only at marital satisfaction and Allred and Poduska looked at overall happiness, it could be thought that the two would be related. There was no difference between men and women. The differences could be attributed to sample size or the fact that two different aspects were being studied.

Hartshorne, Salem-Hartshorne and Hartshorne (2009) found that people are drawn to those who are of the birth order in plutonic and romantic relationships. The researcher hypothesized that this finding would be replicated in the current study, but it was not. There were not more homogenous couples in this study, in fact there were less. The differences in results here could again be attributed to sample size.

One finding that while not statistically significant, but hints at a replicated finding, is that in couples that were made of two only children there were more Devitalized couples. This seems to be congruous with findings by Leman, that homogeneous only child couples are the most volatile combination for couples. Could this be attributed to personality similarities? It is surprising that this finding was not also found in homogeneous firstborn couples or third born couples since only children are often described as having first or third born personality qualities.

Limitations with this study include that those who take PREPARE/ENRICH are either doing really well in their marriage or are doing poorly. Having a stratified, national sample tried to eliminate this bias, but it is not a truly random sample. Another limitation is that there has been very little research on the effects of birth order and even fewer replicated findings in the field. Since this is a very new and difficult field in psychology, having congruent or significant findings that are able to be replicated can be difficult. While a sample size of 10,000 couples is very large, it may have not been large enough to find significant results. It may be possible that using a larger sample could reveal results that were not found in this study.

The field of birth order psychology offers many future opportunities in research. The analyses done in this study could be repeated with a larger sample in order to determine if a

larger sample may yield statistically significant results. The relationship between birth order, personality, and marital types or marital satisfaction could also be examined. If one were interested in attraction, the same study could be done with dating or engaged couples instead of married couples. Another future opportunity in this research may focus on why homogeneous only child couples are apparently more devitalized than first or third born homogenous couples, examining how personality traits in each of the birth orders differ despite that only children are often compared to first and youngest children. There are many different directions that could be explored the effects of birth order in couple satisfaction and attraction.

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