Ethnographic Child Study
A case study on the relationship development and socialisation of an only child

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Children are born into unique circumstances and grow up with primary socialisation experiences which are largely determined by their parents and any other caregivers or siblings within the home environment. Additionally, young children experience a variety of backgrounds, family structures and childcare settings. This study explores whether an ‘only child’, who relies essentially on her parents for primary socialisation before entering nursery might begin to develop a preference for a distinct “form” of social interaction. Using an ethnographic approach, I spent time with a young child in a variety of environments and observed her preferences with regard to early socialisation. I conclude that her family structure has had a large influence upon her social preferences as well as the direction her social development has taken, although at such a young age this may not necessarily continue or affect her future social development. The study also comments on the benefits of ethnography for an increased understanding of early child development and especially for those preparing to work with very young children as a career.

Keywords: Ethnography, Early Childhood Studies, Primary Socialisation, Only Child

Introduction

The purpose of this ethnographic child study is to gain an insight into the socialisation of an only child in the early years of their life. I am interested to see if there is a correspondence with being an only child and primary socialisation experiences. I want to research whether being the only child in a family unit provides opportunity for a strong and dependent relationship with both parents and other people key to the baby’s life, or whether being an only child increases independence within the early years.

Primary socialisation is the socialisation that occurs in a baby’s first years of development and is widely recognised to be provided by those closest to the child. This is predominantly the mother, the father and any siblings who are living with the child from birth. Psychologists led by Bandura (1977) have shaped a theory based on this assumption called Social Learning
Theory. The importance of role models is focused upon in Social Learning Theory as the, “approach to personality development that places particular emphasis on the way children’s individual behavioural patterns develop as a result of their imitation of models.” (Bandura, 1977, cited in Russell and Jarvis, 2003)

A child’s family plays a hugely important role in Social Learning Theory. Russell and Jarvis (2003) write of the suggestion within Social Learning Theory that the family provide both role models for a child and an influence on social development.

Vygotsky (1896-1935) also devised theories regarding social development. His key thinking was that children develop social relationships through interaction. Griffiths (2004) suggested that “development happens through interaction with other people, verbal and non-verbal” (Griffiths, 2004 p.26). This is what I wish to analyse in my study – the choices a child makes as to who this interaction takes place with, and observe whether this may be dependent on the family structure.

This was the main focus and the inspiration behind the direction of my ethnographic study. I am keen to investigate how an only child experiences social development, and investigate if there is a variation in socialisation with similar aged peers and socialisation with adults.

If a baby only has consistent observational or social learning with adults, will they become reliant on adult interaction as a means of enjoyment and learning? Equally, if there is not a sibling or a child role model for the baby to observe, will they relate less to similar aged peers, and favour the social interaction of an adult over play with a peer?

Context

Whilst carrying out my ethnographic study, I have been observing an only child and watching her primary socialisation development and the possible effects that being the first born may have on socialisation. This child is called Clara. I have received permission from Clara’s parents to use her name in this report, and the ethical protocol supporting this permission can be found in Appendix H.

Clara turned one year old in February 2009. Clara’s mother is a nurse at a local hospital and often works two or three night shifts a week. Clara’s father is self employed and works irregular hours and days of the week. Clara attends a Sure Start nursery on two days a week from 9:30 a.m. to approximately 3:30 p.m. On days she is not in nursery Clara is cared for by both her mother and father, depending on her father’s work hours. Her weekly routine is fairly structured and she is accustomed to her mother and father’s working hours and the pattern of childcare.

Clara is my cousin, and therefore a close family member to me. This detail is important to my study with regards to the possibility of family bias, but the essential details of this will be covered further on in my report.

I have had a close relationship to my Aunty, Clara’s mother since I was young and subsequently I have been involved in Clara’s life to a great extent. It is because of this close relationship that I am concentrating my ethnographic study on Clara.
From a research perspective, I have a great deal of knowledge about Clara regarding her physical and mental development, and I am familiar with her home environment. Due to my relationship with Clara's mother this information has been acquired through informal communication and experience with her parents. I am positive that this will have a constructive impact on the study. Due to this unique situation, I know that the information I have regarding Clara is genuine, factual and accurate and none of the details or feedback has been embellished for the sake of my research.

**Ethnography**

“Ethnographers believe that through systematic observation they may come to identify recurring patterns of human behaviour and social activity”.

