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Running Head: CHILDREN IN SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES

An exploration of the perceptions of family among children in single-parent families in Macao

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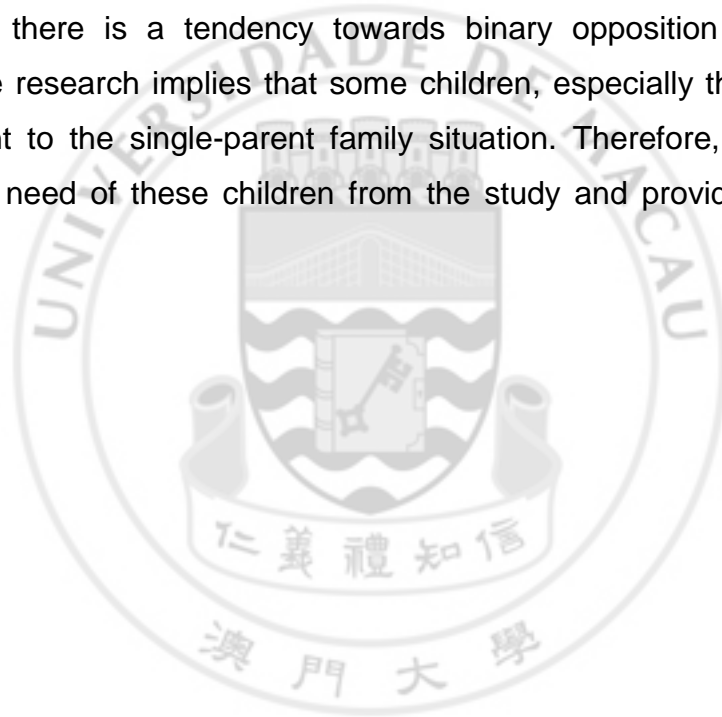
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Abstract

The divorce rate in Macao is increasing rapidly, and more children are experiencing the transition from intact family to single-parent family. While many studies have found this transition to be destructive to children's psychological development, it is important for us to stand in their perspectives and understand more about how they feel. I have therefore carried out a qualitative study to explore the relationship patterns of children living in single-parent families in Macao. The participants were children aged from 9 to 12 years old, including one girl and four boys. I have used Collage Life story Elicitation Technique (CLET) as a tool to carry out my research. The collages show a distant relationship, and there is a tendency towards binary opposition within their close relationships. The research implies that some children, especially the boys are having poorer adjustment to the single-parent family situation. Therefore, psychologists can acknowledge the need of these children from the study and provide suitable help for these children.



Introduction

Divorce is becoming more prevalent in many developed countries (Fan & Liu, 2004). Many first marriages in the United States of America, for example, are likely to end in divorce (Lillard and Waite, 1990 as cited in Fan & Liu, 2004). Moreover, data show that divorce is no longer a phenomenon that is only popular in foreign countries. Official statistics reveal the number of divorces in Hong Kong was 13,425 in 2001, while compared to 2,060 in 1981 (Fan & Liu, 2004). In Macao, the number of divorced men and women tripled since 1998 (DSEC, 2008). Therefore, the prevalence of single-parent families in Macao has increased markedly during the past ten years. Generally, children in single-parent family are either in one of the following situations, i.e. parental divorce, parental death and being born out of wedlock (Wang, 2000). Bumpass and Sweet (1989) found that for most of the children in America, once they start living in single-parent families, will remain in this situation throughout their childhood.

Studies found that it is difficult for children adjusting themselves with the marital disputes between parents (Sit, 2000). There is a lack of cohesive relationship in the family environment before the divorce (Riggio, 2004). Due to the constant arguments, there will be a decreasing love and an increasing negative emotion within the family. This difficult situation certainly affects the psychological development of a child. Some younger children even feel guilty about the divorce as they attribute themselves as the cause of this separation (Yang, Lin & Li, 2000). Moreover, many findings have shown that parental marital conflicts and divorce have negative impacts on children, including poorer academic, social and psychological growth (Amato & Booth, 1991; Amato & Keith, 1991; Booth & Edwards, 1990 as cited in Riggio, 2004), and as fewer friendship networks (Dunn, Davies, O'Connor and Sturgess, 2001).

