

Single Motherhood by Choice: Difficulties and Advantages

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study focuses on the advantages and difficulties encountered by 20 single mothers by choice (SMC). Research has addressed the difficulties that single mothers face, and the present study will discuss these, as well as the advantages that SMC see in this family structure. The research tool was semi-structured in-depth, non-directive interviews. Findings revealed that the difficulties SMCs face are similar to those faced by women who are single mothers due to life circumstances. The fact that they are solely responsible for their child/ren is a source of emotional stress, and they must deal with society's ambivalent attitudes. At the same time, SMCs emphasized their freedom to decide exclusively, and their success in maintaining a calm atmosphere at home, devoid of possible tension with a partner. This study suggests that although the women had chosen to become single mothers, the choice does not ease their difficulties. However, it allows SMCs to acknowledge the advantages of this family structure.

Keywords: single mother by choice, difficulties, advantages, social attitudes, coping, sole responsibility, qualitative study

1. Introduction

1.1 Focus of the Current Study

In this study, single women who chose to become mothers are acknowledged as a distinct group, different from women who became single mothers due to life circumstances. Difficulties and advantages experienced by single mothers by choice (SMCs), are the focus of the current study.

1.2 Single-Parent Households

Profound and rapid changes in contemporary society are significantly related to the appearance of a variety of household types other than the small modern nuclear family. Among these new types are the single-person household, the single-parent household, the same-sex relationship with or without children, the cohabiting household (pre-marriage or without marriage), or the voluntarily childless couple (Adams, 2010).

A dramatic rise in divorce rates in the last third of the 20th century (Adams, 2010) has led to a more fluid family structure, often changing over a child's life course (Sahu, 2016; Zito, 2015). Many children who were born to married parents experience a divorce and new family structures as parents go through single parenting, dating, and partnered lives. And many children who were born to unmarried single mothers experience the entry of a new partner at some stage in their lives (Zito, 2015).

The number of single-parent headed households – a mother or father who is solely responsible for the upbringing of their children – has increased dramatically in the Western world since the mid-1980s. In the United States in 2018, 28% of all households were headed by a single person, a rate more than double of that of 1960. The vast majority of single-parent household is headed by mothers, yet the rate of father-headed families is growing and is now about 17% of households (United States Census Bureau, 2018a).

Israel, where this study was conducted, has the lowest rate of single-parent households among the OECD countries, yet this rate is constantly rising (Single Families in Israel, 2017). In 2017, 11% of the families were headed by a single parent, 87% of them women, most of whom were divorced. The notable change over the last decades was that close to 20% of single women who were heads of household had never married (Single Families in Israel, 2017) and another 15.5% were widows. The rate of single mothers has increased significantly – from some 15% in the mid-1990s to some 25% in the second half of the 2010s (Oren, 2018). These growing numbers represent a significant shift in household structure and reflect a need to better understand the societal perceptions experienced

by this population.

Single parenting can be caused by separation, divorce, or death of one of the parents, although the latter is less common. It can also be a result of a life decision, to become a parent without a partner (single parent by choice). In the United States, most single parents are mothers, and most of them are separated, divorced, or widowed. Many of them are more vulnerable to economic difficulties and to stress and depression, with financial causes playing a part in this vulnerability (Berryhill, & Durtschi, 2017; Copeland & Harbaugh, 2005; Pujar, Chanda, & Hittalamani, 2018; Ta, Gesselman, Perry, Fisher, & Garcia, 2017; Taylor & Conger, 2017).

Single mothers earn less than married mothers, are much more likely to be poor, and experience food insecurity. They often do not have health insurance, and lack money for education – their own or their children’s (Taylor, & Conger, 2017; United States Census Bureau, 2018b). At the same time, children of single-parent families show higher levels of psychological problems than children from two-parent families, and have lower physical, material, emotional, and social resources, often to the point of depletion (Copeland & Harbaugh, 2005; Dunn, Deater-Deckard, Pickering, O’Connor, Golding et al., 1998; Pujar et al., 2018; Sahu, 2016; Thwala, Ntinda, & Mabuza, 2014).

1.3 Single Parenthood by Choice

While research has reported on the negative impact of single parenting on parents and children, a different picture is revealed when referring to never-married parents who chose to become single parents from the outset, the parents who are the focus of the current study. According to Jadva, Badger, Morrissette, and Golombok (2009), the number of never-married single women who chose to have a child without a partner is on the rise, perhaps in correlation with the increasing rates of singlehood. In the United States, 28% of American adults have never married (Jackson, 2018).

