Mothers and Children Alone: The Stamp of Poverty

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ABSTRACT: The contributions from a variety of potential sources of emotional and economic support are evaluated as well as their impact on female-headed households in a university community. A qualitative, in-depth interview investigation of 36 single mothers is summarized; illustrative quotations and marginal tabulations are provided. The single mothers considered in this study report great difficulty in balancing their own needs for a social life with the needs of their children. These low-income mothers are well educated; their life situations can only be described by the word “struggle.” Same-sex friends offer considerable support, but economic and child care needs stand out strongly as needs that are often unmet. Their dependency on the welfare system is determined to be an interim need. Mothers in this sample were trying to find work, go to school, and parent while maintaining some social life for themselves and for their children. Coping strategies are discussed, as are the strengths of mother-headed families.

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One in five children under eighteen lived in a single-parent family in 1980, and by 1990 one in four children will probably live in such a family (U.S. Census, 1981). It is likely that 50 percent of children born in 1978 will live in a single-parent family prior to age eighteen. The reasons for this are complex, but the high (and increasing) rate of divorce and separation and the ever-present never-married mother account for most of the single-parent families.

Statistics about the increasing proportion of single-parent families do not inform us about their lives. What are the main struggles and strengths of mother-headed families? How do mothers feel about the support and gaps in support they experience?

Given the 30 percent drop in remarriage rates between the 1970 and 1980 Census surveys (U.S. Census, 1981), the quantity of single-parent families can be expected to increase over time (especially when the economy improves and the divorce rate escalates as more money

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Alternative Lifestyles, 6(4), Summer 1984
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becomes available for divorce). Single-parent families are becoming more and more of a common family form with a range of lifestyle adaptations. All of this points to the importance of improving the quality of single-parent family life.

More than half of all female-headed households face severe economic hardship (U.S. Census, 1981). Since 90 percent of single-parent families are headed by women, the increasing cost of living and the gap between male and female salaries combine to underline the disadvantaged status of mother-headed households. A related concern is the low level of economic support from the welfare system. As Burden comments:

As things stand now, once alone, the typical single mother faces virtual absence of social supports. The United States is the only nation in the industrialized world (85 nations) that does not provide a series of family support systems as a basic right to all family members. . . . The only governmental support system available to single mothers is AFDC, which is at best a minimal system and at worst a punitive program, reflecting the general stigmatization and negative social attitudes held toward women and children who are not supported by a man (Burden, 1978:6).

Public policies and laws are based on myths about the American family. The model family is the traditional family with a working father, a full-time housewife at home, and exactly two children. But in reality this family form accounts for a mere 5 percent of all American families (U.S. Department of Labor, 1981)!

Although in this study we were not testing a preconceived theory, we were guided by role theory, specifically the impact of multiple roles on the relative satisfaction of single-parent family life. Previous studies by Van Meter and Agronow (1982) and Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1978) effectively concluded that roles and conflict of role expectations and everyday pressures to provide child care, nurturance, and basic income were often in conflict.

Van Meter and Agronow (1982) found that the need for child care and the actual quality of child care were predictors of role strain when their sample of married college mothers undertook multiple roles. Similarly, Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1978) indicated that single mothers had less of a social life than single fathers. This was particularly true of nonworking mothers who had fewer social contacts. They also found that a mother’s effectiveness and a child’s adjustment were enhanced by frequent contact between the father and the children and by support from parents, siblings, and close friends (especially divorced friends and intimate male friends).