

Single-parent family and its effect on child development

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Abstract: The single-parent family is a type of family that can influence the harmonious development of a child. Once the child becomes an adult, the imprint of childhood experiences can propagate into the social sphere, on other social actors. In order to prevent these possible negative effects, both on the individual and on society, it is necessary to have as broad an understanding as possible of the phenomenon of single parenthood. The article analyzes the effects of single parenthood on parents and children, based on the literature and available statistical data, with an emphasis on the implications on child development. An exploratory study based on the case study method supports the theoretical approaches presented in this regard. The analysis carried out took into account the gender structure within the family, through the case study method with several cases. Characteristics considered to be specific to the gender were taken into consideration: obsession for the male gender and hysteria for the female gender, and the way in which the two balance each other was analyzed. In addition, the cases were analyzed from the perspective of the socio-economic opportunities of children from this type of family, in order to visualize the evolution of the quality of life of individuals. Following the analysis, the effects on the child were presented as diverse, multiple and sometimes unexpected.

Keywords: single-parent family, gender structure, effects on the child

Introduction

The family can be defined as the basic cell of society, the “institution” that underpins the evolution of the human species, the main place where the knowledge of previous generations is passed on to subsequent generations. Between the family and society, there is a bidirectional relationship of influence. For a society to be healthy, to function in optimal parameters, its cell –family - needs to be healthy. Humans have one of the longest periods of vulnerability, during which

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they are dependent on their parents and learn to decipher the surrounding environment. Thus, these years of vulnerability and dependence on the parent are decisive for the psychic and social structure of the individual. When the small family loses a family member, the child's chances of deciphering and understanding the world within healthy parameters decrease.

From a sociological point of view, the single-parent family can be defined as “a social group constituted on the basis of kinship relationships between a parent (single-parent) and child/children, a group characterized by common emotional states, aspirations and values. Single-parent families have become an important and permanent feature of many existing societies.” (Iluț et al. 2009 quoted in Matei et al. 2011, 78)

The most important typology of the single-parent family is the one related to the gender structure within the family. Thus, the family with only one parent can be classified into: female-girl; woman-boy; man-boy; man-girl. The effects and consequences on the child's development are differentiated according to the types of arrangements mentioned above.

The single-parent family has become increasingly present in today's society, with consequences and effects on parents, children and, implicitly, on society as a whole. On average, about 6.8% of children live in single-parent households worldwide. (Chavda and Nisarga 2023)

According to Eurostat (2021), in Europe, in 2020 about 14% of households with children were single-parent households, representing 4% of all households. Romania is among the countries with a lower percentage of single parenthood, compared to other EU countries, of 6.3% of all households with dependent children, in 2020. Between 2006 and 2023 in Romania, the lowest percentage of households with single-parent families was recorded in 2008, with a value of 3.4% of the total households with dependent children. In 2010, the percentage increased to 6.2% of all households with dependent children. Between 2010 and 2023, the percentage of households with single-parent families varies between 6% and 7%, the highest percentage recorded being 7.2% of the total households with dependent children in 2022.

Previous research

In Romania, few comprehensive studies have been conducted on the phenomenon of single parenthood, most of them focusing on the risk

factors of poverty that this type of family presents or on the quality of life of single-parent families. However, regarding the effects of the phenomenon on children, the lack of studies is materialized by the lack of a database, of comprehensive and accessible statistical data, which would capture these possible effects over a longer period of time.

A relevant study in Europe is that conducted by a group of Finnish researchers, who created a database with information collected from children from single (unmarried) mothers at birth and mothers married at birth. Data were collected at different times in individuals' lives - including adult life - regarding the level of education, occupational status, income and marital status of the child who became an adult. Some of the results of their study show that, compared to the children of mothers married at birth, the children of unmarried mothers were more likely to have lower educational and occupational levels and income as adults, as well as to remain unmarried. (Mikkonen et al. 2016)

Regarding the effects of divorce on children (one of the most common causes of single-parent families), in 1971 psychologists Judith Wallerstein and Joan Kelly began a long-term study of 60 divorced families and 131 children. According to the authors, five years after the divorce, one-third of the children were adjusting well and had good relationships with both parents. However, "another group of children (more than a third of the sample) were clinically depressed, performed poorly in school, had difficulty maintaining friendships, had chronic problems such as sleep disorders, and continued to hope that their parents would reconcile." (Amato 2005, 76)

