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# Family Characteristics as Correlates of Self Esteem among Young Adults

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## **Abstract**

*This study investigated the family characteristics as the correlates of self esteem among young adults. Three hypotheses were postulated to give direction to the study. The participants for the study consisted of two hundred students randomly selected from tertiary institutions in Ogun state. The instruments used for data collection were Rosenberg's (1965) Self Esteem Scale and Personal Data Card constructed by the researchers. The data collected were analyzed with one- way analysis of variance and independent t-test statistical techniques. The results of the analysis showed that there is a significant difference in self esteem of young adults with respect to their ordinal position. Young adults self esteem have no linkage with size of the family and there is a significant gender difference in young adults self esteem. On the basis of the results, it was recommended among others that preferential treatment should be avoided by parents in the course of relating with their children.*

**Keywords:** Self Esteem; Birth Order; Family Size.

## **Introduction**

One of the most important social contexts for the development and expression of self esteem is the family. The family is the most important context because its major function is the socialization and care of children (Gorbett & Kruzek, 2008). The family is the first primary group where most important identities take shape. Assessments of role performances based on these identities become early sources of self esteem (Gorbett & Kruczek, 2008). Family roles govern the perceived expectations and responsibilities placed on children by parents and siblings. Children's perception of their place in the family constellation influences how they feel about themselves, and how they interact with others (Nims, 1998). Components of family structure during formative years that reflect emotional and affiliative ties are implicated in the psychological status, coping and relating styles of mature individuals (Fullerton, Ursano, Wetzler & Slusarcick, 1999).

It is important to consider the possible factors affecting self esteem as it has been supported that one's self esteem affects several aspects of one's life. Psychologists have posed several hypotheses about what may affect self esteem, but no definite conclusions have been drawn. In fact, some studies have contradictory results. There are two connotations of self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965). One way of looking at self-esteem is to say that a person with high self-esteem considers himself to be "very good". Another view of self-esteem is to say that a person with high self esteem believes he is "good enough" (Rosenberg, 1965). Therefore, to Rosenberg (1965), a person with high self-esteem "simply feels that he is a person of worth; he respects himself for what he is .... He does not necessarily consider himself superior to others. He

defines a person with low self-esteem as someone who 'lacks respect for the self he observes' (Rosenberg, 1965).

Arguably, the most important years in the development of an individual's self-esteem occur during childhood and adolescence. During childhood, the most influential people in an individual's life are his or her parents. Wylie (2001) states that: "(a) the self concept is a learner constellation of perceptions, cognitions, and values. (b) an important part of this learning comes from observing the reactions one gets from other persons. (c) the parents are the persons who are present earliest and most consistently." Studies have shown that children are affected by parent-child communication (Matteson, 2004); perceived parental favoritism (Zervas & Sherman, 1994) and parents' differential treatment (Mchale, Crounter, McGuire, & Updegraff, 1995). These are all different aspects of parental attention.

The subject of birth rank was first introduced by Alfred Adler. He used birth order "as a basis for predicting characteristic behaviours of individuals" who fell into the categories of either 'eldest, middle youngest, or only child' (Greenberg, Guerino, Lahsen, Mayer, & Piskowski, 1993). Birth order has been found to be "an important and complex variable in personality development" (Gates, Lineberger, Crockett, & Hubbard, 1988). The results of birth order research are not conclusive and many have contradictory results (Gates et al, 1988), but nevertheless research on the subject has provided some interesting perspectives on the effects of birth order on characteristic behaviour and personality development of individuals.

It is important to study self-esteem because of the implications of high and low self-esteem on an individual. Rosenberg (1979) claims that a major determinant of human thought and behaviour and a prime motive in human striving ... is the drive to protect and enhance one's self-esteem. This suggests that the thoughts and actions of an individual are greatly influenced by his self-esteem. Thus, studying self-esteem and its factors is important to psychologists in helping to explain a person's thoughts and behaviours. Studies have supported the idea that there is some relation, under certain conditions, between self-regard and sociometric status, i.e., that high self-regard will lead to better ability to get along with others, and that acceptance by others will maintain or enhance self-regard (Wylie, 1961). This indicates that a person's self-esteem is related to how that person relates with others. Studies have also shown that high self-esteem is significantly associated with lower incidence of ... depression sign (Wylie, 1961).

