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Single-Parent Family – Current Events and Challenges

Mocanu Lăcrămioara[1], Cărăuș Ancuța Loredana[2], Cernei Carolina[3]

Abstract: This topic is a topical one due to the continuously increasing number of single-parent families in Romania in recent years. Given that our country is going through a period of transition, the family is subject to processes that negatively influence the relationships between its members. Research has shown that the percentage of single-parent families in total families is very high. The choice of this theme had as its starting point the history and life experience of many young people whose personalities reflect a series of traits and attitudes that are not exactly conducive to good adaptation to the standards of everyday life.

Keywords: parents, difficulties, attitudes, experience.

1. Introduction

Over time, contradictory opinions have been formulated due to mentalities regarding the functionality of the single-parent family. In traditional society, which was based on the extended family, single parenthood was frowned upon, and those who condemned this lifestyle were encouraged. In modern society, the view on the single-parent family has changed. Today it is considered that it is better for the child for the parents to separate than to be subjected to a conflictual family climate. The single-parent family is a normal family, but it is said that it represents a family crisis due to the effects of the social challenges it faces and cannot cope with: poverty and social exclusion.

2. Concept and Terms

Sociological research on the single-parent family has focused on:

- living conditions and economic vulnerability, studies on living standards;
- the effectiveness of family policies, social actions and social transfers;
- the effects of „family dissociation" and the structure of single parenthood on children's socialization.

In contemporary society, the family has undergone major transformations, from several points of view, depending on the society we are referring to, the term "family" becoming increasingly ambiguous. The

[1] PhD, Associate Professor, Danubius International University of Galați, Galați, Romania, Address: Blvd. Galați, nr.3, Galați, Romania, Corresponding author: lacramioara_mocanu@yahoo.com.
[2] PhD Professor, Sanity Post-Secondary Sanitary School of Bacău, Bacău, Romania, E-mail: ancutacaraus@sanity.ro.
[3] Professor, Sanity Post-Secondary Sanitary School of Bacău, Bacău, Romania, E-mail: cernei.carolina99@gmail.com.

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cause of this is the variety of transformations that materialize in: the expansion of premarital sexual experience, the expansion of premarital cohabitation, the desacralization of marriage, the decrease in nuptiality, etc. At the same time, the emergence of other family lifestyles is observed: single-parent families, blended or reconstituted families, consensual unions, same-sex marriages or other social arrangements.

The single-parent family is considered by some specialists to be a special type of family, while others do not consider this social group a family.

A complex definition of the single-parent family is given by Iolanda Mitrofan and Cristian Ciupercă who consider that this type of family is an asymmetrical family structure, formed by one parent and his/her child(ren) either due to the death of the other parent, or through divorce, or through the abandonment of the family by one parent, or through the decision of the parent not to marry, or through adoption by a single person, or through *the accidental birth* of a child from a free relationship, outside of marriage, with particular reference to *teenage parents* (Mitrofan & Ciupercă, 2002, p. 74).

The single-parent family has several specific organizational and functional peculiarities, different from the family with both parents. For each of the two, new types of requests emerge that lead to behavioral changes. Child-parent relationships take different forms and the effects on their growth and psychological maturation process are different. The difference between single-parent families and classic, nuclear families is structural in nature, because from an interactional and psychological point of view it is as complex as a family with both parents.

The single-parent family is analyzed differently in different theoretical models. Thus, in the traditional model it is considered an exception, a borderline situation (where one of the spouses has died, is away for longer periods of time, or, very rarely, is separated or divorced), in which women and children (single fathers are rare cases) risk being left without financial support and being forced to ask for support from the family of origin.

The contractualist model, which considers that the freedom of individuals only implies the obligations assumed, starts from the premise that spouses can decide how to manage personal and financial relationships during marriage. In the case of divorce, this model considers that the single parent wanted to become a parent and is compatible with this situation, being able to positively address the problems that may arise.

The community model shows that no person becomes independent until after a period of dependence. From the perspective of this model, help for single-parent families will come from extended families or the community.

The model based on relational rights and responsibilities considers that the relationships between family life and the political and economic order, the alignment of individuals' lives with cultural patterns, are important.

Cristina Ştefan believes that the single-parent family seems to be like a whole from which, although an element is missing, it does not cease to function as a system, in which the whole is more than the sum of the parts (Ştefan C., 2001, p. 5).

3. Analysis

The issue of single-parent families is increasingly being discussed because they represent a significant proportion of the total number of families in each country. In Romania, the number of children born out

of wedlock was, at the 2002 Census, 296,802. Despite this fact, these families have to solve their own problems because the state takes care of nuclear families that hold the majority share. Due to this, in addition to psychological and interactional problems, economic and social problems also arise that transform single-parent family members into a disadvantaged category.

The difficulties that single-parent families face can be:

- material: high risk of poverty;
- biological: related to sexuality and restriction of offspring;
- emotional: due to the absence of the partner, conjugal love, etc.