(Aubrey et al. 2000, p.111)

Ethnography is a hugely beneficial research method for sociological and psychological research. Ethnographic research is a beneficial way of studying in order to develop a holistic view on an issue and to gain an insight that could not be achieved through interviewing alone. Ethnography is predominantly thought to help psychological understanding of why people do what they do. There are a number of important benefits of ethnographic research. As Aubrey et al (2000) write; ethnography provides opportunity to gain an insight into aspects of social behaviour that influence “the way they act and speak, and the manner in which they interact with others”. (p.112)

As an ethnographic researcher I am trying to develop a holistic perspective on the socialisation and relationship development of Clara. Aubrey et al (2000) states the importance of developing a holistic view on the subject of ethnographic study.

“Ethnography does not merely describe people’s behaviour; it describes people’s ways of living. Hence ethnographers’ reports have to reflect people’s ways of being.”

(Aubrey et al. 2000, p.112)

Within ethnography, the amount of information available gives the researcher a number of perspectives to scrutinise. It provides more secure grounding for developing knowledge.

Effective ethnography is a longitudinal study carried out over a period of time appropriate for the focus of the study. The research I am carrying out is aiming to investigate Clara’s socialisation, which is not an “overnight” or a quick development of her life. In order to successfully observe the changes that Clara makes and the relationships she builds I needed to observe her for an extensive amount of time.

Another benefit of ethnographic research is that Clara’s innate and natural behaviour is observable to me, as I, the researcher, become a part of her everyday life. This was another factor that was extremely straightforward for me, as being so close to Clara’s family, there was minimum disruption in me immersing myself within their lives. Clara is accustomed to my presence in her home environment and therefore this means there has been minimal disturbance to her. Christenson and James (2008) write that “the less subjects are aware of being studied the better.” (p.17). This is a significant and constructive factor of longitudinal ethnographic studies involving young children. Their awareness of being observed should be kept as low as possible.
The data I have collected on Clara is of a qualitative format. I have specific observation sheets that a number of social situations have been depicted on, and I collected video footage and photographs when appropriate. Greig, Taylor and MacKay (2005) support the collection of qualitative data within research, especially when the subjects are children. They agree that it is a "powerful approach that is likely to prove indispensable for everyone who is working in this field." (p.137)

**Ethics**

The collection of my qualitative data brings me on to discuss the ethical implications of my study. As a researcher, I need to be aware that being a close family member may pose some difficulties.

Ethical considerations are vital to acknowledge within ethnographic studies. Researchers should ensure some key principles are recognised within their investigations. These may include, "respect for persons, equity, non-discrimination and beneficence that is, avoiding harm and protecting the weak." (Butler, 2000; Eby, 2000; Graue & Walsh, 1998; Sieber, 1992; cited in Hill, 2005 p.75) I strived to ensure that to the best of my ability I account for these principles and familiarise myself with them for the sake of Clara and her family involved in my study.

As I have previously mentioned, being biased is a complicated issue that may arise due to me having a close relationship to my cousin. Bias in an ethnographic study would be in the case of an observer or researcher allows a personal matter to influence their view. I need to ensure that when I am observing Clara and following up my observations, I "disconnect" myself from being her cousin and become a researcher of her conduct. I need to constantly consider my ethical issues, but I also need to balance this out with distancing myself enough to develop an impartial and fair viewpoint.

Before embarking on my study of Clara, I had to make certain that her parents gave complete consent for Clara to be involved so intensely.

They had supported me through university degree, and so they were aware of my interest, and passion for my course. They fully understood the benefits I felt it would provide me with, in participating in a study of my cousin. Clara’s parents read all appropriate paperwork and signed a consent form to agree to the study. For the benefit of Clara’s parents, I have guaranteed that the writing of this study can be available to them for reference at any stage. Alongside this understanding was the permission to use Clara’s real name in the study. The ethics protocol document which Willan (2004) has stressed the value of can be found in Appendix H.

Due to Clara’s age and her familiarity with me, it can be assumed that it would be difficult to emotionally harm her purely through my presence of observation. The only situation she may have found unusual was when I went to visit her in her nursery setting. However, Clara did not seem distressed by this and although initially curious, she soon disregarded me and continued as normal. I questioned the staff whom are familiar with Clara and confirmed that she was not behaving any differently to a day when I was not present. I was assured that she was behaving in her natural and expected way.
Another ethical consideration I had to overcome was regarding the other children present during my observation at nursery. As I was hoping to film Clara socialise, there was a chance that other children would be captured on footage, either involved with Clara or in the surrounding environment. As a result of this, I had to make certain that the parents of these children were both aware of the situation and happy for me to carry out observations that may involve their children. To bring my study to their attention, I consulted with the nursery staff and wrote a letter for the parents of the children (see Appendix A). The letter explained why I was observing Clara, the facts about my degree at the University of Plymouth and my contact information. I explicitly informed the parents that no names of children would be referred to or footage used unless it was entirely necessary. Hill (2005) supports the importance of ensuring this discretion and that “participants are promised that they will not be named or identifiable in any written or verbal dissemination of the findings.” (p.75) I clarified with the parents that any footage that was irrelevant to me, and not used for the purpose of my study would be deleted and destroyed as a matter of confidentiality.

