

**An investigation into exploring the lived experience of raising children from a single-parent's perspective.**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** This research project aimed to explore the lived experience of raising children from a single-parent's (SP's) perspective. The focus of the research was to identify positive aspects of SP family life, understand the parent's view of the perception of SPs, and to establish how a SP considers they are viewed in relation to stereotyping.

**Method:** An ethnographic approach was employed to provide rich data regarding the SP's lived experience. The research took place over three weeks, in the home of a family with a single-mother and two children within their early years, living in Britain. Observations of the whole family provided a basis for semi-structured interviews with the SP.

**Findings:** The findings displayed the importance of receiving love and social support from family and friends combined with practical assistance and emotional wellbeing. Additionally, viewing this support as mutually beneficial, provides increased positive outcomes with reduced feelings of obligating and burdening family and friends. Interviews highlighted frustrations regarding single-parenthood including lack of time, finances and navigating work-life balance. The significance of labels and gender disparity related to expectations and perspectives of SPs, and reflection and mindset, was also revealed. Finally, it was observed that SPs experience feelings of hope, autonomy, and a positive anticipation of the future.

**Conclusion:** Capturing the lived experience of SPs is complex, each having unique and individual experiences and therefore, not fitting into a homogenous group. Labels are unhelpful and unrepresentative, as they initiate preconceived, inaccurate assumptions and expectations. Findings also illustrate the significance of social support, optimistic mindset and reflective parenting in promoting self-efficacy, fulfilment and enjoyment regarding parenting. Recommendations have been made for improving practice, by ensuring preconceived assumptions and expectations are dismissed, and replaced with the understanding that SPs should be empowered to create their own identity. Further recommendations for policy suggest adapting workplaces to provide more SP friendly conditions by enabling flexible working. Further suggestions relate to future research, highlighting the importance of understanding the lived experience of SPs, and the necessity to increase their representation, by studying participants who became SPs due to various circumstances.

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## **Introduction**

Research regarding single-parents (SPs) is limited (Barajas, 2011) despite 22.3% of families in the United Kingdom being SPs with dependent children in 2019 (Office for National Statistics, 2019). Literature regarding SPs tends to focus on challenges; socio-economic disadvantage (Park, 2008; Doherty and Craft, 2011) and difficulty of managing role-strain in connection with work-life balance (Mairhuber et al., 2009; Gasse and Mortelmans, 2020). Research frequently displays preconceptions and stereotyping (Ganong and Coleman, 1995; Valiquette-Tessier, Vandette and Gosselin, 2016) and often fails to consider positive aspects of single-parenthood. 'Coping' is frequently reported, with support and optimism contributing to positive parental wellbeing and appropriate child development (Defrain, and Eirick, 1981; Nes, and Segerstrom, 2006).

This research endeavours to supplement the limited literature surrounding SPs by exploring the lived experience of raising children from a SP's perspective.

The specific aims of this research project are to:

- identify positive aspects of SP family life.
- understand the parent's view of the perception of SPs.
- establish how a SP considers they are viewed regarding stereotyping.

The significance of this research is gathering information, relating to the daily life of a SP family, and enabling recommendations for practice and future research (Adair, 2010).

## **Review of Relevant Literature**

Within the literature review three themes were identified; 'single-parents: a diverse group', 'cultural stereotypes and research' and 'lived experiences'. The first theme considers the broad range of family situations the term 'single-parents' encompasses (Graham, 2018; Wajim and Grace, 2020; Zhang, 2020). Furthermore single-parents experience a variety of economic circumstances and cannot be categorised into one homogenous group (Heinonen, 2019). 'Cultural stereotypes and research' examines research which states a child's family structure plays a significant role in contributing to their achievements and wellbeing, and that raised within a single-parent family will negatively impact these factors (Barajas, 2011; Valiquette-Tessier, Vandette and Gosselin, 2015; Creese, 2019). However, this is contradicted by other research which suggests economic hardship and parental education are determining factors of child's wellbeing, rather than family structure (Borgers et al., 1996; Murry, et al., 2001). 'Lived experiences', consider how social support (Widan and Greeff, 2019) and an optimistic mindset (Taylor and Conger, 2017) positively contribute to single-parents' wellbeing and self-efficacy, leading to improved ability to cope with stressful situations, enabling optimal parenting behaviours and reduced levels of depression and anxiety (Nes and Segerstrom, 2006; Masten, 2014).

