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Exploring single parenting process in Malaysia: Issues and coping strategies

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Abstract

Parents play a significant role in shaping the emotional and personality development of their children. However, single parents encounter double major roles, i.e. the parenting role and the role of a sole breadwinner for their family. This double role, leads a single working mother into having social and psychological problems. Previous studies reported occurrences of depression and emotional distress among children of single parents, high risks of school drop-outs, substance abuse, premarital sex and teenage pregnancies as well as neglected children. Single parents were found physically, mentally and emotionally unprepared which lead to a collapse of the family structure. Hence, through series of interviews, we explored and validated the coping strategies adopted by a sample of single Malay working widows and divorcees. The result of this study as well as previous studies indicated the importance of social support system in helping the single Malay working women effectively.

1. Introduction

Single parenting is attributed by either the death of a spouse or divorce. Therefore, single parents face the stressful psychological, emotional and physical needs alone while concurrently attending to her/his children's needs.

Hence, single parents need extra help and attention especially the single working mothers (Maznah Baba, 2007), because most of them fail to balance their time between work and family roles, a situation which leads their children into developing social ills, emotional depression and school dropout (Heterington, Cox & Cox, 1985; in Richards & Schmiege, 1993; Heiss, 1996; Charon and Vigilant, 2006).

The painful psychological experiences expose these children to stress, conflict and dilemma (Zastrow, 1998). The single parents' unstable income negatively influences their children's education (Nelson, 2000; Haleman, 2004) and gives rise to behavioural problems, poor reading and mathematical skills (Aurora, 1993).

Coping styles of working single mothers have been observed to change according to their skills and preparedness in facing new challenges as well as in taking advantage of social networks or support systems.

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2. The Present Study

In Malaysia, single parenting issue is also on the rise, it was reported that single working mothers are producing delinquent children (Leman, 2005). Due to absence of additional support in handling household issues, working single mothers, have also been reported to show high level of psychological distress. The problem of insufficient income among many single mothers living in urban area, is thus reported to cause many social problems, although indirectly. In this respect, the scope of this study is on analyzing the various coping strategies which these women adopted to sustain their families and nurture their children in facing these challenges. Therefore, the two main objectives of this study are: to explore the nature of single parenting process among working mothers who are either widows or divorcees and to examine patterns of their coping strategies in handling their parenting role. Hence to meet these two objectives, the authors of this study are trying to answer two main questions, firstly, what is the nature of single parenting process among Malay women in Malaysia upon the death of their spouse/after being divorced by their spouse? Secondly, what are the patterns of coping strategies used by the single working parent (women) in handling their parenting-related issues?

2.1 Single Parenting Process

Individuals in stressful condition do often seek sympathy from others who may offer them assurance, comfort and emotional support (Hewstone et. al. 2008). Social and welfare services and supports, indeed, can alleviate a lot of problems experienced by single mothers while enabling them to improve and fulfill various needs (Haleman, 2004), especially widows and divorcees, who would naturally appreciate any sincere emotional and mental support and emphatic assistance. Support from community centers, school systems and religious organizations potentially help the working single mothers to adjust and accommodate to the new unexpected experiences (Schmiege & Richards, 1993; Nelson, 2000; Clark, 2005). Moreover, long term supports are provided through out-reach programs, legal advocacy and shared child-custody arrangements.These networks are variedly interested in easing the work-family conflict and facilitate employment stability (Ciabattari, 2003). Life management skills like organizational, time management and budgeting skills are helpful for working single mothers to be able to manage their lives (DeBord, 2000).Thus,various single mothers' associations, government institutions and NGO's also provide special programs, instrumental and informational for these women. However, various employers are required by the government to continually consider a variety of employee needs and options for addressing the needs of working mothers and enhancing child well-being in urban Malay single mother families.

The working single mothers can also get benefit from various educational support programs, which will help them balance between time spent at work and time spent on one's personal life. Hence, Robbins & McFadden, (2003) suggested the provision of educational support programs on parenting and child development, resolving work family conflict, enhancing employments skills, financial management, health and nutritional information, and ways to cope with change can be provide.Because, such types of supports and consultancy might indirectly help the single parents in heightening their economic status, and also would motivate them to better equip themselves with advanced management and entrepreneurship skills through further education. Viewed in this way, education is a temporary investment in the future well-being of single mothers and their children.

Other specific educational supports related to empowering single parents mentally are, individual and group counseling. At times, the counseling and consultancy are considered as professional support systems because, both individual counseling and group counseling, as opined by Lipman and Boyle (2005), can facilitate and exert a broad positive influence on personal health, maternal relations, child psychosocial functioning.In the individual counseling, counselor can assist members to grieve out their actual and symbolic losses, such as the loss of the intact family with divorce, and help them find coherence in the midst of complexities and continuities in the midst of upheaval,whereas very importantly, group counseling provides a platform to share and to identify the type of supports and problem solving initiatives needed by them (Haniza Rais, 2006).

