

Addressing Single Parents' Needs in Professional Counseling: A Qualitative Examination of Single Parenthood

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Abstract

Single parenthood is on the rise, but little research addresses the implications for professional counselors who work with single-parent clients. The present study sought to examine single parenthood from the parental perspective and, from that analysis, draw relevant counseling implications. Using qualitative content analysis, the researchers surveyed single parents about their experience of single parenthood, including role expectations, challenges and benefits, and what they believe counselors should know.

Keywords

single parenthood, qualitative content analysis, counseling

Single parenthood is prevalent in the United States. According to a 2016 U.S. Census Bureau report, during the 56-year span between 1960 and 2016, the percentage of two-parent households decreased from 88% to 69%. Likewise, the U.S. Census Bureau (2018) reports that the number of children living in single-parent households increased for both male and female heads of household from roughly 5.8 million children in 1960 to 19.6 million children in 2018. However, there exists a dearth of research on single parenthood and its implications for professional counseling. Although often contradictory, some available research points to notable effects on the parents including changes in their psychological health (Meier, Musick, Flood, & Dunifor, 2016), financial strain (Bauman, 2000), and social stigma (Sidel, 2006). Given the considerable rates of single-parent households, it is imperative that researchers seek to understand the experience and effects of single parenthood. However, few studies have qualitatively analyzed the experience of single parenthood from the custodial parent's perspective (i.e., Ford-Gilboe, 2000; Richards & Schmiede, 1993). To address this gap in research, the authors conducted a qualitative study of single parents' experience of custodial parenting. Using qualitative content analysis (QCA; Schreier, 2012), the authors analyzed open-ended survey questions to address the following research questions: (1) How do single parents describe their parental role? (2) What do single parents identify as the challenges and/or limitations of single parenthood? (3) What do single parents identify as the advantages and/or strengths of single parenthood? and (4) What personal qualities do single parents believe are essential to being effective as a single parent?

Literature Review

Although difficult to judge with precision, rates of single-parent households seem to have increased over the years. Vespa, Lewis, and Kreider (2013) found a 10-percentage point increase in single-parent households between 1970 and 2012, rising from 17% to 27%, respectively. For the 7-year period from 2001 to 2007, Blackwell (2010) estimated that approximately 48% of children were reared in a nuclear family household, whereas approximately 17% were reared in a single-parent home. Grall (2016) further estimates that, in 2013, 13.4 million parents provided singular custodial care to 22.1 million children (ages 21 and under). This equates to over one quarter of all children living with a singular custodial parent (Grall, 2016).

While single parenthood occurs due to factors such as divorce, death of a parent, separation, adoption, unplanned pregnancy, and donor insemination, the main pathways to single parenthood are divorce and unintended pregnancy (Miller,

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1992). For example, in 2009, over 1.1 million children, or 1.5% of U.S. children, lived with a recently divorced parent (Elliott & Simmons, 2011); those figures do not include children whose parents divorced in previous years. Rates of unplanned pregnancy are also high, with approximately 37% of U.S. births being the result of an unintended conception (Mosher, Jones, & Abma, 2012). Factors that lead to single parenthood are important to consider when determining the impact on both parents.

Impact on Single Parents

The experience of single parenthood presents unique challenges and benefits. Single parents tend to face greater hardship than traditional families, mainly related to elevated levels of stress and exhaustion. Meier, Musick, Flood, and Dunifor (2016) found that single mothers tend to experience higher rates of sadness, stress, and fatigue when compared to partnered mothers. These feelings appear to be exacerbated in single mothers who are unemployed (Meier et al., 2016). Indeed, the psychological, financial, and social impact of being a sole custodial parent can be tremendous. However, although the literature in this section summarizes many of the challenges of single parenthood, the authors have attempted to highlight some of the advantages as well. It is important that a review of the relevant literature presents a balanced picture of single parenthood.

Psychological impact. Single parenthood can place significant psychological strains on custodial parents. Although quite dated, Bray and Anderson (1984) described a number of elements of the single parent's role that still hold relatively true, at least in part. Among these, Bray and Anderson discussed *role overload*, in which single parents must simultaneously manage the multiple demands of rearing children and maintaining a household. Richards and Schmiede (1993) later supported some of these assertions when single parents in their study reported "role and task overload" (p. 280), difficulty maintaining social connections, financial stress, and challenges in their relationship with the noncustodial parent.

Bray and Anderson (1984) further describe the social and familial isolation that can occur following the dissolution of a partner relationship, the feelings of grief and loss that naturally tend to emerge following a breakup, and relationship difficulties with the noncustodial parent. Similarly, McLanahan and Beck (2010) highlight the challenges unmarried couples face in rearing children. They identify primary contributing factors to the instability of unmarried parenting relationships including:

low economic resources; government policies that contain marriage penalties; cultural norms that support single motherhood; demographic factors, such as sex ratios that favor men and children from prior unions; and, finally, psychological factors that make it difficult for parents to maintain healthy relationships. (McLanahan & Beck, 2010, p. 30)

Indeed, social and relational factors can present substantial challenges for single parents, which may contribute to issues related to overall well-being and mental health.

