

**Just the One?
What it means to have only one child in
contemporary Britain.**

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Abstract

This thesis examines the way the problem associated with having just the one child has been socially constructed. And it explores parents' own meanings for having just the one, finding a marked discrepancy between public assumptions and lived realities. It reports on qualitative interviews conducted with contemporary parents, comparing those who had chosen not to have a second child with those who found themselves involuntarily limited to only one. It also explores what parents have to say about bringing up their child, taking into account important inter-generational differences, in the context of profound social change.

This study was prompted by the recognition that, as a family form, the single child family occupies a problematic and ambiguous place in British society. In examining the way it came to be constructed as problematic, it highlights the convergence of psychological discourse with the politicisation of the question of family size. It seeks to demonstrate that, in recent years, increased maternal workforce participation has reinforced notions of voluntarism and of selfishness in relation to low fertility. And it suggests that the assumption of voluntarism has been further reinforced and ambiguity increased by the recent availability of reproductive technology, with its illusion of reproductive control.

The research has been informed by theories of social problem construction and of interpretative analysis. In examining the way a public problem has been constructed, then exploring private meanings at the individual level among those who are its subjects, it marks a new development in the scholarship of social problem research. It demonstrates that people are not only products but also producers of discourse. They do not simply conform to the identity conferred upon them by claims-makers but construct their own coherent, powerful meanings. In so doing, the parents who participated in this study provided a new insight into contemporary parenting exposing a clear cultural contradiction in its dominant ideology.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Background to this research	1
Interpretations of declining fertility	3
Reluctant Mothers?	8
Theoretical approach	11
Thesis structure	17
Chapter 2: Research Methods and Design	21
Relevant Literature	21
Methods	24
Historical context	24
Contemporary popular literature	26
Research Design	27
Implementing the Design	31
Recruitment	31
The interviews	32
Ethics	33
Interview schedule	34
Data Analysis	35
Discussion	36
Chapter 3: A Problem ‘Built Into’ English Society	37
Introduction	37
Fertility Decline in Early Twentieth Century Britain	37
Fertility Decline Amongst the Working Classes	42
Post-war Reconstruction and new standards for family size	44
Psychological Discourse and Family Size	45
Public Attitudes to Single Child Families in Post War Britain	47
Reproductive Choice, Working Mothers and Fertility Decline at the End of the Twentieth Century	49
Reluctant Mothers	50
Intensive Mothers	52
New reproductive choices	54
Discussion	56
Chapter 4: Experts, Activists and the Media	58
The Experts	59
Activists	64
The Media	69
Discussion	74
Chapter 5: Reproductive Choice and the Meaning of Having Just the One Child	78
“I’m not mother earth”	79
“I can’t improve on this one”	84
“I want a life of my own”	88
“Let’s not fix what isn’t broken”	93
Discussion	98
Chapter 6: When there is no choice: The experiences of parents who were unable to have more than one child	101
Introduction	101
“The answer one seems so inadequate”	102
“I feel like a failure as a female biological being”	108

“I wonder if these other mothers have any idea of the turmoil that they are causing”	113
“I just wanted to do a good job”	119
Conclusion	125
Chapter 7: What parents say about bringing up their one child	128
Introduction	128
“‘It is the quality of relationships that count not the numbers”	129
“‘My child is not a typical spoilt only child”	136
“‘He is every bit as interested in every little aspect of her as I am”	143
“‘She’s never been a lonely child”	148
Discussion	155
Chapter 8: Conclusion	159
Bibliography	167

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background to this research

“I say ‘no I’m just having one’ and they look at you as if to say ‘one isn’t acceptable’. There is no words that needs to be said. They can’t understand why you just want one child. It’s not the normal thing but I think what is normal you know, there is nothing that’s normal. I had one comment ‘you should be living in China because there they are only allowed one child’ (laughter) and you just let it wash over you really and I don’t take it personally, the comments, because it’s something that’s been built in society, in English society anyway.”
Julie, mother of twelve year old Emma.

This is a study about parents, like Julie, who have no more than one child. It is a study that has not only been privileged by their accounts of parenthood but made possible by them. Its primary purpose has been to elicit the narratives of those whose voices have remained remarkably absent from public representations of the causes and effects of this family form. Relatively little has been said and written, in any case, about families in Britain comprising only one child. Periodically social commentators express alarm that declining birth rates must necessarily result in increasing numbers of only children. They, in turn, invite psychologists to speculate upon the consequences to a child of growing up without siblings. Their hypotheses, which are often pessimistic, prompt their interlocutors to express concern about the qualitative as well as the quantitative social consequences of the diminution of family size. In this context, the family becomes characterised and typified by its size; the possibility of variation in its effects is removed and its causes generalised.

There is remarkably little public acknowledgement of what it means to parents themselves to have just the one child. Psychological concerns for the consequences of growing up without siblings mean that most often the family is viewed problematically in a child-centred way. Although reproductive behaviour is notoriously difficult to explain or to predict, many presume to know the reasons why parents do not go on to have a second child. And, while Julie suggests that ‘it is not the normal thing’, many warn also of an alarming increase in Britain in the proportions of families who are limited to just the one. What is lacking is an understanding of parents’ own accounts and explanations. They remain, for the most part, both unsolicited and unspoken. Therefore the principal research question addressed in this thesis is ‘what does it mean to have only one child when the norm in Britain is to have at least two’.

There is, however, some confusion about the norms for family size in Britain. The assumption that ‘the most obvious consequence of the declining birth rate is an increase in single child families’¹ seems common to many who find reason to express concern about declining fertility. Two eminent British authors suggested recently with dismay that although the ‘much respected’ childcare expert G Stanley Hall found only children to be ‘peculiar and exceptional’, ‘such concerns no longer seem to hold’ (Taylor & Taylor, 2003, p. 53). They also argued that women opt for one child to ‘avoid any of the residual stigma that is attached to the childless without jeopardising

¹ The Independent 15th March 2003, see Chapter 3

their careers' (ibid, p. 53-55). Similarly Professor Katherine Rake of the London School of Economics stated that 'professional married women, in particular, will have one child'². Clearly, there is a view in both popular and in academic literature that increasing numbers of women are limiting themselves to one child and that they do so for professional career reasons. They seem representative of anxieties not only about the quantitative but also about the qualitative composition of society.

What is most interesting about the possibilities opened up by this research is that these anxieties are not born out by statistics. It is no anomaly that Julie is not a professional woman, nor that she left school at the age of sixteen and that she stayed at home during the day to care for her daughter. Neither should it be surprising that she believes that to have only one child 'is not the normal thing' and knows no other family in her immediate community with just the one. Official statistics show that it was much more common for a woman born in England and Wales in 1920 to have only one child than it was for one born in 1959³. They also show that British women are far less likely to have a completed family size of one child than are women in other Western European countries³. And, remarkably, they demonstrate that women who leave school at the age of sixteen are significantly less likely to have a second child than are women who are more highly educated³. Therefore this is a study that offers the opportunity to address a marked discrepancy between public claims and private lived experiences.

This study also offers the opportunity to explore the way in which people experience and negotiate social norms. In the quotation chosen to open this thesis Julie demonstrates that she has only one child not in ignorance but in defiance of what she understands to be considered normal. She is so sure of disapprobation from others that this is what she interprets even when 'no words are said'. Whether criticism is intended in all cases is less important than is the way she herself has internalised the logic that makes having only one child problematic. That is to say, according to her own common sense, Julie herself seems to believe that to have one child 'is not the normal thing'. Therefore this research is concerned with the means by which Julie and others are able to resist this apparent norm. But, in doing so, it needs to ask why and how the problem of having just the one child came to be constructed and to be internalised as common sense.

The claims by eminent sociologists such as Taylor and Rake about low fertility imply considerable voluntarism on the part of parents. Certainly the disapproval that Julie perceives from others implies criticism of the apparent choices that she has made. After all, if there were no concept of reproductive choice there would surely be no grounds for criticism. However, not all parents who end up with one child have voluntarily limited themselves to just the one. For example, in her study of the decision to abandon IVF treatment, Throsby (2002) draws attention to parents who feel that they must endure IVF to provide a sibling for an existing child. But she also draws attention to the way in which its success rates are greatly exaggerated and the ambiguity surrounding those for whom it fails. That is to say, despite the availability of reproductive technology, some do not fulfil their ideal for family size. This raises some very important questions about reproductive choice, suggesting that it should be

² The Telegraph 30th June 2001

³ These statements refer to publications by the Office of National Statistics, discussed fully later in this chapter.

considered as a variable in this study and not as a given. If, as suggested, there is a common sense assumption that it is problematic to have an only child, how do those who do not have the prerogative of choice, who tried and failed to have a second child, experience this norm? And what is the impact of the availability of new technological options upon those who involuntarily fall below the norm for family size?

A further intriguing question in relation to the meaning of the single child family relates to the role of psychology in creating the perception of a problem. The norm to have at least two children is inextricably linked with the association of abnormality with only childhood. It should, perhaps, seem surprising that contemporary sociologists such as Taylor and Taylor refer to psychological research published in 1904 to back up their claims about the problems of declining fertility. By some accounts the research of G Stanley Hall 'obviously violates every rule that any modern social scientist would observe' (McKibben, 1998 p.28). However, Hardymont (1995), Hays (1996) and Furedi (2001) are among authors who demonstrate that twentieth century psychology has provided the most effective means of influencing child-rearing behaviour. When, in the 1940s, the British government needed to establish a minimum standard for family size to reverse the decline in birth rates, psychological claims about the problems of only childhood proved most effective (Laybourn, 1994). Similarly, when contemporary social commentators wish to raise alarm about an apparent increase in single child families, it is expedient to invoke old assumptions about the problematic only child to do so. This raises all the more curiosity about the meaning of having one child to contemporary parents, whether or not they have voluntarily limited themselves in this way.

The important point here is that there is nothing new about the politicisation of the question of family size, nor about the public claims that are made about single child families. Although in Britain there is an assumption of reproductive freedom, Julie's narrative alludes to the perception of normative constraints upon such freedom and to a form of cultural pressure that, she suggests, 'has been built into society'. It seems that because assumptions about the single child family are shaped by political and psychological interests, there is a lack of public or sociological curiosity about its private meaning. In what is the only academically accredited study of single child families in Britain, Laybourn makes the point that 'no-one has studied a representative group of families and asked them how they lead their lives' (Laybourn, 1994, p.120). Therefore, this study is intended to address a clear omission in the burgeoning sociological literature on the institution of the family. Before discussing the theoretical approach taken to this research, it is first necessary to examine statistical and demographic analyses that give reason to doubt the claims that appear publicly.

Interpretations of declining fertility

As discussed, the apparent statistical certainty that birth rates in Britain are declining has been interpreted to mean that many more people are choosing to have only one child. The single child family is presented most often in the media as a new phenomenon, as though birth rates have not fluctuated or declined until the present time. Certainly, this interpretation of statistics disregards or is ignorant of the commonality of having only one child in the past. The following table indicates that it

was in fact much more common to have just the one child in the early decades of the twentieth century than it is today. It also shows that the proportion of women who have the just the one has not changed over the last twenty five years.

Distribution of women by number of children born, 1920 to 1959, selected cohorts

England and Wales

Percentages

Year of birth	Number of children				
	0	1	2	3	4 or more
1920	21	21	27	16	15
1925	17	22	28	17	16
1930	13	18	30	19	20
1935	12	15	32	21	20
1940	11	13	36	22	18
1945	9	14	43	21	12
1950	14	13	44	20	11
1955	15	13	41	20	10
1959	18	13	38	20	11

Source: Office of National Statistics⁴

It is surely significant that in their book *what are children for?* Taylor and Taylor⁵ refer to statistics on family size from Italy, Portugal and the United States to demonstrate the growth in this apparent phenomenon. Clearly, British statistics reveal a rather different demographic pattern and only seem to reinforce the social resistance to very small family size in this country.

A comparison of changes in family size between eight European countries by Pearce et al (1999) shows that those who have only one child in Britain remain in the minority. These authors compare fertility rates of women born between 1940 and 1955 from which they conclude:

“Apart from Spain, the percentage of women having one child has remained relatively constant, albeit at different levels. In Spain, only 8 per cent of women born in 1940 had one child compared with an estimated 28 per cent of women born in 1960, almost the same proportion as Portugal (31 per cent). Roughly one in five women in France, Denmark and Finland had one child compared with one in ten in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, the reverse of the picture of childlessness” (Pearce et al, 1999, p.37).

⁴ in Focus on People and Migration, Fertility and Mortality 2005 Chamberlain, J & Baljit, G

⁵ *what are children for?* was co-written by Professor Laurie Taylor and his son Matthew Taylor. Professor Taylor was Professor of Sociology at York University and broadcaster on public radio. Matthew Taylor is Director of the think tank IPPR and was, in 2003, seconded to Downing Street as advisor on social policy to the Prime Minister.

In fact, Pearce's comparison reveals a slight decrease in the proportion of women having only one child in Britain between those born in 1940 and projections for those born in 1960, from 13% to 12%. In contrast, the proportion of women remaining childless is projected to almost double over this period, from 11% to 20%. The converse is true in France where fertility rates are roughly at replacement level and where 2.5 times more French women born in 1960 have one child than remain childless. Differences in family size between Britain and France and other European countries are presented in Table 1.

The annual release by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) of statistics on birth rates takes a snapshot of the total fertility rate for a specific year. For example, statistics released in 2004 for rates in 2003 reveal a slight increase on the previous year⁶. However, Smallwood and Jefferies (2003) point to a difficulty in the interpretation of data from a particular period in time. They argue that this measurement does not take into account factors such as delayed childbearing upon completed family size. Instead, they use the cohort of women born in 1957 to demonstrate the effect of delayed childbearing. This is one of the most recent cohorts for which data on actual completed family size now exists. It is also one that began to demonstrate a trend to later childbearing. Although women in earlier cohorts had higher fertility at younger ages, the 1957 cohort is not markedly different in its fertility by the completion of childbearing. These women ultimately bore an average of just over two children. The authors explain the rationale for a projected decline in fertility for subsequent cohorts of women in this way:

"For cohorts born in the first half of the 1960s, the falls in cohort fertility were largely driven by increasing childlessness; women who were having children were having on average around 2.4 children" (Smallwood & Jefferies, 2003, p.17)

They state that the trend to childlessness will continue and is projected at around 22% for women born in 1980. In parallel, fewer women are expected to bear three or more children and it is the combination of these two factors that accounts for a fertility decline amongst women who are currently of childbearing age (ibid).

This insight into cohort fertility confirms the prevailing strength of a minimum standard in Britain for parents to have at least two children. That is, women in this country are significantly more likely to have either no children or at least two than they are to have one. Quantitative data is useful in demonstrating the inaccuracy of the assumption that the single child family accounts for declining birth rates. It is less useful, however, in explaining the reasons why some parents end up with one child. Smallwood and Jefferies (2003) raise questions about parents who have less than the ideal of two children. They point out that, according to the General Household Survey, intended average family size for women of childbearing age is two children (Smallwood & Jefferies, 2003, p.16). However, this declines very slightly for older women in the 36 – 38 age group to just over 1.9. The authors ask whether this decline reflects the fact that these women are closer to completing childbearing and is thus based upon the 'reality of their lives' (ibid, p.22). They also ask whether the difference between stated intentions and actual fertility 'indicates an unmet need for

⁶ Total Fertility Rate published by the ONS on 9th September 2004

children or whether stated fertility intentions, while valid at the time they are collected, may be modified by subsequent life events' (ibid). Clearly, qualitative data is needed to answer the questions raised by Smallwood and Jefferies. In recent years, some light has been shed upon the circumstances of childlessness in Britain, most notably by McAllister and Clarke (1998). However, the 'life events' and the possibility of an 'unmet need for children' amongst those who have one child remains largely unexplored.

As demonstrated by Smallwood (2003) and by Pearce (1999), large-scale studies and birth rate data highlight ambiguities about very small family size. Explanations, where they exist, tend to be generalised and tend to rely upon a single explanatory variable. For example, Smallwood refers to a recent paper by Voas (2003) which suggests that the preferences of men have been given insufficient attention in explanations of reproductive behaviour. He states:

"Even in a situation where both men and women separately have preferences that would produce total fertility above replacement levels, the interaction of their preferences can easily lead to much smaller families" (Voas, 2003).

Consequently, Voas argues that men need to be 'targeted' in low fertility countries in order to raise fertility to replacement levels. His rationale is that, where low fertility is the norm, a couple will default to the norm where there is disagreement between them about reproduction. In this way, he is suggesting that the preferences of men are under-estimated in families that fall below replacement level fertility. The implication here is that, in many cases, men are likely to be responsible for the decision to have only one child. Certainly Pearce (1999) seems to allude to the need for a more contemporary approach to the explanation of reproductive behaviour. He argues that an understanding of demography is critical to the planning of infrastructure and to the labour market, but the determinants of changing fertility are far from clear. He goes on to point out that the reasoning given in the 1946 Royal Commission on Population on fertility decline remains largely unchanged over fifty years later (ibid p.39). Therefore explanations such as women's educational opportunities and employment, urbanisation, social promotion and the availability of contraception still dominate assumptions about the causes of low fertility. They do little to explain, however, the reasons why some parents choose to defy the norm in Britain by having one child rather than two. And they overlook the proportion of parents who are unable to have a second child.

No. of children	Year of mothers' birth				
	1940	1945	1950	1955	1960*
United Kingdom					
0	11	10	14	17	21
1	13	13	12	12	12
2	37	43	43	40	35
3	22	21	20	20	21
4 or more	17	13	11	11	11
Av. family size	2.36	2.17	2.03	2.02	1.95
France					
0	8	7	7	8	8
1	18	20	21	20	20
2	34	39	41	39	39
3	21	21	20	22	23
4 or more	19	13	11	11	10
Av. family size	2.41	2.32	2.11	2.13	2.09
Finland					
0	14	14	16	18	18
1	18	21	20	16	16
2	38	40	40	37	36
3	18	17	17	19	20
4 or more	12	8	8	9	11
Av. family size	2.03	1.87	1.85	1.88	1.94
Denmark					
0	10	8	10	13	12
1	17	16	19	19	20
2	40	47	47	45	44
3	23	21	18	17	18
4 or more	10	7	5	5	6
Av. family size	2.24	2.06	1.90	1.84	1.88
Netherlands					
0	12	12	15	17	18
1	10	13	15	15	16
2	40	47	47	45	44
3	42	49	47	43	42
4 or more	13	8	8	8	7
Av. family size	2.21	1.99	1.90	1.87	1.84
Spain					
0	8	6	10	10	10
1	8	10	16	22	28
2	24	36	42	44	45
3	32	28	21	16	12
4 or more	29	20	11	7	4
Av. family size	2.59	2.43	2.19	1.90	1.73
Portugal					
0	6	5	9	7	7
1	26	26	25	26	31
2	30	37	40	44	43
3	16	16	14	13	11
4 or more	23	17	11	9	7
Av. family size	2.61	2.31	2.12	1.97	1.87
Ireland					
0	5	6	9	14	16
1	15	12	13	10	10
2	14	17	19	22	25
3	23	26	27	27	25
4 or more	43	39	32	27	24
Av. Family size	3.27	3.27	3.00	2.67	2.39

• UK = 1959, France = 1957 & Republic of Ireland = 1958

Table 1: Average family size and family size distribution (percentage) selected years

Reluctant Mothers?

If, as assumed, the number of parents who are limiting themselves to one child is increasing, then maternal employment seems, to many social commentators, to be the explanation for this reproductive trend. The reasoning expressed by Gerson (1985) that for 'reluctant mothers' having only one child would make hardly any impact at all seems to make a great deal of sense to British sociologists. Taylor and Taylor (2003) express the view that having only one child has become a 'comfortable' option for those women who want to avoid the stigma of childlessness without jeopardising their careers. Reference is made in an article entitled 'Careers spark rise of the one-child family' in *The Times* to research at the London School of Economics that appears to confirm this view⁷. The article suggests that 'three times as many professional couples were choosing to have only one child than less well-educated couples in Britain'. The journalist goes on to quote Professor Kathleen Kiernan to qualify this by explaining that some women may have hit the 'biological ceiling'; that is to say, they may not have voluntarily limited themselves in this way but, in delaying maternity, find themselves limited to one child. Professor Katherine Rake⁸ attributes this apparent phenomenon to the inadequacy of the response by government to the incompatibility between work and family⁹.

Rake's argument provides a clear example of the contemporary politicisation of questions of family size. Claims about declining fertility play an important role in efforts to obtain greater workplace flexibility and more favourable terms of employment for parents. The politicisation of the concept of 'role incompatibility' is exemplified in the work of Peter McDonald, an influential Australian demographer who is given prominence by Taylor and Taylor (2003). He stated:

"The perceived indirect or opportunity cost of having children (lost earnings) appears to be the central constraint that leads to differing fertility levels in wealthy countries" (McDonald, 2002)¹⁰

McDonald goes on to argue that, as most men and women in their early twenties state a preference for two children, having less than two children is the result of constraint rather than preference. He envisages a new social contract between the state and the individual which would entitle all adults to the right to a minimum of two children and, in his view, anything less than that is 'an abrogation of human rights' (McDonald, 2002). In the language of demography, the progression advocated by McDonald from one child to two or more is described as 'recuperation'. In his view this recuperation is needed to restore 'health' to affluent, low fertility nations. He attributes common causes to childlessness and to having one child and he presents these phenomena as the abnormal, unhealthy consequences of capitalism. Such arguments support claims in favour of a greater 'work-life balance' and are used by activists to justify the increased role of the state in industrial relations. For example, in September 2004, the British Trade Secretary Patricia Hewitt admonished industry

⁷ The Sunday Times November 16th 1997

⁸ Lecturer in Social Policy, London School of Economics

⁹ The Telegraph 30th June 2001

¹⁰ Paper presented at the Meeting of the Population Association of America, Atlanta 9-11 May 2002 entitled *Low Fertility: Unifying the Theory and the Demograph.*

leaders to introduce ‘family-friendly’ policies to enable British women ‘to have more babies’¹¹.

Similarly Sylvia-Ann Hewlett, an activist who attributes low fertility to the consequences of female workforce participation, calls for a change in priorities (Hewlett, 2003). She appeals to women in particular not to give in to their own ambition and to the inflexibility of employment cultures but to give priority to motherhood. In her view, having only one child is as unsatisfactory a reproductive outcome as having none. Although born and educated in Britain, Hewlett is an American resident who generalises the causes of low fertility across national boundaries. She finds commonality not only between childlessness and having only one child but also between reproductive cultures, recognising the phenomenon of ‘Baby Hunger’ to be the same in Britain as it is in the United States. In her book of this title, Hewlett defines low fertility as a problem specific to highly educated, professional women and it is the consequences of their reproductive behaviour with which she is concerned. She expresses alarm at the prospect of a reduction in the number of law-abiding tax paying citizens if reproduction amongst the female elite is allowed to decline.

Hewlett is willing to reveal the pronatalist motivations for her activism and to acknowledge her concerns for the qualitative consequences of variations in fertility. Her exposure of such concerns raises questions about the reasons for the more general discourse that correlates having only one child with high levels of educational and professional attainment. Is it possible that this discourse relates more to the qualitative effects of reproductive behaviour than to a decline in fertility in absolute terms? In Britain, Gerson’s (1985) ideas about ‘reluctant mothers’¹² have resulted in the construction of arguments that seem to account a priori for a decline in fertility since the post war baby boom. Yet these arguments seem most often to be based upon supposition. It could be argued that this implication of maternal ambition in declining fertility is little different to the concerns of eugenicists in the early decades of the twentieth century or with Enid Charles’ (1934) concept of ‘the flight from parenthood’¹³.

As we have seen, there are reasons to question whether increasing numbers of British parents are, in fact, opting to have only one child. There may be reasons too to doubt the extent to which ‘married professional women’ are the most likely to limit themselves to one. For example, Rindfuss et al (2003) argue that reproductive trends should not be generalised across national cultures. Moreover, they place doubt upon the assumptions that correlate low fertility and maternal employment suggesting that they are outdated. They state that ‘sociologists tend to have focused on the incompatibility between the mother and worker roles’ but that ‘the theoretical construct of ‘role incompatibility’ is being conceptualised only at the macro level’. They also argue that, ‘the incompatibility between work and child-rearing varies by institutional contexts ie it varies over time and across countries’. And they draw upon data that demonstrates that in some contexts high female workforce participation can be positively correlated with higher fertility.

¹¹ Daily Mail 22nd September 2004

¹² Gerson’s explanation of the reasons why working women may opt for one child is discussed fully in the following chapter.

¹³ see Chapter 2, p. 8

Most significantly, Rendall and Smallwood (2003) demonstrate that, although, in Britain, childlessness is higher amongst more highly educated women, less educated women who left school at the age of 16 are more likely to have one child. They draw attention to a general view that ‘a higher level of education is associated with later and less childbearing’. However, their analysis of longitudinal data for women born between 1954 and 1958 contradicts this notion. They state that ‘(f)or any given age at first becoming a mother, having a higher qualification was associated with the faster and more likely arrival of a second child’ (ibid p.25). They also demonstrate that the probability of a less educated woman having a second child decreases with age and that having a higher qualification is positively associated with having a third or more children. The table below indicates the proportions of women who go on to have a second child according to educational level and age at the first birth. In so doing, it highlights the difference between the two educational groups.

Age at 1st birth	No higher qualification	Higher qualification
25	93%	96%
30	83.5%	90.8%
35	59.8%	73.6%

Table 2: Percentage of women, according to age at birth of first child and education, who go on to have a second child. Source Rendall & Smallwood 2003

Another factor that has served to reinforce the notion of selfishness in relation to having only one child is the anxiety about ‘replacement level fertility’. This seems to have contributed in no small way to a public contempt for those who have less than two children. The reasons for this are implicit in the language used in the following statement:

“(T)o ensure replacement level fertility a substantial proportion of women have to have three or more children in order to compensate for those who remain childless or have only one child (Smallwood & Chamberlain, 2005, p.17)

The assumption that a proportion of the population must ‘compensate’ for parents who fall below minimum reproductive standards only increases hostility to the idea that they may be compensating for their personal ambition. In fact, Smallwood and Chamberlain point out that the very concept of replacement level fertility is subject to interpretation and varies over time and according to social context. They argue that in the context of the demography of England and Wales, ‘we should not be overly obsessed’ with this level as, in their view, the population ‘will not dramatically rise or fall in the next 30 years’ (Smallwood & Chamberlain, 2005, p.26).

It seems possible that there has been a lack of academic curiosity about the circumstances of single child families because, to date, the causes for this apparent phenomenon seem obvious. Moreover, it appears to be much easier to explain why a ‘career woman’ counts the opportunity costs of maternity than it is to explain why a woman without a higher qualification embarks upon parenthood but limits herself to one child. Given the current anxieties about birth rates and official concerns for ‘replacement level’ fertility, there seems to many to be little point in questioning the charge of selfishness implicit in pronatalist rhetoric about reluctant mothers. It serves a purpose. What appears as a particularly middle class phenomenon about

safeguarding privileges may be much more complex and certainly one which is deserving of renewed sociological interest. If, as argued, the problem of the single child family is one that has been socially constructed to serve particular interests, then at once the assumed attributes of this family form are called into question.

Theoretical approach

While the central curiosity that prompted this research is what it means to parents to have one child, it also needed to be concerned with how and why this came to be constructed as problematic. In light of statistical analyses it would appear that the cultural resistance to having an only child is stronger in Britain than it is in other western European countries. And, remarkably, it seems that it was more normal to have only one child in the early decades of the twentieth century than it is today. Therefore the question should not relate, as Taylor and Taylor imply, to an increase in single child families with implicit disregard for the alleged problems of only childhood. Rather the research needed to ask why beliefs that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century appear to have currency today. And it needed to explore not only the way the problem came to be constructed, but also the way in which it has hung on to its problematic status in the context of profound social change.

Therefore this study required two different kinds of research. The first involved a historical review of academic literature to trace the emergence and development of beliefs that made having one child problematic. Then it needed to examine not only the way the problem appears publicly in the media today, but also to assess who has an interest in perpetuating it and how they do so. The second kind of research involved seeking out and interviewing parents who have one child, to elicit their own accounts and explanations of family life. The analysis of these two different types of data provided the valuable opportunity to compare the discourses between them. It enabled an evaluation of the extent to which parents had internalised public assumptions, the means by which they had negotiated them and their impact upon their family lives.

This unprecedented research project required a somewhat eclectic theoretical approach. There is a growing body of literature on the construction of social problems which provided a theoretical framework for identifying the reasons why a particular problem, such as that of the single child family, should take hold when others do not. Additionally, the research needed to be informed by theories of interpretative social analysis to explore the meanings and the patterns of logic that emerged from the interviewing parents who have just the one child. But it also required an approach that could build upon these two theoretical frameworks. In particular, it needed to examine the relationships between the two different types of data, to identify the dominant discourses within them and to look for continuities of logic. In this way, the research constitutes something of a new development in the study of social problems and of the conceptualisation of the relationship between the public and private domains.

Best's work on social problem construction provided particular value in understanding the way in which new problems emerge, the way they gain public recognition and thus become 'institutionalised'. He makes the very important point that one group of 'claims-makers' is unlikely to be sufficient in its own right to

achieve the institutionalisation of a problem. However, when the interests of four specific groups converge upon a social issue, their collusion elevates it to the status of a public problem and keeps it there. He states:

“Institutionalization depends upon amassing sufficient social support for claims about new problems. Four social sectors are central to this process: the media, activists, government, and experts. When these four work together to reinforce one another, their influence seems overpowering (Best, 1999, p.63).

Certainly the British government had a strong interest in disseminating claims about the need to provide a child with siblings in its attempt to reverse the decline in birth rates in the post war period. Therefore psychotherapists such as Winnicott found strong institutional support for presenting only childhood as an incurable pathology, thus popularising views expressed decades earlier by G Stanley Hall and by Cunningham. Moreover, Winnicott had the increasing power of the mass media at his disposal (Badinter, 1981). And, it will be shown that throughout the twentieth century, other groups such as eugenicists have actively intervened in matters of family size. More recently, a form of activism by adults who claim to be the victims of only childhood has played its role in perpetuating the problem of the single child family. Best uses the metaphor of the ‘Iron Quadrangle’ to demonstrate the mutually reinforcing power of these four social sectors. It is a metaphor that has provided great analytical value in the context of this research.

Best and Furedi are among contemporary authors who have demonstrated the particular power of experts in shaping public beliefs about family and childhood. For example, Best suggests that ‘sociologists have virtually surrendered the study of (...) children to psychologists, who concentrate on the individual, psychological processes that characterize childhood development, rather than focusing on children as social beings’ (Best, 1994, p.4). His theories help to explain why the image of the only child appeals so strongly to contemporary sensibilities about childhood. He states that ‘the notion that children are precious, that they need protection from a harmful adult world, is basic to contemporary understandings of childhood’ (Best, 1990, p.182). But he also argues that while the family is upheld as a ‘haven for children’ it is constructed by psychoanalysis as the cause of difficulties in later life (Best, 1994, p.15). The image of the only child as victim of an inadequate family structure corresponds to one of Best’s four categories of ‘troubled children’. It corresponds also with the image of the ‘deprived’ child, denied the companionship of siblings and with the one of the ‘sick’ child whose deprivation is pathologised and diagnosed to mean irreparable damage (Best, 1990, p.4-5).

In a similar vein Furedi (2003) demonstrates the cultural appeal and strength of psychotherapeutic discourse and its hold on the way in which families and relationships within them are viewed. His concept of ‘emotional determinism’ is particularly pertinent to this study. His idea that, according to ‘therapy culture’ adult life is determined by emotions set in train during childhood and over which the individual has no control is an important one. As we shall see, the concept of ‘only childhood’ is founded in psychotherapy and certain individuals remain active in ensuring that it can only be understood in a psychotherapeutic, problematic way. Furthermore, Berger and Luckman argue that ‘(i)f a psychology becomes socially

established (that is, becomes generally recognized as an adequate interpretation of objective reality) it tends to realize itself forcefully in the phenomena it purports to interpret' (Berger & Luckman, 1967, p.199). These authors use the example of 'the New York intellectual' who becomes neurotic by internalising and recognising in himself symptoms defined by Freudian psychology. They seek to demonstrate in this way that a problem constructed by psychology becomes self-actualising when its logic is internalised by those who become its subjects. The study will show that, like the 'New York intellectual', certain individuals who grew up as only children exemplify the self-actualising of psychological interpretation. In so doing, they seek to perpetuate a mythical victimised version of only childhood and thus to generate considerable doubt about those parents who have only one child.

Furedi's exposure of 'the assumption of parental incompetence' also relates to deterministic beliefs about family life and is an important one here. He suggests that '(T)he interlocking myths of 'infant determinism' (the assumption that infant experience determines the course of future development) and 'parental determinism' (the notion that parental intervention determines the fate of a youngster) have come to have a major influence of the relations between children and their parents (Furedi, 2001, p.24). Significantly, what these 'myths' result in is a culture in which the family is viewed and interpreted in isolation of its wider social and cultural setting. The idea that a child will be irrevocably damaged by the absence of siblings exemplifies this deterministic view of family life. It is one that, according to Rich Harris (1998), ignores a child's relationship with peers as a variable in social development. So although, according to its logic, parents are held responsible for the way their child turns out, it is one, paradoxically, that ignores parents' own meanings and actions if they have just the one child. In all cases, the family becomes characterised by its size. As Ribbens observes 'psychology lacks the theoretical and methodological tools to know how to incorporate an analysis of social context as intrinsic to developmental process' (Ribbens, 1994). She also argues that 'psychologists know very little about how children are brought up'.

While this study has drawn upon the work of Best and Furedi in particular to understand the construction of this public problem, it is also concerned with reporting on parents' own experiences. The work of Sharon Hays (1996) in her recent social analysis of mothers and their beliefs about child-rearing is highly relevant to the empirical component of this research. In *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* she has provided great theoretical value, both in her methodological approach and in the meaning of her research findings. Significantly, Hays provides a detailed analysis of the social context and the ideological underpinning of contemporary beliefs about motherhood. But she also conducted qualitative interviews with mothers to examine the way they interpret what she defines as 'the ideology of intensive motherhood' in both an accepting and rejecting sense. Of great interest here is the way in which Hays traces the development of this ideology, drawing attention to the extraordinary influence of a 'triumvirate of child-rearing authors' including the British psychologist Leach. She presents them as 'carriers' of cultural ideals and reveals that the vast majority of mothers consume child-rearing manuals. Informed by a historic review of child-rearing beliefs and practices, she concludes that all contemporary mothers can be defined as 'intensive' ones. However, she also argues that although they conform to this dominant ideology, each mother's own interpretation of it is in some sense

unique. In so doing, she provides a theoretical framework for examining the relationship between public and private discourses.

In her theory that mothers must choose between the two competing ideologies of 'profit-maximising utility' on the one hand and of 'intensive motherhood' on the other, Hays raises an intriguing question about mothers who have one child. Although she believes that the title of the 'cold-hearted businesswoman is reserved for the childless', others express a different view. In arguing that women will opt for one child to avoid jeopardising their careers, Taylor and Taylor seem to be saying that such mothers have capitulated to the demands of the marketplace. They are following here the logic of Gerson (1985) who argues in *Hard Choices* that for 'reluctant mothers' one child posed no threat at all in career terms. An Australian sociologist Callan (1985) concluded that mothers of one child are different to other mothers because their reproductive decision results from the priority they accord to their employment. On this basis, all of those women who participated in this research should have been fully employed and probably highly educated. Yet, a significant proportion were neither. Hays theory raises a very different possibility, that the meaning of having only one child is much more complex and certainly one that must warrant further exploration. Are mothers who have just the one different to other mothers as some suggest? Or have they found the means to reconcile their family size with the dominant contemporary ideology, one that demands that 'if you are going to be a mother, you must be an intensive one' (Hays, 1996)?

Hays demonstrates that it is necessary to interview mothers and to analyse their discourses to expose the 'concealed' logic of intensive motherhood and the way it makes sense subjectively to them. But she also reveals that her respondents actively reshaped the ideology available to them. Therefore, the opposing decisions to undertake paid work or to stay at home could be reconciled with this ideology as long as they could be presented as beneficial to their child. The analysis of the empirical interview data from this study of parents who have one child has been informed by Hays' insights. It has looked for patterns of logic and for meanings that demonstrate that parents have been influenced by expert discourses, including those that construct only childhood in a problematic way. But it has also paid close attention to the way in which they actively reshaped these discourses to construct their own subjective meanings. In so doing, it has adopted the view that 'people are producers as well as products of discourses (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002, p.104).

The selection of discourse analysis as the most appropriate analytical framework to explore parents' individual meanings for having just the one child was made consequent to the information produced during interviews with parents. It was one that could not be made in isolation of them but rather it involved an iterative relationship between research material and the methods of analysis. This study adopts the view that 'discourse analysis examines how language constructs phenomena, not how it reflects and reveals it' (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002, p.6). And, in relation to qualitative research, 'categories are treated as produced in discourse rather than as pre-existing' (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p.17). In consequence, this discussion of the theoretical approach to the analysis necessarily draws upon certain challenges, questions and issues contained within the narratives. Of course, a detailed analysis will be offered making up the latter section of this thesis. The purpose of this

discussion is to identify and draw out certain key concepts and, with reference to the interview data, exemplify the suitability of discourse analysis to this study.

Certainly, an approach that attempted to identify, a priori, one common cause for having only one child would have been confounded by the varied and often self-contradictory explanations given by parents. Their accounts could not be reduced and simplified to an equation of cause and effect. The contradictions and ambiguities within them seemed to necessitate an analytical approach that could anticipate and accommodate such complexity. For example, the theoretical distinction between economically active and 'stay at home' mothers could not be readily applied to interviewees. Some women who had chosen to stay at home defined themselves as 'career women', offering this as one possible explanation for their family size. Although the variable of reproductive choice is of critical importance to this research, some parents resisted discursively a straightforward categorisation between those who had exercised reproductive choice and those who had not. In one or two cases mothers revealed, at some point in the interview, that they had miscarried children who had been planned as siblings for their child; yet they chose to talk the language of choice as though they had clearly anticipated the advantages of only childhood and had not seriously considered alternatives.

This emphasis upon language and upon discourse fits logically within a social constructionist epistemology. Gergen states that 'social constructionist inquiry is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live' (Gergen, 2003, p.15). What Gergen and others also emphasise is that although reality is constructed through language, language in itself is fundamentally unstable. Therefore 'meaning can never be permanently fixed' (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002, p.6). It seemed perverse, on early reflection, that participants in this study recognised and confirmed the cultural stereotype of the 'spoilt only child' and yet exonerated their own child of this identity. However, the meaning of 'spoiling' a child has been continuously adjusted over time to accommodate profound changes in child-rearing ideology. Although it continues to be juxtaposed with the problematic only child, parents constructed with great efficacy their own versions of what it means to spoil a child to suit their own ends. In some cases, they were able to maintain two competing and contradictory interpretations of the notion of spoiling while identifying with one and distancing themselves from the other.

This negotiation of the meaning of spoiling a child constitutes an example of Berger's concept of 'ideological work'. It is one that is used by both Hays and Swidler to demonstrate the way people reconcile an incongruence between their beliefs and their action. It is also one that has particular theoretical value for this research. For example, the vast majority of parents who participated in this study had not set out with the intention of having only one child; as Julie observed 'it is not the normal thing'. But, like the women in Hays' study who found the means to reconcile their paid employment with being a good mother, many exercised great discursive skill in presenting their choices as ideologically sound. What is also important is that because they did not originally anticipate having just the one child, they were of course aware of alternative options. As Hays points out '(u)nderstanding the socially constructed nature of ideas and practices must begin with the recognition that there are alternative ideologies available (Hays, 1997, p.13).

In the empirical research on parents with just the one child, a distinction was drawn between those who had apparently chosen not to have a second child and those who had attempted to have at least one more but were unable to do so. This distinction revealed very important differences in the ways in which people deal with social norms. Those who had the prerogative of choice, who had clearly chosen to have just the one child had, in most instances, begun this ideological work some time in the past. For this reason they demonstrated great skill in selecting and performing an 'interpretative repertoire' (Swidler, 2001, Phillips & Jorgensen 2002), employing different arguments to legitimise their choices. However, for some of those who had not had the prerogative of choice this work had only just begun. Therefore, an important aim of making comparisons according to the variable of reproductive choice is that it has provided further insights into the process and meaning of ideological work. It showed that those who found great incongruence between their beliefs about family size and their actual reproductive outcomes were forced to begin to consider and accept alternative cultural realities. Therefore it has also provided an important insight into the way those who are, involuntarily, the subject of social problems experience the contradiction between public assumptions and their own private meanings.

This concept of ideological work relates also to the one of internalisation and its relationship with social norms. Those who attempted to have more children but could not do so were acutely aware of the way in which they were violating reproductive norms, because they had internalised the logic that a child needs a sibling. That is to say, they had uncritically accepted this logic as common sense. Similarly, Hays has demonstrated that her interviewees had so fully internalised the dominant cultural model of motherhood that it did not seem, to them, a social construction but 'a matter of intuition and common sense' (Hays, 1996, p. 73). What is most significant about Julie's narrative at the beginning of this chapter is that she too had internalised the belief that to have one child 'is not the normal thing'. Therefore she presumes to know what others consider as common sense even when 'no words are said'. However, her suggestion that the problem with having just the one child is one that has been 'built into society' enables her to reverse this process of internalisation. She has recognised that the problem is one that has been socially constructed because she has engaged in much ideological work.

Swidler also uses Berger's concept of ideological work to demonstrate the way people 'appropriate' culture to reconcile what they believe and what they actually do. Her explanations have also provided great theoretical value to this research and to the interpretative analysis of the interview data. Swidler draws a clear distinction between ideology and common sense, between a self-conscious belief system that requires explicit construction and the unquestioning acceptance of what appears as everyday reality (Swidler, 2001, p.98). One such reality, she suggests, is the way people take for granted the 'popular Freudianism' that what happens during childhood shapes adult life in inescapable ways. Certainly many of the participants in this study accorded great significance to the circumstances of their childhoods. However, they often gave conflicting meanings to the experience of growing up in a family of three children, for example. This experience was just as likely to be used to justify the decision to have only one child as it was to account for the perceived need to have more than one. The implication here is that it was childhood experience that

determined their adult emotions. Yet Swidler offers an alternative possibility, that 'coherence is imposed retrospectively (2001, p.148), that people change their ends relatively easily and use culture to defend their action. These conflicting logics can be used to validate the same phenomenon.

The constructionist view that individuals rhetorically construct their own interpretations and reshape on their own terms the ideologies available to them is of central importance to this study. There are two acknowledgements that must be made, however, in adopting this philosophical position. The first takes the form of an apology to those parents who participated in this study and so willingly gave their time and shared what were often deeply personal experiences. Just as Hays apologises to her participants for her need to ask 'cynical questions', so this inquiry has been sensitive to the contradictions and paradoxes within narratives. And it has identified many examples of the way parents attack discursively alternative choices in order to defend their own. So although, as Hays suggests 'cynical questions are crucial to cultural sociology (1996, p.13), participants may feel that what has been made of their narratives is not what they intended.

This acknowledgement leads to a second important point made by Phillips & Jorgensen that constructionist research does not neutrally reflect what has been said but constitutes, in itself, a 'discursive construction' (2002, p.13). Expressed in a different way 'most constructionists write with the full understanding that they too are constructing realities and moralities' (Gergen, 2003, p.228). Certainly the analysis of what parents had to say about the meaning of having only one child and about the child's upbringing necessarily includes some materials and omits others. It does not claim to represent the totality of causes or of experiences in contemporary Britain or even the full account given in each case. Rather, its selectivity is intended to reveal patterns of logic, to highlight the ideological foundations for participants' constructions and to draw attention to similarities as well as differences in their reasoning. In this way, it represents a departure from the literature that dominates public understanding of single child families that views this family form from a psychological perspective and seeks out individual, private meanings.

Thesis structure

Numerous references have been made so far to the problematic status of the single child family. Yet its status as a problem seems to be in question. For example, Cheal argues that families of one or two children have become the norm in Western society (Cheal, 2002, p.137). On the one hand, the extract from Julie's narrative at the beginning of this chapter suggests that she is consciously defying a norm and that others are conscious, in a censorious way, of her defiance. On the other, her assertion that 'there are no words that need to be said' also suggests that she could be imagining disapprobation. The importance of this extract is that it seems to exemplify the ambiguity of this research topic and the necessity to elaborate upon its appearance as a social problem.

In **Chapter 2**, the methods used to undertake the two different types of research undertaken in this study will be discussed. This discussion will include the way in which texts were selected and analysed from both academic historical and contemporary popular sources. The case for a qualitative study of parents who have

just the one child will be introduced. In particular, it will discuss the need for individual, semi-structured interviews to ‘get inside the logic’ of those who remain poorly understood. The questions and issues raised by the research design will be discussed and some of its potential weaknesses addressed. For, qualitative studies such as these attract criticism that they are cross-sectional and made at a single point in time (Babbie, 1998, p.60). The opportunity for making comparisons within the study will be offered as a mitigation of this weakness. Moreover, the comparison between highly educated and less-educated women will be proposed to shed light on the increased tendency for the latter group to have only one child. The proposition that these parents are likely to offer a broad spectrum of reproductive choice offers a further meaningful form of comparison. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of the challenges of recruitment to this study, the consideration of ethics and the practical and methodological issues presented by the interviews and data analysis.

The purpose of **Chapter 3** will be to examine, from a historical point of view, the social contexts in which the problem of the single child family came to be founded, constructed and reinforced. It will take as its starting point the profound demographic change which was becoming apparent to the British ruling classes at the turn of the twentieth century and, in particular, the growing popularity of having only one child. It will position the role of the Eugenicist movement as a form of demographic activism that formulated the language that made this family form problematic. And it will illuminate the convergence of government pronatalism with behavioural psychology in completing the task of institutionalising only childhood as a recognised social problem following the Second World War. The use of psychology as a powerful instrument of government intervention provides a further demonstration of Best’s metaphoric ‘Iron Quadrangle’ (1999, p.164). But this chapter will also reveal the contradictions in expert psychological opinion and the way that the insinuation of ‘attachment theory’ into normal family life resulted in what Munn describes as the ‘monotropic attachment in mother-child dyads’ (1991, p.166). Although child-rearing experts thus appeared to have removed ideological barriers to having only one child, this chapter will reveal the way more recent developments have reinforced the problematic version of only childhood. It will be argued that the arrival of reproductive technology, the correlation of female workforce participation with declining birth rates and the perceived erosion of the nuclear family form exposed the single child family as a ‘problem-in-waiting’. Therefore, discourses that were initiated at the turn of the twentieth century continue to be invoked to discredit a family form that is made more ambiguous by the new ‘romanticisation’ of motherhood (Douglas & Michaels, 2004).

In **Chapter 4** the contemporary construction of the problem will be examined. Best has demonstrated the critical importance of the media, as one of the four pillars of the ‘iron quadrangle’ of institutionalisation, in establishing and maintaining social problems (Best, 1999, p.164). Therefore it will be the purpose of Chapter 3 to examine the engagement of the British print media over the last ten years in the discursive construction of the problematic single child family. It will take heed of Best’s view that problems compete for public attention in a ‘marketplace’ of claims-making and that new claims are publicised by association with other problems past or present. Therefore it will demonstrate the way the problem of the single child family has been used to enable other issues to compete in the publicity marketplace. It will pay particular heed to the discursive dominance of psychology within this claims-

making activity and to the expert status accorded to those adult ‘only children’ who, in internalising the problem, construct it as the truth. As indicated, ‘people are producers as well as products of discourses’ (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002, p.104). This chapter will not only demonstrate the way these ‘experts’ are products of discourse but also some of the themes and beliefs expressed in the media to which interviewees respond in their ‘discursive struggle’.

Chapter 5 constitutes the first of the three analytical chapters based upon the findings from the qualitative interviews. It addresses the primary research question ‘what is the meaning of having just the one child when the norm is to have at least two?’ In so doing, it is intended to explore the narratives of those who have intentionally limited themselves in this way and have therefore deliberately prevented the arrival into their family of a second child. But, as discussed, the question of reproductive choice in this context is problematic and is subject to interpretation. So although an editorial decision was made to distinguish those who had apparently exercised choice from those who had not, some parents resisted such categorisation within their narratives. This is of course a highly important observation and demonstrates the discursive nature of what people present as the truth. In the main, however, those parents who appear in this chapter unabashedly claimed to have made their choice. As with all analytical chapters, this one is divided into several dominant themes that are represented and exemplified by quotations from interviewees. Chapter 5 focuses particularly upon the discourses of mothers in the way they negotiate their maternal identities. It highlights the way that even those who appear to distance themselves from certain models of intensive motherhood are nonetheless ‘intensive mothers’. It examines the way the decision to have only one child is often presented as a measure of satisfaction with family life. It illuminates the relationship between maternal employment and minimisation of family size as one that is complex, indirect and dynamic. And it draws attention to the way that these parents perceive risk and use discourses about risk to support their action.

In the following **Chapter 6** the experiences of those who intended, but were unable to have, at least one more child will be discussed. In the same way that some in the previous chapter obfuscated upon the question of reproductive choice, so it will be demonstrated that some parents disguise and negotiate the unavailability of choice. Their discourses are remarkably similar to those in the previous chapter who elaborate upon the perceived advantages of having and being an only child. But in the main, the parents who appear in this chapter are unequivocal about their intention to have had at least one more child. For some who, at the time of interview, were in the midst of reconciling themselves to a family size that was not of their choosing, their narratives were dominated by the themes of fertility and of reproductive loss. This chapter provides an insight into the negotiation of reproductive technology for those who carry the contradictory identities of parenthood and infertility. It reveals that those who seek to justify their deservedness for IVF treatment find it necessary to employ discourses that make only childhood problematic. The themes of reproductive loss and of biological failure will be demonstrated to have a significant impact upon maternal identities. The influence of British normative standards to have at least two children will be shown to have constructed notions of naturalness and of competence in relation to motherhood. It will be shown also to have compromised the enjoyment of motherhood by those who unwillingly deviate from such standards. A sense of

deviation will be discussed also in relation to social networks and, in particular, to those networks founded upon motherhood. Their importance in confirming admission to the 'club of parenthood' and simultaneously marginalizing those who consciously deviate from its rules will be discussed. And the relationship between maternal employment and small family size will be shown to be a complex one that says much about ambivalence towards employment and about exacting standards for motherhood.

An important purpose of this study is to examine what parents make of this particular reproductive choice or, alternatively, whether the denial of choice makes a difference in terms of the child's upbringing. Therefore, in **Chapter 7**, parents' beliefs about and descriptions of bringing up their child will be discussed. This chapter will demonstrate that despite enormous differences in experiences of family planning variations in approaches to parenting manifested themselves along educational and social rather than reproductive lines. It is in this chapter that the process defined by Hays as 'sorting the mail' will be most apparent (1996, ch.3) . It will show how effectively and persuasively parents were able to interpret and adapt child-rearing ideology to their own individual requirements. This includes even those who had experienced great adversity and loss. The defining influence of 'attachment parenting' will be shown to have been used to great effect in placing emphasis upon the quality of the relationship with the child. The charge that an only child may be 'spoilt' will be defended by parents with rhetoric that distances their family from such images and reinterprets the meaning of this concept. In this chapter the theme of fatherhood will be explored and discussed to demonstrate that dramatic changes in the paternal role mitigate Freudian objections to only childhood. Further, important intergenerational differences will be discussed in the context of social networks together with the parental role in generating social and cultural capital on behalf of their child. This positive appraisal of the upbringing of an only child in contemporary Britain will be demonstrated to represent a 'discursive struggle'. Hays' (1996) concept of a cultural contradiction will be applied here to show that the defence of having only one child necessarily involves attacking the position of those who have more than one.

