ABSTRACT. A comparison between adult women who are only children and women who grew up with siblings is performed in relation to life course characteristics (events and timing), using a random sample of Canadian women (birth cohorts 1905—29 and 1930—44) surveyed, by telephone, in Vancouver and Victoria (total n of 1,251, with a response rate of approximately 60 percent). Initial analysis shows that female adult only children are less likely to have large families, more likely to marry and have their first child at older ages, more likely to attain high levels of education, and, among the younger cohort, more likely to cohabitate at younger ages. However, more refined analysis reveals that differences are, for the most part, the result of family of origin variables associated with sibsize rather than the result of only child status per se. Results are discussed in terms of their implications for research within the life course perspective, and in the light of possible changes accompanying population aging.

INTRODUCTION

Negative stereotypes about only children are commonplace in North American society, having become incorporated into our cultural worldview and passed on from generation to generation (Baskett, 1985). Thus, it is commonly thought that only children are spoiled, lonely, selfish, unhappy, and generally maladjusted. These presumed characteristics are viewed as resulting from the twin disadvantages of deprivation of crucial learning experiences due to lack of inter-sibling interaction and of parental over-indulgence and over-protection (Veenhoven and Verkuyten, 1989).

Survey data document the degree of negative opinion about only children and, indirectly, the pronatalism that continues to exist in the face of low fertility. Approximately two-thirds of Americans feel that being an only child is a disadvantage; among those with this opinion, 60 percent cite a character or personality defect, and 22 percent feel that only children have lonely childhoods (Blake, 1981). In concert with these negative views about only children, very small percentages of
Americans (1.7 percent) (Davis, cited in Glenn and Hoppe, 1984) and Canadians (3 percent) (Gallup, 1988) state that the ideal number of children for a family is one. However, the avoidance of ‘onlies’ is not realized to a fairly significant degree; approximately 10—18 percent (depending on birth cohort) of ever-married Canadian women have only children, for either voluntary or involuntary reasons (Gee, 1986).

The existence of only children, societal ideals and negative stereotypes notwithstanding, has been accompanied by social scientific inquiry about them. The vast majority of research has focussed on only children when they are children (cf. adults) and on personality characteristics, particularly intelligence (see Falbo and Polit, 1986, for a review of 115 studies). Research results are clear in indicating that only children are not disadvantaged. For example, Falbo and Polit’s (1986) research review indicates that only children score higher on intelligence, achievement, and character measures than children with siblings, particularly those with many or older siblings, and that on five developmental outcomes (achievement, adjustment, character, intelligence, and sociability), only children are not different from firstborns or children with one sibling. In a longitudinal study of over 3000 only children and children from two-child families in Grades 9—12 in 1960 (and following sub-samples one, five, and eleven years later), Claudy et al (1980) report that only children are cognitively superior, more mature, more socially sensitive, more likely to have interests of the ‘high culture’ type, but somewhat less sociable. No differences are found in health status, self-confidence, drive or leadership. Small differences, favouring only children, are reported for academic skills and need for achievement.

Blake (1981), studying adults using U. S. General Social Survey data, reports that only children are high achievers, satisfied with their lives, not socially alienated, and not prone to disruptive family lives in adulthood. Glenn and Hoppe (1984), also studying adults using U.S. General Social Survey data but focussing exclusively on psychological well-being, find that, on average, only children are not disadvantaged in this regard. They, however, feel that more evidence is needed before a solid conclusion can be made; the basis of their caution lies in the crudity of measures of well-being that are used in surveys such as the General Social Survey, small sample sizes, and a general failure to examine sub-populations.