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The Communication Patterns and Experiences of Children in Single Parent Families

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THE COMMUNICATION PATTERNS AND EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN IN
SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Communication Department
Western Kentucky University

In Partial Fulfilment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Masters of Organizational Communication

By
Jessica Cherry

May 2016

THE COMMUNICATION PATTERNS AND EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN IN
SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES

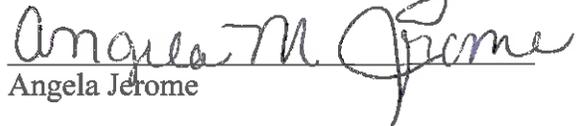
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This study gained the perspective of children from single parent families and explored their family communication patterns. An inductive, qualitative approach was used. Interviews were conducted with eleven participants gathered from undergraduate classes, who had lived with their single parent for a minimum of 3 years. Four major themes emerged from the data: communication, challenges and triumphs, structure, and how parents came to be single. The majority of participants appeared to exhibit pluralistic family communication patterns. Results also revealed the importance of open communication in single parent families and what they learned through their experiences living with their custodial parent. Limitations and directions for future research will also be discussed.

Chapter 1

Introduction

As of 2012 there were 12.2 million single parents households in the United States (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013). The majority of those, 10.3 million, are led by single custodial mothers; the other 1.9 million are led by single custodial fathers (Vespa et al., 2013). According to Demo and Acock (1988), single parent families consist of children with parents that are divorced, separated, or single by death of the other parent.

Regardless of family type, single parents typically experience limited resources as well as stigma attached to this status (Porter & Chatelain, 1981). The comparison of intact and single parent families typically highlights negative elements associated with single parent families, focusing on what they lack in comparison to intact families (Demo & Acock, 1988).

From 2007-2012, the number of single parent households in the U.S. grew; the number of mother-only households grew from 25 to 27 percent and the number of father-only households grew from 4 to 5 percent (Vespa et al., 2013). Thus, examining single parent families through the child's eyes is one powerful way of uncovering the inner workings of these families. This qualitative study is an examination of single parent families. Specifically, it addressed the communication patterns that exist within single parent families, the role the circumstances that led to the parent being 'single' play in the communication between the parent and child, and how these children develop because of their family situation. This population represents an important area of focus because of the growing number of single parent families. Past research has explored the lives of single parents and the development of their young children, finding that children from

single parent homes have higher levels of awareness and greater levels of cognition and maturity (Nixon, Greene, & Hogan, 2013; Weiss, 1979). This investigation furthers this line of research by interviewing the adult children of single parent families to gain their perspective. Knowing the perspectives of these children is key because in addition to understanding the practical and psychological ways that single parent families affect these children, it is equally important to discover how children perceive being a part of a single parent family plays a role in their development and communication patterns, and that of their parents.

The following chapter will summarize previous literature that has looked at family communication patterns, the differences between divorce and death of a parent, compensation within single parent households, and outcomes for children of single parent families. The final section will detail the pilot study for which this thesis is based off. The remaining chapters will explain the methods used to conduct the study and outline the four main themes that emerged from the data: communication, challenges and triumphs, structure, and how parents came to be single. The final chapter will highlight the importance of these themes, how they address the research questions, and discuss any limitations and possibilities for future research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

To define families by their structure is to focus on the presence or absence of family members, with distinctions between extended family and biological family (Wambolt & Reiss, 1991). However, defining families from a constitutive perspective, as is done in this thesis, allows for focus on the interaction and communication that creates and keeps the family going (Whitchurch & Dickson, 1999). According to Whitchurch and Dickson (1999), “Meaning in family is constructed through communication among family members over time, and it influences their long-term enduring interactional patterns” (p. 693). Galvin and Brommel (1999) defined a family as a group that has a past, present and future entwining and influencing their relationships and “members often (but not necessarily) are bound together by heredity, legal marital ties, adoption, or a common living arrangement at some point in their lifetime” (p. 4-5). Instead of relying on blood and legal arrangements, these definitions of family highlight the personally connected relationships families have with one another based on commitment (Galvin & Brommel, 1999).

Intact vs. Single Parent Families

It is predominantly thought that an intact family is well functioning and a well functioning family is intact, but to make this assumption makes it difficult to see the actual family functions, good or bad (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004). Intact families may fit the structural definition of family, but not be considered functional. However, to think that the structure and function are separate from one another can also make it more difficult to see how family structure effects function (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004). In the

case of single parent families, putting more focus on the structure (e.g., the lack of a parent) may make it more challenging to examine how they function.

By examining how single parent families function, the differences between single and intact families can be seen. Gano-Phillips and Fincham (1995) found that the parents in intact families will have better relationships with one another than parents of non-intact families. Additionally, because intact couples maintain such close relationships, they have the ability to be more independent from their children and can rely on one another during challenging and stressful times for emotional support (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004). On the other hand, parents in non-intact families may not have this support, and, if they do, it is not as important as the relationship with their children (Burrell, 1995). Parents going through divorce may disclose more to their children and become more emotionally dependent on them which gives these children more power, more responsibility, and become more adult (Afifi, 2003).

Power dynamics within the parent and child relationship differ between intact and non-intact families because of such emotional ties. Parents in intact families typically hold more power compared to parents in non-intact families (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004). The negative impacts of divorce help form stronger bonds between the parent and child, allowing for more open communication where the parent may turn to their children as well as their friends to vent their frustrations (Afifi, 2003). Afifi (2003) found that when parents disclosed to their children it served as a sort of emotional release. Because of these differences, an intact family is perceived to hold many benefits for children, whereas single parent families are looked at in terms of being disadvantaged (Zartler, 2014).

This view of being deficient includes various implications for the development and relationships of the parents and children (Demo & Acock, 1988). Research comparing divorced to intact families has found that children from divorced families have higher anxiety, poor adjustment due to conflict, and greater stress (Demo & Acock, 1988; Hainline & Feig, 1978; Rosen, 1979; Wyman, Cowen, Hightower, & Pedro-Carroll, 1985). While there is an overabundance of literature that establishes the negatives associated with being raised in a single parent home, there are also positive aspects that may accompany such an upbringing. One particularly telling study (Weiss, 1979), looked at the lives of the children and parents in these families to find children had greater maturity, responsibility, feelings of independence, and possibly of higher self-esteem. Weiss (1979) was able to provide valuable insight regarding the outcomes that may result for single parent families, but because his study was conducted over three decades ago, new research is needed to further address this area.

It is valuable to look at the functioning of single parent families and the effects the structure has. However, it is also important to identify differences within structure and function of intact and single parent families along with identifying their communication patterns.

Types of Families

Family communication patterns are important to understand no matter what structure the family maintains. According to Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2004) “family communication patterns emerge from the process by which families create and share their social realities” (p. 181). Family communication is effected by two dimensions of communication, conformity orientation and conversation orientation. These two

orientations do not work independently but with one another and are constantly interacting. The impact that one orientation has on the family outcome will affect the other (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004).

Conversation orientation is the degree to which families encourage open communication and expression of thoughts and feelings (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004).

Conformity orientation is the degree to which families use their power to enforce conformity and to have the same beliefs regarding opinions and values (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004). The interactions that the two orientations have created four different types of families: consensual, pluralistic, protective, and laissez-faire families.

Consensual families have high conversation and conformity orientation. Family members value conversation, but also share their parents' belief system (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004). They may discuss new ideas but remain within the family perspective. Pluralistic families have low conformity orientation and high conversation orientation. In these families there is much interaction and decision making together (Fitzpatrick & Richie, 1994). Protective families are high on conformity orientation and low on conversation orientation. Within these families there is no room for open discussion, parents are in power and children must obey (Fitzpatrick & Richie, 1994). Laissez-faire families are low in both conversation and conformity orientation. Within these families, children will have little interaction with their parents and be influenced more by outside forces and peer groups (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994).

These communication patterns have been applied to intact families in the past. Originally, Mcleod and Chaffee (1972) created the first family communication patterns instrument (FCP) in order to assess how families understood messages within the media,

which was later altered by Ritchie and Fitzpatrick (1990) to create the Revised Family Communication Patterns instrument (RFCP) so interpersonal family communication could be studied (as cited in Shearman & Dumloa, 2008). Scant research can be found regarding conformity and conversation orientations with a focus on single parent families. Past research has, however, studied family communication patterns in relation to sex differences in interpersonal relationships, the sex of the parent, emotional intelligence, and comparing communication patterns across cultures (Keaten & Kelly, 2008; Koesten, 2004; Odenweller, Rittenour, Myers, & Brann, 2013; Punyanunt-Carter, 2008; Shearman & Dumloa, 2008).

