

## PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL BEING AND ADJUSTMENT OF SINGLE PARENTS: PSYCHO-SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To explore the relationship between psychological well-being and psycho-social adjustment of economically independent and dependent single parents belonging to various socio-economic classes.

**Study Design:** Correlational study.

**Place and Duration of Study:** This study was conducted at technical services association, Lahore, from Jun 2018 to Aug 2019.

**Methodology:** A sample of 213 single parents with ages ranging from 25 to 50 was selected through purposive sampling. Psychological Well-Being Scale Revisited and Psychological Adjustment Scale were used.

**Results:** Multivariate analysis showed that well-being and adjustment levels of divorced ( $M=114.17$ ,  $SD=24.5$ ), ( $M=88.89$ ,  $SD=19.45$ ) single parents was significantly lower than those of widowed ( $M=136.78$ ,  $SD=17.68$ ), ( $M=105.86$ ,  $SD=10.88$ ) ones respectively. Also, economically independent ( $M=135.1$ ,  $SD=20.38$ ), ( $M=104.0$ ,  $SD=14.5$ ) single parents had better well-being and adjustment than those who are economically dependent ( $M=108.3$ ,  $SD=24.5$ ), ( $M=85.5$ ,  $SD=17.1$ ). Furthermore, post-hoc tests revealed significantly low psychological well-being ( $M=130.72$ ,  $SD=23.16$ ) and adjustment ( $M=81$ ,  $SD=12.23$ ) of single parents from lower social class.

**Conclusion:** The study concludes that socio-economic status and economic independence/dependence have a profound impact on the psychological wellbeing and adjustment of single parents. These findings will promote the understanding of single parenting in collectivistic cultures and may lead towards learning of coping strategies to foster psychological well-being, familial and social adjustments of single parents.

**Keywords:** Adjustment, Psychological well being, Single parenting.

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### INTRODUCTION

Among several rapid changes that took place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one of the drastic ones was the breakdown of traditional family structure. During the last few decades, the number of single-parent families increased rapidly. Today, worldwide, single-parent families represent about a quarter of all the families. Single-parent families are those where one parent, mother or father, lives with dependent children without a partner, either by her/himself or in an extended household. Single-parent families are increasing in Pakistan (6%)<sup>1</sup> as well despite that the cultural values of a highly religious country emphasize marital and familial unity.

Single parenting are prone to calamitous and

stressful and anxiety provoking events, which in turn, also effect their psychological well being. For instance, divorce leads not only to numerous economic and employment challenges, but also social loneliness and physical health issues. A socially acceptable prerequisite is always considered marriage and can be most conspicuous in a high collectivistic society like Pakistan where marital success provides the basic matrix of all other social relations. Likewise, death of a spouse is assumed as life's most painful events and widowhood also drastically influence well-being of an individual<sup>2</sup>. Literature is also evident that women face more trauma, pain, and even cognitive decline after losing a spouse as compared to men<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, women are less likely than men to remarry, and men rather take this decision quicker<sup>4</sup>. Although financial hardship after widowhood is generally presumed harsh for women, economic difficulty along with work stress, social

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and emotional crisis are significantly observed in single parents of both genders<sup>5</sup>. Both divorce and death of a spouse are traumas where the single parent not only endure grief and impediments her/himself but also has to redeem her/his children who share the loss of a parent. Also, single parents feel more difficulty in coping with child-rearing because responsibility is multiplied<sup>6</sup>.

Single parenting is a severe challenge in a highly collectivistic culture of Pakistan where norms favour traditional family. Amidst possible stigmatization from society, as well as coping with loss, supporting one's children financially and emotionally poses threats to psychological well-being and adjustment within the family. The rationale of this research follows that previous studies explored the differences between single-parent families with the traditional ones (i.e., a mother, father and children)<sup>7</sup>, and few efforts have concentrated on the psychological differences within the single parent's group<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, a need has arisen to study the variability among single-parents' mental health in terms of psychological well being and adjustment. Psychological well being and adjustment are both multi-dimensional constructs. Psychological well-being comprises of "autonomy (a sense of self-determination), environmental mastery (the capacity to manage effectively own life and surroundings), personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (positive evaluation of oneself and one's past life)"<sup>9</sup>. Psychological Adjustment is "the ability to have an accurate perception of reality, the ability to cope with stress and anxiety, a positive self-image, the ability to express the full range of emotions and to have good interpersonal skills"<sup>10</sup>. Significant differences in the psychological well being and adjustment of single parents on the basis of socio-economic status, economic independence and dependence, divorced and widowed status and gender were predicted.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study was conducted at technical services association (TSA) from June, 2018 to August,

