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# **Life as an Only Child:**

Modern Psychology's Take on the Stereotypical Only and My Firsthand Perspectives

**Samuel Johnson**

Honor Scholar Senior Thesis

Spring 2014

## **Acknowledgments**

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## Preface

*I would have never guessed...you don't seem like an only child?*

If I had a dollar for every time I've heard that, I would probably have enough cash to fill up my car's sixteen-gallon tank. But, that's not how I would spend this hypothetical sum of money. Instead, I would drive to the nearest *FedEx Office* or *Staples* and make as many copies of this thesis as I could afford. From then on, if someone were to say something to this extent, I could hand him or her a nice, crisp copy of this thesis. Sure, there are some obvious pitfalls to this course of action. It requires I have at least one copy on my person at all times. I wouldn't be able to reach a very large audience. And, chances are most people wouldn't get around to reading such a hefty piece of writing. But, if one were to read this piece, I'm confident they wouldn't again make sweeping generalizations like *you don't seem like an only child* or *you're such an only child*. I'm confident this piece would turn their perception of only children on its head.<sup>1</sup>

I have heard declarations like the ones above for as long as I can remember, and still do with some regularity. I've heard it from my friends, my classmates, and grown men and women. And, I know I'm not alone. Earlier this spring I met a good friend of mine's new girlfriend, who happens to be one of six children in her family. She and I began talking about where we grew up and our families, which prompted her to ask how many brothers and sisters I have. When told her I don't have any siblings she was surprised and mentioned I *didn't strike her as an only child*.

I understand when people say things like this it's rarely with malicious intent, which is why it has never bothered me on a personal level – and I really mean that. This project is not a

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this piece I refer to only children (in its singular and plural form) in a number of ways: only children, only child, only-borns, only born, only, and onlies. All of the aforementioned terms are synonymous.

list of grievances about the perception of only children; its purpose is not to defend, but rather to inform. And, the reality that we live in a society where a statement like *you don't seem like an only child* is often offered up and received as a complement, and statements like *you're such an only child* tend to carry unfavorable connotations is, in my eyes, more than enough evidence that our collective impressions about only children are narrow and misinformed.

I felt compelled to explore this topic for myself and the other only children in my life, largely my mother and some of my closest friends. Moreover, I'm writing this piece because being an only child is a defining life experience for so many others. According to digital publication *Only Child*, single-child families are the fastest growing type of household in the United States and most industrialized Western European nations; the U.S. alone is home to an estimated twenty million single-child families.<sup>2</sup>

Onlies carry a stigma and we have for hundreds of years. In writing this piece I want to shed a more informed light on the stereotypes attached to only children and determine which, if any, carry weight in the face of analytical study. I want to dissect the stereotypical perception of only children, and in doing so, hope my readers draw from this piece a more authentic narrative about onlies. About what it is like to grow up and progress through adulthood as an only. About what it is like to raise an only child, and why a growing number of parents are deciding to stop at one.

Let me start by saying, when it comes to stereotypes there are far worse ones out there than those attached to only children – ethnic and racial stereotypes are some of the nastiest. But, after months and months of research, I can say with confidence that onlies bear more inflammatory and disparaging stereotypes than anyone else on the birth order spectrum. The only demographic that even comes close is last-borns, and their body of stereotypes is decidedly

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<sup>2</sup> White, Carolyn. About Us. *Only Child*. 2014. Web. 7 Mar. 2014.

less extensive. Youngest siblings are tagged as immature, loud, needy, and attention-mongers, but that's about it.

People tend to have a pretty cohesive and disparaging perception of only children and seem to subscribe to the notion that all onlys fit a common mold. Even those who are not only children themselves seem to have strong opinions about what it's like being an only. We've all heard the stereotypes associated with only children, and it's probably safe to say that those of us who fall into this demographic are the most versed in them. They touch on behavioral and developmental drawbacks, seemingly all of which can be voiced in more ways than one. I have heard them all, even some that were probably never stamped with the "official only child stereotype" seal.

We're selfish. We're lonely. We're maladjusted. We're difficult. We have a difficult time adjusting to different environments and fitting into social settings. We're anxious and neurotic. We're disadvantaged from a developmental standpoint because we don't have siblings. We're brats. We're bossy. We're more dependent on others, notably our parents. We're unsociable. We're narcissistic. We have trouble connecting with people our own age.

The reality is, many of these stereotypes stem from reasonable thought. It makes sense that only children would have a proclivity for selfish behavior because they do not have a sibling with whom to share their parents' resources and attention. It makes sense to presume someone growing up without another child in the house would have a lonely childhood. But, one must remember when it comes to people – their personalities, their behavior, their development – seemingly reasonable conclusions can be far from accurate. People are infinitely complicated as are the factors that shape them, which is why psychology is such a complex discipline with so many diverse schools of thought.

Regardless of how reasonable or widely held a stereotype may seem, chances are it is oversimplified and draws from a relatively small sample size. When it comes to the stereotypes surrounding only children, and birth order in general, this is certainly the case. Popular notions about only-borns tie into a facet of life people see in a very personal and passionate light – family. People have an inclination to base their opinions on what they know, what they have a vested interest in, and what they have experienced. In the case of these stereotypes, one's point of reference tends to be their family, families they know, and families they have seen in various artistic mediums – all of which make for an irrefutably small sample size. For example, if someone were to ask me what I thought, in general, about eldest siblings, my first impulse would be to consider those I know – my dad, my cousins, friends and acquaintances of mine. This is not a bad place to start but it's important to keep in mind that this sampling makes for a narrow point of reference, and therefore I run the risk of arriving at oversimplified conclusions. When people form opinions about why only children exhibit certain behaviors and developmental trends they have tendency to assume that all families are created equal – or all families are created equal with their own and those they know.

This is why I've chosen to bring analytical literature into the foreground of this piece. Empirical research about only children can be used to tackle the validity of these stereotypes by examining whether or not they hold up in light of large-scale cross sections and thorough methodology. This literature provides the necessary scale that stereotypes lack. And, after spending hours combing through these studies – their statistics, their fine details, and the ins and outs of their procedures – I can say with confidence that they are in no way oversimplified.

In writing this piece I want to uncover what some of modern psychology's seminal minds have to say about only children and single-child families. The authors of these studies come to

salient conclusions about only children, and in doing so challenge many facets of the stigma attached to onlies. Of course, their assertions do not apply to each and every only – with sample populations in the hundreds of thousands there are bound to be outliers – nonetheless, these authors uncover some telling collective trends.

I have chosen to center this piece around pertinent research, but I also felt compelled to incorporate my own perspectives about only children into this discussion – to place my experiences and philosophies in conversation with these stereotypes and the research surrounding them. Here is a quick look at the narrative that will emerge in the remainder of this piece:

*We're selfish and narcissistic.* In actuality, we are no more self-absorbed than any other demographic with respect to birth order and family size. We receive a decidedly high amount of attention from our parents, but this doesn't condition us to seek out that same level of attention in other milieus. School plays a key role in teaching us that we are not always going to be the center of attention.

*We're lonely.* We don't feel any lonelier than those with siblings. Life without a brother or sister doesn't necessarily make for a lonesome childhood or lonelier adult years. Keep in mind that “alone” is not synonymous with “lonely.”

*We're disadvantaged from a developmental standpoint because we don't have siblings.* In reality, the absence of siblings is not a hindrance because friends, classmates, teachers, and our parents can play an equivalent role in our growth. In fact, research indicates that growing up without siblings can be advantageous because it makes for more a more intellectual and adult family atmosphere – a distinct family environment that facilitates the development of heightened intellectual skills.



*We're more dependent on others, notably our parents.* We may receive more attention from our parents, but their decidedly responsive approach to parenting gives us a strong sense of accountability and responsibility. Our parents tend to have comparatively high expectations of us and we set high standards for ourselves. Consequently, we achieve at a level that is higher than that of our peers from large families. We also spend a good deal of time alone, and this cultivates in us a spirit of independence and self-sufficiency.

*We're unsociable and have a difficult time adjusting to different environments and fitting into social settings.* Research indicates that our social faculties are equivalent to those of our peers with siblings. Experiences in school, extra-curricular activities, and close friendships give us a sense of acceptance and teach us how to navigate our social fabric.

In short, the aim of this project is threefold. First, to shed light on the cultural and socio-economic factors that have given rise to and sustained the stigma attached to onlies and their families. Second, to delineate what relevant psychological research has to say about the stereotypical only child. Third, to offer up my own sentiments about what I find to be the defining features of life as an only.

## **A Stigma With Deep Roots**

Only children have been stigmatized for hundreds of years, and in my opinion, this prejudice has prevailed in the public eye for two key reasons. Single-child families are at odds with longstanding views about childrearing and only children are often depicted in an unfavorable light in a host of artistic mediums.

Historically, people around the world have had a proclivity for raising large families, which largely stemmed from prevailing socio-economic circumstances in the modern era and the

doctrines of several religious traditions. Journalist and author Lauren Sandler touches on these two points in her 2013 book, *One and Only: The Freedom of Having an Only Child, and the Joy of Being One*. Economic necessity, feelings of communal responsibility, and a sense of spiritual duty are all factors that motivated parents to rear large families. The conjunction of comparatively high fertility rates prior the twentieth century and the glorification of large families played a fundamental role in shaping widely-held views about childrearing – views that are still intact today throughout the developed and developing world alike.<sup>3</sup> Single-child families are becoming more common around the world, especially in industrialized, urbanized areas. But, in a global context they remain a strong minority.<sup>4</sup> One-child households are a foreign concept to many, and break from widely held, age-old beliefs about parenting and raising children, both of which have helped give rise to rather partial views about this family structure and the offspring it yields.

### **Family Size and Socio-Economic Viability**

Large families are the norm in many cultures around the world, which is in part, a remnant of the longstanding economic fabric of the modern era. Prior to the Industrial Revolution and the advent of more efficient, mechanized factors of production, economic activity required considerable manpower. For most the modern era, agriculture has been the name of the game. Even the United States and the world's other most diversified economies were for so long predominately agrarian, and throughout history we have seen a positive correlation between rural ways of life and larger families. Farming, whether that entails harvesting crops or rearing livestock, is a labor-intensive livelihood. And, before the advent of

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<sup>3</sup> Sandler, Lauren. *One and Only: The Freedom of Having an Only Child, and the Joy of Being One*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013. 154-155.

<sup>4</sup> White, Carolyn. About Us. *Only Child*. 2014. Web. 7 Mar. 2014.

mechanized equipment and modern means of transportation it was even more so. For families in the rural regions of our country, more children meant a larger workforce; childrearing was driven by economic necessity and an underlying notion that self-sufficient, prosperous families are large families. My dad, who grew up on a small farm in central Iowa with his parents and two sisters, has experienced this way of life firsthand – as soon as he was old enough, he began walking beans, tending to the animals, and spraying fertilizer. From a young age, he and his sisters were a vital source of labor for the family enterprise, but a relatively small labor supply at that. Even in the 1960s, most of the neighboring households boasted at least four or five children.

The economies of many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, South America, and the Middle East still rely heavily on agriculture, and in these places large families remain the norm.<sup>5</sup> Nations who depend on sustenance agriculture, not only tend to be some of the poorest in the world, but also boast some of the highest fertility rates. Niger, for example, whose economy is centered around subsistence agriculture and the rearing of livestock (agriculture is the livelihood of roughly ninety percent of the country's population) has one of the highest total fertility rates in the world; according to a 2014 Central Intelligence Agency estimate Niger's total fertility rate is 6.89 children born per woman.<sup>6</sup>

Birth rates are driven by economic factors, but they are also influenced by concurrent social factors like mortality rates. For much of the modern era, infant and child mortality rates were much higher than they are now due to inferior environmental conditions and less advanced medical care. Life expectancies were also shorter, and in order to compensate for these factors,

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<sup>5</sup> Family Structure. *World Family Map*. 2013. Web. 12 Mar. 2014.

<sup>6</sup>The World Factbook: Niger. *Central Intelligence Agency*. 2014. Web. 20 March. 2014.

people had more children. Each additional child meant more income for the household and a higher probability that the bloodline would continue. Children were essentially life insurance.<sup>7</sup>

But, in much the developed world, times have changed. That is to say, in the last century and a half the socio-economic fabric of the industrialized world has transformed; smaller families have become more economically viable and birth rates have decreased. With the onset of industrialization and urbanization children came to occupy an entirely different niche in society. In the agricultural era, they were an asset, but ever since they have been an expense – an expense that is living longer and less likely to die in infancy and childhood.<sup>89</sup>

There is no denying that economic factors “reshape people’s childbearing intentions,” and when the relative cost of childbearing is high, people opt to have fewer children. Let me offer up a historical example to illustrate this point. During the Great Depression one-child families came to make up nearly thirty percent of American families, and that was during a time when only children were a rarity.<sup>10</sup> Onlies have long borne the stereotype they are the spoiled offspring of wealthy parents, and while that may have been the case in the past, it could not be further from the truth in this day and age. Single-child families are on the rise in our country and abroad, and can be found across all wealth brackets. In fact, economist Kevin Mumford asserts that with each hundred thousand dollar increase in household income, birth rates increase by ten to fourteen percent.<sup>11</sup>

The cost of raising children has increased at a staggering rate over the last quarter century. In a recent analysis, the United States Department of Agriculture estimated it will cost,

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<sup>7</sup> Sandler, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Sandler, 153.