In a more recent study of single parents in New Zealand, Collings, Jenkin, Carter, and Signal (2014) found evidence for the poorer mental health among single mothers, which they attributed largely to socioeconomic distress. Campbell, Thomson, Fenton, and Gibson (2016) added to this line of research when they examined the role of mandatory work programs on the overall financial and physical health of single parents. They found that single parents may experience financial stress, depression, and overall fatigue that is exacerbated by working a low wage and time-consuming job with the inability to afford day care for their child. The interaction of these factors may contribute to a sense of loss of control for the single parent, thereby exacerbating psychological stress (Campbell, Thomson, Fenton, & Gibson, 2016). Further, Shenoy, Lee, and Trieu (2016) examined the difference in multiple mental health issues between single-parent and non-single-parent community college students. They found that financial stress was significantly elevated in single-parent college students. Shenoy et al. (2016) also found elevated rates of family problems, sleep difficulties, personal health issues, depression, suicide ideation, and suicide attempts in single-parent students. The degree of potential interaction between financial stress and other mental health issues in single parents is unclear. However, having a support network may help to insulate parents from some of the stressors of single parenthood (see Schrag & Schmidt-Tieszen, 2014).

As aforementioned, unintended pregnancy and divorce are the main routes to single parenthood. Unintended pregnancy has been found to be related to higher rates of depression when compared to planned pregnancy (Yanikkerem, Ay, & Piro, 2013) and higher levels of perceived stress (Maxson & Miranda, 2011). These negative affective responses can be particularly pronounced for unwanted pregnancies, in which cases women may experience higher rates of depression and lower rates of self-efficacy, parental support, and social support (Maxson & Miranda, 2011). Similarly, although unique to each individual, single parenthood resulting from divorce may lead to feelings of stress, depression, and even happiness (Amato, 2000). These feelings of grief and loss may be similar to those one experiences as a result of widowhood (Trivedi, Sareen, & Dhyani, 2009). Overall, researchers have established that single parents experience conditions that make them more vulnerable to stress and conditions that factor into poor physical and mental health outcomes (see Rousou, Kouta, Middleton, & Karanikola, 2013). These symptoms can cause detrimental effects if unaddressed. However, single parents may also experience a number of positive effects.

Positive psychological aspects exist for single parents, including improved communication and parenting skills, personal growth, and the pride that comes from financially supporting and managing a family (Richards & Schmiede, 1993). Also, voluntary single parenthood (e.g., adoption, donor insemination), as opposed to involuntary (e.g., divorce, unplanned pregnancy), often results in positive experiences. Voluntary

single parenthood can engender a sense of empowerment for going against social norms and intentionally pursuing a non-traditional family (Miller, 1992). Further, Beattie and Viney (1981) found that single parenthood following the dissolution of marriage can be a relief for some parents and can lead to feelings of hope in regard to building a stronger connection with their child. These parents also reported the ability to manage problems through “positive action taking” (p. 420). Although the literature on the positive effects of single parenthood is relatively dated and limited, this remains an important consideration for professional counseling, which draws upon client strength and resilience to maximize treatment outcomes.

Financial impact. As discussed earlier, financial strain may be a leading contributor to psychological stress among single parents (Collings, Jenkin, Carter, & Signal, 2014). In 2009, 28.3% of all single-parent households lived in poverty (Grall, 2011). In 2013, approximately 31% of custodial mothers and their children lived below the poverty line, while 17% of custodial fathers and their children lived in poverty (Grall, 2016). Among single parents, significant factors that contribute to poverty include gender, ethnicity, previous work experience, and educational status (Zhan & Pandey, 2004). However, for single parents who live below the poverty line, entering the workforce may actually contribute to additional stresses. In fact, Bauman (2000) found that single parents who receive welfare and are active in the workforce may face greater “material hardship” and instability. There are multiple possible explanations for this finding, but one may be in regard to the balancing of work and parenthood without assistance from the other parent. In their systematic review of the literature on single parenthood, Rousou, Kouta, Middleton, and Karanikola (2013) found that the potential effects of financial distress for single parents may include fewer positive parenting practices and less positive familial relationships as well as diminished physical and mental health. As aforementioned, although financial stress is a real concern for many single-parent households, single parents may also experience a sense of pride for being able to financially provide for their family (Richards & Schmiede, 1993).

Social impact. The rise in single parenthood also points to interesting societal implications that affect single parents’ experience. Zartler (2014) looked at the social views of single parenthood, when compared to the traditional nuclear family. The researcher found that Austrian participants tend to use the nuclear family as an “ideological code” against which to judge single-parent families, thereby focusing on the disadvantages of single parenthood. This judgment can enforce stigma that single parents and their children must learn to manage. Although single parents may face social stigmatization, they may also experience a unique closeness with their children and feelings of pride in their accomplishments as single parents (Ford-Gilboe, 2000).

