PSEUDO-SIBLINGS: FRIENDSHIP AND ONLY-CHILDREN

By

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the ways in which the friendships of only-children are similar to and differ from sibling relationships. Sixteen interview participants were asked to describe their friendships and their sibling relationships, and were asked to explain the perceived differences between the two. Participants agreed that friends can be *like* siblings, but siblings were more willing to equate the two. Participants tended to idealize the sibling relationship regardless of their real-life experience of the sibling relationship. Most participants preferred an even number of children, with only two participants preferring the number of children in their childhood family.

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Approved:

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Toward the end of 2015, China modified its family planning policy, allowing married couples to have a second child (Kuhn, 2015). China implemented its birth control policy in the 1980s after the country's population continued to grow rapidly over several decades. According to Nan (2014), by 2005, some 400 million births had been prevented because of the one child policy.

Researchers and data alike suggest that the United States has adopted an only-child policy of its own in recent decades, due to low fertility and because couples are marrying and having children later in life (Gondal, 2012; Sobotka & Beaujouan, 2014). Gondal (2012) explains total fertility rate (TFR) as "the number of children a woman would bear over the course of her lifetime if current age-specific fertility rates remained constant throughout her child-bearing years" (Gondal, 2012, p. 733). According to the 2010 census data, 23 percent of families in the United States are single-child families (U.S. Census, n.d.). Xuming and Liya (2014) quote a similar number, saying that 16 million, or nearly one in five American families have only one child (Xuming and Liya, 2014). Graham (2014) claims that the number of single-child families increases as a city's population increases, and that 30 percent of children in New York City are now only-children. "Not since the Great Depression has the country had so many only-children" (Graham, 2014). Due to the reasons listed above, the number of single-child

families will likely continue to rise. The purpose of this study was to research the significance close friendships have on only-children. Chapter One discusses the rationale for this research study, gives a brief review of the relevant literature, examines the theoretical framework used, and describes the methodological approach.

Rationale

This research project explored the differences and similarities in sibling relationships and the relationships between that of an only-child and his or her friends. Birth order has been a topic of discussion among researchers since the late 1800s and is still a focus in the present day. Only-children are the "fastest-growing segment of birth order," yet they are also the most stereotyped (Graham, 2014). Only-children have an array of both positive and negative reputations, which include being spoiled, socially awkward, unable to handle conflict, narcissistic, selfish, and "attention-seeking;" however, research on only-children suggests that they are more self-sufficient, more mature, and better educated than those with siblings (Constanta & Marcelia, 2012; Gondal, 2012; Graham, 2014; McHale et al., 2012). Only-children tend to have more developed social skills. According to Li et al. (2013), "the absence of brothers and sisters had no adverse affect on social interaction situation of the only-child college students, oppositely, this particular family environment 'forcing' only-child college students to interact more often with classmates and peers" (Li et al, 2013, p. 5).

Extensive research has been conducted pertaining to siblings specifically how siblings help influence one another's development (McHale et al., 2012). According to Constanta and Marcelica (2012), studies focused primarily on only-children have been

avoided because "pedagogical concerns have been always oriented toward solving the general problems faced by multiple-child families" (Constanta & Marcelica, 2012).

The majority of the literature available regarding only-children consists of studies about China's only-child policy. Though there is some available research about only-children, the bulk of these studies are quantitative in nature. Though most recent studies took a quantitative approach, some of the research available contains aspects of what the proposed study focused on, such as the socialization of only-children and who fills in as siblings in their lives. Not one of these studies indicates how an only-child relationship with a friend compares to a relationship between siblings. Since this study is qualitative in nature, it helps to fill in these gaps in the literature on this topic by exploring how significant the bonds of friendships are to only-children. This study attempts to determine how and to what extent only-children bond with their friends. By using qualitative methods, we can hear only-children explain, in their own words, how significant their friendships are.

Literature Review

Only-children have not often been a major focus of academic study, and what studies have been done leave much to be desired. The little research available shows evidence of only-children longing for a sibling relationship, and even creating fantasy-sibling relationships with their peers. Over a 10-month period of weekly hour-long observations in a nursery school, Spedding (2014) focused her research on an only-child, Hope. Hope had attended this particular nursery school since she was six months old. At the time of Hope's observation, she was four years old. During these observations, the author was provided "the opportunity to witness how Hope used her experiences of

primary relationships as the basis from which to develop her relationships with others" (Spedding, 2014, p. 51). During her observations of Hope, Spedding began to think that Hope's mother was pregnant because of the way the child was interacting with other children in the nursery. However, after a few months of wondering, it was confirmed that Hope's mother was, in fact, not pregnant. Spedding then began to explore the idea that "children experience something equivalent to a sibling relationship with their peers in the nursery setting" (Spedding, 2014, p. 52).

Only-child education and socialization were aspects of exploration in Constanta and Marcelica's (2012) study. The authors conducted a quantitative study to shape a profile of the "educational climate" in only-children as well as determine whether or not parents' attitudes influence the education and socialization of their only-child. The authors hypothesized that there are significant differences between the attitudes of parents with only-children and parents with multiple children in terms of their children's education and socialization. "Primary socialization has an essential role in building the basic structures of the Self and of the world and in the orientation of the *candidate to humanity* toward the world" (Constanta & Marcelica, 2012, p. 73). Two groups of 46 parents were selected as participants in the study; the first group, which was considered an experimental group, consisted of parents of only-children and the second group, the control group, was made up of parents with multiple children. Results indicated, "single-child parents invest special attention in both formal education and knowledge obtained as a result of non-formal education" (Constanta & Marcelica, 2012, p. 76). These parents are also concerned with their children's schoolwork; they check their homework on a daily basis and ensure that their children are completing assignments. However, "students

from large families are not granted the same support, as they are to do homework alone, occasionally receiving support from their elder brothers/sisters" (Constanta & Marcelica, 2012, p. 77).

Coinciding with Constanta and Marcelica's (2012) education and socialization study, Li et al. (2013) explored the differences in the sexual knowledge, attitudes, and practices of only-child female undergraduates and female undergraduates with siblings. The study concluded that only-child female students were more knowledgeable about contraception and regarded condoms and other forms of birth control with more positive attitudes than the students with siblings.

Unlike only-children, who generally have close relationships and depend on their parents more so than children with siblings, according to Salmon (2003), compared to firstborns and lastborns, middleborns consider themselves to be closer to friends and siblings rather than their parents and they find their parents to be less supportive emotionally and financially.

Between 2000-2002, Gondal (2012) conducted a multilevel analysis of sibling size and personal networks from 25 countries, using a Grounded Theory Approach. Gondal reveals that, "individuals who have fewer siblings 'compensate' by being more reliant on their parents. In a sense, parents substitute for siblings by providing support that might otherwise have been drawn from brothers/sisters" (Gondal, 2012, p. 751). However, interestingly enough, Gondal's (2012) study suggested similar findings about only-children as Salmon (2003) discovered about middleborns. Much like the findings from Salmon's (2003) study on middleborns, Gondal's (2012) study on only-children sibling substitutes, results indicated that singletons are "more likely to turn to close

friends for all sorts of support, including first choice in financial support, indicative of a more expansive view of friendship ties" (Gondal, 2012, p. 748). "Single-child adults are more likely to report inadequate access to social support in the form of having no one to turn to or seeking out nonpersonal ties" (Gondal, 2012, p. 749). These individuals tend to "replace" personal ties with professional ones.

One area of sibling research that has been studied extensively is the quality of these sibling relationships. Over a five-year period, Buist and Vermande (2014) collected data and studied sibling relationship patterns by administering questionnaires to 1,670 Dutch children from 51 schools across the Netherlands. During these five years, data pertaining to sibling relationship quality, sibling warmth, and sibling conflict were collected and analyzed. The authors were inspired by previous research on sibling relationships to drive their study. They "examined differences between relationship types in middle childhood concerning internalizing and externalizing problems, as well as social competence, academic competence, and global self-worth" (Buist & Vermande, 2014, p. 530). Four sibling types were found: Harmonious sibling type, conflictual sibling type, affect-intense sibling relationship type, and uninvolved.

According to Sobotka and Beaujouan (2014), previous studies have indicated "ideals may evolve quickly in times of rapid cultural change and thus can give useful signals about shifting family norms and images about 'desirable' family size" (Sobotka & Beaujouan, 2014, p. 393).

Previous research has claimed that generational culture has a substantial impact on personality development. According to Twenge (2006), several studies have found that "when you were born has more influence on your personality than the family who

raised you" (Twenge, 2006). This is an interesting concept because only-children are all too often stereotyped for being spoiled, attention-seeking narcissists who are difficult to get along with (Graham, 2014). However, only-children are not the sole demographic that possesses these specific qualities. Regardless of the number of siblings in a family, individuals born in or after 1981, the Millennial generation, are also commonly guilty of stereotypical only-child flaws (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Twenge and Campbell (2009) discuss Millennials extensively in their book, *The Narcissism Epidemic,* and argue, "the United States is currently suffering from an epidemic of narcissism" (Twenge & Campbell, 2009, p. 2). "It is increasingly common to see parents relinquishing authority to young children, showering them with unearned praise, protecting them from their teachers' criticisms, giving them expensive automobiles, and allowing them to have freedom but not responsibility that goes with it" (Twenge & Campbell, 2009, p. 73). In her book, Lythcott-Haims (2015) reasoned, in agreement with Twenge and Campbell, that millennials exhibit many of the stereotypes associated with only-children. She attributed this narcissism to the new parental role of "personal assistant."