Various studies, such as those conducted by Bowlby (1969, 1973) and Rutter and Madge (1976) have suggested that the disruption of parental ties in childhood predispose to psychiatric disorders, especially depression, and psychopathology in adulthood. The role of quality of substitute care was also emphasized as a crucial factor. Moreover, these studies indicate that the rate of depression was higher in cases of maternal loss, compared to paternal loss. (Chavda & Nisarga 2023)

Another study carried out by two American researchers who, in order to observe specific effects of single parenthood on children, used race, sex and duration of exposure to single parenthood as variables in the analysis, reveals through the results of their study that:

(...) the impact varies by the period and length of exposure. It is mainly during the preschool years that living in a single-parent family has a significant negative effect, and the more years (overall and in the preschool period) spent in a single-parent family, the greater the negative impact. Second, the effect is larger for boys than female. (Krein & Beller 1988, 10)

The lack of understanding of the possible effects that this phenomenon produces both at the individual (psychic) and social level, increases the possibility of perpetuating the consequences of this phenomenon, through the lack of appropriate actions. The more socially, economically, educationally and cohesive a society is, the more it can afford to have loopholes in terms of data collection and analysis, the consequences being limited. Conversely, the higher the degree of division in a society, the less and less it can afford such loopholes.

The effects of single-parent family on the parent who takes care of the child

The phenomenon of single parenthood has various effects, from the micro, individual level - on the single parent or on the child - to the macro level - on society as a whole. Economic, psychological or social problems may arise at the level of the parent left alone. Compared to two-parent families, the single-parent “experiences poverty to a greater extent through low income, lack of childcare services, low self-esteem, reduced personal satisfaction and increased lack of time.” (Besharov 1992; Iluț 2009 quoted in Matei, Sănduleasa & Gheșța 2013, 204)

In Romania, most single-parent family situations are those in which the single parent is represented by the mother. According to a study conducted by INCSMPS (National Institute for Scientific Research in the Field of Labor and Social Protection) in 2010, 81.5% of the single-parent parents who participated in the study were women. (Matei, Sănduleasa and Gheșța 2013)

According to Eurostat (2023), in Romania, 16.18% of single-parent families were families composed of a single father and at least one child living with him.

Economically, single-parent families are more likely to be at risk of poverty compared to two-parent families. The relative poverty rate for single-parent families, according to the INS (National Institute of Statistics), in 2022 is 23.8% compared to the total population. For women, the chances of a precarious economic state are higher, due to gender inequality in the workplace and in the labor market. Statistical data from the US shows that single mothers who have children in their

care are almost three times more likely to be on the verge of poverty, compared to fathers who have received the custody of the child. (Benokraitis 2005, quoted in Iluț 2010)

From a psychological point of view, imbalances can occur at the level of the custodial parent, as a result of being a single parent, as a result of the cause that led to the situation of being alone, but also as a result of the stress caused by the multitude of obligations and challenges that emerges from the situation of being a single parent: financial support for the family, childcare, housekeeping, making decisions without the support of a partner, lack of personal time, etc.

At the social level, there is a risk of social stigmatization, especially in the case of single women. This type of stigmatization also refers to an accentuation of gender inequality in the labour market. In addition, social stigmatization is also observed by the “lower value on the marital market”. (Iluț 2010, 436)

In order to be able to face all these challenges, single-parent families need support from society. Humans have a very high social factor, a social factor that means collaboration - which works through trust. Each generation passes on to future generations both trust and distrust in collaborating with society and, further, in interactions with the environment. And, when the context is that of full space – overcrowding, of intertwined lives, whatever belongs to the human individual, good or bad, becomes everyone’s, the entire society’s.

