

FATHERS WITH SINGLE PARENTING ROLES: PERSPECTIVES ON STRENGTHS, CONCERNS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Abstract

The phenomenon of single parent father families are increasing at a rapid rate in the United States along with the growth in fatherlessness in many families. This article discusses the trends and societal attitudes toward single father parenthood. It reports on a study of the perceptions of single parent fathers about their strengths, concerns and recommendations regarding their parenting roles. The study found that they feel stressed in their roles as parents but strongly recommends educating the public and professionals on their needs and strengths. Perceptions of cultural bias and insensitivity toward single parent fathers were found.

Keywords: family, single parent father families, parenting

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to ascertain what perceptions single parent fathers have regarding their strengths, concerns and recommendations. Their opinions on stresses, single parent father roles, gender fairness in child custody, and societal attitudes toward single parent fathers were considered. Because men typically understate their feelings, this study aimed to examine their perceptions of factors affecting their single parenting roles. Their views on the extent to which cultural norms, values and attitudes cause role strain and ambiguity for single fathers were examined.

The growth of single parent father families over the course of the last 20 years suggest that equating single-parent families with female-headed families is no longer appropriate (Eggebeen, Snyder and Manning 1996). Single father families with children are increasing at a faster rate than single mother families (Meyer and Garasky 1993). Research on single parent fathers as an aspect of family life has been infrequent in the sociological literature and represents a gap in family discourse. Exploring and examining the opinions of those fathers raising children as single parents on such issues as roles, concerns and strengths contributes to filling this existing gap, and is the goal of this study.

The United States, as of the mid-1980s, had the highest percentage of single parent families (28.9 percent) among eight indus-

trialized countries (Australia, France, Japan, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States, Soviet Union, and West Germany), with Japan having the lowest rate, 4.1 percent (Burns 1992; Papalia, Olds and Feldman 1998). The number of one-parent families with children under 18 increased by 280 percent between 1970 and 1994 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1995). Sixty-four percent of African American families, twenty-five percent of white families, and thirty-six percent of Hispanic families were headed by a single parent (Bryson 1996). In 1994, 16.3 million children in the United States were living with their mothers. Forty percent of these children had not seen their father in the last year (Sugarman 1998). It has been estimated (Edmondson 1993; Sugarman 1998) that the number of single fathers could grow forty-four percent between 1990 and 2010, to 1.7 million. While various family forms have been studied and documented (Hernandez 1993; Thomson, McLanahan and Curtin 1992), literature on father only families is scarce.

Much of what is known about single parent fathers is derived from the analysis of demographic data (Eggebeen, Snyder and Manning 1996; Garasky and Meyer 1996). However, attention to pertinent knowledge about their perspectives is greatly needed. Olson and Haynes (1993) have noted that most studies of single parenthood have focused upon the effects of family structure on children and continue

to be slanted toward "what's wrong with single parent families." While substantial evidence indicates that negative stereotypes affect single parents and their children, cultural discrimination persists against fathers who assume the primary parenting role (Greif and DeMaris 1990).

Despite some research suggesting that these families are demographically unique from both married-couple families and female-headed families (McLanahan and Casper 1995), researchers have only recently become sensitized to the concerns of single parent fathers which had been ignored. For instance, Greif and DeMaris (1990) and Wallerstein (1998) note that child support laws, usually constructed to protect the single custodial mother, are being reevaluated closely for equity when applied to single parent fathers. The rising number of single fathers has prompted father's rights advocates to challenge some of the old notions that women are "nurturers" and men mere "providers" and "cash machines" (McNichol 1997; Taylor 1992).

SOCIETAL ATTITUDES TOWARD SINGLE PARENTING FATHERS.

Nieto (1982), Greif and DeMaris (1990), and Meyer and Garasky (1993) have pointed out that single parents of both sexes must contend, from the beginning of their assumption of the single parent role, with a set of perceptions and cultural bias that places them at a disadvantage in their interactions with the rest of society. There is a tendency to blame most of the nation's social problems on single parenting, particularly on poor families.