Theoretical Framework

Attachment theory focuses on the level of intimacy in a relationship, whether that attachment is between a parent and a child, a romantic couple, or a platonic friendship. The theory was developed in the first half of the 20th century by John Bowlby. Bowlby's review of Konrad Lorenz's (1935) research on the imprinting among ducklings, along with his years of experience as a child psychologist, led him to suspect that infants also form instinctual bonds (Bowlby, 1988). Attachment behavior is defined as "any form of behavior that results in a person attaining or maintaining proximity to some other clearly

defined individual who is conceived as better able to cope with the world" (Bowlby, 1988, p. 27). For children, that is most often a parent, but Bowlby records instances in which non-parental individuals, and at times even strangers, have been the objects of attachment. Furthermore, through his years of study, Bowlby has witnessed the same attachment behaviors in adolescents and adults. Regardless of age, people tend to exhibit attachment behaviors, especially when faced with pain, fatigue, and fear (Bowlby, 1988).

The first use of attachment theory in an empirical study was conducted by Ainsworth (1963), when she observed the relationship between Ugandan mothers and infants. She then measured instances of infantile distress compared to the prevalence of attachment behaviors in the relationship (Ainsworth, 1963). Attachment theory has since been used to explore adult attachment, marital relationships and separation, relationships between siblings and their aging parents, as well as adult bereavement (Pietromonaco et al., 2006; Weiss, 1977; Cicirelli, 1989; Parkes, 1972).

Attachment theory is also used to treat "emotionally disturbed patients and families," and Bretherton (1994) predicts that "in the future, attachment theory may provide the underpinnings of a more general theory of personality organization and relationship development" (Bretherton, 1994, p. 791). The current study used attachment theory in the second sense, as a way to explore characteristics of relationships.

Research Question

The following questions were the focus of this study:

RQ1: What are the similarities and differences between the friendships of only-children and relationships between siblings?

Method

Participants

After receiving approval from my university's Institutional Review Board (see Appendix E), students and faculty from a small, Southwestern University were contacted to participate in this study. The target ages for only-children participants and their siblings were between the ages of 18-30. Only-children of this age were ideal for this study because they are still young enough to remember how these friendships compared to sibling relationships and old enough to discuss how these relationships shaped them into adulthood. Similarly, siblings in this particular age group were able to give adequate insight into how siblings form their relationship bonds. Sixteen participants were interviewed.

Procedure

Criterion sampling as well as snowball sampling was utilized in this study. Snowball sampling was utilized in order to interview possible only-child friends of the initial participants. Snowball sampling was a simple and effective way to find only-child participants, and it allowed the researcher to collect both a sibling and an only-child perspective on the same friendship. If a participant had a sibling, attempts were made to interview that sibling, and two sibling pairs were interviewed. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), "snowball sampling is well-suited to studying social networks, cultures, or people who have certain attributes in common" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 114). Interviews consisted of open-ended tour questions. "During this tour, the participant 'educates' the researcher by pointing out the key features- the routines, rituals,

procedures, artifacts, cycles of activity, socialization paths, and so forth" (Lindlof &

Taylor, 2011, p. 202).

All participants consented (see Appendixes A and B) and were interviewed in

person or via Skype, depending on the geographic location of the participant. The face-

to-face interviews were conducted at a location of the participant's choosing. The

interviews were in-depth and of a semi-structured nature. Two separate interview guides

(see Appendixes C and D) were used to help explore participant perceptions of an only-

child's bond with his or her friends and that of sibling bonds. Although an interview

guide was used, follow-up questions varied. Notes were taken during each interview, and

all interviews were recorded. Interview times ranged from 16:38 to 1:38:34, the average

interview lasted 32:34. The total time of recorded interviews was eight hours, forty-one

minutes, and nine seconds. Participant identities were protected with pseudonyms.

Interview data and personal information was stored on a password-protected computer

for security. No reward was provided for participation, except for the opportunity to

reflect on important relationships in their lives, and the self-awareness that comes from

that.

The differences and similarities between sibling relationships and only-child

friendships were explored using in-depth interviews and through the theoretical

framework of Attachment Theory.

Summary and Preview of Chapters

This thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter one has provided an overview of the

proposed thesis, including an introduction to the research, the rationale, a brief review of

the available literature, the theoretical framework, and an explanation of the

methodology. The rationale explained how only-child families are becoming more prominent in the United States and discussed the importance of investigating this emerging trend. The first chapter gave a brief account of procedures used to examine the friendships of only-children in this study.

Chapter Two provides a more in-depth exploration of only-child families, while also focusing on families with multiple children. It is an assessment of the available literature and past research related to the subject of this study. Chapter two examines the strengths of previous studies and identifies gaps in the literature. The majority of previous research about only-children is quantitative in nature and leaves many questions unanswered. The literature review reinforces the importance of the current study.

The third chapter discusses the methodology in greater detail and includes a description of participant criterion, procedures of data collection, and data analysis techniques. Chapter three provides an explanation of the participant selection process, and a justification of the research methods used.

The fourth chapter reviews the results of the data analysis and explains the findings in detail and uncovers any patterns that emerged during coding. This chapter predicts the impact of the results of the study on the academic understanding of only-children, and of sibling relationships, and of friendships. The final chapter considers any limitations of the current study and areas in which further research would be beneficial.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early scholarly investigation of only-children led to the birth of pervasive negative stereotypes. Though recent research has challenged these stereotypes, they still exist today. This chapter discusses attachment, only-child parent-child relationships, friendships of only-children, self-companionship, only-child stereotypes, the challenges only-children face, and sibling longing in past research. Finally, the literature review allows the reader to better understand the only-child.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory started as a theory in developmental psychology that focuses on a child's parental relationships. When formulating the theory, Bowlby drew inspiration from a number of sources, including developmental psychology, information processing, cybernetics, and most significantly, ethology (Bretherton, 1994). Bowlby concluded that child-parent attachment, previously thought to stem from the parents feeding the child, was a biological instinct, and a child would form an attachment with an adult regardless of whether his or her personal needs were met by that adult. In an early experiment on attachment theory, young children were placed in a strange place with adults they did not know, and the children in the experiment exhibited attachment behaviors toward strangers. Further experiments showed that such behaviors are not only

present in children, but that even adults will exhibit attachment behaviors to those available in times of distress (Bowlby, 1988).

Apart from John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth (1963) also performed pioneering work applying attachment theory to infants and their mothers in Africa. Through her research, she discovered that children whose mothers were more sensitive to their distress were distressed less often. After further research led her to similar conclusions, she offered the idea of the "secure base." To have a secure base is to know that the other member of your attachment relationship will be available in times of distress (Bowlby, 1988).

An attachment relationship consists of a careseeker and a caregiver. Since attachment theory is most often used in developmental psychology, the careseeker is usually a child and the caregiver is usually a parent, but the careseeker can be anyone in distress, and the caregiver can be anyone seen as more capable of coping with the world (Bowlby, 1988). In adult relationships, the roles of caregiver and careseeker are reciprocal, with each member acting in both capacities. Even so, parent-child attachment is most often studied by psychologists, because other attachment relationships tend to mirror parental relationships (Bowlby, 1988). When discussing therapeutic implications, Bowlby states that "parent substitutes" can give a person the secure base that was not present in their relationship with their own parents.

Attachment relationships are usually broken into three categories: A secure attachment is when the careseeker expects that the caregiver will be available and

responsive; anxious-resistant attachment is when the caregiver is only sometimes available; anxious-avoidant attachment is when the careseeker expects the caregiver to be neither available nor responsive. Children with secure attachments to their parents are more likely to explore further from their secure base, knowing that their caregiver is nearby. Individuals who are secure in their attachment relationships tend to be more independent, and their relationships tend to be more stable. Anxious-resistant attachment leads to increased conflict in relationships, because people with anxious-resistant attachment relationships are especially prone to separation anxiety, and tend to cling to their relationship-mates. People in the last category, anxious-avoidant, sometimes form a pattern of rejecting others, choosing to live without the support of close relationships. These people are often said to exhibit narcissistic tendencies or to have a "false self" (Bowlby, 1988).

In *A Secure Base,* Bowlby (1988) mentioned two specific variations on the parent-child relationship that lead to problematic adult behaviors. Children who act as caregiver to a parent often grow up to be distrustful of others and believe that people will take advantage of them. People who were never allowed to criticize their parents may over-admire people in authoritative roles. These people do not see flaws in those that take the caregiver role, and will even deny flaws when they become apparent (Bowlby, 1988).

Attachment in Only-children

In Roberts and Blanton's (2001) study, twenty only-children were interviewed and three themes emerged: Only-children have no siblings; only-children have an especially close parent-child relationship; only-children are sometimes seen as and consider themselves to be "small adults." The most obvious of these themes was that

only-children lack a sibling relationship. Lacking a familial peer with which to share the challenges of childhood, these only-children invented confidants to share their experiences. Pickhardt (2008) noticed a similar trend in only-children, mentioning their special capacity for fantasy as manifested by their relationships with imaginary friends. One participant from Roberts and Blanton (2001) shared his fantasy friendship. "I would be this person and then the left hand would be this person and we would talk back and forth. I would even move to the other side and act like I was talking" (Roberts & Blanton, 2001, p. 130).