House (1981) defined social support the feeling of being supported by others. He categorized social support into four categories: (a) emotional support (feeling cared for, love and appreciated); (b) appraisal support (feedback

and social comparison on how to evaluate things), (c) informational support (information about how to handle situations) and (d) instrumental support (receiving aid and help). He added that this kind of support can be either external or internal (family, relatives and close friends). The habit of sharing the feelings as well as the burden of life with them would help in establishing a 'transparent' way of 'showing their congruent feelings and honest reactions' especially in sad and traumatic situations and on times of hardships (Haniza Rais, 2006).

2.1.1 Coping Strategies

Coping strategy can be defined as the specific behavioural and psychological efforts that people employ to master tolerance and to minimize the impact of stressful events (Lazarus, 1984). Conceptually, coping can be defined as "a process of managing demands (external or internal) that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of a person" (Lazarus (1984) and Folkman, 1986). According to Garcia (2008), the stressors can be in the form of emotional negative situations brought by external (the environment) and the internal sources (the family). As pointed by Garcia et al. (2008), individual coping involve configuration of personal characteristics or internal process used by the individual to establish person-environment relations and to respond to specific demand. Conversely, Lin (2004) views coping as a dynamic process which changes according to the situation and how a person appraises it. She gives two types of coping pattern: a) coping style approach (fixed pattern of responses across different contexts); and b) coping process which alters strategies that change in response to demands by the environment (Carver, Scheier, & Weintrub, (1989). Coping then is expressed through all cognitive and behavioral efforts. Thus coping is seen as contextual, in that, it is influenced by the person's appraisal of the stressful encounter and resources available to the individual (Lohman and Jarvis, 2000). In addition, Burr and Klein (1994) suggested that different spiritual, social support, cognitive, economic, recreational activities and self development strategies are adopted by individuals to cope with stressful events in life. An individual's religious belief(s) is of particular interest, as it influences how the individual evaluates stressors and as well as how he/she assesses the perceived resources for coping (Pargament, 1997).

3. Method

The phenomenological approach undertaken is the theoretical approach underpinning this study. This study intends to look into the experience of Malaysian working single mothers in handling single parenting issues and their patterns of coping. The method adopted by this study is analytical and phenomenological by nature, which draw much of the data through selected interviews conducted by the researcher in order to gauge a wide range of perspectives towards understanding this phenomenon. This study involves in-depth interviews with six working single mothers from various career backgrounds. The interview was tape-recorded, transcribed into narrative verbatim, and coded carefully via reading through the transcripts and looking for significant themes reflecting the participants' experiences and their coping patterns. Table 1 tabulates the respondents' biographical data.

Table 1. Respondents' Biographical Data

Respondent	Marital Status &Years of Divorced/Widowed	Age	SES	No. of Children	Level of Education
R1	Divorced - 2 years	37	> RM5,000	3	Degree
R2	Widowed - 4 years	46	RM1,000-2000	4	O-level Cert/SPM
R3	Divorced – 1 year	42	RM3,000-4000	2	Degree
R4	Widowed – 6 years	45	RM1,000-2000	2	A-level Cert/STPM
R5	Divorced – 7 years	40	RM1,000-2000	5	O-level Cert/SPM
R6	Divorced – 3 years	40	>RM5,000	2	Ph.D

4. Research Findings

In addressing the first research question, findings on issues related to Malay single mother are tabulated in Table 2.

Table 2. Common Themes/Issues Related to Single Mother in Malaysia

Themes	Sub Themes
Psychological	Shame & Inferiority Complex; Anxiety; Anger; Guilt; Frustration
Single Parenting Process	Child-care; Children's education; Behavioural problems; Inability to supervise children; Paternal roles
Work-family conflict	Household and work demands; Adjusting parenting roles without spouse; Tasks and time-management
Financial Constraint	Supporting children's education; Lacked of basic necessities; Shortage of support sources

The Malay single mother issues were found related to the psychological matters, parenting roles, work-family conflicts and financial constraints being investigated. These findings were consistent with findings from other studies. These issues apparently creates a sense loss, helplessness, anxiety, guilt and anger as they were not able to provide enough attention, love and basic needs for their children in the absence of father figure in the household (Hewstone et, al. 2008; Buteau, 2007; Schmiege & Richards, 1993; Nelson, 2000; Clark, 2005; Ciabattari, 2003; Haleman, 2004; Cautley & Slesinger, 1998; Robbins & McFadden, 2003; McClendon & Humberstone, 2008; DeBord, 2000; Lipman and Boyle, 2005). It was further worsened by the fact that they have to work longer hours in order to make the ends meet.

