



The Impact of Family Position and Dynamics on Decision-Making and Conflict Resolution in Marital Unions

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the impact of individuals' family of origin position (birth order) and internal dynamics on decision-making processes and conflict resolution strategies within their marital unions. Recognizing that marital satisfaction and stability are influenced by the interpersonal patterns learned in one's family of origin, this research explores how birth order roles and familial communication styles are replicated or adapted in spousal interactions. Using a mixed-methods design, quantitative data were collected from a purposive sample of 150 married couples, measuring birth order, decision-making dominance, and preferred conflict resolution styles. Qualitative data from in-depth interviews with a subset of 20 couples were analyzed to explore the subjective experiences and dynamics behind the numerical trends. Findings reveal that complementarity and conflict in birth order roles between spouses (e.g., a firstborn married to a lastborn) significantly influence decision-making dominance and the adoption of constructive versus destructive conflict management strategies. The study highlights the enduring influence of familial background on marital functioning and underscores the importance of conscious awareness of these patterns for fostering healthy, equitable, and resilient marriages.

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INTRODUCTION

Marital unions represent one of the most complex and significant interpersonal relationships, requiring continuous negotiation, joint decision-making, and effective conflict resolution for long-term satisfaction and stability. The success of these processes is not created in a vacuum; rather, it is profoundly shaped by the interpersonal blueprints individuals internalize from their family of origin. Among the various familial influences, an individual's position within the sibling constellation—their birth order—and the overarching dynamics of their childhood family emerge as critical, yet under-explored, factors that can predict patterns of behavior in marriage. This study situates itself at the intersection of family systems theory, psychology, and marital research, proposing that the roles, expectations, and conflict styles learned in one's family of origin are unconsciously imported into and re-enacted within the marital relationship.

Family systems theory posits that the family operates as an emotional unit, with each member playing a specific role that governs communication, alliance, and conflict management. Birth order is a primary organizer of these roles; firstborns often learn to lead and assume responsibility, middle children frequently become negotiators and peacemakers, and lastborns may adopt strategies of charm and persuasion to gain attention. These ingrained roles do not disappear in adulthood. They become a default setting for how individuals approach shared decision-making—whether they tend to dominate, acquiesce, or seek consensus—and how they manage interpersonal conflict—whether they confront, avoid, or mediate disputes.

Similarly, the overall dynamic of the family of origin—whether it was authoritarian, permissive, collaborative, or conflict-averse—provides a model for what is considered "normal" in close relationships. An individual from a highly communicative family may naturally engage in open discussion with a spouse, while someone from a family that avoided conflict may retreat during marital disagreements, potentially allowing issues to fester. Understanding the transmission of these patterns from the family of origin to the marital union is therefore not an exercise in hindsight but a crucial endeavor for predicting relational challenges and fostering marital health. This study, therefore, seeks to systematically investigate how these deeply embedded familial templates—specifically, family position and dynamics—influence the fundamental processes of decision-making and conflict resolution between spouses.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the acknowledged importance of communication and conflict management for marital success, a significant gap exists in understanding the specific origins of these interpersonal skills. Marital therapy and counseling often focus on the present-day interactions between couples without fully excavating the deep-seated, familial roots of their behavior patterns. While factors like personality, education, and economic stress are frequently studied, the influence of one's ordinal position in the family and the dynamics of their family of origin remain relatively marginalized in empirical marital research. This constitutes a critical problem, as it limits the holistic understanding of marital functioning and the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions.

The discourse on marital conflict often characterizes issues as arising from incompatible personalities or poor communication skills in the present, neglecting the possibility that these are symptoms of deeper, unconscious re-enactments of learned familial roles. For instance, a persistent power struggle in decision-making may not merely be a couple's issue but a clash between two firstborns accustomed to leading, or a pattern of avoidance may stem from both partners originating from conflict-averse families. Globally, research has established that family of origin experiences significantly impact adult romantic relationships, influencing attachment styles and relational expectations. However, the specific mechanisms through which birth order roles and familial dynamics translate into specific marital communication and conflict resolution behaviors are not well-defined.

Moreover, within the African context, and Ghana specifically, where extended family ties are strong and cultural expectations of marriage are pronounced, understanding these familial influences is even more critical. The application of Western models without considering the unique collectivist and familial structures prevalent in Ghana may lead to incomplete or ineffective strategies for strengthening marital unions. There is a pressing need for research that explicitly examines the combined effect of family position and family dynamics on the day-to-day functioning of marriages within this socio-cultural context.

