

On: 13 May 2015, At: 03:11

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Psychology in Africa

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpia20>

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Published online: 13 May 2015.



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To cite this article: Alfred Motalenyane Modise (2015) Resourcing single parents in a South African community rural setting: an exploratory study, *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 25:2, 110-113

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2015.1021510>

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Resourcing single parents in a South African community rural setting: an exploratory study

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This study investigated the resource needs of single parents as child carers. Participants were a purposive sample of 40 single parents (female = 70%, Black = 95%, rural 80%; age range 30 to 55 years old). Data on resource needs of single parents were collected using *semi-structured individual interviews*. The data were thematically analyzed. The findings indicated that single parents need relationship and socio-emotional, material and time use supports to be successful in their carer roles. Resourcing single parents in their child care roles requires a holistic approach addressing both material and socio-relational support needs.

Keywords: emotional, material, relationship, resources, single parent, social

Introduction

Single parenting is a prevalent global phenomenon (Sylvester & Bojuwoye, 2011). Single parenting is defined as a parent, not living with a partner or spouse, who has most of the day-to-day responsibilities in raising the child or children and as the primary caregiver (Ubah, 2012). Single parenting has become an accepted norm in the United States and is an accepted trend found in many other countries (O'Leary, 2014). About 67% of South African children live or have lived with a single parent. (South Africa Institute of Race Relations: SAIRR, 2013). Single parents tend to be mostly mothers (Paterson, 2013) although more fathers are taking active single parental roles (Elkind, 2007).

Parents in their care roles need resource supports which are important to enable them to play their role. Four types of resources are as follows: material, relationship, socio-emotional, health and well-being (Ungar, 2004). Ungar (2010) found that the material, relationship, socio-emotional, health and well-being supports are essential for individual and collective well-being. These supportive resources are important for emotional nurturance, tangible financial assistance, information needs (e.g. advice) and companionship (Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitsch, & Ungar, 2005). In South Africa, Child Support Grants (CSG) were first introduced in 1998 by the Department of Social Development and reach 10 million South Africa children each month. The Department of Social Development in South Africa has a responsibility to ensure that conditions are created for the optimum development of all children and their families through the provision and support of appropriate services. Programmes are organised to assist the children in South Africa. These children should be accommodated in Early Child Development (ECD) programme services which address the needs that parents cannot address with the children (Department of Social Development, 2012). Finland uses the Nordic Welfare services, such as Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), supported by the central and local government, and all children below school age are entitled to receive services provided by the municipality (Maatla & Uusiauti, 2012).

Single parents often perceive a lack of time for themselves, and may be sleep deprived (Atwood & Genovese, 2006). They may experience single parenting as an overwhelming experience (Hockenberry & Wilson, 2011). Thus, single parents may experience a great deal of tension and sometimes guilt that comes with not being able to attend to all of their child's needs or to provide all of the opportunities they wish their child to have. Single parenting households in South Africa are increasing among men, and some prefer living separately from children who may be fathered outside marriage (Sylvester & Bojuwoye, 2011). Single parents in rural communities might have parenting needs which are different from those in urban areas since extended family may be more involved with some child care responsibilities. This brief exploratory study sought to investigate resourcing the needs faced by single parents in a South African setting. The research question was: What are the resource needs of single parents in a predominantly rural South African community setting?

Method

Research design

The study utilized a phenomenological qualitative inquiry to get an in-depth understanding of the resource needs of single parents in a South African setting. This approach is concerned with the understanding of live experiences of people (Ary, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2009) and in this case of single parents.

Participants and setting

Participants were a convenience sample of 40 single parents (females = 70%, rural = 80%) from the Free State Province of South Africa (age range = 30 to 55 years.). They were mostly from black communities; speaking Setswana (35%), Sesotho (60%) or Xhosa as their mother tongue. The majority of the single parents (55%) were unemployed and depend on public welfare social grants.