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of children in middle childhood (aged 9-12 years) of the relationship with different people around them, including parents and friends. I aim to explore how they feel and perceive growing up in this different setting. In this study, a single-parent family refers to a divorced family with either a mother or father living with their children in the same household. In this project, I am going to explore children's feelings, expectation and perceptions towards their

single parent by understanding their perceptions and stories of confiding, participating in family activities, conflict management and so more. Since the situation is becoming more widespread, it is important for their parents, psychologists and educators to understand more about the children who grow up in a different family setting. When the authority realizes the needs of these families, they can assist with financial or counselling service whenever necessary.

According to Erikson, children in this stage are resolving the industry versus inferiority issues. To go through this stage successfully, children need to gain competence through mastering skills and completing tasks of their culture. For children growing up in single-parent family, they might face lots of incompetence in school as being a minority among classmates. For example, whenever there is a parent day while both parents are invited for school party. Children from single-parent family would find themselves inferior once they compare themselves with their schoolmates. When compared to many children in intact families, children from single-parent family might find it more difficult to get along with people with the same sex of the non-custodial parent (Yang, Lin & Li, 2000). The normal parent-child relationship is affected and children become more angry, aggressive and resentful during the time of parental separation since the household has to be reorganized. This phenomenon is more popular in Asian countries while completeness of a family is highly valued (Sit, 2000). Even when a child from single-parent family studies hard and completes college degree, he/she is still perceived as bad by future employers (Baumeister, 2008). Furthermore, children in a one-parent family obtain fewer resources from parents, including money, time and parental support (Papalia, Olds & Feldman 2008). This directly lowers their self-esteem and negatively affects their self-concept (Yang, Lin & Li, 2000). Since school age children are very sensitive to this comparison, they are more prone to loneliness, anxiety and depression (Yang, Lin & Li, 2000), parental pressure and loyalty conflicts (Papalia, Olds & Feldman 2008). They are still scared about being abandoned and rejected by the family and/or the parents, so their relationship with the custodial and non-custodial parent continues to be important for their psychological growth.

Besides these negative evidences, there are some positive findings in single-parent families. Walker, Hennig and Krettenauer (1997) revealed that there are greater

mutual intimacy and nurturance in single-parent family than intact family. That means living in a single-parent family may not be the main explanation for all those negative outcomes stated above. There are also many successful people and great leaders who come from single-parent families, for example, Obama, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Father Sun Yat-sen (Liu, 2008).

However, children from single-parent families face many unfavourable conditions, e.g. being discriminated, parental pressures in academic work, and emotional disturbance when the divorce happens. Therefore, witnessing this change can become stressful for children when they are capable for abstract thinking and understand the underlying meaning of this hard work. Therefore, it is essential to dig more into this single parent-child relationship through research. Linwood (2006) defined parent-child relationship as “a combination of behaviours, feelings, and expectations that are unique to a particular parent and a particular child. The relationship involves the full extent of a child's development.” Linwood further describe parent-child relationship as the most important relationship across life-span and “affected by the parent's age, experience, and self-confidence; the stability of the parents' marriage; and the unique characteristics of the child compared with those of the parent”. Some findings have already shown that children would have fewer adjustment problems, better peer relations, physical health and less failure anxiety when the parent-child relationship is good in single-parent family (Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, Nastasi & Lightel, 1986).

Here I aim to have a better comprehension of how the relationship interacts with different aspects of children's psychological development, how they get along with others and adapt themselves to the new environment. I am especially interested in understanding how the length of parental separation contributes to the children's relationship patterns with others. I also wish to explore their feelings while growing up in this broken relationship. Then, I want to know how they adjust themselves to the situation. After more exploration in this area, I hope to raise the awareness of authorities like scholars, governors, service providers and other researchers.