Weinraub, Horvath, and Gringlas (2002), found that American SMCs, are typically well-educated upper middle-class European-American. They are in their mid-to-late thirties, have well-paid jobs and are financially secure (Morrissette, 2008; Weinraub et al, 2002). Choosing to raise a child without sharing the responsibility with a partner, is often accompanied by having to handle social criticism, regardless of whether single parenting was a decision or a consequence of life’s vicissitudes. According to Kislev (2019) social expectations and policies are still designed to favor marriage. DeJean, McGeorge and Stone Carlson (2012), referred to documentation of many negative societal attitudes and beliefs about single parents (Bennett & Jamieson, 1999; Eby, Allen, Noble, & Lockwood, 2004), particularly about single mothers (Ganong & Coleman, 1995; Rhodes & Johnson, 2000; Robinson, 2009). According to Bennett and Jamieson (1999), never-married parents were perceived as more likely than married parents to have poor family relations and parenting skills.

Who is the single parent? It seems that the gender of the single parent significantly affects social attitudes, with mothers receiving more negative attitudes than fathers (DeJean et al., 2012). Single mothers are perceived as women who could not maintain a relationship, and hence failed in their responsibility to provide a secure family for their children. Single mothers might also be understood as women who had entered parenting without actually choosing it, rather due to unplanned pregnancy or poor personal choices (Maier & McGeorge, 2014). Single mothers were perceived as being more unhappy, deviant, troubled, and having poor child-rearing abilities than other mothers (Ganong & Coleman, 1995). Ganong Coleman, and Riley (1988) found negative attitudes pertaining to the morals of single mothers, including beliefs that they have non-traditional values, do not value marriage, and are promiscuous. Single fathers are perceived more positively, seen as responsible and caring for their children because they have to step in due to circumstances like mothers' death or incapability to fulfill what is originally expected of her (Goldscheider, Scott, Lilja, & Bronte-Tinkew, 2015; Hamer & Marchioro, 2002). Other studies revealed a negative view of single fathers, indicating that they experience societal disapproval (Chima, 1999; Emmers-Sommer, Rhea, Triplett, & O’Neil, 2003). Earlier, Meyer and Garasky (1993) argued that the biases against single fathers in many laws and policies illustrate a societal belief system that single fathers are not adequate parents.

A different perspective was expressed by Maier and McGeorge (2014), who found that single mothers are perceived as hard workers, independent, and self-sacrificing. As such their children develop high organizational skills, initiative, and good time management. Liblich (2009) found that Jewish Israeli single mothers noted that attitudes toward them improved after they became mothers, and that they were better accepted. This improved social acceptance could be explained by the centrality of family life in Israeli society (Liblich, 2009), and by the fact that Jewish tradition promotes procreation and hence enables single mothers to feel more comfortable in society than they did when they were childless.

As more young adults in the Western world choose singlehood and enjoy life satisfaction, the choice to become a single parent should be seen as part of that broader picture (Kislev, 2019). The Western world has witnessed a change in women's status and financial independence, the rise to dominance of individualism, long hours at work in many occupations, collapse of the nuclear family, late emotional maturation and difficulty to find a mate in the social net era (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014). (The motivation to become a parent is shared by around 95% of the population (Lampic, Svanberg, Karlstro, & Tyde'n, 2006) whether a person wishes to be married or not.

1.4 Research Question and Rationale

The rise in the rate of singlehood, and the almost universal motivation to become a parent, call for a better understanding the difficulties and the advantages that SMCs experience. After surveying the literature for studies on this issue, it seems that most studies in this field highlighted the difficulties of single mothers as a homogeneous population, without focusing on SMCs, which are a unique group. In this study the claim is that SMCs are distinct in that their situation was one of choice, and becoming a mother was not an outcome of life circumstances. In addition, in the present study the advantages of single motherhood will be examined, a subject that has received only scant attention. The innovation of this study is pinpointing a special group of single mothers – single mothers by choice – and examining the difficulties and advantages of their chosen lifestyle. The study is based on a broader study that examined other aspects of single motherhood by choice, and refers to previous studies on all single mothers, whether by choice or circumstance Golombok et al., 2016; Jadva et al., 2009; Mannis, 1999; Oren, 2018; Weinraub et al., 2002).

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The SMCs who participated in this exploratory study were 20 Jewish Israeli never-married mothers, all heterosexual and secular. Most of them ($n = 14$, 70%) lived in northern Israel, and their average age was 45.16 years (SD 8.16). About half of the participants ($n = 11$, 55%) had one child, the rest ($n = 9$, 45%) had two children. Three of the mothers (15%) were high-school graduates, 12 (60%) had college or professional degrees, 5 (25%) had advanced academic degrees. Four (20%) of the mothers were 30-35 years old at first (or only) birth, 9 (45%) were 36-40, and 7 (35%) were 41 or older. One of the women of the 41+ was 70 years old and her children were 38 and 36. Other than that, all children were under 18 years of age.

