

Do Single Mothers Differ from Non-Single Mothers in Their Parenting Styles?

A Brief Report Study

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Abstract. The paper briefly reports a study comparing the parenting styles of single mothers with a matched comparison group of married mothers. The sample consisted of 91 divorced mothers (Mage = 37.56, S.D. = 8.35) against 77 married mothers (Mage = 38.70, S.D. = 8.60). Mothers in both groups have at least one adolescent child whose age ranges from 10 to 15. Single mothers scored significantly higher on the authoritarian and the authoritative scales of parenting than non-single mothers, while the formers' scores on the permissive parenting scale was significantly lower. Moreover, single mothers rated their parenting as more authoritative than authoritarian, and more authoritarian than permissive. The study's conclusion, that single mothers retain more parental authority than non-single mothers, is discussed in light of some theoretical and methodological issues.

Keywords: Single-parent; Single-mother; Parenting styles; Child.

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Introduction

The increase in single-parent families has been a source of social concern around the world, with single-mother families far outnumbering the single-father families (Leung & Shek, 2016). The intensive and demanding social properties of present-day life may predispose the single mother to increased psychological stress, which might in turn adversely affect their parental functioning (Jones, Zalot, Foster, Sterrett, & Chestern, 2007). Divorced women experience more mental and physical health problems than do married women, underlined by prolonged stressors associated with divorce, such as decline in the standard of living, economic difficulties, and parenting issues (Amato, 2000, 2012). In comparison to married women, research from the last decades shows that divorced women exhibit more symptoms of depression and anxiety, more health problems, and more substance use (Amato, 2010).

While the above said regarding the psychological well-being of divorced women is comparable with men (Amato, 2010), in the majority of divorce cases, women are the custodial parent and therefore are exposed to greater risk of dysfunctional parenting styles and behaviors. Some evidence shows that single mothers who experience poverty and depression employed more hostile, inattentive, and harsh parenting behaviors (Eamon, & Zuehl, 2001). In addition to the mothers' emotional difficulties (e.g., depression), the usage of harsh discipline such as corporal punishment may also be elicited by the need to strictly control their children's behavior against the background of tough life conditions occasionally associated with the disadvantages of single-parent family settings. On the other hand, single mothers may also find it difficult to maintain their parental authority and exert control over the children, due to lack of time or patience, the need for practical help and emotional support, or the fear from losing the children (Lazar et al., 2009).

When single mothers and fathers employ maladaptive parenting practices, most studies in the field of marital divorce reveal that children of divorced parents manifest lower well-being and functioning indicators than their peers (Amato, 2012). For example, findings from studies conducted in Europe show that, compared to their counterparts from intact families, children of divorced parents generally tend to function less well at school, exhibit more behavioral problems (in school and in relation to sex behavior) and emotional problems (e.g., anxiety, depression, self-esteem), and show greater substance abuse inclinations (Albertini & Dronkers, 2009; Spruijt & Duindam, 2010; Størksen, Røysamb, & Moum, 2005; Tomcikova, Geckova, & Orosova, 2009).

The concept of parenting style refers to the overall attitudes and practices in children's upbringing, based on the degree of parental control and acceptance toward the child (Yaffe, 2017). The Authoritative, Authoritarian, and Permissive (Baumrind, 1971) styles differ from each other mainly in the extent to which the parent sets rules and provides guidance, explains and justifies demands and expectations, exerts control and power, and provides emotional support (Yaffe, 2013, 2017). The authoritative parent integrates consistent discipline and autonomy granting with the provision of warmth and emotional support. Contrary to the permissive parent, who encourages emotional closeness and behavioral freedom, the Authoritarian parent exerts psychological control over the child, along with strict discipline and emotional distance (Baumrind, 1968, 1971; Barber, 1996). As with the case from married families, recent studies reveal that when single mothers implement an effective parenting style (i.e., being either demanding and responsive, while practicing a consistent monitoring), their children adjust and function better in several aspects, such as performance in school and positive emotional and social development (Leung & Shek, 2016; Malczyk & Lawson, 2017).

While these findings' implications highlight the importance of understanding the parenting styles in single-parent families, few studies have addressed this issue directly. It would seem that premising the single-motherhood as impaired lead to examining its adverse effect without directly considering its fundamental nature. However, there is some evidence to suggest that single parenting may differ from paired parenting, but not necessarily for the worst. In this regard, Ghani, Roeswardi, and Aziz (2014) found single mothers to be more authoritative and authoritarian than permissive, while their authoritarian parenting was associated with few desired personality traits in their children such as openness. Even though this study did not use a control group, subject to the cultural differences these findings might suggest that single mothers exert more authority in parenting as a way of protecting and nurturing their children under the circumstances of single family settings. This evokes the question whether single mothers are more authoritative and authoritarian than their peers – non-single mothers.

The current study strives initially to address this very issue among a group of Israeli single mothers while using a control group for a comparison, in order to further clarify the dominant parenting styles in single mothers. While there is a plenty of research dealing with the single-parent family, surprisingly few studies have dealt directly with this specific issue. It was hypothesized that single mothers will differ from non-single mothers in their

parenting styles, and would report themselves as more authoritative and authoritarian than their counterparts.

