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Title	Marital status and birth order in a sample of Dublin males
Authors(s)	Walsh, Brendan M.
Publication date	1973
Publication information	Journal of Biosocial Science, 5 (2): 187-193
Publisher	Cambridge University Press
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/1533

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MARITAL STATUS AND BIRTH ORDER IN A SAMPLE OF DUBLIN MALES

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(Received 16th October 1972)

Summary. The association between birth order and marital status has been explored in a sample of 2500 adult males living in Dublin in 1968. Higher proportions ever-married were found among both eldest sons and eldest children than among the rest of the sample at each age below 46 years. In general, the lowest proportions ever-married were found among youngest sons and youngest children. Differences between the mean ages at marriage of the various birth orders were found among the married sub-sample that accorded with expectations based on the differentials in proportions ever-married. Hypotheses that might be supported by these findings are discussed.

Introduction

The influence of birth order on demographic phenomena has been the subject of several investigations. Surveys of the research in this area by Warren (1966) and Magaud & Henry (1968) discuss the possible influence of birth order on variables ranging from birth weight and infant mortality to intellectual and social advancement. Difficulties arising from data imperfections, and in particular the absence of cohort data for whole families, reduce the reliability of many studies in this area, but in general, as Magaud & Henry point out, the influence of family size seems both more important and better documented than that of birth order.

The association between birth order and marriage patterns appears to have been neglected in previous research. It is intrinsically interesting to ask whether birth order affects age at marriage or the proportion remaining in lifelong celibacy, and the results of such an investigation could also be very relevant to the interpretation of any association between birth order and, for example, mortality or morbidity rates. The only previous study of birth order and nuptiality dealt exclusively with the mean age at marriage in a small sample of university staff (Murdoch, 1966). The present study utilizes data from a large, random sample of urban males, and discusses differentials both in the proportions ever-married and in mean age at marriage with respect to the respondents' position among the boys and among all the children in their families.

The sample

The data used in the present study were collected in connection with a survey of social mobility in Dublin. The sampling procedure used, and the representativeness of the sample obtained, have been discussed in the published research arising from the survey (Hutchinson, 1969). The age distribution of the achieved sample closely resembled that of the target population (as indicated by comparison with Census of Population data). The most serious discrepancy noted by Hutchinson between the sample and the underlying population was the smaller proportion single in the sample: 16%, as opposed to 24% in the Census. Although this under-representation of the single must be borne in mind in evaluating the evidence advanced in the present study, it is not unreasonable to suppose that no bias with respect to birth order was introduced by this feature of the data. In one important respect, the survey data seem to correspond closely with the population data: the mean age at (first) marriage of the ever-married males in the sample was 28.5, compared with the mean age of grooms in non-agricultural occupations in Ireland ranging from 30.4 in 1957 to 27.6 in 1968 (Walsh, 1972).

Marital status and position among brothers only

Table 1 presents the proportions of single men in the sample, classified according to respondents' position among brothers only. At all ages up to 46 years, smaller proportions unmarried were found among the eldest and only sons than among middle or youngest sons. In all age groups, the highest proportion unmarried was

Table 1. Proportions of single men at each age, classified by position among brothers only

Age (years)	Eldest son	Youngest son	Middle son	Only son	N	χ^2	
						(a)	(b)
21-25	62.9	85.2	78.3	79.3	282	12.3**	
26-30	32.0	38.3	35.3	17.5	318	7.3*	
31-35	15.3	29.2	15.3	9.7	266		5.9*
36-40	7.6	18.3	15.4	3.1	260		3.9
41-45	7.5	12.7	8.2	10.5	267		1.4
46 and over	8.9	8.8	9.4	11.9	1135	1.0	
21 and over	18.4	25.0	20.3	18.9	2528	10.2**	

Notes: (1) Data exclude those for whom position among brothers was not recorded.

(2) χ^2 : (a) refers to calculations including only sons; (b) refers to calculations from which only sons were excluded (where calculations of (a) would have involved expected frequencies of less than five).

(3) Significance relates to whether (at each age) the proportions single varied significantly between birth orders.

* Significant, 0.10 level. ** Significant, 0.05 level.

recorded among youngest sons. The differentials decline in size and in level of statistical significance in the older age intervals. These results suggest that there is an association between birth order (among brothers) and marriage patterns, and that this arises due to the lower age at marriage of eldest sons, which is reflected in higher proportions of these sons married in young adulthood. No significant differences are evident with respect to the proportions remaining unmarried at age 46 or older.