It is important to discuss the broader social context of single parenthood. Over time, the perception of what constitutes a family has been shifting from the traditional nuclear family toward including “wider families”—a term used to describe the

voluntary addition of a member to the family unit to address needs unique to the single parent lifestyle (Donati, 1995). This may involve the support of extended families to assist with child-care and household responsibilities. Goldscheider and Kaufman (2006) also found evidence of a potential shift in attitudes toward single parenthood toward greater acceptance. These shifts in social acceptance or tolerance of single parenthood may affect the lived experience of custodial single parents.

Method

Research Questions

The following four research questions guided this qualitative study: (1) How do single parents describe their parental role? (2) What do single parents identify as the challenges and/or limitations of single parenthood? (3) What do single parents identify as the advantages and/or strengths of single parenthood? and (4) What personal qualities do single parents believe are essential to being effective as a single parent?

Recruitment

Recruitment was conducted via e-mail invitations sent to professional counseling, academic and institutional listservs, and by word of mouth. This allowed the researchers to obtain participation from counseling and noncounseling populations (e.g., members of other academic fields and staff) and nonacademic fields. A passive recruitment procedure was chosen to minimize risks to participant confidentiality.

Participants

Eligible participants included any adult (ages 18 and older) who self-identified as a single parent. A total of 29 people initiated the survey, but two survey responses were incomplete and were, therefore, excluded from data analysis. This resulted in a total participant number of 27 ($N = 27$). Self-reported pathways into single parenthood included the following: divorce ($n = 21$), never married ($n = 3$), and separation or breakup ($n = 3$). To maximize anonymity, participants reported their age in ranges, with representation from ranges 25–31 years to 66–72 years. There was a gender overrepresentation of female ($n = 26$) to male ($n = 1$). Participants identified primarily as Caucasian or White ($n = 15$), followed by African American or Black ($n = 8$), Puerto Rican ($n = 1$), mixed race ($n = 1$), and White Hispanic ($n = 1$). The majority of participants reported advanced education, with 44.4% ($n = 12$) reporting doctoral degree attainment, 7.4% ($n = 2$) reporting education at the specialist’s degree level, 29.6% ($n = 8$) reporting master’s degree attainment, 14.8% ($n = 4$) reporting the receipt of a bachelor’s degree, and 3.7% ($n = 1$) reporting some college education. No participants reported only high school or General Education Diploma attainment. No demographic information was collected regarding participants’ professional field of practice. The length of single parenthood ranged from less than 1 year to 43 years.

Instruments

The online survey, administered via Qualtrics (May 2013), included two instruments: a 10-item demographic form and an 8-item open-ended questionnaire. Both instruments were developed by the research team and were based on a review of the relevant literature. The open-ended questions addressed the following topic areas: (a) how the participant entered single parenthood, (b) the participant's role as a single custodial parent, (c) ways in which single parenthood differs from joint caregiving, (d) the challenges and/or limitations of single parenthood, (e) the advantages and/or strengths of single parenthood, (f) personal qualities that are essential to being an effective single parent, (g) things about single parenthood that counselors should understand, and (h) advice/suggestions for individuals who have recently become single parents.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze demographic data. Qualitative survey data were analyzed using QCA as described by Schreier (2012). Mayring (2000) describes QCA as a means through which "to preserve the advantages of quantitative content analysis as developed within communication science and to transfer and further develop them to qualitative-interpretative steps of analysis" (para. 2). Elo and Kyngas (2008) describe QCA as a process of thematic analysis that allows researchers to describe the data through the derivation of categories and subcategories. These categories and subcategories are then organized hierarchically to help explain the nature of their relationship (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In the present study, the researchers coded for latent content and implicit meaning, a process that is consistent with QCA (see Mayring, 2000; Schreier, 2012). For each category and subcategory, the researchers provided definitions and illustrative examples.

Although thematic analysis of qualitative research is inherently shaped by the researchers' unique worldview, the research team sought to minimize bias to the degree possible. Accordingly, the research team utilized three coders to code and to audit the analysis at preestablished intervals. Three coders began by independently coding an initial data set. All coders then met to compare and discuss the initial codes, come to consensus, and establish a working codebook or coding frame (see Schreier, 2012). At that time, the research team developed preliminary categories, subcategories, and definitions. To verify the fit and accuracy to the data of the coding frame, data set Number 1 was recoded with the initial coding frame. The coding frame was then pilot tested using a second data set. All three coders independently coded the second data set and reconvened to establish consensus and identify any necessary revisions to the coding frame. At this point, the coding frame was considered ready for use. Two researchers then coded each subsequent data set independently using the coding frame. Their coding was then audited by the third research team member. As new codes emerged, the coding frame was

modified to accommodate the emerging themes. After all coding was completed and audited, the research team reconvened to determine consolidation of the categories or subcategories. After all consolidation was completed, the final coding frame was subjected to an external audit. Finally, to ensure accuracy of the final coding frame to the data, the final consolidated coding frame was used to recode the entire data set and was subsequently subjected to an external audit.

