

Family Communication and Memorable Messages about Roles In Only-Child Families

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine how only children view their role in the family based on family communication and to explore, the memorable messages that work to shape the only-child situation and identity. Defined by Knapp, Stohl, and Reardon (1981), memorable messages are “remembered for extremely long periods of time and which people perceive as a major influence on the course of their lives” (p. 27). In the past, only children have been depicted as maladjusted individuals as a result of growing up without siblings. Though there are many challenges to the only-child situation, there are also advantages of being an only-child. This study seeks to understand the value of the parent-only-child relationship rather than focusing on how only children might forever be socially inept in the absence of siblings. Family communication processes were analyzed to understand how only children view their role in the family, giving insight to character-specific attributes of the only-child birth order position. Retrospective interviews were conducted with 14 young adults who were raised in only-child households. The narratives acquired from the interviewed young adult only children give an understanding of how they view their role in the family in this unique triadic-family structure. Interviews also explored memorable messages about the only child-role and growing up as an only-child. The memorable messages, grouped into a handful of themed categories, represent the expectations these only children found themselves striving to achieve. This study develops our understanding of the only-child situation and family with respect to their familial position as an only-child and the role expectations of the only-child situation.

Keywords: Only-child, birth order, family, communication, and memorable messages.

Chapter One

Literature Review

Renowned psychologist Stanley S. Hall reported in his study that “being an only-child is a disease in itself” (as cited in Fenton, 1928). A considerable amount of literature pertaining to only children revolves around the assumption that they are handicapped due to their only-child status, and it is believed that growing up without siblings fosters undesirable behavioral characteristics. The only-child is in a unique situation, particularly because about 85% of children in the United States have siblings (Floyd & Morman, 2006). As a result, the socialization and development of only children has been an important field of study (Falbo, 2012; Jiao, Ji, & Jing 1986; Mancillas, 2006; Mellor 1990; Rosenberg & Hyde 1993; Veenhoven & Verkuten 1989). Criticism about only children seems to have partly stemmed from Alfred Adler’s research of birth order in 1931. Mancillas (2006) writes, “the concept of birth order as a mechanism to understand children’s behavior was formally developed by Alfred Adler, who taught that children’s positions in the family greatly influence their overall development and attitude toward life” (p. 268). Adler also found that because only children do not have siblings, they do not compete for the affection and attention of their parents. As a result, he argued that only children become spoiled and maladjusted. Drawing from Falbo and Polit’s (1986) seminal work, Trent and Spitze (2011) asserted that, “the only-child experience is unlike any other birth order position, being somewhat akin to both firstborn and lastborn, yet unlike either. Such uniqueness is thought to engender particular behaviors and personalities” (p. 1180).

Although research about only-child characteristics is useful, to fully understand the impact of only-child status we need to consider the dynamics of the only-child family. In family communication, an insufficient amount of research has explored the communication processes

within only-child families. This project seeks to explore communication in only-child families by considering only children's perceptions of parental influence and how they view their role in the family based on their sense of identity. To begin, I will first consider what the literature reveals about the perceptions of birth order, the negative stereotypes of only children, and the challenges and advantages of being an only-child. Next, I address the cross-cultural research of Chinese only children. Then, I draw from research on memorable messages (Smith & Ellis, 2001) as a way to examine family socialization and to understand the parent-only-child dynamic. Past research on memorable messages has revealed how parents impact work expectations (Medved, Brogan, McClanahan, Morris, & Shepard, 2006) and college achievement (Kranstuber, Carr, & Hosek, 2012). Additionally, and most applicable to this study, Smith and Ellis (2001) researched memorable messages and the self-assessment of behavior. In their survey-based study, they found that memorable messages about behavioral self-assessments became important to how people view themselves and their behavior. Memorable messages shape behavior by providing information about what is important and expected. Thus, common statements become meaningful, memorable messages when they affect or shape our behavior. This project brings together research on only-child development and memorable messages to examine what young adult only children learned about how to communicate within the family and how to enact the role of only-child. For this study, only-child participants were asked to recall the memorable messages communicated to them by their parents and others, pertaining to their only-child situation. This project examines how those messages affected the only-child's understanding of their role and their sense of self as they developed into adulthood.

Perceptions of Birth Order: Socialization and Identity Development

Birth order is a person's rank in relation to their other siblings with respect to age. As

noted above, some of the research regarding only children emerged from a presumption that much of an individual's personality was derived from the different experiences conferred by birth order within the family. Typical birth order classifications include only-child, firstborn, middle child, and youngest. Initial research suggested that birth order indeed had a profound effect on development of identity and socialization (Adler, 1928). More recent work has not supported all of the prior claims about birth order, but it has revealed differences in some characteristics that children develop based on birth order.

In a review of 200 birth order studies, Eckstein et al. (2010) noted the personality characteristics most frequently appearing among each specific birth order position. They found that oldest children have the highest rates of academic success and motivation and are most likely to be leaders. Oldest children are also typically overrepresented among learned groups and are the most competitive among all birth order positions except for middle children. Middle children often have the greatest feelings of not belonging but the fewest problems with acting-out. They are sociable by nature and relate well to older and younger populations. Middle children also seem to be the most successful in team sports. Lastly, youngest children appear to be the most empathetic but may be rebellious in things that test boundaries such as using alcohol. They are also the most popular and are more artistic than scientific. Youngest children also tend to be overrepresented among psychiatric populations, but are also widely represented among researchers and writers.

Eckstein et al.'s (2010) research on only children indicates that they are high achieving and successful individuals because they experience an academically driven environment influenced by their parents. Roberts and Blanton (2001) found that only children who had more detached relationships with their parents felt pressured to succeed, sought attention from others,

and desired to control situations and people. Only children are also highly likely to attend college because in essence, there are more resources provided to one child than multiple or sibling children. For example, finances, attention, emotional support and other material resources divide more thinly the greater amount of members in one family. Falbo (2012) found that “only-borns generally earned higher school grades and attained more education than others” (p. 41). When parents only have to support one child, this more easily opens the door for additional schooling including tutoring and opportunities for higher education. However, because parents of only children have just one child to provide and be responsible for, parental involvement in the only-child situation is more likely to be overindulgent and overprotective than in families with siblings (Falbo, 2012).

