

Examination of Socio-Economic Variables Having Effect on Functions of Single Parent Families

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the affect of socio-economic variables on single parent families general functions. Participants of this study consisted of single parent employees at the Hacettepe University in Ankara, Turkey (n=119). In this research, McMaster Family Assessment Device (FAD) used as well as the socio-economic data such as age, gender, level of education, level of income, state of being satisfied with the level of income, number of family members and children, and the duration of living as a single parent. Results suggested significant relationships exist among level of education, state of being satisfied with the level of income and family general functions in single parent families.

Key Words: Family, single parent family, family functions, general functioning, socio-economic variables

1. INTRODUCTION

As in many countries, the number of single parent families has been increasing in Turkey. Data from the Turkish Statistical Institute show that the number of single parent families (defined as a lone parent due to reasons such as divorce, death, abandonment, etc. plus dependent children) has increased, and that the concept of divorce has recently become more common in society (TÜİK, 2012).

An individual has some compulsory functions towards his/her family members no matter whether or not he/she is a single parent. Its main functions that are more or less similar in all societies are the following: continuing the bloodline, satisfying economic needs, providing status, planning children's education, socialization and care of children, performing spare time activities, protection of family members, creation of environment of mutual love, division of roles within the family and mutual satisfaction (Ogburn, 1963; Yorburg, 1983). All these functions can be grouped under four main categories as "biological", "social", "psychological" and "economic" (Yıldız, 1997; Sanay, 1990; Özgüven, 2001). Lewis, Beavers, Gosselt and Philips (1976) defined functional / non-functional families according to whether or not they were able to fulfill specific functions at an expected level.

Evaluating the features of functional and non-functional families generally, a functional family can be defined as "healthy" while non-functional, in other words families which cannot fulfill functions at expected level, can be regarded as "unhealthy" (Lewis et al., 1976). In a healthy family structure, members are cordial to each other, they react emotionally and exhibit necessary love and care, and emerging problems are resolved without damaging the unity of the family. Flexibility is inherent to the internal structure and functioning of a healthy family. There exists a healthy communication among its members. Children are informed in every issue that matters for the family. No side is taken in case of a conflict. Unconditional love is pertinent in such a family. Other than the common life of the family, every member has different engagements and relationships. In a healthy family, members define the existing interaction as "togetherness" and the needs, skills and powers of each member are taken into consideration. For this reason, the decisions made in this family are based not on coercion but on rationality (Duyan, 2000; Kabasakal, 2001; Nazlı, 1997).

The literature emphasizes that some factors can play a role in whether a family is functionally healthy or unhealthy, such as: the number of household members, composition of family members, age, gender structure, education level of family members, income level of the family, being urban- or rural-based, the age of first marriage, employment of adult family members (Fişek 1992; Bulut 1993; Duyan 1996).

The functions of the family are of great importance because they cannot be carried out by any other entity as successfully and stably as a family. In other words, the family is an entity that cannot be replaced in society in terms of quality and functions. Despite the importance of family, we did not identify any previous studies that directly analyzed the effect of socio-economic variables on the general functions of single parent families. Therefore, this study aimed to identify the socio-economic variables that are effective on general functions of single parent families. In this respect, this research is original in that it is the first study that investigates the socio-economic variables affected the single parent families in Turkey.

2. METHOD

2.1. Sample

Participants of this study consisted of single parent employees (328) at the central campus and Beytepe campus of Hacettepe University, Ankara. No sample was chosen, but instead the study attempted to access the entire target population. Participants were contacted in person and surveys were given individually. On arrival at their work sites, and following the researcher's self-introduction, the purpose of the study was explained. Participants were also informed that participation in the study was voluntary. After obtaining their consent, the survey packets, which subjects read and completed on their own, were distributed and then researchers collected all surveys once they were completed. Only 36% (119) of the target population was reached, since a proportion of families declined to participate in the study and other families could not be reached. Data were collected between October to December 2011.

2.2. Instruments

Socioeconomic Variables: This study involved information about the single parent's personal characteristics such as gender, age, level of education, duration of living as a single parent, level of income, state of being satisfied with the level of income, family size and number of children. Within the scope of the research, the prominent characteristics of families are as follows: the parent is a woman (%76.5), 35 aged or over (%72.2), graduated from high school (%50.4), lived as a single parent for 1–5 years (50.4), has a single child (%64.7), monthly income level is between 2001 TL and 3000 TL (%41.2), having 3 people at home (%52.1) and dissatisfied with the current income level (%38.7) (Table 1).

