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ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF CHILDREN IN SINGLE PARENT HOMES: A CRITICAL REVIEW

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In the United States, almost half of all children by age 15 will have lived in a single-parent family (Andersson, 2002). The percentage of single-parent families has tripled in the past 50 years and has continued to be larger among Latino and African American families when compared to the general population (US Census, 2010). In 2000, 27% of all U.S. children were living in single-parent families; among African American children, 53% were living with only one parent (Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2004). The vast majority of these single-parent homes are headed by women. DeBell (2008) reported that single-father homes represent only 7% of the total single-parent homes in the country.

Many authors have documented differences between children raised in father-absent (FA) and father-present (FP) homes (Balcom 1998; Biller 1970; Chapman, 1977; Daniels, 1986; Downey, 1994; Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell, & Durfur, 1998; Fry & Scher, 1984; Milne, Rosenthal & Ginsburg, 1986). Research has shown that FA children graduate from high school and attend college at a lower rate (Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2004), perform worse on standardized tests (Bain, Boersma, & Chapman, 1983), and are more likely to use drugs (Mandara & Murry, 2006) than children from FP homes. Research has also shown that growing up without a father seems to have a greater negative effect on boys as compared to girls (Mandara & Murry; Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2004).

A few researchers have focused on resiliency (Hunter & Chandler, 1999; Rutter, 1990) and the strengths of single parent (SP) homes (Amato, 1987; Hanson, 1986; Murry, Bynumm, Brody, Willert, & Stephens, 2001; Richards & Schmiege, 1993; Shaw, 1991). Hurtes and Allen (2001) created a scale for measuring resiliency in youth and identified commonalities in SP homes where the children achieve academic success. For many years, theorists have suggested a greater emphasis on strength based research of families of all types (for a review see Giblin, 1996).

Despite calls for a greater emphasis on discovering strengths, the majority of research concerning single parenthood has focused on the disadvantages faced by children raised in the absence of their father. However, understanding the disadvantages focuses only on half of the issue: the other half is to understand the strengths and resiliency factors exhibited by children raised in a FA home. Although children raised in a home where a father is present graduate from high school and attend college at much higher rates than children raised in a fatherless home, nearly 70% of children from FA homes *do* graduate from high school and 50% of them attend college (Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2004). There is a great need for research focusing on the strengths of these academic achievers from FA homes.

This paper will summarize current research, discuss problems with that body of work, and suggest areas for further study. Most of the studies reviewed are from the past twenty years and most are concerned with the academic achievement of children raised in SP homes. Although there is a large body of research, many studies have been flawed by similar factors and by the nature of the difficulty in measuring intrapersonal issues. Because there are flaws, there are many opportunities for further research and areas for growth.

Relevant Literature

There is a large body of research examining the dynamics of single-parent homes (for a summary see McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Studies relating to the academic achievement of children from single-parent homes are the main focus of this paper. Findings will be also presented concerning drug use and employment among young African American adults who were raised in single-parent homes. Two studies regarding adolescent resilience are summarized and a method for measuring youth resiliency is discussed. Finally, two conceptual frameworks are presented as well as a comparison of single-parent households from 11 countries leading to policy implications and suggestions for further research.

General Trends

Many studies have documented the challenges faced by single parents and the disadvantages of their children relative to children raised in two-parent households. Although some studies have been inconclusive, a large majority of studies reviewed show that children from single-parent (SP) homes score lower on tests of cognitive functioning and standardized tests, receive lower GPAs, and complete fewer years of school when compared to children from two -parent (TP) homes (Bain, Boersma, & Chapman 1983; Balcom 1998; Biller 1970; Chapman, 1977; Daniels, 1986; Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell, & Durfur, 1998; Fry & Scher, 1984; Mandara & Murray 2006; Milne, Rosenthal, & Ginsburg, 1986; Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan 2004). Even when controlling for economic and racial differences of the family, children from two-parent households outperform children from one-parent households across a variety of measures (Downey, 1994; Kim, 2004; Krein & Beller, 1988; Mulkey, Crain, & Harrington, 1992; Teachman, 1987). McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) summarize the research by writing:

> Children who grow up in a household with only one biological parent are worse off, on average, than children who grow up in a household with both of their biological parents, regardless of the parents' race or educational background, regardless of whether the parents are married when the child is born, and regardless of whether the resident parent remarries. (p. 1)

