An Exploration of the Social-Emotional Development of Single Parenting:

A Comparison Between Chinese and British Mothers

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Abstract

This cross-cultural study aims to explore and compare parental support for single mothers in China and the UK, identifying how differences affect single parenting experiences and children's social-emotional development between the countries. Previous studies that focused on single-mother families have examined economic and social networks, mental health, and childrearing. However, few studies compare single motherhood between these two countries. Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap by making a theoretical-empirical contribution to understanding structural changes in contemporary families.

I combined Bowlby's attachment theory and Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital and field to develop a more comprehensive theoretical framework, a psycho-social study exploring how single-mother families and children's development are affected by the interactions between individuals and structures, inner psychological processes and outer social factors. A psycho-social approach was therefore employed, utilising pre-pilot focus group interviews and free-association narrative interviews (FANI), interviewing twelve single mothers from China and the UK (six on each side). Thematic analysis was then used to identify important themes.

I discovered that British participants have a wider range of support compared to Chinese participants when needed. Chinese mothers mainly receive support from families, but institutional support is the main support for British mothers, even more important than family support. Insufficient institutional support, along with the traditional culture of familialism, leads to Chinese mothers' higher levels of anxiety and stress compared to their counterparts. However, both Chinese and British mothers find themselves in a dilemma due to emotional and responsibility overload. The changing mother-father-child dynamic negatively affected children's social-emotional development. Children developed a more

sophisticated emotional repertoire and interpersonal skills than their peers due to their exposure to complex family situations. Participants attempted to be "good enough" mothers to break the intergenerational transmission pattern of negative childhood experiences and the mechanism of "identification with the aggressor".

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Contents

Chapter 1 Introduction

Lone parenthood is a widely known family phenomenon in the UK and China. According to the Office for National Statistics (2024), there were 2.9 million lone-parent families in the UK, 4.33% of the overall population of 66.87million in the UK in 2023, 85% of them were single mothers, and the average age of the single mother was 38 years old. In China, the latest data from the Report on Family Development in China in 2015, released by the National Health and Family Planning Commission (Liu et al., 2017), showed that single-parent families were 23.96 million, accounting for 1.74% of the overall population of 1.371 billion in China in 2015, 70% of which are single mothers and mainly caused by divorce. Accordingly, single mothers account for most single-parent families in both countries.

The challenges for single mothers are more distressful than for married mothers, mainly because single mothers face higher levels of pressure in different areas of life. In particular, single mothers face increased pressure to care for family members, their financial status and work-family balance (Avison et al., 2007). The stressful experiences generated from exposure to adversities are also associated with single mothers' higher risk of poor mental health, including depression, anxiety and stress (Liang et al., 2019). Subsequently, it can potentially negatively alter their parental attitudes and parenting practices (Letablier & Wall, 2018). Studies argued that single motherhood is associated with poorer home environments and parenting behaviours, including a lack of routine, harsh discipline, and a lower level of parental supervision (see, for example, Amato, 2005).

Therefore, children growing up in single-mother families tend to have unfavourable outcomes compared to two-parent families (Weinraud & Kaufman, 2019). According to Bowlby's attachment theory, consistent and sensitive caregivers can foster a secure attachment (van IJzendoorn, 1995), which leads to children's better social-emotional competence and mental health (Doinita & Maria, 2015). Given the less ideal condition of

single-mother families, studies argued that children in single-mother families are more likely to have a lower level of emotional well-being, which is caused by single mothers' insensitive and inconsistent parenting practices attributed to their poor mental health (Kiernan & Huerta, 2008, as cited in Harkness & Salgado, 2018).

