Journal Of the Iraqia University (77-1) 30 September (2026)

ISSN(Print): 1813-4521 OnLine ISSN:2663-7502
Journal Of the Iraqia University
available online at
https://iasj.rdd.edu.iq/journals/journal/view/247

Exploring Social Interest in The Middle Born Child: An Adlerian Reading of The Middle Moffat

Researcher: Israa Abdulelah Salman
Supervised by Asst. Prof. Dr. Zainab Abdullah Hussain
College of Education for Women –Tikrit University, Tikrit- Iraq
israa.salman762@st.tu.edu.iq

استكشاف الاهتمام الاجتماعي لدى الطفل الأوسط: قراءة أدلرية لرواية موفات الوسطى

اسراء عبدالاله سلمان
المشرف : أ. م. د. زينب عبدالله حسين
كلية التربية للبنات جامعة تكريت، تكريت العراق

Abstract
The middle child who is positioned between the oldest and youngest plays an invisible role in the family hierarchy. However, this relative invisibility may serve as a motivating factor that pushes the middle children to develop wider social connections. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the ways in which the middle child can secure his/her personality by cooperation and empathy. The study analyzes Eleanor Estes' The Middle Moffat (1942), focusing on Jane Moffat, examining how her birth order position favorably affects her identity formation. With a focus on the concept of social interest, the study employs a qualitative literary analysis through the lens of Alfred Adler's theory of individual psychology. The study seeks to answer the following questions: How does Jane as a middle born child construct her identity positively? How she exhibits the growth of social interest through her behaviors; and in what ways does maternal support influence Jane's sense of belonging?
Keywords: Middle child, Social interest, The Middle Moffat, Alfred Adler, Individual psychology.

المستخلص
يؤدي الطفل الأوسط، الذي يقع بين الطفل الأكبر والأصغر، دورًا غير مرئي داخل التسلسل الهرمي للأسرة. ومع ذلك، قد يشكل هذا التهميش النسبي عاملًا محفزًا يدفع الطفل الأوسط إلى بناء علاقات اجتماعية أوسع. لذلك، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف الكيفية التي يمكن من خلالها للطفل الأوسط أن يعزز شخصيته من خلال التعاون والتعاطف. تحلل الدراسة رواية موفات الوسطى للكاتبة إليانور إستس، مع التركيز على شخصية جين موفات، وبيان كيف يؤثر موقعها في ترتيب الولادة بصورة إيجابية في تشكيل هويتها. وبالتركيز على مفهوم الاهتمام الاجتماعي، تعتمد الدراسة تحليلًا أدبيًا نوعيًا من خلال منظور نظرية علم النفس الفردي لألفرد أدلر. وتسعى الدراسة للإجابة عن الأسئلة الآتية: كيف تبني جين، بوصفها طفلة وسطى، هويتها بصورة إيجابية؟ وكيف تُظهر نمو الاهتمام الاجتماعي من خلال سلوكياتها؟ وبأي طرائق يؤثر الدعم الأمومي في شعورها بالانتماء؟ **الكلمات المفتاحية: الطفل الأوسط، الاهتمام الاجتماعي، موفات الوسطى، ألفريد أدلر، علم النفس الفردي**

1.Introduction

"People first and foremost need to belong.
(to relationships and groups) in order to survive."
(Fiske, 2018, p. xvi).Everyone looks for social connections. Feeling a sense of belonging is an important aspect of human well-being. From an early age, individuals instinctively seek acceptance, recognition, and significant relationships that contribute to their emotional and psychological development. A sense of connection with others offers emotional stability and contributes to the development of confidence and self-esteem. When individuals feel included and supported, they are more likely to have better mental health and develop stronger coping abilities in difficult situations. On the other hand, loneliness or social rejection can negatively affect emotional well-being and create feelings of isolation. Because of this, forming close and supportive

relationships becomes an important part of living a healthy and balanced life. As Baumeister & Leary (1995) state, "The belongingness hypothesis is that human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (p. 497).

