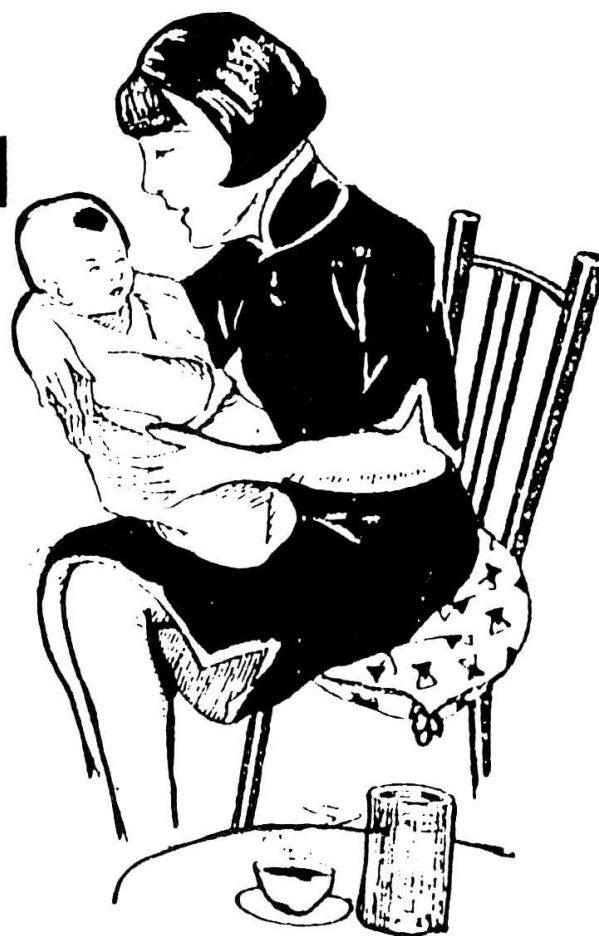


The One-Child Family



By Louis Gendron

The majority of people whether they live in a Chinese or Western society tend to evaluate the only child or the one-child family in rather negative terms. Being an only child is sometimes looked upon as akin to having a disease: only children are thought to be lonely, to have interpersonal problems, to be overly dependent, self-centered, and spoiled. In the developed countries, most couples these days according to a 1978 report by Hawke and Knox, plan on having two children, with only about 10% opting in favour of having only one child. A one-child family is rarely viewed as the ideal. In surveys conducted in the United States from 1936 to 1972, only 1% to 2% of all adults polled indicated their belief that a one-child family was ideal (Polit, Nuttall and Nuttall, 1980). In some cases, childlessness is preferred to having a single child. In Hong Kong and Taiwan, until very recently, a family consisting of two boys and two girls was considered to

be the ideal (Huang, 1982). Of course, traditional Chinese views are completely opposed to the one-child family, and such expressions as "the more sons one has the better off one is," "a son is better than a daughter," and "raise sons to provide for one's old age" were the common coin of traditional Chinese societies.

Many psychologists themselves used to share these negative views, and a common background of the so-called "narcissistic personality disorder" is believed to be the one-child family. Theodore Millon noted how a high frequency of those family conditions believed to be the cause of narcissistic personalities - parental overvaluation, parental overindulgence, lack of parental control - occur among only children:

Such youngsters often are cherished by their parents as possessions of extraordinary value. Not only are these children fawned over, but they frequently experience few of the restrictions and learn few of the responsibilities of sharing acquired by youngsters with siblings. (Millon, 1981, p. 177)

In China, too, there are some teachers and psychologists who are worried about parental overindulgence of their only child.