Other only-children formed strong familial relationships with their pets and personal possessions. Another participant in Roberts and Blanton (2001) mentioned having an emotional relationship with her multitude of family pets. Only-children also form attachment relationships with their personal possessions. "Onlies don't wash their cars. They give them baths. They think the cars will feel bad if they are dirty – and would feel worse if they are sold … These types of attachments do not just extend to cars … Onlies love their things and love to be at home, alone, surrounded by them" (Isaacson and Radish, 2002, p. 54). Only-children seem to be grasping at any imaginable relationship to sate their needs that cannot be fulfilled in a parent-child relationship.

Parent-child Relationship in Single-Child Families

In a single-child family, parental attention is not divided among siblings. The child is also able to focus his or her attention solely on the parent-child relationship, and so the two are often able to create special bonds. Roberts and Blanton (2001) give examples of only-children's experience of the particular closeness of the parent only-child dynamic. "I always knew Mom and Dad loved me best. And I really didn't feel like

I had to compete with anybody for Mom's or Dad's love" (Roberts & Blanton, 2001, pp. 131-132).

> I got a lot, a lot of attention. They spent a lot of time with me playing and helping me with my homework, helping me study, and they were always at whatever I was interested in … I definitely got a lot of attention and love. (Roberts & Blanton, 2001, p. 132)

Pickhardt (2008) mentions a "general principal of intimacy" that can be found in single-child families that is often not present in multi-child families. This intimacy allows an only-child to develop friendships with parents that siblings often lack (Pickhardt, 2008). "I felt I was better friends with my parents than most children are. I was treated as an equal as well as a child" (McGrath, 1989, p. 45).

Once only-children become friends with their parents, this friendship tends to continue into adulthood. Time spent with parents during childhood creates joined experiences and commonality of enjoyment that solidifies the friendship into a life-long relationship. This parental bond serves as a model for peer friendships, and so only-children are often more selective with their friends. They tend to make deeper connections and have longer-lasting friendships than those who grow up with siblings. Only-children take the same approach to romantic relationships, seeking out serious and secure individuals to pursue (Pickhardt, 2008).

Only-Child Friendships

Despite their reported selectivity, only-children have been found to have the same quantity and quality of friendships as those with siblings (Kitzmann, Cohen, & Lockwood, 2002). "Only-children may have a smaller social circle than other kids, but they do have just as many close friends" (Murano, 2007, p. 50). According to Pickhardt (2008), only-children choose their friends with selective care, finding a small number of people with whom they are compatible and offering them a loyal and committed relationship, rather than the informal, relaxed acquaintanceship offered by the socially indiscriminate. Pickhardt goes on to explain the importance of friendship to an only child: "I believe the absence of siblings, and the desire to create some siblinglike friendship, is what is at issue here" (Pickhardt, 2008, p. 65).

Roberts and Blanton (2001) had several participants who had developed surrogate-sibling relationships with friends or other relatives. They noted that the majority of participants who formed these relationships were female. Two of them spoke of cousins as though they were siblings, and one stated: "I've formed special bonds with most of my friends because they provide maybe the sibling emotional-type of relationship for me" (Roberts & Blanton, 2001, p. 131). In her book, *One and Only,* Sandler (2013) claims only-children "tend to build a chosen family" (Sandler, 2013, p. 50). She then offers an anecdote in which she and a friend tour a house and decide to live together, each bringing their husbands with them, forming a four-person pseudo-family. "Every week we'd gather together for Sunday night suppers with six to twelve of our dearest friends" (Sandler, 2013, p. 51). She then mentions her first experience of a "divorce" when the couple that formed her pseudo-family moved out. They were soon replaced by another

couple of friends, and Sunday suppers continued with a smaller and tighter group of friends.

Spedding (2014) quotes Rustin (2007) in the introduction to her observational study of an only child in a nursery school setting:

Vast numbers of young children are now in group day-care from early on in their lives. While not actual siblings, the other children in the group are undoubtedly experienced as quasi-siblings, since they share the attention offered by the day-care maternal and paternal substitutes … Millions of children now grow up spending large amounts of time in a group care situation, where their feelings about the other children probably reflect variations on sibling-like themes. (Rustin, 2007, p. 24)

Spedding observed an only child, Hope, as she interacted with other children at her nursery school. Hope was the only child in her class whose parents were not expecting a new baby, and the author noted Hope's reaction to her situation. The author suggests that Hope felt alone and isolated from her peers, as being an only child was becoming a "rare phenomenon" in her social circle. In order to maintain similarity with her friends, Hope began to experiment with new identities, particularly that of a sibling to her peers.

Four months on, however, when it was clear that her mother was not pregnant, Hope continued to act in ways which led me to ask myself

whether children experience something equivalent to a sibling relationship

with their peers in the nursery setting. In other words, I began to see what

Rustin means by 'quasi-siblings' as I observed Hope with her peer group,

grappling with the fact that other babies were on the way. In her mind she

seemed to be thinking, along with her peers, about the question of a new

baby and played at becoming an older sibling with her friends. (Spedding,

2014, p. 52)

Spedding (2014) acknowledged a change in identity among those children who

now had younger siblings. This section in her study was also introduced with a quote

from Rustin (2007), in which Rustin remembered a conversation with a three-year-old

new big sister: "she believed she had to enter into a new identity at once – otherwise she

would be nobody" (Rustin, 2007, p. 27). This sudden and radical shift in identity could

understandably cause a crisis of identity that is not faced by only-children.

Self-Companionship

Only-children spend a lot of time alone, often engaged in imaginative and creative

pursuits. This imaginative solo-play is often introspective, a time in which the child is his

or her own companion. Time spent in their own company allows only-children to

establish intimate friendship with themselves (Pickhardt, 2008). This may further

contribute to selectivity of friends, and shows why the quality of friendships is often

more important than quantity. An only-child has two models for friendship, his friendship

with his parents and his friendship with himself. According to Pickhardt (2008),

"someone who is well connected to herself tends to connect well with others because she

has confidence in the person she is and what she has to offer" (Pickhardt, 2008, p. 59).
This would imply that time spent in the absence of a social circle serves to enhance a
person's sociability.

Negative Stereotypes

The negative stereotypes associated with only-children stem back as far as 1898,
when G. Stanley Hall studied a small sample of children. The psychologist is said to have
concluded, "being an only child is a disease unto itself" (as cited in Mancillas, 2006).
Hall's (1898) negative remarks pertaining to only-children have remained, and
mainstream acceptance of these negative stereotypes came about after the work of Alfred
Adler in the early 20th century. "Despite growing trends toward having just one child and
the large body of evidence revealing the strengths of the only child, negative stereotypes
about only-children persist" (Mancillas, 2006, p. 268).

In the first section of Blake's (1981) study, she reiterated negative only-child
stereotypes, referring to the fact that "being an only child is widely regarded as a
significant handicap" (Blake, 1981, p. 43). This "handicap" follows only-children all over
the world. The feared notion that only-children in China would develop "little emperor"
and "little sun" syndrome because "only-children were commonly associated with
negative tendencies such as being selfish, unappreciative, and uncaring of others" has led
China to explore the taboo realm of therapy (Chen, 2012, p. 105). Chen discussed how
more Chinese adult only-children are turning toward narrative therapy to overcome
conflictual differences in their marriages.

A stereotypical image of only-children is that they will not be sociable because
they do not get the chance to socialize with their peers at home. As stated in the section

above, Pickhardt's (2008) research has shown the opposite to be true. Pickhardt surmises that the lack of peer groups at home leads to greater self-acceptance, which in turn leads to greater social acceptance. In a study of children in rural China, only-children were found to spend as much time socializing as those with siblings. "They have about as much opportunity to fight, play, laugh, and share with others as children with siblings do" (Wang et al., 1998, p. 57). Though the negative stereotypes associated with being an only-child are pervasive seemingly across all cultures, they are highly contested by empirical evidence.

Negating Negative Stereotypes

In 1986, Falbo and Polit published an analysis of 115 studies of only-children that had been performed since 1925. From their research they concluded that youths from one or two-child families were developmentally similar, and that both were developmentally advantaged over children from larger families. To test the hypotheses made by Falbo and Polit, Mellor (1990) tested a sample of 434 students from the Los Angeles area. The Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory was administered to measure common identity crises faced in various stages of development. The results of this test showed that, when compared by birth order, only-children were similar to first-born children, and that they both scored significantly higher than later-born children in the fields of *autonomy, initiative, industry,* and *identity*. When compared by family size, single-child and two-child families were not significantly different, but both scored significantly higher than medium-sized families in the fields of *autonomy* and *initiative.* The most reliable findings from Mellor's (1990) study were the differences in mean scores between only-child

21

families and families with five or more children. Only-children scored higher in *trust, autonomy, initiative, industry,* and *identity* (Mellor, 1990).

As researchers investigate only-children, results indicate that these negative stereotypes are largely unfounded. Blake's (1981) results reveal that only-children are often "intellectually advantaged," and she offers evidence to disprove the common conceptions that only-children possess characteristics such as being "spoiled, maladjusted, asocial, lonely, and self-centered" (Blake, 1981, p. 46).

