

ECONOMIC STRESS, SOCIAL SUPPORT, AND FEMALE SINGLE PARENTS

Carolyn A. Gorlick

FOR AN INCREASING NUMBER of female single parents, separation or divorce has resulted in such a reduction of income that they and their children end up below the poverty line. For these single parents, becoming poor involves a status passage in the context of continuing financial insecurity and uncertain living conditions. Economic stressors influence the form, duration, and outcome of this status passage. Economic stressors include, for example, the amount, source, and stability of a family's current income, changes in social status position, adequate housing, daycare availability, and the parents' perceptions of access to future income sources.

This status passage is also characterized by a process of negotiation and accommodation among female single parents and their informal (kin and friends) and formal (case workers, social workers, counselors, health care professionals, legal representatives) social networks. Together, the female single parent and her social networks function to define the situation so that family adaptation in the aftermath of marital breakdown might be enhanced or minimized. In this context, the status passage is a dynamic, interactive interpretation of the

Résumé

Pour un nombre croissant de parents célibataires féminins, la séparation ou le divorce a tellement réduit leur revenu que leur famille se retrouve au-dessous du niveau de la pauvreté. Pour ces parents célibataires, devenir pauvres comporte un changement de statut vers une insécurité financière constante et des conditions de vie incertaines. Un examen de la documentation pertinente fait voir les tensions économiques, les soutiens sociaux et la manière dont ils influent sur la santé, sur le bien-être et sur l'estime de soi des parents célibataires féminins à faible revenu. Cet examen révèle en outre certaines omissions dans la recherche actuelle en ce qui a trait à ces relations et à leur impact sur la famille monoparentale.

Carolyn A. Gorlick is in the Department of Sociology at King's College, University of Western Ontario. The author acknowledges the support received from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Special Post-Doctoral Fellowship on the Study of Urban Poverty and the Laidlaw Foundation during the writing of this article.

downward mobility experienced by the female single parent, who plays—along with others—an active role in this critical family transition.

An examination of the relevant literature shows the manner in which economic stress and social support influence the health and well-being of low-income female single parents. Particular dimensions of the status passage include the impact of economic stressors on the female single parent's well-being, the significance of formal and informal social support for low-income female single parents, and the influence of social support "buffers" on health and self-esteem. A conceptual model is offered here, with an accompanying explanation of these three dimensions of the status passage. First, however, it is important to note some of the omissions in current research regarding these relationships and their impact on the single-parent family.

Some omissions in the research literature

A number of observations can be made with regard to the weaknesses inherent in the quantitative analysis of female single parents and their families in the aftermath of marital separation.

An initial observation is that studies of post-separation social networks are based primarily on those single parents not on social assistance. One exception is Gladow and Ray's¹ study of low-income, rural and small-town female single parents in the United States, two years after divorce, which concluded that informal support systems (friendship and relatives' support) have a positive, yet differential, impact on the well-being of low-income female single parents. In particular, friends appeared to reduce loneliness, while relatives assisted with financial and recreational problems.

Secondly, research in this substantive area has tended to emphasize post-divorce, rather than post-separation, experiences. Therefore, it is difficult to answer with certainty whether social networks and social support mechanisms vary in their form, structure, organization, and influence for female single parents in the aftermath of separation, as compared to the finality of divorce. When determining social support needs, is the key concern the time since marital separation, rather than post-separation versus post-divorce intervals? For example, will the social support needs of someone who is divorced after six years of separation differ from those of someone divorced after one to two years? Since divorced individuals will go through a period of separation (the length of which will vary), it seems appropriate to use time since marital separation—the point at which the passage of status begins—as a more precise measure of down-

several years after separation will enable researchers to ascertain the degree to which the status passage is transitional.

Research on the social support needs of single-parent families tends to emphasize informal rather than formal social networks. A study focusing on help-seeking in general discovered that informal social networks were sought out more frequently than formal support, that help-seeking decreased with age, that there were no gender differences in rates of help-seeking, and that the extent of help-seeking varied directly with the degree of stress perceived in the situation.² The influence of formal social networks on single-parent families, however, remains unclear.

Further analysis of the type of social network (formal or informal) and the degree and form of social support (emotional, instrumental, informational, social companionship) at specified time intervals will lead to a more comprehensive understanding of which constellations of social relationships enhance post-separation adjustment and the manner in which this is accomplished.

Why do some single-parent families have fewer health-related problems than others? Is the explanation based entirely on the inverse relationship between income level and physical health? Do those single-parent families with larger social support systems (whether formal or informal) enjoy better mental and physical health? A clearer identification of the relationship between income level, social support, and the health and well-being of the female single parent is appropriate.