In addressing the second research question, findings from this study indicated that there are two types of coping strategies used by the Malay working single mothers in handling their challenges. Table 1.3 tabulates the coping strategies of Malay single mothers.

Table 3. Coping Strategies of Malay Working Single Mothers

Themes	Sub Themes	Category of Sub Themes
Support System	Internal Support	Family Support; Friend/Neighbors' Support
	External Support	Social Support System – Government & NGOs
		Counseling Services/Consultancies
Creative Coping Styles	Balancing Role	
	Prioritize the Task Personal Development	
	Managing Time	

The coping strategies can be seen in two forms i.e., the utilization of internal and external support systems accessible to them. The internal supports came mainly from family members and friends in their neighbourhoods. On the other hand, the external supports came from the existing social support system i.e., government agencies, welfare institutions and community networks, individuals, experts, as well as counselling services (online and conventional counselling process).

The support systems or networks helped to ease or minimise the challenges and problems related to single parenting process among the Malay working single mothers. However, the bureaucracy and the waiting period were too taxing and very tedious. These constraints resulted in great disappointment, frustration, helplessness, fatigue and to some extent their children's needs were not met on time.

With respect to coping, the single working mothers adopt creative coping mechanism in order to ease their problems. For example, they turned to their family for support as this support provides the feeling of being cared for, loved and being appreciated. All participants felt that family support is badly needed during difficult times. This finding is consistent with findings from other studies (Doshi, 2005; Maznah Baba, 1993,2007; Richards & Schmiege, 1993; Walsh, 2002; Patterson, 2002; Nelson, 2000; Clark, 2005; Rozita Ibrahim & Zaharah Hassan, 2009). Family, friends and neighbours supports have indeed played significant roles in helping the Malay working single mothers cope with their challenges and needs. We also observed that, relationships formation are based on blood ties as well as emotional preferences and mutual choices. Therefore, receiving supports from friends or neighbours have direct effect on the emotional well being of the single working mothers (Leslie Leigh & Grady, 1985), which was also observed to ease the burden of the single Malay working mothers.

The support system enabled the Malay working single mothers select their own parenting style which best fitted their family and further improved their self-esteem and financial status. Their participation in some organization provides them with information related to their family, work or network which may improve their

lifestyle. The social support rendered to the single working mothers helped them tremendously. These come in the forms of assistances i.e., material aids, services, information, or emotional by the Government NGOs.

Counselling service is considered as a social support which is also important in helping the Malay working single mothers. It is perceived to be a formal social support provided by professional counsellors or agency workers. Counselling is the most well-known single-parenting support found by this study. Both group counselling and individual counselling facilitate and complement each other, while providing an atmosphere in which free and honest expression of feelings took place. Counselling services offer both information and proper consultations which aimed at providing knowledge on future planning, time and financial management, and parenting skills.

This study also revealed that support systems were instrumental and helpful to the Malay working single mothers. Through the provision of proper consultations, the working single mothers were found more aware, motivated, knowledgeable and well-informed via appropriate guidance from the available support systems. Through counselling consultancies they obtained emotional, cognitive as well as positive educational supports which may influence their personal and maternal health. The Malay working single mothers in this study found solutions to their problems particularly those related to their legal rights or controversies related to child custody and distribution of jointly acquired property.

The social supports created positive reinforcement where respondents were able to cope positively with their current life though a little handicapped at the beginning. The frequent meetings created the sense of belonging among them in that they shared common feelings and understanding which enhanced the sense of relief amongst them. Hence, this process is therapeutic in the sense that it helped to alleviate their pain and sufferings and in returned enhanced the sense of openness in the community through wider exposure. By getting these supports, the working single mothers were able to lead better lives, became better parent to their children and managed their career effectively.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Counselling services can be a platform for understanding, supporting, solving and fulfilling the single working mothers' emotional, psychological and biological needs. Trusted and effective counselling services may result in mentally and emotionally healthy single working mothers, effective single parenting dynamic and emotional stable and successful children of single parent families. This will help reduce their pain and burden in assuming their new roles as single working mothers.

Amongst other findings, this study revealed that some single parents preferred to share their problems with their family members and friends as opposed to counselling services. This is suggesting for the better or improved counselling services which must ensure high level of confidentiality and trust for their clients. This in return would attract and motivate more single working mothers to seek for counselling services from the counselling sites within Malaysia. Developing social support networks for the clients can be of great help to the counselling services in this country. Future studies need to focus on the possibilities recommended by this study.

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