Chapter 8 concludes this thesis. It identifies the key findings of this research project and what it says about the broader issue of contemporary parenting. It presents the problem of the single child family as a socially constructed one, constituting a clear example of Best's theory of institutionalisation. It also suggests that, as a social problem, it is a product of what Furedi defines as 'therapy culture'. It summarises the key findings from the interviews with parents themselves, highlighting the disparity between public assumptions and lived realities. And it identifies the way in which this research has contributed to scholarship on social problem construction in the methods it has used.

Chapter 2: Research Methods and Design

The primary purpose of this chapter is to explain the methods used to undertake this research. It includes a discussion of the methods employed to identify and analyse the way in which the problem of the single child family appears in both academic and popular literature. And it includes a discussion of the development of appropriate methods and design for conducting qualitative research involving parents themselves. King et al state that '(i)f the method and logic of a researcher's observations and influences are left implicit, the scholarly community has no way of judging the validity of what was done (King et al, 1994, p.8). The theoretical importance of certain key authors was discussed in the last chapter. In particular, the influences of Best and Furedi on taking a critical approach to social problem construction were highlighted. The relevance of Hays' work on the relationship between public ideology and private interpretation was defined. So too was the value of Hays and Swidler in approaching the empirical data and in understanding the concepts of 'ideological work', internalisation and social norms.

This chapter will now turn to the methods used in gathering and analysing the data. The research was complicated by the need to gather three different types of data. They were literature of an academic, historical nature; contemporary public commentary obtained from the print media and popular literature; and empirical data derived from interviews with parents themselves. Before discussing questions of methods and research design, other types of literature that deal directly or indirectly with the single child family and with only childhood will be discussed. It is important to draw attention to these sources to demonstrate the way in which this research is distinct and marks something of a departure from what has been done to date.

Relevant Literature

As suggested, there is very little literature in Britain that deals directly with the single child family and, when it appears in the press and other popular media, it usually does so in its problematic form. Moreover, its omission from the increasing body of sociological literature on the family questions its deservedness of academic attention rather than the ideological basis upon which it was constructed to be problematic. In consequence, psychology continues to hold onto its claim to this family form and to interpret it in terms of the private, psychological trajectory of the child. It thus omits a consideration of its broader social meaning and context. And it largely ignores the variable of the child's parents as agents in constructing their own meanings and interpretations. Laybourn's (1994) research constitutes an important exception in this regard; this study owes much to her critique of popular representations and to her definition of the research that, in her view, remained to be done. Otherwise, there are four bodies of literature that are significant to this study either in what they say about single child families or, alternatively, in what they omit to say.

The most focused body of literature on the single child family results from the work of the American psychologist Falbo (1978, 1984, 1986, 1988). She has both undertaken her own comprehensive studies of the psychological outcomes of only childhood and has comprehensively reviewed the work of other authors such as Claudy, Katz and Boswell. Falbo explains why only childhood has been constructed to be problematic, emphasising the authoritative role accorded to G Stanley Hall (1984, ch.1). However her own research and the work of others challenges the assumptions of Hall and his protégés such as Bohannon. Referring to more recent work she states that '(i)n general, these studies conclude that only children are no worse off than their counterparts with siblings and that only children compare quite favourably with other children in some ways' (ibid, p.1). She finds support for the hypothesis that only children are less influenced by gender stereotypes, for example, and that siblings offer little 'predictive power' for developmental outcomes in adolescence. She draws attention to one study that found that the social development of only children is more closely related to the social behaviour of mothers. Another found that, by early adulthood, they manifested some advantages over others in cognitive ability (Claudy, 1984).

Falbo is particularly concerned to resolve a puzzle in relation to the educational attainment of only children. For, although authors such as Blake (1989) seek to demonstrate a strong correlation between small family size and high levels of educational attainment, others have found what they describe as the 'only child discontinuity'. That is to say, overall only children have been found to score less well than expected. Falbo argues that other factors that may affect educational attainment have not been taken into account. Consequently, she states that:

'(A)s long as investigators assume that any difference obtained between only borns and others is produced by the only child's lack of siblings, we can expect to continue to produce inconsistent results about only children. Factors other than sibling absence bring about many so called only child characteristics' (Falbo, 1984, p.19).

She suggests that factors such as infertility that may result in only one child may have an adverse affect upon parenting. She welcomes the correlation between maternal employment and having only one child, with its implicit voluntarism. And she expresses the hope that, in a more favourable social context, the circumstances of only children and therefore their public image will improve accordingly.

In this way, Falbo defines the importance of qualitative research concerned with the variables of parental motivations and cultural beliefs within the broader context of profound social change. However, much contemporary popular literature relating to the single child family is concerned exclusively with the child's lack of siblings and does indeed produce inconsistent results. This forms the second body of literature of significance to this study. Since the publication of Falbo's review in 1984, various child-rearing manuals have been published, mainly in the United States, to advise parents on bringing up an only child. In light of studies that present only children in favourable terms, they take as their starting point differences that are assumed to result from sibling absence. Therefore their content is intended to enable parents to steer a course between capitalising upon assumed advantages and avoiding the pitfalls

that await the unwary and uninformed (Sifford, 1989; Newman, 1990; Nachman, 1996; Coates, 1996).

Of course, as Falbo has acknowledged, the deterministic view that a set of 'only child characteristics' can be readily recognised constitutes something of a double-edged sword for those who seek to defend them. For, those adults who grew up as only children who claim to speak with authority on this subject produce highly contradictory interpretations. On the one hand, an Australian journalist commissioned to write on the subject of only childhood on the basis that she herself grew up without siblings suggests that a disproportionate number of fellow journalists were only children. She concludes that, contrary to her own assumption that she had been greatly disadvantaged by her circumstances, only childhood results in superior verbal communication skills (Cosic, 2001). On the other hand, two British 'only children' draw together a disparate set of individuals who express dissatisfaction with their adult lives to demonstrate the disadvantages of only childhood¹⁴. In a somewhat extreme example of reality 'realizing itself in the phenomenon it purports to interpret (Berger & Luckman, 1967, p.199) they invite anyone who 'feels like an only child', regardless of actual circumstances, to participate. Overall, this literature serves to reinforce a distinction between only children and others, to favour psychological interpretations and to neglect parental accounts.

A third body of literature, concerned with the social implications of reproductive technology, refers obliquely to single child families and is therefore of significance here. In responding to the charge that 'dysfunctional parenting' is likely to result from 'assisted conception' (Burns, 1990) Golombok (2002) has undertaken a longitudinal study of those whose child resulted from IVF. Her findings compare the parenting styles and relationships within these families favourably with those who conceived naturally and with those who had adopted. A significant proportion of the assisted conception families had only one child and, in this way, Golombok includes parental motivations and circumstances in her evaluation of life within a single child family. Amongst feminist literature on reproductive technology, Throsby (2002) is notable in the way that she reveals the 'striking dissonance' between public representations of IVF and the reality of IVF failure. In so doing, she draws attention to two important issues for consideration. The first is that some parents are motivated to endure IVF even though they already have a child, conceived with or without medical assistance, in order to conform to normative standards for family size. Furthermore, her research exposes the way IVF failure is concealed behind the public representations of its success thus exaggerating the opportunity for parental control over reproduction. Her insights are particularly meaningful to this study and explain some of the ambiguity that surrounds having only one child.

Finally, there is a growing body of literature that views the family and motherhood in particular as socially constructed realities. As exemplified by Hays' (1996) work, it has provided this study with great conceptual value in illuminating the development of ideologies and the politicisation of issues such as family size. Hays, Badinter (1981), and Lewis (1992) are among those authors who have drawn attention to the importance of taking a historic perspective to expose the continuously changing meaning of children and their care. Feminist inquiry into the culture of reproduction

¹⁴ The work of Emerson and Pitkeathley on the experiences of only children is discussed in Chapter 3.

has critically analysed the interests that have resulted in what Morrell (1994) describes as 'maternal revivalism' and Douglas and Michaels (2004) describe as 'the new momism'. In particular, feminist writers such as Morrell and Pheonix et al (1991) have demonstrated that the dominance of this culture makes deviants of those who are childless and that the availability of reproductive technology exacerbates reproductive difference.

This literature, including much recent work on childlessness, is of great relevance here in both conceptual terms and in its detail. However, feminist studies of childlessness are, in general, concerned to demonstrate the dominance of the ideology of motherhood. Therefore, they tend to ignore or even attack the position of those who experience parenthood and infertility simultaneously. For example, Morrell states that 'IVF reinforces the master-plan for middle class and wealthy women and rewards those who long for a child (Morrell, 1994, p.10). Alternatively, in a collection of feminist literature on motherhood, Pheonix et al (1991) present the views of those who defend what could be considered unorthodox forms of mothering. And yet, in this context, 'mothering more than one child' is presented as a deviation from the dominant ideology of child-rearing. Therefore, Munn (1991) presents a feminist argument in favour of the right to mother more than one child. Certainly her work provides a critically important insight into the 'psychological models of romantic love and monotropic attachment in mother-child dyads' (ibid, p. 166). In so doing, it exposes a profound contradiction between such models and social norms of family size. Therefore, Munn, Morrell and others serve to reinforce the ambiguity of the single child family and to demonstrate that it has no place within the current feminist 'master frame' (Best, 1990).

This study is intended to fill an apparent omission in social constructionist literature on matters of family and reproduction. Ironically, in drawing attention to a discourse that appears to militate in favour of having only one child, Munn (1991) finds it necessary to articulate another in favour of having two children. In this way, she demonstrates what Phillips & Jorgensen define as a 'discursive struggle' by attempting to achieve ideological dominance in the way that she talks about her subject (2002, p.6). Indeed, inadvertently, Munn has exposed a profound cultural contradiction within the ideology of motherhood in suggesting that 'developmental psychology has neglected the situation of mothers with more than one child (Munn, 1991, p.164). For, as we shall see, it is developmental psychology that created the 'problem' of the only child in the first place. Certainly Julie has demonstrated that parents who have one child may be called to account for their behaviour and made aware of the way they have transgressed reproductive norms.

Methods

Historical context

If, as argued, the problems associated with having or being an only child are socially constructed ones, then it seemed necessary that this study trace their development. McKibben makes the very important point that the precise origin of the concept of only childhood and its emergence as an official problem can be pinpointed to the work, at the turn of the last century, of G Stanley Hall (McKibben, 1999, ch.1). McKibben himself turned to the original archive to retrieve Hall's manuscript in order

to provide a critique of its research methods. From this he was able to make an evaluation of its influence in founding and establishing the new problem of the only child. Certainly his claim that ‘to be an only child is a disease in itself’ has been extensively quoted to the present day, appearing in Taylor and Taylor¹⁵ for example. What this research sought to do was to review academic literature to locate claims about only childhood in a British context. In so doing, it needed to pay particular attention to the emergence of claims similar to those made by Hall with their pathologisation of only childhood.

As exemplified by Hall and his work, the problem of the single child family is one that seemed to be founded within behavioural psychology. Therefore, the literature review needed first to locate and examine texts written by experts themselves searching for data of direct relevance to the conceptualisation of only childhood. In light of McKibben’s comments, it made sense to go back to the beginning of the twentieth century to the emergence of published material by early psychologists. Then it needed to analyse later work by experts such as Winnicott and Leach, to search for continuities in their logic of child-rearing but also to highlight what may have changed. Best (1990, p. 189) advocates a contextual approach to analysis of social problems. Certainly, it seemed important to locate these experts and their discourses in a broader social context, examining more general beliefs about family size and their significance.

With this emphasis upon context, Best’s theoretical framework of ‘the Iron Quadrangle’ offered a guideline for identifying and evaluating the roles of other groups who have contributed to the emergence of the single child family as an official problem (Best, 1999). Therefore the review examined a further set of texts that discussed the meaning of fertility decline and analysed public responses to changing family size in Britain. According to Best’s theory of the institutionalisation of social problems, the four social sectors involved in the construction of problems are government, experts, activists and the media. Therefore, this analysis took heed of the stance of the British government on matters of reproduction and family size and the mechanisms by which it intervened in matters of reproductive behaviour. It sought to identify different groups who, during the course of the twentieth century, have had reason for an active interest in promoting pronatalist views. And it identified the point at which the fourth sector in the Iron Quadrangle, the media, began to enable the dissemination of expert and activist discourses in relation to the single child family.

This literature review concentrated on three distinct periods in British twentieth century history. It started with the early decades of the century during which fertility decline began to be acknowledged with growing alarm and which saw the eugenicist movement at its zenith. It proceeded to examine the period of reconstruction following the Second World War and the impact of the National Health Service in promoting ideals for family size. And it concluded with the last quarter of the twentieth century at a time of profound social change when new developments, such as the availability of reproductive technology, provided new dimensions to the old problem of the only child.

¹⁵ This refers to *what are children for?* published in 2003, see Chapter 1

As this review involved academic sources of information, the analysis took the form of a close and careful reading of the selected texts. This seemed appropriate given the genre of this literature with its analytical clarity. The scrutiny of these texts paid heed to claims made by the different groups of claims-makers; to continuity across the decades in the nature of these claims but also to changes within them; to the collusion between the different sectors within the Iron Quadrangle; and to the association of the problem of the single child family with other social problems. Best makes the point that new social issues ‘piggyback’ upon established ones, acquiring problematic status by association with others. This analysis also identified the way in which the problem of the single child family has been associated with other emerging problems. And it identified the language used within the claims and the way that certain terms and labels reappear.

Contemporary popular literature

Although Cunningham and Winnicott chose to devote whole chapters of their child-rearing manuals to the problem of the only child, the literature review revealed that there is remarkably little recent British literature on this subject. Sociologists such as Taylor and Taylor refer, in the context of declining fertility, to the new normality of having just the one child. There appears to be, in general, an uncritical acceptance of the commonality of having just the one, exemplified in Cheal’s comment that families of one or two children have become the norm (2002). However, in 1994 two books were published which took different and conflicting stances on the problem of the only child. One was by the academic author Laybourn and the other by two public figures, Emerson and Pitkeathley. Both publications generated publicity in the print media and these authors continue to be called upon for comment by journalists who find reason to write about single child families. Therefore, in order to understand the contemporary, public construction of the concepts of only childhood and the single child family, it was necessary to review these two books. And, it was necessary to search the print media for references to them and any other relevant articles.

The search and retrieval of data over an extended period of time, from an extensive data archive, has been greatly facilitated by the availability of powerful computer search engines. The decision was made to search the Lexis-Nexis¹⁶ database for any articles on the concepts of only childhood and the single child family. It seemed appropriate to begin the search in 1993, the year before the publication of the two books in question, at a time when Laybourn’s comments on only childhood were being quoted in the media. Searches were conducted of all British newspapers using the terms ‘only child’, ‘single child family’, ‘one-child family’ and using the names Laybourn and Pitkeathley, from 1993 to the present. Recent press articles drew attention to a conference convened in 2005¹⁷ and addressed by Emerson and Pitkeathley. Its proceedings were added to the data obtained from the Lexis-Nexis search.

In light of the large amount of full text data derived from this search and from the qualitative interviews, the decision was made to utilise a software package for data

¹⁶ www.lexisnexis.co.uk Commercial electronic database providing full text search and retrieval services including British newspapers

¹⁷ Conference entitled ‘The Power of One’ which took place in London in July 2005

analysis. QSR Nvivo¹⁸ was selected as it offers the important facility to recode data following an initial analysis. The selected texts were analysed first of all to consider the sources of information contained within them. What became immediately apparent was that the data could be readily divided up into claims made by three of the social sectors defined by Best in his metaphoric use of the 'Iron Quadrangle', the media, experts and activists. Therefore, an initial coding was undertaken according to these three categories. The data was broken down further according to the themes that emerged from a close reading of each of these three data sets. This revealed that there is considerable overlap and commonality between the claims made by these different sectors, but that they play discrete, complementary roles in the maintenance of this social problem.

In the same way that the review of historic, academic literature looked for continuity in the claims-making but also for what may have changed, so this data analysis also looked for continuity and change. For example, it revealed that certain vocabulary continues to be used in the context of only childhood and continues to denote a problematic interpretation. Nvivo offers the facility to store important quotations and to search upon them. This meant that the data could be interrogated for terms such as 'spoil' or 'spoilt', to examine the way this concept has prevailed in relation to childhood, since the beginning of the twentieth century. But it could also be examined in context for the ways in which the meaning of spoiling has changed. A further important opportunity offered by this critical analysis was to extract from the data set all claims made by expert psychologists and to expose contradictions between them.

Gergen makes the important point that although reality is constructed through language, language itself is fundamentally unstable. Therefore 'meaning can never be permanently fixed' (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002, p.6). This analysis of the discourses of these different groups took account of the instability of language and the way in which those who make claims use it pragmatically for their own purposes. It also allowed for an approach that was sensitive to the power of one discourse over another and to the role of the media in giving prominence to some claims over others. For example, Laybourn argues that the claims made about only children are myths. Emerson and Pitkeathley, on the other hand, argue that only children never escape the disadvantages of growing up without siblings. These competing claims can be seen as a 'discursive struggle' (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002, p.104). The analysis of press articles examined the way journalists present these sorts of claims, their use of experts to interpret them and thus the way in which an authoritative interpretation is constructed.

Research Design

The third type of research involved gathering empirical information from parents themselves through the process of conducting qualitative interviews. Prior to the commencement of interviews, much consideration was given to the research design. However, it became apparent that it was a design that would need to be adjusted in light of new information that emerged during the course of interviews. Similarly, it was only after gaining experience of recruiting and interviewing participants that certain important decisions could be made. For example, some of those who

¹⁸ QSR Nvivo is a software system for qualitative data analysis published by QSR International Pty Ltd

responded to the initial advertisement were single parents. In most cases, they presented the breakdown of a relationship as the reason for having only one child and they were clear that they would have more children under different circumstances. It seemed that this could frustrate and work against the objectives of the study.

King et al point out that a control may be applied where 'a variable is so obvious and well documented that we are not interested in estimating its effects' (King et al, 1994). It seemed that divorce and single parenthood are relatively well researched and their effects upon fertility are relatively well documented. Indeed, it is significant that most people assume that this is a study about single parents or they unintentionally describe it as such because it is a term with which they are so familiar. Further, Voas (2003) has suggested that, in a low fertility country such as Britain, the interaction of the beliefs between the mother and the father are likely to revise downwards the expectations of family size. In particular, he draws attention to the potential importance of the father's opinions in reproductive decision-making. Therefore, the decision was made to limit the study to married or cohabiting couples and to interview both the father and the mother in each case.

The definition of a single child family was one that required careful consideration. As we have seen, journalists are willing to associate it with other issues such as the breakdown of partnerships and the increasing likelihood that a child will have step or half siblings. Yet it seemed that this association is misleading. Therefore this study was intended to focus upon families in which parents have no other children and therefore the dependent variable was defined as 'having only one child'. There is, of course, no guarantee that participants will not have further children. One of the difficulties in studying reproductive behaviour is that it is impossible to know how many children a woman will have until she is no longer fertile. Even then, the advances in reproductive technology and the relaxation of adoption laws mean that the age of forty five can no longer necessarily be considered the conclusion of female reproduction. So although it was limited to those who assume that they will have no more than one child the possibility that they will have further children has to be accepted as an uncontrollable variable.

Another decision that was made in light of experiences of interviewing was to limit the study to parents whose child was around the age of five years old at the time of interview. Some of the first participants had a very young child and it became clear that the interview came during their deliberations over the question of having a second child. While of course this could have provided a valuable insight into contemporary reproductive decision-making, it seemed to diverge somewhat from the research objectives. Moreover, Rendall and Smallwood point out that the probability of a second child being born reduces significantly once the first child reaches the age of five. They state that:

"Very little childbearing occurs more than five calendar years after the first, irrespective of age at the first birth ... fewer than ten per cent of all second children are born more than five calendar years after the first child." (Rendall & Smallwood, 2003, p.5).

The recruitment of parents whose child was at least school age seemed therefore to mitigate the probability of second child. Further, it enabled them to reflect upon the

pre-school years and to talk about starting school, an experience which Winnicott (1957) assumed would be highly problematic. In the event, the families that made up this study had children ranging in age from four and a half years to sixteen years and the mothers' ages ranged from thirty to forty six. Therefore the study involved families in which the children were born between 1987 and 1999 and the mothers were born between 1957 and 1973. It is important to reinforce here the point that while the family was the unit of analysis, it was the parents and not the child that constituted the unit of observation. And while the research was most certainly concerned with what the parents had to say about their child, there are ethical reasons, discussed later in this chapter, for the child not being present during the interview.

The need for variation within the dependent variable of 'having one child' has been emphasised. Indeed King et al point out that the researcher 'must not select observations based on the dependent variable so that the dependent variable is constant' (King et al, 1994, p.108). It could be argued that one of the reasons why parents with one child are misunderstood is that researchers have been tempted to ignore the possibility of variation within this group. For example, Callan (1985) sought to confirm that mothers who choose to have one child are 'career women' who are ambivalent about motherhood so he only recruited working women with one child. A strong underlying curiosity for this project has been to understand in qualitative terms the differences between those who have exercised reproductive choice and those who intended and attempted to have at least one more child.

Not only was there considerable interest in the experiences of those who found themselves involuntarily limited to one child, it seemed possible that an attempt to select on the basis of reproductive choice could prove to be misleading. For example, Cartwright (1976) claims to have eliminated the infertile from her study but acknowledges that she has failed to elicit from mothers of one child the real reasons for their family size. Letherby draws attention to ambiguity in definitions of what is deemed voluntary or involuntary in relation to childlessness. She states:

"It is ...possible to be medically defined as 'infertile' and yet to have a biological child following medical assistances....A woman who defines herself as 'voluntarily' biologically childless may likewise find herself in a mothering relationship with children". (Letherby, 2002, p.8).

Certainly the initial assumption that participants could readily be categorised on the basis of reproductive choice, that is whether they had chosen or had not chosen to limit themselves to one child, proved simplistic.

The ambiguity over the question of choice in relation to family size is raised by Porter et al (2003) in their research on the consequences of caesarean section. They have observed that a significant proportion of women who experience this form of birth may not go on to have subsequent births. They ask whether the caesarean birth itself causes infertility or whether this reflects choice on the part of the mother. These authors highlight the need for qualitative data to explain this phenomenon. Not only did their request raise further questions for this research. It also provided a further demonstration that its participants may not conveniently polarise between choice on one side and infertility at the other. Similarly, McAllister and Clarke (1998) reveal that the childless participants in her study represent varying degrees of voluntarism,

from those who were 'certain' about their decision to be childless to those who felt the decision had been taken from them. What this seemed to indicate is that choice itself could appear as a discursive construction. It was hoped that a sufficiently large number of participants would offer, as McAllister and Clarke had found, a spectrum of choice and this is indeed what eventuated.

This awareness of variation extended not only to differences between participants but also to the possibility of variation within each observation. King et al (1994) point out that very few explanations depend upon only one causal variable. The politicisation of family size seemed to legitimise suspicion about the public constructions of the single child family. It seemed to suggest that the construct of 'reluctant mothers' may be misleading, that things may not be as they appear. Notwithstanding, the assumption at the beginning of the study was that some participants, regardless of the mother's employment status, would have been unable to have a second child. And it was assumed that others would be 'dual-earner professional couples' who may present much more complex reasons for their family size than issues of maternal employment. However, initial recruitment yielded a surprising number of women who had apparently chosen to have only one child but had not been employed during the pre-school years. Further, Rendall and Smallwood's (2003) revelation, published during the second year of the project, that women who leave school at sixteen are more likely to have only one child seemed most significant. These two discoveries indicated that variation within the study may be greater than anticipated and that the variable of maternal educational attainment was worthy of consideration.

This variable also seemed to offer the opportunity to ensure that participants came from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, both in terms of their family of origin and their current circumstances. It also seemed important to recruit from different residential environments, in other words whether families live in inner city or suburban or rural environments. The potential importance of this variable was highlighted by Elizabeth Bott in 1971 in her study entitled 'Family and Social Networks'. She concluded that more variation is likely amongst people who live in loose-knit, urban environments than those in close-knit, non-urban communities. In addition, Garrett (2002) has pointed out that 'people behave like their neighbours'. It seemed possible that, in light of these observations, the study would show that the apparent norm to have at least two children is far less dominant for those who live in inner cities. Certainly, a range of educational and residential circumstances seemed one way of exploring the way parents with one child negotiate this reproductive norm.

Another important point that has been raised in the context of studying matters of family size is that explanations may vary over time. Hakim points out that the reproductive behaviour of the voluntarily childless involves 'a continuous stream of decisions about childbearing over an extended period of time .. and complex causes of motivation and decision-making over different phases of the life-cycle' (Hakim, 1987, p.29). It seemed likely that the meaning of having only one child, or conversely of not having a second child, would have involved a continuous stream of decisions over time in the cases where parents were able to exercise reproductive choice. While qualitative interviewing allows participants to reflect on the past and raise varied explanations for their actions, there is of course a problem with a study of this kind. Babbie states that:

“Explanatory, cross-sectional studies have an inherent problem. Typically they are directed at the understanding of causal processes which occur over time, yet the conclusions are based on observations made at only one point in time.”
(Babbie, 1998, p.60).

Of course, time constraints did not permit a longitudinal approach to be taken. The concern to incorporate as much variation as possible between the parents who qualified for participation in this study precluded the inclusion of a control group. One approach to the problem highlighted by Babbie was to design the study to include as many observations as possible to enable comparisons to be made based upon independent variables.

Implementing the Design

Recruitment

According to the research design, it was planned that around 40 interviews should be conducted in a range of demographic environments. The recruitment proved to be a far greater challenge than originally anticipated. After all, this is not a homogenous group and certainly parents with one child were not immediately visible. Early experiences of attempting to enlist the help of others demonstrated some of the ambiguity and obscurity associated with the concept of a ‘single child family’. One person declined to help on the basis that her own contacts either had several children or were, apparently, in the process of trying to have more than one child. Another considered that the task should be straightforward because ‘surely there is a charity for people like that who only have one child’. A small poster advertising for participants presented at a local library was thrust back with some aggression by the librarian on duty with the statement ‘we are not interested in that sort of thing here!’ From these experiences it seemed that this was a minority who seemed worthy of charitable status but also seemed to prompt hostility or contempt.

The Internet provided a more fruitful and constructive source of assistance. There are a number of Internet sites devoted to parenting in Britain of which the most dominant is ‘mumsnet.com’¹⁹. Its convenors were particularly helpful and suggested a short advertisement in an area of the web site available for ‘media and non-member’ enquiries. They also pointed out that there have been a number of discussions on their site about the question of having only one child and were therefore aware that their members would include potential recruits for this study. Douglas and Michaels point out that ‘The Internet has allowed people to find like-minded others in cyber-space to make up for the fact that compatriots might not be living just around the corner’ (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p.314). Certainly the advertisement²⁰ drew a prompt response from twelve women. Once they received a reply on the web site they authorised the release by the site’s technical administrator of their personal email addresses and an email dialogue was opened up in this way. It became apparent that a number of these women were in the process of deciding whether to have a second

¹⁹ www.mumsnet.com

²⁰ see Appendix A

child. Five women out of the twelve respondents were eligible for the study and were subsequently interviewed.

This experience of recruiting effectively constituted a pilot study and it confirmed that it would not be difficult to enlist participants once they had been found. However, it also confirmed that sources of recruitment other than the Internet would need to be identified as the parenting web sites appeared to be most heavily used by parents with very young children. Once the decision was made to limit the study to parents with a school age child then it made sense, if possible, to use schools as the means of publicising the research. The OFSTED²¹ web site was then used to begin to look at the characteristics of schools in particular areas and resulted in the decision to direct recruitment to the county of Hampshire and to central London. Hampshire is a large and demographically diverse county which includes the cities of Portsmouth and Southampton, large lightly industrialised towns such as Basingstoke and many smaller towns and villages with adjacent rural agricultural communities. A letter, included in Appendix B, was sent to the heads of 180 government schools throughout Hampshire requesting that they bring the research to the attention of parents and giving contact details. Letters were also sent to a further 25 independent schools in Hampshire and 20 independent schools in central London. Independent schools seemed the most logical route to the 'dual-earner professional couples' who, it was assumed at that stage, should be represented in the study. In addition to schools, the newly merged national infertility organisation was approached and its Chief Executive agreed to place an advertisement in their newsletter. Three interviews were organised in Northumberland through a personal contact. This journey to one of the remotest parts of England seemed to offer further diversity within the research group and, in the event, provided one of the most richly descriptive insights of the study.

The letters were sent out in May 2003, just before half term. The recruitment and interview process needed to be well advanced by the beginning of the long summer holiday to avoid losing time. At that stage, it was unclear how long the schools would take to handle the request for assistance or indeed how much cooperation could be expected from them. In fact, there was a continuous stream of enquiries from parents throughout May and June representing a response from about 50 schools in total. The advertisement provided an email address, mobile phone number and post office box address for enquiries and most people called the mobile phone number. It seemed important to most of these respondents to have verbal contact before agreeing to an interview. In some cases they emailed their telephone number so that they could receive a telephone call. Following a telephone conversation and where appropriate, a letter included in Appendix B was sent providing more information about the research and explaining what participation would involve.

The interviews

The first five interviews were conducted in February 2003 and the remainder from May 2003 to April 2004. Following the 'pilot study', four of the subsequent interviewees responded to the advertisement in the infertility newsletter, three were introduced by the personal contact in Northumberland and the remaining twenty nine

²¹ OFSTED is the government's inspectorate for schools <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/reports/> accessed during January 2003

resulted from the letters to schools. The initial correspondence had indicated that interviewees would not be required to travel and that, if permissible, the interview could be conducted at their home or a convenient meeting place nearby. In several cases they were conducted at places of work. Telephone interviews took place with two women who were living temporarily overseas and another who worked full time. But in all of the other cases, parents willingly agreed to meet in their homes. Initially it was anticipated that interviews would need to be in the evening or at the weekend to fit around working hours. However, in all but two cases arrangements were made with mothers and some of them stated a preference for a weekday, daytime interview.

The intention was to interview both parents jointly, given the distance to reach them and the potential constraints on their time. In the event, fathers fully participated in thirteen of the interviews. In some cases they were present in the house but steered clear of participating. In other cases it seemed inappropriate, once the mother had been so generous with her time and with the information she had shared, to request a subsequent interview with the father. Many of the mothers spoke on behalf of their partners, volunteering that, for example, the father would have liked another child and describing his very active involvement in their child's upbringing. Where fathers did participate, they seemed to defer to the mothers and it became clear during the analysis how much mothers dominated those interviews that were conducted jointly.

Interviewees were given advance warning that it would be preferable to record the interview. This posed less of a problem than anticipated and all interviews were in fact recorded. In some cases this had a slightly inhibiting effect at first but the recorder was very rapidly forgotten so much so that a number of people seemed surprised when the time came to change the tape. Although, at the outset, an interview schedule was prepared so that a consistent set of themes could be covered, it soon became clear that flexibility would be required in the order in which they should be presented. There was considerable variation in the ease with which people approached the subject but almost all interviewees had a lot to say. Many commented that the interview constituted an unprecedented opportunity to talk in this way. In some cases there was considerable grief, in others great amusement but it was notable how many subsequently stated how much they valued or enjoyed the experience.

Ethics

Two predominant factors were taken into account when considering the ethics of this study. The first was that participants should be aware that the interview would involve discussing personal information and could therefore involve memories and subjects that they may consider difficult and upsetting. The Social Research Association²² advises that research should 'avoid undue intrusion' into the lives of subjects. The methods of recruitment meant that those parents who participated had, in the first instance, volunteered to make contact. By the time arrangements were made for the interview, they had received a letter explaining what their participation would involve and in most cases there had also been a verbal or email dialogue in which many asked further questions. This gave some confidence that the research was not intruding unduly into their lives. However, one of the features of this study was the wide variation in attitudes to the subject. To some, having one child was a bold statement,

²² <http://www.the-sra.org.uk/ethicals.htm> accessed 1st December 2002

symbolic of their commitment to, and confidence in, their own parenting skills. To others it was a source of grief and despair. As stated by May 'what may be a problem to one group is not a problem to another' (May, 2001, p.51). Certainly the interviews required a cognisance of the potential differences between interviewees and an appreciation also that these differences may not be apparent at the outset. This meant that the initial questions were posed in an exploratory way to gauge the context for subsequent questioning.

The second predominant factor also relates to the differences between participants. To some there was no question that having one child was a problem and served as a reminder of children that they had wanted and could not have. One mother had experienced the death of her second baby, another four miscarriages and several others unsuccessful IVF. But to some participants there was very little sense of a problem, other than an awareness that others might consider having only one child to be problematic. Therefore there was an ethical concern not to create the perception of a problem where none had hitherto existed. This same concern applied to children being present during the interviews. It raised the possibility that drawing attention in this way to their lack of siblings may influence their perceptions of their family negatively. The suggestion was made that the child should not be present but, as interviews were usually conducted in the family home, it was of course the decision of parents how they should handle this. In some cases children were elsewhere in the house or happened to be sick that day and not at school. The Ethics Review and procedures for confidentiality are in Appendix A.

Interview schedule

The objective of this qualitative research was to answer three principal questions: What is the meaning of having just the one child? How do parents experience the social construction of the single child family? What is their approach to parenting? The interviews were conducted to give considerable opportunity to account for their decisions and to narrate their experiences in their own way. For this reason, they did not follow a strict order and could best be described in Lofland and Lofland's words as a 'guided conversation' (1995). For example, different patterns and emphases developed as a result of the answer to the first question. If the reasons for having one child were that the parents were unable to have another one, then the answer to the first question was very concise and the theme of fertility became recurrent and dominant. Conversely, most of those who had chosen to limit themselves to one child did not offer clear or concise reasons but instead drew upon multiple themes during the course of their explanations. Despite this variation, certain core questions were posed and common themes were explored in each case.

Questions related to three dominant phases of participants' lives, although did not necessarily follow this chronological order during the interviews. These were the expectations and experiences in early adulthood and leading up to the birth of the child; the circumstances of the child's arrival and early childhood; and the experience of the child starting school and subsequent family life. Within this high level framework, a subsidiary set of themes guided the questioning and, in turn, defined categories for initial data analysis. These themes are: family of origin; pregnancy and birth; fertility; motherhood; fatherhood; siblings; social networks; employment relationship; leisure.

Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis is considered to be an ‘iterative process’ and researchers are advised to ‘immerse themselves in the data’²³. The transcription of interviews provided an important opportunity to listen carefully to what was being said and transcribed texts were subsequently rechecked against the recording. The expanding quantity of data prompted the decision to use software for its analysis and QSR Nvivo²⁴ was selected as the most suitable for this study. The feature that commended this product most was the ease with which it enables the re-coding of data. Given that the views of parents with one child had been largely unexplored until this study, it seemed important to allow in this way for iteration and re-coding in light of new information. Di Gregorio warns, however, against falling into ‘the coding trap’²³. She argues that because software enables coding and analysis to be undertaken in one step, there is a risk that ‘the iterative nature of qualitative research can be lost’. An alternative way of evaluating the automation of these processes is that it enabled the number of interviews to be large in relation to the time and resources available. As hoped, the number of observations yielded sufficient data to make important comparisons within the study and both justified and took advantage of the selected software.

An understanding of data analysis was gained from attendance at training courses on Social Research Methods at the University of Surrey²⁵. These courses drew upon the techniques and procedures defined by Corbin and Strauss (1998) and informed the initial approach to data analysis taken in this study. During the first stage, the data was coded according to the nine themes, listed above. This stage corresponds to what Corbin and Strauss describe as ‘open coding’ which they define in this way: “Broadly speaking, during open coding, data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences” (Corbin & Strauss, 1998, p.102). It became apparent, however, that the assumption that data could be neatly categorised according to a theme such as ‘motherhood’ was somewhat naïve. This proved to be an overarching theme that was too large in proportion to fit into one coding node. NVivo provides a highly flexible system to break nodes down into sub-categories and this proved to be essential to accommodate some of the highly dominant themes such as this one.

The theme of motherhood produced striking similarities and differences between participants and provided some compulsion to embark upon the next stage of coding. The attempt to generate sub-categories corresponding to the concept of ‘axial coding’ (Corbin & Strauss, 1998, p.229) was complex and required reconsideration of the kinds of definitions that should be used. For example, people often explained themselves in an abstract way that at first seemed to confound attempts to categorise and compartmentalise the research findings. The underlying question for this research is ‘what is the meaning of having just the one child?’ But of course, in most cases,

²³ This advice is provided by di Gregorio in *Analysis as Cycling: Shifting between coding and memoing using qualitative software analysis*, presented in 2003 at Strategies in Qualitative Research: Methodological Issues and Practices using QSR Nvivo, Institute of Education, London. Her training courses and materials for QSR Nvivo were used in this research.

²⁴ Nvivo is a software system for qualitative data analysis published by QSR International Pty Ltd

²⁵ <http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/daycourses/dcindex.html>

they did not offer a single concise explanation nor did they recount a decision-making process that had followed a sequential, chronological order. Swidler's work on the relationship between culture and action provided particular value in conceptualising and analysing this rich collection of data. She demonstrates the way that people apply coherence retrospectively (Swidler, 2001, p. 82). She also argues that people use a 'multiform repertoire of meanings' and certainly the metaphor of repertoire took on great value in making sense of these narratives. What also became apparent was that, in drawing from their repertoires, certain interviewees provided statements or phrases around which the 'second level' analysis could be organised. Therefore, the three following chapters which present qualitative findings are also organised according to these quotations.

Discussion

This study has involved two different types of research. In the early part of this chapter the methods employed to examine the construction of the social problem associated with having an only child were discussed. This research involved an extensive literature review and the selection and analysis of both historical academic and contemporary popular texts. The second type of research involved the recruitment and selection of parents themselves to participate in semi-structured, qualitative interviews to explore the way in which this problem is experienced privately, at the individual level. The study has also provided the opportunity to develop scholarship in the analysis of social problems by bringing these two types of research together. It has involved analysing the language and ideas used by claims-makers in their construction of the problem of the single child family. And it has involved analysing the discourses of parents themselves, identifying the way in which this language and these ideas reappear and the way private meanings are constructed.

One of the criticisms of a qualitative study such as this is that it deals only with a small sub-set of the population. Certainly, it can make no claim to have uncovered or to represent the totality of experiences of parents who have one child or even to have elicited a full explanation in each case. Nonetheless, it opens up an understanding of this minority of parents whose logics and meanings have been concealed by claims-making and by the politicisation of family size. Given the unexplored nature of this research topic, the design and methods were necessarily subordinated to the process of inquiry. That is to say, they needed to evolve in light of the information revealed during the course of interviews. The findings from the two different sources of data make up the following five chapters.

Chapter 3: A Problem 'Built Into' English Society

Introduction

The first introductory chapter began with a quotation from Julie in which she suggests that the perception that it is necessarily problematic to have or to be an only child is one that has been 'built into English society'. The purpose of this chapter will be to explore the validity of Julie's suggestion, taking a historical perspective to identify the ways in which this problem was founded and constructed. Three distinct periods of recent British history will be reviewed to demonstrate the reasons why the single child family began to cause alarm and the ways in which the problem has changed over the course of time. Beliefs about family size during the early decades of the twentieth century will be examined at a time when it was remarkably common for married couples to have only one child. It was during this period that the concepts of 'the single child family' and of 'the only child' were founded within behavioural psychology. The collusion, following the Second World War, between official pronatalism and psychological discourse to discredit having only one child will be discussed together with its impact upon beliefs about family size. Finally, responses to a renewed decline in fertility in the context of profound social change in the latter decades of the twentieth century will be considered. In particular, certain reactions to maternal workforce participation and to the arrival of reproductive technology will be taken into account. Their role in prompting the construction of the single child family as a new social problem and in questioning parental motivations will be highlighted.

The purpose of this chapter is not to suggest that the problem of the single child family is a uniquely British one. Certainly Falbo's (1984) research can be seen as a response to the perception of this problem within American society. It can also be seen as confirmation of the way in which it has been constructed within behavioural psychology. Given the pervasiveness of Freudian beliefs in Western society, it can be assumed that there has been the opportunity for making only childhood problematic elsewhere. What will be explored in this chapter is a distinctly British version of the problem and the particular circumstances and influences that have provided it with firm foundations and support. The role of the state in providing health and family planning services and the prominence of certain British psychologists and their influence upon child-rearing practices are of great significance here.

Fertility Decline in Early Twentieth Century Britain

In 1913, the pioneer psychologist C W Cunnington expressed in his medical handbook entitled *Nursery Notes for Mothers* the view that the number of 'neurotic children' was increasing (Cunnington, 1913, p.15). He correlated this apparent phenomenon with an increase in only children. Moreover, in what was otherwise an entirely medical manual with chapters on topics such as 'fever', 'vomiting' and 'convalescence', he devoted his third chapter to 'The single-child family' (sic).²⁶

²⁶ By this time the American G Stanley Hall had published his 'Study of Peculiar and Exceptional Children' from which he made his claim that 'being an only child is a disease in itself'. Hall established the first research laboratory in psychology at John Hopkins University and launched there the 'child-study movement'. Sigmund Freud is known to have visited the USA at his invitation. (McKibben, 1999, p.21-30).

Cunnington is precise about the reasons for this somewhat anomalous inclusion in his work. He acknowledges that although it may not be within the control of some parents to have more than one child, those who have the prerogative of control should consider the effects upon 'the nation and the race' of having only one. He notes that those 'unconscious hedonists' who are motivated by the desire to shirk responsibilities are unlikely to heed his advice. But, for those parents who are simply thoughtless or inexperienced, he gives his prognosis for the consequences to the child of growing up without siblings.

Not without irony, Cunnington suggests that this family form is often judged in a disinterested way by those who present their views as 'final' and 'conclusive' and he calls for an 'open mind' in this matter (Cunnington, 1913, p.15). He does acknowledge that some parents may be motivated by a genuine desire to improve the prospects of their child and, therefore, may consider their choice to be 'a wise sacrifice'. He concedes that the clear advantages to the child are an increased inheritance and a more expensive education. However, the disadvantages are, in his view, unambiguous. The child without siblings will be 'hyper-sensitive' as 'nursery life is a speedy obliterator of yesterday's sensations'. With its inevitable 'rough and tumble' it lessens the capacity to 'dwell on emotional events' or to distort 'trivial happenings'. Moreover, a child's nervous system will be over-burdened by too much exposure to adult company and 'easily becomes "spoilt"' (sic) (ibid p.17).

Significantly, Cunnington suggests that parents may be so concerned not to spoil their child that they may be too harsh, judging small misdemeanors by adult standards (ibid p.19). Without the means of comparison with other children, they may exaggerate his abilities and make an inappropriate choice of career, for a son at least. In turn, he will be 'plagued by a frail physique, an ill-balanced intellect, a weak morality and loneliness'. And he will make an impulsive and injudicious marriage. His 'exaggerated capacity for suffering' will mean that he will reproach his parents and ask them to consider 'look what sort of a man you have made me'. Therefore, they must not be tempted by the 'small gains' in having only one child and he suggests that the child may not even live long enough to thank them.

Clearly, Cunnington's purpose was to distinguish and make problematic having only one child. His speculation represents the emergence of psychology's claim to the understanding of family and childhood and its provocation of fear to influence parental behaviour. Through discourse, he blurs the boundary between the physical and the psychological and medicalises what had otherwise been considered unremarkable. In describing the only child as one who is 'easily spoilt' he is establishing a linguistic convention that prevails to this day. There are clear reasons why it was such a convenient term to express his claims and why it continues to be juxtaposed with the concept of only childhood almost a century later. For, although the concept of spoiling was not novel in relation to childhood, the contradictions within its meaning lent themselves to Cunnington's requirements and to the emerging construction of 'the single-child family'.

Dictionary definitions of the verb to spoil offer two predominant, contradictory meanings²⁷. From the Latin *spoliare* it means to take forcibly, to pillage, to damage

²⁷ These definitions are from the current Shorter Oxford Dictionary

and to make invalid or useless. The second meaning is to treat with excessive consideration or kindness. The phrase 'spare the rod and spoil the child' is considered to originate from *The Book of Proverbs* and is commonly associated with the teaching of John Wesley²⁸. It contains the paradox that the child who is spared physical punishment will be damaged, in this case, made unfit for heaven. A secular version of this paradox appears in Galsworthy in which he suggests that a child who is allowed 'to do as she wishes' is 'spoiled'. The Shorter Oxford Dictionary's current definition reflects this interpretation stating that, in slang it means 'to injure the character of (a child) by overindulgence or undue lenience'. And it can also mean 'to impair a person's appreciation of something by making accustomed to something better'.

Cunnington exploits the contradictions and variations within the concept of spoiling in the construction of his newly exposed problem. In assuming that parents are likely to be motivated by the desire to invest their resources in this one child, he manipulates its meaning to demonstrate that their benign intentions will produce damaging results. In the context of Edwardian social standards, he is well aware that, far from spoiling through 'undue leniency', they may be particularly strict. Therefore, he moves the concept along from prosaic matters of discipline into the realm of behavioural psychology. And he uses the imagery of food to demonstrate that in both a real and metaphysical sense the child's appreciation will be impaired and the digestive and nervous systems over-burdened through excess. He asks his reader to 'consider the sort of mental food on which the child's mind is fed'.

In her work *Perfect Parents* on the history of ideas of childrearing, Christina Hardyment points out that it was not at all clear whether Cunnington's claims about increasing numbers of neurotic children were valid (Hardyment, 1995, p.109). However, there seemed to be increasing numbers of only children. She states that the new phenomenon of the single-child family was becoming 'a marked feature of the middle and upper classes...It was as notable and fashionable a topic of discussion as the single-parent family is today' (ibid p.109). Therefore, Cunnington found the opportunity to focus upon this particular family form and to apply new theories of behavioural psychology to address the emerging problem of declining fertility amongst the elite. His claims were prescient of the way the single child family continues to be presented today, the way its causes and effects are generalised and the way that it is implicated in population and social decline. They were prescient too of the negotiation of meaning that continues to juxtapose the concept of spoiling with that of only childhood.

Cunnington was only one of the many members of the British establishment at that time to respond to a notable decline in fertility at the turn of the century. There is some question, however, about the novelty of low fertility per se. Secombe points to records from seventeenth century Kent indicating that average family size was 2.5 for a yeoman but 0.9 for the very poor and further evidence from Halesowen that, before the Black Death, a rich man had on average 5.1 children while the poorest had 1.8 (Secombe, 1993, p.125-194). Goldthorpe states that 'net reproduction rates were generally close to or even below replacement level before 1750' (Goldthorpe, 1987, p.31). It seems that it was not unusual for a child in pre-industrial society to grow up without siblings, particularly when high infant mortality is taken into account.

²⁸ From The Bible Old Testament Proverbs 13-24

By the end of the nineteenth century, some important factors had changed, however, to prompt the concern of British elite. As stated by Garrett, 'until the very end of the 19th century there was little public acknowledgement of the widespread nature of the fertility changes that were occurring' (Garrett, 2002, p.17). Once acknowledged, it seemed that it was the elite classes which were becoming the most depleted (Soloway, 1982, p. 27; Lewis, 1980, p.30) And, by the Edwardian era, it had become clear also that the fertility decline was the result of a deliberate decision by married couples to limit their family size (Soloway, 1982, p.48). Therefore Cunnington's speculation reflects the alarm at that time with the qualitative consequences of low fertility amongst the elite. In focusing upon the single child family, he is making his pioneering profession relevant to the dominant issues of the day. Certainly the themes that he introduces came to characterise beliefs about only children following the Second World War. However, it would be several decades before they became incorporated into mainstream beliefs.

Cunnington's speculation follows the release of the 1911 Census which did indeed indicate a change in reproductive behaviour. Soloway states

"Within a generation, .. small families of one or two children had become far more prevalent, constituting the number born to nearly a third of all marriages celebrated in the years 1900 – 1909 (Soloway, 1982, p.8).

In the early part of the twentieth century there appears to have been no lower limit to family size and no stigma associated with having only one child. For example, Tilly states that by the end of the nineteenth century 'motherhood ceased to be defined in numbers' (Tilly, 1992, p.42). She goes on to say that, after the birth of the first child, additional children did not enhance a women's claim to femininity, suggesting 'once a mother, always a mother'. Garrett refers to Galsworthy's accounts of a 'new mood' amongst the upper classes. Influenced by greater longevity, economic uncertainty and the problems of inheritance in a large family she suggests that '(I)n this new order even a single child was enough to cement a marriage, or to provide an heir' (Garrett, 2002, p.212). She also points out that, according to the 1911 Census, one out of four married couples in Social Class I had only one child after 12.5 years of marriage, suggesting that they had therefore employed very successful fertility restriction (ibid p. 286). Having only one child appears to have been the preferred option for college educated women in late Victorian England. Soloway (1982) states that Sidgewick, sister of Balfour and Principal of Newnham College Cambridge, conducted a study of the reproductive behaviour of female graduates. According to this study, their fertility was not markedly different to other women of their class, with average family size at 1.53 children in comparison with 1.81 children for non-educated upper class women. He goes on to say:

'More intriguing, however, was the discovery that although total fertility was less among younger educated wives, a substantially greater proportion of them, 72.4% compared with only 63.2% of the other women, had at least one child. (Soloway, 1982, p.142)

This implies that the college educated women had one child and then stopped reproducing, while the non educated women were more likely to remain childless or

to have more than one child. It also confirms that no social or ideological constraints prevented women from raising an only child but rather, it was considered an enlightened choice.

Cunnington was unusual in singling out and criticising families with one child. Other leading thinkers at that time were merely concerned with the general low fertility amongst the elite. Nor would their interests have been served by attacking single child families. While eminent physicians, academics and clerics were attempting to encourage members of their own classes to have more children, they also had a strong interest in discouraging reproduction in the lower orders (Soloway, 1982, 1990; Garrett, 2002). The reason, Garrett explains, was the perception of a demographic imbalance that resulted in Britain's humiliating defeat in the Boer War:

“The high rejection rates of those trying to enlist at urban recruiting stations was seen to be symptomatic of a withering of vitality and virility which was undermining ‘national efficiency’, a sign that the ‘lower orders’ with their high fertility, poor survival rates and low standards of health were reducing the average Briton’s physical and mental prowess (Garrett, 2002, p.5).

The Eugenics Society, whose importance, according to Soloway, ‘greatly transcended the limited institutional boundaries of a formal organisation’, led a campaign to address this imbalance (Soloway, 1990, p.xvii). The campaign attempted to persuade the middle and upper classes of their moral responsibility to have a larger family, rather than attempting to establish a minimum standard for family size. In parallel, eugenicists were intent upon discouraging what they considered uncontrolled fertility amongst the working classes. In this way they effectively legitimised having only one child.

