Effect of the One-child Family Planning Policy on Chinese People’s Views on Families

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**Abstract.** This paper explores Chinese people’s views on families in relation to China’s one-child family planning policy from young people and children’s own perspectives and experiences. This paper is divided into four parts. Part One examines how the young people and children in the study understand ‘family’. Part Two explores the importance of sibling relationships. Part Three focuses on the effect on the participants of the one-child family planning policy. Finally, the author will explain the overall conclusions.

**What Does ‘Family’ Mean?**

This section was designed to explore what Chinese young people and children understand about family. In the study, participants responded three questions on this topic. One was ‘what is a family’, the second was ‘what are families for’ and the third was ‘who is the most important person in your family’.

**What is a Family?**

In the study, except for some participants did not define who counts as a family, all the participants defined ‘family’ narrowly as consisting of father, mother and biological siblings, or as people who are related by blood or marriage relationships.

- Smile: Family is a union of lineal family members. (Group A)
- Win: ‘Family’ means father, mother and me. (Group B)
- Tt: Dad, mum and me. (Group C)
- Zhen: ‘Family’ means parents and children. (Group D)
- Li: Blood relationships and marriage make a family. (Group A)

In particular, one participant included her brother-in-law and niece as family numbers.

Yi: There are 6 people in my family. They are my father, mother, sister, brother-in-law, my niece and I. (Group A)

It is obvious that most participants defined family by their lineal blood relationship, for example: parents and children. This was a more narrow definition compared with Morrow’s conclusion that “children have a realistic view of family life, and aware of a wide variation in family practices and structures” (Morrow, 1998, p.vi).

**What are Families for?**

In the study, it seemed that family is very important for everybody regardless of individuals’ different backgrounds, and that a family provides material and emotional support.

Smile: The family relationship is the most important relationship for me. It gives me safer, more comfortable, and more supportive feelings in both the material and mental aspects of my life. (Group A)
Dan: Family is the most important thing for everybody. A family can bring one a warm feeling and give one confidence. In particular, when one needs help, family is always one’s supporter. (Group B)

Tt: Family is a warm place. (Group C)

Min: Family is where you feel the most comfortable. (Group D)

Except for a few participants did not answer the question in the aspect of what families are for, the rest of the responses showed that the participants believed that family is about love, happiness, safety and comfort, and it is an important support not only in the practical matters in life, but also emotionally. These results reflect Morrow’s finding that “love, care, mutual respect and support were the key characteristics of ‘family’” regardless of gender, age, social classes, educational background or any other status and “Children’s definitions were more complex the older they were” (Morrow, 1998, p.vi).

**Who is the Most Important Person in a Family?**

This section explored Chinese children and young people’s opinions on parents and siblings’ roles. In another way, the question “Who is the most important person in a family” also reflected on another question—“Which relationship is more important, parent-children relationship or sibling relationships?” In the study, the participants all appeared to believe that parents are the most important persons, usually justifying it through the fact that parents always support and care for children.

Smile: Parents are the most important people as they give their children life and support their lives and studies selflessly. (Group A)

Min: My parents are the most important people to me, because they are the people who always support and care for me. (Group D)

Win: Father, the bread-winner and decision maker for the family. (Group B)

Tt: There are only three of us living together, parents are important. (Group C)

In particular, some of participants stated clear differences between fathers’ and mothers’ roles.

Yi: There are two ‘most important’ persons in my family. One is my father, because he is our ‘idol’, who is well educated, optimistic, and kind-hearted with strong will and wisdom. The other is my mother, because she does most of the decision-making in my family. (Group A)

Lin: Both of parents are important to me, but they play different roles as they have different characters. My father is very strict. I only consult with him for very big things. Normally, I rely on my mum. As a girl, I want to talk with my mum, and I care about her. (Group B)

The responses demonstrated that although sometimes parents played different roles according to their different characters, both parents are important for children as they give children their lives, support children’s education, food and so on. Again, the answers did not show any differences between sibling children and only children (I ordered the data of sibling participants (Group A and D) first, and only children (Group B and C) followed), and there were no differences between different age groups, nor between legal and illegal status. However, it seemed that the participants did not really mention the emotional support by parents except Lin, who said she would like to talk to her mother. Therefore, my finding is slightly different from Morrow (1998) who said “parents, especially mothers, as providers of physical and emotional care” (p.vi) are very important for children.

**Do Sibling Relationships Really Matter?**

As I have discussed above, both being an only child or a child with siblings has some advantages and disadvantages from children and young people’s own perspectives. The question is, do children really care about sibling relationships? This section explores the answers to that question from six angles.
What are the Differences between Your Childhood and Your Parents’ Childhood?