The single-parent family is characterized by an asymmetry of its members resulting from the relationship between the status of the parent (of protection) and that of the child (of dependency). From a quantitative point of view, a single-parent family can be composed of a parent and one or more children. From a qualitative point of view, this can have democratic forms (the adult is the child's friend) or forms in which the adult's authority is indisputable.

In the analysis of the single-parent family, two points of view emerged. From a sociological point of view, this family is considered a social group that is formed based on the kinship relationships between a parent (the single one) and his/her child(ren). It is a primary group whose members maintain direct and formal relationships. This group is characterized by common emotional states, aspirations, and values.

The second point of view, the legal one, considers the single-parent family as the group of people between whom rights and obligations are established, regulated by legal norms.

There are fundamental differences between the traditional and single-parent families.

Unlike the traditional family, which performed functions with a positive impact on society, the single-parent family, although it offers protection and care to its members, as well as a climate of close affection, is deficient in terms of the securing environment and the way it confers status. Due to the fact that the single-parent family is ignored in terms of social policies, a series of effects appear: the majority of institutionalized children come from single-parent families, children have difficulties adapting, etc.

Family abandonment represents, from a legal point of view, the act of someone who, although legally obliged to support a person, abandons or expels them, thus implicitly exposing them to physical and moral suffering, or does not provide maintenance for two months.

Most single-parent families have women as the sole breadwinner (9 out of 10 parents are women). Single mothers share some common characteristics:

- expanding tasks that are not specific to them and that require time and energy. These role tasks cannot be performed with maximum efficiency. Women with a high level of education and financial means usually face fewer difficulties than those with a low level of education. The latter have a harder time solving problems related to absence from work due to a child's illness, care and supervision of young children;
- changes occur in the relationship with the child. In many cases, the mother and the first child share the parental role because she confides in him, thus reinforcing his role as the absent parent. The consequence is that the child's maturation occurs before he or she is ready.

Regarding the single-parent family headed by the father, we can say that this constitutes a minority. Common characteristics of single fathers are:

- have greater financial freedom than single mothers due to their higher level of education;
- have the ability to meet the emotional needs of children;
- they demand more independence from their children unlike other parents;
- prefers to make new acquaintances, but avoids social activities where married couples are present. However, involvement in political activities, study or additional training is increasing;
- divorced single fathers are satisfied with their status and consider themselves well-adjusted, unlike widowed ones who encounter difficulties due to a lack of preparation for this experience.

Comparing single-parent families headed by fathers and those headed by mothers, it was observed that fathers fulfill their parental role in a competitive manner that has positive effects on the child's psychobehavioral profile. Children from these families appreciate and evaluate the degree of their parent's emotional investment more highly than those from families with both parents.

Single-parent families have multiple consequences for children. It was found that family structure has significant effects on them. When we talk about structure, we refer either to the numerical component (generational structure and the set of related statuses and roles), or to the component related to the division of roles within the family and the exercise of authority.

Research on the effects that single-parent families have on children has led to different conclusions. On the one hand, it is considered that there are high risks for the child due to the fact that when one of the parents is absent for a longer period of time, the family no longer functions in a healthy manner. On the other hand, S. Hanson believes that social support and effective communication lead to the physical and mental health of children in single-parent families (Mitrofan, Ciupercă, 2002, p. 235).

Children's reaction to separation is variable, depending on several factors: age, the time that has passed since the parents' divorce, the climate that characterizes the parents' relationships during and after the divorce, etc.

Depending on age, young children will be the most affected. Their overall development is disrupted, on the one hand they become disobedient, even aggressive, less affectionate, and on the other hand they seem to become dependent. Six- to eight-year-old children experience feelings of sadness, frustration, anxiety, and confusion. They live with a conflict of loyalty, seeking contact with the absent parent. At this age, boys seem more vulnerable, having problems with school and social integration. In children aged 9-12, the awareness of their parents' separation is clearer, and they manifest it more discreetly, being able to fight against the psychological states that dominate them. However, they often experience anxiety, shame, pain, and a sense of helplessness that can be expressed through anger towards the parent they consider guilty or against both parents. In adolescence, reactions to parental separation cover a more diverse range; from anger, sadness, and feelings of threat and anxiety about the future, to disappointment, indignation, or even contempt for parents.

Being put in the situation of staying with one parent (most often the mother) he will blame the other or blame himself because his feelings will be of rejection, guilt, and helplessness. These feelings will make him antisocial, revolted, neurotic, or complex.

One difference between single-parent families and those with both parents is that in the second type of family there is a distribution of responsibilities. In the case of a single-parent family headed by a mother, there is a tension in adopting the parental role that increases because the father's responsibilities must now be fulfilled by the mother. Her attempt to fulfill both parental roles leads either to the restriction of

the behavioral sphere specific to each role, or to the exaggeration of certain types of behavior within the maternal role.