While the number of single parent fathers has been noted as the fastest growing family type in the United States, policy analysts often assume that mothers have custody of their children and fathers are absent (Meyer and Garasky 1993). For example, the major data source on child support (the Current Population Survey-Child Support Supplement) did not include custodial fathers until 1992. McNichol (1997) reports on the Department of Health and Human Services study which

indicates that more non-custodial mothers than fathers default on child support arrangements. Yet the term "deadbeat dad" is more common than a sex-neutral "delinquent parent" term. About twenty-seven percent of non-custodial fathers, about 3 million fathers, totally default on support, compared with forty-seven percent of non-custodial mothers (McNichol, 1997).

Another common misconception relates to the single parent father being perceived as being "naturally" ill equipped to perform nurturing roles. He is further perceived as having little ability to acquire the skills required to perform parenting roles (Nieto 1982). Research, however, has refuted the notion that gender roles generally reflect instinctive nature of males and females (Nieto 1982; Lindsey 1990; Cooksey and Fondell 1996). Roberts (1998) suggests cultural and socialization influences. Greif and DeMaris (1990) studied 1,132 single parent fathers from 48 states and Canada and found that the passage of time does help fathers adjust to their roles as does higher income. Their research concluded that: (1) over time fathers would have more experience and feel less role strain from having to cope with parenting demands, (2) higher income would help fathers purchase more child care or house-keeping support, and (3) perhaps more important, higher income may be related to the greater job flexibility that often comes with a professional or white-collar position.

Another misconception about single parent families is that society views them as more pathological than the nuclear family structure. It has been suggested (Nieto 1982) that the consequences of this view are biasing, misleading, and overly simplistic. There is the subtle but potentially destructive assumption that the single-parent family and its members are personally defective. The most salient characteristic of the single-parent family and its members is an assumed dysfunctionality, that is, its "brokenness" from the traditional nuclear family. Olson and Haynes (1993) summarized studies of single parents

regarding the attitudes of school personnel toward their children. Their studies indicate that: (1) school personnel did not perceive the single-parent family as normal, (2) school staff assumed that any problems children experience were related to being from a single-parent family, and (3) teachers perceived the school behaviors of children from intact homes more positively than they did behaviors of children from single-parent homes. Thus, it is apparent that children from single-parent homes are viewed as exhibiting more negative school behavior than are children from intact homes and that teachers see what they expect to see.

While research (Pettys 1993; Davidson 1990) shows that children living without their fathers tend to be more violent, lack self-control, and are more likely to abuse drugs, more attention has been placed on the socio-economic factors and impacts on children and less on the social and emotional contributions of fathers. Nevertheless, research on father-only families, indicates that level of education has been found to be associated with distinctive, and generally positive, child-rearing practices and that single parent fathers have high levels of education. Further, the single parent father's education has been shown to be a major determinant of a child's future educational and occupational attainment (Eggebeen, Snyder and Manning 1996; Edmondson 1993). Single parent fathers are often stereotyped as lacking the interest and the time to spend with their children. This is another misconception based on popular belief. Research indicates that single fathers are quite involved with their children's lives and are more likely to engage in a variety of activities than traditional families (Cooksey and Fondell 1996).

FATHERS AND SINGLE PARENTHOOD

While attention has usually been focused on the emotional costs of traditional female gender roles, the costs of tra-

ditional male gender roles have been largely ignored (Kimbrell 1992, Lindsey 1990). Roberts (1998) notes that up until the mid-1700s, when most fathers worked in or near the home and took a much greater hand in child rearing, western culture regarded them and not mothers as the more competent parent and ultimately held them more responsible for how their children turned out. Fathers were routinely awarded custody of children in cases of divorce and books and manuals on parenting were chiefly written for men.

