

THE WELL-BEING OF ONLY CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Being an only child is generally considered to be a disadvantage. Absence of siblings is thought to involve the deprivation of critical learning experiences, while the exclusive attention of parents is said to result in overindulgence and overprotection. According to such beliefs, only children develop into selfish, maladjusted and unhappy adults. Various empirical studies have contradicted these beliefs, at least where American adults are concerned. The present study considers adolescent singletons in the Netherlands. It examines the related claims that only children have a less happy youth because they are pressed into adult thinking and behavior too early and that they stand out as "little eggheads"; good at school, but not very sportsmanlike, and unpopular among their peers. Data were gathered by means of questionnaires administered to 2,511 secondary schoolchildren. The only children in this sample neither appeared to be less happy nor was their global self-esteem any lower. The "little egghead" hypothesis was only partly confirmed. Only children feel themselves to be less proficient in sports. However, they do not consider themselves better in school or less popular among peers.

1 INTRODUCTION

Few people consider a one-child family ideal. A world survey found only 3% in favor of this option in developing countries and about 5% in the developed Western nations ("Le Monde Entier," 1977). Nevertheless, many children grow up without siblings: in the developing countries about 7%, and in the developed, more than 15%. The rate of only children is particularly high in the communist countries; e.g., in China, 21% (Chen, 1986), and in Hungary, 27% (Poston & Mei-Yu-Yu, 1985). The numbers are growing rapidly. In the United States the proportion of wives expecting to have just one child rose from 7% in 1960 to 11% in 1970 (Moore & O'Connell, 1978). This situation raises two questions: Why do so few people want only one child, and why do so many have just one?

One of the main reasons so few people opt for having only one child is that it is widely believed that children do not flourish without siblings. It is thought to render them lonely and to deprive them of opportunities for developing social skills, with the exclusive attention of their parents giving rise to overindulgence and overprotection. Not only is it thought that this results in an unhappy childhood, but in maladjustment--that only children develop into selfish, isolated, and discontented adults. These beliefs are firmly rooted in public opinion, even in countries where the prevalence of only children is high. Two out of every three Americans consider being an only child a disadvantage, and this percentage has changed little in the last few decades (76% in

1956, 67% in 1977). When asked what disadvantage they have in mind, most Americans mention character: only children are depicted as self-centered, domineering, anxious, and quarrelsome (Blake, 1981). Most Chinese expect personality disadvantages as well (Chen, 1986).

There are several reasons why the occurrence of one-child families is nevertheless great and growing. In the first place, having only one child allows the mother more opportunity to work outside the home. Second, many parents fail to have the desired number of two or three children because of premature marital breakup, in particular because of divorce. One in three only children in the United States lives in a broken home, as compared to the one in five average (Blake, 1981). Third, infertility sometimes precludes the birth of additional children. The rate of secondary infertility has risen somewhat during the last few decades; e.g., as a result of earlier sexual activity and a delay of the first birth. China represents a special case, where restriction to one child is more or less mandated by the government in order to limit the population.

The wide prevalence of such limitation in spite of wide rejection is not unproblematic. It may have several harmful effects. First, it means that one in every twelve children born today is regarded with some pity and distrust. Second, the negative attitude toward singletons will probably hurt the millions of parents who--more or less consciously--settled for having only one child. It can leave them with a sense of guilt, which may complicate the relationship with their child. Third, the negative view about only children might induce some parents to have more children than they in fact want. The desire to avoid having only one child is actually a major reason American parents mention for having a second child (Solomon, Clare, & Westoff, 1956). This is likely to involve large-scale negative consequences for the well-being of both parents¹ and children² and to contribute to overpopulation.

In this light it is worth knowing whether only children are really at a disadvantage.

