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Comparative Study of Children's Adjustment in Intact and Single Parent Families

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The present study was conducted to compare the behavioral problems in children from intact and single parent (mother-headed) families. Purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques were used to collect data. Sample consisted of 60 children (30 = intact families, 30 = single headed families) with an age range of 8 to 10 years. Strength and Difficulty Questionnaire (Goodman, 1999) was used to assess the behavioral problems among children. Teachers were requested to fill the English version and mothers were asked to fill the Urdu version of the measure. It was hypothesized that children from single parent families would exhibit more behavioral problems as compared to the children from intact families. Results indicated significant mean differences between the two groups in terms of behavioral problems as children from single parent families were perceived as high on behavioral problems by their parents and teachers. In addition, results indicated nonsignificant main effect of gender and nonsignificant gender and family structure interactions showing that gender does not moderate the impact of family structure on children's adjustment. Implications have been discussed.

Keywords. Intact families, single families (mother-headed), behavioral problems, middle childhood

Family is a system where all family members have interdependent relationships and behaviors (Hetherington & Parke, 1993). Main functions of family are to satisfy and to facilitate reproduction, economic services, social order, socialization, and emotional support (Berk, 2003). Family is the most important universal institution for rearing up children and plays a central role in

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the socialization of child (Santrock, 2001). Family environment not only provides the earliest and sustained source of social contact for children but also provides better understanding of child in family (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2002). Family environment has two interrelated components: *Family atmosphere* which is a combination of social, economic, and psychological factors that influence the child's development in family environment; and *family structure* that shows the composition of family unit. Main family structures are intact family, extended family, adoptive family, gay and lesbian parent family, step-parent family, and single parent family (Berk, 2003; Bilal, Tariq, Aleem, Shabbir, & Perveen, 2013). The focus of this paper is on intact and single parent family structures and their impact on children's development.

Single parent families result from separation, divorce, death, or unwed parenthood. Number of one-parent families has quadrupled in United States since 1960 (Harvey & Pauwels, 1999). Single parent families differ from intact as they lack one parent figure either mother or father. Single or intact families may further be grouped as nuclear or extended, though, single parent family if mother-headed has lesser chance to live as nuclear in Pakistani society. The extended family is a household that consists of parents, their children, and other relatives who live in proximity with each other. The extended family has an important role in providing childcare support (Caparas, 2011). Nuclear family is comprised of only parents and their children (Berk, 2003; Bilal et al., 2013).

The number of single parent families due to divorce is increasing both in West and in Pakistani society. In 1998, four out of five U.S children of single parent families were headed by their mothers (Lugaila, 1998). In Pakistan divorce rate is also increasing. According to council divorce register, the total number of registered divorce has increased from 98 cases in 1995 to 314 in 2005 (Hassan, 2011). The mortality rate of adult male per 1,000 in Pakistan is 189.3. Either, it is death or divorce, growing up in single parent family has negative consequences for young children as compared to their counterparts. Research has shown that children living in single parent families show higher levels of externalizing and internalizing problems as compared to children from intact families (Bray & Hetherington, 1993; Hassan, 2011).

Keeping in mind the adverse impact of death/divorce on children's development, we were interested to find out the effects of such circumstances on young children. Middle childhood is a developmental period that extends from about 6 to 11 years of age, approximately corresponding to the elementary school years