Effects on the child

Depending on the context, the causes that led to the emergence of the single-parent family, the financial status of the family, the professional status of the parent, the age of the child at the time of the emergence of the single-parent family and the child’s personality, the effects on the child can be diverse, multiple and sometimes unexpected. Studies in the field (Chavda & Nisarga 2023; Krein & Beller 1988; Mikkonen et al. 2016) highlighted possible effects on the child such as: the tendency of maladjustment in social life (e.g. school), or on the contrary, too much dependence on other people and the inability to remain alone; rebellion or, on the contrary, great fear of the unknown; sexual deviations, the desire to harm other people and oneself, inability for a real closeness with another human being, addictions of various kinds (e.g. alcohol addiction, substance addiction), exaggerated and unjustified fears, anxiety, depression, reduced academic performance, decreased motivation etc.

In the case of a single-parent family resulting from a divorce, if the child continues to interact with the other parent, “the differences in the psycho-behavioral profile are insignificant compared to two-parent families. It should be remembered, however, that the interaction must be systematic and positive.” (Iluț 2005, 164)

When a strong bond is created between the single parent and the child, the situation of living in a single-parent family can also have positive effects on the child: they are more responsible, more mature and can make appropriate decisions on their own, they are more mentally resistant to various future difficulties, “they can appreciate the value of parenthood and try to be successful parents in the future for their children.” (Chavda and Nisarga 2023, 17)

According to a synthesis made by Bawin-Legros (1988), studies on single-parent families show that “the probability of identifying illegitimate births, child abandonment, behavioral disorders, school dropout/failure or even delinquency is higher in this category of population. Single-parent families are often victims of poverty, and children tend to repeat their parents' experience.” (quoted in Voinea 2005, 9)

Children from single-parent families can be victims of social stigmatization, both directly and indirectly - through the lack of protection in the social sphere, especially in families where the father is absent. Social stigma can lead to stress and impact education, self-identity, and translate into later life consequences. (Mikkonen et al. 2016)

One of the most important problems that arise in the development process of the child who grows up with only one parent, is the lack of a gender model - female or male. This process can lead to a misperception of the parent's gender who is missing, problems with self-identity, etc. The child may suffer premature maturation, by trying to take over the responsibilities, attributions, role of the missing parent. This phenomenon is predominant in the single-parent families of the woman-boy and man-girl types, where a natural need for complementarity is created. If there are several children in the single-parent family, this role is often taken over by the older child. This process can be explained by means of symbolic interactionist theory. From this perspective, “The family is a unit of interacting personalities. Roles are built as a result of negotiations within the family.” (Popescu 2009, 23) When one of the parents leaves the family, the roles within the family are renegotiated.

Any situation must be analyzed in a specific time-space context, in order to be properly understood. Considering the single-parent family as insufficient, by its nature, or destructive in terms of consequences for the child development, compared to a family composed of two parents, can lead to misconceptions and prejudices that can produce real effects.

The femininity-masculinity model (hysteria-obsession) constitutes the main framework for analyzing the effects of single parenthood on the child, the major differentiating factor.

Starting from various studies on gender complementarity (Kimura 1992; Miralles 2016; Napier, Toorn & Vial 2023) I propose this analysis model of gender complementarity in the context of single-parent families. Femininity and masculinity have their specific role. Within a family, the two of them complement each other, test each other to improve and, create a balance, a whole that is favorable to the development of a child. If one of the parents is absent, this balance between femininity and masculinity disappears. In situations of single-parent families in which one gender is missing (those of the woman-girl, man-boy type) there is a greater imbalance than in those in which the gender of the child is complementary to the gender of the parent with whom he/she lives.

The most important perspective from which single-parent families and their effects on child development can be analyzed is the one based on the gender structure within the family, femininity-masculinity. Perhaps the most relevant attribute of femininity is hysteria, respectively obsession for masculinity. A harmonious setting for the child is provided by the interaction, the mutual control of the two (obsession and hysteria).

This paradigm (femininity-hysteria, masculinity-obsession) is the very framework in which psychoanalysis works. Initially, hysteria and obsession were seen as disorders that needed to be treated. In this paper, they are not treated in this way, as being a priori bad, but are used in the sense of an existing, natural phenomenon, with which we must deal, that needs to be deciphered, analyzed and understood.

Obsession is often considered to be a masculine characteristic: “this type of gender identification, whether understood as obsessive-compulsive or positional (Slater 1961; Chodorow 1978) or paranoid-schizoid (Sweetnam 1996), is more likely to describe masculinity than femininity.” (Jay 2007, 130)

Showalter (2024, 286), referring to hysteria, says: “Throughout its history, of course, hysteria has always been constructed as a ‘woman’s disease,’ a feminine disorder, or a disturbance of femininity, but this construct has usually been hostile.”

