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Abstract

Single mothers living in poverty within the United States have marked increases in psychological and physiological disparities compared to mothers in other income brackets due a lack of support systems. Women who are at or below the federal government poverty line or are of low income status work more hours, receive lower wages and receive little to no “entitlement” benefits, such as healthcare or paid leave compared to other non-poverty groups. This marginalization of single mothers impacts the women and their offspring creating a cyclical pattern that is “imprinted” on the child or children creating a long term trend which may perpetuate into future generations.

Single mothers living in poverty within the United States have marked increases in psychological and physiological disparities compared to mothers in other income brackets due a lack of support systems. It is estimated that there are 85.4 million mothers living in the United States, 10 million are single mothers. Of all single-headed families living in poverty, 86 percent were headed by women compared to married-couple families living in poverty at 5.3 percent (Dinitto & Cummins, 2005). In order to better understand why this demographic sees higher rates of psychological and physiological disparities compared to mothers in other income brackets it is necessary to review other reputable entity's research as well as the various issues that these women and their children face.

A report using data from government agencies, social scientists and researchers worldwide provides useful information regarding single mothers in poverty. The report shows that single mothers in the United States are employed more hours and yet have much higher poverty rates than their peers in other "high-income" countries ("This Week in Poverty – U.S. Single Mothers" 2012, Kaufman). Employment is not moving women and their children out of poverty. Income for the majority of single mothers in the United States is significantly lower compared to other high income countries such as, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom (Kaufman, 2012). Further, Coontz & Folbre (2002), state that "In Canada and France, single mothers -- and children in general -- are far less likely to live in poverty. Sweden and Denmark, with higher rates of out-of-wedlock births, have much lower rates of child poverty and hunger than does the United States" ("*Marriage, Poverty and Public Policy*"). Within other industrialized countries the poor and vulnerable, namely single mothers and their children, are not faced with the same levels of financial disparities that single mothers

living in the U.S. are faced with. These financial disparities leave single mothers in the U.S. disenfranchised and create feelings of hopelessness. What does this say about how the United States culture views one of its most vulnerable demographics?

In a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center evidence shows that the majority of Americans believe that single mothers are “bad for society.” The research study states that, “nearly 7 in 10 Americans think single mothers are a bad thing for society” (“In defense of single mothers,” 2012). Are single mothers truly “bad for society”? Do other industrialized nations view their single mothers in a similar way?

In France, social services distributes not only cash assistance to those in need, but also housing, child care assistance, mediation if needed and single parents receive help in obtaining child support from an estranged partner. According to a recent report by the Caisse nationale des Allocations familiales (the family branch of the French social security services), “Local family benefit funds have a total 29 million people on their files, including spouses, co-habiting partners and children, – nearly half the French population”(“ Caisse nationale des Allocations familiales”, 2012). The people of France support early childhood benefits with 75% being “satisfied” with current services provided to families living in impoverished states. The French government supports all family systems and views single parents and their children as “vulnerable populations in need of assistance.” In 2010 the French secretary of state for family and solidarity, Nadine Morano, launched a series of workshops on the conditions of vulnerable children in France. The workshops came from an interdisciplinary approach and involve local officials, government partners and professionals working in the field of child protection (“France launches workshop”, 2010). The workshops were designed to help eradicate the stigma that is

often associated with living in poverty and being in a single parent household as well as promoting inclusion.