Studies on single mothers have focused on issues of economic conditions (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018; Li, 2020; Harkness, 2022), social networks (Balaji et al., 2007; Lumino et al., 2016; Keim-Klärner, 2022), mental health (Harkness, 2016; Liang et al., 2019; Park & Lee, 2020), and childrearing (Waldfogel et al., 2010; Meier et al., 2016; Frosch et al., 2021). Despite the challenges, these studies have shown that adequate support can have a positive impact on single-mother families. It can help mitigate the stress generated by adversities and act as a protective factor against negative developmental outcomes for children (Liang et al., 2019), Particularly in the early parenting stage, support can improve parent-child well-being and prevent parental psychopathology (Pfeiffer et al., 2011, as cited in Liang et al., 2019). Another mediating factor is the mother's educational level. Single parenthood is strongly correlated with low parental education and low income, but a higher socioeconomic background can compensate for the negative effects of family structure (Garriga & Berta, 2018); once socioeconomic characteristics (such as mothers' education) are accounted for, many of the negative effects of single parenthood on child outcomes become less significant (Harkness & Salgado, 2018).

Conger et al. (2010) examined the correlation between single parenting and poor social status, income and standard of living. However, Chisholm (2017) has argued that the connection is guided in large part by government policies and social support such as child support and advance maintenance, taxes and transfers, family transfers, maternity leave, leave shared between parents, leaves to care for a sick child, rest days, annual leave, and sick leave. There is a variation across countries in social policies that address the difficulties and

inequalities faced by single mothers. Variations in governmental and social policies may be more pronounced when comparing countries with completely different systems of government, such as China and the UK. Previous studies such as Harkness (2022) have examined income distribution in single-mother families, showing that the UK stands out for its success in reducing single-mother poverty, with generous state benefits playing a critical role in this success. For example, in 2019–2020, 84 per cent of single parents were estimated to be entitled to the main means-tested benefit supporting low-income working-age families (Waters & Wernham, 2021, as cited in Harkness, 2022). In China, few policies target single-mother families, but they are entitled to some other social assistance scheme if they meet the criteria. For example, the subsistence allowance is an assistance program that provides a minimum income guarantee to low-income households (Gu & Chu, 2021). Research (Liang et al., 2019) indicates that the underdeveloped social protection system exposes single mothers and children to higher risks, which is worsened by gender factors.

The aim of this study is to explore and compare the differences in parental support for single mothers in China and the UK, identifying how these differences affect parental experiences of single parenting and its impact on children's social-emotional development in both countries. There is hardly any research that has looked at how these cross-country differences in parental support in two very different socio-economic and political systems affect single parenting and children's social-emotional development. My research focuses on single mothers because they are the largest subgroup within the single parents' classification, specifically examining single mothers with undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications. Some studies have shown that single mothers' education level is positively associated with the quality of their lives because the higher the level of education, the more resources one can mobilise (see, for example, Kim and Kim, 2020).

1.1 Research Questions

The research questions are as follows:

- What are the differences in parental support between China and the UK?

- How do they affect single mothers' parental experiences and children's social-emotional development?

To better address these research questions, I broke them down into three key

objectives. These are as follows:

1. To explore what constitutes parental support for single mothers in China and the UK.

2. To identify the differences in parental support between China and the UK.

3. To identify and compare how differences in parental support between China and the UK affect parental experiences and children's social-emotional development.

1.2 Thesis Structure

After this introduction, I present in Chapter 2 the literature regarding the family's

profound influence on children's social-emotional development, the dilemmas of single-

mother families, and how it disadvantages children's development. It also draws comparisons

between China and the UK from different political, economic, and cultural aspects and

examines the impact of cultural differences on attachment in these two social contexts.

Chapter 3 the theoretical framework for my research, explores the relation between

Bowlby's attachment theory and Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capital.

Attachment theory provides a psychological lens to examine how children's social-emotional

development is affected within single-mother families through parenting practices, parent-

child relationships and the intergenerational transmission of attachment. Bourdieu's

theoretical framework enables me through a sociological lens to investigate how the less-

than-ideal condition of single-mother families, which are socially constructed, affects

children's development. Bourdieu's relational theory overcomes the limitations of attachment

theory by considering the impact of wider societal factors on single-mother families, while attachment theory provides more details about the child's socialisation process within the family. The combination of these two theories provides a more appropriate theoretical framework for this research that enables a more comprehensive perspective of how children's development and single-mother families are affected by the interactions between individuals and structures, as well as inner psychic and outer social factors.

