Research Note

Siblings and Political Socialization: A Closer Look at the Direct Transmission Thesis[1]

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The stability of any political system depends upon the persistence of dominant attitudes. Succeeding generations acquire political values from individuals in the community. Following psychoanalytical theory, political scientists generally see the family as an important agent in transmitting political values and personality characteristics from the community to the individual. In 1959, for example, Herbert Hyman catalogued several social psychological studies, and concluded:

> When children and their parents are measured independently and agreements in political views are established, it supports the inference that the family transmits politics to the children. (Emphasis in original; Hyman, 1959, p. 27)

This research not only popularized the term "political socialization," but also it dominated the conceptual framework for many years.

Several surveys of children support this thesis of direct transmission from parents to children. For example, the "Eight City Study of Political Socialization" of 12,000 children from grades 2-8 concluded that attitudes toward authority symbols like the president and the policeman result from authority patterns in the family. Specifically, the president and the

policeman are "father figures" who provide the same stability in society that a child finds at home (Easton and Dennis, 1969; Greenstein, 1965). Even when children from particular subregions of the country (Jaros et al., 1968), of different races (Greenberg, 1970; Liebschutz and Niemi, 1974), with various languages (Lamare, 1974), from different cultures (Jaros and Kolson, 1974), of the opposite sex (Greenstein, 1965), and changing eras (Arterton, 1974; Hershey and Hill, 1975) do not acquire this benevolent leader image, we still attribute their views of external authority to patterns of family authority. Damaged father and son relations, for example, may produce children unwilling to vote while "normal" patterns of father-son interaction may produce children who become involved in politics (Lane, 1962, pp. 268-282). Similarly research which emphasizes the transmission of attitudes from parent to child also notes that dominance of the parent may produce variation in attitude formation (Langton, 1969). Thus direct transmission may be limited by the role of each parent.

In addition to attitudes about authority, children learn partisan attitudes from the family. "Concrete" and "salient" attitudes receive family attention and therefore are passed on from one generation to the next. For example, parents and children show considerable agreement in party identification and candidate preferences. However, "abstract and diffuse" attitudes receive less attention in the home than they do in other socialization agencies, and thus are less perfectly transmitted from parent to child. For example, political trust, political interest, and sense of political efficacy are attitudes with little parent and child agreement (Jennings and Niemi, 1974).

Most students of political socialization, then, argue that the family is an important -- if not the most important -- agent of socialization. Because parents play a dominant role in the family, this influence is often assumed to be intergenerational transmission. We call the conclusion that parents are the primary influence in attitude formation the "direct transmission thesis." It is direct because the agency itself teaches the attitudes; it is transmission because the attitudes do not change from one generation to the next. Thus, the "direct transmission thesis" generally relies on parental influence for explanations of political attitude formation.

However, the direct transmission thesis may overestimate the influence of parents in political socialization. Many political scientists rely on Freudian theory, at least in the assumption that parents transmit attitudes to children. One might, however, follow an Adlerian model (Ansbacher and Ansbacher, 1956; Broh, 1979) and argue that interaction within one generation, especially among siblings, may be as important as interaction across generations, from parent to child. Siblings like parents are members of the family. The agency of socialization is more than the influence of parents; it is the influence of the entire family unit of which siblings are an important part.

Thus, the influence of siblings provides a null hypothesis for the direct transmission thesis. Evidence of systematic variation among siblings in the same family, for example, would suggest that all attitudes were not acquired directly from parents. The siblings would either be modifying or directly influencing the transmission process.

Two pieces of research suggest the effect that siblings can have. The first is a study by Belmont and Marolla (1973) which involved the entire 19 year old male population of the Netherlands. In all social classes these researchers found that males at the beginning of the birth order had higher scores on an intelligence test, the Raven Progressive Matrices, than males later in the birth order. The relationship monotonically decreased from first-born to last-born.

These data led Zajonc and Markus (1975) to propose the "confluence model" of a child's intellectual environment. This model considers the absolute intellectual levels of all members in the family unit. For example, a first born with intellectual level near zero at birth and with two parents at an intellectual level arbitrarily assigned at 100 will have an intellectual environment of $(100 + 100 + 0)/3 = 67$. As the child grows, its intellectual level increases. If a second child is born the intellectual environment changes. For example, the first-born may have achieved an intellectual level of 40 after a few years. The intellectual environment of the family will be $(100 + 100 + 40 + 0)/4 = 60$. Note that the intellectual environment is lower for the second-born than the first-born. Similarly the intellectual environment is lower for a two child family than a one child family. The "confluence model" provides a theoretical explanation for the rela-

tionship between birth order and intellectual development -- an explanation that is dependent on the intellectual levels of both parents and siblings.