Since self-esteem is considered important to the well-being of an individual, it is of interest to determine possible factors affecting self-esteem. One theory is the self-attribution theory. "The self-attribution theory suggests that people evaluate themselves largely in terms of their own behaviour or its outcomes" (Rosenberg, 1979). According to the self-attribution theory, achievement is an important factor in determining self-esteem in both children and adults.

Another view takes the position that what influences self-esteem is different for each individual. One important thing to notice, however, is that "we are not completely free to choose our self-values" (Rosenberg, 1979). Many of our self-values are learnt from our families at a very young age, and sometimes these values are not in our best interest. This becomes significant when such self-values are difficult to change, because it may affect how a person feels about himself. He may excel in one area, but if he fails to excel in the area which he values most, it may have a detrimental effect on his self-esteem. Also, some self-values stem "from the social role definitions and social group norms. At an early age the child learns what is right or wrong, important or unimportant, for him, and these ideas are internalized in his value system" (Rosenberg, 1979). A person will constantly be judged by his significant others, and so "he must seek to excel in terms of

their values, not his own" (Rosenberg, 1979). Conflicts may arise between self-values and the values of others, which may affect self-esteem.

How a person feels about himself is also affected by how he thinks others view him. It is the perceived self – what we think others think of us- that affects our self-attitudes (Rosenberg, 1979). The views of significant others, those people important to the individual whose opinions he values, are the most important to the individual. Symbolic interaction theory states that children's feelings about themselves depend on their perceptions of how their parents view them. Similarly, phenomenological theory posits that children's self-perceptions are affected by the way significant others treat them (Zervas & Sherman, 1994). Significant others vary among individuals, as it is a personal opinion who one considers to be significant in one's life. However, it is reasonable to assume that one's parents fall into the category of significant others. A child's thoughts of how his parents view him can be a great influence on how he feels about himself. If he feels his parents are disappointed in him or are not concerned with him, then he may feel that he is a failure or not worthy of their attention. This could have a negative effect on his self-esteem.

Since parents are such significant figure in an individual's life, the parent-child relationship is of great importance when considering the effects significant others have on self-esteem. Several studies have been done on the parent-child relationship and how it affects the psychological well-being of a child. McHale et al. (1995) conducted research on the differential treatment of siblings and its effects on children's well-being. They measured the differential treatment of siblings using a rating scale procedure adapted from the Siblings Inventory of Differential Experiences which asked parents to evaluate their "affection and discipline toward the first versus the second born child". It was found that "differential treatment almost always took the form of favoritisms toward the younger sibling" (McHale et al, 1995). Their findings indicated that "there may be some positive concomitants, particularly for younger children's well-being and ratings of their parent-child relationships, of being the favored child.

Not only is it important for a child to feel that he is important in the eyes of his parents, it is also important that the child not feel that his parents favour other siblings over him. Zervas & Sherman (1994) found that "total self-esteem and two facets of self-esteem were related to parental favoritism." Zervas & Sherman (1994) administered Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory and a favouritism questionnaire to 91 college students. They found that "both the no-favouritism and the favoured groups had significantly higher self-esteem than the non favoured group" (Zervas & Sherman, 1994). When asked for a reason why a certain child was favoured by their parents, 52% of the subjects selected birth order as one of the factors (26% said oldest, 26% said youngest).

The size of the family and the ordinal position of the child seem to have an effect on the parental attention received by the child. Falbo & Polit (1986) reviewed the research on only children, finding that their development is similar to that of first born and children from small families. They reviewed 115 studies concerning the development of only children. These studies included research on sibling relationships, birth order, and family size. They studied only children as compared to non-only children, and only children compared to groups defined by family size. Falbo & Polit (1986) found that first-born and children from small families ... have warmer relationships with their parents than later born and children from larger families. Firstborn children and children from small families tend to receive more individual attention from their parents than later- born and those from large families

Mellor's (1990) research concluded that the developmental paths of only children are similar to the paths of first-born and children from two-child families but dissimilar to paths of children from larger families. He administered the Erickson Psychosocial Stage Inventory, as well as questionnaires used to determine birth order and family size, to 434 students from 11 to 19 years old (Mellor, 1990). He found that "on the basis of developmental outcomes related to resolutions of developmental crises in childhood, adolescence and early adulthood, the crucial outcome differences appear precisely between the only child, whether defined as only born or first born, and the later born child on the birth-order variable, and precisely between children from two-child families and three-child families on the family-size variable" (Mellor, 1990). This supports the contention that family size as well as birth order may be of importance when considering child development. It has also been suggested that "in large families, the youngest children receive less parental attention than the oldest children because parents transfer responsibility for caretaking to the older siblings" (Sputa & Paulson, 1995).