The continuing decline in fertility until after the Second World War suggests that eugenicist views had little direct or immediate effect on the reproductive behaviour of the elite. However, the ideas, themes and language invoked by pronatalists, and in particular by eugenicists, influenced subsequent beliefs about family size. They would prove useful, following the Second World War, in establishing the perception of inferiority in having only one child. For example, in stating that ‘the mentally better stock is not reproducing itself’, Pearson²⁹ introduced the concept of a reproductive replacement level and of a moral responsibility to reach it (Soloway, 1982, p.27). The Anglican Church, with many eugenicists in its senior ranks, attempted to persuade its members of the moral superiority not only of having a large family, but also of growing up in one. Soloway states that the 1908 Lambeth Conference concluded that:

“although children in a large family might be deprived of greater emotional support and material resources and opportunities, the benefits to be derived from self-denial, personal exertion and responsibility were far more important in establishing a wholesome discipline of life (Soloway, 1982, p.100).

Ideas about the ‘wholesomeness’ of life with siblings and its implicit discipline became incorporated into the ideology of motherhood following the Second World War. Certainly mothers appeared to be a target of eugenicist rhetoric. Lewis states:

²⁹ Karl Pearson, the first Galton Professor of Eugenics at University College London from 1911-1933

“The connection between the selfishness of the woman’s movement .. and the falling birth rate was a favourite theme with eugenicists. (Lewis 1980, p.221)

‘Female interests outside the home’ were considered to have a deleterious effect not only on the quantity but also upon the quality of children produced (Soloway, 1990, p.113). Maria Scharlieb, an eminent gynaecologist and eugenicist offered little encouragement to other women to advance their professional interests but instead castigated them ‘for their selfish neglect of duty to the race’ (Soloway, 1982, p.125).

Fertility Decline Amongst the Working Classes

Although it was assumed that the working classes were uncontrolled in their reproduction, recent sociological interest in fertility decline illuminates some important points. Garrett (2002), Seccombe (1993) and Gittins (1982) have demonstrated that there appears to have been no cultural resistance to having only one child in working class Britain until after the Second World War. Recent research also demonstrates the importance of an emerging ideology of motherhood and the way that this held the key to ideals of family size. Before the Second World War, many more working class women ended up with one child than was generally acknowledged or understood. Garrett states that the 1911 Census shows that ‘the proportions with only one child are actually rather similar within each class (Garrett, 2002, p.287). She goes on to highlight a ‘spatial element’ to reproduction, arguing that ‘people tend to behave like their neighbours’. Certainly in the northern textile districts, a combination of social norm and high infant mortality resulted a high proportion of single child families:

“Infant mortality ...raised the proportion of women with fewer than two living children (their effective fertility) to about 85% for textile workers and 76% for the economically inactive” (ibid p.307)

Increasingly, family size limitation extended to other occupational groups so that between 1911 and 1946 ‘the proportion of completed families with two or less children increased from 20% to 67% (Lewis, 1980, p.223). With no socially defined lower limit on family size, having only one child had become both legitimate and respectable. This new meaning attached to fertility control is thus expressed by Seccombe:

“Formerly, fecundity had been associated with masculine virility; now uncontrolled childbearing was considered to be reckless imprudence, a self-inflicted source of poverty” (Seccombe 1992, p.79).

In their analyses of the fertility decline, Garrett (2002), Lewis, (1980) and Seccombe (1992, 1993) provide important insights into the reasons why working class women were motivated to stop uncontrolled childbearing, in many cases after the birth of the first child. Lewis states that the aim of welfare services was to ‘promote a greater sense of responsibility on behalf of the mother’ and that ‘infant mortality was seen as a failure of motherhood’ (Lewis, 1980, p.18-19). According to Garrett, each child

after the first one brought an increased risk. She states that 'infant mortality was so high that only those without siblings ran a lower than average risk of mortality' and that 'each additional sibling was associated with a 10% increase in the child's chances of dying' (Garrett, 2002, p.162). Seccombe argues that fertility control brought with it an end to 'procreative fatalism'; it also brought the possibility of escape from poverty, freeing women to undertake paid work (Seccombe, 1992, p.182). He points out, though, that there was no concept of 'ideal family size' but rather, for the first time, married couples colluded to control their fertility.

In her study of family size in the textile districts, Gittins (1982) explains why both working and non-working women were motivated to have only one child: Women working in textiles could earn wages equivalent to a man's wage but four to five times that of a child. While they could ask a relative to care for one baby, a second effectively put an end to their employment (Gittins, 1982, p.102). Conversely, having only one child enabled a woman to stay at home and the family to live on the husband's wage alone (ibid p.152). Gittins points out that non-employed women in her survey were influenced by the welfare movement, with its messages about the 'natural' duty of mothers to children. Further, they had 'a highly developed ideology glorifying the family, the home and the importance of children generally' (ibid). The respectability of very low fertility is a point emphasised by Ittman who argues that, in industrial Bradford, 'the desire for respectability extended to issues of ...childbearing ... with large families becoming a sign of nonrespectable behaviour (Ittman, 1995, p.217). It can be concluded, then, that having only one child offered not only respectability but also the possibility of fulfilling the new ideals of family and of motherhood espoused by health and welfare workers. Working class couples had clear reasons to limit their family size in this way and would meet no institutional opposition to stopping after the first child.

If the pregnancy and birth of their first child was problematic, it is clear that many women in early twentieth century Britain sought to avoid the experience a second time. Lewis (1980), Soloway (1982), and Seccombe (1992) draw attention to the correspondence published by Marie Stopes which reveals the strength of the desire for birth control. Seccombe states that "womens' dread of future pregnancies and their fierce determination to bear no more children is an especially prominent theme in the Stopes correspondence' (Seccombe, 1992, p.7). According to Soloway, 'terror of unwanted pregnancies, miscarriages, abortion and death .. compelled them to find the means of controlling their fertility (Soloway, 1982, p.252). Lewis points out that even in the 1930s, rates of maternal mortality were equally high for middle class and working class women. And she argues that this presented a dilemma because it was difficult for MPs to encourage middle class women to have more children when childbirth was still so dangerous (Lewis, 1980, p.36). Further, obstetricians sought to advance the status of their profession by lowering maternal mortality. That doctors themselves had lower fertility than virtually any other occupational group, with an average family size of 1.7 for younger doctors, suggests that many colluded with their wives to avoid a second pregnancy (Soloway, 1982, p.121). Seccombe points out that although they refused their patients help in obtaining contraception, 'doctors did legitimise womens' fears concerning abnormal and protracted childbirth' (Seccombe, 1993). For Marie Stopes (1925), the evidence uncovered of the injuries and morbidity caused by childbirth provided a powerful argument in favour of legitimising birth control. Convinced of the need to lower working class fertility and as the mother of

one child herself, Stopes effectively provided a personal endorsement for having only one child.

Post-war Reconstruction and new standards for family size

For a time during the 1920s the most common family size was one child; twenty five per cent of couples who married in 1925 had only one (Laybourn, 1994, p.4; Glass, 1952). Yet by the 1960s, studies of reproductive behaviour reveal public contempt for the single child family and the vast majority of parents had at least two children (Woolf, 1971; Cartwright, 1976; Busfield & Paddon, 1977). This change in reproductive norms can be explained by the tactics employed to promote higher birth rates, prompted by the 'Depopulation Panic' of the 1930s (Soloway, 1990, ch.10; Lewis, 1992). In 1933, the crude reproduction rate had fallen to 0.75³⁰. The British establishment finally acknowledged the extent of the fertility decline within the working classes (Soloway, 1990, p.226). Further, the justification for low fertility amongst the working classes could no longer serve eugenicist interests (ibid p.197).

In extending its campaign of pronatalism across the social order, the Eugenics Society effectively removed any moral support for having one child. At the same time, intellectuals politicised beliefs about family size by attacking the causes of low fertility and equating it with low morality. For example, in *The Twilight of Parenthood*, Enid Charles suggested that 'the fashionable family' with its one child was the result of the acquisitiveness prompted by capitalism (Charles, 1934, p.195). She also suggested that parents who had one child and those who were childless represented a 'flight from parenthood' and 'the over-weighting of the community with the mentally and morally tired' (ibid p.222). However, she claimed that one out of six couples were likely to be infertile and argued that each mother had a moral obligation to have at least three children to compensate for infertility (ibid p.195). The important implication here is that fertility, once proven through the birth of a first child, is assumed to remain constant: there may be a physical reason for having no children but having only one is, in her view, a clear statement of reproductive control.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, disparate groups including the Eugenics Society were united in their objective to raise fertility and to encourage married couples, regardless of social class, to bear three or four children (Soloway 1990, ch. 10; Lewis, 1992, p.16). Titmuss (1942) had revealed that the marked increase in first births at the outbreak of war was not being matched by second and subsequent births. This confirmed official concern that the desire for parenthood could be fulfilled with one child. The manipulation of ideas to promote larger family size became integral to post-war reconstruction. Lewis points out that this reconstruction was as much about rebuilding family relationships as it was bricks and mortar; to this end, the role of the mother and her redomestication were considered critical (Lewis, 1992, p.38). Soloway states that the Population Investigation Committee (PIC) had concluded that the answer to restoring fertility to replacement levels lay within the realm of psychology (Soloway, 1990, p.347). According to Lewis, the state created 'a new breed of professional social worker with more formal training in the latest psycho-social

³⁰ The crude birth rate is defined by the Office of National Statistics to mean the total number of births per 1000 of the total population.

approaches to help the mother to achieve above all maternal 'adequacy' (Lewis, 1992, p.23). Oakley (1984) has argued that this provision of advice and the medicalisation of pregnancy and childbirth were intended as a means of social control of women. She states that "The purpose of the NHS was to create a better and still healthier world for Britain's babies – and a world in which women would be happy to bear them" (Oakley, 1984, p.131). She also points out that the purpose of the family allowance system was to raise the number of babies (ibid p.129). Therefore the provision of health services by the state enabled the popularisation of psychological beliefs about child development and about the role of the family in child socialisation. Experts such as Donald Winnicott were able to make common sense of the ideas expressed by Cunnington at the turn of the century.

Psychological Discourse and Family Size

Lewis states that, in the post-war period, psychologists resorted to using the radio and newspapers as the means for self-publicity (Lewis, 1992, p.25). Winnicott is cited as most effective in using these media (Badinter, 1981, p.276). His expert opinion on only children makes up a chapter in his 1957 publication '*The Child and the Family*' in which his predictions for a child brought up without siblings are bleak (Winnicott, 1957, 109-110). His essential concerns for the only child are very similar to those expressed over fifty years earlier by Cunnington. They are that siblings provide an essential preparation for life outside the home. Therefore an only child will have difficulty in forming normal social relationships and will be 'spoilt' for normal adult life. However Winnicott alludes to a deeper and more sinister consequence of only childhood. He suggests that the interaction between young children and the way they learn to play provides an important lesson in dealing with aggression. Parents should, in his view, welcome the hostility and even the violent hate the child feels towards a new baby because this hate will turn to love and will equip the child with a means of dealing with aggression. Conversely, he suggests that '(T)he only child's relative lack of opportunity for expressing the aggressive side of his nature is a serious thing' (Winnicott, 1957, p.109).

Winnicott is alluding here to the idea that social isolation or the inadequate expression of aggression in childhood results in despotism. In this way, he is taking advantage of fear of despotic regimes in post war Britain to manipulate ideas about family size. New psychological meanings ascribed to sibling relationships were effective in serving pronatalist objectives. The concept of sibling rivalry is commonly attributed to Sigmund Freud's emphasis upon the Oedipus complex (Mitchell, 2002, p.77). Drawing upon this idea, Anna Freud suggested that when this hate turns to love, a child gains an important lesson in dealing with feelings of ambivalence and the capacity to reconcile love and hate provides the basis for a democratic society (Freud, A, 1966). Therefore a reversal of this logic produces the concern that an only child will not have learned the important lessons of dealing appropriately with aggression. Erik Erikson, for example, suggested that factors such as social isolation in adolescence and indulgence by his mother were important factors in Hitler's personality development (Erikson, 1965). The erroneous assumption by journalists in

the late twentieth century that Hitler was an only child exemplifies this chain of logic and a confusion of cause and effect.³¹

Winnicott merely alludes to a connection between Nazism and an absence of siblings. He is, however, specific about the more prosaic consequences of having only one child. He states that 'there is something quite fundamental' for a child to experience his mother's pregnancy and the physical changes that this brings about (Winnicott, 1957, p.108). The arrival of the baby confirms that the closeness of the mother and father and that the child who experiences his mother breast-feeding the new baby will 'be the richer for this'. Therefore a girl who does not experience her mother breast-feeding a younger child will have no model for motherhood. The only child will have no opportunity to experience play with other children, nor to enact multiple roles which, in his view, prepare the child for larger groups. Ill prepared for arrival at school, the only child cannot make up for the lost opportunity to learn imaginative play. As an adolescent he or she will lack the opportunity to 'walk out' with siblings and, desperate to cultivate relationships, will make an ill-judged marriage. Once married, the family form will reproduce itself as the adult only child will be so overburdened with care for ageing parents that he or she will be constrained into having only one child.

These bleak predictions are based upon a privatised, nuclear version of family life and upon predictable life courses. There are significant inconsistencies in psychological interpretations of only childhood. On the one hand, Winnicott alludes to a correlation between social isolation in childhood and ruthlessness. On the other, his claims are reminiscent of those of Alfred Adler who presented only children as unfit for normal adult life. He stated that 'such children have problems with every independent activity....They are like parasites who do nothing, but enjoy life while everyone else can care for their wants (Adler, 1965). Winnicott could make his claims with moral authority because he was making psychological discourse available to the pronatalist political regime of the time. He was in turn drawing upon ideas expressed speculatively by Sigmund Freud and presenting them as objective facts. Freud himself appears to have expressed no particular view on only children. However, in his biography of Leonardo da Vinci, he speculates on Leonardo's lack of siblings and on the closeness of his relationship with his mother (Freud, 1910)³².

Freud states that, if it can be assumed that Leonardo spent the first five years of his life alone with his mother, he must have represented to her a replacement for her husband. Further, at around the age of three, a child should develop 'infantile sexual researches' (1985, p.27). These do not occur spontaneously but are 'aroused by the impression made by some important event - by the actual birth of a little brother or sister, or by a fear of it based on external experiences - in which the child perceives a threat to his selfish interests.' There is no record of Leonardo experiencing the arrival of a sibling and Freud suggests that the relationship with his mother both robbed him of his masculinity and destined him to remain like a child for the rest of his life. These 'accidental circumstances' of Leonardo's childhood had, Freud suggests, a profound effect upon his psychological development and they account for the energy that he

³¹ This assumption, present in articles by journalists such as Julie Burchill and Virginia Ironside is discussed in Chapter 3.

³² First published in 1910, translated and republished in 1985 *Leonardo and a Memory of his Childhood*, Pelican.

diverted into his intellectual and creative pursuits. Although he is much more concerned with the consequences of paternal absence, much has been made of the significance that he accorded to the arrival of a sibling.

In the post war era, child-rearing experts such as Winnicott used this construction of the sibling relationship to ensure a minimum standard for family size. The concept, expressed decades earlier by Cunnington, of 'spoiling' the child with too much parental attention became embedded in common sense. It also served as an important safeguard in ensuring that parents would not be tempted to limit their family to only one child. Managing the sibling relationship became an important test of parental competence. For example, Benjamin Spock advised that parents should not be tempted to 'spoil' their first child but to consider the arrival of a new baby as an important disciplinary lesson (Spock, 1957). Referring to child-rearing beliefs in the post-war era, Hardyment states that:

"Sibling rivalry was a key concern in discipline, as it tended to be the first serious arena of confrontation between toddler and parent" (Hardyment, 1996, p.285).

Spock went on to suggest that 'spoiling', even in the first few weeks of life, could be harmful and that those parents who may be most tempted to spoil are those who may have waited a long time for a child who are too eager to amuse or those who have eventually adopted one (ibid p. 284). By now 'spoiling' a child is clearly understood to mean the over-indulgence of emotion in the child by parents who are indulging themselves; the implication of what Spock says here is that those parents at most risk of spoiling are those who may end up with only one child. Implicit also is the assumption that such parents would be incapable of choosing their own moralities in bringing up their child. Certainly, Adler was explicit in this view, stating that such parents 'have no choice. They focus all their attention on their only child (Adler, 1965, p.130). By the 1960s, such was the expert view that a child needed a sibling that the American psychiatrist Albert Messer wrote an article in the New York Times admonishing parents to adopt if they were unable to have a second child in order to avoid 'only child syndrome'³³.

Public Attitudes to Single Child Families in Post War Britain

The convergence of psychological discourse and pronatalism to discredit the single child family was highly effective. This is evident in the attitudes expressed by mothers in studies of reproductive decision-making conducted in the post war period. For example, Ann Cartwright (1976) conducted a longitudinal study of families across twenty-five local government authorities throughout England to investigate declining birth rates and concluded that having only one child was unlikely to be responsible for this trend. She states:

"There is no clear evidence of a change in the proportion who were content with a single child family"(Cartwright, 1976, p.11).

³³ The New York Times Magazine, 25th February 1967

Although Cartwright observed a trend towards smaller families, it is apparent from her study that her respondents considered it their moral duty to have at least two children and that they were emphatic that being an only child is not good for the child. She quotes parents who suggest that the only child will be 'spoilt' and 'lonely' and will be deficient in their understanding of what real family life is like. According to Cartwright:

"Nearly one third – 31% - mentioned a dislike of only children and this proportion was 42% of those who had one child but wanted more". (ibid p. 95)

Cartwright attempts to shed some light on the reasons why some parents in her study had only one child, suggesting that mothers of one were far less likely to give cost, hard work or housing as reasons for not having more children than were mothers of two (ibid). Nor were they concerned about overpopulation even though many mothers surveyed believed overpopulation to be a problem in Britain. She does state that they were much more likely to cite fear or dislike of pregnancy, age and 'other reasons' for their family size and were, apparently, the group least likely to say that they were happy with their family configuration. Cartwright leaves considerable ambiguity about this small sub-set of the parents she interviewed and acknowledges that she is unlikely to have elicited the real reasons. Although infertile couples were apparently eliminated from the study, her findings suggest that the concept of choice is problematic in the context of reproductive decision-making. The ambiguity created around these parents raises questions about the extent of their reproductive choice and the impact upon them of the dominant opinions expressed about only children.

A similar ambiguity is created by the study of 'the quality and tempo of childbearing in post-war England' by Busfield and Paddon (1977). This research was based upon interviews with working and middle class parents who had children in England in the 1950s and 1960s and it also confirms the unpopularity of the single child family during this period. The authors hypothesise about the sort of parents who were likely to have only one. They believe that those who pursue 'an active life', 'providing family members with the opportunity to fulfil themselves in the activities and interests that appeal to them' may do this by deviating from the norm and limiting their family size to one child (Busfield & Paddon, 1977, p.200). They suggest that women who are individualistic and attempt to combine a career and pursue other interests would fall into this category, as would those parents 'of a materialistic persuasion' (ibid p.216). In contrast, they suggest that those least likely to deviate are those parents who want to make a better life for their children, providing them with opportunities which were not available when they were children. While parents in this category were highly unlikely to plan a large family, they were also 'highly unlikely to choose to have an only child, since for them the arguments for having at least two are likely to seem cogent' (ibid). This supposition is in stark contrast to the many women in Gittin's (1982) study who had, forty years earlier, limited their family to one child for the sake of a better life for the family.

Busfield and Paddon report on parents who claim that they would have opted for one child for financial reasons if it had been considered socially acceptable, but the views of the parents they interviewed are unambiguous on this subject:

“Time and time again they argue that a child must have a brother or sister either because they believe an only child is sure to be lonely or else because they believe an only child is sure to be spoilt”. (Busfield & Paddon, 1977, p.145)

They go on to say that:

“One woman reflected the contradictory position of the one child family in an ideological context that makes one child a family and yet not fully a family. When asked what size of family she thought of as small she replied ‘Oh one. I don’t think of two children being a small family because I think it is a family, but to me one is not a family at all So strong is the norm that an only child is undesirable that many people believe that parents who choose to stop at one must be selfish. (ibid)

The authors indicate a strong norm to have two, three or four children but suggest that the distinction between having four and five children was not as great as the distinction between having one or two. They give an important insight into the cultural beliefs at that time in which, they suggest, women consider children as ‘a reflection of one’s own endeavour’ and that women measure their performance and compete on the basis of their motherhood.

Several important observations can be made about the attitudes expressed in these studies. They demonstrate how rapidly and effectively psychological discourse had permeated beliefs about child-rearing, making common sense of the avant-garde views expressed by Cunnington in 1913. They leave considerable ambiguity about the reasons why some parents had only child in this context. The explanations for having just one offered by Cartwright and by Busfield and Paddon are at odds with one another. But either way, these authors have very little interest in this family form such as its apparent unpopularity. Finally, they raise questions about the way those who were limited to one child experienced the social norm to have at least two children.

Reproductive Choice, Working Mothers and Fertility Decline at the End of the Twentieth Century

With the decline of birth rates following the post-war baby boom, some social commentators have chosen to present small family size as an unprecedented phenomenon. In the context of increasing divorce, cohabitation and lone parenthood, they consider low fertility to be both the cause and effect of social malaise in Western society, exemplifying a trend to individualisation (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, Fukuyama, 1999 Morgan, 1998). Yet, others argue that fertility patterns cannot be generalised in this way. For example, Irwin (2000) points to the fluctuations in birth rates throughout the twentieth century, underlining the importance of understanding the specific cultural contexts of family formation. She proposes the concept of ‘reproductive regimes’ to explain changing fertility patterns and as an alternative to ‘the unfolding logic’ of fertility decline. However, many influential sociologists seem to consider the single child family as a new phenomenon that epitomises recent and disturbing social change. The remainder of this chapter will address two significant

developments of the late twentieth century that have served to reinforce the problematic implications of having only one child. In so doing, it could be argued that they have made all the more ambiguous the position of those who have just one child.

One of the most significant social changes in recent decades is the greatly increased workforce participation of mothers, defined by Hochschild (1989) as a 'stalled revolution'. As indicated, Busfield and Padden (1977) suggested that maternal employment and 'interests outside of the home' may be becoming identifiable causal factors in the reduction of family size to one child. Certainly, by the 1980s, this suggestion seemed to many to be well founded. It resulted in the view that women in Western economies were limiting their reproduction to one child in order to reconcile the conflicting demands of work and family (Gerson, 1985, p.167). Just as, in the early twentieth century, this correlation prompted eugenicist discourse on 'selfishness of the women's movement' (Lewis, 1980, p.221), so it prompted new discourses about maternal responsibilities. And it prompted the assumption of voluntarism in relation to the diminution of family size. A second important development not only served to reinforce the voluntarist implications of having only one child but also resulted in new anxieties about parental conduct and motivations. This was the arrival, by the 1980s, of what have been defined as 'the new reproductive technologies'.

Reluctant Mothers

By the 1980s it had become clear that the numbers of mothers in paid employment was continuing to increase. Sociologists in the United States began to conclude that women would opt for only one child to reconcile the conflicting demands of employment and motherhood. In *Hard Choices: How Women Decide About Work, Career and Motherhood* Kathleen Gerson (1985) analyses the way in which women negotiate the inflexibility of the workplace with the demands of domesticity. She suggests that some women opt for motherhood and domesticity because they encounter 'blocked mobility' at work, while others who remain committed to a working identity eschew parenthood altogether. But for those who attempt to straddle the competing demands of work and family, there is a need to identify what she terms 'coping strategies' and one such strategy, to which she accords great prominence, is to opt for only one child. She states:

"So reluctant mothers concluded that one child would disrupt their work far less than two. Indeed, they came to believe that, although two children would invite disaster, one child posed no threat at all". (Gerson, 1985, p.167)

In her chapter entitled *Combining Work and Motherhood*, Gerson constructs an image of the woman who counts both the costs of remaining childless and the costs of motherhood to her career and arrives at a reconciliation that amounts to one child. In this context, she uses the terms 'reluctant mother' and 'non-domestic'. She represents this group of women with a description of a mother who justifies her choice by claiming that her child is better off being cared for by someone who enjoys the domestic responsibility of child-rearing more than she does herself. Gerson emphasises that having less than two children has been, until this time, a highly unpopular option. However, given the inflexibility of employment structures and the unresponsiveness of social policy to the needs of working women, she predicts the inexorable rise of the single child family. Furthermore, she suggests that the hard

choices that she defines are not unique to the United States but are common to developed, post-industrial countries.

Gerson is sympathetic to women who must make hard choices and she presents the decision to have only one child as both logical and sensible. She suggests that if these women are ambivalent about motherhood, the cause of this ambivalence relates to the inflexibility of the market economy and to the inadequacy of social policy. She rejects the notion, embedded in psychoanalytic discourse, that motherhood is instinctive and natural (1985, p.34). This theme is amplified by Arlie Hochschild in her book, *The Second Shift*, published in 1989. She describes the entry into the workforce of large numbers of mothers as a 'stalled revolution', a revolution that has faltered because the dramatic changes in the roles of women have not been matched by broader societal changes. Therefore women must shoulder the dual burden of both paid and domestic work. She suggests that the subsequent tension is played out within the home and the marriage; it 'was exacerbated by the birth of their first child and became a crisis with their second' (Hochschild, 1989, p.127). Moreover, she reports that for all of her interview respondents, the birth of a first child had a deleterious effect upon the marriage. In this way Hochschild offers a further possible explanation of why working mothers may be tempted to have no more than one child.

Gerson presents the apparent increase in single child families as a new phenomenon. The construction of the 'career mother' who makes this rational calculation exposes such women to criticism, raising questions about their maternal commitment and competence. Gerson herself describes them as 'reluctant' and 'non-domestic' and, in this way, makes the image of the single child family more problematic. Certainly, a less sympathetic interpretation of this exercise of reproductive choice presents the child as the victim of maternal selfishness. In the same year that *Hard Choices* was published, a harsher image of this apparent phenomenon was presented by an Australian sociologist Victor Callan (1985, ch.5). Callan set out to demonstrate that women who choose to have one child are likely to be 'career women' and that they are different to other mothers. To demonstrate his point he selected thirty five working women with one child and emphasised the way these women 'ridiculed their mothering skills'. He also emphasised the way they claimed that they would rather abort than bear a second child. And it is Callan who reminds his reader that: "The childless are child-avoiders, but parents of one child must endure the more damaging label of being child-abusers" (ibid, p.101).

Clearly, to some, the single child family appears to epitomise disturbing new social developments. Suspicion about parental motivations and about the abusive consequences of their ambitions are expressed by Bech and Bech-Gernsheim (1995). In a chapter entitled 'All for the love of a child' they draw attention to the elaborate planning for a child in contemporary society, including the use of diagnostic and reproductive technologies. They make the somewhat surprising correlation between the increase in the proportion of single child families in Germany and an apparent increase in child abuse (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p.138). They explain that those who 'want the best for my child' invest high levels of emotional and financial resources to achieve this. But, if their ambitions are frustrated, the family may become 'dangerously overheated' and they warn that 'the road from heaven to hell is much shorter than most people think' (ibid p.139). Beck-Gernsheim (2002) goes on to equate the limitation to one child with 'pressure on women to 'have a life of their

own' (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 72). Similarly, in *The Great Disruption*, Francis Fukuyama (1999) correlates maternal ambition with low fertility and social individuation. He upholds the single child family as the consequence of the changing role of woman and strongly implicates it in his predictions for the inexorable depletion of social capital in the Western world (Fukuyama, 1999, p.114).

Intensive Mothers

What these discourses about 'reluctant mothers' seem to be saying is that those who have only one child are somehow different to other mothers. The logic of Gerson (1985) and of Hoschild (1989) suggests that while the arrival of a second child reduces the mother to domesticity, the decision not to have this second one is a rational response to the demands of 'the second shift'. However, more recent sociological analyses question these implications. In *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* Hays (1996) argues that although contemporary mothers face two socially constructed images of what a good mother looks like, neither is the one of the 'cold, calculating businesswoman' (Hays, 1996, p.131). This image is, in her view, reserved for the childless and she also argues that 'if you are a good mother you must be an intensive one'. More recently, Douglas and Michaels expose the ideological underpinning of what they define as 'the new momism' resulting in a 'new glorification of domesticity' which came to prominence in the 1980s (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, ch.1).

These authors draw attention to the role of those who have been accorded expert status in child-rearing and to their literature in their accounts of the rise of 'the new momism'. In both cases, they draw particular attention to the work of Penelope Leach, described by Hays as one of a 'triumvirate' of child-rearing experts who defined the methods of motherhood that characterise the 'ideology of intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996, p. ch.2). They argue that although these methods are presented as natural and instinctive to women, they are in fact socially constructed ones that respond directly to the competing ideology of 'profit-maximising utility'. This revelation about the strength and pervasiveness of the ideology of intensive mothering is highly significant. It raises questions about whether Gerson's cultural image of 'reluctant mothers' may conceal something much more complex about those who have only one child. Moreover, the particular influence of Leach in her home country and what she has to say about the arrival of a second child raise a very different possibility about the reasons for having only one child.

Leach's book 'Baby and Child' was first published in 1977. It draws heavily upon Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory in its ideological opposition to the growing reality of maternal employment. Significantly, in promoting an entirely child-centred approach to child-rearing Leach, intentionally, leaves no room for the mother to work outside of the home. Inadvertently, she leaves little room either for the arrival of a second child. While it is unlikely that Leach intended to advocate having only one child, her model of monogamous love between the mother and child has been interpreted this way. In 'Mothering More than One Child', Penny Munn argues that the exacting standards set by experts such as Leach present having a second child as a compromise. She states:

“It is apparent that one consequence of psychological models of romantic love and monotropic attachment in mother-child dyads is the simple fact of having a pre-schooler and a baby to mother simultaneously rules out any possibility of matching a maternal ideal” (Munn, 1991, p.66).

Leach defines an approach to motherhood which could be interpreted to leave little room for the mother to focus on anything other than one child. Only at the very end of her work does she include a small section on the arrival of a new baby in which she asks her reader to imagine her husband coming home to tell her that he was proposing to take on a second wife (Leach, 1977, p.398). Her instructions to the mother for her departure to hospital and her stay there for the birth of the new baby require careful stage management. It is perhaps no coincidence that Bowlby used the example of a mother leaving her child to have another baby in hospital to demonstrate the principles of attachment theory³⁴. Hardyment expresses doubt that Bowlby intended his theory to be applied in quite the way that Leach and others have done and states:

“Bowlby cannot be blamed any more than Freud for the fact that the meat of both men’s finding has been borrowed from the world of the abnormal, where they were established, and applied over-enthusiastically to everyday life.”
(Hardyment, 1996, p.238)

Nonetheless, a brief separation of no more than forty eight hours is interpreted by Leach to have far reaching consequences if mismanaged and she raises various practical and mathematical impossibilities for the ensuing months and years. The mother must balance the need to breast feed a baby without neglecting the first child. Finding suitable treats and outings for children of different ages will prove to be problematic. She will need to devote all of her emotional support to the child who starts school but, if the second child starts playgroup at the same time, this child will also need all of her emotional support. The solution appears to demand two parts that are greater than their sum and Leach suggests that ‘you will have to share it out or overdraw on your resources’ (Leach, 1977, p.401). In contrast to her predecessors who have warned of the hazards of over-indulgence by stinting on punishment or by over-indulging with attention, Leach believes that it is not possible to spoil a child with too many possessions or with too much attention. A parent can only spoil a child, in her view, if they fail to invest sufficient time in ensuring an appropriate balance of power or by being unwilling ‘to listen patiently to your child-witness’ (ibid p.441). Moreover, if the mother chooses to have more than one child Leach makes it clear that she must not put these children under any obligation to each other and she states that they will inevitably feel jealous and should not be adversely compared with one another.

The disincentive provided by Leach for having several children was keenly observed by Sheila Kitzinger. In *Woman as Mothers*, published a year after *Mother and Child*, she suggests that, according to such idealised cultural models of motherhood, a woman who is socially aware will ration herself to one or two children, or none at all (Kitzinger, 1978, p.30). Kitzinger, an influential proponent of natural childbirth and of

³⁴ A video produced by Richard Bowlby ‘Attachment Theory, Psychopathology and Human Development; available from The International Attachment Network, is used widely in psychoanalytic teaching.

breast-feeding, rails against the perfectionism espoused by Leach. She draws upon Patricia Morgan's critique of the Leach approach to motherhood:

"by comparison with the awful responsibilities falling to a mother of children in their First Five Years, those of directors or cabinet ministers can be regarded as small beer." (Morgan in Kitzinger, 1978, p.39)

Kitzinger laments what she perceives to be the demoralisation of motherhood in which the educated woman is expected to raise perfect children within an isolated, nuclear household. She regrets the medicalisation of childbirth and the way in which obstetric interventions such as caesarean section may interfere with what she considers to be the natural processes of breastfeeding and bonding with the child, resulting in a 'failure of confidence.' (Kitzinger, 1978, p.186). In this way, she also reveals the possible reasons for a mother to limit herself to one child. Yet, as Hardyment suggests, Kitzinger herself succeeds in applying yet another set of exacting standards to motherhood and, in accusing others of taking the spontaneity from it, creates further, different demands and problems.

In particular, Hardyment draws attention to the way experts such as Kitzinger have emphasised the importance of maternal bonding with the baby, emphasising the minutes and hours immediately following the birth and their basis for the emotional stability of the child (Hardyment, 1995, p.309). The implication here is that a perceived failure to fulfil the requirement for bonding, or to give birth naturally, or to breast feed, will be just as demoralising as any perceived failure to meet Leach's cultural ideal. In defining what she describes as the 'Spotlight on Parents' Hardyment suggests that all of these experts have provided 'a legacy of insecurity' to contemporary parents in which the risks associated with parenthood increase (Hardyment, 1995, p.311). And, as suggested by Kitzinger, one approach to mitigating such risk may be to have only one child.

New reproductive choices

Kitzinger is not alone in suggesting that Leach's exacting standards for motherhood may constitute a disincentive to further reproduction. Furedi has drawn a causal link between the 'professionalisation' of parenting and the decline in birth rates (Furedi, 2001, p.89). Hardyment (1995), Hays (1996) and Furedi are among authors who have drawn attention to an unprecedented professional intrusion in private family life in the latter decades of the twentieth century. One of the new opportunities for scrutinising parental behaviour has resulted from the availability of reproductive technology and, in Britain, the prerogative of the state to control its provision. The arrival of this technology and the discourses that it has prompted are highly significant to this research in several different ways.

The availability of these technologies has raised questions about the attitudes and emotions of those parents whose child results from them (Burns, 1990; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1994, ch.4). For example, Baroness Warnock who was appointed to the highly influential role of Chair of the Committee of Inquiry into Human Fertilization

infers that those who resort to IVF will necessarily be limited to one child³⁵. Therefore, she uses old assumptions about only children to express personal concerns about the consequences of the use of reproductive technology. She stated that:

'I have tremendous sympathy for the infertile. But the supposition that you must have a child for your own sake is something I do rather worry about.... Just think about this one child, on whom everything must depend!' (Warnock, 1988, p. 42-43).

The aggregation of statistics from IVF clinics³⁶ has revealed the diminished success rates of older women and has produced a consciousness of the limitation and expiration of female fertility³⁷. This in turn has generated new discourses about 'the biological ceiling' that admonish women not to postpone maternity but to reproduce according to a professionally defined timeframe³⁸. Furthermore, they place a charge of naivety and of questionable priorities upon those who find themselves involuntarily limited to one child. But, as Karen Throsby (2002) has revealed, the exaggeration of the success rates for IVF and ignorance of those for whom it fails have created the illusion of reproductive control. That is to say, by some accounts, there is now no excuse for falling short of standards for family size.

The inaccurate representation of reproductive technology in the media has, according to Throsby, created much misunderstanding about its success. In her thesis *Calling It A Day: When to End IVF Treatment* Throsby suggests that the focus upon its successes ignores the majority for whom it does not succeed and that no consideration is given to those who find that they must abandon IVF (Throsby, 2002, 15-16). She conducted qualitative interviews with people who had decided to give up IVF treatment and, of particular note here, are those interviewees who already had one child. She describes the way in which these parents are prepared to embark upon IVF to pursue a normative ideal of family life and the dilemma with which they are presented. She states:

"Concern about the possible loneliness or isolation of an only child was also balanced against a concern that the engagement with IVF would impact negatively on that child, both in terms of the redirection of resources and the anxiety that repeated hospital visits might generate" (Throsby, 2002, p.221)

She goes on to say that in these cases, once IVF was abandoned, the parents felt that they could 'establish their credentials as appropriately caring parents', even though they had to abandon notions of family completeness (ibid).

³⁵ Baroness Warnock was Chair of Committee of Inquiry into Human Fertilization from 1982 – 1984 established to examine the social, ethical and legal implications of reproductive technology.

³⁶ The Center for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States began to aggregate success rates for IVF in the 1990s and prompting clinicians to admonish women on the risks of delaying maternity. See www.cdc.gov/ART. see also Chapter 6 p. 86 for references to the concept of the 'biological ceiling'.

³⁷ For example, an article in the British Medical Journal, September 2005, by Bewley, Davies and Braude admonishes women to give priority to motherhood.

³⁸ An article in The Sydney Morning Herald 22nd January 2006 'Freeze Careers Not Eggs' exemplifies the participation of infertility specialists in the 'work-life balance' debate.

Throsby reveals a 'no win' situation for such parents who must weigh up the deleterious effect of IVF treatment upon family life against the assumed disadvantages of only childhood. Woollett (1991) describes a further dilemma for the infertile, exacerbated by the publicity surrounding IVF. She suggests that, while reproductive technology has done much to publicise infertility, it has done little to aid an understanding of it. She states that "women with fertility problems are often asked to explain themselves, but run the risk of being 'pitied or patronized' by their disclosure" (Woollett, 1985, p.61). It could be argued that infertile people who already have one child are even more subject to misunderstanding than the involuntarily childless. The existence of a child represents both the possibility of fertility and the intention to be a parent. Yet, as revealed by Throsby, some parents have only one child in spite of their consumption of IVF technology and others have one child because of it.

Discussion

This historical perspective on the emergence and development of the problem associated with having only one child is revealing. What is presented by sociologists such as Gerson (1985), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) and Fukuyama (1991) as a new phenomenon turns out not to be new at all. Indeed, it is ironic that it appears to have been more common for a woman to bear only one child in the early decades of the twentieth century than it was in the latter decades. The focus upon three distinct phases of recent history enables some important comparisons to be made. It reveals the way that, while the single child family has been considered emblematic of social malaise since the Edwardian era, the nature of the problem itself has been continuously revised in line with social changes. It exposes the way in which the problem has been constructed discursively, using language in a flexible way to modify and redefine the construction. The particular utility and flexibility of the concept of 'spoiling' is indicative of this process.

One of the most important comparisons within this historic analysis relates to the way in which the problem progressed from a rather avant garde interpretation of low fertility to one that took on the appearance of folklore. In 1913, Cunnington found it necessary to devote an entire chapter to his newly defined phenomenon, to identify its causes and to present his speculation about its effects as a scientific, medicalised prognosis. By the post war era, the notion that an only child 'is sure to be lonely and is sure to be spoilt' had become embedded in common sense. It seemed to require no explanation and there is an apparent lack of curiosity by authors such as Cartwright (1976) and Busfield and Paddon (1977) about uncovering the actual circumstances of those who are limited to one child. By the end of the twentieth century, new anxieties had emerged about the assumed normality of having only one child and new interpretations were being made about its causes and its effects. An eminent British sociologist expressed surprise that the 'much respected opinions'³⁹ of G Stanley Hall were being overturned such was his consternation at the apparent new normality of only childhood. Yet one commentator points out that Hall's study, published at the turn of the twentieth century 'obviously violates every rule that any modern social scientist would observe (McKibben, 1998 p.28) It seems possible that this says more

³⁹ See Taylor & Taylor, 2003

of anxieties about what the single child family appears to represent than any empirical understanding of its actual meaning.

It is significant that Cunnington was willing to acknowledge that some parents may not have the means of controlling their reproduction, that is, they may be unable to have another child. Further, he was willing to attribute well intentioned but naïve and misguided motivations to some of those parents who chose to have only one. Yet by the end of the twentieth century, the question of reproductive choice had become much more complex and ambiguous. The charge of naivety was extended to those who had tried and failed to have a second child with the new concept of the 'biological ceiling' raising questions of maternal motivations. By the end of the twentieth century, it was unambiguously the parents themselves who were charged with damaging the innocent child. With Cunnington, the child's own lack of self-control was implicated as the factor that would make him 'easily spoiled'. By the time of Leach, the child is beyond reproach and can only be spoiled through wilful neglect. And the charge of selfishness has only intensified with the correlation between maternal employment and low fertility.

Cunnington's concerns related unambiguously to the middle and upper classes, with his concepts of 'nursery life' and of the dangers of over-feeding. As Gittins (1982) reveals, low fertility in the working classes was a matter of survival. Cunnington is unambiguous too in his appeal to consider the effects of reproductive control upon 'the nation and the race'. But fear about the consequences of only childhood took some time to take effect. Only when official pronatalism colluded with psychology and found its voice through the media and through the mechanism of the state health service did it become accepted as common sense. The strength of feeling expressed by those parents in Cartwright's and in Busfield and Paddons's studies and their vilification of those who are limited to one child demonstrates how insidious and how powerful this collusion had become. It had found effect, as Oakley suggests, in 'the social control of women' (1982, p.2). Therefore, by the late twentieth century, concerns that women were deliberately defying conventional wisdom by limiting themselves to one child were alarming indeed. Ideas about professional women opting for only one child and about the 'biological ceiling' seem to relate no less to the qualitative consequences of low fertility than did Cunnington's appeal.

Hays (1996, ch.2) has emphasised psychology's hold on parental behaviour and the way in which it intensified with Leach and theories of attachment parenting. According to her analysis, even women who undertake paid employment subscribe to the ideology of intensive mothering rather than the alternative of 'profit-maximising utility'. What is most fascinating about the single child family is that it appears to many to represent disobedience of the dominant ideology of intensive mothering. That is to say, those who have only one child are presented as though they have capitulated to profit-maximising utility. However, Munn (1991) raises the possibility that those who have only one child may represent an uncompromising obedience to the dictates of attachment parenting. Clearly, it is the parents themselves who hold the answers to this apparent contradiction. But before exploring what they have to say, it is important to explore the contemporary construction of the single child family and the way it appears publicly.

Chapter 4: Experts, Activists and the Media

“I worry about whether people will think he is normal because he is an only child”

“They think an only child is going to be very unsociable, not very friendly and spiteful and horrible, a little spoilt brat - you know you can see it in their faces, how sad they put these things on your child ”

“He is not a typical spoilt only child. He is much more like someone from a larger family”

These statements from parents who participated in this research are significant in a number of respects. They are based upon supposition, upon what they assume that others may be thinking about their son or daughter. They are somewhat defensive, expressing anxieties about unspoken external perceptions or, alternatively, distancing their child from an undefined image that seems to typify an only child. In two of these cases the parents had exercised optimal control over their fertility, availing themselves of it once and then voluntarily relinquishing it. In another, they had involuntarily lost the means of control and, having tried to conform to British norms for family size by having at least two children, found themselves limited to only one. Yet regardless of the enormous variation in their intentions, they seem aware that their family may be typified and characterised by its size.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the contemporary construction of only childhood as it appears publicly, to understand what discourses may have prompted the defensiveness of these parents. Earlier, a historical perspective was provided on the collusion between psychology and governmental pronatalism that resulted in the emergence of only childhood as an official problem. It was one to which Winnicott devoted a whole chapter in his 1957 work *The Child in the Family*. However, no such chapter appears in current handbooks of family psychology. Nor does the single child family appear in recent sociological analyses such as MacRae's *Changing Britain* or Silva and Smart's *The New Family?* It finds no place amongst the burgeoning charities that represent parental activist interests such as *Oneparentfamilies.org.uk*⁴⁰ and the *Single Parent Action Network*⁴¹. So do these parents have grounds for their anxieties and does only childhood continue to be considered problematic?

In order to explore their contemporary constructions, press references to the only child and to the single child family over the last twelve years were identified and analysed. They include the coverage given to Laybourn's work *Only Child: Myths and Reality* and to Emerson and Pitkeathley's *Only Child: How to Survive Being One*, both published in 1994. They also include more recent press coverage of a conference entitled *BeingAnOnly*⁴² and of its proceedings. These materials provide support for Best's view that social problems become institutionalised by the collusion and mutual

⁴⁰ www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk accessed 10th October 2005.

⁴¹ www.spanuk.org.uk accessed 10th October 2005.

⁴² The conference took place in London on 10th July 2005. See www.BeingAnOnly.com

reinforcement of four different groups of claims-makers: government, experts, activists and the media (Best, 1999, p.63). He uses the metaphor of an 'Iron Quadrangle' to demonstrate his theory. In Chapter Two the role of the British government in propagating norms for family size was highlighted. In this chapter, the roles of the other three groups that make up the 'Iron Quadrangle' will be examined in detail.

The Experts

It has been suggested by Best that the understanding of family in contemporary society has been deferred to psychology (Best, 1994, p.4). A clear example of this deference is the way in which psychologists are invited to comment upon only childhood and to provide their predictions for those who grow up without siblings. Almost invariably journalists and other social commentators who find reason to write about single child families seek out such expert opinion. In so doing, they appear to be searching for statements that can be presented as definitive or conclusive, that can confirm or perhaps deny the problematic implications of their chosen topic for discussion. In some cases this deference is extended to other members of what may be loosely described as the mental health profession, to psychiatrists, psychotherapists, school counsellors and life coaches. The variation in the professional credentials of those who are accorded authority in this matter is reflected in the considerable variation and divergence between their expert judgements.

Notwithstanding variation between the views expressed by these disparate experts, all reinforce the discourse that holds parents responsible for their child's psychological development. It is a discourse that has been described by Rich Harris as 'the nurture assumption', an 'ideological dogma' that 'calls for the child to be reared in a nuclear family consisting of one mother, one father, and one or more siblings' (Rich Harris, 1998, p.79). According to Rich Harris, this dogma ignores the child's broader social context, in particular the variable of the relationship with peers, and attributes psychological outcomes to the private world of the nuclear family. Therefore, when experts are called upon to evaluate only childhood, their deliberations focus almost entirely upon this nuclear unit. What seem to be in question are the extent to which the absence of siblings affects the only child in a deleterious sense and the extent to which parents have any possibility of influencing the development of their one child.

Some experts present the single child family as an aberration of the nuclear family form. Their construction of this version of family life is inextricably linked with their constructions of the value of sibling relationships and of the particular value accorded to sibling rivalry. It is as though siblings act according to a script that prepares them for adulthood and that life in the privatised nuclear family offers a training ground for the competitive world outside. For example John Byng-Hall, a psychiatrist and family therapist, argues in an article in *The Guardian*⁴³ that siblings learn to cope with competition through their interactions with each other. Therefore, only children will have difficulty with competition and with feelings of aggression. His argument is echoed by Karen Stobart, a Jungian analyst, who states that siblings teach each other that 'you can hate someone and not destroy them'⁴⁴. In keeping with the assumption,

⁴³ *The Guardian* 12th November 1997

⁴⁴ *The Daily Telegraph* 30th June 2001

implicit in many of these articles, that British society will be populated by increasing numbers of only children, Stobart goes on to express concern about the broader social consequences of such demographic change. She predicts a society in which people will not understand co-operation or sharing, who will respond to a problem either by fighting or by withdrawing.

According to these interpretations of the consequences of only childhood, parents themselves are cast in a somewhat ambiguous and awkward role. It is as though in neglecting to provide a sibling, their motivations and competence must be questioned. For example, in an article in *The Telegraph*⁴⁵, Jay Belsky capitalises upon theories that only children have difficulty with feelings of aggression to make claims about the problems of institutional childcare. His central claim is that children who spend much time in childcare are more 'aggressive, disruptive and disobedient'. But in order to demonstrate this controversial point, he takes advantage of assumptions about only children. He states that "(s)ince only children are statistically more likely to have parents in full time work, they are also more likely to be in full-time child-care in infancy". What is significant here is not only the hypothesis about only children, but also the ambiguity and passivity implicit in the parental role. Belsky seems to be saying that those who are insufficiently committed to parenthood to have only one child are most likely to relinquish their care to others. In so doing, they have apparently relinquished any responsibility and control over their child's behaviour. In a similar vein, Dirk Flower, a child psychologist and family therapist, claims that 'many of the mothers I have seen have only one child because they found that one too many. If you are very focused on your career or some other interest then a child is a distraction'. In such cases, he suggests, the child is handed over to a nanny whereupon he or she 'does not develop the necessary social skills'⁴⁵.

Of course, these arguments are a direct reversal of the claims made by Winnicott (1957) that the inadequate socialisation of the only child results from the intensity of relationships within the nuclear family and from social isolation. In particular, the Freudian interpretation of Leonardo's unorthodoxy has resulted in an expert judgement that presents all only children as the 'spoilt' victims of their mothers' uncontrolled intensity. In the same article in which Belsky made claims about only children in the context of childcare, Stobart asserts that an only child will be unable to share because of the intensity of the relationship with the mother and her child. A school counsellor is quoted in *The Telegraph* as saying that only children 'learn unconsciously from their mothers that there is no room for anyone else'⁴⁵. Therefore, according to this expert, they dominate the classroom and are 'most likely to answer questions', a phenomenon that she considers problematic. Yet the suggestion here of assertiveness is at odds with Byng-Hall's construction of the child constrained by the intensity of relationships within the family⁴⁶. Further, he correlates problems of only childhood with those of single parenthood, pointing to the 'single parents' tremendous need of the child' and 'the great struggle of the child to get away'. To reinforce this point, attention is drawn to the character in Hitchcock's film *Psycho* to demonstrate that '(B)inding a child to a parent too closely can have damaging effects'.

⁴⁵ *The Daily Telegraph* 19th April 2001

⁴⁶ *The Guardian* 12th November 1997

Those who assume that the relationship between an only child and his or her parents 'can be characterised by intensity' make predictions about what this may mean for other relationships outside of the nuclear family. On this point experts are again divided. Pam Allsop, a psychotherapist and herself an 'only child', argues that this model of intensity results in loyalty. Only children, she argues, place great value upon friendships and are deeply committed to them⁴⁷. However, another expert whose authority is derived from his experience as 'convenor of a discussion group for only children' equivocates. He asserts that only children are, in fact, ambivalent about such intensity. Therefore they 'oscillate between wanting to be close and wanting to be alone'. Readers of this particular article are warned to be wary of intimacy with such people as they will find that the relationship will be 'rigorously tested'⁴⁷.

Very often, these claims contradict each other. As exemplified in the deliberations over the intensity of relationships, experts often equivocate within their own claim. And if, as commonly assumed, the intensity of the relationship between an only child and his parents can be taken for granted, its outcomes are permitted to vary. Meyer argues that, on the one hand, only children are more mature because of their exposure to adults but he also argues that they are often less mature because 'the mother tends to baby them'⁴⁸. Diane Jonckheere, a personal development counsellor, asserts that only children have 'maturity beyond their years'⁴⁹. Accordingly, this results in a tendency in later life either to take responsibilities that do not belong to them or to take no responsibility at all. There are contradictions in the interpretations of Falbo's (1984) research findings that correlate high levels of motivation and educational attainment with small family size. Professor Cary Cooper, a behavioural psychologist, accounts for this phenomenon by arguing that only children have 'good self-image' by virtue of not having siblings⁵⁰. Furthermore, the consequence of being the focus of parental expectations and investment is, in his view, high achievement. However, other British experts are less willing to attribute positive outcomes to these expectations. Meyer argues that an only child, 'catapulted into an adult world', will compare himself unfavourably with adults resulting in feelings of insufficiency⁴⁸.

