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‘Just the One?’ Parents’ experiences of having only one child

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These are the findings of a study I conducted over the last five years of British parents who have no more than one child. I would also like to comment briefly on the reasons why it is considered problematic to have or indeed to be an only child. I have often been challenged about why it was even worth conducting this study, whether it really warrants sociological investigation. But what I want to demonstrate is that this is very interesting example of the way in which a certain group of parents are treated with suspicion, their motives and their competence questioned. It provides a clear example the way in which experts, in particular psychologists, have constructed the perception of a problem and have influenced our collective common sense.

I will start by commenting on the public image of the single child family, referring to some very common assumptions expressed by leading commentators. Here are some examples of what influential social commentators have had to say:

‘The most obvious consequence of the declining birth rate is the increase in single-child families. To this unnatural and, dare I say, unhealthy situation, add divorce, consumerism and peer-group pressure and the result is an awful lot of spoilt brat.’

Sue Arnold, The Independent¹

‘Careers, urban living and, perhaps, countless surveys which say that children wreck sex lives as well as bank balances are bringing about voluntarily the one-per-child-family ideal that the Chinese government could only effect by brutal enforcement.’

Cassandra Jardine²

‘Since only children are statistically more likely to have parents in full time work, they are also more likely to be in full-time child-care in infancy.’

Jay Belsky³

There are many such examples. The dominant assumptions that emerged from a review of such press references over the last decade or suggest first that, we are seeing a significant increase in single child families, as a direct consequence of declining birth rates. Those responsible for this phenomenon are professional women who want

¹ The Independent 15th March 2003

² The Daily Telegraph 19th April 2001

³ The Daily Telegraph 19th April 2001

to 'have it all'. This is a new and alarming trend with implications not only for birth rates but also for the children that result from this seemingly questionable reproductive choice. That is to say, the children that result will inevitably be spoilt, whatever we mean by that. And as we can see from these quotations, this assumed problem is then linked to other perceived social problems such as divorce. It certainly provided Jay Belsky with a good excuse to draw attention to his favourite problem of child-care.

This idea that professional women will opt for one child has been accepted for some time as sociological common sense. For example, in 1985 Kathleen Gerson⁴ described those 'reluctant mothers' for whom just the one child would pose no threat at all to a career. It is an assumption that has been taken at face value by Matthew and Laurie Taylor in their 2003 publication '*what are children for*'⁵ when they state:

'Having one child is a comfortable option for those women who want to avoid the stigma of childlessness without jeopardising their careers.'

Often these press articles refer to statistics attributed to the London School of Economics indicating that 3 times as many professional women will opt for one child than less educated women. But I have never been able to find these statistics. When I began my research on single child families I was looking forward to meeting these reluctant mothers, curious to know how they had defied a culture described by Douglas and Michaels⁶ as one characterised by 'the new momism' or by Sharon Hays⁷ as 'intensive motherhood'.

But before I began interviewing parents with just the one child I took a close look at British statistics on completed family size and they gave rise to a suspicion that things may not be entirely as they seem. It came as a surprise to discover that it was far more common for a woman born in the early decades of the twentieth century to have no more than one child than those born in the late fifties for whom we have statistics on completed family size. For example, 21% for those born in 1920 had just the one but for those born in 1959 it was 13%⁸. Clearly, we are not witnessing a new phenomenon. But what I found more fascinating still was an authoritative analysis from the National Statistics Office⁹ which shows that British women who leave school at the age of sixteen are far more likely to have just the one child than those who are highly educated. In fact, these researchers found that 'for any given age at first becoming a mother, having a higher qualification was associated with the faster and more likely arrival of a second child'. Our statistics also show that those women who do become mothers bear on average 2.4 children and it is of course the considerable increase in childlessness that accounts for a temporary decline in birth rates¹⁰.

⁴ Gerson, K (1985) *Hard Choices: How Women Decide About Work, Career and Motherhood* University of California Press

⁵ Taylor, L & Taylor, M (2003) *What are children for?* London: Short Books

⁶ Douglas, S & Michaels, M (2004) *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women* New York: Free Press

⁷ Hays, S (1996) *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* New Haven: Yale University Press

⁸ Chamberlain, J & Baljit, G (2005) in *Focus on People and Migration, Fertility and Mortality*

⁹ Rendall, M & Smallwood, S (2003) *Population Studies* Spring 2003 111

¹⁰ Smallwood, S & Jeffries, J *Family Building Intentions in England and Wales: trends, outcomes and interpretations* *Population Trends* Summer 2003 112

What about this assumption that an only child will be spoiled? This idea has been around for a long time. At the turn of the twentieth century the pioneer G Stanley Hall medicalised the problem by claiming that ‘to be an only child is a disease in itself’¹¹. In 1911 the British pioneer C W Cunnington claimed that the only child, deprived of the company of other children ‘easily becomes spoiled’ going on to say that he will be ‘plagued by a frail physique, an ill-balanced intellect, a weak morality and loneliness’¹². This was at a time of great concern about declining birth rates amongst the elite. In 1957 Donald Winnicott¹³ echoed this view. He suggested that an only child will be spoiled for adult life, unable to form normal social relationships and unable to handle aggression, having been cloistered in the family home with a stay at home mother. Of course, this is exactly the opposite scenario to the one Jay Belsky defines of over-exposure to other children in child-care. Nonetheless it reinforces the expert view that being an only child has causes irrevocable damage. But, as I discovered, there are many inconsistencies and contradictions between claims made by different experts.