2019. The study employed a correlational design using a survey method to gain observations on The sample was drawn with purposive sampling technique. The inclusion criteria were an only mother or father living with her/his children in the nuclear or extended family system with other relatives. Single parents whose divorce was under process and who were not divorced but separated were excluded from study. The data from upper class single parents was collected from TSA assistance through snowballing as they were not directly associated with the organization for any support. The ethical principles as informed consent, the confidentiality of the participant, providing them with knowledge of the purpose of the study and ensuring access to any publications upon their demand were thoroughly followed. Certification of following ethics standards was approved from relevant authorities (Certificate No. TSA/Sep/19/7). Ryff's psychological well-being Revisited<sup>9</sup> was used to measure the psychological well-being of single parents. It consists of 6 distinct subscales of wellness that is Autonomy (a sense of self-determination), Environmental mastery (the capacity to manage surroundings), Personal growth, Positive relations, Purpose in life, and Self-acceptance (positive evaluation of oneself and one's past life). Responses on the scale were elicited on a six-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. There are positive and negative phrased items on inventory. The negatively phrased items were scored reversely. Psychological Adjustment Scale is an indigenous scale in the Urdu language<sup>11</sup>. It was used to measure adjustment levels. This inventory consists of 27 items. It explores different aspects of adjustment that are: accurate perception of reality, ability to cope with stress and anxiety, positive self-image, ability to express the full range of emotions and good interpersonal relationships. Each item on the scale was scored on a five-point rating ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. There were negative and positive statements on the scale. Negative items were reversed scored. Both instruments had well-established reliability and other psychometric

properties reported by their authors and numerous other studies. Data were analysed using SPSS package 21 employing statistical techniques of t-test and MANOVA.

**RESULTS**

A sample consisting of 213 single parents participated in the study, comprising of 102 (47.9%) men and 111 (52.1%) women. Age of single parents varied from 21 to 50 with 21-30 (29.6%), 31-40 (27.7%), and 41-50 (42.7%). Seventy eight (36.6%) single parents were from lower, 69 (32.4%) from middle and 66 (31%) were from

trated very high internal consistency. A t-test indicated no significant gender differences among single parents, psychological well-being and adjustment. The results of multivariate tests (table-I) indicated that the main effect of single parent case type (divorced/widowed) (Wilk’s Lambda  $\lambda=0.85$ ), Economic independence/dependence (Wilk’s Lambda  $\lambda=0.90$ ), and Socio-economic status (Wilk’s Lambda  $\lambda=0.92$ ) were statistically significant on single parent’s psychological well being and adjustment. The interaction effects were not the focal point here.

Results indicated a significant main effect of

**Table-I: Multivariate analysis of variance to explore the single parents’ psychological well-being and adjustment in terms of divorce/widowed, economic dependence / independence, and Socio-economic status (n=213).**

Source	Dependent Variable	Sum of squares	Degree of Freedom	Mean Square	F	p-value	$\eta^2$	Observed Power
Case type	Psychological well-being	10814.18	1	10814.18	34.55	<0.01*	.15	1.00
	Psychological Adjustment	1131.24	1	1131.24	13.06	<0.01**	.06	.95
Economy	Psychological well-being	6529.32	1	6529.32	20.86	<0.01**	.09	1.00
	Psychological Adjustment	1648.36	1	1648.36	19.04	<0.01**	.09	.99
Socio-economic Status	Psychological well-being	4104.60	2	2052.30	6.56	<0.01**	.06	.91
	Psychological Adjustment	582.57	2	291.28	3.36	.037*	.03	.63
Case type* Economy	Psychological well-being	2176.52	1	2176.52	6.95	<0.01**	.03	.75
	Psychological Adjustment	20.12	1	20.12	.23	.630	.00	.08
Case type* SES	Psychological well-being	7221.74	2	3610.87	11.53	<0.01**	.10	.99
	Psychological Adjustment	1078.12	2	539.06	6.23	<0.01**	.06	.89
Economy* SES	Psychological well-being	10823.38	2	5411.69	17.29	<0.01**	.15	1.00
	Psychological Adjustment	583.81	2	291.90	3.37	0.036*	.03	.63
Case type* Economy* SES	Psychological well-being	249.10	1	249.10	.80	0.373	.00	.14
	Psychological Adjustment	42.33	1	42.33	.49	0.485	.00	.11
Error	Psychological well-being	63234.71	202	313.04	-	-	-	-
	Psychological Adjustment	17492.26	202	86.60	-	-	-	-
Total	Psychological well-being	4991125	213	-	-	-	-	-
	Psychological Adjustment	1709353	213	-	-	-	-	-

