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Stressors of Single Fatherhood in California

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Kenneth Jones, Jr.

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Walden University
2021

Abstract

Stressors of Single Fatherhood in California

By

Kenneth Jones, Jr.

MS, Applied Psychology

MA, Education

BS, Psychology

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Clinical Psychology

Walden University

August 15th, 2021

Abstract

This grounded theory study aimed to address the lack of awareness and resources available for single custodial fathers to address stressors in caring for their children. The findings of this qualitative study were derived from electronic correspondence and semi-structured individual interviews with 16 single primary custodial fathers residing in the state of California. The data were analyzed inductively following Percy et al.'s step-by-step process, which generated the following overarching themes: (a) societal stressors, (b) the aftermath of separation from child's mother, (c) the reason for separation from child's mother, (d) hands-on work in raising a child and accomplishing chores, (e) economic stressors, (f) help in caring for a child, (g) motivated by own child to do better, and (h) developed resilience. Despite the increasing prevalence of single-father households, support programs and methods for single custodial fathers continue to be understudied; thus, there has been a lack of attention on the challenges that single custodial fathers face in their experiences of parenthood. Future researchers can continue addressing this gap to help such fathers cope with their experiences and to encourage future leaders to create more programs to support fathers in such a transition resulting in positive social change.

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Dedication

This is for my parents who gave me moral lessons on discipline at an early age and helped pave the way for my future endeavors. It is an honor to complete this for my father, Kenneth Jones, Sr., who was my best friend and confidant, a man of great character who influenced me to reach for goals that to him never seemed attainable because of the life he lived and the place he raised his children. He inspired me to be a protector, provider, and a giver. Rest in paradise, Dad (Sunset: May 2020). I also complete this for my mom, Ms. Flora J. Lang, the most virtuous woman I know. She has prayed for me from birth as she and my dad raised me to the heavens and dedicated my life to the Lord. My mom has influenced me to be a better man for God and to always trust in the ordained path He set forth. Faith is the word that was embedded in my heart by my Mom at a very young age. She was my caregiver, my teacher, and prayer warrior. I possess a special feeling of gratitude to my parents, whose words of encouragement and eternal love have gotten me through this life-changing journey.

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I would also like to acknowledge all the fathers who told their stories and shared their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic so that I could gather data. These fathers extended their personal lives with vulnerability and integrity. I am thankful for their contribution and assistance.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Single custodial fathers are at risk of stressors in caring for their children. Louie et al. (2017) reported that 10% of men experience symptoms of postpartum depression during the parenting process. Chiu et al. (2018b) revealed that single parenthood is associated with elevated stress, causing adverse mental health outcomes and increased mortality. Lack of finances or housing, issues of medical insurance, communication issues, and social stigma are factors contributing to single custodial fathers' stress. Social stigma, gender norms, and traditional masculine values are perceived as the underlying factors behind single custodial fathers' barriers to support and accessing services to address stress (Mnizak et al., 2020; Rominov et al., 2018). Therefore, establishing the variety of stressors that single custodial fathers experience and examining the mental health resources used to mitigate stress in the parenting process are of significance.

In this chapter, I start with an introduction. Then, I provide the background regarding stress among single custodial fathers aligned with the research problem, along with explanations of the research purpose, research question, and theoretical framework. Next, I provide a brief overview of the nature of the study followed by the assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and the definitions of key terms. I conclude the chapter with a summary, highlighting the key details from the introduction.

Background

Many investigators and scholars have revealed negative reports regarding parenting stress among men (Chiu et al., 2018b; The Lancet Public Health, 2018). Chiu et

al. (2018b) noted that single fathers are more vulnerable because they tend to have less social support than partnered fathers and single mothers. When compared to other population groups, single fathers reported poorer risk profiles, especially related to lifestyle practices, habits, and increased mortality (Chiu et al., 2018a; Rattay et al., 2017). Due to these poor risk profiles, single fathers suffer a higher mortality risk, more than two times higher than that of other parents (Chiu et al., 2018a; The Lancet Public Health, 2018). Nonetheless, documentation of the factors causing stress on single custodial fathers in the parenting process has been sparse. Information on the mental health resources that primary custodial fathers use to mitigate stress in the parenting process is also absent. If unaddressed, these problems can lead to fathers' inability to care for their children (Hamer & Marchioro, 2002; Louie et al., 2017). Addressing the emotional, mental, and physical health issues of single custodial fathers is essential.

Most researchers have reported the mortality risks of single fathers. However, scarce research has been conducted regarding the factors and stressors that contribute to this mortality risk (Chiu et al., 2018a; Rattay et al., 2017). Parental stressors are inherent to single parenthood and may include maintaining finances, managing housing, gaining medical insurance, and dealing with communication issues (Melhado, 2017). Cabrera and Mitchell (2009) provided information on socioeconomic stress of fathers living as single men with toddlers. This level of stress is a key factor for future research.

Research has shown that parenting stress among single parents may be derived from socioeconomic conditions (Louie et al., 2017). Researchers have found that parenting stress is amplified by low-income challenges (Louie et al., 2017; Smith, 2020).

Further, researchers have noted that single fathers have vital needs related to self-actualization, belongingness, esteem, safety, physiological needs, and stability (Smith, 2020). Other needs of single fathers include seeking housing, receiving psychological counseling, learning financial management, and avoiding future incarceration (Smith, 2020). Addressing these needs is vital to ensure better health outcomes and parenting processes among single custodial fathers. Current research regarding fatherhood programs indicates that single fathers lack provision of counseling services and understanding and addressing their needs through psychological counseling and financial management programs (Haworth, 2019; King, 2017; Rogers & Rogers, 2019). As such, leaders of targeted interventions should focus on fatherhood programs to increase parenting skills and financial management skills through counseling and training programs (Haworth, 2019; King, 2017).

U.S. health practitioners have attempted to alleviate this issue by implementing fatherhood programs for fathers (Haworth, 2019; Rogers & Rogers, 2019). However, studies have shown that social workers have inadequate knowledge on the needs of single fathers and do not effectively engage with them (Haworth, 2019). As such, more research is needed on the needs of single fathers, especially as they experience multiple stressors in parenting to provide empirical knowledge for mental health professionals and social workers on ways to assist single custodial fathers in their parenting stress.

Typically, single fathers have poor mental health. For example, mental health among single fathers is poorer than their partnered counterparts and poorer than experienced by single mothers (Chiu et al., 2017; Kong et al., 2017; Kong & Kim, 2015).

Biotteau et al. (2019) reported that single fathers face loss of income and support after marital separation, resulting in an increased risk of mental health problems and heightened stress. As such, single fathers face economic risk, impacting children under their care. Albert (2018) reported that men's income and wages decrease by more than \$8,000 annually after entering single fatherhood. Wages and income are related to parental stress, as single fathers face pressures to provide both emotional and financial support for themselves and for the children under their care.

Single fathers face challenges and barriers in caregiving. Some challenges and barriers include exhaustion, preoccupation, social culture, and controlling forces (Rivera, 2019; Summerous, 2019). The stressors include pressures in securing housing while meeting the demands of fatherhood (Rivera, 2019; Rogers & Rogers, 2019). Single fathers face difficulties with making a positive impact on their children when stressed (Noronha & Monteiro, 2016). Therefore, acquiring insight into the stressors affecting single custodial fathers in California is critical for social workers to understand the needs of single fathers to effectively engage with this population. These findings may also be used to design stress reduction programs and trainings to address single custodial fathers' needs.

Problem Statement

Historically, the worldview of childcare responsibilities has appeared to favor women (Chiu et al., 2018b). However, according to recent research, men experience many of the same stressors in caring for their children (Hamer & Marchioro, 2002); for example, 1 in 10 men experience symptoms of postpartum depression (Louie et al.,

2017). This shift in the parenting paradigm shows the perpetually increasing access to paternity leave from work to alleviate or eliminate symptoms of stress and support healthy adjustment to parenthood (Hamer & Marchioro, 2002).

As the landscape of family structures evolves, so does the role of the primary caretaker. In contrast to the widely held public stigma that men do not take responsibility for their children (Gadsden, 1995), there has been a steady increase in the number of single custodial fathers providing for their children (Hamer & Marchioro, 2002). There is a paucity of empirical data that can contribute positively to developing family service policies and community-based programs. Researching this problem will increase awareness and availability of resources to assist with single custodial fathers during the parenting process and potentially alleviating or eliminating stressors (Madhavan & Roy, 2012).

Researchers and leaders of public policy have invested efforts into understanding single mothers' experiences and stressors involved with childcare (Louie et al., 2017). However, there is a scarcity of research about the stressors that fathers experience when raising their children as a single-headed household (Heath et al., 2015; Louie et al., 2017). There is even less known about how reported and unreported stressors may impact the parenting process for single custodial fathers (Carone et al., 2017). The single custodial father perspective has been absent in mental health services to inform developing psychotherapy tools and treatments for men and fathers.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of single custodial fathers in California raising their children. There is a need to better understand the unique experiences of single custodial fathers. Although there has been significant research examining the parenting process, limited studies have shown the types of stressors on single custodial fathers (Heath et al., 2015; Louie et al., 2017). Existing investigations have not adequately identified the specific stressors fathers experience when raising children as a single-headed household (Heath et al., 2015; Louie et al., 2017). Therefore, findings from this investigation will be useful for offering insights regarding the stressors that single custodial fathers experience when raising their children. This perspective can assist in developing mental health treatment solutions to support any single-headed household, regardless of gender.

In the research, there has been no one definition for *single custodial father*. For this study, I focused on men awarded physical custody by the courts caring for a child under the age of 18 or men who physically cared for a child more than 4 days per week, for a minimum of 6 months. I examined the experiences of single custodial fathers in California. Through analysis I sought to identify the stressors of being a single custodial father with children in California.

In the United States, from 1960 to 2011, the number of single-father households increased from 300,000 to over 2.6 million (Livingston, 2013). Despite this increasing number, most investigations in parental stress literature have been focused on single mothers' experiences; no theoretical framework has been developed to specifically apply

to single custodial fathers. Most investigations indicate distinctive stressors associated with single fatherhood; however, these investigations do not show an association between single custodial fathers and factors of parental stress (Carone et al., 2017; Louie et al., 2017). Findings from this study may inform counselors and those involved with single fathers to understand better the needs of this population and alternative methods for alleviating stressors experienced by single custodial fathers living in California.

The current study showed the parenting process for single custodial fathers while ensuring effective development of psychotherapy tools and treatment planning offered to men and fathers. Single custodial fathers designated for this investigation participated in semistructured interviews to gather data on the stressors of being a single custodial father with children while residing in California. The analysis necessitated participation from current primary custodian fathers living in the state of California.

Research Questions

I provided a probable response to the following research questions and filled the current gap in the knowledge regarding stressors identified by single custodial fathers during the parenting process. The research questions that guided this study were:

RQ1: What are the identified stressors of being a single custodial father with children during the parenting process while residing in the state of California?

RQ2: What mental health resources do primary custodial fathers use to mitigate stress in the parenting process while residing in the state of California?

Theoretical Framework

Parental stress and how it influences single fathers and the experiences and parenting processes of single fathers were evaluated to answer the research questions pertaining to parenting stressors of single custodial fathers in California. The research problem was examined through the lens of diathesis-stress theory (see Davis et al., 2017; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pruessner et al., 2017). The basic premise of the diathesis-stress theory is that “stress activates a diathesis, transforming the potential of predisposition into the presence of psychopathology” (Monroe & Simons, 1991, p. 407). According to Pruessner et al. (2017), there is an interplay of vulnerability factors, neurobiological processes, and progression of stress faced by individuals under stress. Researchers have used the diathesis-stress theory from the perspective of life stress theory and research to examine types of stressors faced by the general population (Pruessner et al., 2017). Therefore, in this study, the diathesis-stress theory assisted in understanding the perspectives of single custodial fathers living in California by gaining a holistic view of this family dynamic, whether transitional or normalized.

Nature of the Study

A qualitative methodology was used to identify and understand the parenting process from the perspective of single custodial fathers. I used grounded theory as my qualitative research methodology to answer the research questions in this study. Using grounded theory, I identified an understanding of acquired stress during the parenting process from the perspective of primary custodian fathers. I used this method to gather an analysis of rich and detailed information provided through examples, stories, and

experiences. The interview questions were open-ended so that interviewees could expand, disregard, or provide unique issues. Grounded theory is often adopted to formulate hypotheses or theories based on existing phenomena or to discover the participants' main concern and how they continually try to solve it (Morse et al., 2016). The grounded theory approach was used to offer an explanation about the stressors experienced by single custodial fathers living in California.

According to Miles et al. (2014), qualitative research is all-inclusive, with the objective to understand the complete picture of a social issue under investigation. This study incorporated a qualitative design throughout; during the data collection process, data were gathered from surveys and semistructured interviews. I used qualitative research techniques to identify and comprehend the resources that primary custodial fathers use to mitigate stress in the parenting process while residing in California (see Miles et al., 2014). The analysis best aligned with the qualitative approach, as I aimed to understand the identified stressors that single custodial fathers experience during their parenting process in California.

A qualitative approach is essential in capturing an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon under scrutiny (McGregor, 2019). Qualitative research is fundamental in determining holistic experiences of participants; researchers can use interpretative characteristics of qualitative research to obtain an all-inclusive perception of the participants (Miles et al., 2014). Integrating this design was critical in interviewing the single custodial fathers regarding the stressors they experience during the parenting process, as well as the mental health resources they use to mitigate stress in parenting. I

selected 20 individuals who had been or were currently primary custodian fathers residing in California as participants of the study. I adopted a voluntary contribution through an online survey as the sampling approach. Data were collected through online survey transcripts and were evaluated to determine common themes.

Although a qualitative technique was most appropriate for this topic and analysis, the investigation was limited by this approach. The collected information only shows the participants' opinions; hence, the findings are not generalizable outside the research scope (see O'Brien et al., 2014). There are limited studies showing stress among single custodial fathers, making it challenging to obtain secondary data for the research. Adding the inquiry "parent-related stress for single custodial fathers" as a Google Scholar search only generated three study articles with documentation dates after 2016. As such, the limited research associated with stress among single custodial fathers indicates that an investigation is essential to allow practitioners to formulate a consistent understanding regarding how single custodial fathers experience stressors when raising their children.

Definitions

The definitions of key terms used throughout the study follow to elucidate the context.

Grounded theory: A general research methodology in which data collection and analysis occur simultaneously (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014).

Mental health resources: Ways of obtaining reliable and valid diagnoses of mental health problems; studies on the incidence of mental diseases, prevalence, and

course of mental disorders; national and international classification systems; and estimates of associated health disabilities (World Health Organization, 2001).

Parenting process: The phases or stages in parenting that progress through raising a child (Vacca, 2013). Parenting processes may also be defined by the following phases: expecting a child, the birth of a child, embracing the child, and planning for the future of the child (Vacca, 2013).

Single custodial fathers: Single custodial Men ages 19 and older reported as the parent of a child age 18 or under living in their household (Gates et al., 2016).

Stress: The way the body responds psychologically when trying to adjust to stressful stimuli (Yaribeygi et al., 2017).

Assumptions

Assumptions can be referred to as statements a researcher accepts as fact or truth to facilitate a study (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). For the current study, I assumed that the information acquired during data collection would determine and identify different stressors experienced by single custodial fathers. A second assumption for my study was that the single custodial fathers who participated would provide complete and honest responses during the surveys, focus groups, and in-depth interviews (see Engward & Davis, 2015).

I assumed that the participants would adhere to the research process and requirements. Also, I assumed that the participants would be transparent about their experiences as primary custodian fathers. I also assumed that the participants would

answer genuinely and without any form of bias. Additionally, the collected data were deemed accurate and valid.

In the interviews, I assumed that the participants would provide vital information and explain themselves profoundly. Through personal communication, I was able to project my feelings, experiences, and opinions. Furthermore, I assumed I would remain fair; transparent; and free from prejudice, non-bias, considerate and friendly (see Patton, 2015). I also assumed that single custodial father participants would have prior experience of stressors due to their parenting processes. This assumption of having prior experience equipped participants to answer the surveys, focus groups, and in-depth interviews with information adequate to answer the research questions.

Scope and Delimitations

The qualitative research design determined the scope of the research. The delimitations were primary custodial fathers with children residing in California. As all recruitment occurred via an online survey, another delimitation was that the participants needed access to the internet and know about the online survey or have a contact who would share the recruitment information with them. All participation was voluntary.

Limitations

The purpose of this research was to understand the experiences of single custodial fathers in California when raising their children. The limitations in the study involved the flaws and shortcomings from various phenomena, including insufficient resources, small sample size, and limited methodologies. This study was limited due to the use of the qualitative methodology, which did not consider discoveries of previous quantitative

research, as qualitative researchers used smaller sample sizes. Because sample size affects research results, it would be harder to generalize the findings of a diverse population when unincorporated in the sample size. The use of the pure samples extremely limited the research data. The samples entailed primary custodian fathers only. Also, I examined the experiences of single custodial fathers in California. Thus, the findings might not apply to individuals in other regions. I also had limited access to literature and secondary data. I did not have access to a broader range of secondary scientific data, thus limiting access to previous research, which could be used for comparison to the outcomes.

Significance

Single fathers face parental stressors, and understanding how single fatherhood impacts single custodial fathers is essential. The present investigation is of significance because it offers insight regarding the aspects considered stressful by single custodial fathers when raising their children. I identified stressors in single custodial fathers' daily lives to help develop targeted programs to enable these fathers to effectively deal with the stress. Fatherhood programs are currently available; however, these programs have not been sufficiently tested for effectiveness and reliability specifically for single custodial fathers (Givens, 2020; Payne, 2019).

Furthermore, there is limited evidence and insufficient knowledge on the stress factors experienced by single custodial fathers (Di Nallo, 2019; Parker, 2017).

Addressing this gap is vital because single fathers face unique barriers to parenting, such as gender gaps and roles in society (Di Nallo, 2019; Parker, 2017). Therefore, this study

provides more insights into the parental stressors for single custodial fathers in their parenting processes. The findings of this study may contribute to advancing knowledge in the discipline of clinical psychology regarding single custodial fathers and the various stressors they face in parenting (Di Nallo, 2019). With additional information and greater understanding, leaders can develop more effective programs and interventions, addressing and incorporating the stress factors experienced by single custodial fathers.

The findings of this study may have significant contributions to advance the practice of psychology, providing more in-depth information on how to address the needs of single custodial fathers in California, especially in relation to their parenting processes. Clinicians and mental health practitioners can use the findings of this study to develop more targeted interventions to equip and support single custodial fathers in California.

The potential implications for positive social change of this study include impacts on quality of parenting, specifically regarding fatherhood. These fathers may be more capable of optimally performing their roles as providers and caregivers to their children if they gain support and training based on the stressors single custodial fathers experience. Empowering fathers to deal effectively with their parenting stress may result in better outcomes in parenting quality and child development, leading to better social, physical, and emotional outcomes for both single custodial fathers and children under their care. This research may induce positive social changes in families based on healthy and adequate childcare.

I addressed an underresearched area of single parenting among the male population and the stressors faced. Prior research has shown that from 1960 to 2011, the

number of single-father households increased from 300,000 to over 2.6 million (Livingston, 2013). The results from this study may provide awareness and information beneficial for mental health service providers and community family programs. Insights from this study can also assist policymakers to formulate addendums to current family guidelines, inform judges when making decisions in family court, and assist state-run services that aid families in need. As the number of fathers assuming the role of single parent increases, results of this study may contribute to an increased availability of mental health and family services that can minimize stressors during the parenting process.

According to Louie et al. (2017), much of the research on single parenthood has focused on understanding the experiences of single mothers and the stressors involved with childcare among single mothers. However, scarce research has been found regarding the stressors that fathers experience when raising their children as a single-headed household (Heath et al., 2015; Louie et al., 2017). Therefore, findings from this study are crucial in filling this gap by adding to the knowledge based on the phenomenon under investigation. While wide-ranging classification of parent-related stress for fathers has been previously documented, little is known if these aspects are applicable among single custodial fathers. Therefore, results from this investigation are useful for offering more insights into the parental stress aspects reported by single custodial fathers in California.

The primary objective for this study entailed understanding the experiences of single custodial fathers in California when raising their children, specifically on the identified stressors of being a single custodial father and the mental health resources used

to mitigate experienced stress. For this reason, these findings are essential for allowing health practitioners, social workers, and other crucial stakeholders to comprehend, engage, and train single custodial fathers on effective methods to manage parent-related stress. Understanding the different types of stressors that single custodial fathers in California face is essential for enabling social workers to devise active programs and approaches to help single custodial fathers manage and minimize parent-related stress.