Ethically, it is vital to acknowledge that although Clara is young now at the time of the study, she may develop an opinion on being the “subject” of my research when she is older. People view being “written about” very differently and I cannot predict the opinion Clara may have on this later in her life. Josselson (1966) expresses the implications for participants of ethnographic studies by stating:

“I worry intensely about how people will feel about what I write about them. I worry about the experience of being ‘writ down’, fixed in print, formulated, summed up, encapsulated in language, reduced in some way to what the words contain. Language can never contain a whole person, so every act of writing a person’s life is inevitably a violation.”


As I am focusing on Clara’s family structure I need to ensure that I do no imply, or suggest that it is having a significantly positive or particularly negative influence on her socialisation. It is not my aim to distinguish whether Clara has an advantage or a disadvantage at socialising with peers or adults by being an only child. Nor is it my intention to critically analyse Clara’s family and only child families in general. Ethically, I need to be conscious that this is explicit throughout my entire study. It may cause concern to Clara’s parents (and indeed Clara later in her life) if at any stage I suggest any long term affects that being an only child may have on her relationships socially.

Methods used

Throughout the past year I have spent time with Clara I have been observing her for the purpose of this ethnographic study. Due to the nature of my study focus and the age that Clara is, many of the observations that were most useful to me as a researcher have been in the latter stages of this year.

During this time, situations have arisen that I have wanted to record spontaneously and unexpectedly. In this position I would often write down the circumstances where possible and eventually transfer them onto an observation sheet. This way, I was recording the situation I perceived as remarkable without too much disruption. By copying onto the designed observation sheet, my writings were all clear and generic and this made the organisation of the suitable observations simple and comprehensible.
Due to the convenience of mobile camera phones, I often have the ability to take photographs and video footage whenever it is required. If I witnessed Clara demonstrating insightful behaviour and my digital camera was accessible, I tried to capture the moment. As I was focusing on her behaviour in a situation, I found that sometimes photographs weren’t entirely beneficial as they could not depict the whole story or express the environment effectively. With the videos especially, I could capture the situation, the environment, Clara’s reactions and her behaviour in a continuous manner. Another benefit of recording the videos was the possibility of play back in order to evaluate the situation in greater detail as Sharman, Cross and Vennis (1995) discuss.

Discussion – what have I found out?

Observing Clara has given me a number of situations that I can refer to in order to develop an idea of the social practices of an only child.

My first point of interest was the clear differentiation that Clara demonstrates regarding her relationships with different people close to her. It can be assumed that Clara is a very content girl and is not easily unsettled in common circumstances. As an example, it can be noted from observation Appendix B with Clara greeting familiar people. She has distinct differences in the way she first greets the three adults involved in this situation. Firstly, there was myself, whom she had not seen in a week or so, but clearly recognises and appears pleased to see. Her smile and constant gaze towards me could represent the recognition and familiarity of me visiting to play with her.

Shortly after this, her father enters the room and she starts saying, “Ba, ba, ba...” This sounding was aimed directly at her father and she smiled whilst following him with her eyes. It could be suggested that this is some of Clara’s initial attempts to talk and say “Daddy”, (which is an encouraged phrase from her parents) and greet her father personally. Children aged around twelve months often are imitating tone and speech or sound patterns that they have absorbed from their parents interaction with them. Each time Clara’s father re-entered the room Clara said, “Ba” at least once whilst looking at him, which suggests that she is relating that sound/utterance to her father.

As can be read on the observation, when her mother enters the room she is greeting Clara. Clara appears to hear her mother’s voice as she looks up, but does not respond significantly. However, as her mother walks past and behind the high chair and out of Clara’s vision, Clara begins to appear concerned and slightly distressed at the apparent absence of her mother. Her mother is talking to me, and so Clara can hear her voice, but her position in the high chair means she cannot turn to see - which is quite unsettling for her.

Bowlby (1969) studied young children’s attachments with their parents, and devised a range of theories regarding how children will respond to various situations involving parents or adults they have any particular level of attachment with. The importance of just the mother’s presence to a child is recognised in Bowlby’s theories. He writes of the attention a child often pays to the absence of their parent even when they are not actively seeking interaction from them.

