Not Special but **Different** –
The Only Child experience

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As part of a doctorate in psychotherapy, I have been researching the experiences of adult only children. As an only child I was curious to know if other adult only children had comparable experiences to myself and if these were in any way peculiar to only children. During my research, experiences emerged that were common to only children though not exclusive to them. By using in-depth interviews as well as message boards and chat rooms on the internet, I began to notice that these experiences were important to both men and women and appeared true of adult onlies in the UK, the US, Canada and Australia. I also interviewed therapists who worked specifically with this group, to see if their clinical experiences reflected similar themes. Finally, I co-facilitated workshops, with an only child male therapist, on issues such as surviving the stigma engendered by the cultural stereotype of the only child. The following article gives a flavour of my findings so far and their significance for therapeutic practice.

In a predominantly sibling society being a child/adult without siblings is seen as both a lack and unfair advantage. As with any minority group, prejudices and stereotypes abound, many of which are negative and in my experience remain unchallenged by clients, counsellors or supervisors. This article is an attempt to inform and encourage therapists to move beyond the stereotypes by offering a deeper understanding of the experience of being an only child, not just in childhood, but also as someone living life from a minority perspective throughout their lifespan. During the last twenty years, in my therapeutic work with young people, I have noticed the stigma of the only child is still powerful and reflects my own experience as an only child. *That Question: Are you an only child?- Haven't you got any brothers or sisters? My heart sinks, my stomach turns. I fear the next remarks –'I expect your mum and dad spoil you -don't they? 'I smile wanly, what can I say? If I say yes, heads nod knowingly.*

If I say no, eyebrows raise ever so slightly in disbelief. I can't win, I say nothing, look down, shuffle my shoes and feel ashamed. (Research Journal 2003)

Numbers of only children have increased, and yet the idea that only children are spoilt continues to be a theme with my work with adult onlies. In the US it is estimated 20% of children under 18 are onlies, and having one child is now seen as a positive choice. In the UK 17% of couples have only one child. The percentage is much higher in other parts of Europe: the Portuguese and Italians having 49%, Austrians 43%, Dutch 33% and Irish 30%. In China the proportion is greater still. Yet research on media coverage on only children in the UK, showed it was largely negative. This does not appear to be the case in the rest of Europe. Perhaps the prevalence of the extended family in Europe means only children have more access to younger family members, this may have reduced the stigma and led to greater numbers.

My research review of the literature and media coverage, suggests that the old stereotype of the selfish, spoilt, socially maladjusted only child has not disappeared. In the past, Alfred Adler and psychologists such as A.A. Brill have been negative about children without siblings with comments such as: 'It would be best for the individual and the race that there were no only children', and G. Stanley Hall claiming that: 'Being an only child is a disease in itself'.

Quantative research studies tend to conclude that there is little difference between onlies and non-onlies. Most only-child psychological research has been conducted in the US and of particular note is the work of Toni Falbo (1984) summarising research from the 1920's up to the 1980's from the US and China. She concludes there is little evidence of difference in psychological development, in studies on school age children and college students. Her research is central to many of the parenting books on onlies.

In the UK there is a growing debate between those claiming there is no real difference being an only child, from one who has siblings, and those who claim there is. Only child adults, I interviewed, said they did feel different, but had never connected it to being an only one, they were more likely to attribute feeling different to their perceived difficulties in communication and personal relationships. *I have always been extremely lonely and felt different from my few friends, on occasions very jealous of their extended families. I have never been able to voice my feelings of complete isolation, until now. (email response –www. onlychild.org.uk)*

Both Juliet Mitchell (2003) and Prophecy Coles (2003) have challenged the primacy of parental influence on psychic development, considering it only half the story:- the effect of sibling interaction being equally important. Coles states siblings 'play a significant part in our emotional and sexual development' (2003:3). They help in the process of distancing from parents, and sibling love is important as a way of learning to relate to others in adult life. Sibling relationships can be much richer and have a profound affect on both emotional and social development.

If siblings are an important factor in personality development, a lack of siblings must affect that development. For example, it is apparent from my research that separation from parents has been a difficult task for both my co-researchers and me. This is just one area where a lack of siblings has had an unacknowledged effect on identity and later relationships. Responses on the only child website- www.onlychild.org.uk set up to

disseminate my research findings and encourage feedback, bear this out. Similarly, Ann Richardson, an adult only-child psychotherapist, recently started an only child chat room and message board (www.beinganonly.com) and immediately issues pertaining to only children, such as responsibility to parents, feeling a loner, difficulties in sharing, being in groups, were being exchanged worldwide.