Method

The researcher adopted qualitative approach in this research. It is rather different

from working with a quantitative design, which offers close-ended questions and pre-defined categories to the interviewees and I think that the data are not sufficiently in-depth to create better understanding. Working with a qualitative design provides richer and deeper information about the real-life experiences of children in single-parent families. Not only the information obtained is rich, the qualitative design can facilitate exploration of a phenomenon within its perspective using various data sources. As a result, the issue is explored through many different lenses rather than a single lens. This allows the phenomenon to be understood and disclosed from multiple facets (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

In my study, I have adopted the Collage Life story Elicitation Technique (CLET), which is a qualitative method for narrative inquiry in which language proficiency and conversational skills are not emphasized (Van Schalkwyk, 2010). The narratives offer a framework for studying development (Gergen & Gergen, 2006; McAdams, 2001 as cited in Van Schalkwyk, 2010), and the collage making helps to overcome certain obstacles in the interview and disclosing rich and vivid life memories of the individuals. It is a way of understanding meanings that are hidden from consciousness and active awareness, as well as past traumas, while integrating the experiences with the present and a predicted future (Van Schalkwyk, 2010).

Since children in this stage are still developing their language skills and abstract thinking (Papalia, Olds & Feldman 2008), asking them for a normal interview which requires good logic and language proficiency would be difficult. Therefore, adopting the CLET helped the children to express their thinking and emotion in a better and more holistic way. In doing so, I have understood more about how they perceived their relationship with parents and how it has affected their psychological development.

Participants

The participants for this study were children from 9 to 12 years old, currently living in a divorced single-parent family. There were five participants in this study. Sampling was difficult due to the saving face phenomenon among Chinese in which they tend not to reveal shameful experiences to avoid losing face (Sun, 2008). Therefore, a purposive sampling strategy (Trochim, 2006) was used to intentionally

seek participant from a particular spectrum. Participants were accessed with the permission of parents, and the authorities in tuition and community centres. Letters were sent for recruiting volunteers in the above settings.

Procedures

Interviews were conducted between January and February 2010. These were held in a quiet setting either at home, or the tuition or community centre, with a table and two chairs. The whole interview lasted around 45 to 60 minutes with collage making and semi-structured questions. The setting was important to avoid disturbance during the interview and since the whole interview requires high attention. Once it is interrupted, it is difficult to draw back the participants' focus. However, there were situations, like mother returning home during the collage making section and when a mother phoned the participant during the interview section which created disturbance during the process.

The researcher conducted the interview using Cantonese as the native language since both interviewee and interviewer would feel more comfortable in speaking. Before the CLET section, participants were asked to fill in questionnaires to obtain the basic biographic data for further analysis. During the process, the interviewer was aware of any emotional signals from the interviewee and stopped questioning when needed. After the interview, participants were given a present set to thank him or her for their participation.

When carrying out the CLET, participants were asked to make a collage using pictures from 6 – 7 magazines, including three children magazines, two life magazines, and two fashion magazines, and paste them on an A3 paper to tell the story about their families. The CLET interview consisted of five steps (Van Schalkwyk, 2010). The first step was to provide materials and instructions for making the collage. Each participant was asked to include 10-12 pictures for the collage. This section lasted about 20 to 30 minutes and the researcher was aware not to provide advice or guidance when choosing the pictures. They should have sufficient freedom to do it in their own way (Van Schalkwyk, 2010).

The second to the fifth steps entailed a semi-structured interview during which

specific questions were asked to elicit rich stories about the participant's perceptions of her/his family and relationships. In the third step, participants were asked to position themselves in the picture and added an extra image in order to draw out silent voices. During the fourth step, participants were asked to reflect the conflicts between the narrative voices and the inter-subjectivities. Inter-subjectivity refers to the sharing of subjective thinking or behaviour by two or more individuals (Scheff, 2006). They were asked to select two pictures with similar meanings and one with different meaning (Van Schalkwyk, 2010). In the final step, the interviewer prompted for further conversational scaffolding. Debriefing was provided in this section, and children participants were encouraged to ask questions about the confusion that they encountered during the process (Van Schalkwyk, 2010).

Prior to the interview, both participants and their parents received a leaflet explaining the aim, confidentiality and method of the project, as well as their right to terminate the interview if they feel uncomfortable. Since the participants were under the age of 18 years old, the consent from the (custodial) parent was needed before the interview can begin. During the interview, emotions might surface, so interviewer had to be sensitive and empathic to the participants' emotional state and avoid prompting for further exploration (Van Schalkwyk, 2010). Since the topic is sensitive, especially in the Chinese culture, in order to avoid emotional disturbance, a proper debriefing was given to the participants after each interview. The participant would be referred to a social worker for further counselling service if needed.

