Revisiting the Inner Child: Experiences and Emotions of Growing Up from a Solo-Parent Environment

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Abstract— Inner child refers to childhood experiences that often result in currently shaped personality traits and maladjustments. When explored among children of solo parents, such childhood experiences are often neglected as the own challenging experience of the solo parent is mostly given attention. Karen Horney also argued that social behavior is influenced and characterized by early childhood experiences which prompted us to select and interview 15 young adults who grew up in a solo-parent environment so that we may explore how their childhood experiences resulted in behaviors that revolved toward moving towards, against, and away. With this, we also investigated the emotions that they experienced during such time of growing up in a solo parent environment which revealed that when revisited, they still re-experience feelings and emotions of shock, anger, and worry during the separation stage and while they were growing up, such emotions affected how they adjusted towards interpersonal relationships which suggest that when their inner child is revisited, they feel neglected and rejected.

Keywords: Inner Child, Interpersonal Theory, Karen Horney, Single Parent Psychology.

I. INTRODUCTION

Revisiting the concept of the inner child, Agulana (2013) emphasized the significant role of the family in shaping a child's development during their formative years. It is within the family environment that children acquire crucial psychological, moral, and spiritual foundations (Part, 2013). However, the landscape of parenting has evolved, leading to a rise in single parenthood cases. This shift in family structure has raised questions about the unique experiences and effects on children growing up in solo-parent environments (Gordon, 2014). Research suggests that the presence of both parents tends to promote better childhood development (Stephen & Udisi, 2016). Nonetheless, the experiences and emotions of children in solo-parent households have often been overlooked or given limited attention, prompting researchers to explore this phenomenon using a qualitative approach.

In this investigation, the focus is to understand and delve into the experiences and emotions of children growing up in solo-parent environments. By using a qualitative lens, researchers aim to gain deeper insights into how this family structure influences their development. Understanding the psychological, emotional, and social dynamics of these children can shed light on the implications and challenges they may face during their upbringing.

It is essential to recognize the importance of nurturing environments in children's early years and the potential impact of a single-parent household on their overall development. By addressing these issues, society can better support and create a conducive environment for children growing up in solo-parent families, ensuring their well-being and successful transition into adulthood.

II. METHOD

The research design utilized in this qualitative study involved conducting interviews to explore the experiences and emotions of children who grew up in a solo-parent environment. To gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives on societal reintegration following a prison sentence, a phenomenological approach was employed (Creswell, 2013; Polkinghorne, 1988).

Phenomenology as the primary research approach allowed the researcher to delve into the essence of the participants' lived experiences and the meaning they ascribed to those experiences. By adopting this method, the study aimed to capture the nuanced aspects of the participants' inner child experiences as they reflected on their upbringing in single-parent households. This exploration aligned with the study's objective to gain insights into how societal reintegration following a prison sentence might be influenced by growing up in a solo-parent environment.

The incorporation of Polkinghorne's (1988) work into the research design added depth to the phenomenological approach. Polkinghorne emphasized the significance of understanding human experiences through narrative inquiry, which aligns well with the goal of exploring the emotions and perceptions of the participants. The use of interviews as the primary data collection method enabled direct engagement with the participants, allowing them to share their narratives and provide firsthand accounts of their experiences, emotions, and coping mechanisms.

By integrating Polkinghorne's (1988) narrative inquiry with the phenomenological approach, the study sought to provide a comprehensive examination of the participants'

experiences, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of societal reintegration following a prison sentence. This integration allowed the researchers to capture the complexities of the participants' lives, considering the unique impact of growing up in a solo-parent household on their journey towards reintegration.