Blake's work has compared the social attributes of only-children, along with their personalities, to those of children with siblings, and maintains that the empirical evidence shows that only-children are more socially and personally developed than those from large families, though they are sometimes shown as statistically similar to children from small families. These findings, she says, hold true across social classes, across family types, and regardless of parental divorce. According to Blake, the negative stereotypes associated with being an only child are utter fantasy. As she puts it, "the disadvantages of being an only child may lie primarily in the eye of the socioculturally biased beholder" (Blake, 1981, p. 46). An interesting concept that Blake touched on in her study involved the inverse relation between family size and family intelligence, "as family size goes up, the intellectual environment of the nuclear family goes down because it becomes heavily weighted with infantile minds" (Blake, 1981, p. 45).

Challenges of Being an Only-Child

While quantitative studies have reliably shown that only-children are more motivated and more personally developed than siblings (Blake, 1981; Falbo & Hooper, 2015; Mellor, 1990; Wang et al., 1998), and that they often enjoy a stronger sense of

identity than those from larger families, when interviewed in a qualitative manner, only-children reveal challenges that they uniquely face. According to Pickhardt (2008), only-children tend to be willful: they have a strong sense of self-determination. This trait stems from the individuality he or she develops during the large amounts of time spent alone. The downside to this willfulness is that it can appear as an impatient and demanding child. "On the problematic side, however, when she wants something very much, she often believes that she *should* get it, and if what she desired is delayed or denied, she can get very angry" (Pickhardt, 2008, p. 69).

Only-children experience conflict-resolution with adults more so than with other youths, and so often have little practice negotiating with their age-mates. They are statistically more aggressive and demanding than their peers. The lack of conflict-management experience with their age-group leads only-children to be less liked by their peers, and therefore puts them among the most victimized children (Mancillas, 2006). Only-children spend more time with adults than with their peers. They are often engaged in adult activities and adult conversations, and they learn to be more like adults. "Only-children appear to be more like adults than other children. They imitate not only linguistic behavior, but other adult behavior as well" (Blake, 1981, p. 47). Excessive maturity can cause a separation between only-children and other children. Only-children sometimes have trouble connecting with their peers.

Two participants interviewed by Roberts and Blanton (2001) tie their difficulties connecting with age-mates to romantic hardships. Both Roberts and Blanton and Pickhardt mentioned that only-children are more inclined to be attracted to and seek a romantic relationship with a person who is older than they are (Roberts & Blanton, 2001;

Pickhardt, 2008). "I find myself gravitating, being attracted to older women" (Roberts & Blanton, 2001, p. 135). Another participant admitted that he felt forced to go after older women because, "women around my age, I've heard them say that they're intimidated, that I speak to them like I'm their father, or that I talk like their parents" (Roberts & Blanton, 2001).

Even in China, where only-childhood is commonplace, only-children face harsh romantic criticism. According to Chen (2012), counseling services in China have been in high demand due to marital issues and divorce numbers rising in recent years. Chen explored the use of narrative therapy in Chinese adult only-children. Chinese only-children are guarded when it comes to seeking therapy because of societal opinions on the topic of therapy itself, due to the "stigma associated with mental health services" in Chinese culture (Chen, 2012). Chen described the job of applying narrative therapy to Chinese only-children, who in adulthood faced some form of marital distress. One of the couples who Chen referred to in the study sought marriage counseling because the only-child spouse in the relationship was thought to possess negative qualities associated with being an only child, such as "selfishness," and both members considered their relationship "unsatisfying" (Chen, 2012).

In a multi-child family, parents spread their focus throughout several parent-child relationships. An only child maintains the entirety of their parents' focus, and in turn has no other familial relationship with which to dilute their own. As such, parent-child relations in a single-child family are often emotionally intense. As stated earlier, only-children can have especially strong bonds with their parents, but those who do not often feel especially pressured by their parents (Roberts & Blanton, 2001; Pickhardt, 2008).

The parent/only-child relationship tends to be thoroughly demanding, and children who see themselves as sources of pride or shame for their parents can be even more demanding of themselves.

> If you have several children, you always have the dream that at least one
>
> of them, if not all of them, will be that medical doctor or that lawyer, or be
>
> successful in life. But [my parents] only had one chance in me. (Roberts &
>
> Blanton, 2001, p. 132)

Parents of only-children also put tremendous pressure on themselves, which again increases pressure on their only-child (Pickhardt, 2008). Pickhardt goes further and describes the reasoning behind these only-child/parental pressures; only-children "are motivated to perform well partly through the desire to gain parental approval," as well as mimic adult responsibilities (Pickhardt, 2008, p. 199). Along with pressure, only-children "face many familial and societal expectations" (Chen, 2012, p. 107). Chen mentioned the pressure the only-child feels to carry on a family's heritage. "The only child can begin to feel that the only way to survive is to do whatever is necessary to get the approval of parents who hold the symbolic power of life and death" (Pickhardt, 2008, pp. 203-204). This pressure to be successful in their parents' eyes continues into adulthood.

One interesting examination of only-child pressures was a study by Liu (2006), in which the author brought parental gendered expectations of only-children to the forefront. Liu focused on understanding how socio-economic status of the parents and the sex of an only-child impact the parents' expectations of their child. The author found that parents

had radically different expectations based on gender, rather than socio-economic status. "All the parents wanted to make sure that boys turned out 'masculine' and most of them deem it important that girls turn out 'feminine.' According to them it must be rectified if a child behaves in the 'wrong' way" (Liu, 2006, p. 495). Parents in the study believed that a girl's life should be "steady and safe," and so they often selected a career path for their daughters, while male children were allowed to explore potential careers on their own. Although given more freedom, boys faced higher pressure to be academically and financially successful, while girls faced less pressure on the path chosen for them. (Liu, 2006). This gender-based pressure was present for all twenty families interviewed by Liu.

When Only-Children Want Siblings

Pickhardt (2008) discussed whether or not only-children miss having siblings by explaining that siblings "are *romantically missed* as idealized companions, but they are not *realistically missed* as actual competitors" (Pickhardt, 2008, pp. 60-61). Only-children tend to romanticize the relationship they could have had with their sibling, imagining that their fantasy sibling would be a "tagalong companion," that this sibling would be a convenient replacement when no better friends were.

In the study conducted by Roberts and Blanton (2001), only-child participants disclosed a longing for a specific sibling relationship: during adolescence, they wished they would have had an older sibling to act as a guide and confidante (Roberts & Blanton, 2001). An older sibling with recent experience in the adolescent world and contemporary contacts therein could have helped them find their place in continually changing middle and high school environments. "A lot of the things I had troubles with or began to worry about were in reference to social interaction, interpersonal experience.

I had to learn through trial and error, whereas if I'd had an older brother or sister, I could have asked some questions" (Roberts & Blanton, 2001, p. 129).

By contrast, Pickhardt (2008) found that only-children miss having siblings during early childhood, and that this longing all but disappears during adolescence. The author suggests that, when they reach their teenage years, only-children become less family-focused and focus more on themselves. An only-child may also have heard from his or her friends of the challenges of sibling-relationships, and therefore gladly forego that relationship in order to maintain a simple, peaceful home-life. Pickhardt offers another perspective on why only-children sometimes wish for siblings by quoting Sifford (1989):

> All parents load a lot of stuff on their children, but especially on the only
> child. If most of it is good stuff, the child isn't eager to share it with
> anybody else. But if it is bad, the child, quite understandably, would like
> to have siblings who could shoulder some of the burden. (As cited in
> Pickhardt, 2008, p. 61)

Participants in Roberts and Blanton's (2001) study shared their concerns about their future as an only-child. Only-children are not only faced with solely caring for their aging and ailing parents later in life, they are also forced to deal with tough decision-making that would otherwise be distributed among siblings.

"Taking care of my parents in their older age, I don't have anyone else to help me with that…I have to deal with it, taking care of a dying parent or what have you, by myself" (Roberts & Blanton, 2001, p. 135).

Only-children have a unique place in their family history. When their parents are gone, only-children will be the only survivors of their families. There will be no one left who shared in their childhood experiences. The only-child will be the only member of their bloodline, except for their own children, and so only-children face added pressure to have children of their own. "I'm the only child and there's no one else left to carry the family name. That's a big burden on only-children" (Roberts & Blanton, 2001, p. 136).

Summary

Roberts and Blanton (2001) and Pickhardt (2008) both say that only-children invent additional attachment relationships. Some of those are with friends, some are with pets, and some are even with inanimate objects. Though only-children tend to be more independent, which may imply that they are more likely to have a secure attachment to their parents, it seems that there are attachment needs that go unfulfilled by the parent-child relationship.

Although early theorists created negative stereotypes about only-children that persist to this day, research performed over the last thirty years has not supported the allegations, and it has often reached opposite conclusions. Only-children are independent, sociable, and reach high levels of academic achievement; they tend to develop faster and be more mature than those with siblings. Nevertheless, several researchers have found that only-children "miss" the sibling relationship and fantasize about or seek replacement

for that relationship. They are especially likely to create or wish for pseudo-siblings when faced with unique stresses that life with an only-child can bring, such as undiluted parental pressure and the challenges of caring for their aging parents alone.