Therefore, the problem this study seeks to address is the limited empirical understanding of how birth order and family of origin dynamics interact to shape decision-making processes and conflict resolution strategies in Ghanaian marital unions. By investigating these specific pathways, the research will provide evidence-based insights to inform marital therapy practices, pre-marital counseling programs, and public health initiatives aimed at strengthening family systems and promoting marital well-being in Ghana.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this mixed-methods study is to investigate the impact of an individual's family of origin position (birth order) and internal dynamics on decision-making processes and conflict resolution strategies within their marital unions. The study seeks to provide a comprehensive, nuanced understanding of how these deeply ingrained familial templates are unconsciously imported into and enacted within the spousal relationship, influencing everything from daily choices to the management of disagreements. By situating the analysis within the Ghanaian socio-cultural context, where extended family influence is significant, the study aims to generate culturally relevant, evidence-based insights that can inform therapeutic practices, enrich pre-marital and marital counseling frameworks, and contribute to broader initiatives aimed at fostering healthier and more resilient marital relationships.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the influence of an individual's birth order on their preferred decision-making style (dominant, collaborative, passive) within their marital union.
2. To assess the relationship between the perceived dynamics of one's family of origin (e.g., conflict-avoidant, authoritarian, collaborative) and the conflict resolution strategies they employ with their spouse.
3. To explore the extent to which spousal congruence or clash in birth order roles (e.g., a firstborn married to a lastborn vs. two firstborns) shapes decision-making dominance and conflict management.
4. To analyze how cultural and extended family expectations within Ghana mediate the relationship between family of origin influences and marital functioning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an integrative theoretical framework that combines principles from family systems theory, birth order theory, and social learning theory to explain how familial background influences marital functioning. These theories provide a lens for understanding the transmission of behavior patterns from the family of origin to the marital union.

Family Systems Theory, pioneered by Murray Bowen, posits that the family is an emotional unit and that individuals cannot be understood in isolation from their family network. This theory introduces the concept of differentiation of self, which refers to an individual's ability to separate their own intellectual and emotional functioning from that of their family. Individuals with low differentiation are more likely to replicate the relationship patterns and triangled conflicts of their family of origin in their marital union. This theory provides the overarching framework for understanding how the entire *system* of one's childhood family—its communication styles, emotional climate, and conflict management strategies—becomes a blueprint for marital behavior.

Adlerian Birth Order Theory offers a more specific lens for understanding the roles individuals learn within that family system. Alfred Adler proposed that a person's ordinal position (firstborn, middle child, lastborn, only child) shapes their worldview, personality, and approach to social relationships. Firstborns, often entrusted with responsibility for younger siblings, may develop a leadership-oriented style and a preference for control in decision-making. Middle children, frequently acting as mediators, may become compromisers and diplomats skilled at conflict resolution. Lastborns, often ambitious yet sometimes dependent, may develop charming and persuasive tactics to navigate the world. These roles, when brought into a marriage, can create compatibility (e.g., a firstborn's leadership complementing a lastborn's support-seeking) or conflict (e.g., two firstborns vying for control). Social Learning Theory, developed by Albert Bandura, provides the mechanism for *how* these patterns are transmitted. It posits that people learn behaviors through observation, imitation, and modeling. Children observe how their parents interact, make decisions, and resolve conflicts. They internalize these models as normative and are likely to replicate them in their own adult relationships. For instance, a child who observes parents resolving disputes through calm discussion is more likely to adopt a collaborative conflict resolution style, whereas a child from a home with volatile arguments may learn to either escalate conflicts or avoid them altogether. The integration of these theories suggests a clear pathway: The *family system* creates a specific emotional environment and set of interaction patterns. Within this system, *birth order* assigns a specific role and teaches associated skills to the individual. Through *social learning*, the individual internalizes both the general familial models and their specific role-based behaviors. When forming a marital union, these learned patterns become the default setting for how the individual engages in decision-making and conflict resolution. The theoretical expectation is that spousal compatibility is not just about love but about the functional compatibility of these deeply ingrained, familial blueprints.

Empirical Review

The empirical literature on the transfer of family of origin patterns to adult relationships consistently demonstrates significant links between childhood experiences and marital functioning, though direct studies on birth order and marital dynamics are less common. Research strongly supports the tenets of family systems theory, indicating that individuals often replicate the communication and conflict patterns observed in their parents' marriage. Studies have shown that adults from families characterized by high conflict and poor resolution skills are more likely to exhibit destructive conflict strategies—such as criticism, contempt, and withdrawal—in their own marriages, leading to lower relationship satisfaction (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2000). Conversely, individuals from families with secure attachment and healthy communication patterns are more likely to employ constructive conflict resolution and report higher marital quality, underscoring the powerful modeling effect described by social learning theory.