However, with the Industrial Revolution (Roberts 1998), fathers began working outside their homes and thus were effectively removed from domestic life. As industrialization increased the female dominance of the domestic scope, the role of fathers began to atrophy. By the mid-1800s, child rearing manuals were geared toward mothers, and this trend continued for the most part until the mid 1970s. It was not until the feminist movement of the 1970s that researchers thought to ask whether fathers could be as nurturing as mothers (Roberts 1998). By the mid-1980s, it had become apparent that patterns of family formation in the United States had undergone quite dramatic changes. The divorce rate had nearly tripled, and the number of children living in single-parent homes had doubled. The courts making custody arrangements no longer used a father's work outside the home against them since both parents often were working (Gilbert 1998).

Although the role of single father parenting is becoming more common than ever before, assuming that role may be difficult for many because men are rarely socialized to be the primary caregivers for children. Fathers have few male role models for balancing the conflicting demands of work, socializing, housekeeping, and childcare (Greif and DeMaris 1990). Individual single fathers are left essentially to themselves to define their roles, and expectations on the part of others are reflected in a wide range of behaviors and attitudes

(Nieto 1982). Single fatherhood has not yet been assimilated into American Culture. Thus, cultural discrimination persists against fathers who assume the primary parenting role (Greif and DeMaris 1990). With few role models and limited cultural support, single fathers are likely to experience role ambiguity and role strain.

The application of role theory to the understanding of family problems points out that role ambiguity arises when people are unclear of what is expected of them. Roles can be defined in three ways: the prescribed role, from the point of view of others; the perceived role, from the point of view of the person in the role; and the enacted role, from the point of view of the actual behavior performed by the person in the role (Deutsch and Krauss 1965). The more individuals perceive consensus in the expectations about their roles, the less their role strain. Greif and DeMaris (1990) state that without consensus among themselves and others regarding the nature of their role, single parent fathers are likely to feel unsure about their behavior, which in turn, may result in dissatisfaction and discomfort. Clarifying role expectations, which is already available for single mothers (Nieto 1982), is needed by the single father in a number of areas that are critically important to the successful performance of the parenting role.

The role of tradition in terms of norms, values, and performance expectations are lacking for single fathers. Yet, tradition is potentially a powerful factor in determining problems that face the single father. Because single father status is not institutionalized, allowances and accommodations are not made by institutions to provide for the father's and his children's social, psychological, and financial support. Lack of cultural and institutional support systems will influence adjustment of single fathers to their roles, their help-seeking behavior, and their willingness to use external resources. While many studies show that in general many single fathers are adjusting successfully to their role,

apparent in literature is the lack of congruence between society's perceptions of the single father and his perceptions of himself.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A review of the literature revealed little studies on single father families or specific concerns that they felt. The literature review, however, yielded useful information for the design of research questions for this study. The study reported here examined respondents' perceptions on the following items:

1. Perceptions of single parent father's role as stressful.
2. Perceptions about whether children need their mothers more than they need their fathers.
3. Perceptions about whether children need their mothers as much as they need their fathers.
4. Perceptions about whether American Culture is supportive of single parent father roles.
5. Perceptions about whether American Culture is more supportive of single mothers than single fathers.
6. Perceptions about whether child custody favors parental gender than child's interest.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Fifty-eight single parent fathers participated in this exploratory study, and their average age was 33 years old. The majority ($n=36$, or 62%) were parenting two or more children under the age of 18, while the other ($n=22$, or 38%) had one child. Thirty-four (59%) were high school graduates, 24 (41%) had college, professional, and/or advanced degrees. Their average annual income was \$40,000. A majority ($n=42$, or 72%) became single parents after divorce, the rest ($n=16$, or 28%) became single parents for reasons ranging from widowhood, abandonment, emotional/mental illness, to chronic drug and alcohol dependence.

Sample Recruitment Procedure

Graduate students enrolled in Social Work Human Behavior and Social Environment classes at two large Southeast universities participated in the recruitment of subjects for this study. There were a total of sixty-seven students in both classes of the two universities. For extra credit, students were assigned the recruitment project at the beginning of the semester. They were asked to generate lists of single parent fathers through contacts from their respective communities, cities, state, friends, relatives, church, or civic organizations, co-workers, etc. Although the two universities are located in the Southeast region of the United States, some of the students were from other regions and recruited about twenty percent outside the Southeast.