1.1 Earlier studies

Though few investigations have focused exclusively on the characteristics of only children, the matter has figured in approximately 200 studies on family size and birth order. Several reviews of these findings have appeared (Thompson, 1974; Falbo, 1977; Falbo & Polit, 1986; Polit, Nuttal, & Nuttal, 1980). The reviewers unanimously reject the claim that only children are at a disadvantage. On the contrary, they find evidence of small advantages in achievement and satisfaction.

1.1.1 Studies among adults

Most studies concern adults and compare the majority who grew up with siblings with the minority who grew up without. Most of them draw on specific populations and lack sufficient control for spurious distortion. Yet recently, three well-controlled analyses have been made of representative United States data sets (Claudy, Farrel, & Dayton, 1979; Blake, 1981; Glenn & Hoppe, 1984). Adult singletons do not appear to be at any disadvantage. In fact, the few differences that were found indicate the contrary. Adult only children appear slightly more successful socially, having more prestigious jobs and marrying better educated partners. They also appear to find somewhat more pleasure in life. These differences remain when the positive effect of their higher class of origin is controlled. Contrary to the predicted lack of social skills, adult only children appear neither more prone to divorce, nor to hold more guarded attitudes toward other people. The most that can be said is that adult singletons spend somewhat less time with friends and prefer smaller families.

Of course, these results cannot be considered to settle the matter. First, it is not certain that similar results would be found outside the United States. The slight advantage of being an only child may, for example, be restricted to cultures that value individualism. Unfortunately, sufficiently sophisticated studies from other cultures are not yet available. Second, the studies

among adults do not imply that being an only child cannot be a disadvantage in youth. Folk wisdom may be right in that children flourish more with siblings than without, though such short-term handicaps for the only child may involve developmental advantages in the long run³.

1.1.2 *Studies among youths*

Studies of youths are not very abundant either, and also are largely American. The focus has been on social and cognitive functioning. The results are in line with the above-mentioned studies among adults. Only children appear consistently brighter; they score slightly higher on intelligence tests and do better in school (e.g., Zajonc & Marcus, 1975; Claudy, Farrel, & Dayton, 1979). The latter study also found only children to be more mature, more sensitive socially, more fastidious and more cultured. Participating more in the life of adults, they are more like little adults. On the other hand singletons appear somewhat less sociable, at least according to self-reports. They did not differ from children with siblings in calmness, impulsiveness, self-consciousness, drive, vigor or leadership.

Still, these results do not rule out the possibility that growing up as an only child is a significant disadvantage. Only children may be bright, cultured, and mature, but still feel unhappy and insecure. Being pressed albeit successfully into adult thinking and behavior, they could miss out on some of the rewarding experiences of childhood. Living up to their elders' expectations could set too high demands and estrange them from their peers. Low mood and self-doubt are likely to result, as indicated in two studies. One of these investigated children in the first two years of life, comparing firstborns who later acquired siblings with firstborns who remained alone. At three months of age "only children to be" cried more and smiled less. However, at 12 and 24 months no such differences remained (Feiring & Lewis, 1982). The other study concerned retrospective appraisals of their childhood by homosexuals. Gay only children looked back on less happy childhoods than did gays raised with siblings (Hogan, Kirchner, Hogan, & Fox, 1980). These results suggest that the cognitive lead of only children is indeed bought at the expense of a lower sense of well-being. Yet this cannot be proved since the studies involved draw on populations that are too specific, lack a reliable indicator of well-being, and fail to check for spurious distortions.

Another question is whether only children tend to be "one-sided"--their better intellectual performance being counterbalanced by poorer development of other capabilities.

1.2 **Research questions**

The questions about enduring character disadvantages of only children are thus largely settled. Only-child adults do not appear at a disadvantage, at least not in the United States. However, several questions about possible short-term disadvantages are still open. Our knowledge about the only child's youth is limited, particularly regarding the following two questions.