In Chapter 4, my methodology chapter, I explain the research methodology and methods used to answer the research questions. It argues for a psycho-social approach for this study as the research focuses on single-mother families, which is a manifestation of the interaction between the inner (participants' psychic factors) and outer (social factors) worlds. Accordingly, a psycho-social approach could better serve the aim of this study. The psycho-social approach employed in this study is the Free Association Narrative Interview method. It enables a comprehensive understanding of the research questions. The limitations and critiques of this approach are also discussed. The two participant samples of the Chinese and British groups are described together with recruitment, ethical issues, and the data analysis process.

The first chapter of my findings, Chapter 5, Support for Single Mothers, identifies the different forms of support utilised by participants to manage the challenges of being a single mother in China and the UK. This support consists of institutional support, family support, and other forms of support, including support from children's schools and participants' social networks. Mothers in the two groups can access these various forms of support but at different levels, especially institutional support. A comparison between British and Chinese mothers reveals that British participants have access to a wider range of support than the Chinese group. This is because the British group has more options for spousal maintenance and welfare support, which is lacking in the Chinese context. The difference in institutional

support reflects the cultural values towards family and marriage in the two social contexts. Chinese people hold a more traditional familism, while there is a relatively more "liberal" and dynamic view of family structure in the UK context.

Chapter 6, Feelings of Being a Single Mother, discusses participants' experiences of being single mothers under different levels of support in the two countries. Exploring participants' subjective feelings reveals the universal difficulties of responsibility and emotional overload across the two groups. Participants also confronted with the guilt of letting children live a fatherless life. Meanwhile, the stigma of being a single mother brings extra emotional challenges for them. In China, the choice of being a single-mother violates the dominant marital norm and familism, while in the UK, it is the lower class-related shame and stereotype. Moreover, Chinese mothers present a higher level of anxiety and stress towards their "uncertain future" compared to their UK counterparts. This may be attributed to the less institutional support for Chinese participants, which is discussed in Chapter 5, and the more traditional family view in Chinese culture. My findings reveal that participants' parental attitudes and parenting styles indicated their efforts to be "good enough" mothers, which was their solution to the predicament.

In Chapter 7, Parent-Child Relationship in Single-Mother Families, I discuss the changing dynamic of the mother-father-child triadic within single-mother families, focusing on mother-child and father-child relationships and their substantial impact on children's social-emotional development. A clear pattern of estranged father-child relationships emerged, and closer but ambivalent mother-child relationships appeared in both groups. Family dissolution negatively affects children, and the estrangement from the father adds extra emotional challenges and stress for them. The increased closeness in the mother-child relationship can create unavoidable ambivalence and tension. However, the grandparent-child relationship provides a holding environment that alleviates the negative impact of family

change on children and provides a new emotional dynamic among mothers, children, and grandparents that greatly benefits children's development.

Chapter 8 on Intergeneration Transmission discusses how participants' attachment patterns and childhood experiences are transmitted intergenerationally. Participants reflected on their own childhood experiences, both positive and negative. They made efforts to break the cycle of passing on negative childhood experiences and, in some cases, traumas. At the same time, they inherited good parenting practices and passed on their values and beliefs to their children. Through maternal mentalisation, that is, mothers' ability to understand and interpret behaviours and feelings of themselves and their children (Fonagy et al., 2018), participants shield their children from the intergenerational transmission of childhood pain, which helps children to have better social-emotional outcomes. Additionally, the boundary between adulthood and childhood became somewhat blurred in single-mother families. Because the more democratic mother-child relationship in single-mother families gives children more space to express their agency, they possess more adult qualities. For example, children take care of family members and do house chores. This opposes the traditional view of childhood as innocent, carefree, and excluded from the adults' public arena.