Koesten (2004) utilized the RFCP in order to help examine sex differences and communication competence. She found that growing up in a more pluralistic or high conversation orientation family led to greater use of communication skills in both romantic relationships and same sex friendships as compared to growing up in a more conformity-oriented family. Koesten's (2004) study also found that people growing up in conversation oriented environments were more likely to assert themselves negatively in a romantic partnership and those who grew up in a conformity oriented environment were less able to manage conflict in same sex friendships. Overall, Koesten's (2004) findings indicated conversation orientation to be very important for family interpersonal interactions. Unfortunately, single parent families have not been studied in relation to their communication patterns. Because this area has not been addressed yet it is important to explore how the communication patterns in single parent families may differ from intact families. While Koesten's (2004) study provided evidence of the importance of conversation orientation for future communication skills, this study will add to this by

discovering how conversation and conformity orientation within the single parent family structure may differ from intact families.

Other research conducted using the RFCP has addressed the sex of the parent and child. Punyanunt-Carter (2008) examined the role of the father's communication, but with their daughters. The study looked at the communication patterns fathers and daughters had and was able to establish that certain types of communication determined perceptions of satisfaction within the relationship while others might not. When there was more conversation orientation, mutual understanding, and open and continuous exchange of communication, there was more satisfaction within the father/daughter relationship. When there is more conformity orientation present daughters may look outside the relationship for comfort and turn rebellious (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008). While this study addresses the communication patterns that impact the father daughter relationship it does not establish whether the findings would still apply regarding single fathers. The current study explored the communication patterns among children and their single parent.

Odenweller et al. (2013) focused on how communication with fathers will affect their son's gender ideologies. Their main findings indicated that conformity orientation was positively related to how fathers identified and enforced the masculine gender ideology with grandsons and how a father's conversation orientation is related to how they identify with and enforce gender androgyny with grandsons. Odenweller et al., (2013) found that, overall, fathers should have open communication, encourage their sons to share thoughts and opinions, and include them in decisions. Again, this study addresses the differences that apply to the varying sex of the parent, but it does not address whether these differences still apply if the father is the custodial parent. By studying the children

raised in solely single parent families this study explored how these children feel about their relationships with their parent and what this means for their development.

Keaten and Kelly (2008) conducted a study assessing the relationship between communication patterns, emotional intelligence, and reticence and found that conversation orientation is an important factor for emotion intelligence. A high conversation oriented family, regardless of amount of conformity orientation, will have children who will have high levels of emotional intelligence. According to Keaten and Kelly (2008), these children will be able to understand and manage, and recognize, emotions if they are raised in a family that values discussing feelings and open communication. The current study expanded this research by discovering how emotions are expressed in single parent families and what that might mean for conversation orientation levels.

Other studies, such as Shearman and Dumloa (2008), compared across the Japanese and American cultures, the differences of family communication patterns. There findings indicated that Americans were higher in both conversation and conformity orientation than Japanese. According to Shearman and Dumloa (2008) the most common family in the US is consensual, followed by pluralistic, protective, and Laissez-faire. They also found that parent child conversation was a strong predictor for satisfaction among participants across cultures. Multiple other studies have been conducted using the revised family communication patterns instrument on topics such as religion, privacy, and conducting difficult conversations, with results highlighting positive effects of open communication and high conversation orientation (Bridge & Schrodt, 2013; Fife, Nelson, & Messersmith, 2014; Keating, Russell, Cornacchione, & Smith, 2013). This study added

to this research by exploring how important conversation orientation and open communication is within single parent families.

These findings indicate conversation orientation as being beneficial for many different relationships. By examining the orientations of single parent families this study will explore how this is similar and different for this type of family structure. By investigating these families we can identify which family communication patterns are present in single parent families and whether conversation orientation is beneficial for this family structure.

Therefore the following research questions were proposed:

RQ1: What family communication patterns are present in single parent families?

RQ2: What roles does open communication and high conversation orientation play in single parent families?

Divorce vs. Death

While previous research has highlighted how single parent family structures may negatively impact children, how the parent came to be “single” may also have effects on children in the family. According to Biblarz and Gottainer (2000) and their evaluation of the parental fitness model, divorce has more of an effect on a parent’s behavior and values than being widowed. The model viewed widowed mothers as being more traditional and having more acceptable values than those of divorced mothers. The model views divorce as being a conscious choice for these mothers while being widowed is not. Because of this, the parental fitness perspective predicts that children from single mother homes will be at a greater disadvantage than children from widowed mothers (Biblarz & Gottainer, 2000). However, the research failed to take into account the many

circumstances that may lead to divorce other than irreconcilable differences. This study addressed this gap by shedding light on these circumstances and taking a closer look at what role this may play in these children's lives.

Biblarz and Gottainer (2000) also evaluated the marital conflict model and found that children of divorce experienced more conflict than children from widowed households and thus the children of widowed mothers fared better because they had less exposure to such conflict. Biblarz and Gottainer (2000) drew from the assumption that it is the mother's choice to divorce, while that is not always the case. Marriage may result in divorce for many different reasons not necessarily stemming from the wife/mother in the relationship. Various reasons for either spouse to consider divorce include when one is unfaithful within the marriage, having other family members cause stress, spending time apart, and/or they are having problems communicating (Tulane, Skogrand, & DeFrain, 2011). These two models are limited in that they do not address additional ways mothers come to be single parents beyond divorce and widowhood. A parent may come to be single through marital separation, the ending of a long term or short term relationship, the ending of a long or short term relationship where all resided in the same home, sperm donation, and/or adoption (Doherty & Craft, 2011). They do not address single fathers at all, even though they make up 1.9 million of the single parents in the United States (Vespa et al., 2013). By addressing the different circumstances that lead the parent to be 'single', this study highlighted another understudied aspect of single parent families, single fathers.

These models argue that the death of a parent allows the family to mourn and hold on to a positive outlook of the deceased parent, whereas when a father leaves the house

after a divorce, hostile feelings may result (Biblarz & Gottainer, 2000). While distrust and negative attitudes towards men may result after a divorce there are ways that these mothers can instill “male positive attitudes” in their children (Doherty & Craft, 2011). Some messages that can do this include, acknowledging the male absence and children’s feelings, not lying about their father but not disclosing anything either, and refraining from saying anything bad about him (Doherty & Craft, 2011). However, Doherty and Craft (2011) asserted that these messages were created via clinical or voluntary experiences with single parent families, not through an empirical study, and there should be more empirical research done regarding single parent families.

Each family’s circumstances as to how the parent became ‘single’ may be very different. According to Biblarz and Gottainer’s (2000) assessment of the parental fitness and marital conflict models, whether divorced or widowed, the parent will hold varying values and the outcomes for these children will depend on the circumstance. However these two models fail to address the many other ways a family may come to be non-intact. With so many different aspects of each family situation, it may be assumed that family communication patterns may vary as well. Thus the following question was proposed:

RQ3: What role does the way the family come to be non-intact have on communication patterns?

Compensation

While it is apparent that there are differences between intact and single parent families, there is a stigma attached to how these families are viewed. In a study done by Usdansky (2009), depictions of divorce and single parents in magazines and journals

were examined. The depicted stigmatism that might accompany single parents does not demonstrate normative views, or the valuing of marriage and traditional family values, instead individuality and self-expression are favored (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Urdansky, 2009). The results of this study found that in magazines and journals there was a decrease in the criticism of divorce and a rise in greater acceptance. However, it also highlighted the harm a single parent family had the potential to produce. This study illustrated that views of single parent families and divorce were changing, but still focused on its negative aspects, such as the amount of time that a parent spends with their child. According to Kendig and Bianchi (2008), single mothers will as not have as much time to spend with their children as a married parent would. This study built off of this research by addressing how these adult children feel about the stigma attached to their family type.