Father absence

Early research of single-parent homes focused on "father absence" (FA). The interest in FA homes was due to the large number of single-parent female headed households and to the influence of psychoanalytic theories that called attention to the importance of the presence of a father in the development of a child's personality (Hetherington et al., 1983). In a 1970 literature review, Biller reported evidence showing a correlation between FA and juvenile delinquency. He also showed evidence that FA boys have more difficulty forming peer relationships and long lasting heterosexual relationships as compared to boys raised in a father present (FP) home. Chapman (1977) reported lower SAT scores among FA males compared to FP males, and Bain et al. (1983) showed that FA third graders performed significantly worse in reading achievement and scored lower in a measure of internal locus of control than FP children. In 1984, Fry and Scher found evidence suggesting poor ego development, low motivation, and an external locus of control among ten year-old children from FA homes. Daniels (1986), in her study of young African American men, discovered that the length of father absence from the home was the strongest predictor of future employment for the young men. In a more recent study, Mandara and Murray (2006) reported that boys raised in FA homes were much more likely to use drugs than were boys from FP homes.

Systems perspective

In the 1980's researchers began looking at SP households from a systems perspective and tried to determine exactly *why* children from SP homes were disadvantaged relative to children from two-parent (TP) homes. Milne et al. (1986) found parental expectations, number of books in the home, and income to be important predictors of academic achievement of SP children. In 1987, Teachman discovered four important "educational resources that play a significant role in determining level of schooling for both men and women" (p. 553-554). Downey (1994) built upon Teachman's study and identified 11 key educationally related objects – a place to study, a daily newspaper, regular magazine, encyclopedia, atlas, dictionary, typewriter, computer, more than 50 books, calculator, one's own room – whose presence or absence were predictors of children's future academic achievement. Krein and Beller (1988) examined differences of the effect of living in a SP home on educational achievement by gender and length of parent absence. They found that the negative effects of living in a SP family increase with the total time spent in an SP home, and that the negative effects are greater for boys than girls. Mulkey et al. (1992) and Kim (2004) both reported that while family income is important, other factors have a greater influence on academic performance. They suggested that parental expectations, family size, and the quality of the parent-child relationship are stronger predictors of future academic success than income. Implications for future research will be discussed later in this paper.

Boys vs. girls

A number of studies have documented differences between boys and girls raised in SP homes. In their review, Hetherington et al. (1983) concluded that "the intellectual and social development of males may be seen as more adversely affected by living in one-parent homes than that of females from similar family circumstances" (p. 271). Studies published since Hetherington et al. have reported similar results. Fry and Scher (1984) discovered that the achievement motivation scores of boys declined significantly over a five year period of living in a SP home while the scores of girls in similar home environments remained stable. In 1998, Krein and Beller documented a significant negative effect of the number of years spent in a SP home on educational attainment for all groups except Caucasian women. According to their findings, Caucasian males spending 18 years in a SP home complete 1.7 fewer years of school as compared to Caucasian males spending 18 years in a TP home. African American males complete 1.26 fewer years of school, and African American females complete 0.73 fewer years of school when compared to their counterparts living in TP homes. For Caucasian women, the difference was only 0.03 years. In their recent study of African American adolescents, Mandara and Murray (2006) found FA to be a significant risk factor for drug use among boys but not among girls. They reported that African American boys in a FA home were almost six times more likely to use drugs than African American boys in a FP home, while the risk factor for African American girls was the same regardless of the number of parents in the home. Uncovering a reason to explain the greater negative effect of family disruption on boys compared to girls is a compelling future line of research and will be discussed later.

Resilience and strengths

Research regarding adolescent resilience and strengths of SP families was also reviewed. Basic inquiries into resilience have attempted to answer the question of why some

individuals from high-risk backgrounds thrive while others fail (for a summary see Rutter, 1990). Researchers have had difficulty defining and measuring resiliency and agreeing on specific individual characteristics of resilient individuals. In 2001, Hurtes and Allen successfully validated a self-reporting instrument designed to measure resiliency in youth know as the Resiliency Attitudes and Skills Profile (RASP). They determined that the RASP possessed an acceptable level of construct validity and could be used to measure resilience as a unique construct. Hurtes and Allen's suggestion that the RASP needs to be further tested across a variety of youth subcultures will be discussed later. In addition to resiliency scales, some researchers have explored the strengths of SP homes (Amato, 1987; Hanson, 1986; Richards & Schmiege, 1993; Shaw, 1991). These researchers have identified strong parent-child communication, a network of community support, and high levels of adolescent autonomy as strengths of SP homes. The authors' suggestions for further research will be discussed later.

