

Solo Parents: Ideas on Community Building in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT Solo parent families are often marginalized in their communities for a wide variety of reasons. Financially, such families tend to be less affluent and more dependent upon government agencies for resources than two parent families. Emotionally, many single parents have endured abusive relationships, violence, stress, isolation, and concomitant low self-esteem. Although community psychologists can and sometimes do intervene, solo parents themselves may generate effective social support networks that create meaningful psychological and social ties within a community context. This article describes the situation of solo parent families in New Zealand, and offers ideas and approaches suitable for community psychologists and others who might seek to intervene to foster more harmonious community relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Solo parent families are diverse, but most have some common experiences and requirements. This article identifies solo parent families as a marginalized sector of people within society. Only occasionally do they interact face-to-face, through chance meetings at schools, kindergartens or helping agencies, and sometimes through local networks or by chance. Often in these situations, recognition, mutual identification and a great deal of talk result from such meetings. This paper suggests ways that the isolation faced by solo parent families could be remedied. In virtually all cases, the setting or context of a surrounding community offers potential support and opportunity for empowerment. For our purposes, a community can be defined as a collection of interdependent individuals who interact face-to-face over time, share responsibility, and possess common goals (Glynn, 1981, in Hendrix and Ahern, 1997).

Demographic Information

The majority of single parent families in New Zealand are of lower socio-economic status (SES). Details from the 1996 New Zealand (NZ)

Census show that 28.3 percent of all NZ families with child(ren) were one parent families (up from 25 percent in 1991). Some 33.1 percent of Maori live in solo parent families. Solo parent families are the fastest growing family-type in NZ (Bryant, 1988). At the time of the 1996 NZ Census, 83.1% of solo parents were women (Statistics New Zealand, 1996).

Solo parent families recorded the lowest median family income in 1996 of \$16,000. The median family income across all family types was \$39,200. A comparison of family income and family types shows 70.0% of one-parent families with dependent children received less than \$20,000, compared with 8.5% of couples with dependent children (Statistics New Zealand, 1996).

Existing Social Supports

In New Zealand, Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ) is the government agency that delivers financial support to solo parents. This financial support is minimal, and recipients must consistently justify their need for support. When difficulties arise, in the absence of other sources of support, solo parents must approach the powers-that-be (WINZ) for help. Meetings, contacts, and relationships between these women and personnel at WINZ are frequently demeaning. It is disempowering to have to seek support from an impersonal government agency, and many forms of assistance required by solo parents are not provided by WINZ, particularly those not financial in nature. Having appropriate and effective social networks in place could alleviate some of the problems experienced by solo parents without involving WINZ.

Alternative social supports for solo parents are few, and are mainly organizations targeting families experiencing extraordinary difficulties. The Women's Refuge caters to the needs of women who require protection from abusive relationships. There are organizations such as

Birthright New Zealand that offer support (e.g., workshops, budgeting advice), the James Family, Barnados, and other local charitable organizations. New Zealand has a rich tradition of clubs, activity groups and social activities, but single parents have difficulty affording and accessing such activities. Various other organizations (e.g., churches) offer support to some solo parents, and, of course, some solo mothers have the support of their own parents, and other relatives. Some however, do not.

Economic Implications of Single Parenthood

As can be discerned from demographic information, solo parent families are usually situated within the lower SES. Accordingly, economic hardship affects many areas of their existence, e.g., income, employment, health, education, food and clothing, housing quality and tenure, and leisure activities (James and Saville-Smith, 1989). Children of solo parents are also affected by economic hardship. Because education is increasingly expensive, children are penalized and disadvantaged if parents can not pay for school fees, class trips, equipment and so on. Children's leisure activities are limited with negative flow-on effects on self-esteem and identity formation.

As noted by Safarti and Scott (2001), the vast majority of solo parents are women, many of whom live in poverty and are dependent on government benefits or work in poorly paid occupations. What has been traditionally considered as "women's work" within society is that work performed without pay (Waring, 1996), and work that is at the lower end of the pay scale. This includes such roles as caring for elderly parents, parenting, caring for people who are mentally ill and/or who have disabilities. Along with undertaking these roles comes a diminished capacity to earn a living in a role considered acceptable within the present economic paradigm and climate. Economic dependency, domesticity and the self-sacrifice demanded of women in traditional roles are major contributory factors to psychological problems of women (James and Saville-Smith, 1989).