Forty-six students successfully developed 72 names, addresses, and telephone numbers of potential subjects through various contacts including use of the snow ball approach by the middle of the semester. All of the potential subjects were contacted by telephone to verify their information and willingness to participate in the study. As human subjects, they were informed of the study's purpose, about the confidentiality of their responses, and the low risk of the study to them. A total of 66 questionnaires were then mailed to those who agreed to take part in the survey. Of the 62 surveys that were completed and returned, four could not be used due to missing answers. Thus, 58 of the surveys were returned with complete answers for analysis.

Data Collection

The questionnaire was specifically designed by the researcher to obtain responses to a series of scaled and open-ended questions. It was pre-tested on a small number of key informants involving four students and two single parent fathers to address face and content validity issues. Modifications were made using their feedback. For each scaled question, respon-

dents were asked to give their opinions in a self-administered questionnaire using a Likert-type scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree, Strongly Disagree). Respondents were asked to respond to six brief scaled items (e.g. American culture is supportive of single parent father roles, American culture is more supportive of single mothers than single fathers, etc.).

The open-ended questions were structured to allow the respondents to elaborate in greater depth and detail on three levels: strengths, concerns and recommendations as to how society could better help them in their parenting roles. Using open-ended questions, respondents were instructed to identify and elaborate on those qualities of good single parent fathers' which represent strengths (e.g. priority or significance placed on child-rearing role, commitment to parenting for personal and society's benefit). Regarding their primary concerns as single parent fathers, respondents' perspectives on bias against single parent fathers, insensitivity to their roles, lack of social services, and the perception of them by society were considered. These responses were reviewed by the researcher and subsequently organized into major categories. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

RESULTS

Perceptions of single parent fathers regarding stresses associated with their roles were considered across five items. Table 1 presents the distribution of respondents' perceptions on each of the items. Seventy-two percent of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that single parent father roles are stressful. Twenty-four percent disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 4% were undecided.

A majority of respondents (70%) believed that children do not need their mothers more than they need their fathers. Only 13% agreed or strongly agreed that children need their mothers more than their fathers, and 17% were undecided. Similarly, respondents were asked to indi-

TABLE I
Perceptual Measures of Single Father Parenting Issues In Percent

| Item | (SA) | (A) | (U) | (D) | (SD) | Total |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|-------|
| Single Parent father's role is more stressful than single mother's | 20.7 | 31.0 | 10.3 | 24.1 | 13.9 | 100 |
| Children need their mothers more than they need their fathers | 8.6 | 5.2 | 15.5 | 31.0 | 39.7 | 100 |
| Children need their mothers as much as they need their fathers | 44.4 | 32.8 | 25.8 | — | — | 100 |
| American culture is supportive of single parent father roles | 31.8 | 27.6 | 17.2 | 27.6 | 13.8 | 100 |
| American culture is more supportive of single mothers than single fathers | 31.0 | 39.3 | 5.7 | 13.7 | 10.3 | 100 |
| Child custody favors parental gender over child's interest | 29.3 | 36.2 | 6.9 | 17.2 | 10.4 | 100 |

Based on the scale: Strongly Agree = SA, Agree = A, Undecided = U, Disagree = D, Strongly Disagree = SD.

cate whether children need their mothers as much as they need their fathers. A majority felt that children need their mothers as much the same as they need their fathers. For example, fully 74% agreed or strongly agreed. Meanwhile, none disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 26% were undecided.

Opinions of the respondents were evenly divided on the item that measured whether the American culture is supportive, as in offering services designed specifically to aid single parent fathers' role responsibilities. Forty-one percent felt that single parent father roles lack support from the American culture. Another 41% agreed or strongly agreed that the American culture supports the roles of single parent fathers, and 17% were undecided. Findings also reveal that a majority of the respondents believed that the American culture supports single parent mothers more than single parent fathers. For example, fully 70% agreed or strongly agreed.

