

A Study on Experiences of Single-Parent Children in the Current Indian Context

Dr. Anita Srivastava

(Department of Psychology)

Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar College, University of Delhi

Abstract

The present paper explores and investigates some of the lived experiences and social perceptions of young adults living in single-parent family structures in the existing Indian situation. The sample consisted of 11 college-going young adults residing in Delhi-NCR with their single mothers since the early years of their lives. A qualitative research method was adopted in which data collection was done using semi-structured interviews followed by Thematic Analysis. The results indicate that participants as single-parent children have had mixed experiences where some individual experiences were challenging at the same time other experiences led to positive changes and self-growth during their lives. A total of six significant themes have been extracted as essential findings that highlight varied experiences being a part of a single-parent family in the Indian context. Themes extracted from the data are: Acceptance of Responsibilities, Careful Decision Making, a Sense of Belongingness, Perceived Social Response, Emotional Reaction, and Invoking Resilience. The emerged themes capture negative experiences and positive outcomes perceived in single-parent children.

Keywords: Single-parent children, lived experiences, Negative experiences, Positive outcomes

INTRODUCTION

Parenthood has always been an important area of research in psychology, where various theorists and researchers have also focused on different kinds of family structures and parenthood. Parents perform multiple culturally, socially, and biologically determined roles to ensure the development and well-being of their children (Gupta & Kashyap, 2020). Parental roles are mainly divided amongst parents in dual-parent families (also known as intact families). Still, a breakdown in the family may lead to a different family structure

altogether called a single-parent family. Single parenting can be understood as the availability of only one parent to take up the responsibility of two people for nurturing and rearing the child (Mabuzae et al., 2014).

Lately, the social shift in gender roles may have contributed to an increasing parent separation and single parenthood. According to recent statistics, globally, 320 million children under 17 years of age have been found living in single-parent families, and specifically in the Indian context, approximately 2.3 million children live with single parents (Bhat & Patil, 2019).

Single parenthood is not always an outcome of a breakdown in the family, and it can also be a choice considering a rapid cultural shift in society. The possible reasons for single-parent family structure include the death of one of the parents, Divorce or Separation of the parents, Single unmarried biological parent, and Single unmarried adoptive parent. Single parenthood may impact the family's economic and social conditions and individual family members' psycho-social position regarding their relationships with one another and parenting capabilities.

Single parenthood has been a common phenomenon; it is believed that single motherhood can be filled with many emotional, economic, and social challenges (Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009). The challenges may not be limited to the single parent but can also be experienced by their children due to the absence of a father, given the patriarchy and cultural norms in India, where there may be a social stigma attached to single-parent mothers and their children.

Few researchers in the past have worked on highlighting the strengths of single-parent families instead of only focusing on the negative impact of single parenthood (Atlas, 1981 & Barry, 1979). These researches have suggested that 75% of single-parent children were well adjusted as individual entities. Some conclusions which could be drawn from the research done by Barry (1979) reflected that single-parent families usually require a period of one to two years to adapt, children were able to adjust to diverse custody arrangements, and the success of the family could not be attributed to just one single factor.

In recent years, single-parent families have increased rapidly, and researchers pay attention to emotional, social, and economic problems and challenges faced by single-parent families, including the parent and their children in the Indian situation (Kotwal and Prabhakar, 2009, Bhat & Patil, 2019).

With changing times and socio-cultural shifts in society, different kinds of family structures,

including single-parent families, may be more acceptable than the ancient times in India, which demands the current exploration of experiences of single-parent children in contemporary times. Therefore, the present research explores and understands lived experiences and perceptions of single-parent children in the current scenario, which intend to capture positive adaptations resulting from a new family structure.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Shalini Bharat (2008) examined the issues of the single-parent family in India. The occurrence of single-parent families in India has been calculated using data from the 1981 census after discussing many definitional, causal, assessment concerns and various significant concerns that underline the necessity to view and comprehend the issue of one-parent families from the Indian standpoint while portraying relevant investigational facts.

Barry A. (1979) studied 25 single-parent volunteers to determine the factors contributing to single-parent families. The volunteers were asked about their successful family stories and other questions such as degree of education and income, the child's relationship with the absent parent, problems they have to face for being a single-parent child, and financial and emotional issues. The survey intended to discover how single parents have managed the possibilities and difficulties of their solitary habits. Another goal was to provide single parents and their families with some inspiring, relatable role models. More analysis is required to significantly develop helpful recommendations for single parents and the supporting workers that serve them.