Summary

I sought to understand the parent-related stressors experienced by primary custodial fathers with children during the parenting process in California. The investigation is presented in five chapters. In Chapter 1, the introduction chapter, I outlined a comprehensive background of the phenomenon under analysis. I also outlined the problem statement, research questions, nature, purpose, and significance of the study. Chapter 2 includes an extensive analysis of the documented studies about stressors among single custodial fathers. The literature review shows the existing gap in identifying the literature based on the grounded theory. The research findings are presented in Chapter 4, and identified themes are discussed. In Chapter 5, I interpret the findings of the investigation; the final chapter includes research limitations and recommendations for further study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of single custodial fathers in California when raising their children. The specific problem related to this study is that single custodial fathers are at risk of complications in caring for their children. Researchers have reported that 10% of men experience symptoms of postpartum depression during the parenting process (Louie et al., 2017). Despite this problem, there is a scarcity of research regarding the specific stressors that fathers experience when raising their children as a single-headed household (Heath et al., 2015; Louie et al., 2017). If left unaddressed, the problem could lead to fathers' inability to care for their children (Hamer & Marchioro, 2002; Louie et al., 2017). Moreover, the possible implications can adversely affect single-father households nationally; the number of single-father households in the United States increased from 300,000 in 1960 to over 2.6 million in 2011 (Livingston, 2013). Addressing the problem requires an understanding of fathers' perspectives for a holistic view of this family dynamic, whether transitional or normalized.

Researchers have addressed experiences of single parenthood, but few have directly emphasized single custodial fathers raising children and how they experience stressors in single parenthood (Heath et al., 2015; Louie et al., 2017). Cheng and Wu (2016) and Di Nallo (2019) examined the experiences of single fathers, comparing data to that of single mothers to understand the stressors of single-father households in the United States. The authors found that single fathers often experience social stigma,

influencing the quality of paternal involvement. For example, fewer parent-child activities exist for single fathers than for single mothers, and single fathers experience of stigma and moral condemnations (Cheng & Wu, 2016; Di Nallo, 2019).

Additionally, single fathers face unique barriers to parenting, such as gender gaps and roles in society (Di Nallo, 2019; Parker, 2017). Gender gaps and roles found in custodial arrangements impact the quality of nurturing children receive (Parker, 2017; Van Gasse & Mortelmans, 2020). Fathers in a single-parent system are forced to transition into nurturing roles and engage in the lives of their children while coping with social stigma and moral condemnations as single fathers (Parker, 2017; Rhode, 2018). Researchers have found these experiences of social stigma and moral condemnations among single fathers but not among single mothers (Parker, 2017; Rhode, 2018). This finding shows the need to help and support single custodial fathers transitioning to a single-parent household and system, so they can successfully adapt into a nurturing role.

Previous researchers have not directed attention to examining the stressors faced by single custodial fathers while examining their experiences in single fatherhood transition (Holmgren, 2019; McClatchey, 2018; Parker, 2017). Carone et al. (2017) and Louie et al. (2017) conducted studies on assessing parenting difficulties and parenting self-efficacy and found a lack of understanding of fathers' perspectives on single parenthood regarding their experiences and stressors. Livingston (2013) noted the importance of understanding single fathers' perspectives and distress in parenting given the sharp increase in single-father households. As such, the use of diathesis-stress theory remains largely unexplored among this population, creating a significant gap in

knowledge. Empirical knowledge is not prevalent regarding being a single custodial father and parenting complications and difficulties related to single fatherhood (Carone et al., 2017; Heath et al., 2015).

The objective of this doctoral research study was to understand the experiences of the single custodial fathers in California when raising their children. Louie et al. (2017) and Hamer and Marchioro (2002) noted that 10% of men experience symptoms of postpartum depression during the parenting process, leading to fathers' inability to care for their children. Carone et al. (2017) emphasized the importance of understanding the needs of single custodial fathers and alternative methods for alleviating distress and complications experienced by this population. Therefore, a better understanding of how to meet the needs of single custodial fathers is vital, as single custodial father often experience issues associated with forced parenthood, lack of preparation time, challenges in embracing change, complexities in raising daughters, lack of support and help, and loss of identity (Akande & Heath, 2019; Klemmer, 2019; Rhode, 2018). Further, single fathers have consistently reported some degree of parenting stress (Akande & Heath, 2019; Klemmer, 2019).

Findings from this study may inform counselors and those involved with single fathers to identify the needs of this population and alternative methods for alleviating complications and difficulties experienced by single custodial fathers living in California (see Carone et al., 2017; Louie et al., 2017). The findings from this study may also have implications for aiding the parenting process while ensuring effective development of psychotherapy tools and treatment planning offered to men and fathers. Through the

unique experience of single custodial fathers, mental health treatment solutions can be developed and implemented to support any single-headed household.

Moreover, using diathesis-stress theory as a point of reference, mental health service providers, policymakers, and those who run community family programs can better identify how to support single custodial fathers when raising their children, considering their perspectives, experiences, and various difficulties in single parenting (Morse et al., 2016). Finally, mental health service providers and policymakers should consider emphasizing gathering perspectives and experiences of single custodial men to understand this population better, as they are at risk for adverse health outcomes with needs and challenges (Carone et al., 2017; Van Gasse & Mortelmans, 2020). Each single parent is uniquely complex, which indicates a need for further research on the experiences and challenges of single parents individually (Carone et al., 2017; Heath et al., 2015). This study may increase the development of understanding of experiences of caregiving among single custodial fathers by focusing on their experiences of distress and difficulties in parenting.

In this chapter, I provide the process and strategy of identifying relevant literature, the conceptual framework, the study's population, and a review of literature related to the distress and difficulties of fathers living as single men with children. I then present the details of the framework based on the diathesis-stress theory, with discussions about the prevalence of single custodial fathers, experiences of single custodial fathers, and available programs aimed at this population. Chapter 2 concludes with a synthesis of the most relevant literature related and key points to consider for this study.

Literature Search Strategy

In creating this study's literature review, I used multiple sources of data, such as textual analysis of records or written accounts, primary archival data, and journal articles. I accessed the Walden University library to find apt databases given the topic of study with the objective of building a robust literature search. I also conducted Thoreau multidatabase queries and searched each relevant database. This process allowed for more control over the literature search, resulting in more appropriate articles and sources in relation to the topic.

Specific online databases and search engines used included Google Scholar, ERIC, Global Health, Ingenta Connect, JSTOR, Journal Storage, EBSCOhost Online Research Databases, and Journal Seek. The key search terms and combination of search terms queried in online databases were *challenges of single fathers*, *mental health of single fathers*, *parenting process of single men*, *parenting stress*, *primary custodian father's perspectives on parenting challenges*, *primary custodial fathers and experienced complications*, *role of a primary custodian father*, *strategies to avert parenting stress for single fathers*, and *stressors of being a single custodial father with children*. By searching these key terms, the outlined database search engines returned literature relevant to the problem statement and research question.

Aside from the databases, I searched other relevant resources, such as websites related to the complications, difficulties, and challenges of single fathers; methods of parenting for single fathers; and research groups focusing on the topic. This process allowed for a more extensive literature search strategy, considering a wider range of

relevant sources of reliable information related to complications and difficulties of single fatherhood. All resources were peer-reviewed to assure scholarly rigor and reliability. I searched for journals in Ulrich's Periodical Directory to achieve this objective.

Most (63 of 72 sources, or 87.5%) sources reviewed had publication dates between 2016 and 2020. Articles focused on complications and difficulties of single fatherhood, challenges of single fatherhood, and the parenting experiences for single fathers. It was vital to highlight peer-reviewed resources that met the rigor of scholarly standards. It was common to further search resources based on the review of literature in relation to the study's key terms, concepts, and prior sources. I synthesized the data after obtaining a thorough body of literature related to this study.

Conceptual Framework

The diathesis-stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) served as a framework for this study, helping me to understand the experiences of single custodial fathers in California when raising their children. The diathesis-stress theory shows that parent predisposition, environmental aspects, and reactive behaviors are linked to a parent's risk for deleterious experiences and outcomes, specifically given the right circumstances and stressors (Ingram & Luxton, 2005). Shelton et al. (2016) defined *diathesis* as a persistent vulnerability, referring to both an inborn and acquired liability to psychiatric disorder, where *inborn* refers to a genetic factor and *acquired* refers to the environmental factors, such as life event stressors.

The diathesis-stress theory shows that individuals are more likely to respond to stressful or perceived stressful situations given their specific biological background and

beliefs or values (Ochsner, 2020). The diathesis-stress theory is relevant to parent-child research and contexts given that every parent is at risk for becoming overwhelmed (Ochsner, 2020). The goal of this research was to answer the research questions pertaining to parenting challenges and difficulties related to being a single custodial father in California. Thus, I used the diathesis-stress theory to understand single fathers' perspectives and to gain a holistic view of this family dynamic, whether transitional or normalized.

Researchers have used diathesis-stress theory to examine parent-child relationships and specific parent traits and behaviors that affect stress experienced by the child or parent (Ochsner, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). According to Wang et al. (2020), diathesis-stress theorists can examine the stressors experienced by parents of children with developmental disabilities and parents of children who do not have developmental disabilities. Wang et al. used the diathesis-stress theory as the theoretical foundation in their study examining parenting stressors and the negative effects of the accumulation of stressors on parents' mental health. Wang et al. employed 2,237 Chinese parents, evaluating and analyzing measures of dispositional mindfulness and mental health. The authors also examined socioeconomic status, parenting-related risks, and environmental factors that might impact parenting stressors (low household income, unemployment, low education level, high parenting stress, and severe child internalizing and externalizing symptoms; Wang et al., 2020). The findings showed that parents with heightened parenting-related stressors had a high risk of poorer mental health outcomes, especially among parents who belong to lower socioeconomic status levels (Wang et al., 2020).

Ochsner (2020) used the diathesis-stress theory to study parenting stress among parents of children with autism. The author explored the relationship between the broad autism phenotype, perceived support, and stress in parents of children with autism (Ochsner, 2020). The findings showed that parents of children diagnosed with autism had exacerbated levels of parenting stress compared to parents of typically developing children (Ochsner, 2020).

Using the principles of the diathesis-stress theory, Li et al. (2019) further explained how single-parent family systems are often complex, striving for a new equilibrium where multiple aspects of life are reorganized and coordinated. The authors used the diathesis-stress theory as the theoretical foundation to examine the interactive effects of family instability and adolescent stress reactivity on socioemotional functioning (Li et al., 2019). Li et al. focused on adolescent stressors, considering parent–adolescent conflict. The findings showed that adolescents with higher occurrences of parent–adolescent conflict had higher levels of stress, which resulted in externalizing problems, especially during family instability (Li et al., 2019). This body of knowledge indicates the robustness and appropriateness of diathesis-stress theory as a framework for examining stressors in parent–child settings, specifically among single fathers raising children. The findings of the current study may expand the application of the diathesis-stress theory, specifically focused on single fathers raising children and the stressors this population of parents faces in this process. The experiences of each single parent are uniquely complex and atypical, showing the need for further research on the experiences and challenges of single parents (Carone et al., 2017; Heath et al., 2015).

The diathesis-stress theory also highlights how individuals may have protective coping mechanisms for dealing with stressors (McElroy & Hevey, 2014; Rivera, 2019). McElroy and Hevey (2014) used the diathesis-stress theory and found significant relationships among factors of adverse child experiences, stressors, psychosocial resources, and well-being. The authors further noted the need to identify the stressors within parent–child relationships, as these could significantly impact well-being (McElroy & Hevey, 2014). Rivera (2019) further added that fathers face significant challenges and barriers in caregiving from gender inequality; specifically, these challenges and barriers include exhaustion, preoccupation, social culture, and controlling forces. Such challenges should be considered when helping single fathers, as such stressors could be detrimental to their health and well-being (McElroy & Hevey, 2014; Rivera, 2019). Hence, this research on single custodial fathers’ stressors was based on the diathesis-stress theory (see Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Currently, there is a lack of extant literature and research focused on single custodial fathers raising their children in a single-headed household (Heath et al., 2015; Louie et al., 2017). Furthermore, it is unknown or reported what specific stressors this population faces and how these stressors may impact the parenting process for single custodial fathers, considering the firsthand perspectives of this cohort (Carone et al., 2017). The diathesis-stress theory is particularly relevant and useful for research on stressor settings (Wang et al., 2020). This finding shows the usefulness and significance of the diathesis-stress theory to guide the current study. Thus, the findings of this study may enable the discovery of experienced stressors and difficulties faced by single

custodial fathers (see Morse et al., 2016). These findings may be used as initial references for further empirical information, as has been requested by previous social science scholars (Carone et al., 2017; Heath et al., 2015; Louie et al., 2017).

Mental health service providers, policymakers, and those who run community based programs may use this study's results to provide awareness, support, and information about stressors and difficulties faced by single custodial fathers (see Glaser, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 2017). The findings of this study may also be used to formulate addendums to current family guidelines, inform judges when making decisions in family court, and assist state-run services that aid families in need. Available mental health and family services that can minimize distress during the parenting process for single custodial fathers may occur through a better understanding of relevant, individual needs and difficulties faced by this population, especially as the number of fathers assuming the role of single parenthood increases (Livingston, 2013).

Literature Review

Prevalence of Single Custodial Fathers

A single parent may either be a male or female who possesses the sole responsibility of caring for children in the household or family unit (Nyamekye et al., 2020). Researchers have defined single custodial fathers as men ages 19 to 64 who report as the parent of a child under the age of 18 and living in their household (Gates et al., 2016). In the United States, men have increasingly taken the role of a single custodial father in the past five decades (Coles, 2017). The number of single-father households has

increased nine times from 1960 to 2011, while the number of single-mother households has demonstrated only a four-fold increase (Coles, 2017; Livingston, 2013).

Despite the rising number of U.S. single-father households, there is a lack of appreciation for the challenges that single custodial fathers face during parenthood (Gates et al., 2016). Research has shown that contemporary forms of family structures, such as single custodial fathers, present adverse challenges for fatherhood in society (Freeks, 2017; Gates et al., 2016). Most researchers of single parenting have focused on the challenges and experiences of single mothers, not on those of single fathers (Chiu et al., 2018b; Freeks, 2017; Nyamekye et al., 2020). Chiu et al. (2018b) elaborated on this gap in the existing literature, noting that single motherhood was associated with adverse health outcomes and increased mortality; however, little was known about the health statuses of single fathers. This finding shows the need to examine this topic of single custodial fathers further to show the complications and difficulties faced during parenthood, especially given the increases in U.S. single-father households (Coles, 2017; Gates et al., 2016).

Experiences of Single Custodial Fathers

Single fathers differ from single mothers in a variety of ways. Authors have noted how single fathers are less likely to be aware of parental roles and responsibilities than single mothers (Cheng & Wu, 2016; Di Nallo, 2019). Cheng and Wu (2016) found less parent-child activities available for single fathers than parent-child activities for single mothers. Liong (2016) added to this topic and found that fathers might experience social stigma because of being single fathers, possibly influencing the quality of paternal

involvement. Single fathers may experience more social stigma and moral condemnations of being single parents than their women counterparts (Liong, 2016). These findings show how single fathers' experiences differ from those of single mothers. Identifying the unique experiences of single fathers may lead to a better understanding of how to help this population in their parenthood journey.

Research has also shown that single fathers face unique barriers to parenting, such as gender gaps and roles in society. Gender gaps refer to the discrepancy in opportunities, status, attitudes, and other probabilities between men and women in society (Di Nallo, 2019). There are gender gaps and roles found in custodial arrangements, as well as repartnering probabilities of single parents (Di Nallo, 2019; Parker, 2017). Di Nallo (2019) found that single fathers were more likely to repartner than single mothers, which might be a factor hindering single fathers from participating in bonding activities with the children in their custody (Cheng & Wu, 2016; Di Nallo, 2019). Other researchers have found that single fathers face barriers in nurturing their children due to social norms and gender roles in society (Parker, 2017; Van Gasse & Mortelmans, 2020). Fathers transitioning into a single-parent system experience challenges impacted by factors within their environment (Parker, 2017; Van Gasse & Mortelmans, 2020). Parker (2017) found this outcome in a qualitative methodology and phenomenological study when exploring the lived experiences of African American custodial fathers. The author collected data using open-ended questions during face-to-face interviews and found that single custodial fathers' behaviors and perspectives were impacted by various external

factors (e.g., friends, church, and schools) regarding the care of their children (Parker, 2017).

Fathers in a single-parent system must transition into nurturing roles and engage in their children's lives while facing stereotypical views from society that single fathers are uninvolved and less nurturing or concerned than their female counterparts (Anggraini et al., 2018; Parker, 2017; Rhode, 2018). Hallama (2020) noted this outcome when examining single fathers and their emotions. The author further aimed to discuss the need to address expectations of masculinities and fatherhood, specifically considering traditional gender stereotypes (Hallama, 2020). The author noted that single fathers often struggled with criticisms on traditional family policies, preventing them from showing their emotions to their children and others (Hallama, 2020). McLeod (2020) noted similar outcomes when examining Black fathers' help-seeking posts on Facebook. The author studied 137 Facebook posts generated by 134 Black fathers and analyzed how fathers were less likely to seek help from supports, especially when faced with parenting stressors (McLeod, 2020). Like Hallama (2020), McLeod (2020) found that fathers often faced stereotypical views from society, showing the need to help this population on the following areas: family expansion, financial matters, maternal gatekeeping, navigating family relationship conflict, and raising children and child development. This body of literature shows fathers' experience, specifically of being stereotyped (Hallama, 2020; McLeod, 2020).

These findings provide empirical information regarding the need for single fathers to be supported not only in parenting but also in navigating through parenting stressors

(Hallama, 2020; McLeod, 2020; Rhode, 2018). Most single custodial fathers should be supported as they transition to a single-parent household and system so that they can successfully adapt into a nurturing role and engage in the lives of their children. Support for single fathers is vital because they cope more poorly than single mothers.

Research has shown that single fathers experience heavy demands on their time and mental resources while trying to care for their children (Holmgren, 2019; McClatchey, 2018). Holmgren (2019) found this outcome in a study among single fathers, noting that this population group faced difficulties in relation to such transitions. The participants in the study further reported a mismatch between their experienced needs as single fathers and provided help (Holmgren, 2019). Rhode (2018) concurred when examining this topic further. Rhode conducted a qualitative study to examine the experiences of single, African American, custodial fathers and their perceptions about daily challenges of parenting. Furthermore, single custodial father participants often reported experiences of issues from forced parenthood, lack of preparation time, challenges in embracing change, complexities in raising daughters, lack of support and help, and loss of identity (Rhode, 2018). This body of findings provides a more in-depth overview regarding the experiences and challenges faced by single custodial fathers. These findings show the experiences and challenges of single custodial fathers, but not specifically the distress and difficulties that they face in parenthood.

Stressors

Single custodial fathers are known to experience various stressors. According to Akande and Heath (2019), stress arises when fathers “perceive childrearing power

differentials as maternal gatekeeping behaviors” (p. 103). Akande and Heath (2019) further explored this topic among 80 Black fathers who reported co-parenting a nonresidential child or children with only one mother. Their findings showed that parental stressors included concerns regarding role functions and behavioral problems of their children, as well as management of maternal gatekeeping behaviors (Akande & Heath, 2019). This issue is vital to address because single fathers have, in majority, reported some degree of parenting stress (Akande & Heath, 2019; Klemmer, 2019). However, these researchers have focused on the specific race/ethnicity of African American fathers, which merit the need for the study of single custodial fathers in general, considering those of different races. Nonetheless, this pool of knowledge may be used as reference in extending the knowledge of complications and difficulties experienced by single custodial fathers (Akande & Heath, 2019; Klemmer, 2019).

Researchers have noted that stressors experienced by single fathers come from a sociological perspective. Social structure and culture also influence parental strain, stress factors, and the well-being of parents (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2017; Nyamekye et al., 2020). Nomaguchi and Milkie (2017) explored this topic further and noted that single fathers experienced parenting complications and difficulties in economic, social, and cultural contexts. The authors further proposed the need to examine single parenting complications and difficulties related to parents’ social classes, race-ethnicities, genders, and other statuses to understand how this population could be supported (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2017).

Other authors have noted that parenting stressors experienced by single fathers relate to transitioning to and developing maternal gatekeeping behaviors (Chour & Fosse-Gomez, 2017; Melhado, 2017; Molander, 2019; Noronha & Monteiro, 2016). Aside from managing maternal gatekeeping behaviors, developing maternal gatekeeping behaviors is also a contributor of stress among single fathers (Akande & Heath, 2019; Chour & Fosse-Gomez, 2017). Nyamekye et al. (2020) found that father involvement often meant providing necessities for their children. However, most fathers intrinsically struggle providing care, love, and attention to their children (Nyamekye et al., 2020). As such, single custodial fathers should be provided with ample support in meeting both financial and emotional needs of their children (Nyamekye et al., 2020). This issue is vital to address because parental complications and difficulties significantly impact the overall health and mental health status of single custodial fathers (Klemmer, 2019).