2.Theoretical Framework

Individual Psychology is one of the psychological approaches that focuses on understanding human beings as unified social individuals who continuously strives for superiority and self-improvement. Unlike some psychological theories that emphasize unconscious drives or biological determinism, this approach posits that human personality is shaped through the interaction of psychological and social factors. From this perspective, Individual Psychology is considered as a holistic approach. It was established by the Viennese psychologist Alfred Adler in (1911). This theory provides useful framework for examining the development of individual personality, it focuses on early childhood experiences within the family environment. It also emphasizes the influence of birth order and sibling relationships on behavior and identity formation. Therefore, this chapter draws on the concept of social interest, which is a fundamental Adlerian principle in theory of individual psychology. He defines it as "our innate potential to cooperate with other people to achieve personal and societal goals." (Schultz & Schultz, 2017, p. 116). According to Hoffman (1994), Adler was a sociable and friendly young boy from a very young age. He was surrounded by family, friends, and acquaintances. He had six brothers and sisters as well as a number of friends. Adler always considers social networks and connections to be important and essential (As cited in Feist et al., 2021). Adlerian psychology in general is fundamentally based on the social aspect of human nature. Adler's experiences in World War I led him to emphasize the significance of social context in his theory. He believes that human survival relies on various humanistic reforms, with individual psychology being the most crucial among them (Farsi, 2022). According to Adler (1956), feeling at home is a primary stage of social interest. A person who possesses social interest moves through life with a sense of belonging rather than alienation. For him, life's difficulties are not experienced as personal injustice but are understood as natural challenges that can be faced and overcome. This attitude forms the basis of inner strength and resilience. He emphasizes that all life problems carry social meaning and require solutions that are constructive and socially responsible. To achieve this, an individual must develop a sufficient level of social interest (As cited Schultz & Schultz, 2017).Adler emphasized the significance of the mother as the first individual a child interacts with. The mother's actions toward the child can either encourage social interest or limit its growth. He states that mothers should guide their children in learning cooperation, companionship, and courage. A mother's primary role is to help her child experience trust in another person. As the child grows, she should gradually extend this sense of trust so that it includes the wider world around the child. If she fails at this initial stage, if she cannot gain the child's affection, interest, and willingness to cooperate, the child will get a lack of social interest and a sense of companionship with others. Although every person has the potential to care about and connect with others, this potential must be nurtured through practice and guidance; otherwise, its growth will be hindered (Adler, 1958).The father, on the other hand, plays a crucial role in the child's social environment and is considered a significant figure in the development of social interest. He is expected to model a caring and respectful attitude toward his wife and toward others in general. Adler states that the ideal father works together with the mother on equal conditions in raising their child and recognizes the child as a complete individual. Adler points out to 2 significant mistakes made by fathers that hinder the growth of social interest: emotional distance and a strict, controlling approach. While these attitudes are conceptually different, they often occur together and have similarly harmful impacts on the child's psychological development.. Paternal emotional detachment may lead the child to experience feelings of neglect, develop a distorted form of social interest, or form an excessive attachment to the mother. Consequently, the child may adopt a life goal centered on personal superiority rather than social cooperation. Likewise, paternal authoritarianism can foster an unhealthy lifestyle by encouraging the child to strive for power and dominance, thereby undermining the growth of genuine social interest. Thus, Adlerians highlight the importance of family relationships as the first and potentially most significant social system, and they believe that many human issues are rooted in social interaction (Corey, 2011). A person's distinctive characteristics, including their perspectives and interactions with the world, begin to become more apparent during adolescence. When individuals face new experiences, it highlights their character traits and shows their unique personalities and behaviors in social settings. Their social behavior contributes to their individuality, and this uniqueness is influenced by their birth order. It reflects the initial social interactions individuals experience as they look for acceptance and approval from others. (Largado et al., 2024) Firstborn children frequently assume leadership positions in their families, which influences how