Conceptual Ideas

While most research concerning the effects of single parenthood has been quantitative, there have been some qualitative and conceptual ideas presented. Drawing on his clinical experience, Balcom (1998) stated, "many adult sons abandoned by their fathers have difficulty developing and sustaining self-esteem, forming lasting emotional attachments, recognizing their feelings, or being expressive with their adult partners and children" (p. 283). He suggests father-son therapy sessions as a way healing the pain felt by both men. Downey et al. (1998) compared individualistic versus structuralist perspectives of gender as related to SP homes. Whereas individualistic theorists view the gender of the parent as necessarily important for the parent-child relationship because of immutable biological sex differences between men and women, structuralists claim that sex roles are not immutable inborn traits but rather evolve as a result of the different social situations faced by men and women. Downey et al. argued the structuralist position by showing that men and women behave similarly in the role of a single parent. Van Laar and Sidanius (2001) used social dominance theory to explain the poor academic performance of SP children relative to TP children. They suggested that SP homes have low social status and therefore possess fewer economic resources and face greater personal and institutional discrimination compared to TP homes. Van Laar and Sidanius also discussed the tendency of members of low-status groups to behave in ways that are consistent with and help to confirm negative stereotypes. Similar ideas were presented by Hetherington et al. (1983) regarding teacher evaluations and the tendency of educators to reward students for conforming to expectations. Hetherington et al. suggested that when students who are expected to perform poorly actually perform well, they receive negative attention from their teachers and are pressured to lower their academic performance. Lastly, Pong et al. (2003) compared the achievement gap between children in SP versus TP homes across 11 countries. They found that the United States had the largest gap between the academic achievement of children from SP versus children from TP homes. The authors concluded that national policies have offset the negative outcomes of single parenthood in other countries and that a more generous United States welfare policy could result in greater equality among all children.

Discussion

Research Limitations

Several problems have hindered research regarding single-parent families. Researchers have paid little attention to cultural factors or variations in life experiences and have instead focused mostly on White, middle-class individuals. Methodological issues, poor criterion definition, and the presence of confounding variables have flawed certain studies. Sampling issues have also limited the reliability and representativeness of certain results. Finally, statistical methods have been questioned in multiple studies and some authors have treated their findings as cause and effect rather than simple correlations between variables.

The majority of research about SP families has been conducted on White, middle-class families (for exceptions see Murry et al., 2001; or Toth & Xiaohe, 1999). This trend is disturbing because 52% of SP families are non-White and only 21% are considered middle-class (DeBell, 2008). When researchers have looked at non-White populations they have tended to focus disproportionately on low-income African American families. Although well intended, the over focus on low-income African American families leaves Latino, Asian, and other ethnic minority populations almost completely ignored. A broader sampling of families which more closely represents the true demographics of the United States is necessary.

Research about SP families has been flawed by methodological issues and a difficulty in defining certain factors. Researchers have often failed to identify the reason for parental separation. When the reasons have been accounted for, evidence has shown marital breakdown to be associated with the most negative outcome and parental death to be associated with the least negative outcome (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). The age of the child at the time of familial disruption and the length of disruption were often omitted in many of the studies reviewed. Finally, the presence of other adults in the house, or factors such as gender, age, and the developmental status of the child were rarely considered.

Sampling and statistical procedures used in many studies have contributed to problems in interpreting and generalizing results. In many studies, participants were selected based on their attendance at mental health clinics. These individuals may not be representative of the range of single parents because not all single parents seek clinical help. Samples of SP families taken at different times may distort or misrepresent the data. Another limitation in the existing literature is the overuse of comparing group means. Theorists have become more aware of the variability in SP families and acknowledge that comparisons of simple statistics such as mean GPA "have yielded little information on the intrafamilial and extrafamilial conditions that influence the impact of divorce on children" (Hetherington et al., 1983, p. 209). Finally, Marsiglio et al. (2000) discussed the prevalence and problem of shared-method variance in many studies of SP households:

> Shared-method variance is present whenever researchers use the same source (fathers, mothers, children, teachers, or observers) for data on independent and dependent variables. This occurs, for example, when children report on (a) the amount of time spent with their fathers and (b) their self-esteem. Under these circumstances, shared-method variance tends to increase the correlation between variables, resulting in an overestimate of the true association. (p. 1179)

Although many researchers have studied SP households, very few have done so in a scientifically sound manner. Problems with sampling, difficulty isolating variables, and statistical issues have flawed many investigations. Perhaps most damaging to this body of research is the relative lack of ethnic and racial diversity among the individuals studied. Future proposals should attempt to answer these criticisms.