upper socio-economic status. Fifty nine (27.7%) were matriculates/intermediate, 68 (31.9%) bachelors, and 86 (40.4%) masters. One hundred and thirty four (62.9%) were economically independent and 79 (37.1%) were dependent. One hundred and nine (51.2 %) were divorced and 104 (48.8%) were widowed.

The reliabilities in terms of internal consistency were calculated. Both measures, Ryff’s psychological well-being Revisited ( $\alpha=.90$ ) and Psychological Adjustment Scale ( $\alpha=.84$ ) demons-

trated very high internal consistency. A t-test indicated no significant gender differences among single parents, psychological well-being and adjustment. The results of multivariate tests (table-I) indicated that the main effect of single parent case type (divorced/widowed) on single parent’s psychological well-being (F (1, 213) = 34.55,  $\eta^2 = 0.15$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and psychological adjustment (F (1,213)=13.06,  $\eta^2=.06$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Partial eta squared indicated that Case type (divorced/widowed) was responsible for 15% variance in single parent’s psychological wellbeing and 6% variance in adjustment. Next, results indicated a significant main effect of Economic independence/dependence on single parent’s psychological wellbeing (F (1,213)=20.86,  $\eta^2=.09$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and

psychological adjustment ( $F(1, 213) = 19.04, \eta^2 = .09, p < .001$ ). Partial eta Squared indicated that Economic independence/dependence was responsible for 9% variance in single parent's psychological wellbeing and 9% variance in adjustment.

Further, post hoc analysis (table-IV) revealed that single parents from lower socio-economic class scored significantly lower on psychological well-being and adjustment than the rest.

**Table-II: Mean, standard deviation and pairwise comparisons for divorced and widowed single parents.**

Variables	Divorced (n=109)	Widowed (n=104)	F	Pairwise Comparisons
	Mean ± SD	Mean ± SD		
Psychological well-being	138.61 ± 25.43	163.36 ± 22.47	34.55	2>1
Psychological Adjustment	84.52 ± 14.21	93.13 ± 8.08	13.06	2>1

**Table-III: Mean, standard deviation and pairwise comparisons for economically independent and dependent single parents.**

Variables	Economically Independent (n=134), Mean ± SD	Economically Dependent (n=79), Mean ± SD	F	Pairwise Comparisons
Psychological well-being	161.79 ± 22.75	131.86 ± 22.94	20.86	1>2
Psychological Adjustment	93.75 ± 10.45	80.20 ± 10.65	19.04	1>2

**Table-IV: Mean, standard deviation and f-values for upper, middle and low socio-economic class.**

Variables	Upper Class (n=66), Mean ± SD	Middle Class (n=69), Mean ± SD	Low Class (n=78), Mean ± SD	F	Post Hoc
Psychological well-being	160.56 ± 22.23	163.83 ± 21.54	130.72 ± 23.16	49.46	2>1>3
Psychological Adjustment	95.53 ± 10.70	90.96 ± 8.97	81.00 ± 12.23	36.62	1>2>3

More, results indicated a significant main effect of socioeconomic status on single parent's psychological well-being ( $F(2, 213) = 6.56, \eta^2 = .06, p < .001$ ) and psychological adjustment ( $F(2, 213) = 3.36, \eta^2 = .03, p < .001$ ). Partial eta Squared indicated that Socio-economic status was responsible for 6% variance in single parent's psychological wellbeing and 3% variance in adjustment. Observed power of the tests were very high for all the main effects of case type (divorced/widowed), Economic independence/dependence, socio-economic status on both psychological wellbeing and adjustment indicating that tests were able to detect the difference if it was there.