<sup>9</sup> Trends in Life Expectancy in the United States, Denmark, and the Netherlands: Rapid Increase, Stagnation, and Resumption. *Population Reference Bureau*. 2011. Web. 7 Feb. 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Sandler, 10-11.

<sup>11</sup> Sandler, 150.

on average, 226,920 dollars to raise a child born in 2010 to age eighteen. And, this figure does not include college tuition, student loans, or foregone earnings on the part of parents due to the time and energy required to raise a child. When these costs are tacked on to the aforementioned figure, the cost of raising a child into adulthood can be upwards of a million dollars. Not to mention the cost of childcare is exceedingly high in the United States and we are the only country in the industrialized world that does not guarantee paid parental leave.<sup>12</sup>

These factors have brought about reduced birth rates in much of the industrialized world. Spain, Italy, Japan, Germany, and Austria boast some of the lowest fertility rates in the world – all below 1.4 children per woman. In the 1970s these countries’ birth rates were roughly twice as high.<sup>13</sup> In a global context, these nations (and a host of others like China, Sweden, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom) have low birth rates and also some of the most fruitful economies and robust social fabrics. Their trajectories shed a telling light on the balance between fertility and prosperity; in this day and age, countries with checked population growth and small families occupy the upper rungs of the global hierarchy.<sup>14</sup>

This is a correlation economist and demographer Thomas Robert Malthus postulated two centuries ago. Malthus wrote about the delicate interplay between population growth and economic growth, and warned of the socio-economic issues that can emerge when the former comes to outpace the latter.<sup>15</sup> Malthusian thought contends that there are two types of checks that hold populations within the bounds of their respective resource supply – positive and

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<sup>12</sup> Sandler, 147, 154.

<sup>13</sup> Sandler, 9.

<sup>14</sup> When I say “global hierarchy,” I mean it in an economic sense, particularly in terms of gross domestic product (GDP). GDP is by no means a comprehensive measure when it comes to delineating the socio-economic health of a country, nevertheless, there is a positive correlation between the two. After all, it is typically nations with deeper pocketbooks that have more robust education, transportation, and healthcare systems.

<sup>15</sup> Mokyr, Joel. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Economic History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. 422-427.

preventative checks. Positive checks – disease, hunger, war – raise the mortality rate, while preventative checks – contraception, family planning – lower the birth rate. Malthus championed the importance of preventative checks as an effective means of reducing population levels and restoring a more beneficial allocation of resources – a notion that has long carried weight with policy-makers in the developed world<sup>16</sup>

Preventative checks are born out of our behavior; we have the capacity to reduce birth rates and can do so in a number of ways, from the use of contraceptives to the promotion of family planning. One of the most notable instances of family planning the world has ever seen is China's *de jure* one-child policy, which was put into place nearly thirty-five years ago in an effort to reduce fertility rates, and in turn usher in economic growth and alleviate some of the country's social issues.<sup>17</sup> Its architects postulated that reduced population and smaller households would raise GDP, GDP per capita, and aggregate standards of living. Ethical discussion aside, when one investigates the China's economic growth figures since the enactment of the family planning policy, the data is quite telling. In the roughly three and half decade lifespan of China's family planning program, all three measures have steadily risen.<sup>18</sup>

In 2007, economists Hongbin Li and Junsen Zhang conducted a study wherein they investigated population growth and economic growth in twenty-eight provinces throughout China; the timeline of their research was, for all intents and purposes, the first twenty years of the one-child policy. They found that provinces with highest reduction in birth rates experienced

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> China's system remains extremely controversial in the sphere of ethical debate given its authoritarian tack. Since its implementation female infanticide and sex selective abortion rates have increased dramatically. Many hold reservations concerning the government's power to plan the makeup of its peoples' families and contend that that right should belong to parents and parents alone, who will ultimately be responsible for rearing the ensuing generations.

<sup>18</sup> Liao, Pei-Ju. "The one-child policy: A macroeconomic analysis." *Journal of Development Economics* 101.49 (2012): 15-22.

the highest proportional economic growth, which led them to estimate that a decline in the birth rate by 1/1000 led to a .9 percent increase in annual GDP as well as 14.3 percent increase in per capita GDP.<sup>19</sup>

Now I'm not arguing that single-child households are the gold standard by any means, but from an economic standpoint, micro and macro alike, they make a lot of sense. At the population-wide level, fewer people means less resource dilution, and at the nuclear family level, having one child allows parents to provide said child with the maximum amount of resources and opportunities they can. There are currently more than 100 million only children in China. Single-child households are ubiquitous throughout the country, and despite the fact that the one-child policy's stipulations have been relaxed in recent years, Chinese women are still choosing to have fewer children.<sup>20</sup> In fact, in a recent survey (conducted in Shanghai and surrounding areas) less than two percent of parents cited the family planning policy as their reason for having only one child. Parents in China and elsewhere in the developed world are electing to have fewer children not out of selfishness (which remains a widely-held sentiment) but rather for pivotal socio-economic reasons; stopping at one gives parents "the flexibility to [parent] on their own terms, and have a child who is better equipped to live up to ever-building expectations."<sup>21</sup>

For my parents, having one-child came down to biology, not finances. That being said, we have discussed the financial aspects of being a single-child household numerous times – a family structure that has allowed us to have more experiences as a family. As a family of three, things are cheaper – entertainment, groceries, utilities, healthcare, and travel. My parents and I have talked about my education more than any other expense I have accrued to date. With

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<sup>19</sup> Li, Hongbin and Junsen Zhang. "Do High Birth Rates Hamper Economic Growth?" *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 89.1 (2007): 110-114.

<sup>20</sup> Sandler, 70.

<sup>21</sup> Sandler, 79-80.

tuition rising faster than inflation rates,<sup>22</sup> I probably wouldn't have been able to come to a school like DePauw if there was another kid in our family. Not only have my parents been able to afford me more opportunities, they have never had to worry about allocating their resources unfairly between children, which can be a major point of tension in families with multiple children. When it comes to spending money on me, my parents are not constrained by precedent, and for that I am grateful. *We can't buy him a car because we didn't buy his brother one. We can't send him to a private school because we didn't do that for his sister.* They never had to have those conversations.

### **Religious Grounds and Onlies in the Arts**

Despite economic and demographic shifts that have made smaller households more viable today, many cultures still subscribe to a “family-values ethic that lionizes maternal sacrifice and exalts large households.” These perspectives are in part a remnant of longstanding economic circumstances, but they also have deep roots in religious thought. Throughout history we have seen a strong correlation between religiosity and family size; the “most fertile are the most faithful.”<sup>23</sup>

This correlation is evident in the United States, with our comparatively high birth rates and religious populace. In more secular areas of our country, fertility rates parallel those in much of European, however our national average is decidedly higher – a figure hoisted up by the more religious regions of our country.<sup>24</sup> In 2012, Gallup International compiled a Global Index

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<sup>22</sup> Odland, Steve. College Costs Out Of Control. *Forbes*. Mar. 2012. Web. 15 Mar. 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Sandler, 179.

<sup>24</sup> Sandler, 10, 161-162. The religious fabric of the United States is distinctly regional as are fertility trends in our country. Those states with the lowest total birth rates are found on the Eastern Seaboard (largely New England) and the West Coast, and those with the highest fertility rates are found in the



of Religiosity and Atheism.<sup>25</sup> While the United States has seen a notable decline in religiosity in the last decade, our collective religiosity is decidedly higher than most developed countries in Europe and Asia.<sup>26</sup>

Christianity is the most widespread religion in the United States – a faith that has championed high fertility ever since its inception. One need not look beyond the first chapter of Genesis to find evidence of this; “God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.’”<sup>27</sup> This is a religious imperative that has been voiced by “spiritual leaders and faith communities” for thousands of years, and while socio-economic circumstances were vastly different<sup>28</sup> when this sacred text was being composed, this central tenet resonates with Christians to this day. Award-winning social theorist Ron Lesthaeghe contends that natality in our country and abroad is largely governed by “a strong normative structure based on familistic ideology supported by the church.”<sup>29</sup> According to a World Bank estimate, the United States’ total fertility rate in 2011 was 1.9 children per woman.<sup>30</sup> If one were to remove “churchgoing Americans” (who have, on average, five more children than secularists in our country) from that sample population, that figure would look decidedly lower.<sup>31</sup>

In discussing the relationship between faith and fertility, it is important to keep in mind that Christianity is by no means the only tradition that promotes the rearing of large families. All

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middle of the country and the South. Not only do these latter states boast more religious populations, they also tend to be more conservative socially and politically

<sup>25</sup> Religiosity is broadly defined as the extent to which someone considers himself or herself religious.

<sup>26</sup> Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism – 2012. *WIN-Gallup International*. 2012. Web. 14 March. 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Coogan, Michael. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. 12.

<sup>28</sup> People were bearing large families out of necessity more than anything; infant and child mortality was ubiquitous, life expectancies were short, and economic pursuits were inherently very labor intensive.

<sup>29</sup> Sandler, 162.

<sup>30</sup> Data: Fertility rate, Total (births per woman). *The World Bank*. 2014. Web. 17 Mar. 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Sandler, 161.

three Abrahamic religions – Christianity, Judaism, and Islam – adhere to pro natal texts. And, their ideologies are in play around the globe. When it comes to total number of adherents, Islam and Christianity are the two largest traditions in the world.<sup>32</sup> The Pew Research Center recently mapped out the globe’s religious landscape and found that the three Abrahamic religions account for 54.9 percent of the world’s population.<sup>33</sup>

The positive interplay between religion and family size is evident within the United States’ sizable Christian demographic, and is also discernable among other faiths throughout the world. Fertility rates in countries with sizable Muslim populations vary, however, in the aggregate, followers of Islam raise comparatively large families – particularly, those who are more orthodox in their beliefs. Muslim women who live by *sharia* (the religious law and moral code of Islam) have on average twice as many children as their counterparts who do not strictly adhere to these tenets. The effects of this family ethic are manifest in growing Muslim populations throughout the developed and developing world alike. In a recent Pew Research Center report on the global Muslim population, its authors projected that the number of Muslims in Europe will increase by more than fourteen million over the next twenty years.<sup>34</sup>

Widespread proclivities for large families and concurrent stigmas surrounding one-child households are a product of longstanding socio-economic circumstances and enduring spiritual doctrine, but have also been sustained by critical depictions of only children and their families in a host of mediums. For well over a century, the “peculiar only child has permeated pop culture” via film and literature.<sup>35 36</sup> When I contemplate artistic works that incorporate single-child

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<sup>32</sup> Sandler, 178.

<sup>33</sup> The Global Religious Landscape. *Pew Research Center*. Dec. 2012. Web. 18 Mar. 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Sandler, 178.

<sup>35</sup> Sandler, 4.

<sup>36</sup> In this section, I have chosen to limit the scope of my discussion to American culture. I have done this for the sake of brevity, and also because I feel I can offer up more astute analyses of American works than

families and only children, most of those that come to mind portray these demographics in an unfavorable light and touch on many of the stereotypes borne by onlies.<sup>37</sup>

When it comes to film, horror is one of my least favorite genres. That being said, there are three horror films in particular that terrified me when I first saw them, and still do to this day: Richard Donner's *The Omen*, William Friedkin's *The Exorcist*, and Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. All three films were released in a sixteen-year span (1960-1976) and all three are centered around the heinous actions of a deranged only child.<sup>38</sup> One antagonist is the antichrist and son of the Devil, one is possessed by a demon, and one is a ruthless murderer – an evil trio for the ages. The fact that each of these characters is an only child takes a backseat to their aforementioned identity, but nevertheless these directors make it plainly obvious that these characters are only children. Moreover, all three embody stereotypes commonly attached to onlies. Damien Thorn (*The Omen*) and Regan McNeil<sup>39</sup> (*The Exorcist*) are each the puppet of a wicked entity and possess not one admirable trait. They are anxious, neurotic, and unsociable – and, that is putting it lightly. Norman Bates (*Psycho*) is a psychotic killer, tortured by his past; in his younger years Bates was overly dependent on his mother, an abusive and controlling woman who he goes on to murder out of a sense of abandonment. His dependence on his mother manifests itself in his crippling psychotic state; after his mother's death, her psyche becomes ingrained in his and takes over his mind.<sup>40</sup> Their relationship, and its devastating impact on him, depicts single-child families in a tragically dysfunctional light.

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those from elsewhere in the world, given that I speak only English and am more informed about American culture.

<sup>37</sup> That's not to say that all, or even most, artistic depictions of only children are critical, but those that have had a lasting impact on me have been.

<sup>38</sup> Sandler, 4.

<sup>39</sup> Ironically, my mother attended Sunday school at Christ & Holy Trinity Church in Westport, Connecticut with Linda Blair, the actress who played Regan McNeil, the quintessential demon child.

<sup>40</sup> Breslow, Peter. Norman Bates: A Most Terrifying Mama's Boy. *NPR*. Jul. 2008. Web. 24 Mar. 2014.

