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A Qualitative Exploration into the Unique Experiences and Psychological Wellbeing of Second-Middleborns

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ABSTRACT

Birth order has been shown to have an effect on and influence many aspects of our lives. This research focuses on the experiences and psychological wellbeing of a number of people who are second-middleborn, particularly with regards to their relationships with others, self-esteem and general life satisfaction. Collaborators were engaged via opportunity sampling and their views explored through ethnographic, photo-elicited interviews. A thematic analysis was carried out on the transcripts and as a result, three main themes developed; 'being in the background', independence and self-esteem. It was concluded that despite some similarities, experiences of being a second-middleborn vary between individuals, thus each experience should be valued in its uniqueness. Implications for further research have also been discussed.

KEY WORDS:	BIRTH ORDER	SECOND-MIDDLEBORN	RELATIONSHIPS	SELF ESTEEM	PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING
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Introduction

Birth Order

Birth order has been researched for many years, particularly since Galton (1874), highlighted that there was often an overrepresentation of first born and only children (especially sons) in research. Birth order is said to affect many aspects of life. For example Bakan (1971:195) affirmed '...left-handedness might be correlated with stressful pre-natal and birth conditions' and identified as being more frequent in first and lastborns. However, this correlation has been contested. Hubbard (1971:276), argued that previous findings were due to '... a sampling error.' In addition, Bakan's (1977:195) review of his previous findings explained that 'left-handedness is seen as a result of left hemisphere pyramidal motor dysfunction' as opposed to being as a direct result of birth order.

Personality

Research has proposed that our birth order also has a role in influencing our personality. Salmon and Schuman (2011:11), stated '...personality development has its origins in the family environment, which isn't experienced the same way by each child.' Furthermore, all children are believed to 'seek to diversify their interests in effort to get more parental attention.' For example, Sulloway (2001:39) found that '...firstborns... are more conscientious than laterborns, whereas laterborns are more agreeable, extraverted, and nonconforming.' An Australian study by Bigby (1998:3) researched sibling roles where one had an 'intellectual disability' and found that elder siblings often take on the parental role into late adulthood by caring for their younger siblings. Laterborns have also been found to be; more jealous (Buunk, 1997:997), rebellious (Paulhaus et al, 1999:482), risk taking (Sulloway and Zweigen, 2010:402). However, Marini and Kurtz (2011:910) found 'no significant differences between firstborns and lastborns...' regarding personality traits. This was also found by Rohde et al, (2003:262), who claimed '...birth order plays little, if any, role in personality development.' However, Macdonald (1971:171) asserted that '...only children and firstborns are more socially responsible than laterborns.'

Psychological Wellbeing

The definition of psychological wellbeing involves a combination of concepts (Steptoe et al, 2012:100). For example, Ryff (1989:1069) said it includes, '...self acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy... purpose in life and personal growth'. Armsden and Greenburg (1987:427) found that individuals' '...perceived quality' of attachments to others was also a key contributor to psychological wellbeing. In addition, Crocker et al (1994:503) stated that 'self-esteem is a central aspect of psychological well-being', as well as noting the importance of life satisfaction. Such findings have also been observed cross-culturally (Searle and Ward, 1990:449; Carmeli, Yitzbak-Halevy and Wiseberg, 2009:66). Due to the fact that psychological wellbeing is influenced by many factors, it does not remain constant and so negative experiences can occur. However, its inconsistency suggests that it can be improved through various means such as; being in 'secure

employment' (Flint et al, 2013:796), engaging in Tai Chi (Wang et al, 2010:23) and other physical exercise (Scully et al, 1998; Nertz et al, 2005).

There has been much research into the relationship between psychological well-being and birth order. For example, Fullerton et al (1989:556), asserted that firstborns reported experiencing more negative feelings than other birth orders and that '...laterborns had higher psychological well-being', proposing that, in terms of psychological well-being, it is better to be of a later birth order. However, Salmon (2003:73) stated that second-borns '...tend to be less family-oriented than firstborns or lastborns'. Michalski and Shackelford (2002:182) attributed this to the fact that 'laterborns develop personality characteristics that differ from firstborns in an effort to secure parental investment.' This suggests that psychological well-being is not merely influenced by birth order position but that it is the relationship between the various birth orders that affects experiences of psychological well-being.