Trustworthiness

Although it is impossible to eliminate bias in the interpretation of qualitative data, the researchers took precautions to enhance trustworthiness and limit researcher bias. First and foremost, to increase the reliability of codes and lessen the impact of researcher bias on the interpretation of data, data were coded by a team of three coders (Schreier, 2012). For the first two data sets, all three coders independently coded the data. For the final code sets, two coders independently coded the data, and the last coder functioned as an auditor to identify biases and ensure compliance with the established codebook. Second, the final codebook and analysis were subjected to an external audit, wherein the nonbiased auditor reviewed categories and subcategories for unidimensionality (i.e., each category and subcategory only captures one aspect of the data) and mutual exclusivity (i.e., each category and subcategory reflects separate ideas; see Schreier, 2012). Third, the research team subjected the analysis to a comparison of relevant literature (i.e., triangulation of data) to identify points of divergence. This process helps to determine whether the divergence is in the actual data or whether it is the result of researcher bias.

Findings

A qualitative analysis of the data using Schreier's (2012) model of QCA yielded seven categories and 25 subcategories (Table A1 in Appendix A). Categories included the following: (a) role as the single custodial parent, (b) comparison to joint caregiving, (c) challenges and limitations, (d) advantages and strengths, (e) essential qualities, (f) essential counselor characteristics and skills, and (g) advice to others. In the following section, we will organize the subcategories within their primary categories, provide definitions of each subcategory, identify illustrative quotes from participants, and report frequency counts (f) and the total number (n) of participants whose statements were coded into each subcategory.

Within the category role as the single custodial parent, the following two subcategories emerged: responsibility for all things at all times and financial burden. Responsibility for all things at all times ($f = 62$, $n = 26$) is defined as "Participant discusses the experience of maintaining sole responsibility for all things related to childcare including caretaking, providing emotional support, and/or fulfilling multiple parental gender roles." One participant stated the following when he described his overarching responsibility for his child: "The main difference between being a single custodial parent and being married

is that the onus of responsibility while caregiving falls completely upon me. There is no one there to provide a break when I could use one.” Similarly, another participant talked about her responsibility for caring for all dimensions of her child’s welfare when she stated,

In my current role, I am often providing for the daily emotional, social, physical, and psychological well-being of my children. I am responsible for managing the household, including cooking, cleaning, organizing, and coordinating everyone’s schedules. I provide daily transportation to my children to school, activities, events, and social activities, etc.

The second subcategory of role as the single custodial parent is financial burden ($f = 36, n = 20$), which is defined as “Participant discusses the increased financial responsibility that accompanies single parenthood.” Participants talked about prioritizing expenses, stating “Having one income is the major difference. When the check runs out it forces us to be creative. It was and is extremely difficult to explain to the girls why they could not have the things that were so easy for their friends to get. It was very difficult to pay the mortgage before getting groceries. It was hard not eating out or ordering in.” and “You have less income and are expected to do more with it.”

The category of *comparison to joint caregiving* included two dichotomous subcategories: *challenges of single parenting* and *no distinction*. The definition of challenges of single parenting ($f = 9, n = 8$) is “In comparing single parenthood to joint parenthood, the participant talks about the challenges or burden of single parenthood.” One participant’s statement epitomizes this subcategory: “As single parents, we have the sole responsibilities. Through co-parenting, it’s much easier to ‘tag team.’ One parent may be better at discipline while the other is better at staying organized. Single parents have to do it all.” The subcategory no distinction ($f = 15, n = 12$) is defined as “In comparing single parenthood to joint parenthood, the participant does not distinguish single parenthood as inherently different from joint parenthood.” A large portion of participants made statements such as the following, which represent their belief that parenting is parenting, regardless of the number of parents present within the home: “In my case it didn’t differ that much because their father was not an active participant except for one [*sic*] their extracurricular sports” and “My role is mom, dad, taxi driver, coordinator, and the same as it is for any parent just without having another body in the house to help.”

Within the large category challenges and limitations, seven subcategories emerged: challenges in relationship with noncustodial parent, desire for co-parenting, challenge of finding balance, child-focused concerns: childcare, child-focused concerns: child development, negative effects on self, and blending families. The subcategory challenges in relationship with noncustodial parent ($f = 5, n = 3$) is defined in terms of “Participant discusses challenges she/he faces in her/his relationship with the child’s noncustodial parent.” Participants primarily talked about differences in parenting styles and/or values, such as “You still have the time when they are with