A. Research participants

The participants were selected through convenience and purposive sampling techniques. These allowed the researchers to describe the significant impact of findings on the population. According to Hycner (1999, p. 156) "the phenomenon dictates the method (not vice-versa) including even the type of participants". Therefore, purposive sampling, considered by Welman and Kruger (1999) as the most important kind of non-probability sampling, to identify the primary participants based on judgement and the purpose of the research (Babbie, 1995; Greig & Taylor, 1999; Schwandt, 1997), looking for those who "have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched" (Kruger, 1988 p. 150). The researchers then determined the participants based on the inclusion criteria: (1.) Solo Parent Family; (2.) High School Student (Grade 12) (3) must be legal age.

B. Materials and instruments used

The researchers utilized a self-made structured interview (table 1) in relation to the research objectives aimed at investigating (a) their childhood experiences as determined by Karen Horney's theory, and (b) what emotions emerged as they revisited their childhood experiences.

Table I: Aide-memoire

	Questions Asked
Experiences	What was your most unforgettable experience from having a solo parent? How did it affect you?
Emotions	How did you feel towards that situation? How did it affect you?

C. Data analysis

The researchers employed a phenomenological design, to analyze data from encoded interviews, Colaizzi's (1978) method was utilized procedurally to come up with a content analysis followed by thematic analysis to provide context of experiences and emotions of children from solo-parent environment.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Result

Table II: Profile of the Participants

Code	Sex	Age	Under the custody of
R1	Female	18	Father
R2	Female	18	Mother
R3	Female	19	Mother
R4	Female	18	Mother
R5	Female	18	Father
R6	Male	18	Mother
R7	Male	18	Mother
R8	Male	18	Father
R9	Male	18	Mother
R10	Female	18	Mother
R11	Female	18	Mother
R12	Female	18	Mother
R13	Male	18	Mother
R14	Female	18	Mother
R15	Female	18	Mother

As seen on the table.

Table III: Experiences of Children as they revisited their experiences from having a solo-parent

	Moving towards	Moving against	Moving away
Elementary	4	2	0
Junior High School	14	1	5
Senior High School	9	2	3

The encoded interviews provided valuable insights into the experiences of children growing up in solo-parent environments. The data showed that significant statements were mostly associated with their junior and senior high school years, with fewer recollections from their elementary phase.

Participant 2 reflected on feeling that their family was incomplete during their elementary years. However, in junior high school, they realized the support they had from their father, despite not having a mother figure. Participant 5 described feeling different from others, while Participant 13 shared the difficulties they faced as their mother was the sole provider for the family. Participant 14 also felt different but was able to come to terms with it. Meanwhile, Participant 15 experienced a sense of being left out and different during their senior high school years, seeking social connections with cousins and an uncle to fit in.

Emerging data from other participants revealed similar themes. Participant 5 struggled to share their thoughts and feelings during their elementary years due to the absence of their mother. Participant 11 sought a father figure during junior high school, and Participant 9 felt that their parents were absent during senior high school. Participant 15 expressed uncertainty about whom to approach for support.

During their junior high school years, participants shared moments of sadness when family events required the presence of both parents. Some even became guarded in forming relationships, understanding that people may come and go. Participant 9 experienced heightened sadness when

their mother went abroad and left them. Participant 10 sought reasons for not having a father.

Notably, the majority of responses during their senior high school years reflected a sense of forced independence. Participants acknowledged taking on responsibilities and becoming independent at a young age. They learned to manage household chores and live alone, showcasing their resilience and adaptability.

Overall, the data underscores the challenges and complexities faced by children growing up in solo-parent environments. The experiences of feeling different, seeking support, and developing independence highlight the importance of understanding the unique dynamics of solo-parent households and the impact on children's emotional and psychological development. These insights can contribute to a deeper understanding of how societal reintegration following a prison sentence may be influenced by the experiences of growing up with a solo parent.

Table 4: Emerging emotions from revisiting of inner child

Neglect: this theme represents experiences that stems from mistreatment or the failure of the parent to provide the basic needs of the child as a result of solo-parenting environment. Analysis of the encoded interviews revealed two major subthemes such as experience of being (a) abandoned and (b) forgotten.

