

FAMILY CAUSES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS OF JUNIOR MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS FROM SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES AND THEIR EFFECTS ON SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT – Psychological problems of adolescents have become more common, and changes in the family structure of single-parent families have exacerbated psychological problems and daily behaviour. Different family factors will have different degrees of influence on single-parent families. This research will adopt a qualitative method, in which several junior middle school students from single-parent families are collected through interviewing to understand the students' self-evaluation of the current family and school performance. According to the results of the research, it can be seen that family factors greatly influence adolescents from single-parent families. They are often sensitive, have low self-esteem, and desire companionship and attention. The guardian's education level and style directly affect adolescents' learning attitudes and behaviour. The lack of parental presence leads to increased psychological problems and poor school performance in adolescents from single-parent families, and adolescents raised by grandparents are less emotionally close to their parents. So, in a single-parent family, the parent's company is the most important. Besides, parents' education style will also significantly impact adolescents' psychology and thus affect their school performance.

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INTRODUCTION

The divorce rate is increasing yearly, resulting in more and more single-parent families (Hannighofer et al., 2017). Junior middle school students, already in adolescence, may suffer from varying degrees of psychological problems due to varied reasons, such as changing emotional feelings in this period. Therefore, junior middle school students appear to have psychological issues, which have become common in recent years, and family factors may play a significant role (Hermann et al., 2022).

The reasons for the psychological problems of students from single-parent families are complex and varied. For example, many of them are taken care of by their grandparents. The inter-generational upbringing often has an impact on them. In addition, the economic conditions, education level and parenting style of guardians also affect the students. Previous studies of this kind have been conducted in different countries, but other cultures and ideas lead to different human behaviours. As a result, the family reasons for the formation of psychological problems of junior middle school students from single-parent families and their effects on their school performance will be focused on.

This research will analyse the negative effects on students from single-parent families, which will greatly help solve their psychological problems more effectively and targeted in the future. It is also beneficial to the parent-child relationship of single-parent families. Significant cultural differences exist among countries and regions worldwide, leading to significant differences in people's ideas. The psychological problems that may arise in different situations will also be various. Therefore, studies of adolescents from single-parent families in different regions are needed to learn more about the effects and solutions. Copying the same results from the other areas may not apply to people in their region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As the Internet is more and more developed, adolescents acquire more knowledge and absorb more negative content simultaneously, leading them to be more and more precocious. Nowadays, the psychological problems of adolescents have become a common phenomenon. Still, because of the different educational levels and knowledge experiences of parents and others, everyone has different views on this, some of which, such as biases, can affect the psychology of adolescents to some extent (Hannighofer et al., 2017; Hermann et al., 2022).

Family Capital

There are many influences of family factors on adolescence. First, family capital harms adolescents' subjective well-being (SWB) through academic achievement. It positively impacts adolescents' SWB through the school climate in China (Wu et al., 2022). Similarly, the mother's socioeconomic status, such as whether the mother has a higher education, strongly influences the child. Studies have shown that children of highly educated mothers have fewer psychological problems, whether in single-parent or intact families (Kuruczova et al., 2020).

Family Education

Family education also influences children's behaviour in daily actions and is one of the reasons that cause psychological problems (Chen, 2021). From the theory of developmental psychology, it can be concluded that the influence of family upbringing style on children is great. Jia, Sorgente and Yu (2022) found parents can pass on values, beliefs and behaviours to their children, and their involvement helps children internalise and learn social values and behaviours. For instance, boys in families where 66.7% of parents were violent were more susceptible to aggressive behaviour (Arinin & Aleksandrova, 2021).

Family Structure

The most significant impact on adolescents is the change in family structure. Studies have shown that the transition to single-parent families significantly impacts children (Kuruczova et al., 2020), many of whom find it difficult to accept the split. Previous studies show that the level of socialisation of children from single-parent families is different from that of children from two-parent families of the same age (Kapustina, 2016). For example, they have a higher level of trait anxiety, less prosocial behaviour, and more aggressive behaviour (Wang & Deng, 2007). In addition, children from single-parent families have lower levels of self-confidence, are more likely to be emotionally unstable, and even have lower interpersonal skills (Herke et al., 2020; Kuruczova et al., 2020). Adolescents from single-parent families have higher rates of unhealthy behaviour and poorer mental health (Park & Lee, 2020).