This notion of ‘emotional determinism’, the idea that adult behaviour is determined by the circumstances of childhood, is the assumption that makes only childhood so problematic. The concept of emotional determinism is clearly challenged by Frank Furedi in his book *Paranoid Parenting*¹⁴. And it was not until I read Frank’s book in 2001 that it occurred to me that the cultural stereotype of the spoiled, lonely and maladjusted only child may be a socially constructed one. Perhaps we should not always believe what experts claim to be the truth about children. *Paranoid Parenting* also highlighted a contradiction in the logic that makes only childhood problematic. As Frank points out, parents today are held by experts to be uniquely responsible for the way their child turns out. But according to this logic, if only children are expected to share common behaviour and characteristics, then surely their parents would be expected to behave similarly. And in fact this is exactly what experts have claimed. In the 1960s Albert Adler suggested that parents of an only child have no choice but to ‘spoil’ their son or daughter.

But what I found intriguing about these assumptions is that they are not based upon empirical evidence. And in many ways my study was prompted by the realisation that no one had ever gone out and asked parents themselves about their experiences and their beliefs and the choices they had made – not in this country anyway. So given this expert discourse, I was very curious to talk to parents of only children who had found reason to defy what is clearly a strong reproductive norm to have at least two children. But I was curious also about the impact of this norm on those who haven’t had the prerogative of reproductive choice, who wanted a larger family but were unable to have a second child. My study included 46 households. The parents who took part assumed, for whatever reason, that they would have no more than one child. In all cases I interviewed mothers and in about a third of households fathers took part. What I would like to do now is to review some of the findings from my study to demonstrate what emerged as a clear discrepancy between the public assumptions

¹¹ G Stanley Hall in ‘Study of Peculiar and Exceptional Children at John Hopkins University

¹² Cunnington, C W (1913) *Nursery Notes for Mothers* Bailliere Tindall & Cox

¹³ Winnicott, D (1957) *The Child in the Family* London: Tavistock Publications

¹⁴ Furedi, F (2001) *Paranoid Parenting: Abandon your anxieties and be a good parent* London: Allen Lane

about single child families that we see in the media and in academic literature and the private lived realities.

I will start with this assumption that only children are statistically more likely to be in child-care and to have professional working mothers. In fact a striking number of the women I interviewed had not worked at all, or had not worked during the day until their child was at least school age. Many of the non-workers had left school at the age of 16. They placed great significance on staying at home, in some cases expressing strong disapproval of childcare. Joyce said 'I don't believe in child-minders. If you have a child, you bring them up'. What she explained, as did a number of other mothers, is that it is OK to have only one child as long as you invest time and effort in their upbringing. You take them to all the playgroups and activities now available to pre-school age children. However, it would not be OK for a woman in full time employment to have just the one. In their view, it was not about doing less parenting but about one interpretation of how to do a very good job of being a parent.

Deborah explained 'she's not spoilt because I stayed at home' going on to say 'certainly that first five years at home, that certainly, we spent an awful lot of time together'. Deborah like many of these women was highly indignant that anyone should consider her selfish for not providing a sibling. Janet argued that she had been able to afford to stay at home and to live on her husband's income because there was no second child. She went on to explain that she was 'besotted by her son' and feared that she really couldn't love another child in the same way. She also said 'I can't improve on this one'. The meaning of this is very interesting because of course the notion of monogamous love for a child and the importance of staying at home for the first five years are central to Penelope Leach's¹⁵ model for motherhood. In fact in her book *Baby and Child* she likened bringing home a second baby to bringing home a second husband. Moreover, she asserts that you simply cannot spoil a child with too much love and attention, but only through neglect. This is the very reversal of what Winnicott had to say 20 years earlier when he argued that a child's social and emotional development would be spoiled by being at home with only the mother for company.

But of course this is a study about differences as well as similarities in what people had to say. And what I found very interesting is the way parents used competing logics to reinforce the same point that their child is not spoilt and to present themselves as good parents. Women who had worked during the pre-school years extolled the virtues of child-care, particularly family based childminders, as an ideal means of socialisation. Jenny, who had been an only child herself, pointed out that her daughter had never been spoilt because she had spent her pre-school years at a childminders. She said 'I have been driven to make sure that she is exposed to situations, experiences, people so that she is not hampered by being the spoilt only child'. And she compared her daughter's rich social experience, mixing with children of other ages, with her own isolated early childhood at home in the 60s alone with her mother. For working women, there was also a strong suggestion that it would have been selfish to have a second child. One woman argued that she could not afford two places at child-care and it would have been unfair to take her daughter away from a place where she was so happy. Another suggested that it was right not to have a

¹⁵ Leach, P (1977) *Baby and Child: From Birth to Age Five* London Michael Joseph Limited

second child because she needed to devote all available time to her son when she wasn't working. She said 'it is about giving back the love and care and attention to one child'.