they communicate. Firstborn children often tend to be responsible and focused on achieving their goals. They show confidence and assertiveness in their communication, frequently leading group discussions and decision-making activities. According to Adler, the second child possesses a high potential for social interest; however, this interest may develop in either a positive or a negative direction depending on the individual's style of life and family dynamics. Supportive family encouragement fosters cooperation and a sense of belonging, whereas discouragement and rivalry may cause a lack of social interest, even though it exists as an underlying potential (Adler, 1958).Younger children, on the other hand, are "being the highest in sociability and lowest in quarrelsomeness" (Salmon, 2003, p. 140). One might say a lot about the youngest member of the family. In comparison to the other members, he also finds himself in a position that is fundamentally different. Since the oldest is the only child for a while, the youngest is never the only one. Unlike all the other kids, he has no one following him. Additionally, unlike the second, he frequently had multiple predecessors. Most of the time, his parents spoil him, and he is embarrassingly viewed as the weakest and smallest person. Generally speaking, he is not taken seriously, so his social interest is frequently shaped by a struggle for recognition (Adler, 1964). Finally, only children often display a level of maturity similar to adults because they have no siblings and limited social interactions outside of their adult parents or guardians. (Largado et al., 2024). So, Adler always emphasizes the impact of the person's lifestyle in accordance with his birth order position on social interest. He states that children who are abused and mistreated often show limited social interest and tend to adopt a neglected way of living. They have limited self-confidence and often exaggerate the challenges associated with significant life issues. They lack trust in others and struggle to work together for the benefit of everyone. They view society as an opposing force, feel disconnected from others, and have a strong feeling of jealousy regarding the achievements of other people. Children who are neglected often share some traits with those who are overly indulged, but they tend to be more suspicious and can pose a greater risk to others (As cited in Feist, et al., 2021).

3.Discussion

The middle Moffat is a novel written in 1942 by the American novelist Eleanor Estes. She portrays the middle child Jane Moffat, in a positive manner. Much of the narrative centers on asserting Jane's individuality beyond the family context. From the very beginning of the novel, Jane asks her mother to introduce her to customers as The Middle Moffat as if she embraces and celebrates her birth order position and seeks to assert her individuality like her siblings. "Mama, when you say, 'This is Jane,' don't end there; 'This is Jane The middle Moffat" (Estes, 1942, p. 13). The mother actually did. When the customers visited their house and asked about Jane,' Mrs. Moffat put her arm around Jane's shoulders and said, "This is Jane, The Middle Moffat" (Estes, 1942, p. 14). This moment highly represents the maternal significance in developing the child's social interest, as Adler pointed out, "She is his first bridge to social life" (Adler, 1958, p. 76). This also exemplifies how family life in the early twentieth century is marked by warmth, love, and support within a society that is based on coherence and unity. To everyone in the town, not just her family, Jane makes the middle child look essential. Jane's celebration of her middle position is not confined to a psychological level; rather, it is also reinforced through the physical aspect of the narrative. Throughout the novel, Jane is repeatedly placed in "in-between" positions in various scenes, which visually reflect her identity as a middle child. This is particularly evident in the final scene, when, after the celebration of Mr. Buckle's birthday, he and the Moffat family ride home together, and Jane sits in the middle between Mr. Buckle and his daughter. It was lucky this automobile had extra seats. The driver just pulled them out of the floor in front of the backseat. Mama and Sylvie sat on these two seats. Rufus and Joey climbed into the front seat beside the driver, and the driver let Rufus blow the automobile horn at the corners. Jane sat in the middle, between Mr. Buckle and his daughter. She smiled at the oldest inhabitant. He didn't look any different than yesterday, when he was only ninety-nine. Jane felt happy. What a nice way for the big celebration to end, everybody riding in an automobile!(Estes, 1942. P. 234)This position serves as a planned narrative approach in which Eleanor Estes uses a repeated motif to highlight Jane's positive view of her identity. It changes Jane's role from just a specific place in the family structure to a meaningful position linked to observation, mediation, and self-identity. By presenting both perspectives, the novel transforms the middle position from a possibly insignificant role into an important and empowering identity.Throughout the narrative, Jane follows a cooperative attitude. She is very sociable; she absolutely has a social interest as one of the most important concepts that is highlighted by Adler, and this is mainly attributed to the support that she receives from her mother at home as a first stage of social life. In other words, Jane rises up in a healthy environment and develops a healthy lifestyle based on supporting sibling cooperation; that is why she goes through life with