Nonetheless, this discourse on the relationship between family size and educational attainment seems to allow the variable of parental attitudes and expectations to enter expert reasoning. It seems to offer a departure from the view that ignores parental behaviour, that considers the absence of siblings to be the determining factor in psycho-social development. This more recent psychological theory, prompted largely by the work of Falbo et al (1984), contests the notion that only children can be distinguished from other children. It posits the view that any differences are likely to be favourable, to result from the opportunity for a greater investment of time and resources and to manifest themselves in greater achievement, motivation and self-esteem. However, this discourse in turn permits certain experts to identify further problems. The Irish Times chose to quote from the American author Newman and her self-help style manual '*Raising Your One and Only*' in which she expresses the view that parents 'try to make a superchild'⁵¹. She expresses the concern that parents may also be tempted to abandon discipline when there is only one. Further, Nachman and

⁴⁷ The Guardian 28th September 2002

⁴⁸ The Guardian 28th February 1994

⁴⁹ The Independent 26th January 1992

⁵⁰ The Times 17th May 1997

⁵¹ The Irish Times 8th July 2003

Thompson, the authors of another manual on raising an only child, are quoted as suggesting that it is the parents themselves who are responsible for creating 'only child syndrome'. But they also argue that siblings can present problems, that '(s)ometimes they influence one another in hurtful or damaging ways that linger on into adulthood'⁵¹.

It is surely most significant that experts are divided in their interpretations of the sibling relationship and its importance in diverting and diluting maternal attention. Claims about the necessity for maternal love to be shared are challenged by the view that sibling relationships themselves can cause irreparable damage. For example, Susie Orbach suggests in *The Guardian* that 'sibling rivalry is a pervasive phenomenon that can dog a person through adult life'⁵². According to Oliver James, only children enjoy the great advantage of not experiencing the 'painful blow' of the arrival of another child⁵³. However, in discounting the developmental importance of making way for another child in the family, some experts feel permitted to liken only children to eldest children, suggesting that in both cases they share a capacity for high achievement. Dr Richard Woolfson argues that in the same way that eldest children 'do better in life' because 'parents are focused upon them' so it is logical that the same must apply to only children⁵⁴. In a similar vein, Dr Boyle states in *The Independent*⁵⁴ that only children are like first born children, many of whom go on to be very successful. He goes on to say that they have the great advantage that 'they won't have to share their parents with any siblings and will get stimulation from both parents'. He attributes their perceived relative success to a concentration of financial resources and argues that 'the way a child turns out is down to the parenting regardless of whether they are an only child or not.'

These experts who make the analogy between eldest and only children appear to be attempting to move assumptions about only children away from the deterministic view that a child will be adversely and irrevocably affected by the absence of siblings. However, this in turn makes way for a different kind of discourse, one that relates to the deterministic beliefs about the effects of 'birth order'. Experts who believe that adult personality is determined by the position a child has occupied within their family of origin are invited to give their judgements on the assumed similarity between eldest and only children. In *The Independent* Dr Richard Sulloway argues that, during World War II, most major political leaders, including Mussolini and Stalin, were either first or only borns⁵⁴. To reinforce his allusion to despotism he points out that although Hitler appears to be neither, he was in fact 'his mother's oldest surviving child and she strongly favoured him over two older stepchildren from her husband's first marriage'. However, Sulloway is not entirely willing to concede that the prognosis for an only child can be simplified and reduced to that of an eldest. He goes on to suggest that the lack of constraints imposed by a sibling hierarchy result in a confusion of roles. He illustrates his point by stating that the actor Robin Williams takes on 'multiple stage identities' and that Leonardo da Vinci 'is also like ten different people in one'.

References to eminent and conspicuous people constitute an important tactic to attract attention to what is being written. What these references also demonstrate is a kind of

⁵² *The Guardian* 10th August 1991

⁵³ *The Guardian* 13th February 2005

⁵⁴ *The Independent* 12th January 1997

circular logic employed by experts to reinforce their claims-making. They begin with the assumption that growing up as an only child has brought about certain behaviour and characteristics in adult life. In the following example, the biographer Anthony Seldon explains the behaviour of two British politicians in this way:

“Like Ted Heath, another only child, Irvine was happiest when communicating with others when he was the figure in authority asking the questions or giving the instructions”. (Seldon, 2004, p.11)

But experts are also able to use this logic to work in the other direction. They identify certain behaviour that can be attributed to only childhood and then give the individual concerned the appearance of having been an only child. This is precisely the process that has enabled Sulloway to adapt information about Hitler to suit his theory and to conform to the requirements of the newspaper article⁵⁴. Oliver James employs this technique in explaining the behaviour of John Major. In an article entitled ‘Man in the Psychological Bubble’ James suggests that Major exists in a ‘different psychological space from others’ and was ‘effectively an only child’ because a large age gap separated him from his siblings⁵⁵. Paradoxically, the image of distant siblings is used to reinforce the logic that correlates only childhood with power. It is used also to come back to the notion that an assumed isolation in childhood will result in unorthodox or authoritarian adult behaviour.

Clearly expert opinion is divided on the meaning of only childhood and indeed on how to define an only child. There are many contradictions between these different experts and, in general, what they have to say takes the form of hypothesis rather than empirical understanding. Subjective interpretations of the ‘problem’ of the only child can be used to draw attention to other issues such as the perceived risks of institutional child-care. Yet the definition of the problem itself has proved to be elusive and demonstrates the role of language in its construction and maintenance. Best argues that ‘(o)ur language gives shape to problems, and lets us alter their shapes by redefining, expanding, reframing, changing ownership’ (Best, 1999, p.185). These experts demonstrate the way psychological discourse has shaped and reshaped the notion of only childhood, redefining it in its problematic form and enabling new claims for ownership.

The concept of ownership of social problems is an important one here. Best has also drawn attention to the way that claims-makers attempt to ‘control the definitions of social problems involving children’ in order to maintain their ownership. (Best, 1994, p.12). The resistance by some experts to removing the problematic implications of growing up without siblings surely reveals a struggle to maintain ownership and control. This is most evident in the insistence upon defining political leaders as ‘only children’. Not only does it exemplify what Furedi describes as the ‘psychologising of human achievement’ (Furedi, 2004, p.69). It also demonstrates a blurring of the boundaries between adulthood and childhood in what he describes as the ‘infantilised version of the self’ (ibid p.118). This is perhaps nowhere better demonstrated than in the insistence by mature adults in describing themselves as ‘only children’.

⁵⁵ The Guardian 17th February 1999

Activists

According to Best's concept of the 'iron quadrangle of institutionalisation' (Best, 1999, p.63), activists are critical to the long-term maintenance of social problems. He argues that they distinguish short-term issues from those that become institutionalised. It seemed, from reviewing media references, that a form of activism could be identified in relation to the single child family; it is one that ensures that it reappears periodically in its problematic form and is not allowed to disappear. Best argues that activists not only maintain a long-term commitment to a particular cause but also that they 'assume ownership to apply an authoritative interpretation' of this cause. In Britain, certain individuals have assumed ownership of the problem of only childhood and seek to ensure that the experience of growing up as an only child can only be interpreted through psychotherapeutic discourse. Their activism was apparent recently at a conference held in July 2005 entitled 'BeingAnOnly'⁴². The claim by one of its keynote speakers that 'we're both only children and we're both psychotherapists' exemplifies the authoritative interpretation he seeks to apply to his cause. Further, the claim, and indeed the conference itself, exemplify a discursive collusion between experts and these activists. The opinions of those experts who are invited periodically to cast judgement appear insufficient in themselves to maintain this social problem. However, with their help, individuals such as Baroness Pitkeathley and David Emerson, have over the last decade, reminded the public that they and others are both the victims and the 'survivors' of childhoods deprived of siblings.

In 1994 the book by Emerson and Pitkeathley entitled *Only Child: How to Survive Being One* was published in Britain. In the same year Laybourn's book *Only Child: Myths and Reality* was also published. The claims presented by these respective authors and their subsequent reporting in the British press can be considered to represent a 'discursive struggle'⁵⁶. On the one hand Laybourn seeks to demonstrate that the myth that an only child will grow up to be 'spoilt, lonely and maladjusted' is unfounded (Laybourn, 1994 ch.1). She provides qualitative insights into the positive experiences of those who grew up as only children and of their parents. On the other hand, Emerson and Pitkeathley claim to be able to characterise an adult 'only child' by a number of factors. These include their inability to engage with others, their guilt, their vulnerability to misjudging relationships, their inability to handle anger, their fear of commitment and their fear of exposing their feelings.

Laybourn, an academic member of the Centre for Childhood Studies at the University of Glasgow, indicates that the unavailability of research funding has prevented the comprehensive study that she would like to see undertaken in Britain. She has, nonetheless, employed a number of identifiable research methods to pursue an objective understanding of the single child family. Further, she points to political and social factors that resulted in the construction of the 'myths' of only childhood in an attempt to reverse the decline in birth rates during the first half of the Twentieth Century (p.4). Laybourn provides a review, written in language comprehensible to a lay person, of the extensive findings of Falbo (p. 41-48). From this she concludes that, according to most studies, only children are no different to other children brought up in small families. If any differences can be found they tend to manifest themselves in superior motivation and educational attainment. She backs up these American

⁵⁶ see Chapter 1 p.8

findings with a secondary analysis of the National Child Development Study⁵⁷, one of the most significant longitudinal studies undertaken in Great Britain. She reports on her own qualitative interviews with mothers of only children. And she provides her own subjective insights having grown up as an only child and having brought up two children separated by an age gap of eighteen years.

Laybourn's acknowledgement that her own two children could be considered to have been only children raises the question of definition, of how the concept of only childhood can be defined in research terms. For example, Emerson and Pitkeathley have included anyone in their study who feels like an only child, even if they had siblings during some part of their childhoods. Acknowledging that theirs is not a scientific work, they state that their findings result from the subjective experiences of sixty individuals. Their findings are corroborated by a counsellor who believes that 'only children seek psychotherapy in disproportionate numbers' (1994, p.101). While these activist authors can validate their findings because they are backed up by expert opinion, experts are prepared to argue that the existence of the findings legitimates them. Dr George Meyer, a clinical psychologist at the Tavistock Clinic is quoted in *The Guardian* to have stated that '(t)he fact that the book has been written shows that only children do feel deprived'⁵⁸.

This collusion between clinical expert and activist only child is exemplified in the 1983 publication *Families and how to survive them* by the psychotherapist Robin Skinner and the media personality John Cleese. In a chapter entitled 'Healthier by the Dozen', Cleese is invited by his therapist Skinner to speculate upon what he may have missed by not having siblings. The dialogue between therapist and his patient arrives at a conclusion that Cleese had no opportunity to practice 'natural rivalry' and was 'fragile' because he missed out on 'rough and tumble' (Skynner, 1983, p.233). Cleese volunteers that it was only when he joined a therapy group run by Skinner and his wife as 'temporary parents' that he was able to escape from the constraints of his own parents' attitudes and to appreciate what he had missed (ibid). The image of the adult only child, made aware of his sickness and abnormality by therapeutic intervention, is a consistent one in this collusive discourse between expert and activist. And while Cleese's public identity served to draw attention to Skinner's claims and to their book, his new identity as expert in his own malady ensured that he would be invited to comment on his version of only childhood for years to come.

In an article in *The Scotsman* in 1997, Laybourn's admonishment that society should abandon the myths that surround the only child are preceded by Cleese's claims of sickness and deprivation⁵⁹. Referring to the way he was disadvantaged on arriving at school, unable to cope with 'the rough and tumble' he goes on to say that 'I had a lot of problems about asserting a normal healthy aggression... It's taken me many years to get any confidence in that sort of self-assertive behaviour'. In a similar vein, and with no apparent irony, an actor who played a lead role in a television comedy, states that he was 'awkward, shy, dreadfully inhibited'⁶⁰. He attributes this to the 'overpowering affection' from his mother. The inconsistency between claims of

⁵⁷ National Child Development Study carried out by the National Children's Bureau

<http://www.esds.ac.uk/longitudinal/access/ncds/>

⁵⁸ *The Guardian* 28th February 1994

⁵⁹ *The Scotsman* 14th April 1997

⁶⁰ *The Scotsman* 14th April 1997

inhibition and unassertiveness with the uninhibited capacity for public comedic performance is resolved by one of the central tenets of psychotherapeutic discourse: That is, the inner, authentic identity is concealed by an inauthentic, confident external one. For this reason, Emerson and Pitkeathley can make the claim that:

“The lasting result for many only children is that underneath that socially confident, grown-up exterior there lurks an infant mewling and puking.”
(Emerson and Pitkeathley, 1994, p.112)

‘The confident outward image of the only child and the inward troubled reality’ is a theme that these authors are invited to expand upon at a conference convened in July 2005 by a psychotherapist. They are invited as keynote speakers to summarise their book and to reinforce their claims with reference to their own childhoods. Baroness Pitkeathley is active in other areas of public life⁶¹ and she attributes her competence in ‘working a room’ to her childhood without siblings⁶². It was one that, she considers, made her a ‘very grown up sort of child’, able to converse with adults but perhaps not with her own age group. This results, she suggests, in an ‘absence of personal growth’ attributable to the lack of ‘rough and tumble with siblings’.

Similarly, David Emerson, is active in public life as Chief Executive of the Association of Charitable Foundations. However, he derives his authority to author a book and to address the conference from his experience of being an ‘only child’. Indeed, he suggests that, in his ‘celebration’ of only childhood, he feels tempted to wear a badge stating ‘Solipsism rules’ or ‘A Fair Deal for Solipsism’⁶². But although this suggests that, as exemplified by these eminent individuals, only childhood can only be understood subjectively, his overriding message to his audience is that they need help. That is to say, having missed out on the experience of growing up with siblings, they have diminished ‘self-awareness’ and therefore require therapeutic intervention. He states that ‘self-awareness actually develops in part from the reaction of others to our behaviour and thoughts. And as children indeed it comes in part from that rough and tumble with siblings’.

There is a contradiction in this logic. Although the understanding of only childhood can only be a solipsistic one, only ‘children’ themselves apparently do not know what they do not know. Without ‘the outside perspective’ that otherwise would have been provided by siblings, they need their deficiencies explained to them. This seems to exemplify what Furedi defines as ‘the ability of therapy to reinterpret social experience into personal meaning’ (Furedi, 2003, p.102) and ‘to turn help-seeking into an act of virtue’ (ibid p.103). However, another speaker suggested that the contradiction between the obligation to seek help from an external authority and the notion that the subjective is the only legitimate source of information can be resolved within a therapeutic context. The blurring of the boundary between therapist and client and the concept of ‘co-constructed narratives’ are presented as solutions to reconcile the subjective and the objective.

⁶¹ Baroness Pitkeathley, current chair of the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS); former chair of the New Opportunities Fund and the Carers National Association

⁶² see proceedings from BeingAnOnly, The Power of Being One Conference 9th July 2005 Transcript of Morning Speakers www.beinganonly.com

A further keynote address to the 'BeingAnOnly' Conference reports on current research being conducted at the Metanoia Institute⁶³. Its research methods involve the production of 'co-creative stories, created in dialogue with the researcher'. That is to say, the researcher who is also both the therapist and a participant in the research, contributes her own subjective experiences of only childhood. The research participants, eight women who grew up as only children, are accorded the right to 'voice their own experience as experts on that experience, rather than being told by other researchers what their experience was'. This research is motivated by the notion that its author grew up in 'predominantly a sibling society', one in which there was an 'ever present social stereotype' of the only child which has influenced her identity. She believes that, in consequence, only children are characterised by 'a lack' but also by 'an unfair advantage'. Therefore, the purpose of her research is to 'find out if there were an identifiable set of characteristics and phenomena that relates specifically to the experiences of only children'⁶². The study asks "What are the psychological and emotional developmental implications when the primary mode of relating in childhood is towards adults rather than children?"

This conference paper reports that although, at the individual level the narrated experiences of participants in the study are not actually specific to only childhood, 'collectively they create a sort of complex phenomenon'. In aggregating the collective experiences, the researchers believe that they have identified 'an archetype' that results from a 'lack or absence of sibling encounters'. Consequently, they consider that they have grounds to challenge the positive findings of Falbo et al (1984) and the presenter asks his audience to consider what may be behind 'this need to normalise the only child?' He suggests that the advantages that some wish to associate with only childhood result from the 'very dubious values' of 'an American competitive culture'. Further, he speculates that there is a darker, political motivation to Falbo's work, one that is aligned to the interests of the Chinese government in its defence of the single child policy. And he invites suspicion of those parents who limit themselves to one child, suggesting that they are motivated both by personal ambition and because they do not want the effort of more children.

An important conclusion of Falbo (1984) and of Laybourn (1994) is that only children are no different to other children from small families. However, the research from the Metanoia Institute seeks to reject the notion that they are not disadvantaged by their lack of siblings and it finds expression with the slogan 'not special but different'. This is an example of the way in which ownership of a problem is claimed through language. Furthermore, it demonstrates the application of the authoritative interpretation of psychotherapy to maintain it. Similarly, although language is used to replace the medicalised interpretations by experts such as Adler, it does not overturn the notion that only children are distinct and can be characterised. Rather it reinforces the stereotype and applies the language of addiction and abuse in defining it. For example, Pitkeathley defines a '10 point survival plan' to instruct her subjects on how to deal with normal life. Smith-Pickard states that that he had difficulty in 'coming out' as an only child and that, in a single child family, there is a 'higher than normal level of emotional incest'.

⁶³ The Metanoia Institute, an educational charity specialising in training of counsellors, psychotherapists and counselling psychologists www.metanoia.ac.uk

The notion of emotional incest not only adds a new term of abuse and abnormality when applied to the single child family, it also ensures that the problem defies precise definition. The somewhat outdated notion of 'rough and tumble' is used extensively in activist discourse about only childhood and is of course reminiscent of the Edwardian language of Cunnington⁶⁴. Pitkeathley suggests that it must now be understood as more than the physical jostling between children, that it has an emotional dimension. Only children, in her view, miss out on 'emotional rough and tumble', a concept that is highly malleable and one which she extends to apply to difficulties in negotiating, in resolving conflict and in 'relating to others in a balanced way'. Ironically, Cunnington argued that the importance of nursery life was to avoid 'dwelling on emotional events', to 'obliterate yesterday's sensations' (Cunnington, 1913, p. 17). In contrast, this new contemporary meaning gives emotional events central importance. Although the meaning of 'rough and tumble' is imprecise and somewhat archaic, it seems today to serve as a code in therapeutic discourse to signify the problematic version of only childhood.

The participation of public figures at this conference signifies their intention to remain active in the discursive struggle that maintains the problematic version of only childhood. Pitkeathley and Emerson are well qualified to fulfil this purpose as they are active in other areas of public life with access to professional networks, to the media and with the expertise to take full advantage of them. Best has drawn attention to the connections between claims and suggests that they need to compete with each other in a 'marketplace' of social problems (Best, 1999, p.168). He also suggests that old problems 'piggyback' upon new ones in their competition for attention (ibid). Therefore, the old problem of the only child is used to make problematic newer issues such as 'coping with elderly parents' and the demographic change that has been defined as 'the beanpole family'⁶⁵. Emerson presents the discussion about only children as a means to influence social policy, suggesting that together they 'may bring low child families more onto the policy agenda'. Claims about the problems of low fertility seem to serve the needs of other claims such as the problems of an aging population. But to do so, the old problem of the single child family needs to be kept alive.

Best has also drawn attention to the importance of 'interpretative frameworks' in the construction and maintenance of social problems (Best, 1999, p.64). He demonstrates that activists need to connect their defined problem to a particular ideology to ensure that it can only be interpreted and viewed in a particular way. It is also the job of activists to ensure that other ideologies are made irrelevant. Clearly those who have an interest in perpetuating the problem of the single child family intend to ensure that it can only be viewed through the interpretative framework of psychotherapy. Once the problem is shown to exist in the subjective inner world of the individual and can only be exposed through the medium of psychotherapy then it takes on a protected quality. Moreover, other ways of viewing the single child family can be dismissed as the result of the inferior moralities of foreign cultures and the questionable motivations of competitive, 'goal oriented' parents.

⁶⁴ see Chapter 2 p. 2.

⁶⁵ A report entitled 'The Beanpole Family' by Mintel is discussed later in this chapter and refers to current demographic change in which there are fewer children but more generations are living concurrently.

Psychotherapy also provides these activists with a master frame, described by Best as a broad orientation that is shared by diverse movements (Best, 1999, p.177). In a practical sense, the master frame of the therapy industry provided the convenor of the 'BeingAnOnly' conference with the connections to invite its practitioners and their associates to the event. Many delegates are described as 'carers, therapists or counsellors' or others who share the orientation of 'care' such as members of Age Concern. The conference was presented by its convenor as a marketplace and 'only children' as a market opportunity for offering 'services of some kind'. It also constituted a means to attract the attention of the media. It is reported by its convenor to have 'courted quite a lot of interest' from Radio 2, LBC, The Observer and The Sunday Times. One delegate is described to have been pleased to have found much material for a feature that she was preparing on 'the experience of being an only' for Radio 4. As Best has shown, courting the media is critically important in the maintenance of social problems (Best, 1999, p.63).

The Media

The review of press references to only childhood and to the single child family over recent years demonstrates the role of the media in alerting the public to an incipient problem. Best points out that the media is insufficient in its own right to achieve the institutionalisation of a social problem (ibid). Rather, it is the role of journalists to typify the issue in question, warn of its alarming growth, speculate upon its causes, interpret its meaning and approach it from fresh angles. In addition to providing a medium for experts and activists in their claims-making, journalists have been effective in these roles in the context of the single child family. In the media coverage that followed the publication of the books by Laybourn (1994) and by Emerson and Pitkeathley (1994), it has been the prerogative of journalists to select which experts and activists should be invited to corroborate or to resist their findings. It is also their prerogative to juxtapose certain images and statements.

Certainly, Laybourn's work received some positive media coverage and provoked media interest in Falbo's research findings. However, certain journalists also succeeded in obfuscating upon her beliefs that only children are no different to others and are often high achievers. The purpose of an article in *The Times*⁶⁶ was to interpret the link that she has drawn between only childhood and achievement. But the journalist, Alex Wijeratne, chooses to introduce it with the quotation from G Stanley Hall⁶⁷. She quotes the writer Kate Atkinson to corroborate the 'distortion and introversion in the only child's mind'. She goes on to quote Julie Burchill, 'writer and only child', who stated that: "Somebody once said that only children are natural psychopaths..... You identify with people as objects to push around'. To reinforce Burchill's opinion, she provides a list of infamous 'only children', a technique common to many of these articles, which begins with Leonardo da Vinci and includes Ghenghis Khan, Enoch Powell and John Cleese. Is the reader encouraged, as Laybourn requests, to see beyond the cultural stereotype of the only child? Or, as she suggests, is it more likely that 'bad research often makes good news' (Laybourn, 1994, p.39).

⁶⁶ *The Times* 17th May 1997

⁶⁷ As discussed earlier in the chapter, Hall claimed that 'being an only child is a disease in itself'.

In the same way that some experts have used their interpretations of the biographies of eminent individuals in the construction of their opinions, so journalists find the opportunity to use the construction of the only child to talk about celebrity. Each time a public figure such as Burchill or Cleese acknowledges that they too are the survivors of only childhood, they provide a fresh perspective on an old problem. And they draw attention to what may otherwise be considered no news. There is little reluctance by certain celebrities to 'reinterpret social experience into personal meaning'. For some time John Cleese has been willing to draw public attention to his lack of siblings, attributing his creativity to 'boredom as a child'⁶⁸. He also implies that, as an only child, it is no coincidence that his three marriages to three different psychotherapists have failed. Virginia Ironside points out that, with the publication of Pitkeathley's book, she has for the first time understood her failings as an adult in terms of her childhood⁶⁹. She states that the 'unpleasant' common characteristics identified by Pitkeathley and Emerson enable her to 'feel part of one huge unknown family' and one that is 'a growing band'.

Statistics that indicate the extent of a social problem and appear to demonstrate that it is getting worse are, according to Best, of great importance in claims-makers' rhetoric (Best, ch.3). When Ironside quotes Pitkeathley to have said that 'five times as many people are choosing to have only one child compared to a decade ago'⁶⁹ she exemplifies the rhetorical importance of numbers. She also demonstrates the way that they are 'treated as facts' (Best, 1990, p.45; 2001, p.31). The release of new statistics on birth rates prompts journalists to articulate a sense of moral panic at the prospect of growing numbers of only children. For example, Sue Arnold expresses outrage that the decline in birth rates must, necessarily, result in the growth in single child families⁷⁰. She states that '(t)he most obvious consequence of the declining birth rate is the increase of single-child families. To this unnatural and, dare I say, unhealthy situation, add divorce, consumerism and peer-group pressure and the result is an awful lot of spoilt brats'.

Arnold's interpretation of 'the obvious consequence of the declining birth rate' is common to most journalists who find reason to speculate upon only childhood. Not only does it serve to alert the public to the apparent inevitability of increasing numbers of only children, it also serves to invite moral disapproval of both the causes and the effects of this 'new' social problem. For example, in an article entitled 'Little emperors taking over the world', Cassandra Jardine defines what this apparent new phenomenon signifies to her: 'Careers, urban living and, perhaps, the countless surveys which say that children wreck sex lives as well as bank balances are bringing about voluntarily the one-child-per-family ideal that the Chinese government could only effect by brutal enforcement'⁷¹. That is to say, the statistical certainty that society will be dominated by single child families should engender concern if not about the causes of this phenomenon, then certainly about its effects. For, the purpose of Jardine's article is to question 'is this good for the children?'

⁶⁸ The Times 24th October 2002

⁶⁹ The Independent 22nd February 1994

⁷⁰ The Independent 15th March 2003

⁷¹ The Daily Telegraph 19th April 2001

In most cases, as indicated by Arnold, the implicit warning by these journalists is that it is not good for children to grow up without siblings. The apparently incontrovertible fact that society will be made up of growing numbers of only children takes on a troublesome qualitative dimension. Therefore, statistics that appear to show the extent to which this problem is increasing are made to appear all the more alarming even though the figures themselves are drawn from disparate and often unidentified sources. The following statements exemplify this form of claims-making: 'More than 240,000 Irish families have only one child, up from 195,000 at the last census'⁷². 'Some 40 million children are living in one-child families in China. Britain might well follow suit'.⁷³ 'As estimated, 17% of British couples with children currently have one child, in contrast to just 4 per cent who have 3 or more'⁷¹. 'There were over 2.9 million one-child families registered in 1990-91'⁷⁴. 'Three times as many professional couples – about 30% - choose to have only one child than less well educated parents'⁷⁵.

The media coverage of a report published by the consumer research organisation Mintel in 2002 exposes the extent to which statistical 'facts' are reinterpreted to attract public attention and dismay. It demonstrates also Best's assertions that 'media figures use statistics to promote their own goals' and that they are used as 'tools' for particular purposes (Best, 2001, p.7). Mintel's report was intended to draw attention to significant demographic change. Sub-titled 'Beanpole Families', it points out that although families are getting smaller with, perhaps, one or two children, more generations are living concurrently as life expectancy increases. That is to say, more children are likely to grow up with grandparents and great-grandparents and the report's authors speculate that fewer children may result in stronger relationships outside of the nuclear family. The primary purpose of this report was to alert Mintel's clients to the need to adjust their commercial plans to optimise market opportunities in line with potential demographic change. However, it also provided British journalists with a new perspective on the old problem of the single child family.

The Guardian journalist Hadley Freeman remonstrated that the response to *Beanpole Families* by Peter Hitchens in *The Mail on Sunday* may have been unnecessarily harsh⁷⁶. She states that '(i)n customary jeremiad mode, Peter Hutchens (...) wailed that the rise of the single child family 'means the slow death of society''⁷¹. Indeed, she finds the opportunity to refer to Falbo's research indicating that there is no difference between the 'social adjustment' of only children and those with siblings. In an attempt to present a more responsible and balanced account of Mintel's report, she also finds the opportunity to resort to the well-established technique of talking about celebrity. She states:

"I am sorry to tell you this, Chelsea Clinton, Peter Ustinov and (the late) Iris Murdoch, but, according to recent research, you are all spoilt, self-centred, find it difficult to interact with others and generally adopt a more selfish attitude towards life For you are all only children. (Freeman, 2002)"

⁷² The Irish Times 8th July 2003

⁷³ Aberdeen Press and Journal 28th September 2000

⁷⁴ The Scotsman 14th April 1997

⁷⁵ The Times 11th June 2001

⁷⁶ The Independent 15th March 2003

However, the Mintel report itself had little if anything to do with the psychological outcomes of only childhood. For, the authors resist the assumption that a diminution of family size must result necessarily in more single child families and in a more individuated society. Its interpretation and reinterpretation thus demonstrate the utility of the single child family to attract public attention and of the manipulation of statistics to do the same.

The assumption that society will be populated by significantly increased numbers of only children implies not only that increasing numbers of parents are limiting themselves to one child but that they are doing so voluntarily. While members of the media do not question this underlying assumption, it is their role to speculate upon the causes and the meaning of this apparent social trend. Indeed, in an article in *The Telegraph*, Rebecca Abrams⁷⁷ argues that '(t)he rise of the only child in today's society is part of a much larger picture of changing family life'. It is a picture that, according to Abrams, includes 'marriage breakdown, cohabitation, step-families and single-parent families'. According to her logic, 'the only child with a sibling' has come to epitomise these disturbing social trends, representing a kind of aberration of the nuclear family. That is to say, 'many more children will effectively be raised as only children, even though they may have step-siblings or half-siblings'.

It could be argued that the availability of step or half siblings could remove or invalidate the conditions that, according to activists, make only childhood problematic. Of course it is not the purpose of members of the British media such as Abrams to undermine the problem of the only child. Instead, it serves a valuable purpose in supporting claims about emerging social problems that raise doubts about the motivations and competence of contemporary parents. In a circular pattern of logic, journalists imply that those who are irresponsible enough to have only one child are just as likely to be part of this 'much larger picture of changing family life'. And, consequent to their changing circumstances, they are the ones who are likely to end up with only the one child. When Sue Arnold⁷⁸ states that 'kids don't need stuff they need siblings' she is, like other members of her profession, upholding the single child family as both the cause and the effect of social decline.

Arnold also resorts to a technique, well established in the promotion of social problems, of using a typifying example to reinforce her claims. Josh, a child who was allegedly in the same nursery school as her son, owns 'two playstations, two skateboards, two bicycles'. Not only is this child the victim of his parents' moral impoverishment because he is required to divide his time between two households, his warring parents apparently compete on the basis of material expenditure. In this way, the problems of consumer culture and of divorce are bound up with those of being an only child. The moral of Arnold's cautionary tale is that, although her own son must share a bedroom and wear 'cast-off clothes', he has not been 'spoilt' by his upbringing. And an oblique reference to Freud suggests that the concept of spoiling should be interpreted here in more than a purely material sense. The lavish expenditure by Kate Winslett upon her infant seemed to Arnold to exemplify the 'unhealthy' consequences of a declining birth rate and her charge that '(y)ou cannot spoil children too soon'⁷⁹.

⁷⁷ *The Daily Telegraph* 19th April 2001

⁷⁸ *The Independent* 15th March 2003

⁷⁹ In fact, Winslett has had a second child since this article was published.

Similarly Abrams⁷⁷ uses typifying examples to encourage her readers to question the morality of those who parent an only child. She states that '(t)hree-year-old Nell is a perfect example of this modern phenomenon: the only child with a sibling'. Like Arnold, she constructs her own versions of only childhood, unconstrained by any notion that Nell cannot be an only child because she has a sibling. According to Arnold, parents of only children are not only more likely to be those who allow their marriages to fail, they are also more likely to give high priority to employment and to personal ambition. Belsky's⁸⁰ assumption that 'only children are statistically more likely to have working parents' is one that is quoted and elaborated upon by Abrams. Therefore, she exemplifies her defined social problem not only with three year old Nell but also with a university lecturer who 'never got round to' having a second child after she completed her PhD. In another example, she describes a woman who, in delaying maternity until her late thirties, experienced successive miscarriages instead of a planned second child. The medical discourse that admonishes women not to delay maternity enables social commentators such as Abrams to imply naivety if they find themselves limited to just the one child.

The 2004 publication of *The Mommy Myth* by Douglas and Michaels defined the culture in which women are admonished to give priority to maternity as one of 'frenzied hypernatality' (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p.8). They state that "the most important thing for a woman if you want to do anything else, you'd better prove first that you're a doting, totally involved mother before proceeding" (ibid p. 22) These authors also draw attention to the great importance of the media in defining and promoting these cultural values and in providing a platform for those who espouse them. In an article in *The Times*⁸¹ entitled 'Why I wanted my son to have a sister' the author Carmen Reid seeks to demonstrate that she is a 'doting, totally involved mother'. She states 'Of course, having one child is becoming something of a conscious lifestyle choice for older, busier parents who feel fulfilled with their one and only. But for my husband and I, only one was unthinkable'. Reid goes on to describe in detail the miscarriages that followed her son's birth, the pregnancy that resulted in her second child and the intense affection between her two children.

What is significant about Reid's autobiographical account is not only the public self-exposure that has become commonplace in the context of 'frenzied hypernatality', but also what it says about mothers who have only one child. Clearly those who have apparently made the 'conscious lifestyle choice' of limiting themselves to one fall far short of Reid's standards for motherhood. For, she also describes her interpretation of the sibling relationship as one of intense love that surpasses friendship and serves as a lasting resort 'when all else fails'. Furthermore, she leaves unresolved the position of those who, like her, wanted a sibling for their one child but, unlike her, find that this child does not eventuate. Are they expected to accept, as she had done, 'a sadness that did not go away'? Certainly they are unlikely to find resolution in the debate in *The Times*⁸² that followed the publication of her article in which readers were asked 'is it really so bad being an only child?' In all cases the responses to this question were from adults who grew up as only children. In many of these they argue that it 'really

⁸⁰ Discussed earlier in this chapter p. 3

⁸¹ *The Times* 12th July 2004

⁸² *The Times* 15th July 2004

was so bad' and find significant fault with their own parents and with their personal circumstances.

So far, this review of media references to the single child family demonstrates the strength of the ideology in favour of having more than one child. It also represents a discourse that is prompted by the availability of reproductive choice. And in general, those who end up with one child are charged with mishandling the choice available to them. But in case British parents are in any doubt about the moral superiority of having at least two children, the single child policy in China is made to appear both highly relevant and highly alarming. Like stories about celebrity, it offers a fresh perspective on the problematic only child. When Jardine⁴⁵ suggests that 'little emperors (are) taking over the world' she appears to be warning parents that they need only look to China for confirmation of the correct reproduction decision. For Arnold, China exemplifies the combined problems of only childhood and of consumer excess. She states: "Nowhere is the inverted pyramid of the single child lavished with gifts by parents and grandparents better demonstrated than in China".

Similarly, writing in *The Times*, Andrew Marshall⁸³ paints an unflattering picture of parents in Beijing feeding fast food to their overweight only children. He asks whether 'a new breed of highly educated but emotionally crippled youngsters who are ill-prepared for adulthood' is being created. Marshall appears to be viewing the products of the single child policy through the prism of Western psychotherapeutic assumptions. It is apparent from his article that he perceives the absence of siblings more harmful to the health of these children than the introduction of fast food from the West. On the one hand, British journalists like Marshall seek out what they find distasteful in China; he refers at one point to 'the piggy eyes' of one little girl. On the other, they import these unattractive images to Britain, applying the rubric of 'little emperors' to only children here. Paradoxically, the denial of reproductive freedoms in China is used to admonish British parents not abuse their right to freedom and choice.

Discussion

This chapter has aimed to demonstrate that what experts, activists and journalists present as truths about only children and their parents are discursive constructions. It has also been intended to show that there are many such truths and that, very often, they contradict one another. Most are consistent on one significant issue, that it is necessarily problematic to have or to be an only child. This is not to suggest that the single child family has been a prominent issue at any one time or that it has taken centre stage in national public debate. The review of press references to this family form shows that, as a topic, it appears only sporadically and that the disparate views expressed in isolation often remain unchallenged. It is only by gathering together these references and by analysing and comparing the discourses within them that their contradictions and variation become apparent. Therefore, at any given time, they appear to represent an objective truth rather than subjective versions of it.

It is apparent that the problem of the single child family has changed continuously over the course of the twentieth century. Winnicott's (1957) construction of the only child handicapped by social isolation is a rather different problem to the one

⁸³ *The Times* 29th November 1997

constructed by Belsky⁴⁴ with its claims of aggression in the context of institutional child-care. Clearly, as long as the label 'only child' can carry with it the insistence that there must be something wrong, then that wrong can keep on changing according to the subjectivity of the claims-maker. That Belsky can incorporate the problem of only childhood into his criticisms of institutional childcare demonstrates the strength of the 'nurture assumption' within these claims. That is to say, the child is characterised by the attributes of the nuclear family even when what is at issue is the child's separation from the parental home.

This refusal to allow the problem of the single child family to erode or to be supplanted by other social issues is significant. It is surely no coincidence that Rich Harris (1998) uses the example of the only child in her attempt to expose and to contest what she defines as 'the nurture assumption'. If, as she argues, the normality of the only child can now be taken for granted, then the prescriptive formulae for family life upon which this assumption is based can be overturned. Therefore the deconstruction of the problem of the single child family constitutes a considerable ideological threat to the nurture assumption. It seems to threaten the particular form of parenting which, according to Hays, serves powerful economic, cultural and political interests (Hays, 1996, p.162). It is a threat not only to the quantitative composition of society but also to its qualitative attributes, hence the implication of the diminution of family size in social decline. Not only do those who parent an only child fall short of the quantitative targets for birth rates, their non-compliance with norms of family size seems to raise questions about what sort of parents they really are.

The deconstruction of the problem of the single child family also threatens the ideological basis of 'therapy culture'⁸⁴. The normality of the only child seems to present an affront to those who consider the family as 'the source of social distress' (Best, 1994, p.4) and who consider parents with deep suspicion. As Susie Orbach demonstrates, it is not that siblings are considered a panacea for happiness or normality as they too are considered in some cases to be the source of recurrent ills. Rather, therapy culture places particular doubt upon those who parent an only child and it is uninhibited in its invitation to blame difficulties experienced in adulthood upon the circumstances of childhood. The frequent and often oddly juxtaposed references to Leonardo da Vinci not only demonstrate the Freudian connection of these claims. They also demonstrate the diminishment of human achievement into pathological abnormality. For, it would surely threaten therapeutic interests if a correlation between only childhood and high levels of achievement should be interpreted as good news.

Parents have an ambiguous presence in the claims made by these experts, activists and journalists. Although therapeutic methods pathologise interpretations of childhood experience and examine them in great detail, there is but superficial curiosity about parents and their circumstances. They are either cast in a shadowy role where they must look on as the child proceeds on a course defined by therapeutic assumptions. Or their apparently ill-considered action in postponing parenthood or in allowing a marriage to fail places their one unfortunate child at irrevocable disadvantage. It seems paradoxical that although the discourse of 'emotional determinism' (Furedi,

⁸⁴ In his 2004 publication Furedi presents 'therapy culture' as a cultural phenomenon that encompasses a system of beliefs and a vocabulary, one that is not limited to the relationship between the individual and therapist but shapes public perceptions of issues (Furedi, 2004, p.22)

2002, p. 30) removes from adult only children responsibility for their actions, parental action is implicit in the blame for their misfortune. Infertility is an inconvenient truth in all of this and there is little or no recognition that some parents may not have the prerogative to control their fertility. Moreover, there is little recognition that they may be, nonetheless, self-determining agents in choosing their own moralities in relation to their child's upbringing. The claims that make the single child family problematic exemplify Furedi's assertion: "The paradox that drives parents paranoid is to be told that although they are hopelessly incompetent, they also bear greater responsibility for the well-being of their children than parents of previous generations". (Furedi, 2001, p. xxiv).

Yet despite the seriousness of the charges that are made about those who parent an only child, very often the tone of the claims-making is flippant or highly exaggerated. Burchill's⁵⁴ reference to natural psychopaths and Emerson's exclamations about solipsism are expressed with a lack of seriousness. Cleese's⁵⁹ self-parody in relation to his successive failed marriages is presented as something of a joke. Did the unfortunate seven year old Josh really leave a camcorder on a bus in the knowledge that he had another at home, as Arnold claims?⁷⁰ The accuracy of such descriptions is of far less importance than is their rhetorical impact. For those who accept uncritically the statistical illusion that the numbers of only children are growing rapidly, accuracy can be surrendered in a moral crusade to halt this apparent epidemic. An important purpose of Emerson and Pitkeathley's (1994) rhetoric is to dissuade parents from having only one child. Therefore their activism can unashamedly take the form of criticising their own and the parents of other only children. And, most often, such parents do not answer back.

A central curiosity for this research project has been to understand why the problematic version of the single child family is allowed to dominate public understanding. Carmen Reid's⁸¹ exposure of her own reproductive history may be instructive here. It reveals they way some of those who are assumed to have made 'the conscious lifestyle choice' of limiting their family in this way subscribe instead to the view that a child does indeed need siblings. For Reid also reveals a silent resignation when she herself was apparently asked '(y)ou're not going to be one of those dreadful modern parents that has only one child, are you?'. Could it be that such parents exist in far fewer numbers or enjoy far less voluntarism than commentators such as Abrams and Arnold assume?

Of course, the availability of reproductive choice and the dialectic that hinges upon the question of whether a child needs a sibling are important. The activism that finds such fault with those parents who have one child is prompted in some cases by the apparent need to defend the decision to have more than one. It is no coincidence that Abram's unflattering representation of very low fertility came at a time when she was launching a book instructing parents on how to handle the arrival of a second child⁸⁵. Persuaded that highly educated women are 'not getting round' to a second one, her account has a strongly pronatalist undertone. Similarly, Arnold's tirade against small families can be characterised by a sense of indignation and defensiveness about her own maternity of six children. It as though these members of the British maternal elite

⁸⁵ A book by Abrams entitled *Three Shoes, One Sock and No Hairbrush: Everything You Need to Know About Having Your Second Child* was published in 2002.

consider that the apparent decision to have one child in some way attacks their own ideological position. Perhaps it is for this reason that the image of the single child policy in China seems so alluring as a cautionary tale and can be used to remind British parents not only of their freedoms but also of their reproductive obligations.

Finally, why is it that Laybourn's scholarly work has been somewhat overshadowed by one which, by its own admission, makes no claim to scholarship? In the same way that the problematic version of the single child family is embraced and reinforced by therapy culture, Laybourn's message seems in many cases to be an unwelcome one. Furedi and Best make the important point that 'victim culture' is so pervasive because it threatens no interests (Furedi, 2004, p.191). But the converse is not true, hence the collusion between experts, activists and journalists to ensure that only children continue to be considered the victims of family life and that only childhood keeps its place in the inventory of social problems.

Chapter 5: Reproductive Choice and the Meaning of Having Just the One Child

The purpose of this chapter is to report the findings from interviews with parents who have apparently chosen not to have a second child. It explores the meanings that they ascribe to having just the one when the norm is to have at least two children. In the following chapter findings from interviews with parents who attempted to have at least one more child will be discussed. The variable of reproductive choice provides an important means of comparison within this study. Although 'the single child family' serves as a label for those who seek to characterise and typify only children and their parents, there is of course enormous variation between them. It seemed most likely that there would be considerable qualitative differences between the experiences of those who have voluntarily defied reproductive norms and those who intended and attempted to have more children. Therefore, from a methodological point of view, it has been important to make this distinction. The parents who will be discussed in this chapter are those who indicated that they had exercised reproductive control and who assumed, at the time of interview, that they were unlikely to change their intentions.

There are, of course, ambiguities over the question of choice. It became clear that parents choose how they wish to construct their circumstances regardless of biological constraints upon childbearing. In their own right, these ambiguities are significant and will be discussed in this and in the following chapter. For the purposes of comparison, a distinction was made based upon what parents revealed about their circumstances. However, they did not polarise conveniently between those who had chosen to have just the one child and those who had not. As we shall see, some of those described in this chapter do not talk the language of choice even though their fertility appears to have been unconstrained in physical terms. Conversely, it became apparent that some who talked the language of voluntarism would have had at least one more child if not for physical constraints.

As discussed already, parents who choose to resist British reproductive norms are assumed to give individual fulfilment precedence over 'normal' family life. In this context, female workforce participation and the privileging of work over family are dominant among such assumptions as is the breakdown of parental relationships. Quantitative analyses of reproductive trends seem to challenge the validity of these claims but they do not explain the cultural beliefs and interpretations of family life of those who limit themselves to one child. Of course, these parents who had agreed to be interviewed were not asked in blunt terms why they have just the one. Instead, the interview was introduced with questions about their expectations of family size resulting in a notable variation between those women who had left school at sixteen and those who had further educational qualifications. By good fortune, although not insignificantly, around half of the women in this study who had exercised reproductive choice were early school leavers; the comparison based upon the mothers' educational attainment proved to be meaningful.

This study is concerned both with similarities and with differences between what participants had to say. While there was considerable variation between the different accounts offered, this chapter will draw out certain patterns of logic that emerged as well as the way in which they differ. With one notable exception, no one had set out with the intention of having only one child. Therefore, these narratives revealed much 'ideological work' as parents endeavoured to reconcile their beliefs and their action. They revealed the need to select and draw upon disparate arguments to defend the unorthodox decision not to have a second child. The concept of an 'interpretative repertoire' provided great explanatory value here. Swidler uses the metaphor of a musician and her repertoire to provide important insights into the way people use culture to explain their action. She states:

"The cultural repertoire a person has available constrains the strategies she or he can pursue, so that people tend to construct strategies of action around things they are already good at." (Swidler, 2001, p.7)

These insights and this metaphor provided great value in understanding and explaining the complexity and richness of the narratives. In particular, the idea that people both construct and are constrained by cultural repertoire proved instructive.

"I'm not mother earth"

In considering the meaning of having just the one child, some parents chose to distance themselves from certain cultural images. When Shirley stated 'I'm not mother earth' she is using a distancing strategy to explain herself in terms of what she is not. This process is recognised by Swidler who states: "People thus use common cultural images as they formulate their own views; yet we must see that they frequently use culture by distancing themselves from it." (Swidler, 2001, p.15) The cultural image of the 'earth mother' was invoked by a notable number of mothers including Philipa who states:

"I am not, you know, some women are very much natural what I call the earth mother types. I am not that sort of woman".

In this way Philipa alludes to a version of motherhood that she perceives to be natural and she appears to distance herself from it in her deliberation over why she has only one child. Sarah and Roger construct a more graphic image of the earth mother in their description of their son's childminder:

Roger: *She is a true earth mother isn't she?*

Sarah: *She is, yes, she is quite a big lady. She is a bit like a mother duck with her ducklings.*

Roger: *You can imagine her with a great big skirt with them all hanging off.*

(laughter)

Roger: *If one let go she would know by the weight.*

(more laughter)

Subsequently, Sarah went on to state that she herself is a ‘non earth mother’, referring also to the ‘animal like imperatives’ that drive people to have children. Her explanation for having only one child is that she had intended to have no children at all but, at around the age of thirty, she was overwhelmed by a biological urge that was completely satisfied by the arrival of her son. In her words, ‘then the clock stopped ticking’.

Sarah and Philipa are both highly educated women. In keeping with a number of the other women in this study who had continued their educations beyond the age of sixteen and who had exercised reproductive choice, they claimed not to have wanted children at all during early adulthood. They use the image of the ‘biological clock’ as the explanation for the change in their circumstances. The concept of a clock ticking to remind women of the expiration of their fertility is a feature of the socially constructed model of motherhood⁸⁶. Like the one of the earth mother, it is based upon an assumption of a maternal instinct that is both natural to women but also beyond their control. Consequently, these women can present their transition to motherhood as one that resulted from an abstract desire or physical impulse. Philipa, who was working in the information technology industry as a project manager at the time of her pregnancy stated:

“I did find approaching thirty that biological time clock was very dangerous and things were just entering my head that I couldn’t er..... I was very surprised that I was having these sort of feelings”

Similarly Diane, a management consultant in the energy industry, describes the process that led to motherhood as unexpected and beyond her control. She stated that:

“there was something inside me that said you know I have changed my mind ...and I found myself looking at babies which I had never done before.”

Hays argues that women face two opposing ideologies, one of ‘self- interested profit maximising utility’ and the other of ‘intensive mothering’ (Hays, 1996, p.9). As discussed, the dominant explanation for women having only one child is that they allow profit maximising utility to take precedence over intensive mothering. In this case, according to Hewlett (2003), they may often have ‘postponed themselves out of choice’ and have no time left to have a second child. Perhaps these ‘non earth mothers’ confirm the validity of these claims. However, their accounts so far fall a long way short of their full stories. The consistency with which these women described experiencing maternal urges at around the age of thirty is indicative of a powerful contemporary discourse on motherhood. Not only has it informed them that motherhood is natural and instinctive, it has also proposed to them an appropriate age for it. As revealed by Berryman (1990), the concept of a ‘biological ceiling’ is a

⁸⁶ This is the theme of an article in The Times 16th September 2005 ‘Older mothers epidemic a danger to health doctors warn’. It reports on a paper published in the British Medical Journal (Bewley, S, Davies, M & Braude, P (2005) “Which Career First?”) that warns that the “have it all” generation of women who go for careers first, then try for children, were defying the natural progression of their biological clocks’.

modern construction and, in recent decades, it has been used by the medical profession in particular to warn women of the risks of delaying maternity. Women like Philipa, Sarah and Diane had not postponed themselves out of choice although, as we shall see, the concept of the biological ceiling provided great value in justifying the reasons not to have a second child. Neither, according to their descriptions of their approach to parenting, had they capitulated to profit maximising utility once they had their child. The rejection of the 'earth mother' model of motherhood can be seen to represent a distancing strategy. In a context defined by Douglas and Michaels (2004) as one of 'frenzied hypernatality', they demonstrate cultural selectivity in their negotiations of maternal identity.

Patricia also resorts to a distancing strategy when referring to the 'NCT⁸⁷ group' that she had joined prior to the birth of her son. She stated:

"as much as it is awful to say, it was an NCT group and I didn't do a lot right by them anyway. I didn't breastfeed, I didn't have a natural delivery and then I only had one child. I wasn't mother earth."

This differentiation by Patricia from what she perceives to be the trajectory of motherhood endorsed by the NCT is highly significant. Unlike the women discussed so far, she left school at sixteen, married at twenty one and had her son two years later. Despite claiming not to be 'mother earth', she worked as a nanny before marrying and she stayed at home after her son was born, providing informal childminding for friends until he was seven. She undertook an ACCESS⁸⁸ course during his school hours and she was training to be a paediatric nurse at the time of the interview. There was no talk by Patricia about not being interested in babies or about biological clocks ticking. Most of the women in this study who had left school at sixteen gave birth in their early twenties, relatively soon after marrying, and many had worked with children. So why do these women, who appear so unconstrained in their capacity to have more children, choose to defy British reproductive norms? Patricia herself acknowledges the existence of the norm to have more than one child amongst the other mothers she had met through the NCT.