Bhat, N.A., & Patil (2019) suggested ways for single parents to overcome the hardships and challenges they go through while upbringing their adolescent children. Also, the positive and negative impact of single-parenting on children's physical, psychological, emotional, behavioral, educational, and social well-being has been studied thoroughly. They also highlighted that single parenting has increased in India because of the higher impact from foreign countries and the advantages and limitations of this phenomenon.

Laurie C. Maldonado and Rense Nieuwenhuis (2019) addressed the main problems of single parents. It promotes nonbiased perspectives clearly on both sides and includes the qualities of single parents that help to shape their well-being. They conducted this study in six foremost fragments: general contributions, insufficiency, child security, and stereotypes. It also focuses on how employees can affect the upbringing of a single-parent child. This

study includes many policies and focuses on different kinds of policy-based descriptions.

Cote S et al. (2003) revealed that income is one of the main factors contributing to the unfavourable outcomes in single-parent homes. Youngsters from lower-income homes typically have a more challenging time getting by daily than children from wealthier families. This results from the atmosphere condition in their families, schools, and neighborhoods and their exposure to financial and psychological benefits.

Mackay and Ross (2005) discussed that although having a single parent increases the danger of an amount of undesirable sentimental and behavioral consequences for youngsters, many other considerations can affect how these children turn out, including the mother's and father's age, academic background, and professional career, the family's earnings, and the network of relatives and loved ones that they have. The majority of such relationship seems to be caused by an imbalance in these aspects that frequently characterize single parenting instead of single parenting. Most children from single-parent families succeed when there are good conditions.

Swain and Pillai (2005), according to the National Family Health Survey (1998–1999), found that more than half (51%) of all females with children are in charge of their own houses, and 28% of them are residing alongside their father and mother or in-laws, and 10% are staying with other caregivers. Females make up a tiny percentage of those who live apart from their families. Only 39 percent of divorced ladies and 29 percent of those who are separated hold the position of the family head, compared to 59 percent of widows.

METHODOLOGY

OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this research is to understand the experiences of young adults living as single-parent children, the impact of single parenting on their lives, the challenges they have to go through, society's reaction towards them, and the positive lessons they learn while growing up as a single-parent child.

SAMPLE

Purposive sampling was used in the present study, and 11 college-going women in the age range of 18-25 years residing in Delhi-NCR with their single mothers participated. It was

ensured that participants had at least an experience of one or more than a year living in (a single-parent family structure) since their parent's divorce/separation or the death of their father.

PROCEDURE

This research aimed to collect information through semi-structured interviews consisting of 8-10 questions about their intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences as single-parent children and their perception of social reactions and perceived differences from dual-parent families. Interviews were then analyzed using Thematic Analysis. The codes were first generated from participants' responses, followed by the categorization of codes from which different themes were extracted.

RESULT & DISCUSSION

The main aim of this study was to determine the experiences of single-parent children, including their emotions, challenges, and adjustments in the current Indian situation. The separation of parents affects the lives of children and their psychology. This study has reflected these effects by analyzing single-parent children's experiences and responses. These children have to go through different kinds of experiences living in a patriarchal society. Some experiences positively affect the child and help in self-growth. As a result, the following themes have been extracted from the interviews of single-parent children living with their single mothers in the current Indian context:

1. Acceptance of Responsibilities

Responsibility can be understood as accepting the consequences of the chosen actions (Blatz, 1944). However, in some situations, the person may not choose actions, yet they must accept and perform specific tasks as additional responsibilities.

Along such lines, single-parent children in the present study have been found to experience an increased sense of responsibility as a result of the absence of the father (<https://owaa.org>). Participants reported sharing the financial load of the mother by starting working at an early age. Where a participant stated, "I got over with my 12th standard because my parents separated, so my mom was the only one earning, so I had to work as well, and I started teaching in a daycare", another participant also highlighted "both of us siblings have also taken up little-little responsibilities in the absence of support."