Methods

Participants and procedure

The sample consisted of 91 divorced mothers (Mage = 37.56, S.D. = 8.35) against 77 married mothers (Mage = 38.70, S.D. = 8.60), which was narrowed down from a total of 186 respondents through matching the two groups on a basis of their children's age. The groups slightly, yet significantly, differ in their education level (M difference = 1.06, $p = .02$), with the single mothers reporting 13.94 (± 2.03) years of schooling on average and the married mothers reporting 15.00 (± 1.57) years of schooling on average. Mothers with at least one adolescent child, whose age ranges from 10 to 15, were conveniently sampled to actively take part in the study's data collection. Based on their reports, the children's mean ages were 12.35 \pm 2.30 (45 boys and 56 girls) in the single-parent group, and 12.71 \pm 2.77 (43 boys and 34 girls) in the non-single parent group. The groups did not significantly differ in child's age ($t(166) = .92, p > .05$), nor in the age variances. The family's number of children in the single-parent group were 2.2 \pm .70 on average, and 2.6 \pm .95 on average in the non-single parent group ($t(166) = 3.14, p = .002$).

The participants (mothers) were recruited mainly through collective appeals in learning forums of Israeli colleges, calling for mothers of teenagers to take part in a brief on-line survey on "parental authority in different family types". The collective appeals were carried out in three separate waves that unfolded over two years, while two of the waves included only divorced mothers. Responders were referred to an internet link where they were asked to read the instructions for participation, and fill in anonymously the parental authority questionnaire (PAQ), followed by basic personal details about themselves and their children (sex, age, and education). By submitting the online form, they declared their informed consent to take part in the research and to allow us to use their information. The institutional ethics committee of Ohalo academic college authorized the data collection procedure prior to its execution.

Measure

Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ)

The original PAQ contains 30 statements items and is used to classify parents into one of Baumrind's (1971) three parenting styles (Permissive, Authoritarian, and Authoritative), based on the child's self-report (e.g., "As I was growing up my parents seldom gave me expectations and guidelines for my behavior"). The response scales for an item range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The index for each parenting style is the sum of the relevant items of each scale. Thus, the total score for each parenting scale ranges from 10 to 50, with a higher score reflecting a higher specification of the style. The original PAQ is a valid questionnaire with a relatively high internal consistency and test-retest reliabilities (0.74 to 0.78) (see: Buri, 1991; Smetana, 1995), widely used in Israel (e.g., Enten & Golan, 2009; Myselles et al., 2003; Yaffe, 2017) and around the world to measure Baumrind's (1971) three basic styles of parenting. Previous research had shown supportive evidence for the PAQ's validity in its Hebrew version, with adequate rates of reliability as internal consistency (Yaffe, 2017). The current study utilized the Parent's report version (PAQ-R: Reitman, Rhode, Hupp, & Altobello, 2002), designed for the parent's self-reporting. This revised questionnaire is basically identical to the original PAQ, which was converted and validated as a parent's report version. When revising the tool, Reitman et al. (2002) maintained the original structure of the questionnaire, but converted its statements into the first person. Similar to the original tool, the PAQ-R's validity was based upon correlations against different parental constructs with conceptual relevance. In the current study, the Hebrew version of the PAQ-R recorded sufficient Alpha coefficients for the permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative scales of .85, .87, and .82 (respectively), which are consistent with the reliability data found for the tool in past research.

Results

In order to test the research hypothesis, according to which single mothers are more authoritative and authoritarian than non-single-parent mothers, a multivariate analysis of covariance (with mothers' age, mothers' education, and family's number of children held as covariates) was conducted for the differences between the mothers' groups in each parenting style (Table 1). Mothers' reports of their parenting styles did not significantly differ by the child's gender in both groups (i.e., the child's sex

did not have an effect on each of the three parenting styles of all mothers), therefore the samples in each mothers' group were treated as a whole regardless of the child's sex. Moreover, although the mothers' age did not significantly differ by group, age was held as covariate in the following analysis due to its differential correlation with the parenting styles in both groups. In this respect, the mothers' age in the single-parent group was negatively correlated with authoritarian parenting ($r = -.42, p < .001$) and positively correlated with authoritative parenting ($r = .40, p < .001$), whereas in the non-single parent group, the mothers' age was positively correlated with permissive parenting ($r = .42, p < .001$) and negatively correlated with authoritative parenting ($r = -.36, p < .005$).

Table 1

Means, standard deviations, and the results of a multivariate analysis of covariance for the differences in parenting styles by mother's group (single parent / non-single parent)

	Single mothers	Non-single mothers			
	N = 91	N = 77	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial η^2
Permissive	24.13 (6.90)	27.69 (8.41)	9.73	.002	.056
Authoritarian	31.55 (8.38)	27.05 (7.44)	13.40	.000	.075
Authoritative	37.47 (5.52)	34.15 (8.46)	9.25	.003	.053

Note: Partial η^2 is a measure of effect size after accounting for the covariates (mother's age, mother's education, and family's number of children).