Because of the views of harm that accompany this type of family, ways to cope develop. In another study done by Zartler (2014), three ways that these parents and their children cope with these negative associations were uncovered: a) *imitation* in order to hide the variances between single and intact families, b) *compensation* to make up for the missing gender and the traits they might have had; for the children this included having attachments with relatives and c) *delimitation* in order to separate the intact families from the single parent families, which was only used by parents. Zartler's (2014) study focused on the way these families deal with the negative associations that society attributes.

Demo and Acock (1988) argued that these parents must expand their "behavioral patterns" in order to meet the responsibilities required of them and in doing so fulfill

more of a gender neutral parental role (p. 626). It does not seem to matter if the parent is male or female, they must fill the gender void.

Further emphasizing compensation and imitation, findings by Hall, Walker, and Acock (1995), suggested that fathers will do more when mothers are not available and single mothers and fathers will exhibit behaviors similar to the opposite gender parent. These studies identified the coping mechanisms that may result from the stigma associated with single parent families. What they fail to address is how the children might adapt after utilizing certain coping methods. This study addressed how these adult children feel growing up within this family type and how they view single parent families.

Compensation within this family type is also applied to the roles of the children who use compensation to make up for the lack of a missing parent through household responsibilities (Weiss, 1979). Again there are negative effects attributed to both parents and children in single parent households; however, if neither positive nor negative behavior is exhibited by the children in these families, it can be seen as one of the benefits of their upbringing (Demo & Acock, 1988). These views and methods of compensation are of great interest among single parent families, but there also needs to be an understanding of the outcomes that result.

Outcomes

There are many outcomes that may result from children living within divorced and single parent families. Some of the more positive outcomes for these children could include greater feelings of worth and efficiency, a higher level of maturity, and belief that their choices will affect the outcome (Guidubaldi & Perry, 1985; Kalter, Alpern, Spence,

& Plunkett, 1984; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1974; Weiss, 1979). There is also research suggesting that when a father is not present both male and female children are more androgynous than children from intact families (Kurdek & Siesky, 1980; Demo & Acock, 1988). Awareness is also prevalent outcome among these children. In one study done by Nixon et al., (2013) almost half of their participants identified the family environment as being “difficult and stressful”.

Previous literature highlights the perspectives of these children but they come from all different ages, backgrounds and family structures. Within all of this research, however, the roles that may be produced because of this family dynamic remain understudied. All circumstances are different and must be looked at in how they play a part in the lives of these children. However, as stated by Hines (1997) “...both parents and adolescents actively participate in the mutual and reciprocal process of defining the relationship, and the family is viewed as a system of intertwining relationships and reciprocal effects” (p.379). This study is important because it seeks to uncover the positives that may come from being raised in a single parent household. The main focus has been on the over abundant negative outcomes associated with this family type. By highlighting some of the positives and getting an inside perspective from these children it seeks to reduce some of the stigma that is attached to single parent families. Therefore, the following research questions were proposed:

RQ4: How do adult children raised in a single parent family view their family structure?

RQ5: What positive and/or negative elements do children identify as part of being raised in a single parent family?

Summary

Overall, this section took a closer look at intact and non-intact families. The literature reviewed intact families' structure and function as well as their communication patterns. It also examined the differences of intact versus non-intact families and the impact of how the parent came to be 'single'. Other areas covered were the compensation single parent families undertake and ways to cope with the stigma, along with the positive outcomes the children develop from their involvement in their families.

The study of communication within single parent families is important because there has not been much research done in the way of examining the patterns of single parent families and if they vary from intact families. If they do in fact differ then it is important to understand how. It also important to study the roles that might occur within single parent families because this may also help to understand the function of these families.

Of the studies that have been done regarding single parent households, they highlight the negative aspects and stigma associated with them. The single parent family as a whole is relatively understudied. This study seeks to address the ways that single parent families communicate, if these families have similar or different communication patterns from intact families. This study also seeks to expand on the pilot study (detailed below) and discover what other kinds of roles children of single parent households take on within their families.

Previous Qualitative Study

A pilot study (Cherry, 2014) was conducted to qualitatively examine the dual roles children raised in single parent families might adopt. Two research questions were created and will be readdressed in the current study:

RQ6: What dual roles, if any, do children raised in a single parent household experience?

RQ7: What similar experiences do children raised in single parent households share?

For the pilot study one focus group along with individual interviews was conducted with a total of six participants (Cherry, 2014). These participants' ages ranged from 18 to 24 and were recruited from various classes within the communication department at large southwestern university. In order to participate they had to have lived with their single parent for three or more years. The focus group was conducted first with only three participants. The remaining participants were interviewed individually.

One major theme resulted from the analysis, dual roles for children in single parent households (Cherry, 2014). Within this theme were four major categories, the surrogate parent role, higher levels of cognition and maturity among the children, special relationships between parent and child and outside support systems, and two parents in one where the single parent compensates for the missing parent. There were two additional themes, special places for the children and their parents, and emotions that were key to understanding the parent child relationship.

This study had several limitations, such as the use of two data collection methods. The focus group granted more thought and discussion, while the interviews were more direct. Additionally, to accommodate the change of data collection some questions we

changed, perhaps altering the participants' answers. Another limitation is the participants were primarily female with single mothers and did not fully address the roles of male children and single fathers.

This thesis overcame past limitations by only using one data collection method, interviews. By using this one method, the need for altering the questions can be avoided. This thesis paid attention to the participants gathered. Both grown male and female children were recruited, along with children who were raised by either a single father or single mother. This way the sample represented children and parents of both sexes. The remainder of this paper utilized qualitative methods in order to explore the communication patterns single parent families might exhibit and to further investigate the dual roles children in single parent households may experience.

Chapter 3

Methods

The following chapter will discuss the methods used to conduct this study. The first section will explain why qualitative was the preferred method, as well as detail the sampling used to gather participants and the interview questions and procedure. The remaining section in this chapter will outline the resulting themes.

Data Collection and Sampling

For this study a qualitative inductive *emic* approach (Tracy, 2013) was used in order to explore the lives of young adults from single parent households. Qualitative research is about examining and making sense of the context being explored and uses inductive emic approaches to “understand local meanings and rules for behavior” (Tracy, 2013, p. 22). This inductive emic approach looks to understand the behavior from the viewpoint within a specific context and reach a conclusion after thorough exploration (Tracy, 2013). This viewpoint can be provided from individuals within the context, such as children from single parent families. By using this method a researcher can delve deep with the particular context, and gain a greater understanding of the topic. Qualitative research also “assumes that reality is socially constructed and it is what participants perceive it to be” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 125). An interpretive approach highlights how important it is to understand the point of view from participants (Tracy, 2013). A greater understanding of how adult children from single parent families view their lives and development could be provided through a qualitative approach.

In order to take a deeper look into this area, interviews were conducted to gain the participants point of view. Recruitment was done through convenience sampling (Tracy,

2013). Undergraduate classrooms at a large southwestern university were used to collect participants. A script was read to students detailing the study, what it was about, and what the requirements were in order to participate. There was eleven participants interviewed for the study. Participants were required to be 18 years or older, in order to satisfy IRB requirements and to have a more complex perspective as adult children. They also needed to have lived with their single parent for at least 3 years. This was required so that there was an established time period where the parent and child had enough interaction that could potentially influence their relationship.

The research questions asked about the family communication patterns and conversation orientation among single parent families, how the family come to be non-intact and its role in family communication patterns, how these children view their family structure, and what these children recognize as part of being raised in a single parent family. The final research questions were from the pilot study, asking what dual roles children may present and similar experiences they may have being raised in a single parent household. Interviews were conducted using the interview questions found in Appendix A. The interviews were semi-structured in order to ask follow up questions in addition to the protocol questions (Bernard, 2000). In order to assess conformity and conversation orientation questions were developed based on their characteristics provided by Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2004). The interviews included questions regarding participant's everyday life with their custodial parent, the interactions they have with their custodial parent, their custodial parents dating life, and what they thought about single parent families.

There were eleven total participants: 3 male and 8 female. All were between either 18 or 19 years of age. They all came from a variety of different living situations. Of the male participants, two lived with their father and one with their mother after divorce. Of the remaining female participants, one lived with her father after divorce, four lived with their mothers after divorce, and three lived with their mothers that were never married. Two participants also experienced the death of their non-custodial parent.