Patricia's references to the demands of this group of women and her interpretation of them are highly revealing. They draw attention to the imposition of a moral imperative for natural childbirth, for breastfeeding and of course to have at least one more child. Instead, she required an emergency caesarean section and complications following the birth prevented her from breastfeeding. It is as though, having veered off the trajectory imposed by the other mothers in her group, there seemed no point in trying to join it again and her decision not to have a second child is significant. It seems to represent a way of distancing herself from these precise standards for motherhood. It is apparent from Patricia's account that she was continuously reminded of expected standards by the other mothers in her group. Therefore, her introductory statement 'it is awful to say' is a defensive one, with an implication of moral superiority towards those who seemed to be judging her performance

⁸⁷ National Childbirth Trust; reference to a group who became mothers at the same time who met through ante and postnatal classes run by the NCT.

⁸⁸ An Access course is to 'prepare adult learners from non-traditional backgrounds and under-represented groups for admission to undergraduate education', UCAS, the University College and Admissions service.

pejoratively. It is not that Patricia had rejected ‘the ideology of intensive motherhood’. Indeed, her own approach is both time and labour intensive. Rather, she had rejected the particular version of motherhood that she associates with NCT guidelines and to which, she assumes, the other mothers conform with its implications for family size.

Perhaps because there is no clear ideology in Britain in favour of having only one child, these women, like Patricia, found it necessary to resort to distancing strategies to justify their choice. This is exemplified by their use of the cultural symbol of the ‘earth mother’. Occasionally there seemed to be an unwillingness to identify or to discuss reasons for having no more than one child at all. Shirley, for example, states ‘I just live my life the way it is’ but she is prepared to talk in detail about the way she and her husband bring up their daughter. In one remarkable case, however, one mother who had left school at sixteen and who had her child at twenty four clearly elaborated the meaning of having only one. Swidler makes the point that there is much variation in the extent to which people link cultural resources to a unifying ideology (Swidler, 2001, p.43). Julie, together with her husband Keith, use their decision to have no more than one child to symbolise an ideology which guides and unifies the way they lead their lives. Moreover, it is their very defiance of reproductive norm that is so symbolic to them of their moral conviction. They are very clear about what it is they seek to distance themselves from and the way that having one child enables them to do this.

Julie and Keith met at the age of fourteen and decided, as adolescents, that they would marry and have only one child. Keith, the son of a miner, grew up as an only child, although he mentioned in a matter of fact way that his parents had had four other sons who had all died. Their decision was influenced by what they both considered to be the more favourable circumstances of Keith’s childhood. Julie was the youngest of six children and her father worked in a factory. She stated:

“There is no way I want that kind of life. You know, me mam and dad did the best thing for their family. They were great that way but I saw the other side.”

While remaining loyal to her parents, Julie describes what ‘the other side’ means to her. It is a life in which the upbringing of their daughter is shared with Keith. She chose not to breastfeed so that they could both feed her and he could take his turn to get up in the night. Referring to her own parents she said ‘it was very old fashioned you know and the men went to work and the women did the work, the housework’. Julie points out with some frustration that Keith was the only father to attend a recent parents’ evening at their daughter’s school in the small northern town where they live. Since their daughter started school, Julie has sought and found opportunities to educate herself. She was required to terminate her own education at sixteen to contribute to the family income. The couple can afford an annual holiday overseas and to send their daughter on school trips. By having only one child, they believe that they have sufficient time and energy to give to society, in keeping with their devout Christian faith. As foster parents, they have made their spare bedroom available to a succession of adolescents who have lived with them since their daughter was school age. They argue that none of these things would have been possible if they had had a second child.

Within this study, Julie and Keith were distinct in the coherence of their worldview and in the conviction with which they articulated their moral meaning for having one child. What they demonstrate most clearly is the need to have a strong defence for this choice in order to succeed with this strategy of action. They also demonstrate that, very often, this defence must take the form of a comparison with larger families and many, like Julie, used their own childhoods as a cultural resource to achieve this. Catherine, also one of six children and an early school leaver, states that 'I don't even think my parents knew what options I took at school because there were too many kids'. Both Clare and Sarah point out that their mothers just became pregnant after marrying and went on to have further children. Sarah finds this apparent lack of planning amusing but, at the same time, she is highly critical of people who 'have more children than they can afford'. Clare considers her mother to have been naïve and states that 'it is important to have a child for the right reasons'. So although some of these mothers, including Sarah, are willing to use arguments about naturalness and instinct to justify their own pregnancies, their justifications for having no more than one child are constructed around correct planning and reasoning. This professionalisation of parenting is apparent in Rosemary's comparison between her childminder's household and her own. While she considers that her son's physical needs are met by the childminder, she believes that he has significant educational and psychological advantages over this woman's four children because he is an only child. Rosemary, a primary school teacher, comments that many of her pupils are one of three children. She states:

"We have a very high proportion here, quite a few threes and they don't work."

Clearly, this differentiation from larger families is a distinct pattern in what these parents say about their reasons for having one child. Like Rosemary, they refer to a family that they know well or to their own family of origin, or both, to define what it is that they find unacceptable. It has become clear that their use of the cultural symbol of the 'earth mother' is not used in deference to this construction of motherhood but as a means to disparage its unthinking, irrational connotations. Why is it that these parents feel that they must seek moral superiority in this way? Surely the answer lies in the cultural resistance that they encounter to their own family form. Julie knows no other family in her town with only one child and was told by a relative that she ought to go and live in China. Patricia left the 'earth mothers' in her NCT group because of constant questioning about when she intended to become pregnant again. With the notable exception of Julie, none of these parents set out with the intention of having only one child. Although there is a tendency for these interviewees to present their own circumstances as unique, many of the highly educated women claimed to have expected to be childless. Most of those with a more limited education expected to have had several children. In defying the clear reproductive norm of having at least two children or the emerging norm to remain childless, these parents demonstrate a cultural capacity to defend their action. Swidler argues that 'the skills and capacities necessary to pursue a line of action have greater influence than their objectives in determining how people will actually act in new situations' (Swidler, 2001, p.82). It seems that it is because these people have developed effective capacities such as distancing strategies to defend themselves that they have been able to maintain the line of action to have only one child.

“I can’t improve on this one”

It became apparent that the rejection by these mothers of the ‘earth mother’ model does not represent a rejection of, or even ambivalence towards, motherhood. Hays (1996) argues that all mothers are subject to the ideology of intensive motherhood and these women seem to be no exception. Hays also makes the point that mothers are inundated with expert advice on child-rearing and she reveals that the way they deal with this advice is analogous to ‘sorting the mail’ (ibid p.71). In presenting their decision to have only one child as morally superior to having more than one, the parents described had sorted their mail. As a result of this process, they were able to draw upon the clear message that, for intensive mothers, having a second child will place a great strain upon parental resources. ‘I can’t improve on this one’ exemplifies the selective interpretation of child-rearing advice by these parents. It is a statement that capitalises upon notions of monogamous love for the child and presents parenthood in a competitive light as a test of competence.

‘I can’t improve on this one’ is the way that Lizzie justified abandoning her intention to have a second child. Her son was conceived within days of her marriage when she was twenty four and she expected a second child to follow soon after. However, when no pregnancy immediately ensued she claims to have felt some relief, explaining:

“I was a bit worried that I wouldn’t feel the same about the second one. How could you possibly love two the same and that was difficult because I was besotted with him but oh gosh it is quite different having a second one.”

The suggestion of a love affair between the mother and baby is present in Penelope Leach’s seminal work ‘Baby and Child’ (1977)⁸⁹ and Leach likens the arrival of a second baby to the mother bringing home a second husband. The language of love and monogamy provides Catherine with a means of explaining why she did not have the ‘huge family’ that she had originally intended. In fact, Catherine revealed with some amusement that she had considered trying to have two children so close together that they would have been in the same academic year. However, when her daughter arrived she explains her feelings in this way:

“I don’t know, it just felt right. I don’t know how I could have given the feelings that I had towards that one being to another being..... You think here I am, I have this great baby. Everything is absolutely lovely. You know there is no reason, is there, as well as thinking how would that person fit in.”

What is most significant about both Lizzie and Catherine is that, before the arrival of their babies, their model for family life comprised more than one child. Yet, with apparent ease, they changed to a different repertoire, one that seems to have been readily available to them. This adoption of a different cultural belief is explained by Swidler in this way: ‘This frequent shifting among multiple cultural realities is not some anomalous sleight of hand but the normal way in which ordinary mortals (as distinguished perhaps from trained philosophers) operate (Swidler, 2001, p.40).

⁸⁹ See Chapter 2, p.16

A further important point about what these women say is that there appears to be nothing incongruous or inappropriate about claiming monogamous love for their child. The availability of this repertoire is testimony to the pervasive influence of expert advice upon this generation of parents, and of Leach's advice in particular. The child-rearing discourse of the 1950s and 60s which served pronatalist rhetoric so effectively by warning against 'spoiling' the child appears to have been overturned. So when Teresa says 'we were both totally in love with our little boy' she is eager to demonstrate that she has conformed to the standards of parenting required by the child-rearing manuals she describes as 'a lifeline'. It is notable how many of these women immersed themselves in motherhood and how they express a high level of satisfaction not only with their experiences as mothers but also with the results they describe. When asked what gives her so much confidence in her family form, Deborah states:

"certainly that first five years at home, that certainly, we spent an awful lot of time together."

Deborah referred to 'the first five years' several times during the course of her interview, according them great significance. She believes that her daughter is 'well grounded' and is 'not a typical spoilt only child' because of this investment of time. Although she had worked as a nanny when she left school, she describes herself as having been 'petrified' when she had her baby and claims to have read every available child rearing manual. Of course, the 'first five years' are also accorded great significance by Leach⁹⁰ whose interpretation of Bowlby's attachment theory requires the mother to devote herself entirely to her child during this time.

Parents raised repeatedly the importance of spending time with their child. But 'time' in this context has more than a temporal meaning. Not only did they describe the way they encouraged and shared in their child's hobbies and leisure activities, they emphasised the importance of 'individual time' and of talking. Catherine and Julie who perceived their own childhoods to have been so deficient in these qualities state that 'we both spend individual time with her' and 'with an only child you have time to discuss things at length'. But this discourse of time was not limited to these women who had staid at home during the preschool years. Penny hesitantly admits that she found caring for a small baby boring and that her return to work was a welcome alternative to having a second one. However, when her daughter started school, she reduced her work hours and states that 'she knows that we are there for her and we have enough time for her'. Penny is deeply committed to her role as a parent and stated that that 'good parenting' is very much harder than she had expected it to be. However, she expresses great satisfaction and pleasure in her daughter and, in contrast to the early years, describes motherhood now as 'fun'. Her implication is that she feels that she has redeemed herself through this undivided time and attention to her daughter. It is a strategy that would not work, in her view, if she were to have to share her time with another child.

For these people who had fully exercised their reproductive choice, the meaning of having only one child is not about doing less parenting. On the contrary, they seem to

⁹⁰ Leach's handbook deals with the child's 'first five years'. This term has come to be associated with Leach and with the concept of 'attachment parenting'. See quotation from Morgan, Chapter 2, p 17

be suggesting that parenting can be made to be more 'time' intensive because there is only one child. Patricia, who had experienced working as a nanny, describes caring for several children as a process of 'constant chastisement' whereas she considers that she has the opportunity to be a playmate and a confidante to her son. For this generation of parents, there seems to be no apparent tension between bestowing undivided attention upon their child and claiming not to be 'spoiling' him. Judith sums up this cultural context when she states that 'you cannot spoil a child with too much love and attention'. The profound difference between the beliefs of this generation of parents and the preceding one provides Philipa with the means to defend her choice. She was an only child herself and claims that she could never have imagined having only one. She refers to the isolation of her own childhood and her need to confide in a teacher at her school because of problems at home. In contrast, she describes the warmth of the relationship with her daughter and their conversations as she walks her home from school:

"It has struck me over time that I would almost like our relationship to develop as she becomes older, that she will almost see me as a sort of big sister or friend as much as a ... if that makes sense that she always does feel quite comfortable to come and be open"

Douglas and Michaels point out that 'mothers today are urged to inhabit and identify with the child's inner subject positions' (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p.307). It is significant that it is this therapeutic role that gives Philipa confidence in her parenting and the conviction that her daughter's childhood differs so favourably from her own.

Most of these parents describe their only children in highly favourable terms. They emphasise their confidence, their sociability and their popularity. They seem to be saying that 'the proof is in the pudding' and that they genuinely feel that they cannot 'improve on this one'. Their personal interpretations of parenting have succeeded and have yielded the desired results. That is not to say that they believe that other parents who have one child will be equally successful, but rather they have effectively 'sorted the mail' in their interpretations of what constitutes good parenting. However, in some cases mothers expressed concerns about the way their child was turning out and doubts about their own judgement in the choices that they had made. In the same way that the apparent moral conviction of other parents was bound up with their positive appraisals of their children, in these cases it foundered upon perceived difficulties. Vicky fears that the arguments she has with her nine year old son are symptomatic of an aggression that will prevent this boy from making friends at school. She attributes this to her son's lack of siblings and generalises the perceived problem to all only children. She states:

"If they had siblings they would be able to relieve a lot of their frustrations and sharpen their claws, their argumentative claws, their debating claws. Sometimes they have to be negative and they have to vent anger on brother and sisters."

Vicky's reasoning is reminiscent of the view expressed in the 1950s by Winnicott (1957) that only children have no outlet for normal aggression and will have problems in forming normal social relationships. Further, she has worked full time since her son was a few weeks old and now she believes that she has 'damaged' her child both by working and by denying him siblings. During the interview she questioned

whether she should now give up work and have another child to 'make up' to her son for what she believes she has taken from him, but suggests that it is now likely to be too late.

Teresa also seems to imply that she could improve upon the child she already has. She states:

"I would like another one because I think I could do a better job this time. It's just that I wonder how many goes I would have to do to get it right."

In contrast to Vicky, Teresa believes that it was because she was trying too hard when her son was a baby that she did not 'get it right'. Although she and her husband had planned that she should return to work and that he should stay at home, she could not bring herself to do this. Like others she sought to reverse aspects of her own childhood. Believing her own mother to have been inattentive, she refused to let her son cry alone and, in consequence, she spent the first four years as a mother severely deprived of sleep. She argues that she had 'no choice' in resisting the experience a second time round. She describes the early years of motherhood in this way:

"I was reading all the books and I was so keen to be a mother and I was so geared up for it and I thought I would do such a super job and of course when it happened I didn't do a super job. I was a total nightmare."

Her negative appraisal of her own performance as a mother results in concerns for her ten year old son. She compares him unfavourably with his cousins, suggesting that they are more considerate of others because they have siblings and that they are less competitive. There are some significant contradictions in Teresa's interpretation of the copious child-rearing information she has consumed. She claims to have intended to have a big family because she herself was 'an only child', although a sister was born when she was eleven. She believes that her approach to caring for him as a baby was determined by what happened to her as a baby. So although she sought to compensate for her own mother's shortcomings, she now believes that the intensity of her approach prevented her from giving him siblings and resulted in his perceived selfishness. In distancing herself from her own childhood, she seems to indicate that she may have gone too far in the other direction. Both she and Vicky seem to be saying that their action is now responsible for the traits that they have identified in their children that cause them concern. Their differing interpretations of the same discourse on attachment parenting results in their insecurity about their performances as mothers. It seems also to result in their speculation about whether they could improve upon it if they were to attempt it a second time.

The ambivalence expressed by Vicky and by Teresa helps to explain why parents need to present their family life in a positive way if they are to continue with their line of action. In a cultural context in which the norm is to have at least two children, parents need to be able to maintain strong arguments in favour of having only one child. For example, it was apparent that some had gender preferences and felt fortunate in having a child of the desired gender first time round. Therefore they justified why a child of that gender did not need siblings. Senali lives in a Hindu community in north London and has a five year old son. She described her husband's delight in their son and suggested that if she had had a daughter she would have felt

the necessity to have a second child. Her justification for this rationale is that boys do not need siblings whereas girls form close relationships with theirs. On the other hand Deborah argues that it is acceptable for a girl to be an only child but not for a boy. She describes the way her daughter is happy to read while they are on holiday but argues that boys cannot entertain themselves in the same way. 'I can't improve on this one' seems, in most cases, to represent an expression of satisfaction in their child by these parents. But it also seems to be their way of remonstrating that they have passed the expert-guided test of parental competence already and therefore should have no reason to be tested in this way again.

"I want a life of my own"

As discussed, the idea that women may opt for only one child to safeguard their own educational and professional interests dominates public assumptions about the causes of very low fertility. So when Julie says 'I want a life of my own' is she confirming Gerson's view that, for ambitious women, one child 'posed no threat at all'? (Gerson, 1985, p.167) On the contrary, Julie has been able to present her decision to have one child as the foundation for both a child-centred approach to family life and a morally sound way of contributing to the wider community. She is among a number of participants in this study who left school at sixteen and stayed at home during the day to care for their child. So what do these women reveal about the reasons why less educated women are more likely to have only one child? And what further insights into the single child family can be given by comparing participants who left school at sixteen with those who stayed on and, in most cases, received a tertiary education? These questions will now be considered.

In most cases, those women who did not continue their schooling beyond the age of sixteen married in their early twenties and had their child soon after. Julie and Keith were unusual in agreeing to have five years together before the arrival of their child. But, like most other parents in this group, there was no question that parenthood was an integral part of their model for married life. Patricia is an exception in this regard as she claims that she and her husband did not intend to have children at all. Her pregnancy at the age of twenty four was unplanned but she was concerned to point out that she never considered having an abortion. She explains that, having worked with children prior to her pregnancy, she could not reconcile having an abortion with her own moral code. Similarly Julie emphasises that she would never abort a second child despite her ideological commitment to having only one. Julie is also clear on the role of parenthood, stating:

"I don't believe in child minders. If you have a child you bring them up because I don't want anybody else's opinions or ways of life to be put on her. I want it to be totally ours."

Although most of the other less educated women are not so unequivocal on this subject, it became clear that, in the main, they share this view. Therefore, not only was parenthood an assumed consequence of marriage but also full time motherhood, at least during the early years, was part of this equation.

Catherine, who married at nineteen and had her daughter at twenty one, states 'I didn't want anyone else picking her up'. During the pre-school years she took her

daughter to local playgroups and, when she started school, she volunteered in the classroom and she states that she is proud that her daughter was ‘the first to come off the reading programme’. Lizzie believes that by having only one child she and her husband could afford to live on his income and she describes how much she has valued being able to be at home with him. Like Catherine and most of the other women in this group, she invested considerable time in taking her son to the various activities and playgroups that are available now to pre-school age children. She believes that, if a mother is to have only one child, she must be prepared to be ‘proactive’ in facilitating their social development in this way. She is critical of her own sister whose only child was not given these developmental opportunities. And she draws attention to a woman she knows who has four children and places them in childcare because ‘she has to work’. Despite an initial intention not to be a mother, Patricia became a ‘professional’ parent. Not only did she stay at home to care for her son, she provided informal childminding to her friends so that she could be at home. She was concerned to emphasise that her eight year old son has had almost continuous care from herself or her husband. There is no indication here that having only one child makes little difference to these women. On the contrary, they seem to confirm Hays’ view that ‘(i)f you are a good mother, you must be an intensive one’ (Hays, 1997 p.131).

In some cases the women found part-time evening employment which meant that fathers had returned home before they left the house. Julie worked in her local supermarket and as a school cleaner. Patricia worked several evenings a week in a garage. Teresa, who had planned to return to an administrative daytime job which was better paid than her husband’s, stayed at home during the day and describes her part time, less skilled work in this way:

“When he was a year old I went back to work part time and for four years I worked five nights a week, six til ten which was super.”

Like Patricia, Teresa also provided informal childminding to friends. She describes having so many children to care for that they had to walk everywhere. And like Patricia, she considers this as some compensation to her son for having no siblings. She also considers this childminding to be her compensation for the large family she had intended and did not have. Kitzinger argues that the reason women have fewer children today is that they are inexperienced and intimidated by the task of caring for small children (Kitzinger, 1978, p.186). There is little support for this view amongst the less educated women in this study. On the contrary, the opportunity to stay at home with their own child and their apparent competence in caring for other peoples’ children seemed to equip them with the capacity to defend their choice.

Swidler argues that, ‘In a voluntarist, market society, we present ourselves to others as individuals with a certain kind of character that guarantees our performance, trustworthiness or inclinations’ (Swidler, 2001, p.74). It seemed that, with the possible exception of Teresa, these women felt no need to have more children in order to demonstrate their performance and trustworthiness in caring for children. Significantly, many of them leveraged off their competence in this regard to generate new opportunities for learning and for employment. Having volunteered as a juvenile probation officer, Catherine resumed paid employment in this field on the same day that her daughter started secondary school and she was completing a Masters’ degree

at the time of the interview. Julie describes the way she felt drawn to working with children and used her job as a school cleaner and as a foster parent to gain access to training in special needs education. She had also completed a diploma in Psychology.

It seems that it was not because they only have one child that these women were able to develop such skills and careers. Indeed, Catherine refuted any suggestion that she would not have been able to find time for her degree if she had had more children. Rather, they seem able to have one child because they have these inclinations, because they can demonstrate to the outside world their commitment to the good of children. Further, their exposure to children with developmental and behavioural difficulties seems to confirm to them that their own approach to parenting and their decision to have one child is correct. And they use this information in turn to demonstrate to their child how fortunate he or she is to have a stable home. Julie is proud that her daughter not only shared in their decision to open their home to foster children but also that she persuaded her parents to allow a particularly difficult adolescent to stay on. Patricia believes that it is important for her son to understand her need to nurture the children she cares for as a paediatric nurse. She believes that it helps him to understand how fortunate he is. However, she emphasises that he also understands that at home she is 'there for him' and that she can take time to explain her job to him because there is no second child. Her concern to be seen first as a devoted mother is evident in her statement that 'he comes first' and that she has been known to walk off a ward round at the hospital because she had to pick him up. When Julie states 'I want a life of my own' she seems to have realised this intention through her child. And her professional identity seems founded upon a taken for granted maternal competence.

In contrast, some of the more highly educated women seem not to have taken maternal competence for granted. Having assumed, in some cases, that they would not have children at all, their transition to parenthood is presented as much more tentative and experimental. When asked about her expectations Penny replies:

"Hadn't a clue (slight laugh). Not really a clue, so erm yeah it was yes it was a shock to myself and my partner. We weren't close to other people who had children."

She was very happy with the childminder she found and argues that she was not earning enough to fund two places. Therefore if she had had a second child she would not only have denied herself the opportunity of employment but her daughter the social environment that they both valued. Now that her daughter has started school, she has changed jobs and has thus reduced her work to two days a week leaving time to volunteer in the classroom. Philipa claims that she and her husband would not have been concerned if she had failed to become pregnant and there was no question that she would return to work when her daughter was six months old. She states that she enjoys work and that her daughter gained the important developmental experience of 'rough and tumble' at the home of a childminder. However, Philipa had given up paid employment completely three and half years earlier when her daughter was five, stating that she decided to 'take a year out to help her settle into school'. She has no immediate plans to return to work and she believes that her time at home has enabled her to reflect upon and observe motherhood at close hand. Neither Philipa nor Penny express any ambivalence about motherhood now and, although they present

themselves as professional women, they also present child-centred rationales for their employment relationships.

Some of these 'career women' gave up work completely when their child was born yet they too refuse to eschew a professional identity. Jan left the Navy claiming that despite the introduction of greater employment flexibility, 'it is no life for a family'. She studied at home through the Open University and began a new teaching career when her son started school, describing with some amusement the way they both 'started school on the same day'. She states:

"I also knew that I wanted to go back to work but I didn't know really what I wanted to do. Teaching is an ideal occupation really and I do enjoy it and it worked out really well."

Deborah completed further professional exams during her pregnancy but, when her son was born, she abandoned her career in an industry which she describes as hostile to maternity. Although she believes that a professional identity and financial independence were her response to her father's abandonment of his family when she was fourteen, she has no trouble in justifying full time motherhood. With the language of managerial efficiency, she describes the weekly schedule she has devised for her son and the way she has applied her professional skills both to assist him and to provide her own fulfilment. She took over the running of the playgroup he had attended, then the local branch of Beavers; she volunteers at his school and has found it necessary to purchase a 'seven seater' vehicle to fulfil her child-oriented obligations. Certainly these women confirm structural and cultural constraints upon reconciling the obligations of work and family. Their responses however have not been to 'postpone themselves out of choice' or to capitulate to the demands of their employers. Instead, they describe an approach to motherhood which enables them to maintain professional identities and to distance themselves from a more indulgent and irrational model. For example Jan responded to a friend who expressed a desire for a fourth daughter by saying 'are you completely mad?' These women present their choice of having one child as an effective means of reconciling the conflicting identities of 'career woman' and mother but not in the way that Gerson (1985) and others suggest. Their routes to self-fulfilment are child-centred and their approaches to motherhood are certainly no less intensive than their less educated counterparts.

Two women did, however, cite employment as a determining factor in their decisions to have only one child. Diane states:

"I went back to work after about six months and I think because I had quite a senior job in a large organisation and was quite committed to my career I did the kind of usual thing. Well I thought I will do both. I will be a mum and be a career person as well and that just went on and my career progressed and I had a couple of promotions and it was just like we never got round to having another one."

There is no sense here of the kind of ideological commitment to having one child expressed by Julie. Although Diane states that they 'never got round' to having a second child and her son is now eight years old, she has kept his pram and cot. Her husband would have liked another and she claims that they have not completely ruled

out the possibility. Her reference to the 'usual thing' acknowledges that being committed to a career is a valid and recognised explanation for having one child, one that makes common sense. However, when Diane justifies her decision she invokes a different kind of logic. Swidler describes this process as 'shifting frames', the way people switch to a different vocabulary to present a different moral vision (Swidler, 2001, p.31). Diane switches from talking about seniority, promotion and progression to a vocabulary which presents her decision as ideologically sound. She states:

"It is about being able to give back that amount of care, love and attention to one child."

One of the ways Diane is able to 'give back' is to apply her professional skills to motherhood. For example, she used 'neuro-linguistic programming' to teach her son to swim and to ride a bike. Like a number of the other mothers in this more educated group, she identifies the perceived advantages to him of spending time in institutional child care before starting school. She believes that he has developed good 'social skills' both through this experience and through the individualised attention that he receives at home. Her satisfaction in her own professional and home life and in her son's social and educational development seems to account for her belief that there are insufficient 'good' reasons so far to have the second child her husband would have liked.

Vicky, however, provides a reversal of Diane's logic. As discussed earlier in this chapter, she identifies certain difficulties in her relationship with her son for which she takes responsibility. She expressed remorse for giving her career priority over staying at home. Although she attributes her son's aggression to the absence of siblings rather than spending time in childcare, she perceives nonetheless that he has been damaged by this experience and one is the consequence of the other. With much emotion she states:

"You know, I see how my friend's daughters, it's wonderful to see how they keep each other company. They fight of course as all kids do, but they do things together and I see poor James and it breaks my heart – it just, it just sometimes I think Oh you poor little thing and it just breaks my heart."

Vicky's remorse is exacerbated when she recalls how her son attended two different child-care centres and her husband arrived at the wrong one to pick him up one evening. She reveals also that one factor in her decision to return to work full time was that her husband was starting a business at the time and they were required to live on her income. She volunteers this information not in an attempt to absolve herself of what she perceives as a compromise of motherhood, but rather to point out that it would be very different if there were to be another opportunity to establish her credentials as a good mother. Her husband's business is established, she has satisfied her own professional and educational ambitions and she would be prepared to give up work. She states:

"To have another child is to make up to my son for what I took from his childhood, i.e. not being with me all the time and also to make up to myself to say I'll do it right this time."

In contrast to the way Diane normalises having one child to reconcile career and motherhood, Vicky refers to her own situation as 'very peculiar' and describes herself as the 'black sheep' of her family. She describes her sisters as being 'locked in to being mothers'. But she finds no ideological support for her choice amongst the affluent mothers of her son's classmates who have neither found it necessary to work nor to limit themselves to one child.

The comparison between mothers based upon their educational attainment reveals two distinct patterns of logic. In the main, those mothers who left school at sixteen expressed strong ideological opposition to childcare outside of the home. Therefore, they constructed their justifications for having one child upon the moral high ground of being at home to care for the child. Consequently, their self acknowledged competence as a child carer provided a short route to professional and educational opportunities in working with children. Conversely, many of those women who were more highly educated and who returned to work after the birth of their child justified their choices in terms of the developmental advantages provided by childcare outside of the home. They too constructed strategies of action around what they were good at, sometimes applying a new-found maternal competence more intensively as the child grew older. Even full time employment can be reconciled with good motherhood if it can be demonstrated to be of benefit to the child and, in so doing, incorporated into the arguments in favour of having only one child. In this way, two opposing logics that either support or condemn institutional child-care can be used to justify the same reproductive decision. Clearly what matters are the mother's skills and capacities to defend her action and her ability to 'professionalise' motherhood to suit her own ends. Although it is apparent that some women do indeed opt for one child to reconcile employment and motherhood, it seems to be an effective strategy when it can be couched in the rhetoric of intensive motherhood. As Vicky demonstrates, there is little room for doubt and being a good employee is a more fragile justification for having one child than is being a good mother.

"Let's not fix what isn't broken"

So far, it has been argued that the decision to remain a single child family is presented by most of these parents as a measure of satisfaction in their family life. The claim that there is no need 'to fix what is not broken' was made in a notable number of interviews. However, this claim is also founded upon a consciousness of risk. The presentation and negotiation of risk constituted an important resource for these parents to explain their action. Sarah describes her family as a 'happy little unit' and emphasises that there is no need to 'fix what isn't broken' by having a second child. She refers to her brother's family and the way that the premature arrival of twins has adversely affected an older sibling and has provided considerable anxiety and effort for the parents. This is not the only reason for Sarah's heightened awareness of obstetric risk. She describes the traumatic arrival of her son by emergency caesarean section following a threatened abruption of the placenta, arrival at hospital by ambulance and then a prolonged labour. A notable number of participants in this study experienced an emergency caesarean section although rarely do they accord this prominence in their explanations for having one child. In some cases they did not volunteer information about the birth at all but only revealed the circumstances when

questioned. Porter et al (2003) have drawn attention to the phenomenon of low fertility following caesarean section and they ask why it is that over 50% of mothers who give birth this way do not give birth again. Significantly most of the women in this study who described an adverse birth experience, including caesarean section, emphasised that this in itself did not deter them from a second birth. So what meaning do they ascribe to their experience and in what way has it influenced their interpretations of parenting?

There is no question that, in the cases where these women had experienced a caesarean section or a very prolonged, difficult labour they considered this to have been both harsh and unexpected. Although this is not a quantitative study, there seem to be a disproportionate number of participants for whom the birth of their child was problematic. In many cases they used dramatic, extreme language to describe the events at that time. 'Trauma', 'emergency', 'screaming', 'awful memories', 'horrific' and 'nightmare' are examples of the way their language 'shifts frame' when describing their one experience of childbirth. As has been demonstrated so far, most of these women speak with moral conviction, presenting a version of family life which appears settled, under control and highly satisfactory. Therefore their constructions of childbirth are at odds with the general tone of the interview. It could be argued that childbirth would, in any case, be presented as an anomalous, extreme event. But not all of the women in this study had such experiences and some describe their births with calm, matter of fact language. For example, Jan says:

"I had the easiest labour in the worldI think people thought it had been an awful time but it wasn't, it was a doddle really. I didn't want to chance my luck again, maybe, I thought this is it."

It is possible that Jan's statement 'I didn't want to chance my luck again' provides an important insight into the reasoning of other women who were not so fortunate and for whom childbirth was not 'a doddle'. Paradoxically, because Jan had such an easy birth she does not want to take the risk that it may not be so easy second time around. Conversely, those women who were confronted with obstetric risk express a strong sense that they do not want to 'chance my luck' again. This sense of risk also applies to perceived risks to the child. Clare had a prolonged labour and eventually ventouse equipment was used to deliver her son. She describes a profound sense of vulnerability, the 'trauma' to her son and her response 'poor little thing' when he was born. Deborah, whose manner is usually assertive and, at times, dogmatic, also speaks about vulnerability in the weeks following her son's birth and the surgery he required when he was five days old. She states that, eight years later, she 'cannot bear to be around tiny babies'. Clare and Deborah seem to be saying that they 'got away with it', that they may not be so lucky another time. Some women express a sense that not only is it possible that a second child may be damaged in some way during childbirth but that trying to 'fix what isn't broken' may be irresponsible to the child they already have. This seems to be what Sarah is saying when referring to her brother's family and to the twins whose premature birth has resulted in deafness and a perceived burden upon the whole family. Senali argues that her undiagnosed post-natal depression has been one factor in not having a second child because it would be 'unfair' on her son.

This perception of risk has also enabled some women to use the construction of the 'biological ceiling' to their advantage. Although remarkably few women in this study delayed maternity beyond the age of thirty five, their construction of risk provides an important 'cultured capacity' to defend their action. Penny, who was thirty nine at the time of the interview, describes receiving unwelcome questions about her intentions to have another child from mothers in a local playground. She states that, under such circumstances, she tells them:

"I am too old for all of that and that shuts them up."

Terri refers to a friend of the same age whose pregnancy was terminated because of Down's syndrome. Among the varied explanations she gives for not having the second child she had assumed she would have, this is not a dominant one. However, it seems to provide a morally sound justification for her action. It is, perhaps, a significant reflection of the subjectivity of risk that some of these parents who articulate the dangers associated with having a second child have first hand experience of child death. Yet their perceptions of risk seem to apply to the hypothetical second child and its effects rather than the child they already have. Clare's own brother died at the age of ten. Patricia has worked in a children's hospice where she cared for dying children and a child in Lizzie's son's class at school died at the age of five. The intergenerational difference in attitudes to child mortality is expressed by Lizzie when describing pressure from her grandmother to have a second child. She states:

"I always remember my grandmother quite soon after having Charles she said 'you are going to have a second one aren't you?' and I said 'well we don't know yet'. She said 'well you better had because if anything happens to Charles'. I said 'what, you have got to have a spare laid out? It would be devastating whatever happens. You can't just have more children as spares so we are very happy with one and very interested in peoples' reactions really."

This negotiation of risk and its importance in enabling these women to defend their action is evident in a further statement from Sarah. When asked how she deals with questions about her family size she states:

"I tell them 'been there, done that, got the scars'."

She is referring here to her emergency caesarean section. Contrary to Penny's belief that such quips should 'shut them up', Sarah suggests that women are interested in the 'gory details' and describes herself as 'flabbergasted' when colleagues questioned her about her family planning. Her response takes the form of a retort and implies that she should not be expected to go through this again. However, Sarah's flippancy masks her bitter disappointment at not having a natural delivery. Despite her intention not to have children at all and her disdain of the 'earth mother' model, she had her reasons for wanting a natural delivery when the time came. She states that

"I got an emotional and mental thingy about giving birth. I thought my body can do something properly there would be that final push and the bundle was handed but I had a caesarean and felt that I was a misery."

She explains that, having experienced considerable ill health throughout her life, giving birth seemed to offer the opportunity to demonstrate a new physical competence. It seems, then, that Sarah's response to this disappointment was to change repertoires and to build a strategy around what she is good at. In this way, she skilfully turns her own perception of failure into a script to deal with unwelcome questions.

Kitzinger suggests that the medicalisation of childbirth and obstetric interventions have deterred women from having larger families (Kitzinger, 1978, p.191) Is it possible that what Sarah reveals is that the discourse of natural childbirth and the expectation that women should give birth naturally is at least as great a disincentive to further reproduction? Patricia provides another insight into the way some women may feel that they have failed expert-guided tests of childbearing competence. As discussed, she feels that she did not conform to the expectations of her NCT group in failing to give birth naturally, to breast feed and then only having one child. Although Patricia presents cogent arguments in favour of having one child, she makes other statements that indicate that she had to change her repertoire in light of her experience. She states that she 'loves having children around' and that she would have been very happy with twins. Significantly, Patricia emphasises that 'you don't have to have a natural delivery'. Others are not so willing to dismiss the importance of 'natural' childbirth and express feelings of failure and disappointment. Teresa says:

"The birth was an absolute nightmare and again having read all the books I thought I was so prepared and of course I wasn't prepared. A lot of things that happened I wasn't expecting and it was fairly hard for me and my husband. He was there and I had an emergency caesarean in the end but I was awake and that was good. I had been prepared for a natural childbirth and I didn't want any pain relief and I had an epidural and a caesarean."

Lizzie, who also attended NCT classes and had been booked into a birthing centre describes her experience in this way:

"I mean I did feel I haven't really done this birthing bit properly. I felt cheated because I had still gone all through labour and then had a caesarean."

Lizzie and Teresa are among the most intensive mothers in this study. Their interpretations of their experiences of childbirth suggest that their decisions not to have a second child are not about avoiding physical pain or medical intervention again. They both emphasise that they would simply have elected to have a caesarean next time. Rather, they seek to avoid failing this particular test of maternal competence again.

As discussed, these mothers seem to be saying that the real measure of maternal competence is their child and the way he or she represents tangible proof that it has not been necessary to have a second child. Their satisfaction with their child and their family life are such that many of them stated or implied that there is no need to fix a family that is not broken. But the spectre of a broken family took on great significance for some of them because they perceived that their own childhoods had been adversely affected by parental conflict, divorce or other difficulties. Therefore they present a hypothetical second child as a potential risk to their relationship and to the

unity of their home. Philpa cites this risk as an important factor in her decision not to have a second child. She had been an only child herself and believed that she would never have only one. However, she realised after her daughter was born that it was not only childhood that was problematic but the conflict between her parents. When she felt that her own marriage was beginning to suffer from the strain of two careers and a small child, she came to the conclusion that to have a second one would be to 'throw the baby out with the bath water'. Both Vicky and Deborah present their professional identities and financial independence as responses to the vulnerability of their own mothers who were abandoned by their husbands. They also believe not only that their mothers were 'trapped' by having several children but that family size played a role in determining the breakdown of their parents' marriages.

The image of an incomplete family and the risk of family breakdown provides many of these parents with another means of constructing claims of moral superiority in having only one child. It is notable how many of these women experienced parental divorce or, in some cases the death of a parent. For example, Deborah's parents divorced and her mother died soon after; Shirley's father was killed when she was two years old and Patricia's parents divorced when she was a baby. Therefore an important argument to defend their choice is that at least their child has both parents. These parents express considerable conviction that this is more important than having siblings. It also constitutes another way of distancing themselves from their own childhoods and what they consider to be unsatisfactory family structures. Although Julie's childhood was not affected by parental conflict, she believes that the burden of six children meant that her parents had no time for each other. Invoking her Christian faith she states that 'the most important thing is love'; this love applies not only to her daughter but to Keith. She states:

"I think having free time as a couple as well. I think if you are tied up too much in family life you can miss out on your relationship with your husband and it's lovely to have."

Julie also believes that her daughter should not miss out on the relationship with her father. The theme of fatherhood will be discussed in more detail in chapter 7. What is most relevant here is the importance of the paternal role in the way that some are able to construct their arguments in favour of having one child. Not only does having one appear to them to mitigate the risk of their own partnerships breaking down, it offers significant qualitative advantages to their child. The majority of these women are highly complimentary about their husbands' competence as a father and the way they devote time and effort to share in their child's hobbies and interests. It is no coincidence that many also refer to children that have not experienced the 'happy little unit' that they identify as their own. Keith points out that the adolescent whom he and Julie were fostering at the time of the interview had never known a father. Catherine describes her distress at the plight of the first young offender she befriended at a police station. Sarah expresses great amusement at a recent newspaper article that reported on a ten year old who was caught for a second time exceeding the speed limit in a car. She also suggests that the sort of child who behaves in this way is unlikely to come from a small, caring family. The risk of delinquency seems to provide these parents with the conviction that they have no need to 'fix what is not broken'.

Discussion

The meanings of having just the one child are complex. While certainly not unwilling to discuss their decision-making and the intimacy of their family lives, parents took in general some time to deliberate upon their non-conformity. Very often, interviews gained momentum, initial explanations were later expanded upon and, on occasions, new ones emerged towards the end of the narrative. Participants seemed intrigued but perhaps slightly suspicious of the reasons for this research. Usually, they had good cause for a sense of guardedness towards their family size and were accustomed, necessarily, to defending themselves against the cultural hostility to having only one child. Therefore, in many cases, they embarked upon the interview with a degree of caution and, as their confidence in its context increased, so too did the richness of their narratives.

Although in most cases narratives became increasingly expansive, there was nonetheless considerable variation in the accomplishment with which they were delivered. Julie and Keith seemed most accomplished and well rehearsed in their repertoire, familiar not only with the different arguments that they offered but also with their respective roles in communicating them. Diane suggested that she had not really considered her reasons for limiting her family size and yet spoke with great conviction and assuredness. It seems possible that it was the public performance of such discourse rather than its content with which she was unfamiliar. Certainly, a number of participants commented that they had never found the opportunity to talk so freely about their reproductive non-conformity. Sarah, who had very recently had reason to invoke her retort 'been there, done that, got the scars', seemed most enthusiastic about the opportunity to draw fully upon her repertoire. Together with Roger, she delivered it with increasing frankness but also with great humour as though both energised and slightly surprised by her own mastery of it. But in some cases, although participants indicated that they had exercised reproductive choice, they seemed much less assured. It was as though, in performing their repertoire, they feared that they may have chosen the wrong one.

What these narratives reveal is a very strong awareness of the social norm in Britain that those who become parents have at least two children. As discussed, social commentators interpret the apparent decline in birth rates as confirmation that parents are ignoring or overturning this norm. With this assumption in mind, they construct their own qualitative explanations of the single child family. Not only is the interpretation of birth rate data misleading, it would appear that the discourse generated by such misinterpretation is inaccurate. In both content and form, these narratives show that parents are self-conscious in their deviation from the reproductive behaviour that they see around them. As Julie acknowledges, to have only one child 'is not the normal thing' and therefore its defence requires considerable discursive effort. The capacity to maintain this strategy of action is much more about skill in selecting and utilising cultural resources than about the perceived normalisation of having one child. For this reason, those, like Teresa, who talk of the possibility of capitulating to reproductive norms show great difficulty with such selection and utilisation.

The important point here is that, in order to maintain the strategy of action that involves having only one child, parents need to engage in 'ideological work' and thus

to talk with great conviction. When Diane explains her reconciliation of the competing demands of employment and of motherhood she resorts to a cultural logic that she acknowledges as a familiar one. In stating that she did 'the usual thing' in having only one child in order to be 'a mum and a career person' she looks, at first glance, as though she may be one of the 'reluctant mothers' identified by Gerson (1985). However, Diane's skill in using culture means that she talks the language of intensive motherhood and it is to its ideology that she conforms. What women had to say about their negotiation of employment relationships constitutes the most revealing and, perhaps, surprising aspect of this study. Curiosity about the circumstances of those women who leave school at sixteen was rewarded with the rich explanations offered by Julie, Patricia, Catherine and others. They spoke with moral conviction because they had staid at home during the day to care for their respective children and, if necessary, had taken advantage of employment flexibilities to undertake part-time, evening work. Not only had they demonstrated their uncompromising commitment to their own child, they used this to demonstrate their capacity and competence to care for others.

Talk about the meaning of employment relationships and, consequently, about attitudes to childcare was most significant and exposes something of a cultural contradiction. It corresponds to Hays concept of the necessary ideological work undertaken by women to make sense of either working or staying at home (Hays, 1996, p.133). But what is most significant here is that the participants in this study did not simply divide between those who engaged in paid employment and those who were at home. They divided over their constructions of the way a pre-school age child should be brought up and over their endorsement or disapproval of childcare. Philipa, who describes herself as a career person, is confident that her daughter has learned about 'rough and tumble' because she spent her days with other children at a childminders. Yet she had not undertaken paid work for several years. Julie is the most emphatic in her hostility to institutional childcare and yet, like other early school leavers, she had worked throughout her child's pre-school years but in part-time, evening employment. What is important is that from diametrically opposed positions these mothers can demonstrate a compensatory strategy that removed the need for siblings as a means of socialisation. And they could demonstrate that they had taken full advantage of the social capital available to them to the benefit of their child. In keeping with Swidler's view, it has been argued that it is the capacity to defend the decision to have only one child that makes this strategy of action possible (Swidler, 2001, p.82-83). For this reason, opposing logics can be used to great effect to justify and defend the same reproductive decision.

This ideological work was meaningful in other respects. The availability of childcare or, alternatively, of social and cultural opportunities for very young children enabled these parents to draw a clear intergenerational distinction. Philipa points out that, as an only child herself, she had no opportunity to meet other children until she started school. This was, of course, the basis for Winnicott's (1957) concerns for only children. However, Philipa's childrearing strategy is intended to invalidate such concerns and to distance herself from her own upbringing. Such distancing strategies formed an important part of the repertoires of most of these parents. Certainly, their own families of origin took on great importance but not in the way that certain psychotherapeutic discourse suggests. As conscious actors, they demonstrated a skill and capacity to reject certain aspects of their own upbringings to ensure that their own

child did not experience parental divorce, poverty, an over-crowded household or social isolation. In the main, it would appear that the decision to have only one child is a measure of their satisfaction with their family lives and one that has been made with reference to their own childhoods. It seems most ironic that, while social commentators uphold the single child family as the epitome of family decline, parents' own motivations seem to relate to a conservative ideal of family life and a deep commitment to the job of parenting.

Those who present this family form as a new phenomenon point to causal factors such as the individuation of society, marital breakdown and to the inflexibility of the workplace (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, Hewlett, 2003, Taylor & Taylor, 2003). Certainly, these narratives point to contemporary factors that have enabled parents to limit themselves to one child and may, perhaps, be indicative of an emerging trend. But these factors seem to relate to the unprecedented influence of expert discourses upon parenting and to a cautious and conscientious attempt to get it right. The important point raised by Munn that 'monotropic attachments between mother and child' effectively preclude the introduction of a second one has not been lost on many of these mothers, (Munn, 1990, p.166). Far from showing reluctance towards motherhood, many have professionalised it and it is their conformity to the ideology of intensive mothering that serves as the most powerful cultural resource to defend an unorthodox choice. Crow draws attention to research indicating that 'people seek to create ordinary family life more often than they express a commitment to 'progressive' alternatives' (Crow, 2001, p.290). It seems paradoxical that, in their self-conscious deviation from the British norm to have at least two children, these parents are so intent upon conforming to a conservative ideal of family life in its most nuclear form. This paradox exposes profound contradictions in the demands made by experts upon contemporary parents.

Chapter 6: When there is no choice: The experiences of parents who were unable to have more than one child

Introduction

There is very little public acknowledgement of the contradictory position of those who have been able to have one child yet find themselves unable to fulfil an ideal of family size by bearing at least one more. The politicisation of reproduction has resulted in a correlation between low fertility and structural and institutional constraints upon childbearing. Perceived incompatibility between the roles of employee and mother has resulted in a discourse that attributes small family size to ambivalence towards motherhood and to naivety about the expiration of female fertility. Theories of individualisation question not only the motives of those who parent only one child but the quality of life within such a household. That 'the family may become dangerously over-heated' when parental expectations are focused upon one child is central to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's argument that the single child family represents both the cause and effect of family decline (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p.138). The strength of such discourses means that those who have freely and willingly limited themselves to one child do so because they have developed 'cultured capacities' to defend their action in the face of cultural opposition. But what about those parents who planned to have a second child but were unable to do so? This research is also intended to explain their position, to explore the accuracy of public assumptions in relation to those who were unable to exercise reproductive choice and to explain the effect of such assumptions upon them.

It seems possible that theories about the effects of female workforce participation have obscured a full understanding of low fertility. In the last twenty years, the much publicised advances in reproductive medicine may also have resulted in an assumption of reproductive choice where parents fall below norms for family size. That is to say, despite or perhaps because of the availability of IVF treatment, some parents may still end up with only one child even when they hoped for a larger family. Throsby has drawn attention to the way those for whom IVF fails are largely ignored and certainly her study includes parents whose motivation to endure IVF treatment relates in part to a child they already have (Throsby, 2003, p.20). This important study also highlights the contemporary dilemma of those who feel that they must understand and take advantage of all available medical options in their pursuit of social conformity.

Approximately half of the parents who took part in this study had tried to have a second child but, for a variety of reasons, were unable to do so. Some of them had resorted to IVF treatment to have their first child but found that it was not to work for them again while others resorted to IVF in their attempt to provide a sibling for a child conceived without assistance. There was talk in these interviews of reproductive loss including recurrent miscarriage and, in one case, the death of a newborn baby. The distinction between those who had exercised reproductive choice and those who had attempted to have a second child required some judgement based upon the information that interviewees volunteered. As we saw in the last chapter, some of those who, in physical terms, could have had a second child chose to talk as though they had been denied choice. Conversely, some of those described in this chapter

presented having one child as their preferred choice even though it became apparent that they had intended or tried to have another child. Of course, this contradiction serves to underline the importance of ‘cultured capacity’ and, as we shall see, the experience of parenting only one child varies considerably according to the parents’ capacity to defend their action.

“The answer one seems so inadequate”

For those British parents who embark upon parenthood, the norm today is to have at least two children. Women born between 1954 and 1957 who became mothers and who provide recent statistical data on completed family size bore on average 2.4 children (Rendall & Smallwood, 2003). Only around one in ten of them bore only one child. The parents who took part in this study confirmed that they find themselves in the minority by having only one child. For those who intended to conform to social norms by having a second child but were unable to do so, questions about their family size can cause great discomfort. So when Nancy states that ‘the answer one seems so inadequate’ she is referring to her feelings when asked ‘how many children do you have?’ She has found, during her fourteen years as a parent, that this question is very common when meeting fellow parents for the first time. She explains:

“I probably still feel that they think I am a little inadequate because I feel that I am a little inadequate.”

In this way she demonstrates that her discomfort about her family size results from the way she has internalised the logic in favour of having more than one child. Her use of the word ‘inadequate’ has the implication of insufficiency, of falling below a quantifiable performance target. Of course, it was not Nancy’s intention to limit her family in this way. She and her husband Derek had planned to have several children but instead, after their daughter was born, they experienced two miscarriages and then two unsuccessful IVF attempts.

Almost half of the parents who took part in this study had been unable to have a wanted second child and many of them, like Nancy and Derek, had experienced some form of reproductive loss. Some had been unable to conceive again following the birth of their child but chose not to seek medical assistance. In one case a second baby, conceived through IVF, had died and subsequent attempts at IVF failed. Clearly there is some variation in the extent of adversity experienced by these parents in their pursuit of a second child. There is variation also in the intensity with which they pursued their ideal of family life and in the way they became reconciled to a family form that was not of their choosing. An important conclusion of the last chapter is that those who have chosen to have one child demonstrate a ‘cultured capacity’ to defend their action. But some of those who had attempted to have a second child also demonstrated this capacity. Although they had intended to have a larger family, they had been able to master the repertoire in favour of having only one child when a second did not eventuate. In this way, they invoked the same discourses as those who had freely exercised their reproductive choice. In so doing they stood in contrast to Vicky and Maria, described earlier, who had exercised choice but found wanting both their family size and their capacity to defend it. Much of this chapter will focus upon the experiences of those who, at the time of interview, continued to experience incongruence between their actual reproductive outcome and their expectations for

family life. But first the response to reproductive loss will be considered where parents had effectively 'shifted frames' and had chosen to adapt their beliefs and to reject the implication of inadequacy expressed by Nancy.

