

ADOPTION RESEARCH NOTES

THE 'ONLY CHILD' AS AN ISSUE IN ADOPTION POLICY: MYTH & EVIDENCE—J. KRAUS

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Introduction

Neither State nor private adoption agencies in Australia give preference to childless applicants over applicants who already have one child. This policy is presumed to be in 'the best interest of the child', and is based on the belief that being an only child leads to maladjustment. Empirical evidence indicates, however, that in general only children are in fact better adjusted than children from larger families. Consequently, not only has the existing policy no substance but also it denies natural justice to the childless couples who have to wait to start their adoptive family.

In the past two decades there has been a complete reversal of the supply/demand situation in the area of child adoption in Australia. At present, the number of children available for adoption is so small relative to the number of potential adopters, that approved applicants have to wait for up to eight years in N.S.W. before they can expect to have a child allotted to them. The length of this waiting period seems excessive not only in terms of the applicants' expectations but also in terms of ordinary common sense values of the general community. If the situation is to be remedied, there is a need for a more flexible adoption policy suited to the prevailing social circumstances. A facet of this policy, which could shorten the waiting period possibly by half if adapted to the existing situation, is the proviso that all other things being equal childless applicants are given no preference over applicants who already have a natural or adopted child.

This 'equality' of treatment would appear to be not only unreasonable but

also in violation of the precepts of natural justice: why should couples who already have a child be allotted another child, while childless applicants have to wait for a number of years to even start their adoptive family? The answer seems to lie in the implicit presumption that this policy is consistent with the paramount principle in adoption legislation, 'the best interest of the child'. The presumption is based on an unsubstantiated belief, held not only by the lay public but also by many professional 'experts', that it harms a child's development and adjustment to be the 'only child' of the family.

In effect, thousands of childless applicants for adoption are denied the right to natural justice because of an implicit, if not actually explicit, official acceptance of a popular belief which can in fact be shown to be no more than a myth.

The extent to which this belief is held in a Western community is illustrated by American surveys, which indicate that up to 80 per cent of respondents regard being an only child as a disadvantage, and that the popular stereotype of the only child is that the child is generally maladjusted, self-centred, self-willed, attention seeking, dependent on others, temperamental, anxious, unhappy, unlikeable. (Thompson 1974). According to demographic surveys, American family norms show that a two child family is the lower limit of the socially acceptable family size. (Blake, 1974). Australian demographic data present a similar picture, by indicating that at the end of their reproductive life 87 per cent of women who were ever married have borne at least two children, with three children being the most frequent family size. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1979). An in-depth investigation of psychological factors associated with fertility has shown that one of the main reasons parents cite for having a second child is to prevent the first from becoming an only child—they believe that they "must have a second to save the first". (Solomon et al, 1956).

More recently, however, there has been a trend, at least in America, to re-examine the myth associated with only children, which resulted in an increasing number of young married couples considering the one child family as a desirable family size. (Hawke & Knox, 1977). Indeed, it does seem most relevant to the issue of equity in the treatment of childless applicants for adoption, that the question be asked how much substance of the myth concerning the only child survives a re-examination of this myth in the light of the available empirical evidence?

In regard to the intellectual development in childhood, community surveys show that only children have a higher (as much as 22 IQ points) intelligence than children who come from large families. (Scottish Council for Research in Education, 1933, 1949, 1953; Thompson, 1950). If, as has been claimed, this difference is explainable in part by differences in socio-economic status, then the surveys' results lead to the inference that the decision to have only one child is made by families with above average education, occupational status, and socio-cultural standards, and therefore by those most likely to make rational decisions about the desired size of their families. This is so, because of the long standing sociological truism that there is an inverse relationship between family size and socio-economic status.