Family and extra-family tasks take up more of the mother's time and the consequence is a decrease in the time available for bonding with her child/children. It is true that the socializing function is diminished due to the absence of a parent (which determines the lack of affection), but we must also take into account the fact that in families with both parents this function is increasingly less fulfilled. This is due to the fact that the school is increasingly intervening in this process, taking over the family's responsibilities. We cannot say that the single-parent family has a negative influence on the child due to the diminution of some functions, since the classic family also faces such problems.

Some specialists believe that children's chances of performing poorly on intelligence tests or engaging in criminal behavior depend largely on the family situation, which is influenced by the presence of the father. However, just because the father is not visible does not mean that he is absent because a divorced parent can have contact with his children and influence them even though he is not present in the family. Even the deceased parent can have an influence on children through the memory they carry of him. If the father is absent during childhood, there is a possibility that the desire to achieve it will be repressed. The child will not have the self-confidence necessary to set goals and try to achieve them. For this reason, the structuring of his personality will remain deficient, especially in terms of orientation towards a personal future and extra-familial relationships. Paternal insufficiency leaves cruel imprints on the child, and his socialization has a very high chance of being deficient. The general conclusion is that the absence of parents can generate identity problems for the child.

The short and medium-term effects of single-parent families on children are different from those on parents. Custodial parents exert influence, but this influence is not manifest in all respects. Even if the parent's relationship with the ex-spouse's relatives no longer manifests itself legally and diminishes in terms of interaction and communication, the same does not happen with the relationship between children and relatives.

Children continue to consider themselves to belong to both parents because despite the fact that the role of the parent living with them increases, it does not mean that the role of the other parent diminishes from a psychological point of view for the children. The parent is absent from the family only from an interactional point of view, not from a psychological point of view. Communication between the child and the parent is maintained, even if only through the phone or the time they spend together on weekends or during vacations.

Children from single-parent families headed by their mother are characterized by early maturation due to the fact that from a young age they have to solve various domestic tasks and are invested with the role of partners. Due to the fact that the single mother sometimes abdicates the role of parent and becomes a kind of partner for the oldest child, communication relationships regarding life-related aspects are increased. The mother finds emotional support in the oldest child, causing him to mature prematurely. The child gradually takes on the role of the absent parent, and the resulting conflicts tend to imitate the old ones.

If the single-parent family is headed by the father, the children have fewer responsibilities regarding household chores because the parent seeks help outside the family and therefore the children's support is reduced than in families headed by the mother. This is due to:

- the father's voluntary non-involvement of the children;
- the attempt to ease children's transition to the single-parent family lifestyle;

- difficulty in planning household chores.

The experience of a single parent brings changes in the parent-child relationship, changes that can occur depending on the time spent by the mother (father) in the family, the way the separation affected the children or the parents, and the way the parents and children adopted new lifestyles.

In the single-parent family, the inequality of status between parent and child will decrease and balance will be established in family relationships, a balance that will favor the child's psychosocial evolution.

Regarding the impact that divorce has on children, as well as the feeling of losing a parent, it has been found that what fundamentally influences the child is the context in which the separation occurs. If the atmosphere is hostile, children will be tempted by negative feelings (fear, guilt) and negative behaviors (irritability, aggression).

Most research has had as subjects children who came from both *intact* and broken families and sought to highlight statistical differences between groups. However, the results obtained were not conclusive due to several factors:

- separation can occur before divorce, and children react more strongly to separation than to the divorce itself;
- separation can occur in different ways: either through a sudden separation, or due to frequent departures and returns, so measuring children's reactions must be correlated with the time scale of the separation, respectively the divorce;
- parental separation can occur at different times in children's physical and emotional development. Due to this fact, but also due to differences in temperament, it is almost impossible for the little ones to react in the same way.

Once the child begins to become aware of the search for self, the value and spiritual wandering, questions like: „Why did I end up in this situation?", „Why did it happen?", „What will I do?". Although they may separate from their parents in terms of values, due to the fact that they will not find coherent explanations to questions, they may become frustrated and determined not to assume paternity.

The child will identify with the „good" parent. The consequence is the emergence of psychological effects related to gender role identification. The boy left with his mother will be subject to the phenomenon of maternal overprotection. Research has shown that divorce can lead to the reduction and ignoring of parental tasks regarding the child's upbringing and education: controlling the environment, supervising school performance, how to spend free time, etc.

4. Conclusions

In the long term, the effects of single-parent families on children can be negative. Most of the time, with the change in family structure, some measures are adopted to adapt to the new situation. In Romania, the income situation of single parents is serious. Due to the fact that salary is the main source of income, and children are a main factor facilitating the establishment of poverty, most families in this category live below the minimum subsistence level.

One such measure is changing your home to a smaller one that requires lower expenses. Although there are financial advantages, the child's development may be negatively influenced. Moving to a cheaper neighborhood characterized by poverty and crime will influence the behavior of family members. Due

to the fact that a single parent will be less able to supervise their children than both parents, there is a very high possibility that the little ones will fall prey to negative influences.

The effects of single-parent families on children are multiple and not fully known. That is precisely why they remain a permanent challenge for researchers.

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