The second study of relevance to our discussion concerns U.S. Presidents and British Prime Ministers. Stewart (1977) found that first-borns tend to be selected U.S. President and British Prime Minister during times of crisis, while later-borns are selected during times of relative peace. He postulated that one of the reasons for these results is the nature of the sibling interactions that first-borns and later-borns have in these two cultures. The first-born generally assumes a take-charge, overseer position with regard to future siblings, whereas the later-born must learn the skills of coalition formation, persuasion, and image building in order to gain the upperhand at any time. Being forced to deal with other siblings affords the later-born an arena in which to acquire skills in dealing with people in groups. The first-born, on the other hand, is often a surrogate parent to other siblings, having authority by virtue of position.

Building on this research, we hypothesize the following:

H_1: Children in one birth order have significantly different political knowledge than children in another birth order.

H_2: The correlation between parents' and children's political knowledge is different for each birth order.

DATA AND METHOD

The data[2] in this analysis were originally collected by M. Kent Jennings and presented in The Political Character of Adolescence (Jennings and Niemi, 1974). This survey of high school seniors done in 1965 was a[3] weighted national sample of 1,927 students and their parents.

Students were classified by birth order according to a survey question asking the age of the students' brothers and sisters. Obviously this classification ignores the influence of deceased siblings. Nevertheless students can be grouped as first-born, middle-born, or last-born. This classification of birth order controls for family size, since there can be only

one first-born and one last-born in any size family. For this reason a comparison between first- and last-born children is probably more sound than comparisons of first or last with the residual, middle-born category.[4]

Information on political knowledge was gleaned from a Guttman scale of the following six survey items:

1. How many years does a United States senator serve?
2. Marshall Tito is a leader of what country?
3. Do you happen to know how many members there are on the United States Supreme Court? How many?
4. Who is the governor of (your state) now?
5. During World War II, which nation had a great many concentration camps for Jews?
6. Do you happen to recall whether President Franklin Roosevelt was a Democrat or Republican? Which?

For the students all six of the above items formed a Guttman scale in the order presented. For the parents the political knowledge scale included items two through six.

The analysis relies on Tau correlation coefficients. The use of Tau for a measure of agreement is discussed in Niemi (1974, pp. 11-13). For items with identical numbers of categories, Tau-b is appropriate; for items with unequal categories, Tau-c is appropriate.

Several caveats are in order here. Weissberg and Joslyn (1977) warn against the interpretation of parent-child correlations and/or agreement scores as evidence of intergenerational transmission. While this criticism is appropriate for hypotheses about direct transmission processes, our comparative use of parent-chld correlations for different birth orders reduces the relevance of the argument. That is, we are less concerned about the presence or absence of transmission than about the relative transmission for different birth orders. What increases nonrandom error in parent-first-born correlations should also increase nonrandom error in parent-later-born correlations. Thus, a comparison of correlation coefficients is more appropriate than simply evaluating the magnitude of the correlation.

Weissberg and Joslyn also note that identical scales have different cognitive meanings to children and adults; the

absence of a correlation does not indicate the absence of transmission. Again this criticism makes the comparison of correlation coefficients more appropriate than the evaluation of the magnitude of correlation coefficients. Since our subjects were all the same age (high school seniors), error due to cognitive capabilities should be similar across all birth orders. Of course, this assumes age is an indicator of cognitive development -- an assumption not entirely justified by the psychological literature. With the absence of better indicators of cognitive development, we must depend on the control for age as an approximation of developmental stages.