The state of our mental health is another contributor to psychological wellbeing and is also influenced by the birth order position we hold. Extensive research has been done regarding our susceptibility to developing Schizophrenia, thus, as stated by Lilliston (1970:40) implies that '...siblings in different positions within the family constellation are subject to varying degrees and kinds of psychological stress.' Examples of this come from, Schooler (1961:91) and Rao (1964:87), who found that laterborn children are more likely to be Schizophrenic. However, other research has found no significant relationship between birth order and incidence of Schizophrenia (Erlenmeyer-Kimling, 1969:523), thus there is much conversation regarding the topic. Fullerton et al (1989:556) found that laterborns scored higher on psychological wellbeing. However this research needs to be developed as it only focused on males and did not differentiate between later birth orders. Apart from this, psychological wellbeing regarding birth order has not attracted much attention from research.

The relationships we have also contribute to our psychological wellbeing. Certain research (Salmon and Daly, 1998:299; Salmon, 1999:183, Salmon, 2003:73; Tomeh, 1970:360) has found that birth order influences our views about family relationships. This has also been supported by Van Zyl (2011:iv) who asserted that this often results in them being '...low achievers and harbouring negative feelings.' Suitor and Pillemer (2007:32) looked into the relationship between birth order and family relationship, from a parent's point of view and concluded that '...birth order continues to play an important role in explaining favouritism when families enter later stages of the life course.'

Evaluating research into birth order

It is widely accepted that although birth order influences our being, it is not the sole determinant of the above. For example, Schooler (1972:161) researched found that there was '...only a marginal increase in such evidence [to support birth order effects] when restrictions on time, place and sex [were] removed.' This has been paralleled by Dunn (2011:5), who found 'birth order also appears to have few implications for behavioural adjustment.' Rohde et al (2003:262) even argued that, '...birth order plays little, if any, role in personality development.' Corley (2011:29) explained that birth order is '...a simple topic, which is often ignored and not

analysed enough.’ In particular, Pollet and Nettle (2009:1030) found that second-born children ‘...have been consistently found to differ from other birth positions.’ For example, Salmon and Schuman (2011:7) stated that they are;

...often referred to as “the neglected birth order”- a reference both to the way they’ve experienced their family growing up and the way they’ve experienced their family growing up and the way they’ve been overlooked by researchers.

Van Zyl (2011:48) claimed that ‘the middle child is a person born somewhere between the first and last child in the family.’ However, Kidwell (1982:225) had a more refined definition and stated that,

...By definition a middleborn (is) when there is an older and younger sibling

Such definitions seem simple when considering 3 child families, however, this becomes more complex with larger families. Defining second-born is simply when there is only one sibling born before the second-born.

Much research has been done on middleborns and second-borns as separate entities (Kennedy, 1989:755; Tucker et al, 2013:1; Mahmud et al, 2011:74). For example, Mukangi (2010:221) emphasised that middle-born children receive less parental attention than first and lastborns and that this can affect their perception of self. In addition, Van Zyl (2011:48) explained that second-borns often experience feeling as though they were

...born too late to receive the privileges and special treatment of the first-born and born too soon to enjoy the relaxed discipline the last-born children often experience.

Even so, Schumann (2011:2) claims that middle children ‘... are more likely than their siblings to be successful and enjoy strong social lives and flourishing careers.’ However, Harris (2001:1) found that ‘...birth order effects are dependent on context.’ This suggests that if specific feelings and memories are not induced during the exploration then people may not be able to describe and express their experiences to a full extent.

Despite the large amounts of research regarding second and middleborns as individual entities, I believe more research needs to be done that focuses on the life-world of being a second-middleborn. This research intends to explore the unique experiences of being a second-middleborn from the perspective of those who have journeyed through this.

Concerns with previous research

Research on second-born and middleborns most commonly makes use of the undergraduate population as opposed to adult samples and thus, ‘...while undergraduate students might indeed exhibit’ the aforementioned, ‘...this effect may disappear when they are no longer financially dependent on their parents’ and so therefore such experiences ‘...may be specific to young people’ (Pollet and Nettle, 2009:1030). Further support comes from Harris (2001:2), who stated that ‘birth order

effects are presumed to have their roots in childhood' and made note that 'no one...has proposed that these effects suddenly appear in adulthood.'

However, Saroglou and Fiasse (2003:19) uncovered the fact that most

'...studies do not often distinguish between two kinds of laterborns: middleborns and lastborns' and that it is vital to consider this division when exploring experiences of birth order.

