

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SINGLE FATHERS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS DURING THE HEALTH CRISIS

*Lucille D. Evangelista¹, Lhara M. Leynes¹, Wency Anne J. Manalo¹
¹Batangas State University

*Corresponding email: lucille.evangelista@g.batstate-u.edu.ph

Received date: 8 February 2022; Accepted date: 31 May 2022

Abstract: A single father whose dealing with work and taking care of a child with a disability is indeed challenging, however, fathers' perspectives on this matter are not given first preference in research. Hence, this descriptive phenomenological study aimed to describe the lived experience of three single fathers of children with special needs. The participants voluntarily responded to open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview and thematic analyses were done to extract meanings and concepts. Based on these data, three major themes emerged from describing the participants' lived experiences. Out of 14 subordinate themes, 3 main themes of emotional pain, financial stress, and adaptive coping emerged. These men experienced financial hardship, isolation, anxiety, shame, worry, and fatigue; nevertheless persisted, adapted, and accepted life as a parent with friends and family's support.

Keywords: Qualitative, Lived Experiences, Working Single Fathers, Children with Special Needs, Child Disability

INTRODUCTION

The challenges of parenthood, personality differences, and difficulties living together may tear couples apart, leading to separation and leaving their child with one of the parents. Parental responsibilities denote the involvement with and overseeing of the lives and daily care of a child. It also entails providing discipline, nurturing, teaching, and instilling values and solid belief systems in the family. The overall concept of parenting is general household responsibilities and duties that coincide with child-raising. Solo parenting is considered a unique and challenging experience especially if the child has a disability. These parents are assumed to face more daily challenges.

It is observed that children stay mostly with their mothers after separation and a lot of literature focuses on single mothers who raised their children solely. Previous studies are highlighting the challenges met by mothers in parenting a child with disabilities such as autism but there is very limited information

about single fathers and their experiences in parenting a child with special needs or disabilities (Barker et al., 2011). Moreover, Smith and Elder (2010) added that the fathers' perspectives are not given first preference in research, although the literature mentions the fathers. Single fathers have been under-researched in studies and not allowed to share their experiences.

Although limited, the researchers found a study by Seepersad (2016) which focused on single fathers with autistic children. This study became a source of inquiry on the experiences of single fathers with children with special needs in the local setting, especially during the COVID -19 pandemic. Single fathers have reshaped their position in society in the 21st century as not only providers but primarily take care of their children. In this undertaking, the researchers focused on the situation of single fathers who were left alone to take care of their children with special needs. In this type of family, the custody of the child belongs solely to the father and it is the father's responsibility to provide for every need for his children from basic needs such as food and shelter, love and care as well as education, and financial support. The term "special needs" has no clear or exact definitions of what it means for parents and a child. Many would think of special needs as inevitably concerning the serious or chronic physical and mental condition of a child. From the perspectives of parents, a child with special needs is clearly about additional demands on parents of chronically ill children that cause stress that affects the family socially and economically (Cousino et.al. 2013).

The purpose of the study was to describe the lived experiences of working single fathers of children with special needs and to develop a program that will directly help single fathers and their children, especially in this time of the pandemic. It can provide much-needed information about the motivations and perceptions of the participants, provide insights on capacity as a parent in handling disability, or how fatherhood is perceived, and finally provide information about programs needed by this type of participant. Furthermore, the findings may encourage social change or may also cause people to bring single fathers to find social support. The findings could add information regarding single fathers' experiences, their psychological and emotional state, and their actions and behavior in parenting a child with special needs or serious medical conditions.

Research Objective

To describe the lived experiences of single fathers of children with special needs during the health crisis.

METHODOLOGY

To get a deep understanding of the experiences of the single fathers of

children with special needs, three men who are separated from previous partners and taking responsibility for the needs of a child with a major disability for more than 10 years participated in semi-structured interviews. The participants were in the middle adulthood stage (40, 45, and 60 years old). Interviews were conducted in their homes for approximately 2 hours each following safety and health protocols during the COVID-19 crisis. The researchers and participants wore face masks and face shields, following the one-meter rule during the interview. The responses were recorded using a voice recorder and by note-taking. During the three interviews, photos were taken with the participants' consent.