Until relatively recently when it was consecrated, validated and explained by psychoanalysis, this psychic process was used for centuries “as a dramatic medical metaphor for everything that men found mysterious or unmanageable in women” (Devereux 2014, 19)

Both hysteria and obsession have their role, the absence of one of them creates instability. Hysteria and obsession, in the masculinity-femininity “dance”, have the role of controlling each other, directing each other, validating or invalidating each other. In order to resist and survive the constant onslaught of the other, each of the two must adjust, improve constantly, and change. The purpose of this interaction is to negotiate the framework of life.

Quality of life in single-parent families

When we consider the presentation, understanding and analysis of the effects of the single-parent family on the child – the future on earth, they can be discussed from multiple perspectives, one of them being quality of life. For a society to have a high level of quality of life, it is necessary to increase the quality of life in the subgroups that make up the society and, further, at the level of the individual.

The various specific measures of quality of life have multiple roles, including creating, complementing, revising social policies. Through appropriate social policies, the quality of life in single-parent families and of the child from such a family can increase. “The quality of family life and especially the quality of family relationships are often considered as the most important factor of quality of life”. (Alber and Fahey 2004 quoted in Popescu 2011, 101)

The quality of life can be measured in terms of the existing opportunities of the individual, society (economic, social) to live a harmonious, successful life or, according to Maslow’s theory, in terms of needs and the degree to which these needs are satisfied. Maslow, in his theory, presents needs as a hierarchical system on five levels: biological needs, security needs, social needs, esteem needs, and the need for self-actualization/self-realization.

Within single-parent families, children face shortages and dissatisfaction of the needs that are at the bottom of the pyramid, especially at the level of biological needs (due to the higher poverty

rate), security (due to the lack of a protective figure - single parents are in a much higher proportion women), social (the absence of a parent increases the possibility of problems in establishing social relationships). The incomplete satisfaction of these needs causes dissatisfaction at the higher levels of needs (esteem and self-realization) according to Maslow's theory, which determines a low quality of life of the individual, but also of the society to which he belongs.

Thus, quality of life in single-parent families is "the end result of the policies and services offered to individuals and their families." (Matei, Sănduleasa et al. 2011, 78)

Methodology

In this research, the methodology is based on the analysis of three distinct case studies. The research method adopted has an exploratory character, allowing a deep and detailed investigation of each case, capturing the evolution over a long period of time. The cases were selected on the basis of availability, according to the criterion of the gender structure within the family, to allow a comparative and comprehensive analysis. The methods used for data collection are semi-structured interviews and participatory observation. The data collection period for participatory observation is between 2020 and 2024 and for interviews in March 11-27, 2024, face to face. The collected data were analyzed qualitatively, using the strategy of interactive synthesis. The detailed interpretation of the results highlights both the particularities of each case and the common elements, providing a holistic picture. The research questions are: (1) Are the effects on the child differentiated according to the gender structure within the family? (2) Which types are more likely to be favorable to the child's development? Through this methodology, the research aimed to provide a deep and nuanced understanding of the analyzed cases, contributing to the development of knowledge in the respective field and providing solid foundations for future research.

The demographic structure of the cases is as follows:

1. Female parent – boy child
 - a) Parent demographics: urban environment, medium level of education (completed high school), low standard of living
 - b) Child demographics: urban environment, 45 years old, average level of education (completed high school), average standard of living
 - c) The cause: divorce

2. Female parent – girl child
 - a) Parent demographics: urban environment, low level of education (without completed high school), low standard of living
 - b) Child demographics: urban environment, 23 years old, average level of education (completed high school), low standard of living
 - c) The cause: divorce
3. Male parent – girl child
 - a) Parent demographics: rural environment, low level of education (without completed high school), low standard of living
 - b) Child demographics: rural area (of origin) – urban area (currently), 35 years old, level of higher education (bachelor's degree), low standard of living
 - c) The cause: divorce

Results

Woman–boy case study

In the first case, I am talking about a male individual, who, despite family and financial difficulties, managed to overcome the shortcomings of the situation of living with only one parent, becoming a successful individual. In this case, the relationship with his father ended completely at the age of four, the father lacking any type of support, including financial.