The early intellectual abilities of only children have been observed also in the educational context, and their school grades were found to be as good or better than the grades of students who have brothers and sisters. (Lees & Stewart, 1957). The very nature of the one child family favours a more intense interaction between child and parents than is the case in larger families, with the consequence that ". . . intellectual ability, even for students classified by their teachers as superior, seems to be more completely developed if students have benefit of more adult interaction during their formative years." (Pulvino &

Lupton, 1978, p.215). It must be noted that some studies have shown the presence of younger sibling(s) to be associated with higher IQ of the first born, the advantage having been explained by the opportunity for the older to tutor the younger (Falbo, 1977). If tenable, this explanation would be relevant in adoption only to the child adopted first, and even then questionably so, because of the considerable age difference between the first and the second adoptee that would be inevitable under the present adoption circumstances.

The advantage of the more intense social interaction that only children have with their parents, as compared to children in larger families, appear to be reflected also in their language development. Younger age groups of only children were shown to attain relatively high scores on formal tests of linguistic ability, (Paraskevopoulos & Kirk, 1969), while older age groups were found to have larger vocabularies, better verbal skills, and greater verbal precocity than children with siblings. (Davis, 1937, Horrocks, 1962). Consistent with these findings is the evidence that the school grades of only children are as good or better than of students who have brothers and sisters, (Lees & Stewart, 1957), and that at the tertiary level their performance records tend to be at least equal if not superior to that of students with siblings. (Bayer, 1966). Only children, moreover, are the most over-represented family size group among college students, (Bayer, 1967), and disproportionately large numbers of them are found among eminent men and other groups presumably representing achievement (Falbo, 1977).

In so far as the only children's socialization is concerned, the negative stereotypes of their interpersonal behaviour are not confirmed by the available research evidence. On the contrary, only children usually thought of as friendless have been reported by at least one study as being consistently the most popular group among primary school children (Bonney, 1944). Study of older age groups showed that only children had as many close friends and felt as popular as non-only children, and had as many leadership positions among their peers. They were however less gregarious than children with siblings, had fewer casual friends, and belonged to fewer clubs, but without being more lonely than the other children. Further, they were more co-operative and had more personal autonomy, but not to the extent of being or feeling socially isolated (Falbo,

1976a; 1978).

The lesser gregariousness of only children is probably explained by their lower needs for affiliation, which were hypothesized to result from the fact that they suffer less from being deprived of affection than do children with siblings who compete with them for parental time and attention. (Conners, 1963; Rosenfeld, 1966).

In general, it would appear that from preschool through adulthood only children display more self-reliance, confidence, resourcefulness, assertiveness, self-esteem, and independence than their peers with siblings, (Guildford & Worcester, 1930; Dyer, 1945; Rosenberg, 1965; Feldman, 1978), while being also more co-operative and more trusting in their relationships with others. (Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg, 1970; Falbo, 1978). As adults they are at least just as likely as people who grow up with brothers and sisters to have successful careers, happy marriages, and good parenting experience. (Cutts & Moseley, 1954).

There appears to be little ground to expect that the social and personality traits that have been found characteristic of only children would be associated with special problems of psychological adjustment. The negative expectation is in fact confirmed by research evidence which shows that, in general, on a variety of mental health variables there are no differences between only and non-only children (Burke, 1969; Howe & Madgett, 1975). Moreover, there is some evidence suggesting that only children are in fact under-represented among psychiatric and other clinical clients. (Tuckman & Regan, 1967; Kuth & Schmidt, 1964; Corefield, 1968) Among adopted children specifically, no differences were found between the adjustment problems of only children and of those who had adoptive siblings (Kraus, 1978).

There is evidence, however, that only children are more likely to be referred for clinical help, and to repeat visits to the clinic. This relatively high referral and repeat rate was interpreted by the investigators involved as a reflection of the overprotective attitude of the only child's parents (Falbo, 1977).