“Thenceforward he is keenly alert to his mother’s whereabouts: he spends much time watching her or, if she is out of sight, listening for sound movements.”
It is suggested to me from this that Clara has a confidence and reliance in her relationships with her parents, and “outsiders” from the initial family unit, such as me. It is not unusual for her father to irregularly leave during the day at home to work, and in this situation, his inconsistent presence was not of concern to Clara. She was comfortable in him leaving her area of vision. As her mother generally does not leave Clara during the day at home the unpredictable attendance in the kitchen may have been initiating apprehension.

I observed Clara in her nursery setting to examine whether her further socialisation is reflective of her recognition and familiarity for her relationships at home. I chose to attend the nursery setting for an observation as “natural environments such as the classroom or the playgroup are ideal arenas for research.” (Greig, Taylor and MacKay, 2007, p.137) This applies especially to the collection of qualitative data, such as in my study and I felt that observing Clara in a setting in which she is without her parents, yet familiar to, would be hugely insightful. I was keen to see if she had concrete relationships with any staff or children at the nursery and how she may behave towards these people – was it different to her socialisation in the home environment?

For a considerable amount of time, Clara has had a steady and constant adult key worker who has been regularly supporting, and monitoring her through her time at nursery. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS, 2007) supports the development of relationships outside of the family setting, particularly within a childcare environment. In their first year it would be expected of children to “depend on close attachments with a special person within their setting” and continue to “build relationships with special people as she progresses through the profile.” (EYFS, 2007, p.30). This key worker was present on the day of my visit. From observations and the video evidence I obtained in Appendix C it is apparent that Clara is secure and at ease around her – building a positive relationship within this environment. Clara is comfortable when closely interacting with her key worker and in Appendix D she actively seeks attention and creates an opportunity for play with her. Even in situations where her familiar key worker is not present, (in my visit this was demonstrated during the key worker’s lunch break) and a different member of staff is at hand, Clara is not unsettled and is happy to cooperate, play and interact with them. This can be seen in Appendix E. The staff member present had never met Clara before and was new to the Baby Room that Clara was in. She reads a book with her and another baby, and Clara voluntarily watches her, and involves herself within the situation even though this adult is new to her and they have no previous relationship.

It could be considered from these particular observations that Clara is at ease with adult company and supervision, regardless of whether they are familiar or not. This brings me to the difference in Clara’s relationship with other babies around a similar age to her. As can be seen in Appendix F Clara’s interaction with the babies in nursery (on the day of my visit) is very different to that with adults. In nursery, Clara does not appear upset by the presence of other children, or distressed by any necessary socialisation that occurs. However, simultaneously she is not enthusiastic about any kind of interaction or play with other babies around her. Her investigation of her surroundings, and her learning and discovery of toys and the equipment available is predominantly something which Clara prefers to do alone and without company of peers, or support from adults. In Appendix F another baby was attempting to develop a social situation and interact with Clara over their interest towards some equipment and a piece of furniture. Clara was investigating an area of the Baby Room
and another baby joins her with intention of interacting together. The video of Appendix F is just after this scenario but it is still demonstrating how Clara was keen to leave this particular social situation and play alone with the toys. At the time in question, Clara is even uninterested in efforts of socialising from her key worker and is determined in her effort to play on her own.

As stated by Robinson (2008), there may be two strong recurring themes in child socialisation:

“First, behaviour may not only be an adaptive response to circumstances but also a direct communication from the child to the adult about the child’s current understanding of the world.”

(Robinson, 2008, p.168)

Clara appears to be more familiar with lengthy adult interaction than child interaction therefore it could not be expected of her to spend great amounts of time with peers voluntarily. At one year old, she would not naturally choose the unfamiliar and in this case, would prefer to be alone than in a situation she is not wholly confident about.

Appendix G was an observation written at a significant social situation for Clara. It was a birthday party which was at a children’s indoor play area. There were around 15 children at the party, aged between twelve months old to approximately nine years old. To begin with, there were not many children on the play equipment, and I was playing with Clara in the plastic ball pit. She seemed content, happy and playful and was enjoying playing both alone and with me. After some time, another child of a similar age to Clara came into the ball pit and made an attempt to play with her. Clara had met this baby on a number of occasions before and it could be said that he would have been familiar to her. However, his presence upset Clara and she began to cry and show signs that she wanted to be removed from the situation. His efforts to socialise with her were not aggressive or threatening, it just appeared that Clara did not want him to play with her and he disturbed the comfortable play she had on her own. For the rest of the afternoon at the party Clara was extremely “clingy” to her mother and would not leave her for any length of time. The more children who began to play around Clara the less she made attempts to join and socialise with them. However she was no longer distressed or indicating a want to leave, or that she was unhappy. She was content and smiling and watched the other children play closely but just wanted to do this from the comfort of her mother.