It seems more than a coincidence that two of the women who succeeded in shifting frames in this way were married to farmers. Moreover, in both cases the pregnancies they sustained to full term resulted in the births of healthy sons. As we have seen already, one child can be presented as adequate if their gender holds a particular significance for the parents. So when Christine states that her son is 'all I wanted' she qualifies this statement by referring to the importance of a male child:

"Actually I didn't realise it but we are into farming and I didn't realise the importance then of having a boy my in-laws were 'Oh I hope you are having a boy'. To take over the farm is quite a major thing."

It was six years after she and her husband began trying for a family that finally their son was born. During this time, they experienced several miscarriages for which they sought medical advice. Christine suggested that, if a first child had arrived when planned when she was thirty-four, she would have gone on to have a second. Similarly Annika, who is also married to a farmer, found that her intentions for family life did not go according to plan. At one stage she had considered six children an ideal family but had miscarried twice after her son was born. By the time that her son was approaching school age she and her husband decided to abandon their hope for another child, a decision which seemed to enable Annika to talk the language of reproductive choice during the interview. Both Christine and Annika use arguments characteristic of those who had freely chosen to limit themselves to one child. They invoke the discourse of risk, both referring to obstetric and paediatric dangers once a mother reaches the age of thirty-five. Christine believes that she can speak with some authority on this subject having worked as a nurse in both paediatrics and in an infertility clinic.

In language reminiscent of some of those who had freely exercised reproductive choice, Christine distances herself from the cultural model of the 'earth mother' and from what she describes as 'neurotic mothers'. She also distances herself from the infertile and draws upon a discourse used by those who deliberate the ethics of reproductive technology. She suggests that people who resort to IVF may 'want a child for the wrong reasons' and may consider it 'a disposable asset'. The repertoire of infertility is one that Christine knows well but refuses to play. On the other hand, Annika talks the language of intensive motherhood to justify the reasons why she and her husband eventually abandoned their intention to have another child. She argues that, as there had been a downturn in farming, she was able to take a part time job to supplement their income when her son started school. A second child would have prolonged the necessity to stay at home. Annika reasons that an age gap of five years is too great to offer companionship between siblings. Yet she also uses Leach's hypothesis that pre-school age children can only engage in 'parallel' rather than 'interactive' play (Leach, 1977, p.402). In this way, she effectively dismisses the value of siblings as a means of socialisation and companionship.

While Annika uses the assumed necessity to stay at home during the pre-school years to support her argument that having one child is appropriate to her particular

circumstances, Christine uses the cultural image of the ‘career woman’ to defend her position. In keeping with the logic employed by other working women in this study, she argues that her son had no need of siblings because she sent him to a childminder where he could play with other children. However, Christine had given up paid employment some time before her successful pregnancy. The assumption that a ‘career person’ may opt for one child also provided Coralie with a repertoire to defend her family size. She had almost died during her pregnancy and both she and her baby were so ill after the birth when she was twenty-three that she was advised not to attempt a second one. However, when her daughter was three years old she became so concerned about the intensity of their relationship that she decided to return to work thus enabling her child to meet other children in a crèche.

Coralie, who left school at sixteen, describes herself as ‘a career person’. She suggested that, surely, the conclusion of this research would be that women are opting to have one child because they want to work but find that childcare is prohibitively expensive. Yet Coralie seems more like the women described by Garrett who did not have one child in order to work but were able to work because they had only one child (Garrett, 2001, p. 14). The three different narratives offered by Christine, Annika and Coralie seem to demonstrate Swidler’s observation about the way people use to culture to justify action. She states:

“The commitment to particular values, including the ability to consult them and to apply them to specific choices, is one of the cultured capacities that make a strategy of action possible, rather the cause of the adoption of that strategy (Swidler, 2001, p.87).

These women demonstrate a clear capacity to consult and apply values that make having one child possible even though these values appear not to have been the cause of having only one. In all three cases they consider the underlying reasons for not having a second child a private matter. It was not exactly their original intention to have only one but, in articulating a particular set of values, they have been able to present it as a reproductive choice.

However, the majority of parents in this study who wanted but were unable to have a second child were far less willing to consult and apply the values presented by Christine, Annika and Coralie. The sense of inadequacy expressed by Nancy was more characteristic of those who, unwillingly, found themselves deviating from British reproductive norms. Furthermore, it was one that seemed to be exacerbated by the experience of reproductive loss. Parents expressed this sense both in terms of an incomplete and unfulfilled experience of parenthood and as a dereliction of duty towards the child they already had. For example, Trudy describes her feelings about the second and subsequent births to other mothers she had met through her NCT⁹¹ class:

“You have this sense of I wanted that, I was supposed to have that”

She and her husband Marco succeeded in having one daughter through IVF; a second baby, also conceived this way, died in utero during the second trimester of pregnancy.

⁹¹ National Childbirth Trust

Stephanie, who also required IVF treatment, experienced the death of her second baby from a congenital heart problem when he was three weeks old. She said:

“I have so many examples of how I think it should be and the other little brothers playing together at an age when they are enjoying the same things. It is just a pain that is there. Oh I wish he had that.”

While both women acknowledge that witnessing their friends going on to have more children constitutes a source of discomfort, they believe that the pressure to have a second child is, in Trudy’s words ‘internally generated’.

What is notable in these two particular cases is that these parents had to resort to medical intervention to achieve parenthood in the first place. They acknowledge that, under such circumstances, there is no guarantee of success; that is to say, they could not take it for granted that they would even have one child. Trudy describes a sense of precariousness and uncertainty when she finally became pregnant by means of IVF:

“All through the pregnancy we were absolutely agonising. I never felt I could relax. It was about two days before Emily was due I finally unpacked the cot and things like that and it wasn’t until after she was home that I actually chucked the boxes away because I thought still things can go wrong at this stage.”

Why is it then that these parents subjected themselves to the ordeal of IVF again after their first child was born and how can this ‘internal pressure’ for a second child be explained in such a context?

In the same way that those parents who chose to have one child use their own families of origin as a cultural resource to justify their action, these parents who have not had choice ascribe great significance to the circumstances of their own upbringing. However, they reverse the logic employed by those described in the last chapter by attributing great value to sibling relationships and distancing themselves from their own constructions of a single child family. Trudy suggests that, having grown up with three siblings, her own assumption about what constitutes a ‘proper family’ is one with several children. Further, her husband Marco was an only child. Without specifying which features of his upbringing she considers to have been inadequate, she suggests that their motivation to have three further IVF attempts after the birth of their daughter related in some way to Marco’s family of origin. Paradoxically, Marco states that for him being an only child was ‘normal’ and that he never felt that he missed out in any way. However, once he and Trudy were required to consider their reasons for wanting another child, he claims to have a new found sense of what it is that he may have missed. He stated:

“The thing with siblings is that it is now that I regret not having siblings. Before I never thought but now going through these experiences I really regret in some ways that I didn’t have brothers and sisters.”

Similarly Nancy uses the fact that she was an only child as a self-evident truth to justify her consumption of IVF following two miscarriages:

“When I went to see the doctor to discuss the IVF, why I felt so strongly that I wanted to do it was because having been an only child - but not a lonely miserable only child by any means, a happy only child - but you know nothing in life is perfect.”

Of course, these arguments are in direct conflict with those described in the last chapter by Julie and Keith. Their conviction about their family size was based upon their interpretation of the more favourable circumstances of Keith's only childhood. What is also significant about these examples of parents who find themselves justifying why it is so important to have a second child is that they seem to have been required to do so in the particular context of requesting IVF treatment. Trudy was concerned that she may be perceived to be greedy by returning for more medical treatment and explains:

“When I went back to (the hospital) I almost expected them to say to me ‘go on this is a bit cheeky. You want a second child?’”

However, she also asks why she should have to consider one child adequate because of her need for medical assistance. For Nancy, the decision to resort to IVF was complicated by her concern to keep it secret from her elderly parents and from her daughter. Therefore, the implication of what she says is that she needed to find a particular personal justification for pursuing a line of action which did not sit comfortably within the moral context of her family. Perversely, her central argument that she herself had been an only child forced her to distance herself from her construction of only childhood. She also created an ideological difficulty in reconciling herself to remaining a single child family when IVF failed.

Barbara also interprets her own childhood to justify the necessity of sibling relationships. She describes the way that her father's alcoholism effectively rendered her mother a single parent and the way that her three siblings were more important to her than were her parents. Although, for a decade, it had been uncertain that she would experience motherhood at all, this did not seem to mediate her conviction that she needed to have at least two children when the time came. Barbara's first husband left her for someone else at a time when, at the age of thirty, she was ready to have children. She was forty when she found the opportunity to remarry and embark upon parenthood. She describes her own and her husband's assumptions in this way:

“I never planned or wanted to have just one child. I am one of four and Malcolm is one of three and my sisters and my brother have been incredibly important to me so the idea of having an only child We both knew from the beginning that we might have no children or only one child and we would have to welcome whoever came along and that was the attitude we had. But right from the beginning, from the very first conversation we had about it Malcolm said ‘but it would be nice to have two’ and that was what we were thinking.”

Barbara's suggestion that she had never wanted to have just one child and that she 'would have to welcome whoever came along' implies ambivalence or even antipathy towards parenting in a context where there is only one child. It implies ambivalence also towards her child, as though there is some question about whether she would be welcome in her household unless she was to be followed by a sibling. Of course this

is not the way Barbara intends to represent her feelings towards her adored daughter whom she describes as 'an angel'. The way that she distances herself from the abstract concept of 'an only child' serves only to intensify a sense of vicarious vulnerability and loss on behalf of the little girl. She articulates these feelings in this way:

"Thoughts of bringing her up as an only child were always terribly weighted down by this feeling of, you know, tragedy. It was as if she were bereaved before she started and that we would be condemning her to an awful life."

There are, in fact, similarities between the circumstances of Barbara's and Christine's transitions to parenthood. Both women had found it necessary to delay maternity because their first marriages failed. Both experienced miscarriage before giving birth at around the age of forty and both grew up in a family of four children. Yet, in the way that Christine chooses to consult a set of values that allow for having an only child, Barbara suggests that this choice has not been available to her. She makes a clear distinction between 'feelings' and 'thinking'. After describing the grief she felt for herself and on behalf of her daughter she went on to say:

"You can't make yourself feel the way you want to feel. You can't choose the way that ideally you would feel and decide that you are going to feel that way. It wasn't in my thinking. (...)It wasn't a conscious thing."

In fact, Barbara acknowledges that she is aware of the arguments in favour of having only one child and she has read research from the United States suggesting that only children do not have adverse psychological outcomes. Nonetheless, she describes her motivation and subsequent struggle to obtain a referral from her local health authority to a clinic specialising in miscarriage in her attempt to produce a second child.

It seems significant that those parents who had arrived at parenthood by difficult means and who had subsequently sought medical assistance to attempt a second child articulated the strongest motivation for this child. Although some such as Trudy, Nancy, Barbara and Stephanie attribute this to an 'internal pressure' that they assume to have been there before their first child was born, others provide a different perspective. Tim, another 'only child' suggests that he had felt a slight ambivalence towards having children and had assumed that being an only child was 'normal'. However, he describes the way his view changed when his son was born:

"Once we had one child my perceptions changed remarkably quickly and then I really did want another child. Once we had the child my expectations changed considerably, dramatically."

It was only at that point that Tim began to question the 'normality' of being an only child and what he may have missed. What is also significant here is that he seems to have needed to 'shift frames' in this way to justify consumption of IVF treatment. The pursuit of a second child was further complicated by the apparent need to use donated gametes which required participation in a 'lengthy interview' at a fertility clinic to justify this course of action. On the other hand, Derek describes what could be considered a reversal of this process when he agreed with Nancy that they should abandon a third IVF attempt some years earlier. He stated:

“I wanted more than one child but really without thinking about it. I think because I suppose it is normal or whatever and I had a brother and having children was always for me the greatest thing in life.”

Derek also describes the way he began to resist the logic, emphasised to him by a female friend, that life is meaningless without children, that they are ‘the whole purpose of life’. He went on to say:

“When you think about it, it has got to be wrong. You know it is saying individuals don’t count, they are unimportant, their quality of life is unimportant is clearly wrong and I think the idea of having more than one now, my views have changed.”

The varying experiences of these parents who had not had full reproductive choice available to them demonstrate that it is not inevitable that they should feel the sense of inadequacy expressed by Nancy. As demonstrated in the last chapter, there are discourses in favour of having only one child and some of these parents chose to avail themselves of them. However, a sense of inadequacy was a more common response to the inability to have a desired second child amongst parents who participated in this study. It seems possible that it is one that has been intensified by the process of consuming reproductive technology. For, in this context, parents seem to be required to interrogate their own background assumptions about family size and to distance themselves from images of the single child family. This is not to suggest that the fertility clinics themselves have necessarily played a persuasive role in this process. Rather, in justifying why they are deserving of medical assistance, these parents have drawn upon notions of adequacy and normality in relation to family size and sibling relationships. In so doing, they have, by necessity, reinforced the notion of inadequacy in relation to having one child. Derek demonstrates that, having once employed the argument that a child needs siblings, it is necessary to engage in considerable ‘ideological work’ to resist such notions of inadequacy.

“I feel like a failure as a female biological being”

Although Polly conceived immediately that she and her husband Clem decided to start their family and she gave birth to a healthy child, her assumption of failure relates here to their inability to have a second child. Her reference to her gender and to biology assumes that reproduction is natural to women and her perception of failure is reminiscent of the sense of inadequacy described by Nancy. Clearly this represents a very different view to the dominant one described in the last chapter. Most of the women who had chosen to limit their family to one child expressed a high level of satisfaction with their interpretations of family life and thus with their reproductive outcomes. Many of them also found it necessary to distance themselves from the cultural image of the ‘earth mother’ and they talked very little about fertility. Some made a point of stating that they had become pregnant as soon as they had stopped using contraceptives and some suggested that they would have no trouble becoming pregnant again. Fertility only appeared briefly in these narratives if at all and it was both taken for granted and dissociated from appraisals of family life. In contrast, for those parents like Polly who still wanted, but found that they could not have, a second

child, fertility was present in their accounts as a central defining theme. As they had internalised the dominant cultural belief that motherhood is natural and that a good mother has at least two children, their sense of reproductive failure had become bound up with their parental identity.

Polly was thirty eight when she had her son after completing a PhD and obtaining employment in a highly specialised area of research. She miscarried a second child and eventually sought medical assistance in her attempt to have this further child. She believes that she was 'not taken seriously' by the consultant gynaecologist because of her age and acknowledged during the interview that she expected not to become pregnant again, stating:

"It is the loss of a dream. You have to change your ideas, lots of expectations. For my part this is my body. As far as we know Clem is functioning perfectly well but you see I am not so it is the loss of the dream that we had decreed was our normal way."

In this way she takes personal responsibility for their loss. Her assumption that her husband 'is functioning perfectly well' and that she has become reproductively dysfunctional relates also to an age difference between them of several years. Clem, her husband, corroborates the 'normality' of reproduction by making the point that, having studied evolutionary biology, it is clear to him that the desire for children 'was programmed into our genes'. Stephanie also expresses the view that procreation is natural and instinctive and also one that is primarily a female responsibility. She states:

"That is what we are made for, made to have a baby. That mothering maternal urge. Not for everybody. Some people don't have children, don't want them or want one or whatever but for me it has always been there from being a little girl. I loved babies and took it for granted that I would have them."

What is also significant here is that Stephanie dissociates having only one child with 'that natural mothering urge' and for this reason she cannot accept her identity as the mother of one child. It seems a reflection of the prevailing influence of pronatal discourse that, unlike women at the turn of twentieth century whose desire for parenthood was satisfied with one child, these women find their claims to true maternity so compromised.

However, Janice seemed to have attempted to reconcile her claim to maternity with having only one child by donating her ova anonymously to another woman. Her only child was conceived by donor insemination because her husband was totally infertile. When their relationship began to be strained by his unwillingness to repeat this experience, she sought to satisfy what she perceived to be a 'natural urge' by donating her own genetic material. Although, at the time of interview, she claimed to have accepted that she would not experience parenting a second child, she had pursued a line of action that seemed to enable her to resist the perception that she had failed as a 'female biological being'.

Conversely, Cynthia could not relinquish this sense of failure. She suggested that her inability to become pregnant again after the birth of her daughter was in some way

related to an abortion a number of years earlier. She claimed that ‘it is nature getting back’ at her. She had been told that repeated attempts at IVF were destined to failure because of ‘poor egg quality’; despite extensive consumption of alternative health products and services, she could not reverse what she perceived as the degeneration of her fertility. Her husband had dismissed any consideration of using donated eggs and, although her daughter was by now thirteen, she speculated during the interview about the possibility of fostering or adopting another child. When questioned about her motivation for this hypothetical child she suggested that she did not want her daughter to become a ‘spoilt only child’. However, Cynthia had already pointed out earlier that she was very glad that her daughter was not a ‘stereotypical spoilt only child’. With language reminiscent of Vicky, she also suggested that she felt the need to make up for deficiencies in her approach to parenting and, in particular, for working part time when her daughter was very young. For Cynthia, her inability to have a second child seems not only to represent a taunt for the pregnancy that she terminated but also her sense of reproductive failure seems to represent to her a failure of parenthood.

The pathologisation of fertility, a recurrent theme during these interviews, resulted not only in talk of failure but it also prompted these parents to account for and explain their reproductive status. It is notable that Mandy, who chose not to seek any medical assistance when no second pregnancy occurred, does not find it necessary to explain nor to recriminate herself. Although she acknowledges that she had become ‘obsessed’ for a time with the possibility of a second pregnancy, she decided that this obsession was ‘ridiculous’ and stated:

“We didn’t go down the line of finding out why or taking any drug treatment or anything. We thought we would just be grateful for Edward.”

Her husband Dan pointed out that, as Christians, they felt that they should simply ‘trust in the Lord’. However, for those who wanted a second child, it was much more common to seek a medical interpretation of their inability to do so. And when no other explanation was evident, the expiration of female fertility was offered as the most likely cause. Barbara assumed that, because of her age, she would be refused medical assistance to diagnose and, potentially, treat her miscarriages. Although eventually it was concluded that their cause was unrelated to maternal age, she referred to ‘my secondary infertility’. She too interprets her inability to have a second child in terms of a dereliction of duty to their daughter. She stated:

“All the way through with Clara I’ve been fighting a fear that actually I can’t be good enough for her, I can’t be enough for her. She needs brothers and sisters as well, that actually there’s a real conviction that’s part of my bones that I won’t be enough.”

Of course, this is a direct reversal of the logic expressed by parents who had freely chosen to have one child, who talked in terms of the moral correctness of monogamous love for the child and felt no need to ‘fix what isn’t broken’. In contrast, Barbara associates not being ‘good enough’ for her daughter with the view that, finally, she must acknowledge that ‘something inside has just stopped working’.

At the time of interview Barbara was in the process of reconciling herself to the probability that there would be no second child and to the idea that her reproductive

capacity had 'just stopped working'. Some, like Nancy and Mandy, had reached this resolution some time earlier. While expressing great regret that they had not been able to have the family size of their choosing, they had proceeded with their lives. But for a number of parents who participated in this study, fertility was viewed as a source of aggravation, both taunting them and placing them in a liminal, uncertain position. Some expressed a longing to experience pregnancy again. Stephanie describes how much she loved to feel the babies kicking inside her. However, having experienced the death of one baby, she believes that another pregnancy would bring intolerable anxiety. Judith also emphasises how much she enjoyed pregnancy and, at forty, acknowledges that it is not impossible that she could experience it again. However, this would involve negotiating with her husband who does not want to be 'back there'. It would involve taking clomiphene which, she now understands, has been implicated in ovarian cancer. Having experienced gestational diabetes during her one pregnancy, another could result in irreversable health problems. Both Stephanie and Judith express the view that menopause will, at least, bring the end to this uncertainty and longing. For these women who had already experienced maternity, fertility represented a paradox. It had been both highly prized and a source of great joy and yet it also brought deep frustration and very real dangers and threats.

This negotiation of fertility clearly prompted intense emotions and a search for meaning. For those parents who were still in the process of reconciling themselves to the loss of the ability to have a second child, life was presented as unsettled. Swidler makes the important point that 'Peoples' cultural involvements intensify when they are reordering their lives' (Swidler, 2001, p.92). She also points out that culture is more visible in unsettled lives (ibid p.89). For Barbara, the trauma of loosing four pregnancies at a relatively late stage was acknowledged during a visit to a cathedral where she lit four candles and left them in front of a picture of the Madonna and child. She believes that this represented a highly symbolic gesture of 'letting go' so that she could begin to establish an order to their family life that had eluded them through repeated pregnancies and miscarriages. Polly and Clem acknowledge the need to get rid of all of their baby equipment. However, Clem suggests that this represents to them not only the abandonment of their hope for a second child but also symbolises 'an outward admission of failure'. This constitutes a clear contrast to Diane, described in the last chapter, who had kept some baby equipment and who believed that, at age forty two, 'it would be perfectly OK healthwise' to have another baby. Even though she presented her life as entirely settled, she did so with the assumption that, like the baby equipment, fertility could be unpacked and made functional again if desired.

There was a suggestion also, amongst those parents who had reason to doubt the functioning of their own fertility, that the experience of parenthood was all the more vivid and intense because of this limitation. Marion described the way she continued to breastfeed until her son was a year old because she was unlikely to experience this again. She said:

"I found it very difficult initially to breast feed but I thought I am never going to have another chance, I am going to breast feed this child. I did it for much longer than my friends. I enjoyed it, Max enjoyed it and I was really sad when I stopped breastfeeding and the reason that I stopped was fertility treatment."

There is a sense here that, in the same way that fertility is acknowledged to be a finite resource, so too the experience of parenting is a both highly valued and highly limited. Marion and Mike were concerned to emphasise that all of their friends placed great value on their parental experience but Mike also suggested that:

“It would be difficult to imagine a situation where you could - I couldn't conceive of a situation where they would see their children more meaningfully than we do, put it that way.”

A further consequence of the meaning and intensity of this experience is that it seems to have sharpened the motivation of these parents to repeat it. Marion herself acknowledges that she had assumed that she would not breastfeed again and described her curiosity, not long after her son's birth, when she encountered another woman who had had a second baby by means of IVF. While her explanation for wanting a second child was based upon a model of family life determined by her own childhood, it seems that her action to attempt this hypothetical child was prompted by the actuality of parenthood. Barbara provides an insight into the consequences for her of delayed maternity:

“Having waited so long for a child it's difficult to stop yourself wanting to make everything perfect.”

For her, and for a number of the parents in a similar position, making everything perfect must involve producing another child. Barbara's suggestion that she 'can't ever be good enough' for her daughter relates to her conviction that this long-awaited child who has brought so much joy deserves a sibling and it is therefore her obligation to provide one. This sense of obligation brings with it, however, a dilemma summed up in this way by Nancy:

“We had two goes at IVF and pulled out of a third one. Again for various reasons it just seemed to be taking up so much of our time and I felt it might not work and we were losing time with Freya when we were concentrating on this instead of concentrating on her.”

Nancy seems to be saying that this investment of time and energy undermines the enjoyment of parenting. Polly goes further and suggests that it may compromise the relationship with the child in some way. She is referring here to the strain of the last three years and the competing demands of parenting her one child while deliberating over the possibility of another:

“It is impossible to do both. You can't say 'you are absolutely wonderful' when you are trying to have another one because having another one means you are not enough.”

In this way, these parents are presented with a paradoxical situation. While resorting to the child-centred justification for fertility treatment that their child needs and deserves a sibling, it can be construed that he or she is 'not enough'. In attempting to give something that they consider so fundamental as a sibling, they can also construe that their action is taking something away from their child. And in wanting to make this intensive experience of parenting so perfect, they are effectively compromising

their enjoyment of it. The sense of reproductive failure had come to have a considerable impact upon the parental identities of women, in particular, who were unable to have a second child.

“I wonder if these other mothers have any idea of the turmoil that they are causing”

In a context where parenthood has neither been taken for granted nor easily accomplished, membership of what Jane described as ‘the mystic club of parenthood’ can become both highly prized but also highly problematic. Judith suggests not only that her parental status has brought with it a sense of turmoil but that other members of this club may be oblivious to the emotions and the discomfort they have caused her. She is referring here to repeated questions from other mothers about her family planning intentions while waiting to collect her daughter from school. She has not met any other mother at the school who has only one child and perceives the curiosity about her family size to relate to her apparent difference from them. Judith’s pursuit of parenthood was complicated by her health problems and by her husband’s ambivalence towards having a child. Until her daughter became ‘socially active’ she had assumed that, under the circumstances, she would be entirely satisfied with her family size. She stated:

“I really believed that I would be happy with one child and I said to Geoff ‘I just want to know what a child of mine would be like, would turn out like and I would like to know what my skills as a parent would be like’. That’s all really.”

Because Judith is so influenced by the ideology of intensive motherhood, she has developed the view that she can never be considered highly skilled in this endeavour because she has only one child. She recalls with resentment an article written by a colleague following the birth of her second child; in it the woman had claimed that only now that she was the mother of two children did she ‘really understand what parenting was about’. Judith’s narrative seems to confirm Morrell’s view that the discourse of contemporary motherhood has produced ‘hierarchies based upon reproductive difference’ (Morrell, 1994, p.5). These mothers who had been unable to have a planned second child talked a great deal about the social networks that had become available to them as a result of their parental status. Yet, when their lives became unsettled by their frustrated attempts to have a second child, the culture of these networks seemed to reinforce to them a vivid sense of inadequacy and difference.

Participation in ante-natal classes and the relationships formed with other new parents took on particular importance for highly educated parents. Their employment mobility had often brought with it the need to relocate geographically. Their lives had not followed a predictable course and they found themselves embarking upon parenthood in a context in which they had no peers in a similar situation and, in some cases, were socially isolated. Many made friends with other parents immediately prior to the birth of their child and the mothers, in particular, continued to meet regularly after the children were born. Barbara, describes the significance to her and her husband of joining a parenting group:

"We joined the NCT specifically because we wanted to meet people who were in the same situation because we were living in a place where we didn't know anybody. We were both working a long distance from where we lived. We had to triangulate these strange journeys so we joined the NCT and this odd group of people came together and it worked. We had nothing in common and yet it worked."

However, Barbara describes the way their relationship ceased to work when the other mothers went on to have their second children while she experienced recurrent miscarriages. She points out that she placed so much value on her membership of this group that she was the one who continued to initiate contact and offer to travel to meet the other mothers. But she believes that she and her daughter became dispensable to them once the new babies arrived and she describes these women as 'ruthless' in the way they seemed to cut her out. She acknowledges that 'the feeling of fellowship' that resulted from having their first babies at the same time was not genuine, that these women were acquaintances and not friends. This group, which seemed to offer the opportunity for mutual support and was so symbolic of the long-awaited status of parenthood, became to Barbara the most vivid reinforcement of her reproductive loss.

Marion also describes a sense of divergence once her fellow NCT members went on to have second children. She and her husband had been eager to meet other new parents as their friends and colleagues were either childless or well beyond the years of early parenthood. Therefore they too found the NCT offered valued new social relationships. Moreover, Marion discovered after the children were born that several other members of this group had required fertility treatment. When those with 'normal' fertility went on to have second babies, they parted company with the others as their motivation to belong to the group seemed to diminish. However, despite the shared experience of infertility, Marion refers to certain tensions in the relationships with the surviving members of the group. While they had already been able to have second children with medical assistance, Marion came to believe that her only hope for another child was by means of donated gametes. To her dismay, she experienced what she describes as 'hostility' to this concept from those same women who had had fertility treatment themselves. She suggests that now that they have had their second children, their families seemed complete and 'they have closed the book' on fertility treatment. In so doing, she found that they made the same 'unthinking remarks' as those who have normal fertility.

This perceived insensitivity and intolerance was all the more 'difficult and hurtful' to Marion because she feels that she had to make a conscious choice to force herself to be interested in and to welcome the second babies. She followed social convention and took gifts to 'normalise' the situation even though the second child she had expected to have by that time had died in utero. Mike suggests that this situation prompts 'a certain resentment' because it reinforces their lack of a second child. Marion accounts for her feelings in this way:

"I do think there is something about pregnant women and really small babies, if they are under one, there is something which is much closer to the bone there."

The sensitivity that she describes here is a direct reversal of the logic employed by women, described in the last chapter, who chose to distance themselves from the cultural image of the earth mother. Marion's story constitutes a striking contrast to the one told by Juliet whose son was unplanned and who was happy to dispense with her NCT acquaintances when their interests came into conflict with hers over the question of a second child. Juliet had other parenting networks available to her and no known constraints upon her fertility. In contrast, Marion's regular meetings with her group had become an important ritual to celebrate parenthood and yet had come to reinforce the paradoxical position of being a parent who is self-consciously infertile. She points out that, by belonging to such parental networks, she and her husband were 'constantly exposed to pregnant women' in a way that did not happen when they were childless. Their discomfort was exacerbated by the feeling that their more profligate friends were not entirely oblivious of their reproductive difference; Mike suggests:

"I can see some kind of enjoyment about being able to talk about something that another person can't have. You have procured some enjoyment even if unconscious."

Despite the conflict of interest that Mike describes here, these parents who had wanted a second child so intensively had a further reason to continue to invest in these parental groups. Having articulated the necessity of siblings, they were most concerned to facilitate social relationships for their child to compensate for the absence of other children at home. Barbara justifies why she felt that she should continue with the other mothers even when she felt that they were treating her with callousness and indifference:

"I felt that I should keep going. I felt that really they were the nearest thing she had to sibs⁹². That was in my mind, obviously, not hers. I think I kept going because I wanted her to have that contact."

Similarly Marion and Mike point out that their son had been seeing the children of their NCT friends 'almost every week of his life until he started pre-school'. Polly expresses a sense of being trapped by the assumptions of the mothers with whom she shared the experience of having a first child. At the time of interview she had just decided that she must accept that there would be no second child but had found that these women had admonished her 'never to give up' the pursuit of another pregnancy. While parenthood had provided Polly and her husband with the opportunity for social relationships in a new city where they had known no one, she questions the depth of these new relationships by suggesting that 'we have no soul mates'. Conversely Christine chose not to subject herself to discussions about motherhood nor to disclose her experience of reproductive loss. She stated 'I am just not the coffee morning type' and expressed disdain for the intimacy of networks founded upon motherhood.

The contrast between Christine's rejection of shared intimacy and the more common experience of parents such as Marion, Barbara and Polly reveals some important points about self-disclosure in this context. For Marion, the revelation that others had arrived at parenthood by means of fertility treatment came as a relief after years of keeping their IVF treatment secret from everyone other than their own immediate

⁹² siblings

family. The NCT group seemed to provide a safe cultural context to admit to such a deeply personal experience. Barbara describes a perception of unity within her group that seemed to offer the invitation to share the physicality of child-bearing and to disclose information that may have been inappropriate under other circumstances. She stated:

“You need somebody you can talk to about sore nipples when you really don’t want to talk about anything else and it was wonderful.”

Yet this sense of mutual support proved to be illusory when their reproductive outcomes diverged. Barbara’s subsequent disillusionment and isolation resulted from the fact that these other mothers knew about her miscarriages and yet found it easier to turn away. Marion points out that the women in her group had already agreed that they found other women’s pregnancies difficult when they were involuntarily childless. Therefore she felt that this disclosure placed her in an exposed position when the other women became pregnant again and she had lost her child and was undergoing further fertility treatment. In taking the risk of disclosing their infertility and the emotions that this had prompted, these highly educated women had made themselves vulnerable in this way.

A number of parents referred to the dilemma of self-disclosure in relation to infertility and reproductive loss. As Marion demonstrates, some of those who chose to reveal their difficulties to their peers found that they had, unwittingly, invited moral judgements and had positioned themselves unfavourably in a reproductive hierarchy. Yet Stephanie, who had chosen not to disclose her need for IVF treatment, reveals that this non-disclosure caused ambiguity and social isolation. This is her description of a social encounter not long after her second son died:

“Just a few months after Jonathon died I plucked up the courage to go the mother and toddler group with David and it was the first time I had gone to that group afterwards and I felt really self conscious and people not knowing whether to say hello and she sat there chatting to me and said ‘Oh will you try for another one?’ and she came straight out with it and what do you do? I don’t want to have a row with somebody.”

As a result of this encounter, Stephanie never returned to the group. Her discomfort related not so much to her bereavement but to her embarrassment over the necessity to resort to IVF if she were to ‘try for another one’. It was this particular feature of her circumstances that left her with no script, unable to defend her position and leaving her interlocutor oblivious to the way she had intruded upon what she considers ‘a personal, private matter’.

For women like Stephanie who are inexperienced in the language of reproductive choice and unwilling to invoke discourses in favour of having only one child, there is little to say. In contrast to the scripted retorts such as ‘been there, done that, got the scars’ used by some women who had exercised choice, truthfulness presents a dilemma to infertile parents. They either risk having inaccurate assumptions made about them or they risk making themselves vulnerable. Marion even suggests that she does not want to risk embarrassing those who intrude upon her privacy in this way.

She describes a familiar dilemma when questioned about her intention to have a second child:

“There is no simple answer because I can’t say ‘no I only want one child’ because I don’t want to lie, a social hypocritical lie in that sense. But I don’t want to say no I want another child or people don’t necessarily want to know much more than that so it is very hard to find.”

Judith suggests that mothers who are infertile are much more likely to be questioned about their reproductive circumstances than are the involuntarily childless. The existence of one child confirms to the outside world a willingness to become a parent in the first place and it also seems to confirm the potential for fertility. Yet Marion reveals the way those same people who are uninhibited in interrogating others about their family planning intentions can find no appropriate social response when the truth is offered. She went on to say:

“In some cases I have been pretty blunt and have said ‘well I can’t have another child’ and you are faced with total silence and in other cases I have said things like ‘well it is not quite that easy’ and equally have been met with total silence.”

Nancy, who was an only child herself, provides an important reflection on this culture of self-disclosure and suggests that the nature of the dilemma expressed by many of these parents is a particularly contemporary one. She describes the way she felt her privacy was intruded upon by a nurse at her local health centre when, six years after her last IVF attempt, this woman had announced ‘Oh, you did IVF didn’t you?’ She points out that the availability of reproductive technology and the publicity surrounding it has provoked a curiosity and a discourse that was not experienced by her parents’ generation. She stated:

“Maybe we do go into it too much these days. In my parents day you just got on with it. You didn’t have these discussions. People didn’t. Some are only children and I don’t remember (...) my parents saying ‘Oh Ken only has one child, was it bad or good’ or that is just how it was and then medicine couldn’t do what it does these days because everyone knows about IVF. You think there is more to be done whereas my parents generation you just accepted it.”

What Nancy also seems to be saying is that, because of the availability and awareness of IVF, those who have been unable to have another child cannot be left alone to ‘just accept it’ in the way that her parents would have done. She also seems to be saying that the advances in reproductive medicine have generated ignorance of those who, in spite of it, have been unable to have another child. This seems to confirm the point made by Woollett that, while reproductive technology has done much to publicise infertility, it has done little to enhance the understanding of it (Woollett, 1991, p.61). Mandy refers to the assumption of reproductive choice when she stated:

“I think that is one of the difficulties because people assume always that you have chosen to only have one and I would say that perhaps in most cases that isn’t the case.”

Mandy and Dan consider their inability to have a second child as a private matter and revealed, during the interview, that no one knew that they had hoped and tried for another child. Mandy recounted a recent incident in which a young woman at her Bible study group had expressed pejorative opinions about only children but she suggests that it is not in her nature to argue or to disclose that her situation was not of her choosing. Judith is somewhat more assertive on this issue and expressed anger at what she considered to be an impossible predicament. She is referring here to the way she was put on the spot by a mother at a school function when she was asked if she planned to have more children and her concern that she does not want it assumed that she chose to have one child. She stated:

“The trouble is that when you think people are making assumptions you assume they are making negative assumptions and I don’t want people thinking that of me. I don’t want that situation so I would rather bear my soul. But why do I have to do it? Why is it even an issue? You are put in a pretty horrible situation.”

She went on to suggest that the all too familiar question ‘are you planning to have any more children?’ is equal in impertinence to asking an acquaintance ‘and how is your sex life!’

A further point that should be made in the context of social networks and self-disclosure is what these parents have to say about childlessness. It should be recalled here that social commentators tend to link voluntary childlessness with having only one child by suggesting that there are common causes for both phenomena. In so doing, there is the implication of Gerson’s argument that, in relation to employment, ‘one child posed no threat at all’ (Gerson, 1985, p.167). That is to say, those with one child are more like the childless. Yet it has become evident that not only do those parents who have experienced infertility find parenthood to be all the more intense and vivid as a result of their hardship, those with one child are socially distinct from the childless. This distinction operates in several different ways. Many of the parents in this category argued that it would be in poor taste to complain publicly about their inability to have another child because they are aware of others who are involuntarily childless. Some had experienced this for a period of time themselves. While they found that they were questioned repeatedly about their reproductive intentions, it had been pointed out to some of those who had experienced reproductive loss that they should feel fortunate to have one child. Barbara believes that, despite her miscarriages, she is considered undeserving of sympathy. She describes the incomprehension of her situation in this way:

“I think people were absolutely baffled by it. Just absolutely baffled. What on earth, because they have this beautiful daughter, she’s lovely, what on earth are they thinking about wanting to go through all that again and then expecting sympathy when it goes wrong.”

Moreover, the very reason why these parents found themselves placing so much value on relationships made rapidly on the basis of their newly acquired status of parenthood was that so many of their friends and colleagues were childless. This is particularly true of the most highly educated parents in this category, and is, perhaps, unsurprising given the increasing incidence of childlessness amongst those cohorts

who took part in this study. Furthermore, their departure from childlessness reinforces the liminality of their position in being unable to have another child. Clem describes the way his lifestyle has become incompatible with that of his childless colleagues who have greater disposable income and more time.

It seems a reflection of the relative isolation of those who have achieved parenthood and yet long for another child that some of them expressed the wish to meet other parents of only children. Stephanie and her husband had decided to move away to a different part of the country and she expressed the hope that, when her son moved school, they would find there to be another only child in the same class. Polly and Clem describe the way they find themselves sitting on the beach looking around for another family like theirs and yet they feel confronted with family groups that seem invariably larger. Some of these women turned to the Internet as it seemed to offer a sense of community that other social networks had failed to provide them. Barbara described the way that, when she gave up work, she spent hours reading accounts of reproductive loss by other women on a web site entitled 'Pregnancy Loss'. However, this proved ultimately to be counter-productive to reconciling herself to her situation when other women 'had a mission to stay in the same place, who wanted to hold on to the rage and hold onto the grief'.

If, as Taylor and Taylor suggest, society has become polarised between two camps comprising parents and the childless, it cannot be assumed that those who have only one child are attempting to have a foot in both (Taylor & Taylor, 2003, p.48-49). As we have seen, those who chose to limit themselves to one child seemed to have founded their decision upon the intensity of their approach to parenthood rather than any ambivalence towards it. In so doing, they demonstrated a strong cultured capacity to defend their decision and therefore they seemed not to question their eligibility for membership of the 'club of parenthood'. However, those who had internalised the logic in favour of having more than one child were acutely aware of the way they had transgressed social norms of family size when they were unable to have a second child. In many cases, they had no 'cultured capacity' to defend having one child and believed questions from others to be founded upon judgements of their parental commitment and competence. It is for this reason that Judith suggests that the other mothers at her daughter's school had 'no idea of the turmoil they are causing'.

"I just wanted to do a good job"

When Mandy stated that she 'just wanted to do a good job' she is referring to the job of bringing up her son rather than the managerial position she decided to leave to be a full time mother. Explanations for low fertility generally point to role incompatibility between motherhood and employment. They present children as 'opportunity costs' and suggest that women are 'postponing themselves out of choice' by delaying maternity in favour of employment. Such assumptions have obscured an understanding of the position of women like Mandy who simply sought to fulfil a conservative ideal of 'normal' family life but, for unknown reasons, was unable to have a planned second child.

Mandy's decision to start a family at around the age of thirty conforms to the dominant pattern revealed by other highly educated women in this study who appear to be well aware of the 'biological ceiling'. Although she was offered a 'five year

career break' by her employer, she describes it as an 'open agreement' and chose not to return to managerial employment at the end of the five year period. Mandy expressed considerable satisfaction with her family life although she suspects that, on occasions, assumptions are being made about her son because he has no siblings. In many senses Mandy seemed more like the less educated women described in the last chapter who had stayed at home and then had sought employment opportunities at their child's school. She could demonstrate her commitment to the good of children through full time motherhood and then through her work as a special needs teaching assistant at her son's school. But for other women in this study who were unable to have a second child, their experiences were complicated by the negotiation of fertility, of reproductive technology and the impact of this negotiation upon their employment relationships. There is no question that, in the context of the culture of 'intensive motherhood', these parents 'just wanted to do a good job'. However, by internalising the assumed necessity of providing a sibling, they had set themselves what proved to be an unattainable standard. And, as Mandy found, this standard was reinforced by the expectations, implications and judgements of others.

The dominant assumption about women who have one child is that the job they want to do well is one outside of the home and having only one child will not compromise their employment mobility. It seems somewhat ironic that, in direct contrast, Stephanie found herself immobilised by her inability to have another child after her second son died. She believes that she ought to find a part time job but she can summon neither the motivation nor the confidence to do so. She is fearful of volunteering or seeking a part time position at her son's school as she is so intimidated by the other mothers in the school community who continue to question her about her family planning. Her discomfort is accentuated by her perception that having one school age child is insufficient justification for remaining at home full time. She describes the awkwardness of her situation in this way:

"I gave up work before I became pregnant with David and we decided it is what I wanted to do. I wanted to stay at home and had Jonathon been here I wouldn't have gone back to work until he went to school and I almost feel redundant."

Of course, the death of a child in contemporary Britain is considered a catastrophe under any circumstances. But Stephanie seems particularly incapacitated not just by her loss but by her inability to have a second child. She seems trapped by her embarrassment about her consumption of IVF treatment, by the intrusion and presumptions of those who have conformed to standards for family size and by her own assumptions. This is exemplified in a vignette she chose to recount: She and a friend were both in the late stages of pregnancy and were pushing their first children along the high street when they observed another woman who had, apparently, chosen not to have a second child. They had agreed that this was an 'extremely selfish' choice and was inconsiderate of the needs of the child. Having made this observation, the impossibility of doing a good job now that she is unable to provide her son with a sibling weighs heavily upon Stephanie.

In some cases, although women were engaged in some form of employment, they seemed to consider themselves ineligible to fully participate in either the culture of motherhood or the culture of work. As a journalist, Judith left a salaried position in an office to work free-lance from home to care for her daughter. She describes her

situation as isolated 'with none of the feedback and interaction and none of the position'. At the time of interview, Judith's daughter had just started primary school where the 'impertinent questions' from other mothers about her fertility intentions had deeply offended her. She had found it easier to avoid the social network that had developed amongst other mothers at the school and suggested that 'I suppose I have just alienated myself from the group'. When Nancy's daughter started primary school, she found a way of avoiding the social discomfort experienced by Judith by returning to professional employment as a lawyer. This was not the repertoire she had expected to be playing but it was, at least, one that she knew well. She describes her reasoning in this way:

"I had another justification for living so, OK, I have one child but I have a job as well. By the time she was four and a half most people had produced another one so that was harder explaining yourself away without wishing to tell complete strangers your medical details which is the answer to the question but you don't want to do that."

However, having succeeded in changing repertoires in this way from being a full time mother to a working one, Nancy was soon to leave her job to concentrate on attempting to have a second child by means of IVF. It seems an ironic challenge to the dominant assumptions about single child families that more women in this study, like Nancy, gave up work in an attempt to have a second child than had only one child in order to work. When, eventually, she and her husband agreed to discontinue medical treatment, she began to work from home in a field unrelated to her former employment. At the time of interview, she was finding this to be socially isolating and, now that her daughter was fourteen, was considering whether she could retrain to return to her profession.

The idea that female fertility may be compromised by the demands of employment was present in eugenicist discourse in the early twentieth century (Garrett, 2001, p.14). This assumption appeared in the narratives of some of the women in this study. Like Nancy, Barbara had returned to work for a period after her daughter was born only to relinquish her employment again in an attempt to sustain a second pregnancy to full term. Following a prolonged unpaid maternity leave her return to a highly specialised professional position had been made difficult by recurrent miscarriages. She stated:

"I was convinced that the stress of my job was working against me and if I was serious about giving myself a chance I had to stop work."

While a second child may be perceived to place a strain on the capacity to do a paid job, Barbara demonstrated that, under certain circumstances, the inability to have one can prove to be a greater burden. Her situation could be construed to exemplify the problem of delaying fertility highlighted by Hewlett. She is exactly the sort of women who should not, according to Hewlett, be permitted to limit her fertility in this way. Yet Barbara's circumstances suggest that the assumptions upon which this elite pronatalist discourse are based may overlook important causal factors in low fertility. She delayed maternity not because she privileged career over reproduction but because she was 'jilted' by a first husband at a time when she was ready to have children. After much consideration, she chose not to attempt to parent on her own:

“You know I seriously considered having a child on my own after my previous partner left because I really felt I was ready and I couldn’t just cross it off the agenda. I spent a lot of time thinking about it and a lot of time thinking and reading and talking to people about it, deciding what I was going to do and decided that I wasn’t going to do it not because of pressure from society but because I felt that I didn’t want to do it. I wouldn’t be strong enough. I needed somebody with me, someone to help and to look after me and someone to parent a child with.”

There is another feature of Barbara’s situation which could suggest that this contemporary consciousness of a ‘biological ceiling’ may be misleading and unconstructive. In Barbara’s case, as a medical practitioner herself, she was reticent to seek a specialised diagnosis of the cause of her miscarriages. She believed that her age would militate against the justification for such expenditure by her health authority. In the event and after much delay, the cause was eventually attributed to an immunological problem which is not directly attributable to maternal age and could possibly have been treated with medication. This contemporary consciousness of a ‘biological ceiling’ resulted in some of these women being admonished by others about their family size as though they were being naïve or unrealistic about their fertility. On the one hand, Barbara was told by a friend that she was lucky to become pregnant at all at her age. On the other, both Stephanie and Polly describe the way they had been told that they ‘had better hurry up’ and have another child by relative strangers who were oblivious of their losses. At a time when she was becoming reconciled to the idea that she would not have another child, Judith found the unsolicited advice of her GP to be highly intrusive and unhelpful. Despite her complex health problems, she was advised that she was likely to regret not attempting a second pregnancy once it was too late.

There is some support in this study for the hypothesis that highly educated women delay maternity in order to fulfil academic and professional ambitions. Certainly in two cases women had waited until the completion of PhDs and the establishment of careers before embarking upon parenthood. They could be considered, in this sense, to have ‘postponed themselves out of choice’. However, for those women who were over thirty-five when they had their child, the breakdown of a first partnership was a more dominant explanation for the postponement of maternity. Some suggested that, although they had been unable to have a second child, this subsequent relationship provided a much better context in which to do the job of parenting. There was certainly much talk about the difficulties presented by the formal workplace and, in elite institutions, its cultural hostility to reproduction. However, this did not in any way diminish the motivation of those who sought to have a second child. Those same women who had delayed maternity for professional reasons were no less subject to the culture of intensive motherhood than any other mother. Hays argues that this is a culture which only makes sense once inside it (Hays, 1996, p.128). For those women who were used to doing a good job, motherhood presented a new professional challenge. Once inside its culture, they conformed to the more conventional interpretation of its standards that a good mother has at least two children.

It has been observed that the culture of motherhood seemed to appear all the more vivid to those who, at the time of interview, found themselves having to re-order their lives when a planned second child did not eventuate. It has also been observed that a notable number of women gave up paid employment in their attempt to have this child. The huge investment of time and effort and emotion in pursuing this ideal of family size was emphasised by many of these parents but, despite its magnitude, it was one that needed to be kept concealed. Barbara describes the ambiguity of her situation in this way:

“I had a big problem at work though. I mean, I didn’t tell anyone at work and I should have done and it meant that I had to be OK and I wasn’t OK and I was only weeks into a new job and I had started off in the throes of recovering from the miscarriage and I was only weeks into the job and told nobody. I now concede that that was a big mistake, that it put me under a lot of extra strain. I wish I had told somebody that. That was a great mistake but I didn’t know people well enough to tell something so personal that was so raw and so painful and so liable to be misunderstood.”

Some referred to the investment required in order to utilise reproductive technology in becoming what Throsby describes as an ‘IVF consumer’. Marion, who chose to continue working while she evaluated her reproductive options, refers to ‘the great cost of doing all of the research and the energy’. Conversely Stephanie, who had chosen to stay at home, suggested that ‘IVF was my project’. Throsby has also highlighted the way that those for whom IVF fails occupy an ambiguous space between social conformity and transgression (Throsby, 2003, p.20) and that nothing marks them out from those who have chosen to live without children (ibid p.218). It could also be argued that nothing distinguishes those parents who made IVF their ‘project’ from those who prevented the conception of a second child. The assumption of ‘selfishness’ seemed to appear all the more vivid to women like Marion and Stephanie despite their efforts towards social conformity.

This sense of reproductive failure resulted, amongst some parents, in anxiety about how their parental performance would be perceived. Judith pointed out that the other mothers who caused her so much ‘turmoil’ had suggested that they considered their first child to be a ‘rehearsal’. She went on to say:

“They have made all the mistakes with the first child and by the second child they are now a competent parent and so the implication there is that you are forever the incompetent parent.”

It was notable, however, that those parents whose child had reached adolescence were far less willing to concede to such assumptions. In reconciling themselves to the likelihood that there would be no second child, they also allowed themselves to evaluate their own circumstances in a more positive light. Derek, whose daughter was fourteen at the time of interview, had done much ‘ideological work’ and pointed to the extraneous nature of any assumed problem. He stated:

“It’s almost like a disease, as a fault why have you not got more than one. I think that is very, very wrong and I think there are huge advantages as well just having an only child.”

Coralie, who expressed great satisfaction with her adolescent daughter, recognises that the ‘problem’ with having one child is socially constructed and that rhetoric is needed to counter it:

“I think that the only child syndrome is very much put into parents’ minds. I think we just feel more conscious of it. We feel that we have done our child an injustice by just producing them but I suppose it just varies with people because if you have a really confident person with one child they will just say ‘no that is all that I wanted’ and they can be quite positive and take on those questions without batting an eyelid.”

It was notable that both Derek and Coralie drew attention to the warmth of the relationship with their adolescent daughters and commented that they seemed to have avoided the problems generally associated with adolescence. They seemed to have come round to the view, expressed more willingly and at an earlier stage of parenthood by many of those who had chosen to have one child, that there is no need ‘to fix what isn’t broken’.