An article in Wen Hui Bao endorsed the new restriction of family size but warned that kindergarten teachers already are complaining that many only children are so pampered by parents and grandparents that they do not fit into China's collective society. A six-month survey by Shanghai kindergarten teachers and psychologists concluded that, without strict rules and proper moral education at home, an only child was more likely than a child from a large family to have behavioural problems at school. The study further reported that an only child is more likely to be fussy about what he eats and wears, careless with his property, be bad-tempered and selfish. At the other extreme, an only child tends to be more timid than average and, because he is indulged at home, less able to take care of himself. (Huang, 1982, p. 780)

Psychological Aspects

In recent years, however, some researchers have subjected the only child stereotypes to empirical testing and their findings have failed to demonstrate that the only child is at a serious psychological or emotional disadvantage when compared with individuals who have siblings. Polit, Nuttall, and Nuttall in their 1980 study of 132 adults from one-child families who were polled within a group of 537 married couples, reported that the former were found to have higher educational levels and higher occupational status. Females were more likely to have planned their own families before marriage and were more autonomous in their decision to work outside the home. The survey indicated that both men and women of one-child families were as happy and satisfied with their lives as those who had siblings. There was no empirical evidence to show that the only child was any less well-adjusted as an adult than other people.



A most interesting study was conducted by S. Hawke and D. Knox in 1978 with parents and children of approximately 100 one-child families. Their views of themselves and of their families contrasted sharply with commonly held beliefs about only children and their parents. These findings indicated that the children enjoyed certain benefits: they were free from sibling rivalry, had more privacy and affluence, generally had higher I.Q.s than other children, and tended to be more self-confident and resourceful.

One researcher even found them to be the most popular at school. It may be, however, that these positive qualities are partly due to the fact that a disproportionate

number of these only-children came from middle and upper-class families. The parents of these children saw the benefits of having more time to devote to their own marital relationship, mothers found it easier to keep a job, and fathers felt that the financial pressure on them was not so great. As for the families as a unit, it was found that family members had closer ties among themselves, and decision making was more democratic.

Surveys also indicate certain disadvantages in one-child families. An only child feels he or she misses the positive experience of having a brother or sister (they do not seem to consider the fact that the relationship could also be of a competitive or even an hostile nature). An only child also feels the extra pressure to succeed, being the object of too much attention from parents, and also feels that he or she will have to bear the burden of caring for aging parents alone. For parents, their greatest concern and fear is that their only child might die prematurely. Also, they have only this one chance to make good as parents. A major problem for them is how to give necessary attention to the child without being overindulgent. At times they also feel that others consider them to be selfish for having only the one child. For the family itself, there is a constant danger that the three-person group will result in a two-against-one situation. Also, individual family members may feel unfulfilled in the one-child family system, such as a father of a son who would also like to have a daughter, or a mother who seeks fulfillment in mothering more than one child, or a child who is too shy to make friends outside the family circle.

In the promotion of one-child families, it is clear that solutions can be found to the above-mentioned disadvantages. Parents can develop other personal interests apart from their only child in order to alleviate some of the pressure on him or her. They also have to encourage their child to make friends outside the family. They have to remember, too, that the death of a child is a tragedy in any family and that having another child can never make up for the loss of a child who has died. Parents must

also make early and realistic provision for their advancing years. And, they have to be constantly aware of and guard against the danger of the two-against-one syndrome developing in their family.

Parents have also to consider seriously their own motivation for having a second child. There are many wrong reasons for having more than one, e.g. if a second child is born merely for insurance against the first one dying, or only to satisfy the wishes of grand-parents, or just to conform to a socially popular family-size model, or out of sexual bias. These are hardly good reasons for having more children. Every child should be wanted and welcomed for himself or herself alone, and for no other reason.

In one-child families (and other small families), because parents either have planned it that way or are unable to have more children, the probability of finding unwanted children is low. In large families, the probability of finding unwanted and unloved children is much greater (Eshleman, 1981). Moreover, "large families heighten the complexity of intragroup relations, pose additional problems in the fulfillment of family needs, and are likely to influence the amount of parental comfort or praise available per child" (Eshleman, 1981, p. 458). In China, if the additional child is a daughter when a son was hoped for, she runs the risk of becoming an unwanted, and therefore, a neglected child.

For a treatment of the differences between one child and two children we turn to a study of 144 American mothers of two-child families done by Knox and Wilson in 1978. In each case the second child was under five years old. The survey showed that none of these women desired to return to the time when they had only one child. Almost half of the mothers had decided to have two children before they had the first one, thus reflecting a cultural bias in favor of the two-child family and against the one-child family. Many of the mothers wanted a companion for the first child, some wanted a child of the other sex, and most were quite accepting of the fact that they had less

time for themselves after the birth of the second child and they felt that the additional work was not too burdensome. The mothers of this sample were all highly educated, held part-time jobs, and assumed about 70% or more of the child-care responsibilities.