The researcher contacted participants via email and set up and time a place to meet. To entice students to participate, extra credit was offered. The interviews were held in the researcher's office and lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participant. To protect confidentiality, participants were given pseudonyms. All interviews were transcribed, resulting in 87 single spaced pages. All of the transcription were coded directly from the typed audio. Before any interviews were conducted, this study was approved by Western Kentucky University's Internal Review Board and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data, open and axial codes (Charmaz, 2006, Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were created from the interviews. An initial reading of all transcriptions was done first, followed by a primary-cycle coding in order to identify any themes that occurred (Tracy, 2013). A second reading was conducted, or secondary-cycle coding, where the words that are attributed to the themes found were documented (Tracy, 2013). Axial coding was then done by placing the codes onto a separate document (Tracy, 2013).

The first level of coding revealed 83 open codes by taking notes throughout the transcriptions. These open codes were then grouped into relating categories that revealed four themes. In regard to family communication patterns, the first theme that emerged highlighted the importance of communication in each relationship. This theme had subthemes including how fortunate participants felt, unique relationship, parent and friend, challenges of it, and how much influence their parent has. The challenges and triumphs they experienced with custodial parent was the second largest theme with additional subthemes such as dating, lessons, interaction with non-custodial parent, finances, and independence. How they viewed their family structure and how their parent came to be single were also major themes.

Chapter 4

Findings

Analysis of the data uncovered four themes related to how children talk about their experiences in single parent homes, as well as how children viewed their relationship with their custodial parent. Children from single parent homes explained the importance of communication with their parent. They also noted the amount of influence their parent has in their lives. All participants had a different outlook regarding their upbringing, but shared similar opinions on what makes a family. How their parent came to be “single” was also an important factor in these childrens’ lives. The following findings section will use exemplars to demonstrate these themes: communication, challenges and triumphs, structure, and how parents came to be single.

Communication

The role of communication was addressed many times by participants as an important factor within their relationships with their custodial parent. Four different categories emerged regarding participant’s communication: feeling fortunate, having a unique relationship, having both parent and friend, challenges communicating, and parental influence.

Fortunate. Despite how relationships were formed with their parent, nearly all participants described having an open and close relationship, and considered themselves “lucky”. Participants used other terms such as thankful, satisfied, and happy. Many participants felt as though the closeness they developed with their parent is unmatched. Elena described: “I, I cherish it. I cherish it because you know I see, a lot of people don’t have it.” Participants also compared their relationship to other parent/child relationships

they have observed. Heather explained, “I have friends that don’t really have a good relationship with like their mom or think that. So I feel like I’m pretty lucky to have a relationship that I have.” Heather even went on to describe her relationship as more than just a mother-daughter relationship, “I’m really open with my mom, she’s like my best friend basically. So, yeah.”

Unique relationship. While some participants specifically noted their relationships were more than just parent and child, others noted the differences in their relationship in comparison to children in two parent homes. Several participants felt their relationships with their single parent differed from someone who has both parents in the home because the custodial parent tends to be the only parent/adult participants had in their lives. Heather explained in the following excerpt:

You have to like interact with that one person more often cause it’s like the only person that you have, so you interact with them and you become closer with them and stuff like that. As long as like, as long as you can communicate and stuff like that, you become a lot closer that way.

Many participants felt that children raised by single parents only received support from their custodial parent, resulting in a deeper bond between the custodial parent and child. Heather explained feeling like communication is different with two parents instead of one:

Like my best friend, her parents are still together and she’s not as close with her parents I guess. ...I don’t know, they don’t really listen to her as much as like my mom would listen to me cause she’s like the only person I talk to so.

Participants felt like the one-on-one they had with their custodial parent made them closer. Other participants also described feeling comfortable disclosing things to their parents and felt as though they were heard. When participant's had such open communication with their custodial parent, it allowed them to develop a type of trust and understanding with that parent. Ethan felt this way about his relationship with his father:

Simply because I don't know, my dad just kind of understood who I was as a person and I feel like only having one parent for that time, it allowed my dad to kind of understand the kind of person that I am and how I function, so that allowed us to like foster a relationship of trust and understanding that is unmatched in a lot of I guess two parent homes...

Participants that had open communication felt as though they were able to develop a special type of relationship. Maintaining open communication, coupled with having primarily one parent, led participants like Ethan to feel as though they have a relationship that does not always exist in a two parent household.

Parent and friend. While many participants described their relationship with their parent as a friend, some felt the need to make a distinction between the two.

Participants still expressed how close they are with their custodial parent, but recognized and valued the fact that they are a parent and not just a friend. Ethan described this in his relationship with his father:

I wouldn't characterize my relationship with my dad as like best friend relationship, like I know a lot of people do. I still recognize the fact that he's like, an authority figure and he's my father, so I always keep that in mind. I don't try to

undermine that reality but at the same time I feel like we have a very comfortable relationship.

While Ethan enjoys the relationship he has with his father, he recognized his father's parental role, being comfortable with his relationship but having no desire to cross the line. Mia felt the same way, and explained, "...my friends are always there for me so I don't need another friend. I need a parent." Whether relationships were described as parents or friends, nearly all participants highlighted open communication and positive relationships with their custodial parent.

Challenging. Not all participants felt as though they had open communication with their parent which resulted in relationships that were more challenging to navigate. Tracy felt this about the relationship with her mother, sometimes being less than truthful with her. She stated: "I guess I do lie to her a lot, but it's not like major stuff. It's kind of stuff that I just feel like it would be easier if she didn't know." Alan felt as though he could not talk with his father at all, putting unwanted strain on their relationship. He explained:

Like if we actually sit down and talked about something like that, it takes me actually going up to him and starting a conversation, but I don't do it cause he never did it for me when I was little, it's just really, how it is really... I mean if I probably had a better one [relationship] I'd probably be a happier person.

Alan expressed a desire to speak openly, but his father's lack of communication made it difficult to engage with him. While most participants noted how "lucky" they felt to have open communication with their parent, Alan felt if he had more communication with his

father, he would have a better relationship. This further emphasizes the importance of open communication.

Parental influence. Participants also discussed the amount of influence their parents had in their lives. Some participants felt as though their parent had expectations as to how their children should view things. This was the case for Chelsea and her mother:

She would ask me a question and for my opinion but she would already know in her head what she wanted me to do. Like she, I guess she would kinda give me a choice, either you can go here or there and in her mind she already said there.

Chelsea felt as though her mother would ask for her opinion, but try to influence her if their views did not align. However, most participants felt as though their parents allowed them to form their own values and opinions. Some felt as though parents guided their children to have their own belief system, not necessarily copy the custodial parents' views. Elena felt as though her mother provided this for her:

Well...she, she taught my brother and I to be very independent and that's why he's off in another country right now. She taught us to think for ourselves and don't let anyone change our opinions. And, so, she's, I've, she's never tried to alter what I feel or think because she's always taught us that you should not let anyone change your opinion. Value your opinion and still with it.

For some children, like April, their parent did not force them to share similar views or beliefs, however they shared them anyway. April felt as though she shared the same views as her mother because her mother has been a role model. She said: "We probably do just because I look up to her and I'm like, 'I'll follow what you believe.'"

Participants also felt as though they could express how they felt about situations. Alex had never been shy about voicing his opinion to his parents. He explained: “Oh I voice my opinion on things they do, if I don’t agree if I think something they do is dumb I’ll let them know.” Even if children were able to express their views, it did not always mean that the child had an influence on the final outcome. Ethan described a difficult decision made by his father:

Since I was a freshman in high school we lived in the same house, but now that my dad started dating someone and I left for college he decided to get rid of our house because I was only there for a limited amount of time, so I didn’t support that decision. I wanted to like keep my house because like that’s where I’ve lived and all my stuff is, I had a big room with all my stuff was in there, but it was my dad’s final decision that, move my stuff into storage because I’m never there, but I understand the logic behind it so, while I don’t get to make the ideal decision for myself I can recognize, I mean he’s looking out for me I guess.

While Ethan was not happy about the decision, he still saw the wisdom in it. Participants might not have been happy with all of their parents decisions, or how influential (or not) parents were in their lives, however, participants still felt as though parents did what was best for their children.

Overall, participants noted how important communication was within their relationship with their custodial parent. Those who had open communication felt fortunate to have the relationship they had with their parent and provided participants with what they thought is a unique relationship. Some participants also felt as though their parents preserved a parent child relationship, while maintaining open communication.