This study used a descriptive qualitative method to attain the objectives of the study. According to Sandelowski (2010), a qualitative research approach intends to create knowledge grounded in human behavior and experiences. The qualitative method of research is well-defined as a systematic subjective approach used to describe lived experiences. It is deemed the most appropriate method to describe the participants' situation and phenomenon that was being studied by the researchers including their traits, behavior, opinion, and personal experiences (Boyce & Neale, 2006).

The accounts of the three respondents were transcribed and used a widely used qualitative analytic method, the thematic analysis. After coding the data subordinate and main themes emerged. Although the results cannot be generalized, the data provided an in-depth understanding of the participant's perspectives, thoughts, emotions, and motivations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study were actual experiences shared by three single fathers who are taking care of their children with special needs. The findings are limited to the responses of the participants during the interviews which were described and interpreted as meanings of their human life experiences. Their experiences may not be similar to other single fathers with different personalities, cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds or be used to generalize, nevertheless, it sheds light on the uniqueness of their situation. Three main themes emerged after close examination. Table 1 shows the main themes of working single fathers lived experiences: psychological pain, financial stress, and adaptive coping.

Table 1: Summary of Main Themes and Subordinate Themes from the Emerging Concepts

Main Themes	Subordinate Themes
1. Psychological Pain	Isolation Separation negative feelings Irritability Fear Separation anxiety
2. Financial stress	Shame Worry Fatigue
3. Adaptive Coping	Normalization Persistence Adaptation Support Acceptance

Main Theme 1: Emotional pain

The first main theme was emotional pain. There were emerging concepts about disagreement, annoyance, stress, non-existence, low morale, mockery, hurt, worry and loneliness. Throughout the participants' narratives, there were indications that the participants are facing emotional problems in their life as being single fathers. The participants verbally expressed their emotions and their thoughts which are painful to bear. It's hard to not have someone to be with to take care of my child, his condition adds up to the difficulty" (Participant B) "... I go back home without anything. It's depressing" (Participant B). It is recognized that the participants faced emotional distress. The absence of a caregiver and the nonexistence of a partner and mother cause deep sorrow and eventually lead to low morale. There were quarrels within the household due to the child's distressing behavior "she (mother) knows that our child has a disability but she can't cope and impatient with her it is disruptive (Participant A) "... if he doesn't get what he wants he will hurt himself or others" (Participant B). The social stigma was experienced in the form of teasing and the use of contemptuous language directed at the child and the father add up to unpleasant feelings. For the participants, worrying about the child's welfare is inevitable. "What if I'm gone? Who will take care of him?" (Participant A).

Hartney (2020) explained that emotional pain is pain or hurt that originates from non-physical sources. Sometimes this emotional distress is the result of the actions of others. This psychological pain can be intense and significantly affect many different areas of your life. As single fathers, the participants

experience this emotional distress since they serve as mothers and fathers to the child.

Main Theme 2: Financial Stress

The second theme is financial stress. The participants' financial struggle is experienced and it negatively impacts their emotional state. "the situation is overwhelming, it's hard to find money because I can't leave him alone and work for hours" (Participant A) "...Sometimes I do not have money for his medicine, we live from hand to mouth, sometimes I have nothing, really zero" (Participant B). We tried to get the help of doctors but that also entails money. I felt hopeless (Participant C) we do not have enough money to maintain his medications and therapy especially now that I am old, and I worry... (Participant C). They have feelings of sadness and experience upset for being poor. The participants' lack of education limits possible work opportunities since many jobs require some educational degree. Their income is lacking, they have an unstable work schedule and are doing multiple jobs to ensure the satisfaction of immediate needs. The feelings of shame and upset linger while the prolonged financial difficulties lead to worrying and depressing feelings of hopelessness.