Finally, the absence of sibling relationships impacts processes of identity development and behavior. Evidence first shows that only children have fewer opportunities to develop the important skills that naturally arise out of sibling relationships, such as fighting, competing, and rivalry with age-mates (Roberts & Blanton, 2001, p. 131). As a result, sibling children exhibit more self-controlled behaviors (Downey & Condrón, 2004, p. 345). In comparison to all other birth order positions, only children tend to be the most selfish and have the highest rates of behavioral problems. This finding has primarily depicted only children as spoiled, selfish, lonely, and maladjusted individuals (Roberts & Blanton, 2001).

Sibling children also have each other to monitor behavior and influence identity choices. In lieu of this, previous literature frames only children as experiencing a greater “need” for affiliation because of their tendency to connect or attach with others (Connors, 1963). Life satisfaction has also been studied in only children indicating that only children have reported low levels of popularity (Veenhoven & Verkuyten, 1989), social standing and acceptance (Kitzman

et al., 2002), but high satisfaction with self (Rosenberg & Hyde, 1993). Further, birth order may influence family dynamics that shape everyday life. Based on the surrounding social context, our connections with others and our affiliations or perceptions of self and development, are shaped by interpersonal bonds with others and therefore, determine the influences that shape family dynamics and everyday life.

In sum, the research on birth order creates the impression that only children are likely to display achievement-hungry, privileged or entitled behaviors and has lead many people to the assumption that there is only one kind of only-child. However, research that goes beyond comparison of only children to children of other birth positions indicates that only children encounter both challenges and advantages from their family structure.

Challenges to and Advantages of Only-Child Status

Research that has considered children's perceptions and family processes provides a more complete picture of the only-child experience. Similar to Eckstein et al.'s research, the work here notes some of the challenges that only children face in addition to highlighting the advantages or benefits of being an only-child.

Challenges. A large body of literature suggests the importance of siblings in the development of social interactions for children (Downey & Condrón, 2004; Falbo, 2012; Trent & Spitze, 2011; Veenhoven & Verkuten, 1989). Only children are believed to be at a social disadvantage because they do not have the opportunity to socialize as frequently with other children. Rosenberg and Hyde (1993) write, "siblings are an essential part of social and emotional development; therefore dysfunctional behaviors result from the absence of siblings" (p. 270). In sibling interactions for example, experiences of sharing, fighting and competition occur (Roberts & Blanton, 2001, p. 131). As a result, children with siblings exhibit more self-

control than only children (Downey & Condrón, 2004) and develop a better understanding of conflict. Only children however, never experience these types of interactions; therefore they may develop patterns of interaction that negatively impact their behavior. For instance, it has been reported that only children exhibit significantly higher levels of aggressive-disruptive and passive-withdrawal behaviors than firstborn and second-born children (Kitzmann, Cohen, & Lockwood, 2002). They have also been found to display self-centered and quarrelsome behaviors (Blake, 1981), and some research even indicates that they are egocentric and less cooperative than children with siblings (Jiao, Ji, & Jing, 1986).

Without siblings, only children are their parents' sole focus and responsibility. Based on the novel written by White (2004), the seven common sins of parenting an only-child are overindulgence, overprotection, failure to discipline, overcompensation, seeking perfection, treating your child like an adult, and over-praising. Falbo (2012) indeed found that only children describe their relationship with their parents to be indulgent and overprotective. These parental practices have the potential to influence the development of negative behavioral characteristics in only children. In part, many assume that being constantly surrounded by and interacting with adults makes it harder for only children to relate to and socialize with their peers. In her study centered on teachers' perceptions of their class, Falbo (2012) found that teachers perceived their only-child students as "lacking in social and interpersonal skills, compared to their peers with siblings" (p. 43). Despite the fact that only children may be at a disadvantage because they do not experience the same dynamic as sibling children families, they also reap some benefits in the absence of siblings.

Advantages. Falbo and Polit (1986) claim that only children possess more desirable personality and behavioral traits than do sibling children; specifically, they argue that only

children develop the following outcomes: intelligence, achievement, character, sociability, and adjustment. Similarly, Veenhoven and Verkuyten (1989) found that behaviorally, only children “appear no worse off than their contemporaries with siblings” (p. 4). In the absence of siblings, only children have the potential to develop positive behavioral characteristics that result from their family structure. For example, Roberts and Blanton (2001) write: “The vast majority of these only-children developed an ability to be alone, to entertain themselves, and often to enjoy their own company. Some developed in creative and imaginative ways” (p. 131).

Countering the claim that only children feel their relationship with their parents is overindulgent, parental attention and involvement can provide only children with more resources like time, energy, and financial and emotional support. Mancillas (2006) explains that only children “are the sole recipient of their parents’ resources and attention” (p. 270), but Roberts and Blanton (2001) captured it best when they wrote, “these only children received all of their parents’ attention, financial support, and love. The majority of them experienced and felt grateful for particularly close relationships with their parents” (p. 133).

Having grown up interacting with adults, Falbo (2012) found “only children to be advantaged in their verbal abilities” (p. 41) and further research suggests how they are more apt to connect with adults (Roberts & Blanton, 2001). Although only children spend time in school and other settings interacting with children their own age, ultimately, their parents are their primary source of socialization. Parents’ practices, teachings, and messages affect the identity of the child, shaping their identity in adulthood. Constantly surrounded, influenced, and socialized by adults, Roberts and Blanton (2001) further noted that with respect to their chronological age, only children grow into mature individuals much earlier on than sibling children.

In sum, the research suggests that there are both challenges and advantages to being an

only-child. As has been illustrated, siblings can support the acquisition of certain behavioral characteristics essential to the development from childhood into adulthood. However, only children are able to gain a deeper sense of self and identity as a result of spending a significant amount of time alone. Without siblings, only children must communicate more directly with their parents, and having been socialized by an older generation, only children become mature individuals (Falbo & Polit, 1986; Veenhoven & Verkuten, 1989).