Table-II shows the further exploration by pairwise comparisons revealing higher mean scores for Widowed single parents on psychological wellbeing and adjustment as compared to Divorced ones.

Table-III shows the further exploration by pairwise comparisons revealing higher mean scores for Economically Independent single parents on psychological wellbeing and adjustment as compared to Economically Dependent ones.

## DISCUSSION

The present study was designed to explore the mental health of single parents in terms of psychological well-being and adjustment. The results of the study supported the hypotheses. Except for gender, there were significant differences in the adjustment and well-being of single parents according to their economic independence and dependence and divorced and widowed status.

The results supported significant differences in psychological adjustment and wellbeing among single parents belonging to various socio-economic statuses. This, therefore, reinstates the role of economics in the adjustment of single parents who, as a result of changes in family structure, have to face economic pressures. These results support earlier research where interviews with single parents revealed economic circumstances to be a major contributor to their distress<sup>12</sup>. Well-off single parents can, thus, nurture their children better as compared to those stuck at lower levels of socio-economic scale or dependent on others for daily needs. Furthermore, earlier studies reveal financial constraints and the

realization of the lack of a provider to modify the relationship between widowhood and depressive symptoms<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, economic hardship perturbs the well-being and adjustment of impecunious ones.

There were significant differences between economically independent and dependent single parents on psychological well-being and adjustment. Similar to other research efforts showing how balancing employment with childcare helps lone parenting in single mothers, the current study also demonstrated higher psychological well-being and adjustment levels of employed single mothers. However, maternal employment has a positive effect up to an extent, as workload and job stress can exacerbate the situation when the single parents struggle to manage quality time at home<sup>14</sup>.

Moreover, substantial differences between the well-being of economically independent and dependent single parents also illustrate the collectivistic to individualistic transitioning of Pakistani society<sup>15</sup>. A few decades ago, burdens were abated by family as compared to current circumstances; families continued to live together in a monied sense as well. The ceaseless shattering of traditional, integrated and joint-family is inciting individual economic hardships. Therefore, single parents may experience economic dependence as a repercussion for their self-esteem, and consequently, well-being. This is supported by earlier research showing that amidst financial hardships, social support can be a protective factor in transitions of widowhood<sup>16</sup>.

Divorced and widowed single parents differed significantly on psychological well-being and adjustment with the latter scoring higher on both variables. The influence of a collectivist culture is accentuated with widowed single parents reporting better adjustment and well-being than divorced ones. These results can be understood in a context where divorce is a stigma. Nonetheless, widowed single parents face economic challenges, yet divorced ones are the special targets of social stigmatization. Pakistani culture is a highly

religious and collectivist one, where the separation between couples elicits many social pressures<sup>17</sup>, delineating their discounted social adjustment and well-being scores. Divorced single parents live with the unfinished business of a previous relationship that is further amplified by the social stigmatization. The unfinished business remnants come as court trials, child custody cases and inefficient court systems which may pose further challenges to the well-being and adjustment of single parents<sup>18</sup>.

Like any other scientific investigation, this study also has some limitations. First, our sample may have over/under-represented the single parents of any particular age group, gender and other social and economic demographics due to non-probability sampling. Future investigations can design their samples to a more accurate depiction of demographical ratios. Secondly, a larger sample is likely to bolster the intended demographical variety. Besides, self-report measures may inflate or deflate the psychological experiences of these single parents, and further studies may prefer to measure psychological constructs with more robust methods. Moreover, this study was conducted in urban and semi-urban areas of Punjab, lacking rural single parents issues exploration.

## CONCLUSION

This study provided a detailed description of psychological well-being and adjustment in single parents of different socio-economic class in a highly collectivist and family-oriented culture. The study concludes that socio-economic status and economic independence and dependence have a profound impact on the well-being and adjustment of single parents. Apart from economic aspects, one of the unique findings of the study is the impact of a social identity as a divorced single parent within a high family-oriented culture that negatively influences their well-being and social adjustment and this seems to influence men and women alike, as this investigation found no gender differences. The study prompts for further phenomenological research

into the identities and familial relations of single parents.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

There was no conflict of interest to be declared by any author.

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