Another neglected aspect of a female single parent's impoverishment is that it does not necessarily begin at her birth. Instead, becoming poor is an abrupt downward mobility, frequently as a result of separation or divorce or the death of her husband. Given this, researchers might ask, "How abrupt?" particularly as it relates to the level of family income prior to and after separation. Other related questions might include: for those families experiencing downward mobility, what is the relationship between perceived and actual status differences, and how might an accompanying explanation offer a greater understanding of family restructuring?

Studies of female single-parent families have been conducted primarily in the United States and Great Britain. It is appropriate to examine this target population in the Canadian context by focusing on the Canadian social welfare delivery system and its impact on this family structure.

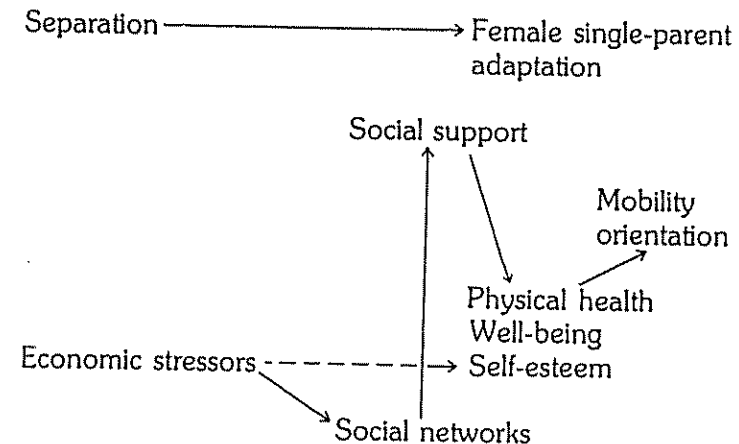
Another omission from studies of low-income female single parents is the exclusion of a feminist methodological approach. The advantage of this approach is that it would sensitize the researcher to

More specifically, "context-stripping" (in which concepts are methodically simplified by removing them from their context), masculine research biases, and feminine and masculine gender stereotypes would be avoided.³

Finally, emphasizing the pathologies inherent in family dissolution tends to neglect the strengths that exist in single-parent families. Perhaps the act of separation was a positive alternative for a family whose members had suffered from physical or emotional battering, incest, or alcoholism. Perhaps not all female single-parent families experience multiple problems as a result of separation or divorce. An approach that emphasizes the strengths and healthiness of the female single-parent family, rather than primarily stressing its dysfunctional attributes, is a worthwhile consideration.⁴ An understanding of these strengths and the manner in which formal social support networks might build on them is a useful direction to pursue.

In response to some of the omissions evident in the substantive literature, the conceptual model in Figure 1 and the following explanation of three dimensions of the status passage are presented.

FIGURE 1
The Status Passage



Impact of economic stressors on well-being

Chronic strains such as poverty and marital separation are ongoing, objective conditions that lead to constant behavioural adjustment, in

In the sequela of marital separation reduces the single-parent family's access to material and social rewards while influencing the family's credit availability, housing, choice of friends, and parental self-image.⁶ Indeed, both the "level" and the "source" of family income are key economic stressors facing female single parents. Studies indicate that a higher family income level augments a female single parent's satisfaction with family roles and feelings of role competency.⁷ In particular, those female single parents who sought social assistance following a divorce possessed less self-confidence and had a more negative self-concept than those who chose employment or equivalent low-paying jobs.⁸

The level of family income may also influence a mother's perceptions of accomplishment in her parenting role. It is important to remember that the female single parent does not go through this process of downward mobility alone. Her children accompany her. In 1984, more than one million Canadian children (or one child in five) were poor. Single-parent families were the most vulnerable, with five in 10 families headed by a single mother living in poverty compared to two in 10 led by a single father and one in 10 families with two parents.⁹ A female single parent's perception of her value as a mother is undermined by the fact that more funds would be available for her children if she gave them up to foster care. For example, in Ontario, a Family and Children's Services foster parent would receive \$663 per month while a mother on general welfare would be given \$282 per month for the care of her two children.¹⁰ In sum, 38 per cent of the beneficiaries of social assistance in Ontario are children, and current benefit levels have not provided them or their custodial parents with adequate financial resources.¹¹ Thus, low income levels have an impact on parental perceptions of role adequacy and generally accentuate the negative repercussions of the depth of poverty experienced by the female single-parent family.