(Santrock, 2001). At this stage, children acquire the skills of writing, reading, and arithmetic, and they are exposed and experience the world at larger scale. Achievement becomes the central theme of child and their self-control increases (Santrock, 2001). In middle childhood, children become more balanced, realistic, comprehensive, and conscious about their self. Unquestionably, children need the guidance and support of both parents as they try to meet the unique challenges of this particular age. Parents provide sole relationship to their children in their early years (Hetherington & Parke, 1993). It is important to note that mutual relationships of parent not only influence their own lives but their children as well. Parents provide physical and emotional support and comfort, and therefore, their dual participation is very important for household chores, which allow both parents to interact more playfully and pleasurably with their children (Santrock, 2001). It does not matter that how conflict ridden the marriage, its breakup carries a shock for children. Children may be guilty for causing the divorce or breakup; they may be afraid of future and hurt by both parents (Papalia et al., 2002). Divorce s' influence on child adjustment includes the child's maturity or age, temperament, and gender (Papalia, Gross, & Feldman, 2003). Children in single parent families rely more on themselves. These children tend to take more responsibility of household, have conflict with their siblings, and show less attachment with their family. If father is absent then child will also have less support, discipline, and control (Amato, 1987; Coley, 1998; Walker & Henning, 1997). In one study, children from divorced mothers had more internalizing and externalizing problems than children from intact families (Wood & Repetti, 2004). In addition, intact families reported higher family cohesion and parental monitoring scores than did single mother families and single mother families had more economical problems than intact families (Florsheim, Tolan, & Gorma-Smith, 1998). Researchers have provided sufficient evidence that children living in single mother households are more likely to have psychiatric disorders (Amato & Keith, 1991; Feldman, Rubenstein, & Rubin, 1988; Munroe-Blum, Boyle, & Offorod, 1989), problems in academic achievement (Abdelnoor, 2004; Demo & Acock, 1996; Dornbusch, Ritter, & Steinberg, 1991; Kinard & Reinherz, 1986; McLanahan, 1985), and behavior problems (Barber & Eccles, 1992; Kellam, Ensminger, & Turner, 1977).

Parental death is another traumatic experience for children that adversely affect their well-being. However, the effect of parental death may vary with gender, age, culture, and ethnicity. Research has indicated many negative outcomes of parental death (either mother or

father) including higher risk of substance abuse, depression, criminal behavior, and poor academic performance (Ellis, Dawrick, & Lioyd-Williams, 2013). In addition, father's death leads to more negative effects for sons as compared to daughters and mother's death have more adverse effects for daughters than sons (Mark, Jun, & Song, 2007). Research has shown that adolescents with both living parents use different coping strategies as compared to their counterparts. Adolescents with both living parents employed more active, distractive, and religious focused coping as compared to those with one parent (Kausar & Munir, 2004). The effects of death and divorce may differ for children. Previous findings indicate that adverse influence of parental death is less severe than parental divorce (Felner, Ginter, Boike, & Cowen, 1981). Children whose one parent died show less behavioral problems and high competency as compared to children from divorced family. Moreover, children from death or divorced families show elevated levels of behavioral problems as compared to children from intact families (Felner et al., 1981).

However, the support is largely from Western culture and very little evidence is available from our society where the divorce rate has increased. Therefore, the main objective of the present study was to extend the literature by finding the links between single parenthood (mother-headed families) and children's behavioral problems. It was hypothesized that children from single parent (mother-headed) families would exhibit elevated levels of behavioral problems as compared to children from intact families. Moreover, we were also intended to find out the gender differences among children behavioral problems.

Method

Sample

Purposive sampling technique and snowball sampling was used to collect data. The inclusion criteria had three conditions: 1) only mother-headed families were included 2) the duration of death or divorce was two years 3) the families both intact and single parent were taken from middle and upper middle social class.

Sample consisted of 60 children (30 from intact families and 30 from single parent families) and their mothers. Single parent families consisted of 17 death cases and 13 divorce cases. The researcher included both in single parent group due to the unavailability of the sample. Children's age ranged from 8 to 10 years (M = 8.88, SD = 1.32). Mean age of mothers at the time of data collection was 36.53 (SD = 5.0). Data was collected from private schools only.

Teachers were also contacted and only those teachers were included who had been teaching the children for minimum of one year.