When single fathers transition to a single-parent system, they enter a traditionally feminine field. According to Chour and Fosse-Gomez (2017), single fathers face challenges as they experience the domestic sphere, a traditionally feminized domain, while undertaking their roles as fathers. Molander (2019) concurred and noted this experience as a stress factor for single fathers. According to the author, single fathers must navigate a traditionally feminine role when the traditional marketplace ideology focus on intensive mothering (Molander, 2019). The authors noted that single fathers should be supported when navigating a traditionally feminine marketplace and ideology in society, especially as they transition to a single-parent system (Chour & Fosse-Gomez, 2017; Molander, 2019). Aiding single custodial fathers in this domain, considering the

traditionally feminine field in parenthood, may decrease experienced complications, difficulties, and stressors found in single fatherhood.

Regarding parenting stressors experienced by single fathers, some researchers have examined factors that contribute to experienced complications and difficulties in parenthood. For example, Melhado (2017) identified stressors experienced by single fathers parenting in New York City. The author focused on the experiences of 14 single parent men, the impact of living in New York City on single fathers parenting, and helpful services for single fathers (Melhado, 2017). Through interviews, the findings revealed that single fathers experienced complications and difficulties regarding childcare, especially in the absence of the child's mother. The single fathers also reported various challenges and difficulties due to finances, housing, medical insurance, and communication issues (Melhado, 2017). Though Melhado's (2017) findings provide initial knowledge about stressors of parenting experienced by single fathers, the researcher only focused on one area, New York City. Therefore, the findings could not be generalizable to other areas or locations, especially because Melhado's (2017) findings indicated that participants believed living in New York significantly influenced their parenting experiences.

Noronha and Monteiro (2016) conducted a similar study to Melhado (2017) and examined the challenges faced by single parents about teenager care. The authors noted that fathers were challenged and stressed because of caregiving duties, especially as they were not socialized as primary caregivers (Noronha & Monteiro, 2016). Rivera (2019) also examined the challenges of men regarding caregiving. After conducting interviews

among 35 fathers, their findings showed that fathers struggled creating a home and being more than the commander in the household, reporting some barriers of caregivers as including exhaustion and social norms (Rivera, 2019). These experienced struggles contribute to experienced complications and difficulties of fathers, as they aim to secure housing while meeting the demands of fatherhood (Rivera, 2019; Rogers & Rogers, 2019).

Single parent fathers may struggle to have a positive influence on their children when distressed (Noronha & Monteiro, 2016). This pool of findings further corroborates the need to examine the stressors faced by U.S. single custodial fathers, as parental complications and difficulties impact their abilities to parent their children effectively (Melhado, 2017; Noronha & Monteiro, 2016). These findings may be used as initial guidance in identifying the stressors faced by single custodial fathers in different areas and locations in the United States.

Housework, Employment, and Wages

Challenges of single custodial fathers are also related to income levels. Albert (2018) and Biotteau et al. (2019) found that single fathers experienced setbacks and decreases in income after separation, contributing to their stress. Biotteau et al. examined this topic further to identify gender-specific contributions of income and support lost with separation. Using a two-wave survey, their findings indicated that separation was significantly associated with a loss of income and loss of support found more apparent in males than their female counterparts (Biotteau et al., 2019). Furthermore, findings showed that this loss of income and support contributed to their stress, resulting in

increased risk of mental health problems (Biotteau et al., 2019). Albert (2018) found similarly and noted how men's income and wages decreased after entering single fatherhood due to marital separation. Single fatherhood suppresses men's annual income by more than \$8,000 per year (Albert, 2018). In a more recent study, Lu et al. (2020) noted similar findings when examining the inequalities in poverty and income between single mothers and single fathers. The authors examined 1,135 nationwide census data gathered from the 2011 and 2013 Panel Study of Income Dynamics in the United States (Lu et al., 2020). Using multivariate regression techniques, the authors found that all factors of taxable income, total income, and poverty status were higher for single fathers than mothers (Lu et al., 2020). Further findings showed that single mothers received higher nonwork income than single fathers (Lu et al., 2020).

These findings show that single fatherhood not only increases mental health risk among single fathers but also increases the economic risk of this population, including children under their care (Albert, 2018; Biotteau et al., 2019; Lu et al., 2020). These risk factors show the need to provide necessary support for single custodial fathers to manage their risks and experienced challenges in single parenthood effectively. Support program leaders should help single custodial fathers not only regarding managing parental stressors but also concerning dealing with economic hardship.

Aside from income levels, researchers have shown fathers are affected by employment. Fritzell et al. (2020) and Nomaguchi and Johnson (2016) underscored how parenting stress was exacerbated by the role of employment. For one, Nomaguchi and Johnson (2016) examined the role of employment among low-income and working-class

fathers through a quantitative research study. The findings showed that job instability and workplace inflexibility were significant contributors of parenting stress among fathers (Nomaguchi & Johnson, 2016). Unemployment and workplace inflexibility were greater predictors of stress among fathers than among mothers (Nomaguchi & Johnson, 2016). Stack and Meredith (2018) noted similarly when examining the impact of financial hardship on single parents. The authors examined the social distress and seeking help journey of 15 single parents (Stack & Meredith, 2018). Through semi-structured interviews, the authors gathered data from their respondents and used the constructivist thematic analysis approach to analyze the gathered data (Stack & Meredith, 2018). The authors found that single parents faced the high risk of financial hardship, resulting in days without food as they struggled to pay bills (Stack & Meredith, 2018). The findings further showed that financial hardship had significant impacts on their psychological wellbeing, as the participants reported feelings of isolation, anxiety, depression, paranoia, and suicidal ideation (Stack & Meredith, 2018).

The findings revealed that the psychological services available to single parents were insufficient for addressing their needs as single parents (Stack & Meredith, 2018). Fritzell et al. (2020) concurred, showing that economic and social conditions impacted the mental health of single parents due to job instability and a lack of social support. Therefore, single custodial father's stress and drivers of distress must be considered when addressing their needs, as distress among this cohort may lead to worsened psychological wellbeing (Fritzell et al., 2020; Stack & Meredith, 2018). This body of literature shows the role of employment and economic conditions as central contributors to fathers'

parenting stress (Fritzell et al., 2020; Stack & Meredith, 2018). Although past researchers did not focus on single custodial fathers, these studies could be used as initial empirical reference to examine parenting challenges and difficulties experienced by single custodial fathers (Fritzell et al., 2020; Nomaguchi & Johnson, 2016).

Challenges of single custodial fathers are also related to house-related problems and negative behaviors of their children (Melhado, 2017; Mudau et al., 2018; Steffens et al., 2019). According to Mudau et al. (2018), single fathers face multiple challenges related to housework, which may be due to a lack of financial resources. The authors further found that single fathers were more stressed due to the negative behaviors of their children, especially those who were delinquents and poorly performed at school (Mudau et al., 2018). The Lancet Public Health (2018) reported that single fathers were also more likely to be widowed than single mothers, contributing to heightened distress and grief. As such, researchers have requested further examination of how social support can be provided for single custodial fathers, especially as social support is currently more commonly available for single mothers than fathers (The Lancet Public Health, 2018; Steffens et al., 2019).

Poor Health Outcomes

Single custodial fathers are at risk of poor health outcomes (Biotteau et al., 2019; Cheung, 2019; The Lancet Public Health, 2018) and suffering from psychological problems (Waldvogel & Ehlert, 2016; Whitley & Fuller-Thomson, 2017). Waldvogel and Ehlert (2016) conducted a cross-sectional study of fathers in Central Europe regarding forms of fatherhood and paternal psychological well-being. The authors found that

fathers who reported a history of family separation and concomitant loss of father-child contact contributed to the negative wellbeing of these fathers (Waldvogel & Ehlert, 2016). The authors noted the need for single fathers to sustain contact with biological children and develop parent-child activities to impact their wellbeing positively (Waldvogel & Ehlert, 2016).

Whitley and Fuller-Thomson (2017) concurred to the findings of Waldvogel and Ehlert (2016) and underscored the health risks of single fathers. Whitley and Fuller-Thomson (2017) further revealed the prevalence of health conditions in single fathers, such as diabetes (44%), heart attack (27%), chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (23%), and stroke (6%) (Whitley & Fuller-Thomson, 2017). These researchers did not focus on single custodial fathers; rather, they focused on the general population of fathers, including single grandfathers, male caregivers, stepfathers, adoptive fathers, and foster fathers (Waldvogel & Ehlert, 2016; Whitley & Fuller-Thomson, 2017). However, these findings may be used as initial empirical references for future research, as well as the current study, on the topic of complications and health risks experienced by single custodial fathers.

The mental health profile of single fathers is poorer than other population groups. Chiu et al. (2017) and Kong et al. (2017) conducted different studies but arrived at similar conclusions to those of Waldvogel and Ehlert (2016) and Whitley and Fuller-Thomson (2017). Chiu et al. (2017) and Kong et al. (2017) focused on the mental health status among single fathers. For one, Kong et al. (2017) examined mental health among single and partnered parents in South Korea, employing 12,024 single and partnered

participants, aged 30 to 59 years, with children. The authors administered self-reported questionnaires to measure mental health dimensions, such as depression and suicidal ideation. Their findings revealed that single parents had significantly poorer mental health than their partnered counterparts (Kong et al., 2017). Single parents had poorer health statuses of depression, suicidal ideation, and alcohol dependence (Kong et al., 2017). Furthermore, their findings showed that single fathers had significantly increased risks of depressive symptoms (OR = 3.13, 95% CI 2.50–3.93) and suicidal ideation (OR = 2.50, 95% CI 1.97–3.17) than their partnered counterparts (Kong et al., 2017). Moreover, single fathers had significantly higher odds of alcohol dependence, as they were 1.4 times more at risk of alcohol dependence than their partnered counterparts (OR = 1.35, 95% CI 0.81–2.25; Kong et al., 2017).

Chiu et al. (2017) reported the same findings as Kong et al. (2017) when examining the self-rated health and mental health of single fathers compared with single mothers and partnered fathers. Chiu et al. (2017) conducted a cross-sectional study among single fathers, partnered fathers, and single mothers. Using a health survey, the authors employed 1,058 single fathers and compared their mental health results with 20,692 partnered fathers and 5,725 single mothers (Chiu et al., 2017). Their findings showed that both single fathers and single mothers had similar poor health and mental health outcomes (Chiu et al., 2017). However, single fathers had even poorer health and mental health outcomes than both partnered fathers and single mothers (Chiu et al., 2017). Chiu et al. (2017) analyzed these findings further and found that after accounting for stressors, low income, and factor of unemployment, the differences in health

outcomes among the groups were insignificant. These findings show that distress, low income, and unemployment may be significant factors that impact fathers' mental wellbeing and health outcomes (Chiu et al., 2017; Kong et al., 2017). Therefore, one should examine these factors further by focusing on single custodial fathers, especially because they have poorer mental health experiences than single mothers and partnered fathers (Chiu et al., 2017; Kong et al., 2017).

Like Chiu et al. (2017) and Kong et al. (2017), Kong and Kim (2015) conducted a study among single fathers and their mental health in an urban community in South Korea. Kong and Kim focused on evaluating the mental health of 58 single fathers and 256 partnered fathers comparing the mental health scores of both groups. Their findings revealed that single fathers had poorer quality of life (OR 7.30, 95% CI 2.82–18.74), more depressive symptoms (OR 3.85, 95% CI 1.29–11.45), and more stress (OR 3.36, 95% CI 1.25–8.98) than their partnered counterparts (Kong & Kim, 2015). Consistent to other studies (Chiu et al., 2017; Kong et al., 2017), the findings revealed that poor socioeconomic conditions, such as no house ownership, unstable employment, having two or more children, and having a youngest child in elementary school or middle school, were significant factors that contributed to poorer mental health among single fathers (Kong & Kim, 2015). This pool of findings provides more empirical knowledge on the factors that impact single parents' mental states, also justifying that single fatherhood is significantly associated with poorer mental health (Chiu et al., 2017; Kong et al., 2017; Kong & Kim, 2015). As such, more research should be conducted on parenting

complications and difficulties that contribute to health outcomes of single custodial fathers, as addressed by the current study.

Increased Mortality Risk

According to The Lancet Public Health (2018), single fatherhood should be considered a public health issue. Researchers have found that single fathers' mortality risks were more than two times higher than other parents (Chiu et al., 2018a; The Lancet Public Health, 2018). Chiu et al. (2018a) delved into this topic and explored the rate of mortality among single fathers compared with single mothers and partnered fathers. The authors utilized healthy surveys in Canada (from 2001 to 2012) and found that single fathers reported poor risk profiles, especially related to lifestyle factors. Furthermore, single fathers' mortality rates are three times higher than for single mothers and partnered fathers (5.81, 1.74 and 1.94, respectively; Chiu et al., 2018a). Chiu et al. (2018a) did not determine the causes of death for single fathers; however, these findings provided empirical data on the heightened risks of mortality among single fathers than other parents. Single fathers have the least favorable risk factor profiles and greatest risks of mortality; therefore, there is a need to examine how this population group can be supported from health interventions to support groups, mitigating their mortality risk.

Adding to Chiu et al. (2018a) and The Lancet Public Health (2018), researchers of single fathers have shown that they face the highest mortality risk (Kühn et al., 2019; Simpson & Floud, 2018). Kühn et al. (2019) examined this topic by conducting a longitudinal analysis of mortality for single and partnered parents in Denmark. The authors examined the differences in mortality among single parents and partnered

households, finding that single fathers had the highest mortality risk (Kühn et al., 2019). Simpson and Floud (2018) acknowledged the same risk for single fathers, reporting that even in Sweden, single fathers had greater mortality risks compared to partnered fathers. The authors reported almost four times as many deaths in single fathers compared to partnered fathers (Simpson & Floud, 2018). Although these studies indicate that single fathers have a higher risk of mortality, each highlight gaps in current knowledge (Chiu et al., 2018a; Kühn et al., 2019; Simpson & Floud, 2018). The heightened mortality risk among single fathers merits the need to examine why single fatherhood is more detrimental than other groups.

Some factors can contribute to the increased mortality risk among single fathers. This issue may be due to the association between social isolation and health and premature death, as well as barriers from gender stereotypes and stigma (Chiu et al., 2018b; *The Lancet Public Health*, 2018). Chiu et al. (2018b) noted that single fathers were vulnerable as they tended to have less social support than partnered fathers.

Further research has shown that single fathers have poor risk profiles, especially related to lifestyle practices and habits (Chiu et al., 2018a; Rattay et al., 2017). Single fathers reported low levels in fruit and vegetable consumption and high consumption of alcohol (Chiu et al., 2018a). They were also more likely to experience depression, smoking, and the nonutilization of dental check-ups (Rattay et al., 2017). Rattay et al. (2017) found this outcome when studying 9,806 single mothers and 6,279 single fathers in Germany. Their findings revealed that single fathers had poorer health statuses and faced more health impairments than single mothers (Rattay et al., 2017). This body of

findings shows the need to examine single fathers' risk factors because of the higher prevalence of health impairments compared to single mothers. More efforts are needed to improve the health and address parenting challenges and difficulties experienced by single fathers.

Programs for Single Custodial Fathers

Programs to support single custodial fathers are essential to their health and wellbeing. Research has shown that formal counseling centers, support groups, and father-child community activities are needed to support and sustain single fathers (Contreras, 2018; Johnson & Steir, 2016; Keohane & Richardson, 2018). Contreras (2018) examined this topic in their qualitative study and aimed to examine the challenges and needs single Latino fathers faced in parenting. The author found that the single fathers often needed family support and formal support from local and state agencies and organizations (Contreras, 2018). Johnson and Steir (2016) concurred and noted how single fathers are in need for vital support and information regarding parenting skills and how to raise their children at each developmental stage. The authors conducted a literature review, revealing limited support provided through parenting programs specific for single custodial fathers (Johnson & Steir, 2016). This lack of support was found more apparent among single custodial fathers residing in transitional housing facilities than other fathers (Johnson & Steir, 2016). The single parents in the study reported the need for training in parenting styles, communication, discipline, and enforcing and maintaining rules in the household for their children (Johnson & Steir, 2016). This pool of findings provided empirical information regarding the need for support among single custodial

fathers, which could help them in their parenting processes (Contreras, 2018; Johnson & Steir, 2016).

Forms of support (family and organizational) may mitigate experienced distress and health risks of single fathers (Contreras, 2018; Johnson & Steir, 2016). Seepersad (2016) noted this finding in a phenomenological study examining the experiences of single fathers of children with autism in Thailand. The author interviewed 10 single fathers regarding their challenges and experiences as single fathers of children with autism. Their findings showed that these fathers had various challenges in their day-to-day experiences of caregiving, in achieving a balanced social life, and in attaining social support systems to help them in their daily challenges (Seepersad, 2016). Although Seepersad (2016) focused on single fathers of children with autism, this body of findings could be utilized to understand the experiences and needed support of single fathers who care for their children both in home, school, and the community.

Researchers have proposed using online programs to help single fathers. Interactive online parent training program leaders can benefit single fathers by developing positive parental behaviors and support groups (DeGarmo & Jones, 2019; Finzi-Dottan & Cohen, 2016). DeGarmo and Jones (2019) noted that single fathers might be trained and supported through online interventions with other single fathers. The authors selected 426 divorced or separated fathers to participate in an interactive online behavioral parent training program, focusing on parenting skills and children's behaviors (DeGarmo & Jones, 2019). The findings showed that after the online intervention, there were improvements in fathers' coercive parenting, as well as positive changes in child

behaviors (DeGarmo & Jones, 2019). Internet support groups also provide a safe space for custodial fathers to share their experiences and challenges (Finzi-Dottan & Cohen, 2016). Finzi-Dottan and Cohen (2016) noted that custodial fathers experience challenges in time constraints; thus, online support groups have proven to be a positive modality for single fathers to alleviate the burden they face in parenthood.

Teague and Shatte (2020) concluded similarly when examining 2,393 fathers who sought peer support on the well-known social media site, Reddit. Their findings showed that fathers openly disclosed distress experienced on Reddit, including individual, familial, and societal (related to traditional gender roles) stressors (Teague & Shatte, 2020). The findings further revealed that these fathers employed Reddit to seek peer support, as they received action-oriented language and encouragement from peers through comments (Teague & Shatte, 2020). One should specific factors that drive further distress and support on other fatherhood forums, specifically forums for single custodial parents. However, these findings provide empirical information regarding using online modalities to train and support single custodial fathers as they face challenges and manage burdens during single parenthood (DeGarmo & Jones, 2019; Finzi-Dottan & Cohen, 2016; Teague & Shatte, 2020). Health practitioners can develop effective programs for this cohort, mitigating their risks of stress and health outcomes.

Other programs can help single fathers in parenthood. For example, single fathers can use mindfulness practices to develop a better understanding of parenting techniques and engagement, as well as the negative effects that complications and difficulties can have on children (Dobson, 2017). According to Dobson (2017), single fathers can use

mindfulness practices to gain more awareness when fully engaged with their children than before. This process can also decrease the negative effects that parenting complications and difficulties can have on children (Dobson, 2017). Payne (2019) proposed another approach to help fathers in parenthood by focusing on fatherhood intervention programs. The findings showed that fathers were more involved with their children and responsible in parenthood than others who had not attended, leading to increases in parent-child activities (Payne, 2019). Givens (2020) conducted another qualitative study, examining the African American fathers' lived experiences with fatherhood programs. Givens (2020) took a phenomenological approach and explored the experiences of 10 African American fathers aged 18 to 60. Their findings showed that after participating in fatherhood programs, the participants reported increases in motivation to become better fathers and men, with increased awareness of being an absent father (Givens, 2020). The fatherhood program leaders also enabled participants to address and acknowledge their insecurities in communication, resulting in feelings of gratitude (Givens, 2020). Overall, fatherhood programs result in positive outcomes and behaviors for fathers of different backgrounds (Givens, 2020; Payne, 2019).

Although Payne (2019) and Givens (2020) did not focus on single custodial fathers, the findings provided initial empirical information on the potential outcomes of a fatherhood intervention program. Leaders of such programs can increase parenthood outcomes, as well as overall wellbeing of fathers and their children. As such, these programs and approaches aiming to support single fathers can help them become more

involved, responsible, and sharing in parenthood than before (Dobson, 2017; Payne, 2019).