In Chapter 9, Children's Social-Emotional Development in Single-Mother Families, after exploring parent-child relationships and the intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns, I explore in further depth children's social-emotional development. Children in single-mother families are perceived to develop a more sophisticated repertoire of emotions than peers and are more capable of dealing with complex family situations. This is because children's experiences of exposure to complicated situations that other children are not exposed to allow them to learn and practice skills emotionally and interpersonally, such as family dissolution, parents remarrying, and living with stepparents and stepsiblings. Results from my interviews suggest that children in my study are more likely to develop a secure

attachment to their mothers through mothers' regulation and recognition of emotions, echoing participants' intention of breaking the intergenerational transmission pattern of negative childhood experiences.

In Chapter 10, I summarise and discuss the key findings of my research. In general, British mothers received more varied support than Chinese mothers in my study, which contributes to Chinese mothers' higher levels of anxiety and stress. However, the single mother dilemmas and negative impact of family dissolution on children's well-being are no different in the two groups. There is a marked change in the mother-father-child dynamic in single-mother families, which negatively affects children's social-emotional development. The father-mother-child triadic family structure is replaced by the mother-child dyadic relationship, along with the grandparents-child relationship as additional support. Fortunately, grandparents provide a holding environment that forms a new emotional dynamic and mitigates the negative impact of family dissolution on both mothers and children. In this family dynamic, children are more likely to be viewed as "junior partners" due to the more democratic mother-child relationship in single-mother families. This enables children to express their agency with less constraint and contributes to children's more sophisticated emotional and interpersonal competence than their peers.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature on parent-child attachment and its impact on children's social-emotional development. It focuses on parent-child attachment in the context of single-mother families and explores some of the factors that disadvantage children's social-emotional development in this context. This is followed by examining from a broader perspective how attachment and social-emotional development are affected in two different social-cultural contexts, China and the UK, including their political, economic, and cultural aspects.

2.1 Parenting and Attachment

Individuals are able to best develop their talents when they are confident that one or more trusted persons will provide support when difficulties arise. This trusted person is considered an attachment figure who provides a child with a secure base (Bowlby, 2005). An attachment figure plays a pivotal role in a child's personality formation, both externally and internally (Bowlby, 1977). Later, these experiences are internalised by the child, which enables him or her to discern trustworthiness in others, foster collaboration, and build mutually rewarding relationships that impact a person throughout life (Bowlby, 1977). Childhood experiences affect a person's ability to recognise a secure personal base and further affect his or her competence to initiate and maintain a mutually rewarding relationship (Bowlby, 1988). Therefore, the family relationship, as the very first relationship a child experiences, is crucial for his or her later personality development (Bowlby, 1988).

What the child internalises are not just experiences, but experiences help the child form internal objects, which Bowlby named internal working models (Bowlby, 1977). A good object is an attachment figure who is accessible, trustworthy, and ready to help when called

upon. A bad object is an attachment figure who is unwilling to respond or even hostile. A child's working models represent the features of the world of himself or herself and the world in which he or she as an agent. These working models influence a child's expectations and predictions towards others and provide her or him with tools for constructing action when interacting with others. Moreover, it also explains an understanding of self-image and self-esteem (Bowlby, 1988).

Three main attachment classifications were identified and categorised: secure, avoidant and ambivalent (Ainsworth, 1979). A responsive and sensitive attachment figure enables a child to construct an inner representation which moderates his responses to internal and environmental events (Ainsworth, 1979). When a child constantly experiences inappropriate responses from the attachment figure, he or she becomes anxious and does not know what to expect from the figure. Consequently, the child can develop either avoidant or ambivalent behaviour. An avoidant child would employ avoidance as a defensive response to lessen experienced anxiety and anger into a tolerable range of proximity to the figure. An ambivalent child would be more easily frustrated, less persistent and competent (Ainsworth, 1979). A fourth classification, disorganised attachment, was proposed later by other researchers (Duschinsky, 2015). This contains characteristics of avoidant and ambivalent but shows more distress and fear and is attributed to frightening parental behaviours. Each attachment insecurity is related to a particular way of coping with the stress which is generated from conflicting interactions with the attachment figure. Bowlby (1977, 1988) argued that many forms of disturbed personality reflect an individual's impaired ability to recognise suitable and willing figures and to build mutually rewarding relationships. The impairment is reflected in many forms, including anxious clinging, excessive demanding, aloof, non-committal, and defiant independence (Bowlby, 2005).