When I think about only children in literature, there are two pieces that immediately come to mind: Henry James' *What Maisie Knew* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. The former features a dysfunctional single-child family, the child of which finds herself in unfortunate circumstances; as an only child, this novel struck me as cautionary tale about this family structure. Maisie Farange becomes a pawn in her parents' battles following their divorce. Her parents are deplorable and superficial people who, for all intents and purposes, abandon her. With no siblings, Maisie is forced to endure her parents' divorce and its aftermath alone, save for the support of a close friend.<sup>41</sup>

*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is about a young boy's journey to "find" his father, who was killed in the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center. At its core, this book is not about the experience of being an only child, but nevertheless it's protagonist, Oskar Schell, is an only child and I believe Safran Foer depicts him in a rather stereotypical fashion. Oskar is troubled by a sense of loneliness throughout the book. He possesses an anxious personality and is fastidious to the point that it causes tension between him and the people in his life.<sup>42</sup> He's maladjusted and has trouble connecting with people our own age. There is really only one point when the reader sees him with his peers and in this scene it becomes clear that Oskar has trouble relating to his peers; Jimmy Snyder and his minions ridicule Oskar on the playground for being socially awkward and threaten him with exclamations like "prepare to die."<sup>43</sup>

If there is one thing I have learned as an English major and an aspiring film buff, it is that no artistic choice happens by accident. I don't believe any of the aforementioned works were born out of a serious antipathy toward only children or one-child families. However, I do believe these authors, directors, and screenwriters consciously chose to incorporate this family structure

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<sup>41</sup> James, Henry. *What Maisie Knew*. New York: H. S. Stone & Company, 1897.

<sup>42</sup> Safran Foer, Jonathan. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Safran Foer, 192.

into their creations for a pivotal reason. They wanted to create richer characters – characters more befitting their respective work’s storyline and greater themes. Each recognized that their audience would draw associations, consciously and subconsciously alike, between fictitious character and stigmatized only child, and in doing so conceptualize a more complex and authentic character. But, by playing on these stereotypes these writers and filmmakers have served to perpetuate stigmatized views about only children and one-child households.

### **Stigmatized by the Scientific Community**

What is even more discouraging is that the stigma surrounding onlies mushroomed in the twentieth century in many thanks to the very people who possessed the means and expertise to put these sentiments to bed – scientists and psychologists. The earliest scientific publications painted only children in a disparaging light and even likened this fate to a grave affliction.<sup>44</sup> In retrospect it is hardly fair to call this early literature *scientific* in contemporary terms given the newness of psychological theory and the shaky research practices that were used at the time. In these years there were no internal review boards to ensure psychological research was being carried out in a viable and ethical manner. By no means am I taking a dig at pioneers in the fields of child development and evolutionary psychology, I am only pointing out that by today’s standards, prototypical scholarship regarding only children lacked some vital tenets of modern psychological study.

Perhaps the most well known of these pioneers was Granville Stanley Hall – a pupil of William James and a contemporary of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung (later in his life he would become the first president of the American Psychological Association). Hall didn’t originate the

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<sup>44</sup> Falbo, Toni, and Denise Polit. “Quantitative Review of the Only Child Literature: Research Evidence and Theory Development.” *Psychological Bulletin* 100.2 (1986): 176. Henceforth, in my footnotes, I will refer to this piece of literature as “QR” for Quantitative Review.

stigma surrounding only children but he was the first to bring it into the realm of academia, and he did so with his 1896 study, *Of Peculiar and Exceptional Children*. With regard to onlies, Hall's main point was this: they're misfits in more ways than one and they possess an inherent deficiency when it comes to adjustment. In fact, he is quoted to have said, "being an only child is a disease in itself".<sup>45</sup>

To illustrate my earlier point about the unsophisticated research practices of this time period and the shortcomings of Hall's scholarship, let me point out an important element of his 1896 study – much of his research was centered around undomesticated animals and livestock! Does this seem at all problematic? Cows and pigs in a study about only children? That thought clearly did not cross Hall's mind, and why should it have? After all, he believed that the intrinsic flaws of onlies stemmed from irrefutable natural law. In that study he went on to write: "creatures which have large families, whether beasts or birds, have less trouble in rearing them than those which have only one or two young. Little pigs are weeks ahead of young calves, and the young partridge, with its dozen brothers and sisters, is far more teachable than the young eagle".<sup>46</sup>

But perhaps I'm not being fair. Maybe there are more similarities than meet the eye when it comes to only children, cows, and eagles – it's just hard for me to get past the hooves and the talons, and our uncanny capacity for long division.

Hall was the first academic to publish his ideas about the shortcomings of only children and he certainly was not the last. His sentiments quickly spread through the scientific community and began to take hold around the country. Historically, those in the field of psychology have portrayed onlies as abnormal with regard to development, social behavior, and

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<sup>45</sup> Sandler, 16-17.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

personality.<sup>47</sup> Abraham Arden Brill, one of the most prominent psychoanalysts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, described only children as neurotic and sexually perverted.<sup>48</sup> In his 1921 book *Basic Principles of Psychoanalysis* he wrote that “it would be best for the individual as well as the race that there should be no only children,”<sup>49</sup> whom he believed were the “morbid product of [the] present social economic system”.<sup>50</sup> Six years later, Austrian neuropsychiatrist Erwin Wexberg, who had much to say on the subject, published *Your Nervous Child* wherein he wrote that only children “have a boundless egotism...tyrannize over their friends and...suffer no gods beside themselves”.<sup>51</sup> I was taken aback when I came across this quotation. It seem uncharacteristically dogmatic and hyperbolic coming from a psychologist (keep in mind this was written within the last hundred years) and it also flies in the face of the perspectives I’ve formed about myself and other only children I know. Is it really fair to say that we are all tyrants and egomaniacs?

### **Norman Fenton: A More Authentic Investigation**

Psychology and psychiatry were relatively nascent fields in the earlier part of the twentieth century but its seminal minds had already generated a cohesive and disapproving image of the typical only child. The notion that only children were an inferior demographic who didn’t share the faculties of their peers with siblings had permeated America’s collective consciousness for decades and the earliest scientific study on the subject only reinforced this stigma, particularly in more educated circles. It wasn’t until the end of the 1920s when a

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<sup>47</sup> QR, 176. See section titled “Prejudice Against Only Borns”

<sup>48</sup> Tartakovsky, Margarita. History of Psychology: American Psychoanalyst A. A. Brill. *Psych Central*. 2011. Web. 7 Jan. 2014.

<sup>49</sup> QR, 176. See section titled “Prejudice Against Only Borns.”

<sup>50</sup> Tartakovsky.

<sup>51</sup> Sandler, 18.

researcher from the California Bureau of Juvenile Research decided to test these widely accepted hypotheses in a more thorough and systematic manner that others began to question their validity.<sup>52</sup>

Norman Fenton was committed to putting the assertions of Granville Stanley Hall and his contemporaries to the test. Fenton recognized that their sentiments were ubiquitous in America and wanted to see just how pervasive they were among those he believed ought to be the most informed on the subject. He surveyed a child psychology class of about fifty students at a nearby university, asking each to offer up a detailed psychological assessment of only children. Only two students held that only children were no different from their peers who had siblings with respect to development, personality, aptitude, etc. This was more than enough impetus for Fenton to kick off his own study, and upon its completion in 1928 it was the most comprehensive and tenable piece of scientific literature about only children.<sup>53</sup>

He distributed questionnaires to teachers, asking them to provide pertinent observations and statistical data about their students – to this day, these types of surveys remain one of the most widely-used means of research among developmental and child psychologists. As Fenton expected, his findings undermined just about everything previous literature had set forth. In terms of obedience, generosity, and sociability these teachers reported that their onlies were no different than other students. Only children sampled in this study showed greater initiative and higher leadership potential, and with respect to intelligence, they reported higher scores on aptitude tests than their peers with brothers and sisters. That being said, some teachers reported that only children tended to be more aggressive and conceited than their peers. From a statistical

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<sup>52</sup> Sandler, 19-20.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.



standpoint this divergence was only minor, but in the spirit of objective reporting, Fenton was sure to include these observations in his analysis.<sup>54</sup>

This study did not gain public attention, which does not come as much of a surprise given the relatively small readership of *The Pedagogical Seminary and Journal of Genetic Psychology* and other academic journals in which it appeared.<sup>55</sup> In the scientific community, however, the publication of Fenton's work was a definitive turning point; his findings made waves in a whole host of fields from developmental psychology to child psychiatry. Above all else, he initiated a more authentic discussion about only children.

### **Modern Psychology and the Only Child: The Scholarship of Dr. Toni Falbo and Others**

In writing this piece one of my foremost objectives is to uncover what modern psychology has to say about only children – and I place the upmost emphasis on the word modern. After decades of research and peer-reviewed publication, this field of study have come to paint a vivid picture of only children – what does this picture look like? Are the stereotypes valid? Does the conventional image of the only child as a selfish, difficult, and lonely hold truth in the face of scientific study? You may already have an idea based on Norman Fenton's work.

Dr. Toni Falbo teaches in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, and is widely considered to be the preeminent authority in the field of only child studies.<sup>56</sup> For more than three decades she has committed her academic pursuits to constructing a more complete and informed narrative about only children.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Sandler, 20-21.

<sup>56</sup> Sandler, 3.

<sup>57</sup> Sandler, 61.

Early in my research I was fortunate enough to come across her most thorough and perhaps most acclaimed publication to date, *Quantitative Review of the Only Child Literature: Research Evidence and Theory Development*. In many ways it is the Magna Carta of only child scholarship, and that is why I've chosen to center the psychological component of my piece around this study. It is modern psychology's most comprehensive and extensive take on only children.

Published in 1986, with the help of renowned research methodologist Denise Polit, this study is comprised of six meta-analyses, which draw from 115 scientific studies investigating only children.<sup>58</sup> A gold standard in the realm of science, meta-analyses are conglomerations of many different studies, which bring their constituent literature under a cohesive framework for the purpose of investigation and measurement.<sup>59</sup> These types of studies include a greater number of subjects and greater diversity among these subjects, both of which contribute to higher credibility.<sup>60</sup> I feel I struck gold in finding this piece and I must also point out that it gave me an unbelievably extensive list of cited sources from which I was able to launch further research.

In Falbo's own words, the aim of her 1986 study was to "evaluate the status of the only child and...guide theory development in this area."<sup>61</sup> She wanted to compare only children to their counterparts with siblings along the lines of behavior, development, character traits, and mental capabilities. By drawing parallels between studies with congruent methods and models she was able to create a cohesive framework for measurement. Over the course of the study,

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<sup>58</sup> QR, 176. Henceforth, when I directly reference this study in the body of this piece I will use Falbo's name only. Mainly, I have chosen to do so in the interest of brevity. And, for all intents and purposes it is Falbo's study – while Polit was a fundamental player in the realization of this analysis, she played a lesser role in generating the psychological thought behind it.

<sup>59</sup> A meta analysis allows researchers to combine quantitative and qualitative data from multiple studies in order to formulate conclusions with greater statistical power than any one study would possess.

<sup>60</sup> Meta-Analysis. *Himmelfarb Health Sciences Library*. 2011. Web. 8 Jan. 2014.

<sup>61</sup> QR, 176.

Falbo paints a comprehensive psychological and developmental picture of only children and makes enlightening comparisons between onlies and other comparison groups based on family size and birth order.<sup>62</sup>

Like all meta-analyses this review began with an arduous discovery process. Since 1925, more than two hundred studies have been published that focus directly on only children or consider them within a “larger framework of investigation,” and for much of her career Falbo has been gathering and dissecting this literature.<sup>63</sup> Falbo’s next task in formulating this study was to sift through this canon of only child scholarship and determine which pieces of literature met the necessary criteria to be included in the analysis. And, this list of criterion was by no means brief.<sup>64</sup>

When all was said and done 115 studies made the final cut. About half of these were drawn from psychological journals; others came from various sociological, educational, and interdisciplinary sources. Roughly fifty-eight percent of the studies were carried out using self-report methods. That is, subjects supplied information and data through written psychological tests, surveys, and directed interviews. Those remaining studies gathered data via observation – at the hands of psychologists, teachers, and other parties.<sup>65</sup>

All of the studies were published within a fifty-nine year span, between the years of 1925 and 1984; approximately one third of the pieces included in the analysis were published after 1975, which makes this study even more relevant.<sup>66</sup> And, there is good reason for this

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Studies were considered only if they employed most, or all, of the following: established models and theories, a large sample size, a sophisticated and modern analytic approach, probability sampling, controls for extraneous variables, and the use established instruments, such as standardized intelligence quotient (IQ) tests and various psychological metrics. See page 178 for more information about selected literature.

<sup>65</sup> QR, 179. See section titled “Studies Included.”

<sup>66</sup> QR, 179. See section titled “Studies Included.”

abundance of scientific literature in and after the seventies; it was during these years that more progressive social trends were beginning to take hold. Women were beginning to have children later in life, America was experiencing low birth rates, and families were getting smaller.<sup>67</sup> A majority of the studies investigate sample populations within the United States and include male and female subjects.<sup>68</sup> Taken in full, Falbo's analysis examines a sample population of hundreds of thousands of subjects that encompass a whole host of ages and positions in life – from preschoolers and high schoolers, to college students and working adults.<sup>69</sup>

So what does all this information about the literature used in Falbo's quantitative review tell us? From a scientific standpoint, her analysis carries a lot of weight. It demonstrates tremendous breadth and depth in its analysis, as meta-analyses often do. It spans an extended period of time. It encompasses a large and diverse sample of subjects. It draws on sound, relevant scientific and psychological concepts. And, perhaps most importantly her findings are upheld by other experts. The convergence of all of these characteristics gives her work statistical significance and a strong footing in the realm of scientific scholarship. It is the preeminent piece of scientific literature on only children.