Marital status and position among brothers and sisters

Table 2 sets out the proportions of single men at each age among the respondents classified according to their position among both brothers and sisters. The number of only children in the total sample was eighty-nine, and hence very small numbers were encountered in individual cells in the separate age groups. The differentials revealed by Table 2 are broadly similar to those of Table 1 but they generally do not attain statistical significance. If the 'only child' column is excepted, the highest proportion unmarried is found among youngest children. However, in contrast with the more clear-cut pattern evident when position among brothers only was considered, the lowest proportion unmarried in three out of the five age intervals under 46 is held by the 'middle children', and by 'eldest children' in the other two intervals. After age 46 years, the differentials are very slight and non-significant. As was the case with the tabulation by position among brothers only, the pattern of proportions single in each birth order among brothers and sisters suggests that a difference in age at marriage gives rise to a high proportion of unmarried among the youngest children.

Table 2. Proportions of single men at each age, classified by position among brothers and sisters

Age (years)	Eldest child	Youngest child	Middle child	Only child	N	χ^2	
						(a)	(b)
21-25	70.3	81.2	74.6	88.9	282		2.3
26-30	35.2	37.9	29.9	10.0	318		1.5
31-35	17.5	30.8	15.1	0.0	265		3.3
36-40	8.6	22.4	10.9	0.0	262		6.1**
41-45	8.8	13.0	7.4	28.6	267		1.5
46 and over	9.5	9.4	9.3	8.8	1134		0.01
21 and over	21.3	26.8	18.6	16.9	2528	15.3**	

Notes: (1) Data exclude those for whom position among brothers and sisters was not recorded

(2) χ^2 : (a) and (b) relate to calculations including and excluding only children. See note to Table 1.

** Significant, 0.05 level.

Age at marriage and birth order

The data on which Tables 1 and 2 are based were coded into quinquennial age intervals (starting from age 21, the youngest eligible for inclusion in the sample). It is possible that the youngest brothers or children within each age interval are on average slightly younger than those in other birth orders, and this may account for some of the differentials recorded above. This source of bias is, however, unlikely to be a major one, and certainly could not account for contrasts such as, for example, the lower proportion of eldest sons unmarried at age 31–35 than of youngest sons at age 36–40. The data on age at marriage could not reflect this bias, since they were based on the responses of the ever-married respondents only.

The mean ages at marriage are set out in Table 3, classified by the respondents' position among brothers and among brothers and sisters. It may be seen that eldest and only sons (and children) had the youngest mean age at marriage. This is in conformity with expectations on the basis of the differentials of Tables 1 and 2.

Table 3. Mean age at marriage classified by birth order

	Eldest	Youngest	Middle	Only
	Position among brothers only			
Mean (years)	28.21	28.67	28.87	28.04
	Position among brothers and sisters			
Mean (years)	28.17	28.49	28.72	28.00
Differences between means: $\bar{X}_i - \bar{X}_j$				
	Position among brothers only:			
<i>j</i> =	Eldest	Youngest	Middle	Only
<i>i</i> = Eldest	0	-0.46*	-0.66**	0.17
Youngest		0	-0.27	0.63*
Middle			0	0.83**
Only				0
	Position among brothers and sisters:			
<i>j</i> =	Eldest	Youngest	Middle	Only
<i>i</i> = Eldest	0	-0.32	-0.55*	0.17
Youngest		0	-0.23	0.49
Middle			0	0.72
Only				0

* Significant, 0.20 level. (Two-tailed *t*-test for differences between sample means).

** Significant, 0.05 level.

However, in Table 3 the middle sons (and children) have the oldest mean age at marriage, whereas the differentials in proportions ever-married gave rise to the expectation that youngest sons would have the oldest age at marriage. It is also notable that none of the differences between the means are very great, ranging as they do from about 10 months to 2 months. Nor is the level of statistical significance reached by these differences very high, especially in view of the fact that the *t*-test employed here is approximate only, due to the skewed frequency distribution of age at marriage (Donaldson, 1968). However, in trying to reconcile the differentials in age at marriage with those in proportions ever-married it must be borne in mind that if the differentials in proportions ever-married were of recent origin (or had only recently become pronounced), differentials in age at marriage corresponding to those in proportions ever-married would not be apparent among those who had married some time ago. The fact that after age 46 the proportions ever-married do not vary significantly between birth orders could be due to the fact that differentials have emerged only recently, among those marrying at a young age.