Regarding birth order, empirical findings are more nuanced but suggestive. Research outside the marital context has found that firstborns often score higher on measures of conscientiousness and dominance, while later-borns may score higher on agreeableness and openness (Sulloway, 1996; 2010). Translated to a marital setting, these traits could predispose firstborns to take a dominant role in decision-making and approach conflicts in a direct, task-oriented manner. Some small-scale studies have suggested that complementary birth order pairings (e.g., a firstborn with a lastborn) may experience an initial "fit" in roles, potentially reducing power struggles, though this can sometimes evolve into dependency or resentment over time (Richardson & Richardson, 1990). However, other studies controlling for family size and socioeconomic factors have found null effects of birth order on broad personality traits (Damian & Roberts, 2015), highlighting the need for research focused on specific marital behaviors rather than general personality.

The interaction between family dynamics and birth order is particularly understudied. For instance, a firstborn from a collaborative family may lead through facilitation, while a firstborn from an authoritarian family may lead through control. Research in the African and Ghanaian context adds a critical cultural layer. Studies note that extended family involvement and strong filial obligations can intensify the pressure to conform to familial expectations, making the replication of family of origin patterns even more pronounced (Amoateng & Heaton, 2012). In Ghana, where marital decisions often involve extended kin and conflict resolution may prioritize family harmony over individual needs, the influence of one's natal family is likely to be especially potent. Qualitative studies on Ghanaian marriages often cite interference from in-laws and the pressure to adhere to traditional gender and familial roles as significant stressors, suggesting that family dynamics extend beyond the nuclear unit (Adomako Ampofo, 2001).

Gaps in the current literature are threefold. First, there is a scarcity of research that directly measures the link between birth order and specific marital communication behaviors. Second, few studies employ a dyadic design that captures the interaction between both spouses' familial backgrounds. Third, there is a critical lack of culturally situated research that examines these relationships within non-Western contexts like Ghana, where collectivist values and extended family structures fundamentally shape marital dynamics. This study aims to fill these gaps by examining the combined influence of family position and dynamics on marital decision-making and conflict resolution within a Ghanaian sample.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to provide a comprehensive analysis of how family position and dynamics influence marital unions. The quantitative strand aimed to identify statistical patterns and relationships across a larger sample, while the qualitative strand sought to explore the subjective experiences and nuanced meanings behind these patterns. This design was chosen to capture both the breadth of observable trends and the depth of lived experience.

The target population consisted of married couples residing in Accra and Kumasi, Ghana, who have been cohabiting for a minimum of three years. A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure diversity in age, socioeconomic status, and family structure (with and without children). For the quantitative phase, 150 couples (300 individuals) were recruited through community centers, religious organizations, and social media. For the qualitative phase, a nested sub-sample of 20 couples was selected from the larger pool to represent a range of birth order combinations and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising four sections:

1. **Demographics:** Age, length of marriage, education, income, number of children.
2. **Birth Order Assessment:** Participants indicated their birth order and provided the ages of their siblings.
3. **Family of Origin Dynamics:** Measured using the 12-item Family Atmosphere Scale (FAS), which assesses perceptions of conflict, expressiveness, and cohesion in one's childhood family.
4. **Marital Functioning:** The Decision-Making Dominance Scale (DMDS) assessed power distribution in decisions. The Conflict Resolution Style Inventory (CRSI) measured the use of constructive (e.g., negotiation) and destructive (e.g., avoidance, aggression) strategies.

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured, joint interviews with the 20 couples. The interview guide explored topics such as: how decisions are typically made, how conflicts are handled, perceptions of how their family of origin influences their marital behavior, and experiences with extended family interference. Interviews were conducted in English or Twi based on preference, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics summarized the sample. Pearson correlations examined relationships between family dynamics, birth order, and marital outcomes. Multiple regression analyses tested the predictive power of family dynamics and birth order on decision-making and conflict resolution styles. T-tests were used to compare means between different birth order pairings.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis in NVivo. Transcripts were coded inductively to identify emergent themes related to the transmission of familial patterns, power dynamics, and conflict management. Codes were grouped into themes such as "repeating parental patterns," "clash of familial expectations," and "creating new marital norms." Member checking was employed by sharing summaries with participants to ensure accuracy.