In practice, when caregivers meet the infant's demands, the child will interpret the world as safe and others as trustworthy (Duschinsky, 2018). The continuous availability of the caregiver moulds the infant's basic trust, which allows the infant to seek the caregiver's attention. This relationship helps the mother to respond quickly and to ease her newborn's needs. The mother-child attachment establishes the foundation for a child's emotional development and sets the stage for future social skills (Duschinsky, 2018). In contrast, if a child adopts the notion that the world is unpredictable, unresponsive, or even hostile, the child will spend a great deal of energy to self-manage the emotion. This negative experience will influence subsequent emotional responses and interpersonal behaviours. Therefore, early attachment is considered a foundation for later social-emotional development and is predictive of many outcomes, including internalising problems, externalising problems, social competence, self-esteem, cognitive development, and achievement (Waters & Cummings, 2000). Parenting shapes a child's attachment and usually manifests itself in the caregiver's behaviours, responses, and emotions towards a child (Duschinsky, 2018). Therefore, attachment theory advocates warm, sensitive and consistent care from the main caregiver for a child's secure development.

2.2 Parenting and Children's Social-Emotional Development

Social-emotional development refers to the set of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills that individuals develop, which are related to emotions and social interactions (Malti, 2011). It involves the ability to understand, regulate, and express emotions in a way that is appropriate for one's age and stage of development, as well as establishing and maintaining healthy relationships with peers and adults (Eisenberg, 2000; Malti & Noam, 2016). As such, it requires taking an active, autonomous, and responsible approach towards oneself in a social world that is interconnected (Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2004). Social-emotional development is

central to navigating challenges in social interactions in everyday life and in adapting flexibly to situational demands.

The central dimension of social-emotional development entails three aspects: an individual's ability to understand the emotional experiences of self and others, the ability to express emotions appropriately, and a capacity for emotional regulation (Malti, 2011). See my further discussion in 9.2 Children's Social-Emotional Competence in Chapter 9. The ability to understand emotional experiences is at the core of these three dimensions. Understanding one's own emotions inevitably entails understanding others, as well as the similarities and differences between one's own and others' emotional experiences (Hoffman, 2000). These three dimensions provide a comprehensive understanding of emotion that can be simplified into two main components. The first component is one's own emotional responses, which include bodily functions and physiological regulation. The second component is one's responses to multifaceted social experiences and interactions which involve understanding others' emotions and expressing one's own emotions in an age-appropriate way (Malti & Noam, 2016).

The quality of attachment has profound consequences for children's social-emotional development, and securely attached children have better social-emotional competence and mental health (Doinita & Maria, 2015). Research (Van IJzendoorn, 1995, as cited in Demby et al., 2017) has shown that consistent and sensitive caregivers can foster secure attachment. A secure child tends to experience less fear and show more cooperation and resilience interpersonally (Thompson, 2001). Because securely attached children have a more positive interaction model, they have a basic sense of trust when they encounter a social situation based on their experiences with sensitive caregivers (Van Der Voort et al., 2014). Conversely, insecure and disorganised children may have more social and behavioural problems because they bring their previous negative attachment experiences into new social interactions (Van

Der Voort et al., 2014), which is based on their experiences with inconsistent and insensitive caregivers. Their beliefs and expectations of future relationships have been shaped by caregivers' insensitive responses (Doinita & Maria, 2015), so insecurely attached children intend to develop a sense of self that is incompetent (Bowlby, 1973).