In a recent speech in New Zealand, Lipps (1999) noted inequitable pay rates, glass ceilings, family commitments, household labor, hours spent with children, and the feminization of poverty, all of which meant that women were

unlikely to achieve as men did. Further, for the future, the lack of availability of learning opportunities, coupled with the types and levels of education chosen, conspired to block women from a semblance of equality (see <http://www.runet.edu/~gstudies/sources/nz/keyecon.htm>).

Western culture generally promotes and rewards individualistic dimensions of existence, and marginalizes and penalizes communal aspects. Many of the problems being faced by solo parents may be seen to relate to the myopic concept that a consumer-based economy is the epitome of human civilization. For many New Zealand people, this concept lies at the base of their sense of powerlessness. The neoclassical economic paradigm where individuals maximize their own self-interest is flawed because it ignores the need for humans to interact as social creatures (Hendrix and Ahern, 1997).

Emotional Implications of Solo Parenting

In many New Zealand communities, the status of "beneficiary" carries negative and undesirable connotations, for example, that one is a parasite on society, or a second rate citizen. A stigma is attached to being dependent on "the State" and thus indirectly, the tax-payer. The traditional importance of being a parent at home available to care for dependents has been undermined by many influences, among them media depiction and glamorization of lifestyles that require two full-time wage-earners. However, in light of their familial responsibilities, the expense involved in finding quality childcare, and fragmented family networks, it is not possible for many solo parents to earn an income sufficient to support a family.

Alienation, segregation and fragmentation are commonplace experiences in society today, particularly among those of lower SES (Kelly, 1990). Social isolation contributes to physical and psychological problems. Over an extended period of financial hardship, and without an adequate support network, solo parents can become bored, lonely, and demoralized. This engenders resignation, passivity and apathy as described by Seligman in his learned helplessness syndrome (cited in Weiten, 1992) where people believe they are powerless to help themselves. Loneliness and financial struggle over a prolonged period saps solo parents'

motivation and energy. Self-esteem may drop and they may experience a sense of inadequacy, and feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness and worthlessness.

Without financial resources to socialize, solo parent families have little chance of getting out and meeting new people or attending activities and events in the community. This compounds their isolation. The transient nature of contemporary existence leaves many people without a social network. This increases the risk of their experiencing depression and other psychological disturbances. Safarti and Scott (2001) note that solo mothers have a high risk of social isolation, and that this, combined with the heavy physical and emotional demands they experience as the main provider and caregiver, can have adverse effects on health. Research by Clarke and Jensen (1997) found that sex, age, and SES is significantly related to depression. Hendrix and Ahern (1997) note that mental illness is consistently associated with low SES, and that the percentage of people of low SES is increasing. Solo mothers were found in Safarti and Scott (2001) to have significantly worse self-reported mental health than couple mothers, and studies were cited that indicate that solo mothers are more likely to experience a broad range of emotional problems such as anxiety, depression and psychological distress.

Impersonalization, alienation and shifts and movements of individuals in modern society work against innate needs to emotionally connect and build co-operative, supportive relationships (Bowlby, 1987; Bretherton, 1992; Karen, 1990). Social science research supports the link between an individual's sense of being involved in a community and their psychological wellbeing. Dressler (1992, cited in Hendrix and Ahern, 1997) found that supportive households, intact family structures, and supportive church relationships were important buffers against depression. A sense of belonging to a community can meet people's emotional needs as well as their requirements for connection and cooperation.

Dohrenwend (1978, in Levine and Perkins, 1997) proposes that following a stressful event (e.g., becoming a solo parent), a stress reaction will often occur. This reaction may be temporary, and/or it may increase the risk of maladaptive behavior. Without social and situational supports and positive psychological mediators,

adverse reactions become more likely. Stresses in one area of life impinge upon all other areas. Pinderhughes (1983) observes that when stress becomes extreme and families are overwhelmed, the tendency is for them to learn to function in an autonomous fashion, which contributes to their alienation from community and society. This can make families vulnerable to conflict and dysfunction.

