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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Birth Order: Its Influence on Personality. by Cecile Ernst and Jules Angst

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Source: *Social Forces*, Jun., 1985, Vol. 63, No. 4 (Jun., 1985), pp. 1117-1119

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2578634

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work symbolizes this. The task is to use the new methods to advance our understanding factors influencing the proximate determinants of fertility. Bongaarts and Potter have given the foundation for that work.

Birth Order: Its Influence on Personality.
By Cecile Ernst and Jules Angst. Springer–Verlag, 1983. 343 pp. $34.40.

Reviewer: ELEANOR SINGER, *Columbia University*

At least since Galton called attention to the "over-representation" of first-borns among British men of science in 1874, social scientists have been fascinated by the concept of birth order. Early studies—and there were many of them—were concerned primarily with the relation between order of birth and certain physical traits, including the incidence of disease. The results of these early studies were, for the most part, inconclusive. Around 1930, concern with physical characteristics gave way to an interest in intelligence and adjustment, with similarly inconclusive results.

For about twenty years, and with the notable exception of the clinical writings of Alfred Adler on "dethronement," interest in ordinal position was largely quiescent. Then, in 1959, the publication of Schachter's *Psychology of Affiliation* ushered in an entirely new wave of research on ordinal position, with such dependent variables as anxiety, dependence, and conformity. Agreement on the findings, however, has been no better than before.

Periodically, social scientists have attempted to bring some kind of order to the research on ordinal position that has flooded the scholarly journals and, occasionally, spilled over into the popular press. This most recent effort is by two psychiatrists at the University of Zurich, whose book combines a review of the literature—some 1,500 articles and books appearing between 1946 and 1980, most of them in the U.S.—with a new (1971) study of the relation of ordinal position to school achievement, personality characteristics, and the consumption of tobacco, alcohol, and certain other drugs.

On the basis both of their review of the literature and of their own study, Angst and Ernst conclude that reports of birth order effects have been greatly exaggerated. There is evidence for some physical differences just before and just after birth (first-borns weigh less at birth, are more likely to die in utero after 20 weeks, are at greatest risk of intracranial and spinal birth injuries, and are at greatest risk of dying at birth and shortly after birth) and some differences in socialization (parents are more demanding of first-borns and more attentive at infant ages, but this attention diminishes markedly when the second child comes along; first-borns describe themselves as more likely to communicate with their parents and, in small families, as readier to accept their authority). There are also very modest differences (0.5–2.5 percent of variance explained) in educational and occupational attainment, with first-borns in small families and youngest children in large attaining more education and higher occupational status than middle children do. But Angst and Ernst argue that when proper controls are applied birth order is unrelated to such outcomes as IQ, school achievement, or mental illness, or to such characteristics as anxiety and dependency. Even with better research,

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they contend, the chances of accounting for any meaningful part of the variance in personality or behavior by means of ordinal position are exceedingly small.

Bringing together in one place the vast amount of research dealing with order of birth is an impressive achievement. My one complaint is that Angst and Ernst have included studies varying widely in quality, and although they try to weight the results by the methodological sophistication of the studies from which they are derived, the logic by which this is done is not always clear. As a result, even a reader sympathetic to their position is too often asked to take their evaluations and conclusions largely on faith.

The report of the Swiss survey, which makes up the last sixth of the book, is somewhat disappointing, chiefly because the analysis suffers from the same kind of over-inclusiveness as the literature review. Bivariate relations are first discussed in detail, even when subsequent multivariate analyses negate them. For the less sophisticated reader, this is bound to be confusing; for the more sophisticated, annoying. Furthermore, it is not always clear how the multivariate tests were carried out, and once again this makes evaluation of the findings difficult.