Children of separated or divorced parents understood their parent's worry as they

were constantly aware that their parents were pressed financially with the single earning person in the family (Weiss, 1979). It can be inferred from the responses of the participants that the children actively acknowledge the obligations and financial burden of the mother as a single parent and make efforts to share the responsibility amongst the family members; as also suggested by research, those financial problems were one of the main stressors for the majority of the single mothers (Kotwal and Prabhakar, 2009) which interviewees also shared. Participants also highlighted other spheres of their lives where they reported handling college admissions or legal paperwork independently from an early age. Where one of them said, "I never took my mother for my college admissions; I did myself because I know she is working and has other responsibilities."

One of the participants also shared the recent incident of her sister handling all the arrangements for her wedding due to her father's demise. Children had to pitch in for responsibilities, which, if given a choice, they probably would not have taken up; as reported by a participant, "I would have liked just to surpass that phase of responsibility." Children of separated parents are generally required to assume new responsibilities and obligations (Gardner, 1976).

Therefore, it can be concluded that the heightened level of maturity that comes with the early acceptance of additional responsibilities presents itself as an ability to relate to adults' perspectives and may foster a sense of self-reliance in single-parent children.

2. Careful Decision Making

Building on acceptance of additional roles and responsibilities by the children as partners in the family's decision-making process, they may have to be more careful with their decisions for themselves and their family.

One participant shared that she did not go abroad for education despite the scholarship as the remaining expenses were still a considerable cost that would have been difficult to pay by her mother alone; instead, she joined a government college and started modeling to support her education. From this, it can be inferred that single-parent children tend to prioritize their parents' struggles over their desires. Another participant reported being very careful with her social responses as she was cordial and courteous in conversation even when she did not reciprocate it. She also shared the possible pressure on single-parent children to make better choices as they are expected to be more careful. "It is okay if you want to do this, but take good decisions, study hard, and do not engage in bad habits."

The consequences of decisions made by children of dual parents fall on

both parents while such may not be the case in single-parent families, hence, adding a responsibility to be more cautious, be it in terms of allocating their resources or academic and social decisions. In addition, past research suggests that single-parent children are presented with more opportunities to be involved in decision-making in the family (Brown & Mann, 1990; Jacob et al., 1993) which could be a possible reason for children being extra careful in their choices.

3. Sense of Belongingness

According to Maslow's (1970) Hierarchy of Needs Model, belongingness is one of the fundamental human needs which can affect an individual emotionally, socially, and psychologically. Individuals spending time together, being protected and accepted by each other, having fun together, participating in day-to-day work, and having a sense that they are part of the family constitute a feeling of belongingness towards one's family (Goodenow 1993; Leake, 2006).

Family structure is an important variable that tends to influence one's sense of family belongingness (King et al., 2018) as also shared by a participant that "I feel when you are a single parent-child, there is less belongingness to the family. I do not know like the moment I saw my family scattering I felt that I am also a different part rather than being in a collective family." King and Boyd (2016) found that relationship experiences within the family have an impact on belongingness. In the present study, the also participant reported, "This is like we do not talk much now. I like her. I love her, but we do not talk much now compared to earlier; this can be associated with her experience of a lowered sense of belongingness. "Also, from this, it can be inferred that the family environment may influence one's sense of belongingness, which can significantly contribute to single-parent children's lives.

Moreover, suggested by attachment theory, which focuses on the intrinsic need of individuals to form emotional connections (Bretherton 1992; Bowlby 2012), and object relations theory emphasizes the significance of close parent-child relationship (Klein 1948; Winnicott 1953). In case of disharmony in the parent-child relationship, consequent difficulty may be experienced in establishing other intimate relationships, which was again reported by a participant whom she stated, "I would say that whenever like I feel emotionally intimate, I would retreat and maybe that is something because I do not want to get hurt so I do not get intimate that easily so I would say I stay guarded a little."

Therefore, specifically in the case of single-parent children where a positive family environment is perceived, including having a fulfilling mother-child relationship, it

may add to an enhanced sense of belongingness.

4. Perceived Social Response

One of the significant challenges faced by single-parent children may include perceived social stigma around the current family structure of single parenthood due to an absence of a father. It is socially perceived that a father's absence can leave members of the family without a disciplinarian (Biller, 1974), as also stated by a participant sharing, "I guess there is less discipline and mother are taken lightly. Still, we do everything, but I have seen friends and families with their fathers, it is not same". Though it can be noted that in some cases where single-parent children are in a joint family, extended family members take the father figure role. However, due to the cultural shift, more nuclear families are observed in India, which can leave children with no father figure leading to a different set of personal and social challenges.

