The Only Child: Maladjusted? Study Says No

By Lib Brantley

Don't waste pity on the only child, because an only child is likely to be more trustworthy and independent than the child who has brothers and sisters.

That is the opinion of a Wake Forest University psychologist who would like to see the one-child family become more 'socially acceptable.'

Dr. Toni Falbo, visiting assistant professor of psychology at Wake Forest, was principal investigator for a research project which tested a sampling of adults in Winston-Salem and Greensboro who are only children.

Working with her were Drs. Russell S. Vaught, Stanley S. Gryskiwicz and Douglas L. Mills, psychologists at the center Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro.

The researchers wanted to find out whether only children are different from people who grow up in large families. One of the project's purposes was to test the truth of popular stereotypes which picture only children as "lonely, selfish and maladjusted."

Dr. Falbo said that results of the studies demonstrate that "to the extent that only children are different from people in other birth categories, they differ in a desirable direction."

The researchers have written a paper about their research, titled "The Only Child as a Theoretical and Social Issue."

Test groups included 150 Wake Forest students, 48 Greensboro public school teachers, and 21 participants in a creative leadership program at Greensboro. There were 64 only children in the groups.

The psychologists said the studies show only children to be more trustworthy than children who have brothers and sisters. The psychologist also said only children are more autonomous, but not to the extent that they are "loners," and that, like first-born children, they are above average in leadership and language skills.

In questionnaires, only children claim to feel as popular and to have as many friends as children from larger families. They belong to fewer clubs but hold a significant number of offices in clubs they join. They report a close relationship with parents. A large number say they want to have one child.

The only child is a continuing research interest for Dr. Falbo, and the paper reflects her concern about "ways to humanely decrease world population growth."

Americans have a remarkably negative image of the one-child family, she said, and tend to think of only children as unhappy and unlikeable. "One of the most frequently cited reasons for having a second child is to prevent the first from becoming an only. If the choice of having only one child became more of a socially accepted option, it is likely that more people would choose to have an only child."
Only children are not the maladjusted unhappy people that popular thought would have them, according to Dr. Toni Falbo, assistant professor of psychology at Wake Forest University, in an article in "Psychology Today" magazine.

Instead, only children show many of the characteristics of first-born children: They are more trustworthy, autonomous without being "loners," more articulate and have more leadership qualities than middle- and last-born children.

In doing research for the article, Dr. Falbo tested 150 Wake Forest students, 48 Greensboro public school teachers and 21 participants in a program at the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro. Sixty-four of them were only children. She then examined the test results to find if there were any truth to the traditional stereotypes about only children.

Only children are neither selfish nor lonely, she found. They are less likely than average to belong to clubs and organizations, but more likely to hold offices in them.

One reason only children are more independent, trustworthy and have better verbal IQs, the article says, may be that "they spend more time with their parents during their formative years, and thus learn more 'adult-like' behavior."

"These findings suggest that couples can limit their families to one child without undesirable consequences to themselves or to the child. Parents can stop worrying that they must have a second child in order to keep the first from becoming neurotic, selfish and lonely," she wrote.
THE QUESTION

Psychologist: No Innate

By Allison Blount
Sentinel Staff Reporter

Fact: 84 per cent of women who marry have children.

Fact: The U.S. population is expected to increase by 63 million and reach 275 million in the year 2025.

Myth: Women have an innate need to bear children.

In these times when concern over the world’s population is mounting, when many couples are considering childless marriages and when thousands of women are searching for a meaning to “womanhood” and “fulfillment,” the last statement is a widely and emotionally disputed one.

The debate over whether women need to have children has elicited response and inspired research from many professional fields: psychiatrists, pediatricians and other medical specialists, psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists. Arguments have come from the standpoints of environmental conservation, religion and women’s rights.

One outspoken advocate of the position that there is no biological psychosexual need to be a parent is Dr. Toni Falbo, assistant professor of psychology at Wake Forest University. She feels that the pressure which the American society exerts on women to have children has gone on long enough and that unless Americans take a serious second look at their ideas about childbearing, this country someday will find itself overpopulated with children who were either unwanted or wanted for the wrong reasons.

“The information that’s available in surveys from all different countries suggests that parenthood is a liability, it’s not this great fulfillment that a lot of people seem to think it is,” Dr. Falbo said in an interview in her university office. She cited scientific studies from The Netherlands, West Germany and the United States, leading to some pretty startling conclusions:

—Nonparents are significantly healthier, regardless of age or sex.