These findings are similar to what single mothers experience, especially those living in poor communities. Single and cohabiting parents also had financial difficulties that have fewer assets, less stable employment, and higher levels of material hardships. Single parents and never-married mothers may be even worse off than divorced mothers because they had lower levels of human capital or family support and were less likely to receive child support (Gibson-Davis, 2010).

Based on these studies single-parent families are at high risk of financial hardship which may impact psychological well-being. Participants experienced a lack of food and fuel, and the need to make sacrifices to ensure that children's basic needs were met. The participants went without food and struggled to pay bills. It can be inferred that low-income parents were more likely to use harsh discipline, engage in erratic and inconsistent parenting practices, and provide less cognitive stimulation since financial strain contributes to stress, anxiety, and depression. The experiences of single fathers may take a toll on mental and physical health.

Theme 3: Adaptive Coping

The last main theme is adaptive coping. Dealing with and taking care of a child with special needs is indeed daunting and stressful, nevertheless, the participants' feelings, thoughts, and behavior indicated adaptive coping in

dealing with difficulties. "It's hard but I persevere... I must face it, if not, the situation will only worsen" (Participant C) since they are already accustomed to their situation they are surviving and have found enough income to sustain the needs of their family. Acceptance and understanding of their situation helped to ease the emotional burden. "I love my child very much more than my own life even if he has a disability, there's no problem about it, he is my child" (Participant A)

Being optimistic also fuels self-determination. The participants recognized that to survive they needed help from others. They try to be open to family and friends' guidance and support in addition to the government's aid to low-income families. Accepting the loss of a partner, loving the child, and accepting the nature of illness cause a sort of relief. Faithfulness and belief in the power of God's mercy also become a source of strength "I am not stressed when I see my child happy my God have mercy on us" (Participant B)

Participants claim that they assess the situation whether they can deal with a difficulty or not. After some thought, they adopt different coping strategies whether internally or externally. The participants perceived that they struggle but can cope. Coping strategies such as normalization, persistence, seeking moral support and presence from others, positive reframing, and adapting to the situation they are experiencing were the results of the perceived ability to cope. The participants used emotion-focused coping techniques. There are problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. In emotional-based coping, the person tries to reduce negative emotional responses associated with stressful conditions. The person might try to avoid the situation and distance themselves from the condition that creates negative emotions. They might also accept the situation, seek emotional support and use selective attention that is only dealing with certain limited aspects of the problem (Schoenmakers, Tilburg, & Fokkema, 2015).

In the case of the participants, acceptance is done to cope. Acceptance in human psychology is a person's assent to the reality of a situation, recognizing a process or condition even in a negative or uncomfortable situation without attempting to change it or protest it. This was seen in the statement of the participants. Not only is it vital for their survival, but it is used in everyday relationships with others. "I already accepted his disability; I need to focus on providing for his needs" (Participant C)

Some parents lack information about their children's disabilities which makes their roles as parents challenging. Being a single father and having a child with special needs are separate concepts but are intertwined. The participants need support. Family care-related factors such as a satisfactory parent-child relationship that provides emotional support and affection as well as financial

and economic productivity are necessary. The overlapping of stressors like their work, their responsibilities from home to children's school, and providing for children's basic needs creates insufficient time for themselves which adds to their stress. The lived experiences of working single fathers of children with special needs included psychological consequences and adaptive coping. It's the unconditional support for their children and their willingness to understand things that define their role not only as the father but also as mothers to their families. There are some ways of coping and adapting to their environment which has been applied to their experiences. Emotional-focused strategies may be reflecting, praying, hoping, and positive self-talk to regulate negative emotional reactions.