Data collection and procedure

Data on the resource needs of the single parents were collected using semi-structured individual interviews. Data were collected at home because it was an appropriate place

for the participants. Participants volunteered for the study. The purpose of the research was explained to the participants. The names of respondents were not identified for ethical reasons.

Data analysis

Data were thematically analyzed using open coding procedures (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). This involved systematically organizing, categorizing and summarizing data and describing it in meaningful themes. Themes were assigned codes in an attempt to condense the data into categories.

Findings and discussion

Relational and socio-emotional resource needs

Some of the single parents (80%) made the following comments about their relationship and socio-emotional resource needs as child carers: child development support, father absence, partner access and personal intimacy needs. These subthemes are considered next.

Child developmental support needs

It is not easy for me to talk to my boy about issues related to the boys, like if the boy has affairs with a girl. Respondent #36, female, 40 years, rural area.

I am not prepared to talk to my girls [about intimacy issues] and ask another woman to come and talk to the girls since some other issues are sensitive. Respondent # 9, female, 34 years, urban area.

Parents, especially men, reported support needs in talking to the girl children who might be pregnant or seeking advice on menstrual cycles. According their African traditionalist culture, menstrual cycles are a taboo subject for men and for woman helpers.

Father absence

This was a major concern for the children of single mothers (95%)

My boy always asking me about his father and why he is not staying with us and he does not know his father. Respondent # 18, female, 47 years, rural area.

I feel that my child need a father figure who will assist me him, direct him and guide him in life and as a mother cannot go to that extend, a father is needed to play fatherly role. Respondent # 1, female, 47 years, urban area.

My child need father figure or the voice of the father at home and this well help the child in terms of discipline and behaviour. Respondent # 21, female, 47 years, rural area.

My child is not prepared to accept the step father. Respondent # 38, female, 44 years, urban area.

Father culture is very important and the child must be exposed to the culture of the father. Respondent # 33, female, 47 years.

Boys and girls in middle childhood often respond differently to father absence. For example, boys may become very aggressive after the father moves out, making it difficult for the mother to assert her authority (Ackerman, 2006). Poggenpoel, Myburgh, and Simelane (2014), report that single parent mothers in Swaziland perceived themselves to be disrespected by their adolescent sons. Du Plooy and Pretorius (2014) further state that limited social networks and social interactions are still a challenge and are very important. Mavungu, Thomson-de Boor, and

Mphaka (2013) state that father absence in South Africa is intricately connected to historical, social, economic and cultural contexts including materialist constructions of fatherhood and masculinity which others misinterpret to renege on parenting responsibility. Father absence has been identified worldwide by government and several non-governmental organisations as a key developmental challenge in communities and a source of multiple social challenges. It is difficult for single parents to handle all issues such as assisting the children with school work and addressing issues related to culture alone (Epstein & Limag, 2008).

Partner social access needs

Regardless of gender, partner access was a major challenge to children of single parents.

As a single parent I need to talk to the father of my child and the big challenge is that he is in a relationship with another woman and I cannot talk freely to the father of my child. Respondent # 36, female, 42 years, rural area.

It is difficult for me as a man to talk with other woman to assist me with problems of my daughter since their partner is not comfortable about those arrangements. Respondent #26, male, 46 years, urban area.

I become frustrated if I have to attend the meeting at school as parent and alone since I am a single parent. Respondent # 19, female, 38 years, urban area.

My child become so frustrated at school if other children talk about the father or sometime are requested to draw something about their father and he does not. Respondent # 19, female, 43 years, rural area.

Some single parents in South Africa (either the father or mother) become disengaged from their children's lives. The interviews show that some of them experience difficulties negotiating access to the child because of the new relationship the former partner had developed, as found in other studies (Mavungu, Thomson-de Boor, & Mphaka, 2013).

Personal intimacy issues

The single parents perceived their privacy to be violated due to constraints on entertaining partners at home.

I need a partner but I am afraid to do so since my child is around and I do not know how she is going to react. Respondent # 14, male, 49 years, rural area.