The U.S. was also striving to make changes in regards to how the nation was addressing the issues around poverty. In the 1990's the United States federal and state aid to needy families began its transformational process. In an attempt to get single mothers into the labor work force a law was passed that replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) which allowed single mothers cash assistance was replaced with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA) at the Federal level and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) at the state level (Farley & Haaga, 2000, p. 215). Many critics argue that the PRWORA negates what the program was initially set up to do, place those in poverty back into the labor work force. According to London (2005) the welfare reform outcomes for the those who qualified was a great contradiction and showed little if any empirical evidence of bolstering recipients finances stating that, "nearly half of welfare recipients lack basic education and the minimum qualifications necessary to gain good-paying jobs that would enable them to stay off of welfare" (As cited by Kim, 2012, p.70). Those who are fortunate enough to receive a college education, regardless of marital status, have better earning power than those with a high school diploma, GED, or some college education without a degree. This is especially true for women and those who find themselves in the role of single mother head of household. Research shows that women who are highly educated are more likely to be employed compared to an uneducated woman due to higher wages and increased job interest, in other words the highly educated woman has greater opportunity afforded her due to her higher education in obtaining and maintaining a position of employment that is both meaningful and interesting (England, Gornick & Shafer, 2012, p.1). Further, higher education attainment by single mothers has positive

influences on their children as well. A study of single mothers attending college in Australia found that women and their children showed marked increases in positive feelings,

As a result of their educational experience, single mothers reported that they were more understanding of people, better communicators and problem-solvers, more tolerant and open, more interesting, more interested in others, more enthusiastic, more sympathetic to others, and less defensive. Accompanying these changes, single mothers reported that their children were more respectful, were more likely to ask them for help, became more resourceful, were less sexist, and had expanded their own interests and aspiration (Van Stone, Nelson and Niemann, 1996, p. 2). The study further stated that these women often had higher achievement standards than that of single or married women and were more likely to rely on faculty and staff for support. On the other side of the educational attainment spectrum those who are unable to receive a college degree experience higher levels of negative self concept due to higher than average hours and decreased wages at exceptionally higher rates. According to Timothy Casey and Laura Maldonado (2012),

U.S. jobholders have an exceptionally high rate of low-wage employment (25%) compared to jobholders in comparison countries, and jobholding U.S. single parents have an exceptionally high rate of low-wage employment (around 40%) compared to other U.S jobholders (p.7).

Casey and Maldonado also state that U.S single parent households are the worst off due to the barriers that this demographic faces, such as a lack of paid-time-off-work benefits, having little to no health coverage, high costs of daycare and a lack of higher education. Furthering the blow comes in the form of tax credits. Most tax credits provided by the United States Federal government such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) benefit those who are married,

working and are receiving low to moderate incomes. Bear in mind the income must be “earned” according to the federal guidelines. The Internal Revenue Service website states that in order to qualify adjusted gross income (AGI) must each be less than:

- \$45,060 (\$50,270 married filing jointly) with three or more qualifying children
- \$41,952 (\$47,162 married filing jointly) with two qualifying children
- \$36,920 (\$42,130 married filing jointly) with one qualifying child
- \$13,980 (\$19,190 married filing jointly) with no qualifying children (“2012 tax year”, 2012). The report does not show the EITC as being beneficial to other types of family systems residing in the United States such as single parents or single mothers- head- of- household. In 2009 the median income for single mother families living in the United States was roughly \$25,172 (“Harder times for single mothers and their children”, 2011). If income is based on scholarships, student loans, grants and the like the IRS does recognize this as “earned income” and persons who fall under this income type will not qualify for the EITC. In other words those who choose to attend a college or university full-time and raise their child or children will not receive benefits in the form of tax credits. However there is some conflicting evidence that the EITC is in fact beneficial to those that it was intended to serve and bears mentioning. In a study from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities states that the EITC is proving to be effective in reducing poverty and is successfully getting single mothers employed. In regards to the study Meyer and Rosenbaum stated that, “EITC expansions instituted between 1984 and 1996 were responsible for more than half of the large increase in employment among single mothers during that period” (As cited by Charite,

Ghupta and Marr, 2012, p.2). The report also states that millions of people, including children, are being moved above the federal government poverty line. I think that it is important to note that the study does not reflect the current state of single mother-head-of-household family systems or those who fall under this category and who are attending college or university.