Additionally, there is need to maximize engagement of services targeting single fathers. Rominov et al. (2018) underscored this finding, noting that fathers' experiences and needs regarding support had not been adequately examined. The authors conducted a qualitative study to explore men's experiences of seeking support for their mental health and parenting in the prenatal period and their support needs (Rominov et al., 2018). Through interviews, their findings showed that fathers needed more support, as they experienced barriers to support (Rominov et al., 2018). Mniszak et al. (2020) also found similar findings, although focusing on young fathers as their target population. The authors conducted a series of interviews and field observations among young parents in Canada. Their findings showed that young fathers lacked the support services needed in caring for their children, indicating information inequalities for young fathers concerning parenting information and resources (Mniszak et al., 2020). The fathers also reported that they faced barriers to support and accessing services due to social stigmas, gender norms, and traditional masculine values that led them to avoid asking for support (Mniszak et al., 2020).

Although Rominov et al. (2018) and Mniszak et al. (2020) did not focus on single custodial fathers as their target participants, their findings provided more empirical data on the need to examine the necessary support for fathers who encountered daily complications, especially as they faced barriers to support (Mniszak et al., 2020;

Rominov et al., 2018). More research is needed regarding such barriers to support that may be faced by single custodial fathers.

Other researchers have noted using fatherhood programs to fulfill the needs of single fathers (Smith, 2020; Whisenhunt et al., 2019). However, current fatherhood programs are not enough to meet the needs of single fathers (McClatchey, 2018; Smith, 2020). For example, Smith (2020) focused on African American noncustodial fathers' perceptions of fatherhood programs and the impact of such programs on participating fathers. Smith conducted in-depth, semi structured interviews among six participants and found that single fathers had various needs related to relationships, challenges, custody issues, and healthy living. Their findings further indicated that fatherhood programs effectively met the needs of the single fathers by enhancing self-actualization and belongingness. However, other needs, such as gaining self-esteem, safety, physiological needs, and stability; seeking housing; receiving psychological counseling; learning financial management; and avoiding future incarceration, remained unfulfilled (Smith, 2020).

Whisenhunt et al. (2019) concurred and conducted a qualitative study on single parenthood. The authors found that addressing single parents' needs was vital in professional counseling (Whisenhunt et al., 2019). Haworth (2019) also noted that single fathers should be provided counseling services, presenting a systematic literature review on social work practice with single fathers. As such, there is a great need for the inclusion of single fathers to understand and address their needs through counseling (Haworth, 2019; King, 2017; Rogers & Rogers, 2019).

There is also a vital need for greater awareness for social work practitioners to identify ways to help single custodial fathers cope with parent-related complications (King, 2017). The findings of Haworth (2019) also showed this outcome, indicating that social workers had inadequate knowledge on the needs of single fathers and, therefore, did not effectively engage with them. Also, Haworth only included seven studies, both qualitative and quantitative, which indicated the lack of research on single fathers and their needs. As such, more research is needed on the needs of single fathers, especially as they experience multiple complications when parenting.

It remains unclear how mental health professionals can assist single custodial fathers, which is vital to address as several researchers have noted how men tend to socially isolate without asking for help in times of distress (Keohane & Richardson, 2018; McClatchey, 2018). Keohane and Richardson (2018) underscored the importance of helping men cope with their challenges by helping them navigate their roles, responsibilities, and limitations, especially for men in psychological distress. Lian et al. (2020) asserted similar findings when examining coping strategies used by fathers with infants in the neonatal intensive care unit. The authors employed a qualitative descriptive approach, conducting interviews with 15 fathers (Lian et al., 2020). The findings showed that fathers did not know how to cope with distress effectively, as they lacked the necessary knowledge and emotional support to overcome distress (Lian et al., 2020). Additionally, their findings showed that the fathers often resorted to coping strategies that entailed attempting to identify their stressors and moving forward when making deliberate efforts to address those issues (Lian et al., 2020). Considering this finding,

results further indicated that the lack of information, knowledge, and emotional support were key contributors to their stress amidst uncertainty and anxiety (Lian et al., 2020).

McClatchey (2018) also noted this outcome in another study wherein the author conducted a qualitative case study among 10 widowed fathers in the United States. The findings showed that single fathers struggled with their new parenting responsibilities as they transition to a single-parent household. Further, the participants outlined that they needed support in coping with problems/concerns and in caring for their children (McClatchey, 2018). These bodies of findings underscore the lack of empirical information regarding the stressors faced by single custodial fathers, including the programs that could help this population in single parenthood (Keohane & Richardson, 2018; Lian et al., 2020; McClatchey, 2018). These findings underscore the need to provide support and develop parenting programs for this population, as well as more research that underlines the needs of single custodial fathers. This merits the need for the current study.

Gap in the Literature

Research focused on distressing complications experienced by single custodial fathers is limited. There were limited existing empirical studies, either quantitative or qualitative, where researchers examined the specific stressors of single fatherhood (Biotteau et al., 2019; Cheung, 2019). This issue is vital to examine further as single custodial fathers are at risk of poor health outcomes (Biotteau et al., 2019; Cheung, 2019; The Lancet Public Health, 2018).

Scholars have found that in single fatherhood, paternal psychological well-being is at risk (Biotteau et al., 2019; Waldvogel & Ehlert, 2016). Mental health among single fathers is poorer than their partnered counterparts, as well as single mothers (Chiu et al., 2017; Kong et al., 2017; Kong & Kim, 2015). However, most researchers of this topic focused on single grandfathers, male caregivers, stepfathers, adoptive fathers, and foster fathers (Kong et al., 2017; Kong & Kim, 2015; Waldvogel & Ehlert, 2016; Whitley & Fuller-Thomson, 2017). Nonetheless, these could be used as initial empirical references for future research, as well as the current study, on the topic of parenting difficulties and health risks experienced by single custodial fathers.

Research focused on the programs and interventions to meet the needs of single custodial fathers is limited (Chiu et al., 2018a, 2018b). There were limited existing empirical studies, either quantitative or qualitative, where researchers examined the stressors that contributed to increased mortality risks among single fathers. Chiu et al. (2018a) and The Lancet Public Health (2018) did not determine the causes of death for single fathers, considering single fathers' mortality risks were more than two times higher than that of other parents. Single fathers have the least favorable risk factor profile and greatest risk of mortality of other fathers; thus, there is a need to examine how this population group can be assisted, from possible health interventions to support groups, to decrease their mortality risks and alleviate their experienced stressors.

Previous researchers examining single fathers have reported the risk of early mortality among this population, rather than focusing on factors and complications in parenting that contribute to such a mortality risk (Chiu et al., 2018a; Rattay et al., 2017).

Further, researchers have not focused on single custodial fathers as the target population (Chiu et al., 2018a; Rattay et al., 2017). This issue is vital to address due to the increasing number of U.S. single father households (Coles, 2017; Livingston, 2013). This problem can lead to fathers' inability to care for their children if left unaddressed (Hamer & Marchioro, 2002; Louie et al., 2017).

Some scholars have outlined programs to support single fathers, such as formal counseling centers, support groups, and father-child community activities (Contreras, 2018; Johnson & Steir, 2016; Keohane & Richardson, 2018). Other forms of support include family and organizations focusing on enhancing parenting styles, communication, and discipline, as well as enforcing and maintaining rules in the household for their children (Contreras, 2018; Johnson & Steir, 2016). However, these researchers focused on specific racial groups, such as single Latino fathers in the United States who faced specific and unique experiences. Thus, their findings are not generalizable to the wider population of single custodial fathers (Contreras, 2018; Johnson & Steir, 2016; Keohane & Richardson, 2018).

Other findings have shown the impact of online support groups and programs to benefit single fathers (DeGarmo & Jones, 2019; Finzi-Dottan & Cohen, 2016). However, these past researchers focused on the impact of online support groups and programs without examining distress and difficulties faced in single fatherhood (DeGarmo & Jones, 2019; Finzi-Dottan & Cohen, 2016; Teague & Shatte, 2020). However, these findings could be used as initial, empirical references in examining experienced complications and

difficulties of single custodial fathers, and how these programs could be applied for this specific cohort, helping them mitigate their stressors and risk of health.

The gap in the literature is the lack of research about not only parent-related complications and difficulties and challenges faced by single custodial fathers but also the intricacies and specific challenges involved in addressing the need of these fathers and alternative methods for mitigating their distress. Past researchers have focused on general population groups, such as widowed fathers and African American single fathers (Dobson, 2017; Givens, 2020; Parker, 2017; Payne, 2019; Rhode, 2018). However, no findings are specific to the population of single custodial fathers.

Existing empirical studies are also lacking regarding the use of fatherhood programs developed and implemented for single custodial fathers (McClatchey, 2018; Smith, 2020). Current fatherhood programs are not enough to meet the needs of single custodial fathers (McClatchey, 2018; Smith, 2020). Given the significance of meeting the needs of single custodial fathers to ensure their overall wellbeing, Haworth (2019) and Whisenhunt et al. (2019) suggested the need for more rigorous examination of ways/mechanisms to support and address the needs of single custodial fathers, especially in relation to social work practices (Haworth, 2019; King, 2017; Rogers & Rogers, 2019).

There is a call for more rigorous examination and awareness for social work practitioners to identify ways to help single custodial fathers cope with parent-related stress (King, 2017). Furthermore, Haworth (2019) and King (2017) found only limited literature on exploring ways to help single custodial fathers cope with parent-related stress, especially for social work practitioners to consider. Considering these findings,

future researchers should delve further into this phenomenon and examine it according to the needs and challenges faced by single custodial fathers (Haworth, 2019; King, 2017).

Supporting single custodial fathers is crucial to address (Keohane & Richardson, 2018; McClatchey, 2018). Among the implications of past researchers are that mental health professionals, social workers, and single custodial fathers should strive together to examine ways/mechanisms to promote the overall wellbeing of single custodial fathers by promoting the development of new skills and parenting responsibilities (Keohane & Richardson, 2018; McClatchey, 2018). Finally, future scholars, social workers, and counselors who work with single custodial fathers should increase the understanding of the specific complications and difficulties that this population faces to ensure positive wellbeing outcomes and increased abilities to care for their children (Hamer & Marchioro, 2002; Louie et al., 2017).

Summary and Conclusions

Despite the increasing prevalence of single-father households, support programs and methods for single custodial fathers continue to be understudied; there is a lack of attention on the challenges that single custodial fathers face during parenthood (Freeks, 2017; Gates et al., 2016). Contemporary forms of family structures, such as single custodial fathers, present adverse challenges for fatherhood in society (Freeks, 2017; Gates et al., 2016). Although this information provided the baseline for my study, the lack of focus on the challenges and experiences of single custodial fathers was a knowledge gap. As Chiu et al. (2018b) and Coles (2017) indicated, there is a need to

address the specific needs of single custodial fathers and the complications and difficulties they face in parenthood.

Chapter 3 includes a discussion of this quantitative doctoral study and systematic steps to address the research question concerning stressors that fathers experience when raising their children as a single-headed household. Then, the next chapter contains an outline of the research design in line with the purpose of the study, the population group, and the sampling method to attain an unbiased, balanced set of data. Chapter 3 includes an in-depth discussion of the methodology for collecting data, including recruitment, participation, and interviewing. Chapter 3 also contains issues of trustworthiness regarding the findings of this study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of single custodial fathers in California when raising their child (ren). Although there has been significant research examining single parenthood, few researchers have examined the specific types of stressors experienced by single custodial fathers (Heath et al., 2015; Louie et al., 2017). A review of literature revealed that single fathers face multiple demands from childcare, finances, housing, medical insurance, and communication issues (Melhado, 2017; Noronha & Monteiro, 2016; Rivera, 2019). Having to meet the financial and emotional needs of their children, single custodial fathers face heightened stress and poorer health than other population groups, such as single mothers and partnered fathers (Chiu et al., 2017; Kong et al., 2017).

Identifying stressors in single custodial fathers' daily lives is necessary to develop specialized support programs to help this population deal with stress effectively. Currently, fatherhood programs are available, but leaders of these programs do not focus on single custodial fathers; rather, leaders of fatherhood programs focus on the general population of fathers or fathers from minority groups (Givens, 2020; Payne, 2019). Researchers have noted a need to examine the necessary support for single custodial fathers who encounter daily stressors in parenting, especially as they face barriers to support (Mnieszak et al., 2020; Rominov et al., 2018). An understanding of the different types of stressors that single custodial fathers experience is essential in enabling health practitioners to devise initiatives and effective programs to mitigate their risk of stress

and health outcomes (DeGarmo & Jones, 2019; Finzi-Dottan & Cohen, 2016; Teague & Shatte, 2020).

This chapter contains a discussion of the selected research design. The role of the researcher and a detailed outlined of the methodology follow. Recruitment and description of participants, along with procedures for data collection, follow with a detailed outline of procedures for data analysis. This section is followed by issues of transferability, reliability, and trustworthiness. The ethical considerations precede the summary of the chapter.

Research Design and Rationale

Two research questions guided this study: “

RQ1: What are the identified stressors of being a single custodial father with children during the parenting process while residing in the state of California?

RQ2: What mental health resources do primary custodial fathers use to mitigate stress in the parenting process while residing in the state of California?

The phenomenon of interest was the identified stressors of single custodial fathers. The primary objective was the different parent-related stressors reported by single custodial fathers when raising their child (ren) in California. The unit of analysis was the single custodial father participants' perceptions of parent-related stressors.

I used a qualitative research method, examining the identified topic that requires further exploration. Qualitative research is all-inclusive, as the objective is to understand the complete picture of a social issue under scrutiny (Miles et al., 2014). In general, a qualitative approach is best used in findings about how participants experience a topic of

interest based on their backgrounds, lives, situations, and cultures (Davidsen, 2013). I used a qualitative approach to examine participants' identified stressors. I used open-ended questions to stimulate authentic discussions from the participants, providing deeper insights into their perceptions and feelings.

In qualitative research, researchers conducting data collection focus on obtaining firsthand accounts from participants through interviews, discussions, observations, and qualitative analysis (Walliman, 2011). Quantitative researchers focus on collecting numerical data used for statistical analysis (Cleland, 2017). Quantifiable responses were unsuited to determine individual experiences and feelings given the objective of the present study (see Walliman, 2011). Therefore, a quantitative approach was unsuitable for use in this study. Because qualitative researchers focus on exploring the *how* and *why* of a phenomenon being studied (Cleland, 2017), this approach was best suited for this study.

There are various research designs. Qualitative research designs include ethnography, narrative, phenomenological, and grounded theory (Cleland, 2017). Ethnography researchers focus on participants' motivations, challenges as embedded in their culture (Cleland, 2017). The objective of this study was not to focus on a particular culture; therefore, ethnography was unsuited for the current study. A phenomenological researcher describes the essence of participants' lived experiences of a situation or activity, while a narrative researcher focuses on obtaining narratives and stories from participants (Cleland, 2017). Neither phenomenology nor a narrative approach was suited

for the current study focused on the stressors experienced by single custodial fathers living in California.

Grounded theory researchers describe the theory underlying the events or obtain a deeper understanding of the event grounded in structured analysis of data (Glaser, 1992). Grounded theory is adopted to formulate hypotheses or theories based on existing phenomena or to discover participants' main concerns and how they continually try to solve them (Glaser, 1992). The current study showed the identified stressors of being a single custodial father with children during the parenting process, as well as the mental health resources used by primary custodial fathers to mitigate stress in the parenting process in California. Grounded theory design researchers focus on providing predictions, interpretations, and applications of the collected data, formulating a theory based on the data collected (Chang, 2017). A grounded theory study was conducted to satisfy the requirement of the study of identifying and understanding the parenting process from the perspective of a single custodial father. The grounded theory approach was used to explain the stressors experienced by single custodial fathers living in California.

Role of the Researcher

A researcher is vital in collecting data in qualitative studies. Researchers are the primary lead for conducting qualitative data collection procedures using interviews and surveys (Walliman, 2011). As such, the role of the researcher introduces the likelihood of potential bias because establishing a relationship and building rapport with participants along with a researcher's ideas and beliefs of the phenomenon under study may influence a researcher. According to Unluer (2012), the role of the researcher is that of observer-

participant in qualitative research, as participants meet the researcher, are made aware of the research study, and interact with the researcher throughout data collection procedures.

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was selected to study parent-related stressors among single custodial fathers. I aimed to understand the social problem of parent-related stressors among single custodial fathers in California when raising their child (ren). In this study, semistructured interviews with participants were conducted via Zoom or phone interviews.

Previous researchers have studied stressors found in single parenthood situations. Stressors found were related to childcare, finances, housing, medical insurance, and communication issues (Melhado, 2017). However, Melhado (2017) only focused on one area, New York City. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalizable to other areas or locations. Noronha and Monteiro (2016) conducted a similar study and examined the challenges faced by single parent on teenager care. Noronha and Monteiro (2016) found that caregiving duties and their roles as caregivers were factors of stress among fathers. However, Noronha and Monteiro did not focus on single custodial fathers as their participants. This study was conducted among single custodial fathers with children in California to address this gap in the research.

Participant Selection Logic

The participants in this study were 16 single custodial fathers currently serving as primary custodial caregivers and residing in California. One of the inclusion criteria also included using mental health resources to mitigate stress in the parenting process. I

identified the stressors experienced by single custodial fathers and how this population coped with stress in the parenting process.

The nonprobability strategy of purposive sampling was the sampling strategy I used (see Alvi, 2016; Etikan et al., 2016). This sampling strategy is best used in qualitative studies because it enables a researcher to set inclusion criteria. Through purposive sampling, the resulting sample was homogenous (see Etikan et al., 2016). Another sampling strategy for this study was snowball sampling, which is commonly used to access specific populations. Snowball sampling is a recruitment technique that entails asking selected participants to provide names of other potential participants who may be interested and willing to participate in the study (Browne, 2005). Before recruitment of participants, I obtained approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). After obtaining IRB approval, I obtained permission from moderators of relevant Facebook and Reddit groups involving custodial fathers to recruit eligible participants for the study.

Recruitment was done using researcher-developed recruitment flyers. After obtaining approval from group moderators, I posted the recruitment flyers on the internet in relevant Facebook and Reddit groups involving primary custodial fathers. The recruitment flyers contained information on the study, inclusion criteria, and my contact information. Interested respondents were requested to contact me using their personal email addresses to ensure privacy.

Purposive sampling is best used in qualitative research, as a researcher can identify inclusion criteria to obtain information-dense data from targeted and relevant

participants (Etikan et al., 2016). The inclusion criteria for this study included (a) primary custodian father, (b) currently residing in California, (c) used mental health resources with respect to the parenting process, and (d) at least 19 years old. Single custodial fathers who had not used resources with respect to the parenting process might not have sufficient information on ways to cope with parental stress (Oliver & Meier, 2009).

Compared to quantitative research, the sample size in qualitative research is smaller because the aim of qualitative research is not to generalize results (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As such, data saturation is commonly used in qualitative research to evaluate and determine sufficiency of participants and data. For this study, purposive sampling saturation was used to determine sample size. Saturation of data refers to the point at which including more participants will not yield any new data (Etikan et al., 2016). The sample consisted of 16 individuals who had been or were currently primary custodian fathers residing in California.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

After obtaining the IRB approval to conduct the study, I approached the moderators of relevant Facebook and Reddit groups involving primary custodial fathers to recruit eligible participants for the study. After receiving permission, I posted the IRB-approved recruitment flyer in relevant Facebook and Reddit groups involving primary custodial fathers. The recruitment flyer contained all pertinent information regarding the study, inclusion criteria, and my personal contact details. Interested respondents were requested to contact me using their personal email addresses to ensure privacy.

After individuals indicated a willingness to participate, I emailed an informed consent form via email to obtain electronic signatures and indicate suitable dates and times. A 10-day period was allotted for interested parties to decide whether they wished to participate in the study and clarify any questions about the study with me. The first 20 respondents whose electronic consent forms were signed and received were going to be selected as participants; however, data saturation occurred at 16 participants. All the electronic consent forms were saved in encrypted format on my personal computer, which was password-protected and secured.

The participants were required to take part in semistructured individual interviews that were audio recorded and lasted approximately 60 minutes. If a participant did not consent to audio-recorded interviews, I planned to take notes throughout the interview. Additionally, participants were asked to review and corroborate the notes to determine accuracy. Participant participation ensured the quality and validity of the information gathered throughout the study. Member checking was conducted after the transcriptions of interviews.

For the audio-recorded interviews, I emailed a transcript to each participant for their review and possible suggestions for alterations. I allowed the participants 7 days to conduct the member checking and respond with their suggestions. Throughout the interviews, I made observations, interview notes, field notes, and notes on observations of nonverbal communication. These notes were used along with the data from the interviews during data analysis.