the other parent who may have different standards which conflict with what you are trying to instill in your children.” The subcategory desire for co-parenting ($f = 15, n = 11$) is defined as “Participant discusses the desire to mutually rear her/his child with a collaborative co-parent.” Participants made statements like the following, which illustrate their wish to have a partner to assist in parenting: “I think it would be amazing to have support in this parenting journey from her father” and “Not having a peer or companion to share the good and bad times with was very difficult.” The subcategory challenge of finding balance ($f = 34, n = 7$) is defined as “Participant discusses the challenge of finding balance among the multiple life dimensions and roles.” Participants talked about learning to manage time, balance responsibilities, muster energy, and remain present to their children. One participant summarized much of this when she said: “My role as a single parent means I’m always trying to find balance without feeling overwhelmed/burnt-out, so that I can meet the ongoing needs of all three of my children.” The subcategory child-focused concerns: childcare ($f = 9, n = 3$) is defined as “Participant discusses challenges surrounding finding appropriate childcare and/or maintaining supervision of child.” Participants talked about the logistical, financial, and emotional demands of providing adequate childcare in the absence of a second custodial parent—“In my experience, my child was shuffled around a lot because I had to accept childcare assistance from many sources so that I could attend school and pursue my own interests occasionally” and “One of my greatest challenges is adequate affordable day care.” Somewhat related, the subcategory child-focused concerns: child development ($f = 8, n = 5$) is defined as “Participant discusses the possible negative effect of having a single parent on the child’s psychological development.” Participants talked about their concerns regarding possible negative emotional effects of not having a same-gender role model in the home and/or the absence of a positive model of a healthy relationship. Examples include the following: “Similarly, my son doesn’t get to experience another person caring and loving him, another parent in particular. I think that’s significant. If his dad was more involved he could still have, but that’s not our reality and seems unlikely to change. My son doesn’t have a good example of married life” and “Of course, as a male, he doesn’t have a male example or counterpart to seek for advice and a model of how to be as a male or not to be.” The subcategory negative effects on self ($f = 17, n = 10$) speaks more directly to the effects of single parenthood on the parent and is defined as “Participant discusses the negative effects single parenthood has had on self, including the stigma of single parenthood and/or intrapersonal struggles.” Participants spoke primarily about the stigma, directed to both them and their child(ren), associated with single parenting. The following participant talked about being treated differently when she said: “Teachers, married friends, neighbors, etc. treated me/us differently than I believe joint caregivers are treated.” Relatedly, others spoke about the criticism they receive personally for their conduct as a single parent—“I was criticized for most of my behaviors around our child’s care as well as for dating

and the ‘type’ of men I dated. Parents felt I should live a life of celibacy, even return home.” A tone of being judged unfairly ran clearly throughout this subcategory. The final subcategory of challenges and limitations, blending families ($f = 3, n = 1$), talks about the challenges of bringing another parent into the home and is defined as “Participant discusses the challenges of romantic partnering when children are involved.” This subcategory is very small but reflects concerns about the change in dynamics and others concerned about the nature of the relationship between their child(ren) and the new parent. The one participant talked about her concerns related to blending families when she said, “You worry about your children and if they’ll be mistreated by a stepparent” and “If there are other children be mindful that blended families are very difficult to maintain, but, not impossible. It takes a lot of caring and sharing to make blended families work.”

Within the category advantages and strengths, five subcategories emerged: child is protected, enhanced child development, connection with child, self-directed parenting, and intrapersonal development. The subcategory child is protected ($f = 7, n = 6$) speaks to single parenting as a means of protecting children and is defined as “Participant discusses protecting the child from unhealthy parental relationships as an advantage of single parenthood.” Illustrative examples of this subcategory include the following: “In situations of domestic violence or other maladaptive situations, there may be only benefits to single parenthood” and “Another advantage would be that you don’t subject your children to the other parent’s lifestyle that caused the divorce.” The subcategory enhanced child development ($f = 5, n = 4$) is defined as “Participant discusses exposing the child to opportunities that enhance personal development as an advantage of single parenthood.” Participants talked about the values and skills their children learn in a single-parent home, which they may not learn to the same degree in a joint parent home. For instance, one participant stated, “I believe my children and I have learned to trust, rely on, and work together in a way that may not have been as necessary in a household with joint caregivers.” The subcategory connection with child ($f = 13, n = 10$) is defined as “Participant discusses the advantage of being able to establish a closeness with the children that she/he could not have in a co-parenting relationship.” The following example illustrates this advantage: “The major advantage is that you are in a one-on-one relationship with the child.” The subcategory self-directed parenting ($f = 33, n = 17$) is defined as “Participant states that single parenthood allows her/him to rear the child in accordance with her/his belief system, without compromising with another parent.” A participant captured this subcategory when she said: “I get to raise my children with the values that I see as being important without anyone else telling me it’s wrong or that I should do it another way.” The subcategory intrapersonal development ($f = 13, n = 10$) is defined as “Participant talks about the intrapersonal development and recognition of one’s own strengths that accompany single parenthood as distinct advantages.” Participants talked about the strength and resilience that comes with effectively parenting on one’s own—“It

has made me a stronger person” and “I also believe single parents are very resourceful out of necessity and are able to establish a greater balance between parenthood and life outside of parenthood.”

Within the category *essential qualities*, three subcategories emerged: *effective parenting skills*, *fortitude*, and *transpersonal qualities*. Effective parenting skills ($f = 42, n = 20$) is defined as “Participant discusses the importance of practicing effective parenting skills such as using structure, being consistent, communicating effectively, and demonstrating confidence.” Although they discussed other skills, such as consistency and communication, to a large degree, participants talked about staying focused on their child(ren) as a critical skill for single parents to possess—“If the cooperation is not there, keeping a focus on the fact that you can be intentional about the life you model for your children is critical for your sanity.” The subcategory fortitude ($f = 21, n = 13$) is defined as “Participant discusses the importance of learning to overcome adversity and draw upon one’s own internal strengths in difficult times.” Within this subcategory, participants talked about the strength of character required of effective single parents. One participant stated, “The phrase, ‘Long days, short years’ is appropriate. Perseverance and stamina with emotional detachment from the other parent is essential.” The final subcategory of essential qualities is transpersonal qualities ($f = 16, n = 12$) is defined as “Participant discusses the importance of enhancing one’s own transpersonal qualities such as forgiveness, selflessness, and/or spirituality.” Within this subcategory, participants talked largely about the giving of themselves completely to their children and the importance of spirituality. One participant summarized this when she said, “Lose the anger and forgive as quickly as possible because it frees your soul emotionally and teaches one about resilience. Love your children’s father or mother, in doing so you are teaching your children a powerful life lesson.”