Self-esteem has also been studied directly as a function of birth order. Gates et al. (1988) administered the Piers-Harris Children's Self Concept Scale, the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for children and the Children's Depression Inventory to 404 children aged 7 to 12. They found that "first-born children showed significantly higher levels of self-esteem than second-born and youngest children". They also found that "first born (in some comparisons) showed less depression, less anxiety and higher self-esteem than later-born and only children

Greenberg et al. (1963) administered the California F scale, the Allport Study of Values and the Gordon Personal Profile to 264 students ranging from 18 to 24 years. They found that the first-born children had the lowest self-esteem, which is consistent with Adler's theory. However, the critical ratios between the oldest and middle are not significant in most cases (Greenberg et al., 1993).

According to Lessing & Oberlander (1997) first-born children reveal a healthier level of adjustment than later-born on a self-report personality inventory. Lessing & Oberlander (1967) administered the California Test of Personality to 272 fifth graders, 242 eighth-graders, and 341 eleventh-graders. The study was designed as a systematic, controlled exploration of the relationship between ordinal position and personality adjustment. They found that although "some significant sex differences emerged ... no significant interactions between sex and ordinal position were obtained". They also found that "in comparison with the later-born children, the first-born children presented a healthier picture of themselves". They also found that the importance of ordinal position was found to decline over grades, with an independent birth-order effect remaining after two covariance adjustments in grade five, after one in grade eight, but none in grade eleven.

Rosenberg (1965) conducted extensive self-esteem research using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. He found that only-children had higher self-esteem than children with siblings, although he found that male only-children were more likely than female only-children to have high self-esteem. He found that "the only girl has no general self-esteem advantage over girls with siblings". Furthermore, regarding the gender distribution of siblings it was found that boys in a family of mostly older sisters have usually high self-esteem. While for girls, the sex distribution of siblings had very little importance. He concluded that if a family consists mostly of boys, then, as far as self-esteem is concerned, it makes no difference whether the boy is among the earlier or the later born. Rosenberg (1965) did not look at self-esteem taking into account only gender differences, but in most of his analysis, boys tended to have a higher self-esteem than girls.

Nystul (1995) also conducted research on the effects of birth order and sex on self-esteem. He administered the Tennessee Self-concept Scale to 168 college students. He found that birth order did not have a significant effect on self-esteem. He did find, however, that girls have higher self-concepts than males; have a more positive feeling about their identity than males and have less basic personality defects and weaknesses and less of a tendency to void reality than males.

From the foregoing it is evident that a lot of research had been conducted on the nature of self esteem, but there is still much that can be studied about the subject. It is important to consider the possible factors affecting self esteem as it has been supported that one's self esteem affects several aspects of one's life. Psychologists have posed several hypotheses about what may affect self esteem, but no definite conclusions have been drawn. In fact, some studies have contradictory results. It is against this background that this study examined whether birth order, family size and gender are factors influencing self esteem.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The primary purpose of this study was to:

- i. Determine the effect of ordinal position on young adults self esteem
- ii. Examine the influence of family size on self esteem of young adults.
- iii. Find out the role of gender in young adults self esteem.

### **Hypotheses**

1. There is no significant difference in self esteem of young adults with regards to their ordinal position.
2. Young adults self esteem are independent of family size.
3. There is no significant gender difference in young adults self esteem.

### **Methodology**

The participants for this study consisted of 200 students from tertiary institutions in Ogun State. The state is divided into four divisions (Egba, Ijebu, Remo and Yewa) one tertiary institution was selected from each division. Federal College of Education, Abeokuta (Egba), Olabisi Onabanjo University (Ijebu), Babcock University (Remo), and Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro, (Yewa). Fifty students were randomly selected from each of the four institutions. Their ages ranged between 18 and 24 years with the mean age of 22. The participants are made up of 108 females and 92 males.