The Committee of Enquiry into Violence (1987: 99, cited in James and Saville-Smith, 1989) noted that it is difficult in today's society for even two parents to provide for the material, emotional and social needs of their children and themselves, and it is obviously even more difficult for a solo parent family. Gregory (1972) observed that little systemic social change has occurred with regard to child advocacy efforts, and that case remains the same for most disadvantaged groups in the new millennium. By focussing primarily on individuals, broad-spectrum or deep social change is side-stepped and the root of the problem is left untouched and intact.

What Can and What Needs to be Done at the Community Level

People need social support to feel and be healthy. Maslow (1962, in Weiten 1992) observes in his hierarchy of needs that humans need food, water and shelter, then safety and security, and affiliation and love. Bates and Toro (1999) propose that social support comprise three different aspects: resources, social connections and validation. These appear to tie in with Maslow's hierarchy of needs. A positive correlation is consistently found between social support and both physical and psychological health (Bates and Toro, 1999).

Recent research has demonstrated the importance of supportive large social structures for individuals' health (Caughy et al., 1999). An effective intervention will improve community resources and infrastructure and facilitate access for members of marginalized communities (Durie, 1999), and then create opportunities for community members to become a part of their community. Caughy et al. (1999) found that appropriate broad scale targets of intervention include economic factors, community factors such as resources and local networks, and residential political organizations. Community

revitalization is an important component of efforts to improve conditions for individuals within communities.

Most citizens do not participate in the important decisions affecting their lives (Alinsky, 1971). However, knowing how power and the condition of powerlessness work in human systems (Pinderhughes, 1983) is a key to planning effective interventions. Power in fact, is defined by Pinderhughes as the capacity to influence one's life. The availability of roles and responsibilities for individuals within a community is an empowering mechanism (Rappaport, 1987). By community building and forming coalitions, the collective voice of individuals can be heard, and change becomes more likely. Furthermore, the changes are likely to be those identified as most appropriate by those affected by social problems. Persistent and organized efforts of social movements are essential for social reform (Kelly, 1990). Forming action groups to identify and implement strategies for improvement can and will empower solo parents and their families.

Enhancing Competencies

One strategy to empower solo parents is to enhance their competency and skills (Albee, 1980). Helping people enhance their personal fit with key environments can be achieved by connecting people to networks of social support. "Community development refers to a process of strengthening a community's human, economic and environmental resources with the goal of creating a healthy or competent community ... one that can reduce social, psychological and physiological problems and enable members to grow to their maximum potential." (Chavix and Newborough, 1986, in Thomas and Venio, 1996, p.28). Links must be forged between community members.

Supportive social networks help protect and promote health. Mental health is related to involvement in community, and to having a sense of community (Hendrix and Ahern, 1997). The knowledge that an infrastructure exists to offer support when and where it is needed gives a sense of security. Social support can be seen as the provision of coping assistance. By increasing the repertoire of coping skills, flexibility in coping is enhanced, and the

incidence of psychological disorders will be reduced. Individuals need to have some control over social and economic stressors, social support networks must be put in place and maintained, and then individuals will develop a sense of self-esteem and efficacy (Albee, 1980). However, social and political changes must be wrought that are flexible enough to enable individuals and groups to develop coping skills appropriate to their requirements.

Possible Areas for Intervention

A survey of solo mother carried out by the Christchurch branch of the Society for Research on Women in New Zealand (Inc) (SRWNZ) obtained a descriptive account of the lives of respondents both before and after becoming a solo parent (Sears, 1975). Parts of their questionnaire could be adapted to gain an additional understanding of the needs of solo parents across New Zealand.