The research covered in this literature review was useful in interpreting questionnaire responses, especially those from only-children. The authors of these studies were able to find common traits, issues, and desires among only-children which indicated expected patterns to look for when conducting interviews. The current thesis adds to the literature by specifically studying the sibling relationship that many other authors have spoken about but never fully probed.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

Chapter Three discusses the two sets of participants, describes interview procedures, and briefly explains methods of data analysis. In order to explore how only-child friendships differ and compare to sibling relationships, attachment theory was used to measure the two relationships from the perspectives of sixteen study participants.

The West Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board, as well as the thesis committee, approved of all data collection methods before participants were contacted and data collection began, in accordance with university protocol. A copy of the IRB approval letter can be found in Appendix E.

Participants

The majority of the participants in this study were students or faculty of a small, southwestern university. However, participants were not limited to being affiliated with the university. Some participants were recruited using social media. An announcement was posted on two university Facebook pages in an attempt to draw more only-child participants. Once preliminary participants were recruited, they were asked to refer other people of interest to the study. The use of snowball sampling was a convenient way to find sibling pairs and friendships that crossed the sibling/only-child line. Although the original target age for participants was 18-30, due to the surprising difficulty of locating only-children in the area, sample ages of the only-child participants ranged from 18-59,

with the mean age of 32. A wide age-range was beneficial to this study, allowing the only-child perspective to be seen through diverse life stages. Younger participants had more recent memory of childhood friendships, especially during early childhood, when Pickhardt (2008) claims they should miss having siblings the most. The older participants were able to discuss the later-life challenges of only-children that the younger participants had yet to experience. Ages of sibling participants ranged from 19-32, with the mean age of 23. According to Kvale (1996), there is not a specific number of interviews required for this type of study, but he recommends between 5 and 25. For this particular study, sixteen participants were interviewed. The interview process was concluded when participant answers could be anticipated and they became redundant.

This study featured eight only-child participants and eight sibling participants. There were three male only-child participants (37.5%) and five female only-child participants (62.5%). The sibling group also had three male participants (37.5%) and five female participants (62.5%).

Sibling participants were divided into three subgroups: firstborns, middleborns, and lastborns. Mellor (1990) found that only-children have developmental processes similar to firstborns. Only-children are both the first and last-born children in their families, and so middleborns can be expected to be most different from them. For this reason, more middleborn siblings were asked to participate than either of the two other subgroups. There was one firstborn, two lastborn, and five middleborn sibling participants.

Participants who were interviewed in person signed and returned written consent forms (see Appendixes A and B). The participants who were interviewed via Skype gave consent in initial corresponding emails.

Procedures

Qualitative research methods were utilized for this thesis to better explore the experiences of only-child participants and participants with siblings through their individual perspectives. Two separate interview guides (see Appendixes C and D) were used to help explore participant perceptions of an only-child's attachment to their friends and that of sibling relationships. One interview guide was used for sibling participants and the other was used for only-child participants. Each guide listed 17 questions pertaining to the participants' childhood, their attachment to their friends and siblings, and general relationship stability. They were asked how many best friends they have had and how long those friendships lasted. These two questions were important because only-children and siblings are expected to take different approaches to the "quality vs. quantity" of friendships. Past research, as discussed in Chapter Two, suggests that only-children should have fewer, longer-lasting friendships. Participants were also asked how easily they bond with others. This was important because it served as a measure of the security of their attachments. Those who bond with people more easily are expected to be more securely-attached to their friends. Only-child and sibling participants were asked how many, if any, children they planned to have. This question served two purposes: to see if the growing trend of single-child families was present in the study, and to see if participants planned to mirror their childhood family size. Due to the qualitative nature of this study, the guides were not definitive. Additional questions were asked whenever a

response merited further probing. In-person interviews took place at local coffee shops, as well as in participant offices and apartments. All interviews, whether conducted in-person or via Skype, were audio recorded, and notes were taken. Audio was later transcribed so that it could be more easily reviewed. Data was collected August 27 through October 3, 2015. All participant identities were protected with pseudonyms. Interview data and personal information was stored on a password-protected computer for security.

As stated previously, in-depth interviews were conducted with sixteen voluntary participants. Only-children were asked to recall their childhood friendships, as well as discuss their current friendships, and look deeper at the significance of those relationships. In addition to questions in these areas of interest, participants with siblings were asked about the nature of their sibling relationships and how those relationships differ from friendships. Participants were asked to describe the extent to which they feel attached to their friends and romantic partners.

Data Analysis

Each recorded interview was transcribed verbatim. Transcribed interviews were compared and portions of each interview were separated into emergent themes. According to Owen (1984) an emergent theme must be recursive and repetitive. All themes were found in multiple interviews, and were often repeated in those interviews. Data analysis revealed both expected and unexpected themes. Expected themes included: the relationship between attachment and independence; participant appreciation of alone time; the belief that friends can be *like* siblings; the idealization of sibling relationships; and wanting an even number of children. Unexpected themes included: the hardships of

aging as only-child; the necessary number of friends among only-child and sibling participants; and the existence of friend "categories." Once data was separated into basic themes, the quotes related to each theme were studied so that the theme could be fully developed. All of the developed themes were examined to find overarching patterns. To ensure authenticity, three participants were asked to review the conclusions drawn from the research and confirm that the author's interpretation of their testimony was similar to their intended message.

Summary

Chapter three has discussed the qualitative interview approach used in this study. After giving consent, sixteen participants responded to questions in the interview protocols. Participants described their friendships and sibling relations to the researcher either in face-to-face interviews or via Skype interviews. Themes from the participants' answers emerged, commonalities across subgroups were identified, and patterns were studied. Conclusions drawn from the qualitative data are discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Data were collected and analyses were performed using the procedures previously stated in Chapter Three. To protect the privacy of participants, this chapter addresses participants only by pseudonyms and does not include any information by which they might be identified. Chapter Four offers an interpretation of the results of this study, discussion of commonalities among participants and how those commonalities crossed the only-child/sibling boundary, and an answer to the research question, from the perspectives given by the interview responses.

The research question sought to explore how the friendships of only-children differ and compare to sibling relationships. The qualitative nature of this thesis allowed for in-depth perceptions into many different areas. Data analysis revealed several themes: the relationship between attachment and independence; participant appreciation of alone time; the belief that friends can be *like* siblings; the idealization of sibling relationships; and wanting an even number of children. Questions were specifically designed to touch on those subjects, and so each participant expressed his or her opinions in those five categories. Three unexpected themes, which were never addressed by interview questions, also emerged, but were only present in the participants that mentioned them on their own. Although these three themes were not common among all participants, strong patterns among those who did mention them were apparent. The three unexpected theme

were: the hardships of aging as only-child; the necessary number of friends among only-child and sibling participants; and the existence of friend "categories."

Attachment and Independence. Previous research led to the expectation that those who felt securely attached in their relationships would be more independent in those relationships; however, results of this study found that some of those who described themselves as securely attached also described themselves as "clingy."

> Blair: My attachment with my Mom is very secure. It is a very secure attachment. I know that if I called her up in the middle of the day and said please come get me, she'd be there, no problem. My attachment with those five girls I've hung out with and [another friend] all this time, it's also very secure. (personal interview – in person, October 3, 2015, lines 257-261)

Despite describing the securing of her parental attachment, Blair also reveals that she can be "a little bit clingy" in other personal relationships. Although she specifically mentions romantic relationships rather than friendships, it was expected that secure parental relationships would lead to security in all relationships.

In early childhood, Gideon found himself spending a lot of time alone in his room reading and drawing. As he got older, he described the need to be around people his age. "I started clinging a lot to my friends" (personal communication – September 5, 2015, lines 4-5). He draws comparisons between his friendships and his friends' sibling relationships by saying, "a lot of my friends had brothers or sisters that they could cling

to" (personal communication – September 5, 2015, lines 8-9). Continuing the trend from his teenage years, Gideon would still prefer to spend more time with his friends than alone. That being said, he was sure to say that he has no anxiety about being alone and was not lonely as an only-child.

Appreciation of Alone Time. Almost no one expressed anxiety about being alone. Two participants, both of them only-children, said that anxiety disorders kept them from being alone for too long. Grace, a sibling, feared loneliness the most. She first experienced real solitude in her first semester of college, when circumstances led her to be without a roommate. The psychological consequences were harsh, and she sought counseling to deal with the new stressor. "I guess because I had never been alone and I was used to being around a big family or something, so I'm not good at being alone. I have horrible anxiety when it comes to being by myself" (personal communication – in person, October 1, 2015, lines 65-67). Another participant, also a sibling, used to have similar feelings about lonesomeness, but now has greater anxieties. She worries that she is being unfairly exploited:

> Jane: I think I just learned to be alone because I really didn't have that much of an option. It used to really bother me and I used to go to great lengths to be friends with people, and then, after people just taking advantage of me, I learned that not everyone is that great and you can't depend on people to fill the void." (personal communication – in person, September 8, 2015, lines 51-56)

Other than the participants mentioned above, who showed signs of anxiety about being alone, participants appreciated their alone time and, in most cases, emphasized how important that time was. According to Wendy, a sibling and mother of three, she relishes moments alone:

Wendy: Before I had children I really did like to do things like go to the mall by myself and I went to the movies by myself. I never had a problem with that. It was always kind of like a feeling of independence. I felt good about doing that and enjoying my own company. (personal communication – in person, September 9, 2015, lines 56-59)

Both Oliver and Isaac, one a sibling and the other an only-child, said that they appreciate their alone time just as long as it is not for too long. Another participant who needs her alone time is Piper. "I really appreciate it. I need it, in fact, to recharge" (personal communication – in person, August 27, 2015, lines 54-55). Piper mentioned enjoying solo road trips, when she can be alone in the car for six or seven hours at a time. She likes the isolation. However, once she has "recharged," she needs to be around people again.

