

PARENTING STRESS AND COPING SKILLS AMONG SINGLE FATHERS AND SINGLE MOTHERS IN EAST COAST PENINSULAR MALAYSIA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract: During recent years, the rate of single parent structure has increased steadily in Malaysian context and it provides a via alternative to nuclear family. Raising a child and managing life can be a stressful experience for single parents as they have no other parents to act as a buffer and to share the responsibility with. Most of the previous research in Malaysia focused more on the problems and issues related to single mothers and its effect on the child well being. However, very little is known about the life of single fathers. The present research compared both single fathers and single mothers' parental stress and how they cope with the stress. 80 single fathers and 80 single mothers in Kota Bharu, Kuala Terengganu and Kuantan completed a set of questionnaire. The questionnaire comprises of sections on personal background, parenting stress and coping skills. The results highlight single father experience higher level of parenting stress compared to single mothers. There was no slightly difference between the way both single fathers and single mothers cope with stress. This indicate the fact more studies and programs should be more in tune with the issues related to single fathers besides single mothers.

Keywords: Parenting Stress, Single Father, Single Mother, Coping Skills

INTRODUCTION

Being a parent is one of the most happiest and most satisfying experiences of most parents' lives. Most parents find bringing up their children very rewarding but also very demanding. This may be particularly true if there are other issue to cope with, such as relationship difficulties, lack of money, unemployment and being a single parent. Within Malaysian context, one of the most striking changes in family structure over the last decade has been the increase in single parent families. The fact that single parents and their children constitute a rapidly increasing population was mairly due to the increase of divorce rate.

Raising a child and managing life can be a stressful experience for single parents as they have no other parents to act as a buffer and to share the responsibility with. A study by Webster-Stratton (1989) [6] reported greater levels of stress among single mothers than both maritally supported and maritally distressed. The strain perspective, argue that single parents experience more stress and less access to coping resources than parent who are married. Consistent with this argument, prior research has reported that single parents, compared to those who are married are more apt to experience economics hard ship and stressful life events whereas they are less likely to be involve in a network of high social support (Mc Lahanan & Booth, 1989, Raschke 1987 cited in Simons et al. 1993) [5].

Early identification of stressful parent- child systems and intervention efforts aimed at reducing stress have the potential for reducing the frequency and intensity of behavioural and emotional disturbance among children in our society (Abidin, 1995) [1] especially those children who came from single parent families. Past research has indicated that these children were more likely to experience less healthy lives, on the average, than children from intact families. For instance, children growing up with only one parent are more likely to drop out of school, bear children out of wedlock, and have trouble keeping jobs as young adults (Mc Lanahan & Sandefur, 1994) [4]. Other consequences include risks to psychological development, social behaviour and sex-role identification. Therefore, research investigating the single parent stress, adjust and cope with the stress while raising their children will provide a useful information that will help us to develop appropriate support for them.

Most of the previous researches in Malaysia focused more on the problems and issues related to single mothers and also its effect on the child well being. However, very little is known about the life of single fathers. Thus, this study was aimed to :

- examine the difference of parental stress level between single fathers and single mothers
- examine how single fathers and single mothers differ in the pattern of coping skills

In other words, this study tries to find out the answer for the question “What does the sex of a parent play in respect to parental stress and how they cope with their stress? The parental sex is critical because men and women are inherently different. They have unique parenting styles and ultimately make distinction contribution to the children’s development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Subjects

The entire sample comprised of 80 single fathers and 80 single mothers from Kota Bharu, Kuala Terengganu and Kuantan. The respondents were selected based on purposive sampling.

Procedure

The 155 of single mothers and single fathers completed the questionnaires were overseen by the researcher and research assistant. Only 5 questionnaires were completed in a postal survey.