Conclusion

Carrying out my observations and researching the socialisation of a baby has given me a huge insight into many aspects of children’s social development. Alongside my key observations I have the further interaction that I have had with Clara in the year of her life in order to bring together suggestions for my conclusion.

On a number of occasions I have witnessed an only child being insistent on individual and independent behaviour, and seen the same child contrast, and be dependent on comfort, and familiarity. Although I would suggest that these are stages and phases that all babies may experience, observing Clara was extremely interesting to me from the perspective of an ethnographic researcher and a trainee practitioner.
Many factors are dependent on a child’s behaviour in any situation, be it a social context or not. Having regard to these is important when looking at my observations as it would affect any judgements that could be taken from them. As an example, the day of the birthday party observed in Appendix G, it appeared Clara was showing symptoms of teething. It is widely accepted that this can be extremely uncomfortable for a baby and may have affected her temperament and her interest in socialising. However, despite these aspects of the observations I do believe that I have learnt some useful characteristics of social development that will assist me as an early year’s practitioner.

A huge interest of mine within early years work, is children in pre-school and day care for the under threes. This is why I felt observing Clara would be so insightful for me as I can assume I will come to meet a great number of only-child children in my future career.

Having an understanding about children’s possible reasons behind their socialisation or the likely direction they will take with regards to relationships and socialising in their early years will be a benefit to my own relationship development with all my children.

It is vital to remember as an early year’s practitioner, that some children will not just desire, but need social interaction of a certain kind, especially in their very early years. Jarvis and Lamb state that:

“Early years practitioners need to have a good understanding of the development of communication and the role of the adult in this process. They should be able to identify strategies which are useful and to monitor their own use of these strategies.”

(Jarvis and Lamb, 2001, p.129)

If a child has only experienced a certain type of consistent socialisation and contact then they may feel extremely unsettled if placed in a situation that is totally unfamiliar to them. In the case of only child children, if they have had limited experience of lengthy social interaction with peers, then it should not be expected that they interact effortlessly in settings such as nursery. However, this will need to be regarded alongside a holistic view of the child’s social behaviour and not develop a “biography” (Robinson 2008) of the child and unintentionally limit their opportunities socially. As Robinson (2008) writes; parents and practitioners can develop perceptions of children’s behaviour in relation to their social behaviour, and “such perceptions, if negative or distorted can impede an understanding of the child’s emotional and developmental needs.” (Robinson, 2008, p.90) Practitioners need to recognise when children need, and do not need interaction from adults and children and provide consistent opportunities for both to be beneficial for all children. With regards to Clara’s socialising at nursery, as she progresses through the nursery age ranges, her interaction with key workers and staff may have to lessen as the ratio of staff to children decreases. As fewer adults are present to “play” and provide social support throughout day care and pre-school the benefits of peer interaction will appeal more to Clara and she may begin to develop preference to relationships with children.

Research has supported both arguments in the natural development of socialisation of very young children.
“It has been assumed that children younger than six or seven were simply not able to relate in an intimate way to other children, and that their relationships with other children were inevitably fleeting and transitory.”

(Selman, 1980; cited by Dunn, 2005, p.90)

This is how I could depict the situation that Clara may be in; that she cannot yet relate to her peers around her, and has no desire to develop a relationship with them yet. However, the counter argument research in this area as recognised further by Dunn (2005) states that there may be levels of closeness and intimacy in young children (Howes, 1983, 1988, 1996 cited in Dunn, 2005, p.90), but these are often developing from about the age of two years old.

Marcos et al (2003) suggest that children “express different types of communicative intentions” throughout their first year. Clara’s intentions may be that she is not yet socially interested in peers, and prefer social interaction and relationships with adults. I suggest that it is largely due to her family structure that this is the direction her social development has taken. I do not believe this to be a negative factor in her future development. It is important to regard that Clara is only one year old and the level of socialisation she receives presently is sufficient and the relationships she has formed are solid and beneficial to her. Once her social opportunities become more common, as they are bound to with age, I would suggest her interest in peers will increase and her reliance on adult social contact will diminish.

References


Appendices for this report can be viewed in the Supplementary Files link, located in the Reading Tools list in the window adjacent to this article.