—Pregnant married women are significantly less happy than nonpregnant married women (“You would think they should be euphoric, but the majority of them are uncomfortable,” she said).

—Nonparents feel that their lives are as meaningful as parents do, regardless of age (“This would deny the idea that when you’re old you’re remorseful that you don’t have children”).

—Marital satisfaction of childless couples is as good, and often better, as that of parents. Childless couples are also more sexually faithful to each other.

—With the birth of the first child, satisfaction with life ebbs and stress increases dramatically, and this “depressed state of feeling grim about life” continues for about 17 years, until the children start leaving home.

If one accepts these indications that life without children is just as fulfilling, if not more so, as life with children, there is little explanation for the belief that evolution, destiny, religion, biology or any other force demands that a woman bear children, Dr. Falbo said.

“I’m not saying that being a parent is all bad,” she said. “There are good sides to everyone, and children and parents can contribute a lot to each other.

“The question is would the parents have grown as much if they hadn’t had the children — and a lot of people feel they would have grown as much, if not more, if they had not had children.

“What I would like to argue for, and what a lot of people in the women’s movement and population movement are arguing for, is simply opening up options, so that a person can say, ‘I don’t want to be a parent, I want to do other things with my life,’ without suffering the tremendous social stigma that they do. That stigma is no longer functional.”

Dr. Falbo is population chairman of the Sierra Club here. Her professional expertise is in the areas of psychological sex differences, the women’s movement and survey research.

She recently wrote an article for the Journal of Social Issues with John Condry of Cornell University, a social psychologist specializing in family and human development, which will be published in family and human development, which will be published...
She wrote that bearing children is the necessary result of the human "genetic code," and that adopting a widespread policy advocating childlessness endangers "the well-being of a people."

Because women are equipped biologically for reproduction, they are destined to be mothers by evolution, according to the article.

If all women should feel obliged to bear children, what about those who for some physical reason are unable to?

Their infertility is one of nature's "fail-safe mechanisms" to take care of those who are not "psychologically healthy enough to nurture."

Dr. Falbo readily showed her anger to that charge. "That's just out-and-out cruel," she said. "One's gentleness or ability to fondle or feed has nothing to do with whether one's Fallopian tubes have formed properly or not."

"If you're born with a deformed leg, is that your fault? Does that mean that you should be shot?"

The real culprit behind attitudes such as Bardwick's is American society, Dr. Falbo said.

"Children are trained into roles, taught to be a very soft and cuddly and timid person, or to be a very tough and aggressive person. And because of their reinforcement and training, they end up that way," she said.

"The contention that women have a need to parent is related to that. Little girls are trained to be mommies, given little dolls to play with and nurture."

"And we are told that there's something wrong with us if we don't want to."

For those couples who see the decision to have children as a crucial one, there are many reasons for which they would choose to become parents. Many women decide to have children because they are bored or working in an unstimulating job, Dr. Falbo said — and for them motherhood is often a legitimate alternative.

"Compared to spending the rest of your life typing or answering the phone, it's much more interesting, much more of a challenge and much more creative." She said it is unfortunate that men generally do not have the same option of "dropping out" to become parents.

Another pressure in our society stemming from unwarranted prejudice is the stigma against having only one child, Dr. Falbo said. Parents of only children too often are assumed to be selfish and only children are thought to have a greater incidence of emotional disturbance.

"My research suggests that in most ways only children are not at all different from first-borns, second-borns or anyone else. They have the same likelihood of joining clubs, of being popular, of being asked to the senior prom."

And if one feels that there is an innate or learned need to have children, then having only one should satisfy that need, she added. Dr. Falbo herself is an only child.

Despite the fact that our society demands parenthood, little is done to support it, she said.

"One of the reasons that parenthood is stressful in our society is that we have a very unusual custom of not training anyone for parenthood. Diapering and burping goes on in private, and we never see it. Then we isolate nuclear families, the mother and children, at home all by themselves. A lot of parents just get panicked by not knowing what to do because they're expected to know."

"Even though we're supposed to believe in motherhood and apple pie, mothers are given the biggest shaft in our country."

Because of her work in the population movement, Falbo said she is glad that more and more people are "having the guts" to be childless; many belong to the National Organization of Nonparents (NON). Yet she realizes that some day she may decide to have at least one child.