Table 1 describes the scores (means and standard deviations) obtained in each mothers' group for the three parenting styles, and the results of the analysis of covariance for the differences between the groups' scores. Consistent with our hypothesis, single mothers scored significantly higher on the authoritarian and the authoritative scales, while their score on the permissive scale is significantly lower. As can be seen from Table 1, the largest effect size for the differences between the groups was observed for the authoritarian parenting style.

Moreover, a within subject view of the differences between the parenting styles scores in each group (via repeated measure analysis of variance), shows that single mothers obtained the highest score on the authoritative parenting scale, and then on the authoritarian and the permissive parenting scales (in descending order). The differences were

statistically significant between each pair parenting scales ($F(2,178) = 16.42, p < .001; \text{Partial } \eta^2 = .16$). In the non-single-parent groups, mothers also scored the highest on the authoritative scale ($F(2,150) = 16.46, p < .001; \text{Partial } \eta^2 = .18$), but with no differences between their scores on the authoritarian and permissive scales. It is noteworthy that the powers observed for the effects discussed in this section were all above 95%.

Discussion

The current study examined the differences in self-perceived parenting styles between divorced mothers and non-single mothers from intact families (i.e., married mothers). The globally growing proportion of divorced families raises the necessity of better understanding of the nature of single parenting. With women still being the dominant custody parent in single-parent families (Leung & Shek, 2016), this need is even greater with respect to mothers. In the current study, we found single mothers to be more authoritarian and authoritative parents, and less permissive parents than non-single mothers. Subject to cultural diversity, these findings correspond with the previous findings of Ghani et al. (2014) regarding the dominant parenting styles of single mothers, and reinforce the premise that single mothers use more authority and exert more control in parenting their adolescent children. Single motherhood in Malaysian society may not reflect the conservative norms derived from Islamic cultures, but rather the movement with global developments which are family-related (Ghani's et al., 2014). As single parenthood becomes more prevalent and common in such conservative countries, the resemblance in parenting styles between single mothers from these societies and their equivalents from western societies seems more plausible.

While a large body of research deals with the single mothers' vulnerabilities in the context of their children's well-being, the current study rather focuses on these mothers' adaptive and normative parenting styles, seeking to disclose which styles are dominant aiming to better understand them in relation to single-parent family settings. Subject to self-report biases, the study's findings suggest that single mothers retain more parental authority of both sorts (authoritativeness and authoritarianism). These parental inclinations of mothers who raise their children in single-family settings may resemble those identified in families of minorities and low socioeconomic status groups. In this respect, researchers point out the utilitarian value that rigid and consistent parental authority may provide in the wellbeing and safety of children in certain conditions (e.g., poverty and socio-economic hardship), where the consequences of lax parental control

and disobedience to the parent might be harmful (Kelly, Power, & Wimbush, 1992). Researchers suggest that in certain living conditions, strict parental authority in the family may be interpreted as expressions of concern, love, and protection toward the child (Randolph, 1995). This might be the case of the single mothers who intensely experience the children's upbringing while facing socioeconomic challenges, and tend to strongly perceive their duty in protecting and socializing their children. This notion may be reinforced by the current study's finding about the dominant parenting style of single mothers who, unlike their counterparts, perceived themselves as more authoritative and authoritarian parents than permissive parents.

Our findings generally strengthen recent research evidence about single mothers' affirmative parental functioning (Ghani's et al., 2014; Leung & Shek, 2016; Malczyk & Lawson, 2017), carefully suggesting that certain settings of single-parenthood among mothers may paradoxically elicit more adaptive parenting functioning (in the form of parental control and authority), rather than maladaptive parenting. This assumption is yet to be elucidated, since the majority of research studies still link divorce-related settings and single-parenting with poor adjustment outcomes for the children (for example: Albertini & Dronkers, 2009; Spruijt & Duindam, 2010). Greater research attention should be given to the aspect of parenting styles per se among single mothers, in an attempt to further refine its profile against the background of single parenthood. It is not impossible that the single-parent's parenting style is confounded by some adverse divorce-related aspects in the context of the children's well-being. In this equation, accounting for the parenting styles of single mothers mainly as a moderating factor may contribute to further clarify the phenomenon.

The study's findings are limited in several aspects. First and foremost, given the convenient sampling employed in the current study, it fails to properly represent the Israeli single mothers' population in several demographic variables (especially, socioeconomic status, and education). Therefore, the current study's findings might apply to only a limited part of this population. Additionally, a considerable aspect that was not taken into account in the current study's variables is the duration since the divorce in the single-mothers group. Regardless of the methodological reasons, this is a major issue to take into account when considering the study's conclusions, due to its direct relevance to the single-family's adjustment and the functioning of its members. Ultimately, to assess the participants' parenting styles, the study used the mothers' subjective self-reports, which might take a toll on the accuracy in reflecting the actual parenting style. Especially in respect to specific groups such as single parents, using self-reports of the mothers alone might be vulnerable to the social desirability bias. In order to

further reinforce the current study's conclusion, a replication study should utilize a multiple informants design (e.g., mother and child) to cross-validate the mother's index of parenting styles.

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