Analysis

To create the field texts for analysis, the recorded interviews were transcribed and translated into English. After the translation, a classmate helped me to translate part of the transcription back to Chinese. If two sets of texts were 80 percent overlapping, the credibility of the field texts was ensured.

In analyzing the data with Collage Life story Elicitation Technique (CLET), there were three main steps and it started with text reduction aiming to identifying important clusters of meaning. First, I used the collage transcript to list the literal and symbolic meanings of each picture (Van Schalkwyk, 2010). Second, I started with the narrative

analysis to understand the denotation and the metaphor of the collage, and searching for the contextual meanings from each manifested symbol. This involved further examining both collage and narrative and looking for the positive and negative images, high point or low point and the distance between each picture. After this, it sets the path for us to find out the voices of the participants during a particular time or place. The researcher has to understand the meaning of these stories in the interviewees' perspective. The researcher would read the texts several times to help make a story grid for analyzing the symbolic meaning and metaphors. A story grid is a unique protocol for each participant that consists of i) meaning for each picture, ii) the hidden and symbolic meaning for each picture and iii) the summary for each picture in the collage (Van Schalkwyk, 2010). Then we can come to the final step of the analysis, which involves comparing each story grid, so that we can understand the lived experience of the children and perceive how they view their parents and families from specific cultural settings.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

In order to achieve the credibility of this qualitative research, I analyzed the data with different theories to reduce bias and enhance more valid interpretation. Since the CLET provides more than one type of data source, a deep understanding and transcription from rich and comprehensive literature study was needed for exploring the data. Trustworthiness was obtained by using critical and concrete story grids from the interview, and to check and re-check interpretation with the original collage, texts and literature about the topic (Van Schalkwyk, 2010). While working in progress, I also needed to focus on the overall goal, the contents and the themes of the research to obtain global, local and thematic coherence, and to create a coherent representation of the experiences of middle-aged children in single-parent families in Macao.

Findings and Discussion

There were five participants in this study. All of them were primary students living in Macao, aged from 9 to 12 years old. There were four boys and one girl and the mean age of the participants was 10.6 years old. Children in this age group are developing concrete operational thinking. They are less egocentric, more competent in logical

reasoning, e.g. understanding causality, and the law of conservation. However, their reasoning ability is only in the beginning stage (Papalia, Olds & Feldman 2008). Moreover, children in middle childhood are in a stage of industry versus inferiority, and their development of self-esteem depends on the sense of productive competence. They usually have a better control of negative emotion; the relationship with family continues to be important and the most important influence on the children's development comes from the atmosphere within the home, e.g. loving or conflicting (Papalia, Olds & Feldman 2008).

The table below shows the basic information of the interviewees, including name, age, school grade, current family members, main activities that he/she involves and their responsiveness during the interview section (Table 1). It is then followed by two collages, one from Mandy and the other from Mark (Figure 1 & 2). Pseudo names were given in the study to protect the privacy of the interviewees.

Table 1: General descriptions of the participants

| Name | Age/ School grade | Family members | Activity | Responsiveness |
|---------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|--|---|
| Bobo | 10/ primary 4 | Mother and sister | Watch cartoon/ play computer | Refuse to share in details |
| Kevin | 10/ primary 5 | Mother, sister and maid | Play violin and with the doggie | Active and tends to give quick answers, but fragmental |
| Mandy | 12/ primary 6 | Mother | Likes to draw and has a closed friend for disclosure | Revealed the family story and answer question in a coherent way |
| Andrew | 9/ primary 4 | Father and grandma | Watch cartoon | Short and superficial answers |
| Mark | 12/ primary 5 | Mother and two brothers | Watch cartoon/ play computer, has no friends | Always long silences |