"I would look on it as some kind of challenge, but I certainly don't feel that my identity or my adulthood depends on my having children — nor does my happiness." She knows she would never look to motherhood for her life's fulfillment.

"Motherhood is not really an unmixed blessing. It's just one of the great untalked-about.
Mother of 10: ‘I’m Really Glad’

When Pearl Welborn and Mickey Tamer got married 30 years ago, they knew they would someday have children, but they had no idea they would wind up with 10.

“I didn’t think that much about being a mother or having a large family, but the first baby came along, and then the second, and they just kept coming,” said Mrs. Tamer.

Because of their Roman Catholic belief (she converted from Baptist after six years of marriage) the Tamers never tried to limit their family size, or space the births of their children. But despite the adjustment and hard work it took to rear the 10, they are pleased at the results of “God’s will,” and said they would do it all over again.

“The church does try to help people limit their families, they certainly don’t push you to have all the babies you can,” Mrs. Tamer said. “But I made my mind up very early about not limiting my family, and I’m really glad I did. Now that we have them it’s quite nice.”

“It doesn’t matter how many you have as long as you can provide for them,” said her husband, who scoffed at the suggestion that they were contributing to overpopulation.

“There’s plenty of room in this world for everybody,” he said. “What people don’t have in children they have in dogs, and they’re bringing in so many children from other countries, what difference does it make?”

The 10 “little” Tamers, one of whom is adopted, range in age from 11 to 28. All have at some time worked for their father at his self-service grocery store, “Mickey’s Place,” in the same block of Acadia Avenue as their modest home. They are a handsome family, most having their father’s strong Italian features.

And because they grew up in a large and close-knit family, they are all “very fond” of each other, and any competition among them has been healthy, Mrs. Tamer said. Important decisions, such as whether to adopt, have involved all of them, with occasional voting by ballot. And when small jealousies have arisen over matters such as who gets to take swimming lessons, the child who felt slighted has been pacified by a little extra maternal attention.

The bulk of the child-rearing has been in Mrs. Tamer’s hands, because her husband has always had to work long hours. At times, when there were babies and very young children, it was frustrating and exhausting, she said — “if anyone says having a large family isn’t a lot of hard work, they’re just lying” — but she never resented her role.

And she feels her children have benefitted from her many years of experience in motherhood.

“I’m much more relaxed with it now, I’ve forgotten a lot of rules and go by my own instincts.” She followed a child-care book closely when her first child, Joe, was born, but constantly consulting a book every time he cried “made me so nervous I threw the book away.”

Pressures are much eased now, she said, because the children can do so many things for themselves. The older ones earn their own money, and the younger ones help her with the housework.

Time alone with each other has not been as lacking as many might think, the Tamers said, although it has concerned them at times. They have been on two Caribbean cruises together, and whenever they leave town their married daughter, who lives across the street, supervises the family.

And though Mrs. Tamer said she “couldn’t imagine” life without the children when they are all grown, she and her husband are looking forward to retiring to their farm in Carroll County, Va.

“She misses it all, but I’ll be able to do things I haven’t done, and we can go on more trips together,” she said. For the present, the family is preparing to move into a larger house nearby, since they are now a family of 16, with three married children and a grandson.

Self-expression and decision-making abilities have been encouraged in the Tamer home, and the parents have put no pressure on their children to follow in their prolific footsteps, Mrs. Tamer said.

“That’s their department, we’re not pushy about it.” She admitted that she would be distressed if she knew her daughters practiced birth control, or believed in abortion, “but I wouldn’t say anything because that’s their life.”

The household is a relaxed one, with family members and friends steadily coming and going. The Tamers spoke warmly and easily about their 29 years of parenthood, but surprised themselves at being able to fill an hour talking about it.

This is our life, they seem to feel — is it really so unusual?

—Allison Blount

Childless Wife: Unsure of Rewards of Motherhood

KERNERSVILLE — Bob and Linda Clark are not your “typical young married couple.”

Both have doctorates in the same field, they work in separate cities, and they say their relationship is more open, more flexible and rewarding than most.

And unlike most couples after almost four years of marriage, they are not planning to

The Mickey Tamer family (clockwise from left): Pat, Andy, Gina and Vicki. At one point, Mrs. Tamer helped in the self-service grocery store.
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The Mickey Tamer family — (clockwise) Susan, Mrs. Tamer, Chris, Terri, Pat, Andy, Gina and Vicki. At one time or another, all 10 children have helped in the self-service grocery store.