As a Chinese saying goes, parents are their children's first teachers. That is to say, of all people and things, parents have the most significant influence on their children. Single-parent families cause different kinds of harm to children, but most leave children insecure. Many adolescents have behaviours that need attention at school, such as not doing homework or talking in class deliberately. Some of the guardians of adolescents in single-parent families are their parents, and some are their grandparents. This kind of generational parenting causes adolescents to attach to their grandparents the attachments they would otherwise have with their parents (Chen, 2015). In this case, the grandparents are the guardians of the adolescents. Besides, there are also differences between the children of single parents raised by their father and those raised by their mother: single mothers, by contrast, are more likely to have negative and unstable emotional displays and are more likely to have emotional and behavioural control over their children by silly girls in their parenting style (Chen, 2015; Alami et al., 2014).

These possible family causes of adolescents' psychological problems have been studied in different countries. Still, different countries' cultures can have certain effects on people's psychology and behaviour, even in different parts of the same country. As a result, whether these conclusions would hold up in another region is debatable. In this research, the researchers took some family factors, such as family economic status, as the control variables and selected families with the same economic level

as the research objects. Other factors, such as who the guardian is, will be studied as independent variables. The psychological problems of the participants will be preliminarily understood through the questionnaire survey, and an in-depth understanding of some research-related issues will be completed through the interview. It can be roughly obtained through this research what the psychological problems of adolescents from single-parent families are, what family factors cause the psychological problems of junior middle school students from single-parent families, and how these problems affect their school performance in Northeast China.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was used to choose three adolescents (1 boy and two girls) from the Secondary School affiliated with Anshan Normal University in the northeast of China, 12–15 years old, to participate in semi-structured interviews individually. The Secondary School affiliated with Anshan Normal University is located in a remote area, and many of the student's parents are migrant workers. Most of the families are poor, and there are a large number of left-behind adolescents. The participants from single-parent families whose school performances are different were selected in three grades respectively through communication with their head teacher and the observation by the researcher. The situation of premature death of their parents is excluded.

Research Approach and Data Collection

This research is qualitative, mainly based on a semi-structured interview. The discussion is based on narrative research composed of two parts: the first will collect the sociodemographic data of the students (age, gender, academic record, educational background of parents), while the second will consist of 6 open-answer interview questions. Each interview lasted at least 20 minutes. The following questions will guide the interview :

- How do you like going to school? Why? What about your popularity at school? How do you evaluate your performance in school?
- Who do you live with now? What do they expect of you, and how do you rate them? Why?
- What do your parents do in your life that makes you unhappy? Why?
- How old were you when your parents separated? Do you know why they split up?
- Do you want your parents to reconcile? Why? If they start a new family, what do you think about it?
- How do you think the interaction between your parents and you?

The students who will participate in the research are all the students of the researchers and have even had psychological counselling individually before. Hence, the researcher and the participants had some understanding and familiarity in advance. In the selection stage, the students will be selected according to the researchers' understanding of them and through communication with the head teacher. Information about the research will be provided orally and in writing to the students and their guardians, and they will sign a written informed consent form before the research.

DATA ANALYSIS

This study aimed to explore family-induced psychological problems and their impact on school performance in single-parent families through qualitative research in which three participants were interviewed with semi-structured questions, and the interview content was audio recorded with the participants' permission. The researcher first made a rough extraction from the original data of the participants to make it into chunks of data, then extracted them into salient points. Second, the salient points were coded and named into groups. The groups were put into smaller groups to find the themes in common in the coding 2 level at last. Four themes were derived, and the explanation of the themes is listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Explanation of Themes

Themes	Explanation of Themes
Learning attitude and behaviour are affected by the guardian's educational level and the way to educate them.	Participants reported their own school performance and academic performance, as well as the education level and expectations of their guardians, which may be affected.
Adolescents from single-parent families always lack love and hope for attention to	The psychological emotions expressed by the participants in the interview about their parents' behaviours and opinions on certain things
Raised by grandparents, I have little affection for my parents	Participants reported the current living conditions and mentioned who they were primarily raised by
Parental love and companionship may reduce family conflicts	Participants self-reported what had happened to their parents and their attitudes towards their parents

According to the interview records of the three participants, they all come from single-parent families and are influenced by their families to varying degrees. Family is the first environment for children to grow up, and parents are the first teachers of children, so the family greatly influences them.