Cross-Cultural Research About Only Children

A final area of research worth exploring is recent work focused on only-child status in China. Research conducted on only-child families in China has grown rapidly in the last few decades in response to China's implementation of their one child policy. In an effort to reduce and control their accelerated birth rate, in 1979, China developed a policy that limited families to having one child. The intent of this policy was not only to minimize the rate of population growth, but also to maximize the standard of living for the Chinese people. In exchange for the limitation, parents who abided by the policy received a certificate, which made their only-child eligible for benefits including health care and education. After the policy was enacted, however, the people of China feared they were supporting a generation of "little emperors" and that growing up without siblings would create an egocentric environment where only children would acquire undesirable behavioral characteristics (Falbo, 2012). Falbo (2012) writes, "the reasoning was that children without siblings would become the center of their four grandparents' and two parents' attention, with spoiling as the inevitable outcome" (p. 44).

Research on only children in China has examined behavioral characteristics (Cameron, Erkal, Gangadharan, & Meng, 2013; Jiao, Jing & Jing, 1986), gender differences (Jankowaik, Joiner, & Khatib, 2011; Liu, 2006; Yu & Winter, 2011), narrative therapy (Chen, 2012) and

psychological distress (Liu, Lin, & Chen, 2010). For example, Lin (2006) found some Chinese parents of only children who still believed that males are superior to females. Previously regarded as a “typical patriarchal society” (Shen, 2011), this negative view could contribute to the concerns raised in China about supporting later generations of “little emperors.” The results of a patriarchic society could foster a further negative environment, affecting its people and building generations of “little emperors” to come. On the contrary however, Liu, Lin and Chen (2010), found adolescent only children to report lower levels of delinquent participation than sibling children. In part, behavioral and personality traits vary based on the environment children encounter and the people who surround and influence them. The concerns about only-child behavior in Western society do not coincide fully with those in China, and the outcome of this policy results in a much different socialization context than that experienced by only children in the United States (Jiao, Ji, & Jing, 1996, p. 393). Therefore, family and cultural environment shape the experience of being an only-child.

Although research has considered the impact of only-child status on things like achievement and life satisfaction, there is a gap in our knowledge concerning family communication and the role of only children within the family. It is not surprising that much research compares only children to sibling children. Falbo (1984) writes, “Americans apparently believe that sibling relationships are the sole source of experiences conducive to social development. Without siblings, a child is expected to become a socially handicapped adult” (p. ix). Siblings are the obvious component missing in an only-child’s life; however, understanding the dynamic in only-child families, specifically parental interactions and influences, could improve our understanding of the only-child experience. This study focuses less on the absence of siblings and how only children are missing out; instead it considers the parent-child

relationship and the effects parents have on the socialization and development of only children because, “intuitively, understanding between parents and adolescents has important implications for individual and family adjustment” (Sillars et al., 2005, p. 103).

Influence of Family Socialization Through Memorable Messages

Memorable messages have been used to analyze communicative patterns and behavior in the exploration of organizational socialization (Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Dallimore, 2003; Gundry & Rousseau, 1995; Stohl, 1986), gender socialization (Dallimore, 2003), perceptions of aging (Holladay, 2002), navigating college life (Kranstuber et al., 2012; Nazione et al., 2011), and, of most relevance to this study, the self-assessment of behavior (Smith & Ellis, 2001).

Memorable messages essentially provide criteria upon which people base their self-perceptions in a variety of contexts; applying this framework to only children as a unique population potentially yields insightful information about their socialization and identity development from the most important perspectives, their own. Medved et al., (2006) defined memorable messages as “ones that are vividly remembered and believed to have had a large impact on how we behave, the attitudes we hold, and the decisions we make or anticipate making in the future” (p. 167). In other words, memorable messages shape behavior by providing information about what is important and expected. For instance, researchers have explored memorable messages around achievement in college and found that “work hard, play hard” is a message that many college students received from their parents and which shaped their approach to college life (Kranstuber et al., 2012).

The research on memorable messages provides a conceptual foundation for thinking about how only children learn about their role in the family and the expectations others have for them. Parents, friends or classmates can be sources of memorable messages in the only-child

situation. Particularly in triadic families, parents play an important role in the socialization of their child into adulthood. Smith and Ellis (2001) characterize memorable messages as serving a “critical function in establishing and maintaining standards for personal behavior” (p. 154).

Knapp, Stohl, and Reardon (1981) were the first scholars to address the existence of memorable messages and define them as “verbal messages which may be remembered for extremely long periods of time and which people perceive as a major influence on the course of their lives” (p. 27). They further sought to understand the structure and form of the message, the circumstances surrounding the enactment and reception of the message, the nature and content of the message, and the nature of the relationship between the recipient and the source.

Medved et al. (2006) focused on memorable messages about work and family life. They found the most common messages about family life to be: “family is more important than anything else” “family is number one,” and “family comes before work” (p. 170). These messages provided a framework for how individuals should view work and how communication with the family around work was handled. They declared that, “such messages provide frameworks for sensemaking within specific interactions. They also become powerful linguistic tools if drawn on to interpret meaning in future communicative experiences” (p. 162).

Memorable messages have typically been examined to understand how messages from parents or other important individuals help people interpret the world around them. In fact, Kranstuber et al., (2012) identified sense-making as the most important element in the assessment of behavior.

Smith and Ellis (2001) examined memorable messages as a tool for the self-assessment of behavior by asking a multitude of participants to complete a survey about expectations of personal behavior. They found three key features of memorable messages: “they are applicable to a wide variety of situations; they are general action-oriented prescriptions for behavior; and

they provide a standard with which to judge the valence of behavior in particular situations” (p. 157). Memorable messages provide ways for understanding behavioral acts that guide individuals’ interactions with others in the social world. These messages have been used in a variety of studies to understand how communication from family shapes the way individuals construct their identity.

Memorable messages are applicable to a wide variety of situations including those derived from family interactions and dynamics. Specifically, messages about roles in the family or what it means to be an only-child may be one interesting context for exploring memorable messages. For instance, the negative stereotypes surrounding only children may be conveyed to only children as memorable messages, either by parents or by others in a child’s life. Memorable messages also act as general action-oriented prescriptions for behavior because they provide a standard with which to judge behavior in particular situations.