But, what about the design of this study? How did Falbo turn hard data and a myriad of observations into sophisticated conceptions about the experiences and qualities of only children? To put it simply, here is how her study works: using data from the analysis' constituent literature, Falbo compares the personality and developmental traits of only children to several other demographics.

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<sup>67</sup> QR, 177. See section titled "Prejudice Against Only Borns."

<sup>68</sup> Sample sizes vary greatly among the included works, from roughly fifty people to upwards of 680,000 people.

<sup>69</sup> Not only was Falbo able to assemble such a diverse sample of subjects in terms of age, but her inclusion of multiple studies emphasizing long-term investigation also allowed her to follow specific sample populations throughout their lives. See page 179 for more information.

When I say “other demographics,” I mean demographics that are different with regard to family size and birth order. Least specifically, she compares only children to any and all subjects with at least one sibling. More specifically, she compares onlies to those from families of various sizes – *small* (two children), *medium* (three to four children), and large (five or more children). She also compares only children, or only-borns to first-borns and later-borns.<sup>70</sup>

Falbo looks at fourteen distinct facets of personality and development. She refers to them as *developmental outcomes* and they vary from occupational prestige and academic grades, to autonomy and extraversion. And, as I mentioned previously, she arranges them into five categories: achievement, adjustment, character, intelligence, and sociability.<sup>71</sup>

Falbo selected these particular developmental outcomes because they receive significant attention in the cited literature. She also chose them because they present an amazingly comprehensive delineation of the human psyche. In conjunction, these characteristics span the many facets of mental growth, personality, achievement, and interpersonal communication. They paint a picture of how one interprets their surroundings, how one see themselves in the fabric of these surroundings, and the ways in which they engage the world around them and the people in it. What I find so compelling about Falbo’s developmental outcomes is they bring objectivity and subjectivity under the same roof. They draw on tangible measures like educational attainment and standardized testing but they also rely on subjective perceptions gathered through careful observation, in-person interviews, and honest surveys.<sup>72</sup> In writing this piece, I’ve tried to strike a similar balance by delving into high-level, analytical sources as well as my own experiences and perspectives about these topics.

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<sup>70</sup> QR, 179. See section titled “Comparison Groups.”

<sup>71</sup> QR, 179. See section titled “Outcomes.”

<sup>72</sup> QR, 180. See table titled “Description of Developmental Outcomes.”

In this analysis, Falbo's investigation was twofold. She wanted to discover how onlies stack up with their peers from larger families when it comes to developmental outcomes, but she also wanted to shed light on the factors responsible for these results. She refers to the latter as *explanatory mechanisms* and in many ways they are the focal point of her research. Think of it like this: developmental outcomes are the effect and explanatory mechanisms are the cause. As she puts it, "there are many psychological and interpersonal explanations" for the results we see in scientific literature about only children, and "the most common of these can be synthesized into three basic explanatory mechanisms, [each of which] has been used to explain results across a broad range of developmental outcomes."<sup>73</sup>

The first of these is the *deprivation mechanism*, and it tends to be found in studies that depict onlies as disadvantaged relative to their non-only counterparts. This mechanism is centered around the notion that only children miss out on the "critical learning experiences" that siblings provide for one another. Studies that uphold the deprivation mechanism tend to assert that the absence of siblings brings about various behavioral and communication problems as well as mental deficiencies among only children.<sup>74</sup> In other words, the deprivation mechanism holds that only children are the way they are because they don't have siblings.

The *only child uniqueness mechanism* maintains that the experience of being an only child is fundamentally distinct because we don't really fit anywhere in the conventional birth order spectrum. We may have some things in common with first-borns and last-borns, but we cannot be classified as either. As only-borns we "are discontinuous from all others," including first-borns and those from smaller families, and this is why we are the way we are, for better and

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<sup>73</sup> QR, 177. See section titled "Status of Theory."

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

worse.<sup>75</sup> This mechanism tends to paint only children as “wild card[s]” in the sense that we aren’t “influenced by the sibling order that shapes other people.” We go through life without a point of reference that siblings have in one another. In her book, Lauren Sandler brings up an interesting point about this topic – a perspective shared by renowned scientist and MacArthur Fellow Frank Sulloway: only children have a propensity to “develop unusually multifaceted notions of themselves” due to the fact that they “aren’t habitually defining [themselves] against a sibling”.<sup>76</sup> Onlies are less likely to be reduced to the role of *athlete*, or *smart one*, or *popular one*, or *musician*, as siblings sometime are.

The last of these commonly cited explanatory mechanisms is the *parent-child relationship mechanism*, which as its name suggests, emphasizes the influence that a child’s relationship and interactions with parents has on the developmental outcomes he or she exhibits. This mechanism tends to guide studies centered around only children and first-borns, given the similar family construction they share; they both “share the experience of being their parents’ first child and at least for a limited time, both are the only child.”<sup>77</sup> And, because of these factors, many theorists maintain that only children and first-borns develop relationships with their parents that are unlike those of later-borns – relationships marked by higher levels of parental anxiety and attentiveness, which in turn lead to heightened internality, intellectual development, and achievement motivation among their respective children.<sup>78</sup>

In any scientific study or statistical model, it’s imperative that its architects look beyond the key variables they are investigating and consider other factors that have the potential to impact results. These extraneous variables are commonly referred to as confounds and they can

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Sandler, 95-96. Frank Sulloway studied at Harvard College and is currently a visiting Scholar in the Institute of Personality and Social Research, at the University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> QR, 177-178. See section titled “Status of Theory.”

have a tremendous influence on the interplay between independent and dependent variables within a model. When confounding variables are not accounted for, oversimplified correlations and fragmented theory can emerge. In the case of this analysis, we must recognize that there are factors other than explanatory mechanisms that impact the development of only children and their counterparts with siblings.<sup>79</sup> That is to say, Falbo's findings can be used to establish correlational relationships but not concrete, causal ones.

### **Falbo's Findings**

Now that we have a layman's look at the ins and outs of Falbo's analysis let's examine the results it yields and the broader implications of these findings. With regard to developmental outcomes, Falbo's analysis suggests that only children are by no means disadvantaged when compared to children with siblings. Across all five groupings – achievement, adjustment, character, intelligence, and sociability – onlies didn't lag behind any comparison groups, nor did they lag behind all non only-borns taken in conjunction. If anything, they fared better when it came to measures of intelligence and achievement – although, it is important to note that this inference only holds true in comparisons between only children and all non only-borns, only children and those from medium and large families, and only children and later-borns. First-borns and children from two-child families were indistinguishable from onlies in terms of intelligence and achievement. In fact, only children were indistinguishable from first-borns and those from small families across all five groupings, which was a major point of emphasis to come out of this analysis. With regard to measurements of character (this developmental grouping encompasses a host of attributes from autonomy and personal control to citizenship and

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<sup>79</sup> QR, 178. See section titled "Status of Theory."



maturity), onlies reported decidedly higher scores than those from large families.<sup>80</sup> Measures of sociability and adjustments were indistinguishable across all comparison groups.<sup>81</sup>

So, what can one infer from these developmental outcomes? Above all else, that the stereotypes surrounding only children have no grounding in scientific observation.<sup>82</sup> We're no more selfish, anxious, maladjusted, you name it, than individuals with siblings. Actually, this conglomeration of research shows that across several facets of personality, development, and aptitude only-borns are better off than those from families with three or more children.

I was not surprised by any of Falbo's findings pertaining to developmental outcomes; I suspected that extensive scientific analysis wouldn't uphold the disparaging stereotypes about only children. When I think about my experience as an only and those of other only children I know, the word "disadvantaged" has never come to mind. I've always speculated that, in the aggregate, onlies possess sharp intellects and achieve at a high level given we tend to be brought up in adult-oriented environments. When I picked up this study for the first time and read through the list of developmental outcomes, I thought it might be possible that only children lag behind when it comes to adjustment and sociability because we grow up without other children in the house, but I was relieved to find that we aren't deficient in either of these areas.

As I mentioned previously, Falbo's impetus in carrying out this project was two-fold: to investigate the status of the only child and to guide theory development in this area. Results surrounding developmental outcomes give her readers insight into the status of onlies but they're only part of the theoretical equation. In the framework of this analysis, developmental outcomes give us tangible results about only children and their counterparts, but taken by themselves they can only give so much insight into the factors that bring about these results. Developmental

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<sup>80</sup> QR, 180. See table titled "Description of Developmental Outcomes."

<sup>81</sup> QR, 181. See section titled "Developmental Outcomes."

<sup>82</sup> QR, 182. See section titled "Discussion."

outcomes tell us *what*. *What* the results are, *what* the effects are. But, they don't really tell us *why*. And, that's where explanatory mechanisms come into the picture. Explanatory mechanisms are the basis for theory development in this area. They ask *why*. *Why* do only children and those from multiple-child families exhibit the developmental outcomes they do? Is there something inherently unique about being an only that explains *why* many are the way they are? Three popular explanatory mechanisms have emerged in only child scholarship, and in this piece, Falbo puts all three to the test. She delves into the rationale behind each mechanism and uses pertinent data to determine which, if any, provide sound reason for why onlies exhibit the traits they do.<sup>83</sup> I find these explanatory mechanisms and the schools of thought surrounding them fascinating – together they capture the many facets of life as an only child. It was eye opening to contemplate my upbringing and recent experiences as an only through the lens of each of these mechanisms, and equally intriguing to uncover which theories ring true in light of pertinent data.

### **Import of Siblings**

Falbo's analysis and its constituent literature discredits two of the three explanatory mechanisms – the deprivation mechanism and only child uniqueness mechanism.<sup>84</sup> To reiterate, the former holds that because only children grow up without a sibling in the house they miss out on vital learning experiences, which can bring about various behavioral and developmental setbacks. Theorists whose work falls in this camp hold that larger families make for a more robust learning environment because siblings are able to learn from and teach one another. First-borns and older siblings are in a position to impart important lessons to their younger siblings –

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<sup>83</sup> QR, 182. See section titled "Discussion."

<sup>84</sup> QR, 182-183. See section titled "Explanatory Mechanisms."

practical lessons their brothers or sisters may not learn as readily in a formal educational setting. Consequently, later-borns are able to observe their older siblings and gather, consciously and subconsciously alike, critical insights about behaving and communicating in more mature contexts.

Based on the literature I've read about only children, one of the most common reasons parents cite for choosing to have more children is the well-being of the children they already have.<sup>85</sup> Many parents are compelled to have a second or third or fourth child for the sake of their other children, and I can certainly see the merit here. As Lauren Sander so eloquently puts it in her book, "one of America's most successful exports has been the cultural assertion that joyful families are big families." For decades, American television, film, and literature have influenced our perceptions about family dynamics and have championed the notion that a larger family makes for a happier, more exciting home.<sup>86</sup> When I have asked my mom (incidentally, an only herself) whether she and my dad wanted to have another child after me, she has always offered up a similar answer: *Yes. Absolutely. We thought having a sibling or two would make your life more full. And, when we passed on you children would have one another.* I have considered both of these things throughout my life and have thought about the latter more in recent years. It is hard for me to imagine my world without my parents; when they go, there will be no one else in my life who has known me in the same capacity – no one who has been with me from the very start. I know that will be very tough for me just as it will be for my mother when her parents pass. It is saddening to think about being the sole survivor in the immediate family and having to carry on the family history alone. Sometimes I wonder what it will be like to care for my

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<sup>85</sup> QR, 177. See section titled "Prejudice Against Only Borns."

<sup>86</sup> Sandler, 6.

parents in their waning years. Will that be even tougher to go through without a brother or sister by my side?

Most parents, in our country and around the globe, go on to have at least one more child after their first and in many cases their rationale is children, plural, entail a stronger sense of companionship. That is the reason I have longed for a sibling at points in my life. A brother to play catch with. A sister to hang out with on vacation. Another place setting at the dinner table. For many parents I think this notion of companionship extends beyond the idea of simply having at least two children so they can keep each other company. It's about creating a richer and more stimulating environment. Sibling relationships present an opportunity for self-betterment, and a means of learning how to relate to others and manage conflicts.

The data gathered in Falbo's meta analysis, however, paints a divergent picture of the role siblings play in one another's development; when it comes to an individual's intellect and level of achievement, growing up without siblings is by no means disadvantageous. In fact, only children scored significantly higher in these two developmental groupings than their counterparts from families with three or more children.<sup>87</sup> When I was younger

### **The Power of Peers**

There are a number of suppositions as to why a lack of siblings isn't necessarily a setback when it comes to emotional growth and intellectual development. One of the most prevalent of these assertions is that children without siblings can just as easily learn valuable life lessons from

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<sup>87</sup> QR, 182-183.

their peers.<sup>88</sup> That being said, this assertion hinges on the provision that onlies are provided with ample opportunities to socialize with their peers throughout their formative years.