Ethical approval was obtained from the [Blinded] Institutional Review Board. Informed consent was secured from all participants, with emphasis on confidentiality and voluntary participation. Participants were informed that they could skip any question or withdraw at any time.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Thematic analysis of the qualitative data from 20 spousal interviews revealed profound insights into the mechanisms through which family of origin position and dynamics shape marital decision-making and conflict resolution. The analysis moved beyond the quantitative correlations to uncover the lived experiences and subjective meanings behind the statistical trends. Four central themes emerged, each illuminated by the powerful narratives of the participants.

The Inertia of Inherited Models was a predominant theme, describing the unconscious replication of parental behaviors. A majority of participants acknowledged that their default approach to conflict mirrored what they had witnessed growing up. A forty-two-year-old male school teacher, a firstborn married to a lastborn, explained, "I find myself shouting during arguments, and I suddenly hear my father's voice coming out of my mouth. In my house, my father's word was law, and there was no discussion. Now, I have to consciously remind myself that my wife is not my child and that we can talk calmly." This illustrates the powerful modeling effect, even when the behavior is negatively perceived. His wife's response confirmed the challenge: "He doesn't mean to be harsh, but it is his default setting. I have to tell him, 'We are not in your father's house now,' and then he calms down and we can talk." Conversely, a thirty-five-year-old female nurse from a collaborative family described a different inheritance: "In my home, my parents would sit us down and talk through everything. So for me, it is natural that my husband and I do the same. I cannot imagine just making a big decision about the children's school or money without us agreeing together."

Complementary versus Conflicting Roles emerged as a critical theme explaining marital harmony or discord based on birth order alignment. Couples with complementary birth order positions often described a natural, unspoken fit in their decision-making roles. A male lastborn married to a female firstborn stated, "She is the planner, the organizer. I trust her with the big decisions because she is good at it. My job is to make her laugh and to support her. It works for us because I never wanted that pressure anyway." His wife confirmed this dynamic: "He brings me joy and reminds me not to take life so seriously. I handle the details, and he provides

the morale. We balance each other." In stark contrast, couples where both partners were firstborns frequently described a "clash of captains." A forty-year-old male engineer married to a fellow firstborn articulated the struggle: "It is a constant negotiation of power. Everything from what to have for dinner to where to invest our money becomes a subtle test of wills. We both are so used to being in charge that we have to consciously create rules for taking turns leading decisions."

The Permeable Marital Boundary theme highlighted the significant, and often intrusive, role of the extended family in reinforcing or disrupting marital dynamics. This was a particularly potent finding within the Ghanaian context. Participants consistently reported that in-laws could activate deeply ingrained familial roles, pulling spouses back into patterns learned in childhood. A thirty-eight-year-old woman with a dominant mother-in-law shared, "Whenever his mother visits, my husband changes. He becomes an obedient son, and all the decisions we made together are put before her for approval. It makes me feel like a child in my own home, and it causes our biggest arguments." Another participant, a fifty-year-old patriarch, explained how his birth order role was exploited by his family of origin: "As the first son, my siblings and my mother still bring all their problems to me. They call me to settle disputes and ask for money. My wife feels I prioritize them over our own children. She says I am still playing the 'big brother' instead of being a husband and father first."

Conscious Reconstruction of Marital Norms was the final theme, offering a pathway toward marital resilience. This theme captured the process through which couples became aware of detrimental inherited patterns and actively worked to create new, shared norms for their own union. This often emerged from a crisis or from participation in marital counseling. A female middle child married to a male lastborn described their journey: "We realized we were both avoiding conflict because that's what our parents did. But the problems would fester. We had to learn, from a counselor, how to have a fight properly—how to argue without insulting each other and actually find a solution. It was like learning a new language in our forties." A male participant summarized the essence of this theme: "You have to understand that your marriage is a new family. You cannot let your old family dictate how it runs. It is hard work to break those habits, but you must choose each other over the past. You must create your own culture." Taken together, these four themes provide a rich, nuanced understanding that the quantitative data alone could not capture. They reveal that the influence of family of origin is not a deterministic force but a powerful current. Marital satisfaction is not solely determined by the patterns spouses bring into the union, but by their awareness of these patterns and their conscious, collaborative effort to build a new shared system that serves their unique partnership.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The findings of this study illuminate the profound and complex ways in which family of origin dynamics and birth order roles are imported into and shape the functioning of marital unions. The results confirm and extend the theoretical foundations of Family Systems Theory, Adlerian psychology, and Social Learning Theory, providing a nuanced understanding of marital behavior within the Ghanaian socio-cultural context.