1.2.1 *Less happy youth?*

Is better school performance and greater adult success of only children bought at the cost of a less happy youth? If only children tend to be forced into adult thinking and behavior too early, i.e., they conform to a pattern, which does not really fit their development, they are likely to feel less cheerful and to be less satisfied. The present study sought to determine if this is the case. If constantly pressed to perform above their level of development, singletons should also reveal lower self-esteem. Even though they may be brighter, more fastidious and more cultured than other children, they obviously do not meet the adult standards for which they strive. At the same time, they do not fully meet the demands of their peers either.

1.2.2 Little eggheads?

If not altogether unfavorable, the development of only children could be at least one-sided. They could become little eggheads who do well in school and receive praise from parents and teachers, but do less well in sports and are not very popular with their peers. The present study examines this hypothesis by comparing selfconcepts of only children with others. If only children tend to develop into little eggheads, their self-appraisals (real self) should be relatively positive with regard to intellectual qualities, and relatively unfavorable in the realm of physical and social performance. They are likely to expect to be viewed in this way by others as well (social self), in particular by peers. It is not unlikely that they would adjust their standards accordingly, rating intellectual qualities higher and performance in sports and with peers lower (ideal self).

2 METHOD

2.1 Subjects

Data were gathered among pupils of 40 secondary schools in the Netherlands. All types of secondary schools in the Netherlands were represented proportionally. Schools were selected in all regions of the country. Classes within the schools were chosen at random, from which 2,511 students completed a questionnaire. Their ages were between 13 and 17 years; 54% were boys and 46% girls. The number of only children in the sample was 280 (11%). Sex and age distribution among the singletons did not differ from the sample as a whole.

2.2 Indicators

Two dimensions of happiness were assessed: satisfaction with life-as-a-whole and current mood. The former was measured by means of Cantril's (1965) self-anchoring ten-step rating scale, the top of which marks the best possible life one can imagine and the lowest step the worst. Respondents indicate on which step their own life is now. This indicator is widely used in cross-cultural research, and is well suited for children and adolescents because it does not involve difficult words such as "happiness" or "satisfaction." Yet a limitation could be that it measures a more or less cognitive appraisal which might not show emotional suffering to its full extent, the evaluation being modified by values and comparisons. One also could doubt whether adolescents are capable of evaluating life sufficiently. Therefore the more raw mood was assessed as well. For this purpose the Affect-Balance &ale (Bradburn, 1969) was used, which involved 10 yes-no questions on the occurrence of specific positive and negative feelings in the last few weeks. Responses on this latter scale were reasonably homogeneous: Cronbach's alpha was .71. Global self-esteem was measured by means of Rosenbergs (1965) Self-Esteem &ale, which involves 10 questions, each scored on a 5-step scale (originally 4 steps; a neutral category was added). Cronbach's alpha was .69. Specific self-appraisals were assessed by questions on the following four themes: looks, performance in sports, performance in school, and popularity with peers. Each theme was scored on three dimensions: how important excellence in each area is considered (ideal self), how the subject thinks others perceive his/her performance (social self), and how the subject judges him/herself (real self).

3 RESULTS

3.1 Not less happy

ANOVA with Only Child x Social Milieu x Sex did not show a significant main effect for the first factor (**Scheme 1**). Only-child adolescents appear to be no worse off than their contemporaries with siblings. In fact, they showed slightly more life satisfaction, but reported somewhat less pleasant affect. Neither of these differences is statistically significant, however.

Contrary to the results of earlier studies in the United States, being an only child does not appear to be more advantageous for boys than for girls. ANOVA showed no two-way interaction effects between only child and sex.

3.1.1 *Advantage in social milieu does not veil a negative effect*

As noted earlier, parents of only children tend to be better educated and enjoy higher than average incomes. This advantage for singletons could compensate for the presumed disadvantage of growing up without siblings. The observed absence of a difference in average well-being thus could be misleading.