Rationale for Study

A large majority of literature discusses the importance of sibling relationships in the development from childhood into adulthood. Studying all of the birth-order positions during the duration of this project would have been too comprehensive for the scope of this study. This project focuses specifically on the only-child birth order position, because unlike every other, the only-child situation is unique due to the absence of siblings. Additionally, previous literature has yet to research the relationship between memorable messages and the only-child experience. Memorable messages may be a useful way to think about experiences of only children because they can reveal what is expected of them and what is important in family life. Moreover, one issue that needs further exploration is how only children view and understand their role in the family. It is important to concentrate on the interactions between parent and child in only-child

families in order to better comprehend how only children come to understand who they want to be based on messages around them about their role.

This study explored the experiences of only children, drawing from four areas of literature: only children, birth order, family communication, and memorable messages. In order to better understand the experience of only children and family communication about the only-child role, and the memorable messages specific to their situation, the following research questions were developed:

- (1) How do only children view their role in the family growing up?
- (2) What family communication processes do they remember as being important to their family and as resulting from their only-child status?
- (3) What memorable messages do they remember receiving about their role in the family and how do they think these messages have impacted how they view themselves and their family?

Chapter Two

Methods

Study Participants

Fourteen adult only children between the ages of 18 and 24 were interviewed for this study; all participants lived in the Boulder/Denver area. The investigative group consisted of diverse heterosexual, middle to upper class individuals, and consisted mainly of current or recently graduated college students. Of the 14 adults interviewed for this study, 3 were males and 11 were females, each chosen for their only-child status. Snowball sampling was used to identify subjects, and many participants were friends of the principal investigator. Participants were recruited via email or text message based on their work or social circles of which they share with the principal investigator. Interviews were chosen for this project in order to gain first-hand narrative accounts of the only children, gaining insight and perspective from their point of view. Participants were allowed to skip or decline any questions and/or stop the interview completely if they did not feel comfortable answering or continuing forward. With some variety, generally the interviews looked and proceeded in a similar fashion, but all addressed the following topics of interest: how they view their role in the family, family communication and memorable messages.

Data Collection

The adult only children involved in this study participated in audio-recorded interviews, which lasted from 30 to 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted, by the principal investigator, at quiet coffee shops in the Boulder, Colorado and surrounding areas. This study used a qualitative approach to conduct in-depth interviews allowing participants to explore areas and topics of mutual interest. Interviews allowed participants to recall and reflect on past experiences by providing insight and perspective of life as an only-child. The interviews were

semi-structured and covered topics about birth order roles, family communication and memorable messages about being an only-child. During the interviews, the participants were asked to focus on their experiences from adolescence since they were closest in time to their current age and since things could have changed over their life course.

Participants were first asked questions regarding birth order in order to understand their position in the family and how they perceived their role as an only-child. After, participants were asked about communication processes within the family. For instance, participants were asked, what do you think is the most effective form of communication? This data was used in attempts to understand the fundamentals of communication and how only children interact with their immediate family and how they comprehend the situations and perceive the messages surrounding them.

Next, participants were asked questions surrounding personality traits and behavioral characteristics. It was important to understand the behavior of the only children in order to gain a sense of whether or not the parents or other sources influenced or shaped the only children. Finally, they were asked to recall the memorable messages they deem significant and as impacting or affecting their behavior. The research on memorable messages was intended to see if messages surrounding only-child status influenced participants' behaviors.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Analysis of the transcripts began with reading through them carefully to identify key ideas about only childhood that were evident in the data. I noted and marked key ideas or interesting comments by participants. I made a list of these, and I organized them into categories of types of statements that reflected different themes or topics in the interviews. Then, I sought to organize the key quotes and comments

from the interviews around the research questions for the study. I generated a table for each research question, where I reorganized used the prior list of comments to identify key themes or processes described by participants that helped to answer the research question.

This organized material was then used to identify key statements that were responsive to each of the research questions that either answered or spoke to the theme of the question. In anticipation of future research, I then organized the data in a separate document to reflect the key ideas I noted as evident across the interviews but not central to the research questions. For example, the varied socialization among the only children and development of parental personality traits and influence.

Chapter Three

Analysis

The interviews demonstrated how roles, familial communication processes, and memorable messages became meaningful to adult only children. A key finding in this study was that only children understood their role in the family as involving multiple roles and serving as the “glue” of the family. The data also indicates a range of family communication processes that seemed important in these only-child families. These processes included: *(1) parental discipline techniques, (2) how only children view their situation as different from sibling children, (3) greater amount of attention from parents, and (4) self-image and identity development.* These processes became meaningful to the participants in part because of their only-child status. Memorable messages about being an only-child were also explored. Memorable messages about the participants’ only-child status, how only children are advantaged over siblings, expectations of achievement, independence, adult-like behavior, and expressing emotions were described by participants. These messages reveal the way that only children are encouraged to understand their situation and make sense of what it means to be an only-child. Following is an analysis of the findings using first-hand account excerpts from interviews to demonstrate the memorable messages that resulted around the study’s three research questions.

Only-Child Role in Family

The first research question asked how adult only children viewed their role as an only-child in the family growing up. Understanding the differences between birth order positions has been a popular field of study, and research has explored the personality characteristics found in only children as compared to first-born, middle, and youngest children. Previous literature has failed, however, to consider family roles and the way only children learn to make sense of their

role within the family. This study sought to better explain the role that only children played in their family. In this study, two subthemes emerged from the interviews. First, the data indicated that adult only children feel obligated to fulfill multiple roles within the family. Second, adult only children feel like the “glue” of the family.

Fulfilling multiple roles. In terms of their place in the family, these participants reported feeling like had they had to fulfill multiple roles; a position akin to both first and lastborns. Reflecting on the leadership components of the first-born stigma and the youngest born of being spoiled, many of the participants felt like they played both of these roles. For example, Jennifer said, “I think my role as the only-child was probably to encompass the younger and older stigma, instead of the only-child.” Similarly, Stephanie said, “in some ways I got both ends.” Michelle for example, recalls falling victim to performing the roles of other birth order positions; in her case, the youngest child and the widely held view that they are the most spoiled: “I’d get spoiled because I did show growth and responsibility and better characteristics than just to be a spoiled only-child, I guess,” she said.