Figure 1: Mandy's collage



Figure 2: Mark's collage

The analysis focused on a few main aspects. First, in terms of the mode of expression and the non-verbal cues, I observed the quality of their tone, their enthusiasm while telling the story as well as the frequency of their utterance, avoidance of eye contact and silences. From these observations, we can further manifest the latent emotions of each child toward a certain event or people. Second, the physicality of the collage, i.e. the distance, the positive and negative meanings of each picture, provided comprehension about the meaning of pictures placed far apart from each other, and the significance of choosing aggressive or loving pictures to make the collage. So, we can have a better understanding of the hidden metaphors of each story. Third, I interrogated the family stories or narratives. I have asked questions about their family members, their happy memory as well as unhappy one. Interestingly, most of their memorable reminiscences included family members. My goal here was to combine the cues from the collages and their mode of expression with all family stories to form a holistic picture of each child's perceptions of family. Finally, by comparing the different stories, observing their distance and noting their emotion, I can understand the relationship pattern of children in single-parent family and how they adjust themselves through specific settings.

Family perception representation

Family representation is the way single-parented children express their

perception of family as a developmental setting, which refers to how they perceive their family as loving or threatening. Their representations will be discussed with different aspects, including the modes of expression while they were making the family collage and sharing their stories.

Reluctance

In the beginning of the interview, I asked the interviewee to use the material from the magazines to make a collage that can tell stories about his or her family. Only Mandy managed to finish the collage with the required number of pictures (12 pictures, Figure 1). The boys found it difficult to pick pictures from the magazine and did not want to continue. Most of them ended up using only eight pictures instead of 12 pictures. One boy agreed to flip through the magazines again to find more pictures to represent his family, while another boy posted only one picture and a few light drawings on the collage (Figure 2).

This may denote their reluctance to recall the family and express freely on family issues since childhood trauma may be evoked during the collage-making process. Those family related picture may happen to elicit their repressed feelings towards their family members. Once people realize the emotion coming out from the surface was threatening and causing anxiety, they further repressed it.

Object oriented

The collages of Bobo and Mark were particularly object-oriented. The boys' collages seldom included pictures that showed any relationship with other people or emotional content. This seemingly implies a cognitive regression and an avoidance of relationship. Children in early childhood develop pre-operational stage, which can be referred to a symbolic thought (Papalia, Olds & Feldman 2008). An object, such as a doll, symbolizes a person and individual qualities. Therefore, Bobo and Mark seem to escape their current situation to a fantasy world where they can stop worrying about their families being different from other classmates'.

Emotion

Mark got particularly emotional when he flipped through the magazine. His

mother came back from work while he was choosing pictures. She scolded him to be good and listen to my instructions. He flipped harder when his mother was nagging to him and there are several times which he grasped the paper tightly and held it there for a few seconds. He ended up finding only one picture and strongly refused to flip through the magazine again. Here, Mark showed a strong repressed anger towards his mother. During the process of emotional socialization, parents discuss anger more than sadness with their sons (Fivush, Brotman, Buckner & Goodman, 2000). Therefore, anger might be Mark's only way to express negative emotion (e.g., I am unhappy and do not experience enough love). Research implicated that in the divorced family with the mother and son combination, the child would experience more negative emotions (Lam, 1995), and these are often not properly resolved. In Mark's case, his mother unknowingly elicited his anger during the interview and this might lead to more anger manifested and influence his response during the interview.

Fragmental narratives

Most children responded with very short phrases and non-committal answers. It is said to be a common phenomenon found in this age as they lack the vocabulary to explain inner feelings (Papalia, Olds & Feldman 2008). When it came to questioning specific relationship, the fragmental phenomenon became more prominent, including Mandy, Mark, Bobo. However, the children gave richer explanations when they began to talk about their hobbies. It is uneasy for people to talk about event that have great emotion hidden inside. The utterance is likely to link with the emotional aspect of the event (Fivush, Brotman, Buckner & Goodman, 2000). Since talking about family and relationships might involve a great emotion in which the triggering event is unpleasant that they tend to avoid.

Silence

When they were asked to describe each picture, they either went through them very quickly or gave very brief explanations for each picture. Moreover, long silences or a quick shift of topic was found between conversations when it came to parent-related topics. For example, I had to ask a question twice before he/she could tell me something. For Mark, he refused to tell anything about his dad (non-custodial parent)

even being asked several times. His face was blank and he kept shaking his head when I asked questions about daddy. This can further illustrate the repression of the negative event happened in the family and the negative perception towards family.