Instruments

Strength and Difficulty Questionnaire (SDQ). This questionnaire was developed by Goodman (1999) to assess the behavioral problems of children. The SDQ is a brief screening questionnaire that asks about 25 attributes both positive and negative, such as considerate of other people's feelings, many worries, often seems worried. The responses can be marked on three options: *not true, somewhat true, and certainly true*. The 25 items are divided between 5 subscales of 5 items each including, Conduct Problems, Hyperactivity, Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, and Prosocial Behavior. Except Prosocial Behavior subscale, all are summed to generate the total difficulty scores. Three versions of SDQ exist: the self-report, the parent report, and teacher report. The teacher rated form was used in English for teachers and parent rated form was used in Urdu translated by Syed, Hussein, Azam, and Khan, (2009). High inter-correlation (r = .59) between Child Behavior Checklist (Urdu version) and SDQ (Urdu version) on Pakistani children have been reported by Syed et al. (2009).

The total difficulty score ranges from 0 to 40. Low score range from 0-13 where as high score ranges from 17-40 showing elevated levels of behavioral problems. Satisfactory reliability has been reported. Alpha reliability of SDQ is .73 and test-retest reliability is .62 (Goodman, 2001).

Procedure

After getting permission from school authorities, consent letters and demographic sheets were sent to parents through children to get their permission. After getting demographic forms, the sample was selected according to sampling criteria. However, for single parent families, the researcher had to use snowball technique. Many families refused to participate and it was difficult to find only mother-headed divorced families. Therefore, death cases (only mother-headed in which fathers were not alive) were also included. Mothers were contacted at their homes. First they were explained the purpose of the study and then they were requested to fill SDQ-Parent Form. Teachers were given SDQ-Teachers Form at school and were requested to rate the children on the scale.

All ethical requirements were fulfilled. The families were assured that the data was used only for research purposes. The research study was approved from Research Board of GC University, Lahore.

Results

The present study was conducted to study the adjustment problems between children from intact and single parent (mother-headed) families. The first step of analysis consisted of reliability analysis of SDQ. Inter-rater reliability of teacher and parent rating forms of SDQ was also calculated. To compare behavioral problems of single and intact families, *t*-test was run and to find out whether gender moderated the relationship between family structure and children's adjustment, univariate analysis was done. The present study used the total score of SDQ which indicates overall behavioral problems among children and not the subscales. However, for more deep understanding one-way ANOVA was run to compare conduct problems and hyperactivity among children from intact and single parent families. The analysis was run both for PRS and TRS.

Reliability Analysis

Alpha coefficient was calculated and was found to be $\alpha = .50$. Teacher rating forms were given to teachers and to find out inter-rater reliability the forms were given to another group of 10 teachers to rate the same children on SDQ. The correlation between two groups (group 1 = 10 teachers: group 2 = 10 teachers) of teachers were calculated. The results indicated high inter-rater reliability ($r = .92$). In addition, correlation between teachers' and parents' ratings were also calculated and was found to be high ($r = .82$), supporting the reliability and validity of the measure.

Comparison of Divorce and Death Cases in Single Parent (mother- headed) Group

Single Parent Group included 17 death and 13 divorce cases. *t*-test was run to study the difference of behavioral problems between the children of these two groups. Results show nonsignificant mean difference between children of death and divorce cases both on parent {death: $M = 19.1(SD = 5.3)$; divorce: $M = 18.2$ ($SD = 6.74$) and teacher rating {death: $M = 17.53$ ($SD = 5.74$) divorce: $M = 18.46$ ($SD = 7.07$) scales of SDQ.

Behavioral Problems among Children from Intact and Single Parent Families

To test the hypothesis *t*-test was run for both parent and teacher rating forms of SDQ (See Table 1).

Table 1

Mean Differences of Children's Score on SDQ (PRS, TRS) of Intact and Single Families (N = 60)

	Intact (n = 30)		Single headed (n = 30)				95 % CI		Cohen
Variables	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*	LL	UL	's *d*
PRS	11.00	3.56	18.67	5.89	6.09	.000	-10.19	-5.15	0.65
TRS	11.27	4.11	17.93	6.24	4.88	.000	-9.40	-3.93	0.54

Note. PRS = Parent Rating Scale; TRS = Teacher rating Scale

Results indicate that children from single parent (mother-headed) families exhibit elevated levels of behavioral problems as compared to children from intact families. The difference is significant $t(58) = -6.095$, $p < .001$ with an effect size of $r = 0.65$. Results also indicate that children from single parent (mother-headed) families are perceived high on behavioral problems as compared to children from intact families by their teachers. The difference is significant $t(58) = -4.883$, $p < .001$ with an effect size of $r = 0.54$.