Those participants who did not have open communication, found the relationship with their custodial parent to be more challenging. Also, depending on how involved the custodial parent was in their lives, participants noted the amount of influence the parent had over them.

Challenges and Triumphs

Participants described both challenges and triumphs they had living with their custodial parent. Five sub-themes emerged: dating, lessons learned from their experiences, interaction with their non-custodial parent, their parent's financial situation, and the child's level of independence.

Dating. All participants remembered their parent dating at one point or another. While some participants had more experiences than others, there were many things that stuck out in their minds. First and foremost, participants felt very protective of their parents and were very cautious when it came to the person their parent was involved with romantically. Heather explained how she felt about her mother dating:

Yeah, like I wanted to get to know him and then like, I guess kinda make my own judgement on if he was kinda right her or not or like, if like if my mom was upset about something and like kinda go and see what was going on so stuff like that.

Participants that were concerned for their parents, felt the need to share their feelings about who their parent was dating. Children tended to take note when their parents were not being treated in a way that they felt was best. Heather described this as one of the more difficult aspects of her mother's dating:

...when somebody was like not treating her the way that she wanted to be treated kinda, or like the way that she should have been treated so that was kinda

challenging like trying to like explain to her that, she shouldn't be treated the way that she was treated and stuff like that.

While observing their parent's relationships, participants like Heather were able to see things that their parents did not notice right away. It was difficult for children to watch their parents figure their way around a new relationship. Most participants, like Heather, were protective of their parents, and critical of how they were being treated. Participants were always looking out for their parents, and at the same time, they wanted their parents to be happy. April explained: "I just have a mom that's, happy with her kids but, I want her to be happy with a man."

Participants were not the only ones that tended to be open about their parents' dating. Parents used their children as support systems in their romantic relationships. Mia explained how she helped her mom through her divorce: "She was the one that divorced him and she is still upset about it so she kind of leaned on me a little bit more, cause she didn't really have anyone so."

Both the parents and kids took turns sharing their concerns about the custodial parent's romantic life. April described this with her mother: "She has, she talks to me about her problems, like her relationship problems or like her problems too. So I feel like she can communicate with me, like I communicate with her." The participants not only listened to their parents' concerns about dating, but also served as a shoulder to lean on. Participants described being there for their parent during the difficult parts of their dating lives, comforting them when they needed it. Tracy described her experience with her mother:

She was upset about one of the guys and I remember I was already asleep, or I wasn't asleep I was laying in my room, and I could hear her like crying, and so I went out there. And so I mean, I guess, I think it's kind of one of those things you bond over so.

While participants described the need to be there and protect their parent in their romantic lives, their parents dating also had an impact on their own lives. Some participants expressed no knowledge or negative feelings toward their custodial parent dating, as April expressed:

I think I was too young to really know what happened. I never really asked but, they broke up, and she still like, every once in a while she'll go on dates but she won't ever let us meet them until, like it, they, she knows something actually might happen.

Parents made an effort to keep that part of their lives separate from their lives with their children, or attempt to mask it when things got more serious. This was the case for Stephanie. She was aware of her father dating, but it was never an obvious part of their lives: "My dad never really brought a lot of women around, but he, whenever he would he would just call them friends."

In some cases, children either thought it made things easier, it didn't really matter to them, or it was just part of life with their parent. This was the case for Alex: "No. I don't think it ever really, were I was so young when they got divorced nothing really, I just grew up with the separation...so I just grew up like it was normal." However, for some participants, their parent's romantic life was not without its challenges. Having their custodial parent date was not something that all participants thought to be normal and

found it difficult to cope with the change. Alan explained: “It just caused more drama that didn’t really need to be there, even though it’s a part of him moving on, it’s just a problem that I wasn’t ready for especially like, a year after, like maybe like 2 years after.”

All participants noted that their parents did not involve them in their relationships right away. However, for some, when it was obvious their parents were being dishonest with them about the subject, it created tension. This was the case for Sandy, when she described her relationship with her father when he started dating her stepmother: “I kinda had hints about it cause he wasn’t always honest with me about where he was going and that hurt me for a while and I think that was part of the reason I resented her for the first year or so.” Others, like Alan, expressed feeling caught between their custodial parent and non-custodial parent, having knowledge that might hurt one parent or the other: “It probably messed me up for, it probably messed me up as a kid, honestly cause I knew a lot of things that I never told, but it always like, killed me inside to know that I knew really.”

Participants described experiencing their parent dating as something that they not only have to manage, but the custodial parent does also. Chelsea experienced this with her mother:

I remember one time I was like 6 uh no I don’t know... I’ll never forget this, and like, I wanted to sleep in the bed with her. So the person that she was involved with had to like sleep on the couch or whatever and she said, she said ‘you took their spot’ or whatever. I was like, so, that I mean. I talk to her about it now but that was when she was younger she’s still learning parenting like, like to parent me, ya know, so...

No matter what the circumstance, children still felt the need to defend and protect their parent. Participants communicated an understanding of the challenges for both their lives and their parents.

Lessons. All participants felt that they had learned something through their experiences in single parent homes. For those children who were old enough to be aware and observe their parents becoming single, they did not want to make the same mistakes. This was the case for Chelsea: “Like I didn’t want to be like her. I didn’t want, I wanted my children not to go through that, seeing yeah.” Through observing their parents and family life, participants learned what they wanted for the future. Alex expressed this:

Yeah I don’t want to ever put my children in that, in that, in the position I’m in.

Well I mean, it’s not even, it doesn’t bother me, but I just feel like, a firm family is better for a child growing up instead of divorced parents.

Even though no ill feelings were expressed regarding their family situations, participants did not want their own children to have the same experience. Participants also took away lessons of how they wish to be treated and avoid making the same mistakes with further generations. Alan expressed this desire for his future children: “I noticed the, through generations of like, their fathers not liking each other in my family, so like I automatically like, I wanted to change that.”

However, not all lessons were described as being negative. Participants described their parents as role models and were grateful for the way that their parents handled the situation. Stephanie explained: “Just like how he raised us I would raise my kids like he raised us.” Participants not only looked at their mother/father’s parenting as a guide, but how their parents lived their lives. Through watching their parents handle divorce and/or

separation, participants felt as though they themselves could do it. Elena described her respect of her mother and the example she set:

I feel like, if I were to ever, you know, get married and have a child and I were to divorce, I could do it, because I saw my mom do it. I saw her struggle to make ends meet. I saw her struggle to keep food on the table... but I feel like if I were to have to do it on my own I could because I have such a strong figure to base it off of.

Participants also reflected on how much they learned about themselves. No matter the circumstance, all participants felt as though they had to overcome certain challenges being part of a single parent family. Participants who remember divorce or separation learned to overcome difficult feelings. Sandy learned to overcome a feeling of guilt:

“Trying to build a bond with each individual parent and realizing that it’s not your fault, if you’re a kid of divorce. That things happen and there certain things you don’t really have control over.”

Participants agreed that experiences vary, but that all children in single parent homes learn something from it. Stephanie believed that these lessons are what link these children together:

I think all situations are different but I think that a single parent home, the parent, really works really really hard, and I think that people that come from single parent homes understand what hard work really means, so... I’ve learned that hard work is just crucial and I think hard work really ties people that have gone through this situation.

All participants felt that every situation is different, but that all children experienced something that would link them together. The participants all identified different qualities they thought linked them together, but thought they were linked none the less.

Participants also unanimously thought that their experiences forced them to “grow up” faster than if they were not raised by one parent: “It taught me how to grow up, for real. I mean it taught me how to just grow up and uh, just do what I had to do and just not, just do the right thing really.” Some considered this to be either a positive or negative outcome of their upbringing. Overall, however, participant’s found their experiences to be positive. As was the case with Ethan:

I feel like it’s made me a better person, more mature, umm more capable of, of handling crises, more capable of taking care of myself. Yeah I feel like it’s been a, a generally positive experience I don’t think of a lot of negative that has come from it.

Ethan felt as though his experience allowed him to grow in a positive way, providing him the ability to handle himself in difficult situations. This ability to cope with difficult situations was expressed by all participants. The positive lessons far outweigh the negatives, and even negative experiences were taught to lead to positive outcomes.