Evidence from folklore

The archives of the Irish Folklore Commission are rich in material relating to inheritance and marriage customs in rural Ireland. A survey of material relevant to the subject matter of the present study suggests that primogeniture was the preferred system of inheritance, especially 'in the old days', but it is also clear that the system was nowhere rigidly in force. One speaker puts it as follows: '“ the eldest son in his father's stead”—that was what the old people used to say, and it is generally so arranged still'. On the other hand, there are several references to the youngest (or weakest) son having to remain on the farm, unmarried, to care for infirm parents. These traditions could reinforce themselves, and contribute to the birth order differentials observed in the data of the present study. Thus if the father died (or relinquished control of the farm) at a comparatively early age, the eldest might exercise his claim on the farm and marry into it, whilst the younger brothers would have to make their own way, probably by leaving the countryside. On the other hand, if the father retained control over the farm until an advanced age, the eldest son might migrate, leaving the youngest to care for his aged parents and await their death before marrying. Although these are rural patterns, some elements could carry over into an urban context and contribute to the patterns revealed by the Dublin data.

Discussion of the results

One possible explanation of these findings is the higher proportion of younger sons found among the in-migrants to Dublin: among the single respondents, 32.3% of the youngest sons were born outside Dublin, compared with only 26.2% of the eldest sons. This aspect of the data no doubt in turn reflects the tendency (already mentioned in connection with the folklore evidence) for eldest sons to inherit farms

and other family businesses in rural Ireland. Data for a sample of 408 family farms in the West of Ireland (kindly made available to me by Professor D. Hannon) reveal the following distribution of farm ownership by birth order:

Position among sons	Only	Eldest	Second	Third	Fourth or later	No answer
%	5.4	43.6	27.2	12.3	9.2	2.2

Thus, 49% of the farm owners sampled were either eldest or only sons, compared with 42.8% of the males in the sample used in the present study, and in view of the larger average family size in rural Ireland, an even smaller proportion of all rural males should belong to these birth orders. An interpretation of the findings of the present study that stresses the role of the inheritance system is consistent with the fact that the differentials in marital status were more pronounced when position among sons (as compared with position among all children) was considered.

Whilst the selective nature of the inheritance system may account for some of the disparity in proportions married between the birth orders (by swelling the ranks of the urban younger sons with unmarried migrants from the country areas), this is not the only factor at work. When the data on the Dublin-born respondents were analysed separately, a similar pattern of differentials in proportions married was evident. To account for the persistence of these differentials when attention is confined to the non-migrant sample, the role of inheritance among the urban population might be invoked. It is possible that elder sons tend to be favoured in regard to inheritance of family businesses (shops or small manufacturing companies for instance) even in the urban context, and this may imply an earlier acquisition of economic independence among them than among their younger siblings. Although no data are available on the inheritance patterns among the urban Irish, it is interesting to recall in this context that the social group which includes shopkeepers and independent traders has a relatively high marriage rate in Ireland (Walsh, 1972).

Another possible influence on the marriage patterns of sons in different birth orders is the difference in educational attainment of eldest sons that has been noted in other countries. Warren (1966) found a higher proportion of eldest sons reaching college-level education, and the Irish Census data show that members of the professional social groups have a low rate of lifelong celibacy, although their prolonged education results in a low marriage rate in young adulthood (under age 25). Hence, if eldest sons are more likely to attain professional status, they are less likely to remain celibate.

The Irish evidence is consistent with Murdoch's (1966) conclusion that the eldest-born tend to marry earlier than others. His sample was a very small one, drawn from the married staff of a university. It is interesting to see the same result obtained from a much larger sample, drawn from a city of over three-quarters of a million population, and extended to establish differentials in proportions married as well as in mean age at marriage. Murdoch called on a psychological hypothesis

advanced by Schachter (1959) to account for his findings. According to this hypothesis, the eldest sons exhibit a higher level of *n*-affiliation than later-born sons, and marry earlier because they are likely to respond to anxiety by seeking companionship. Thus three possible interpretations may, separately or in combinations, be used to account for the differences in marriage patterns that have been found, namely, differences in inheritance patterns, educational attainment, or personality between sons in different birth orders. In offering the present findings for consideration it is realized that the data used are not ideal from the viewpoint of isolating the impact of birth order on age at marriage or the marriage rate. In particular the possibility that inter-generational changes in marriage patterns account for some of the apparent differences between sons in different birth orders cannot be ruled out. Cohort data, preferably of the type that would facilitate the study of members of the same family in their progression through the marriageable ages, would be required if the rigorous standards suggested by Magaud & Henry (1968) are to be met. In the absence of such refined data, the present findings are at least suggestive. Unfortunately, no comparable information is available for Irish females. In view of the persistent interest of demographers and others in the influence of birth order on behaviour further research along these lines seems warranted.

Acknowledgments

I am very grateful to my colleague, Professor B. Hutchinson, for having made available the data on which this paper is based and for his help in the preparation of the study. Professor K. H. Connell, Queen's University, Belfast, very kindly made available an abstract of material in the Irish Folklore Commission on birth order and marriage patterns. Professor D. Hannon, University College, Cork, provided me with data from his survey work on the ownership of farm holdings.

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