It can be seen from the interview records that the psychological problems of the participants mainly refer to negative emotions, cognition and behaviour. For example, the psychological problems of several participants can be summarised as low self-esteem, often feeling lonely, eagerness to be attentive to and being praised, emotional instability and so on. The performance in school mainly refers to the participants' academic performance, how much they enjoy going to school and popularity.

Learning Attitude and Behaviour are Affected by The Guardian's Educational Level and The Way to Educate Them

In this research, the guardian refers to the person with whom the adolescents of single-parent families live now.

For instance, the guardian of Participant 1 is his grandmother. He said when asked what his grandmother thought about his academic record: “She is illiterate, so she cannot read. She checked my homework to see if I had filled my exercise book with words, and I just messed around because I didn’t know how to do it. She didn't know whether my answers were correct, so she couldn't help me with my lessons.”

The education level of the guardians would affect the level of their guidance to the adolescents’ learning. In addition, guardians' education and management abilities also play a great role in cultivating their learning ability.

Participant 3 said, when asked to say something about their relationship with their parents: “My parents disagreed on many things but were united in raising me. They never talk about each other's faults in front of me.”

This unified parenting style will make adolescents more understanding. Many single parents believe that the idea of education is not a fight but can make adolescents conflict.

From the expectation theory of psychology, we know that people's expectations around adolescents are very important. But it also has a mutually reinforcing effect on whether the adolescents themselves understand their parents. When adolescents understand their families, high expectations for

them have a positive promoting effect. At the same time, it will play no role when adolescents do not understand them. There may even be a backlash due to puberty.

Participant 1 said when asked what they expect of him and how he rates them: “They hope that I can study hard and not be asked by parents all the time. I was annoyed with my grandmother for disciplining me.”

On the contrary, when parents make no demands on their children, the children will fall behind, give up on themselves, and even suffer from depression due to disappointment and lack of attention.

Participant 2 said when asked what they expect of him and how he rates them: “She made no academic demands on me. When I was in primary school, my grades were very good. But later, for various reasons, I always asked for leave and missed some classes, so I fell a lot behind.”

The parents' indulgence to their children in the children's eyes is not caring, and this kind of thinking will make them give up on themselves even more.

Adolescents from Single-Parent Families Always Lack Love and Hope for Attention To

All families have contradictions to some extent, but the contradictions in single-parent families often appear in the parents' lack of care for their children and the children's lack of understanding of their parents. Adolescents who grow up in single-parent families will be overly sensitive due to some aspects of lack.

Participant 3 said, when asked what did her parents do that made her unhappy and why: “I will be angry when they don't keep their word. They were very busy with work when I was young, so they could seldom go out with me. Sometimes, they promised to take me to the shopping mall or KFC on the weekend, but they often cancelled the promise because of the sudden work, which made me very sad. That's when I think they don't love me. They promised me clearly but did not keep the promise. They accompany me little time originally.”

This type of behaviour in which parents make promises in early childhood and then fail to keep them, making the child unhappy, is called order sensitivity, which can impact the child's subsequent development.

Participant 2 said when asked about their communication situation: “Every time we talk, we will quarrel. So, I stopped telling her about myself after that.”

Parents seldom take care of their children when they are young, resulting in a lack of parent-child affection, so parents and children cannot communicate and express themselves normally for a long time.

Raised By Grandparents, Have Little Affection for My Parents

As do all three participants, adolescents from single-parent families generally live with one parent. However, grandparents also often live with children as guardians because of varied problems such as parental work or other reasons. Adolescents are in great need of their parents' companionship during their infancy. Grandparents raise many adolescents in single-parent families because their parents cannot accompany them for a long time. So, a child may mistakenly form an attachment to a grandparent when they should be forming an attachment pattern with their parents. This results in a cold attitude towards their parents.

Participant 2 said when asked if there was something her mother did that impressed her: “I didn't see my mother all the time. So, I did not have a deep impression on her. I can even say that she was just a stranger whom I needed to call my mother at that time in my heart.”

Adolescents may become closer to the people who spent time with them as infants, even if that person is not a parent.

