



Ordinal Position and Social Mobility

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Ordinal Position and Social Mobility*

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Previous findings that first borns exceed later borns in rates of college attendance are explained in terms of the greater dependency needs of the first born. Evidence supports the general hypothesis that dependency is associated with social mobility to the extent that aspirations and values conducive to mobility are differently rewarded by significant others. First borns are more likely than later borns to attend college if the social milieu offers them a choice in selecting among significant others who vary in support for attendance values: Given possible selection between college attending or non-attending peers, first borns are more likely than later borns to choose attenders. Demonstration of this structural effect eliminates most alternative explanations and accounts for observed mobility differences in terms of the same theoretical perspective that explains most other ordinal-position phenomena.

A wide variety of phenomena related to ordinal position has been explained quite parsimoniously in terms of the greater dependency of the first born, his greater sensitivity to others' expectations, opinions, and evaluations (Schachter, 1959; Warren, 1966). However, the consistently observed association between ordinal position and educational attainment remains virtually isolated from this theoretical account of other birth-order differences. Schachter's (1963) initial and influential paper simply demonstrated the existence of the relationship without purporting to account for it. And, while subsequent researchers have looked for differences in intelligence, an explanation in terms of such an appended variable is disadvantaged by theoretical inelegance and by lack of consistent empirical support.¹

The observed association between birth order and educational attainment could be explained in terms of dependency by two related arguments: (a) Dependency denotes sensitivity to social approval, and people who desire

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¹Schachter (1963, p. 767), citing studies of relationships between IQ and birth order, puts it nicely: "Viewed *en masse* these studies appear to have yielded completely inconsistent results. . . . Sanity certainly would suggest a conclusion of no association." More recent studies have reached the same conclusion (Altus, 1967; Bayer and Folger, 1967).

social approval will be oriented toward values for which they receive directly rewarding support from others (Alexander, 1966; Schachter, 1964). High educational achievements are positively valued in our society. Thus, an adolescent is more likely to obtain social approval by espousing high rather than low aspirations and by following through on them. Unless attainment of these goals is clearly unrealistic and pretentious—and, hence, likely to incur negative sanctions from interpersonal referents—first borns should be more likely than later borns to plan to attend college. (b) As Schachter (1964) and Alexander (1966) have demonstrated, first borns are sociometrically attracted to people whom others evaluate positively: they are likely to choose referents whose characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors are socially valued and approved. Thus, given a universe of referent-potentials with varying attributes, first borns would *selectively orient* themselves to those who exemplify and support generally valued social goals, such as college attendance. Given the opportunity to choose between a college-attending peer and one who did not plan to attend, for example, first borns would be more likely than later borns to choose the attender as a friend.

This reasoning leads to two conclusions: So long as college attendance is socially defined as feasible for the individual and, consequently, is socially approved, first borns will be more likely to plan to attend than later borns. Furthermore, first borns will be more likely to attend than later borns *to the extent that* the social milieu provides them with the opportunity to *select* those who positively encourage attendance from a population in which approval for attendance is variable. This latter prediction is crucial, since it provides a basis for differentiating first and later borns in terms of a characteristic of a social system that is unrelated to “personality” differences.

Regarding effects of the social system, many studies have shown that school status is an important determinant of college aspirations and attendance (e.g., Sewell and Armer, 1966). Campbell and Alexander (1965) provide evidence that this is due to the differential possibilities that systems offer for the formation of friendships with high status college attenders. The selection of attending friends in school is directly related to their availability: Friends are likely to be of high status in high status schools “simply because there are proportionately more of them available to be chosen” (p. 286). This area of research suggests a “structural effects” hypothesis about ordinal position differences in educational attainment.

STRUCTURAL EFFECTS

The average status of an adolescent’s school structurally determines his possibilities for selecting among peers who vary in college-attendance plans. Based on numerous studies (King, 1961), it can be assumed that people select friends whose status approximates their own or is just slightly above it; and

this implies that the likelihood of having high status friends depends upon the status of the individual and of those in his universe of friendship potentials. When the adolescent's own status is low, and he is in a school composed predominantly of similarly low status peers, his friends are most likely to have low status and low educational aspirations. When both personal and school status levels are high, he is also confronted with a relatively homogeneous social environment, but one in which almost everyone has high status and aspires to college. In such circumstances, referential "selectivity" is virtually meaningless.