Table 5: Codes generated in relation to feelings of neglect as they revisited their experiences from having a solo-parent

	Content analysis	Code used
Significant statements extracted	10	abandon
	5	forget

Majority of the extracted significant statements pointed to feelings of abandonment and being forgotten. Rejected children are divided into two groups: aggressively and withdrawingly rejected children. They are noted to be disagreeable, reclusive, and even to have poor social skills as they grow older (Hymel et al. 1993). It was also shown from studies that as neglected kids grow older, they are more likely to engage in undesirable activities (e.g., Chang,

Schwartz, Dodge, & McBride-Chang, 2003; Khaleque & Rohner, 2002). at early to middle childhood phase which is mostly comprise of age 3 to age 11 (Ladd 2006) supporting that majority of significant statements emerged during their junior high school years.

Table 5. Codes generated in relation to feelings of rejection as they revisited their experiences from having a solo-parent

	Content analysis	Codes used
Significant statements extracted	5	Given away
	5	Dismiss

Majority of the extracted significant statements pointed to feelings of abandonment and being forgotten. abandonment refers to feelings of being given away or dismissed not just from non-custodial parents but even to those parents with sole custody. This supports that among participants of this study, who are children from solo-parent environment, they feel that due to the situation, the theory of rejection sensitivity applies where according to such ideas on social cognitive processing styles, recalled bad experiences hints to abandonment or feelings of being unwanted (e.g., Sandstrom, Cillessen, & Eisenhower, 2003).

B. Discussion

In this study, the respondents' profile indicated that the majority (67%) were female, while the remaining 33% were male. Most of the participants (93%) were 18 years old, with a small proportion (7%) aged 19. Furthermore, 80% of the respondents were under the custody of their mothers, while the other 20% were in the care of their fathers. The prevalence of female respondents may have contributed to the study's reflexivity and the genuine expression of emotions as they revisited their childhood experiences.

Despite coming from financially stable guardians, the experiences encountered by senior high school children from solo-parent families were grouped into eight sub-themes. These sub-themes included feelings of brokenness, the search for love, lack of parental care, a sense of belongingness, thoughts of abandonment, feelings of independence, resentment, and taking on early responsibilities. The study revealed that even with financial stability, the children still perceived neglect and rejection from their parents and the community. Even as they accepted their situation of being raised in a solo-parent family, the damage to their inner child and emotional well-being persisted. This aligns with Karen Horney's psychoanalytic social theory, which suggests that childhood experiences significantly shape personality. Children may evaluate such experiences negatively and perceive themselves as powerless, hopeless, and vulnerable, unable to express hostility towards their significant caregiver.

The study also highlighted the importance of understanding the needs of children during their early developmental stages. While acknowledging the challenges and conflicts faced by parents, it was evident that children at this age were still unable to fully process and comprehend the reasons behind their parents' separation and how it might have negatively affected them as they progressed into their school-age years. The data indicated that senior high school children from solo-parent families took on additional roles, resembling those of parents, and were forced to assume responsibilities at an early age due to the loss of one parent. The various experiences reported by the participants, such as feelings of brokenness, the search for love, a sense of belongingness, lack of parental care, thoughts of abandonment, feelings of independence, helplessness, and early responsibilities, further highlighted the impact of their childhood experiences.

A notable finding was that participants from solo-parent families exhibited independence. While this may initially seem positive, it could also be seen as a protective mechanism stemming from their childhood experiences. Children who have experienced neglect and rejection may function with a constant sense of dread and danger, leading them to adopt protective measures like independence as a way to cope with their inner child issues.

Overall, the study provides valuable insights into the experiences and emotions of children growing up in solo-parent families. It emphasizes the significance of understanding the unique challenges faced by these children, as well as the potential long-term effects on their emotional and psychological well-being. The findings underscore the need for early interventions and support systems to help children navigate through their childhood experiences and facilitate a healthy transition into adulthood.

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