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SINGLE-PARENT FAMILY AS AN INSTITUTION OF GENDER
SOCIALIZATION AT ADOLESCENT AGE

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Abstract

Family is the first social group where a child is integrated when he/she comes to this world. Disruption of traditional family structure, i.e. the absence of one of the parents (more frequently, the father is a missing parent) is supposed to cause severe social and psychological consequences. This article contains the results of an empirical study focused on the specifics of gender socialization in a single-parent family. A general hypothesis about the specificity of a single-parent family as an important factor for gender socialization is confirmed. A number of concrete specific features of boys' and girls' identities brought up in a single-parent family is presented. Boys from single-parent families demonstrate a lower level of emotional self-attitude. As far as girls growing up in similar families are concerned, if we examine their declaration of their own femininity, we can assume the existence of an intrapersonal role conflict, because in their self-conception traditionally male and neutral characteristics come to the forefront, when feminine features are denied.

Gender socialization in single-parent families follows the route of acquisition and acceptance of traditional male and female roles by adolescents. In the present-day world, that cannot be viewed as an adaptable strategy and often becomes a source for intra- and interpersonal role conflicts, discontent with themselves, problems in the field of self-actualization and self-fulfillment. We have also discovered that both boys and girls from single-parent families feature inadequate and contradictive ideas about female role, and general and vague representations of male qualities

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Keywords: Gender socialization, two- and single-parent families, psychological gender, images of the perfect man and perfect woman.



1. Introduction

Family is the first social group where a child is integrated when he/she comes to this world. Disruption of traditional family structure, i.e. the absence of one of the parents (more frequently, the father is a missing parent), is supposed to cause severe social and psychological consequences (Akhverdova, 2009; Repina, 2004; Dubovskaya & Mishina, 2015; Mullins, 2008; Stuart, 2014). The single-parent family structure plays a special role in the gender socialization process. Gender socialization is understood as a process of acquisition and active reproduction of social experience by a person. The result of gender socialization is the establishment of sex-role behaviour (assimilation of gender roles and models of behaviour) as well as the formation (construction) of gender identity. Researchers note that an “average” child begins to try on the roles intrinsic for his sex even before he/she reaches three. And, at the age of five years old the first representations regarding behaviour of men and women are established. After the age of 5-6 years old and during further development and socialization, sex-role repertoire of a person gets enriched. The models of gender behaviour consolidate within self-conception. By the age of seven gender repertoire is enhanced, and gender identity is formed (Kraig, 2000).

2. Problem Statement

Our study makes an attempt to reveal the specifics of gender socialization depending on the characteristics of family structure (a two-parent family, or the absence of the father or the mother in constant surrounding of the child, i.e. a single-parent family). A child growing up in a single-parent family suffers from the deficiency of emotional warmth and from psychological discomfort possibly due to dysfunctional upbringing style (single-parent families are often marked by overprotection or rejection).

The absence of the father results in non-implementation of four conventional roles: the role of the father as a “third person”, the father as a man, as the husband of the mother and as a relative (pursuant to Chizhova & Romanova, 2008).

3. Research Questions

1. Are there any differences in the specifics of gender socialization of teenagers from two- or single-parent families that originate in some particular characteristics of parent-child relationship in the families of both types?
2. Does gender identity of children from single-parent families have any special features linked to the specifics of parent-child relationship? Please replace this text with context of your paper.

4. Purpose of the Study

To reveal the specifics of gender socialization of children from single-parent families.

5. Research Methods

The technique for the identification of children with their parents.

The technique “Behaviour of parents and the attitude of adolescents to it”.

The questionnaire for masculinity-femininity assessment.

Semantic differential.

The methods of data processing

Data processing for compliance with normal distribution was carried out with the help of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used for the purpose of juxtaposition of empirical distribution of some characteristics against theoretical normal distribution. Given the results of our examination, we decided that it was necessary to apply a non-parametric statistic test because the distribution of a large part of data significantly differed from the normal one when $p < 0.05$.

Comparison by the Mann–Whitney U test. Mann–Whitney U test was designed for the evaluation of differences between two samples according to the level of one of characteristics measured quantitatively. Mathematic and statistical data processing was executed by means of SPSS 17.0 statistical pack for Windows OS.