In her fascinating book *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* Sharon Hays demonstrates the way in which there are conflicts of interest between women over the question of paid work and the way in which they adapt and reshape the ideology of intensive motherhood for their own purposes. Clearly the opposing arguments about work and staying at home and the way mothers seek to demonstrate that their child has not been spoilt are very good examples of this.

But I found other examples of conflicts of interest and opposing logics within my study group, all of course reinforcing the point that parents who have just the one child cannot be generalised or reduced to a common denominator. I would like to look now at the question of reproductive choice. While some parents presented having just the one child as a clear choice, symbolic of their commitment to being a good parent, the more dominant assumption is of course that a child should have siblings. As we know from statistics, the vast majority have at least two children. Those parents who planned and wanted but were unable to have a second child had found themselves in a very ambiguous position and many expressed strong feelings of guilt and concern that they would not be perceived as competent parents. This is in dramatic contrast to the ones who had had a choice in the matter. Jane said that a colleague had once told her that you are only a proper parent when you have your second child and she interpreted from this that she must be perceived, in her words as 'forever the incompetent parent'.

Some talked of real grief and despair. Barbara who had had four miscarriages said of her daughter 'she was bereaved before she even started and we felt that we would be condemning her to an awful life'. She also said 'I feel that I can never be good enough for her. She needs to be bolstered by siblings'. This is a very different story to claims about monogamous love or statements like 'I can't improve on this one'. Yet both positions are based upon a model of intensive motherhood in which these people seem acutely conscious of the way their performance is monitored and appraised.

It is perhaps symptomatic of this sense of scrutiny, of their performance being monitored, that parents who could not have another child found questions from other parents extremely difficult. They found they were often asked at the school gate 'when are you going to have another one? Or 'doesn't he have a brother or sister? They faced the dilemma of whether they should divulge their infertility, often to a relative stranger, or have the assumption that they had made the choice not to have a second child with the implications of selfishness. Jennie, who had herself grown up as an only child, made the interesting observation that the pressure to divulge personal information would not have been there for her own parents. She also felt that the publicity around IVF has created an illusion of reproductive control. She said 'These days because everyone knows about IVF you think there is more to be done whereas my parents generation you just accepted it'. Very often these parents found themselves using arguments about how they did not want their child to grow up as an only child to justify their deservedness for medical treatment. In this country, parents find themselves being monitored and scrutinised when seeking medical assistance. But of course, if and when IVF fails, these arguments create all the more difficulty in reconciling themselves to having an only child.

But a very important finding of this study I believe is that those parents who were so anxious in the early years about their child's lack of siblings did not find that they were 'forever the incompetent parent' as Vicky had feared. What is interesting here is that the discourse that charges parents with responsibility for the way their child turns out can begin to work in their favour by the time their child reaches adolescence. In a culture in which parents feel monitored and believe that their child's behaviour relates to the quality of the relationship with him or her, many came round to the view that they were at some advantage by having just the one. So for example, Derek, a head teacher, who had experienced huge anxieties about his daughter when she was young said 'the intensity of the relationship can be a big plus'. He went on to say that it is the 'quality of the relationships and not the numbers that count'. Mandy pointed out that she would have told a very different story if I had interviewed her tens years ago, suggesting that 'only child syndrome is something that's very much put into people's minds'. In other words, it is a social construction.

There are many other aspects of this study that I would like to talk about but now it is time to draw some conclusions. As we have seen, the old psychological argument that an only child will be spoilt by the exclusivity and intensity of the relationship with the mother has effectively been rendered meaningless by the attachment parenting imperative. In most cases, my interviewees interpreted spoiling in a purely material sense, in which case it came down to a question of relative expenditure. Their child may be spoilt to some extent, perhaps more spoilt than his cousin but less spoilt than his next door neighbour, for example.

There is clearly enormous variation between the different parents who took part in this study. And it seems most ironic that the very logic used by some parents to defend what remains an unorthodox reproductive choice – arguments about exclusivity, fidelity to the one child – is precisely the logic that gives other parents so much anxiety. And yet contradictory statements such as 'I can't improve on this one' and 'I felt I could never be good enough for her' are based upon the same underlying beliefs, up the ideology of intensive motherhood.

It would seem from this study that the meaning of having only one child is much less about career and ambition and much more about wanting to be seen to be doing a good job of parenting. Parents seem acutely conscious of the way in which their performance is monitored. And one unfortunate consequence of this monitoring culture is that those who haven't had a choice, who wanted a second child, can be made to feel paranoid and to experience a strong sense of inadequacy and failure.

I should emphasise at this point that this study has not been motivated to persuade people that it is right to have only one child. That is surely a private matter. But I do want to show that there is a large discrepancy between public assumptions and private lived realities. And one final point is that it is not only experts, with their highly contradictory advice, who play a monitoring role. Parents themselves monitor each other, often finding it necessary to defend their own position by attacking the alternative in a culture, described by Douglas and Michaels as one of 'frenzied hypernatality'.