This research aims to qualitatively explore the unique experience of being a second-middleborn, with regards to; their relations with others, life satisfaction and self-esteem. I believe that it will be of particular value, as it will help to understand the lived reality of being a second-middleborn, not only by exploring the actual experiences but the meanings that those who have experienced them attach. Doing the exploration in a qualitative manner will hopefully allow for the researcher's personal agendas to be of secondary importance to what the collaborators will gain from the research.

The researcher

I am a 21 year old, Black British, working class, female student. As a second-middleborn, I have an interest in the topic of birth order, as I believe it has influenced and shaped certain aspects of my life experiences. As a result of this, I am keen to explore the experiences of other second-middleborn children in order to gain a more meaningful insight into the topic, specifically with regards to their psychological wellbeing.

Methodology

The main aim of the research was to explore the experiences of those who are second-middleborn and made use of qualitative research methods. As Flick (2009:12) states,

Qualitative research is of specific relevance to the study of social relations, due to the fact of the pluralisation of life worlds... individualisation of ways of living

In addition, '...qualitative research allows researchers to get at the inner experience of participants...and to discover rather than test variables' (Corbin and Strauss, 2008:12). It was decided that an interpretivist epistemology would be adopted as it was appreciated that '...reality is not objectively determined' (Kelliher, 2005:123). It was also believed that this would enable the exploration of knowledge through the collaborators' experiences, which were to be the focal point of the research (Goldkuhl, 2012:135).

A participatory approach was employed as it involved ‘...the co-construction of research through partnerships between researchers and people affected by...the issues under study’ (Jagosh et al, 2012:311), thus believed it would allow an understanding of the topic through the perspective of those who have experienced it.

Psychological wellbeing and birth order is commonly researched quantitatively (Armsden and Greenburg, 1987:47; Ryff, 1989:1069; Searle and Ward, 1990:449; Carmeli et al, 2009:66), which implies a causal relationship between the two. However, psychological wellbeing is a personal, subjective concept, thus it was deemed more appropriate to explore such experiences in a qualitative manner.

The study made use of both phenomenological and ethnographic approaches. Starks and Trinidad (2007:1372) stated that ‘the goal in phenomenology is to study how people make meaning of their lived experience’ and that ‘...reality is comprehended through embodied experience.’ As stated by Gray (2009:171):

...the relation between perception and objects is not passive – human consciousness actively constructs the world as well as perceiving it.

Lawthom and Tindall (2011:13) have asserted that taking such an approach allows for ‘...the depth and complexities of experience to be revealed and thus ultimately strengthen the authenticity of findings.’

‘Ethnography can be defined as the study of the way of life’ (McLeod, 2011:105). The ethnographic approach focuses on ‘...how the participant of social action negotiates what it is to count as meaning and representation’ (Gibson and Brown, 2009:163). This is achieved by investigating ‘...the meanings that people ascribe to actions and events in their cultural worlds, expressed in their own language’ (Roulston, 2010:19). However, Runswick-Cole (2011:81) indicates that although ‘ethnographic research produces ‘thick’ descriptions’, it must also be considered that:

...ethnographic research methods have a tendency to produce a colonising discourse- presenting the ‘Other’ interpreted through the values of the researcher.

Nevertheless, it has been argued that ethnographic methods lend to a deeper understanding of the experiences of those who engage with the research because findings are ‘...a product of the ethnographer’s interaction with participants in the field-rather than an ‘objective’ record of what really happened’ (Runswick-Cole, 2011:81).

Gaining access to collaborators

Collaborators (appendix 1) were accessed ‘...in any way possible (or convenient)’ (Langdrige & Hagger-Johnson, 2009:86). However, some quantitative researchers often regard this as ‘...the weakest form of sample selection’ (Jupp, 2006:205; Gray, 2009:153). King and Horrocks (2010:29) highlighted that this is due to the fact that quantitative studies have a ‘...need to establish the generalizability of the conclusions drawn from research’ and go on to assert that qualitative research:

...does not seek to make this kind of generalisation and therefore does not normally use sampling strategies aimed at producing statistical representativeness.

On the other hand, Jupp (2006:206) praised the method for being “...cost and time-efficient’, as well as emphasising the fact that:

...it releases researchers from relying on structural institutions in society to identify the samples and allows them to engage with the social world proactively.

Additionally, it was noted (Langdrige and Hagger-Johnson, 2009:56) that gaining access in this way may have served to minimize any bias in findings, as the collaborators had not been specified as such. However, it was also recognised that the researcher’s personal biases may have influenced who they considered to be convenient collaborators.