One of the book's most useful contributions is its first chapter, which outlines statistical fallacies in birth order research. The most pernicious of these all pertain to the analysis of birth order distributions in some group selected for homogeneity on an outcome variable—for example, a group of college presidents, or schizophrenics, or alcoholics. The observed distribution is then compared with some "expected" distribution, and if (for example) first-borns are more numerous in the "observed" than in the "expected" distribution, the investigator concludes that birth order is causally related to the dependent variable. The problem lies in the construction of the "expected" distribution. Some of the fallacies involved in such constructions were pointed out by Greenwood and Yule as early as 1914, but others have been extensively discussed only since the late 1960s. Briefly put, the Greenwood and Yule correction controls for the distribution of family size in a sample. It assumes that, within each family size, birth order is equally distributed—that there are as many older as younger children in two-child families, for example. On the basis of this assumption, an artificial control, or expected, distribution can be created. Unfortunately, the assumption of equal distribution of birth order within sibships is true only under certain conditions—specifically, only in a population whose fertility is neither increasing nor decreasing. As a result, overrepresentation of some ordinal position with respect to a theoretical distribution is extremely difficult to establish in practice; in most of the research relying on this method, any birth order effects discovered are probably artifactual.

Because research on birth order has been the province primarily of psychologists and psychiatrists, there has been a virtual neglect of explanatory concepts drawn from sociology—for example, concepts of social role, and of patterned variations in expectations and opportunities. That expectations and opportunities have varied by ordinal position is clear (viz., primogeniture); the extent to which they continue to do so, given changing patterns of marriage, divorce, child-bearing and child-rearing, is an open question. But though there may be room for the study of birth order in the context of more comprehensive studies of socialization and its outcomes, it is to be hoped that this book will put an end to simple-minded research on birth order effects—research lacking in controls for the many other

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variables (e.g., social status, sex, family size, place of residence) that may be responsible for them.

New Perspectives on Prison and Imprisonment.
By James B. Jacobs. Cornell University Press, 1983. 241 pp. Cloth, $29.50; paper, $10.95.

Reviewer: WILLIAM B. BANKSTON, *Louisiana State University*

Prison policies and correctional systems in the United States have undergone dramatic changes in the last two decades. This book is a compilation of several recent articles, previously published elsewhere, that link these changes to the broader context of American social structure and culture.

The first chapter argues the need for a macro-sociological approach to the study of prisons. The second chapter contains a presentation of the origins and effects of the prisoners' rights movement. Jacobs (correctly, I think) sees this movement as stimulated by other social movements since World War II that have sought to express the interests of marginal groups in American society. Of particular interest is his argument that it was the presence of Black Muslims in prisons that elevated the issue of prisoners' rights to one of racial and religious equality. This constitutional question brought concern for prisoners' civil status into the arena of the federal courts to stay. Jacobs does a good job of tracing the development of court decisions, and he notes that the most important long-term consequence is not in the specific effects of various decisions, but in the "symbolic" value of their vindication of prisoners' rights.

The third and fourth chapters deal with race relations in prisons. Chapter 3 will be of particular interest to those familiar with traditional research on prisoner subcultures. It develops the thesis that racial conflict has radically altered the subcultural solidarity identified in pre-1970 studies. The limited contemporary literature is used to support the author's contention that racial conflict must be a primary focus of future research, and Jacobs argues for systematic comparative studies of the conditions under which racial divisions arise and are stabilized. Chapter 4 extends the examination of prison race relations by looking at the implications of court-imposed integration in prison settings. The history of court decisions shows that federal courts have applied to prisons the same logic found in the desegregation of other segments of society, particularly public schools, but prison administrators are often placed in a dilemma: the "racially blind" assignment of prisoners may expose them to assault and exploitation. The author rightly has reservations about suggesting that segregation may be necessary, but he suggests that subjecting prisoners to danger because of integration's symbolic value is also a grave injustice.

Chapters 5 through 9 shift the focus to the organizational structure of correctional systems, and to their relation to society. Chapter 5 contains three studies of community–prison relations. The first is a case study of a facility in rural southern Illinois that developed a positive relationship with the local community. The author concludes—somewhat in contradiction to current trends in correctional

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