Yet the present study found that the fathers' occupational status was no higher among singletons. So the absence of a difference in wellbeing cannot be attributed to a difference in social milieu. In any case, parental status had little influence on perceived well-being; correlations with life satisfaction and hedonic level were both .02. This holds both for only children and for those with siblings. In present-day Dutch society, social class is not related to happiness of adults either (Veenhoven, 1984).

3.1.2 *Broken home background does not suppress a positive effect*

Earlier investigations involved controls for family completeness in order to check whether possible lower well-being of only children could be the spurious result of a greater incidence of familial disruption in this category. In the case at hand, no lower well-being appeared. Hence the question is not whether the first order averages inappropriately suggest a disadvantage of growing up alone, but whether they fail to show its advantage to the full extent.

Broken homes indeed occur more frequently among the singletons under review here (27% as compared to 15%). There are, however, no significant two-way interaction effects between only child and broken homes (life satisfaction, $F = 0.72$, $p > .10$; hedonic affect, $F = 0.79$, $p > .10$). Three-way interaction, with sex as a third factor, also shows no effects. This means that there is no difference in this regard between boys and girls.

3.1.3 *A working mother does not veil an advantage*

Parents of only children are more likely to be involved in work outside the home. This applies to mothers in particular, their wish to continue working being an important reason for having only one child. As a result, singletons are more likely to be latchkey children and therefore could feel more lonely and unhappy. With a lack of siblings, this condition could hurt even more. Such an effect could then distort the view on the consequences of being an only child as such; it could again hide an advantage of single-child status.

In fact, working mothers appeared no more frequently among the only children in this sample, nor are working mothers associated with the lower well-being of the children. Indeed, the children of working mothers report somewhat higher life satisfaction and hedonic level--both singletons and nonsingletons, and female only children in particular.

Employment of the father is also associated with greater well-being of only children again, mostly among girls. Female only children whose fathers are unemployed report lower life satisfaction and feel more depressed. On the other hand, the unemployment of the father bears almost no relation to the happiness of children with siblings.

3.2 **No lower self-esteem**

Only children do not differ from nonsingletons in the global appreciation of themselves (Scheme 1). In fact, they show somewhat more self-esteem. As in the case of happiness, the lack of difference remains after controlling for the occupational status of parents and a broken home background. Specification by employment status of parents showed significantly higher global self-esteem of female only children with a working mother (three-way interaction effects among

only child, sex, and working mother: $F = 4.1, p < .05$). Female only children with an unemployed father, on the other hand, distinguish themselves from children with siblings by lower global self-esteem (three-way interaction effect among only child, sex, and working father: $F = 3.9, p < .05$). This latter pattern reflects the case of happiness.

3.3 Mixed difference in self-appraisal

No differences in ideal self conceptions appear, but there is a slight difference in the appraisal of social self and a noticeable difference in real self appraisal (Scheme 2).

Ideal self

Contrary to the little egghead hypothesis, only children do not assign higher value to good grades, popularity, and looks. Yet they do stand out in their lower evaluation of sports.

Social self

Only children also are less apt to think others rate them as good in sports. Not only do they estimate their reputation with peers as lower, but they also are more likely to think that their parents feel they are not great at sports. Yet they do not perceive themselves as having a better reputation in school (with peers, parents, and teachers).

Real self

Opinions of the respondents themselves about the four qualities differ in two cases. Only children are less satisfied with their looks than are nonsingletons and feel less able in sports. There is no difference with regard to school performance and popularity.

4 DISCUSSION

This study rejects the hypothesis that the slightly better cognitive development of only children is bought at the expense of their emotional well-being. Only children do not differ from nonsingletons in respect to life satisfaction and hedonic level. Their global self-esteem also is not lower, even though they rate their looks and sports abilities less high. This result is in line with earlier studies among American adults which also failed to find evidence of lower well-being.