Twenty-four percent were of the opinion that the American culture does not support single parent mothers any more than it supports single parent fathers, while only 6% were undecided.

Respondents were asked to indicate whether child custody favors parental gender with less consideration to the child's interest. Fifty-six percent said they believed that parental gender favoritism compromises the child's interest in custody decisions, 27% felt that child custody decisions consider the child's interest more than the parent's gender, and 7% were undecided.

The survey instrument utilized open-ended questions and gave respondents a choice of expanding on their strengths, concerns and recommendations. Respondents' data on strengths to the open-ended questions are reported in Table 2. The open-ended question on strengths was related to those characteristics which respondents considered to be important for

successful single father parenting. They were asked, "What are the qualities of good single fathers?" A significant majority (more than half) of the respondents indicated one of three prevalent qualities: (1) a single parent father should view his child-rearing role as a contribution to society, (2) a single parent father's values and commitment should be based on the belief that children represent human future, and (3) a single parent father's responsibilities and actions should be based on the belief that his children are extensions of himself. They felt that these qualities are essential in single father parenting.

Respondents provided a wide range of responses to the open-ended question about their concerns. When asked, "What are your primary concerns about single

father parenting?", five highly prevalent concerns were indicated. Significantly more than half of the respondents were concerned about: (1) cultural bias against single parent fathers, (2) anti-father child custody process, (3) cultural insensitivity to single parent fathers who desire to raise their children, (4) severe lack of social services that recognize single parent fathers, and (5) society's emphasis on the weakness and problems of single parent fathers without supporting their strengths and contributions to child-rearing.

Responses on the recommendation category also solicited the respondents' responses to the question, "What are your recommendations to the concerns of single parent fathers?" The two most prevalent recommendations provided by close to half

TABLE 2
Categorized Strengths, Concerns and Recommendations

| Strengths | | |
|--|------------|----------------|
| Item | Number (N) | Percentage (%) |
| Value of child-rearing as a contribution to society | 30 | 51.7 |
| Commitment to value that children represent future | 31 | 53.4 |
| Believe that children are extensions of self | 34 | 58.6 |
| Concerns | | |
| Cultural bias against single parent fathers | 37 | 63.8 |
| Percentage of anti-father child custody process | 38 | 65.5 |
| Insensitivity toward fathers' desires to parent | 36 | 62.1 |
| Lack of social services that are inclusive of single parent fathers | 42 | 72.4 |
| Lack of strengths perspective toward single fathers | 40 | 68.9 |
| Recommendations | | |
| Educate society on children's need of both parents | 30 | 51.7 |
| Educate to remove disrespectful treatment of teachers, professional, and public toward single parent fathers | 33 | 56.9 |

Note: Responses may exceed sample size (N=58) because of opportunity to provide multiple responses.

of the respondents were: (1) the need to educate society that children need both their fathers' and mothers' socialization in their development process, and (2) education is needed to remove disrespectful treatment of teachers, professionals, and the public toward single parent fathers. A respondent reported:

"After two divorce judges ruled that our children's mother was not emotionally able to provide primary care to the children, my child's fifth grade teacher insisted on telling my daughter that she needed to runaway and be with her mother and that all children belong with their mothers regardless. My daughter resented going to this teacher's class because she continued to talk about her family daily. I had to go to the principal to have my daughter transferred to another teacher."

DISCUSSION

Research on single fathers has been infrequent, so this study is contributing in paving new territory in the exploration of the myths and realities associated with this growing newer family form. The topic of single parent fathers and their roles is current and often politically charged. Providing more parenting and guidance opportunities to America's children is particularly important in this epoch of high crime and violence, substance abuse, and traditional family disorganization. This study found that single parent fathers encounter stress in their roles as fathers. The stressors associated with parenting are similar for all families (single parent fathers, married couples with children, and single parent mothers). These stressors include: too much to do in too little time (role overload), not being specifically trained for many of the tasks (role insufficiency), having to answer to too many different family members' demands (role conflict), and not being clear on all that is expected (role ambiguity) (Deutsch and Krauss 1965; Greif and DeMaris 1990). For single parent fathers, when the denigration of the role is added to these stressors, the load may become too much to bear. This find-

ing was not surprising since it has been a common knowledge that parenting is perhaps the most difficult role for most adults. However, this finding may perhaps reflect single parent fathers' feelings of not being equally valued in society as parents and the consequent perceived lack of support.