2.2 Research Tool

This is a qualitative phenomenological study. The phenomenological study identifies phenomena through the way participants perceived them in the situation studied (Lester, 1999). The current study was designed to reach an in-depth understanding of the difficulties and the advantages that SMCs experience. Studies of single mothers abound in the literature, and the innovation in the present study is the attempt to distinguish between the perspective of difficulties of SMCs and single mothers by circumstance. It was further designed to focus on the advantages of single motherhood, as perceived by SCMs. Because no studies focused on this unique population had been found, the interview questions were developed by the researcher specifically for this study. The questions were:

- 1) Based on your experience, what are the difficulties of being a single mother?
- 2) Based on your experience, what are the advantages of being a single mother?

Semi-structured, in-depth, non-directive interviews were conducted with each participant to gather her descriptions of her experience. This type of interview enables interviewees to expand and clarify their answers, and to give examples and a full description of their experiences, thoughts, and feelings, and allows the researcher to gain an in-depth look at the interviewees' – in this case SMCs – experiences in relation to their difficulties and advantages in their family structure. In addition to the main interview questions, the participants were asked follow-up question based on their answers. For example, participants who referred to financial difficulties, were asked to give examples and to describe their way of coping, and to mention the people who are part of their support system.

2.3 Research Procedure and Ethical Consideration

Prior to the research, approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Academic institution where this research was conducted. Participants were contacted using the snowball method. This began by turning to never-married single mothers on social media, asking them to be interviewed for research about their life within this family structure; some of those who agreed to participate contacted other possible participants. After a woman agreed to participate, she was contacted by the researcher. Interviews were conducted from January to October

2018, by the researcher and a graduate student who served as a research associate and who was guided by the researcher through the entire process. Most interviews were conducted at the participants' homes at their convenience. The participants were given an informed consent form to sign, listing the purpose of the study, permission to audio record, and a notice that they can withdraw from the interview at any time. They were assured that their anonymity would be kept by using pseudonyms and were also informed that the findings of this study could be shared with them. Each interview lasted 45-70 minutes, was audio-recorded and then transcribed using the intelligent verbatim transcript method (Hennink & Weber, 2013), editing out the fillers and repetitions, while sticking to the participants' voice and expressed meaning.

2.4 Data Analysis

Each interview was first read in its entirety to gain a general picture of the content. Following the interview structure, a thematic analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was conducted to derive distinct themes for each of the questions. To establish thematic reliability, the two researchers separately began searching for systematic, recurring, visible, and direct content. A comparison of their analyses enabled to identify mutually agreed-upon themes, which they then named.

3. Results

The findings were analyzed according to their contents in each question, and the themes derived are presented here by question.

3.1 Interview Question 1: *Based on Your Experience, What Are The Difficulties of Being a Single Mother?*

Answers to this question yielded three themes: Emotional stress, Limited personal freedom, and Negative social attitudes.

Emotional stress

Almost all the participants described experiencing emotional stress. As single parents who were solely responsible for their children, they always had to be on the alert, without being able to share their doubts, fears, moments of joy, and experiences with a partner. As much as the mothers trusted themselves, they did have doubts about the ramifications of this family structure on their child's development and psychological wellbeing. They had to cope with their children's questions about their father's identity and to provide an age-appropriate response. Financial issues and the need to manage their household by themselves were a constant challenge for some of the participants. As single mothers, their job opportunities were limited and so was their income. They found it difficult to handle multiple required tasks, without a natural partner to share them. As a result, they described feelings of loneliness and stress.

I find myself fighting eighteen fronts simultaneously, at times, it's not humanly possible. When I'm with my daughter I'm not with my son, and vice versa. And sometimes, when I'm taking care of his stuff, she says 'You're always with him.' It's hard. (Hila, 52, mother of two, age 12 and 9).

The main difficulty is that there is no other perspective, ... no one to bring in other energies. ... My son had a head injury, ambulance, ER, and all, and there's no one to call who'll share your worry and existential anxiety, another energy beside mine. No one who worries with me and feels what I'm feeling. I can share things with my close family of course, but it's still not a first relationship, always second or third level (Lilach, 40, mother of a 4-year old).