Gender Moderation between Family Structure and Children's Adjustment

To test the hypothesis of gender moderation between family structure (intact or single) and children's behavioral problems, univariate analysis (Two way ANOVA) was done both for parent and teacher rating forms (see Table 2 & 3).

Results indicate significant main effect of family structure on SDQ parent ratings of children. Children from single (mother-headed) families are perceived high on behavioral problems as compared to children from intact families. The main effect gender is nonsignificant. In addition, results show nonsignificant gender × family structure interactions, showing that gender does not moderate the effect of family structure (single or intact) on children's adjustment. Girls and boys both from intact and single families show higher level of behavioral problems.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Children's Score on SDQ (PRS & TRS) from Intact and Single families (N = 60)

	Behavioral Problems (PRS) (n = 30)			Behavioral Problems (TRS) (n = 30)		
Family Structure	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*N*	*M*	*SD*
Intact						
Girls	12	12.08	2.81	12	11.75	4.90
Boys	18	10.28	3.89	18	10.94	3.6
Single						
Girls	14	19.29	7.04	14	18.29	5.72
Boys	16	18.12	4.86	16	17.62	6.85

Table 3

F-values of Children's Score on SDQ (PRS) from Single and Intact Families (N =60)

Source	*SS*	*df*	*MS*	*F*	*p*
Corrected model	915.198	3	305.066	12.719	.000
Intercept	13095.464	1	13095.464	545.996	.000
Family Structure	830.191	1	830.191	34.614	.000
Gender	32.251	1	32.251	1.345	.251
FS×Gender	1.524	1	1.524	.064	.802
Error	1343.135	56	23.985		
Total	15460.000	60			
Corrected Model	2258.333	59			

Note. R^2 = .40, adj. R^2 = .37, $p < 0.05$

The same univariate analysis was run with teachers rating forms (see Table 2 & 4). The main effect of family structure is significant. However, the main effect of gender and gender × family structure interactions is nonsignificant.

Table 4

F-values of Children's Score on SDQ (TRS) from Single and Intact Families (N = 60)

Source	*SS*	*df*	*MS*	*F*	*p*
Corrected model	674.59	3	224.86	7.80	.00
Intercept	12589.24	1	12589.24	436.85	.00
Family Structure	640.24	1	640.24	22.22	.00
Gender	7.88	1	7.88	.27	.60
FS×Gender	.07	1	.07	.00	.95
Error	1613.80	56	28.81		
Total	15078.00	60			
Corrected Model	2288.40	59			

Note. R^2 = .29, adj. R^2 = .25, p<0.05 .

The present research used the total score of SDQ as the indication of behavioral problems among children, however, for more deep understanding, one-way ANOVA was run to compare conduct problems and hyperactivity (subscales of SDQ) among children from intact and single parent families (see Table 5).

Table 5

Mean Differences of Children's Score on Subscales of SDQ (Conduct Problems & Hyperactivity) of Intact and Single families (N = 60)

	Intact Familie (n = 30)		Single Families (n = 30)			
Variables	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*f*	*p*
PRS Conduct Problems	1.83	1.68	4.43	1.79	33.50	.000
Hyperactivity	4.23	2.13	5.93	2.91	6.67	.012
TRS Conduct Problems	2.30	1.93	4.90	1.73	30.10	.000
Hyperactivity	4.33	1.90	5.70	2.64	5.29	.025

df = (1, 58), $p < .001$.

