

The Pecking Order: Which Siblings Succeed and Why

By Dalton Conley

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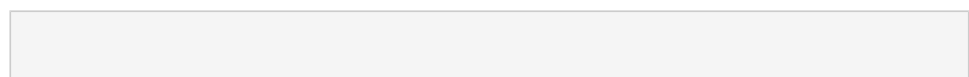
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We want to think of the family as a haven, a sheltered port from the maelstrom of social forces that rip through our lives. Within the family, we like to think, everyone starts out on equal footing. And yet we see around us evidence that siblings all too often diverge widely in social status, wealth, and education. We think these are aberrant cases—the president and the drug addict, the professor and the convict. Surely in most families, in our families, all children will succeed equally, and when they don't, we turn to one-dimensional answers to explain the discrepancy—birth order, for instance, or gender.

In this groundbreaking book, Dalton Conley shows us that inequality in families is not the exception but the norm. More than half of all income inequality in this country occurs not between families but within families. Children who grow up in the same house can—and frequently do—wind up on opposite sides of the class divide. In fact, the family itself is where much inequality is fostered and developed. In each family, there exists a pecking order among siblings, a status hierarchy. This pecking order is not necessarily determined by the natural abilities of each individual, and not even by the intentions or will of the parents. It is determined by the larger social forces that envelop the family: gender expectations, the economic cost of education, divorce, early loss of a parent, geographic mobility, religious and sexual orientation, trauma, and even arbitrary factors such as luck and accidents. Conley explores each of these topics, giving us a richly nuanced understanding that transforms the way we should look at the family as an institution of care, support, and comfort.

Drawing from the U.S. Census, from the General Social Survey conducted by the University of Chicago over the last thirty years, and from a landmark study that was launched in 1968 by the University of Michigan and that has been following five thousand families, Conley has irrefutable empirical evidence backing up his assertions. Enriched by countless anecdotes and stories garnered through years of interviews, this is a book that will forever alter our idea of family.



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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In recent years, people have begun to examine family dynamics for clues to individual success. Birth order, in particular, has been a favored explanation for the differences between siblings in everything from leadership skills to romantic conquests. Now Dalton Conley, a sociology professor at NYU, reveals that indeed our siblings may affect how our lives turn out, but not in the ways we might think. Conley made an effort not to simplify the very complex familial data collected by both the United States Census, a long-term study conducted by the University of Michigan, and the University of Chicago's General Social Survey. What he found was that the differences between siblings outweigh almost every other kind of difference between any two individuals in the United States. Every family has a pecking order independent of birth order, and the differences between siblings are magnified by poverty and disenfranchisement. In these situations, families invest in the sibling most likely to succeed, leading to stark divides, even class differences between family members. Oddly, the choice of successful sibling is made independent of birth order, parental attention, or innate talents, and becomes a tacit agreement among family members. Conley uses a plethora of examples, including Bill and Roger Clinton, to illustrate his findings, and readers will nod knowingly at many of the ubiquitous family behaviors that set siblings up for differing life paths. Ultimately, what *The Pecking Order* reveals is that there is no single factor that can predict one's success or failure in life, but that complex, multilayered familial dynamics play the biggest part in determining our fate. --*Therese Littleton*

From Publishers Weekly

The surprising fact that sibling differences account for three-quarters of all differences between individuals in explaining American economic inequality acts as a challenge for NYU sociology professor Conley. Drawing on economic studies conducted by the U.S. Census, University of Michigan and University of Chicago, and interviewing hundreds of subjects, Conley illuminates provocative findings. Counter to the belief that birth order predicts a child's success and role within a family, he argues that what really matters is family size, parental time and attention, and how much of the family's financial resources are available for the child. Conley concludes from his findings that parents can more easily affect their children's development by their choices of family size and spacing of births than by attempts to move up the economic ladder. He is candid about the limitations of current surveys and discusses the complexities of studying an institution whose modern workings are contingent on slippery factors (e.g., gender, race, class). Despite all he's learned, the staggering number of factors affecting the workings of a family frustrates Conley's desire to come up with hard and fast rules. Yet from what he has found thus far, he can proclaim, "the family is not a haven in a harsh world. It is part and parcel of that world, rat race and all. Inequality, after all, starts at home." Although Conley's academic prose may challenge general readers, graduate students looking for thesis topics will be well served: he has tons of ideas where research could go to get more answers.

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From [Booklist](#)

Conley challenges conventional wisdom and preconceived explanations about individual success by examining divergent success rates within nuclear families, specifically between siblings. Rather than comparing two successful but nonrelated people, he concentrates on comparisons between brothers and sisters who have experienced vastly different rates of achievement. Arguing convincingly that "inequality starts at home" among siblings who share the same parents, the same socioeconomic status, and the same environment, he analyzes the different ways in which social mores and societal pressures affect various

members of the same family, predetermining who will have the greater chance for personal and professional fulfillment. All but abandoning the birth-order theories that have dominated sibling studies and the personality-based explanations for success and failure, he offers a revolutionary new theory--grounded in facts and statistics--detailing the complexities of both the familial and the societal sorting processes.

Margaret Flanagan

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Users Review

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