The environment of potential friendship choices becomes differentiated—and selectivity can make a difference—to the extent that personal and school status levels are discrepant. First borns can be selective in choosing friends on the basis of their college-attendance plans if the frequency of attendance among their similar-status others permits them such selectivity. When attendance is rare, just as when it is widespread, there is little room for choice. But, when attendance frequencies are intermediate and moderate, selectivity is possible; and these situations exist most prominently among high status persons in low status schools and among low status persons in high status schools.

Consequently, to the extent that personal and school status levels are discrepant, first- and later-born attendance rates should differ. The status of the school is thus hypothesized to affect the friendship choices and mobility aspirations of first and later borns as follows: (1) First borns should be more likely than later borns to choose college-attending friends and to attend college in *low* status schools to the extent that their personal status is *high*; (2) First borns should be more likely than later borns to choose college-attending friends and to attend college in *high* status schools to the extent that they have *low* personal status.

Viewing referential selectivity as constituting a choice between parents and peers reinforces these expectations. Parents and peers should contribute uniformly to low aspirations among low status youngsters in low status schools and to high aspirations among high status youngsters in high status schools. The adolescent can look to parents for aspirational support if he has high status in a low status school, and to peers if he has low status in a high status school. Thus, the conditions that provide a potential for selectivity between parents and peers (as referents for aspirational goals) should correspond to those which provide a potential for selectivity among peers alone.

DATA ANALYSIS

A detailed description of this sample of 1,410 male seniors in 30 high schools may be found elsewhere (Alexander and Campbell, 1964). Since

college attendance is defined here as actual attendance, ascertained by an extensive follow-up study in the fall and spring of the year following each sample member's graduation from high school, some methodological criticisms of previous studies are obviated (Bayer, 1966). Friendship selection was determined by a question asking for the names of same-grade, same-sex students that the respondent "goes around with most often." His best friend is defined as the first-named choice who also returned a signed questionnaire. School status was computed in a previous study (Campbell and Alexander, 1965) on the basis of the highest educational levels attained by both of the parents of all male seniors in the school.

If the data are examined without regard to school status, comparisons between first and later borns within the six status levels yield data consistent with previous findings. First borns are more likely than later borns to attend college (five of six comparisons) and to select college-attenders as friends (six of six). However, such data are merely consistent and cannot be claimed to support any particular theoretical perspective. The dependency interpretation must here rely upon the structural-effects hypotheses.

In analyzing these data it is necessary to face the inevitable problem of rapidly decreasing cell frequencies that attends the successive introduction of relevant controls. When considering college attendance, it seems essential to consider both the total resources available to a family (indicated by occupational status) and the number of persons among whom these resources are divided (indicated by family size). Given the size of the sample, it is necessary to make some sacrifice in one of these; and the decision was made to eliminate, insofar as possible, differences in family size in order to maintain maximum discrimination on family status. Thus, only adolescents in two- and three-child families are considered here. To deal with adolescents in families of different sizes or to make further distinctions among those in this category would reduce discrimination on family socioeconomic status.

First borns are expected to select referents who possess socially desirable characteristics, and later borns to reflect unselective orientations to all influences in their interpersonal milieu. When family and school status are similar, the population of reference potentials is homogeneous, and both later-born unselectivity and first-born selectivity would yield the same results. However, first and later borns should differ in selecting college-attending friends when personal and school status levels are discrepant, since attendance frequencies in the population of potential referents permit selectivity in these circumstances. Thus, first- and later-born differences in selecting college-attending friends should vary with personal status *directly* in low status schools and *inversely* in high status schools.