a sense of belonging rather than alienation. She always tries to help the oldest inhabitant in the town, Mr. Buckle, a very kind and most honored citizen who is ninety-nine years old; she did her best to help him to live to be one hundred. “She sometimes followed him from a distance, to see that he crossed the street safely and that no dogs jumped out at him unexpectedly and made him lose his balance” (Estes, 1942, p. 67). She always tries to protect him secretly, following him from a distance carrying an umbrella in order to protect him if it might rain, also she was clean the road, remove the fallen branches, a broken bottles so the way would be clean when the old man return back to home. All these behaviors shows Jane as a kind, friendly, helpful, empathetic, she always ready to help others. This also reflects her deep need to participate in a shared sense of belonging and mutual care. “She would keep herself free in order to be of any possible service to the oldest inhabitant. He had reached the age of one hundred. True! Even so, she was going to be on the alert and help him if necessary...” (Estes, 1942, p.222)This quotation highlights Jane’s unconditional readiness to help the old man as a cooperative and socially attentive attitude, which enhances the Adlerian conception of social interest as the innate potential to cooperate with others for personal and social goals. Although she may want to get recognition, she focuses more on the others’ needs; she always gives the priority to the people around her instead of getting personal benefits. Another example is the basketball team; when she did her best to help them to achieve a collective success for the team, she may have wanted to be appreciated and praised by others in doing so, but more important was to support the team.Everybody was chanting it. It was a challenge. Jane threw the ball. Up! Up! Ah, up! Right through the basket. The cheering was tremendous. But Jane did not heed the cheers. Instead, she ran under the basket, caught the ball as it fell through, backed out onto the floor, and threw again! And it fell through again! Well! When the ball soared through the basket this second time, such a roar swelled through the gymnasium that several conductors and motormen rushed out of the carbarn with lunch cases in hand, and stuck their elbows into the windows and looked through the side door and cheered, too(Estes, 1942, pp. 192-194)This quote effectively highlights Jane Moffat as a character who is strongly connected to her community and motivated by a sense of cooperation. While the focus of the scene is on her successful basketball shots, the story also underscores Jane's role within her team and the larger community. She does not pay attention to the support and compliments from the audience. The clapping was very loud. However, Jane did not pay attention to the cheers. This line reflects Jane, as she never seeks to be dominant or self-centered, and this idea supports Sollway’s perspective that middle children are not in a strong position to assert dominance, her reaction toward praise transforms her success into a shared experience rather than for personal goal. In addition, the rapid sequence of action verbs “ran,” “caught,” “backed,” and “threw”; these movements reflect Jane’s focus and discipline as well as her commitment to the team’s ongoing effort. The setting that is employed by the writer highly supports Jane’s representation as a sociable middle child; the writers often choose a specific historical period and a certain social environment to influence how readers perceive a character. In this sense, setting becomes a fundamental technique that frames Jane’s personality. Estes has a notable skill in establishing a strong sense of setting by skillfully combining colors, sounds, shapes, and smells, focusing on the most prominent characteristics. New Dollar Street had a curved shape resembling a bow. It was not a straight street created by using a measuring tool. It had a smooth curve resembling the first half of a parenthesis. In the middle of New Dollar Street stood the yellow house belonging to the Moffats (Russell, 1989). Estes explicitly explains the time and place in The Middle Moffat to show how actively they shape the character development, values, and opportunities. She sets the novel in early twentieth century, before and during the First World War in American small town that is called cranbury, connecticut. A historical town in New Jersey, it represents the essence of a well-preserved nineteenth-century village, marked by its intact and cohesive domestic and commercial architecture. This status was acknowledged when it was included in the State and National Registers of Historic Places. This social context allows Jane to successfully begin her journey toward self-realization, seeking recognition and forming her own identity. Thus, Estes portrays Jane as a socially oriented child whose own identity is deeply connected to a sense of belonging and cooperation. It is worth mentioning that Jane demonstrates a strong desire to form and maintain meaningful peer relationships. By structuring two chapters under the title Best Friends and Best Friends again, Estes tries to show Jane’s interest in friendship and how she cares deeply about having friends. Her relationship with their neighbor Nancy Skotes who lived in the big house behind the Moffats house, is based on mutual love and loyalty, and it is not a superficial relationship; rather, it functions as a crucial aspect in the formation of Jane’s identity and self-worth. They shared most of the activities together, such as playing, going to school, doing their homework. Even the temporary conflict that accrued between them because of the game of “cops and Robbers” reflects the natural dynamics of close relationships,