## **Methodology and Ethics**

Hughes (2010) suggests that paradigms frame the perception of research projects, influencing the epistemology and chosen methodology, including the process of investigation and the method of demonstrating validity (Ramani, and Mann, 2016). The aim and questions for this research are subjective, accordingly the ontological assumption is that there is not a single truth or correct answer to be discovered, but further understanding and insight will be gained (Tai, and Ajjawi, 2016). Investigations that require information regarding an individual's perceptions and experiences, cannot be provided via numerical quantitative data (Tai, and Ajjawi, 2016). Therefore, this research adopts a qualitative method, studying participants within their natural

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setting with the purpose of gaining knowledge ethnographically (Ellis, 2007; Atkins and Wallace, 2012; Aspers and Corte, 2019). This ethnographic research uses observations and interviews within the participants home (Parahoo, 2006). This approach is well suited to understanding an individual's perspectives allowing the researcher to become immersed within the culture and environment, and consider how these contribute to findings (Robert, 2009). Ethnographic research evolves and adapts as the relationship between participant and researcher develops allowing unique information to be gained, making it an ideal approach for this research (Ellis, 2007; Garrity and Canavan, 2017).

An aspect which decreases the transferability of findings is the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on the participant's lived experience (GOV.UK, 2021). Furthermore, the small-scale nature of this study has implications for validity with the generalisation of findings reduced (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007). However, this was not the intent of the research which was rather to gather detailed data representing an individual's experience of single-parenting. This was achieved through observations which guided semi-structured interviews increasing the validity within the data, as they provided the participant opportunity to share their views on the researcher's observations, fostering reduced misinterpretation (Golafshani, 2003; Turner, 2010). These were recorded and transcribed which Bell and Waters (2014) suggest increases validity, due to lack of interference from the researcher. The rich data collected consequently led to data saturation with topics being repeated within the interviews, increasing the validity of research (Fusch and Ness, 2015). As the researcher remained within the participant's environment for a prolonged duration, this reduced the impact of the Hawthorn effect as research became less novel (Roberts, 2009; Papatheodorou, 2013). The relationship between the participant and researcher developed during the study allowing for further understanding, empathy and trust 'I felt very comfortable and at ease' (Interview 4). This means a wider variety of sensitive topics were discussed than expected, such as personal information regarding the participant's financial situation. This increased the validity as it enabled the participant to feel comfortable in sharing sensitive aspects of their lived experience (Rogers, 2014; Carlos, 2018).

As highlighted within literature regarding an ethnography, issues of reliability may occur however, repeating aspects of the research, including methods of data collection and the position of researcher, can increase replicability (Cohen, Morrison and Manion, 2011). Moreover, employing observations and interviews increases inter-rater reliability (Roy, and Banerjee, 2012). To further improve reliability, the same method of data analysis (thematic) could be utilised in future research (Clarke and Braun, 2014; Terry, et al., 2017). Although the research sought to gain knowledge of an individual's experience of raising children as a SP, those with similar characteristics may find research provides relevant findings (Cohen, Morrison and Manion, 2011).

Sensitive topics are subjective, so difficult to define (Auguston and Hilario, 2019). Augusto and Hilario (2019) state sensitive topics are subjects which could cause substantial harm to those involved with research. The term single-parents encompasses a range of family situations, some of which increase the sensitivity surrounding research, such as those who became single-parents through bereavement (Graham, 2018; Zhang, 2020). There are negative stereotypes associated with single-parents which further increases the importance of researcher tact and empathy (Ganong and Coleman, 1995). Therefore, single-parents could be considered a sensitive research topic. It is essential for participants to be treated with respect and dignity without prejudice regarding any characteristic, including 'parental status' (EECERA, 2015, p.3). The researcher will signpost the participant to their General Practitioner should sensitive topics lead to distress.

To undertake research involving a sensitive topic ethically, Cornejo, Rubilar and Zapata-Sepúlveda (2019) argues a sensitive method of collecting data must be employed. Sensitive methods include using an ethnographic approach (Banerjee, et al., 2017) as the relationship that is built between researcher and participant during ethnographic research provides the researcher

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with an insight into participants self-esteem and feelings towards the study (Davies, 2007). Another method of mitigating risk of harm associated with researching sensitive topics, is using individual semi-structured interviews. Guest, et al. (2017) states individual interviews are an effective method of collecting qualitative data in comparison to focus groups, when pertaining to sensitive information as the interviews are semi-structured, participants can guide discussion, giving them control and autonomy over their responses and reducing the risk of discussion becoming uncomfortable or distressing (Roy and Banerjee, 2012). It is the researcher's responsibility to stop the interview at any time, if they feel it is causing the participant harm, and to ensure the participant knows they have the right to withdraw from the interview without repercussions (Dixon, 2015). Furthermore, it is vital the participant's voice is heard this being a fundamental aspect of the ethnographic approach (Boivin and CohenMiller, 2018). This protects participants from harm by empowering and representing their thoughts and perceptions within research achieved here by the chosen methods (Turner, 2010; Ralls, 2020).