A person spends much of his or her young life at home in the company of family – particularly in their preschool and elementary years. Because only children don't have siblings, we inherently have fewer opportunities to interact with other young people at home. We spend a good deal of time alone and most of our interactions within the household setting involve either one or both of our parents. While these adult-oriented interactions are extremely valuable, it's imperative that parents of only children ensure their child has ample social outlets outside of the household setting – youth sports teams, Sunday school, birthday parties, music ensembles, play dates. The list goes on, and each of these milieus give only-borns the opportunity to engage with people their own age and further develop their social skills and emotional intelligence.

I have spoken to my parents about this topic numerous times before, and they've always reiterated the same thing. From the time I was very young they felt it was extremely important to make sure they were exposing me to a whole host of social settings. Part of that meant including me in exchanges with *their* peers so I could learn how to communicate with and conduct myself around adults. And, part of that meant getting me out of the house and putting me in settings where I could socialize with *my* peers in one way or another.

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<sup>88</sup> Sandler, 65-66. In 2004, Ohio State University's Douglas Dewey published a study titled "Playing Well with Others in Kindergarten: The Benefits of Siblings at Home," in which he asked kindergarten teachers to evaluate the sociability of their students. He recorded reliable differences between only-borns and subjects with at least one sibling and came to the conclusion that siblings benefit one another by playing the role of "social practice partners at home." Several years later he published an addendum to his initial study, which led him to change his tune. In this supplemental analysis he extended the scope of his research to include middle school and high school students as well. When he compared the social skills of onlies and non-onlies within this new sample population he found no reliable differences. To him, this indicated that social and behavioral deficiencies exhibited by only children during their younger years tend to dissipate as they mature and climb the educational ladder. These findings indicated that siblings play a rather minor role in one another's social education.

Growing up as an only can be lonely at times with no sister to torture or brother to play catch with. I spent a good deal of time alone as a child – as many only children do – reading books and children’s magazines, riding my bike around the neighborhood, and building streamlined vehicles and grand structures with Legos and Lincoln Logs. There certainly were times when I felt bored and somewhat isolated, but I never felt a lack of companionship in my life and I owe that to my mom and dad. They always made sure I was spending time with other kiddos. My mom would call my friends’ moms to set up play dates. My parents opened up our house for slumber parties on weekends. For years, my mom and dad drove me to and from rec basketball games, soccer tournaments, and choir rehearsals. At the start of each season my mom and I would sit at the kitchen bar and fan through the Bexley Recreation Department catalog, earmarking day camps, swimming lessons, and other exciting activities.

Many of my earliest memories are of play dates I had – sometimes with just one friend, other times with a whole group of buddies. It was through these experiences that I gathered, consciously and subconsciously, how to socialize with people my own age. Looking back on these years, I recognize each one of my close friends gave me something unique, taught me how to navigate our shared social fabric. These relationships were a central part of my social education, and to this day I attribute much of my intellectual and emotional growth to the intimate friendships I’ve forged thus far. As an only, my close friendships have taken on tremendous importance in my life – they are everything to me, much the way I imagine a sibling would be. I’m convinced that these people and my relationships with them taught me the lessons I would have otherwise learned from a brother or a sister of my own, and I’m confident Falbo and many of her colleagues would agree.

My friend Jake, who moved to Buffalo, New York the spring before we started high school, has been a friend of mine longer than anyone else in my life. We don't see much of each other anymore, given the fact that our homes are hundreds of miles apart and our respective colleges are even farther from one another, but growing up we were always doing stuff together.

It was with Jake I came to understand how to go about the delicate art of ribbing. He has about three inches on me now, but from the time we were five to the time we were eleven, I was taller and bigger. I was pushier and more adventurous too, and these traits of mine caused tension between us for a long time.

His family had a top-of-the-line basketball hoop at the end of his driveway. For a six-year-old kid, playing out there under the glow of his garage lights was like playing at a packed Madison Square Garden. At least that's what I thought, and whenever I went to Jake's house I would ask him to play a game of Horse or one-on-one. More often than not his answer was "no." At the time, I clearly didn't understand his point of view; why would he want to take to the court with someone who was bigger, stronger, more athletic, and on top of that overly competitive and rather domineering? Playing basketball wasn't as much of a priority for Jake and it was hard for me to come to terms with that.

I didn't look at these exchanges from his perspective and that is essential if one wants to dabble in a little bit of banter. More so, that's essential if one wants to be a good friend. As I got older I became better at reading Jake's signals. That is to say, I became more cognizant of his state of mind and whether or not a little banter was in order. There is a big difference between engaging in a little banter and pushing someone's buttons, and in many ways my relationship with Jake helped me internalize the difference between the two.

Based on conversations I've had with friends of mine who are siblings and common depictions in television, literature, and film, it seems that many sibling relationships entail raillery in some capacity. Whether it takes place between brothers, between sisters, or across gender-lines these interchanges help children develop a thicker skin and teach them, from a young age, how to "dish it out" in a lighthearted manner. For me, this social education didn't take place under my roof but rather in the company of Jake and some of my other close friends.

My friend Isaac and I spent many afternoons together tearing around the neighborhood on our rollerblades, skateboards, bikes, you name it. He moved to Rochester, New York around the time we were wrapping up elementary school, but in the four or five years we spent together he had a tremendous influence on me – on the person I was becoming, on the way I saw the world around me.

Isaac pushed me out of my comfort zone and urged me to take risks. And, while I've had several friends like that since, he was the first. In more ways than one, Isaac was to me what I was to Jake. Isaac was more assertive and more adventurous. He took more risks and he was also quite a bit ahead of me on the social learning curve. Perhaps it was because he was one of the older kids in our grade or because he had a lot of friends who were older than we. Whatever the reason, when it came to topics like sex, drinking, or cursing, Isaac was more versed than I, and a lot of other kids our age. He exposed me to things that I wasn't learning in the company of my parents, and while some of these things probably could have waited until I was a bit older, my time spent with Isaac was educational nonetheless. He gave me a little nudge in the direction of what lay ahead. He pushed me upwards on the social learning curve much the way many older siblings do for their younger siblings.



Isaac and Jake are two close friends among several who shaped my younger years. I was fortunate enough to grow up in a centralized suburban area – a small landlocked town on the near east side of Columbus. Nearly all of my close friends lived either a short drive or a quick bicycle ride away from my house, which made it easy to connect with them. In 1998, psychologist Patricia Nachman published a book titled *You and Your Only Child*, wherein she discusses how a child's proximity to their friends and other children impacts his or her socialization and well-being. She asserts that close proximity is key when it comes to childhood friendships, particularly among only children.<sup>89</sup>

### **School as a Socializing Agent**

Another key supposition as to why growing up without siblings is not disadvantageous when it comes to intellectual and emotional growth is that all children, including onlies, readily learn valuable lessons and take part in formative experiences at school. As I mentioned previously, when I was young my mother and father felt it was one of their upmost responsibilities as parents of an only child to put me in settings where I would be surrounded by my peers. So, when the time came for them to start thinking about enrolling me in preschool, there wasn't much discussion about holding me back another year. I was itching to spend more time with people my own age and my parents recognized that I had reached the point where I would really benefit intellectually and socially from being in that environment. Numerous psychologists, teachers, and administrators hold that school serves as an equalizing force, in that it is a collaborative learning environment where all children receive necessary instruction and develop important skills. Jean-Claude Brizard, a career educator who has served as the superintendent of the Rochester City School District and the Chief Executive Officer of Chicago

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<sup>89</sup> Sandler, 41.

Public Schools, has always been guided by the belief that “education is the great equalizer” in American society; “when we empower teachers and principals and give them freedom and flexibility to drive real change in students' lives, then our schools can and do fulfill their fundamental promise to be gateways to opportunity.”<sup>90</sup>

For nearly all of our young lives, essentially from the time of our oldest memories to the closing semesters of our journey through higher education, we spend much of our days in school. Formal education plays a tremendous role in our socialization. By teaching children to look beyond themselves, school hampers selfishness. This is a recurring theme in the publications of child and adolescent psychologist Carl Pickhardt. He posits that only children tend to be really good “attention getters” because they receive “so much attention” from their parents, but that it is imperative that they are put in social settings where they are part of something larger so they learn to be good “attention givers.” School is an ideal environment in that children quickly gather the consequences of “outsized egocentrism.”<sup>91</sup>

In educational settings we gain knowledge and wisdom through interactions with our peers and teachers alike, both of which supplement the lessons we learn from our parents. When it comes down to it, a school is a far more diverse setting than any household. A student body, no matter how homogeneous it may seem, spans so many different walks of life, so many different upbringings, and so many different perspectives. When we’re immersed in educational settings we learn some of life’s most valuable lessons. We learn how to communicate with and relate to many different types of people. We learn how to look at ideas and arguments from points of view that may be wildly different from our own.

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<sup>90</sup> Brizard, Jean-Claude. Education Is the Great Equalizer. *The Huffington Post*. 2014. Web. 9 Jan. 2014.

<sup>91</sup> Sandler, 60.

## **An Incomparable Existence?**

Falbo's findings also refute the only child uniqueness mechanism, which again asserts that the experience of being an only child is inherently unique because we don't really fit anywhere in the conventional birth order spectrum. Across all five developmental groupings only children were effectively indistinguishable from first-borns and subjects with just one sibling – this is one of the most important assertions to come out of this analysis.<sup>92</sup> Because these three comparison groups displayed commensurate developmental outcomes, this implies that the absence of siblings is not a totalizing variable when it comes to personality development and intellectual growth.<sup>93</sup>

Put simply, this finding conveys that only children have a lot in common with first-borns and those from two-child families. When I place this in the context of my own life it rings true. Most of my friends are eldest siblings, middle children, or only-borns in their respective families. In fact, I don't think any of my close friends are last-borns. I would consider myself an old soul – emotionally stable, wise, and responsible – and am drawn to people who exhibit these characteristics. And, the reality is, some of these friends have siblings and some do not.

For Falbo, this finding evoked a critical question: if siblings are not dominant players when it comes to shaping the developmental outcomes of an individual, than who are? In answering this question, Falbo shifts her attention to another key relationship within the nuclear family unit – the relationship between parents and their children.<sup>94</sup> This ultimately brought the focus of her analysis into the realm of the third popular explanatory mechanism – the parent-child relationship mechanism.

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<sup>92</sup> QR, 182-183. See section titled "Explanatory Mechanisms."

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> QR, 183.

## **Parent-Child Relationships and Their Influence on Development**

Falbo comes to the conclusion that the most important relationship within the immediate family unit – when it comes to a subject’s emotional maturation and intellectual growth – is that between said subject and his or her parents.<sup>95</sup> The parent-child relationship mechanism is the only explanatory mechanism upheld by her analysis. This mechanism revolves around the role parents play in their children’s intellectual and emotional growth, specifically the ways in which parent-child relationships impact developmental outcomes. Often, this mechanism is found in scientific literature that paints only children, first-borns, and those from smaller families in a more positive light than their peers.<sup>96</sup> A number of theorists assert that these three demographics tend to have upbringings that are marked by more fruitful, adult relationships with their parents, which consequently give rise to a host of desirable traits, such as stronger communication skills, more mature behavioral patterns, and higher levels of intelligence and motivation.<sup>97</sup>

In more ways than one, this mechanism becomes the focal point of Falbo’s study and her endorsement of the parent-child relationship mechanism has and will continue to inform research about birth order and family size. In essence, she shifted the psychological dialogue about only children away from the implications of growing up with or without siblings and toward the centrality of parenting. At the time of its publication this meta analysis was truly groundbreaking – just as Norman Fenton’s study had been some sixty years earlier. Fenton postulated that life as an only child is in no way a disadvantageous one, and is actually advantageous in some respects. Falbo reiterated Fenton’s findings and the findings of dozens of other researchers in her meta-analysis; moreover she carried the conversation surrounding only

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<sup>95</sup> QR, 183-184.

<sup>96</sup> QR, 177-178. See section titled “Status of Theory.”

<sup>97</sup> QR, 183. See section titled “Parent-Child Relationship of Firstborns and People From Small Families.”

children into new territory by deducing *why* onlies exhibit the developmental, intellectual, and emotional traits they do.

Within her analysis, Falbo uses two frameworks to test the validity of the parent-child relationship mechanism, wherein she compares developmental outcomes and parent-child relationships of only- and first-borns with one another, and with those of other comparison groups.<sup>98</sup> Taken together, the results from these two analytical frameworks make a compelling case for smaller nuclear families. That is to say, the data suggests that parent-child dynamics are decidedly more constructive in single-child households and families with two children. Across most developmental outcomes only children and first-borns surpassed all other comparison groups. They also reported better relationships with their parents, and this correlation tells us that the developmental outcomes onlies and first-borns exhibit likely have a lot to do with the similar family construction they share (for at least some period of time, both share the experience of being the only child in the house), and consequently how they are parented (both are their respective parent's first child).<sup>99 100</sup>

In Falbo's analysis and much of its constituent literature we see a rather consistent narrative surrounding parent-child relationships in smaller families. Reported data conveys that only-borns, first-borns, and those from two-child families are brought up in a home environment that is quite disparate than that of large families. Falbo asserts that smaller households feature a distinct parent-child dynamic – one that is marked by a few key threads, each of which give rise to the developmental outcomes exhibited by these comparison groups. In one and two-child

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<sup>98</sup> QR, 180-181. See sections titled "Explanatory Mechanisms."