J: Can you tell me something about your daddy? How's daddy?

M:

J: Huh?

M:

J: Anything?

M: (shake head)

Eye Contact

Most interviewed children in this project avoided eye contact while they were sharing their stories. They tended to look down or look around the environment. One of them even turned his head when I tried to look into his eyes. This can further illustrate their avoidance to talk about family issues. It might be too intrusive for them to talk about this sensitive topic in front of a stranger and more intrusive when I tried to enter their world through the direct eye contact.

Through observing the mode of expression, the interviewees showed withdrawal symptoms throughout the interview. They were reluctant to work on the collage, having few eye contacts, silences or incomplete sentences during the process. This kind of expression can be interpreted as an implicit way to show their anger or sadness for being apart from the non-custodial parent. Some of them attempted to separate themselves from the social group as they might perceive themselves as inferior. As a result, some of them seem to have difficulties adjusting themselves and their repression needs to be acknowledged as it indicates a need for the children towards an intact family.

Parent-child relationship

This section aims to look into the nature of the parent-child relationship. A parent-child relationship depends on the interactions between parents and their children and the quality of relationship, e.g., sensitivity, responsiveness, mutuality (Pridham, Lutz,

Anderson, Riesch and Becke, 2010). From how the children talked, react and their stories from the collage and narratives, we can examine whether the parent-child relationship is closed or distant.

Characteristics of collage

In terms of the spatial orientation on the collages, there were observable spaces between pictures in most of the collages and the space was found to be bigger in boys' collages. In Mandy's collage (Figure 1.), the whole picture is filled up with color and smiling faces. There is not much space between each image. For Kelvin and Bobo's collages, the average physical distance is about two centimeters. However, Andrew's collage shows a big space (8 centimeters) between two groups of images. He mentioned that one group represented his family and the other represented his non-custodial parent's new family. Lastly, Mark's collage (Figure 2.) only contained one picture in the middle showing vast open spaces surrounding the single image. Moreover, most of the collages were filled up with cartoon figures.

The space and object-orientation indicates distant relationship patterns among the children and their families, some cases are more serious than the others (e.g., Mark is very reluctant to give anything). Furthermore, most of the images that they choose are cartoon figures, which show immaturity and an escape into a fantasy world. Finally, even Kelvin's collage show moderate distance between each picture, there is one large image of text that talks about "stealing babies". This seems to indicate a sense of not fitting in with the family. He might feel himself as leftover and not included as a family member. Lam (1995) claims that if there is any emotional torture brought on by living in a broken family, the children might develop despair, and loneliness. Therefore, this can be one of the explanations for the distant relationships, as some children seem to exhibit isolation, withdrawal and separateness through the spatial orientation on the collage and the use of predominantly cartoon figures and other objects.

Binary opposition

Binary opposition refers to "the means by which units of language have value or meaning; each unit is defined against what it is not" (Manji, 2005). The oppositional feeling is found in their expression towards their caretaker or the custodial parent. The

parent is expected to be their favourite person at home eliciting positive emotions. Nonetheless, both negative and positive emotions were expressed in relation to the caretaker. For example, Andrew told me that grandmother is scolding his most unhappy memory. This situation also happens to other children with their family members. Bobo said that his mum would beat him when he is not behaving well, and this is what made him unhappy. However, his mother is also his favourite person at home.

B: My mum, she always gets angry.

J: She always gets angry?

B: Um.

J: Is there something related to these pictures?

B: No.

J: Have these pictures talked about her?

B: No.

J: Expect being angry usually, what do you think about mother?

B: (shake head)

J: No, I see. Is there any story?

B: No.

J: I see. Then who do you like the most at home?

B: My mum.

J: Why?

B: It's because mum help me in doing things.

Mark claimed that he likes his brothers, yet would get very furious when his brother forgot to buy him McDonalds'. From these stories, we can see that beside love, there is also fearfulness and dissatisfaction in these children relationship patterns with their favourite family members.