In the absence of a male role model in the family, the child had to create one on his own, and take over the responsibilities of an adult man: to take care of his mother (the woman in the house) but also of himself (the child). Without a father, he had to deal with social stigma. His only defense, as a child, against the injustices of other children (who came from two-parent families) and their parents, was himself. The lack of financial support and the appropriation of the role of the man of the house, pushed him to start working at the age of twelve. These difficulties have led to an increase in motivation and self-esteem.

From an educational point of view, he had difficulties in adapting to the social of the educational system, had low grades and was repetitive for reasons of behavior. The interest in education and learning came, in this case, in adult life, as a self-imposed requirement.

From the point of view of social stability and closeness to other people, he had difficulties not only at school, but also in terms of professional employment, and, in general, in the entire social context. In this case, instability, often associated with failure, has been

transformed into an openness, an advantage, an increased possibility of analyzing and understanding several social environments.

Woman-girl Case Study

In this case - the family composed of the same gender, a conflictual, disastrous family relationship was created, with multiple negative effects on the child's development. The daily routine of the two women was conflict, often violent, which led to multiple placements in children's centers. The child's father left the house in the early period of the child's adolescence.

Due to the endless conflicts with her mother, the young woman had periods when she spent her nights on the streets, which is also how she ended up in such a center. In this case of a single-parent family, the conflict and the precarious financial situation, to which problems related to the mother's alcohol consumption are added, led the child to deviant behaviors.

From an educational point of view, the child had poor results, materialized by low grades and repeating a year. The precarious education had negative effects on her professional development and on her quality of life, in general.

In this case of a single-parent family of the same gender (woman-girl), the responsibility was not assumed by the child, as it is not a case of complementarity of roles. In this case, the effects on the child were distrust of people, low self-esteem, a high degree of social instability, deviant behaviors and the desire for self-destruction (consumption of alcohol and other substances, suicidal desires).

Man-girl case study

In this case, the mother left the house during the child's adolescence. The child continued a very distant, cold, inconsistent, relationship with her mother. The child had to take over the responsibilities of the woman-mother, which disrupted her development as an adult.

The lack of a female role model has led to an imbalance in her understanding of the role of femininity, and, as she declares, she has always felt a difficulty in managing to be feminine. The child who has become an adult has had difficulties in relationships with others.

Educationally, she had no behavioral problems or low grades and completed higher education. However, on a professional level, low self-esteem, distrust of people, lack of motivation limited her development, keeping her at an insufficient standard of living. This stress experienced in the most vulnerable period of the individual's life has built a fragile person, skeptical of change, of the new.

Discussion

The type of female parent-boy child arrangement is the case with the highest chances of access to mental and social harmony, due to the feminine characteristics – the low tendency to take risks, the natural predisposition towards a close relationship between the parent and the child (birth, breastfeeding) – and gender complementarity.

Children from similar gender arrangements (female parent-girl child, male parent-boy child) are less likely to develop harmoniously, due to the lack of balance, in terms of the complementarity of gender roles, and due to the lack of understanding of male or female genders. Among the cases presented, the case of a similar gender (woman-girl) presents the highest degree of instability, delinquency, the desire to harm oneself, professional and social failure.

The perspective of female hysteria and male obsession, in the analysis of the phenomenon of single-parent families and not only, is a poorly developed one and would require further study. In the absence of official and accessible statistical data that would capture the dynamics of the phenomenon of single-parent families and the effects that this type of family can have on the development, education and adult life of the child, and the analysis of the type of single-parent male-boy family, this study is limited.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of single parenthood has significant effects on the child's development, the difficulties that an individual from a single-parent family must overcome are multiple, with an increased risk of instability in adult life, and of the formation of psychological traumas that generate difficulties in the social sphere and that can lead to the failure of the individual. Further research is needed in the analysis of the possible effects on child in the context of single parenthood, but also an increase in the interest of public decision-makers in supporting these families, in developing, monitoring and implementing appropriate strategies, with a real impact on individuals, on their quality of life.

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