Results indicate significant mean differences between children of intact and single families on conduct problems and hyperactivity. Children from single families show higher levels of conduct problems and hyperactivity as compared to children from intact families on conduct problems and hyperactivity on parent rating scale. Teachers also perceive that children from single families as high on conduct problems and hyperactivity as compared to children from intact families on conduct problems and hyperactivity subscales.

Discussion

The present Study was designed to compare the behavioral problems among children from intact and single parent (mother-headed) families. It was hypothesized that children from single parent families will exhibit more behavioral problems than children from intact families. It was also intended to study the gender as a moderator between family structure (intact/single) and behavioral problems of children.

Results of the present research have supported the hypothesis that children from single parent families exhibited higher levels of behavioral problems as compared to children from intact families. Prior researchers have also provided evidence that children living in single mother households are more likely to have psychiatric disorders (Amato & Keith, 1991; Feldman et al., 1988; Munroe-Blum et al.,

1989), low academic achievement (Demo & Acock, 1996; Dornbusch et al., 1991; Kinard & Reinherz, 1986; McLanahan, 1985, 1997), and elevated levels of behavior problems (Barber & Eccles, 1992; Kellam et al., 1977). In addition, children from remarried and divorced families exhibit high risk for internalizing problems, including increased levels of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, unemployment, drop out from school, substance abuse, delinquency, and early activation of sexuality than children of intact families (Bronstein, Clauson, Stoll, & Abrams, 1993; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Wood & Repetti, 2004). The present findings are in line with the earlier research and indicate the importance of father figure for children's development. It is suggested that absence of father may lead to elevated levels of behavioral problems as externalizing and internalizing problems among children. Moreover, single parent families also lack that cohesion and parental monitoring that characterizes intact families which play crucial role for optimal development of children. The economic difficulties have also been suggested as one leading cause that may lead to behavioral problems among young children (Florsheim et al., 1998).

According to literature the loss of parent figure may contribute to the development of variety of psychiatric disorders and such experience can make a person emotionally vulnerable to life. This special vulnerability of children is attributed to the developmental immaturity and insufficiently developed coping capacities (Kliman, 1980). Along with medical and psychiatric consequences the parental bereavement leads to adverse impact on school functioning both in academic performance and social behavior, including dropout, decreased interest in school activities, and school refusal. Delinquency has also been found to correlate with parental loss. It may also lead to vulnerability during adulthood to a variety of serious disorders such as depression, schizophrenia, psychosis, physical illness, and antisocial behavior (Black, 1974; Lifshitz, 1976; Raphael, 1983). The present research findings have supported the earlier one showing significant mean differences between children of intact and single parent families on conduct problems and hyperactivity. Mothers from single parent families perceived their children as having elevated levels of conduct problems and hyperactivity as compared to mothers from intact families. Similarly children from single parent families were perceived high on conduct problems and hyperactivity by their teachers as compared to children from intact families. The results are consistent with earlier findings showing high levels of behavioral problems among children of single parent families (Bronstein et al., 1993; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Wood & Repetti, 2004).

It was also intended to study gender moderation between family structure and children's adjustment. Our nonsignificant family × gender interaction revealed that gender does not moderate the relation between the two. Boys and girls from single parent families (mother-headed) were found to be equally affected by the absence of their father.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Suggestions

The overall results of the study are in in line with existing literature, showing the importance of the presence of both father and mother figure. Absence of father either due to death or divorce put children on risk to develop behavioral problems, delinquency, and make them vulnerable to develop serious psychiatric disorders during adulthood (Raphael, 1983). One of the limitations was that the researcher included both death and divorce cases due to the unavailability of the sample. We found nonsignificant mean difference between children of death and divorce cases on SDQ scores from single parent group (mother-headed). However, these results might be due to small sample. It may also due to the age group of the children of the present study as the impact of trauma (parental death) in children depends heavily on the life stage during which the event occurs (Kilman, 1980). It is, therefore, suggested to conduct further studies with larger sample to find out the impact of family structure and difference of children's adjustment among various family structures.

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