In this study, it was found that single parent fathers reject the notion that children need their mothers more than their fathers. The majority of respondents also supports the notion that children need their mothers just as much as they need their fathers. This finding is important for family advocates and requires their cognizance of this perspective to influence public policy with sensitivity to single fathers. Many respondents reported experiences in which institutions such as schools and child welfare services, fail to recognize that some children are being raised by single fathers. Social policies and cultural norms have served to fortify the emphasis on the primary role of fathers as the economic provider for the family. Consequently, fathers have been discouraged from involvement with their children by accepting a masculine imperative which denies men the opportunity for more meaningful parent-child relationships.

Another interesting finding concerns respondents' opinions about the degree of cultural support for their roles as single parent fathers. It was found that respondents were evenly divided on the issues about whether society supports their role. On the other hand, this study found that respondents felt strongly that single parent mothers receive more cultural support than single parent fathers. This finding corroborates existing literature (Greif and DeMaris 1990; Nieto 1982) which has suggested that single parent fathers encounter cultural discrimination and bias more than single parent mothers. The notion of social justice and equal treatment regardless of gender is implied here. This perception is further implied in respondents' overwhelming belief that child custody process favors parental gender than child's interest.

The principal findings concerning the strengths of single parent fathers indicated that their successes are imbedded in their value systems. That is, the majority value their child-rearing role as a contribution to society, their commitment to their parenting role emanate from their values and beliefs that children represent society's future, and that in their value systems, children are extensions of themselves. This study found that education was recommended as the favored means for increasing understanding, recognition, and support for the roles of single parent fathers. The need to use education to inform the society that children need both of their parents was recommended. Most importantly, this study found fathers believed that disrespectful treatment from professionals and the general public toward single parent fathers can be reduced through education. The media may show some positive aspects of single fathers.

Contemporary child welfare problems ranging from increased child abuse and neglect to substance abuse among children and sometimes parents demands both private and public efforts in the development of appropriate institutional responses and practices. It is clear that much work needs to be done on behalf of single father parents to explore their psychological, social, and education needs. In contemporary America where absent fatherhood has become pandemic, those single parent fathers are role models. While some of them may feel confident in their roles, negative social attitudes may cause some to experience role ambiguity. Single-father families, like all families, can be encouraged to take advantage of available resources in the community. There is need for child(ren) oriented incentives to build connections between the home, the work-

place, the school, the neighborhood, and the community.

It is important to note that this study was based on a convenience sample. The annual \$40,000 income of these 58 caucasian fathers suggests they are middle class. The selectiveness of this sample may influence results and may vary for other single fathers because of cultural, ethnic, and social class variations in families. Ethnic minority families such as African American and Mexican American differ from Caucasian American families in their size, structure, their reliance on extended kinship networks, and their levels of income and education. Evaluation of these factors and variables requires further research.

The consideration of the phenomenon of single parent fatherhood and of the literature on it clearly suggests that more research is essential. Future research aimed at developing a conceptual or theoretical framework for the analysis of single father parenthood is needed. The need to clarify single parent fathers' roles, expectations, and concerns will be helpful in developing interventions to address their potential psychological, social, economic, and educational concerns. Research is needed to address the negative attitudes of society and to inform the public that men adapt to the rigors of fatherhood, see raising a family as a very important goal in their lives, and that it is mainly the emphasis on the provider role and the de-emphasis on the childhood socialization role which keep men from assuming greater responsibility for nurturing their children. The research represented by this study is by no means exhaustive, but should be acknowledged for calling attention to the status of inquiry in this area. Research on single parent fathering should continue apace.

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