5.1. Subjects

Research sample consisted of 100 adolescents between 15 and 16 years old. 50 subjects under test were brought up in single-parent families (50% of the sample, 25 girls and 25 boys), and 50 participants grew up in couple families (50% of the sample, 25 girls and 25 boys). Mothers from 38 families (38% of the sample) were unemployed at the moment of the study; one family (1% of the sample) had an unemployed father. 42 respondents were the only children (42% of the sample), 46 adolescents (46% of the sample) came from two-child families, and 12 participants (12% of the sample) grew up in large families (three children or more). Among the participants coming from large families, 14 adolescents (14% of the sample) were the youngest of the siblings, 40 (40% of the sample) were elder, and 4 respondents (4% of the sample) were middle children.

6. Findings

The sample was divided into four equal groups (25 participants each): boys from single-parent families, girls from single-parent families, boys from two-parent families, and girls from two-parent families. Further mathematic and statistical processing included comparison of the specifics of gender socialization of the adolescents of different genders brought up in two- and single-parent families.

Against the teenage boys from two-parent families, the respondents from single-parent parents demonstrated a significantly lower level of the father's prestige ($U=200.00$ when $p < 0.05$), the identification with the father in the professional field ($U=200.00$ when $p < 0.05$), and the intensity of expression of emotionally warm attitude towards their father ($U=175.00$ when $p < 0.01$), as well as a significantly higher level of the mother's prestige ($U=112.50$ when $p < 0.01$) and the intensity of expression of emotionally warm attitude towards the mother ($U=175.00$ when $p < 0.01$).

In comparison with the teenage girls from two-parent families, the respondents from single-parent parents demonstrated a significantly lower level of the father's prestige ($U=187.50$ when $p < 0.05$), the intensity of expression of emotionally warm attitude towards the father ($U=187.50$ when $p < 0.05$), and the fear of punishment on the part of the father ($U=187.50$ when $p < 0.05$), along with a significantly higher level of the mother's prestige ($U=137.50$ when $p < 0.01$) and the intensity of expression of emotionally warm attitude towards the mother ($U=187.50$ when $p < 0.05$).

Against the teenage boys from two-parent families, the respondents from single-parent parents demonstrated a significantly higher level of the evaluation of the separateness and autonomy of the mother (U=124.50 when $p<0.01$) and father (U=173.00 when $p<0.01$). In comparison with the teenage girls from two-parent families, the respondents from single-parent families showed a significantly lower level of the evaluation of positive interest on the part of their mother (U=166.50 when $p<0.01$) and her autonomy (U=191.00 when $p<0.05$).

In all the adolescent groups except the boys from single-parent families, the majority of the respondents featured androgynous gender. In a great measure, they could be described as having the combination of both masculine and feminine qualities, which in its turn could be regarded as a sign of high social adaptability. However, the adolescent boys from single-parent families demonstrated the domination of masculine psychological sex, which could be found in that group six times more frequently than among the boys from two-parent families. As for the girls from single-parent families, they exhibited feminine gender two and a half times more often than their peers from couple families. The significance of those differences was confirmed by the fact that the main index of the Bem Inventory was significantly higher in the group of the girls from single-parent families than that of those from two-parent families (U=153.50 when $p<0.01$). The BSRI index was also significantly lower for the boys from single-parent families than that for those from couple families (U=137.00 when $p<0.01$). In other words, this index tended to femininity pole in the group of the girls from single-parent families and to the masculinity pole among the boys from single-parent families.

When describing the image of the perfect man, the adolescent boys from single-parent families used such qualities as “fast” (U=210.50 when $p<0.05$), “active” (U=167.50 when $p<0.01$), “fun” (U=204.00 when $p<0.05$), and “strong” (U=206.00 when $p<0.05$) less frequently than their peers from two-parent families.

When describing the image of the perfect man, the adolescent girls from single-parent families applied such qualities as “nice” (U=179.50 when $p<0.01$) more frequently, and less frequently such characteristics as “active” (U=188.00 when $p<0.05$) and “sincere” (U=207.50 when $p<0.05$).