Undertaking ethnographic research within a family home requires ethical consideration regarding when it is appropriate to complete observations and interviews. To protect participants from harm it is crucial that family life is prioritised over research (Palmer et al., 2014). Researchers should aim to 'maximise benefit and minimise harm' (BERA, 2018, p.4; Norland College, 2020). To follow this, research will only occur if it is deemed to not cause detriment to those being observed or interviewed. Consequently, research methods for this research are flexible, as they can occur when convenient, increasing validity of data collected. However, if it is not possible for observations to occur, the method of retrospective observations may be utilised (Amaechi and Fusch, 2019; Landrum, Cook and Tankersley, 2019). Although these are not as detailed as 'in the moment' observations, they are still suitable for guiding interviews (Palaiologou, 2012).

For this research informed consent was gained using a consent letter which informed the participant of research aims and purpose, processes involved within data collection and their rights as stated within research ethic guidelines (EECERA, 2015; BERA, 2018; Norland College, 2020). Participant rights include the right to confidentiality, anonymity, protection from harm, and to withdraw (Cohen, Morrison and Manion, 2001). Participants are also made aware of data protection processes which follow the General Data Protection Regulation ('Council regulation (EU) 2016/67', 2016) and the Data Protection Act 2018. These involve safe storage of audio recordings and transcripts on a password-protected laptop. This research does not involve participants who are unable to give informed consent, the parent will act as a gatekeeper and provide consent to observe children (Palaiologou, 2012). However, the researcher will continually assess appropriateness for observations to take place and follow safeguarding procedures if there are concerns (Oliver, 2010; Palmer et al., 2014). Participants were be offered the opportunity to see the final submission of research in order to thank them for their participation.

## **Background to Findings**

Pseudonyms have been employed throughout, to ensure confidentiality (Muchmore, 2002). Research focused on one family, Eliza and her two children, Arthur (34 months) and Henry (15 months). Eliza became a SP five weeks after Henry was born when Rufus her spouse died. Observations provided a basis for semi-structured interviews. To gain further understanding of the qualitative data, thematic analysis was conducted with codes created, to allow four themes to emerge; 'love', 'self' and 'hope' (Clarke and Braun, 2014). This research adopted an inductive approach, with the data collected, providing new meanings (Kalpokaite and Radivojevic, 2019).

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## Findings

### Love

Family and Friends	Valuable contributions
Grandparents	Relationship <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parental figures</li> <li>• Close bond</li> <li>• Mutual love and adoration</li> </ul>
	Responsibilities and assistance provided <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Childcare - regular, ad hoc and emergency</li> <li>• Practical household maintenance support</li> <li>• Providing children with a range of education and life skills experience and knowledge</li> <li>• If require financial support for the children's education</li> </ul>
Aunties and Uncles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing children with a range of education and life skills experience and knowledge</li> <li>• Mutual love</li> </ul>
Friends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Play dates</li> <li>• Mutual social support</li> <li>• Childcare - during adverse times</li> </ul>