Instrumentation

The main data collection instrument included semistructured, audio-recorded interviews with the participants. I developed an interview guide based on the literature study and guided by the research questions. The interview guide consisted of three questions to determine the stressors that the participants perceived in their parenting processes. I asked follow-up questions for enhanced clarity. I anticipated that the interviews would last approximately 60 minutes, resulting in 15 to 20 pages, single-spaced, typed transcriptions.

During the audio-taped interviews, I made field notes, especially considering the participants' nonverbal communications of facial expressions, gestures, and vocal tones. These notes, along with notes on my interpretations that occurred during or after the interviews, were considered field notes and used during the data analysis phase. Single custodial father participants might not have been comfortable with being audio-taped due to sensitivities about parental stress. If participants requested not to be audio recorded, I made verbatim notes and transcribed directly after the interview.

The interviews were conducted via Zoom using the participants' code names to maintain confidentiality. I used an audio recorder, taking notes throughout the process. Interview and field notes were written in a journal. The interviews were estimated to last approximately 60 minutes, yielding 15 to 20, single-spaced pages of typed transcriptions.

Researcher Developed Instruments

The semistructured interview guide was developed by me based on insights from the literature review. Using an interview guide ensured that all participants were asked

the same set of questions. The interview questions focused on identifying stressors experienced by primary custodian fathers in the parenting process. Semistructured questions are appropriate when dealing with perceptions or sensitive topics.

Two expert researchers field tested the interview guide to ensure that the questions were easily understood. Furthermore, two chairs or university professors who were experts in the field of qualitative research reviewed the interview questions. This procedure was essential to ensure that the interview questions remained free from bias, did not lead the participant to answer a certain way, and remained clearly worded (see Kallio et al., 2016). The feedback from the university professors and expert researchers was used as references to refine the questions further.

Data Collection

Several data sources—semistructured interviews and electronic correspondence from social media sources—were used to obtain data related to themes and patterns of parental stress. I scheduled the interviews through email correspondence. Each participant determined a suitable time for the interview session. The interviews were conducted via Zoom calls.

Before the start of the interview, I ensured the reliability and sufficient capacity of the audio recording device. A USB digital audio recorder was used to record each interview. Also, the Zoom recording feature was an option to record each interview. Further, I kept a journal and pen ready to write down all observational and field notes. This journal and pen were used to make interview notes if a participant declined audio recording.

Before starting the interview, I established rapport to put the participant at ease, as the topic dealt with personal situations. The participants identified these personal situations as stressors; thus, putting participants at ease served to encourage honesty and openness in answering the interview questions (see Janesick, 2011). During this stage, I reviewed the informed consent form with each participant; they were encouraged to ask questions for clarifications. I emphasized the voluntary nature of participation; thus, the participants could choose to withhold an answer to a given question or halt participation at any given time, without penalties or repercussions.

Verbal confirmation to participate with audio-recorded interviews was obtained to reiterate their consent. If the participant did not give their consent to audio-recorded interviews, notes were taken instead. Additionally, issues of confidentiality and protection of the participants' privacy were discussed extensively to assure them of their protection and privacy.

I selected Zoom as a platform to conduct the interviews due to using seamless muting and unmuting of the participants without displaying the individual's face per video. The quality of voice contributions via Zoom was good, allowing me to audio record the sessions. An interview guide consisting of three semi-structured and open-ended questions was used for all participants. The interview guide was developed by me and checked for clarity and possible bias by two experts in qualitative research at the university. Interview questions asked included the following:

1. What lead up to your role as a primary custodian father?
2. What role does the child mother maintain in the parenting process?

3. What resources have you used to date with respect to the parenting process?

The interviews considered the participants' identified stressors, and they might have relate situations in which they felt particularly stressed. Discussions that entail emotionally involved topics might trigger stress to a participant (see Råheim et al., 2016). As such, I remained sensitive to signs of stress from the participant. Examples of signs of stress include prolonged pauses, voice pitch changes, speech hesitations or repetitions, fidgeting, sighing, and unnecessary movements of any body part (Råheim et al., 2016). Depending on the situation, I made a judgment call to either stop participation or pause the interview to be resumed later (see Råheim et al., 2016). I provided my personal contact details to the participants so that they might contact me at any given time, especially so that I could address any of their concerns related to the study.

Before interview conclusion, I conducted member checking of the transcription of data via email. In cases where the participant was not audio recorded, I provided the participant an opportunity to read through the notes to check for correctness after the interview. I then asked each participant to respond and mail their responses within seven days after receiving the interview transcripts.

I also utilized electronic correspondence from social media sources (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit), groups involving primary custodial fathers, and resources of valid information regarding the parenting process of primary custodial fathers in California. These data added to the themes related to parental stress as a single custodial father.

Data Analysis Plan

This study had two research questions, and all data collected were focused on answering those two research questions. After conducting the interviews, I transcribed the audio-recorded data or handwritten notes into Microsoft Word. The individual semi-structured interviews yielded narrative information analyzed through inductive analysis. I used those data to determine common themes and categories (see Percy et al., 2015). The steps of inductive analysis were the following (see Percy et al., 2015):

1. I reread the data for increased familiarity. I transcribed the data such that I was more familiar with the data of each participant. I also reread each set of data derived from each participant before proceeding to the next steps of the analysis process. I highlighted specific words, phrases, or paragraphs that seemed significant to the research topic to answer the research questions.
2. I reviewed the highlighted data sections (specific words, phrases, or paragraphs). I then determined whether the data were linked to either of the two research questions.
3. I omitted all unrelated, highlighted data related to the research questions indicated by changing the digital highlighting color. Thus, I could easily review these data in the future, whenever necessary.
4. Each data section was coded by attaching a respective number to it to keep track of the data sections.

5. I grouped all the related codes together. Patterns emerged, which were described and named appropriately. I attached a secondary code to those patterns for further ease of recognition and management.
6. I identified patterns linked to the data, considering the direct quotes from the participants' responses during the interviews. I attached an identifier to each emerged pattern for ease of recognition and identification.
7. A larger grouping of patterns emerged, which formed the overarching themes. A third level descriptor was allocated and attached to these emerging, overarching themes.
8. Each theme was categorized in a matrix with respective patterns and direct quotes from the data. This matrix also contained the codes and more detailed descriptions of each data group than before.
9. I then proceeded to conduct and write a comprehensive analysis for each theme, emphasizing the scope and contents.
10. Steps 1 to 9 were reiterated for each of the 20 participants. NVivo was the software analysis tool I used to store and categorize relevant data.
11. These data were synthesized and analyzed to find consistent themes across the participants.
12. The consistent themes were then synthesized to form organized groups of the collected data related to the research questions.

Inductive analysis was done per participant. Discrepant cases were analyzed and noted for discussion in the interviews; these cases were noted and described in the final report of the research.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility and transferability are commonly used in qualitative research to highlight that the results are represented truthfully and relevantly (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Additionally, a credible qualitative research is deemed trustworthy.

Credibility

Polit and Beck (2014) defined credibility as the degree of confidence in the truth value of the research and its findings. One should conduct a study according to the standards set by the selected study design to achieve credibility. I used member checking, prolonged interactions with participants, and reflective journaling to ensure credibility of this study. The technique of member checking ensured the accuracy of data collected during interviews, enhancing credibility (see Connelly, 2016). In addition, I upheld reflexive thinking to minimize the likelihood and potential of researcher bias, especially while forming part of the data collection instrument. Reflexive thinking refers to a researcher continuously thinking of possible biases to mitigate any impact when interpreting the qualitative findings (see Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

Transferability

Although credibility refers to the internal validity in research, transferability refers to the external validity (Connelly, 2016). Transferability can also be defined as the extent to which the findings of a study are useful to other researchers working in similar

situations and topics (Connelly, 2016). I thoroughly described the procedures, from population, recruitment, sampling, and data collection, to ensure transferability of this study's findings. Thus, researchers in the field can better assess whether this study can be useful in their research (see Amankwaa, 2016).

Dependability

According to Baskerville et al. (2017), dependability refers to the likeliness of obtaining similar findings should the study be repeated in another setting. Dependability is vital in increasing trustworthiness of the research. The strategies followed included audit trails and triangulation to enhance the dependability of this study. In conducting triangulation, I used various data sources; comparing those data to one another to establish truthfulness and the dependability of data (see Baskerville et al., 2017). I used three different sources for triangulation of data to achieve dependability.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the objectivity of a given study attained by ensuring the truthfulness, consistency, and appropriateness of the research as much as possible (Noble & Smith, 2015). I ensured prolonged or sustained interactions with the participants to achieve confirmability for this study, connecting the results of this study to my theoretical position and experiences. Furthermore, I ensured reflexivity to mitigate researcher bias (see Morse, 2015). Reflexivity was vital to achieve to establish confirmability (see Morse, 2015). In addition, I employed triangulation techniques and provided an audit trail to establish confirmability. Overall, triangulation and researcher reflexivity were used to increase confirmability.

Ethical Considerations

Laumann (2018) defined ethical consideration and sensitivity as essential in qualitative research. In conducting human research, one should ensure that no harm comes to the participants, participants must be treated respectfully, and their privacy and confidentiality must be protected. Also, participants must receive an informed consent form before any data collection procedure. Additionally, data were protected by using unique pseudonyms or identifiers to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of each participant.

I first obtained a university IRB approval before any arrangements to conduct the research. The regulations pertaining to the application for IRB approval were observed. Also, I noted all regulations and further restrictions for the research.

Permission to recruit at the chosen Facebook and Reddit groups involving primary custodial fathers for this research was obtained from online group moderators. Permission was obtained to provide an IRB-approved recruitment flyer posted on the Internet on relevant Facebook and Reddit groups involving primary custodial fathers. The flyers contained information on the study, including the purpose of the research, inclusion criteria, activities of participants with a time frame, and my personal contact details.

Recruitment of participants was done by posting flyers on the relevant Facebook and Reddit groups involving primary custodial fathers selected for this study. Interested parties were requested to express their interests and willingness by contacting me using my personal contact details. I established the eligibility of interested parties using the

following inclusion criteria: (a) primary custodian father, (b) currently residing in the state of California, and (c) used resources with respect to the parenting process.

After establishing eligibility, I emailed an electronic informed consent form to prospective participants. Each participant was requested to sign an electronic signature by stating, "I consent;" these forms were collected via email. During this time, all participants were informed and reminded of their rights to withdraw at any given time, without any penalties or repercussions. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could choose not to answer a question or not to participate. I explained the measures used to protect the participants' privacy and ensure data confidentiality.

Each participant was given a designated code name to ensure data confidentiality; these code names were used on all gathered information, including audio recordings. I created and kept a secured list that showed the code names with the respective real identities or names of the participants. The list was stored in an encrypted format file, which was password protected. All emails containing the signed electronic consent were saved in an encrypted format on my personal password-protected computer.

Audio recordings made from the interviews were stored in a digital USB recorder, which was password protected. After the interviews, I wrapped the digital USB recorder in an unmarked envelope, and then stored it in a drawer of a locked file cabinet. I had access to the password. After 5 years of storage, all gathered data and information will be permanently destroyed to preserve participant privacy and data confidentiality.

After the interviews, I transcribed the audio data or notes into Microsoft Word. A summary of the transcribed data was emailed to the participants for member checking. I allotted 7 days for the participants to respond and email changes to their responses, if any. All transcribed data were stored in password-protected files on my personal password-protected computer. Only I had access to the password.

I kept a journal throughout the data collection process to take reflective field notes of any observations from the interviews. The same journal was used to record the actual interviews, should the participant not consent to audio recordings. After conducting the data collection procedures, the journal was kept in an unmarked envelope and stored in a drawer of my locked file cabinet.

All gathered data from the study will be stored for 5 years after the research study is completed. After this period of 5 years, all gathered data, including digital data, paper trails, observations, field notes, and journal notes, will be permanently destroyed and deleted to ensure confidentiality of data and participant privacy.

Summary

I conducted a qualitative study to answer the research question. Single custodial fathers with children residing in California were selected. 16 primary custodial fathers were recruited using purposive sampling. Recruitment flyers with the inclusion criteria were posted on selected Facebook and Reddit groups involving primary custodial fathers.

The participants were asked to take part in individual Zoom interviews; three primary interview questions guided the interviews. I kept a journal for observational and reflective notes during the interviews. I performed member checking of the interview

transcriptions. All the data were analyzed for final interpretation through inductive analysis. Only code names were used to identify the participants, entailing encrypting data, saving any data in password-protected files, and storing those data in my locked file cabinet. All gathered data will be destroyed and deleted after 5 years.

IRB approval and permission from the research sites and university were obtained before conducting the study. Also, each participant provided an electronic signed informed consent to participate. The next chapter, Chapter 4, includes the setting and demographics. Chapter 4 also provided more in-depth discussions on the data collected, including the results of the data analysis.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of single custodial fathers in California when raising their child (ren). This grounded theory study was aimed at helping to address the lack of awareness and resources available for single custodial fathers based on stressors from caring for their children. Previous researchers have revealed that single custodial fathers tend to experience the same persistent vulnerabilities as single custodial mothers (Louie et al., 2017), yet family service policies, community-based programs, and societal perceptions of childcare responsibilities appear to mostly benefit women (Chiu et al., 2018b). The constructs of diathesis-stress, such as parent predisposition, environmental aspects, and reactive behaviors, were essential for investigating this research problem. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) diathesis-stress theory served as the framework of this study. As such, this study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the identified stressors of being a single custodial father with children during the parenting process while residing in the state of California?

RQ2: What mental health resources do primary custodial fathers use to mitigate stress in the parenting process while residing in the state of California?

This chapter contains the results derived from primary custodian fathers in California. This chapter includes descriptions of the study setting and demographics. Additionally, this chapter contains details of the data collection, data analysis, and evidence of trustworthiness. The overall findings consisting of categories and the

theoretical narrative are presented. Lastly, this chapter concludes with a summary and a transition to the next chapter.

Setting

This grounded theory study was conducted using the video conference software Zoom. The participants responded to my IRB and group administrator-approved recruitment flyer posted in Facebook and Reddit groups for primary custodial fathers. I screened the eligibility of each father who responded to the flyer through the electronic demographic questionnaire obtained from social media correspondence. The inclusion criteria included (a) primary custodian father, (b) currently residing in California, and (c) used resources with respect to the parenting process. All informed consent forms and discussion of interview schedule and reminders were obtained through e-mail. The interviews were completed in January 2021. At this time, social distancing restrictions were in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented in-person interviews. I kept track of the participants by assigning a participant number, along with their initials and contact information.

Demographics

The sample consisted of 16 single primary custodial fathers in California. Most participants were primary custodial fathers to one child. The children's ages ranged from birth to 13. Participant 9 specified that his child was 1 month old, and Participant 13 indicated that his child was 3 months old at the time of data collection during January 2021. Participant 1 described his experiences raising his daughter after her mother left her at her maternal grandparents' house, only to find that the child was not biologically his.

Nonetheless, Participant 1 continued to raise the child until she was taken by the mother.

Table 1 shows an overview of information related to the children.

Table 1

Information Related to the Children

Participant	Age when first child was born	Age at single parenthood	Age of child(ren) when they came to his care	Number of children cared for
1				
2				
3	18	27	3, 6, 9	3
4	23	28	4, 6	2
5	21	36	8, 13	3
6	28	28	7	1
7	28	34	6	1
8	25	36	4, 10	2
9	27	27	0	1
10	35	43	8	1
11	24	34	0, 10	2
12	29	32	1	1
13	24	35	11	1
14	37	37	0	1
15	31	31	0	1
16	37	43	5	1

Table 2 contains the education, income, and household information of the participants. All the participants resided in California during data collection in January 2021. Participant 13 did not provide his yearly income, but the average yearly income of the remaining participants was an estimated 60 to 70 thousand U.S. dollars. Their educational backgrounds were heterogeneous, with undergraduate degree holders as the highest representative ($n = 5$). The average number of people residing in the household was three.

Table 2*Education, Income, and Household Information*

Participant	Highest education completed	Yearly income	People residing in home
1			
2			
3	bachelor's degree	\$60K–\$70K	4
4	bachelor's degree	\$20K–\$30K	3
5	high school diploma	\$50K–\$60K	5
6	high school certificate	\$40K–\$50K	4
7	bachelor's degree	\$60K–\$70K	2
8	associate's degree	\$50K–\$60K	3
9	high school certificate	\$60K–\$70K	2
10	technical certification	\$60K–\$70K	3
11	master's degree	\$60K–\$70K	4
12	bachelor's degree	\$60K–\$70K	3
13	high school diploma		2
14	high school diploma	\$30K–\$40K	4
15	master's degree	\$70K–\$80K	2
16	bachelor's degree	\$70K–\$80K	2

All the participants reported no developmental disabilities. Only Participant 4 reported a mental health disability. The participant was diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder in 2010 because of his experiences serving in the U.S. Marine Corps. Most participants were raised by both parents in one household. However, Participant 3 reported being raised by both parents in separate households. Participants 5 and 16 were raised by their fathers, and Participant 12 was raised by his mother. Table 3 summarizes this information.

Table 3*Disabilities and Childhood*

Participant	Developmental disabilities	Mental health disabilities	Raised by
1			
2			
3	None	None	Both parents
4	None	posttraumatic stress disorder	Both parents
5	None	None	Father
6	None	None	Both parents
7	None	None	Both parents
8	None	None	Both parents
9	None	None	Both parents
10	None	None	Both parents
11	None	None	Both parents
12	None	None	Mother
13	None	None	Both parents
14	None	None	Both parents
15	None	None	Mother
16	None	None	Father

Data Collection

Electronic correspondence and semistructured interviews were conducted with 16 single primary custodial fathers in California. I collected the informed consent forms and all the data online. Electronic correspondence was collected in Facebook and Reddit groups in which the 16 participants were members. I conducted the semistructured interviews with participants individually via the video conference platform Zoom. Each interview was scheduled via e-mail. A protocol guided the direction of each interview to maintain standards in the questions asked to maintain alignment of the conversation with the research questions. Each interview was audio recorded with the permission of the

participants. The duration of the interviews was at least 60 minutes each. I completed verbatim transcriptions of all interview recordings.

All electronic correspondence and interview transcripts were saved in Microsoft Word files. A total of 16 Word files were made, one for each participant. I reviewed all files and imported those files into a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program (NVivo), for storage, organization, management, and analysis.

Data Analysis

The data analysis procedures moved inductively. Inductive analysis was congruent with the grounded theory methodology, in which I openly considered all possible theoretical keystones that might emerge from the participants' experiences. As recommended by Percy et al. (2015), I did not determine any preexisting categories, and I set aside any preconceived notions about the data before coding. Instead, I engaged in Glaser's (1965) recommended steps for the constant comparative method of analysis for ground theory. The step-by-step analysis involved: (a) comparing incidents applicable to each category, (b) integrating categories and their properties, (c) delimiting the theory, and (d) writing the theory.

Comparing Incidents Applicable to Each Category

The first step of analysis was to break down the data into small units of meaning, and then generate conceptual categories. I began with immersing Participant 1's interview transcript. I imported Participant 1's Microsoft Word formatted transcript to NVivo 12, then read and reread the text in search of general concepts. Once I was familiar with the transcript as a whole, I read the transcript line-by-line and began open

coding. Open coding entailed identifying small units of meanings or codes that were relevant to the research questions of this study. I assigned key words, phrases, or paragraphs into small units of meanings to represent codes. Codes with similar meanings were clustered into a conceptual category. The next step involved identifying the relationships among the categories.

Integrating Categories and Their Properties

After developing conceptual categories using the open codes, I began the integration of categories and their properties using axial coding. *Axial coding* refers to the search of relationships among the codes. The codes, conceptual categories, and some sample quotes are shown in Table 4. The sample quotes are organized by participant number, which was determined and assigned according to the order in which the participant transcripts were analyzed.

Table 4*Comparing Incidents Applicable to Each Category*

Conceptual category	Codes	Sample quote
Social stressors	Not aware of any resources available for single fathers	Participant 13: I do not know what could help. I wish I had that answer. I would probably have already [sought] that answer already, if I had one. Participant 14: I never even knew you can get professional services for a child unless they were bad in school and fighting or bullying other student's. Participant 15: None that I know of.
	Racial and environmental violence	Participant 6: Social injustice, systemic racism, financial growth, proper health care, fair treatment, understanding, the benefit of doubt, gangs, girls, drugs and alcohol, these are concerns that turned into everyday stressors. Participant 14: Life itself is a stressor seeing black boys murdered by police and not knowing if you would fall victim to this racist world is a stressor.
	Single fathers were judged	Participant 3: It was a stressful feeling because not often do they see the father having to do parent conference alone. I was quickly judged as incapable of having a parent conference for my kids on my own. Participant 13: My environment has always taught me to be a man and take care of your responsibility, but it did not tell me what to do if you become a single father. Where I am from, even in my family it's all about single mothers.
	No stressors cited	Participant 5: No stress Participant 15: I did not feel that I had any stressors
Aftermath of separation from child's mother	The involvement of the child's mother	Participant 2: She was in their life sometimes but most of the time she had a choice to sit and spend time with the children Participant 10: She came around a lot. She tries to correct her mistakes and be a better person for our daughter. We did not seek therapy Participant 13: His mother is not active in his life.
	Got custody	Participant 10: I won custody of my daughter Participant 14: Me and the mother agreed that I would take care of the child and she signed her rights over to me, I wasn't ready to raise a child even though I wanted a child. A family of my own.
	Suddenly took on the role of a single parent	Participant 5: I didn't know what to expect so it happened so fast I didn't have time to think. Participant 9: Learn how to take care of a little girl.

