

Experiences of single-parent children in the current Indian context

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ABSTRACT

Background: Single-parent family structure involves only one parent responsible for rearing the child and their welfare. Among all types of families, single-parent families can have difficult individual and social experiences, which may affect both single parents as well as their children. Therefore, the present paper attempts to capture some of the lived experiences and social perceptions of single-parent children qualitatively in the current Indian context. **Method:** A qualitative research method was adopted in which data collection was done using semi-structured interviews followed by thematic analysis. The sample consisted of 11 college-going young adults residing in Delhi-NCR with their single mothers since the early years of their lives. **Result:** The results indicate that single-parent children participants had mixed experiences where some individuals' experiences were challenging; at the same time, other experiences led to positive changes and self-growth during the course of their lives. Findings suggest varied experiences of single-parent children in the Indian context, where 82% of participants reported additional "responsibilities" and 54% reported careful "decision making" process; lower "sense of belongingness," "social stigma," and higher "resilience" were reflected in responses by the majority of the participants (91%), and lastly, 73% reported difficulty in "emotional regulation." **Conclusion:** Experiences of single-parent children can be both positive and negative. Strengths such as an increased sense of responsibility, decision-making, and resilience can be considered while dealing with the unique challenges faced by them.

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

Introduction

Parenthood has always been an important area of research in psychology; various theorists and researchers have focused on different types of family structures and parenthood. Parents perform multiple culturally, socially, and biologically determined roles to ensure the development and well-being of their children.^[1] Parental roles are mainly divided among both 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.^[2]

Lately, the social shift in gender roles may have contributed to an increasing parental separation and single parenthood in society. 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.^[3]

Single parenthood is not always an outcome of a breakdown in the family; it can also be a choice considering a rapid cultural shift in society. The possible reasons for single-parent family structure can include the death of one of the parents, divorce or

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separation of the parents, single unmarried biological parent, and single unmarried adoptive parent. Single parenthood may have an impact on the family's economic and social conditions along with individual family members' psycho-social position in terms of their relationships with one another and parenting capabilities.

Where single parenthood has been a common phenomenon, it is believed that single motherhood can be filled with a great deal of emotional, economic, and social challenges.^[4] The challenges may not be limited to the single parent but can also be experienced by their children as a result of 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 as opposed to only focusing on the negative impact of single parenthood.^[5,6] These studies have suggested that 75% of single-parent children were found to be well adjusted as individual entities. Some conclusions that can be drawn from the research are that single-parent families usually require a period of 1–2 years to adapt, children are able to adjust with diverse custody arrangements, and success of the family cannot be attributed to just one single factor.^[6]

In recent years, single-parent families have increased rapidly, and researchers are paying attention to emotional, social, and economic problems and challenges faced by single-parent families, including the parent and their children in the Indian situation.^[3,4]

Significance of the Study

Separation or death of parents can be a traumatic experience for children. It brings sudden changes in family structure and socio-emotional and financial experiences. Psychological and physiological problems may manifest from unresolved traumatic experiences in single-parent children. For instance, negative remarks or micro-insults significantly affects the person's overall well-being as in the long run, these may create conflict and stress, in turn increasing the risk of traumatic stress symptoms and depression.^[7] Lack of social support has been linked with physical and mental health outcomes such as heart disease^[8] and mortality.^[9] On similar lines, several other studies suggest that children brought up by single mothers are at higher risk of developing conditions such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and externalizing behavior.^[10-14] To deal with such difficulties faced by single-parent children as a result of prolonged trauma, psychologists and physicians can come together to provide better care. For the same, current exploration of experiences of single-parent children is required in contemporary times, which not only helps in understanding unique challenges but also any strength that such children may develop over time. Therefore, the present research explores and understands lived experiences and perceptions of single-parent children in the current scenario and intends to capture positive adaptations resulting from a new family structure.

Method

This paper explores and understands young adults' lived experiences and social perceptions as single-parent children in the current Indian context.

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 the participants had at least an experience of 1 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

The data were collected using a semi-structured interview consisting of 8–10 questions around their intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences as single-parent children as well as their perception about social reactions and perceived differences from dual-parent families. Interviews were then analyzed using thematic analysis. The codes were first generated out of the responses given by participants, followed by the categorization of codes from which different themes were extracted.

Result & Discussion

The following themes were extracted from the interviews of single-parent children living with their single mothers in the current Indian context:

1. Perceived Responsibilities

Responsibility can be understood as accepting the consequences of the chosen actions.^[15] However, in some situations, actions may not be chosen by the person, yet they have to accept and perform specific tasks as additional responsibilities.

On such lines, 82% of single-parent children in the present study were found to experience an increased sense of responsibility as a result of the absence of the father. Participants reported sharing the financial load of the mother by started 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 said, *“both of us siblings have also taken up little-little responsibilities in the absence of support.”*

Children of separated or divorced parents understood their parents' worry as they were constantly aware that their parents were pressed financially with a single earning person in the family.^[16] 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 among the family members, as also suggested by a previous study^[4] that financial problems were one of the main stressors for the majority of the single mothers,

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. One of them said, *“I never took my mother for my college admissions, I did myself because I know she’s working and has other responsibilities.”*

One of the participants also shared a recent incident of her sister handling all the arrangements of her own wedding as a result of 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 to just surpass that phase of responsibility.”* Children of separated parents are generally required to assume new responsibilities and obligations.^[17]

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 with adults’ perspectives and may foster a sense of self-reliance in single-parent children.