SRWNZ found that approximately 50 percent of solo mothers surveyed experienced loneliness as a major problem, while 46 percent were dissatisfied with their social lives. Some 75 percent of these respondents reported that they had no social life at all. Almost 70 percent of mothers felt restricted in their ability to take part in activities outside the home. The main reasons given for this were financial constraints, insufficient time, inability to access childcare, lack of energy, ill health, lack of transport and hours of work. A large group mentioned feelings of rejection, loss of confidence, social inferiority or shame. The researchers also found that 61 percent of solo mothers had experienced or were experiencing mental, psychological or emotional disorders. This research is supported by more recent research carried out in New Zealand by Safarti & Scott (2001). Effective social support networks could alleviate many of these problems.

Educational, behavioral and vocational problems of children of single parents can cause additional hardship (Bryant, 1988). Safarti and Scott (p.257) cite UNICEF data (UNICEF, 2000) noting that "children raised in low socioeconomic conditions are disadvantaged in terms of survival, mental and physical development, educational achievement and future job prospects. They are also more likely to become involved in criminal activity, to be

unemployed and to become pregnant at an early age". Early intervention and assistance at the family level could lessen these problems. Children are best served in a family supported within the community. Biddulph (1998) for example, cites a study in the United States that sought to find out why some teenagers from low income, broken homes became criminal offenders while others did not. Those who remained law-abiding and productive had access to friendly, supportive adult involvement outside their own family.

Socialization can occur through leisure activities as well as through sport and recreation. Solo parents and their children tend to be disadvantaged in this arena, because of financial hardship. Participation in recreational settings, particularly during adolescence, can facilitate pro-social behaviors (Chalip et al., 1996). Cushman and Laidler (1988, cited in Chalip et al., 1996) list various individual and community benefits which can occur through recreation, including alleviation of boredom or anxiety, a sense of identity and involvement, family cohesion, shared community values, development of potential and enhancement of productive value orientations.

Chalip et al. (1996, p. 146) observe that "participation in recreational activities can provide a rationale for entry into a social setting without requiring the participant to acknowledge being lonely". A sense of belonging enhances personal identity through an increased sense of control over social interaction.

The ecological approach to human development emphasizes the influence of social context on human development. To protect their own interests, and to enable them to take collective action where necessary, individuals need information along with appropriate social structures (Heller, 1989). Appropriate social structures allow individuals to take steps to remedy their sense of isolation. Heller emphasizes that our concept of community must recognize that group attachments are fundamental to human's development of self-identity, self-efficacy and self-concept. Humans are social creatures, with a need for interaction.

Empowerment

Empowerment is a process by which people,

organizations and communities gain mastery over their affairs (Rappaport, 1987). It is a process with organizational, political, sociological, economic and spiritual aspects, through which people's potential to actively control their own lives is enhanced. Empowerment is a process of developing skills and competencies and it must be considered within context, taking into account the embeddedness of individuals within communities. Through the process of empowerment, individuals (i) gain a more positive self-concept and sense of self-competence, (ii) develop a more critical understanding of the surrounding social and political environment, and (iii) develop skills and resources to achieve social and political action (Kieffer, 1983/4 in Thomas and Veno, 1996).

Pinderhughes (1983, p. 334) recommends that "enhancement of support groups for effectiveness, and of the client's ability to use these groups, should be a priority." To achieve this, individuals should be taught "skills in creating alliances, building coalitions, overcoming organizational barriers and engaging in political action". This is the very essence of empowerment. As observed by Rappaport (1987), solutions to societal problems lie in having or creating a broad variety of local settings. Rappaport also notes that settings that enable people to develop a sense of community and commitment may enable members to become empowered by criteria unique to their own goals and purposes.

Riger (1993) believes that empowerment can be seen as a panacea for those excluded from majority society which fails to take account of the multiplicity of effects which accompany such empowerment. She claims that empowerment needs to be balanced with commitment to community, noting that social connections are as important a construct as empowerment.

Community members can become local leaders to facilitate change within a community (Hernandez, 1998). This calls for community members to overcome self-doubts and take on leadership roles. Hernandez's perspectives in motivating people to take on leadership roles were (i) the notion of "being part of" (a particular community), (ii) the notion of "having part in" (the experiences of that community), and (iii) the notion of "taking part in" (action to improve the

experiences of that community).