(McMaster Family Assessment Device-FAD): The General Functions Sub-device of Family Assessment Device, developed by Brown University and Butler Hospital in the USA, was used to

assess the general functions of single parent families. This sub scale aims to gather information about the all dimensions (problem solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, behavior control) of the scale. Device points range from 1 (healthy) to 4 (unhealthy). Theoretically, a score of 2 is determined as the distinguishing point; scores below 2 indicate healthy family functions while scores above 2 show unhealthy functions (Bulut, 1990). The average mean Family General Functions Scale score for Turkish sample was 1.81 ($SD=.45$), which indicated that upper moderate levels of family general functions. Resulting scores range from 1 to 3.08. Cronbach alpha internal consistency reliability was calculated to be .77. These results can be accepted as proof for the validity and reliability of the items, and thus, of the scale.

2.3. Data Analyses

Tables were prepared, showing frequency and the distribution of score averages related to dependent and independent variables. As independent variables in this study are based on single parent' gender, age, level of education, duration of living as a single parent, level of income, state of being satisfied with the level of income, family size and number of children.

In the research, the statistical significance level of the difference between the questions regarding the general functions of families and independent variables was tested through "The Test for the Significance of a Difference between Two Means (t-test)" and "One Way Variance Analysis". When ANOVA showed a significant difference, the group(s) responsible for the difference was distinguished via Scheffé's method.

3. RESULTS

General functions of families were analyzed in terms of gender, age, education level, duration as a single parent, monthly family income level, satisfaction with income level, number of people living at home, and the number of children. The mean scores for general functions were lower among families, in which the parent is a woman aged 35 or less, graduated from high school, living single for 6–10 years, having monthly income level of 3001 or more, satisfied with the income level, having 3 people at home and having single child (Table 2).

There were significant relationships between general functions of families, and education level of parent ($F_{(2,118)}=3.48, p<.05$) and being satisfied with income level $F_{(3,118)}=4.47, p<.05$). As can be seen in Table 2, the relationship between other independent variables (single parent' gender, age, level of income, family size, number of children and duration of living as a single parent) and general functions of the families was statistically significant.

Analyzing general functions of families and mean scores for statistically significant socio-economic variables, it is seen that the mean scores among more than high school graduates ($M=1.63$) are lower than those of high school graduates ($M=1.82$) and secondary school or less schools graduates ($M=1.93$); and mean scores among those who are "satisfied" with their income level ($M=1.60$) are lower than those who were "undecided" ($M=1.79$), dissatisfied ($M=1.92$) or completely dissatisfied with their income ($M=1.95$) (Table 2).

4. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Being a single parent is often associated with different forms of loss; one of the most important of these is the disruption of family functions. In the study carried out by Hayden et al. (1998), in which the average difference with respect to family functions was investigated between families whose heads were married couples and unmarried mothers, family functions were found to be significantly low in families where the head is unmarried mother. The research findings show higher mean scores (indicating less healthy general functions) for families in which the parent is: a man aged 35–44, graduated from secondary school or less schools, living as a single parent for less than 1 year, with a monthly income of 2000 TL or less, completely dissatisfied with the income level, having 4 or more people living at home, and having 2 children. In the study carried out by Hossain (2001) to examine the family functioning of mothers and fathers, mothers reported greater commitment, cohesion, and communication in the family than fathers. Similarly Sylvanus's (1992) research found higher scores from the Family Functions Style Scale for women when compared to men. In parallel with the results of our study also in İnci's (2008) study, the number of family members affect the family's general functions. However, the study carried out by Çakıcı (2006) found no such correlation.

The findings reveal that, although no significant relationship was found between general family functions and income level, that higher income level is associated with healthier general family functions. Although no previous studies were found of this subject in single parent families, similar studies that did not consider the family type reveal that families with high income level are physically and mentally healthier, more successful, live longer, have less stressful lives, and thus their functions are healthier; those results are support the findings of the present study (Diener & Diener, 2002; Park, Turnbull & Turnbull III, 2002; Mcloyd, 1990; Lempers, Clark-Lempers, & Simons, 1989; Kadushin & Martin, 1981; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980; Rubin, 1994; Mills, Grasmick, Morgan, & Wenk, 1992; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978; Voydanoff, 1984; Naz ı, 1997; Duyan, 2000; Şimşek, 2009).

According to our results, general family functionality differs significantly with respect to satisfaction with income levels ($p<.05$). Families who described themselves as satisfied with their income level showed healthier general functionality than those who were "undecided", dissatisfied or completely dissatisfied. Although financial satisfaction is positively related to income, it is not determined by income alone. Low income is not always associated with dissatisfaction nor does a high income guarantee economic satisfaction. Studies have shown that income only indirectly influences financial satisfaction (Hira & Mugenda, 1998). For example Marlowe and Godwin (1988) reported that income alone was not a good measure of families' financial welfare. Joo &

Grable (2004) also reported that income had no direct effects on financial satisfaction. Families' income and finances can be changed depend on economic changing over the period changed in multiple and often overlapping domains, such as employment status, employment conditions, and savings, emergency funds and debt, all of which impacted the amount of income available to parents toward their goals and practices (Iversen et al. 2011).