Erratic "sources" of income, such as delinquent child support payments, may contribute to a female single parent's weakened sense of control over her life and an increased sense of insecurity.¹² In Ontario, 85 per cent (N = 50,000) of support orders were in default in 1986. Emotional stress for the female single parent as a result of delinquent or non-existent support payments is formidable.¹³ This heightened psychological distress is accentuated when the female single parent must, as a result, apply for social assistance. The response by the social assistance delivery system does not ease this tension, with most provinces insisting that the female single parent initiate proceedings against her former spouse to provide maintenance payments. In sum, studies have shown that both the level and

terized as being more important than the source of income.¹⁵ Certainly, prediction and planning of a single-parent family's financial resources becomes a complex and stressful activity, regardless of the type of economic stressor.

In conclusion, economic inadequacy becomes a social as well as an economic deficit, potentially jeopardizing the relationships formed by female single parents both within and outside the family structure.

Significance of formal and informal social support

With the loss of a husband and father, roles, norms, and forms of interaction are renegotiated and modified within the family structure. The emergence of new expectations and resources are often ambiguous and fluctuating for family members. An important factor in the family's coping experience is the presence of informal and formal social networks.

Social support differences appear to relate to social class. More specifically, divorce in lower-income groups not only affects well-being directly, but also indirectly, by influencing the availability of social support. Colletta¹⁶ found that low-income, compared to middle-income, divorced mothers received the highest levels of support, but were generally dissatisfied with the support they received. Divorced mothers who appreciated the support they received, but who felt that families could and should function independently, came mainly from moderate-income, one- and two-parent families. Divorced mothers who felt that their families could not make it without considerable support came mainly from low-income families. There is some indication that the informal social support systems of low-income single-parent families might become "overwhelmed" by the needs of these families and might not be able to provide necessary emotional, instrumental, and material support.¹⁷

Unfortunately, much of this substantive research has limited the measures of social support systems to demographic and structural characteristics, emphasizing age, sex, marital status, and number of individuals in the social network. As a result, there is a tendency to ignore that social networks vary both in their organization and in an individual's perception of them over time.¹⁸ Not only will the type of social network change in the aftermath of separation, but its effectiveness as perceived by the family and its individual members is also likely to alter. For example, is a tightly knit, supportive kin network that reinforces parental adjustment¹⁹ preferable to a less dense, less kin-filled network that enhances the drive for self-autonomy and availability of greater personal and social identity options? It may be

this trend continues in subsequent years and at what time interval single mothers might explore other personal and social identity options leading to particular mobility strategies.

Another consideration is the degree to which separated or divorced relatives or friends, experiencing similar levels of economic stress, provide models or alternatives for coping. For example, many female single parents find themselves in low-income housing developments with other female single-parent families; to what extent is this close proximity helpful or destructive to family adaptation? Is living in a co-operative housing development with varying family structures and income levels possibly more supportive to female single-parent families?

Without a satisfying network of friends and relatives, the female single parent may rely on her children as confidants,²¹ in turn threatening their emotional health.²² With the heightened distress after separation, a "coercive cycle" between parent and children begins to emerge. Studies have indicated that a female single parent's anxiety regarding her inability to maintain past family living standards is frequently accompanied by a breakdown of disciplining control, particularly with sons.²³ Parental role strain has been consistently linked to low socio-economic status and availability of social supports.²⁴ In conclusion, for female single parents, supportive, satisfying relationships following separation or divorce have positive effects, including less stress, improved parenting, and a better self-identity.²⁵

Impact of social support "buffers" for health and self-esteem

The evidence for social support as a buffering mechanism has been well established with regard to self-reported physical and psychological distress.²⁶ Numerous studies indicate that individuals with social networks providing adequate psychological and material resources are in better general health than those with fewer social contacts.²⁷

Without "protective buffers" such as social support, emotional stress may lead to physical health problems for the female single parent.²⁸ Hanson²⁹ found a significant correlation between male and female single parents' mental health and social support; this relationship also held for the children of these families. Hanson concluded that the greater the social support, the higher the level of overall health.

It is, however, less clear from the research literature the manner in which social support mediates the impact of economic stress on a female single parent's health and self-esteem. Numerous studies have focused on the relationship between poverty and health,³⁰

noted that low-income persons had higher rates of premature death, tended to die younger, were frequently ill, had less time disability-free, and were less happy; poor children experienced greater health risks. With data from the Ontario Child Health Study, Offord and Boyle³² drew comparisons between welfare and non-welfare children on the basis of psychiatric disorders, school performance, health status, participation in extra-curricular activities, and smoking behaviour, discovering the overall negative repercussions for each indicator on the social assistance child. In particular, the authors stressed that, for children on social assistance, boys had difficulty with psychiatric adjustment, while girls performed less well in school. Although the relationship between welfare status and psychiatric disorder, as well as poor school performance, was suppressed by the effect of low income (less than \$10,000), family structure (single-versus two-parent families) appeared to have no effect on these relationships. With this finding in sharp contrast to the substantive literature, researchers are left attempting to define and assess those intervening variables that might provide a greater understanding of the complexity of the relationship between economic stress and the health and well-being of members of single-parent families.