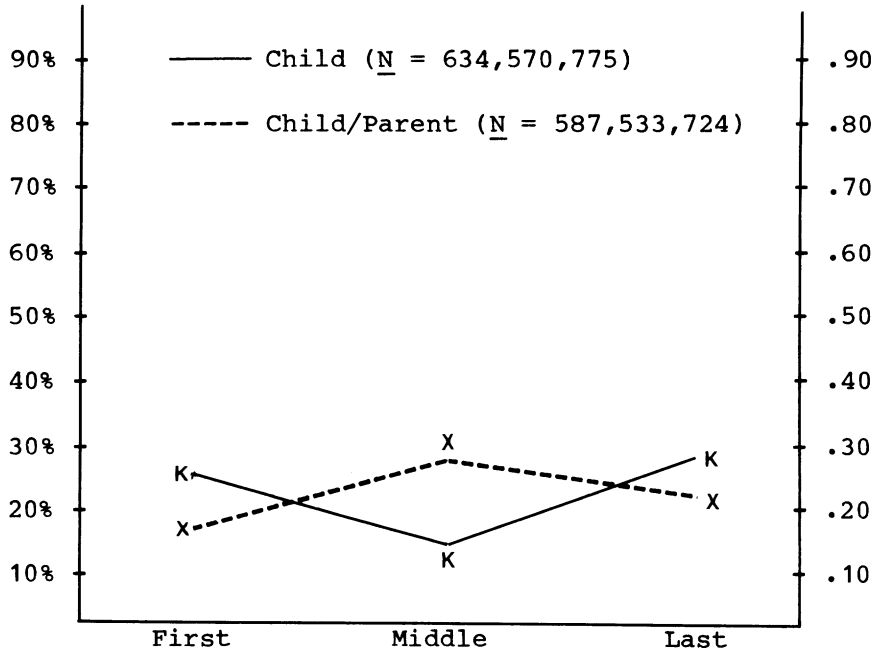
Finally, Weissberg and Joslyn's criticisms are most appropriate for highly skewed distributions. This is not the case in our analysis. There are approximately equal numbers of students in each birth order and the variables in the analysis are evenly distributed. The number of respondents in categories of each variable are reported throughout the results.

RESULTS

Figure 1 presents the data for H_1. As predicted, there is a significant difference ($p < .05$) among the three birth orders in our sample; however, birth order provides neither an ascending nor a descending pattern of political knowledge. Some 28.5% ($N = 775$) of the last-born children have high political knowledge while 16.5% ($N = 570$) of the middle-born children have high political knowledge and 23.6% ($N = 634$) of the first-born children have high political knowledge.

Figure 1 also contains the data relevant to H_2. The right-hand vertical axis indicates the relationship between parent and child scores on the political knowledge scale. The data support H_2 with the correlations between parents' and children's political knowledge differing across the three birth orders. The correlations form an inverted U-curve ($p < .05$). First-borns and last-borns, who have the highest political knowledge, have the lowest correlations with parents. The T_c correlations between parents' and children's political knowledge are .19 ($N = 587$) for first-borns, .27 ($N = 533$) for middle-borns, and .22 ($N = 724$) for last-borns.

Figure 1: Political Knowledge and Birth Order.[a]



[a]This figure has two vertical scales for the purpose of comparing patterns. Knowledge dimensions use the scale on the left; agreement scores use the scale on the right.

DISCUSSION

In this paper we have focused on the role of the family in the political socialization process. We agree with others that the family helps to shape the child's political world. The inspiration to learn about politics or to associate with a political party comes from the environment at home.

Unfortunately political psychologists generally define family influence as parental influence. There is a direct transmission from parent to child. If we consider family constellations, however, it is conceivable that brothers and sisters -- indeed Gilbert and Sullivan's "aunts, uncles, and cousins by the dozens" -- may influence the political socialization of children. More specifically, as we have studied

here, the fact of being the oldest or youngest brother or sister can influence political socialization. In the present study we found that first- and last-born children had more political knowledge than children who were middle-born and showed less similarity to their parents than middle-borns.

We have barely scratched the surface in the present study of what are the possible effects of siblings and birth order on political socialization. Many questions remain. For example, do first-born and last-born children gain different types of political skills as a result of their differing relationships to their siblings and parents? Does sibling rivalry lead first-borns to strive for achievement and later-borns to violence (we note the rather large number of famous political leaders who were first-born, e.g., Marx, Martin Luther King, Jr., Pershing, Julius Caesar, Churchill, Alexander the Great, and the large number of later-borns who have been assassins, e.g., John Wilkes Booth, Charles Guiteau, Leon Czolgosz, Lee Harvey Oswald, Sirhan Sirhan, Jack Ruby)? Does it matter whether one's siblings are male or female -- are the political skills learned different depending on the sex of one's siblings? Does what one learns politically from one's parents differ depending on the family constellation and one's place in it?

Political psychologists have overlooked what would seem a ripe area for research. Hopefully such will not be the case in the future. To ignore the influence of siblings on political socialization would seem inevitably to lead to an oversimplification of the process by which childen acquire political orientations.

NOTES

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2. The data used in this article were made available by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. They were originally collected by M. Kent Jennings. Neither Jennings nor the Consortium bear any responsibility for the analysis or interpretations presented here.

3. An ideal data set for our analysis would include survey items for students, parents, and siblings in the same family. The "Eight City Political Socialization Study" has student-sibling dyads, but no interviews with parents. In addition no political knowledge questions were included in the data.

4. Several birth-order classifications have been developed to alleviate the confounding influence of family size on birth order. See, e.g., Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg (1970, pp. 14-18). This typology has the unfortunate consequence of complicating theory on birth order effects.

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