Conceptual category	Codes	Sample quote
		Participant 12: I really did not have any expectations. This was a sudden situation and I never put thought into it.
	Blame self for child being motherless	Participant 2: To be the best dad I could be, I just talked to people to see where I went wrong and tried to do better. Participant 13: I felt I was the blame for choosing an irresponsible woman for a mother of my child. I also chose not to have any more kids due to the experience unless I have a wife.
Reason for separation from child's mother	Child's mother left and left the child behind	Participant 1: My daughter's mom brought her to my mother's house and left her where I was living. Participant 2: Mom didn't want to keep the child. Dropped off on the porch Participant 9: My daughter's mother left for unknown reasons Participant 13: My son's mother left him with her parents.
	Child's mother died	Participant 11: My wife died of preeclampsia while giving birth to my son. Participant 12: My daughter's mother died of pancreas cancer.
	Child's mother was abusive and alcoholic	Participant 3: My circumstances that led up to me being a single father was after my divorce from my wife who was abusive and an alcoholic. I was granted full custody by a judge in family court. Participant 7: My daughter mom was abusive to my daughter and I.
	Child's mother was drug user	Participant 4: Ex-wife on drugs Participant 7: She was addicted to drugs.
	Child's mother cheated	Participant 8: My wife cheated on me with a co-worker. She decided not to fight me for custody because she became pregnant by the man she cheated on me with.
Hands-on work in raising child and accomplishing chores	Routines, changes, and sacrifices	Participant 2: Making sure they got up for school, eat, go to school on time, do my business whatever it would be, have them do homework, play time, clean up, bed time Participant 4: Getting them up, dressed, hair done, fed, off to school, homework, talking and playing. Participant 7: I did what everyone basically would do as a parent. I worked, cooked dinner, went to soccer games for my daughter, parent chaperone events (once a month).

Conceptual category	Codes	Sample quote
		Participant 13: My daily routine was dropping my son off to school in the mornings and me working at night. While I worked at night...
Economic stressors	Expenses	Participant 2: I think there was always stressors. I try to make sure they were ok and had what they needed.
		Participant 6: The ability to properly parent my son was impacted because the time needed to invest in my child wasn't available for him because it had to be used to keep us afloat and surviving until things got better.
		Participant 13: I tried to get a babysitter, but the cost was extreme. I rather spend my money paying my parents to watch him.
	More work, less quality time with kids	Participant 3: Because I did spend a lot of time trying to provide I feel like it took away from me being able to have as much time as I could have had with my kids.
Help in caring for child	Family took care of the child when father was working or at school	Participant 1: With the help of my mother and my sisters I was able to take care of her daily needs while working and going to college. She was with me when I wasn't working or at school.
		Participant 2: Always had support with my mother and family.
		Participant 14: Yes, my dad, my brother, and my cousin
	Send kids to daycare	Participant 11: Childcare and the school was the most help during the week days.
		Participant 12: I had to drop my 3 years old daughter off to childcare and go to work
		Participant 16: I lived in another state from my family, so my help was daycare.
	No help sought	Participant 10: No, I take care of my daughter alone.
		Participant 16: Living away from family really made it hard to connect with anyone or to have support from people I know.
Motivated by own child to do better	Teaching kids to be responsible	Participant 2: I wanted them to be the best at what they could be. I would talk to them and sometimes discipline them when it was necessary. Never had to get professional service for them.
		Participant 4: I wanted them to be independent women and not to rely on any man for anything. The only man I wanted them to rely on, is me and that's only for advice.

Conceptual category	Codes	Sample quote
	Keeping a routine for their children	Participant 14: I just wanted to raise a healthy and Christian minded child so I didn't have to many expectations of myself.
		Participant 10: I make sure alarm clock is set to keep me on schedule and I write everything down in my phone calendar so I can get reminders.
	Doing what's best for the kids	Participant 16: It was hard to balance work and being a single father. I had to get organized with my schedule and be more responsible.
		Participant 7: I want to give my daughter the world.
		Participant 8: My stress was to make sure I did not lock their mom out of their lives. I still love her and want her to experience their growth. It was hard seeing her with another baby but I knew I had to do what was best for my girls.
Spending quality time with the child	Involved in kids' education	Participant 3: I made sure that I was involved more in their education to make sure that their education will never suffer.
	Give kids equal attention	Participant 11: I wanted to make sure that I did not spend more time with one kid than the other.
	Have dinner together	Participant 8: We also had family time at dinner where I got to hear about their day so no electronics at the kitchen table.
Developed resilience	Pushed through	Participant 2: I feel I did the best I could handling their needs
		Participant 6: The best way I could and sometimes it wasn't nice, honest or moral.
	Positive outlook	Participant 14: I thought I was doing and did okay emotionally and mentally. I can say I was stressed sometimes and very tired but I just pushed through.
		Participant 9: I felt like life was crumbling but I also felt like if she could leave her precious daughter than fine. I start looking at it as if she gave me the world's best gift, my daughter and true love.
Acceptance and moving on	Participant 8: I made sure their mom was notified about grades, accomplishments, award assemblies, etc. I did not stress myself. I accepted life for what it was. I moved on with a new relationship myself.	

The conceptual categories that emerged from the relationships among the codes were derived from the phenomenon, the causal conditions, the context, the intervening conditions, the action strategies, and the consequences. The phenomenon refers to the central concept or the subject of interest (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this study, the phenomenon of interest was the mental health resources of single fathers. The causal conditions refer to the elements that result in the phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The single fathers' stressors lead them to seek mental health resources or to cope on their own. The context refers to the specific characteristics of the sample that influence the phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this study, the context depended on the stressors identified by the participants. Particularly, their stress in relation to their child(ren)'s mother. The intervening conditions refer to the additional link between the phenomenon and causal conditions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The single fathers' stressors and coping/seeking mental health resources were associated with the availability/their utilization of their support system, as well as their own motivation, priorities, and resilience. The action strategies refer to the intentional behavior towards attaining a goal (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The single fathers in this study reiterated their actions towards prioritizing their children, sticking to a routine, and sacrificing to do their best for their children. Lastly, the consequences refer to the results of the participants' action strategies (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The consequences that resulted in this study were not clear; however, only Participant 3 discussed a possible consequence of jeopardizing his quality time with his children due to spending time working.

Delimiting the Theory

Delimiting the theory involved the selective coding process. The aim of selective coding was to identify the core category in which all other categories were linked (Glaser, 1965). The core category was a result of developing conditional propositions through providing an answer to the research questions.

RQ1 asked, “What are the identified stressors of being a single custodial father with children during the parenting process while residing in the state of California?” The identified stressors of being a single custodial father with children during the parenting process while residing in the state of California were (a) societal stressors, (b) aftermath of separation from child’s mother, (c) reason for separation from child’s mother, (d) hands-on work in raising child and accomplishing chores, and (e) economic stressors. The answer to RQ1 was central to the single father’s separation from the child’s mother, as this experience was the core of all the stressors experienced by the participants.

RQ2 asked, “What mental health resources do primary custodial fathers use to mitigate stress in the parenting process while residing in the state of California?” Generally, the primary custodial fathers did not seek mental health resources, but used their own network for help in caring for the child and used their own coping abilities to be motivated by own child to do better, to spend quality time with the child, and to develop resilience. These experiences of coping were also central to the single father’s separation from the child’s mother, as the primary custodial father was left to use his own resources to mitigate stress in the parenting process. Therefore, the core category that

links all other categories together was the single father's separation from the child's mother.

Writing the Theory

The step-by-step process was repeated for each participant data. The categories were then synthesized to develop the final categories that completed the theoretical narrative of experiences of the single custodial fathers in California when raising their children based on stressors and mental health resources. Discrepant cases were considered and identified as codes that emerged without sufficient evidence (e.g., only one participant experienced the phenomenon). Such cases were included in the presentation of the results. The final categories and the theoretical narrative are presented in the results section, while Table 5 shows an overview of the final categories, descriptions, and RQ alignment.

Table 5*Categories and Descriptions*

RQ	Category	Description
RQ1	Societal stressors	Included stigma experienced by single fathers, the lack of resources for single fathers, racial issues, and safety of the community
	Aftermath of separation from child's mother	Involved father's and child's reaction towards separation, as well as the mother's involvement after the separation
	Reason for separation from child's mother	Circumstances that led to the father being the single, primary custodian
	Hands-on work in raising child and accomplishing chores	Experiences of balancing housework, employment, child's school activities, and child's discipline
	Economic stressors	Included worries about expenses, as well as the time spent at work and away from the child
RQ2	Help in caring for child	The support system from family, friends, and paid help
	Motivated by own child to do better	Finding the drive to be a better person and father for the sake of the child
	Developed resilience	Using own capacities to overcome challenges of being a single custodial father

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The rigor of the study was established through ensuring the trustworthiness of the findings. This section contains the evidence of trustworthiness applied in this study. The four trustworthiness criteria established in the study included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (see Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

Credibility

Three credibility methods were used to increase the integrity of the study. First, I used member checking. After transcribing the audio recordings of the interviews, I e-

mailed a copy of each transcript to each corresponding participant to review the accuracy of transcription. The participants also had the chance to review and edit their responses. Second, I triangulated the data from the semi-structured individual interviews and electronic correspondence from social media groups. I compared the participants' responses in both data sources and synthesized consistent themes. Third, I practiced reflexive thinking. During the data collection and analysis phases, I constantly stopped to review the alignment of the processes with the research questions to ensure that the findings remained relevant, and biases were limited.

Transferability

Transferability was established through rich and thick descriptions. First, I provided a detailed account of the procedures completed to arrive at the findings of this study. Second, I disclosed all the conditions impacting the population, recruitment, sampling, and data collection. The descriptions determined the context in which the study was conducted. Therefore, readers can make inferences about the relevance of the study findings to another context.

Dependability

I used audit trails and triangulation to establish the dependability of the study. Audit trails involved documenting the processes in data collection and analysis. Triangulation involved comparing the findings from the two data sources.

Confirmability

I engaged in prolonged interactions with the participants. From recruitment to member checking, I personally conversed with the participants. I also applied reflexive thinking, audit trails, and triangulation to increase the confirmability of the study.

Results

This section contains the presentation of the categories and the theoretical narrative. Each category is presented in a subsection containing the description, narratives, and excerpts from the data. The last subsection contains the theoretical narrative that emerged from synthesizing the retelling of the participants' stories. Table 6 shows an overview of the categories with the number of participants and references.

Table 6

Overview of Categories

Category	Number of supporting participants	Number of References
Societal stressors	12	29
Aftermath of separation from child's mother	14	28
Reason for separation from child's mother	13	20
Hands-on work in raising child and accomplishing chores	14	15
Economic stressors	8	12
Help in caring for child	16	28
Motivated by own child to do better	14	28
Developed resilience	8	8

Societal Stressors

The category, social stressors, included stigma experienced by single fathers, the lack of resources for single fathers, racial issues, and safety of the community. The

participants shared their common experiences of stigma toward single fathers; they perceived that they were “judged” (Participant 3). Participants 3 and 13 expressed that the “environment” was more accepting and helpful for single mothers. Participant 13 explained the following:

My environment has always taught me to be a man and take care of your responsibility, but it did not tell me what to do if you become a single father.

Where I am from, even in my family it’s all about single mothers.

Participant 14 also referenced feeling the need to be a “man,” stating that people did not help men as readily as they did women:

Maybe because I was living okay the world sees that as I didn’t need help or they shouldn’t or didn’t have to help me, shoot or maybe it is because I am a man, and no one really helps men they have all these programs to assist women but not men.

Participant 3 believed that his “living environment” at home was “stable,” but the “environment outside” was a stressor:

Fathers were not as lifted as mothers were. For an example, when I went to a parent conference for my kids, the teacher automatically assumed that my wife would be joining me. It was a stressful feeling because not often do they see the father having to do parent conference alone. I was quickly judged as incapable of having a parent conference for my kids on my own.

Regarding professional services, most participants stated that they were unaware of such programs directed toward single fathers and their children. Participant 14 shared,

“I never even knew you can get professional services for a child unless they were bad in school and fighting or bullying other students.” Similarly, Participant 6 articulated the following:

I really never knew of any services that were available for men with children. I was always informed that men aren't given assistance by the state for their children. If there were information and services available for single men with children, it would definitely make life easier for men and create a more stable, emotional and mental environment for both the child and the father to live in.

Although race was not specifically asked, two participants emphasized that their racial backgrounds added to their stress. Participants 6 and 14 both accentuated how being “Black” added to their stress as a single father. Participant 6 enumerated, “Here’s a few: social injustice, systemic racism, financial growth, proper health care, fair treatment, understanding, the benefit of doubt, gangs, girls, drugs and alcohol. These are concerns that turned into everyday stressors.” Participant 6 perceived that some abovementioned stressors “would have followed” him in any environment; however, he emphasized that being able to live in a community with “less crime and no gangs” was a “step in the right direction.”

Aftermath of Separation from Child’s Mother

This category involved father’s and child’s reaction toward separation, as well as the mother’s involvement after the separation. Most participants expressed that they suddenly took on a new role as a single father. Participant 5 cited, “I didn’t know what to expect so it happened so fast I didn’t have time to think.” Participant 12, whose wife

passed away due to terminal illness, expressed, “This was a sudden situation and I never put thought into it. Mentally I was and still is broken. My daughter lost a great mother, and I lost a great partner.” Participant 9, a 27-year-old whose only daughter was 1 month old at the time of the interview, recounted that the child’s mother suddenly left “for unknown reasons.” The participant shared that he unexpectedly had to “learn how to take care of a little girl.”

Participants 2 and 13 conveyed the feeling of guilt; they believed they had done something wrong toward their children. Participant 13 “blamed” himself for “choosing an irresponsible woman” as the mother of his child. The participant added, “I also chose not to have any more kids due to the experience unless I have a wife.” Additionally, Participant 2 stated, “To be the best dad I could be, I just talked to people to see where I went wrong and tried to do better.” In the case of Participant 7, he felt guilty for not being able to give his daughter what she wanted—to be a family with her mother:

My daughter asked me on numerous occasions if her mom and I could live together. I asked her why and she told me, “I want us to be a family.” I knew that was the one thing I couldn’t give her, no matter how hard I worked or how much money I made.

In some participants’ experiences, the mother’s involvement in the child’s life was considered a positive experience, such as in the experience of Participant 10: “She came around a lot. She tries to correct her mistakes and be a better person for our daughter.” Participant 8 also shared that co-parenting worked well for raising his daughters:

She do [*sic*] still spend time with the girls. She loves them very much. She just knew that she could not take them from me because of her choices she made. We co-parent. She gets them on the weekend. I usually work on the weekend and I get to have them the rest of the time. We still do family things together. My ex-wife and I were friends for a long time, so we were not going to through that away. We worked together to make it work. She did lose her job, so I am the only provider for my girls.

However, for most participants, the mother's involvement was not healthy for them and the children. Participant 14 shared that his child's mother tended to make promises to the child but ended up not keeping those promises. Similarly, Participant 13 shared, "She does call to check on him and to see when she can see him, but she never come when she tells him she will come to see him." Participant 6 perceived that his child's mother provided a "dysfunctional environment," and the relationship between mother and son was "unhealthy." Participant 3 sought family therapy to help his children cope with their family dynamics:

The role of my children mother that was maintained and parenting our children was she have visitation rights that was supervised by me on certain days of the week. As a part of court order, she had to be sober in the presence of our children and to take anger management courses on her own. We did try seeking family therapy so the kids could understand what was going on and why their mother was not a part of their daily lives.

Reason for Separation from Child's Mother

The category, reason for separation from child's mother, involved circumstances that led to the father being the single, primary custodian, which the participants considered as stressors. In most cases, the children's mothers chose to leave the fathers and leave the children behind. Participant 9 shared, "I never knew why my daughter's mother left us. She just left and called and said she was okay and for me to raise our daughter." Some participants perceived that the children's mother did not want them, such as Participant 2: "Mom didn't want to keep the child. Dropped off on the porch." Participant 15 shared, "My girlfriend was going to have an abortion and I told her to keep the baby and I will raise the baby." In Participant 13's experience,

My son's mother left him with her parents. After she did not return and no one could find her, I was notified by her parents which led to me picking up my son and I have had him ever since.

In Participant 8's case, his wife did not choose to leave, but the participant stated, "My wife cheated on me with a co-worker. She decided not to fight me for custody because she became pregnant by the man, she cheated on me with." Participant 6 noted that he and his child's mother were "never married," nor lived together.

For two participants, their children's mother passed away. Participant 11 lost his wife while giving birth to their second child. Participant 11 shared, "My wife died of Preeclampsia while giving birth to my son." Apart from losing his wife, the participant added that another stressor entailed explaining the situation to his older child. Participant

12 lost his wife to terminal illness, which led to feeling stressed about leaving his daughter:

I feel that losing her mom made me hold on to my daughter that much tighter. I could not leave my daughter at first until I realized that she needs to learn how to socialize. I feel that my parent instincts have fully kicked in. I am up constantly at night checking on my daughter, making sure she is breathing, worrying if she inherited her mother genes or will be a cancer candidate when she grows up. My stress level is so high until I shadow my daughter and I know I have to be able to relax and let her be a kid.

For some participants, their children's mother had unhealthy behaviors.

Participant 3's ex-wife was "abusive" and an "alcoholic." After the divorce, the participant "was granted full custody by a judge in family court." Participant 7 also reported that his wife was "abusive" to his daughter and him, adding that the child's mother was "addicted to drugs." Participant 4's ex-wife was also "on drugs." Among the participants, only Participant 16 reported that his ex-wife suffered from mental illness: "My ex-wife was unstable, and I was granted custody of my son ... At first it was said that she had postpartum depression, but it continued after two years."

Hands-On Work in Raising Child and Accomplishing Chores

The category, hands-on work in raising child and accomplishing chores, referred to experiences of balancing housework, employment, child's school activities, and child's discipline. Most participants shared time-specific tasks they accomplished for the day.

Participant 16 described the following:

My daily routine was waking up in the morning around 6 a.m. I took a shower cooked breakfast then I woke my son up to get dressed. We ate breakfast and I went to work, and he went to school (school bus). He was in an all-day kindergarten class, so he was at school majority of my workday except for 2 hours. For the remaining two hours my son went to daycare. I picked my son up from day care at 5 p.m. I went home prepared dinner, and we ate dinner by 7 p.m. Homework for my son was done at daycare, so I did not have to worry about doing homework. My son took a bath about 7:45 p.m. and he was able to watch TV until 9pm. I went to bed about 9:30 p.m.

Most participants also reported following a routine to manage their time between their children's needs and their own employment and/or schooling. However, the fathers worked around the child's schedule. Participant 10 described the following:

Work, drop my daughter off to school, home, homework, workout, dinner, sleep ... Typical stressors like getting her to school on time. Keeping up with shot records and making sure I save my sick days at work for my daughter school events and if she ends up ill.

Some participants added that certain days, mostly weekends, were dedicated to housework, chores, and errands (e.g., grocery shopping). Participant 3 shared, "Saturdays usually was our grocery shopping day and our hang-out together day. Sundays was our stay home and wash and fold clothes for the week."

Economic Stressors

The category, economic stressors, included worries about expenses, as well as the time spent at work and away from the child. Half of the participants expressed experiencing stress due to economic reasons. Mostly, the participants were stressed about expenses, including living and childcare expenses. Participant 13 emphasized, “I tried to get a babysitter, but the cost was extreme.” Participant 13 added that his child was taken care of by his parents, and he would rather spend his money paying his parents than a babysitter. Participants 9 and 12 cited that they asked their sisters to babysit while they went to work “to cut down my childcare expense” (Participant 12).

Several participants added that the lack of financial support from the government was an economic stressor. Participant 3 shared the following:

As a single father I had to deal with a lot on my own which was very stressful. I had to pay for health insurance on my own, I had to pay for a childcare out of my pocket, pay mortgage on my house, provide food for my kids, clothing, and anything else that my children may have needed on my own with no assistance from the county or the government.