Only children have their parents’ full attention. Sure, this attention may result in negativity, like spoiling, but it can also be the attention of time, money, and financial liberation. Most interestingly however, Michelle, as well as other participants, acknowledged their effort to prove responsibility in the family, which can then sometimes result in spoiling. Above all, the data indicated how only children feel responsible for fulfilling multiple roles by playing into similar themes that represent other birth order positions. This supports existing research about spoiled only children, but is framed differently when accounting for a narrative understanding of how only children view their role in the family.

Reports of fulfilling multiple roles suggest an expectation that only children need to be versatile in their place in the family. As described, notions of family often include filling roles like “oldest/responsible” and only children were called upon to do so even though the family was small. Only children then, become centered in responsibility by feeling like they serve to maintain the inferences made about other birth order positions. Therefore, only children may have to play a role in the family that is, in some ways, more important or onerous than what children in multiple child families encounter and/or perform.

Glue of the family. Additionally, the only children in this study reported that they felt like the “glue” of the family. Because there were no other children, or siblings, to occupy space in the family, these only children feel responsible for maintaining a relationship with their parents and building an environment for a sustaining family unit. For instance, one participant, Claire, said:

I think I’m like the glue in the family because I think that my mom, like I said, is my best friend and her and I are really close and I think that I have kind of taken on the role of giving her strength through situations that if her and my dad are arguing I can almost be like the mediator and almost be like dad you can’t walk all over mom because she can’t stick up for herself and also be like mom, you have to be like stronger and I think I’m literally the glue that holds everything together, and just like really tight with my family.

Another participant, Mark, noted that he felt his parents had stayed together because of him and that created a sense of holding the family together:

Well I guess in a way there was a lot of pressure on me cause I was kind of like the glue – I know for a fact especially retroactively, the only reason my mom stayed with my dad was because of me cause she thought it was the right thing to do.

Both Claire and Mark reflected on their responsibility as only children. In Claire's instance she is the adhesive of the family unit, feeling that it is her duty as an only-child, that involved providing support for and mediating communication between her parents. In Mark's case, he felt his role in the family was a significant member that keeps the family from detaching.

Feeling like the glue of the family highlights the importance of "family" to only children. In their reports of feeling responsible for maintaining the family unit and as being vital to the family communication, only children place a great significance on family. "[It's] just the three of us up against the world," Kathy said. Combined, these findings about fulfilling multiple roles and feeling like the glue of the family explain how only children view their role in the family. This further suggests that our cultural ideas of "family" center on children, making them important or essential to "family." Further, these subthemes help develop our understanding of the roles only children report performing as part of their identity as an only-child.

Family Communication Processes in Only-Child Families

The second research question asked what family communication processes the only children remember as being important to their family and/or as resulting from their only-child situation. By investigating family communication processes within only-child families, we are able to gain an understanding of this specific type of interaction. The data supports four communication processes as important in only-child families: (1) *parental discipline techniques*,

(2) how the only children saw their situation as different from sibling children, (3) greater amount of attention from parents, and (4) expressing feelings and emotions.

Parental discipline techniques. First, only children reflected on how parents handled discipline and how this was related to the family composition. Only children aligned with the first-born birth order classification, meaning that these only children felt that in terms of parental discipline, “like the first-born[s]...it’s trial and error,” Mark said. Parents do not have an example of how to manage children, therefore, in the only-child and first-born situation, participants often felt that they experienced more “leeway” in some aspects of discipline. For some, this even translates into parental failure to discipline. Jeremy said, “[My parents] disciplined me and they tried to stick to it but in the same kind of way, I manipulated my parents because I knew exactly what I had to do to get ungrounded.” Similarly, Alexandra mentioned, “[My parents] grounded me for three months but they didn’t go through with the grounding, like I went out the next day.”

These only children also felt that because they did not have siblings growing up, compromise was more easily made with parents. Direct interactions between parent and only-child made discipline less important than arriving at an understanding about what had gone wrong or needed to be done differently. Most interestingly however, were the reports only children made about siding with one parent, the non-disciplinary, over the other. For example, Patty mentioned saying, “It’s weird because it is just the three of us, like games. I’ll be on my mom’s side then he’ll [father] get jealous about it because he’s by himself.” This describes an interesting dynamic in how only-child families function. The triadic structure creates an opportunity for children to be central to the family and supports tight connections between family members — whether they are positive or, in this case, negative.

How only children view their situation as different from sibling children. Only children also indicated how they saw that their only-child situation differed from sibling children. These only children reported a desire to have siblings for advice, friendship, and because they believed additional children would add to the importance of family events. Lindsey said:

It's weird when people have family nights when everybody gets together for dinner or they go out to dinner because we never had that, like there was no point I mean there was three of us. It's not like there was a lot of effort to round everybody up to go to dinner.

In the absence of siblings, however, these only children expressed having closer relationships with their parents, calling them, "best friends," which allowed for a deeper trust between family members. Kevin states, "I think there was a level of trust that I got that a lot of multiple sibling families wouldn't." In addition, they also described having more involved communication based on the nature of their relationship. These findings reveal how only children may wish for a different family structure (with more siblings) but also recognize the closeness they experienced and felt with their parents.

Greater amount of attention from parents. The close relationship between parent and only-child allows parents to attend to more of their only-child's needs. Participants mentioned the attention they received from their parents and saw this as a unique feature of only-child families. "I don't think I realized how lucky I was to have my parents and to have their undivided attention," Christine said. Although these only children seem to appreciate the closeness of their relationship with their parents, they noted how it has impacted their expectations with other relationships. Alexandra said, "I'm used to having my parents do everything for me and so I reflect that on my friends sometimes." Another participant, Kathy,

described her relationship with her parents as unconditional, so when trying to make friendships, she was most often disappointed, feeling like it was hard to find what her parents gave her in outside friendships. Kathy said this:

Clearly when you're growing up you have a lot of friends and a lot of friendships, but your parents are really your only two good friends cause you don't have siblings. And my parents love me unconditionally and I love them unconditionally and I feel like when you don't find that in a friend, you just kind of get disappointed in the friendship. And then you're just kind of over it and so it's just like keeping friends as an only-child, I feel like is really difficult because it's just like you have such high expectations and if those expectations aren't met, then it's just like oh well.