2. Decision-making

Building on acceptance of additional roles and responsibilities by the children as partners in the family’s decision-making process, they are required to be more careful with the decisions they take for themselves and their families, as reported by 54% of the participants.

One participant shared that she did not go abroad for education despite receiving a scholarship as the remaining expenses were still a huge cost, which 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 own desires. Another participant reported to have been very careful with the social responses she gave as she was cordial and courteous in conversation even when it was not reciprocated. She also shared about the possible pressure on single-parent children to make better choices as they are expected to be more careful. *“It’s ok if you want to do this, but take good decisions, study hard and don’t engage in bad habits.”*

The consequences of the decisions made by children of dual parents fall on both parents, while this may not be the case in single-parent families, thus adding a responsibility to be more cautious, be it in terms of allocating their resources or academic and social decisions. In addition, past studies^[18,19] suggest that single-parent children are presented with more opportunities to be involved in decision-making in the family, which may be a possible reason for children being extra careful in their choices.

3. Sense of Belongingness

According to the Hierarchy of Needs model, belongingness is one of the fundamental human needs that can affect an individual emotionally, socially, and psychologically.^[20] 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 toward one’s family.^[21,22]

Family structure is an important variable that tends to influence one’s sense of family belongingness.^[23] The majority (91%) of the participants reported a lowered sense of belongingness when it came to their families or otherwise in intimate relationships. One participant shared that *“I feel when you are a single-parent child, there is less belongingness to the family. I don’t 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.”* Past literature suggests that relationship experiences within the family have an impact on belongingness.^[24] In the present study also, a participant reported, *“This is like we don’t talk much now I like her I love her, but we don’t talk much now as compared to earlier, this can be associated with her experience of the lowered sense of belongingness.”* 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, attachment theory suggests the intrinsic need of individuals to form emotional connections,^[25,26] and object relations theory emphasizes the significance of close parent–child relationships.^[27,28] In case of disharmony in parent–child relationship, consequent difficulty may be experienced in establishing other intimate relationships, which was again reported by a participant where she stated, *“I would say that whenever like I feel emotionally intimate, I would retreat and maybe that is something because I don’t want to get hurt so I don’t really 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. Social Stigma

One of the major challenges faced by most of the participants (91%) included perceived social stigma around the current family structure of single parenthood as a result of an absence of a father. It is socially perceived that father’s absence can leave members of the family without a disciplinarian.^[29] It was 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’s 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 role of a father figure, due to the cultural shift, more nuclear families are observed in India, and that 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’ve been avoiding going to get together and everything as well for a very long time because I just want to avoid those conversations.”* Lower social and recreational participation by single-parent children is noted on account of lack of social acceptance.^[3]

Another finding in the present study was a common experience of social judgment toward single mothers as well as their children. This was shared during the interview when a participant said “*a lot of 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 one shared, “*Relatives say so many things which I feel they couldn’t have said in the presence of my father.*” 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 Regulation

Parental separation can be emotionally traumatic for the children, and studies show that single-parent children can experience confusion, feelings of embarrassment, and emotional stress.^[30] They tend to experience a lack of discipline, sense of warmth, and aggression,^[31] which was also reported by 54% of the participants. A participant shared “*I feel that I have bottled up a lot of emotions each time that I felt bad... because I feel let it be, let them say, it doesn’t 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 set of rules.*”

Past literature also suggests that single-parent children tend to develop feelings of abandonment and sadness.^[3] 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’d 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 toward the condition of the mother as a single parent. Acknowledging their parents’ struggles, single-parent children develop elevated emotional regulation and problem-solving abilities. They also tend to develop the ability to manage their expectations and disappointments better and feel motivated to share their burden.^[32]

6. Resilience

Single parent households undergo a shift with respect to dimensions such as relationships, family roles, and economic conditions that impact overall family functioning and adaptations by individual family members.^[33] 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 actually trying too hard when I was working because we don’t have that habit that you have to start working the moment you turn 18.*”

Children started working and financially contributing to the family at an early age; there was acceptance and adaptability toward new additional roles. After acknowledging their changed economic and psycho-social positions, the majority (91%) of the participants displayed a tendency to invoke resilience by taking initiative, working on relationships, and displaying perseverance, which are also some of the dimensions discussed in a study as seven protective characteristics of resilience: vision, freedom, associations, initiative, humor, creativity, and morality.^[34]

Previous literature reflects that women experienced high personal resilience,^[35] which is in line with the present research findings where higher adaptability with time was reported by the participants who were all females, as one mentioned: “*I’m 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 took up little responsibility.*”

It can also be noted that individuals with higher adaptability show personality traits such as agreeableness and flexibility, which are important contributing factors toward resilience.^[36,37] These may be possible factors contributing to personal resilience in the present study as well.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored the lived experiences and social perceptions of single-parent family structures in the current times. Findings reflect that young adults living with their single mothers tend to accept additional responsibilities. Lack of social support and difficult emotional responses were expressed; however, they also reported to have high resilience as single-parent children. It is recommended that a fulfilling family environment along with optimum social support can have a positive impact on the lives of single-parent families. Also, a collaborative network of psychologists and physicians can be of great help dealing with specific concerns of children from single-parent families.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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