Before the main exploration, preliminary interviews were held with collaborators in order to inform them of the research aims and to ensure their commitment. It has been stated (Tabaka, 2010:94) that this helps to discover whether the research ‘...may bring up potentially negative consequences to someone in the meeting’ and that

...knowing this...in advance can help you manage the discomfort or dysfunctions that may arise due to difficult revelations or decisions that come to light.

Number of collaborators

It was decided that there were no definitive number of appropriate collaborators. Francis et al (2010:1229), argued that ‘sample size is often justified by interviewing participants until reaching data saturation.’ However, Marshall (1996:523) stated that ‘an appropriate sample size for a qualitative study is one that adequately answers the research question.’ As there was no need for representativeness, it was surmised that 6-8 collaborators would be used.

The interview method

The main aim of the research was to explore the experiences of psychological well being of those who are second-middleborn. As stated by Sofaer (1999:1101):

Qualitative research methods are valuable in providing rich descriptions of complex phenomena; tracking unique or unexpected events; illuminating the experience and interpretation of events by actors with widely differing stakes and roles; giving voice to those whose views are rarely heard...

It was deduced that the use of qualitative methods would enable a more in-depth understanding of; the meanings for the collaborator (of being a second born), the context in which they operate, the processes by which events and actions take place and helping to reveal any unexpected influences and phenomena (Maxwell, 2013:54).

King (2004:11) argues that 'the interview remains the most common method of data gathering in qualitative research...' and states that 'the goal of any qualitative research interview is... to see the research topic from the perspective of the interviewee'. Similarly, Jupp (2006:250) focuses on lessening the influence of institutional definitions and favouring subjective meanings. Additionally, Howitt (2010:86) asserts '...the qualitative interview is extremely flexible and is not necessarily constrained by a conventional structure.' It has been illustrated (Beck, 2005:411) that face-to-face interviews could have various benefits for those who engage in them. For example, they can help to improve '...self-awareness, self-acknowledgement, sense of purpose, catharsis, healing and providing a voice for the disenfranchised' (Beck, 2005:411).

In particular, ethnographic interviews were employed to gather data with the collaborators. McLeod (2011:105) explained that ethnography is '...the study of the way of life' and aims to '...develop a comprehensive description and understanding'. Ortiz (2003:35) stated that,

'Ethnographic interviews give researchers unique insight into the lives and experiences of individuals...[and that they]...allow the researcher to explore a topic in a way that yields rich data impossible to obtain through surveys, document analysis, or observation.

Ethnographic interviewing has also been extolled for appreciating the fact that, as stated by Qu and Dunmay (2011:238),

...we cannot lift the results of interviewing out of the contexts in which they were gathered and claim them as objective data with no strings attached .

Westbury (1990:105) explained how the intense focus on collaborators experiences and meanings in ethnographic research allows for the avoidance of researcher biases that may otherwise occur because ‘...both questions and answers must be discovered from the people being interviewed.’

The interviews were semi-structured (appendix 2), as this allowed the collaborator to direct the interview thus the researcher was able to ‘relinquish’ their power over the interview (Behar, 2003:16). Most importantly, it was concluded that semi-structured, ethnographic interviews would allow for the researcher to employ the salient skill of ‘...engaged listening’ (Forsey, 2010:558), which includes attitude, body language and the way the researcher responds to collaborators. However, it was also noted that a major concern when conducting interviews is the fear of silence (Murray, 1971:244; Sharpley et al, 2005:149), thus it was decided that photo-elicited interviews should be used.

Photo-elicitation

Harper (2002:13), indicated that ‘photo elicitation is based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview.’ This method has been shown to help prompt memories, which are important to the collaborator (De Leon et al, 2005; Radley, 2003:77; Okamoto et al, 2010:1). Harper (1986:25) explained that the exploration of photographs give interviews ‘...a concrete point of reference.’ Additionally, photo elicitation can create ‘...a model for collaborative research’ (Loeffler, 200:536), allowing collaborators to translate the meaning of their photographs for the researcher. As a result of this, it has been argued that photo-elicited interviews gather more information from collaborators (Samuels, 2004:1532). It has also been shown that the use of photo-elicited interviews helps to redistribute power in the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, by allowing them to choose the photographs, thus empowers the collaborator (De Leon et al, 2005:200). Additionally, Epstein et al (2006:2) stated that photo-elicitation helps to minimise ‘...the power relationship between the researcher...and participant’ thus means this method is ‘...user-friendly’. This is also supported by the work of Padgett et al (2013:1437), who found that photo-elicited interviewing is a ‘...reflexive process made possible by introducing respondent-controlled visual stimuli’ and that it allows for ‘...deeper and more elaborated accounts as well as new information.’ Further research has found that photo-elicited interviews can have other personal benefits for collaborators. For example, Padgett et al (2013:1441) found that it was ‘...described as therapeutic – a way to connect or reconnect with people and places that held meaning.’ Another benefit of using photo-elicited interviews, as opposed to standard interviews, is that they allow for the uncovering of memories and emotional responses that are distinctively different from those obtained verbally (Harris and Guillemin, 2012:696).

