

Parenthood and Partnership in a German risk sample: Are there differences between single-mothers and parents living together?

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Theoretical Background

Generally, distinct aspects influence changes in partnership quality after the birth of a child (Howard & Brooks-Gunn, 2009). It is known that often the relationship quality diminishes throughout the first year after the birth of a child (e.g. Schneewind, 1991). In this context the status of the relationship (married, living together, single-parent) can be seen as a main factor. If parents are not living together the risk of a later separation is fairly high (Osborne et al., 2007). A separation of the parents is a known risk factor for later developmental problems of the child (Cowan et al., 1994). Single parenthood is in general assumed to be a psycho-social risk factor influencing child development (e.g. Sameroff et al., 1993).

Focus of the current study

This study aims to find out if there are differences between married parents or parents living together and single mothers concerning their perception of parenthood. It will be investigated how the mothers perceive their child. It is hypothesized that the additional burden of being single-parent will lead to a higher stress level, a more negative experience of parenthood, a lower sense of coherence and a less positive perception of the child compared to the parents who raise their child together. All data derived from the early prevention project "Nobody slips through the net".

"Nobody slips through the net" ("Keiner fällt durchs Netz")...

...is a German early prevention project with the aim to support families at risk throughout the first year of life with their infant. During this year the families are attended by a special trained family mid-wife aiming to foster parent-child interactions and parental sensitivity. In the project we accompany married as well as single-parents (Cierpka, 2009).

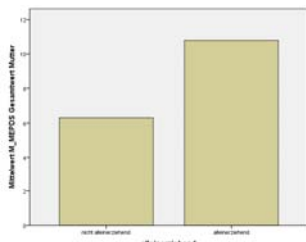
Sample and Method

In total 322 families/mothers could be recruited: 257 of these mothers are in a partnership (age: 25,16) and living together with their partner and 65 are single mothers (age: 24,69). With respect to the sociodemographic data there were hardly any differences between these groups. The only significant differences were concerning the number of rooms in the house as well as the income per month [both less for single mothers].

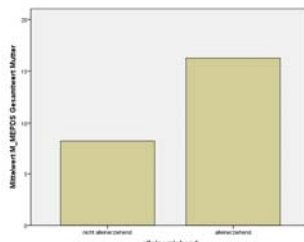
Constructs and measures: temperament of the child (items from SOEP-panel); depressive markers (EPDS); impaired bonding PBOQ; sense of coherence (soc-scale); parenting stress (PSI); stress of: a) the mothers, b) the child and c) the family in total (self developed scale, HBS); family functioning (Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale ,FACES; Familienbögen).

Results

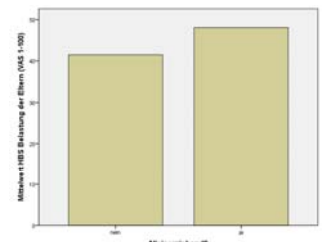
With respect to our study's assumptions, only few significant differences between the two groups could be found: the two subsamples differ concerning *nationality, religion* as well as the *presence of other caring persons than the mother* (better findings for co-parents). The results of the HBS hint to a slightly higher personal *stress level* of the single parents compared to parents being in a partnership (significant by trend). As well in all items concerning the *infant's temperament* there are more positive results in the co-parenting sample (not significant).



Subgroup without presence of others persons:
Mean value EPDS (depressive markers)
Single parents: N = 14; M = 10,79
Co-parents: N = 60; M = 6,32
p = .009*



Subgroup of non-German mothers:
Mean value EPDS (depressive markers)
Single parents: N = 4; M = 16,25
Co-parents: N = 23; M = 8,26
p = .001*



Whole group:
Mean value HBS (parents' level of stress)
Single parents: N = 55; M = 48,07
Co-parents: N = 204; M = 41,44
p = 0,51 (sign. by trend)

Discussion

In contrast to other studies focusing on this topic, we only found few significant differences between the two groups. In both samples the infant's temperament seems to play an important role. The lack of significant differences may be explained by the specific sample. Both groups were scored to be highly burdened by many risk factors. Thus, single parenting is just one risk factor of many. Therefore, the distinction single parent yes or no might not be sufficient enough in this specific context. Furthermore, both groups take part in "Nobody slips through the Net". This network might have a compensating effect (→ see result on the presence of others persons). Additionally, during the work the specific problems of the families are focused on, which could be leading to advancements in the families' situation. In the future, it might be interesting to investigate if the quality of the mother-child-relationship is possibly moderating the effects. The role the family mid-wife plays for the mothers and the effect of her presence need should be looked at in more detail as well. Furthermore, the role of the father should be investigated, especially concerning his influence on the mother compared to the family midwife's influence.

References

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