Parenting Experiences of Single Parents by Choice and the Challenges, Dilemmas and Practical Implications - An Innovative Study

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ABSTRACT

There is limited research and literature on Parenting Experiences of Single Parents by Choice (SPCs). In an innovative study in Israel, we examined the parenting experiences and attachment styles of 54 Jewish SPCs in various regions in Israel. Both women and men, city dwellers and villagers, with between one to three children, participated in the research. The sample included individuals who had become parents in different ways: sperm and egg donation, adoption and surrogacy. The objective of this study was to examine parenting experiences and their unique characteristics and how family relationships and past couple relationships correlate attachment styles.

The results of the study indicate that an SPC is generally characterized by a sense of responsibility and loneliness. The participants viewed their choice positively despite the difficulties experienced and separating couple hood from parenting was perceived by most as a life constraint. The attachment styles (AS) were distributed as follows: Secure – 50%; Disorganized (Fearful-Avoidant) – 32%; Fearful – 9%; and Avoidant – 9%. Furthermore, reported relationships and AS could be loosely divided into three groups: A. Those who had significant relationships in the past and an interest in future relationships were found to be have a more Secure AS. B. Those who reported complex relationships with their original family and couple relationships were found to be more disorganized. C. A relatively small group of women, who reported a paucity of relationships in their lives and a lack of intimate relationships, were found primarily to have Fearful or Avoidant AS. This paper discusses the challenges and dilemmas we discovered and offers directions and practical implications aimed at helping SPC families with their parenting*.

*The research was published in Hebrew in a book called, 'Single Parenting by Choice – To Raise a Child Alone' (Resling, 2018). This paper is an expansion of a presentation that was delivered at the 4th International Congress of Clinical and Health Psychology on Children and Adolescents, Spain, 16.11.18.

Keywords: Parenting, Single parenting by choice, Attachment styles, Solo mother, Solo father

DEFINING THE CONCEPT OF SINGLE PARENTING BY CHOICE

Single Parenting by Choice (SPC) is a phenomenon that seems to be expanding in western society [1,2]. In the past, single women with children called themselves 'solo parents' [3,4] and 'single mothers by choice', until the latter became the accepted term in the USA [5] as well as in Israel [6]. A single-parent family relates to all families that are headed by a single parent in everyday life. This general classification includes families in a state of divorce, widowers and separated couples [7] and those who were once called celibates or 'unmarried women with children' [8,9].

In the past, some women had unwanted or 'unchosen' children as a result of unsafe intercourse or unplanned pregnancy, children outside of marriage and even as a result of rape. In the last decade, more women and recently some men, have decided to have children on their own [10,11], which means that the concept is changing and various

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groups and researchers have started to use the terms 'Single Parent by Choice' (SPC) instead of 'unmarried women with children'.

Historically, in Israel it was customary to use the general concept of 'single-parent family' with no specific distinction between the types of families included in the concept; that is, those who were considered 'unmarried mothers' were in the same category as every other one-parent family. In recent years there has been a dramatic increase in women who choose to raise children alone. Although it was claimed these children grow up in a 'fragile' family, both socially and economically, a popular and widely published article also mentioned that this family structure is now part of the Israeli middle class [12]. In 2014, the term 'single-parent family' was changed to 'family with an independent parent' [13] and included divorced families, widowed families and single-parent families.

This common definition is not clear enough. A single parent (by choice) is a parent who parents alone. This means that the other parent is absent, as opposed to a co-parent, meaning that family started with two adults and then there was a change, due to divorce or the death of a partner. Creating a family entirely on one's own is a different and unique psychological state, which is why we define a single parent as someone who has become a parent alone, with no other parent in the picture from the outset.

SPCs IN ISRAEL - AN EXAMPLE OF THE GROWTH OF THIS UNIQUE FAMILY STRUCTURE IN THE WEST

SPCs have existed for many years. In Israel, the phenomenon became more common 20-30 years ago, especially on the Kibbutz (a collective community that was traditionally based on agriculture), which enabled women to raise children by themselves more easily. In the last 20 years, the numbers of SPCS have been increasing. Between 1980-1989, 8,685 children were born to unmarried Jewish[a] women in Israel[b]; between 1990-1999 – 16,092 children; between 2000-2009 – 34,014 children; and between 2010-2015 – 32,961 children were born to SPCs [14]. This registers an increase from 860 children per year in the 1980s to 6,600 and more per year in the current decade. Women generally conceived through sperm donation and IVF [17]. Sometimes the children were adopted. Approximately 15 years ago, men also started to become SPCs, with homosexual and heterosexual men becoming fathers by themselves with the help of a surrogate mother and egg donation through the IVF process. In Israel today, there are hundreds of SPC fathers and thousands of SPC mothers.