Participatory approach

As stated by Jagosh et al (2012:311),

Participatory research ... is the co-construction of research through partnerships between researchers and people affected by, and/or responsible for action on, the issues under study.

The participatory approach ‘...seeks to generate research outcomes that are relevant and beneficial to all involved in the research’ (Macaulay et al, 2011:46). Furthermore, Cornwall and Jewkes (1995:1667) praised participatory methods as ‘local knowledge and perspectives are not only acknowledged but form the basis for research and planning’, thus truly allows for the collaborators’ experiences to be the focal point of research. Additionally, Trimble and Berkes (2013:768), credit the participatory approach for being ‘power sharing’, ‘trust building’ and enabling learning through the co-production of knowledge.

Analysis: the thematic approach

The Jefferson (1978:xi; 1984:ix) method was used to transcribe the data (appendix 3). The data collected was analysed using thematic analysis (appendix 4). As stated by Buetow (2010:23);

Thematic analysis is characteristic of most qualitative research. Themes are groups of codes that recur through being similar or connected to each other in a patterned way.

There are many approaches to doing thematic analysis (Aronson, 1994:1; Attride-Stirling, 2001:385). For example, Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006:5) stated there were six salient stages; ‘developing the code manual’, ‘testing the reliability of codes’, ‘summarizing data and identifying initial themes’, ‘applying template of codes and additional coding’, ‘connecting the codes and identifying themes’ and ‘corroborating and legitimating coded themes’. Braun and Clarke (2006:15) asserted that thematic analysis consists of six key steps; ‘familiarising yourself with the data’, ‘coding’, ‘searching for themes’, ‘reviewing themes’, ‘defining and naming themes’ and ‘producing the report’. This method of analysis was chosen as; it is ‘...suited to a wide range of research interests and theoretical perspectives’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013:120). Additionally, Dawson (2009:119) found that thematic analysis is ‘...highly inductive, that is, the themes emerge from the data and are not imposed upon it by the researcher’ thus allows the experiences of the collaborators to remain central to the research.

Ethical considerations

The BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2010) guide was adhered to. Informed consent was gained from each collaborator prior to data collection (see appendices 6, 7 and 8) to ensure that they were aware of what the research entailed. In addition, collaborators were all informed of their right to withdraw without consequence. Throughout the research, collaborators remained anonymous

(appendix 9) and their confidentiality respected. As per the BPS guide, all collaborators were debriefed after the research (appendix 9) to ensure they were fully aware of the research aims. Other ethical considerations were also been made (appendix 10).

Analysis & Discussion

An in-depth analysis of the transcripts revealed a number of recurrent themes that were present throughout them.

Theme 1: *"I was in the background"*

Throughout the interviews, the collaborators all discussed (at varying lengths and depths), the extent to which they felt unnoticed or undervalued in their relationships with others, a feeling which McGowan and Beck (2009:7) argue is common among second-middleborns. Some expressions of this were explicit, for example Sade stated, *"I was in the background with regards to my relationships with others"* (L196-197), whereas others were less obvious. For example, when Serenity explains, *"my sister did it first"* (L98). The emphasis on *"first"* suggests she received less attention than her sister, thus experienced feelings of unimportance.

The main sub-themes that emerged from the collaborators experiences of 'being in the background' were regarding the extent to which they considered their marginalisation as a result of choice or not.