The category of essential counselor characteristics and skills includes four subcategories: counselor nonjudgment, counselor empathy, counselor provide resources, and counselors take a holistic approach. Within this category, participants provided feedback regarding the most important things counselors can do to support single parents. The subcategory, counselor nonjudgment ($f = 14, n = 9$), is defined as “Participant discusses the importance of counselors being nonjudgmental in their relationship with the single-parent client.” In addition to identifying specific ways that counselors can avoid judging their clients, participants talked about the importance of counselors knowing their values and beliefs about single parenthood, so that they do not impose them on clients—“I also think that it is important for counselors to examine their own beliefs about parenting in advance of working with single parents.” The second subcategory, counselor empathy ($f = 17, n = 13$), is defined as “Participant discusses the importance of counselors practicing empathy and compassion in their clinical work with single parents.” In addition to urging counselors to understand the challenges of single parenthood and exercise flexibility, participants talked about wanting to feel supported—“be

encouraging and supportive because single parents usually lack that from other people.” The third subcategory, counselor provide resources ($f = 6, n = 5$), is defined as “Participant discusses the importance of counselors providing resources, or information about resources, to their single-parent clients.” One participant clearly emphasized the expectation that counselors should help clients identify and utilize community and psychoeducational resources when she said, “Be sensitive, ask what basic needs are needed and be willing to suggest resources to get them.” The fourth subcategory, counselors take a holistic approach ($f = 11, n = 6$), is defined as “Participant discusses the importance of counselors taking a holistic approach to intervention, through focusing on the entire family system, identifying client strengths, and/or helping the client to use positive reframing.” Participants asked counselors to work with clients on identity development that is not tied to parenthood, explore fears, address relationships with children, and use parents’ strengths as therapeutic tools. Examples include the following: “to understand they have other aspects of their identity, not just a single parent” and “the rest of the world loves to tell you what a disadvantage your children have, so emphasizing their strengths is important.”

Within the final category, *advice to others*, two subcategories emerged: *find support* and *practice self-care*. The subcategory find support ($f = 40, n = 20$) is defined as “Participant discusses the importance of finding external support (e.g., emotional and financial) to assist in relieving some of the challenges of single parenting.” This subcategory frequently emerged in the data. Participants talked about finding support groups, bonding with other parents, relying on friends and family, and learning to ask for help. An illustrative example of this subcategory is “there is no one to partner with, creating the need to establish an outside support network to assist you in caring for your child.” Similarly, the subcategory practice self-care ($f = 29, n = 16$) is defined as “Participant discusses the importance of practicing self-care and/or promoting personal growth.” Within this large subcategory, participants emphasized the importance of self-care. One participant stated this clearly when she said, “The one thing I see single parents forget to do is take care of themselves. However, that looks it needs to remain important.”

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of single parents. The results addressed seven main categories: (a) role as the single custodial parent, (b) comparison to joint caregiving, (c) challenges and limitations of single parenthood, (d) advantages and strengths of single parenthood, (e) essential qualities, (f) essential counselor characteristics and skills, and (g) advice to others.

Consistent with past literature, participants reported both advantages (see Beattie & Viney, 1981; Richards & Schmiede, 1993) and challenges (see Bauman, 2000; Collings et al., 2014; McLanahan & Beck, 2010; Meier et al., 2016; Richards & Schmiede, 1993) to single parenthood. Challenges included the

relationship with the noncustodial parent, a desire for co-parenting, finding balance among multiple roles, managing childcare and supporting child development, negative effects on self, and blending families. These challenges are relatively consistent with the factors leading to psychological strain among single parents outlined by McLanahan and Beck (2010). The majority of the participants reported increased financial burden, which could lead to increased stress. This is consistent with Collings and colleagues (2014), who identified economic deprivation as a leading cause of psychological stress among single parents. This also supports Meier and colleagues’ (2016) finding that single parents’ distress can be exacerbated by unemployment. Participants also expressed concerns related to childcare and their child’s psychological development. Parents did not identify academics as a concern for their child, which has been reported by other researchers (i.e., Amato, Patterson, & Beattie, 2015).

Parents in this sample reported advantages of single parenthood as well as the essential qualities necessary to succeed as a single parent. Advantages included the following: child is protected, enhanced child development, connection with child, self-directed parenting, and intrapersonal development. Although participants identified concerns related to child development as a challenge, they also identified enhanced child development and stronger connection with the child as advantages. This aligns with Beattie and Viney (1981), who noted that some recently unattached single parents experience a hope for an improved relationship with their child. This is also similar to Ford-Gilboe (2000), who reported that “optimism pride may be a more critical strength for single parent families” (p. 54), the participants identified effective parenting skills (e.g., confidence), fortitude, and transpersonal qualities as essential qualities for being a single parent.