Eliza utilises friends and family for regular childcare, with grandparents being ‘massively involved in bringing them up’ (Interview 1). Eliza explained when Henry was newborn and Arthur not sleeping she ‘really needed help with nights’ (Interview 1). She received over-night help from grandma and friends demonstrating, during difficult times Eliza called on family and friends. This led the discussion to whether Eliza felt a difference between asking for support from family or friends. Widan and Greeff’s (2019) study found, due to the voluntary nature of friendships, single-mothers placed a greater emphasis on friendship support compared to family support. However, Eliza suggests ‘it’s easier to ask family’ (Interview 1) implying this is not the case for all. Webber and Boromeo, (2005) propose seeking family support is less desirable than friendship support, due to a negative inference with links to conflict, emotional costs and burdening, however Eliza noted ‘they are obliged but they’ve also got a massive, vested interest, it’s their grandsons’ (Interview 1) implying this is mutually beneficial (Murry et al., 2001; Taylor and Conger 2017). Hayles, Xu and Edward (2018) propose grandparents are grateful for the opportunity for involvement. Eliza stated she was ‘conscious about burdening family’ (Interview 1) but also recognised ‘[the children] always would have been adored, but I think the relationship is another level because of what has happened [being widowed]’ (Interview 1) thus indicating the relationship between grandparents and the children has become stronger, due to their circumstance. From the statement ‘The relationship between Arthur and his grandparents ... is incredibly beautiful to watch’ (Interview 1) it is evident the whole family benefits from the close bonds. Hank, et al. (2018) suggest strong bonds between grandparents and grandchildren can have a plethora of mutual positive impacts, including improved cognitive function and wellbeing. This highlights the unique nature of family relationships, suggesting individual opinions exist regarding requesting support and caveats involved (Grevenstein et al., 2019). Overall, receiving support is impacted by mindset and viewing familial support as mutually beneficial, engenders positive outcomes (Attar-Schwartz, Filippelli and Fallon, 2019). Eliza views her strong family and friend support network, as a positive aspect of SP family life.

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## Self

Topic	Eliza's perspective and views
View of self and labels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Labels are not important</li> <li>• Assumptions are made about widowed SPs</li> <li>• There are preconceived ideas about how widowed SPs should behave</li> </ul>
Gender disparity and perceptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Single-fathers are highly praised and respected, which Eliza feels is not always deserved</li> <li>• SPs can be patronised</li> </ul>
Reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflecting on parenting is important to evaluate its effectiveness</li> <li>• Children are a reflection of parenting ability and how you are coping</li> <li>• Wellbeing is an integral part of parenting</li> </ul>

Eliza does not relate to labels of 'SP' and 'widow' stating 'I am a SP, but I don't really see myself as a SP ... I don't really identify as a widow either, even though I am, I just don't feel like I am' (Interview 2). Lauchlan and Boyle, (2019) consider labels as having both positive and negative effects but can provide a sense of belonging within a community (Ginsberg, 2012) or can lead to stigmatisation and misinformed assumptions (Ohan, et al., 2013). Eliza has experienced the latter 'people ... assume I've got no mortgage because my husband is dead' and have 'views about how a widow should behave, not all of which I believe or agree with' (Interview 4). Taylor and Robinson's (2016) study investigating the lived experience of young widows and widowers found their participants had unique experiences (Zhang, 2020) thus suggesting individuals with similar characteristics do not fit into a homogenous group. Regarding not identifying with 'labels' Eliza explained 'I don't want to be pigeonholed, I feel I am just their Mum' (Interview 2). For Eliza, labels are inappropriate, suggesting assumptions and perceptions she does not identify with.

Eliza mentioned on several occasions that single fathers are viewed differently and are 'very well respected' (Interview 2) which is supported by Sallee (2014). Emslie and Hunt (2009) argue this is because when men undertake childcare responsibilities, they are executing work outside of their traditional roles whereas, Eliza is fulfilling societal expectations (Manicom, 1984; Hooks, 2000). For Eliza, reflecting on her parenting is incredibly important. Eliza states 'I am really conscious, because I am a single-mum, of doing a good job and not have people think that child doesn't behave because there is no dad at home' (Interview 2) implying Eliza feels increased pressure to parent successfully because of being a SP. This is supported by Dijanic's (2016) study suggesting widowed single-mothers experienced increased pressure due to solely bearing the responsibility of raising children. Eliza highlighted 'the reflection is bigger because there is no one else to blame' (Interview 2). Ensink et al. (2017) propose reflective parenting increases parents' awareness and understanding of their actions (Cooper and Redfern, 2016). Moreover, Stenason, Moorman and Romano, (2020) state by evaluating the effectiveness of parenting, parents gained improved self-efficacy. Eliza 'believe[s] children are a great gauge of how you are coping yourself' (Interview 3). The idea of 'coping' appears extensively within literature surrounding SPs with this ability determined by social support, attitude and mindset (Defrain, and Eirick, 1981; Sperlich and Maina, 2014). In agreement with Eliza, Taylor and Conger's (2017) study into promoting strengths and resilience in single-mother families, found optimism and social support led to competent parenting, positive mental wellbeing and coping strategies, resulting in positive child outcomes including appropriate development, reduced emotional and behavioural issues and improved social ability. Thus, implying children's wellbeing is consequential to parental wellbeing (Taylor

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and Conger, 2017). Eliza feels perception and stereotyping of SPs, and being solely responsible for her children, increases possible judgement on her parenting ability. Therefore, by reflecting upon her parenting, she empowers herself to consider and adjust her parenting.