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[a] Women from Muslim or Christian societies do not report such a phenomenon; however, this situation could change in the future.
[b] According to the publication of the Israel [15,16].

SINGLE PARENTING DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH

In recent years there has been some discussion and research on the various aspects of SPC and its consequences [18,19]. Discussions range from the question of the very legitimacy of this parenting [20], SPC relationship choices, difficulties in establishing or in maintaining relationships [21], resilience [22] and zeitgeist [23-25], through to the debate as to how broad the phenomenon actually is and whether it is largely a wide social media echo [26-29] and the effects of this parenting on child development [30-33].

The SPC family structure has gained momentum since IVF became an option. In the USA in the 1980s, psychotherapist and single mother Jane Mats founded Single Mothers by Choice (SMC) and later wrote a book on the subject [5]. In Israel, several dissertations have been written about unmarried mothers by choice [8,9,34] referred to as 'single mothers by choice' [35,36]. In addition, several studies have been conducted on the quality of life of single mothers by choice [37] as a family structure [38,39] with references to the difference between choosing a heterosexual-family structure and SPC [40,41], along with preliminary research. One study on hetero-gay families compares to single-parent families of divorced mothers [42]. Weinberg-Kornick and Ben-Ari examined the maternal identity of SPC through adoption [43] and Shechner et al. [44] explored children's adjustment and development in non-traditional families in Israel. Weiss-Sadeh and Dawn [45] compared the personal aspects of religious and secular single mothers and Rosenberg [46] interviewed a number of single mothers and wrote about SPC from the legal perspective and through the eyes of Israeli society.

THE CURRENT RESEARCH

To try to understand the single parenting experience, an attempt was made in this study to sample a wide range of single parents' mothers and fathers from different regions of Israel, with diverse lifestyles, raising one or more children. The participants ranged from women with newborns to SPCs with children over the age of 20. Because the single-family structure can be achieved through various means, it was decided to target individuals who became parents from sperm or egg donation, surrogacy, unplanned pregnancy and adoption.

The participants were recruited by posting on social media groups such as Facebook and WhatsApp and by spreading word-of-mouth research and contacting caregivers who knew single parents and adoptive parenting counselors for gay fathers, and more. More than 10 of the applicants who were accepted were not sampled as they did not fit the exact definition of 'single parenting by choice'. The goal was to focus on single parents raising children alone and to our knowledge, no research of this magnitude has ever been conducted in Israel.

THE SAMPLE

Age of participants: Most of the single parents in this study started parenting between the ages of 35-44 (70% of the sample), a small portion between the ages of 30-34 (14%), another small portion between the ages of 45-49 (14%) and the rest were over the age of 50. At the time of the interviews, the ages of the participants ranged from 39 to 70.

Until recently, most SCPs were between the ages of 32-35 when they started thinking about becoming parents and between the ages of 35-45 when they actually became parents. Over the past decade, there seems to have been a change in this tendency and we are now seeing more individuals in their early 30s forming this family structure [6].

RESEARCH TOOL

Participants filled out an informed consent form, contact information and the following questionnaires:

Personal information questionnaire

Gender, age, marital status, children's details, education, degree of religiosity, socioeconomic status, living environment, parental status, number of siblings and place of birth. In addition, the participants were asked about the extent of economic and functional assistance they received and their past relationships.

Parenting experience questionnaire

This questionnaire was based on an extension of the Parenting Stress Questionnaire, a parent questionnaire developed for the 'Nitzan' organization in Israel, Carmiel [47] and it is used in various works.

TESTING THE PARENTING EXPERIENCE

The questionnaire included questions in which the parent was asked to assess whether parenting had become easier or more difficult over the years from a practical and emotional standpoint; the level of coping required relative to the difficulties experienced by parents in a two-parent model; and: how much time is invested in parenting and the degree of guilt, feeling at ease, anxiety and satisfaction. The participants were also asked about how much assistance they received and if they had read up about parenting and how much they were helped by relatives, friends, neighbors and professionals such as a GP, consultant and psychologist. In addition, the participants were asked about their parenting experience in terms of tackling challenges and difficulties, gratitude and discourse and rapport with each of their children. Each participant assessed on an axis the extent to which each of their children were independent, sensitive, mature, rigid, creative, proactive and happy, relative to their peers. Regarding parenting, the participants were requested to give a general subjective assessment of their parenting experience according to terms such as annoyance, pride, exhaustion, success, confidence and comfort on a 1-5-level axis.