Illustrated here, only children report having close relationships with their parents and valuing what the dynamic has to offer: attention, time, money, and other resources. The majority of the participants also mentioned the downside to having close relationships. For example, Lauren described her mom as “nosy,” constantly interested in detail and what Lauren was up to. Thus, participants saw the only-child family as entailing closeness between parents and children but that closeness was both beneficial and problematic.

Expressing feelings and emotions. Expressing emotions became a key process in only-child families. For instance, one participant said, “my mom always taught me to say how I feel about things and don't bottle things [up].” In another situation, the concept of “open-mindedness” was highly regarded as an effective form of communication. Messages about expressing feelings and emotions stemmed from parents wanting their only-child to be independent. Independence is a grand theme surrounding only children, in part, because they do

not have siblings. Expressing feelings and emotions provides one framework for understanding the relationships between independence and only children.

Participants reported on family patterns of interaction that were recurrent. These patterns mostly revolved around ways of showing affection. For example, “I love you” became a significant message for most of the only-child participants. Greetings like goodnight, good morning and hello, goodbye also became important to the participants as well as physical touch such as hugging. These only children felt that because their relationship with the parents was more involved and direct that these communication styles became important to their relationship with their parents. Positive memories like taking vacations, playing and visiting with extended family (cousins, grandparents) and spontaneous or random acts with parents also become important to their relationship. It was the “little things” that helped develop strong bonds between the only children and their parents.

Memorable Messages About Only Childhood

The third and final research question asked what memorable messages the only-child participants remembered receiving about their role and how these messages impacted how they view themselves and their family. The data revealed five memorable messages themes: *(1) only-child status, (2) adult-like behavior, (3) independence, (4) achievement, and (5) the self and identity development*. These categories reflect the expectations these only children found themselves performing and fulfilling based on the memorable messages that surrounded each theme.

Only-child status. One frequently appearing type of memorable message in the data was messages that had to do with the nature of only children. Megan recalled friends saying, “only children are the worst.” Past research often portrays only children in a bad light, calling them

socially handicapped or maladjusted individuals (Blake, 1981). Falbo (2012) has noted that these views of children are widespread and reflect cultural expectations for only children that may impact their parents and them. Supporting this, Amy mentioned feeling like her parents had put a lot of emphasis on making and maintaining friendships because she was an only-child. Additionally, only children are often stereotyped as not being able to share because they never have siblings to learn from. A very strong and prevalent message throughout Claire's life came from her father who always said, "only children have problems sharing." Furthermore, Stephanie recalled, "that was actually one of the main things my mom drilled into me when I was younger, [it] was that I had to share."

Only children also remembered receiving messages about the benefits of being an only-child. These messages were often framed in comparison to situations where there were siblings in the family. Several only children recalled asking their parents for siblings but were quickly reminded that being an only-child has its advantages. Kathy remembers her parents telling her, "No it's much better to be an only-child because we have more money to spend on you." Similarly, Maria reflects on her situation, "I kind of wanted a sister but then I realized I'd have to share my room and my clothes and I decided I didn't like that."

Additionally, messages indicating the advantages of their situation were memorable. Recent research on only children has revealed that they may experience economic benefits from their situation (Mancillas, 2006; Roberts & Blanton, 2001). Parents of a single-child are more economically stable than families with multiple children. They can also provide their child with more attention and resources, which is a benefit of the only-child situation.

The messages received by only children, both negative and positive, are consistent with previous research and what we know about only-child status. In a birth order position that might

seem odd to others, only children are likely to encounter negative messages or stereotypes surrounding their only-child status. Likewise, they are also likely to encounter the messages describing the benefits to being an only-child. In sum, these only children received messages about how they are at risk for being selfish, but they also received messages about the benefits of their situation. This seems interesting because these are messages that highlighted their only-child situation and gave them a rationale for understanding what they can expect.

Adult-like behavior. Behaving and acting adult-like throughout childhood became a memorable message for these only children. Almost all of the participants mentioned their ability to speak and communicate well with adults and their parents. For instance, Rachael said, “I think the pros [to being an only-child] are that I learned a lot more like how to interact with adults which I think is a good skill in some ways.” Likewise, Kathy also mentioned this by saying, “I feel like I can talk to an older generation better than some people.” Furthermore, Lauren said, “Definitely when I was younger I could communicate with parents better and a lot of parents would always talk to my mom about that.”

Because they spend the majority of their time surrounded by and interacting with adults, only children may be expected to play a role that involves acting adult-like. Lauren said, “I did spend so much time with [my parents] and I was expected - like when we go out to nice dinners - I was expected to go and behave.” For others this translated into being responsible and making adult-like choices. Mark described it as such, “When I screwed up [my mom] would always be like, ‘what have I always told you,’ and I would be like, ‘everything in life has a consequence.’” Similarly, Stephanie also mentioned, “[My parents] were like, ‘this is your life and you have deal with the consequences of your choices.’”

Adult-like behavior became essential to the participants' role as an only-child. Because there were no other siblings to interact with, only children were expected to behave on the same level as adults at a much earlier age. Constantly being surrounded by adults prompted different communication styles, helping only children to mature into adulthood much sooner than may have been expected of other children.

Independence. Having independence and being independent were also common memorable messages themes. For example, this meant being social and making friends or being responsible when left at home. "Doing things independently scares me a lot less," Steve said. Brittany also said, "[my parents] encouraged me to be independent and do my own thing." Without siblings, only children seem to have a greater capacity to develop mentally because they spend a significant amount of time alone. "I'm very comfortable doing things by myself, like I have a lot of friends who can't even go get food by themselves," Alexandra said. The theme of independence was also represented physically; learning how to care for personal space by becoming self-sufficient and responsible, and learning how to communicate and interact with adults.

The majority of these only children mentioned having a lot of personal or physical space. This meant having their own room, bathroom, and for some, their own floor like the basement. So, in one sense, it may seem that only children are spoiled because they don't have to learn to live and share with siblings; however, several were sure to mention that being responsible for and attending to this space. For example, Mark said, "I always have to keep my room clean." Mentally, these only children recalled having spent a great amount of time playing alone throughout childhood. In fact, Rachael said, "I would play board games by myself with four different players and I didn't think it was weird." For these only children, their independence

proved to be both positive, having lots of room to grow and develop, and also negative, sometimes wishing for sibling playmates and interactions.