1.1 - Choice

There was reference to peacekeeping within relationships due to an aversion to conflict throughout a number of the interviews. Joshua (L19-20) stated that he actively chooses to *"avoid confrontation"* to maintain a *"peaceful life"*. Similarly, Shaun described himself as a *"peacemaker"* (L8) and a *"mediator"* (L96). McGowan and Beck (2009:7) found that those who describe themselves as mediators often experience extensive conflict between their siblings. Such expressions show how the lifestyle choices of collaborators lead them to behave in certain ways, thus they actively seek out and take the subordinate role in their relationships with others. Further illustrations of the choice to be 'in the background' come from the explanations that doing so allows the collaborators to protect themselves from negative experiences. For example, Sade explains that is a *"defence mechanism thing where I keep my guard up"* (L34) thus indicating that such a choice acts a safeguard against her fear of rejection. This view is also shared by Rebecca who elucidates, *"I shut myself off from people if I start to sense...an atmosphere"* (L53-54); again indicating that remaining reticent in her relationships with others is a rational choice. Jamie also describes that he is a sensitive person *"under this hard shell"* (L19) in order to avoid people thinking he is *"vulnerable and take advantage"* (L28-29).

1.2 - Lack of choice

Throughout the interviews it became evident that not all experienced of 'being in the background' were through choice. Key examples of this were the explanations by collaborators' that they felt they had been pushed into the background by the fact they were expected to "*live up to the achievements of others*" (Jamie, L135-136). It is commonly believed that firstborns are cleverer than their siblings (Bradley, 1968:45; Herrera et al, 2003:142; Collins, 2006:4; Black et al, 2011:103), however, others contest this idea (Thurstone and Jenkins, 1929:641; Kanazawa, 2012:1157) and argue that this is not necessarily the case. A number of the collaborators reported feeling second-best in comparison to their elder siblings, as indicated by the following statements; "*first ones...set the standard for younger ones*" (Jamie, L111-113), "*my sister did it first*" (Serenity, L98), "*I never had to be the first*" (Sade, L20-21) and "*I was second at everything*" (Rebecca, L108), which all suggest that sentiments of being unnoticed are derived from a lack of attention being paid to them by those deemed important. Such a finding has also been reflected in the work of Collins (2006:10) who asserted, '...middle children are thought to experience less interaction and received significantly less attention' in comparison to their siblings.

It was also found that their sense of 'being in the background' (due to reasons beyond their volition) came from feelings of being less valued than others. Joshua explained how his parents "*only wanted two kids, one of each so when I came along...[it was] not really what they were expecting*" (L32-33), which exemplifies that he felt as though he was a disappointment to his parents, particularly his mother who he "*never really connected...with*" (L36). Emphasising that the feeling of being undervalued is accentuated when siblings are '...in competition for parental investment' (Sulloway, 2001:39). Rebecca described a similar experience when she explained that she felt as though she was living "*between two golden children*" (L125), suggesting that she felt her efforts were never appreciated. Additionally, Schulman and Mosak (1997:116) also found that second-middleborns experience feeling as though they are '...surrounded by competitors...squeezed into a small area in [their] search for significance.' Keller and Zach (2002:177) asserted that '...firstborns are preferred over laterborns', this seems to be paralleled in Sade's expression whereby, in addition to being made to feel as though her efforts were less valuable than others', her experiences of 'being in the background' were even extended to the loss of her identity whereby she was referred to as "*so and so's sister*" (L130).

Theme 2: "*do my own thing*"

The degree to which they considered themselves independent was something explored by all of the collaborators. Some explicitly described themselves as "*independent*" (Serenity, L52; Shaun, L13; Rebecca, L8 and Joshua, L8), whereas others elicited examples of when their independence had been exercised. Three main subthemes emerged from the independence of the collaborators; self-sufficiency, dependency and evaluations of their independence.

2.1 - Self-sufficiency

According to the literature, second-middleborns ‘...experience less interaction and receive less attention (Collins, 2006:4) than their siblings, thus deem their need to be self-reliant. This is reflected throughout a number of the transcripts; for example, Serenity explained, “*I was kinda left to it*” (L121) to “*do my own thing*” (L115). Use of “*left*” suggests that her independence was induced through circumstance. Additionally, Rebecca described herself as “*an independent person*” (L8) due to the fact that others were dependent on her, for example she explained how she used to spend a lot of time “*coverin for my older sister*” (L34) and that she would “*fight her corner*” (L42). However, it has been argued that the ‘path to independence’ involves a notion of choice (Plott, 1973:1075). Within the transcripts, this is suggested when Shaun stated his preference “*not [to] rely on anyone*” (L66) and that he “*would rather have to work harder*” (L67) than rely on others. However, consideration of his family background (whereby he had to be “*the man of the house*”, L32-33) elicits that his independence was also induced through circumstance, despite his apparent unawareness of this fact.