It seems that, in time, some parents were able to come round to the view that they could make a good job of parenting even though they had been unable to have a second child. In most cases, there was a notable difference between those whose only child had just begun school at the time of interview and those who had an adolescent child. Coralie pointed out that she would have expressed much greater anxiety about her daughter had she been interviewed a decade earlier. Many started out with the view that a child needs a sibling and thus created for themselves an ideological trap. But one or two demonstrated a capacity to ‘shift frames’ at an early stage and therefore to have confidence in their capacity to make a good job of parenting. Mandy emerged distinct in the way that she neither employed the discourses used by women such as Christine nor expressed the sense of bereavement that characterises many of the parents who appear in this chapter. It is notable that she was able to interpret in a positive way the psychological discourse that has made only childhood so problematic. She described a discussion with a group of mothers in which she had expressed concern about a recent argument with her son. Another woman had observed that, as an only child, his only option was to focus his aggression upon her and Mandy stated that she found this observation ‘very reassuring’. This vignette provides an ironic contrast to Vicky, described in the last chapter, whose interpretation of this same discourse caused her so much anguish. While she also attributed arguments with her nine year old child to the unavailability of siblings, she chose to consider this behaviour to symbolise a failure of parenthood.

Yet although Mandy expresses relative confidence in her own performance as a parent, she is nonetheless aware that not all judgements about her son and her family size may be benign. At the time of interview she had just received professional advice that, as she had long suspected, her son is dyslexic. It had also become clear to her that difficulties that he had experienced in the classroom were being attributed to his lack of siblings. She described a recent experience in this way:

“Certainly at school I have heard things and sort of hints at parents’ evenings and things implied....The last time somebody said something it was Edward’s

current teacher. She didn't know that I was there because I was in the staff room and she was in the room next to it. She was talking to the classroom assistant and I heard her say 'well of course he is an only child.'

She explained that, when she had raised the question that he could be dyslexic with the teacher, this possibility was dismissed out of hand and she was then asked 'do you ever have fun with him at home?' It was apparent to Mandy that this question, which seemed to her somewhat inappropriate under the circumstances, related to her family size. For the most part, Mandy had succeeded in not allowing feelings of inadequacy or of reproductive failure to compromise her identity as a parent or to get in the way of her relationships with other mothers. However, she did express concern that her son may not be perceived as 'normal' because he is an only child. Mandy's narrative is highly significant. Despite her strong commitment to doing 'a good job' and her relative confidence in her own parental competence, she demonstrates the pervasiveness of the cultural hostility in Britain to having only one child.

Conclusion

For the most part, the narratives analysed in this chapter constitute a striking contrast to those of parents who had unambiguously chosen to have only one child. Indeed, it has become apparent that there are profound conflicts of interest between parents who are so frequently united under the banner 'single child family'. The possibility of reproductive choice means that some would rather expose their infertility than to bear the assumption of selfishness associated with the exercise of choice; others distance themselves from images of desperation and dysfunction by emphasising their reproductive freedom. There is a strong sense of cultural contradiction between these two positions. The very logic employed by those who defended their choice to have one child is precisely the same logic that causes other parents so much anxiety. While those who have exercised reproductive choice defend their decision in terms of monogamous love for the child, those who were unable to have a second one anguish over the undiluted nature of their relationship with their only child. Yet opposing statements such as 'I could never love another child in the same way' and 'I will never be good enough for her' are both based upon a child-centred view of family life and differing interpretations of the same ideology of intensive motherhood.

This research has revealed that the meaning of having only one child relates as much to the commitment to this ideology as the meaning of having a larger family.. The problem for those parents described in this chapter is that, for the most part, they subscribe to the more usual and more dominant view that a good mother has at least two children. The consequence of their commitment to this set of values is that, when no second child eventuates, their position seems highly ambiguous and unsatisfactory. It is as though they continue to try to play the repertoire expected of them but find they cannot complete it. The importance of cultural repertoire was demonstrated in the last chapter. Some parents made their choice to have only one child possible by selecting certain images and arguments from their repertoire to construct a version of responsible parenthood that involves having only one child. Indeed, the cultural opposition they encountered to their reproductive choice seemed only to enhance their capacity to defend it. As we have seen, some of those who had been denied choice were also able to consult and apply a set of values that made having one child possible even though this had not been their original intention. Coralie's use of the cultural

image of the 'career woman', for example, provided a repertoire to conceal the unavailability of choice. It seemed one that was more straightforward and more recognisable than the version that involves making public the inability to reproduce for a second time.

However, some parents seemed to suggest that they were silenced by their inability to bear a second child. They found themselves pitted between the options of telling what Marion considers as 'a social, hypocritical lie' and what Judith considers to be the public bearing of her soul. Having demonstrated their potential for fertility and their intention to parent by having one child, they find that, if there is a repertoire available to them, it is a most obscure and unfamiliar one. Sandelowski describes the infertile as 'involuntary members of a marginally deviant group' (Sandelowski, 1993, p.73). For those parents of one child who are also infertile, they can find themselves in the contradictory position of both belonging to a group and simultaneously deviating from it. Furthermore, their membership of the 'club' of parenthood places them in a context in which they are questioned repeatedly about their reproductive intentions and are continually reminded of their apparent difference. After all, the assumption that a child needs siblings has been embedded in British common sense since the 1950s. Therefore, the continual questions seem to relate not only to their intentions but also to their competence and commitment to parenting the child they have brought into the world.

The same psychological discourse that created the assumption that a child needs siblings is precisely the same one that has trapped some of these parents into a sense of inadequacy and failure. Barbara suggests both that her view of family life has been determined by emotions prompted in childhood and that she perceives her daughter to be bereft without siblings. She also suggests that that she has no choice in the way that she 'feels', that the selection of discourses in favour of having only one child is not an option available to her. This view seems to demonstrate what Furedi describes as 'emotional determinism', the idea that life is determined by emotions that are beyond the individual's control (Furedi, 2003, p.30). The psychological discourse that underpins emotional determinism has both created Barbara's problem in the first place and serves to keep her subject to it. However, what has become evident when parents talk about their negotiation of health services to attempt to have a second child is that they do indeed exercise some choice in the values they consult and apply to their situation. In presenting themselves as worthy and deserving of IVF treatment, for example, they are required to consult certain values upon which they construct a version of family life that necessitates having a second child. This cultured capacity is important when they find that they need to have a second child to conform to social norms and yet their existing child seems to place doubt on their deservedness for health resources. It is one that militates, however, against becoming reconciled to having only one child when the pursuit of a second one fails.

Furedi also draws attention to the erosion of the right to privacy in a cultural context characterised by a therapeutic ethos (Furedi, 2004, p.67). In particular, he draws attention to the incursion of the state into the private domain of family life. There are examples in the narratives of these parents of resentment towards what they present as gratuitous bureaucratic intrusion into their personal lives. The unsolicited advice from Judith's doctor that she would regret not trying for a second child and the nurse's reminder to Nancy that she could not escape the identity of infertility exemplify a

public curiosity with reproduction. In this context, it is highly significant that Christine, who is so well aware of the repertoire of infertility, chooses to reject it with its implication of neuroticism and questionable parental competence. The way these parents describe the continuous questioning prompted by the absence of a second child seems to exemplify a contemporary obsession with reproduction and disrespect for privacy. When Judith asks 'why is it even an issue?' perhaps one answer is that psychological discourse has made it one. Another is that parents are subject to a culture described by Douglas and Michaels as one of 'frenzied hypernatism' (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, ch.1). As Nancy points out, in this culture the rules that protected reproductive privacy for her parents' generation appear to have been overturned. Yet it seems a reflection of the competitiveness of this 'hypernatist' culture that so many of these parents seemed to find themselves distanced and isolated by the disclosure of infertility and reproductive loss.

One final point that needs to be addressed in relation to these parents who had wanted but could not have a second child is that a disproportionate number of them are highly educated, some at the highest levels of educational attainment. Of course, this does seem to corroborate the view that the fertility of highly educated women is being constrained by employment cultures, by their own ambitions and by naivety of the expiration of female fertility. Yet, overall, this study seems to have demonstrated a high level of awareness of the 'biological ceiling' and the way that this awareness is not always conducive to increasing fertility. The experiences of these highly educated women do not indicate any ambivalence towards motherhood. Indeed, there is some support for Hays' view that women in high status jobs employ the most intensive approaches to parenting (Hays, 1996, p.161). What this study does seem to indicate is that the very highly educated women in this study who were unable to have a second child appear the most vulnerable. Social relationships seem more problematic because they had been isolated from parental networks until they embarked upon parenthood. The nature of their work does not provide them with a cultural resource to demonstrate their competence with children in the way that many of the less educated women were able to do. Furthermore, because of the discourse about 'reluctant mothers', these women seemed to have all the more motivation to distance themselves from this image and to demonstrate their commitment to parenting through an unfulfilled intention for a second child.

Chapter 7: What parents say about bringing up their one child

Introduction

In a recent study of contemporary British lifestyles, Willmott suggests that ‘parents are taking parenting very seriously, and perhaps more assiduously than in the past’ (Willmott, 2003, p.153). Certainly, those who participated in this study appear both serious and assiduous in their approach to their parental responsibilities. The justifications given by parents who freely chose to limit their family have been shown to be child-centred, demonstrating a very high level of commitment and devotion to the child about whom they speak. Those who wanted more children seem most concerned that their transgression of reproductive norms may be perceived as a dereliction of duty to a much wanted only child. There is little sense that these parents were either ambivalent about parenthood or inconsiderate of the dominant ideology of contemporary child-rearing. Yet Arnold’s suggestion that ‘kid’s don’t need stuff they need siblings’⁹³ constitutes not only a vernacular way of perpetuating the discourse that has made having only one child so problematic. It constitutes also an indictment of naivety upon those who parent an only child.

In examining the meaning of having just the one child, this study is also intended to illuminate what parents have to say about bringing up their child in contemporary society. Given the pervasiveness of the discourse that places doubt upon these parents and their motivations, it seemed unlikely that they would be oblivious to what is said about them. The ‘cultured capacities’ of those who chose to limit themselves to only one child, and the anxieties and discomfort of those who did not, seem to relate to an acute awareness of parenting norms and standards. This chapter will examine the way the parents who participated in this study interpret contemporary parenting ideology and what they say about their child. It will examine also the impact upon them of the discourse that has attempted to mandate the presence of siblings by turning psychological hypothesis into common sense.

It was intended that interviewees should first dwell upon reproductive decision making, including experiences of infertility, and then move on to talk about the child’s upbringing. In practice, this distinction often proved infeasible. Some parents talked almost exclusively about their child’s upbringing, justifying their reproductive decision in terms of its perceived advantages to their child. In such cases, they presented their arguments and claims as common sense, as though their decision should require little or no explanation. But, at the opposite end of the spectrum of choice, some experiences of infertility seemed so immediate and so intense that they dominated the narratives. Those who still clung to the hope that there would be a second child found it much more difficult to talk at length about the actuality of only childhood. Perhaps for this reason, some of those who had endeavoured to have a second child but could talk persuasively about their child’s upbringing had engaged, necessarily, in much ideological work. Therefore, this chapter draws heavily upon the narratives of those who have more years of parenthood behind them who had either relinquished the possibility of a second child or had chosen to have no more than one.

⁹³ The Independent 15th March 2003, see Chapter 3

“It is the quality of relationships that count not the numbers”

Derek, who had done considerable ‘ideological work’ in order to reconcile himself to the idea that there would be no planned second child, places great importance on the quality of the relationship with his daughter. He has come round to the view that his fourteen year old daughter has not been disadvantaged in any way by her lack of siblings. Rather, he suggests that ‘the intensity of the relationship can be a big plus’. As the head of a primary school, his views are informed in part by his professional experience:

“As I said earlier, it is to do with the quality of relationships. I can think of children that have horrendous relationships with their parents. There are some fantastic relationships between single parents and single children, brilliant. Certainly having brothers and sisters affects children sometimes in a negative way at school. Sometimes it can do, the competition. They will be compared and all that sort of thing but plenty of other times there is a brilliant relationship between brothers and sisters.”

Derek expresses indignation at the assumptions that he has observed in the media about ‘single children’. And although he asserts that numbers do not count he is treading a fine line here. On the one hand he is concerned to resist the notion, implicit in media representations, that family size in any way determines the quality life within the family. On the other, it is evident that he has made an evaluation of only childhood and has found advantage in his daughter’s circumstances. He refers on several occasions to a family he knows well in which there are four children and in which relationships are highly problematic. His evaluation has been prompted both by his anger at the public portrayal of only children and by a decision years earlier to abandon IVF treatment. For a man who expresses his views in a calm and considered way, he states that the pejorative statements he has read in the newspapers make him feel ‘almost aggressive’. He would like to see ‘this stigma removed from society’.

Derek’s emphasis upon the quality of the relationship between parent and child is entirely consistent with the dominant ideology of contemporary child-rearing. As Hay’s has demonstrated, it is one which holds parents responsible for the way their child turns out and it is the intensity of this relationship which is now considered necessary for favourable outcomes (Hays, 1996, p.108). According to this logic ‘the proof is in the pudding’. That is to say, if a parent can positively appraise their child’s behaviour and attributes then their relationship with the child and their approach to parenting can be considered to have been effective. It could be argued that the culture of ‘intensive mothering’ represents a reversal of the logic that made only childhood so problematic by giving advantage to those who can devote the most to their child. According to Hays, a moral obligation has been constructed that ‘involves selflessly giving much of one’s time and attention to the unspoiled and unspoilable child’ (ibid p.65).

Of course, the centrality of the child’s position within this context has provided an important cultural resource for those parents who chose to have only one child to defend their action. What is highly significant here is the way that parents like Derek,

who had wanted more children, were able to draw upon these cultural beliefs and incorporate them into their repertoires when talking about their child's upbringing. Despite the enormous variation in the reproductive experiences of these parents, this difference manifested itself remarkably little in what they said about their child and their relationship with him or her. That is, the distinction between whether a parent had freely chosen to have one child or had endured IVF in an attempt to have another, was not usually evident in what they said about his or her upbringing once the intention to have a second child had been abandoned.

There was considerable variation in the way different parents interpreted the dominant ideology of contemporary child-rearing. And it has become apparent that they are no less subject to this ideology than any other parent, contrary to certain hypotheses about small family size. Where patterns of logic were discernable, they were more likely to manifest themselves according to educational and social rather than reproductive variables. As Derek has demonstrated, the parents who participated in this study are well aware of the charges that have been made about them. The opportunity to talk about their relationship with their child afforded them also the opportunity to articulate their defences against perceived or actual criticism and to demonstrate that they had defied social stereotypes.

Mandy, who had attempted to have another child, expresses here the important assumption that enabled parents to present their family life in highly positive terms:

"Relationships generally benefit from time and time spent with one another so as a general rule if you have got one child you are probably spending more time."

The idea that a child will 'benefit from time' is echoed by Keith who was himself an only child. He describes his fourteen year old daughter in this way:

"She's got the confidence. She can stand her ground in anything. We have both put that into her. She can. She knows who she is."

'She knows who she is' was also the claim made by Cynthia who had started out with none of Keith's confidence that her daughter would turn out so well. It was particularly notable that those parents whose child was approaching or had reached adolescence emphasised not only their confidence but also their relative maturity. Coralie described the way her sixteen year old daughter had negotiated a part time job in a hairdressing salon on the strength of her capacity to talk to customers. She stated:

"We have been able to treat her like an adult which maybe isn't good in the beginning because maybe children should have like a childhood and we tried to do that and focused on that but now that she is an adult we can treat her like an adult. It's nice. It really is."

At the time of interview, Derek and Nancy's daughter had just left the house for a day out in London with her friends. Nancy commented that 'Freya has them all organised' and that, in comparison to her daughter's maturity, these other girls 'can seem a bit silly'. Having been an only child herself, she suggested that Freya feels the need to be 'a good girl'. But she also suggests that only children are 'closer to their parents',

hence her daughter's relative maturity. These parents also perceived that, as a result of the quality of relationship with their child, they had been able to avoid the problems generally associated with adolescence. Shirley stated:

"I have got a poppet. She has never ever given me any trouble. I mean we have teenage life round the corner but she has never ever given so I mean everything as far as that is concerned is absolutely perfect."

There was a very strong implication in what these parents had to say that, by treating their child with respect and by establishing good channels of communication with them they have brought about the sort of positive outcome that Shirley describes. Catherine, who had herself grown up with five siblings suggested that this sort of dialogue is infeasible when there is more than one child. She says of the relationship with her daughter:

"You also have all the time in the world to sit and discuss things and to encourage and support and be friendly - I think it is a huge time factor actually."

This opportunity for dialogue prompted some parents to comment not only upon their child's maturity but also upon their advanced verbal communication. Diane refers to her son's 'precocity', a term that was applied pejoratively to only children by Cunnington in 1913⁹⁴. A century later, parents related their child's relative maturity to qualities such as eloquence and sociability and present it as a positive attribute. Diane describes her eight year old son thus:

"If I look at his social skills, his ability to react in different circumstances, he is much more adaptable than similar children or children of a similar age and particularly in adult company. You can take him out for a dinner at night and know he is going to behave and if we have people with us he will make conversation and he is able to do that."

The correlation between small family size and high levels of educational attainment is central to the Judith Blake's hypotheses (Blake, 1981,1989). It has also been highlighted by Falbo et al (1985, ch.5) in their defence of 'the single child family'. This discourse was invoked by Rosemary, a primary school teacher who suggested that the behaviour and language of children corresponds to 'the lowest common denominator'. Therefore, as an only child, she believes that her nine year old son has some competitive advantage to other children of the same age from larger families:

"I think all the adult attention and interaction that he has had has actually given him a significant advantage particularly in language because he has had to interact with adults most of the time so his language development was always very good and he is not worried about talking to anyone. He is a very confident articulate child."

In the context of the child's education and attributes parents referred repeatedly to the importance of 'choice'. There was a strong sense that an only child has greater

⁹⁴ see Chapter 2, p.2

choices and opportunities than a child from a larger family. Coralie invoked the deterministic beliefs about birth order by suggesting that an only child is free from the constraints and expectations that befall an oldest or a youngest or a middle child. In many cases, parents asserted that they were able to give their child choices that had been unavailable when they were children. Julie, who was the youngest of six children, feels particularly strongly on this issue. She pointed out that her clothes were handed down from older siblings, stating that 'your character is in your clothes'. In contrast she says of her daughter:

"It's the choices and the freedoms and having choices and I think hopefully in the future when Emma is old enough to live on her own independently she has choices and she will make the right choices and she'll have reasons for those choices."

But although it was very common for parents to use this discourse of choice to reinforce the efficacy of their relationship with their child, there was much variation in their expectations of what the child would make of these choices. Diane had recently moved her eight year old son to a new school so that he could be admitted to a 'Talented and Gifted Programme'. She had considered that he was not being sufficiently challenged at his former school and commended the academic and extra-curricula opportunities now available to him. She equated the availability of choice with 'taking risks' and described the way she had helped him to learn to ride a bicycle and to swim in far less time than would normally be expected. She stated that she would not want to 'hold back' in encouraging him to achieve academically and that, by virtue of the school he attends, he will be expected to go on to university.

In contrast, what is important to Penny is that her daughter will have the opportunity for university, even if she does not avail herself of it. She stated:

"I am not sure that she is going to be academic or not. I would like her to have the choice of going to university or whatever, but if she doesn't then so be it. She can try and earn a fortune (laughs). ... Yeah I hope that we don't go into the sort of putting pressure on her. I don't want to do that really."

Shirley expressed the view that, as a parent, 'you have to give them every opportunity' and it seems to be one that Penny shares. Yet Penny seems also to be expressing a dilemma as she does not want to be seen to be putting too much pressure upon her child. After all, there is a discourse which charges parents of only children with burdening them with all of their hopes and expectations. It is one which prompted Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) to correlate an assumed increase in single child families with an increase in child abuse. They choose to quote Hurrelmann in the claim:

"Parents want 'the best for my child' but fail to recognise what the child really wants or needs. The trend to one-child families ... hastens this development. A large proportion of parents nowadays are pushing their children either openly or (usually) covertly to get high marks at school" (Hurrelmann, 1989 in Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p.138)

In light of this discourse, it is perhaps unsurprising that there was clear reticence to express high hopes for the outcomes of the choices to which Julie refers. The provision of opportunities such as university, sporting and leisure activities, playing musical instruments and school trips provide these parents with important cultural resources to argue that there are indeed advantages to being an only child. For, in many cases, they also argued that they simply could not afford to offer such a range of opportunities to more than one child. However, Diane was unusual in her unambiguous ambition for her son. Although parents express a moral obligation to encourage and pay for these activities, many of them also seem to be saying that the quality of the relationship must not be compromised by expecting a return on investment.

Notwithstanding, those parents who had received further education themselves were much more likely to mention university and to express the hope that their child would take the opportunity for further education than were those who had left school at sixteen. Jan, herself a graduate, suggested that her son will need to give serious thought to the choices available to him on leaving school. She stated that she and her husband will accept his decision whether he chooses 'to be a plumber or to do a PhD' as long as he has given the matter sufficient thought. Sarah and Roger state that 'if he wants to go to university or if he wants a deposit for a house' they will be able to help financially as they have no other dependants. However Julie reinforces the importance of the principle rather than any anticipated outcomes of choice. Although she asserts that she does not want her daughter to take a 'menial job' as she was required to do, she goes on to say:

"Even if she wanted to be a cleaner somewhere. But she has the choice. I didn't have the choice. I had to go out and find a job fast. Emma doesn't have to have that. She doesn't need to. I will support Emma until the very end of her days. I want to give her the freedom to do what she wants to do and help her financially."

It should be pointed out here that these parents are certainly not unusual in their acknowledgement of the moral duty to go on supporting their child beyond adolescence. In 'Complicated Lives', Willmott has drawn attention to what is described as the phenomenon of 'Forever Parents' (Willmott, 2003, p.163). From a study of contemporary British parents he concludes that 'adult children are relying on their parents more than they have ever done'. They are relying upon them not only for an unprecedented level of financial support but also they are delaying their initial departure from home and they are more likely to return to the parental home after the age of thirty (ibid p.166).

Clearly, this 'Forever Parent' culture provided the participants in this study with the opportunity to point out perceived qualitative advantages to having only one child. Catherine suggested that some parents with several children would feel 'there is not a lot I can do about it' if their child was either unable to obtain academic qualifications or, alternatively, sought funding to attend university. Although she emphasises that her daughter is already required to manage her own money very carefully, she also suggests the opportunity for financial assistance will be available to her in the future:

“It would be wrong for her because she can’t go through life thinking ‘hey my parents can bale me out’ and we certainly wouldn’t do that. However if she wasn’t at all academic but had a flair for hairdressing, I don’t know, we could probably afford to help her start her own business without having to sweep floors in another salon or something like that.”

Having described his anger at media representations of single child families, Derek went on to suggest in the following statement that he feels entitled to identify and promote the advantages of having one child:

“The other is the financial side. If you want to play that game you can say financially it is a big advantage. You can afford private education if you wish or when you eventually depart you can leave them more money. I don’t think those things are that important but you don’t hear enough about the positives, I think, and that actually does annoy me quite a lot. It is assumed as a negative thing and I don’t see it as that and obviously some people do make the choice.”

What is most significant here is that Catherine and Derek, who represent opposite ends of the spectrum of reproductive choice, express similar values when evaluating the upbringing of their child. It is also significant that they seem to feel the need to make these evaluations in order to defend a position that they feel is so subject to attack.

This emphasis upon the quality of relationship between parent and child, with, in some cases, implicit financial advantages, prompted parents to speculate about more problematic and dysfunctional households. Derek, a headmaster, had alluded to ‘horrendous relationships’ between parents and children. Many other parents in this study were engaged in professional or voluntary work with children and used their perspective as a cultural resource to reinforce the importance of good parenting. As a special needs teacher and foster mother Julie stated:

“I think the majority of kids with behaviour problems at school, it is because the parents don’t have time with them. I mean, it is very difficult to have five children and have quality time with each child. I believe you can’t do that.”

Catherine stated that, as a result of her voluntary work with young offenders, she was convinced that juvenile crime is the result of ‘inconsistencies in how people treat children’. She went on to say that:

“It would be interesting to know how many only children there are, and this is going to sound derogatory, but how many children there are living in inner cities in high rise blocks. I don’t think there are very many.”

Annika, a teacher who had chosen to specialise in special needs education after her son was born, stated:

“I think this is the teacher bit of me. You see children that are so out of control sometimes. I have a real horror of that happening to Robert.”

Despite the vicarious grief that Barbara had expressed on behalf of her daughter and her suggestion that ‘I can never be good enough for her’ she had come round to the view that her daughter is not suffering in any way. Furthermore, she draws upon her professional expertise in mental health when commenting on the causes of problematic family relationships. In the following statement she suggests that some mothers may consider their child as an emotional substitute for an adult partner:

“It’s not a proper sort of grown up maternal view, that this is a separate human being who is autonomous. I think that is reflected in some of the terrible relationship problems that we are seeing.”

It has been demonstrated that those parents, like Julie and Catherine, who had freely chosen to have only one child, have been able to invoke moral panic about delinquency to justify their reproductive choice. However, it is most significant that parents like Derek, Annika and Barbara who had fully intended to have more children, use very similar arguments when evaluating their family life. Once they are able to separate problems of reproduction with the actuality of their child’s upbringing, their anxieties seem to diminish. In a cultural context in which the child’s behaviour is attributed to the quality and intensity of relationships within the family, they seem to have found themselves at some advantage. After all, it is not their child who is exhibiting ‘behaviour problems at school’ or is perceived to be ‘so out of control’.

The very same discourse about family decline that has been used by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, ch.4) to discredit the single child family is precisely the one that offers these parents such reassurance. Clearly, they have a heightened motivation to demonstrate the seriousness with which they take their parental duties. The prevailing cultural beliefs about only children and the media portrayals that cause Derek so much anger only serve to reinforce the importance of positive evaluations of their family relationships. With much irony, and with reference to the implication of abuse, Patricia describes what she perceives to be her father-in-law’s surprise at her son’s normality:

“Each time we go down he says: (whispers) ‘Oh he has turned out quite well hasn’t he?’. (shouts) ‘Yes it is because we don’t chain him to his bed every night!’”

There is remarkable consistency with which the parents in this study emphasise the positive relationship they have with their one child and their pleasure at the way he or she has ‘turned out’. Clearly those with an adolescent child have most to say on this subject. However, the argument that it is ‘the quality of the relationship and not numbers that count’ is a difficult one to maintain. As soon as parents begin to make qualitative evaluations of the relationship with their child then it seems inevitable that they need to draw attention to perceived disadvantages in having siblings. Even Derek, who speaks with such diplomacy, cannot avoid implying that his daughter is at some advantage to a child from a larger family. It is surely significant that even those who had intended to have several children are drawn into these comparisons. Their arguments represent a defensive response to the cultural resistance they have encountered to their family size and invoke the same logic as those who justified their decision to have no more than one child. Ironically, their defences are constructed

upon expert-guided discourses about responsible parenting. Therefore, the capacity to present themselves as devoted parents who offer ‘every opportunity’ well beyond the years of childhood is entirely consistent with contemporary principles of parenting. In a context also in which the decline of the nuclear family is held responsible for societal decline, they find a very strong defence in upholding the family in its most nuclear form.

“My child is not a typical spoilt only child”

So far, it seems that what parents have to say is heavily influenced by what is said about them. As exemplified in talk about the quality of the relationship between parent and child, they have particular reason to turn parenting discourses to their advantage to defend their position. Of course, the most pervasive feature of the socially constructed problem of having only one child is that the child is ‘sure to be spoilt’⁹⁵. This notion has become so embedded in common sense that rarely does it seem to require explanation. So when parents in this study acknowledged the existence of characteristics that typify an only child, they qualify their claim with the adjective ‘spoilt’. They assume that everyone understands the way a spoilt child behaves in the same way that they also understand that an only child will necessarily be spoilt. However, it became clear that the contemporary version of the act of spoiling is at odds with the psychological construct of the child spoilt by a surfeit of maternal indulgence. This is exemplified in Judith’s statement that ‘a child cannot be spoilt by too much love and attention’.

That parents have been able to defend their approach to parenting by suggesting that ‘the intensity of the relationship can be a big plus’ is indicative of a significant change in beliefs. In general, the act of spoiling is understood in more prosaic terms today and it relates to material excess. For example, Willmott has analysed expenditure by British parents upon their children. He finds that some parents ‘claim that by spoiling them, by giving them too much, they are endangering their development into adulthood (by failing to instil a proper understanding of money, values, responsibilities and hard work) (Willmott, 2003, p.150). But he also points out that deprivation of sufficient ‘thrills, experiences and belongings’ is central to arguments about child poverty.

In light of these discourses it is unsurprising that parents dwelt on the notion of spoiling when talking about the way they bring up their child. But it is also unsurprising that their interpretations of what it means to spoil a child were subjective, varied and contradictory. Willmott suggests that it is ‘extremely hard’ for parents under any circumstances to know exactly what the balance should be between deprivation and over-indulgence. Certainly the parents who participated in this study used the opportunity for narrative to demonstrate the seriousness with which they took their responsibilities and with which they had considered this balance in relation to material consumption. They also took the opportunity to demonstrate that their child’s behaviour is uncharacteristic of what may be expected of an only child.

⁹⁵ Reference to parents in Cartwright’s (1976) study; see Chapter 3, p.11

In some cases parents from the highly educated group alluded to alternative, psychological interpretations of spoiling. For example Marion and Mike demonstrate their awareness of the kind of discourse employed by Spock in their attempt to define what it means to spoil a child. They are referring here to Mike's only childhood:

Mike: *I think there was a sense of that the only child, spoilt, centre of attention. I can't say that caused any difficulty.*

Were you spoilt in your view?

Mike: *Materially, comparatively, in relationship to my class, materially but spoilt has a connotation of ...*

Marion: *You got a huge amount of attention from your mother.*

Mike: *Huge amount*

Marion: *She was quite strict at the same time.*

Mike's subsequent positive appraisal of his relationship with his parents effectively undermined any suggestion that he may have been 'spoilt' by the closeness of his relationship with his mother. Marion and Mike agree that, to some extent, they have modelled the way they relate to their son on the way his mother related to him, spending time talking to him and reading stories together. But in case there should be any suggestion of maternal indulgence, Marion emphasises the way her work provides a safeguard against focusing too intensely upon her child:

"Because we both enjoy the work that we do I am much less concerned about me putting pressure on him, that I think sometimes somebody who didn't work at all and didn't have any kind of hobbies, that is what I was worried about in families where there was only one child."

Marion had argued that their particular justification for the consumption of IVF to have a second child related to their interpretations of Mike's only childhood. However, despite Mike's belief that he could have been considered to have been materially spoilt in relation to other children, there is no sense here that he believes that he has been damaged by the experience. Neither do they believe that their son's childhood is being disadvantaged in any way.

The incongruence between the abstract constructions of only childhood and lived experience is apparent in Barbara's narrative. It is Barbara who has suggested that her daughter 'was bereaved before she started', that she 'needs to be bolstered by siblings' and that she as a mother 'can never be good enough for her'. Her claims imply that her daughter's life has been spoiled or damaged by the absence of siblings. However, when Barbara talks about the reality of the girl's life her language changes. She stated:

"She's flourishing like a weed (laugh). Nursery has been great. She's actually been to two nurseries and settled very well in both of them actually and she's

very happy there, good friends. She loves the company of other children. She's doing very well. She likes her life."

Barbara concludes that her anxieties have nothing to do with her daughter but are founded upon her own problematic childhood. Her metaphoric use of the term 'flourishing like a weed' is perhaps significant. It is as though the little girl is growing healthily in defiance of her context and of what may be assumed or expected for her.

Only in two cases did parents express concern that the absence of siblings may, in some way, be harming their child and having an adverse effect upon their behaviour. But although at one point Teresa speculated that her son may appear too competitive and insufficiently considerate of others, she also stated that 'he isn't a typical only child. He is very good at sharing'. She also stated that 'David has never been spoilt'. While she is particularly aware of psychological discourse, she acknowledges by the end of the interview that she is at a loss to understand how it can be applied to her son. Vicky also tries to evaluate the way her son has been affected by not having siblings. She expresses the view that her decision to work full time and thus her resistance to having a second child has 'damaged' the nine year old boy. She described in this way the behaviour that causes her so much concern:

"My son will come home and maybe he has had a very tiring, a very frustrating day and feeling angry and feeling frustrated and he has to lash out at someone.... I take it personally and I know that I shouldn't and I know to a certain extent because he's an only child there's no one else. My child's got no one to fight with."

Perhaps Vicky confirms Winnicott's view that 'the only child's relative lack of opportunity for expressing the aggressive side of his nature is a serious thing' (Winnicott, 1957, p.109). Has she, in this sense, spoiled her son by failing to give him a sibling? Of course, Vicky does not describe her son as 'spoilt' and it is precisely his capacity to express aggression that causes so much concern. Although Vicky speculates that she may have damaged her son, she also invokes psychology in a contradictory way to suggest that his behaviour has not been determined by an absence of siblings. She suggests that although there are some children who have a 'personality type' suitable to be an only child, her son is not such a person. She describes him thus:

"He's very lively, he likes company, he likes to interact. He's not really only child material. I would have been perfectly happy to just have one child if I had a child who was suited to be an only child. I have a son who is just not suited to it at all."

In this way she removes the possibility that being an only child has determined her son's behavioural attributes. The boy, in her view, behaves like someone who is not 'a typical only child'.

Philipa, who was an only child herself, alluded to the possibility that spoiling could relate in some way to the child's deprivation of social relationships. She stated that she was concerned that her daughter should be 'socially equipped' and went on to say:

“The thing that is driving me to sort of make sure that she is exposed to situations and experiences, people, in a way that we make her, er, so that she is not hampered by being the spoilt only child.”

Significantly, in language reminiscent of Cunnington (1913), she also suggested that only children miss out on ‘rough and tumble’. But, as her own daughter went to a childminder from the age of six months where ‘she had the precious edges knocked off her’, she is confident that she can neither be considered socially deprived nor spoilt.

The confusion about how a lack of siblings may affect a child and the contradiction within the interpretation of spoiling is apparent in what Senali has to say:

“Whichever way you do it you are selfish for having them and then you are going to spoil them. Hang on! Are we spoiling them or are we being selfish? Make your mind up.”

Senali was particularly indignant about comments by other parents that she had read on a parenting web site that it is selfish to have only one child. Having grown up in a developing country with first hand experience of what she perceives as the problems of over-population, she believes that there are no grounds for this charge of selfishness. But what is most significant in her statement is the way that she dissociates spoiling from being selfish. In light of her cultural beliefs, the concepts of spoiling and parental selfishness seem to Senali to be in opposition to each other. Ironically, although she suggests that her son is indeed ‘spoilt rotten’, she makes this claim with reference to her own experience of poverty and to local families living on an income of £10,000 per annum. However, she goes on to point out that ‘the star chart will never work if you give him everything anyway’ and describes the way she and her husband ration their son’s possessions.

In most cases parents interpreted the concept of spoiling in a quantitative, material sense and dissociated it from qualitative evaluations of their child’s behaviour. Some suggested that they were spoiling their child to some extent and certainly when compared to their own childhood. This was particularly evident in cases where parents felt that their own childhoods had been disadvantaged by financial hardship as well as by a lack of parental attention. Therefore they were uninhibited in defining the financial and material advantages in having only one child even if that meant that they could be perceived to be spoiling the child to some degree. Patricia exemplifies here the way many of these parents dealt with such an admission:

“I must be honest. Compared to my childhood Connor does have absolutely everything and a lot of people would look and say ‘yes he is spoilt’ But he is polite and if you take the time to ask how he is ‘fine thank you’ and he has common decencies and I think well, that is the main thing. But he has a playstation in his room, a television in his room and we have theme park season tickets.”

Patricia’s defence here is twofold. First she takes responsibility for introducing the possibility of spoiling but counters the impact of this admission by giving a positive

appraisal of her son's behaviour. She went on to point out that all of her son's friends have siblings but also enjoy much the same material benefits that he receives.

It is apparent that Patricia is well aware that, according to interpretation, she is 'spoiling' her son. Like Patricia, a number of parents used the opportunity for narrative to evaluate their performance in terms of spoiling and measured it in relation to other comparable families. In some cases they were able to demonstrate that their child receives less than others, as exemplified in this statement by Lizzie:

"I mean Charles is very conscious of the word spoilt and uses it quite a lot and we don't often use it here and you quite often hear him say 'Oh that boy in my class is really spoilt because his dad keeps on buying him computer games every time he comes back from holiday' and sometimes if he asks me for something in the shop and I'll just say 'no you've had sweets or a game this week' - or a toy - then he will always accept it and never argue and say 'Oh yes well I don't want to be spoilt do I?' (laughs) so he actually recognises, I think, that he can actually understand that it is a good thing to not always get what you want."

What is also important here is this boy's apparent awareness of his material advantages. For a number of parents, their child's appreciation of the gifts they receive together with a capacity to share with others were interpreted as confirmation that they cannot be spoilt. Mandy pointed out that parents of only children are much more likely to be concerned about their child's capacity to share than are those with larger families. Certainly the importance of sharing is revealed in this way by Shirley:

"We could give her anything she wanted. She is not a spoilt brat.....She has always got friends in. She is always out with friends. She is not selfish. She will share with everybody."

Shirley is uninhibited in her claim that she and her husband could give their daughter 'anything she wanted'. It is made with reference to her own childhood and the effect of her father's death with resultant financial hardship.

The contradictory interpretation of the concept of spoiling is clearly demonstrated in the narratives of Julie and Keith. At the beginning of their interview Keith stated:

"I was spoilt rotten. (laughter) The pocket money was divided between me."

It should be recalled that the comparison between Keith's only childhood and Julie's experience as one of six children resulted in a strong conviction that they should have no more than one child. However, Julie later emphasises that people are often surprised that her daughter is an only child because she does not behave like 'a spoilt little brat'. She also emphasised their belief in clear rules and strict discipline and specifies their punishment for misbehaviour, such as 'grounding'. What is evident from the contradiction in these narratives is that these parents draw a sharp distinction between the act of spoiling on the part of the parent and the adjective 'spoilt' when applied to their child. Spoiling in this sense is relative, not absolute. Paradoxically, although they have set out to spoil the child in material terms, the child cannot be spoilt. Their commitment to ensuring that the child has clear discipline, an awareness

of the value of what they are being given and a capacity to share was used consistently to demonstrate that they have not succeeded in creating a 'spoilt' child.

This paradox is evident in what Coralie has to say. She is confident that her sixteen year old daughter is not spoilt and yet she also argues that it was inevitable that she and her husband have spoilt their daughter. She states:

"Because we both work she is showered with all sorts of stuff and although we didn't want to spoil her you can't help it. When you have the money you will spoil them. She will always have the latest things but she is not spoilt. She doesn't come across as a spoilt brat which is nice."

Others confirmed Coralie's suggestion that spoiling is the inevitable consequence of affluence. For example Jan states:

"His friends are spoilt and some of them having siblings. He is a product of parents who have money."

However, there is more of significance to Coralie's discourse on spoiling. She describes the way that, for a time, her daughter asked persistently for a sibling and was fascinated by the arrival of a new baby in her friend's household. Coralie, who was advised not to have a second child on medical grounds, uses the lack of restraint on their capacity to 'spoil' their daughter as a defence against her daughter's request. She describes the way her daughter compared the Christmas gifts she receives to those of her friends; Coralie believes that this provided confirmation that 'there are advantages to being an only child'.

Conversely, Cynthia uses the discourse on spoiling to make claims about the disadvantages of being an only child. She lives, with her husband and thirteen year old daughter, in one of the most affluent areas of London and her daughter goes to an independent school. Having grown up in a financially advantaged household, Cynthia places no value on being able to give this girl 'anything she wants'; rather, she believes that it is particularly important that they restrict her material benefits. She stated:

"We are strict on the spoiling issue. We could give her anything but we don't. She needs to know the value of things."

Having exhausted the possibilities offered by reproductive technology, Cynthia had recently attempted to persuade her husband and daughter that they should adopt or foster a child but neither were prepared to take her request seriously. She suggested that her motivation to pursue the possibility of another child is founded upon her concern that her daughter will become a 'stereotypical spoilt only child'. However, having already described her daughter as 'a delight' who receives highly positive appraisals both from school and from adult friends of the family, Cynthia laughed at the weakness of her argument. It seems that the common sense view, expressed by women interviewed by Cartwright (1976) in the post war period, that 'an only child is sure to be spoilt' is the only cultural resource now available to Cynthia to defend her pursuit of a second child.

In general, those parents who expressed disapproval of excessive expenditure upon their child were from the more highly educated group. They were more likely to suggest that rationing gifts and treats offered the opportunity for an important disciplinary lesson. However, this study did not gather quantitative information and the attitudes expressed by these parents may not necessarily reflect actual or relative expenditure. After all, the claims by parents that they were indeed 'spoiling' their child were often made with reference to childhoods considered to be relatively impoverished. Nonetheless, claims of frugality and rationing seemed to offer some parents an important defence against any suggestion of 'spoiling'. Judith who had suggested that 'a child cannot be spoilt with too much time and attention' went on to say:

"I think Sophia is a very unspoilt child. I am very aware because again it is synonymous isn't it with an only child, a spoilt brat. No, we have been at real pains not to spoil her right from the off. Obviously if you only have one child you have more to spend so you could go crazy but, no, she knows the value of treats and the nature of treats and that they are special and only for occasional indulgence."

Annika suggests that the economic difficulties of contemporary farming have necessitated financial caution therefore there is no question of 'spoiling' her son with material possessions. She stated:

"By nature Mark and I are quite careful with money and we don't just go out and buy things for ourselves so I don't think we were at risk of going out and buying lots of clothes and lots of toys for Robert."

Similarly Christine, who also drew attention to the uncertainty and hardship of farming, suggested that her son has considerably fewer possessions than other children in their small rural community. She went on to argue that he is far less aware of fashion and the consumer culture to which other children are exposed and attributed this to the absence of siblings. She reasoned that siblings can use material possessions as a means of competing with each other and they can provide a source of information about consumer products that is unavailable to her son.

As these parents have demonstrated, once the concept of spoiling a child has been interpreted in purely material terms then it becomes relative not absolute, losing the sense of irrevocable damage implicit in psychological discourse. It also becomes self-contradictory in the sense that a child can be spoilt but not spoiled. Parents can spoil a child in a material, benign sense with the conviction that their child is not spoiled because they are polite, appreciative and able to share. They could be considered to be spoiled in relation to some children but less so than others. Even those who demonstrated an awareness of spoiling in a psychological sense found no means of reconciling this concept with the reality of their child's circumstances and behaviour. With one or two exceptions, these parents could claim that their approach to parenting had reaped the desired rewards. Or in spite of their original anxieties, the child had defied the cultural stereotype of the 'typical spoiled only child'. What is most significant, though, about the claim that 'my child is not a typical spoiled only child' is that, in making it, parents succeed in confirming and reinforcing the assumptions about only children. They seem to be saying that their own particular approach to

parenting has enabled them to defy the odds but that others may be less skilled and less resourceful.

“He is every bit as interested in every little aspect of her as I am”

Barbara, who had expressed much anxiety at the concept of bringing up her daughter as an only child, takes great reassurance from her husband’s enthusiasm for fatherhood and his interest in their daughter. As a theme, fatherhood has not been given prominence so far. It was originally intended that fathers should be interviewed in each case as well as mothers and therefore their views would be elicited in defining the causes of having only one child. However, in some cases it was far less feasible to interview both parents and in others the father was unwilling to participate. Where they did take part in the study, they belonged almost invariably to the group who had not exercised reproductive choice who were also highly educated. Keith constituted a particularly notable exception to this pattern.

Yet what fathers have to say and what mothers say about them is of vital importance to this study. Although there appears to be great variation in the way different households operate, all of these parents acknowledged the critical importance of the paternal role within their family lives. While some couples referred to the equal division of domestic responsibility within the household, others seemed to operate along more traditional, gendered lines. Yet either way, and in the majority of cases, women appraised their partner’s commitment to their child and their acquittal of their paternal duties in highly positive terms. Those men who spoke for themselves sought to demonstrate the seriousness with which they fulfilled their role and the high value they placed upon their relationship with their child.

This study was, intentionally, limited to households where both parents are present. For, although the correlation between the breakdown of the parental relationship and low fertility is relatively well documented, it seemed that other causes and explanations are poorly understood. Certainly there is a tendency for social commentators to confuse the causes and effects of single child families; they suggest, as Arnold has done, that children who grow up without siblings are also likely to have absent parents. Yet some parents in this study have argued that their decision to have only one child was founded, in part, upon their determination to safeguard their partnership so that their child would grow up with both parents. And others, like Barbara, have suggested that it is more important for her child to have a father than a sibling even though it would have been her choice to have at least two children. In keeping with the discourses on the quality of relationships and on spoiling, parents chose to include fatherhood in their repertoires. Within the context of parenting rather than reproduction, it is one they knew they could play with accomplishment.

When Marion argued that her employment provided a safeguard against placing too much ‘pressure’ upon her son, she is alluding to the psychological discourse that warned that the child would be spoiled by a surfeit of maternal attention. But another important argument that mothers like Marion use as a defence against this psychological interpretation of spoiling is the father’s high level of involvement with the child. Although, in the 1960s, it was expedient for Messer⁹⁶ and others to focus

⁹⁶ The New York Times Magazine 25th February 1968

upon the absence of siblings in their creation of a new disease called 'only child syndrome', Freud (1910) himself was far more interested in the consequences of paternal absence; this is evident in his speculative biography of Leonardo da Vinci⁹⁷.

The claims-making that developed from Freudian beliefs about the relationship between a mother and her one male child underlines Sarah's vehement defence of her own approach to parenting:

"The attitudes, especially a boy and his mother, you have only got to read the literature (laughs), whether he is going to be a mummy's boy and so I actively totally discourage that. I will push the point so hard for him not to be a mummy's boy."

Sarah works full time and she and her husband Roger describe the way the care for their son is shared equally between them. Although Sarah points out that the fathers of her son's friends seem to play a much more active role in their children's upbringing than did her own father, she goes on to state that:

"It's just that Rowan has his dad to himself I mean he idolises Roger quite frankly."

The time that her son and husband spend together and the quality of their relationship seems to provide all the defence that Sarah needs to justify that Rowan is not 'a mummy's boy'.

To reinforce the significance of her husband's role within their family, Sarah works hard to demonstrate that it would have been very different had she or Roger been only children. She refers to her own upbringing with 'Mum at home, Dad never there' and she prompts Roger to describe the way his father's employment necessitated his absence from home for prolonged periods of time. She also prompts him to confirm that he had found himself playing a paternal role to his own younger brother. In fact, Sarah and Roger refer continuously throughout the interview to their own siblings, mentioning amusing comments they have made and recent family gatherings. They also refer to their son's close relationship with a childless uncle and the time he spends during school holidays with his cousins. It seems that this extended family provides an important frame of reference for this couple and that they cannot omit it from their narratives. It is surely for this reason that Sarah seeks to emphasise the inter-generational difference between her own and her son's childhood. She is well aware of the value that her own siblings have played in her life and needs to find a way of reconciling their significance with the reality of her son's life without any. For this reason, she selects fatherhood as a continuous theme in her repertoire. Not only does it provide a safeguard against the charge of maternal over-indulgence, it can be presented as more than adequate compensation for the companionship that otherwise may be provided by siblings.

Even though Julie and Keith use the circumstances of their own upbringings as a cultural resource to present only childhood in favourable terms, this does not mean that Julie herself feels ambivalence or antipathy to her own siblings. Indeed, in

⁹⁷ see Chapter 2, p.10

describing the close-knit community in which they live, she mentions that her sister lives with her family immediately across the road. She also mentions the noisy 'family get-togethers' in which she is 'teased' rather than criticised for her decision to have only one child. It seemed, on early reflection, a curious thing that some of these parents who appeared so resolute in their decision to have one child could not avoid mentioning, often with affection, the dynamics of their own larger families of origin. But, as in the case of Sarah and Roger, Julie and Keith also give prominence to the theme of fatherhood. Indeed, it is one over which they have mastery. Julie says:

"But the things I notice with being a one child family is parents' evenings. The majority are mothers. Keith would always be with me even taking time off work to actually go together. It's tiring you know. Not just me holding the fort. Most mothers you know take them to the doctors, take them to the dentists, everything is mother, mother, mother and we wanted that to be very much together. We are a family unit. We both decided to have Emma and we both want to bring her up. And it's surprising on parent's night how we only ever saw another couple there and us. You know you are looking and think 'dear me'. I know there might be reasons for it but we have noticed it through Emma's whole life at school there's only mothers going, maybe because of the break up of marriages and things and most of them end up with their mother rather than with their father."

Not long before the interview, Julie and Keith had come close to terminating their arrangement with their adolescent foster child because of his persistent drug and alcohol use. They were particularly gratified by their daughter's persuasion that he should be allowed to stay, considering this as a demonstration of her confidence and security. Keith, who considers his own father as a model for fatherhood, is clear about the reasons for this boy's difficulties:

"I look at my past and I look at the life of young David. There is no comparison really, no comparison. Not that I could have everything I wanted. He had nothing. He hasn't had a mother and father for years."

With such first hand experience of childhood deprivation through fostering for Barnados and other charitable work for their church. Julie and Keith are very clear about the reasons for their daughter's confidence. Keith describes the way he will go straight down to her school if she telephones him to tell him she is being bullied. Julie describes the way Emma discusses things with her father that she 'would never have dreamt about' discussing with hers and suggests that her openness is a clear measure that she is 'very balanced'. Julie also suggests that Emma is a 'tough character' and, in relation to discipline, 'we always make joint decisions especially if we ground her.'

Of course, this presentation of contemporary fatherhood provides parents like Julie and Keith with a powerful cultural resource in the justification for having only one child. They seem to be saying that, with this level and quality of fatherhood, their child does not need a sibling. What is most significant is the way that those who had attempted to have more children say rather similar things about the paternal role. In Barbara's case, her husband's devotion to their daughter seems to be the one cultural reality that enables her to see an alternative to the view that 'she was bereaved before she started'. Having made the point that 'he is as interested in every little aspect of her as I am' Barbara goes on to describe the relationship between father and daughter:

“She has him exactly where she wants him. He does very well. I mean he is her favourite toy at the moment. He plays and plays and plays but he also does lots of other things with her. He baths her and puts her to bed and gets up in the night sometimes and he used to take her to nursery and collects her and that’s a big part of her life.”

In fact, although Barbara’s grief at her recent miscarriages was apparent throughout the interview, she stated that she was experiencing something of a ‘breakthrough’ in her beliefs about her family. This breakthrough seemed to be the result of serious ideological work on fatherhood. While she considers that her own childhood would have been bereft without her siblings because of her father’s alcoholism, she recognises that her daughter’s upbringing with a devoted father is entirely different. Moreover, her capacity to state that her husband ‘does very well’ seems to have confirmed her moral conviction that it was right to wait for the opportunity to marry before becoming a parent. She describes her ideological work as a conflict between ‘feelings’ and rationality in this way:

“There’s a real conviction that’s part of my bones that I won’t be enough and that she needs bolstering with other people ... but there is another side of me that’s trying to be rational and say ‘look, she’s got a father who is very devoted, very hands on and interested father’ and I mean I don’t know what it would be like for us if we hadn’t had that.”

Like Barbara, many of these parents described the way the father is effectively the child’s ‘favourite toy’ or favoured playmate. This provided an important means of demonstrating the happiness of their household and the way that their child was not being deprived of social relationships. Mike did express some concern about the way he may be ‘moving between brother and dad’ for his five year old son and whether his son was demonstrating a ‘craving’ for a brother. However, Marion presented their relationship in wholly positive terms, stating:

“Of all of the dads that I know there is nobody who does nearly the amount of active involvement with their children that Mike does. But it is also that it is a very real decision on our part which I think in part comes out of your own experience.”

