



# Number of siblings and personality: Evidence among eighth graders from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K)

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 29 July 2012

Received in revised form 1 July 2013

Accepted 2 July 2013

Available online 31 July 2013

### Keywords:

Siblings

ECLS-K

Fertility decline

Personality traits

## ABSTRACT

Most prior sociological research on siblings explores their effects on educational, cognitive and social outcomes. This study focuses on personality traits and extends its scope to early adolescence. Using the eighth-grade data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K), it tests the relationship between number of siblings and three personality traits: internalizing problem behavior, self-concept, and locus of control. The results suggest that sibship size has only a modest effect on personality traits among early adolescents. Specifically, only those adolescents who have at least four siblings are found to have significantly worse internalizing problem behaviors, worse self-concept, and worse locus of control compared to only children. In addition, this study finds little evidence that adolescents benefit more from sisters than brothers. Lastly, compared to having older siblings, having younger siblings is more beneficial for personality traits in predicting self-concept and locus of control.

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## 1. Introduction

How do children benefit from their siblings? For many individuals, sibling relationships are some of their most significant: they begin early, last long, and develop and change as the siblings age and their social settings change (Newman, 1994; Noller, 2005). Despite the importance of these relationships, and particularly the potential implications of growing up with fewer siblings, the impact of the number of siblings on personality traits has received little attention. With the decline in fertility and the increase in small families – almost one in five children are currently growing up without a sibling, it is critical to investigate the effect of sibship size on personality traits. Similarly, because sibships feature a range of different configurations, analyzing the effects of different types of siblings enriches

our understanding of their impact on personality development.

In recent years, there has been a consensus that individual differences in personality can be measured using a comprehensive taxonomic system, tracing what is usually referred to as the Big Five personality factors or the five-factor model of personality (Bruck & Allen, 2003; Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005; Klimstra, Akse, Hale, Raaijmakers, & Meeus, 2010; Van Leeuwen, Mervielde, Braet, & Bosmans, 2004).

This study extends prior literature to early adolescence and tests the effect of siblings on three personality traits: internalizing problem behavior, self-concept, and locus of control. In the next section, I examine the five-factor model of personality in greater depth, specifically in terms of these three traits. Overall, siblings might be important for positive personality traits, especially during a stage where the detrimental effects of growing up without siblings might accumulate. Accordingly, I ask three questions in this study: (1) Do adolescents with more or any siblings exhibit

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more positive personality traits? (2) If there is an association, do these associations remain after taking into account a wide range of control variables? (3) Do particular dimensions of the sibship—brothers or sisters, older or younger, full vs. other types of siblings—matter more than others in determining the shape of personality traits?

## 2. Previous research

### 2.1. *Different domains of personality – negative vs. positive personality traits*

Used prominently in psychology literature, the Big Five personality traits are five broad domains or dimensions that are used to describe human personality. These conceptually different domains capture five key personality traits – neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness – and together they represent the basic dimensions underlying personality (Costa & McCrae, 1991). According to Costa and McCrae (1991), each of these dimensions also provides examples of what are considered positive and negative personality traits. To distinguish between these categories, Bruck and Allen (2003) focus on what each of the five dimensions measures. This study specifically focuses on three personality outcomes that are shown to be related to neuroticism, extraversion, and conscientiousness: internalizing problem behavior, self-concept, and locus of control.

The neuroticism dimension assesses adjustment or emotional stability vs. maladjustment or neuroticism. Individuals who score high on neuroticism experience emotional instability, and show heightened negative traits such as worrying, fear, guilt, sadness, and embarrassment. Individuals who are low on neuroticism are expected to be more emotionally stable, even-tempered, relaxed, and calm. The extraversion dimension assesses the quantity and intensity of interpersonal interaction and activity (Pervin, 1996). Individuals who score high on extraversion are considered extraverts and exhibit characteristics of sociability, assertiveness, and talkativeness. Overall, extraverts are cheerful, energetic, and optimistic. In contrast, individuals who score low on this dimension are referred to as introverts who can be characterized reserved, independent, and quiet. The conscientiousness dimension deals with planning, organizing, and carrying out tasks. Individuals who score high on this scale are purposeful, organized, and strong-willed. Individuals who score low on this scale are more prone to be careless, aimless, and unreliable. The openness to experience dimension deals with having an active imagination and intellectual curiosity. Individuals who are high on this scale are curious and willing to entertain new and original ideas and values, while those who score low on this dimension exhibit conventional and conservative behavior. Finally, the agreeableness dimension deals primarily with interpersonal tendencies. An individual who ranks high on agreeableness is characterized as being helpful, cooperative, and good-natured, while an individual who is low on agreeableness is more ego-centric, competitive, and skeptical of others' intentions (Costa & McCrae, 1991).

Prior research suggests that conscientiousness and extraversion are positively related to locus of control, whereas neuroticism is negatively related to locus of control (Morrison, 1997). Self-concept, which is one of the most important personality traits, is usually measured using Rosenberg's (1965) self-esteem scale (Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001). Erol and Orth (2011) evaluate these traits among young adults, using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, which includes eight assessments performed over a 14-year period of a national probability sample of 7100 individuals age 14–30. They find that in each cohort, emotionally stable, extraverted, and conscientious individuals experienced higher self-esteem than emotionally unstable, introverted, and less conscientious individuals.

Several studies also demonstrate that extraversion and emotional stability are negative predictors of internalizing problem behavior (Huey & Weisz, 1997; Van Leeuwen et al., 2004). In addition, adolescents who changed from an introverted and socially withdrawn personality type, low on extraversion, to a personality type that was more extraverted and less socially withdrawn, which is high on extraversion, displayed decreasing levels of internalizing problem behavior, while increasing levels of internalizing problem behavior accompanied personality type changes in the opposite direction (Akse, Hale, Engels, Raaijmakers, & Meeus, 2007).

### 2.2. *Prior research on the effect of siblings*

Most prior sociological research on the effect of siblings focuses on cognitive and educational outcomes. Children who grow up with fewer siblings have greater educational success than those with many siblings because they must compete for parental resources (Downey, 1995, 2001; Powell & Steelman, 1993; Powell, Werum, & Steelman, 2004; Steelman, Powell, Werum, & Carter, 2002). In contrast to these findings, some other research classifies siblings as resources: these studies argue that siblings are not simply competitors, and that children actually gain interpersonal skills from the presence of siblings (Downey & Condrón, 2004). Using this argument, some research tests the relationship between sibship size and social skills (Baydar, Hyle, & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Blake, Richardson, & Bhattacharya, 1991; Bobbitt-Zeher & Downey, in press; Downey & Condrón, 2004; Downey, Condrón, & Yucel, in press; Kitzmann, Cohen, & Lockwood, 2002). Even though most of these studies rely on large data sets, their conclusions are inconsistent, mainly due to the age of the children they assess and also because the studies measure different things, ranging from sociability and popularity among peers to peer relations and social skills.

Most psychology literature argues that siblings have a unique influence on individuals' development from birth to old age. Brothers and sisters are children's most frequent companions. They offer the first opportunities for children to interact with others who are similar in age (Dunn, 1993), and critical interpersonal skills are developed from the give and take of sibling disputes and interactions (Brody, 2004; Ostrov, Cric, & Stauffacher, 2006). Sibling relationships are considered fundamental, with a long-term impact on an

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