ATTACHMENT STYLES QUESTIONNAIRE

Each participant's attachment style (AS) was examined using a questionnaire that the participants completed before the personal interview. We used the Experience in Close Relationships (ECR-36) assessment questionnaire [48] to examine and define AS and close relationships in adulthood. The questionnaire included 36 sentences (for example, "I worry that I won't measure up to other people") – 18 details created a score on the Avoidance axis and 18 created a score on the Anxiety axis. Summary of the two axis scores created four attachment styles or orientations: Safe or Secure AS (low on the Avoidance axis and low on the Anxiety axis); Uncertain AS; Fearful (high anxiety); Avoidant (high in avoidance); Fearful-Avoidant (high in both avoidance and anxiety), which is also called a Disorganized AS. The time taken to complete the questionnaire ranged from 30 to 40 min. More than 90% of the participants completed the questionnaire [49].

The Hebrew version of the questionnaire was validated in 2000 in the Mikulincer and Florian study [50,51] and was found to have a high internal reliability for both anxiety (0.92) and avoidance (0.93) items. This questionnaire was translated into English and is being used in various studies in Israel [52].

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The research questions were examined using a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods that enabled us to interpret the experience of reality being investigated from the perspective of those involved and is especially suited to unknown or new phenomena [53]. Researchers using this research method usually rely on small, unrepresentative samples for exploratory in-depth research, incorporating qualitative research with in-depth interviews [54] integrated with additional data. In the case of the present study, this method was adopted with the aim of deepening our understanding of the individual parenting experience.

RESULTS

The parenting experience

Parenting is an important developmental stage in adult life [55,56], with parents going through different stages in relation to their growing child and his/her development [57]. At the same time, parenting is understood and accepted as a significant identity and meaningful experience in itself [58,59] and the parenting experience is derived from the development of a parent's self-concept in the context of dealing with a variety of practical, day-to-day, emotional tasks [60,61].

Parenting today is defined as an adult's growing relationship with a child, whether a biological descendant or not. Because of the dimension of responsibility involved in the absolute concern for the unborn, infant and child, many parents experience gaps between desired and imagined parenting and actual parenting [62]. These differences mean that, along with the enjoyment of parenting, there may be some ongoing experiences of frustration and guilt [63] and even difficulties in parenting [64]. In the present study, using self-report and in-depth questionnaires, the individual parent's experience was examined to determine how he/she views parenting in comparison with the two-parent model. It was found that overall; the reported experience of individuals with children of different ages is satisfying. Despite the responsibility and loneliness, parents report positive experiences and do not experience frustration or distress differently from other parents. Although most reported that they would prefer parenting in a two-parent model, half confirmed that they would not currently replace their parenting model and few reported remorse.

Most of the participants, women and men, confirmed that SPC was indeed a parenting choice. Over 80% considered raising children alone as a life constraint when they reached the stage where they wanted to be a parent and did not have the appropriate partner to start a family with. A small group, less than 20% of the participants, mostly mothers, stated that it was clear to them that they would not base a family on couple hood and therefore, when they understood they had a practical possibility of having a child alone, they knew that it would be their way of having a family.

SPC - Fulfilling and challenging

The SPCs we met reported that they were happy with their decision and that they experience great responsibility, loneliness, burden and satisfaction in parenthood. Many said that they became parents after years of focusing on their lives as unmarried individuals and on their career and they felt open and ready to experience parenting. The study also attempted to determine what aspects of being a single parent were similar to and different from parenting as a couple. Most of the SPCs mentioned that parenting was more complicated than they had imagined which is not surprising.

Most SPCs in this study reported that they receive assistance from family members, friends and professionals help, which is compatible with other literature on this topic and with professionals we spoke to. SPCs generally require more assistance than parents in couple relationships. They deal with the fact that they do not have a parenting partner who is present in their lives and with whom they can share their burdens and consult regularly. They do not have a partner with whom to share their day-to-day responsibilities, excitement, difficulties, happiness and concerns. Therefore, single parenting is characterized by a heavier sense of responsibility and pressure, with simultaneous feelings of a greater possibility to devote oneself entirely to the sense of

wholeness in the emotional experience and the freedom to accept any decision fully and without compromise.

Single parenting is parenting for all intents and purposes. It entails special emphases and characteristics, with dilemmas and challenges that differ from those in the two-parent model. The literature and discussions indicate that a single parent will experience more solitude and freedom, responsibility and burden, exclusivity and calmness), in a way that differs from a parent raising children with a spouse [42,45,65].