Participant 6 perceived that spending time to earn money took the time away from his child: “The ability to properly parent my son was impacted because the time needed to invest in my child wasn’t available for him because it had to be used to keep us afloat and surviving until things got better.”

Help in Caring for Child

Most participants perceived that their source of mental health support was the support system from family, friends, and paid help in caring for their children. Most received help from their immediate families (e.g., parents and sisters). Participant 7 reported that his mother and sister helped him “whenever” needed. Participant 1 stated, “With the help of my mother and my sisters I was able to take care of her daily needs while working and going to college. She was with me when I wasn’t working or at school.” Similarly, Participant 4 reported, “My parents helped me care for my kids ... when I had to do field training or deploy overseas, my children would stay with them.” Participant 12 shared the following:

My sister helps a lot. She combs my daughter hair for the week and showed me the ropes of taking care of a girl. Without her I would not be handling the situation very well. My sister has my daughter 3 days out of the week.

Only Participant 11 shared that his deceased wife’s parents came during weekends to take care of the children. In the case of Participant 13, the child’s maternal grandparents did not want to get involved with the child, as they “want[ed] a relationship with their daughter.”

Participant 6 remarried and shared that his wife helped care for his son. Participant 9 shared that his mother and his “female friends since high school” came to help him babysit, which relieved the stress of spending for a babysitter. However, Participants 9 and 15 hired nannies on the days that they worked.

Motivated by Own Child to Do Better

This category, motivated by own child to do better, emerged from data referring to finding the drive to be a better person and father for the sake of the child. A common experience among most participants was that they looked past the stressors and attempted to teach their children to be responsible for their actions. Participant 2 shared, “I wanted them to be the best at what they could be. I would talk to them and sometimes discipline them when it was necessary. Never had to get professional service for them.” Participant 4 also did not seek professional help for his daughters. He believed that by setting an example, he taught them that they could rely on themselves to overcome challenges. However, the participant added that he also let them know they could rely on him.

Participant 4 shared the following:

I wanted them to be independent women and not to rely on any man for anything. The only man I wanted them to rely on, is me and that’s only for advice. I had to regroup and get them to also regroup and focus. No, I have never seek [*sic*] professional services for them.

Participant 4 added the aspect of religion: “By praying, being very strict, constantly talking to them about people and how to try to live their lives.” Similarly, Participant 14 was motivated by the following: “I just wanted to raise a healthy and Christian minded child.” Despite the stressors, some participants shared that they wanted to do their best for their children. Participant 7 mentioned, “I want to give my daughter the world.” Participant 8 elaborated the following:

My stress was to make sure I did not lock their mom out of their lives. I still love her and want her to experience their growth. It was hard seeing her with another baby, but I knew I had to do what was best for my girls.

Participants 10 and 16 tried to maintain a routine for the sake of the children regardless of the stress they experienced. Participant 16 noted, “It was hard to balance work and being a single father. I had to get organized with my schedule and be more responsible.”

Developed Resilience

This category referred to using own capacities to overcome challenges of being a single custodial father. Half of the participants shared instances of being resilient.

Participants 2, 6, and 14 believed that they overcame their stressors by pushing through.

Participant 14 stated the following:

I am not sure; I didn't have a mental health plan or outlet. Mental health never really crossed my mind. I thought I was doing and did okay emotionally and mentally. I can say I was stressed sometimes and very tired, but I just pushed through.

Participant 9 maintained a positive outlook despite the situation of his child's mother leaving. Participant 9 shared, “I felt like life was crumbling but I also felt like if she could leave her precious daughter then fine. I start looking at it as if she gave me the world's best gift, my daughter and true love.” Participants 7 and 8 believed in acceptance and moving on. Participant 8 noted, “I made sure their mom was notified about grades, accomplishments, award assemblies, etc. I did not stress myself. I accepted life for what

it was. I moved on with a new relationship myself.” Participant 7 shared, being open to dating to “connect with another woman who can be a part of” his and his child’s lives. Participant 7 emphasized, “I did not want to replace her mom but to try and give her balance where she could have her mom outside the home and a woman figure inside the home.”

Theoretical Narrative

This grounded theory study showed stressors and mental health resources experienced by single, primary custodial fathers residing in California. The phenomenon that emerged from the data was the single, primary custodial fathers’ coping and relieving stress associated with parenting. This phenomenon was an occurrence caused by stressors. The participants’ stressors were generally associated with their separation from their children’s mothers regardless of the reason and the aftermath. Additionally, the participants also generally experiences social and economic stressors. The single fathers’ stressors and coping/relieving stress were associated with the availability/their utilization of their support system, as well as their own motivation, priorities, and resilience. The single fathers in this study reiterated their actions towards prioritizing their children, sticking to a routine, and sacrificing to do their best for their children. The consequences of the participants’ actions strategies were not clearly identified from the data; however, only Participant 3 discussed a possible consequence of jeopardizing his quality time with his children due to spending time working.

Summary

This chapter contained the presentation of the study findings. The findings of this qualitative grounded theory were derived from electronic correspondence and semi-structured individual interviews with 16 single, primary custodial fathers in California. The data were analyzed inductively following Percy et al.'s (2015) step-by-step process. The analysis generated the following categories: societal stressors, aftermath of separation from child's mother, reason for separation from child's mother, hands-on work in raising child and accomplishing chores, economic stressors, help in caring for child, motivated by own child to do better, and developed resilience.

The participants perceived that single fathers had added stressors compared to single mothers in that they were stigmatized. Furthermore, the participants believed that fewer people and organizations would help single fathers than single mothers. Some participants also had the notion of being "a man," which could prevent them from seeking mental health services for them and their children. Nonetheless, most participants developed their own ways to cope with their stressors. Their stress from childcare and babysitting expenses were eased by the support from parents, sisters, and friends. Most participants chose to overcome their challenges to provide for their children and set an example for them.

The categories and the resulting theory are interpreted and discussed in the next chapter. The discussion involves the study's contribution to the diathesis-stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and the body of literature on single fathers. The next

chapter also contains the limitations, implications, recommendations, and conclusions of the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

Single custodial fathers may face stressors when caring for their children. Louie et al. (2017) showed that 10% of men experience symptoms of postpartum depression during the parenting process. Furthermore, Chiu et al. (2018b) conducted an intensive investigation and revealed that single parenthood is associated with elevated stress, causing adverse mental health outcomes and increased mortality. Some factors that contribute to single custodial fathers' stress include lack of finances or housing, medical insurance issues, communication issues, and social stigma. Researchers also found that participants perceived social stigma, gender norms, and traditional masculine values as underlying factors behind single custodial fathers' barriers to support and accessing services to address stress (Mnizak et al., 2020; Rominov et al., 2018). Therefore, establishing the variety of stressors that single custodial fathers experience and examining the mental health resources used to mitigate stress in the parenting process is of significance, as done in this study.

In this qualitative study, I aimed to understand the experience of single custodial fathers in California when raising their children. I used grounded theory to address the lack of awareness and resources available for single custodial fathers in relation to stressors in caring for their children. Previous researchers revealed that single custodial fathers experience the same persistent vulnerabilities as single custodial mothers (Louie et al., 2017). However, family service policies, community-based programs, and societal perceptions of childcare responsibilities appear to mostly benefit women (Chiu et al.,

2018b). The constructs of diathesis-stress, such as parent predisposition, environmental aspects, and reactive behaviors, were essential in investigating this problem. I used Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) diathesis-stress theory as the framework. As such, the following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the identified stressors of being a single custodial father with children during the parenting process while residing in the state of California?

RQ2: What mental health resources do primary custodial fathers use to mitigate stress in the parenting process while residing in the state of California?

Data were gathered using electronic correspondence and semistructured individual interviews with 16 single primary custodial fathers in California. I analyzed the data inductively based on Percy et al.'s (2015) step-by-step process. The analysis showed the following themes: (a) societal stressors, (b) aftermath of separation from child's mother, (c) reason for separation from child's mother, (d) hands-on work in raising child and accomplishing chores, (e) economic stressors, (f) help in caring for child, (g) motivated by own child to do better, and (h) developed resilience. The core theme linking all the categories was the single father's separation from their child's mother.

The participants perceived that single fathers have added stressors compared to single mothers because they face a level of stigmatization not experienced by single mothers. Furthermore, the participants believed that fewer people and organizational leaders would assist single fathers compared to single mothers. Some participants also expressed the need to "be a man" based on society's perceptions, preventing them from

seeking mental health services for themselves and their children. Nonetheless, most developed ways to cope with their stressors. The participants expressed that parents, sisters, and friends helped relieve childcare and babysitting expenses. Most participants chose to overcome any challenges to provide for their children; the participants also hoped to set an example of strength and fortitude for their children to follow.

In this chapter, I interpret the findings from Chapter 4 as informed by the literature review from Chapter 2. I demonstrate the differences and similarities behind this research and others. Limitations of this study and recommendations for future research follow. Future researchers can use the limitations to develop other avenues to identify, understand, and broadcast the problem further. Finally, the implications of this study are discussed, followed by concluding statements.

Interpretation of the Findings

This section contains the interpretations of Chapter 4's findings based on the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. The section is organized by categories to show the connections more clearly to the reader. The categories found in Chapter 4 include the following: (a) societal stressors, (b) aftermath of separation from child's mother, (c) reason for separation from child's mother, (d) hands-on work in raising child and accomplishing chores, (e) economic stressors, (f) help in caring for child, (g) motivated by own child to do better, and (h) developed resilience. The final section is the interpretation of the core category in relation to the diathesis-stress theory (Davis et al., 2017; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pruessner et al., 2017).

Social Stressors

The social stressors theme relates to the stigma experienced by 12 single fathers, which included a lack of resources, racial issues, and community safety. The participants shared their common experiences of stigma toward single fathers as they perceived they were “judged” (Participant 3). Participants 3 and 13 expressed that the “environment” was more accepting and helpful for single mothers. This finding shows agreement with other studies. For example, Haworth (2019) and Rogers and Rogers (2019) indicated that fathers face a lack of support in their environment when raising children alone. Thus, U.S. health practitioners have attempted to alleviate this issue by implementing programs specific to fatherhood (Haworth, 2019; Rogers & Rogers, 2019). However, Cheng and Wu (2016) found fewer parent–child activities are offered for single fathers than are offered to single mothers. Liong (2016) found that fathers might experience social stigma because of being single fathers, influencing the quality of paternal involvement. Other researchers have indicated that single fathers face exhaustion, preoccupation, social culture, and controlling forces as social stressors (Rivera, 2019; Summerous, 2019).

Studies have also shown that social workers still have inadequate knowledge of single fathers’ needs despite such research and, therefore, do not effectively engage with them (Haworth, 2019). Even if social workers lacked such awareness but offered programs to help single fathers, the participants of this study expressed that they were unaware of such programs directed toward single fathers and their children. More research is needed to expand the needs of single fathers, particularly as they experience multiple stressors in parenting. Future researchers can provide empirical knowledge for

mental health professionals and social workers to assist single custodial fathers in their parenting stress.

Although race was not specifically a focus in this study, two participants emphasized that their racial background added to their stress. For example, Participants 6 and 14 both accentuated how being Black added to their stress as a single father. This finding confirms other researchers' conclusions that single fathers face barriers in nurturing their children due to the social norms and gender roles in society (Parker, 2017; Van Gasse & Mortelmans, 2020). Hallama (2020) noted this phenomenon when examining single fathers and their emotions. The author addressed expectations of masculinities and fatherhood, specifically based on traditional gender stereotypes (Hallama, 2020). Single fathers often struggle with criticisms of traditional family policies, preventing them from showing their emotions to their children and others (Hallama, 2020). McLeod (2020) noted similar outcomes when examining Black fathers' help-seeking posts on Facebook. Like Hallama (2020), McLeod (2020) found that fathers face stereotypical views from society, showing the need to help this specific population in the following areas: family expansion, financial matters, maternal gatekeeping, navigating family relationship conflict, and raising children and child development. This body of literature showed fathers' experiences, specifically, of being stereotyped (Hallama, 2020; McLeod, 2020) and mirrored the findings of this study. The findings concerning the aftermath of separation also mirror findings from other studies.

Aftermath of Separation from Child's Mother

This theme involved the fathers' and children's reactions toward separation and the mothers' involvement after the separation. Fourteen participants expressed that they suddenly took on a new role as a single father; for example, Participant 5 cited, "I didn't know what to expect, so it happened so fast I didn't have time to think." These findings mirror other research; for example, some researchers have shown that fathers in a single-parent system are forced to transition quickly into a nurturing role. Single fathers engage in children's lives while facing stereotypical views from society that single fathers are uninvolved and less nurturing or concerned than single mothers (Anggraini et al., 2018; Parker, 2017; Rhode, 2018). Moreover, as mentioned by the participants in this study, most fathers face this transition abruptly, with little preparation. The fathers even experience guilt, as Participants 2 and 13 stated they believed they had done something wrong toward their children.

Researchers similarly found gender and role gaps in custodial arrangements, as well as repartnering probabilities of single parents (Di Nallo, 2019; Parker, 2017). Di Nallo (2019) found that single fathers were more likely to repartner than single mothers, which might be a factor hindering single fathers from spending time engaging in bonding activities with the children in their custody (Cheng & Wu, 2016; Di Nallo, 2019). Although this study's participants did not seem to want to take more time away from their children than necessary, they did seem to feel guilt for not providing a proper mother for their children, hoping they would make a better choice next time and

experiencing guilt related to this feeling. For example, Participant 13 “blamed” himself for “choosing an irresponsible woman” as the mother of his child.

Holmgren (2019) found a similar finding among single fathers, noting that this population group faces difficulties concerning abrupt transitions. Rhode (2018) concurred when examining single African American custodial fathers’ experiences, thoughts, and feelings of daily challenges of parenting. Single custodial father participants often report nightmares regarding forced parenthood, lack of preparation time, challenges in embracing change, complexities in raising daughters, lack of support and help, and loss of identity (Rhode, 2018).

For most participants in this study, the mother’s involvement might not be healthy for them and the children. Participant 14 shared that his child’s mother tended to make promises to the child but ended up not keeping them. Researchers have shown such an issue causes single fathers to transition from a single-parent system to enter a traditionally feminine role. According to Chour and Fosse-Gomez (2017), single fathers face challenges as they experience the domestic sphere where they must act in a motherly way to their children who lack a mother figure while undertaking their roles as fathers. Molander (2019) concurred and noted this experience as a stress factor for single fathers. Single fathers must navigate a traditionally feminine marketplace that focuses on mothering (Molander, 2019). The authors noted that single fathers need support while navigating through society, especially as they transition to a single-parent system (Chour & Fosse-Gomez, 2017; Molander, 2019). Aiding single custodial fathers in this domain, considering the traditionally feminine field in parenthood, may decrease complications

and difficulties and stressors in single fatherhood. The reasons for separation found in this study also mirror previous findings.

Reason for Separation from Child's Mother

The theme reason for separation from the child's mother involved circumstances that led to the father being the single primary custodian. Of the 16 participants, 13 considered this to be a significant source of stress. In most cases, the children's mothers chose to leave the fathers and children behind, a notion not heavily studied in the research presented in the literature review. However, two participants stated that their children's mother passed away. McClatchey (2018) studied widowed fathers in the United States, finding this situation a prevalent experience for single fathers; however, few of the studies reviewed seemed to focus on single fathers of divorce.

The Lancet Public Health (2018) reported that single fathers were more likely to be widowed than single mothers, contributing to heightened distress and grief. The current study's participant agreed with this assertion, adding that another stressor was explaining the situation to his older child. Participant 12 lost his wife to a terminal illness, which led to feeling stressed about leaving his daughter when going to work. These findings help fill a gap in the literature as past researchers have focused on general population groups, such as widowed fathers and African American single fathers (Dobson, 2017; Givens, 2020; Parker, 2017; Payne, 2019; Rhode, 2018). However, no findings were specific to the population of single custodial fathers, like the ones in this study. The findings of this study regarding the act of raising a child and accomplishing chores also mirrored findings from other studies.

Hands-On Work in Raising Child and Accomplishing Chores

Raising a child and accomplishing chores refers to experiences of balancing housework, employment, children's school activities, and discipline. Fourteen participants shared time-specific tasks they accomplish for the day. Other researchers have shown similar results, finding that single fathers often experience heavy demands on their time and mental resources while trying to care for their children (Holmgren, 2019; McClatchey, 2018). In this study, most participants reported following a routine to manage their time between their children's needs and their employment and schooling. However, 14 of the 16 participating fathers in the current study stated they generally worked around their children's schedules to fulfill their duties better, lacking time to seek outside influences. The participants conducted time-specific tasks throughout the day that they did not have to do before they were single fathers. Finzi-Dottan and Cohen (2016) noted that custodial fathers experience challenges in time constraints. The researchers suggested helping such fathers by providing online support groups to alleviate the burden they face in parenthood and minimize the time needed to seek help, thus alleviating any additional burdens on the fathers' time. Not only do single custodial fathers face time issues, but they also face economic stressors.

Economic Stressors

The category, economic stressors, included worries about expenses and the time spent at work and away from the child (ren). Eight participants expressed stress due to economic reasons, predominately living and childcare expenses. Participant 13 emphasized, "I tried to get a babysitter, but the cost was extreme." This finding mirrored

other studies. For example, Biotteau et al. (2019) reported that single fathers often faced the loss of income and support after marital separation resulting in an increased risk of mental health problems and heightened stress. As such, single fathers not only face economic risks, possibly impacting the children under their care, but this loss of resources also impacts overall psychological wellbeing. Another researcher agreed with these findings, as Albert (2018) reported that men's income and wages decrease after entering single fatherhood by more than \$8,000 annually. Stack and Meredith (2018) similarly noted when examining the impact of financial hardship on single parents. The authors found that single parents often faced a high risk of financial hardship, resulting in days without food as they struggle to pay the bills (Stack & Meredith, 2018). Their study's findings further showed that financial hardship had significant impacts on their psychological well-being, as the participants reported feelings of isolation, anxiety, depression, paranoia, and suicidal ideation (Stack & Meredith, 2018).

These factors of wages and income are related to parental stress, as single fathers face pressures to provide both emotional and financial support for themselves, as well as for children under their care (Albert, 2018; Stack & Meredith, 2018). This issue causes fathers to require more time at work, but as expressed by participants in the current study, increased hours at work detracts from time spent with their children (e.g., Participant 6 perceived that spending time to earn money took the time away from his child). Given the issue of time or lack thereof, fathers may seek help in caring for their children. The category, help in caring for child, as identified in this study mirrors prior research findings and is discussed in the following subsection.

Help in Caring for Child

Sixteen participants perceived that their support systems of family, friends, and paid help for their child (ren) also comprised their mental health support network. Most participants received help from their immediate families (e.g., parents and sisters). Participant 7 reported that his mother and sister helped him “whenever” he needed them. Researchers noted similar findings, indicating that forms of support (family and organizational) could mitigate experienced distress and health risks of single fathers (Contreras, 2018; Johnson & Steir, 2016). Seepersad (2016) noted this finding in a phenomenological study when examining the experiences of single fathers of children with autism in Thailand. The author interviewed 10 single fathers regarding their challenges and experienced as single fathers of children with autism. Their findings showed that these fathers had various challenges in their day-to-day experiences of caregiving, achieving a balanced social life, and attaining social support systems to help them in their daily challenges (Seepersad, 2016). These issues were alleviated by having a support network, whether through family members, friends, or organizations. Although Seepersad (2016) focused on single fathers of children with autism, this body of findings could be utilized to understand the experiences and needed the support of single fathers who care for their children at the home, school, and community.

In a similar study, Contreras (2018) examined this topic in their qualitative study about the challenges and needs single Latino fathers faced in parenting. The author found that single fathers often needed family support and formal support from local and state agencies and organizations (Contreras, 2018). For example, Participant 7 reported that his

mother and sister helped him “whenever” he needed them. Only Participant 11 shared that his deceased wife’s parents came during weekends to care for the children. In the case of Participant 13, the child’s maternal grandparents did not want to get involved with the child, as they “want a relationship with their daughter.” Participant 6 remarried and shared that his wife helped care for his son. Participant 9 shared that his mother and his “female friends since high school” assist with childcare, relieving the stress of spending for a babysitter. However, Participant 9 and 15 hired nannies on the days that they worked, exacerbating any financial issues they faced. Through interviews, Melhado (2017) revealed similar findings that single fathers experienced complications and difficulties with finding childcare, especially in the absence of the children’s mother. The single fathers reported various challenges and difficulties in terms of finances when seeking childcare. However, though Melhado’s (2017) findings provided initial knowledge about single fathers’ parenting stressors, the study only focused on one area, New York City. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalizable to other areas or locations, especially that Melhado’s (2017) findings indicated that participants believed living in New York significantly influenced their parenting experiences with childcare. Despite these challenges, the participants mentioned feeling motivated by their children to do better, as discussed related to literature review findings in the following subsection.