Custodial parent

Bobo exhibited binary opposite relationship with his custodial parent, i.e., he loves his mum, but was also afraid of her. Although Mandy, Andrew and Kelvin seem to spend a lot more time with the custodial parent, their favourite person at home is

someone else. Therefore the quality does matter when compared to the quantity in relationship. For Mark, who seems to be the most disturbed child, showed love to his custodial parent by choosing her as his favourite person, and making a wish to lessen her tiredness. However, he would get emotional when his mother talks to him. Therefore, the relationship of the child in a single parent family with their custodial parent is complicated and sensitive. So, more effort is needed to properly monitor the relationship pattern of these children and their custodial parents.

Non-custodial parent

Mark and Bobo avoided talking about their non-custodial parent and showed distinct defensiveness once we talked about it.

Bobo:

J: Um....After talking about mother, then how about father?

M: Ha.....they got divorced already.

J: Oh, I see. Then do you know something about him.

M: I don't know.

Mark:

*J: Then, after talking about mum, can you tell me something about your daddy?
How's daddy?*

M:

J: Huh?

M:

J: Anything?

M: (shake head)

This seems to illustrate detached emotion and a distant relationship with their non-custodial parent. Moreover, they became defensive and cut the conversation short when we talked about this non-custodial parent. This can refer to a stronger repression of the need for this parent. However, Mandy and Andrew became more active when they started to talk about their non-custodial parents. They even described more about their non-custodial parent than about their custodial parent. Mandy also mentioned

meeting her non-custodial parent on a regular basis where they can share and talk to each other. A craving for reunion is exhibited in these two cases. It is interesting to find out this large discrepancy among these cases and I wonder if the defensiveness is because of the great repression of the desire for a complete family.

Relationship with parents is important as it influences children psychological growth. However, some of the interviewees showed oppositional feelings towards their custodial and even remained silence when the topic was about their non-custodial parents. On the other hand, some children showed the opposite attitude towards their parents. Bauserman (2002) stated that joint custody where both parents share their time to take care their children can lead to a better adjustment of the single-parented children. The study also indicates that children's adjustment is not related to parental physical custody, but the quality of custody. Through analyzing the interview and the collage, Mandy exhibits a better psychosocial adjustment than the others as she mentions sharing her unhappiness with her father (non-custodial parent) and friend; also she has filled up the collage with happy faces. The boys seem to have a lower level of adjustment since they are more reluctant to share stories about their parents. Two out of four boys has no current contact with their non-custodial parents and they presented moderate to least psychosocial adjustment.

Attachment bonds

Abandonment

From the collected collages, we can observe distance between each picture. This may refer to their perceived social bubble in relation to other people that they tend to keep a distance with others. They might feel insecure with people around them. Also, most of the boys devoted their time to individual activity rather than sharing with family or friends (Table 1). Many of them seldom mentioned being involved in group play. Mark even claimed that he had no friends other than family members, and said that he did not want any. When we look at the surface, it seems that children like Mark is very independent and do not want to engage with group activities. However, he revealed his unhappiest event as not having McDonalds from brothers and claimed that he hates being deceived by his brothers. This might be an effect of reaction formation towards

the need for love, as he might perceive himself as being abandoned by the family. Moreover, the content in the collage is more object-oriented for Bobo and Mark. This is also a form of isolation by escaping into the unreal world and the reason why children replied in fragmental sentences and avoided eye contact with the interviewer.

Attachment

On the other hand, there is relationship closeness or longing found among their individual story and collage. This phenomenon is more obvious with the girl interviewee. Her collage is covered with people, family, couple and smiling faces. Mandy revealed with a smile that her father (non-custodial parent) would come to visit them on a regular basis. Some other children also show moderate relationship with people by showing a baby in mothers' arm and an urge to reunite with the non-custodial parent. Even the child who claimed that he does not want any friends, showed his need for relationship by putting two cartoon characters playing together. However, except Mandy, it seems that most of their needs are not fulfilled at present.

Berns (2010) states that friendship is important to human development, since it satisfies the need to belong and interact socially, and the need to develop a personal identity. Yet, Mark is obviously having low attachment, which might affect his development of social identity. Also, when the feeling of abandonment goes too extreme, children might have problem adjusting their emotion as we can see when Mark grasped the magazine. There is also an extreme situation with the children's attachment bonds. Some of them seem to mainly engage in individual activity and Mark even claimed to have no social life. However, some children like Mandy have social bonding with friends. Their feeling of belongingness varies and the better adjusted group seems to show more signs of belonging over the other group.