2.2 - Dependency

Research has shown that birth order affects the way we interact (Corley, 2011:29) and that laterborns are less socially responsible than their elder siblings (Macdonald, 1971:171), thus labels laterborns as dependent. However, the extent to which collaborators were dependent varied. A number of collaborators described their dependency on others as a means for emotional support. For example, Joshua explained he “*couldn’t imagine livin so far away*” (L77-78) from his grandparents. Similarly, Sade described herself as her “*mother’s shadow*” (L39), suggesting a strong dependency on her mother. Notions of dependent were also evident in the ways collaborators defined themselves. For example, they explained how they were reliant on others to “*set the standard for younger ones*” (Jamie, L113) to enable them to “*follow the good things*” (Serenity, L158). Closely linked was collaborators’ dependency on others to validate themselves, as indicated by Jamie’s declaration that his father “*kept sayin e were proud of us*” (L79). This supports Becker et al (1964:318) who found ‘later-born persons rely on others for validation of their beliefs.’ Furthermore, Rebecca’s preference to be the “*submissive one*” (L50-51), suggests dependency on others’ decisions as opposed to her own.

2.3 - Evaluating independence:

Throughout the transcripts it is obvious that a number of the collaborators saw the values and flaws associated with varying levels of independence. Some collaborators described being independent as a positive experience, for example, Joshua stated, “*I like to be able to do things myself*” (L8-9). Additionally, Serenity explained how it enabled her to venture “*away from family*” (L153). However, not all experiences of independence were considered positive. For example, Joshua explained that his biological parents and siblings were a “*happy family without me*” (L45). Other collaborators also described feeling as though they were forced into independence. For example, Serenity explained that her independence developed after she was “*cast out*” (L116) due to the arrival of her younger sister. Rebecca described a comparable experience when she explained that her younger sister

“*stole my thunder*” (L121) and that she “*took all the attention*” (L124) away, thus leaving Rebecca to “ *fend*” (L30) for herself. Such examples appear to support research that has found that second-middleborns perceive themselves as being in receipt of less parental support than their siblings (Kennedy, 1989:755; Kidwell, 1982:225; Rohde et al, 2003:261).

While some collaborators indicated a preference for independence, others described and appreciated the need for a balance between dependency and independency. For example, Serenity asserted the need for a “*happy balance between bein too...babied and bein independent*” (L175-176). Whereas Jamie (L133-136) focused on the necessity of a;

...balance between the pressure of...having to be what the parents expected and...pressure to live up to the achievements of the others.

Thus value of independence was acknowledged as well as considering its limitations.

Theme 3: Self-esteem

Research has found that ‘self-esteem has a strong relation to happiness’ (Baumeister et al, 2008:1). Confidence in self and their own abilities was something that emanated throughout the interviews. Two main subthemes emerged from collaborators’ self-esteem perceptions; beliefs about ability and positioning.

3.1 - Beliefs about ability

Collaborators’ beliefs regarding their abilities were expressed in many ways. Firstly, with the use of adverbs which undermined collaborators’ statements. For example, Rebecca stated that she’s “*Quite a nervous person...when I’m in a new environment*” (L13-14). This explicit declaration indicated her anxiety due to a lack of confidence in her abilities. This was additionally emphasised through the use of “*Quite*” which added questionability to her perception of self. Further examples were manifest through the use of non-committal phrases such as, “*sometimes*” (Serenity, L13) and “*I would say...I dunno*” (Sade, L12). Collaborators’ doubts with their abilities were also evident through expressions, which indicated their need for others’ approval to validate their decision. This has been found to be a common trait in second-middleborns (Becker et al, 1964:318). For example, Jamie described confidence in his boxing abilities, however, he attributed his success to the fact that he was “*from a line of boxers*” (L53), an external factor which diverted focus away from his abilities. The approval of others also features heavily in the interview with Sade, most notably when she explained the importance of her siblings getting “*on with my boyfriend quite well*” (L89), thus authorising her choice of partner.

Despite this, not all experiences were negative as collaborators additionally explored their affirmative beliefs regarding their self-esteem. Confidence in their abilities was most commonly demonstrated through explanations that they were “*independent*”

(Rebecca, L8) and that their capabilities enabled them to “*not rely on anyone*” (Shaun, L66). However, it has been argued (Dimond and Munz, 1967:832) that;

...the later-born child is forced, by a lessened degree of attention to...not depend so heavily on his parents.