However, this independence may put only children at a disadvantage by hindering their understanding of how to interact with non-family individuals. For example, by the time only children reach adulthood, they have spent a great amount of time alone. Siblings do not necessarily become independent until they reach adulthood. One participant, Claire, mentioned a struggle between her boyfriend, a sibling child, and herself. Her boyfriend desired more alone time because he had grown up with four brothers and sisters whereas his girlfriend, the only-child, felt comfortable spending more time together because she had already spent a significant amount of time alone. She explained it in the following way:

[My boyfriend] says this all the time, 'I'm red, you're blue and together we can make purple, but I like you because you're red, I don't want you to become blue,' and I think it's hard because he wasn't an only-child.

Achievement. Many of the memorable messages centered around what type of person the only-child is expected to be. It is difficult to tell, from this data, to what extent these messages are unique to only-child status; however, they reveal the expectations that these children were held to. Specifically, messages about making academics a priority and work ethic were common themes across many of the only-child participants. Many described how academics became important to their role when thinking about college. Coming from the parents, these messages revolved around the idea that attending college and/or grad-school was expected, particularly in light of messages relating to parents' ability to better provide for an only-child; not attending college was "not an option," "you're going." Stephanie even described it as her parents "pushing" her to be academic. Kathy also described it in the following way:

“Academics were very very very important - it might be because both of my parents have masters degrees.”

In one sense, only children are fortunate to be in a situation where parents can more easily provide for them. For some, there was recognition that they may have been a bit spoiled, but they also remembered clear messages about working for things. Memorable messages surrounding work became important to Mark for example, thereby shaping his behavior. He explains how his parents applied the following quotes to several instances involving achievement: “it’s not a right, it’s a privilege” and “you don’t make the shots you don’t take.” Milestones like graduating from college and developing a successful work ethic were memorable messages found among the only children in this study. This was especially important in terms of how only children were expected to perform academically. What is interesting here is the way that only children find themselves being very highly independent and highly responsible for meeting their parents’ expectations.

These only children recognized memorable messages surrounding achievement based on parents’ expectations of privilege, including their opportunity to attend college. This is consistent with the findings about only-child, adult-like behavior. In only-child families, direct communication between parent and only-child allows the only-child to more easily communicate with adults. In terms of achievement, communication about work ethic between parent and only-child teaches significant lessons about success. Messages about realizing their opportunity to attend college and comprehending responsibility and privilege may impact and shape only children to behave adult-like.

The self and identity development. Participants also reflected on the messages that influenced their self and identity development. Common sources for these messages were

parents, the media, and friends at school. Aware of the fact that there were no siblings around to aid in identity choices, these only children realized how much they relied on outside sources in thinking about how they should behave. Emily stated, “I have relied on [friends] more than anything or probably more than anyone else,” referencing sibling children.

As a result, many of the participants elaborated on their exploration of identity development. Following are accounts of only children and their search for identity. A few participants recalled struggling in this area as they were continually trying on new identities. For example Mark said, “I changed my wardrobe completely back to what I was comfortable with.” Claire even admitted, “I think that a lot of my identity comes from the people that I surround myself by.” These only children became aware of their identity by seeking outside sources to develop different personas.

Although these accounts are not specific memorable messages, they provide insight in how only children are able to develop a sense of identity without sibling influence, framing it as problematic or a challenge to their only-child situation. It is important to note the identity development in only children because they do not have siblings to monitor or influence their behavior. Understanding only children’s sources for identity development helps to build our understanding of the only-child socialization process and how only children are influenced by various factors other than siblings. Thus, there is a prevalent link between only children and identity development based on the sources for identity memorable messages that help shape only children into adulthood.

The findings regarding how only children perceived their role suggested that these only children felt like they fulfilled multiple roles. Participants also felt like they were the glue of the family; feeling responsible for maintaining and interacting with their parents in order to remain

as a family unit. As a result, only children place a high value on the meaning of family and what it takes to create and maintain a working family unit. For some, this may even translate into mediating communication between family members. The family communication processes the only children felt were significant to their only-child situation included: discipline techniques, direct relationships with their parents, sources for identity development, and expressing feelings and emotions. These themes reveal common communicative patterns in only-child families with relation to only-child status. Finally, the most frequently appearing memorable messages included themes surrounding ideas of only-child status, adult-like behavior, independence, achievement, and the self and identity development. These themes reveal common memorable messages expressed in only-child families by indicating the importance of what is expected of only-child and their role.

Chapter Four

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study add to our understanding of the nature and experience of only children by revealing themes surrounding the roles only children play, what their family communication is like, and the memorable messages they deem significant to their situation and development. Much of the previous research on only children has emphasized the challenges to being an only-child but has not allowed only children the opportunity to narrate their position based on the memorable messages that shaped their development and only-child situational perceptions.

Theoretical Implications

The participants in this study revealed interesting concepts of birth order socialization, feeling responsible for fulfilling multiple birth order positions; particularly like those of the first and last borns. Another concept of birth order socialization, was feeling like the “glue” of the family. In his novel, *The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler*, Adler (1956) writes:

It is common fallacy to imagine that children of the same family are formed in the same environment. Of course there is much, which is the same for all children in the same home, but the psychological situation of each child is individual and differs from that of others, because of the order of their succession. (p. 376)

The only-child experiences a psychological situation unique to their birth order position. Single-handedly the only-child performs the various roles of other birth order positions. The findings here help to develop our understanding of the ‘individual psychology’ of only children; feeling the need to fulfill multiple birth order positions and feeling like the “glue” of the family. In pursuing further birth order studies, this information should be added as it reveals personality

characteristics specific to the only children and their situation.

In her research, Falbo has made an effort to dispel the negative stereotypes of only children by highlighting the ways in which they are advantaged. This study supports Falbo's previous research by identifying the ways only children feel privileged and advantaged by their only-child situation. A common theme among the participants was recognizing their situation in the absence of siblings. For example, only children recalled communicating with their parents, wishing for siblings. However, they were quickly reminded how advantaged the only-child situation is in terms of not having to share their space or belongings. These findings indicate how only children make sense of the advantages of their only-child status.