<sup>99</sup> QR, 182-184. See sections titled "Explanatory Mechanisms" and "Parent-Child Relationship of Firstborns and People From Small Families."

<sup>100</sup> QR, 180-181, 183. See sections titled "Explanatory Mechanisms" and "Explanatory Mechanisms."

families, parents are more anxious about childrearing, children receive more attention, and the family climate is more cerebral and adult.<sup>101</sup>

### **First-Time Parents: A More Responsive Approach to Childrearing**

The first of these defining characteristics of small families Falbo and her colleagues point to is the inexperience that comes with being a first-time parent. Only children and first-borns are their respective parents' first shot at raising a child, and for this reason, these parents tend to approach the child rearing process with a heightened level of anxiety. I myself can't even begin to imagine the stress that comes with raising a child. And, it doesn't seem like something that would really get that much easier after having more children, but literature on the topic does in fact reveal that seasoned parents are markedly less anxious when it comes to raising their children.<sup>102</sup>

Falbo and a host of other theorists hold that this heightened anxiety has a tremendous impact on the manner in which many onlies and first-borns are parented, and in turn how they develop. Perhaps the most widely held view is that this lack of experience and anxiety among parents motivates them to be more responsive to and "have high-quality interactions with their children," both of which contribute to desirable character and intellectual development.<sup>103</sup> My mother and her mother, both of whom are parents of just one child, have always been quick to point out that there is a high level of self-inflicted pressure that comes with parenting an only. *There are no do-overs. You don't have the luxury of being able to draw from past experiences and mistakes.*

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<sup>101</sup> QR, 183-184. See section titled "Parent-Child Relationship of Firstborns and People From Small Families."

<sup>102</sup> QR, 183. See sub-section titled "Anxiety."

<sup>103</sup> QR, 183. See section titled "Parent-Child Relationship of Firstborns and People From Small Families."

In a study published in 1984, Falbo investigated parent-child relationships from several different vantage points and came to the conclusion that heightened anxiety and responsiveness among first-time parents has a considerable impact on how only- and first-borns come to view the implications of their actions. She centered her discussion around a key theory of modern psychology – locus of control, which was conceptualized by psychologist Julian Rotter in the mid twentieth century.<sup>104</sup> A practical manifestation of behaviorist thought, this theory is a staple of personality psychology.<sup>105</sup> In short, one's locus of control is the extent to which they believe they have control over what happens in their life. Like many theories regarding personality, locus of control is spectral in nature, which is to say that an individual's locus, or location, will fall somewhere between the *external* and *internal* end of the spectrum. Those who embrace the notion that they have little control over the events in their life are said to have an external locus of control. They hold the perspective that their trajectory is governed primarily by external forces. On the other hand, individuals with an internal locus of control approach the world with a more inward-looking perspective; they hold that events in their lives are brought about by their actions rather than elements outside their control.<sup>106</sup>

Locus of control is closely tied to many elements of personality, and depending where an individual falls on the spectrum they may be more or less likely to exhibit particular personality and intellectual traits. Responsibility and accountability are closely tied to the concept of locus of control, and they are also major points of emphasis within the character grouping of Falbo's developmental analysis –along with a myriad of other traits like leadership, personal control,

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<sup>104</sup> QR, 183. See sub-section titled "Anxiety."

<sup>105</sup> Haslam, Nick. *Introduction to Personality and Intelligence*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2007. 131.

<sup>106</sup> Haslam, 132.

autonomy, maturity, and cooperativeness.<sup>107</sup> When one considers what it means to have an internal locus of control, it's easy to see why this deep-seated perspective gives rise to many of the aforementioned characteristics. For example, those with an internal locus of control tend to have a strong sense of self and a high capacity for leadership. Those who fit this mold have a deep understanding of the abilities they possess and how they can best utilize these abilities to impact positive change within their environment. When push comes to shove, they look inward and place little weight on factors that are outside of their control. Those with an internal locus of control have a propensity to engage their surroundings, their friends, and their coworkers in a responsible and proactive manner. By nature, those who fall on the internal span of the spectrum tend to be governed by a strong sense of accountability and describe themselves as “active... achieving...[and] independent.” There is even evidence to suggest that those with an internal orientation are more proactive about their health – more likely to kick a smoking habit, exhibit preventative dental behavior, practice effective birth control, and use a seat belt while driving.<sup>108</sup>

That being said, because many onlies have an inward-looking approach, at times we can be hard on ourselves. That has certainly been the case for me and for other only children I know. For example, in group-oriented academic and athletic endeavors I have a tendency to look at shortfalls through an overly individualized lens. That is to say, if my lacrosse team loses a game or a group project I was a part of generates a poor grade, I have a propensity to place the weight of that defeat on my shoulders – not the entirety of that weight, but a disproportionate amount. I often fail to account for factors beyond my control that contributed to a shortfall, such as the effort and performance of my teammates, and this can be a self-destructive predisposition.

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<sup>107</sup> QR, 180. See table titled “Description of Developmental Outcomes.”

<sup>108</sup> Corsini, Raymond. *Encyclopedia of Psychology: Second Edition*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1994. 348.



In her 1984 study, Falbo asserted that only children and first-borns are more likely to develop an internal locus of control due to highly reactive approach to childrearing taken by many first-time parents. Her rationale was as follows: because these parents tend to react more promptly and more frequently to their child's actions – in the form of praise and punishment alike – their children are more likely to “develop the belief that their behavior causes their parents' reactions than are children whose behaviors go unnoticed and therefore unrewarded or unpunished.”<sup>109</sup> And, with no other children in the house – for at least some period of time – only-borns and first-borns receive their parents' undivided attention.<sup>110</sup> They develop an undiluted conception of the relationship between their behavior and the reactions of their parents, and thus from a young age quickly come to internalize the meaning and weight of their actions.

Falbo's contention about only children and locus of control is upheld by the findings of several other researchers, including that of West Virginia University's A. P. MacDonald. In 1971, he carried out a study wherein he investigated the correlational relationship between birth order and various personality traits. He looked at two separate samples, the second of which was comprised of 476 undergraduate students at West Virginia University.<sup>111</sup> In this sample population he tested specifically for measures of social responsibility and locus of control (as well as other characteristics that I will not go into here). His findings are quite telling, and in more ways than one support the assertions of Falbo pertaining to this topic. Only-borns scored the highest when it came to social responsibility, followed closely by first-borns; later-borns

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<sup>109</sup> QR, 183. See sub-section titled “Anxiety.”

<sup>110</sup> QR, 183-184. See section titled “Parent-Child Relationship of Firstborns and People From Small Families.”

<sup>111</sup> MacDonald, A. P. “Birth Order and Personality.” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 36.2 (1971): 171-172. Data and a short personal history was collected from each of the students. 210 of the students were male and the remaining 266 were female. The sample population included 53 only children, 168 first-borns, and 255 later-borns.

reported the lowest scores.<sup>112</sup> With regard to measures of locus of control, which were gathered using Julian Rotter's Internal-External Locus of Control Scale, we see a similar progression; later-borns tended to be more external than first-borns and "significantly more so than only children."<sup>113</sup> Put simply, MacDonald found that only children tended to exhibit a more internal locus of control than later-borns, as well as higher measures of social responsibility – a correlation clearly rooted in more than just coincidence.

### **Responsibility and Reciprocity**

I would venture to say that anyone who grew up with a sibling has at one point or another found themselves deadlocked in a heated blame game. I have never experienced this inter-sibling beef myself, but I've seen it countless times in the company of my friends and cousins, and I've seen enough episodes of *Modern Family* and *Arthur* in my day to have a good idea of how these things tend to go. A typical scene might sound a little something like this:

*"Now which one of you boys forgot to put a new roll of toilet paper in the powder room, because I know your father sure as hell didn't?"*

*"It was Joe, Mom. I haven't used that bathroom all day."*

*"Liar! I saw you go in there last night, Bill."*

*"Did not. If you're so sure why don't you go wipe it down for fingerprints?"*

*"Maybe I will."*

*"Fine."*

*"Well, if there's not a fresh roll in there before your father gets home from work, neither of you are watching the basketball game tonight."*

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<sup>112</sup> MacDonald, 173. See section titled "Results." These findings were based on a 22-item true-false text.

<sup>113</sup> MacDonald, 172-173. See sections titled "Method" and "Results."

*“Rock-Paper-Scissors?”*

I’ve found myself in situations like these before, but never with a brother or sister of my own. As an only, there is no scapegoat in the house, and therefore at a young age we come to realize that we alone must bear the consequences of the decisions we make. That’s not to say that children in larger families don’t learn these lessons, because they do. But, having other siblings in the house can make it tempting to pass one’s responsibilities or mistakes onto them. This is a notion that Dr. John Cacioppo, the current director of the University of Chicago’s Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience, has touched on time and time again in his research. Cacioppo is a pioneer in the budding field of social neuroscience, which “seeks to understand the psychological and biological bases of social behavior,” more specifically, how “biological systems produce our thoughts, feelings, and actions toward other people,” and “conversely, how [] our social experiences affect the brain, body, and physical health.”<sup>114</sup>

Much of his research delves into family dynamics and the influence they have on cognitive and behavioral development in children. He asserts that sibling interactions have the potential to perpetuate a “that’s mine” attitude among children, which often manifests itself in the form of immature and irresponsible behavior. In single-child households, however, children tend to be more in tune with their parents’ interactions and thus learn how to conduct themselves in a mature and ethical manner. Because onlies grow up mimicking and reciprocating the behavior of their parents and not another child, from a young age they come to develop a strong sense of responsibility and accountability. Growing up in an adult-oriented environment leads only children to see their surroundings and relationships in a more mature light. In Cacioppo’s

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<sup>114</sup> What is Social Neuroscience? *Social Neuroscience at New York University*. Web. 10 Jan. 2014.

own words: as an only “you know you can’t exploit other kids, you know you have to attend to other people, and you tend to take a greater responsibility within those relationships.”<sup>115</sup>

In many ways, Cacioppo’s assertions about sibling interactions parallel those of Toni Falbo, whose research has indicated that only children and those from small families are more likely to develop an internal locus of control than later-borns. She points out that from a very young age only children, first-borns, and those from two-child families begin to conceptualize a causal relationship between their actions and the ensuing implications.<sup>116</sup> And her data shows that this heightened internality tends to really pay off when it comes to emotional and intellectual development. In the framework of her analysis, these three comparison groups exhibited more desirable developmental outcomes across several groupings than later-borns and those from families with three or more children.<sup>117</sup>

Throughout our lives one of the most common processes by which we learn is operant conditioning; in our early years this learning is most often carried out by our parents. Conceptualized by psychologist B. F. Skinner in the late 1930s, operant conditioning is a process by which we attach meaning to and exhibit certain behaviors depending on the responses they evoke. Skinner asserts, “behavior is conditioned or ‘shaped’ by its consequences.” If an individual’s behavior is met with punishment, he or she will be less likely to exhibit that particular behavior in the future. If an individual’s behavior is reinforced, he or she will be more prone to exhibit said behavior in the future.<sup>118</sup>

In my early years, if I made a big stride while learning to read or did something thoughtful for someone else I was met with praise from my parents. Conversely, if I called a

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<sup>115</sup> Sandler, 61.

<sup>116</sup> QR, 183. See section titled “Parent-Child Relationship of Firstborns and People From Small Families.”

<sup>117</sup> QR, 181. See section titled “Developmental Outcomes.”

<sup>118</sup> Bjork, Daniel. *B. F. Skinner: A Life*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993. 106-107.

friend a name during a play date or lied to my parents I was met with a punishment. It is through this process that I began to learn right from wrong and attach meaning and weight to my actions. It was also through this process that we began to grasp the concepts of responsibility and accountability.

In my case this conditioning was prompt and consistent. My parents reacted to my behavior, good and bad, in an expeditious fashion; with no other children to watch over there was little to distract them from what I was up to. I had two sets of eyes and two sets of ears on me whenever the three of us were together. And, when it came to praise and punishment, there weren't disparate standards for them to keep track of – my parents handled my behavior in a consistent manner.<sup>119</sup> Delving into the theories of B. F. Skinner and Julian Rotter has greatly informed my conceptions about why many onlies and first-borns I know exhibit a heightened level of accountability. Among other intervening factors, it's the product of growing up under particularly watchful eyes.

It's hard for me to believe that any sibling can grasp the experience of being the only kid at the dinner table, the only kid in the backseat of the car, the only kid with a report card on the fridge. Some may experience that for a few short years after their older brother or sister goes away to college, but never in the same capacity as an only child. There is a certain level of accountability that comes with being an only.

Earlier this spring I was eating dinner with two friends of mine, Brian and Mark, both of whom have older brothers. They are both from two-child families – Mark's brother is three years older than he and Brian's two. Toward the end of the meal Mark asked me how my thesis was going, and that gave way to a larger discussion between the three of us about birth order,

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<sup>119</sup> On page 48, Sandler points to the difficulties that come with parenting multiple children: "In families with more children, different allegiances are formed, different rules are enforced, and family crises are experienced at different developmental stages."

sibling relationships, and family dynamics. They each offered their thoughts about growing up as a younger sibling. It was illuminating, but there was one point they made that really stood out for me. When I asked them what it was like to grow up with an older brother in the house, they both said – almost in unison – “having an older brother takes all the pressure off.” I guess I wasn’t surprised that they raised this idea, but I did find it interesting that for both of them that was the first thing that came to mind when asked what it is like to grow up with an older sibling. And, I found their choice of words quite intriguing, and far more plain and direct than what I had encountered in a handful academic sources. They didn’t say, “having an older brother takes *some* of the pressure off,” or “having an older brother takes *most* of the pressure off.” They both used the word “all,” and as they expanded on this idea it became clear they weren’t being hyperbolic for effect.