Motivated by Own Child to Do Better

This category, motivated by own child to do better, emerged from data referring to finding the drive to be a better person and father for the child’s sake. A common experience of the 14 participants was that they looked past the stressors and attempted to

teach their children to be responsible for their actions. Other researchers showed similar results, indicating that fathers desired to set examples for their children. For example, some researchers found that single-parent fathers positively influence their children but found it difficult when distressed (Noronha & Monteiro, 2016). Researchers found that fathers were highly motivated to do better for their children through other studies of programs supplied to single custodial fathers. Payne (2019) proposed another approach by focusing on fatherhood intervention programs to help fathers in parenthood. The study's findings showed that fathers were more involved with their children and more responsible in parenthood, leading to increases in parent-child activities (Payne, 2019).

Givens (2020) conducted another qualitative study examining the African American fathers' lived experiences with fatherhood programs. Givens showed that after participating in fatherhood programs, the participants reported increased motivation to become better fathers and men, finding inspiration in the program and their children. This finding mirrored comments by Participants 10 and 16, who both tried to maintain a routine for the children's sake regardless of the stress they experienced. Participant 16 noted, "It was hard to balance work and being a single father. I had to get organized with my schedule and be more responsible." Despite these few studies finding such a positive motivation behind single custodial fathers' desires to do better for their children, this pool of findings still showed that U.S. single custodial fathers faced parental complications and difficulties that influenced their abilities to parent their children effectively (Melhado, 2017; Noronha & Monteiro, 2016). These findings could be used as initial guidance in identifying the stressors faced by single custodial fathers in different areas

and locations in the United States and require more research. When facing such issues, some fathers in the study reported that they developed resilience, a finding that only slightly supported research reviewed in the literature review, as discussed in the following subsection.

Developed Resilience

The category, developed resilience, referred to using one's capacities to overcome the challenges of being a single custodial father. This finding showed some hope for single custodial fathers' adverse experiences, as eight participants shared instances of resilience. Participants 2, 6, and 14 believed that they overcame their stressors by pushing through any barriers faced. This finding was a bit different from other studies; for example, Hallama (2020), McLeod (2020), and Rhode (2018) found that support for single fathers was vital because they coped more poorly with the situation of single parenthood than single mothers. The researchers found that single custodial fathers needed to be supported as they transitioned into a single-parent household and system to adapt successfully into a nurturing role and effectively engage in their children's lives. Despite these researchers mentioning such parents as struggling to cope with their situations, resilience was not mentioned in the studies as in the current study. No other literature review studies mentioned resilience as a coping strategy as participants in this study. This gap in the research leads to how the study's theory is impacted by the results, as discussed in the following subsection.

The Core Experience: Separation from the Child's Mother

The experiences of single, primary custodial fathers in this study revealed the central experience of separation from their child (ren)'s mother. The single father household per se was not the stressor that emerged from the participants' general experience, but the fathers' predispositions, environmental aspects, and reactive behaviors involved in raising their child (ren) without the child (ren)'s mothers. The father's predispositions in relation to separation from the child's mother were related to their own motivation and resilience. The environmental aspects were generally the social and economic stressors, the fathers' support network in caring for the child, and the reason and the impact of separation from the child's mother. The reactive behaviors were generally associated with the efforts of the fathers in raising their children.

The diathesis-stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) served as the framework for this study to understand the experiences of the single custodial fathers in California when raising their children. The diathesis-stress theory posits that parent predisposition, environmental aspects, and reactive behaviors are linked to a parent's risk for deleterious experiences and outcomes, specifically given the right circumstances and stressors (Ingram & Luxton, 2005). A diathesis-stress theorist posits that individuals are more likely to respond to stressful or perceived stressful situations given their specific biological background and beliefs or values (Ochsner, 2020). The diathesis-stress theory is relevant in parent-child research and contexts, as every parent is at risk of becoming overwhelmed (Ochsner, 2020). This research's goal was to answer the research questions about parenting challenges and difficulties from being a single custodial father in the

state of California; thus, the diathesis-stress theory assisted in understanding the single fathers' perspectives in gaining a holistic view of this family dynamic, whether transitional or normalized.

Using the diathesis-stress theory principles, Li et al. (2019) further explained how single-parent family systems were complex, striving for a new equilibrium in which multiple aspects of life were reorganized and coordinated. The authors used the diathesis-stress theory as the theoretical foundation to examine the interactive effects of family instability and adolescent stress reactivity on socio-emotional functioning (Li et al., 2019). The authors focused on adolescent stressors based on parent-adolescent conflict. Their findings showed that adolescents with higher parent-adolescent conflict levels had higher stress levels, which resulted in externalizing problems, especially during family instability (Li et al., 2019). This body of knowledge indicates the robustness and appropriateness of diathesis-stress theory as a robust framework for examining stressors in parent-child settings, specifically among single fathers raising children. The current study's findings expanded the application of diathesis-stress theory by focusing on single fathers raising children and the stressors faced in this process. The participants in this study showed that every single parent's experience was uniquely complex and atypical, showing the need for further research on single parents' experiences and challenges individually (Carone et al., 2017; Heath et al., 2015). The conceptual framework of the study supported this finding.

The theory also helps explain the findings of resilience among the study's father participants, a factor not often discussed in other literature, as shown in the above

subsection. Other researchers used the diathesis-stress theory to show how individuals may have protective factors coping mechanisms to deal with stressors (Mc Elroy & Hevey, 2014; Rivera, 2019), like those coping mechanisms of resilience described by participants in this current study. Mc Elroy and Hevey (2014) utilized the diathesis-stress theory and found significant relationships among factors of adverse childhood experiences, stressors, psychosocial resources, and well-being. The authors further noted the need to identify the stressors within parent-child relationships, as these significantly impact one's well-being, showing that their participants could develop positive coping mechanisms to combat any barriers faced (Mc Elroy & Hevey, 2014). Rivera (2019) further added that fathers faced significant challenges and barriers in caregiving, including exhaustion, preoccupation, social culture, and controlling forces. Such challenges need to be considered in helping single fathers, as such stressors could be detrimental to their health and well-being if they lacked coping mechanisms (Mc Elroy & Hevey, 2014; Rivera, 2019). Hence, this research on single custodial fathers' stressors framed with the diathesis-stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) showed the applicability of such a conceptual framework to understanding the results.

Limitations of the Study

I aimed to understand the experiences of the single custodial fathers in California when raising their children. The study's limitations involved the flaws and shortcomings resulting from various phenomena, including insufficient resources, small sample size, and limited methodologies. This study was limited from using qualitative methodology, which did not account for previous quantitative research discoveries, as qualitative

researchers used a smaller sample size. Because sample size could influence the research results, the results are harder to generalize the findings to a diverse population when unincorporated in the sample size. The use of pure samples also limited the research data. The samples entailed primary custodial fathers only. Also, I solely examined the experiences of single custodial fathers in California. Thus, the findings may not apply to individuals in other regions, which are not urban nor including rural areas. The research also had limited access to literature and secondary data. I did not have access to a broader range of secondary scientific data, thus limiting access to previous research, which could be used to compare the outcome.

Recommendations

There are several recommendations the researcher can make based on the results and the limitations of the study. First, the data in this study indicated that the participants had various reasons for being the sole parent, ranging from the wife suddenly leaving the family to death. The reasons behind fathers facing single parenthood were not fully explored in the literature. The Lancet Public Health (2018) reported that single fathers were more likely to be widowed than single mothers, contributing to heightened distress and grief. The current study's participant agreed with this assertion when adding that another stressor explained his older child's situation. These findings help fill a literature gap as past researchers have focused on general population groups, such as widowed fathers and African American single fathers (Dobson, 2017; Givens, 2020; Parker, 2017; Payne, 2019; Rhode, 2018). However, no findings showed specific reasons behind fathers facing single parenthood nor showed correlations among different situations and single

fathers' outcomes for raising their children successfully. For this reason, future researchers could conduct a quantitative study to show possible correlations behind fathers' outcomes when raising their children alone and the reasons behind their situations.

Another recommendation derives from the participants citing their children as a motivating source and contributing to an intention to persevere. Few researchers cited this finding, as most did not focus on asking parents about their coping mechanisms or reasons for continuing. Rather, most researchers focused on the stressors involved (Mc Elroy & Hevey, 2014; Rivera, 2019) or the need to provide fathers with programs to raise their children better (Chour & Fosse-Gomez, 2017; Molander, 2019). For this reason, it would be of great interest and contribution to the field to explore how single custodial fathers cope with their experiences of raising a child (ren) alone. This recommendation relates to another finding in this study, which showed that the participants developed resilience as a coping mechanism. Resiliency among single fathers is also a topic a finding little explored by other researchers. Thus, future researchers are encouraged to study how single custodial fathers cope with their abrupt transitions into raising their children alone.

Based on the study's limitations, a similar study on a larger sample size would further expand upon the findings indicating here. Future researchers could also study primary, custodial fathers but focus on those left by their child's mother compared to those widowed to show any differences in outcomes between the two cohorts. Future

researchers could also focus on more defined populations of single custodial fathers based on race and ethnicity than was completed in the current study.

Implications

The findings of the study led to several implications for social change. First, this study has implications for social change at the individual level. The findings of this study could help inform single, primary custodial fathers of the possible mental health resources they could utilize to reduce stress. Second, for the family level, the findings of this study could contribute to the support for the family, especially on how fathers could develop their relationship with their children. At the organizational level, social workers and leaders in government organizations can use these findings to see the need to provide further implementation programs to help single custodial fathers specifically. Other research supported this need as Johnson and Steir (2016) noted how single fathers needed vital support and information regarding parenting skills and how to raise their children at each developmental stage. The authors conducted a literature review, revealing limited support provided from parenting programs specific for single custodial fathers (Johnson & Steir, 2016). This lack of support was found more apparent among single custodial fathers residing in transitional housing facilities (Johnson & Steir, 2016). The single parents in the study reported the need for training in parenting styles, communication, discipline, and enforcing and maintaining rules in the household for their children (Johnson & Steir, 2016). This pool of findings provided empirical information regarding the need for support among single custodial fathers, which could help them in their parenting process (Contreras, 2018; Johnson & Steir, 2016), showing how the findings of

this study may be used to expand the knowledge of the need for providing more aid to these fathers. As such, the knowledge from this study could be used by government organizations to develop more tools to help single custodial fathers, promoting positive individual change among this cohort.

This study also has social change implications in the societal level. Leaders in social work or government can also use the findings to understand the consequences of sudden custodial situations with fathers, such as impacts on their time and finances, which would cause positive social changes, as well. If leaders institute actions based on the findings, they may positively influence social changes by helping fathers in society function better. These actions can influence the children under their care, possibly adding to bettering their lives and their fathers' lives so that both can be more productive members of society than before they gained help. As suggested by other findings, leaders can develop more online programs that have shown the impact of online support groups and programs to benefit single fathers (DeGarmo & Jones, 2019; Finzi-Dottan & Cohen, 2016). These past researchers focused on the impact of the online support groups and programs without examining specific distress and difficulties in single fatherhood (DeGarmo & Jones, 2019; Finzi-Dottan & Cohen, 2016; Teague & Shatte, 2020). However, these findings could be used as initial, empirical references in examining experienced complications and difficulties of single custodial fathers and how these programs could be applied for this specific cohort, helping mitigate stressors and health risks. Thus, this study's findings can be used by leaders to understand the need for online programs for such fathers.

This study also has implications for theory as the study expands the diathesis-stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The basic premise of the diathesis-stress theory is that “stress activates a diathesis, transforming the potential of predisposition into the presence of psychopathology” (Monroe & Simons, 1991, p. 407). According to Pruessner et al. (2017), there is an interplay of vulnerability factors, neurobiological processes, and progression of stress faced by individuals under stress. Furthermore, researchers have extensively used the diathesis-stress theory from the perspective of life stress theory and research, examining types of stressors faced by the general population (Pruessner et al., 2017). Therefore, this study’s diathesis-stress theory showed an understanding of the single custodial fathers’ perspectives in this study, showing a holistic view of this family dynamic, whether transitional or normalized. The fathers in this study developed guilt and stress associated with their sudden transition to single custodial parenthood, as supported by the diathesis-stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984); however, some fathers also developed resilience and focused on their children to find further motivation and inspiration to continue.

Additionally, this study has potential theoretical implications, utilizing an evolved grounded theory approach associated with Strauss and Corbin (1997) and Clarke (2007), and constructivist grounded theory associated with Charmaz (2017). The end result of this qualitative grounded theory is a theory that is grounded from the gathered data through electronic correspondence and semi-structured individual interviews among single, primary custodial fathers in California. The categories of this study revealed the following: societal stressors, aftermath of separation from child’s mother, reason for

separation from child's mother, hands-on work in raising child and accomplishing chores, economic stressors, help in caring for child, motivated by own child to do better, and developed resilience. These outlined major resulting categories have potential theoretical implications, specifically concerning the stressors of single fatherhood. That is, the findings of this study can be used as an explanatory theory regarding the unique stressors that single, primary custodial fathers face. Overall, the core category was that single, primary custodial fathers' experiences of stress and coping were central to their separation from the child's mother.

Conclusion

This qualitative study aimed to understand the experience of the single custodial fathers in California when raising their child (ren). This grounded theory study aimed to address the lack of awareness and resources available for single custodial fathers to address stressors in caring for their children. This qualitative grounded theory's findings were derived from electronic correspondence and semi-structured individual interviews with 16 single, primary custodial fathers residing in the state of California. The data were analyzed inductively following Percy et al.'s (2015) step-by-step process, which generated the following categories: societal stressors, the aftermath of separation from child's mother, the reason for separation from child's mother, hands-on work in raising a child and accomplishing chores, economic stressors, help in caring for a child, motivated by own child to do better, and developed resilience. Overall, the participants perceived that single fathers had added stressors than single mothers because they were stigmatized.

Despite the increasing prevalence of single-father households, support programs and methods for single custodial fathers continue as understudied; thus, there was a lack of attention on the challenges that single custodial fathers faced in their experiences parenthood (Freeks, 2017; Gates et al., 2016). This issue was vital to examine further because contemporary forms of family structures, such as single custodial fathers, could present adverse challenges for fatherhood in society (Freeks, 2017; Gates et al., 2016). Although this information provided the baseline for my study, the lack of focus on single custodial fathers' challenges and experiences was a knowledge gap. As Chiu et al. (2018b) and Coles (2017) indicated, there was a need to address single custodial fathers' specific needs and the complications and difficulties they faced in parenthood, especially given the increases in U.S. single-father households. Future researchers can continue addressing this gap to help such fathers cope with their experiences and to encourage future leaders to create more programs to support fathers in such a transition better.

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Appendix A: Consent Form

Consent Form

You are cordially invited to participate in a research study about the stressor experienced by single fathers who are parenting in the state of California, USA. You have been chosen as a potential participant because of your personal experience on this particular topic. The study is being conducted by Kenneth Jones, Jr., Doctoral Candidate at Walden University. Please read the form below and feel free to ask any questions you may have.

Background Information

The sole purpose of this study is to obtain a better understanding of the experiences you have had as the primary parent of your child/children.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview that will take approximately 1-2 hours and will be conducted via a secure online platform like Zoom. A follow-up interview may be requested at some point and will follow the above process.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Research should only be done with those who freely volunteer. Your participation in this study is voluntary and at any time during the study you can decline to continue participating without any explanation. Your decision to participate or not to participate, will not impact any current or future affiliations with Walden University or any other entity. The researcher seeks 12-15 volunteers for this study.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

The possible risk of this research surrounds those personal feelings that will be brought up talking about your experiences on being a single father. With the protections in place, this study would pose minimal risk to your wellbeing. This study offers no direct benefits to individual volunteers. The aim of this study is to benefit society by enhancing possible mental health services and treatment planning for other single fathers that may come from your own experiences.

Compensation

There will be no form of compensation for this study.

Privacy

The researcher is required to protect your privacy. Your identity will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law (very rare). The researcher is only allowed to share your identity or contact info as needed with Walden University supervisors

(who are also required to protect your privacy) or with authorities if court-ordered (very rare). You are entitled to maintain a copy of the informed consent.

Contacts and Questions

The researcher collecting information for this study is Kenneth Jones, Jr. and can be contacted through kennethjr.jones@waldenu.edu. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant or any negative parts of the study, you can call Walden University's Research Participant Advocate at 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is 01-08-21-0676912 and it expires on January 7, 2022.

You might wish to retain this consent form for your records. You may ask the researcher or Walden University for a copy at any time using the contact info above.

Obtaining Your Consent

If you feel you understand the study and wish to volunteer, please indicate your consent by replying to this email with the words, "I Consent" ____.

Appendix B: Letter to Potential Participant

Letter to Potential Participant

Date:

Name of participant:

Address:

Dear (Name),

My name is Kenneth Jones Jr. and I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University. I am conducting a dissertation study on the stressors single fathers experience while raising their children in the state of California, USA. There are a number of studies that explore single fatherhood; however, many of these studies do not include the voice of the father. This research will provide insight into what stressors these fathers experience through their own unique words.

I understand that your time is precious and I appreciate your consideration to participate in this study. In order to fully understand your experience we will need to meet a minimum of two separate times. The first meeting will consist of an interview that will take approximately 1- 2 hours. A second interview may be requested within 1-2 weeks for any additional information. Interviews will be held via video platform (Zoom) and will be scheduled around your availability. Each interview is designed to get to know you and learn about your experiences of being a single parent. All information gathered during these meetings will be kept confidential.

Any information from the meetings that are included in the research study will use an alias and will not be able to be linked to you. Should you have any questions pertaining to the study, feel free to contact me through via email at: [REDACTED]. If you are interested in participating in the study, please contact me at your earliest convenience to schedule a date and time that we can meet to further discuss the study. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Kenneth Jones Jr.

Doctoral Candidate - IRB approval #: 01-08-21-0676912

Walden University

Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer

Single Fatherhood



Do you care for your child on your own?



I am not Mr. Mom. I am a Dad!!!
Calling all single fathers!



Are you a single father, over the age of 18 who previously or currently has a child under the age of 18 years old?

Do you want to share your experiences with the world and other fathers?

DAD

*A son's first hero
A daughter's first love*



QuotesIdeas.com

ly is t

the parenting process.

For more information or if you are interested in participating please contact:
Kenneth @
Email: kjj2209@yahoo.com

All research is for a clinical psychology research study

approval # 01-08-21-0676912

Appendix D: Screening Protocol

Screening Protocol

Date: _____

Location: _____

Name of Interviewer: _____

Name of Interviewee: _____

Interview Number: One

1. How old were you when you became a parent?
2. How old were you when you became a single parent?
3. How old was your child when he/she came into your care?
4. How many children have you cared for as a single parent?
5. What area were you residing in when you became a single parent?
6. Were you working? If so where and what was your yearly income?
7. How many people were residing in your home?
8. What level of school did you complete?
9. Have you ever been diagnosed with any developmental disabilities, if so what and when?
10. Have you ever been diagnosed with any mental health disorders, if so what and when?
11. Were you raised by your mother, father, both, or neither?

Appendix E: Research Questionnaire

Question 1: What are the circumstances that led up to your role as a single parent?

Question 2: what did your daily routine consist of when you were parenting?

Question 3: What expectation did you have of yourself as a single parent? How did you deal with the expectations you had for yourself when they were not met? How did you deal with this mentally?

Question 4: What were the expectations you had for your child? How did you deal with the expectations you had for your child when they were not met? Did you seek professional services for your child?

Question 5: What is the role your child's mother maintained in parenting this shared child? Did you seek family therapy?

Question 6: Did you have any family or friends who helped you care for your child? If the participant answers yes, these are the follow up questions: A) who was available to help you? B) How did each of these individuals assist you with the care of your child? C) How often did each of these individuals assist you with your child?

Question 7: As a single father, were there any stressors that you experienced? If the answer is yes, the follow up question is: Can you explain what these stressors were?

Question 8: How did you deal with each of these stressors?

Question 9: Do you feel that these identified stressors influenced your parenting abilities? If the answer is yes, the follow up questions are: A) How do you feel they impact your ability as a parent? B) In your opinion, what do you think could have helped minimize the stressors you have identified?

Question 10: Do you feel your living environment contributed to the identified stressors?

If so the follow up question is: How do you feel your environment impacted these stressors?

Question 11: Interviewer: Do you think services could help minimize the stressors you have identified? If the answer is yes, the follow up questions are A) what service do you think have been beneficial to you and your child? B) How do you think these services could have helped improve your parenting?