

Family Diversity from a Social Worker Perspective

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Introduction

The emergence of a new family structure necessitates the refocusing of the social workers' understanding of family diversity. There has been a continued debate on the effects of the structure of a family on the development of children- socially, emotionally, and intellectually. Although, as will be seen in the proceeding sections of this paper, the negative effects of single parenthood on the development of a child have yet to be determined in more certainty. There are a myriad of factors that lead to the increase of single parenthood and its effect on child development; hence, social workers are called upon to understand family diversity. Crucial to the effective performance of the work of a social worker is the understanding of family diversity.

Single Parent Families

The term family, although acknowledged to be the basic unit of society by social scientist, has seen changes in its definition today. According to Baca Zinn & Eitzen, (1990), “[T]he standard American family became defined by three features: a nuclear unit; mother, father, and children; and a gendered division of labor” (as cited in Patterson, 2001, p. 28). This definition was criticized by Patterson (2001) for being too limited and would result in the exclusion “of couple who have no children, older couples whose children are grown and gone, and extended families, which include more than one single family residing in close proximity” (p. 28).

The U.S. Bureau of Census reported in 2001 that “there are now over 12 million single parent households approximately 10 million of which are maintained by mothers” (as cited in Walsh, 2003, p.121). Moreover, citing the reports of Furstenberg & Cherlin (1991) and Lamb, Sternberg, & Thompson (1997), Walsh (2003) noted that “[E]ven though many divorced single parents [are] likely to remarry, over half of the children born in the 1990s will spend some or all

of their childhood in a single-parent household” (p.121). There are a variety of ways by which single families are formed. Some are formed by force of circumstances while other are formed because it was the best option for the family’s well-being. As explained by Golombok (2000), “[A]lthough most results from their parents’ separation or divorce, some lose a parent through death and others have had only one right from the start” (p. 3).

The concern of many social scientists on the effect of single parenthood on the development of the child has persisted over the years. According to Thomas & Hoching (2003) “[T]he increase in divorce and separation has created much confusion over what is best for the child” because the usual way of rearing the child had been assumed by two parents has changed, in some circumstances, to the state intervening for the better interests of the child (p. 26). There are other competing claims as to the effect of single parenthood on child development in general and on childrearing in particular.

Golombok (2000) stated that “[T]he outcomes for children in single parent families depend to a large extent on the circumstances of their lives as more and more cases have proven that within two years, most of the children of the divorced parents are able to cope with the emotional and behavioral problems that come with the separation of their parents (p. 5). The effects of single parenthood seem to vary depending on the environment of the children. For instance, many children have been easy in accepting the fact of separation their parents while others can take such separation to be difficult to accept (Golombok, 2000, p. 3).

In spite the increase in the number of single parents in the United States, the stigma associated with single parents and children of single parents persists. Scholars continue to find consensus on the nature and magnitude of family structure effects on children (Glen & Sylvester, 2006, p. 11). Some have considered that family structure negatively affects the development of a

child while others have accepted the fact that even with single parents, there are evidences that children have fully developed emotionally and intellectually despite their circumstances (Glen & Sylvester, 2006, p.3). According to Hawkins and Eggebeen (1991), “[I]n contrast to the stereotyped view of single-parent households as inherently deficient, most single parents provide the structure, values, and nurturance that their children need despite the challenges and criticisms they encounter. Their homes are not broken, their lives are not miserable, and their children may have problems, but most eventually thrive.” (as cited in Walsh, 2003, p. 123). Likewise, Patterson (2001) argued that “successful single parent households challenge the notion that the healthiest family structure requires two parents”.

In addition to the stigma being associated with single parenthood, there are economic issues that a single parent has to deal with- ranging from physical vulnerability to financial hardships. As aptly described by Walsh (2003), the number of single parents “is growing across all socio-economic groups, with the greatest increase among affluent and educated” (p. 122). It cannot be ignored, however, that the category of single parents has included “an increasing number of never-married poor minority women struggling to raise two or more children as they are pressured to move from welfare to work (Walsh, 2003, p. 122). Walsh (2003) reported that although a “considerable data show that single parents in comparison to their married counterparts are more likely to be depressed and to have children who are more likely to have social and emotional problems, [M]any of these studies do not address the relative impact of poverty (p. 124).

Beyond the pressure and stress that single parents have to deal with, they are also very much concerned with providing finances to their respective family. Some single parents, specifically mothers who never worked in their entire life, would be forced to work in a full-time

basis. This does not only adds pressure to single parenthood but more importantly, it limits the time that the mother has to spend with her children.

Social Workers Understanding of Family Diversity

According to Walsh (2003), “[G]iven the prevalence of the single-parent family form, gaining or understanding of the needs, strengths, and challenges of single parents and their children is crucial” (p. 121). It is crucial for the social workers especially those that provide services and assistance to family, parents, and children to improve their social and psychological well-being.

There are a myriad of aspects that contribute to social workers understanding of family diversity in child rearing practices and single parent families. First, as correctly put by Pryor (2004), “[P]arenting is a challenge in all families, even those who have the obvious advantage of two competent and harmonious parents with children who are wanted and loved. However, when there are variations in family structure and relationship . . . then there are extra challenges to be faced” (p.110). The understanding of the social and economic issues that affect single parents have to deal with would make social workers more effective in their work.

Another aspect is the reality that “[M]any of the single-parent families are built on a foundation of a loss, whether the loss of a partner or the loss of a dream” (Walsh, 2003, p.122). By taking into consideration the reality that single parenthood is more than the physical loss being felt by children as well as by the single parents, the social worker would be able to take the situation in more depth. Moreover, the social support system available to single parents definitely affects the coping of those caught in this situation.

To cope with the many issues that single parents have to face, there are various resources available to them. There are government welfare programs that help single parents not just financially but also, and more importantly, morally. The existence of the social support system that include the extended family of single parents and the children of single parents also helps in the coping aspect of the loss. This support system also include non-government organizations that provide assistance and counseling to single parents.

Conclusion

The role of social workers in understanding family diversity provides more depth in the analysis and in providing assistance to single parents and their children. It is crucial for the social worker to look at the myriad of issues that single parents and their children have to face as well as the several factors that would facilitate or hinder the full development of the children who are confronted with family diversity issues.

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