My research points to a difference in the experience of only children to that of people with siblings. Findings also borne out by Pitkeathley and Emerson(1994) in an excellent piece of research describing the subjective experience of only children, and their partners. After extensive interviewing of sixty plus only child adults, they concluded there are gaps between the social maturity only children demonstrate in public, and the emotional immaturity they manifest in personal relationships. The gap created because opportunities to learn tolerance, boundaries, and realistic expectations with siblings are missing. Although children do eventually learn from interactions with peers, this is not in the safe environment of home and mediating parents, but more often on the school playground and other less emotionally secure places. This causes the only child to hold back their emotions and become secretive, thus inhibiting emotional maturity and intimate relationships.

So what is different about the only child experience?

I will offer some stanzas from my interviews, to illustrate a sense of the only child experience. Stanzas give a rich flavour and help re-create the intention embodied by the speaker, and phenomenologically reveal both the power and the passion of the original exchange.

As children, my co-researchers spoke of very vivid imaginary worlds, and periods of time involved in creative activities, a result of being alone. This ability to have both a rich imaginary world and be alone, is seen by them as very positive and something useful in later life. On the negative side, it gives the impression of independence, and not needing others, which makes relationships difficult, and led some co-researchers to live alone, thus avoiding the problem. The following illustrates this tension. *When I was little: I always use to have incredible daydreams about being rather grand, in the centre of things. I know it sounds really arrogant, but it was kind of the natural place I should be. Not having to fight to get attention. I had grand ideas of being the queen. I mean a lot of other girls dream about being a princess - but I wanted to be a queen, which does sound very arrogant! The way I played tended to be very much in the imagination. I was very, very happy with that but when it comes to the real world - it's all very nice to be happy in your imagination - but from a practical point of view it's not necessarily the best, if you're happier in your imagination than in the real world. (Georgina)*

All my co-researchers spoke of the times spent alone as a child, often feeling lonely, and having positive fantasies of how it would be to have a sibling. Pets were particularly important, along with toys and imaginary friends, to dispel the isolation.

My house always seemed terribly quiet. My dad played music but there wasn't life, there wasn't people, there wasn't lots going on… it was those sorts of experiences, when I was younger, that highlighted the fact it felt very lonely. (Lyn)

Attending school could be traumatic because it was often the first opportunity they had to be with groups of children. They described their sense of being different, feeling separate, isolated, and some experienced bullying. For others it was a great opportunity to make friends, and a way to escape intrusive parents. Whilst some felt privileged and special at home, others felt claustrophobic from too much focus and attention. Some felt unseen and unheard, and very much on the periphery of their parents' relationship. They all had high expectations of themselves, though not necessarily a strong sense of who they were, tending to be defined by parental hopes and ambitions. Often they saw themselves as overly sensitive and emotional, despite appearing outwardly confident.

All mentioned difficulties experienced in relationships. As children, they were often enmeshed with one parent, who used them as a confidant, giving inappropriate levels of personal information, and leaving them caught in the middle of the family triangle. Knowing one is the repository of all the hopes, ambitions and fears of the parent gave a sense of huge responsibility and appeared to be a reason for the difficulties in separation all co-researchers experienced. Few went through a teenage rebellion, rather waiting till later in life to really separate, often after the parents' death! *About mother: I had to separate myself from her. I think in many ways she was too much she was too close… it felt like she wanted to run my life for me, the fact we were so close and I didn't have siblings, she projected a lot of her own child on me and tried to give me everything she didn't have She also competed with me. There was this dynamic in the family, a competition - who was the top woman in the family. (Anna)*

I think it is quite difficult to be too separate from your parents. You are their only focus. It feels somehow I should be keeping in touch with them all the time, so that feels quite difficult, but equally you can feel quite special…(Lyn)

Siblings provide opportunities to learn social skills such as sharing, negotiating conflict, arguing your point of view, and generally mixing with others. These were all areas my co-researchers found specific difficulty when navigating relationships. Most felt their over-sensitivity to others was unhelpful and tended to blame themselves when relationships were difficult. Missing learning opportunities afforded by the rough and tumble of sibling relationships led them to avoid conflict, anger or assertiveness, fearing the relationship would not survive if these feelings were expressed. *There is a lot of anger inside. When I feel really secure in a relationship I can be angry, that's really freeing. There are few relationships, very few, I can be really angry, can really say I'm angry and I know it will be ok and the relationship will survive. (Carol)*