Questionnaires

Data were gathered from responses to questionnaires that include 4 sections:

The first section includes the personal background of the respondent. The second section contained Parenting Stress Index, 3rd edition developed by Abidin, 1995 [1] to measure the parenting stress level. This inventory that have been translated and modified, using 4 point scales (strongly disagree, disagree, agree and strongly agree) measures stress in parental domain namely; competence, isolation, attachment, role restriction and depression. The following is the interpretation of each subscales Abidin (1995) [1]:

- Competence subscale assesses the parent’s sense of competence in relation to his or her role as parent.
- Depression subscale assesses the extent to which the parent’s emotional availability to the child is impaired and the extent to which the parent’s emotional and physical energy is compromised.
- Parental Attachment subscale was designed to determine the parent’s motivation level to fulfil the role of parent
- Isolation subscale examines the parent’s isolation and the availability of social support for the role of parent.
- Role restriction subscale addresses the impact of parenthood on the parent’s personal freedom and other life roles.

The total score from this questionnaire was used to gauge the level of stress between the two groups of respondent. The last part consists of items prepared to discover types of coping skills. Four point scales (strongly disagree, disagree, agree and strongly agree) were also used to identify different types of coping skills used by single parents.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages and means were used. Cross tab and t-test methods were used to measure the differences between the two groups in term of level of stress and coping skills.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Composition of the sample

See Table 1 for the age, experience as single parents and marital status. Demographic information provided by respondents indicates that 50% are single fathers and 50% are single mothers. The age of single fathers, 5.6% of them are between 20 to 29 years, 8.1% between 30-39, 14.3 % between 40-49 and 21.9 % were above 50 years old. Experience of becoming single parent for single fathers were 26.9 % between one to five years and 23.1% were between six to ten years. 19.4 % of the single fathers were divorced or separated and 27.5% were widowed.

Table 1: Composition Of Sample With Respect To Age, Experience As Single Parents And Marital Status

Variable	Single fathers %	Single mothers %
Age		
20-29	5.6%	7.5%
30-39	8.1%	13.1%
40-49	14.3%	16.3%
50 and above	21.9%	13.1%
Experience		
1- 5 years	26.9%	23.8%
6-10 years	23.1%	26.3%
11 years and above	-	-
Status		
Divorced	19.4%	18.7%
Widowed	27.5%	26.1%
Others	3.2%	5.7%

The age of single mothers, 7.5% of them were between 20 to 29 years, 13.1 % between 30-39, 16.3 % between 40-49 and 13.1 % were above 50 years old. Experience of becoming single parent for single mothers were 23.8% between one to five years and 26.3% were between six to ten years. Thus, the mothers had been single parents longer than had single fathers. 18.7% of the single mothers were divorced or separated and 26.1% were widowed and the rest were left by their husband.

On the average, single mothers earned considerably less than single fathers (See Table 2). Almost half of the respondents (51.9%) reported a total family income of less than RM 400 monthly, 20 % between RM 401- RM600, 8.8 % between RM 601 to RM 800 and only 19.4% were more than RM801.

Table 2: Monthly Income For Single Fathers And Single Mothers

Monthly income	Single fathers	Single mothers
< RM 400	26.3%	25.6%
RM 401- RM 600	7.5%	12.6%
RM 601- RM 800	4.4%	4.4%
RM 800>	11.9%	7.5%

Table 3 shows the percentage of children living in single parent household. One half of the single parents (53.7%) reported having 1 to 3 children and the rest were above 4 children living in single parent household. Moreover 12.5 % single fathers and 17.5 % of single mothers indicated that they have other adults living in the household with them and children.

Table 3: Percentages Of Children And Adults Living In Single Parent Household.

No of children living in household	Single fathers	Single mothers
1-3	28.5%	26%
4-6	19.6%	22.2%
7-11	2.5%	1.9%
More than 11	-	0.6%

Adults living in household		
Yes	12.5%	17.5%
No	37.5%	32.5%

Single parents were asked to describe the relationship with their children. The single parents responds' regarding their relationship with their children are presented in Table 4. Majorities of single parents (61.2%) agreed that they have good relationship with their children. This figure includes 28.1% responds of single fathers and 33.1% responds of single mothers. Single fathers were more likely to say that they have some ups and downs with children (20.6%) compared to single mothers (15%). Whereas very few percentages of single fathers (1.3%) and single mothers (1.9%) who stated that they were in serious trouble with their children.