Table 1 presents the percentages of college-attending friends selected by

TABLE 1
Percent of Choices Attending College—By Chooser's Ordinal Position, Socioeconomic Status, and School Status

Father's Occupation	School Status Low		School Status High		Average Birth-Order Differences in Schools of	
	First Born	Later Born	First Born	Later Born	Low Status	High Status
Professional	65.1 (43)	53.1 (32)	92.6 (27)	85.0 (20)	12.0	7.2
Exec-Manager			79.5 (39)	72.7 (33)		
Bus-Farm Owner	84.0 (25)	53.3 (45)	66.7 (21)	60.0 (35)	13.7	8.9
Clerical-Sales	46.7 (30)	50.0 (22)	66.7 (30)	55.6 (18)		
Skilled Labor	39.1 (23)	37.5 (24)	57.6 (33)	38.5 (39)	2.0	19.1
Unskilled and Farm	41.3 (46)	38.9 (36)				

first and later borns at each status level in schools of high and low status. The last two columns of the table show the average percentage difference (first born minus later born) in proportions of attending friends at high, middle, and low personal status levels, by school status.² With one slight discrepancy (high versus middle status levels in low status schools), the ten comparisons clearly support predictions. The relationship between birth order and choice of college attenders *increases* with personal status in low status schools and *decreases* with personal status in high status schools.

These differential interpersonal influences should produce similar differences in the college attendance rates of first and later borns. Table 2 presents the percentages who attend college—by ordinal position, socioeconomic status, and school status. Again, average percentage differences by school status and the three personal status levels reveal a strong structural effect in support of expectations. The strength of the association between ordinal position and college attendance varies *directly* with individual status in low status schools and *inversely* with individual status in high status schools. Differences in college attendance between first and later borns simply disappear among those of lowest status in low status schools and among those of highest status in high status schools; but they are quite pronounced when discrepancies exist between personal and school status levels. With all expectations supported, then, a striking structural effect is evident.

DISCUSSION

Suggestions of parental favoritism toward first borns in allocation of family resources or of first born superiority in intelligence provide temptingly simple and direct explanations for ordinal-position differences in educational attainment. Evidence, both historical and contemporary, provides a plausible basis for possible “academic primogeniture,” but it is circumstantial at best. Empirical studies have not consistently supported the hypothesis of intelligence differences. Nevertheless, since neither view can predict structural effects, the data presented here warrant their rejection. In fact, this demonstration of structural effects rules out any explanations of ordinal-position differences in terms of stable personality variables that do not interact with conditions of the social milieu.

Only differences in achievement motivation predict effects that may be similarly contingent on the interpersonal environment, and this remains the only plausible alternative explanation for these findings (Sampson, 1962;

² Where status levels are combined to obtain a comparison, the percentage for comparisons is based on the collapsed cell rather than on the average of the separately computed percentages.

TABLE 2
Percent Attending College—By Ordinal Position, Father's Occupation, and School Status

Father's Occupation	School Status Low		School Status High		Average Birth-Order Differences in Schools of	
	First Born	Later Born	First Born	Later Born	Low Status	High Status
Professional	77.8 (45)	51.4 (35)	76.7 (30)	75.0 (24)	26.4	0.4
Exec-Manager			75.6 (41)	76.5 (34)		
Bus-Farm Owner	72.4 (29)	58.7 (46)	66.7 (24)	40.0 (40)	6.9	19.7
Clerical-Sales	50.0 (34)	50.0 (22)	72.7 (33)	60.0 (20)		
Skilled Labor	20.0 (25)	29.6 (27)				
Unskilled and Farm	25.9 (54)	20.5 (39)	50.0 (34)	25.0 (40)	-2.1	25.0

Sampson and Hancock, 1967). Aside from lack of parsimony, however, such hypothetical differences may be considered irrelevant, since dependent persons should learn high-achievement orientations if they are systematically encouraged to achieve by general social rewards and by the values and attitudes of their significant others. In other words, dependency would logically produce high achievement needs under such circumstances.

The conclusion emerges that differences between first and later borns in educational attainment and social mobility can most parsimoniously be explained by the same dependency variable that accounts for most other findings related to ordinal position—the first born's greater sensitivity to and dependency upon the social evaluations of others. Dependency would lead to greater adoption of valued attitudes and behaviors *when* these are differentially supported by potentially significant others in the social environment.

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