Interaction with non-custodial parent. Interaction with non-custodial parents varied depending on how the parents came to be single. All participants found interactions with their non-custodial parent to be challenging, at one point or another. For those participants whose parents were never married, they had little to no interaction with their birth fathers. Tracy felt that to be one of her biggest challenges growing up:

My dad, he didn't come around often, like maybe once every three years he'll be like 'oh hey happy Christmas'. And so whenever he did, it made me really upset cause it made question like why doesn't my dad want me in his life... I didn't really know what like a father figure was and so it kind of sucked cause like my actual dad was just in and out.

Children whose parents were divorced, also found this to be difficult. Some participants had interaction, but harbored resentment towards their non-custodial parent. This was the case for Sandy. She explained: "When my parents got divorced, she [mom] was the one I lived with, so I kinda saw her as the, the hero in the situation." Sandy is now very close with her father, but the initial separation still caused ill feelings.

Finances. Participants also tended to be aware of the financial situation of their families. All participants noted observing differences in their custodial parent's finances compared to that of their friends with two parents. Participants felt as though they did not have as much compared to their friends with married parents. This difference led some participants, like Alan, to feel embarrassed: "I was always shy to have my friends over cause like, my friends and then my girlfriends houses like there all mansions basically, and I living like a little shack, so I was always afraid to have people over at my house, just because the difference in money." For others, like Chelsea, it created the desire to want more for themselves:

Yeah its different I mean I didn't grow up with a lot, I didn't grow up with a lot of money but, I mean I, I grew up with enough, but I always wanted more so I think that had an effect on me to want better for myself and make me work harder so I won't have to struggle as much and they did.

The majority of the participants did not have to contribute to household expenses, however, participants with siblings were more likely to contribute financially. Heather's sister is special needs, and Heather helped her mother any way she could: "Like if she needed help like, feeding like me and feeding my sister or me paying for something like that then I would help her..." Participants noted that they were aware if their parent struggled with employment and finding time with their children. Tracy described this in the situation with her mother:

I feel like some people have more money. And their parents have more normal jobs I guess. Cause I know I had a group of friends and all of them had, you know, two parents and all of them had two parent, they lived, you know, their parents worked normal schedules, 9-5, and then I was like okay I have one parent and she works midnights.

For many participants, the burden of employment and finances meant less family time spent together. Tracy felt as though her family's financial situation was different from that of two parent homes, not just because of the money her mother made, but the hours she worked. In addition to odd work hours, some participants felt they had less family vacations compared to their friends with two parents. For these participants, not having vacations not only signified that they had less money, but also that they didn't get to spend time with their family.

Independence. Participant's also felt an overall sense of independence resulting from their experience living in a single parent household. Stephanie believed her independence is a result of her father's parenting. She said: "I feel the way my dad always gave me the opportunity to express my freedom at home, has made me very independent in school and

made me okay with being alone and that its okay.” Sandy expressed a similar attitude: “I think a lot more independent, which I’m thankful for.” Ethan, thought it to be one of the more positive aspects of his upbringing:

...I feel like I matured a lot earlier than a lot of my friends,...its allowed me to mature quicker than most of my friends, its allowed me to foster a sense of independence and at the same time its allowed me to get really close to one of my parents and form a bond that has kind of shaped who I am in a positive manner.

Not all participants thought that a high degree of independence was the best outcome.

Others, like April, thought that being so independent is good in the long run, but she was forced to become more independent before she was ready:

Like I wouldn’t have had to be self-sufficient at 6 years old. I would have been able to like, slowly become self-sufficient at a normal age. Not be making macaroni at 6 years old. But I know, in some ways I think it’s good that I was self-sufficient at a young age but...

April felt as though her independence was more of a burden than a gift. Participants felt as though the experiences of children from single parent families pushed them to become more independent at an earlier age. Being forced to develop a stronger sense of independence, made some, like April, feel as though it was not one of the more positive aspects of her experience growing up.

Structure

For all but one participant, communication and interaction among family members constituted family, not its structure. Some participants did not believe their

family to be intact, but thought so because of the lack of communication. Stephanie had her own thoughts about what she thought forms a family:

...it doesn't have to be all the time all good, but it's just like a solid, umm, just solid, like having like a solid relationships with somebody or umm, comm, like open communication with a person. Like not just, all the time, super 'oh my gosh I love you' all the time because that's not normal but like, just a super like good conver, like a good communication with a person, or brother or dad or whatever.

Like Stephanie, many participants believed communication to be what makes a family, regardless of the content. Even if communication is negative or members are not in agreement, as long as there is communication, the family is intact.

In addition to believing communication to be key, participants also highlighted the importance of interaction and providing support for one another. Tracy explains the importance of this in her opinion of family:

I think it mean not always having your stuff, but always knowing you're going to be there for each other and love each other, regardless of how stupid, you know they may be acting. Just making sure you're always gunna be there for each other even if you're not physically or mentally all together that day you know.

Overall, participants thought of family to be constituted by communication, interaction, and support through the good, bad, and the ugly. Actual structure was only mentioned once by participants, and still did not constitute an intact family unless all members within that structure were happy.

Participants also described their parent's single lives as normal. Some, like Alex, were so young when their parents divorced that they could not think of them as being anything other than divorced:

I'm so used to it, where I literally, as far as I can remember my parents have been divorced so I've grown, grown up with it. I just got acclimated to it, when I was young and it's just normal and if, I'd be weird, like to me it would be weird for my parents to be together.

While Alex was too young to remember his parents being anything other than separated, other participants were old enough to remember life before divorce. When Ethan's parents got divorced he choose to live with his father and expressed gratitude for his upbringing:

I really like it. I don't see where I would, were I would be the same person I am now had I not had the relationship I have with my dad now. Sometimes people are like, I know other people have divorced parents, there like oh I wish my parents would have stayed together, and I'm like, no. no no because, I feel like that events that occur in my life as far as like my parents relationship, has definitely molded exactly who I became, and I'm happy with who I am.

Ethan credits his parents' divorce and experience living with his father, for the person he is now. Nearly all participants explained being happy with the way things are currently and have no desire to see their parents married.

How Parents came to be Single

How parents came to be single also influenced how participants felt about their relationships with their parents. All participants had different stories to tell regarding how

their custodial parent came to be single, including divorce, never married, or death of a parent.

Divorce or never married. Participants whose parents are divorced or never married, felt that non-custodial parent involvement, or lack thereof, impacted the relationship with their custodial parent. April experienced her parents divorce at a young age, and felt as though her father's past actions and current absence is why she is so close with her mother. She explained: "I don't associate with him, but I...I think that we are better now that's he's gone and not bothering us." Other participants, such as Chelsea and Tracy, have custodial parents that never married. Chelsea attributed the relationship with her mother to all the experiences they had together. She said: "I think I'm close with her because of all the things we went through, but especially when my dad not being there and we were poor and just kinda being alone struggling a little bit." Tracy felt similarly, not only credited her relationship with her mother to their experience, but to the people they are now. She explains: "Cause I think that's just something we both experience together. We kinda had to like, we've grown from it, so we've both learned it together."

Death. Unfortunately some participant's suffered the loss of their parent. Elena experienced the death of her father as a teenager, forever changing the relationship with her mother. She explained, "Since my dad died, it's given us a lot of, more closeness, because we absolutely, despised each other... and then when my dad died I was just like, well I kind of have to get along with you now." While the loss of her father was devastating, it provided another opportunity to bond with the remaining parent. Elena said, "I'm, like you know, I'm not thankful that my dad passed away but I'm thankful for

the opportunity that I got a second chance to, you know have a better my relationship with my mom.”

Chapter Summary

This chapter detailed the themes found relating to how children talk about their experience growing up in a single parent home. The chapter provided exemplars from participants detailing how they felt about their communication with their non-custodial parent, the challenges and triumphs they had, how they felt about their family structure and how their parent came to be single. The following chapter will go into greater detail of the implications of these findings.

Chapter 5

Discussion

This study explored the lives of children living in single parent households. Interviews with these children revealed the importance of communication among family members, further emphasizing the value of conversation orientation in relationships. The second and most important theme uncovered was the positive and negatives aspect of their upbringing. How these children view their family structure and what they have learned from their experiences represented additional themes. The following section further discusses the implications of participants' experiences and outlook. This chapter will also explain how the themes provide answers to the research questions.