Table 4: Responses Regarding Single Parents Relationship With Their Children.

Relationship with children	Single fathers	Single mothers
Good	28.1%	33.1%
We have our ups and downs	20.6%	15%
In serious trouble	1.3%	1.9%

Table 5 shows single parents' responds with respect to questions " Does being a single parent affect your work life and social life?" The greatest percentage of single parents agree that being single parents do not affect their work life (83%) and social life (83.3%). More single mothers (10.1%) than single fathers (6.9%) said that being single parents have an effect on their work life. Nearly equal percentages of single fathers (8.2%) and single mothers (8.8%) agree with the statement that their social lives were influenced by their status as single parents.

Table 5: Influence Of Being Single Parents On Work Life And Social Life

	Single fathers	Single mothers
Being single parent affect work life		
Yes	6.9%	10.1%
No	43.1%	39.9%
Being single parent affect social life		
Yes	8.2%	8.8%
No	42.1%	41.2%

Single parents were also asked to response to a statement on how they think themselves as parents (see Table 6). Overall, single fathers were likely to say that they have some trouble being a parent (8.2%) compared to single mothers (1.9%). Nearly equal percentages of single parents (42.5%) believe that they were very good parents: 18.1% were single fathers and 24.4 % were single mothers who said so.

Equal percentage of single fathers and single mothers (23.1%) described themselves as average parents. Fewer single parents perceived they were not being very good at being parents (1.2%).

Table 6: Percentages Of Single Parents' Views As Parents.

I think that I am:	Single fathers	Single mothers
A very good parent	18.1%	24.4%
An average parent	23.1%	23.1%
A person who has some trouble being a parent	8.2%	1.9%
Not very good at being a parent	0.6%	0.6%

Parenting Stress

The study suggests that single fathers experienced significantly more total stress compared to single mothers; $t(158)3.145, p \leq 0.05$. This indicates single fathers in this study were more at risk for the development of dysfunctional parenting behaviours than single mothers. Moreover, individuals who earn high scores in this domain feel overwhelmed and inadequate to the task of parenting (Abidin, 1995) [1].

Table 7 presents means of parenting stress sub domain score for the single father and single mother samples. Single fathers were found to be more stressed than single mothers on every subscales namely competence, isolation, attachment, and depression except for the role restriction subscale. In other words, single fathers viewed themselves as more socially isolated, depressed, less competent, less attached to their children than did the single mothers.

High scores in competence subscale among single fathers may be produced by a number of factors. One of the factors is lacking in practical child development knowledge or possesses a limited range of child management skills (Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1988) [7]. This may be explained by the responds given by single fathers that they were likely to say that they have some trouble being a parent (8.2%) compared to single mothers (1.9%). (Refer Table 6). Moreover, the general impact of high score on depression subscale is that single fathers find it is more difficult to mobilize the psychic and physical energy than single mothers needed to fulfil parenting responsibilities (adapted in Abidin 1995) [1].

Single fathers in this study also scored higher in isolation subscale than single mothers. The result shows that single fathers found themselves to be socially isolated from their peers, relatives and other emotional support systems. This data is supported by the result of types coping skills used by single parents, summarized in Table 8. It was identified that single fathers were less likely to use instrumental support and emotional support than single mothers in order to cope with their stress.

The presence of a high score in attachment subscale indicates the absence of emotional bonding that may be reflected in a rather cold pattern of parent child interaction (Abidin, 1985) [2]. Result that is shown in Table 4 may provide an explanation for the higher score in this subscale among single fathers compared to single mothers. It reveals the fact that single fathers were more likely to say that they have some ups and downs with children (20.6%) compared to single mothers (15%).