Even so, being an only child can be disadvantageous under certain conditions. The data suggest that the unemployment of parents is one such condition. Female only children, at least, report less life satisfaction and lower hedonic level and self-esteem when their fathers do not work, while male only children and children with siblings show very little such difference. This could be interpreted as partial support for the view that only children tend to be overprotected. Continuous surveillance, combined with less freedom for girls, could result in a smothering family climate. The effect of unemployment of father is greater than nonemployment of mother, possibly because unemployment among males tends to be more closely linked with psychological problems. If true, this still implies that only children are more vulnerable to parental pathology than are children with siblings.

Several of the previously mentioned studies of American adults found male only children to be more successful and happy as compared to children with siblings than were female only children. Hence Blake concluded that males have a greater advantage in being only children. The present study showed no such difference among Dutch adolescents. However, the above analysis of the relation between an only child's well-being and parental employment does indeed suggest that girls may be more vulnerable to the disadvantages of being an only child.

The data provide partial support for the notion that only children's development nevertheless involves some one-sidedness. The little egghead hypothesis is confirmed in that only children are less involved in sports and feel less competent at it, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of

others. Yet the hypothesis is not confirmed where school performance and popularity are concerned. Only children do not think they do better in school, do not place less value on popularity, or perceive their actual popularity as being lower. What is puzzling is that only children rate their looks as lower. This finding would make sense if they also felt less popular, which might have made them more anxious about their looks. Moreover, this explanation would presume that appearance stands higher in the self-ideals of only children, which is not the case either.

5 CONCLUSION

Among Dutch adolescents, being an only child does not involve greater risk of having an unhappy youth. On average, the singletons in this study appeared to be no less happy or self-accepting. Still, it is possible that only children are at a disadvantage under specific conditions. The results indicate that unemployment of parents is one such condition for girls, and there is only partial support for the claim that only children tend to become little eggheads.

Scheme 1**Well-being among only children and children with siblings**

	Average scores		F	P
	only children	children with siblings		
	N=280	N=2231		
life satisfaciton	7.5	7.3	2.96	>.05
mood level	1.6	1.7	0.80	>.10
global self-esteem	3.8	3.7	0.27	>.10

Scheme 2**Specific self-appraisals of only children and children with siblings**

	Average scores		F	P
	only children	children with siblings		
	N=280	N=2231		
Ideal self				
Looks	3.8	3.7	.48	>.10
Sport	3.1	3.4	2.52	<.01
Popularity	3.7	3.6	1.10	>.10
School	4.3	4.3	.53	>.10
Real self				
Looks	5.0	5.8	2.64	<.01
Sport	3.2	3.5	2.80	<.01
Popularity	.04	.01	.24	>.10
School	-.09	-.01	.77	>.10
Social self				
Sport mother	1.9	2.1	2.53	<.01
sport father	1.9	2.1	2.45	<.02
sport friends	1.8	1.9	2.01	<.05
sport classmates	1.6	1.8	2.43	<.02
School self				
School mother	1.8	1.8	.81	>.10
school father	1.8	1.8	.25	>.10
school friends	1.8	1.8	.83	>.10
school classmates	1.7	1.8	1.11	>.10
school teacher	1.6	1.6	.36	>.10

NOTES

- ¹ Raising children is a demanding job, taking its toll on the parents' health and happiness (Veenhoven.1984).
- ² Half-wanted children are more likely to meet with half-hearted acceptance by their parents, and are therefore at greater risk of abuse and pathological development. This is shown in the ample literature on the consequences of deprivation of parental affection (e.g., Dytrich, Matejcek, Schuller, David & Friedman. 1975: Rohner 1980).
- ³ As long as no unmanageable hardships are involved, discomforts in one's childhood may even foster development and thus result in later advantages. In this respect the situation of only children may be analogous to that of children after divorce. There is no doubt that the latter are hurt by it, follow-up studies have shown an increase in learning problems and psychosomatic complaints (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Yet in adulthood, children of divorcees do not appear to be less happy or more maladjusted than the average. Apparently the distress is, in the long run, more or less compensated for by the positive effects of coping with such a challenge.

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