Friends Can Be Like Siblings. When asked the difference between a friend and a sibling, both only-child and sibling participants admitted that a friend can be *like* a sibling. However, none of the participants who considered their best friend a brother or a sister said it without adding the *like* qualifier. Grace, a sibling, has had the same best

friend since elementary school and, although she has two biological sisters, considers her best friend to be *like* a sister to her.

> Grace: I'm a strong believer that a friend can become like a sister or a brother and I think that if you have a close enough relationship with them then it becomes essentially the same thing because you have that love for them and you have that care and just that connection with them. (personal communication – in person, October 1, 2015, lines 258-261)

Immediately following that statement, Grace continued by saying there is a distinct difference between friends who can be *like* a sibling and actual biological siblings. She explained an innate connection that siblings share and that is much more difficult to break.

> Grace: But, there's still always a difference, I mean, I love, [my friend] so much, I would say that she's just like my sister, but it's like you have this thing inside of you that allows you to never hate your sibling, you know what I mean, like things can break up friendships and you can get mad at your sibling but in 20 minutes or 30 minutes everything is going to be okay with them. (personal communication – in person, October 1, 2015, lines 261- 266)

Omar, an only-child, described his relationship with his cousin. Every summer, he goes to visit his cousin, who is "like a brother" to him. Having a brother-figure for even a short time once a year reminds him that he does not actually have a brother.

Friends Are Not Siblings. Surprisingly, only-child participants were quick to explain the differences between friends and siblings, while sibling participants seemed to be more willing to blur the distinction between the two. Lucy, an only-child, argued that severing a friendship is much easier than severing a familial relationship.

> Lucy: You're always going to love your family, because they're your family. You're not always going to like your family. In a friendship, when it becomes that you don't like your friend, you don't necessarily love them, because you can sever that. (personal communication – in person, September 10, 2015, lines 69-72)

Emmy, an only-child, said that over the years, she has recognized the impact of having a sibling after observing the relationship her boyfriend has with his brothers. Through her observations over the years, Emmy has come to the realization that she can never be a part of a brotherly bond. She pointed out that even though the brothers invite her into their relationship, she cannot help but feel like the fourth wheel.

> Emmy: Dating someone who has two brothers, I've learned what having a family feels like and I want my children to have that. Even though he may hate his brothers one day and then love them the next, they're still his

brothers. It's a unique bond that as an outsider, to look in on that, is so

interesting. (personal communication – in person, September 9, 2015,

lines 147-150)

Continuing the distinction with which only-children view friends and siblings,

Isaac explained a deeper connection that siblings share. "People would let their brother or

sister live with them and mooch off of them and not bat an eye, but a friend would

probably be a different scenario" (personal interview – in person, September 21, 2015,

lines 122-124). Only minutes before giving that statement, Isaac compared his

relationship with his childhood friends with the sibling relationships he has seen and

concluded that those friends were his brothers.

Siblings Vincent and Wendy both consider the other to be one of their best

friends, yet also mention feeling more like themselves when around their friends

compared to when they are around their siblings. They both stressed that friends are

chosen and family is mandatory.

Wendy: With a sibling, I think it's that sense of obligation: No matter

what this person says, I'm still related to them at the end of the day. With

a friend, I feel like you have more freedom. You are choosing this

relationship, so you have more freedom to stay, you have more freedom to

leave, you have more freedom to maybe be yourself because you're not

trying to appease the situation. (personal communication – in person,

September 9, 2015, lines 277-282)

Although Oliver said he has remained close to his siblings, he also revealed having a closer relationship with his friends. "I would say I have at least that amount of closeness or maybe more with my friends just because we have those same interests and now I'm around my friends more than my family, or siblings" (personal communication – in person, August 27, 2015, lines 46-48).

The perceived freedom of friendships in comparison to sibling relationships may imply that familial relationships are seen as more formal. Since, ideally, the bonds of family cannot be broken, people may approach those relationships with more tactful intention, putting their "true selves" aside to keep the relationship amicable. This, along with the perceived connection between siblings, a connection that seems to avoid explanation, constitutes the preponderance of the identified differences between friends and siblings. Nearly all participants specifically noted at least one of these dissimilarities.

Idealized Sibling Relationships. It is possible that some of the perceived differences between siblings and friends stem from idealization of the sibling relationship. Having never experienced siblings for themselves, it is understandable that only-children would have a romanticized idea of sibling relationships; however, during their interviews, siblings often showed idealized pictures of the sibling relationship themselves, even if they had revealed the shortcoming in their own sibling relationships earlier in the conversation.

Jane has three siblings that are all considerably older than she. Her family faced many hardships during her childhood, and she and her youngest brother lived in foster care for some time. Her sister never lived with her, she was married by the time Jane was born, and her oldest brother moved out and got married when she was still young. While

she does not think of herself as an only-child, she has never had close bonds with any of her siblings. She has not seen any of her siblings in years and rarely speaks with them on the phone. Despite all of these flaws in her sibling relationships, Jane still idealizes siblings in general. "I think a sibling is there for life and friends come and go" (personal communication – in person, September 8, 2015, line 87). This statement does not mirror her description of her own sibling relationships.

Life-long constancy seems to be the main identifier of a sibling relationship, even though it may not be present in all sibling relationships. Isaac, an only-child, neatly explained why children need siblings, and why he intends to have at least two children. "Companionship. That person is always going to be there for you" (personal communication – September 21, 2015, line 101). Gideon, also an only-child, thinks of siblings as forever friends. He believes that a person with siblings should include those siblings in their list of friends, and, forced to choose between the two, will choose siblings over friends.

Emmy, an only-child, agrees that a person will choose their siblings over their friends and that a sibling relationship is permanent.

> If [my friend] and I decided today that we weren't going to be friends,
> that's it. There's nothing connecting us. There's no bloodline, no lifeline. I
> feel like, as close as you get to somebody, you will never be as close as
> someone who bares the same genetics. (personal communication – in
> person, September 9, 2015, lines 213-216)

Participants stressed the fact that, unlike friends, siblings are not chosen. It was common among participants to speak of siblings as though they were gifts or fated-friends. Grace explains, "Siblings are kind of like people that God is forcing you to be friends with" (personal communication – in person, October 1, 2015, line 345). Grace said God chose her siblings specifically for her, and while no other participant mentions a higher being, they mostly agree that sibling-friendship is obligatory. The lack of choice, the notion that siblings are chosen for you, perhaps explains the noted idealization of the sibling relationship. This could also justify the common belief that an even number of children is ideal. Participants wanted their children to have sibling companionship, even though very few of the participants had any anxiety about being alone.

Aging Only-Child Hardships. Past research has indicated that, as only-children grow up, they are left to take care of aging parents and perhaps feel most alone when making end-of-life decisions for their parents. As stated in Chapter Two, previous authors have found that only-children tend to want a sibling earlier in life, before adolescence. However, Lucy, an only-child, discussed wanting a sibling during a different time in her life.

> Lucy: Here's where being an only-child became hard. When my parents
> got older, you're the only one there. When my parents died, you're the
> only one there to make those decisions. But, there's an upside to that too.
> Nobody is going to be fighting over the inheritance; you're not going to
> get in fights of, "do I have to make this decision?" My dad went into
> hospice. I didn't have to check with brothers and sisters or whatever of

whether this is the right decision or not. I had to make it. But you have to

be able to make that decision. I loved being an only-child up until that

point and then all of a sudden, it became really hard because you didn't

have somebody to share going through that with. I mean my husband was

very supportive but it's not the same because those aren't his parents and

if there would've been a sibling there, to share that mix of emotions that

you go through. I mean, that's the weird time, that's when I didn't like

being an only-child. (personal communication – in person, September 10,

2015, lines 101-112)

Lucy also felt that she is now essentially alone in the world, in terms of familial

affiliations. Both of her parents have passed away, as well as her grandparents. She does

have two cousins on her father's side of the family, but they are not close. "My family is

pretty much gone. I'm really an orphan at this point because of being an only-grandchild

and only-child" (personal communication – in person, September 10, 2015, lines 87-88).

Lucy has no biological children of her own, although she does have three

stepchildren. She admitted that she only wanted a child of her own during one

particularly difficult time of her life, after her mom passed away. "I don't like being an

only-child in that I don't have children because now this whole lineage of family is gone

with me and those family traditions. That's kind of sad, because that's where it's done"

(personal communication – in person, September 10, 2015, lines 113-116).