To generate relevant data, two research instruments were used:

1. Rosenberg's (1965) Self Esteem Scale. This consisted of 10 statements to which the participants were asked to select either strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree. The ten statements were divided into six separate scale items. The scale ranged from 0-6, with 0 being the highest self esteem and 6 being the lowest. A point was given for each of the items that had a positive response (low self esteem was indicated by positive responses). To validate this instrument it was administered to 20 students of Moshood Abiola polytechnic, Abeokuta twice with an interval of two weeks. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient formula was used to estimate test re- test reliability which yielded 0.82.
2. Personal Data Card was constructed by the researchers to collect information on the biographical data of the participants such as name of the institution, age, sex, number of children in the family age and sex of siblings, position in the family. In this study, large family size consists of above six children, medium/moderate family size between four and six children while small family size consists of three children and below.

The researchers personally administered the instruments to the participants, one institution in a day (every Tuesday and Thursday) for two weeks. Two hundred and fifty (250) instruments each were administered out of which two hundred and eleven (211) were returned but only two hundred (200) were found usable.

### Method of Data Analysis

Hypotheses one and two were analyzed with one-way analysis of variance, Fisher's protected t was used to carry out post hoc analysis of the significant difference in hypothesis one. Independent-t-test was employed to analyze hypothesis three.

### Results

**Hypothesis one:** There is no significant difference in self esteem of young adults with regards to their ordinal position. The one-way analysis of variance statistical tool was used to analyze data. The result of the analysis is as presented in table 1 and 2.

**Table 1: ANOVA analysis of young adults self esteem due to ordinal position.**

Ordinal position	N	X	SD
First born	33	27.81	6.23
Second born	42	25.11	6.12
Middle born	68	23.08	5.84
Last born	35	24.31	5.46
Only child	22	27.63	6.37

  

Source of Variation	SS	DF	MS	F - ratio
Between Group	124.62	4	31.16	3.86
Within Group	1575.6	195	8.08	
Total	1700.22	199		

F at 0.05,  $df = 4/195 = 2.37$

An examination of table 1 shows that F-calculated value of 3.86 resulted as the difference in young adults self esteem. This value is higher than the F-critical value of 2.37 given 4/195 degrees of freedom at 95 % confidence level. Consequently, the null hypothesis is rejected while the alternate hypothesis is accepted. This means that there is a significant difference in self esteem of young adults with different position of birth.

Since the result is significant, it became imperative to find out where the differences lie among the group means. Fisher's protected t was used for pair wise comparison. The results of the comparison are presented in table 2 below.

**Table 2: Fisher's protected t test comparison on self esteem**

Ordinal Position	First born (N=33)	Second born (N=42)	Middle born (N=68)	Last born (N=35)	Only child (N=22)
First born	27.81	33.2*	63.9*	41.4*	1.82
Second born	2.70	25.11	10.2*	9.87*	-9.73*
Middle born	4.73	2.03	23.08	27.5*	-51.7*
Last born	3.50	0.80	-1.23	24.31	34.9*
Only child	0.18	-2.53	-4.55	-3.32	27.63

a: Group means are in the diagonal, differences between the group means are below the diagonal while protected t-values are above the diagonal.

From table 2, all the group comparisons showed that there are significant differences in their self esteem with the highest between first and middle ( $t = 63.9$ ,  $df = 99$ ; critical  $t = 1.98$   $P < 0.05$ ) followed by middle and only child ( $t = -51.7$ ,  $df = 88$ , critical  $t = 1.98$   $P < 0.05$ ) then, first born and last born ( $t = 41.4$ ,  $df = 66$ , critical  $t = 1.99$   $P < 0.05$ ); last born and only child ( $t = 34.9$ ,  $df = 55$ , critical  $t = 2.0$   $P < 0.05$ ), middle born and last born ( $t = 27.5$ ,  $df = 101$ , critical  $t = 1.97$   $P < 0.05$ ). Second born and middle born ( $t = 10.2$ ,  $df = 109$ , critical  $t = 1.97$   $P < 0.05$ ); second and last born ( $t = 9.87$ ,  $df = 75$ , critical  $t = -9.73$ ;  $df = 62$ , critical  $t = 2.0$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ).