From the result of recent empirical studies, then, we can conclude that there are no compelling psychological reasons for viewing negatively children of one-child families. Further, given today's society and its life-styles, one-child families have some distinct advantages, and those disadvantages arising in the one-child family can readily be coped with. However, there is a need for more empirical studies, especially in the field of sibling relationships.

From a moral point of view, are there any reasons in favor of or against one-child families? It does not seem morally reprehensible to want to have only one child as a relief to population pressure, or for the sake of being able to provide the child with a better education. There are some parents who may even feel it to be a moral obligation on their part to limit the family to one child. In many other cases where parents would actually prefer to have one or two more children, they feel frustrated in their desires by strong external pressures, mostly from government agencies, to have only one child. But in such cases, such pressures can also be seen as an invitation to parents (and grand-parents) to reflect on and re-think traditional views which might eventually bring about a new way of looking at the whole question from a wider perspective. Just as one can accept limitations on the number of children for reasons of health

and for economic reasons, so, too, one can make the same decision for the national welfare, where population growth poses serious problems to the nation as a whole.

In this area, moral problems do not arise from the objective that is pursued but some of the methods used to pursue the objective. When the material and social incentives to have only one child, and, correspondingly, the material and social sanctions for having more, are so strong that people are no longer able to make an informed and free decision but feel psychologically compelled, we must question whether or not they are still being treated with the dignity and respect due to human beings. While the one child family does go against traditional cultural values, it is not, however, contrary to right reason. Consequently, it is well worth the effort to try to convince people to make a free and rational decision on their own.

The laws of human reproduction are such that man is capable of controlling, of increasing or diminishing, the rate of human reproduction according to the objective needs of society. Many highly developed animals are pre-programmed to conceive every time there is copulation, and the times for copulation might also be preprogrammed. Human beings, however, are not preprogrammed in this way; it is by use of their freedom that they can control population. In the history of China, population has varied a great deal (Huang, 1982). In the Han dynasty, the population reached 60 million, but during the Three Kingdoms period around 265 A.D., it had come down to some 7 million. During the Ming dynasty, from a high of 60 million, it declined to about 20 million in the later years of the Ming. In the early 20th century, it went up to 420 million. From 1949 to 1978, it went up from 548 million to almost one billion. It might be important at some stage of history to work to keep the population stable, and to do it in a rational and free way through the collaboration of everyone. The promotion of one-child families may be the only practical way, although some other ways can be used as adjuncts, such as the promotion of later marriages. There are also many naturally childless marriages. (In some countries, up to 15% of all couples are sterile even though they themselves would like to have children). These couples

could be encouraged not to divorce and remarry for the sake of having children. In many developed countries more and more people choose deliberately not to marry. The Church, which has always promoted "celibacy for the Kingdom", is not opposed to the choice of remaining single, especially when it represents an unselfish dedication to service, such as one pursuing a career in social service, or in education or in scientific research, etc. But celibacy for egoistic purposes, like material comfort or other self-seeking advantages is morally unacceptable. Selfishness and narcissism, although they may reduce population growth, also deeply hurt the social fabric. If the main purpose, then, for not conceiving, or for conceiving children is self-seeking, it is morally objectionable.

From a strictly Christian point of view, the one-child family is a very familiar concept. Catholics believe, and most other Christians agree, that Jesus was an only child. Nobody has ever suggested that as an only child Jesus may have shown those undesirable traits usually associated with only children. The Church also has a special devotion to the Holy Family, the one-child family of Joseph, Mary and Jesus, and has proposed this family as a model for Christian families.

Finally, we are very grateful to God the Father, who has given his Only Son, for our salvation. Christians are called to imitate His love. Hopefully, the Christian father and mother of an only child would not oppose their beloved child's decision to become celibate for the sake of advancing the Kingdom of God among His people. This only child would devote himself or herself to improving the quality of life of many people, with also the added side-effect of reducing population growth.

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