The only-child family communication processes found in this study indicated interesting interaction dynamics between only-children and their parents. Studying only-child family communication builds our understanding of how the triadic family structure functions as a working unit. For example, Patty reported that "it's like playing games" between her parents. This may indicate an interaction specific to the only-child triadic family structure, and this interaction pattern may be compounded when children feel they are the "glue" of the family. Additionally, this study extends our understanding of only-child families by providing insight into only children's view of their role in the family and the family communication processes that were specific to their situation.

A significant amount of research conducted on only children has focused on the absence of siblings rather than the parent-child relationship and communication dynamics. For example, constantly being surrounded by and interacting with adults, these only children were more easily able to communicate with adults. This reveals certain details about only-child-parent interactions about their family communication. Based on the narrative reports made by the only-

child participants about family communication processes, the findings from this study reveal a specific communication unique to only-child families. The majority of the participants recognized their ability to speak well with adults because of their only-child status. Only children then, may be more apt to develop mature communication skills as a result of direct socialization from parents.

Defined by Knapp, Stohl, and Reardon (1981), memorable messages are “remembered for extremely long periods of time and which people perceive as a major influence on the course of their lives” (p. 27). The following influential memorable messages themes became significant to these only children: only-child status, adult-like behavior, independence, achievement, and the self and identity development. The findings of this study compare to the many assumptions about birth order personality characteristics. By using memorable messages as a tool to understand the only-child situation, the data revealed the influential sources that construct identity and a situation specific to only children.

One interesting finding here is that the sources for memorable messages in the only-child situation include parents, friends and media. Further research about these sources of messages in a study focused on identity development could yield potential insight into how only children develop their sense of self in adulthood and how different message sources play a role in identity processes. As Adler has illustrated, birth order affects child development and may influence personality characteristics of each position (only-child, first, middle, and lastborn). Research about identity could help better explain characteristics of only children. Studying sources of memorable messages in only-child families, and any other birth order position for that matter, could indicate how messages about birth position shape the way individuals see themselves.

Practical Implications

As part of their role of feeling like the “glue” of the family, only children may encounter experiences of mediating communication between parents. Feeling responsible for bonding the family together could also be a potential outcome for only-child expectations and/or roles. One practical implication seems to be that parents need to be aware of how much only children seem like the “center” of the family. If this happens, it could put pressure on only children and make their role more difficult. One communication theme found in the data was parental techniques in regards to discipline. The close relationship between parent and only-child could affect the parent’s enforcement of discipline techniques. Another practical implication seems to be parental inability to follow through with discipline. Lack of discipline could disrupt only children’s ability to behave and respect instructions from parents and also lead them to devalue authority. Additionally, the close relationship between parent and only-child could negatively impact developmental outcomes. For instance, the closeness could prevent only children from being able to gain independence and hinder their ability to physically and mentally become individuals. Although the only-child situation may be more economically stable than that of multiple sibling families, it may be easy for parents to continue supporting their only-child in adulthood.

Limitations

It is important to note the limitations of the study. First, this group of only children was relatively homogenous in race and socioeconomic level, all residing in the Boulder and Denver, Colorado areas. Because an advantage to being an only-child is financial stability, a more diverse group of individuals would have yielded further insight and experiential narratives. Second, snowball sampling was used to identify participants, so many of them had some

connection to the researcher. A sample of only children who have no relationship to the principal investigator could have potentially yielded somewhat different results. Participants may have been more willing to talk about their experience with someone they know or they may have been more reserved about sharing experiences and perceptions because of the relationship between interviewee and researcher. Another limitation of this study was being able to understand the dynamics in an only-child, single-parent family. The majority of the participants had married parents, and a group with more diverse family situations would have revealed potentially different communication styles.

Further Areas of Research

In the absence of siblings, only children are left to explore other sources for identity development. The sources mentioned in this study included parents, friends and media. Identity became especially important for one particular participant. Interviews asked the only children to identify the biggest or most significant turning points in their life. For Claire, it was dealing with identity shifts after major life changes. She describes it following way:

I think that a lot of my identity comes from the people that I surround myself by... I have a lot of different friends that influence the way I present myself and I think that with siblings, it's your siblings that shape the way you present yourself.

Investigating ways only children narrate self-image and identity could provide further insight on the only-child situation and birth order position. This could yield potential information regarding how the only-child situation differs from that of sibling children. "A wide range of contexts of identity formation has been suggested by identity theorists, including cultural settings as distal contexts, and school, workplace, and interpersonal relationships are seen as relatively proximal contexts" (Sugimura & Shimizu, 2011, p. 26). An individual's

identity is influenced by the people and atmosphere around them. Examining the absence of siblings with respect to identity development in only-child research could help explain how children develop their sense of self, based on the influential sources around them. “Identity development can be seen as a central piece in further understanding human development and growth” (Wolfe & Munley, 2012, p. 283). Research on the self and identity development provides a framework for understanding who we are and how others view us.

Because sources for identity development may impact child socialization, future research should focus on the only children raised by single parents. This is particularly interesting because the family structure and interactions become dyadic. Additionally, research on only children raised by divorced parents would yield further insight into sources for identity development and how their situation impacts the identity of the only children and the communication patterns among the individuals. Single and/or divorced parents could have major implications on the development of only children into adulthood.

Conclusion

This study examined family communication and memorable messages about roles in only-child families. The study reveals that only children as asked to fill multiple roles in the family. Additionally, they may find themselves at the center of the family or feeling that they are the “glue” that holds the family together. This suggests that it is important to consider how children are positioned in the families and their perceived importance to the family structure. Additionally, this dynamic of children at the center of the family was evident in the findings about both discipline and affection in these only-child families. These only children recognized that discipline played out differently because parents were only dealing with one child; they also recognized the strong expressions of affection that seemed to occur because they were only

children. Finally, participants indicated the memorable messages that were most significant to their situation. Participants could recall messages about the risks of being an only-child and messages about the benefits. The findings of this study demonstrated how only children view their role in the family, indicating the importance and value only children place on family.

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