How are single parents, namely single mothers fairing? The current state of the United States economy and the “sequestration” says they are not and forecasts for this demographic looks fairly dismal. Cuts to needed programming such as, Women Infants, Children (WIC) will negatively impact this program. WIC is a highly effective nutrition program for millions of low-income women and children in the United States. According to Neuberger, “575,000 to 750,000 eligible low-income women and children will be turned away by the end of the fiscal year if sequestration, which took effect on March 1, remains in place” (“Sequestration could deny nutrition support”, 2013). The article further states that WIC will begin reducing caseloads in April 2013.

Negative stigma associated with being a single mother needs to be addressed with great immediacy. Often, for women who choose to leave their marriage it is a matter of choice however there are special circumstances such as being widowed, babies being born out of wedlock by choice or in the case of teen pregnancy and in more extreme cases domestic violence. Domestic Violence is still prevalent in the United States and is considered to be a global phenomenon. Control of a woman and/or her children through aggression is influenced by cultural norms within a community or society. Aggression in the context of domestic violence can be defined as, “any act or behavior that intentionally hurts another person, either physically or psychologically” (Matsumoto & Juang, 2008, p. 395). I would also like to add

sexually. Sexual aggression toward an intimate partner, regardless of whether a person is married is rape. Domestic violence from an intimate partner is considered to be one the most inhumane acts that plagues our world, it is an act against women's rights and therefore is an act against human rights. There is still a cultural influence within the United States in which male dominance over women and children is acceptable. In the United States a woman is beaten every 15 seconds in her own home, at least 25% of victims of domestic violence are beaten while pregnant. Further, "femicide" the murder of women is thought to occur at the hands of partners with whom these women shared their daily lives (Mananzan et al., 1996, p. 40). In these instances entering into single motherhood is a means to survival. The shame experienced by those who are victimized by acts of violence is insurmountable. Feelings of shame can lead to negative self concept leading to poor psychological and physiological health.

Depression in single mothers with children due to chronic stressors and poverty are significantly higher than mothers who are married. A research study by Hall & Sachs (1992) designed to examine the effects of welfare reform in a sample of 1,602 single mothers with children between three and six and one-half years and who reside within the United States shows that, "49% of the mothers had high levels of depressive symptoms as measured by the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D). Depressive symptoms in this population persist over time" (As cited by Hatcher et al., 2008, p. 91). Depression alters one's mood often leaving them feeling sad, hopeless and isolated leading to negative self concept, apathy the desire to hide or worse suicidal thoughts. Single mothers often have intense feelings of shame, suffer from insomnia and can become easily agitated. There is some evidence suggesting a correlation between depression in women and physical pain. A research study suggests that this form of comorbidity is increased in women who are considered to be

financially disadvantaged, “Chronic pain and psychiatric illness are associated, and this association remains consistent across race, nationality, and sex. Women are more likely than men to report emotional distress associated with their pain” (Poleshuck, Giles & Tu, 2006, p.183). The study further states that both chronic pain and depression increased significantly in women who were experiencing poverty.

The prevalence of depression among single mothers impacts both women and their children. Often single mothers due to the nature of their circumstances combined with depression, social isolation and a lack of support systems have little tolerance for “misbehavior” and place abnormal expectations on their children. According to James (2002), “The most common emotions that a parent projects onto their family members are depression and aggression...depressed mothers are very liable to deal with their irritability and self hatred by inducing it into their children”(p.70). This behavior is projected onto a child who then takes over the role of the absent parent. Through a parent’s fearful anxieties and over-control their children often become fearful themselves making it difficult for a child to progress and mature. Often this type of parenting is carried into the adult child’s life in the form of passive aggressive manipulative behavior from the parent. Susan Forward, PhD.(2002), refers to this parent as the “helper” in which the parent continues to attempt to control their now adult child by creating situations that are “well-meaning but unwanted assistance” (p.56). The cycle is often repeated unknowingly by the now adult child to their own children. It is a form of imprinting that needs changing.