Suggestions for Future Research

There are several opportunities for future studies to add to the body of knowledge regarding single-parent homes and the effects of single parenthood on children's academic achievement and educational attainment.

Past researchers have discussed the need for more longitudinal studies of disrupted families. Hetherington et al. (1983) has suggested the possibility that children in SP families initially suffer but then adjust and adapt over time; this process could only be documented with longitudinal research. Marsiglio et al. (2000) discussed the importance of realizing how parenthood may change a person over time and suggested studying the subjective experience of men as they become fathers. Balcom (1998) believed longitudinal research should be conducted that follows boys from FA homes as they grow into adults and become fathers themselves. Certainly many opportunities exist for more longitudinal research regarding family disruption and the effects on children.

Another area for further study is determining why single parenthood seems to be associated with greater negative outcomes for boys as compared to girls. Although many researchers have documented differences in academic performance between boys and girls raised in SP homes, very few have attempted to discover reasons behind the performance discrepancies. McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) presented a theory of male adjustment to divorce that claims that boys express their emotional pain in a more overt way than girls express emotional pain. They suggest that boys' reaction to familial disruption most often includes defiant behavior while the response of girls is marked by depression and mood changes. More studies are needed which attempt to identify those factors in SP homes that result in poorer academic achievement among boys as compared to girls.

Very few researchers have looked at strengths and resilience of individuals from SP families. Richards and Schmiege (1993) and Murry et al. (2001) have called attention to the fact that despite many disadvantages, SP families often thrive. Hetherington et al. (1983) noted that several studies have reported childhood loss of a father in the family histories of gifted, extraordinary, and highly creative individuals. Further inquiry is needed to determine if there is any relationship between familial disruption and the development of creative thought. Lastly, the RASP, designed by Hurtes and Allen (2001) is a tool that has proven to be valid in measuring resilience among White, middle-class youth. As the authors suggest, the RASP needs to be further tested with non-White ethnic and racial groups and with non middle class youth. Further validation of the RASP is an important and tangible line of future research.

Finally, most researchers have investigated White, middle-class individuals and largely ignored Latinos, Asians, and other ethnic minority groups in the United States. Studies which have considered African Americans have disproportionately studied lower income families. Greater emphasis must be given to the study of non-White individuals. Concerning studies of African American SP families, attention must be paid to SP families who are not low income. As racial and ethnic diversity continues to grown in the United States, the need to understand all people becomes more important.

Conclusion

Single parenthood continues to be a reality for many adults and almost 50% of children born today will spend significant time living with only one parent. A large body of research has documented the disadvantages of children raised in single-parent homes relative to children raised in two-parent homes. Lower high school graduation rates, lower GPAs, and greater risk for drug abuse are only some of the negative outcomes associated with growing up in a single-parent home. However, despite the statistics, many children from single-parent homes *do* attain academic success. Unfortunately, relatively few researchers have followed Otto (1963) in researching family strengths. Scholars can help influence public policy by understanding factors which are associated with academic achievement and promote training, education, and advocacy programs which support single parents and their children.

As a discipline, Counseling Psychology has been among the leaders regarding issues of diversity and inclusion. Expanding our understanding of single-parent families beyond White, middle-class populations is crucial if we are to have significant impact on policy and be able to meet the needs of all people. Furthermore, as more and more gay men and lesbian women become parents there is a need to expand our research into the dynamics of single-parent families headed by sexual minorities. Counseling Psychology cannot afford to rest on its past achievements regarding diversity and inclusion, we must continue to expand our thinking and reach out to underserved individuals and families.

In addition to expanding the sphere of research beyond White, middle-class heterosexuals, the field must do more to understand the strengths exhibited by single parents and their children. Resilience as a basic construct can be much better understood as well as the parenting skills necessary to foster academic success. My own experience of living in a single-parent, first-generation US born, female-headed household was one filled with uncertainty at times regarding finances, my mother's emotional availability, and the social stigma of not knowing my biological father. Despite the challenges, my mother successfully completed college, provided me with key educational resources, and set an academic example to follow. She planted a belief in me that with preparation, organization, and diligence, academic achievement is inevitable. Identifying the intuitive skills my mother, and other successful single parents have, and sharing those best practices with single parents in need can help to close the academic achievement gap of children from single-parent homes.

This paper has been a review and critique of research from the past few decades regarding single parenthood. While the economic and social costs of single parenthood have been well documented, the strengths of single parents and their children have been largely overlooked. Multiple areas for future inquiry have been suggested and it is the hope of this author that science can influence policy to ensure all children receive equitable resources and are given the opportunity to thrive.

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