Mobility orientation as a coping mechanism

Stress arises when one appraises a situation such as poverty and marital separation as threatening or otherwise demanding, and does not have an appropriate coping response.³³ Stress is reduced by formal and informal social support, which alters an individual's appraisal of stressors by changing coping patterns or by affecting self-perceptions. A measure of a coping mechanism is the presence of a mobility orientation, or exit strategy, on the part of the female single parent.

Employment or educational activities appear to be important components of an exit strategy. Employment is a major factor in enabling women to leave and stay away from abusive relationships.³⁴ If financially insecure separated or divorced women are helped to achieve the rewards and benefits of stable, well-paid jobs, an outcome may be an increase in parental self-confidence, self-esteem, and a sense of independence. For female single parents on social assistance, the process of educational training and upgrading prior to employment has also led to a more positive self-esteem.³⁵ This heightened self-esteem has occurred in spite of the frustration of dealing with two administrative systems (educational financial and social services) and the informational discrepancies that arise from

the overwhelming administrative, program, parental, and individual time constraints. Nevertheless, this additional stress is endured to permit an "exit strategy," which recipients perceive as insurance against long-term welfare dependency.

Time and the status passage

Once the status passage has been set in motion, at what point does it end? Poverty appears to begin with divorce and end with remarriage or a job.³⁶ Two studies focusing on recipients of Ontario's family benefits appeared to support this observation. The reasons for leaving Ontario's family benefits program were: 37 per cent changed marital status; 35 per cent became employed; 7 per cent moved out of Ontario; and 2 per cent had the youngest child leave home.³⁷ Another study stated the following reasons for stopping family benefits: changed marital status (20.6%); receipt of Old Age Security (15.7%); employment (15.7%); left Ontario (11.1%); child no longer in recipient's care (7.0%); or child became 21 years old (6.1%).³⁸

In a 1986 follow-up of the Porter study, it was discovered that 32 per cent of those who left the family benefits program in the initial study had returned to the program. From this group, the return rate for sole-support mothers was 38 per cent. Specifically, those female single parents who returned to family benefits, compared to those who did not, were younger, had younger children and a higher number of dependent children, and had initially left because of employment. Also, three years was the key time interval during which the majority had returned.³⁹

Another "time" consideration is that an individual's social network type and level of support may vary over time.⁴⁰ Generally, female single parents have been found to experience adjustment problems for longer periods of time following divorce.⁴¹ Wilcox⁴² reported that women with less change or disruption in their social networks following divorce were better adjusted than those who had witnessed significant turnover in the members of their social networks. In sum, the changing constellation of social network type and social support level and its impact on this family structure is a complex issue in need of greater explanation.

Conclusion

There are several key participants (formal and informal social networks) in a female single parent's understanding of her situation and the manner in which she responds. Each participant (including the female single parent along with social workers, counsellors, policy makers, family members and friends) brings to that definition of the

These understandings are reflected in participants' different meanings, contexts, structures, and languages, which, in turn, influence the passage of status for the female single parent. Furthermore, in the process of defining the situation, these key participants may function to "buffer" the impact of economic stress on the female single parent. It is apparent from the literature that there are several research omissions, which, if pursued, would provide a greater understanding of this passage from one status level to another. Furthermore, the relationship between economic stress, social support, and the health and well-being of female single parents and its significance over time has still to be measured.

Financial insecurity, both real and perceived, functions as a significant hurdle for female single-parent families coping with family dissolution. Between 1970 and 1980, the dependency of Canadian female-led families on government transfer payments grew. Several trends have reinforced the downward mobility of these families, including the recession of the early 1980s, increased divorce rates, the ongoing practice of awarding child custody to the mother, implementation of greater divorce reform legislation, continued lack of recognition for domestic labour (housework and childcare), and unavailability of pay equity. With regard to the marginality of female single-parent employment, 46 per cent of this group who are employed are identified as "working poor."⁴³ Subsequently, these trends have augmented female single-parent families' applications for social assistance or ensured their placement as the "working poor."

Without significant social, legal, and economic policy changes in support of this family structure, the dependency of the female single parent and her children on social assistance will not only continue, but increase. It is appropriate and timely to approach this growing social problem with an awareness of the sense of urgency experienced by this family structure, coupled with a greater knowledge of the complexity of the status passage and the policy implications drawn from this information.

In the interim, each day, another female single parent embarks on a profound life change, one for which she has had little rehearsal and which she will not go through alone.

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