Pleasing and placating in relationships, being overly responsible for the feelings of others, and problems in keeping firm boundaries were further characteristics. Naivety, gullibility, and taking things too literally, were cited as a result of not having enough interaction with children rather than adults. High expectations of others particularly associated with needing intensity in relationships and space, both physical and emotional, led to disappointment and a sense of not being good enough. For many asking for help was particularly difficult. Parental neglect and intrusion led to levels of independence that was perceived as self-defeating. *I found I liked being superwoman, juggling all these balls. I don't need you. I don't need anyone. I can do this alone. I don't*

need anybody - that's the paradox of being alone. There's part of me that wants to be alone, thinks I am quite independent, but the other side of that is, I am desperately lonely and I want to have an intimate relationship. (Carol)

Co-researchers were aware how they appeared confident and outgoing in the public sphere, although inside the opposite was true. A recent workshop for adult onlies, 'Surviving the Stigma' explored this. The first thing mentioned, was the gap between what people *assume* only children are like and how they experienced themselves in reality. The stereotypical assumptions that participants had experienced were the common ones of spoilt, selfish, self-centred, lonely, unable to share, bossy, arrogant, independent, privileged and lucky. As the day progressed, the 'reality' emerged based on the experience of growing up and being grown up in a sibling society. Words and phrases used were shy, a swot, observant, quiet, polite, responsible, high expectations of self and others, jealous, possessive, moody, introverted, naïve, defended, sensitive, emotional, and reticent about saying they are an only. Bullying appeared to be an issue for many only children, and is a repeated concern on message boards.

The power of the only child stereotype was also evident in some interviews in the past and in the present: *The stereotypes that I used to get, when I was younger, from friends who had siblings - was the spoilt aspect - of course you're spoilt! (Georgina)*

At school: I was the only one who was an only child. I actually felt awkwardness and embarrassment, I actually felt ashamed. I felt like I was different, not as good, there must be something wrong with me, my family, I actually felt ashamed (Carol)

If only children show few differences, compared to children with siblings as the quantative research suggests, why do so many experience bullying, which is about seeming different and not fitting in? Most of the popular books on parenting only children concentrate on issues such as forging a healthy threesome, avoiding the super-child syndrome, ensuring your child has friends, and avoiding turning 'myths' of the stereotype into self-fulfilling prophecies. This to me indicates only children have interrelational difficulties that children with siblings are more able to negotiate.

An American organisation (onlychild.com), supporting parents of only children, produces a monthly magazine extolling the advantages of only children as high achievers, confident, autonomous outward going individuals which, from the 'public' perspective, is often true. But it also reports that the fear, anxiety, and even shame some parents feel about having an only child, have diminished only slightly over the years. If this is true, (and parent message boards suggests it is), it will surely have an important impact on the internal psychic development of the only child? Parents who are afraid of producing a child who might fit the negative only child stereotype will pass these feeling on unconsciously if not consciously. *My mother: used to say 'You're an only child, everybody's going to say you're spoilt! Well you're not going to be spoilt -just because you're an only child -don't think you're going to get anything more!' And it almost felt as if – because I was an only child - I was going to be deprived, I wasn't going to get anything. I didn't get anything. It*

was like there was an over compensation there was that assumption - you'd be spoilt. (Kate)

As a therapist I have noticed that onlies bring a fear of standing out or being seen. In a culture that is not overtly child-centred there is likely to be a conflict between the parents' natural pride of their child and the social expectations regarding acceptable behaviour. Parents who are particularly susceptible to social mores may well be overly fearful of having their one child be anything but a little adult, well behaved and quiet: *As the only one: you're the focus, everything is noticed, politeness, saying thank you, behaving properly – and in my case my mother was concerned I didn't become spoilt so I needed to be grateful! (Lyn)*

It is also important not to ignore the positive side of the only child experience. Lack of siblings often leads to an appreciation of others, and onlies can become loyal and thoughtful friends, even though they may be more self-orientated. They are likely to have a developed imaginative world and the ability to be alone. However, the high proportion of onlies in therapy may point to relationship difficulties, low self-image and a sense of alienation. As an only, there is no one to compare oneself to, or talk about one's parental experience. Opportunities to meet other onlies at adult-only-child workshops have been welcomed as they offer a chance to see that, although their experience is different, it is not unique, as one workshop participant wrote on speaking to people with siblings:

I am very different from you. I can't experience what you have, there is a whole topic of conversation, I can never be involved in. (Martha)

Hence, the importance for therapists to understand the difference in growing up without siblings, and the stigma that it engenders, thus facilitating a safe environment where these issues can be explored.

Further reading:

Coles P, The Importance of Sibling Relationships in Psychoanalysis: Karnac. 2003 London:

Falbo T, The Single Child Family: Guilford 1984 York

Mitchell J, Siblings: Polity Press 2003 Cambridge

Pitkeathley J, Emerson D, Only Child.: Souvenir Press 1994 London

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