2.2.1 Intergenerational Transmission

Parenting practices are greatly determined by the attachment classification parents fall under. For example, it may be hard for a parent to adequately provide sensitive responses if she is insecurely attached, which may further affect her children's attachment type (Van Der Voort et al., 2014). In "normative" populations, the attachment distribution is 62% secure, 15% avoidant, 9% ambivalent and 15% disorganised (Van IJzendoorn et al., 1999, as cited in Van Der Voort et al., 2014). The Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), a semi-structured interview which explores links between parental states and children's attachment types based on parents' ability to reflect upon attachment-related experiences coherently, classifies adults into four types: autonomous, dismissing, preoccupied, and unresolved (Van Der Voort et al., 2014). These four classifications parallel children's secure, avoidant, ambivalent and disorganised attachment, respectively (Hesse, 2008, as cited in Van Der Voort et al., 2014).

AAI analyses the participant's internal coherence, consistency, and reflectiveness of the narrative, which manifests important features of the representational world related to attachment (Music, 2017). AAI demonstrated that parents' thinking about their own lives can impact their children's development and that attachment patterns can be transmitted from generation to generation (Music, 2017) (see later discussion in Chapter 8 Intergenerational Transmission). In AAI, adults who are classified as secure-autonomous tend to produce consistent narratives rather than muddled or contradictory. They develop a coherent story about their lives that considers emotional experience and shows interest in how significant others experienced events. Adults in this category are most likely to have children with secure

attachments (Fonagy et al., 1995). Adults classified as avoidant-dismissing have positive brief descriptions of their childhoods, but they cannot back up their positive statements with actual examples. Their memories are generally limited when recalling stories which contradict the original positive view. It is hard for this group of people to connect to their negative emotions (Music, 2017). Adults who align with the ambivalent-preoccupied style often respond with a mix of fury and confusion. When asked to recount an experience, they seem to be thrust back in time to the incident, such as a childhood argument with parents. Their responses are full of details but lack self-reflection with longer and more fragmented phrases. Their children are more likely to fall into the ambivalent category (Music, 2017). The fourth category is referred to as disorganised-unresolved. Their stories are inconsistent, illogical, and full of discontinuities and sudden shifts that don't make sense. They also exhibit weak reasoning and bizarre thinking. These parents tend to be both "frightened and frightening" and are most likely to have children classified as disorganised (Music, 2017).

Secure attachment is specifically associated with an advanced understanding of negative emotions (Thompson, 2001) where children can express distress freely and confidently to their mothers. They are confident of their mothers' availability and carry a complementary sense of being worthy of their mothers' affection (Kennedy et al., 2014), this is discussed with greater details in 9.2.2 Emotional Regulation in Chapter 9. This early confidence is the typical character of a securely attached child who is expected to develop an advanced understanding of emotion (Steele et al., 1999, as cited in Kennedy et al., 2014). Based on research, three robust intergenerational patterns can be identified concerning parenting attitudes toward negative emotions (Alegre, 2011): parents of securely attached children are more flexible, open-minded and reflective towards either negative or positive emotions; parents of avoidant attachment children tend to take a defensive or dismissive

stance against negative emotions; and parents of children with resistant attachment are over-involved in negative emotions, angry or passive.

The parent-child attachment relationship sets the foundation for the child's future interpersonal experiences and becomes a prototype for all subsequent relationships (Holmes, 2006), directly affecting an individual's sense of self and shaping behavioural responses that operate as an important part of socialisation (Thomson & Jaque, 2017). However, children's emotional security is also affected by other aspects (Cummings & Davies, 2002), such as parenting style. The interactions of attachment and parenting style influence a child's social-emotional development (Doinita & Maria, 2015).

2.2.2 Parenting Styles

Parenting is a specific behaviour that adults use to care for, nurture, and educate their children. It is a caregiving system activated simultaneously with attachment (Doinita & Maria, 2015). Parenting includes parenting practices, which are behaviours parents use to socialise with children, and parenting style, the emotional climate in which parents raise children (Darling & Steinberg, 1993).