where disagreement does not necessarily signal separation, but, instead, it tests the depth of loyalty and mutual respect. What is particularly significant in this scene is Jane's reaction to the quarrel. When Nancy repeatedly says, "Jane is a pain," Jane does not respond with anger or aggression. She does not seek revenge, nor does she break up the relationship out of pride. Instead, she internalizes her hurt and experiences sadness quietly. "Jane frowned back her tears." "Jane blinked back the tears." This calm and non-aggressive response reveals emotional maturity and dignity that fits with her broader social behavior, and this is a strong positive point in Jane's character. In addition, Jane appears many times as she anxious upon social rejection or criticism. She does her best to get social acceptance by conforming to social norms and to present a favorable impression of herself and her family and this also attributed to her mother as she always teach them manners to be as respectful as possible :Mama had taught all the Moffats a lot about manners. For instance, always Let the older people speak first. Jane did that. Also, if you were having dinner in a house where there was a maid, and there were lamb chops for dinner, you should not accept a second lamb chop if it were the last one left on the platter after everybody had had one. Because that chop was for the maid, and if you took it and ate it, the maid would have none. (Estes, 1942. p.54)This quote enhances the significance of mother's role for her children and how their well-developed social interest is profoundly shaped by maternal influence. Mrs. Moffat does not merely teach manners as rigid social rules; rather, she instills values of empathy, respect, and consideration for others. Jane's willingness to sacrifice personal desire, such as refusing the last lamb chop for the sake of the maid, reflects an early awareness of others' needs and feelings. From an Adlerian perspective, this behavior illustrates the development of social interest, as Jane learns to prioritize cooperation and mutual respect over self-centered satisfaction. Furthermore, the emphasis on proper manners reinforces Jane's desire for social acceptance and belonging, qualities often associated with middle children who seek meaningful connections beyond the immediate family. Through maternal influence, Jane develops a socially responsible attitude that encourages harmonious interaction with others and strengthens her sense of community.

4.Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the middle child position which often perceived as marginal within the family structure, can function as a productive space for the development of social interest rather than a source of psychological deficiency. Through the analysis of Jane's character in *The Middle Moffat*, it becomes evident that her in-between position does not lead to withdrawal or inferiority; instead, it motivates her to seek connection, cooperation, and meaningful participation within her social environment. Her behaviors consistently reflect empathy, responsibility, and a genuine concern for others,, which is align with the core principles of Alfred Adler's concept of social interest.Moreover, the study highlights the crucial role of family dynamics particularly maternal encouragement in shaping a healthy lifestyle that supports the growth of social interest. Jane's development illustrates how a supportive and cooperative home environment can transform the challenges associated with birth order into opportunities for psychological resilience and social integration. Her relationships with peers, neighbors, and community members further reinforce her identity as a socially oriented individual who values belonging over personal dominance.Ultimately, this research emphasizes that the middle child experience should not be reduced to narratives of neglect or invisibility. Instead, it can be understood as a dynamic and meaningful position that fosters adaptability, emotional maturity, and social awareness. By situating Jane's character within this framework, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of birth order and its potential to cultivate individuals who are deeply connected to their communities and capable of constructive social engagement.

References

Adler, A. (1956). The individual psychology of Alfred Adler: A systematic presentation in selections from his writings (1st ed.). Basic Books.

Adler, A. (1958). What life should mean to you (A. Porter, Ed.). Capricorn Books.

Adler, A. (1964). Social interest: A challenge to mankind (J. Linton & R. Vaughn, Trans.). Capricorn Books.

Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. Psychological Bulletin, 117(3), 497–529. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497

Corey, G. (2011). Theory and practice of counseling and psychotherapy (8th ed.). Brooks/Cole.

Estes, E. (1942). The middle Moffat. Harcourt, Brace and Company.

Farsi, I. (2022). The basic principles of Alfred Adler's individual psychology. The Review of Contemporary Scientific and Academic Studies, 2(7). https://doi.org/10.35454/rcsas.2.7.2022.004

Feist, J., Feist, G. J., & Roberts, T. A. (2021). Theories of personality. McGraw-Hill.
Fiske, S. T. (2018). Social beings: Core motives in social psychology (4th ed.). Wiley.
Largado, A. M. S., Gonzales, P. X., Bautista, G. J. Y., & Gabriel, B. D. C. (2024). Implications of birth order on personality and social behavior. Cognizance Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies, 4(3), 127–143.
Russell, D. L. (1989). Stability and change in the family saga: Eleanor Estes's Moffat series. Children's Literature Association Quarterly, 14(4), 171–174.
Schultz, D. P., & Schultz, S. E. (2017). Theories of personality (11th ed.). Cengage Learning.
Salmon, C. A. (2003). Birth order and relationships: Family, friends, and sexual partners. Human Nature, 14(1), 73–88.