This first theme addressed RQ1 by focusing on the family communication patterns present in single parent families and RQ2 regarding the roles open communication and high conversation orientation play in single parent families. Most of the participants described open and frequent communication with their custodial parent. Participants also described low conformity orientation, with little pressure to conform to parents' values and belief system. Only a fraction of the participants indicated that their parent still made the major decisions, or that they have an image of the ideals they wish their child to have. Because a majority of participants described high conversation orientation and low conformity orientation, participants appear to be fulfilling a pluralistic family type (Fitzpartick & Ritchie, 1994). Participants thought to have more pluralistic communication patterns also had minimal conflict. The pluralistic family type is still representative of high conversation orientation, indicating that open and frequent communication is found in single parent families. The pluralistic family type might be

more common in single parent families because the child has one primary parent to talk to, leading to more communication. Low conformity orientation might have resulted from developing more of a friendship with their parent, due to the stress of divorce or separation.

The second largest family type found was consensual, followed by protective and Laissez-faire. This is not in line with Sherman and Dumlao (2008), who found that consensual is the primary family type, followed by protective and pluralistic. Participants that exhibited more pluralistic and consensual Family Communication Patterns were happier overall with their relationships with their parents. Participants that exhibited more protective and laissez-fair Family Communication Patterns did not feel their relationships with their parents contained open communication and were not as happy with their relationships with their custodial parent. This is similar to Sherman and Dumloa's (2008) study, which found that pluralistic were the family type most satisfied with their relationships, followed by consensual, protective, and laissez faire. This suggests that while single parent families might not represent the most common family type, they still exhibit open communication and satisfying relationships.

Which participant's displayed more protective or laissez-faire communication patterns is difficult to determine. Participants that presented a more consensual communication pattern, described open and frequent communication with their parent, but felt the need to highlight their parent's authority. For some participants, decisions were made for them and views points are shared, further signifying protective and laissez-fair Family Communication Patterns (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 2004). Many participants mentioned that they felt no pressure to conform to their parents, noting they

make their own choices. However, they still look to their parents and follow their views. This could be the result of only having one primary parent and looking at them in a role model capacity. This highlights the importance of high communication orientation, no matter the family structure.

Open communication had a large impact on how participants felt about their relationships with custodial parents. Participants that were raised by their fathers felt as though open communication was an important aspect of their relationship, regardless if it was a father/son or father/daughter relationship. Participants with open communication commented on how fortunate they are and those who did not have open communication with their father wished for it, thinking it would produce a better relationship. Therefore, all children based the quality of their relationship based on communication with their parent. This reinforces previous research on the importance of open communication in father and child relationships (Odenweller et al., 2013; Punyanunt-Carter, 2008).

All participants mentioned the importance of communication, no matter the gender of their parent. Those who did not have an open relationship with their parent expressed the desire to have one, believing that if they did they would have a better relationship with the custodial parent. This is in line with research that suggests the importance of communication orientation (Keating, et al., 2013; Punyanunt-Carter, 2008). This is still true for children in single parent homes.

Those who had open communication with their custodial parent described their parents as friends and were very fortunate to have a unique relationship. It was common for participants to describe their relationship with their parent as that of a friend. This is similar to the findings of Weiss (1979) who found that because of the family relationship,

children might be more encouraged to develop relationships closer to that of friend. However, there were a majority participants that felt the need to recognize their parent's authority and did not wish that have this relationship at all. This could be the result of varying specifics of divorce, depending on the involvement of the child during the actual separation.

The theme which emerged relating to divorce/separation and death of a parent provided important answers to RQ 3 by addressing how the family came to be non-intact and its role on communication patterns. When there was the death of a parent and/or divorce, it played a role in communication patterns when children were older. Afifi (2003) found that parents would be more open and confide in their children regarding divorce and difficult situations. Similarly, this study found that parents leaned on the child after divorce, relying on them for comfort and having conversations that would not have happened before the split. If the child was too young to remember, there was no way to determine how conversation and conformity orientation differed or effected the communication patterns. The findings do suggest, however, that for some, the more challenging the situation, the more open communication.

Similar to research by Biblarz and Gottgainer (2000), death provided a positive outlook of the non-custodial parent. The findings of this study indicate that this outlook depended on how the child felt about their parent before their death. If the child was maintaining a positive relationship or negative relationship, nothing changed. However, it did provide a new chance to bond with their custodial parent. For many, divorce provided hostile feelings (Biblarz, & Gottgainer, 2000), such as resentment and anger. How participants felt after the split, and the amount of time that past, dictated to an extent if

the feelings would be resolved. It also depended on the involvement of the parent. Participants were able to resolve their hostile feelings after divorce when their non-custodial parent was present in their lives. For others, these hostile feelings remained, and led to other feelings such as abandonment. This suggests that depending on the severity of the divorce or separation, and the involvement of the non-custodial parent, hostile feelings can either be resolved or enhanced and effect the relationship with their non-custodial parent.

In order to cope with feelings of abandonment and resentment, children leaned on their parents for support. From participant's accounts, parents seem to be employing the strategies outlined by Doherty and Craft (2011), in an effort to reduce the ill feeling towards their non-custodial parent. Children described their parent acknowledging the non-custodial parents absence and their feelings about it, but did not really talk negatively about them.

When it came to how children viewed their family structure, nearly all participants believed communication to be the key to forming a family. This theme addressed RQ4, by focusing on how adult children from single parent families view their structure. Participants followed the definition of family by Whitchurch & Dickson (1999) in their own way. The majority believed that communication is what constitutes a family, regardless of whether the communication is positive or negative. While some did not think their family was fully intact, it was because of the lack of communication and the relationship they had with their custodial parent. Only one participant thought an intact family to be constituted by two parents, but thought that the parents needed to be happy in order for them to truly be intact.

Many participants also felt their family structure to be normal. Having their family conform to the structural definition would be very strange for them. Not all children were old enough to remember a time when they were not just with their custodial parent. They did not view their family structure and function as anything other than normal. This is similar to what was found by Nixon et al. (2013), being in a single parent family was the norm. Participants who remember living with two parents felt that it would be strange if their parents still together.

The final theme related to the positives and negatives they found in their lives with their parent. This final theme addressed the remaining RQ's by painting a detailed picture of the positive and negative elements associated with being part of a single parent family (RQ5), the dual roles children in single parent homes experience (RQ6), and the similar experiences children from single parent families share (RQ7). All participants in this study discussed their custodial parent's dating and their experiences managing that part of their lives. These experiences were both positive and negative. Similar to the findings of Weiss (1979), the current study found that children are very aware of the situation around them, noticing another side of their parent, being happy or sad in their romantic lives. Participants were highly aware of their parent dating and what role it played in their lives. Children saw how their parents either celebrated or struggled in their romantic relationships, and for most, it changed the dynamic with them.

The participants need to protect and comfort their parent was generally positive. Participants thought this to be a reason why their relationship is so close. This is in line with past research that suggests that the impact of divorce causes parents to turn to their children and develop strong bonds (Afifi, 2003). They did not identify it as a positive or a

negative. On the other hand, having knowledge about their parents dating life that might hurt their non-custodial parent, led to feelings of being caught in-between both parents, similar to Afifi (2003). There needed to be boundaries as to how much interaction children had with their parent's dates and how much information they shared about their relationship (Afifi, 2003; Fergusson & Dickson, 1995). However, when parents were honest about their dating life, children associated it as a positive.

Even when parents didn't specifically label "dates", if it was not a secret, it was not thought to be negative. When parents were less than truthful about their dating, is what children found challenging and it impacted their relationship with their custodial parent. This is in line with Fergusson and Dickson (1995) findings that children see themselves as involved in their parent's relationship and they need to know about who their parent was seeing. When parents seemed to acknowledge how aware their children were of the situation, it led to a more positive relationship.

Other positives that children identified was the lessons they learned through their experience with their parent. Participants expressed learning from their parent's mistakes in order to avoid them in the future and looking up to their parents when they felt they had done right by them. The most notable positive lesson participants felt, was how they had grown from their experiences. Whether it was learning to overcome the feelings associated with divorce or separation, overall the participants thought that being from a single parent family was positive because it helped them work hard, grow as people, and become a better person. This is again, in line with Weiss (1979), who found that children in single parent households will become more self-sufficient, independent, and proud of their abilities.