This reverence of the paternal role is in keeping with Marion’s view that her approach to motherhood is all the more valued because of the impact of infertility upon their experience of parenting. However, some of those women who had freely exercised reproductive choice also compared their partner’s acquittal of his paternal responsibilities favourably with others. For example Diane stated:

“My husband is brilliant and I think he is a super father. I have girlfriends and I think their husbands aren’t brilliant fathers. Again it is time. Andy is lucky because he is self-employed as well and he is quite happy to work his diary around William and do things with him on his own as well.”

Of course, for those like Diane who had chosen not to have more children, this discourse on the importance of the father's time with the child only serves to reinforce the moral appropriateness of their decision. In fact, Diane stated that her husband would have liked another child. It seems entirely possible that arguments that promote the necessity for the father to spend time exclusively with the child and the resultant quality of their relationship have played an important role in reproductive decision making. That is to say, it seems likely that Diane has rehearsed this script already in her negotiations with her husband over the possibility of a second child. Similarly Patricia stated that her husband expressed interest in having another child. Unlike Diane's husband, he is not self-employed and cannot 'work his diary' around his son. Patricia goes on to state that:

"Any spare time he has is time for Connor and to have to split it again I think it would have been quite hard to do you know and it's worked really well for us."

It seems that these parents are not unusual in the importance that they accord to time spent with their child. Willmott draws attention to research indicating that parents in the 1990s spent on average over three times as much time per day per child than did parents in the 1970s. He states:

"We found a clear sense of needing to work harder to be good parents, to provide the best for your children both materially and in terms of involvement in their lives" (Willmott, 2003, p.146)

At the time of writing, the National Family and Parenting Institute has just called for greater paternal involvement in children's education, encouraging schools 'to do their bit in making this happen by welcoming fathers into schools and making it easier for them to get involved than we have in the past.'⁹⁸ On the one hand, fathers are being admonished in this way to spend more time with their children and on the other, increasing numbers of children are growing up without fathers. Both features of this cultural context provided the parents who participated in this study with important discursive resources. In the same way that, since the 1970s, the discourse of 'attachment parenting' has permitted women to talk of monogamy in relation to their child, this language seems to have spilled over into beliefs about contemporary fatherhood. For example, Senali describes her husband's response to the arrival of their son:

"You know, like every other male who doesn't want to have children he is absolutely in love with our son and besotted by him and I think, one of those things, I don't know, men seem to find it difficult to think they could love ... You know when it was the two of us he wouldn't love the child or that I would love the baby but wouldn't love him."

Senali concluded that her husband's devotion to their son is essential to the effectiveness of their family life together. He entertains the five year old boy at weekends so that she can have time to herself and, as there is no second child, there is, apparently, sufficient love to go round.

⁹⁸ The National Family and Parenting Institute (NFPI) announced the launch on 8th April 2005 of an 'In-depth study into father's involvement in their children's education'. <http://www.nfpi.org/> accessed 12th April 2005.

There seems little question that, as a theme, fatherhood plays a significant role in these narratives, regardless of whether the father himself participated in the interview and regardless of whether the parents exercised reproductive choice. For those who were denied choice, there is a sense that the father plays a compensatory role, stepping in as a highly resourceful substitute for a sibling who was planned but did not eventuate. However, for all of these parents, his role is very more than a superlatively conscientious playmate. In a cultural context in which fatherhood is often intermittent or omitted altogether from family life, these parents are able to present the constant presence of a father as advantageous to their child's social development. It has been offered as an argument against maternal indulgence, as a means of providing consistent and firm discipline and as a competitive strength in relation to other families. For these parents who have, on occasions, been charged with selfishness and with responsibility for family decline, it seems imperative that they learn the repertoire of fatherhood. Even for those who are acutely aware of the way they transgress norms of family size, it is one that can be played with great accomplishment. And it can be presented as a redeeming quality in a context in which parents are required to measure and appraise their commitment to their task.

“She’s never been a lonely child”

In recent years, the correlation has been made between an assumed increase in single child families and the depletion of social capital. For example, Fukuyama implicates a perceived trend towards having only one child in the breakdown of kinship and in an erosion of ‘the informal values or norms that are shared among members of a group that permits cooperation’ (Fukuyama, 1999, p.114) British journalists interpreted the phenomenon of ‘Beanpole Families’⁹⁹ to represent the emergence of a society characterised by selfishness. According to their logic, the child who is given no siblings is thus assumed to be born out of selfishness and will, inevitably, grow up as ‘a loner’. Their claims continue the discourse that permitted Winnicott (1957) to make bleak predictions not only for their entry into primary school but also for their integration into society as a whole.

Willmott contests, however, the way that trends such as the diminution of family size represents a devaluation of social relationships. He states that ‘research in Britain certainly does not support the contention that there is an erosion of social capital’ (Willmott, 2003, p.51). In particular, he draws attention to the way that parents have become more important in their children’s success. He states that:

“parents with high levels of human capital, coach and endow their children with cultural capital, manage education systems to maximise intellectual capital and use their contacts (their social capital) to promote their children’s chances”
(Willmott, 2003, p.70)

It certainly seems to be the case that the parents who participated in this study found themselves with what they perceived to be both an enhanced opportunity and motivation to promote their child’s ‘chances’. They seem to demonstrate an acute

⁹⁹ See Chapter 3, reference to Mintel’s report ‘

awareness of what is meant by social capital even if they do not label it in this way. So much of what they have said about the quality of their relationship with their child, including talk of fatherhood, relates to this awareness. Their narratives seem intended to demonstrate the way they are able to maximise their child's opportunities even if there is variation in the way they define and evaluate them in educational and cultural terms. In this context, the child's social relationships and access to social networks takes on great significance.

We have seen already the way that membership of a network such as an NCT group took on great importance in the early years of parenthood, particularly for those who had reason to doubt whether they would have another child. It provided not only the opportunity to meet other parents but also highly valued relationships for the child. For example, Barbara says:

"From the word go we knew that we would need to foster any relationships that she would want to have with other children as much as we could."

In fact, the need to foster these relationships took on such significance that, in some cases, parents persevered beyond the point of their own enjoyment of, and comfort with, these family groups. Some talked about regular weekend meetings at 'indoor play centres' with other families they had met through the NCT or other parenthood networks. There are examples of both mothers and fathers who had been unable to have a second child expressing a sense of discomfort and envy at seeing siblings playing together and families larger than their own. Yet there seemed to be no question that they and their child had to be in the midst of these groups, taking part in these child-centred activities.

The fear that their child should be socially isolated provided parents who had not exercised reproductive choice with a powerful motivation to find what Barbara considered to be 'the closest thing' to siblings. But those who had exercised choice also demonstrated a comparable motivation to establish connections with other families. Lizzie had moved to a new area not long after her son was born and she describes the early years in this way:

"It was quite good getting involved with the church there and play group and NCT group and almost any group that had children, the toy library, because I just felt that I had to have somewhere to go and for Charles to play with other children and mix with other children."

There was a strong sense amongst these parents that, having made the decision not to have a second child, they must instead make every effort to facilitate their child's social life. Catherine, who chose not to undertake paid work until her daughter was eleven, described the importance of playgroup and nursery as precursors to starting school. She emphasises here that they were entirely for her daughter's sake and not hers:

"That was for the mixing. It wasn't that I wanted to go off and do anything it was so she could start mixing with other children because we knew that was a decision that we had made."

Christine suggested that her son could have had difficulty in 'mixing' when he started school. However, even though she did not work, she had sent him to a childminder from the age of six weeks old and she believes that, in consequence, he arrived at school well equipped to integrate with the other children. Diane stated that, when her son started at primary school, his teacher commented that she could readily distinguish those who had been in childcare because they were so well prepared for a 'structured environment'.

The availability of playgroups, nursery, childminders and the plethora of activities available to pre-school age children provide an important cultural resource for these parents. For, regardless of the mother's employment status, they sought to demonstrate the way they had availed themselves of them for the benefit of their child. Several women who had, themselves, been only children, pointed out a significant inter-generational difference between their own upbringing and that of their child. Philpa, who describes herself as having been 'at home with mum' until she started school, stated:

"The thing we have to take into account and makes a difference is that thirty years on the things open to parents and children socially is so much different to when I was a child and so I didn't get the chance to go to nursery and when my friend from next door went to school I was quite lonely. There was no company. I was desperate to get to school as a four or five year old but for Eve it has been so different because I was working anyway so she was with a childminder. She was exposed to lots of children of different age groups."

Penny suggested that the value that her daughter gained from her time in the home of a childminder was such that it would have been unfair to her had she had a second child. She argued that she could not afford two childcare places and therefore the arrival of a sibling would have necessitated her abandonment of her work and also would have deprived her daughter of valued social relationships. But now that her daughter has started school, she has reduced her work hours so that she can volunteer as a classroom assistant.

A notable number of parents described, like Penny has done, their active participation in their child's school and leisure activities. Some suggested that they were free to contribute to their child's life in this way because they were unencumbered with other children. Many of the fathers were involved in Cubs or coaching weekend football. Women who had given up paid work described taking over the running of playgroups, providing informal childminding for friends and volunteering in the classroom. This provided them with the opportunity to demonstrate that not only had they developed important social connections with other children, their child was particularly well socialised as a result. In fact, there is a suggestion in what Debbie says here that, as a result of her action, she believes her son to be better socialised than other children:

"I was very keen that he had lots of friends around so from six months he used to go to playgroup twice a week and then I took it over and he was there twice a week and he did a music group once a week and a French group with French teacher, songs and dance, we did that. We always had people at our house. We have made an effort. I always knew to be honest of all the children in ... this isn't just me saying it, it's supported by anyone who has him, he plays extremely

well. He will play with girls or boys. He is not a fighting sort of child. He's very level, fair play basically. That's because he has always had the opportunity to have other children around even though he is an only one."

Debbie also seems to be saying that her professionalisation of the role of parent has put her son at some advantage. Others, like Philipa, argued that their employment outside of the home was beneficial to their child and to their social development. But either way, these parents seem to be saying that it is their own particular approach to bringing up their one child that is proving to be effective. To reinforce this point, some made unfavourable comparisons with other only children known to them. Philipa's conviction that childcare had been good for her daughter was founded, in part, upon a comparison with another only child whose behaviour had apparently attracted criticism. She referred to a discussion with other mothers about the difference between her daughter and this other child in which they had confirmed to her that her daughter 'does not behave like an only child'. Similarly Teresa, who had 'filled the house' with other children by undertaking informal childminding, describes her son in this way:

"He isn't a typical only child. He is very good at sharing. I think he has a lot of personality traits of a person who grew up in a big family. He is very confident. He can easily make friends."

In this way Teresa confirms and promotes the very logic that has made having only one child so problematic and has caused her so much anxiety.

Shirley also uses a comparison with another single child family to suggest that there is a right way and wrong way to bring up an only child. She describes the way she and her husband can afford to take their daughter to a holiday resort where she can meet other children at the children's club. Then she refers to another couple with one adolescent daughter who 'just go walking in the hills' for their vacation. Shirley considers that this child 'doesn't share very well and she gets quite stroppy'. In her view, 'there is so much more you can do The parents can make the children into these spoilt brats'. The implication of Shirley's assertion that 'there is so much more you can do' is meaningful. Like Teresa, she seems to be saying that it is possible and indeed morally appropriate to engage in compensatory strategies to reverse the assumed consequences of growing up as an only child. That is to say, the parents of an only child cannot be complacent and they must avail themselves of every opportunity to enhance their child's social life. In this context, the family vacation takes on great significance. Within these narratives it takes the form of a metaphor symbolising the way these parents seek to present their child's social world and their role in creating it.

For those parents who grew up in relatively impoverished households, the vacation represents both the chances they believe that they missed and their approach to compensating for the lack of siblings. Julie says of her daughter:

"She sees the value of going to different places and trying different things. It's like when we are away on holiday we try all the water sports and paragliding and all of that sort of thing. She'll try new things. Now sometimes you know with a large family they would think 'Oh no I can't do that'".

Catherine, who was one of six children, stated:

“We didn’t have holidays We have been able to take her skiing, you know all those fun things and ‘bring along a friend as well, you are not there because you have to socialise with your siblings, you are there to have fun. It is your holiday’.”

Several parents pointed out that, as many child-centred resorts cater for families of at least four people, they provide a perfect opportunity for their child to bring a friend. Teresa stated that:

“We agreed that because he was going to be an only child, if we ever went out or go on holiday he could always take a friend. You know we said we are not going to have two or three children and so we should be able to afford always to have a friend round.”

Nancy recalled that the only time she had found only childhood to be lonely was when she was on holiday with her parents. Therefore, she and Derek have made a point of inviting other children on holiday with them and of sharing holiday accommodation with family friends.

It seems from what these parents say that the growth in child-centred leisure facilities and in family oriented vacations have provided contemporary parents with a means of demonstrating the ‘cultural’ and ‘social capital’ they have made available to their child. They also provide them with a means of satisfying their consciences that their child need never be lonely. However one mother expressed disdain for the institutionalised culture of holiday resorts as well as the networks of mothers who congregate at the school gate. Notably, she is one of the parents who suggested that her child’s behaviour may result from loneliness. She acknowledges that the problem with having only one child is the obligation to make social arrangements and suggests that, if she had had a second child, her family could be self-contained. She would not be required to telephone other parents at weekends nor to be concerned about how they spend their vacations.

In keeping with this view, many parents argue that their child is being given social and cultural opportunities that may not be available to children in a larger but ‘self-contained’ family. Nancy states that her daughter was one of the few from her class to receive parental permission to participate in a highly challenging school trip, pointing out that a friend with two children considered her ‘mad to let her go’. She believes that in some cases parents considered the trip to be too risky and, in others, the obligation to spend leisure time with siblings militated against the expenditure. Informed by her own experience of growing up as an only child, Nancy also suggested that her daughter has the opportunity for both sociability and independence. This belief was expressed by many other parents. Diane described her son as ‘highly sociable’ and ‘a diplomat’ but also argued that she and her husband have encouraged in him a sense of independence and a capacity to ‘take risks’ because he does not have siblings to rely upon. Therefore he began to travel on the school bus at a much younger age than did the children of her friends and his classmates. Similarly Julie

and Keith describe the way their daughter participates in every school trip regardless of whether her friends are going. Julie states:

“She has an extremely good social life. An independence that we wanted her to have and choices as well.... she can socialise when she wants to or she can be on her own.”

One of the implications of the construction of the ‘spoilt only child’ is that, without siblings, the child will be over-protected by a surfeit of parental attention. Moreover, parents today are considered to be more ‘paranoid’ and more over-protective than were previous generations (Hardyment, 1995; Furedi, 2001). It is, perhaps, a reflection of the assiduousness with which these parents take their role that they can make these such claims. That is, they have turned these criticisms to their advantage to demonstrate that their child is better off than other children in terms of independence and freedom and choice.

In the majority of cases, interviewees were able to find and incorporate into their repertoires a means of demonstrating that their child ‘has never been a lonely child’. Therefore, connections beyond the immediate nuclear family took on great significance within their narratives. Some stated that they had moved house to enable their child to play outside in the street, even if this meant extending their financial resources. Sarah stated:

“We moved here four and a half years ago and frankly we had to spend double to move here but it has certainly been worth it Being an only child, if he wants to play with others he would have to go and find them. He doesn’t have a sibling to play lego with. He takes that out and goes and finds people and it is important that he can do that”.

Most parents who took part in this study live on housing estates or in cul-de-sacs or in environments that they believe are conducive to their child’s social life. Some even suggested that their residential environment and the availability of other children nearby had removed the need for siblings. Many of them also argued that they have afforded their child greater freedoms because of their need to seek out the company of other children. Jan, who lives in an inner city terrace stated:

“It’s a lovely road. It may not seem it but it is nice because it doesn’t go anywhere. He has been out there on the pavement since he was about seven riding his bicycle. ‘Can I go further? I would like to cross the road?’ The three of them, he and the boys opposite, go to the park and I would give them a time to be back.”

Parents also highlighted the importance of telecommunications technology as a means of demonstrating the availability of social relationships beyond the immediate nuclear family. In so doing, they were able to draw attention to a further favourable inter-generational comparison. Derek and Nancy describe the way their daughter’s use of technology enables her to continue to converse with her friends outside of school:

Derek: *“But children can be less isolated now because of communication, you know, so if you were an only child or at home it was hard for you to meet friends*

etc. Now you get on your mobile and it's constant. She spends time on the computer with her friends.

Nancy *'I am talking to my friends'*.

Derek: *When I was a child with a brother you would never communicate to that level with your friends."*

Even parents like Derek and Nancy who had experienced such anxiety about their daughter's lack of siblings are confident that she has neither been lonely nor inadequately socialised. The one anxiety expressed consistently by these parents relates to the impact of their own old age and mortality. Almost invariably, they acknowledged the possibility that their child could be required to care for aging parents 'with no one to share it with'. And they acknowledged the potential for social isolation after their death. Julie, who otherwise presents her daughter's circumstances in entirely advantageous terms, stated:

"There is something else people often say 'what about when you two die? She's going to be all by herself'. That's a big thing. I can honestly say that is the only thing that hurts. Hopefully she will have her own life by then that she has chosen."

Like Julie, parents invoked the discourse of choice to mitigate this anxiety, suggesting that 'you can't choose your siblings'. They were able to point to examples of unreconciled disputes between brothers and sisters and of siblings who themselves constituted a financial or emotional burden. And they referred to cases, often their own, where one sibling was perceived to bear a disproportionate responsibility for parental care. In contrast, the opportunity to choose friendships took on great significance in these deliberations. Diane stated:

"We have tried to and always have maintained that friendship is important to him and if he questions 'why have I not got siblings?' we say 'well look at the amount of very good friends you have. You can choose your friends. You can't choose your siblings. It's great to be able to make friends.' And we have talked very much about how you don't only love brothers and sisters but you can love friends and you have that very good bond that can go throughout life."

Although it was Nancy who justified her consumption of IVF treatment on the basis of her only childhood, her one stated concern about her daughter relates to adulthood and to the idea that 'there is no one to share your past history with'. She demonstrates a point made speculatively by other parents that, on the basis of her own experience, only children have an increased motivation to form close friendships. She suggests that it is no coincidence that her four closest friendships dating back to childhood are with women who were also only children. One further point made by some parents in the context of choice is that their child should feel unconstrained by responsibility for their care. In keeping with the beliefs upon which the 'forever parent' phenomenon is constructed, they suggest that their efforts and expenditure in favour of their child are unconditional. That is, there is no expectation of reciprocity when they themselves need care. Catherine stated:

“When we get older, I am sure lots of parents think it, I don’t want her to have that burden on her own of the one who visits daily that sort of thing and we have said ‘when we are older put us in a home and forget about us. Enjoy your life’.

It seems, from what these parents have to say, that they are highly motivated to do whatever they can to ensure that their child does indeed enjoy life. Almost invariably, they seek to demonstrate clearly elaborated strategies to optimise the child’s educational, cultural and social opportunities. Their narratives respond directly to the discourse that has made having only one child so problematic. Therefore ‘she’s never been a lonely child’ represents both a positive appraisal of the child’s character and a claim about the efficacy of their parenting strategy. If, as suggested, these parents demonstrate a heightened awareness of the importance of social capital, their return on investment is realised through the sociability and socialisation of their child. In this context, they have been able to emphasise clear inter-generational comparisons and have been able to audit their child’s social assets favourably in relation to other children.

Discussion

It seems most ironic that there appear to be such similarities in what these parents have to say when they talk about their child’s upbringing in contemporary Britain. For, despite the dramatic differences in the routes they have taken to get there, they seem to end up converging upon much the same arguments and claims. Where differences in beliefs are apparent, they manifest themselves according to social and educational variables rather than reproductive ones. Of course, the similarities only became apparent once a somewhat clinical separation had been made between what was said about reproduction and what was said about bringing up an only child. It was a separation that was made difficult, in some cases, where parents who had exercised reproductive choice justified their action in terms of their satisfaction with their child with implicit parental foresight and competence. It was as though they had clearly anticipated and planned from the start that their child would turn out to be sociable, unspoilt and well socialised. Yet the similarity of claims by those who had set out to have a larger family questions their implication of infallibility in relation to cause and effect. And it points to an alternative explanation offered by Swidler that, with regard to biographical narrative, ‘coherence is imposed retrospectively’ (Swidler, 2001, p.148).

Yet this observation is not intended to place doubt upon the sincerity with which these parents described their family lives nor to suggest that they were being disingenuous in their claims. The privilege of being accorded admission into their households and, in some cases, of being introduced to the child about whom they spoke only served to corroborate an impression of order and coherence in their family lives. This capacity for retrospective coherence does, however, reveal the ‘problem’ of the single child family for what it is, a socially constructed one founded upon political interests rather than objective truths. So, in some cases, parents found their profound anxieties and guilt about their child to be unwarranted. And, in others, their defiance of cultural norms could be demonstrated to have delivered positive outcomes. What is important is that these parents reveal a clear discrepancy between hypotheses constructed upon psychological discourse and the realities of lived experiences.

But commonalities in the arguments presented by these parents do not suggest that their households or the children who grow up within them can be considered to be similar. Although psychologists and claims-makers would have us believe that they can be characterised in the same way, this study reveals considerable differences as well as similarities. Furthermore, it seems to confirm Swidler's view that there is 'variation in the ways people 'mean it' when they use their culture' (Swidler, 2001, p.43). There is clear variation, for example, between the way Judith and Lizzie 'mean it' when they state that their respective children are 'unspoilt' in a material sense. Although Diane and Julie both draw upon the same discourse of choice, there is variation too in their assumptions about where and how it will be applied. And, of course, some mothers undertook paid work and others stayed at home. But either way, they could argue that their child was better socialised as a result. They demonstrate what Hay's (1996) has described as the 'cultural contradictions of motherhood' in which opposing logics are used to attack each other but demonstrate a commitment to the same underlying ideology.

Hays' insights into the cultural ambivalence experienced by women who work and women who stay at home is meaningful to this study in other respects. In the same way that women who stay at home necessarily attack the position of those who go out to work and vice versa, there is a further cultural contradiction in the positions taken by these parents. In a context in which child-rearing has become 'labour-intensive, emotionally absorbing and financially expensive' the parents in this study have ready recourse to the perceived deleterious effects upon their household of more children. Stories about the reality of life within larger families were told to bolster these arguments and some suggested that they perceived that parents with several children were envious of them. Indeed, Hays demonstrates the analogy between ambivalence towards having a second child and ambivalence towards paid work:

"I think I do feel guilty about working 'cause it takes time away from (my oldest daughter). But it struck me that it's acceptable to have a second child that takes just as much time away from the other child." (Hays, 1995, p.146)

If, as demonstrated, the parents in this study capitalise upon such ambivalence then claims about the problems and selfishness of having only one child have their purpose too. It is one that was clearly demonstrated in the justifications parents gave for the consumption of IVF treatment to have a second child.

It is some time since the notion that an only child will be 'lonely, spoilt and maladjusted' (Laybourn, 1994, p.1) was insinuated into public consciousness. Today, this cultural belief serves as a taunt and a challenge to these parents. And their narratives seek to demonstrate the way they have succeeded in defying the common sense assumptions about only children. They do so as conscious actors, able to construct their own versions of family life and to determine the way they wish to be perceived. So even Barbara, who was so influenced by psychological discourse, finds that she can speak a different kind of language in relation to her child and her upbringing. Conversely, in finding fault with her family life, Vicky invokes the language of emotional determinism to try to make sense of the choices she has made. So although, for the most part, parents could find a means of distancing their child from the problematic version of only childhood, this version remains salient for those who seek to excuse perceived mistakes in their action.

There was certainly much variation in the familiarity with which these parents presented their arguments and their claims. Some were well rehearsed while others seemed more tentative, as though they were playing a repertoire over which they would like to develop mastery but were rarely invited to play. For those who had been denied reproductive choice, they found themselves able to capitalise upon the same contradictions within the dominant ideology of contemporary child-rearing as those who had freely chosen to have only one child. While conscious of the way they had transgressed norms of family size, they found this freedom once they had relinquished their quest for another child. In a context in which the quality of the parent child relationship is evaluated and appraised and in which increasing demands are placed upon the parent's emotional and financial resources, they could find little fault with their child's situation. Indeed, even those who had experienced so much adversity in reproductive terms could find their child to be at relative advantage to others.

Relativist arguments served a very important purpose in these narratives. This is exemplified in the way that parents were able to apply a relative meaning to the notion of 'spoiling' and turn it to their advantage. The profound change in what is meant by spoiling a child offers a kind of paradigm for the profound changes in child-rearing ideology since the post-war period. Now that a child cannot be spoilt 'with too much love and attention', it is one that has provided them with a powerful cultural resource. In this context, the discourse on family decline has also been used to reinforce the efficacy of the nuclear family where the parental union remains intact, hence the prominence given to fatherhood. This is surely not an argument that would have made sense in the same way in the fifties and sixties and points to the significance within these accounts of inter-generational comparison.

Regardless of their position in relation to reproductive choice, parents were well prepared to point out further inter-generational differences to support their claims. The rich social life available to a pre-school age child today, whether or not the mother undertakes paid work, was used to counter the assumption that an only child will be inadequately socialised on arrival at primary school. The growth in child-centred leisure was used by some to justify their reproductive choice and by others as reassurance against the fear of social isolation. Technological change was presented as a means to enhance social relationships and there was no sense, in what these parents had to say, that social networks have become less important. On the contrary, they sought to demonstrate the critical importance of facilitating and augmenting their child's social world and of generating rather than depleting what is meant by social capital. In describing strategies of action intended to compensate for the absence of siblings, they seemed to suggest that their child may be at an advantage to other children.

In light of what these parents have revealed about their family lives, it should seem surprising that the single child family has not succeeded in relinquishing its problematic status. After all, these people seem deeply committed to their parental responsibilities and highly satisfied with their outcomes. One explanation for the prevalence of the beliefs is that there is something of a cultural contradiction between those who have one child and those who have more. That is, some parents with more children have a strong interest in perpetuating claims about problematic only children and their parents. But another is that parents with one child themselves play a

significant role in propagating such claims. Arguments about the relative advantages that their child enjoys are made just as often in relation to other single child families as they are to larger families. There is no homogeneity within this group of parents nor do their interests converge or conspire with other groups to counter the claims made about them. They do not belong to what Best (1999, p.177) has described as a 'master-frame' and therefore, despite the coherence that they are able to apply to their own family lives, their position remains socially ambiguous.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

What this research has exposed is a considerable discrepancy between public assumptions and lived realities. Although certain eminent social commentators believe that it is now normal for parents to have just the one child, a minority do so. Although some warn of an alarming growth in the proportions of children growing up without siblings, a mother born in 1920 was more likely to have an only child than a contemporary mother, born in the late 1950s. Although professional women are charged with reproducing at below replacement level for career reasons, British women who leave school at the age of sixteen are the more likely to have just the one child. In light of these contradictions, it has been necessary to examine both the public construction of the problematic single child family and its private meaning. Certainly, the opportunity to compare public assumptions with private lived realities has revealed a marked disparity between the two. But it has also provided a means of developing methods of enquiry into social problem construction to include an analysis not only of the way problems are constructed but how they are experienced at a personal, individual level.

The analysis of historical academic and popular contemporary texts referring to the single child family confirms the extent to which it has become an institutionalised social problem in Britain. It provides an intriguing and somewhat unusual example of Best's theory of institutionalisation (Best, 1999). Certainly the constructive roles of the four social sectors in his metaphor of 'the Iron Quadrangle' are readily recognisable. What is also apparent is that the problem did not become institutionalised nor to exist in popular beliefs, at the level of common sense, until these four sectors were able to work together to reinforce each other. Ideas that pathologised only childhood and presented it as an incurable disease have existed for some time, generated by pioneers of behavioural psychology at the turn of the twentieth century. However, it was only during a time of official governmental pronatalism, following the Second World War, that these ideas were effectively transferred to the public domain. By that time eugenicists were active in extending their pronatalist propaganda across the social orders. Experts such as Winnicott could use the mechanism of the state health service and the mass media to influence ideas about family size. A powerful collusion was thus established between government, activists, experts and the media and the problem became a publicly recognised one.

What is intriguing also about the problem associated with being or having an only child is the way in which it has prevailed. Although, as Hardyment (1995) demonstrates, beliefs about child-rearing have changed considerably within the space of a generation, certain ideas about family size seem remarkably resistant to change. But, significantly, the analysis of popular contemporary texts also revealed new kinds of activism that work to discredit having only one child. For example, Munn's critique of 'monotropic attachments between mother and child' is representative of a 'feminist maternal revivalism' that encourages women not to stop reproducing after a first child. Journalists such as Arnold¹⁰⁰ and Abrams¹⁰⁰ vehemently defend the moral superiority of having more than one child by drawing attention to the problems of

¹⁰⁰ See Chapter 4, within section on the media

having less than two. Certain individuals, active in public life for other reasons, continue to argue that they are the 'survivors' of only childhood and have been incurably damaged as a result. Such revelations are highly newsworthy, particularly when they involve celebrity and present the only child as the victim of family life.

The problem of the single child family constitutes a clear example of Best's theory that the understanding of family has been deferred to psychology (Best, 1994). For this reason ideas first introduced by the pioneer psychologist Cunnington¹⁰¹ in 1913 have currency today. His ideas that a child will be 'spoilt' by a surfeit of parental attention, will be over-burdened by the weight of their expectations and will be unprepared for adult life are present in the claims of contemporary experts and activists. They represent an entirely child-centred view of the family, ignoring the variables of the parents' own beliefs and of profound social change. An outdated term such as 'rough and tumble' continues to be used to denote a problematic interpretation of only childhood. However, it does so with a distinctly contemporary meaning. Today adults who grew up without siblings are encouraged in the view that they missed out on 'emotional rough and tumble'. Yet, paradoxically, Cunnington considered the inevitable rough and tumble of 'nursery life' to be 'a speedy obliterator of yesterday's emotions', the very opposite of what is meant today.

The concept of 'emotional rough and tumble' is significant. It is a clear product of what Furedi defines as 'therapy culture', in which emotions are taken very seriously and in which '(t)he therapeutic ethos endows the claim of emotional injury with authority' (Furedi, 2003, p.176). This explains why a few eminent individuals are accorded such authority when they claim to have been irrevocably damaged by the experience of growing up without siblings. But it also explains why psychotherapists are invited to give the authoritative interpretation of only childhood, even when their subjective views are contradictory and in conflict with each other. It is the collusion between expert psychotherapists and activist only children that seems most responsible for the prevalence of the social problem of the single child family. In a climate in which there are anxieties about declining birth rates, their claims find ready public approbation. Moreover, the normalisation of only childhood constitutes a significant ideological threat to therapy culture and to the assumption of emotional determinism in relation to family life. It is surely for this reason that some of those invited to give expert psychotherapeutic judgement are reluctant to accept that only children are no different in psychological terms to other children.

Furedi (2001)¹⁰² has also drawn attention to the contemporary phenomenon of 'paranoid parenting', to a cultural context in which parents are regarded with deep suspicion by experts. This study provides a clear example of the questioning by experts of the competence and motivations of those parents who have just the one child. It also reveals the impact upon parents of such suspicion. Those who had wanted and tried to have at least one more child find their disappointments greatly exacerbated by the assumption of reproductive freedom and the deterministic psychological view of only children. However such parents are not only the products but also the producers of discourse; they find their own ways of dealing with the claims that question the normality of their family lives. Those who have had the

¹⁰¹ See Chapter 3

¹⁰² Paranoid Parenting is the title of Furedi's book on this phenomenon

prerogative of reproductive control seem most accomplished in defending their unorthodox choice precisely because of the assumptions made about them. Parents' constructions of their own meanings and interpretations of family life constitute one of the most interesting aspects of this research.

A deeply entrenched belief about mothers who have just the one child is that they are highly educated, professional women who seek to avoid the stigma of childlessness 'without jeopardising their careers' (Taylor & Taylor, 2003, p. 53). Such views are little different to eugenicist claims, in the early twentieth century, about the selfishness of the women's movement and female interests 'outside the home'. However, a most surprising feature of this study has been the overriding priority accorded to motherhood by those women who took part. Indeed some had chosen to relinquish paid employment altogether and others, by necessity, were prepared to take evening work in order to maintain an active daytime involvement in their child's activities. Certainly statistical analyses have provided reason to question claims that women who have only one child have privileged employment over reproduction. But this study has exposed something much more profound than the indirectness of the link between paid employment and low fertility. That the labour intensity of caring for one child can be offered as reason to preclude having another says much about the contemporary ideology of motherhood. And it says much about the pervasiveness and power of expert discourses in shaping the cultural beliefs of mothers.

While Hays argues that all contemporary mothers are subject to the 'ideology of intensive motherhood' she seems, at one point, to reserve judgement on those who have 'very few children'. She asks whether their family size relates to the time and energy of doing a good job of motherhood or whether they wish 'simply to maximise their efficiency and personal gain' (Hays, 1996 p.160). Certainly this study would suggest that it is the former. For example, Diane's arguments about 'giving back the love and care and attention to one child' seem to offer a most child-centred explanation for the reconciliation of the demands of work and family. Of course it could be argued that this research has not succeeded in including those who have alternative priorities; it may be that they are more concerned with efficiency and personal gain than with sparing scarce time to talk about the competing demand of parenthood. Qualitative research has afforded the opportunity to delve deep into the beliefs, perceptions and experiences of those who chose to participate. This is, of course, at the expense of the breadth of observations.

The important point here is that this study makes no claim to represent all of those who have only one child. However, the duration of interviews with resultant unprecedented insights into the meanings of having just the one afforded the opportunity to uncover some highly significant truths. Some of those who were unable to have a second child found the guise of professional career mother to offer a public identity preferable to the one of reproductive failure. It provided an escape from contemporary parental culture in which the right to privacy has been eroded and in which they were likely to be probed about their family planning intentions. Most often, the timing of their return to employment was the consequence of their inability to have a second child and not its cause. More women in this study gave up work in their attempts to enhance their fertility to have a second child than chose not to have a second one in order to work. And, as Hays has demonstrated, the engagement in or rejection of paid employment divides contemporary mothers and constructs conflicts

of interest between them. While Deborah considered that her daughter was not spoilt because she had been at home for the first five years, Marion's view was that her son was not at risk of being spoilt because she worked during this time. But in both cases, the measure of their maternal performances was bound up with the perceived attributes and behaviour of their respective children.

The insight that this study provided into the professionalisation of motherhood was unexpected. At the outset, there were no conspicuous reasons or clear discourses to explain why some women who leave school at sixteen are the more likely to have only one child. But once inside their logic it became clear that the opportunity to be at home with their child had, at a later date, generated professional and educational opportunities for working with children. Moreover, these women distinguished themselves from their own mothers whose larger families and menial employment provided no clear means of social mobility. The emphasis upon the link between high levels of education and small family size obscures the position of women from working class backgrounds who, today, seek advancement and respect through a conservative ideal of motherhood. It had seemed possible that the interviews would draw out a non-conformist, defiant group of parents who would scorn the ideals of motherhood defined by experts such as Penelope Leach. Instead, they prompted some of the most diligent interpretations of these ideals by people who expressed indignation that their efforts should be considered anything other than beneficial to their child. Yet ironically they are diligent and obedient towards the very ideology that has made having only one child problematic in the first place.

It has been suggested that this contemporary ideology places far greater demands upon mothers than did the child-rearing doctrines of the post war period (Hays, 1996, ch.2; Hardyment, 1995, ch .6; Willmott, 2003, p.153). Certainly, many of these participants consider that they work harder and take parental responsibilities more seriously than did their own parents. They point to dilemmas and to choices that, they assume, required no particular consideration by the preceding generation. But they also point to opportunities that enable them to construct a moral defence for having only one child that would surely have been unavailable when they themselves were children. Philipa's explanation that child-care has provided her daughter with rich experiences and friendships was particularly instructive; intentionally, it distinguished this childhood from her own, also without siblings but alone at home with her mother. There are many references to the facilities and social networks now available to pre-school age children and to the importance of communications technology to adolescents. But these parents argue that such opportunities need to be carefully selected and require their active involvement and expenditure. While they demonstrate that it is possible to construct a highly positive contemporary version of only childhood, it is one that requires considerable discursive effort.

This study provides an important insight into the way in which people deal with social norms and the way they engage in what has been described as 'ideological work'. With one notable exception, those who had chosen not to have a second child had assumed that they would either have no children or at least two. This suggests that they had internalised the normative assumption that a child needs siblings. Yet, during interviews, these same parents presented powerful, cogent arguments about the moral appropriateness of having just the one child. To do so, they had made an effective and pragmatic use of the culture available to them. They had reshaped the ideology of

intensive motherhood for their own purposes, demonstrating Hays view that each mother's own understanding of it is in some way unique (Hays, 1995). They had been able to construct their own interpretations of how to be a good mother even though the dominant view is that a good mother has at least two children. In so doing, they capitalised upon ideas of monogamous love between mother and child, thus exposing a clear contradiction in expert-guided discourses on motherhood. Like the women in Hays' study, they are subject to a cultural contradiction in which the defence of the choices they have made necessarily involves opposing alternative ones.

Of course, the dominant view that a child needs siblings places those who wanted but were unable to have more children in an ambiguous position. Very often, those who had experienced some form of reproductive loss did not want to reveal publicly the distressing reasons for their family size. Consequently, they were left without a script when questioned about their intentions to have another child. In some cases, they had had no time to undertake ideological work and no time to select and rehearse a repertoire to deal with unwelcome questions. However, an important finding of this study is that when they find the time to do this work, they can also find alternative ways of thinking about themselves as parents. They do not have to accept that they are 'forever the incompetent parent' as Judith feared. While, for example, their deservedness for IVF treatment seemed to involve invoking discourses about the problems of only childhood, relinquishing the hope for a second child involved the rejection of them. But of most importance is the finding that the unavailability of choice did not seem to affect their approach to the upbringing of their child in an adverse way.

Swidler suggests that '(p)roblems of action generate meaning. Insoluble problems of action generate intense, powerful, relatively coherent meanings' (Swidler, 2001, p. 158). The pursuit of a second child had become, for Derek, an insoluble problem of action. However, as a result of his ideological work over the course of some years he was able to generate a powerful and coherent meaning for having just the one child. His experience of parenting an adolescent daughter resulted in his belief that the comments he had read in the media are 'very, very wrong'. Having once internalised the logic that it is necessarily problematic to have just the one child, he had come round to the view that any problem is external to himself and his family. It is surely most significant that parents, like Derek, gained in confidence as their years of experience increased. With a relatively successful, unproblematic son or daughter they found that the discourse that charges them with full responsibility for the way their child turns out had begun to work in their favour. Coralie suggested that she would have expressed far greater anxieties about her daughter had she been interviewed a decade earlier. However, over her years as a parent she had rejected the identity conferred upon her and her family by experts; she too had succeeded in externalising the problem, suggesting that 'only child syndrome is very much put into peoples' minds'.

The important point here is that people do not simply comply with what experts require of them. When, yet again, in September 2005 medical experts admonished British women for delaying maternity¹⁰³ their claims may be just as likely to dissuade

¹⁰³ Reference to article in the British Medical Journal entitled "Which Career First" by Bewley, Davies and Braude. See also Chapter 6, p. 86.

as to promote reproduction. Certainly, the parents in this study showed great skill in adapting such admonishments to their own ends. For example, the pronatalist rhetoric of medical experts about the risks of delaying reproduction provided some mothers with arguments about why pregnancy should not be attempted for a second time. Similarly, what were revealed to be the bitter disappointments of undergoing an emergency caesarean section were turned into highly coherent justifications for not having a second child. Many used the assumption of emotional determinism to give meaning to their family size. However, they did so in a contradictory way. The experience of growing up with several siblings was just as likely to be used to legitimise having only one child as it was to justify the use of IVF treatment in pursuit of a larger family. Although parents assumed that their beliefs about family size had been determined by their own childhood experiences, this contradiction is significant. It suggests that they applied coherence retrospectively, that they were effective in using their own family of origin as an important cultural resource in developing their interpretative repertoires.

These research findings about the way parents engage in ideological work, developing new meanings for their family lives, suggest that a longitudinal study would be most appropriate. By necessity, the qualitative component of this research was limited to taking a cross-sectional approach, interviewing parents at a single point in their lives and asking them to reflect upon past events. Certainly there was great value in selecting parents at different stages of parenthood, from those whose child was only just of school age to those who had reached adolescence. This provided important means of comparison and clear insights into the way people continuously negotiate their parental identities, their relationships with other parents and expert discourses. However, this also suggests that there would be greater value in interviewing each set of parents at different stages in their parenting experience.

One of the great disappointments of this study is that it did not succeed in including more fathers or in hearing their own accounts and interpretations. Of those thirteen fathers who did participate fully in the interviews, the majority were from the highly educated group who had not had the prerogative of choice. Some had a great deal to say about the perceived injustice of infertility, suggesting that they have a strong emotional investment of matters of parenting. It is notable that a number of mothers stated that it was the father who would have liked a second child but there was little opportunity to explore their negotiations and reasoning in this regard. Certainly, mothers drew upon the paternal role as an important theme in their interpretative repertoires. Some drew attention to further significant intergenerational differences, pointing out that today fathers can play a companionate role to a child in the way their own fathers would not have done. Some presented the father as a safeguard against the charge of maternal indulgence and, simultaneously, as more than adequate compensation for a sibling. Moreover, the absence of a sibling was often constructed as a means of ensuring the continuous presence of the father, most often by those who experienced divorce or conflict between their own parents.

That fathers who did participate were predominantly the ones who had something to say about the distress of infertility is surely indicative of their strong emotional investment in matters of parenting. It is beyond the scope of this study to examine the reasons why more of them did not take part in the interviews. One of the ways in which it could be improved would be to take a different approach to the recruitment

and selection of respondents, to attempt to include more fathers or even to make their involvement a condition of participation. This became a study more about motherhood and less about fatherhood than anticipated but in itself this is perhaps a further reflection of the culture of intensive motherhood. It could be that mothers feel that it is their responsibility to represent the family to the outside world in this way. They are perhaps more accustomed to being questioned on intimate matters of family life and more experienced in constructing narratives about them. Clearly there is scope for further exploration of these issues.

This has been a study of a somewhat unusual social problem. Further, the research methods mark something of a new development, combining analyses both of the way the problem has been constructed and the lived experiences of those who are its subjects. Certainly, much of the work undertaken on the analysis of social problems does not extend into a detailed examination of their impact at the personal, individual level. By doing so, this research has revealed that those who are subject to the claims that make having just the one child problematic are often acutely aware of what is said about them. It reveals the way such claims add insult to injury in cases where parents are unable to have a wanted second child. It shows that to persevere in defiance of social norms for family size, parents need to develop the 'cultured capacities' to defend their action. They need to choose a repertoire and rehearse it and become accomplished in its performance. But the study also shows that the claims that are made to construct and maintain the public problem bear remarkably little relationship to personal lived realities. It is only by undertaking both types of research that this incongruity can be exposed.

A further important point that emerged from this combined analysis is the way that parents themselves contribute to the maintenance of this social problem. One of the underlying curiosities for this research has been why such an old problem has withstood dramatic social change. One answer is that the subjects themselves play an active role in maintaining it. We have seen the way certain adults who grew up as only children seek to perpetuate a victimised, therapeutic version of events. But what has also become clear is that parents themselves have their own role to play. The distinction between those who apparently chose to have just the one child and those who did not provides important insights into this role. On the one hand, those who express deep regret about their family size and anxieties about their child only seem to confirm to the outside world that something must surely be wrong. On the other hand, those who have made a bold choice not to have a second child seek to distance themselves from cultural stereotypes. The claim 'my child is not a typical spoilt only child' is not only an effective distancing strategy. It also provides confirmation of the very logic upon which the problem is founded. In externalising the problem in this way, parents also seem to be saying that they are an exception to the rule, but that others may well conform to it.

Finally, this study makes a new contribution to social problem scholarship. It demonstrates that by using a discourse analytical approach, it is possible to examine the important dimension of how a problem is experienced. It does so by identifying the particular language used in the construction of claims and then examining the way this language reappears in the discourses of individual parents. In so doing it looks for continuity and change, the way certain ideas have prevailed over decades and the way in which the meaning of others has changed. Even though the very label 'only child'

continues to signify a problem its contemporary definition is imprecise and has changed since Cunnington and Winnicott. The emphasis upon language also provides the means of demonstrating the way people negotiate meaning, adapting public claims to their own personal advantage. And it has demonstrated that not only are governments, experts, media and activists producers of discourse. Individuals necessarily produce their own meanings. In the case of parents who have just the one child, they are often highly coherent and powerful ones.

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Appendix A

Ethics Review

Research project: The Single Child Family in Britain Today

Helen Bowcock, 28 January 2003

Purpose of the Study

The study aims to explain why some parents have one child in contemporary Britain, to understand how they experience parenting and to assess what this experience means for society. This will involve recruiting and interviewing parents who have one child who assume, for whatever reason, that they will have no more children. The very basis for selection to this study raises important ethical issues and others emerge as subsequent stages are considered and planned. The purpose of this ethics review is to identify the ethical issues that this study of reproductive behaviour raises so that it can be planned to minimise the risk of doing harm to respondents.

Background and Rationale

This research is based upon the underlying theory that 'the study of reproductive behaviour must be based upon the assumption that reality is constructed' (Busfield and Paddon, 1977, p5). The way in which the single child family has been problematised throughout the twentieth century supports this theory. However, as stated by the social researcher Ann Laybourn 'no-one has studied parenting in a representative group of one-child families (Laybourn, 1994, p120). An important objective of this study is to elicit the views and experiences of parents with one child in contemporary Britain and to explain their reproductive behaviour and their parenting experiences. Therefore this inquiry creates obligations both to the parents who will participate but also to professional colleagues and to society. As stated by the Social Research Association: 'the social researcher is never free of a responsibility to pursue objectivity'.

Ethical Considerations in the Research Design and Methods

The Social Research Association advises that researchers should 'avoid undue intrusion' into the lives of subjects and ensure that data does not already exist that could avoid such intrusion. Certainly valuable quantitative data does exist within studies such as the National Child Development Study and this will be used to complement findings. A literature review has been conducted to attempt to identify any other relevant British studies and this review has confirmed Laybourn's view that no-one has studied parenting in a group of single child families. On this basis, the recruitment for interview of parents who have one child seems justified.

The nature of the information to be obtained necessitates an intensive, semi-structured interview. An important objective of this study is to explain a range of causes, from a carefully considered choice on the one hand to an unexpected medical condition such as infertility on the other. As stated by May 'what may be a problem to one group is not a problem to another' (May, 2001, p. 51). Within the sample group of parents some may perceive their family size to be a problem and others may not. For this reason, data collection will depend upon intensive interviews rather than focus groups as there is a risk of conflicts of interest between participants.

The investigation of causal factors suggests that the family should be the unit of analysis and the parent or parents the unit of observation. Studies of childlessness indicate that reproductive outcomes may be specific to the particular context of a relationship and therefore information about and from both parents would be advantageous. However, one parent may be keen to participate in the study and the other reluctant to do so. In this instance, it would be unfair to eliminate a respondent because their partner does not want to take part but, conversely, undue pressure upon the reluctant partner would also be inappropriate. A further consideration is that there may be differences of opinion between partners who have consented to take part; for example, they may give entirely different reasons for their family size. Therefore, where both do agree to participate interviews will be conducted separately and will be treated with the same confidentiality as any other.

Potential Risks

The Social Research Association advises that 'social researchers should help subjects to protect their own interests by giving them prior information about the consequences of participating'. For this study, it is important that respondents are informed that the study assumes that they will have no more children. If this is not clear, there is a risk that respondents who are not reconciled to having one child could find the interview difficult and intrusive. There is a potential risk that certain questions could raise issues that the respondent had not considered and could create a problem where none had hitherto existed. Further, questions about reproductive outcomes could invoke memories of difficult experiences such as post-natal depression or miscarriage or the respondent may find themselves divulging personal details that they would otherwise wish to keep private.

Measures then need to be taken to minimise the risks outlined above. Anyone who expresses interest in participating will be sent a letter which clearly outlines the purpose of the study, the selection criteria and the nature of the questions that will be asked. It will also inform respondents of their right to confidentiality and to decline to answer questions or to terminate the interview if they wish. These rights will be reiterated verbally at the beginning of the interview. Nonetheless, judgement will need to be exercised during interviews to decide whether to pursue a particular line of questioning.

Data Protection and Confidentiality

The Social Research Association advises that measures should be taken to ensure that the respondents' identity cannot easily be disclosed or inferred. As a basic measure,

respondents' own names will not be used in the thesis or any published material. The data collected during the interviews will be analysed and used by one researcher only for the purposes of this research. Data stored electronically will be secured with a password and CD- ROMs and printed material will be stored in a secure filing cabinet. The data will be anonymised before being transcribed and pseudonyms will be used where respondents are quoted in any published material. Efforts will be made to ensure that identities are not revealed in any subsequent discussions about the research.

Appendix B:

23rd May 2003

Dear

Research on families with one child

I am conducting research on families with one child and seek parents who would be willing to be interviewed. To be eligible, they need to have one child of school age, be married or cohabiting and be willing to share with me their views on having a single child and on their experience of parenting. All interviews are treated confidentially and I would arrange a time and location convenient for any parents or staff who may be interested in participating. Would you be kind enough to include my request in your communication with parents – perhaps through your newsletter or notice board or, if you consider it appropriate, to draw it to the attention of suitable parents?

There has been no real research on single child families in Britain and, for this reason, little is really understood about the reasons why some parents have one child and about their experience of parenting. I hope to shed some light on this under-researched area and have been fortunate to gain the support of Professor Frank Furedi who is my supervisor.

Anyone who is interested in my research can contact me by phone on 07887 775395, by email at either helenab@dial.pipex.com or hab3@ukc.ac.uk or in writing to Helen Bowcock, PO Box 172, Haslemere GU27 1AJ.

With many thanks,

Yours sincerely,

Helen Bowcock

Letter sent to parents

Dear Parent,

**“The Single Child Family in Britain Today”
Information for parents who are interested in participating in this research
project**

I am a postgraduate researcher with the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research at the University of Kent at Canterbury and I am the mother of one child. Several years ago I began to read all that I could find about parenting one child and concluded that there is a real need for professional research on single child families in contemporary Britain. I was fortunate enough to gain the support of Professor Frank Furedi to conduct this research project.

The purpose of the project is to explain the reasons why some parents have one child in Britain today and to understand how they experience parenting. Although very little research has actually been conducted on this subject, much speculation has taken place by journalists and by academics about single child families. Some studies of family size tend to have ignored parents with one child or to have made broad assumptions about them. There are likely to be many experiences of, and explanations for, having one child and I would be interested in finding out about your experience.

So what will participating in the research involve? The key criteria for participating in the project is that you have only one child, you are married or cohabiting and that you assume, for whatever reason, that you will have no further children. I should emphasise that if you agree to be interviewed there is no obligation to answer all of the questions and that you may stop the interview at any point. However, I hope that you will enjoy talking about this subject and certainly your comments will be highly valued. So please give it some thought and I very much hope to hear from you. I can be contacted by email at hab3@kent.ac.uk or helenab@dial.pipex.com, by phone on 07887 775395 or in writing to PO Box 172, Haslemere GU27 1AJ.

Yours sincerely,

Helen Bowcock