Penelope also expressed the added pressure only-children have to take care of

their parents as they age. Her parents live six hours away, and she said that, when the

time comes for when they need assisted living, she will have to make those decisions by herself. She has started gathering decorations for her parents' upcoming 50th wedding anniversary, two years in advance. She believes a sibling would help alleviate some of the pressures of throwing such an important party. Penelope also touched on other demands only-children face:

> Penelope: When I don't go home for a holiday, they have no children or grandchildren there. If I don't go to the annual family reunion, they are disappointed. There's no one to fill that gap. I'm it, and there's a burden in that. (personal communication – follow up email, September 9, 2015, lines 31-33)

Number of Best Friends Among Siblings. An interesting theme that emerged during data analysis was that, with the exception of three of the sibling participants, they all appeared to be perfectly content with having two friends. Sophia, a sibling, mentioned consistently having two friends throughout her life. Two of the three sibling participants who mentioned not being able to single out and name a best friend seemingly did so because they felt that setting any one friend apart would hurt the others' feelings, even though none of their friends were present during the time of the interview.

Number of Best Friends Among Only-Children. The number of claimed best friends among only-child participants ranged from one to as many as five best friends. Blair discussed the significance of her longest friendships, saying "I've known five girls since I was five and I still hang out with them and we still do things together. I consider

them all more than friends and more than best friends" (personal communication – in person, October 3, 2015, lines 115-117).

Categories of Best Friends. Both only-child and sibling participants mentioned friendship categories. Wendy, a sibling, specified these different categories:

Wendy: I consider [friend #1] my best friend. But I also consider my little brother my best friend. I definitely consider my husband my best friend. I think I have different categories of best friends. I would say [friend #2] is my best school friend. You know, things like that. [Friend #3] is my best church friend. I have other mom friends. So, there are categories. (personal communication – in person, September 9, 2015, lines 77-81)

Penelope also mentioned similar categories. She has "best friends at different places" (personal communication – in person September 9, 2015, lines 172-173). She has best friends at work, best friends from childhood, a best friend at home, and best Facebook friends. While there are people she qualifies as best friends in each category, her husband is her best friend at home and in general.

Six out of the sixteen participants, all married or in serious relationships, considered their husband or significant other to be their best friend. Gia, an only-child, said her best friend is either her husband or her mom. When asked why she considered those two her best friend, she said, "we know everything about each other and we've been through a lot together. I think that really deepens a friendship or any relationship, if

you've gone through life together" (personal communication – in person, September 22, 2015, lines 136-138).

Along with the categories of friends mentioned above, whom participants see in person on a regular basis, both only-child and sibling participants mentioned a social media friend-category, and a category of friendships mostly continued through Christmas cards. Penelope has remained friends with several people from her early childhood. She had an interesting insight into how she thinks these friendships are able to stay active; "we collect friends all through our lives in different contexts, and via social media, they are in one place together and sometimes interacting, from my 7th grade English teacher to my current grad students and everyone in between" (personal communication – follow up email, September 11, 2015, lines 5-6). Lucy admitted that Christmas card friendships do not have the same "immediacy" as stronger, in-person friendships.

Number of Desired Children. All but four of the sixteen participants discussed wanting an even number of children. Two participants, one only-child and one sibling, said that they desired only one child of their own. One participant, a sibling, saw three as the optimal number of children, while another said five children would be best. One participant said that she never wanted to have children of her own. When asked their preferred number of children, twelve of the participants responded with an even number. Most participants stressed the importance of companionship, saying that siblings should be automatic friends, and thought an even number would be best because the children could "pair off," while an odd number would always have someone left out. As Piper explained, "trouble comes in threes" (personal communication – in person, August 27, 2015, line 63).

Penelope laughed as she said that she wanted ten children and had names chosen for each of them while she was in elementary school, which she supposed may have indicated that she was lonely as a child. As she got older, she thought that she would be satisfied with four children. While she would have liked to have had more, she stopped at two children, for medical reasons. Every number she listed as ten shrank down to two over her lifetime was an even number.

The two who wanted only one child both listed similar reasons. Stating his reasoning for wanting only one child, Finn said, "I don't really want to have to raise a whole bunch of kids, I don't really want my future wife to have to go through childbirth a whole bunch of times, because that seems unpleasant" (personal communication – in person, August 31, 2015, lines 39-42). Omar explained, "I feel like I could only handle one" (personal communication – in person, September 4, 2015, line 211).

Only two participants wanted to have the same number of children as the family in which they grew up. One, Omar, was an only-child, while the other, Sophia, wants to have five children. "That's how many siblings I had growing up. It was a great number. I loved it" (personal communication – in person, September 10, 2015, line 46-47). Although Sophia's parents have now raised nine children, four of them were adopted only two years ago, when she was already seventeen. It is interesting that almost all of the participants wanted a different number of children than the family size they grew up with. This might have to do with the idealization of siblings, and those that have siblings may have experienced a relationship closer to the ideal with one sibling in particular, giving them that idea that siblings are better in pairs.

Two only-child participants, each with two children of their own, explained how vastly different their lives at their current homes are from their lives in their childhood homes. During her interview, Penelope observed the distinctions in her childhood home and the house that she currently shares with her husband and two young children. "Now, having two kids," she said, "I can see a difference in that it was quieter around our house" (personal communication – in person, September 9, 2015). Gia notices the benefits her daughters have from their sibling relationship. She specifically mentioned that her older daughter helps with the development of her younger daughter:

Gia: Having an older sibling has really helped my second child and I don't think she actually needs the help, but I see how much more quickly she progresses by having an older sibling. For example, with her speaking, she was speaking way earlier than other kids her age. Maybe that's just partly her, but I think it's also partly because she had someone else on her level speaking to her. (personal communication – Skype interview, September 22, 2015, lines 229-233)

Summary

This chapter presented the patterns discovered during analysis of the sixteen participant interviews.

Contrary to expectation, some participants who claimed to be secure in their friendships and relationships also admitted to being "clingy" in those relationships; however, few participants had any anxiety about being alone. Though several of them

considered their best friends to be siblings, participants said that friends can only be *like* siblings. Participants, especially only-children, were quick to define an unfathomable connection between siblings that friends can never have. Belief in this connection seemed to come from idealization of the sibling relationship, the belief that a sibling relationship is a picture-perfect friendship, even among siblings with less than ideal actual sibling relationships. As previous research indicated, only-children face at least one time during their lives when they wish they had a sibling. For many only-child participants, it was during adolescence, but the two oldest participants wished they had siblings to share the worries only-children face as their parents get older. Those two participants find support from their friends and spouses but describe a distance from others when dealing with things specifically related to their family.

Only-child participants, in general, had more best friends than participants with siblings: Five out of seven siblings have two best friends, while the number of best friends for only-children ranged from one to five. That might be partly due to the way several only-children, and one sibling, split friendships up into categories: They have a best friend from work, a best friend from school, a best friend at home, and a best friend on social media.

Almost all participants wanted an even number of children. Two participants wanted only one child, and one participant wanted five. The majority of participants felt that an even number of children would be ideal so that their children could form sibling pairs. Only two participants wanted the same number of children as they had in their family growing up, one only-child and the participant with four siblings.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This study aimed to identify commonalities between friendships and sibling relationships, and to uncover ideas about the nature of the sibling relationship itself. This chapter offers further insight into the results of the study, discusses limitations, and suggests future areas of research.

The research question was: What differences and similarities are there in the way friendships are perceived by those who grew up with siblings as compared to only children? The answers given by the participants in this study were heavily qualified, but followed a distinct pattern. Participants generally agreed that friends can be *like* siblings, but there are important differences between the two. Despite acknowledging these differences, several participants have or have had friends that they described as their siblings. Grace, Omar, and Blair all said that they have friends who are their siblings (my friend *is* my sister/brother) but, as the interview continued, they began to add the qualifier, *like* (my friend is *like* my sister/brother). All three then explained that friends can never be siblings. One participant, Isaac, an only-child, compared his childhood friends to brothers, and concluded that they were the same. Later on in his interview, he discussed the insurmountable differences between friendships and sibling relationships, and concluded that friends cannot be siblings; however, he never added the qualifier or went back and changed his statement that his friends were his brothers.

There were a number of uncovered patterns that did not follow expectations based on previous research. Even though some participants described secure relationships, they also admitted a tendency to be "clingy." Previous research in attachment theory supposes that individuals with secure attachments are more independent and stable in their relationships, while individuals with anxious-resistant attachments are expected to be clingy (Bowlby, 1988). In her book, *How to Raise an Adult,* Lythcott-Haims (2015) attributed this clinginess among Millennials to the fact that parents are no longer content with just "being there" for their children. She implied that parents have, in recent years, taken on a "personal assistant" role for themselves, because they are apprehensive about their children's independence; parents do not trust their children "to be able to work out their own problems" (Lythcott-Haims, 2015, p. 44). She goes on to say that even as children develop into adults, and are "chronologically grown," they are still very much dependent on their parents. This idea of parental over-involvement offers a possible explanation as to why the participants, although secure in their relationships, describe themselves as "clingy."

It was originally anticipated that only-children would consider friends and siblings interchangeable, because they have never experienced a sibling relationship and cannot personally know the difference; however, only-children were the first to describe the differences between friends and siblings, while sibling participants tended to blur the lines between the two relationships. Also because of their lack of sibling experience, only-children were expected to idealize the sibling relationship. While most participants did have a romanticized picture of siblinghood, siblings expressed the same idealization

of sibling relationships as only-children. Siblings were expected to have a more realistic view, because they have real sibling relationships.