The lure of motherhood, she said, evolves from the pleased reaction of others. "I was a high school teacher for four years," she said, "and I've seen these teenagers getting so excited about marriage and pregnancy. What they were really excited about was all the fuss people made over them when they were getting ready to have a baby or get married.

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Clark is an educational psychologist for the Guilford County school system, and his wife teaches educational psychology at Wake Forest University. She is 26, he is 30.

Mrs. Clark is more committed to remaining childless than her husband. She is unwilling to compromise her professional concerns for the demands of child-rearing, she said in an interview in their apartment here, and she feels that the rewards of being a mother would not equal the rewards she gets from her career.

She is even unsure about what the real rewards of motherhood are.

For both of them, their jobs and their relationship with each other are the most important things right now, and they see no reason to jeopardize their freedom and contentment.

"The main reason I can't imagine a child adding anything to my life is the responsibility," Mrs. Clark said. "It's someone who would take away my free time, take away my freedom to devote my time to my job and to myself."

"I see a child right now as a taker, at least for the first five years. I'm not sure I see what I'd get in return being worth all that I would have to give up."

"I guess it's a form of conservatism," Clark explained. "We're enjoying things so well now as a couple, just beginning our careers and finishing our education, that we see no reason to change."

Their decision was mostly an implicit one, because the opportunity to have a child has never really offered itself. "There's just always been something more exciting to do that didn't include having kids — going to school, looking for jobs, planning to build a home, going on vacations," Mrs. Clark said.

Their position has been strengthened by research exposing some of the myths of parenthood, and by the regrets of some of their close friends who have children.

"It makes a real impact to have somebody that you respect, and who's a lot like you, say that if they had it to do over again, they would not choose to have a child because it didn't add to the relationship to the degree that they felt it would," she said.

There is no precedent in the Clarks' pasts that would encourage their decision to be childless. Both came from "regular, traditional, middle-class families," as Mrs. Clark put it — she from a family with two children, he from a family of three children.

They said they have met with no social pressures to have children, because their friends support their position, and "we gravitate towards people without children because it's easier for them to go out at any time," Mrs. Clark questioned them.

"Not many women do," Mrs. Clark admitted. Motherhood has always been "an intrinsic part" of femininity that inspires her to "be somebody that people are curious about."

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Unsure of Rewards of Motherhood

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Clark said. Their parents have never questioned them about it, they said, grinning.

"Not many women ask me, but a lot of men do," Mrs. Clark said. "I think that motherhood has for so long been equated with femininity that if you don't have children, people are curious, particularly men."

The greatest pressure they feel is what they term the "biological time clock," the fact that unless they have a child within the next 3 or 4 years, the chances that they might have a handicapped or severely retarded child greatly increase.

If they ever did have a child—and they are convinced they would never have more than one — it would be because they felt they could grow personally from the experience. Mrs. Clark said she could experience the same growth from being a foster mother.

"Say I'm 40 or 45 years old and I'd like to have a child living with me — then at that time maybe I'll make some plans to do that, even if it's just on a temporary basis. I think you can learn just as much about yourself by being with children, even if they're not your own kids."

Clark sees a qualitative difference between being a temporary parent and bringing up one's own child. But he shares his wife's resentment over what she listed as the worst reasons for having a child: 1) to have somebody to take care of you in your old age; 2) to have somebody to carry on the family name; and 3) to have somebody around to compensate for a weak and boring marriage.

These reasons are all supported by the traditional values of American society, they said, and backed by the media. Mrs. Clark was particularly disturbed that married people, especially women, are seldom portrayed as being happy if they have no children. Much of the lure of motherhood, she said, evolves from the pleased reaction of others.

"I was a high school teacher for four years," she said, "and I've seen these teenagers getting so excited about marriage and pregnancy. What they were really excited about was all the fuss people made over them when they were getting ready to have a baby or get married."

"Society and institutions should make an effort to present the joys of nonparenthood. The best thing parents could do for those of us who aren't parents is to be honest, and let other people know it's not for everybody."

Clark is similarly concerned that society does not emphasize the responsibilities involved in childbearing and the skills needed.

"Society's responsibility to educate people about pregnancy compared to society's promotion of having babies is unequal," he said.

Mrs. Clark said she has probably done more thinking about the decision to remain childless than her husband, because she would carry the opportunity to have a child has offered itself. "There's just something more exciting to do than include having kids — going to jobs, planning to build a home, going on vacations," Mrs. Clark said.

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