When describing the image of the perfect woman, the adolescent boys from single-parent families used such qualities as “fast” (U=176.50 when $p<0.01$), “excited” (U=203.00 when $p<0.05$), “fun” (U=158.00 when $p<0.01$), “kind” (U=211.00 when $p<0.05$), “beautiful” (U=159.50 when $p<0.01$), “happy” (U=178.50 when $p<0.01$), “strong” (U=178.50 when $p<0.01$), “big” (U=147.50 when $p<0.01$), and “liberating” (U=134.00 when $p<0.01$) less frequently. On the other hand, they applied such characteristics as “lively” (U=155.50 when $p<0.01$), “optimistic” (U=191.50 when $p<0.05$), or “individual” (U=65.00 when $p<0.01$).

The adolescent girls from single-parent families more often described the image of the perfect woman using such adjectives as “fast” (U=192.00 when $p<0.05$), “consistent” (U=136.00 when $p<0.01$), “strong” (U=173.50 when $p<0.01$), “comprehensible” (U=176.50 when $p<0.01$), and “healthy” (U=171.00 when $p<0.01$). Herewith, they used such qualities as “loud”, (U=209.00 when $p<0.05$), “passionate” (U=197.00 when $p<0.05$), and “tender” (U=179.50 when $p<0.01$) less often.

The boys from single-parent families evaluated themselves less positively than their peers from two-parent families. In particular, that was true for such qualities as “fast” (U=131.00 when $p<0.01$), “excited”

($U=117.50$ when $p<0.01$), “consistent” ($U=194.50$ when $p<0.05$), “lively” ($U=187.50$ when $p<0.05$), “kind” ($U=87.50$ when $p<0.01$), “pure” ($U=117.50$ when $p<0.01$), “beautiful” ($U=193.50$ when $p<0.05$), “happy” ($U=168.00$ when $p<0.01$), “big” ($U=83.00$ when $p<0.01$), and “healthy” ($U=150.00$ when $p<0.01$). In comparison with their peers from couple families, the boys from single-parent families demonstrated more positive self-estimation regarding such qualities as “optimistic” ($U=174.50$ when $p<0.01$), “strong” ($U=142.00$ when $p<0.01$), and “individual” ($U=102.00$ when $p<0.01$).

Against to their peers from two-parent families, the adolescent girls from single-parent families described their self-image defined by such qualities as “strong” ($U=148.00$ when $p<0.01$), “sincere” ($U=192.50$ when $p<0.05$), and “individual” ($U=151.50$ when $p<0.01$) more frequently. They used such adjectives as “lively” ($U=184.00$ when $p<0.05$), “kind” ($U=196.00$ when $p<0.05$), and “pure” ($U=139.00$ when $p<0.01$) less often.

Gender socialization in single-parent families follows the route of acquisition and acceptance of traditional male and female roles by adolescents. Girls identify themselves with their mothers to a great degree, but at adolescent age this connection between mother and daughter can be slowly deformed due to the father’s contribution that stimulates a young girl to look for her own way. It is not surprising that this process of psychological separation of the mother and the daughter gets interrupted in a single-parent family, which may result in the assimilation of the mother’s qualities by the girl and the formation of maladaptive femininity. As to the gender socialization of boys brought up in a single-parent family, they often experience a certain inadequacy and inferiority, as if they were handicapped (they see themselves as “fatherless”). Therefore, they tend to compensate it through developing masculinity and “masculine” aspects of character.

The image of the perfect man represented by the boys from single-parent families is less gender-typical as the one created by their peers from couple families. At first glance, it contradicts with a more pronounced masculinity of the boys from single-parent families. However, this contradiction can be resolved if we take into consideration the absence of a male behaviour model in lives of these boys. Even though they strive to look as “real-men”; the boys from single-parent families often have very vague idea of what qualities exactly such an ideal is supposed to have. This leads to uncertainty in the process of building their identity. The girls from single-parent families have in common the same: a very general and vague representation of the specific qualities of the perfect man. Meanwhile, the girls from couple families have the advantage of a closer interaction with their father that contributes to the creation of a clearer male image. In particular, according to them, he should be active and sincere. In fact, it reflects the aspiration intrinsic to girls and women – to have a reliable companion, ready to perform all kinds of actions in order to reach common goals and achieve self-actualization.