Most participants agreed that while a person can feel closer or more attached to their friends than their siblings, there is almost some kind of metaphysical connection between siblings that can never be severed and can never exist between friends. While Gia, an only-child, pretty much grew up as part of another, multi-sibling family, she never felt truly accepted as part of the group. She always felt like an outsider. Sophia, a sibling, also noted a difference in her relationships with her biological siblings and her adopted siblings. Sophia was 17 when her parents adopted her four youngest sisters. She described her role in the beginning of her relationships with her adopted siblings as that of a "boss figure;" with such a significant age difference between her and her new sisters, she felt more responsibility over them, rather than attachment to them.

The discrepancies between previous research and the findings of this study indicate that more research is needed on the subject of only-children. It may be that the participants of this study did not fit societal norms, and it is possible that previous research overlooked some details about the commonalities of only-children. Even though there were unexpected findings, this study gives valuable insight into sibling relationships that seems to be common across gender, age, and family size.

<div align="center">**Limitations**</div>

A number of limitations are present in this study. The most prominent limitations were the lack of diverse participants and the inclusion of romantic partners as best friends. Because the "best friend" was also fulfilling a romantic role, participants were less able to compare those friendships to brother/sister relationships.

<div align="center">54</div>

Some participants stated that their significant others were their best friends. During the interviews, the author did not keep in mind that participants would not consider their husband or wife to be their brother or sister, which was the intended question. For this study, non-romantic best friendships should have been the primary focus. Some participants listed their mother or grandmother as their best friend, which also precluded the idea of feeling that their friend was also their sibling. All participants who listed a parental figure as their best friend also listed their romantic partners in the category.

The sample used in this study was relatively small and gender-biased. The ratio of men to women was three to five. The lack of diverse participants could explain why the findings of this thesis did not fit original expectations. It is possible, although unlikely, that the author had sixteen unique cases that are not indicative of common thoughts among the population. These results may have differed if the sample size was larger. Another notable limitation of this study was that the author relied on participant self-reporting. People may not have been completely honest with their answers, or they may not have fully understood the questions. There is also the possibility that the participants may have embellished their answers and given a false impression of themselves.

Areas for Further Research

This study investigated the differences and similarities in the friendships of only-children and those of siblings, and then compared those friendships to sibling relationships. Further research should be conducted pertaining to only-children, because only-child families in the United States are becoming more prevalent, and because the majority of past research about only-children focuses on only-children in China.

One participant suggested that future research should explore the later-life decisions only-child adults have to make concerning their parents. Further qualitative research pertaining to this subject would be beneficial because, although the author did not mention the hardships that only-child adults face as their parents age, two older only-child participants both discussed their concerns. Although locating enough only-children who are at the parent-caregiving age may prove to be difficult, the study could be a major contribution; past researchers have concluded that only-children most want a sibling during their adolescent or pre-adolescent years, but the two participants of this study who spoke about the difficulties of being an adult only-child said that they wish they had siblings later in life.

Another interesting area of future research would be to study friendship dyads in which one member is an only-child and one is a sibling. Past researchers have noted that only-children tend to have a strong sense of identity and independence, and are more likely to seek out leadership roles (Mellor, 1990). It would be interesting to see how expected characteristics manifest in friendships that cross only-child/sibling boundaries. This could also be used in romantic relationships where one is an only-child and the other is not. In her study of Chinese only-child marriages, Chen (2012), indicated that these marriages often struggle because the only-child is seen as "selfish" in the eyes of their spouse.

Since many of the themes that presented themselves in this thesis were unexpected, it would be beneficial to perform a similar study in a quantitative manner and determine if those themes carry over to a larger sample of the population. For example, participants in this study all idealized the sibling relationship, regardless of their

own experiences of sibling relationships. More often than not, participants mentioned a genetic link that is specific to siblings and that those relationships are stronger than any friendships. A quantitative study would help to determine if this is characteristic of the general population, and, if it is, would possibly lead to further research to determine why sibling relationships are so idealized.

Summary

This chapter discussed the results of this study, limitations found in the study, and suggestions for future areas of research. This research revealed several patterns that contradicted expectations. Participants who were secure in their attachments were expected to be most independent, yet they sometimes described themselves as "clingy." Only-children were expected to blur the lines between siblings and friends, but they had more clearly defined distinctions between the two than the sibling participants did. Siblings were expected to have more realistic views of sibling relationships than only-children, but participants all seemed to have the same idealized view, regardless of family-size.

The sample size was small and there was a lack of diversity among participants. Some participants named romantic partners or other family members, specifically mother and grandmother, as their best friends, which limited the degree to which those friendships could be compared to sibling relationships. This study relied on self-reporting, which can be an unreliable source of information.

It would be beneficial to perform a quantitative study with the same focus as this study, so that patterns and beliefs uncovered here can be compared to the population at large. Two participants brought up only-child aspects of later life that have not been

addressed by research. The number of only-child families in the United States is growing, and so situations specific to only-children merit further research.

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Consent Form

Thank you for participating in this study. Your participation is completely voluntary and you are more than welcome to stop at any time without penalty or to skip any questions you would prefer not to answer. In agreeing to participate, you will be assisting in the exploration of the differences between sibling bonds and that of the bonds between only-children and their friends. Your responses will remain confidential with the use of pseudonyms if you so choose.

The information collected will be recorded and stored on a password-protected computer. There are no right or wrong answers, and no judgments will be made based on how a particular individual responds to these questions.

During this study, you will be asked in-depth questions about the bonds between you and your friends. There is no more risk to you than expressing your opinions in everyday conversation. There is no direct benefit to you, but your participation will benefit the field of family communication.

This research has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at West Texas A&M University. If you have any concerns about this study or your rights, you can contact Dr. Angela Spaulding, Dean of Graduate School and Research at 806.651.2730.

Thank you again for your participation. If you have any questions or want to review summary findings, please feel free to me call at: 806.290.4836.

If you sign this sheet, reply YES via email, or by telephone, it means that you have read this form, all of your questions were answered, and you agree to participate in this study.

_____   _____
Signature of participant   Date

Thank you for your time,

Maddisun Fowler

Consent Form

Thank you for participating in this study. Your participation is completely voluntary and you are more than welcome to stop at any time without penalty or to skip any questions you would prefer not to answer. In agreeing to participate, you will be assisting in the exploration of the differences between sibling bonds and that of the bonds between only-children and their friends. Your responses will remain confidential with the use of pseudonyms if you so choose.

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Thank you again for your participation. If you have any questions or want to review summary findings, please feel free to me call at: 806.290.4836.

If you sign this sheet, reply YES via email, or by telephone, it means that you have read this form, all of your questions were answered, and you agree to participate in this study.

_____   _____

Signature of participant   Date

Thank you for your time,

Maddisun Fowler

Appendix C
Interview Guide for Only-Child Participants

Because this is a qualitative in-depth interview, some answers may inspire new questions that are not listed.

1. How would you describe being an only-child?

2. How would you describe your childhood?

3. Growing up, how did you feel about being an only-child?

4. Who was your best friend growing up?

5. How many people fell into your "best friend" category then?

6. How easily do you bond with people?

7. How long do these friendships last?

8. How easily are these friendships broken?

9. How would you describe your anxiety about being alone?

10. How many children do you plan on having?

11. Who is your best friend now? Do you consider them your brother/sister?

12. How many of your friends now fall into that "best friend" category?

13. Why do you consider them your best friend?

14. What part does being an only play in bonding with other people?

15. How would you describe your friendships?

16. How do the friendships of only-children and their friends differ than sibling bonds?

17. How have your childhood friendships shaped your adult relationships?

Appendix D
Interview Guide for Sibling Participants

Because this is a qualitative in-depth interview, some answers may inspire new questions that are not listed.

1. How many siblings do you have?

2. How would you describe your childhood?

3. Growing up, how did you feel about your siblings?

4. Who was your best friend growing up?

5. How many people fell into your "best friend" category then?

6. How easily do you bond with people?

7. How long do these friendships last?

8. How easily are these friendships broken?

9. How would you describe your anxiety about being alone?

10. How many children, if any, do you plan on having?

11. Who is your best friend now?

12. How many of your friends now fall into that "best friend" category?

13. Why do you consider them your best friend?

14. How does having siblings impact or influence the bonds you have with other people?

15. How would you describe your sibling bonds?

16. How do the friendships of only-children and their friends differ than sibling bonds?

17. How have your sibling bonds shaped your adult relationships?

Appendix E

Dear Maddisun Fowler:

Your research proposal titled, **"Pseudo-Siblings: Friendship and Only Children"** was submitted to the full membership of the West Texas A&M University IRB on **June 2, 2015** for an **expedited** review. The IRB may (i) approve, (ii) approve conditionally, or (iii) disapprove proposed protocols and consent forms. The decision of the IRB regarding your proposal was:

X	Approve
	Approve Conditionally
	Disapprove

Approval is extended for one calendar year. Should data collection proceed past one year, or should you make changes in the methodology as it affects human subjects, you must resubmit the study to the IRB.

Assuming all IRB training requirements have been met, procedures involving human subjects may now proceed.

Upon verifying your successful completion of all training requirements, an official letter of approval from the Graduate School is forthcoming. Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB and we wish you well in your research project.

Sincerely,

Dr. Gary Bigham, IRB Chair