Participant 1 said when asked who he is living with at home now: "I live with my grandmother and father, but sometimes my father doesn't return home. My grandmother usually takes care of me."

Also, most adolescents in single-parent families live with their mothers or have at least one female guardian, such as a grandmother.

Parental Love and Companionship May Reduce Family Conflicts

Due to the influence of heredity and family environment, the child's performance is the epitome of family education. Adolescents from single-parent families tend to show more psychological problems because their parents cannot accompany them or even lack the love of one parent. Hence, the influence of parents is the greatest. It can be seen from the interview records of several participants that the most frequently mentioned words about parents are companionship, care and communication.

Participant 1 said when asked how he rated his father and the relationship between them: "He doesn't discipline me at all. He doesn't come back every day and always comes back late. I barely get a chance to talk to him." "I have little communication with my father. I don't feel like I have a relationship with him."

Such behaviour like parents around the child but lack of care and accompany will cause the child's indifference to the family and increase the child's loneliness.

And he also said, when asked about his mother, "They divorced when I was young. I don't remember my mother, and I haven't been in touch with her."

Even in single-parent families, the lack of love from the other parent still affects their children. The love and companionship of both parents for their children are different, and the lack of either side will make them produce some psychological issues. Conversely, parents are responsible for their children's development when their parent's divorce makes them less vulnerable to the effects of their parent's divorce.

Participant 3 said, when asked about the relationship between her parents and her: "I think I get more love after their divorce."

DISCUSSION

The main results of this research indicate family reasons influence some psychological problems and school performance of adolescents from single-parent families. For adolescents from single-parent families, the reduced time spent with the child due to the parents' separation makes the child more sensitive and eager for love and attention. When parents increase their own company, adolescents' psychological problems will be correspondingly reduced, and family conflicts will be reduced. Adolescents are often closer to whom they are raised by, regardless of whether their guardians are their parents. Besides, the education level and education mode of guardians will affect adolescents' learning attitudes and behaviour.

The participants came from single-parent families, and most lived with their mothers. The grandparents raise the one living with his father. Single fathers interact more with their children and have higher educational expectations if living with a grandparent (Alami et al., 2014). Single fathers tend to be less attentive to their children than mothers, so the guardian of a child in a single-parent family often requires at least one woman. However, single mothers are prone to emotional instability due to their heavy burden. Adolescents born to mothers in unstable relationships were likelier to have emotional or behavioural problems than those born to mothers in good relationships (Hannighofer et al., 2017). So, a single mother's excessive love often makes the child out of breath and forms a rebellious psychology.

Adolescents' self-esteem in widow single-parent families was lower than in two-parent nuclear families. Parenting style also impacts adolescent self-esteem (Chen & Wan-Chi, 2016). It is not difficult to see from the research that the participants in single-parent families are incredibly eager for attention and excessively follow certain rules, which manifests in low self-esteem. That's precisely the risk of

family education, which can easily cause psychological problems in teenagers' growth process when accumulating to a certain extent and will affect normal growth and development (Chen, 2022).

Many parents have violations in family education (Arinin & Aleksandrova, 2021). For example, parents' indifference to adolescents' emotions and disapproval of their children's uncompanionship existed in this research. When parents are good at education or single-parent families have shared expectations for their children's education, they tend to develop better, are less likely to have psychological problems and perform better in school.

Single-parent families have more emotional and behavioural problems, and new-partner families have more hyperactivity and behavioural problems (Kuruczova et al., 2020). Adolescents often don't want their parents to form a new family with someone else. Many adolescents from single-parent families fear becoming outsiders in their new family and losing the scant love and attention their parents give them. However, stronger family cohesion and better parent-child relationships were associated with better self-rated health, higher life satisfaction, more prosocial behaviours and fewer problem behaviours, and these associations were more robust than family structure (Herke et al., 2020). As a result, if the parents can have a unified education for their children and give them enough love and companionship, the adolescents will not necessarily have psychological problems, even in single-parent families.

The most significant limitation of this research is that the number of participants is not large enough. If the sample size is sufficient, the research results can be summarised more accurately, and the gender differences of the participants can also be studied. In future studies, family analysis can also be carried out during interviews. In addition to adolescents' self-reports, parents' reports can also be added to study the influence of family factors on children from single-parent families.

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