Participants felt as though their experiences helped them to develop more maturity, but did not always look at this as a more positive aspect. Children also felt more self-sufficient and that they could rely on themselves. Depending on the relationship with their parent, however, they would lean on them for support if they needed it. These findings are in line with Weiss (1979), in that children move toward more maturity, and become more self-reliant. The benefits of being mature and self-sufficient were apparent, but not what participants would have wished for themselves or want for their own children. Weiss (1979) found that both parents and children of single parent families thought that how children developed was of “mixed value” but that children were still proud to be able to do more than their friends with two parents. All participants thought that they had grown up faster than their friends that had both parents. These children also felt as though they had overcome things being from a single parent family, and it was not always easy. It was the challenges in they experienced in their household that made them feel as though they had developed in such a way.

Children were also aware of the financial situations of their parents. Children found this to be positive and negative. For some, comparing their financial situation to that of their friends with married parents resulted in feelings of embarrassment. Participants were aware that their custodial parents were financially strained (Nixon et al., 2013). Lack of financial resources was also felt when it effected how much time they spent with their parent, like working odd hours or not having the finical ability to take family vacations (Nixon et al., 2013). Others found their financial situation to be more positive because it taught them to work hard and not struggle as much as their parents. Some even helped their parents financially if they needed it taking care of their sibling.

Similar to how they felt about their parent dating, children were aware of the situation and it played a role in the interaction with their parent.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study was able to provide a better understanding of children raised in single parent families. It highlighted the importance of open communication for relationships, especially for single parent families, where the child has one primary parent. Children learn a lot about themselves through their experiences. They have many challenges and accomplishments, but as a whole do not view their family structure as anything out of the ordinary. The study does have limitations, however, and this leaves room for future research.

The largest limitation was how the Family Communication patterns were assessed. While there is a reliable scale to determine these patterns, this study attempted to do so qualitatively. Using qualitative methods to determine family communication patterns provided the participants perspective on their family type, but it was difficult to conclusively decide the family type they belonged to. Other limitations included the amount of time to conduct the study. In order to complete the study in a particular time period, the specifics required for each participants were minimal, only requiring them to have lived with their single parent for three years or more. This limits the extent to which generalization can be made regarding a specific single parent home. Narrowing the type of single parent family, for example focusing on families with single parents where parents were never married, could provide a better understanding of that specific situation. Additionally, the participants that volunteered for the study described having a more positive relationship with their parent. This might have been why they were willing

to participate in the study. This is a limitation because while these participants provided a valuable perspective, it might not be the case with all children from single parent families. While the study provided insight into the lives of children from single parent families, perhaps more could be learned with a more specific focus.

To get a better understanding of family communication patterns in single parent families, future research should conduct a quantitative or mixed methods study, to get both personal experience/examples and more reliable determination of family type. A mixed methods study with both interviews and scale can give a more informed decision as to what family type they belonged to with the addition of the participant's experiences within that family type. It would also be interesting, for participants to fill out two scales, one for each parent and specify which is custodial and non-custodial to see if patterns differ.

Communication was very important in how children viewed their relationships with their parents. Many noted that while they still consider their communication to be open and value their relationships, their communication has changed as they entered college. Conversation orientation might change as they get older. Gathering a different range of ages and life experiences, rather than just entering college, might produce different results.

Future research should also conduct a comparison of single parent homes and two parent homes. Participants made their own comparisons and judgments of their friends with two parents based on their own experience. Future research should explore these comparisons. When conducting further research on single parent families, the views of single parents can also be included, in order to get both viewpoints.

There should also be more focus on participants that experienced the death of a parent. Participants in this study did experience death of a parent, however it was after separation of parents. Experiences also varied depending on the involvement and relationship with the non-custodial parent. Future research should pay greater attention to children who experienced the loss of a parent no matter the parent's marital status. This could provide a better comparison to those who experienced divorce or separation.

Overall, participants in this study highlighted the importance of open communication in their relationships and the bond they have with their parents. These children had some challenging experiences with their parents, but overall, did not feel as though living in a single parent household put them at a disadvantage. Living in single parent homes made them feel as though they had grown up faster and was a learning experience. Future research should continue to look into the lives of these children to get a better understanding of the different circumstances and outcomes that occur.

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Appendix A.

Interview Guide

Introduction Questions

1. Tell me a little about yourself?
 - a. What is your name, age, interests, hobbies?
 - b. Highest level of education?
 - c. Job title?
2. If you could describe yourself in 3 words, what might they be?

General Questions

3. Who were you raised by?
4. Tell me a little about your life with your custodial parent?
5. How did you come to live with your custodial parent?
6. How long have you lived with this custodial parent?
7. Are you still living with them now?
 - a. If no, why are you no longer living with them?
 - b. Are they still a single parent?
8. Do you have any siblings?
 - a. Any other family members you are especially close to?
9. Do you consider your family to be “intact”?
 - a. Why? Can you give me an example to illustrate?
 - b. What does the term “intact” mean to you in the family context?
10. How would you describe how your family functions?
 - a. Why? Please give me examples to illustrate.

Establishing Conversation Orientation

11. What is your daily interaction like with your custodial parent?
 - a. What would a daily interaction be like with your sibling?
 - b. Daily interaction with another close family member?
12. How often do you speak with your custodial parent?
 - a. About what?
 - b. How, is at all, do you discuss feelings/ thoughts with your custodial parent?
13. What do you do with your custodial parent when you spend time together?
 - a. What task-oriented things do you do with your custodial parent? Can you please share a few examples?
 - b. Personal things?
 - c. How often?
14. How would you describe your relationship with your custodial parent?
 - a. What is the best part of this relationship?
 - b. What is the biggest challenge in your relationship with your custodial parent?
 - c. How do you feel about this type of relationship with your custodial parent?
15. How would you describe your communication with your custodial parent?
16. How open are you able to be when you interact with your custodial parent?
 - a. In what cases, if any, do you ever feel like you cannot interact with your custodial parent?

Establishing Conformity Orientation

17. What types of beliefs, if any, do you and your custodial parent discuss?
a. What similar beliefs, if any, do you and your custodial parent share?

Can you please share some stories to illustrate?

- b. What different beliefs, if any, do you and your custodial parent share?

Can you please share some stories to illustrate?

18. What types of values, if any, do you and your custodial parent hold?

- a. What similar values, if any, do you and your custodial parent share?

Can you please share some stories to illustrate?

- b. What different values, if any, do you and your custodial parent share?

Can you please share some stories to illustrate?

19. What types of attitudes, if any, do you and your custodial parent hold?

- a. What similar attitudes, if any, do you and your custodial parent share?

Can you please share some stories to illustrate?

- b. What different attitudes, if any, do you and your custodial parent share?

Can you please share some stories to illustrate?

20. How well do you get along with your custodial parent?

- a. Why? Can you provide an example to illustrate?

21. What, if any, conflicts have you had with your custodial parent?

- a. How often?

- b. What, if at all, do you do to avoid it?

22. What is your level of independence from your family?

- a. What is your involvement in decisions regarding family?

- b. What decisions do you make on your own?

- c. What decisions are made for you?

23. What close relationships, if any, do you have with people outside your family?

- a. How do you know these people? What is your relationship with them?

- b. How important are these other relationships to you?

24. What circumstance, if any, does family come before all else?

- a. Why? Can you provide an example to illustrate?

Dual Role Establishing Questions/Narratives-establishing emotional support

25. Were you employed living with your custodial parent?

- a. Why or why not?

- b. Did your income contribute to household expenses?

26. Tell me about your experiences with your custodial parent dating.

- a. How has this affected/affects you?

- b. How involved were you in the relationship? Uninvolved?

- c. Was that your choice? Parent choice? Partner choice?

- c. Did it influence your interactions with your custodial parent? How so?

27. What, if any, challenging moments did you have in this area?

- a. What brought them on?

- b. Did you learn anything about/through the experience?

Closing Questions/Narratives

28. What similar experiences do you think people share in a single parent family based on what was talked about today?

a. Before today have you met anyone from a similar situation to your own?

29. What differences have you noticed between your relationship with your custodial parent and your friend's relationships with their parents?

30. How do you think being from a single parent family has affected you? If at all?

a. Examples?

b. Do these things sound familiar?

c. Do you disagree? How so?

Catch All Question

31. Have I missed anything you would like to discuss?