BIRTH ORDER AND NEED FOR ACHIEVEMENT1

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Summary.—Since first-borns exceed later-borns in academic achievement and IQ does not differ systematically, one may test the hypothesis that first-borns have higher need achievement than later-borns. Various measures of need achievement were used with three separate samples of adults. The hypothesis was not supported.

Schachter (1963) has shown that the tendency for eminent scholars to be first-born or only children can be explained by the fact that these persons are drawn from a college population where first-born and only children are in marked surplus. Further, he presents findings which demonstrate that, in high school, first-born students tend to have higher grades than do later-borns. Schachter rejects differential intelligence as an explanation and tentatively suggests that higher motivation may account for the higher levels of achievement of first-born persons. This paper examines the hypothesis that first-borns have higher need Achievement than later-borns.

METHOD

The data were collected as part of three larger studies. The first dealt with 60 married couples participating in a research project. Each S took a symbol-substitution test from which a level of aspiration index was derived; it pertained to the score that S predicted for himself on the first trial. Forty-nine of these couples took two 12-need adaptations of the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule—a general and marital form3—and also gave a direct self-rating of his need for achievement.

The second sample included 72 couples who were applicants for divorce. They completed the marital adaptation of the EPPS.

In the third sample were 38 men and 64 women about to be released from psychiatric hospitals and judged appropriate for referral to a post-hospital rehabilitation center. They responded to a sentence-completion test (Stotsky & Weinberg, 1956), which had in it an index of need Achievement.

RESULTS

Analyses were performed separately for each sex for each of the six measure-
ments. None of 12 separate $t$ tests contrasting scores of first- and later-borns was statistically significant. In fact, fewer than half were in the predicted direction.

These findings contradict the only previously published test of this hypothesis. Sampson (1962) reported significantly higher need Achievement among first-born college students than among later-born students.

The differences between Sampson's results and ours might be explained by differences in $S$s' age or by differences in methods of investigation, i.e., Sampson's $S$s were younger and he used a projective measure not used by us. Yet, such explanations seem weak, especially when one considers Rosenfeld's* recent unpublished findings using McClelland's Standard TAT-index of $n$ Ach. Rosenfeld has found no consistent differences in need Achievement between first- and later-borns in five different samples of male and female college students.

The bulk of present evidence then indicates that, despite differences in level of achievement between first- and later-born persons, there is no difference in need for achievement between occupants of these ordinal positions.

REFERENCES


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*Personal communication from Howard M. Rosenfeld, Department of Psychology, University of Kansas.