Gender difference

Narratives and gender difference

During the interview, Mandy has given more coherent responses than the boys. When I asked her about her family, she immediately explained to me that her father and mother got divorced many years ago since they hold different opinion with each other.

J: Okay. Then, can you tell me something about your mother? Like some story, etc.

M: ...my mum and dad, er...they knew each other in school. Then, they dated with each other, and then got married. After they got married, they have me. But...because they have different opinion and point of view, they got divorce. Although they got divorce... um... I am now living with my mother.

Although we could notice that there is still something hidden which she did not want to talk much about, the narrative expression is more cohesive and clear. When I asked the boys to tell story about their family, there were a lot of hesitation and incomplete sentences. However, most of the boys told me that they wish to have a bigger house. This can be interpreted as a hidden need for the reunion of the family. They might perceive the bigger house, which contain more room for the non-custodial parent to come back. However, they did not show this message in their narratives. Here is an example from Andrew.

J: I see. So after talking about daddy, can you share something about your mother with me?

A:

J: Are you familiar with mother?

A: Yes.

J: Have mum played with you when you were small?

A: Er...sometimes.

This difference can be attributed to the differences in socialization process. Fivush (1991 as cited in McLean, 2008) suggests that parents may be more involved with their daughters to help resolve negative affect than with their sons. Therefore, daughters are more capable of developing an elaborated self-concept, particularly in terms of emotional experiences. Thompson, Skowronski, Larsen and Betz (1996 as cited in McLean, 2008) also note that women report their memories to be more personally revealing and longer than men do. On the other hand, Berns (2010) indicates that boys suffer more from the parental separation and have poorer adjustment when compared to their female counterparts. In most of the societies, boys are taught to hide

their emotions and be strong. Moreover, Chinese society emphasizes maintaining face and men would therefore avoid any behavior that is seen as weak or incapable (Sun, 2008). Kilmartin (2007) reported that self-disclosure of men often means vulnerability and men disclosing themselves always receive social disapproval. It might be the reason to explain the stronger repression towards this traumatic event in their family. Except for Mandy, the only girl who participated in this project, it seemed that the longer the parental separation was, the more difficult it was for the boys to choose pictures that represent the family; either they took a very long time or they gave up the search early.

Limitation

Nevertheless, the sample size is too small and it is not representative enough. In addition, we do not have participants coming from the intact family. Without comparing, we are not sure if this avoidance and repressive phenomena are related to growing up in a single parent family. Therefore, further study that includes children from the intact family and more interviewees is needed to know more about children's experiences and perceptions of family.

Conclusion and Implication

The study revealed that children from single parent family seemingly have certain avoidance in forming close relationships with others. From their perspective, it seems that this parent-child relationship might arouse traumatic feeling and therefore some of them escaped it by remaining silent or not giving much information. Then, some of the children tend to show contradictory feelings towards their custodial parents. They love them but also hate them at the same time. This could imply ambivalence in the relationship, which makes it difficult for the children to adapt. Moreover, there are also gender difference observed in this relationship pattern and the level of adjustment. Boys are more repressive and hiding their feelings as opposed to the girl. This gender difference in adjustment is in line with most other research. As a result, we cannot neglect the harm done by parental divorce to these children. Some of the children are repressing their feeling and it is not good to their psychological well-being. Therefore, when a couple gets married, they should think about their future children and make decision carefully.

Moreover, among our interviewees, Mark seems to show great distress, withdrawal and self-isolation. This is very unhealthy to his psychological health and he might become antisocial when one day he cannot repress his anger towards his family anymore. Therefore, immediate counseling service is recommended. I think there would be other children from single-parent family like Mark who need immediate help. There are also some children who can adjust better than others, and who become great leaders in the society. However, they also need support to go through the adjustment process before they can become successful. Therefore, it is very helpful if more scholars and counselors come to recognize this problem. Then, they can provide proper social service to these children or educate people to think carefully before committing to a family.



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