THE FUTURE

Community psychology is a field wherein human diversity is valued and respected. Thomas and Veno (1996) have outlined four major themes, which form the conceptual orientation of many community psychologists in New Zealand. These are (i) an ecological approach to understanding and preventing social problems, (ii) a knowledge of how social systems operate, (iii) an emphasis on enhancing the competencies of individuals, groups and organizations in community interventions, and (iv) an emphasis on prevention rather than treatment. Trickett et al. (1993) note that community psychologists must observe "how social values, reflected in social structures and policies, differentially affect the experiences of different groups" (p. 273). Community psychology occurs on a community-wide level and expands the reach of psychological services. It is an action science (Seidman, 1988).

Accordingly, support networks for single parents clearly need to be established in New Zealand. Committees of interested individuals could be convened to decide what needs exist within each community, and how best these needs can be met. Some of the needs of single parents may well be met by assisting them to set up low cost leisure activities, both for themselves and for their children. Chalip, et al. (1996) carried out a survey, and found that 41 percent of respondents took place in leisure activities for reasons of social contact. Those of low SES often cannot afford to participate in leisure activities. Sport and recreation has been demonstrated in recent works (cited in Thomas and Veno, 1996) to be replacing neighborhoods and worksites as a source of communal activity and sense of community.

A suitable framework for developing a support network for solo parents is the eight step PEOPLE (Planning and Evaluation Of People Led Endeavors) system outlined by Raeburn (1996). The PEOPLE system advocates community control, empowerment, deprofessionalization, positive strength building, a social systems/ecological perspective and program evaluation. The eight steps are, in brief:

- * Outline the aims of the intervention, how these can be achieved, and who is to be

involved.

- * A strengths, weaknesses and needs analysis (see also Gregory, 1999) must be carried out in the identified community. It is important to gain input from as many community members as possible, especially those most isolated, those least articulate, and those with disabilities.
- * An action plan can then be drawn up to translate information from (2) above into an action plan. Goals should be specific, measurable, agreed upon, realistic and placed within a time frame (Rudman, 1996).
- * The organizational structure of the core group within the community must be clarified. This often falls into two functions, an action group and an executive group, with responsibility for achievement of goals being invested in the action group, and the executive group being responsible for administrative and managerial roles.
- * Broad categories of goals identified at step (3) can be divided into action components with specific steps being identified towards achievement of these goals. Again, it is important to set a time for completion of goals and sub-goals in order to keep momentum.
- * The action phase - the stage of implementation of activities that have been identified to meet goals.
- * Continuous regular reviews must be held to report on progress or impediments to progress. As goals are achieved, new goals can be set. Continuing feedback on the effects of an intervention is essential in order to ensure that the intervention is effective.
- * Periodic outcome evaluations, usually held annually, review the overall operation of the project, and check that goals have been met, and that interventions meet the needs of the community. This can be ascertained by observation of participation rates, and surveys of various measures such as perceived satisfaction, social indicators, and reported health and well-being, etc. (Raeburn, 1996).

CONCLUSION

People develop optimally in environments that provide appropriate resources, support, and

challenges. Such resources facilitate growth, development and realization of potential, by enhancing the cognitive, emotional and social development of community members. Many solo parents long to be part of a network that permits fulfillment of their needs for intimacy, diversity, usefulness and belonging (Sarason, in Heller, 1989). Social structures need to be put in place to allow people to remedy their sense of alienation (Heller, 1989).

An effective community is one where members have a feeling of belonging, a feeling that they matter to each other, a sense of unity, and confidence that their needs will be met through their commitment to the community. Biddulph (1998, p. 133) sums up nicely in the following quote: "when families are woven in with friends and neighbours, and when people of all generations have access to each other, then we won't need psychologists or departments of social welfare. We'll take care of ourselves". Locally based support networks for solo parents are a step in the right direction. Families, whether with one parent or two, thrive in a supportive and nurturing community where they are able to develop meaningful social ties.

A well-functioning society is its own reward, wherein each individual is encouraged, enabled and empowered to reach his or her personal potential interdependently with other community members, and where unity is achieved whilst maintaining respect for differences (Durie, 1999).

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