However, there was no significant difference in the self esteem of first born and only child ( $t = 1.82$ ;  $df = 53$ , critical  $t = 2.0$   $P > 0.05$ )

**Hypothesis Two:** Young adults self esteem is independent of family size. One way analysis was adopted for data analysis. The result is presented in table 3.

**Table 3: ANOVA table on young adults self esteem owing to family size**

Family Size	N	X	SD	
Large	55	27.01	5.99	
Moderate	89	27.69	6.03	
Low	56	28.21	5.33	
Source of Variation	SS	DF	MS	F- ratio
Between Group	18.24	2	9.12	
Within Group	898.32	197	4.56	2.0 (ns)
Total	916.56	199		

F at 0.05,  $df = 2/197 = 3.05$

Data in table 3 show that F – calculated value of 2.0 resulted as a difference in self esteem of young adult. This result is not significant because it is less than the value of F – critical of 3.05 given 2/197 degrees of

freedom at 5% probability level. Thus, the null hypothesis that stated that young adults self esteem is independent of family size is upheld.

**Hypothesis Three:** There is no significant gender difference in young adults self esteem. Independent t – test was used to analyze data. The result is as presented in table 4

**Table 4: t- test gender comparison of young adults self esteem**

Gender	N	X	SD	DF	tcal	terit
Male	92	29.63	6.81	198	4.69*	1.96
Female	108	25.41	5.76			

\*  $P < 0.05$ ,  $df = 198$ ;  $t$ -calculated = 4.69;  $t$ -critical = 1.96.

Table 3 indicates that a calculated t-value of 4.69 resulted and this is higher than the critical t- value of 1.96 at 198 degree of freedom. It was concluded that there is a significant gender difference in self esteem among young adults.

### Discussion

The finding of hypothesis one that there is a significant difference in the self esteem of young adults owing to their ordinal position is not surprising because the family especially the parents consciously or unconsciously treat their children differently in terms of love, care, affection, encouragement, communication and discipline. This differential treatment, to a greater extent affect the totality of the personality make up of the children in which self esteem is an integral part. This result corroborates the finding of Blake (1989) that oldest and only children do seem to have higher self esteem than later born children. Also, Gates, et al (1988) found that first born children showed significantly higher levels of self esteem than second-born and youngest children and that first born showed less depression, less anxiety, and higher self esteem than later born.

The findings of the second hypothesis that self esteem among young adults is independent of family size is some how worrisome because one would have expected the children from small family size to exhibit higher level of self esteem than those from large family size. The possible explanation for this result is that since the participants are aware of the fact that the country is success oriented must have developed their self worth and belief in themselves that they have the capability to make it in life irrespective of their condition of birth and the size of their family. This result partly agrees with the finding of Falbo and Polit (2006) that children from small families have warmer relationships with their parents than children from larger families but found no significant difference in the level of self esteem from children from both small and larger families.

The finding of the third hypothesis is that there is a significant gender difference in young adults self esteem. This means that male young adults manifested higher level of self esteem than their female counterparts. This result agrees with the finding of Rosenberg (1965) that boys tended to have a higher self esteem than girls. This result however contradicts the finding of Nystul (1995) that girls have higher self concepts than males; have a more positive feeling about their identity than males and have less basic personality defects and weaknesses and less of a tendency to avoid reality than males.



This result can be explained from the perspective of the fact that females in Nigeria and Africa as a whole are considered to be weak, soft and not strongly determined owing to attached sex-roles. Consequently, the sex role orientation may probably be a reason for their low self esteem as against their male counterparts.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

On the basis of the findings of this study it is concluded that the ordinal positions as well as gender contributed to the self esteem of the participants. But their self esteem is not attributed to their family size. Therefore, it is hereby recommended that:

1. Parents should try as much as possible to treat their children equally without any preferential treatment.
2. Young adults should be forward looking and goal directed. By so doing, they will believe in their own ability to make it without recourse to the size of their family and the attendant conditions.
3. Female young adults should be exposed to group counseling on the need to engage in a healthy competition in all areas with their male counterparts. This will considerably bring about higher self esteem.

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