Acknowledging these challenges, participants highlighted their lack of enthusiasm and willingness to participate in social gatherings; a participant reported, "I have been avoiding going to get together and everything as well for a very long time because I just want to avoid those conversations" which is in line with Bhat & Patil's (2019) study that suggested lower social and recreational participation by single-parent children on account of lack of social acceptance.

Another finding in the present study was a shared experience of social judgment towards single mothers and their children. This was shared during the interview when a participant said, "many accusations and blames and tension in my family from my father's side even from my mother's side of the family when we lost our father." Another shared, "Relatives say so many things which I feel they could not have said in my father's presence." Based on the responses, it can be inferred that participants reflect perceived social stigma and lack of social support as single-parent children, which may lead to a socially challenging experience, reducing their motivation to seek social support or engage socially.

In addition, multiple participants in the present study reported experiencing feelings of sadness and vulnerability as there is constant judgment and comments that act as social reminders by extended relatives about the absence of male representatives in the family.

5. Emotional Reaction

Mello et al. (2016) found that Parental separation can be emotionally traumatic for children,

and studies show that single-parent children can experience confusion, embarrassment, and emotional stress. They also tend to experience a lack of discipline, a sense of warmth, and aggression (Richter & Lemola, 2017), which the participant also reported, "I feel that I have bottled up many emotions each time that I felt bad... because I feel let it be, let them say, it does not matter, but there will be a time that this might come out as a volcano. "Another participant reported a lack of discipline as she stated, "I am stubborn, and my sister is also aggressive, but there is some discipline when fathers are there some rules."

Past literature also suggests that single-parent children tend to develop feelings of abandonment and sadness (Bhat & Patil, 2019). Psycho-social needs of the children may be compromised as a single parent needs to take up the roles of the other parent as well, which was highlighted by a participant who stated, "I would say because there was so much focus on her being the provider being an officer being somebody who spends about 70% of her day in the office, so I spent barely 2-3 hours with her, and I think that sort of definitely affected our emotional bond". At the same time, the participants also exhibited empathy towards their mother's condition as a single parent. Acknowledging their parents' struggles, single-parent children develop elevated emotional regulation and problem-solving abilities. They also better manage their expectations and disappointments and feel motivated to share their burden (Guhasarkar, 2020).

6. Invoking Resilience

Single-parent households undergo a shift concerning dimensions like relationships, family roles, and economic conditions that impact overall family functioning and adaptations by individual family members (Thompson and Rudolph, 2000). As reflected in the present study responses, after the change in family structure, single-parent children opted for roles they would not have had if their father had been present. For example, "I felt I was trying. I was trying too hard when I was working because we do not have that habit that you have to start working the moment you turn 18".

Children started working and financially contributing to the family early; there was acceptance and adaptability towards the new additional roles. After acknowledging their changed economic and psycho-social positions, the participants displayed a tendency to invoke resilience by taking the initiative, working on relationships, and displaying perseverance which is also some of the dimensions discussed in Wolin & Wolin's (1993) seven protective characteristics of resilience that are vision, freedom, associations, initiative, humor, creati

vity, and morality.

Previous literature reflects that women experienced high personal resilience (Hsieh & Shek, 2008), which is in line with the present research findings where higher adaptability with time was reported by the participants, which were all female as mentioned, "I am also very used to living without my father right now, and my mother has taken up that role and both of us siblings have also taken up little responsibility."

It can also be noted that individuals with higher adaptability show personality traits like agreeableness and flexibility, which are substantial contributing factors to resilience (Dumont & Provost, 1999; Frederickson, 2001). These could also contribute to personal resilience in the present study.

IMPACT ON CHILDREN

1. Single-parent children spend carefully on their needs as there is only a single income source in the family.
2. Frequent changes in schedules and adjusting to managing time.
3. Sometimes single-parent children face negative feelings such as disappointment and missing a separated parent, which affects their mental and emotional state.
4. Feeling of insecurity and longing for a protector and a complete family.
5. Single-parent children must deal with stress and stigmas from society and their surroundings.
6. Single-parent children develop trust issues regarding marriage.

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