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Chris Scalzo

Only-Child Experience And Adulthood

Bernice Sorensen. (2008). Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

I have three quibbles with this book: the hyphen between only and child; a lack of proof reading; and a feeling that this is a research paper rather than a book.

Having said the above, I found this book well structured. It is divided into three sections: Transcending the stereotypes; A Multiplicity of Voices; and Implications for Therapy; it has good index and reference sections, which makes it easy to access for researchers and others. It was easy to read and gave me much to think about and reflect on.

Sorensen herself is an only child who has had a 30-year career in counselling and psychotherapy, including private practice. She notes there has been deep international research into only children – much of it in China, where the one-child policy has created a huge field for research.

I would like to say, as an only child, that Sorensen's research has been a revelation to me and has enabled me to look at myself in a totally new light. As Sorensen says, there is a received opinion of only children: that they are over pampered; unable to interact with others; that they have complex psychological problems not experienced by those with siblings. I seem to have swallowed this opinion whole and reflected my experience through it. The book has helped me to see that descriptions of only children may have a political edge. The received idea that they are selfish, solitary, little adults, etc, may have been a useful tool after the second world war, when there was a population to replace. Equally, China's one child policy has often been criticised as producing 'little princes' – spoiled darlings who can't relate to others and whose every desire is fulfilled by over indulgent parents – maybe a view harboured by those with an anti-abortion, anti-contraception agenda.

Sorensen quotes (p 16) Toni Falbo as concluding that only children vary

very slightly from others and have certain advantages: higher achievement and higher self esteem, and that only children may be pampered when young but as they grow and other influences occur, these influences are stronger and the young adults adjust (p 17). The perceived view is that all onlies are cosseted and cherished. Sorensen asks us to consider that there is another side.

Sorensen mentions that much research in this field is on a 'comparative' basis and subjective/feeling research is thought of as difficult to interpret and often not attempted. She is of the opinion that comparative research does not address the 'on-going experience of living as an only throughout one's lifespan' which this research attempts to do. On page 26 Sorensen notes that research conducted around only children is not compared to sibling children. She notes that the direction of her research is to describe the only state and not compare it.

Sorensen suggests that there are three types of only children (p 24) and the differences can be seen over lifetimes. I wonder if this is a different way of viewing what is in front of the researcher(s) and not so much a difference in the children. Again and again I return to Spinelli (1995) and sedimented beliefs – we see what we have experienced. How do I ever know that I have uncovered all of me – and left other influences behind? Sorensen has revealed to me my 'excuses': I am like I am because I am an only – the world says this is what onlies are like. I am forced back on examining my sedimented beliefs, searching for 'me' in the creativity of the moment.

Sorensen quoting Pitkeathley and Emerson (p 27): 'Most of them (only children) felt that, in the end, the only child is always alone.' They think only children are different. Only children are described as 'appearing confident, organized and in control ... internally (they) are unsure and insecure.' Sorensen thinks of onlies as 'not knowing the rules of the game' a thought that reflects what I have felt all my life. The question is: is this a reflection of me as a person or me as an only? As it happens, I had coffee with a friend yesterday. She is an only, too, and we found ourselves in agreement over our feelings of never quite knowing how to be in a group; of feeling we had missed out somehow; and our desire not to have an only child ourselves. She has asked to borrow this book and I look forward to her comments on it. I still have a feeling of being more at home with older people – even now and, yes, there are not so many around these days.

Sorensen quotes Newman (p 29) as saying that the way to prevent sibling rivalry is to have only children. Sorensen notes that Newman seems to think it necessary for parents to provide a long list of 'things' for children – and if they can't be provided for a second child then that child shouldn't be produced. There seems to be an assumption that an only child is automatically loved. I can tell you, this is not so. In this way, there is no

difference between sibling-rich and only children.

There seems to be a perception of onlies as ‘little adults’, that parents avoid ‘childish’ behaviour in their children by having only one. Sorensen questions: what is childhood about but being ‘childish’? She questions what it might mean to be a ‘little adult’. The suggestion seems to be that only sibling-rich children are ‘real’ children – with all the diversity that implies.

Sorensen’s co-researchers’ stories echoed and reechoed with me. As Sorensen says (p 52) these stories stirred deep memories – the children described described me.

Sorensen speaks of the ‘idea of an only-child archetype to provide a way of understanding the only-child experience.’ (p 159) If, as she argues earlier, there may be no difference between only children and sibling-rich children, does this archetype try to enforce difference where there may be none – and maybe initiate feelings of difference in children/people. For example, when that dreadful day comes and one’s other half dies, does it make the process, what, easier/more bearable/less unknown, etc – because one is going back to the ‘known’ – the solitary state. Maybe the togetherness is like a magical fairytale, hardly believable to the only, and the conclusion only what one expected and knew.

As an only child, when I came to have children I was adamant that I didn’t want an only – though two was enough. It was my experience that I never grasped the idea of being a part of something with other children, ‘they’ had a group to belong to, I was alone. I have always translated this as being a product of my only status – now I am debating with myself whether it was just the unique way I see the world.

I would recommend this book. It widens the experience of what it means to be human and enriches and deepens understanding.

References

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Nicola Slade

Sexuality And Gender For Mental Health Professionals. A Practical Guide

Christina Richards & Meg Barker. (2013). London: Sage

Any book with the words Sexuality or Gender in its title is almost certain to generate interest in readers and Richards and Barker have provided us with a grounded up-to-date description of a specific area of mental health and its client groups. The primary aim of the book is to provide mental health professionals with a basic understanding of sexualities, genders and relationship structures in a clear informative style. On a first read I certainly felt that the authors succeeded in doing this in an elegant and