Such an overprotective attitude would not be inconsistent with the very close relationships between parents and children, which have been shown to exist in one-child families. These close emotional ties were described as the most noticeable characteristics of one-child families, with both parents and children (both young and old) believing

that they have a closer relationship with each other than in families with more than one child (Hawke & Knox, 1978). Mothers of only children provide them with much more attention and interact with them more frequently when the children are young (Gewirtz & Gewirtz, 1965). As they grow older they can participate more fully in family life, because decision making in one-child families tends to be more democratic than in larger families, where the lines of parental authority are more clearly drawn (Bossard & Boll, 1956). In adulthood they have a much stronger identification with their parents, as shown in a study of tertiary students, in which 40 per cent of only children but only 3 per cent of those with siblings reported that their parents were the strongest influence in "...making me the person I am today" (Falbo, 1976).

Because among the major concerns in the placement of adoptive children is the marital adjustment of adoptive parents, it seems relevant to the best interest of the child to know if this adjustment is less satisfactory in one-child than in multi-child families. Although the number of studies dealing with this issue is relatively small, the findings are remarkably consistent: family adjustment becomes more difficult and the level of marital satisfaction drops with each subsequent child (Rossi, 1972; Feldman, 1971; Knox & Wilson, 1978). Both the overt and the covert expressions of the affective intellectual, and physical relationship between husband and wife tend to decrease with children (Rollins & Feldman, 1970; Ryder, 1973; Rosenblatt, 1974). Even with only two young children in the family the mothers are under a considerable stress, and "... progressive negative effect of children on the marital relationship (was) reported by these mothers", with this effect being greater after the second child (Knox & Wilson, 1978, p. 25). In families of only children, on the other hand, both mothers and fathers were satisfied with having only one child, and stressed the advantages of having a small family, not the least of which is the relative affluence which such a family can enjoy. Finance can be an important consideration in view of the not infrequent but unsubstantiated belief that raising two children is not much more costly than raising one: "a second child costs almost as much as the first" (Hawke & Knox, 1978, p.217).

In conclusion, it is apparent that both considerations for natural justice in respect of childless adoption applicants and the best interests of the child, call for

a preferential treatment of such applicants over applicants who already have one or more children. The existing policy based on ex-cathedra pronouncements of so called 'experts', and on popular beliefs, should be discontinued.

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OUT-OF-SCHOOL TERRITORY: THE

CHILDREN'S SERVICES SUB-COMMITTEE, A.C.T. CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL WELFARE*

*Responsibility for the views expressed in this paper rest collectively with the Sub-Committee's members, who are Mr John Dixon (Chairman), Mrs E. Antoniou, Mr K. Cox, Mrs M Edwards, Ms P. Ford, Mr P. Fox, Miss E Knight, Mrs N. Milligan, Mrs J. Richmond and Mr R. Walker and does not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Social Security.

The Children's Services Sub-Committee of the Consultative Committee on Social Welfare has recently examined the adequacy of out-of-school programmes in meeting the needs of families in the ACT. The sub-committee initially consulted with several organizations that provided holiday care and after-school care programmes. Child-care workers expressed the view that there is a high level of dissatisfaction amongst users of out-of-hours care programmes. On the basis of this consultation the sub-committee discovered that:

- (a) some holiday care programmes reported recent changes in enrolment patterns, especially that children who had been attending in the past were no longer doing so, and that the average age of the children attending had declined;
- (b) some programmes had ceased to operate through lack of enrolments after the first two or three days;
- (c) many after-school programmes had developed slowly and existing programmes were often under-utilised. Some child-care workers reported that it had taken twelve months to build up enrolments to economically viable levels in after-school care programmes; and
- (d) there was an awareness by organisations that in most suburbs there were significant numbers of 5 to 12 year olds returning to empty houses after school and that there appeared to be resistance on the part of children to attending programmes, not just reluctance on the part of parents to send their children to such programmes.

In the light of this information, the sub-committee decided to carry out further consultations on out-of-school care programmes which involved both parents and children. The Executive Officer of the Children's Services Sub-Committee sought the views of schools and Parents and Citizens Associations and arranged interviews. Committee members visited and talked to both children and parents at seventy primary