Around the time they were starting junior high they each began to notice their relationship with their respective parents was different than the relationship their folks had with their brothers. Brian and Mark both felt that their parents gave them more rope than their older sibling. That is, if they did something they shouldn’t have – stayed out past curfew or went out drinking with friends – in almost every case, their brother had done it before, and Brian and Mark were met with a noticeably less severe punishment. In situations where both they and their brothers had acted up, the blame almost always went to their brothers. Their parents placed more responsibility on the shoulders of their brothers given the fact that they were older and ought to have known better.

Not only did their parents give them more rope when it came to their behavior, Mark and Brian also relayed to me that their parents have always seemed to connect with them in a more relaxed manner. Whether it was the college application process, school, or learning to drive their

parents had a more hands-off approach with them than they did with their older brother. They found this dynamic empowering but pointed out that at times they have longed for the heightened sense of accountability present in their brother's relationship with their parents.

After they had said their piece about growing up with an older sibling I asked them what they thought it might be like to grow up as an only child. Their response was just as unanimous: "a lot of pressure."

As mentioned earlier, a host of studies have shown that first-time parents are typically more anxious about child rearing. In some families, I'm sure this manifests itself in the form of more stressful parent/child interactions, but for other families, including my own, I think this underlying anxiety takes on a more constructive form.

When I think about my relationship with my parents, now and in years past, the word congruence comes to the forefront of my mind. My parents and I have always seen eye to eye on most things. There are not smoke and mirrors in our household, and I imagine that is the case in many smaller families, particularly those with just one child. There's a strong sense of reciprocity that permeates my relationship with my parents and I think that is a product of both the size of our family and an underlying current of diligence we share.

The balance of power in a single-child family is an interesting phenomenon. With no other children in the house, onlies are "always outnumbered [and] always outgunned" by their parents – there is "no strength in numbers."<sup>120</sup> Nicole Campione-Barr, a psychologist whose areas of focus are family relationships and adolescent development, posits "parental authority is especially inescapable for only children."<sup>121</sup> I can say with confidence that this "top-heavy" familial structure has shaped my relationship with my parents and my development for the better.

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<sup>120</sup> Sandler, 46.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

When I was younger, I pushed back against my parents. Whether that entailed whining about having to go to church on Sunday mornings or refusing to turn off the television after they had asked me to go to bed, I did test the waters pretty regularly. But, around the time I was starting junior high school, I began to realize that there was little to gain from going against the wishes of my parents. With no other kids in the house and no precedents with regard to misbehavior, my behavior was met with my parents' full attention. When I screwed up there was no one there to take the fall with me. I had come to the realization that my parents had all the leverage in our family. This is the reality for only children, and at times it can be tough to come to terms with.

In my teens, my parents and I hardly ever clashed – early on we seemed to reach an unspoken agreement. They knew I had developed a strong moral compass and didn't have any intention of getting on their bad side. And, I recognized that they had no intention of playing the role of dictators unless they felt it was necessary. Our relationship was marked by a high level of trust and accountability. I didn't tell my parents everything that was going on in my life, but for the most part we were on the same page, and I found that empowering. I could tell that our relationship was adult even at a time when I didn't really even know what it was to be an adult. They were the supreme authority in the house, which I never questioned, but in our interactions I saw them more as equals. Lauren Sandler brings up an important point in her book, and that is that parents with multiple children tend to take a more authoritarian tack when it comes to raising their children, which makes sense given the fact they have more children to keep an eye on as well as inter-sibling tensions to manage.<sup>122</sup> If I had siblings to deflect the attention of my parents or to share the weight of a punishment, I may have stirred the pot more. But, I don't and

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<sup>122</sup> Sandler, 81-82.



therefore I have always felt compelled to uphold the sense of accountability that permeates our relationship.

Falbo asserts that first-time parents tend to parent in a more anxious manner. Based on my experiences, I think “diligence” might be a more fitting term than “anxiety.” Anxiety carries a connotation of stress, and while I’m sure my parents were anxious throughout the process of raising me, it was never palpable to me. They have always been attentive to my ideas and my behavior, and have approached our relationship in an amazingly conscientious manner. I think a lot of that stems from me being their first-child. And, once it became evident that I would be their only, this underlying current of diligence only grew stronger. It was clear to me that they wanted to do the best possible job they could in raising me and this had a huge impact on how I’ve come to view our relationship and my place in the family. From a young age, I have felt a strong sense of responsibility as their first and only child. They have always had high expectations of me, and I have always had an underlying desire to meet and exceed these expectations – for myself and for them.

## **High Expectations**

Research shows that first-time parents tend to have higher (sometimes unrealistic) expectations of their children, which has certainly been the case for me and for many other only children and first-borns I know. In 1980, psychologists Kathryn Waddell and Jessica Ball conducted a study in which they found that first-time parents tended to “underestimate the time it takes for a child to be toilet trained, speak a complete sentence, or sleep continuously through the night.”<sup>123</sup> A number of theorists have posited that these elevated expectations placed on only-

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<sup>123</sup> QR, 183. See section titled “Parent-Child Relationship of Firstborns and People From Small Families.”

borns, first-borns, and those from small families, in turn facilitate higher levels of achievement motivation among these demographics.<sup>124</sup>

Achievement motivation or need for achievement can be defined as “a social form of motivation involving a competitive drive to meet standards of excellence” – an individual’s aspirations to reach considerable goals and experience a sense of accomplishment.<sup>125</sup> The extent of one’s need for achievement is a defining facet of personality and can have considerable bearing on the trajectory of their educational and professional career; in the framework of Falbo’s analysis we see a positive correlation between achievement motivation and measures of occupational prestige and educational attainment among only children and those from small families.<sup>126</sup>

Growing up, the weight of my parents’ expectations was placed squarely on my shoulders, and only my shoulders. They had high expectations of me when it came to school and other intellectual pursuits, as well as my responsibilities around the house; I’m confident I was doing my own laundry before many of my peers even knew the difference between permanent press and a delicate cycle. My parents encouraged me to challenge myself in middle school and high school and readily encouraged me to sign up for advanced and honors classes. I have internalized their expectations and in doing so have developed high standards of my own – standards that have driven me to find success in various avenues of my life. Four years ago, around this time, I wrote a five hundred-word essay about cognitive enhancing drugs – my application to DePauw University’s Honor Scholar Program. I didn’t do it at my parents’ urging. I did it for myself. And, after seven semesters of extensive reading and writing, and exacting discussion I’m moving on from DePauw with much more than just another line on my transcript.

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Colman, Andrew. *A Dictionary of Psychology*: New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. 479.

<sup>126</sup> QR, 180, 181. See tables titled “Description of Developmental Outcomes” and “Mean Effect Sizes for Developmental Outcomes: Only Children Compared With Others.”

### **More Parental Attention, More Time Alone**

Falbo asserts that parent-child relationships in single-child and two-child families are also marked by heightened levels of parental attention, which contributes to the “developmental advantages” exhibited by first-borns and those from single- and two-child households.<sup>127</sup> A myriad of research indicates that parents with fewer children have more time to spend with their children, and do, in fact, tend to spend more time with said children.<sup>128</sup> Falbo has investigated this particular topic time and time again throughout her career. In a 1980 study, she and fellow researcher Catherine Cooper, found that mothers with one child spent more time with their pre-school-aged onlies in a typical week than their counterparts with more children. Two years later psychologists James Mercy and Lala Steelman conducted a study, wherein they investigated the relationship between family size and intellectual development among children; they came to the inference that “family size constrains both the amount of time parents have for each child and the type of activities they engage in with that child.”<sup>129</sup>

For now, let’s just consider the first part of Mercy and Steelman’s assertion, which holds that the fewer children a parent has, the more time said parent has to spend with each child. This notion probably didn’t come as much of a surprise to many of their readers, and it certainly didn’t come as a surprise to me, given my experiences as an only. After work, sleep, chores, errands, and other commitments, parents have only so much time to spend with their children, and the more children they have, the less attention each child receives. And, the reality is these external demands on parents are only on the rise. When it comes to the topic of careers, the

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<sup>127</sup> QR, 185. See section titled “Summary.”

<sup>128</sup> QR, 183. See section titled “Parent-Child Relationship of Firstborns and People From Small Families.”

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

United States has the longest workweek of any developed nation, and in the last fifty years that average has increased by about thirteen hours.<sup>130</sup>

At a young age I began to recognize that I spent more time with my parents and received more attention from them than any of my friends with brothers or sisters did. If my parents and I were under our roof at the same time, rarely would a significant period of time pass without some interaction taking place between us – even when I was in the company of friends. When I went to friends' houses, however, that wasn't always the case. My friend Tommy and I have been close since second grade. He is the middle child in his family; his brother is two years younger than he and his sister two years older. Our houses are a few blocks away from one another – about a five-minute bike ride. I spent many afternoons and evenings at his house playing basketball and ping pong, jumping on his neighbor's trampoline, playing videogames, and watching movies – *The Mummy* with Brendan Fraser was our favorite. And, on many occasions I would arrive and leave without ever seeing either of his parents (now, keep in mind that we each had stay-at-home moms, so that wasn't a product of work schedules). For him that was normal, but for me it seemed atypical. When I would ask him where his parents were, many times his answer would involve his brother or sister. *He's picking up Jaime from practice. She's taking Kara to tutoring. She and my brother are at the doctor's office. They're at Kara's field hockey game.* His parents had two more demands on their time than my parents did. One child's schedule must be hard to manage – I can't imagine juggling three.

While only children tend to receive more attention from our parents in family settings, I think it's worth noting that we also spend a lot of time alone. Life as an only can be a rather solitary existence, and while this can bring about feelings of loneliness from time to time it can

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<sup>130</sup> Sandler, 138.

also be quite constructive.<sup>131</sup> People have a tendency to bundle the words “lonely” and “alone” together, but in actuality the two are very different. In my opinion this flawed association is a major reason why the notion only children are lonely children continues to prevail.<sup>132</sup> Loneliness stems from being alone, however being alone isn’t necessarily a despondent experience.

I enjoy being alone, and find that I do some of my best thinking and tend to make better decisions when I am in a state of solitude. And, I’m convinced much of that stems from being an only child. Growing up, I spent a lot of time in my room (which is up on the third floor of our house) building with Legos and K’Nex and assembling huge armies of little green army men. Throughout middle school and high school I did homework, listened to music, and read up in my room.

When I tell people that I am an only child, one of the most common questions I get is, *were you lonely as a kid?* Sure, there were plenty of times when I wished I had a brother or sister to keep me company, but on the whole, loneliness wasn’t a defining motif of my childhood. And, it never manifested itself in the form of serious psychological distress. In fact, research indicates that only children are no more likely than any other demographic to exhibit heightened levels of anxiety or depression.<sup>133</sup> In retrospect, I’m glad that my life has been marked by stretches of solitude. I suspect it’s been good for my mental health and my intellectual development, and has also prepared me well for life as an adult.

Spending time alone has allowed me to develop an affirmative relationship with myself as well as a better understanding of who I am. To paraphrase psychologist Carl Pickhardt, being

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<sup>131</sup> Sandler, 33-36.

<sup>132</sup> On page 35 of *One and Only: The Freedom of Having an Only Child, and the Joy of Being One*, Lauren Sandler points out the following: in Falbo’s meta analysis, measures of loneliness among only children were no higher than those of any other comparison group.

<sup>133</sup> Yang, Bin, et al. “Only Children and Children with Siblings in the People’s Republic of China: Levels of Fear, Anxiety, and Depression.” *Child Development*. 66.5 (1995): 1308.

an only child has given me a great gift: I've become a good companion to myself.<sup>134</sup> Time spent in solitude has made me independent and self sufficient, and has also motivated me to forge and sustain close friendships. Many intellectual pursuits happen to be solitary activities and thus I've come to develop a passion for reading, writing, music, and other artistic outlets. I feel strongly that the coalescence of all these things has conditioned me for adulthood – a way of life that seems to entail a host of solitary pursuits from commuting and working to exercising and cooking.

When I consider the well-founded and logical relationship between family size and parental attention, which I touched on previously, it's easy to see why certain stereotypes about only children have come to be. It makes sense that because onlies receive more attention from their parents they are more likely to be selfish, entitled, and dependent. It makes sense to assume that because onlies aren't forced to share their parents' time and resources with a sibling they may come to develop a tendency for spoiled behavior and a diminished faculty for sharing.

Historically, only children have been associated with narcissistic and self-obsessive behavior, and while I can see the thought process behind this I've never understood it myself. I'm not self-absorbed, and neither are the only children I know. If those who subscribe to this notion could slip into the shoes of an only for just a few days I think they'd realize why this stereotype doesn't carry much weight. Only children tend to receive more attention from our parents than our peers from multiple-child households; for much of our lives we're in our parents' spotlight, with no brother or sister to deflect that beam. And, when one grows up in this spotlight, there's a good chance they aren't going to seek that same attention in other facets of their life. My good friend Matt is an only as well, and he is about as unassuming and mild-mannered as I am. We've grown up as the center of attention in our respective households, and I

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<sup>134</sup> Sandler, 35.

think that's a big reason why neither of us have ever wanted to play that role in other parts of our life – in the company of our friends, at school, you name it.