The theme of the Inertia of Inherited Models strongly supports Social Learning Theory, demonstrating that individuals unconsciously replicate the conflict resolution styles and decision-making processes witnessed in their childhood homes. The participants' narratives of "hearing my father's voice" or finding calm discussion "natural" underscore Bandura's premise that behavior is learned through observation and imitation. This finding aligns with global research on the intergenerational transmission of marital behavior but adds a critical cultural dimension: in the Ghanaian context, where respect for elders is paramount, the power of these inherited models may be even more potent and harder to challenge. The struggle described by participants to override these default settings highlights that without conscious effort, the past actively dictates the present marital relationship.

The theme of Complementary versus Conflicting Roles provides robust empirical support for Adlerian Birth Order Theory within the marital dyad. The reported harmony in couples with complementary birth orders (e.g., firstborn-lastborn) and the "clash of captains" in firstborn-firstborn unions validate Adler's concept of role fit. This suggests that marital compatibility is not merely about love but also about the functional compatibility of the deeply ingrained social roles each partner developed to navigate their family of origin. This finding offers a compelling explanation for certain common marital power struggles that may otherwise be misattributed to personality flaws rather than understood as a clash of learned familial roles.

The theme of the Permeable Marital Boundary is perhaps the most significant contribution of this study, deeply contextualizing the findings within the Ghanaian collectivist culture. It extends Family Systems Theory by highlighting that the "family system" influencing the marriage is not limited to the nuclear family of origin but includes the extended family, whose active involvement can reinforce or disrupt marital dynamics. The experience of a husband reverting to his role as an "obedient son" when his mother visits powerfully illustrates how extended family members can trigger a regression to childhood roles, directly undermining the spousal subsystem and its autonomy. This finding resonates with studies on Ghanaian families that emphasize the strength of extended kin networks and suggests that in-law interference is a major stressor specifically because it activates these deep-seated familial roles.

Finally, the theme of Conscious Reconstruction of Marital Norms provides a crucial optimistic counterpoint to the deterministic pull of the previous themes. It introduces the concept of conscious differentiation, a proactive process through which couples can

break free from detrimental inherited patterns. This aligns with Bowen's concept of differentiation but frames it as a dyadic achievement rather than solely an individual one. Couples who successfully engage in this process do not deny their past but actively choose to create a new, shared culture for their marriage. This finding is vital for marital therapy, as it moves the focus from blaming families of origin to empowering couples with the agency to define their own relationship.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study set out to investigate the impact of family position and dynamics on decision-making and conflict resolution in marital unions. The findings conclusively demonstrate that the roles individuals learn in their families of origin and the behavioral models they observe significantly influence their approach to spousal decision-making and conflict management. Birth order roles create a tendency toward dominance, mediation, or passivity, while family dynamics set a blueprint for what constitutes "normal" communication and conflict. The Ghanaian context, with its strong extended family ties, acts as a powerful reinforcing mechanism, often making these inherited patterns more pronounced and more challenging to change.

However, the study also reveals that these influences are not deterministic. The most critical finding is that couples possess the agency to become aware of these patterns and consciously work together to build a new, healthier marital culture that serves their unique partnership. Marital satisfaction and resilience are thus not determined by the past itself, but by the couple's ability to understand and negotiate the influence of that past on their present relationship.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Integrate Family of Origin Exploration into Marital Counseling:** Therapists and counselors should routinely incorporate a structured assessment of each partner's family dynamics and birth order position into marital therapy. Helping couples identify the source of their patterns can depersonalize conflicts and foster empathy.
2. **Develop Psychoeducational Programs for Couples:** Community centers and religious organizations should offer workshops that educate engaged and married couples on how family of origin and birth order can impact a marriage. This knowledge can serve as a preventive tool, normalizing challenges and providing strategies for conscious communication from the outset.
3. **Strengthen the Marital Subsystem:** Interventions should focus on helping couples establish and maintain clear boundaries with their extended families. This includes developing united strategies for managing in-law expectations and interference, thereby protecting the autonomy of the spousal relationship.
4. **Promote Dyadic Differentiation:** Counseling should aim not just at individual differentiation but at *dyadic differentiation*—helping the couple as a unit to define their own values, rules, and conflict resolution styles that are distinct from those of their families of origin.
5. **Cultural Sensitivity in Practice:** Mental health professionals working with Ghanaian couples must be culturally competent, acknowledging the deep value of extended family while simultaneously helping couples navigate the challenges it presents to marital privacy and autonomy. Strategies must be respectful yet empowering.

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