High on the list of participants' descriptions were heavy burden, exhaustion, and solitude. Being solely responsible for the children and their wellbeing, without having someone to lean on or to share responsibility with, was a long-distance race that allows no rest or moments of weakness. As a result, they constantly needed to find power within themselves to ensure their family's wellbeing

Limited personal freedom

Being solely responsible meant requiring a great deal of help, having to rely on the good will of friends and relatives or having to pay for help. Most of the participants described how they must plan each activity carefully and consider everything in advance. They used help (from family, friends or paid help) only when absolutely necessary, and tended to forego what they perceive as non-crucial activities such as hobbies, meeting friends, or just relaxing.

I can't go to the gym. There's always the logistics, needing a grandparent or a babysitter. It decreases my element of freedom. Nothing's spontaneous (Karin, 44, mother of two, age 7 and 4).

To begin with, you to adjust everything to the child's schedule, and then you discover that it matches nothing else,

so you basically have to give up on everything. You give up on it all and you say, 'Well, I'm giving up for something that's mine, my daughter' (Ronit, 38, mother of a 5-year-old).

Single mothers of young children experienced many limitations. Although they were at peace with it, they were aware of the personal price they paid.

Negative social attitudes

Alongside what seems to be openness toward single parenting and acceptance of it, the participants also mentioned negative attitudes, implying that they did not provide a normative healthy family to their children. Hence, they felt judged and criticized.

As far as society is concerned, I'm the most selfish one can be. I don't think about the child. To bring a child to this world with no father, even if he gets to see him once a week or once a month – as long as he gets to know him – is egotism personified. I'm severely judged, very much so (Dorit, 41, mother of a 6-year-old).

From the very beginning when I moved here with my son, I felt people were not communicating with me. They saw an unmarried woman with a child. I felt other parents at school didn't want to cooperate with me.... I feel as they see me as second rate, a weirdo (Mor, 52, mother of 10-year-old).

Participants felt that there were parts of society that were still very traditional, and that a family that was different from the normative nuclear family (mother, father and their mutual children) was not easily accepted. Sometimes people did not know how to handle the single-parent family and were too embarrassed to be open and talk about it. The mothers felt their family was perceived as irregular, weak, and one from which others should keep a safe distance. Alternatively, they confronted the different family structure by not approving – they might have showed it by letting the mothers feel they pity them, or express criticism and patronization. At times, and this may be inadvertent, they exclude the child of a single mother from social events such as a trip or a picnic, simply by planning activities that were designed only for two parent families.

3.2 Interview Question 2: Based on Your Experience, What Are The Advantages of Being a Single Mother?

Answers to this question yielded two main themes: Exclusivity of decision making; Calm atmosphere at home.

Exclusivity of decision making

A state in which mothers could reach decisions by themselves regarding house rules, educational attitudes, and any other aspects of their child's lives, was perceived by the participants as a significant advantage. Although decision making was often accompanied by hesitation and uncertainty, they appreciated the fact that they did not have to deal with discussions and conflicts over their children's upbringing. They lived by their own values.

There's no one who decides for you or whose opinions and wishes you have to consider. I was free to make every decision exactly as I wanted for the child (Talia, 49, mother of a 9-year-old).

In single parenting there are no arguments. I've had my doubts, but I didn't argue. Once I did something, I knew that it was the right thing for that situation (Vered, 70, mother of two, 38 and 36).

It seems that being a sole source of authority in a child's life mean power and confidence to these women. They handled situations without the need to justify themselves to anyone, they were free to choose a way and to change their mind. Although it was not easy not to have someone sharing the burden, they did see this as a comfortable state they were experiencing.

Calm atmosphere at home

The participants described a sense of calmness as they focus entirely on their child and did not need to divide their attention between a child and a spouse. Based on what they knew from friends and relatives, the SMCs believed that in many ways they were better off than many married women who must handle differences with their husbands regarding gender expectations, household chores, or fatigue, differences which often create stress and anger. They claimed that unlike other family structures, their own family structure was unbreakable and that brought calmness.

Friends have told me that their husbands wanted their attention. They couldn't understand how, all of a sudden, all attention goes to the child. This is my advantage. Nobody's breathing down my neck (Dorit, 41, mother of a 6-year-old).

I was not looking for the battles. No court, no.... He'll take, he won't take. He'll pay childcare, he won't.... I really didn't want all these problems, and I'm grateful that I made this choice (Hani, 46, mother of 6-year-old twins).

It seems that the SMCs feel that in some ways, single parenting is easier to handle than shared parenting. Their ability to devote their total attention and time to their children, while no partner resents them for that, lack of fear

for the unity of the family as they see no option for their family to break up, lead them to experience their parenting with comfort.