## Hope

Themes	Aspects that display hope
Future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Open to adding to the family - parental figure and/or more children</li><li>• Eliza's young age allows for increased options for the future</li></ul>
Joy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Raising the children is joyful</li><li>• Having Arthur and Henry is a blessing</li></ul>

For Eliza, the future holds hope and possibility. Eliza describes being widowed at a young age with young children as a 'really rough hand to have been dealt, but it is also sort of a gift for the options of rebuilding my life, at my age I can choose whatever I want' (Interview 3). However, Lowe and McClements's (2010) study of young widows, found the loss of their spouse meant a loss of hope and dreams. Whereas, Bishop and Cain (2003) found for women, age was a predictor with younger widows increasingly likely to engage in cohabitation or remarriage, thus emphasising Eliza's evaluation, that her age increased her future options. Eliza stated she is open to having more children with a partner or in an 'unconventional setup' as she is 'doing it on my own anyway' (Interview 2). Regarding whether single-parenting has changed her opinion on having more children as a SP, Eliza expressed 'I've done it, so it can be done' (Interview 2). Eliza views having sole responsibility for future decision making as liberating, 'being on my own, the world is ... our oyster' (Interview 2) illustrating, being a SP has increased Eliza's parenting self-efficacy and empowerment (Gilkerson, et al., 2020).

Another theme that occurs frequently is the joy Eliza experiences 'I enjoy being a Mum' (Interview 2), displaying the positive impacts of having children are not diminished by being a widowed SP. Nelson et al's. (2012) study focused on understanding whether children are associated with more joy than misery, found parents experienced higher levels of positive emotion, fulfilment, happiness and life contentment than non-parents. Eliza echoes this 'I am really lucky to have those boys' (Interview 4). Children enhance the lives of their parents, enabling developing social networks, self-efficacy and self-esteem (Nomaguchi and Milkie, 2003). As emphasised by Lavee and Katz (2003 quoted in Barkan 2020, p.14) 'the greatest joy in life is to follow children's growing', throughout the interviews it is evident Eliza loves and derives great joy from raising her children.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of this study was to gain an understanding of the lived experience of raising children from a SP's perspective. As can be seen in the data, Eliza experiences a variety of positive aspects of single-parenthood including love and social support from family and friends (Masten, 2014; Hartwig, 2016). Furthermore, this research sought to understand the parent's views on the perception of SPs and related stereotyping, finding gender disparity in the expectations placed upon SPs, (Valiquette-Tessier, Vandette and Gosselin, 2016) and all SPs experiencing judgement regarding parenting ability and feeling patronised (Bloom, 2001; Reay, 1998). Thus, demonstrating achievement of the research aims.

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However, there is significant complexity when considering the lived experience of SPs. An ethnographic case study captured the individuality of the experience of raising children as a SP, providing in-depth data, unique to the participant involved. Eliza considers 'labels' as unhelpful and unrepresentative due to association with assumptions and expectations Eliza views as inaccurate and unnecessary (Ginsberg, 2012; Lauchlan and Boyle, 2019). SPs are often viewed as a homogenous group (Heinonen, 2019) what Eliza demonstrates is SPs are unique, each experiencing individually, love, frustrations and hopes. Relevant research tends to focus on the disadvantages compared to two-parent families (Murry, et al., 2001), failing to capture how raising children as a SP can be extraordinary and gratifying. The findings highlight the individual nature of single-parenthood, thus evidencing all SPs must be respected as unique individuals, a fundamental necessity of Early Years practice that seeks to celebrate and support families and offer assistance where needed (Grevenstein et al., 2019).

Findings illustrate the strength of an optimistic mindset and reflective parenting in fostering self-efficacy and enjoyment regarding parenting (Nes and Segerstrom, 2006; Ren et al., 2020). This is displayed by an instrumental aspect of Eliza's parenting which is enjoying chores enabling increased enjoyment and fulfilment. Also highlighted are the extensive positive aspects of single-parenthood such as autonomy and increased attention directed to the children. Through discussion with Eliza, subtle nuances of hope surrounding the future were captured with her viewing 'the world is ... our oyster' (Interview 2). An overwhelming theme throughout the data is single-parenting is found to be a 'privilege' (Interview 4), joyful and self-empowering.

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