The idea that the level of income satisfaction is related to family functions is a commonly accepted fact. Economic hard times can have severe adverse consequences for family functions, including family disorganization, physical abuse, and child neglect, (Mcloyd, 1990; Lempers, Clark-Lempers, & Simons, 1989; Kadushin & Martin, 1981; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Mcloyd (1990) analyzed the effect of financial difficulties on families, and found that adults on low incomes experienced mental health problems and stress associated with inability to pay bills, loss of employment, frequent relocation, financial anxiety; parents experiencing financial difficulty got angry more easily, and were less successful in handling their problems.

In the present study, general family functionality showed a significant positive association with the education level of the parent ($p < .05$); families in which the parent graduated from higher education showed healthier functions than graduates of secondary school or less schools. Studies also found a positive correlation between males' educational backgrounds and general functions (Nazl, 1997; Duyan, 2000; Çakıcı, 2006, Şimşek, 2009). Although women's educational level is understudies, a positive correlation was found between functions and women's educational level in one study (Çakıcı, 2006).

Several limitations must be kept in mind in interpreting these results. The main limitation of the study is the sample size. New studies administered to greater samples are needed to verify the results gathered from this study. Additionally, the present study has some methodological limitations that should be taken into account. The sample of the study included only staff at the Hacettepe University, which limits the generalizability of the results. In addition only person from each family participated our study. Different findings may have been obtained if more member of each family had been asked to participate in the study. In order to ensure that single parent families can sustain healthy general functions, common education programs should be given to single parent families, particularly those with low education and income level. Such programs should employ various mass media to address issues associated with being a single parent, potential functional difficulties during the following process, and means of overcoming these problems. In addition, consultation centers should be opened.

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Table 1. Socio-Economic Characteristics of Families

Socio-economic characteristics	N	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Women	91	76.5
Men	28	23.5
<i>Age</i>		
34 aged and under	33	27.7
35 - 44	43	36.1
45 aged and over	43	36.1
<i>Levels of Education</i>		
Secondary school or less	33	27.7
High school	60	50.4
More than high school	26	21.8
<i>Levels of Monthly Income</i>		
2000 TL and under	42	35.3
2001 TL-3000 TL	49	41.2
3001 TL and over	28	23.5
<i>State of Being Satisfied with the Level of Income</i>		
Satisfied	37	31.1
Undecided	12	10.1
Dissatisfied	46	38.7
Strongly dissatisfied	24	20.2
<i>Family Size</i>		
2 people	39	32.8
3 people	62	52.1
4 people and over	18	15.1
<i>Number of Children</i>		
1	77	64.7
2	36	30.3
3	6	5.0
<i>Duration of Living as a Single Parent</i>		
Less than 1 year	11	9.2
1-5 years	60	50.4
6-10 years	27	22.7
More than 10 years	21	17.6

Table 2. Bivariate Analysis Results of General Functions of Families According to Socio-economic Variables

Socio-economic variables	Mean	SD	Test Statistics
Gender			
Women	1.78	0.43	$t = -1.41$
Men	1.92	0.51	
Age			
34 aged and under	1.69	0.45	$F = 1.71$
35 - 44	1.88	0.46	
45 aged and over	1.83	0.44	
Levels of Education			
Secondary school or less	1.93	0.49	$F = 3.48^*$
High school	1.82	0.45	
More than high school	1.63	0.37	
Levels of Monthly Income			
2000 TL and under	1.93	0.42	$F = 2.35$
2001 TL-3000 TL	1.76	0.46	
3001 TL and over	1.72	0.47	
State of Being Satisfied with the Level of Income			
Satisfied	1.60	0.44	$F = 4.47^{**}$
Undecided	1.79	0.45	
Dissatisfied	1.92	0.40	
Strongly dissatisfied	1.95	0.48	
Family Size			
2 people	1.82	0.52	$F = 0.35$
3 people	1.79	0.42	
4 people and over	1.89	0.40	
Number of Children			
1	1.76	0.47	$F = 1.55$
2	1.92	0.40	
3	1.86	0.46	
Duration of Living as a Single Parent			
Less than 1 year	1.83	0.58	$F = 0.62$
1-5 years	1.79	0.49	
6-10 years	1.77	0.38	
More than 10 years	1.93	0.36	

* $p > .05$ ** $p > .01$