In sum, the findings show that although they chose this family structure, SMCs must cope with significant difficulties, similar to those reported by single mothers by circumstance. They handled emotional stress, limited personal freedom, and ambivalent attitudes from society. Along with these, SMCs highlighted their freedom to reach decisions exclusively, and with the absence of possible tension with a partner, they succeeded in keeping a calm atmosphere at home. They see this as different from the situation of divorced or separated mothers who are not solely free to make choices about their children as they need the father's consent.

4. Discussion

The current study focused on the difficulties and advantages that SMCs experience. This study acknowledges single women who choose to become mothers as a distinct group, different from women who became single mothers due to life circumstances. To gain an understanding of their situation, semi-structured, open interviews were conducted, with leading questions.

The participants referred to significant difficulties with which they coped, among them the emotional stress of sole responsibility, concerns for their child development, financial issues, the need to lower the priority of their own desires, loneliness, and needing a lot of help from their support network. They also spoke about social ambivalence, despite the seemingly greater openness and acceptance of diverse families in current society. They reported feeling stigmatized, criticized, and sometimes ignored or avoided, a finding that has been discussed in other studies (Dor, 2018; Maier & McGeorge, 2014; Valiquette-Tessier, Vandette, & Gosselin, 2016).

All single mothers – whether by choice or by circumstance – have higher stress scores than married mothers (Berryhill & Durtschi, 2017; Copeland & Harbaugh, 2005), perhaps due to concerns regarding the possible negative effect of not having a male figure in the child's life. The participants in the current study described difficulties to explain the absence of a father to their children, and their attempts to protect them from offensive remarks made by teachers or other children, difficulties that have been previously reported (Bock, 2000; Graham, 2014; Jadva et al., 2009). It is apparent that SMCs, although a distinct group of single mothers, still cope with many similar everyday difficulties that single mothers by circumstance face (Taylor & Conger, 2017).

However, along with these difficulties, the participants referred to several advantages in relation to their experience as single mothers. While the absence of a man in their child's life worried them, they also saw it as being the cause of less possible conflicts, calm atmosphere at home, and making all child-related decisions on their own, without argument. The exclusivity in decision making, that these mothers cherish, might also relate to a high sense of competence and high levels of initiative, and positive self-image, which was found also by other SMC researchers (Copeland & Harbaugh, 2010; Jadva et al., 2009; Kumar, 2017). For these mothers, relationship with men came second to motherhood. It is possible that this tendency not to compromise on a marriage partner, represents their high sense of confidence that they can manage parenting on their own. The absence of a father figure, which worries these mothers regarding their children's psychological future development, should not necessarily lead us to assume that the children of a SMC are at risk for psychological problems. In line with many studies on parenting and children's outcomes, solo motherhood, in itself, does not result in psychological problems for children (i.e., Baumrind, 2013; Choquet, Hassler, Morin, Falissard, & Chau, 2008; Golombok et al., 2016; Sahu, 2016; Waldfogel et al., 2010).

In fact, Recent studies show that although, children who are raised in two-parent households have a lower likelihood to be in poverty (Kramer et al., 2016), single parenting may be one of the most effective ways of contributing to children's adjustment (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Taylor & Conger, 2017). It is especially true when single parenting is an alternative to children's long term exposure to high conflict level between parents (Amato & Afifi, 2006; El-Sheikh & Elmore-Staton, 2004; Waldfogel et al., 2010).

The fact that the study was conducted among Jewish women in Israel may also affect the participants' perspective of the advantages, as these women experience the central place of family life in society and in the Jewish tradition. In line with the global change in women's status, it probably enables them to feel more comfortable as many of them feel higher levels of acceptance as mothers (albeit single) than as unmarried childless women (Liblich, 2009). This comfort though, carries a degree of uneasiness, as these women also feel some unacceptance of their family structure, from parts in the society.

4.1 Research Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While this study adds to the body of knowledge about difficulties and advantages of single mothers by choice, it is not without limitations. First, this is a sensitive issue, and although the semi-structured interview allowed personal

expression, we may assume that not all interviewees always revealed their true feelings. Also, as one of the participants was 70 years old, her responses may skew or not align with the rest of the sample, due to generational gaps. Second, the interviews were conducted in a single region – north Israel, meaning a broader generalization should be approached with caution. It is recommended that future studies should include additional demographic data (e.g., child gender, urban/rural living), and be conducted in other parts of the country, perhaps leading to additional results and conclusions. Third, although these women chose to be single mothers, their situation as well as their children's, might be different depending on whether or not there is a man in their lives. It is recommended to gain more information on these aspects in a future research and compare single mothers (separated, divorced, and widowed) with SMCs to better clarify the distinction between them. Nonetheless, based on their authentic voices heard in this study, this is an important step in the research of the rising phenomenon of single motherhood by choice.

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