Thus suggesting that the independence of second-middleborns is due to circumstance rather than confidence in their abilities. Nevertheless, their decision to be independent as opposed to focusing on gaining more parental attention indicates an element of self-belief.

3.2 - Positioning

As stated by Schacter (1964:453), ‘...one evaluates his own feelings about a person [including self] by comparing his feelings with those of others.’ Throughout the interviews, levels of self-esteem were also suggested by the ways collaborators described themselves in relation to others.

As stated previously, collaborators’ belief in self was often displayed through references to their independence. However, their ability and perceived necessity to be independent was often explained in comparison to their siblings. For example, Joshua clarified “*if other people want to do things for me then that’s fine*” (L9-10) indicating his appreciation of others’ efforts, but went on to state that “*I like to know that I can do things for myself*” (L10-11), declaring that he values his independence as it allows for acknowledgment of his personal value. Similarly, Shaun compared his level of independence to that of his younger siblings who he explained his “*mum did a lot for*” (L13-14).

Self-esteem levels were also exemplified through the way in which collaborators considered themselves as “*cast out*” (Serenity, L116) in comparison to their siblings who they believed were regarded as “*more of a priority*” (Rebecca, L29). For example, Sade explained feeling unappreciated with regards to her relationship with her grandmother as she felt “*there was always an excuse*” (L239) as to why she could not “*sleep over*” (L237) at her grandma’s like her brother.

Concluding remarks

There are a number of strengths and limitations associated with the research. For example, the research fulfilled its core aim to explore the experiences of second-middleborns in a way, which facilitated the empowerment of the collaborators. However it must be appreciated that, despite making numerous attempts to make the collaborators feel comfortable with and trust the research environment, they may not have disclosed their true feelings. This may have been due to a number of reasons, including the fact they may have wanted to present themselves as socially desirable (Leggett et al, 2003:561; Van de Mortel, 2008:40) as a way of managing others’ impressions of them (Randall and Fernandes, 1991:805). However, an explanation of the research aims and explaining that there were “no right or wrong answers” (Serenity, L4) may have helped to reduce such as occurrences as it made

collaborators ‘...value the research objectives and appreciate the detrimental consequences of providing incorrect...information’ (Gregson et al, 2002:568).

The use of qualitative methods in the research allowed for an in-depth exploration of the experiences of a number of second-middleborns. It would be useful for future research to continue the exploration of such experiences, possibly in a group setting, as this may allow for the elicitation of certain topics in a manner that is ‘...emotive and interactive’ (Gibbs, 2012:186) with others who may have similar experiences (Kitzinger, 1994:103). Additionally, it may be useful for future research to utilise narrative methods of analysis, which are ‘concerned with how human life is storied’ (Miller, 2000:310) as it is argued there is an emphasis on experiences ‘...in relation to past events and future expectations in relation to other actors’ (Miller, 2000:311).

Overall, this research has found that the experiences of second-middleborns are generally diverse but that similarities can occur, however an appreciation of individual experiences is more valuable than attempting to make generalisations regarding all who are second-middleborn.

Reflexive analysis

It was important for me to reflect on my experiences and how they may have influenced the research in order to ‘increase the integrity and trustworthiness’ of the research (Finlay, 2002:531). As a second-middleborn I was aware of the fact that my own personal experiences may have been manifest in the research and even biased my interpretations of the collaborators’ responses, thus it was essential to ensure that the research did not act as a vehicle of agenda confirmation (Wagenmakers et al, 2012:632). Prior to the research my initial response to the phrase ‘birth order’ elucidated negative connotations of being a second-middleborn. As the research aimed to empower collaborators, it was imperative to ensure that all aspects of their experiences (both positive and negative) were acknowledged as opposed to merely focusing on negative ones. The fact that not all of the collaborators made use of their photographs also facilitated their empowerment as it meant that the research method was not being imposed on them but allowed them to navigate the course of the exploration. This research has changed me as a person; in that I feel I am more appreciative of others’ experiences regarding being a second-middleborn.

When initially engaging with the research, I was conscious of the fact that my experiences had the potential to influence the interactions with the collaborators. As a result of this, I was unsure whether to disclose that I was also a second-middleborn as I was aware of the issues of social desirability but on the other hand knew that disclosing such information may have helped collaborators to feel more at ease when collectively exploring their experiences.

Undertaking this research has enabled personal development and optimistically aims to encourage individuals to value their own experiences.

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