Like the boys from single-parent families, the girls growing in the same circumstances credit the image of the perfect woman with masculine features, such as speed and strength. Apart from that, one can trace the signs of the dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship. The girls from single-parent families underline such qualities as consistency and understanding. Obviously, one may speak of that secure attachment to the mother, who performs her functions in a way unpredictable to the child, failed in the early childhood. Insecure type of attachment presupposes formation of high anxiety level, mistrust and problems in the field of the establishment of close relations with other people.

The boys from single-parent families demonstrate a lower level of emotional attitude to themselves. They see high value in strength which can be regarded as a sign of masculinity, but their estimation of other qualities typical of the traditional representation of the “perfect man” is quite low. The difference in emotional attitude to their own self between girls from single- and two-parent families are less outstanding and is of more qualitative than quantitative character.

1. The adolescent boys from single-parent families demonstrate a lower level of the father’s prestige, their identification with the father in the professional field, and the intensity of expression of emotionally warm attitude towards their fathers. On the other hand, the level of mother’s prestige is higher as well as the intensity of expression of emotionally warm attitude towards her. The adolescent girls from single-parent families show a lower level of the father’s prestige, the intensity of expression of emotionally warm attitude towards him, and the fear of punishment on the father’s part. Along with that, the level of the mother’s prestige together with the intensity of expression of emotionally warm attitude towards her are higher.

2. The adolescent boys from single-parent families demonstrate a higher level of evaluation of the mother’s and father’s autonomy. The adolescent girls from such families show a lower level of estimation of positive interest on the mother’s part, as well as her autonomy.

3. The index of psychological sex tends to femininity pole in the group of the girls from single-families and tends to masculinity pole when it comes to the boys growing up in the same circumstances.

7. Conclusion

It is often typical of adolescents brought up in single-parent families to experience emotional alienation from male parent and to form a symbiotic connection with their mother. Adolescent boys from single-parent families grow up in the face of the absence of a model that could help in construction of their social identity. And, the girls from such families do not feel a bounding and restraining influence of the father’s figure. In single-parent families, gender socialization follows the route of acquisition and acceptance of traditional male and female roles by adolescents. In the modern world that cannot be seen as an adaptable strategy and often becomes a source for intra- and interpersonal role conflicts, discontent with themselves, problems in the field of self-actualization and self-fulfillment. We have also discovered that both boys and girls from single-parent families feature inadequate and contradictive ideas about female role, and general and vague representations of male qualities.

The boys from single-parent families demonstrate a lower level of emotional self-attitude: they estimate their own level of the development of qualities typical of the traditional idea of the perfect man as low. As for the girls growing up in similar families, if we examine their declaration of their own femininity, we can assume the existence of an intrapersonal role conflict, because in their self-conception traditionally male and neutral characteristics come to the forefront, when feminine features are denied. Dysfunctional parent-child relations in a single-parent family result in disruption of the process of the construction of gender identity of an adolescent boy, and in his infantilization, feminization and the formation of maladaptive representations of matrimonial relations. Positive identity of adolescent girls in single-parent families is based on the combination of masculine and feminine qualities, and the involvement of the father in relationship with his daughter, as well as emotional intensity of that relationship is an important

prerequisite for constructive gender socialization. When building their identity, teenage girls from single-parent families look for an approval of society and strive for emancipation from their parents. Positive mother-daughter relationship in a single-parent family becomes a presupposition of acceptance of her own femininity by an adolescent girl.

There is no doubt that dysfunctional parent-child relationship can take place in a couple family, too. Symbiotic connection of a boy with his mother, low authority of the father and emotionally poor relations with him can act as the factors that provoke disruption in gender socialization process. Nevertheless, adolescent boys brought up in two-parent families can be characterized by such features as: complete and gender-typical representations of self-conception, structuring and clarity of the perfect woman image, and a pronounced tendency to build their own unique identity (which boys from single-parent families do not demonstrate). So, in order to form a harmonized, adaptable and functional gender identity, adolescents need close and emotionally intense relationships both with the mothers and fathers. Still, growing up in a single-parent family does not necessarily lead to destructive consequences for the child's personality, and dysfunctional relations can be often found in a two-parent family, as well. It is essential to hold a more detailed study of family functions in gender socialization and the specifics of a single-parent family as an institution.

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