

Thematic analysis of the experience of being a single mother by choice

Análisis temático sobre las vivencias de ser madres solteras por elección

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Background

The emergence of different family structures can be observed in Spain as in other modern advanced societies. These structures mirror new social models of the family institution. Single mothers by choice began to play an important role in the deinstitutionalization of the hegemonic family model in the '70s, and established the basis for new family structures such as single parenthood. For decades, single mothers by choice needed the support and reinforcement offered by the feminist rhetoric of equal rights and opportunities because most of these women had been subject to social rejection and exclusion.

Aims

We developed a qualitative approach to address the issue of how these women decide to be single mothers by choice. Specifically, we wanted to know their experiences and, thus, attempted to investigate the challenges they faced in becoming single mothers. Our aim is to contribute to a better understanding of the process of considering, becoming, and being a single mother by choice.

Method & procedures

A qualitative approach was used because it is the most appropriate for the kind of data collected. A descriptive method was employed to analyse the narratives of the voluntary single mothers. Thematic analysis was chosen as the phenomenological method. The description of the phenomenon allows us to understand participants' experiences (Espinoza-Ibacache & Íñiguez-Rueda, 2020). The social reality of voluntary single motherhood is a product of the way participants explain, describe, and experience this phenomenon within their social and cultural settings. Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect the information.

We conducted an inductive textual thematic analysis to identify common patterns in the interviews. This analysis describes and reveals the meaning of the data obtained from the interviews used in the study according to the initially defined research objectives. The analysis allowed us to identify, organize, analyse, and specify different themes relating to voluntary single motherhood, which was achieved through a meticulous reading of the information collected and transcribed. The construction of the emerging discursive categories led to a better understanding of the phenomenon and allowed us to identify the themes related to voluntary single motherhood. Themes are common patterns that derive from the literal transcription of interviews in relation to the objectives of the study that were used to describe and explain the research topic.

Results & discussion

Two themes were identified to describe how these women decided to be single mothers and the challenges they had to face. The patterns detected during the analysis of the material were coded into several categories such as the desire to be a mother, the difficulties of motherhood, the supportive social networks that helped them, and the absence of a father figure. We organized these categories into two main themes: The decision to start a family, and Challenges of being a single mother by choice: normalization. Table 1 shows the common themes and the coded categories generated after analysing the interviews.

We illustrate each theme with real-life examples, describe some of the links between the categories, and indicate the relevance single mothers place on them in their discourse.

Table 1
Themes

The decision to start a family	Challenges of being a single mother by choice: normalization
The desire to be a mother: breaking the “motherhood-couple” link	Absence of a father figure
Economic security	Normalization: “We are normal families, like any other”
Late motherhood	Lack of support networks in the extended family: civic associations
Empowerment	

Conclusion

We observed that in their discourse the mothers favoured the use of arguments that normalized and assimilated them into the experience of two-parent families.

Generally, participants assessed their motherhood as a process they approached with responsibility and full awareness of the family project they had decided to undertake. These women defined being a mother as a source of satisfaction that filled them with happiness. They also considered this process as an essential part of their lives and, therefore, of their self-realization. However, we observed that the exploration of an alternative model of motherhood led them to develop legitimization strategies for their type of family.

This study demonstrates that the conventional family model underlies the construction of the social practices that shape voluntary single motherhood. This underlying model can even permeate or pervade professional activity. Thus, we suggest that present and future psychosocial intervention professionals (i.e. social workers) should have the knowledge and tools that will allow them to understand the aspects related to social change that emerge from the experience of new types of family. Social intervention has always been orientated toward the traditional family model. However, interventions can no longer be exclusively centred on the heteronormative ideal of a two-parent family. Individuals working and studying in the setting of social work and its related disciplines should be provided with strategies that facilitate the development of intervention programs addressing new types of family and that deemphasise heteronormativity. Social workers, psychologists, and social educators in schools should be encouraged to “naturalize” this type of family on behalf of the children and prevent potential discrimination.

We suggest that social intervention professionals and, in particular, social workers should include within their discipline family diversity as a both a research field and a central focus of intervention. Thus, it would be a priority to include social workers as key players in the development of policies for the social protection of new types of family. These professionals could develop new operational criteria that would act as guidelines for intervention and allow family diversity to become a legitimate field of research and intervention within the profession.

Keywords: family diversity, qualitative method, single mothers by choice, Social Work, thematic analysis

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