Table 2: Proposed Psychosocial Interventions for Working Single Fathers

Psychosocial Intervention Project		
	1	2
Key concern area	Dealing with erratic behavior of children and psychological stress	Economic emotional struggles
Objective	To discuss and provide practical knowledge on how to handle erratic behavior of children with special needs and stress	To increase capacity in dealing with economic struggles
Strategies	Provide psychoeducation and social training	Participation in seminars and attendance to government programs and vocational and small business ventures
Specific Activities	Skill workshop, parent training, interpersonal psychotherapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, and Problem-solving Therapy	Workshop, small business training
Pearson Involved	Single father of children with special needs, caregiver of the children, a pediatrician, and a licensed psychologist	Single father of children with special needs, licensed psychologist, and DSWD
Success Indicators	The participant is able to deal with or improve the ways to handle erratic behavior and manage stress	Participants increased their knowledge and ability about government programs and entrepreneurship

They also try problem-focused coping wherein they target the cause of stress in practical ways which consequently directly reduces the stress. Two of the single fathers emphasized that the presence of their relatives and communication with others were beneficial in handling stressful days. Financial support and economic stability are crucial to providing for the needs of the child. The researchers noted that mental health consultants and other professional practitioners can help out single fathers of children with special needs.

The project summarized in table 2 may be useful for the participants of the study. Single fathers face difficulties that need to be addressed. There is no perfect parenting but providing the basic needs and social support to their child can be considered good parenting. They may embrace their optimistic attitude and would not be overwhelmed by the stress of being a single parent with children with special needs.

This project aimed to help the research participants become mindful of stressful and unavoidable situations of being a working single father of children with special needs. Participation in help groups may alleviate anxiety, and depression, and the improvements could be sustained when mental health professionals are involved. Having a child or children with special needs is considered a serious concern. The parents and the community need to understand the child's nature and support the child. Partnership with community platforms such as homes, schools, settings, and technologies play an important role in delivering the psychosocial intervention to the target beneficiaries. Finally, the call for increased conglomerate between policy-makers, psychology practitioners, and social workers to give more attention to single fathers or parents.

CONCLUSION

The following are the conclusions of the study:

1. Working single fathers and having children with special needs experience emotional pain, financial stress, and adaptive coping.
2. The researchers identified some factors as to the key concern areas of the research namely; children's undesirable behavior due to the disability, maintaining self-esteem, and family-related factors.
3. The psychosocial intervention program with implementing strategies is made for working single fathers who have children/ with disability.

REFERENCE

Barker, E. D., Oliver, B. R., Viding, E., Salekin, R. T., & Maughan, B. (2011). The impact of prenatal maternal risk, fearless temperament and

- early parenting on adolescent callous-unemotional traits: a 14- year longitudinal investigation. *Journal of child psychology and psychiatry, and allied disciplines*, 52(8), 878–888. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2011.02397.x>
- Boyce, C., & Neale, P. (2006) Conducting in-depth interviews: A guide for designing and conducting in-depth interviews for evaluation input. Pathfinder International. http://dmeforpeace.org/sites/default/files/Boyce_In%20Depth%20Interviews.pdf
- Cousino, M. K., & Hazen, R. A. (2013). Parenting stress among caregivers of children with chronic illness: a systematic review. *Journal of pediatric psychology*, 38(8), 809–828. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jpepsy/jst049>
- Gibson-Davis, C. M., & Gassman-Pines, A. (2010). Early childhood family structure and mother–child interactions: Variation by race and ethnicity. *Developmental Psychology*, 46(1), 151–164. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017410>
- Sandelowski, M., & Leeman, J. (2012). Writing Usable Qualitative Health Research Findings. *Qualitative Health Research*, 22(10), 1404–1413. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732312450368>
- Schoenmakers, E. C., Tilburg, T. G., & Fokkema, T. (2015). Problem-focused and emotion-focused coping options and loneliness: how are they related?. *European Journal of Aging*, 12(2), 153–161. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10433-015-0336-1>
- Seepersad, M (2016) A Phenomenological Study of Single Fathers of Children with Autism in Trinidad. <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3206&context=dissertations>
- Smith, L. O., & Elder, J. H. (2010). Siblings and family environments of persons with autism spectrum disorder: a review of the literature. *Journal of child and adolescent psychiatric nursing: official publication of the Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nurses, Inc*, 23(3), 189–195. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6171.2010.00240.x>