This question was designed to discover to what extent only children are aware of the differences between their situations in the family and their parents’ situations in the family. The responses showed that only children both in two groups were aware that their parents have quite a few siblings, and that their parents’ living conditions were much tougher.

Win: Their lives were quite difficult and they had to share everything with their brothers or sisters. (Group B)

Rose: It was very different. No one had energy to cultivate you if you want to learn drawing. But they have siblings, and thinking about it carefully, it is important to learn from siblings and to improve people’s personalities. (Group B)

Tt: My parents have siblings, but their childhood was very hard. (Group C)

The data tend towards showing that the majority of only children participants did recognize the difference in sibling status, as well as material conditions between the two generations. In particular, Rose commented that it was important to have siblings. Moreover, it can be seen that the younger only children participants also reached the same points which the older only children raised.

What are the Differences between Sibling Relationships and the Parent-child Relationship?

As I have discussed above, all the participants acknowledged that parents are the most important people in a family. So can parent-child relationships replace sibling relationships? This section investigates the differences between parent-child and sibling relationships based on sibling participants’ own experiences. The results showed that sibling relationships are very important, and at some level are even more important than the parent-child relationship.

Yi: There is a more equal relationship between siblings compared to the parent-child relationship. (Group A)

Li: See above. (Now she – little sister - is even more important than my parents in terms of my everyday life and mental state) (Group A)

Zhen: Siblings are normally in the same age group, so it is easier to communicate with them, whereas you cannot say some fashionable things when speaking with your parents. (Group D)

Min: Relationships with parents is more about up-bringing and respecting them, but sibling relationships are more about communication and help. (Group D)

Peng: There is more to talk about between siblings compared with parents. Sibling relationships are closer sometimes at some level. (Group D)

In the study, the participants used the words equality, relaxation and freedom when talking about sibling relationships, and they also said that sibling relationships are more important or closer in some aspects. At the same time, they used ‘generation gap’ and seriousness to describe the parent-child relationship. The answers reflected Mitchell’s (2003, cited in Edwards et al., 2005, p.3) suggestion, “The ‘lateral’ relationship between siblings is relatively autonomous and just as important as, or even more important than ‘vertical’ parent-child relationships”, as well as Punch’s “the ‘informality’ of sibling interactions means that they do not have to strive to maintain a particular impression and are perhaps more free to express themselves with less fear of the consequences” (Punch, 2005, p.185). However, we should be aware that “an appreciation of the potential importance of sibling relationships has developed slowly” (Lamb, 1982; also see Dunn, 1993) as many studies tend to emphasize the importance of parents.

Definition of ‘a Good Childhood’

This section was intended to discover whether a sibling relationship is a crucial element when participants define a good childhood. The data indicated that a good childhood is about freedom, simplicity and not having to study too hard, according to the different aged participants. No one really mentioned sibling relationships as a necessary factor.
Smile: A good childhood is a period when children can do what they want to do, relax and have an easy life. (Group A) (1975)

Yi: A good childhood should be full of happiness, freedom, and attention from others. (Group A) (1979)

Dan: A happy childhood for me is about parents loving each other, a harmonious family, no worries, carefree, someone to play with. (Group B) (1979)

Zhen: Care free and don’t need to go to piano and dancing lessons and so on. (Group D) (1986)

Chen: Find a better study method, and get good results. (Group C) (1992)

Heng: Do whatever I want to. Only go to school for half day. (Group C) (1992)

Out of the whole group, Most of participants described a good childhood as free and simple, which reflects the age and social contexts differences.

Would Only Children Like to Have Siblings if it was Possible?

After discussing the advantages and disadvantages both being only children and children with siblings, this section was designed to explore whether only children would like to have siblings where it was possible. Most of the only children in the study admitted they had benefited from all their parents’ attention and all the family resources. However, if they had a choice, most said they would prefer to have siblings although one of them said it was difficult to answer, since people always want what they do not have.

Win: Yes, sometimes, because you would not feel lonely. Just one, a sister would be better, because I like girls and would not want to share everything with a boy. (Group B)

Rose: When I was younger, I wanted to have a little sister to play with, now I want a big brother to protect me. (Group B)

Tt: Yes, I would like that, I feel lonely. I want to have an older brother, a younger brother and a little sister, because then we could all play together. (Group C)

Chen: I would like that, I could tell them the words in my heart, I want a big brother and a big sister to take care of me. (Group C)

Pan: I wish I had siblings. We could talk with each other. I would like brothers, because boys need to play with boys. (Group C)

Therefore, it appears obvious that most participants would like to have some siblings if the one-child family planning policy did not exist.

What do Relatives and Friends Mean to Chinese People?

