Social consequences of birth order: twins

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Let us put the question of birth order in some perspective. All cultures utilise social distinctions: the two most universal distinctions in terms of psychological and social identity are gender and age. In general, twins do not transgress the gender category, although some societies, such as in Bali, believe that incest occurs in the womb between opposite-sex twins. But twins do most certainly transgress expected age distinctions. From literally the moment of birth, the biological reality of twin birth and birth order become important social facts. So, for example, not only may the first child, usually the first-born son, inherit the family's property and effects, but birth order may equally help to mould relationships between twins, between twins and their parents, and between twins and the outside world.

Twinship therefore represents a potential or even an actual blurring of the category of differentiation by age. In societies in which birth order greatly determines both social roles and social action, the simultaneous birth of two children may cause many problems. We can identify cross-cultural attempts to minimise the disruptive effects of such potential transgressions. Probably the most prominent of these are what we may call 'strategies of naming'. Some cultures require that twin children be named with exactly the same name, thereby attempting to negate the double nature of the birth. Other cultures name twins in terms of birth order (he/she who comes first; he/she who comes second , with the first going out to 'taste the world' and the second twin moving out of the womb more slowly but with more wisdom: Thus, for example, the Yoruba in Nigeria (and many others, as discussed in the webinar) reverse the importance placed in the English-speaking world on the first-born: here the second twin is the senior member of the twinship . Most recently I have come across another view of birth order which states that the second twin is the favoured twin because he/she remains in the womb for a longer period of time, the womb being a sacred place, and the second becomes more sacred by being there longer.

On the other hand, another normalising strategy, albeit a radical one, may involve infanticide, where either one or both twins may be killed. In some cultures, there are quite specific rules governing how the perceived 'problem' of twin birth is to be addressed, and the rules are specifically related to birth order. For example, the Kakwa invariably expose the second-born twin (or the female twin). So, birth order is vitally important here.

We also clearly see that birth order is an important factor in myths about twins. Take the Genesis story of Esau and Jacob, twin sons of Isaac and Rebekkah. Rebekkah becomes pregnant with twins who, we are told, struggled together in her womb. When she enquires how she could live with this, she is reassured with the following words:

> Two nations are in thy womb …
>
> And two peoples shall be separated from thy bowels:
>
> And the one people shall be stronger than the other people
>
> And the elder shall serve the younger. (Genesis 25:23-4)

Esau, the first born, emerges at birth with his brother, Jacob, clutching at his heel. Jacob eventually robs his first-born brother of his birthright. Another set of Biblical twins, Pharez and Zarah, are also described as being vigorous in vivo, each twin engaged in the struggle to emerge as the first-born. Birth order is thus depicted as having extensive (even critical) social consequences. Parents of twins

may favour one twin at the expense of the other according to birth order. [Similar to other myths in North and South America]

With regard to the management of a twin pregnancy and the actual delivery of twins, in the past in more industrialised societies and probably still relevant in less industrialised societies - birth order was indeed significant, especially in terms of perinatal mortality rates and/or generally in terms of less favourable birth circumstances for the second born. But with changing times and the increasing use of modern technology, this preferable position for the first-born seems to be altering (although we should note here that Nancy Segal has indicated that now the first-born is more at risk in mothers with HIV infection (Segal)

This leads me on to the importance of birth order as one of the areas least covered or even considered in the study of twins. The first question usually asked of the parent(s) of twins we would all agree is, 'Are they identical?' The question(s) which follow on from this are, 'Which one is the older twin?' or 'Who was born first?' The answers to these questions indeed have consequences, which vary in different cultures as we have already seen, as well as with respect to, for example, inheritance and status differences.

So, what does birth order determine? One area to look at is parental preference for one of the twins. Is that determined by birth order? Many previous studies indicate that parental preference (to the extent that a parent will admit to any sort of preference for one twin or the other) is based on the birthweight of the twin, the heavier twin being the preferred child, usually on the grounds that he/she is somewhat easier to care for (Audrey Sandbank). Others have argued that the preferred twin is the twin who comes home first from the hospital (David Hay), with the parent being able to bond sooner and more easily with this twin.

But another answer may be that parents use birth order not to indicate preference, but to help them to differentiate their twins. In other words, using birth order may aid parents in assigning individuality to each twin, as well as helping the parent to differentiate the twins in immediate social situations (as when asked, which twin is the brighter/the noisiest/ the prettier, etc --- you can fill in the blank). The consequences of this differentiation may, however, affect the twins themselves — in some cases adversely and in some cases preferentially. I have in mind, for example, assigning privileges or other priorities according to birth order. So that the first-born is asked to 'take care' of his or her younger (by 6,10 or 20 minutes) twin sibling, thus putting the elder one in control of a particular situation. Or the reverse may be true: one of my respondents was particularly happy to be the second-born because in all the fairy tales, the youngest was always special, like in Cinderella. [in excusing the younger from some sort of task because he or she is actually younger]!

Related to this is assigning each twin a role within the family. If a family consists of an older sibling and a set of twins, one twin is the middle child and one twin is the youngest child, with all that this sort of labelling may entail. Some sort of domination and/or superiority in different social situations obviously are thus possible.

If you actually ask twins themselves, rather than their parents, what has been the significance of birth order for them, another picture — if at times an unclear one — emerges. Some have indicated that the X factor, that is, the actual difference in minutes at birth, really affected them in a very significant way. The labelling of the older and the younger twin had definite consequences for their behaviour, they would explain, so that they felt that one twin was privileged at the expense of the other to the extent that one was 'superior 'to the other. In other cases, the twins teased or taunted each other on grounds of birth order, and their friends followed suit. Others indicated that their sibling sometimes 'acted' older, but they knew they were the elder, a feeling which didn't actually please them.

Some twins in my research indicate, however, that actual birth order was less important to them that their actual size, usually expressed in terms of strength or height. So a heavier or taller twin would conclude that he or she was the first born.

Another interesting point to emerge from this research is the fact that some twins are very unsure or resistant to the fact of birth order, querying whether or not the hospital made a mistake by labelling the first-born as the second-born or vice versa. Some twins who were delivered by caesarean section also queried who was actually first and who was really the second-born. In other words, yet again with twins, critical questions of identity are raised which singletons don't even/ever consider.

Therefore, birth order – and its subsequent perception(s) — may lead us to pose alternative questions about identity formation in twins. Variations in assumed roles within the family on account of birth order and the behaviours which follow on from this may be significant. Equally important is the empirical question of when the twins are actually told of their birth order and what consequences, if any, follow on from this. Another empirical question is what happens to those twins who are not told who was first and who was second – what consequences follow on from this? Finally, I close by suggesting that birth order may be one more key to confronting aspects of identity formation in twinship, indicating yet another variable in the different processing of twins.