Pertinent research has found nothing to support this stereotype either. Psychologist Jean Twenge has devoted much of her career to investigating narcissism among young people. In a recent series of tests she found that while measures of narcissism are on the rise among younger generations, only children are not “overrepresented in any way”.<sup>135</sup> In actuality, scientific analyses show that the junction of smaller family size and heightened one-on-one parental attention contributes to “greater quantities of high-quality parent-child interactions” and in turn desirable developmental trends among those raised in single- and two-child families.<sup>136</sup> That is to say, being the only child in a family isn't a recipe for selfish attitudes and behavior but rather a circumstance that facilitates the development of attractive personality traits and a heightened intellectual aptitude.

### **A More Adult and Intellectual Upbringing**

Falbo's analysis and the scholarship of many of her colleagues present a compelling argument that parent-child interactions tend to be of a higher quality in one- and two-child families.<sup>137</sup> Within the framework of her study, only children, first-borns, and subjects from smaller families reported reliably higher results than later-borns and those from families with three or more children when it came to the developmental groupings of achievement and intelligence – keep in mind that these two groupings are rooted in tangible measures such as

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<sup>135</sup> Sandler, 57-60.

<sup>136</sup> QR, 183-184.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

educational attainment, grades, IQ, and standardized tests.<sup>138</sup> Other studies have found comparable results about only children as well, such as Project Talent, a 1960 longitudinal study, funded by the United States Department of Education, that has tracked the intellectual development and academic achievement of more than 440,000 high school students from around the country. Project Talent found that only children performed better on cognitive tests and “[found] greater success in school and work” than their counterparts with siblings. The study also investigated 32 different types of intelligence from abstract reasoning and general knowledge to reading comprehension and language aptitude; compared to subjects with siblings only children scored higher in twenty five categories and equal in four.<sup>139 140</sup>

Falbo asserts that elevated levels of intelligence and achievement among those from one- and two-child families has a great deal to do with the nature of how they are parented, specifically the more cerebral tune of parent-child interactions in smaller households. As to why subjects from medium and large families exhibit lower measures of these two developmental outcomes, Falbo’s rationale is as follows: parents with three or more children are less attentive and have more demands on their time, and therefore their children are less likely to have “the experiences conducive to intellectual development and achievement.”<sup>141</sup> Other theorists share her stance. For example, in 1982, psychologists Michael Lewis and Candice Feiring conducted a study wherein they investigated interactions during family meals; they found that one-child families “engaged in more parent-child conversations with more information exchange than did families with two or three children.”<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> QR, 180, 181. See tables titled “Description of Developmental Outcomes” and “Mean Effect Sizes for Developmental Outcomes: Only Children Compared With Others.”

<sup>139</sup> Sandler, 75.

<sup>140</sup> About Project Talent. *Project Talent*. Web. 20 March. 2014.

<sup>141</sup> QR, 183-184.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.



In her meta-analysis, Falbo's discussion about the intellectual environment characteristic of many small families is rather vague. She uses the phrase "experiences conducive to intellectual development and achievement," but she does not really elaborate much on these "experiences" or how they facilitate heightened intellectual development and achievement among only children and those from two-child families.<sup>143</sup>

I'd like to take this opportunity to delve into what these "experiences" have entailed in my case and the lives of other only children I've known over the years.<sup>144</sup> In my opinion, Falbo hit the nail on the head in contending that only children tend to be raised in a more cerebral environment, and thus exhibit heightened intellectual skills and achievement. Let me start by saying that I have always believed people are a product of their environment. We internalize the ideas and behaviors of those we surround ourselves with. We gather, consciously and subconsciously alike, information from the various stimuli around us. And, it is my belief that we are most impressionable in our younger years.

It probably doesn't come as a surprise that growing up as the only child in the house can, and often does, make for a family environment that is intrinsically adult. The interpersonal environment in a conventional single-child household (two parents and one child) is finite. What I mean by that is this: within this nuclear family unit, there are only four possible interpersonal interactions that can take place, and they all involve at least one adult. A child can interact with both of his or her parents. A child can interact with parent A. A child can interact with parent B. Or the parents can interact with one another. Interpersonal communication in a one-child family never entails multiple children, as is frequently the case in families with two or more children.

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<sup>143</sup> QR, 183-184.

<sup>144</sup> I can't speak for all only children when it comes to this topic, given the reality that there are a myriad of circumstances surrounding my upbringing (my parents' level of education, their propensity to include me in their affairs and expose me to many different social settings, our socio-economic position, the list goes on) that don't align with those of other only children.

As I mentioned previously I am a firm believer in the notion that individuals are shaped by their environment, and that is why I feel strongly that the adult atmosphere of single-child households has an exceptional influence on how only children develop – from a behavioral standpoint, which I touched on earlier in this piece, and an intellectual standpoint, which I'll touch on now.

Until the time I left for college, I spent a great deal of time with my parents – at home, in the car, out to dinner, in a whole host of settings. I've spent more time in the company of each of my parents than any other single person in my life, and by a large margin. And, at a relatively young age I began to appreciate the nature of our interactions. In writing this piece I have come to develop an even stronger appreciation for the dynamic between us, and the role it has played in shaping my intellectual trajectory.

I have always had a capacity for speaking to adults that outpaced most of my peers, and I believe that is a product of growing up in an adult-oriented, single-child home. Under our roof, just about every conversation I was a part of and every conversation I observed involved adults – my parents, my grandmother, my parents' friends, and even people working on our house. By speaking with adults and observing exchanges between them, I picked up on conversational skills I wasn't readily learning from my peers. I feel confident I picked up on these skills all the more because I didn't have a brother or sister to distract me.

Since the end of elementary school, I have been confident in my ability to express myself effectively and appropriately. At home, I was exposed to new vocabulary; when I asked my parents what a word meant they happily explained to me its denotations, connotations, and synonymous terms. And, if they were not terribly confident in their answer they would point me to the giant Random House Dictionary on our coffee table. Not only did my vocabulary expand

swiftly, I also began to pick up on the fundamentals and nuances of adult conversation. Grown-ups have a tendency to pay more attention to grammar than children do. Dialogue between adults also tends to follow a more natural progression. That is, information is offered up in a rational manner and certain contextual details are voiced depending on the audience. I noticed my parents and their friends didn't frequently interrupt one another the way my peers did.

When it comes to intellectual growth, there seem to be advantages to being raised in an adult-centric household. And, there is a body of work that suggests growing up in a large family with several children can be disadvantageous. Perhaps the most common rationale behind these assertions is each additional child dilutes the cognitive atmosphere of the nuclear family, regardless of how educated its constituents are. That is to say, after the second-born, subsequent children lower the intellectual bar.<sup>145</sup>

The data in Falbo's meta analysis cannot be used to refute these claims. Later-borns and those from large families reported decidedly lower measures of intelligence and achievement than all other comparison groups.<sup>146</sup> Recent studies have shown that onlys score higher on IQ tests and up to forty-five points higher on the SAT than later-borns.<sup>147</sup> The work of social psychologist Robert Zajonc conveys a similar narrative. He codeveloped the Confluence Model, which investigates the effect birth order and family size have on IQ scores among children and adolescents. His research indicates the following: as the number of children in a family increases, the household's intellectual atmosphere is "dragged backward" to accommodate the

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<sup>145</sup> Sandler, 81.

<sup>146</sup> QR, 181. See table titled "Mean Effect Sizes for Developmental Outcomes: Only Children Compared With Others."

<sup>147</sup> Sandler, 81.

development of its youngest members. Parents of larger families tend to read and speak less to their children, and consequently these children report lower IQ scores.<sup>148</sup>

I don't know if I believe it is markedly disadvantageous from an intellectual standpoint to grow up in a large household, but I do see the merit in Zajonc's point about a slumped cognitive atmosphere in larger families. I'll admit I have seen this at times – at dinner parties, for example, and in the company of some of my closest friends.

I went to a lot of dinner parties with my parents, often to the homes of close family friends with children around my age. In most cases, these gatherings involved a kid's table," especially when we were in the company of larger families. The "dreaded kid's table," as my mom has always referred to it, was an interesting setting for me. It was foreign to me because my parents always made a concerted effort to include me when they were with their peers – certainly at get-togethers that took place in our home. My parents and I ate together every night unless I had a sporting even or choir rehearsal, so meals shared with a bunch of other kids, and just kids, were a real change of pace. I enjoyed my time at the "kid's table" because it was a chance to goof off, freely chew with my mouth open, and talk about kid's stuff, but I did miss being in the company of adults and came to realize, at a relatively young age, that the conversations taking place in the dining room were more stimulating and informative than those going on at the "kid's table." On these evenings, we kids spent most of the night tearing around the house and playing games in the basement or backyard. In retrospect, we didn't really spend much time with our parents, and while that was probably more noticeable to me than the other kids, I think we all overlooked the opportunity to take part in some valuable, high-level interactions with one another's parents. And in reality, the dinner table is one of the best places for that.

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<sup>148</sup> Sandler, 81.

Zajonc asserts that the intellectual atmosphere in large families has a tendency to be more “babyish,” particularly among families in which there are sizable age gaps between children.<sup>149</sup> I am certainly in agreement with him and have witnessed this firsthand on a number of occasions. Martin has been one of my closest friends for the last twelve years or so. He’s my age, and has a sister who is four years younger and a brother who is nine years younger. Everyone in his family is really bright; his parent’s have at least four advanced degrees between them and Martin and his siblings all do exceedingly well in school. That being said, I have noticed that the intellectual environment within their home fluctuates depending on who’s there. Let me illustrate my point with a couple examples. As freshmen and sophomores, Martin and I both played on our high school basketball team. At that time neither of us could drive so our parents took turns driving both of us to and from practice. When I was in the car with Martin and his dad, or Martin and his mom, I noticed that the level of our conversation was essentially the same as when we were with one of my parents. While Martin and I were only fifteen, sixteen at the time, in the midst of adolescence, I always felt that his parents engaged us in an adult manner. They drew from an elevated vocabulary, spoke about consequential topics, and never really had to dumb things down. These times spent in the car were informative and there was a productive give and take between all of us. But, one more than one occasion I had dinner with his entire family, and in these instances I found myself in a very different intellectual atmosphere – a setting occupied by people with drastically different cognitive faculties. With his brother and sister present the tune of our interactions was of a noticeably different quality. His parents wanted to facilitate a cerebral environment that was conducive to everyone around the table (for that I give them the upmost praise), and that meant catering conversation to the intellectual capacity of the youngest person in the room – Martin’s brother, who at the time was just starting elementary school. I’m

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

of the opinion that this was a conscientious approach on their part, but I also think we, as humans, have an uncanny aptitude for subconsciously recognizing our audience and engaging whoever that may be in an effective manner. In these situations, the level of our collective vocabulary dropped and the nature of what we talked about changed as well. On the way to basketball practice we talked about current events and topics Martin and I had covered in our AP classes. In the company of his entire family conversation revolved around things like what had happened at recess that day and cartoons his brother had recently watched.

From time to time, I've thought about what it would be like to grow up as an older sibling in a family like Martin's. That is to say, what it might be like to find myself in an environment like the one above on a consistent basis throughout my younger years. I've never had a younger sibling to dilute the intellectual quality of my interactions with my parents, and I feel fortunate that that has been the case. It's allowed me to connect with my parents on a different plane than many of my peer. In terms of knowledge, wisdom, and many other facets of intelligence I've been the lowest common denominator in our family, and I've always liked that. For me, it's been empowering and humbling alike. Had not been raised in this heightened cerebral and verbal environment I do not believe I would have developed many of the intellectual capabilities I now possesses – at least not in the same capacity – or found the same success in my educational career.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout my life I have questioned the validity of only child stereotypes. When I put them in the context of my own persona and development, they do not hold up. Nor do they ring true when I attach them to other only children I know well. Sweeping generalizations about

entire groups of people are problematic. In the case of only children, pertinent scholarship indicates that the behavioral and developmental deficiencies commonly associated with onlies are by no means unique to, or even more prominent among only children. In fact, an ever-growing body of research shows that a lack of siblings is not a developmental disadvantage, and that single-child households can be quite beneficial when it comes to intellectual growth and character formation.

The aim of this piece was to construct an authentic narrative about only children, and in doing so chip away at common misconceptions surrounding onlies. It is my hope that the points I have raised will have a lasting impact on my readers. And, for those readers who are thinking about starting a family at some point in the future, or considering whether or not to have more children, I hope the reasoned tack of this piece informs their decisions. At my age it's hard to wrap my head around the emotional component of starting a family or choosing to have more children. But, I do have some sense of the tangible factors that influence these decisions, and they seem to span just about everything from biology and square footage, to finances and career implications. I think it's important for parents to approach family planning in a deliberate and thoughtful manner – to consider the various facets of family size and birth order, and the bearing they can have on a child's development, on the interplay between those in the nuclear family unit, and on the socio-economic fabric of the greater community.

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