What do relatives and friends mean to Chinese people? Do they mean different things to only children and sibling children? Can relatives and friends replace sibling relationships? This section explores these questions. Firstly, young people with siblings responded that what relatives and friends mean to them depends on whether they had attitudes and philosophy in common, and there is no difference between relatives and friends although there was a blood relationship between relatives.

Yi: It depends. No matter whether people are relatives, or extended kin, the most important thing is the relationship. Sometimes, I find there is a closer relationship with neighbours or friends than with relatives. (Group A)

Li: With a lineal relative, I just naturally feel very close, it is like what my sister said, “I can shout at you in a fit of pique, but I cannot do it to my friends. I may think in my heart that something is wrong there, but I do not say it straight away. I may lose my friend if I do that, but no matter what, sister is still sister”. Actually, we do our best for the relationship. But for other relatives, if we do not have the same philosophy, I will give up, at least I will not make any effort on my own initiative. For friends, I feel the same, if we are not the same kind of people, I will not take the initiative, and I may reject them. (Group A)

Secondly, young people from the first only children generation though that relatives and friends were important. Some of them even saw relatives and friends as family.
Dan: For me, relatives and friends are somewhat like my family, the difference is that I do not have a blood relationship with my friends. (Group B)

Rose: They are important. I also rely on friends and cousins, they encourage me and make me feel comfortable. How can I put this? Sometimes my parents do not understand me; also I do not want them to worry about me. (Group B)

Yang: Some relatives are friends with blood relationship, but friends are relatives who have not got a blood relationship with you. (Group B)

The younger only children aged 10 to 14 had the same opinion as the older only children that relatives and friends were people who give love, and look after each other.

Tt: They are ones who are able to stay with me, give me love. (Group C)

Chen: It is a part of your life, which should not be absent. (Group C)

Heng: We should care each other, and look after each other. (Group C)

It can be seen from above, the blood relationship with remote relatives is not a matter for sibling children, the way for them to see relatives and friends depend on their common sense. However, it appears that the majority of only children participants care more about relatives and friends, since they do not have so many closer biological relationships.

What are Your Hopes for Future Family?

This section explored participants’ hopes in order to offset the answers for now and the past. For example, they might reply that the sibling relationships are important, and if ask directly, they might say they would like to have siblings, but do sibling relationships really matter? It may be possible to find answer from the way they describe their hopes for future family.

Yi: I hope I can marry a man whom I really love and have two or three children (one boy and one girl, or two boys and one girl). (Group A)

Win: To have a clever, healthy, beautiful boy and a girl. (Group B)

Yang: To keep closer relationships with family members, and to get enough time to enjoy the life with parents, partner, and children. (Group B)

Zhen: I would like to have two or three children. (Group D)

Peng: Having a good parent, and a lovely child. Oh, may be two if it is possible. (Group D)

It can be seen that more than half participants among Group A, Group B and Group D expressed that they wanted more than one child in the future if it is possible. This collective orientation reflected on the fundamental Chinese cultural habit of preferring the collective rather than individual, which was mentioned in Yang et al.’s study (1995; also see Santoro, 2000; Zhao, 2000; Song, 1999).

Effect on the Participants of the One-child Family Planning Policy

As presented above, both the majority of older and younger only children participants did realize the dissimilar in sibling condition between the two generations. Moreover, the sibling participants suggested that sibling relationships are more equal, free and less serious (Punch, 2005), and as important as parent-child relationship, or even more important in some aspects (Mitchell, 2003, cited in Edwards et al., 2005). Also most of the only children would prefer to have had siblings if it were possible, although in talking about what a good childhood is, sibling relationships were not mentioned as a significant ingredient, but the points which reflected on their age differences, such as heavy burden in study, were key issues. Furthermore, it seemed that only children see relatives and friends more importantly since they do not have as many closer relationships as sibling children. Last but not least, apart from only children aged 10 to 14, most of the young people among the only children and the children with siblings with or without approval would like to have more than one child for their own future family. To sum up, sibling relationships are an important matter for Chinese young people and children.
Conclusion

I adopted the sociological approach to find out how the one-child family planning policy affects Chinese young people and children’s daily lives with regard to families. Therefore, rather than investigating personal traits and characteristics, I discovered, firstly, that most of the participants define family narrowly around their parents and biological siblings regardless of age, gender, education background and sibling situations, and although the younger only children described what a family was less specifically compared with the older participants, all of them agreed that family is about love, support and happiness, and everybody in the family is very important. Moreover, some participants were aware that father, mother and siblings play different roles and no participant mentioned the emotional support by parent except one. Compared with parent-child relationship, sibling relationships are believed to be more equal and free, they are more like friends, but more stable, loyal and closer since they have a very close blood connection. Finally, there were more than half of participants who would have liked to have had more siblings or would like to have more than one child in the future if it were possible.

References