Single mother heads of households were and will continue to be a type of family system on a global scale and need to be looked upon in a manner that both nurtures and provides meaningful support through an interdisciplinary approach. We need to move away from

societal norms that punish people for not fitting into perceived notions of what it means to come from a place of normalcy and remove labels that conjure negative images in the forms of stereotyping and generalizations. Sociologists refer to this as “labeling theory” which explains how labeling a specific demographic within society can alter assumptions among the general population creating prejudicial outcomes toward the specified demographic. In order to move toward the removal of stigma against single mothers and their children sociologists and other fields related to human studies who research family systems need to promote their work publicly regarding positive outcomes for single mothers and their children.

Government, at the federal and state levels should look to other countries such as France who are seeing positive outcomes through social service programs that are in place and through reform. Government and institutions of higher education need to reach out to this demographic by creating opportunities such as work study with benefits, onsite counseling, onsite daycare (especially for those institutions that provide degrees within the childcare sectors such as child education), scholarships, and assistantships at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Further, government entities at the federal level need to provide tax benefits for all and discontinue penalizing those families who are single heads of households or are attending school full-time without receiving an “earned income.” Debtedness after college for those of low income poverty status is punishment enough.

The time for change is now. The current state of the economy suggests that our most vulnerable populations, namely single mothers and their children, residing within the United States are at even greater risks than ever before. Who, if not society, is going to help them navigate single motherhood when they are not equipped with the appropriate tools?

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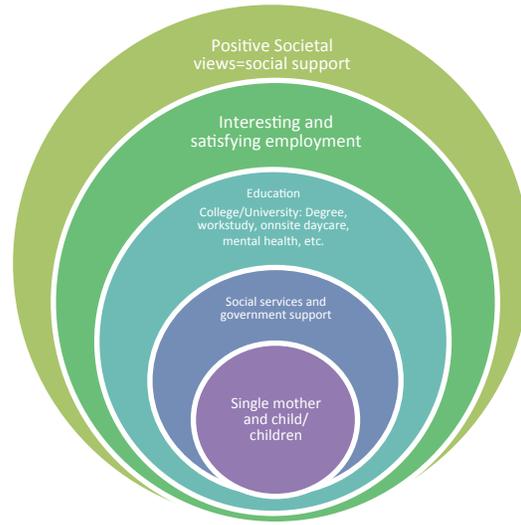
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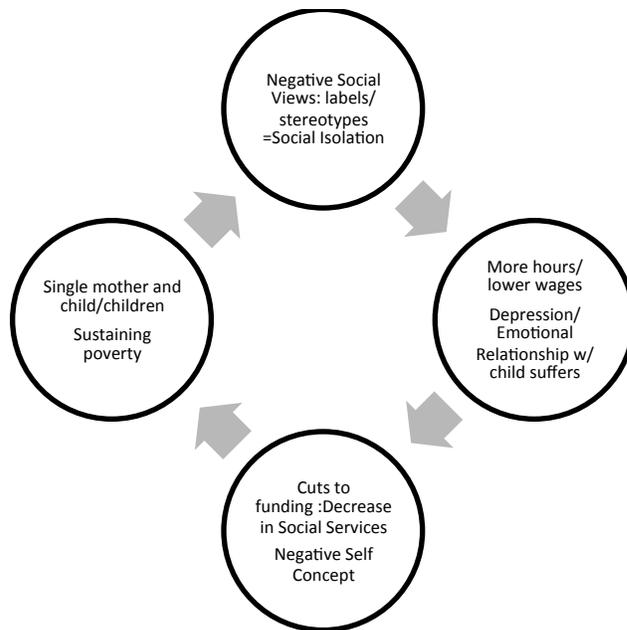
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Appendix A



The chart above emulates Urie Bronfenbrenner's Theory of Ecological Systems. The Circles embrace the mother and her children creating feelings of hope and positive self concept.



The chart above shows the perpetual cycle of single mothers and their children living in poverty.