SPC and relationships

When we examined the motivations for choosing single parenting, our findings suggest that the participants could be divided into three categories: The largest group consisted of men and women who had been in intimate relationships in the past, but because they were not in a relationship at the time, or because their partners weren't fully committed or were not available, they chose to separate parenting from relationships of couple hood and intimacy. We will refer to this group as Group A: Positive experience in a couple relationships. The second group consisted of adults who reported complex and unstable relationships and complex attachments with their parents, both during their childhood and as adults. We will refer to this group as Group B: Complex experience in relationships. The third and smallest group consisted of women who had never been in a significant couple relationship, combined with the fact that they always knew they would not get married and that they would live alone. We will refer to this group as Group C: No couple relationships. For this group, SPC was their way to become mothers.

Motivations of choosing SPC

In this study, we tried to determine the motivating factors for SPC through questionnaires and interviews. We asked these parents to tell us the story behind their choice. Most of them said that they had planned to have a family with a partner, but due to life circumstances they found themselves without a satisfactory relationship or with a partner who wasn't ready to start a family. When they reached the age of 35 or more, they felt that the only option available to them was to separate parenthood from a relationship and become an SPC.

Most of the participants emphasized two majors' perspectives: 1) They had wanted to have a relationship in the future but decided to give up this option; 2) Their choice was not an ideological one, but one made out of necessity – the biological clock and the feeling that later they would be too old for parenting. Approximately one third of the participants indicated that they had never had long-lasting, meaningful relationships in their lives. These participants – mainly mothers – reported that they had had a problematic relationship in the family in which they were raised and had experienced difficulties in creating relationships as adults. These parents stated that technology – IVF and the social

acceptance and possibility of IVF (sperm donations in Israel are, in most cases, financed by the government) – enabled them to choose this path.

Most of the participants who became SPCs felt that it was a necessity of life; none of them presented it as an ideology and most said they would have preferred to do it traditionally. Until recently, most of SPCs were between the ages of 32-35 when they started to think about becoming parents and between the ages of 36-40 when they actually became parents. In the past decade, this trend has changed and we see more individuals in their early 30s considering this family structure.

Attachment style, past relationships and SPC

In an attempt to understand the relationship and family structure in SPC, which is based on one adult, it seems

relevant to examine the attachment style of the parent who chooses this parenting style. In general, attachment is a psychological model that attempts to describe interpersonal relationships and how human beings respond in relationships in which they feel secure, hurt, separated or perceiving a threat [66-70].

Before the personal interview with the participants, we used the ECR-36 assessment questionnaire [48] to examine the SPCs attachment styles. There are two axes of the tool, avoidance and anxiety, which create four attachment style options: a secure attachment style (low in avoidance and in anxiety) and three insecure attachment styles: fearful (high in anxiety), avoidant (high in avoidance) and fearful-avoidant (high in avoidance and in anxiety), which is also called disorganized **(Table 1)**.

Table 1. Distribution of attachment styles.

Attachment Style	SUM	%
Secure	27	50%
Disorganized (Fearful-Avoidant)	17	32%
Fearful	5	9%
Avoidant	5	9%

In the current sample, of those who completed the questionnaires, the Anxiety score was (M: 4.01, SD: 0.69), higher than the score studied in non-patients ('normative') population (M: 3.33, SD: 1.01). The scores on the axis of Avoidance were (M: 3.78, SD: 1.31), which is also high relative to other studies (M: 2.65, SD: 0.87). When we looked at the attachment styles as a whole, we found the following distribution: 50% Secure and 32% Disorganized

(Fearful-Avoidant), 9% Fearful, 9% Avoidant. It can be concluded that this corresponds with the classification of those who declared that they had meaningful relationships in the past and an interest in future relationships and those who reported complex relationships with their original family and in couple relationships as adults. Further research is required to examine these issues **(Table 2)**.

Table 2. Past relationship and present attachment style.

Group	Nature of Past Relationships	Attachment Style
A	Positive experience in a couple relationship	Secure
B	Complex experience in relationships	Fearful-Avoidant (Disorganized)
C	No couple relationships. For them, SPC was their way to become mothers	Fearful or Avoidant

After observing the anamnestic interview and collecting and examining the data questionnaires, we found that in matters of experience and attitude towards relationships in general and couple relationships in particular, we can divide the participants into three categories or groups, according to the different tendencies to relationships: In the first group, A. Positive experience in a couple relationship, when we examined the attachment style we found that the participants tended to have a more Secure attachment style. In the second group, B. Complex experience in relationship, the more common attachment style was disorganized attachment. The

third group, C. No couple relationships, was commonly characterized by Fearful or Avoidant attachment. This primary tendency is interesting and requires further research.