In addition to essential qualities for the single parent, participants identified essential counselor characteristics (i.e., non-judgment and empathy) and counselor skills (i.e., providing resources and taking a holistic approach). Participants consistently noted the importance of the counselor’s patience, understanding, and sensitivity to the unique responsibilities single parents hold. In addition, they emphasized the need to assume a more directive approach in helping single parents identify resources and sources of support. A willingness within the counselor to address issues from a family systems perspective, which involves the purposeful inclusion of the child(ren) in treatment, and operating from a strengths-based/wellness approach was another common recommendation that has direct clinical application. In line with Korittko (1991), single parents in the present study brought attention to the role of counselors in helping clients identify their strengths and positive qualities rather than focusing on the challenges of single parenthood.

Finally, participants provided advice for other single parents, encouraging them to find support and practice self-care. These findings are grounded in the literature on stress and distress among single parents. Bray and Anderson (1984) highlighted the impact of isolation on single parents, and Schrag and Schmidt-Tieszen (2014) discussed the value of familial and

nonfamilial support in helping teenage mothers to manage the stress of single parenthood.

The results of this research address the experiences of single parents. Specifically, this research elucidates the meaning single parents attach to their experience of parenthood and identifies strategies single parents employ to fulfill their multiple roles. Participants offered a range of information related to role differentiation and engagement, perspectives on caregiving, qualities possessed by effective single parents, and ways that others can support single parents. The results of this study apply to both counseling practice and counselor education.

Implications for Practice

In linking the results of this study to effective counseling practice, our analysis suggests that professional counselors and counselor educators must make several significant therapeutic considerations. Specifically, the authors recommend that professional counselors demonstrate an understanding of the following: (a) the unique aspects of single parenthood and the multiple roles single parents assume; (b) the challenges or limitations of single parenthood; (c) the benefits of single parenthood and the strengths single parents tend to possess; (d) strategies to elicit or enhance personal qualities for effective single parenting practice; (e) ways to link single parents to their support systems and promote self-care; (f) approaches that support single parents with empathy, patience, and understanding; and (g) resources that can assist single parents in meeting the multiple demands of their parental role. To address the first 3 items (i.e., unique aspects of single parenthood and the multiple roles single parents assume, challenges or limitations of single parenthood, benefits of single parenthood and the strengths single parents tend to possess), professional counselors must assume a multiculturally sensitive therapeutic approach.

In working effectively with clients who are single parents, counselors must develop knowledge of their clients' unique experience of single parenthood and remain attuned to ways in which the counselor's biases and assumptions shape counseling practice. Strategies for developing awareness should be embedded into the counselor education process and should follow the process of developing cultural awareness as it pertains to any unique group of clients. This training often addresses utilization of the Arredondo et al. (1996) Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development Multicultural Counseling Competencies. In professional practice, counselors are encouraged to approach single parenthood in the way they would approach any diversity status—with openness, respect, and a willingness to learn about the client's unique experience.

As a means of eliciting or enhancing personal qualities for effective single-parenting practice, professional counselors can assume a strengths-based approach that highlights clients' resiliency, fortitude, and skills related to effective parenting practice. This practice is consistent with the American Counseling Association's (2010) *20/20: Consensus Definition of Counseling*, which emphasizes the role of empowerment in the professional counseling process. To this end, professional counselors

can help clients to identify meaning and purpose in their experience and, when appropriate, support their spiritual connections. Cognitive reframing may also be used as a means of helping clients to see the strengths in themselves and the positives in their experience rather than focusing on the challenging. However, cognitive reframing should be utilized in a way that is neither invalidating nor falsely optimistic.

Through the use of psychoeducation, professional counselors can help single parents to understand the importance of utilizing their support systems and exercising self-care. Single parents may be resistant to these interventions, as doing things for themselves may feel selfish or unnecessary. However, as the analysis of the present data suggests, attending to one's emotional and interpersonal needs is paramount to one's ability to be emotionally present as a parent.

In their work with single parents, professional counselors are encouraged to exercise empathy, patience, and understanding for the parents' multiple demands. This may include considerations such as not charging cancellation fees for single parents, using an appointment reminder system, and maintaining a child-friendly lobby or having a separate playroom. Counselors may also request feedback from clients who are single parents regarding small accommodations or adjustments they can make to improve service delivery.

As indicated by the data analysis, it is important that professional counselors are aware of resources that can assist single parents in meeting the multiple demands of their parental role. This may include community resources such as those for low-income families, child-sitting services, academic support programs for children, and child-friendly businesses and/or events. Although not all single parents will want or need access to community resources, professional counselors should be aware of the services available to support families and be prepared to share that information with clients as appropriate.