On the other hand, higher score on role restriction subscale was found among single mothers than single fathers. Higher scores on this subscale suggest that the parents experience the parental role as restricting their freedom and frustrating them in their attempts to maintain their own identity (Matthews, 1989) [3]. The result of this study suggests that single mothers were more likely to address the impact of parenthood on the parent's personal freedom and other life roles than single fathers. This data is supported by the result provided in Table 5. For instance, more single mothers (10.1%) than single fathers (6.9%) said that being single parents have an effect on their work life.

Table 7: Means Of Parenting Stress Subscales For Both Single Parents

Subscales	Single fathers	Single mothers
Competence	21.862	20.098
Attachment	11.965	10.559
Role restriction	13.886	14.061
Depression	13.467	12.817
Isolation	9.132	8.008

Coping Skills

Table 8 presents the percentages of coping skills used by both single fathers and single mothers. Results on how single fathers and single mothers adjust and cope with their stress indicated that there was not slightly difference between these two groups. The use of religion and acceptance and positive reframing were identified to be the most common coping skills used by single parents. This is supported by the fact that almost half of the single parents (46.9% of single fathers and 47.5% of single mothers) in this study indicated they have been praying and remembering God when they were under stress situation. The percentages of single fathers who revealed that they have been looking for something good in what is happening or what is called as positive reframing was 41.9% whereas for single mothers, the percentages was 30.7%. This is followed by the use of active coping. Table 8 shows that 18.1% of single fathers agreed and 13.8% strongly agreed, and 19.4% of single mothers agreed and 12.5% strongly agreed with the statement related to active coping.

Moreover, single fathers reported more usage of denial (11.3 % agree and 6.9% strongly agree) to cope with stress than single mothers (6.9% agree and 2.5% strongly agree). Single fathers were also found to be more likely to use cigarettes (5.6% agree and 2.5% strongly agree) compared to single mothers (0.6% agree) as one type of coping strategies.

Single mothers reported usage of instrumental support (12.5 % agree and 8.1% strongly agree) such as seeking advice from others more than single fathers (12.5% agree and 3.1% strongly agree). Single mothers are also reported to use more behaviour disengagement (8.1% agree and 1.9% strongly agree) such as giving up trying to deal with their problems than single fathers (5.6% agree and 0.6% strongly agree).

Table 8: Percentages of coping skills used by single fathers and single mothers.

Coping Skills	Single fathers		Single mothers	
	Agree	Strongly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Religion	7.5%	39.4%	13.8%	33.7%
Active coping	18.1%	13.8%	19.4%	12.5%
Acceptance	18.1%	25%	23.8%	13.1%
Self distraction	16.9%	3.1%	16.9%	9.4%
Denial	11.3%	6.9%	6.9%	2.5%
Substance use	5.6%	2.5%	0.6%	-
Positive reframing	23.1%	18.8%	21.9%	8.8%
Instrumental support	12.5%	3.1%	12.5%	8.1%
Emotional support	10%	5.6%	15%	5%
Self blame	7.5%	0.6%	7.5%	1.9%
Behaviour disengagement	5.6%	0.6%	8.1%	1.9%

The results highlight how the single mothers and single fathers considerably differ from each other in the parental stress level. More important the result also suggest that being a single father can be more stressful experience compared to single mothers. This mean, single father need more support from others or someone who can help them in term of bringing up the children and doing the house chores compared to single mothers. Whereas, single mothers experienced less parenting stress than single fathers may be contributed by their own nature, handling the bulk of parental responsibility such as educational and emotional care of children. Thus, taking care of the children alone, wouldn't be many problems for most mothers. But as single mothers, they are now bearing a dual burden, not only family carers but also family providers. Thus, lack of income may be explained as one of the most important problems related to single mothers.

In term of coping skills, both single fathers and single mothers were identified to have positive types of coping skills such as religious, positive reframing and active coping. Thus, these mechanisms will help them adjust and cope with their stress better. In conclusion, study and program should be more in tune with the issues related single fathers besides the single mothers in Malaysian context.

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