My boy is jealous about me and he react very fast if I have relationship with anyone. Respondent # 11, female, 47 years, rural area.

I only meet with my partner outside my premises not at my home since I do not want the situation whereby my children are going to be aware that I have partner. Respondent # 49, male, 47 years, rural area.

I bring my partner at my place if my children are not at home. Respondent # 25, female, 49 years, rural area.

I am afraid as a woman to ask other men to help me with my boy or discipline my boy, since their partners will think that I have relationships with their partners. Respondent # 12, female, 47 years, urban area.

I do not want the community and my neighbours to be aware that I have relationship. Respondent # 31, female, 47 years, rural area

I normally refer my daughter to the extended family for assistance. Respondent #7, male, 52 years, urban area.

It was often the case that the mother had left the children with their grandmother while she entered into a

relationship with a new man. Situations were also described where the new partner objected to caring for the child when the mother brought the child into their shared residence and so the child would then be left in the care of the grandmother (Mavungu, Thomson-de Boor, & Mphaka, 2013).

Material and time resources needs

The single parents reported significant material and time resource needs.

Income strains

If is month end I have stress due to many accounts that I have to pay [limiting ability to provide for the children.] Respondent # 22, female, 44 years, urban area.

As a single parent, I cannot afford to buy everything, like to buy food, to buy the car, to pay the house, pay electricity and water, my financial status does not allow me. Respondent # 17, female, 38 years, urban area.

I cannot afford the fees at the University and I am forced to borrow the money to pay for the fees of my child. Respondent # 14, female, 47 years, rural area.

A low income is often an additional problem faced by single parents in rural areas and most single parents are women who traditionally earn a low income. The salary or wages earned by single parents cannot afford to satisfy the needs of the whole family (McLaughlin, 2008).

Time resource needs

Time was found to be at a premium for the single parents.

I have to perform many tasks as single parent, ...assisting my child with school work alone and sometimes it is difficult to assist my child with certain tasks and forced to look for a help. Respondent # 39, female, 38 years, urban area.

I am forced to attend the meeting at school alone and cook for the children after the meeting. Respondent # 17, male, 34 years, urban area.

I forced to attend the school activities like fundraising activities, parents meeting or class meeting as a parent as a requirements of the schools. Respondent # 26, male, 41 years, rural area.

Single parenting might affect children negatively in their school work due to a lack of time available to complete homework (Poggenpoel, Myburgh, & Simelane, 2014). Buehler and O'Brien (2011) reported that single parents worked part time to be better able to help their children with school work as opposed to having fulltime employment.

Health and well-being

Stress from single parenting was a health risk for the single parents.

I cannot cope with number of responsibilities as a single parent....my health status is not right.... Respondent # 7, female, 47 years, rural area.

If I am sick because of stress, my child is also affected and she cannot perform well at school too. Respondent # 11, female, 42 years, rural area.

Single parenting affected me a lot, health wise due to the number of responsibilities that I have and my health status is not good. Respondent # 6, male, 48 years, rural area.

Poggenpoel, Myburgh, and Simelane (2014) asserted that stress from single parenting is associated with physical

symptoms such as headaches, poor sleep, anorexia, hypertension, frustration, and anger. Du Plooy and Pretorius, (2014) further stated that because of financial difficulties, buying medicine is still a challenge to most of the single parents; thus worsening their access to health care services.

Limitations highlighted by the study include that the majority of the participants were from historically disadvantaged rural areas or areas lacking in resources such as infrastructure, technology, employment opportunities and support for material needs. These resource limitations constrain coping as a single parent. However, rural families also have extended families to assist with parenting; in which case single parents from the rural areas may experience better overall parenting support. Nonetheless, single parents from the rural areas surveyed perceived themselves as experiencing relational, socio-emotional, material and other deprivations. Support programs for single parents should address these needs to enable the single parents to cope better in their parenting roles.

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