Finally, given the continued rise in the rates of single parenthood (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016), it is imperative that counselor education programs integrate considerations for clinical intervention with single parents into their curriculum. Counselor education programs are responsible for providing a strong foundation for clinical practice and for developing competent professional counselors who are able to work with clients from various diversity statuses. Considering the unique experience of single parents, it is imperative that programs include the development of knowledge, skills, and awareness that specifically addresses serving single parents as a standard part of the curriculum.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Although measures were taken to increase the quality and the trustworthiness of this study, limitations remain. Because the survey was anonymous, the researchers were unable to ask follow-up questions and gather additional detail when participant responses were vague or too succinct for interpretation. Accordingly, some responses were considered as insufficient for coding. Additionally, the anonymous online format prevented the research team from using member checking (i.e.,

participants did not have the opportunity to review the results). Future studies should provide opportunities for the participants to engage in more in-depth interviews and allow opportunities for member checking. Moreover, future research could involve interviewing counselors who work directly with single parents or single parents who have recently sought therapeutic assistance. This line of inquiry could yield results that are particularly pertinent to the counseling field. Another limitation of the study is in the participants' gender representation. All but one of the participants were female; therefore, gender underrepresentation

limits the generalizability of the results to males. Future studies that highlight the male experience of single parenthood could contribute markedly to the knowledge base. A final and noteworthy limitation is the disparity in length of time as a single parent. The length of single parenthood ranged from less than 1 year to 43 years. The experience of these parents may be markedly different due to a number of factors, such as various cultural changes, and the recollection of single parenthood may not be fully comparable to the real-time lived experience of single parenthood.

Appendix A

Table A1. Summary of Qualitative Analysis.

Category	Subcategory	Definition	Freq.	<i>n</i>
Role as the single custodial parent	Responsibility for all things at all times	Participant discusses the experience of maintaining sole responsibility for all things related to childcare, including caretaking, providing emotional support, and/or fulfilling multiple parental gender roles.	62	26
	Financial burden	Participant discusses the increased financial responsibility that accompanies single parenthood.	36	20
Comparison to joint caregiving	Challenges of single parenting	In comparing single parenthood to joint parenthood, the participant talks about the challenges or burden of single parenthood.	9	8
	No distinction	In comparing single parenthood to joint parenthood, the participant does not distinguish single parenthood as inherently different from joint parenthood.	15	12
Challenges and limitations	Challenges in relationship with noncustodial parent	Participant discusses challenges she/he faces in her/his relationship with the child's noncustodial parent.	5	3
	Desire for co-parenting	Participant discusses the desire to rear her/his child with a collaborative co-parent mutually.	15	11
	Challenge of finding balance	Participant discusses the challenge of finding balance among the multiple life dimensions and roles.	34	17
	Child-focused concerns: childcare	Participant discusses challenges surrounding finding appropriate childcare and/or maintaining supervision of child.	9	3
	Child-focused concerns: child development	Participant discusses the possible negative effect of having a single parent on the child's psychological development.	8	5
	Negative effects on self	Participant discusses the negative effects single parenthood has had on self, including the stigma of single parenthood and/or intrapersonal struggles.	17	10
	Blending families	Participant discusses the challenges of romantic partnering when children are involved.	3	1
Advantages and strengths	Child is protected	Participant discusses protecting the child from unhealthy parental relationships as an advantage of single parenthood.	7	6
	Enhanced child development	Participant discusses exposing the child to opportunities that enhance personal development as an advantage of single parenthood.	5	4
	Connection with child	Participant discusses the advantage of being able to establish a closeness with the child(ren) that she/he could not have in a co-parenting relationship.	13	10
	Self-directed parenting	Participant states that single parenthood allows her/him to rear the child in accordance with her/his belief system, without compromising with another parent.	33	17
	Intrapersonal development	Participant talks about the intrapersonal development and recognition of one's strengths that accompany single parenthood as distinct advantages.	13	10
Essential qualities	Effective parenting skills	Participant discusses the importance of practicing effective parenting skills such as using structure, being consistent, communicating effectively, and demonstrating confidence.	42	20
	Fortitude	Participant discusses the importance of learning to overcome adversity and draw upon one's internal strengths in difficult times.	21	13
	Transpersonal qualities	Participant discusses the importance of enhancing one's own transpersonal qualities such as forgiveness, selflessness, and/or spirituality.	16	12

(continued)

Table A1. (continued)

Category	Subcategory	Definition	Freq.	<i>n</i>
Essential counselor characteristics and skills	Counselor nonjudgment	Participant discusses the importance of counselors being nonjudgmental in their relationship with the single-parent client.	14	9
	Counselor empathy	Participant discusses the importance of counselors practicing empathy and compassion in their clinical work with single parents.	17	13
	Counselor provides resources	Participant discusses the importance of counselors providing resources, or information about resources, to their single-parent clients.	6	5
	Counselors take a holistic approach	Participant discusses the importance of counselors taking a holistic approach to intervention, through focusing on the entire family system, identifying client strengths, and/or helping the client to use positive reframing.	11	6
Advice to others	Find support	Participant discusses the importance of finding external support (e.g., emotional and financial) to assist in relieving some of the challenges of single parenting.	40	20
	Practice self-care	Participant discusses the importance of practicing self-care and/or promoting personal growth.	29	16


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