The participants were asked if, had they had had the knowledge and retrospective point of view at the time of their decision to become SPCs, if they would have preferred to become single parents or have children in a couple relationship. We found in this sample that about half of the participants would have preferred dual parenting, while the rest would still prefer single parenting.

CHALLENGES AND DILEMMAS

We have examined to what extent SPCs use individuals close to them to get assistance in various aspects of daily life. We found in the current sample that for over 80% of the SCPs, the mother (grandmother of the children) was very involved and helpful and for about 60%, the father (grandfather) was very involved and helpful. For approximately 30%, siblings of the SPCs helped significantly.

Most of the single parents in the study needed assistance in everyday life tasks. They expressed the desire to receive considerable support from the community, but in reality, they received help mostly from their parents and family. One third of the participants moved closer to their parents for the first few years after their children were born and questions of boundaries, independence, different perspectives about raising children and other issues arose. This complex issue – a significant change in the closeness and reshaping of relationships with parents – is one of the main challenges that are not always taken into account.

SPC parenting is much the same as any other parenting in many important aspects. Nevertheless, there are some unique challenges SPCs generally face. For example, participants presented various narratives through which they had decided to explain their circumstances to their children. Common dilemmas regarding the future, including the effects of the absence of a partner in the parenting model were also reviewed [71-75].

The unique challenges and dilemmas SPCs face are diverse and linked to parenting, family and environment, image, messages for their children and the future. We will focus on the following points:

1. Feelings of responsibility and loneliness;

2. The need to feel a sense of belonging, to be part of a peer group or community;

3. Functional and economic difficulties in everyday life;

4. Acceptance of the absence of a traditional family image;

5. Absence of a partner in the parenting model;

6. Aspiration and dilemma about having more than one child;

7. Possibility of couple relationships in the future;

8. Expectations from the SPCs siblings to fill the absent partner's role;

9. Increased dependency on parents;

10. Fear of the future;

11. Constructing an evolving narrative for the child and society regarding the family structure;

12. The impact of the absence of support in couple hood.

REVELATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study sparked food for thought and led to some ideas for offering practical parenting support to single parents:

- Social support from the community and preparing the SPCs' parents, siblings and friends for the need for support. Most of the SPC participants reported that they had difficulty in obtaining social support from relatives. One conclusion is that an SPC needs to undergo a matching of expectations process with their surroundings before becoming a parent. It is more productive to verbalize what is needed and expected and to communicate those things in advance. For example, many SPC mothers said that they expected their brothers, as male figures, to take a part in raising the children, but they were disappointed; as it turned out, those expectations weren't always in the actual dialog between the siblings.

- Family size. An SPC family tends to be a small family, which means that the child may be alone in the world in his/her 20s or 30s, without first-degree family members. In addition, being a single child means being in a parent-child dyadic relationship with no other interpersonal relationships in the home. These aspects naturally reinforce the dilemma of most SPC parents of whether to make an active effort to become a bigger family and to strive for more than one child despite the actual difficulties in handling a larger family alone.

- Dealing with the future – from constructing a narrative for the child or children regarding the family structure and circumstances to preparing a last will. One of the biggest concerns for the SPCs in general, who were mostly in their 50s at the time of this study, was what would happen to their children and who would take care of them if they died before their children were adults. This question and the conflict that may arise often leads to denial. Thinking about this and creating a dialog with a chosen family member or friend, can help ease some of the fear and uncertainty entailed. Another important issue for the SPC is when and what to tell their children about the family structure and about the decision that led to it. Sometimes SPCs choose to wait until the child raises the question. We suggest that the SPC should be prepared to discuss this with his/her child in an age-appropriate way at the specific developmental stage.

- Questions about issues of relationships, being different, separation and couple relationships. SPCs find themselves faced with dilemmas about the right way to create a potential space for growth when there are two people in the family, a dyad. SPCs need to find a way to be with their children, while simultaneously giving them the distance and separation needed for development. This task could become easier for SPCs if they could find other individuals who could become significant

others for their children. Most SPCs articulate that they want a relationship in their lives and that the way to construct such a relationship would be challenging but worthwhile if established.

SUMMARY

SPC is a relevantly new social phenomenon, part of the new family structures and it occurs more frequently today than it did 20 or 30 years ago. It is a complicated way of living, but it is also easier to manifest technically and is now more socially accepted. An individual who decides to become an SPC should consider the psychological issues that will inevitably accompany their parenting. This includes responsibility, intensity of emotions and work that should be done considering the still relative uncommonness of this path. By preparing themselves and their surroundings, recognizing potential difficulties and dilemmas, SPC mothers and fathers can make their parenthood more constructive and their parenting more effective.

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