Baumrind (2013) categorised parenting into three types: authoritative, authoritarian and permissive parenting. This categorisation is established on two dimensions: responsiveness and demandingness. Responsiveness refers to parents' ability to respond to children's needs which reflects parents' degree of support, warmth and affection towards children. Demandingness refers to parents' requirements for children to be responsible and mature, which manifests in the rules and limits parents set for children. Authoritative parents are both high in responsiveness and demandingness, the authoritarian parenting style is low in responsiveness but high in demandingness, while the permissive style has high responsiveness but low demandingness.

Parenting style reflects parents' attitudes and behaviours toward children, including parents' responses to children's emotions, parental expressivity and the family climate (Shaw & Starr, 2019). Parents' personalities can influence parenting styles, in particular, parents' perception of emotions, their attachment style, and their social-emotional competences can affect the way parents interact with their children and thus affect the outcome of their children's social-emotional development (Stettler & Katz, 2014), see my further discussion in 6.2.2 Parenting Styles in Chapter 6. Empirical studies (Mortazavizadeh et al., 2022) showed that authoritative parenting is crucial in children's emotional development which positively relates to children's emotion regulation and the regulation of others' emotions. Permissive parenting represents a negative association between parents' emotional regulation and parenting style, where children are less inclined to develop emotional maturity and self-regulation.

Chan and Koo (2011) analysed the association between parenting style and youth outcomes in the UK, arguing that parenting style is mainly structured by family structure rather than social class. Authoritative parenting is more prevalent among two-parent families, salaried households, and parents with tertiary education. Permissive parenting is more common in single-parent families and stepfamilies in working-class households where the parents are self-employed or have no qualifications. The prevalence of permissive or authoritarian parenting in working-class households is due to there being more single or stepfamilies. According to their results, parenting style rather than social class is associated with children's well-being. Specifically, authoritative parenting is associated with teenagers' higher subjective well-being and self-esteem, lower smoking, being involved in fighting or having friends who use drugs.

In China, studies (Xu et al., 2005) have shown that parenting style is a mix of both authoritative and authoritarian, which reflects the dominant cultural values of Confucianism

and Taoism. A key aspect of Chinese childrearing is reciprocal expectation, in which parents expect children to be respectful and obedient while children expect parents to be responsible and experienced instructors. Therefore, a distance associated with traditional hierarchy is maintained, which conveys an authoritarian or controlling parenting style. Nevertheless, parents take the role seriously and are devoted to their children immensely, even making sacrifices to meet children's needs with sufficient affection and warmth, which is a manifestation of authoritative parenting. Accordingly, authoritative and authoritarian parenting intertwines with Chinese cultural values and shows in varying degrees according to each family's circumstances.

2.2.3 Emotional Regulation

The most apparent outcome of children's social-emotional development in the family context is children's competence in emotional regulation (Eisenberg et al., 2003) which is the ability to initiate, maintain, and modulate the occurrence, intensity, and expression of emotions (Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2004). One of the major roles of emotional regulation for children is to manage emotions in ways that can adapt to the environment (McCabe & Altamura, 2011). A considerable amount of emotional regulation for young children occurs via parents' intervention, but with their development, they will switch to other socialisation methods, such as peers, instead of relying on parents (Silk et al., 2003), see my further discussion in 9.2.3 Advanced Emotional Development in Chapter 9. From the developmental angle, emotions perform important expressive and communicative functions that help to promote, inspire, and direct adaptive functions (Eisenberg et al., 2002).

Different parenting styles lead to different emotional regulation competencies. Demanding parents with high but reasonable expectations for children who enforce rules consistently and flexibly leads to children's better emotional competences (Lerner, 2015). Parental ability to respond to children's emotional cues promotes children's self-regulatory

behaviours (Lerner, 2015). Parental acceptance, supportiveness and sympathy can help children seek a wider range of positive emotional regulation strategies, which reflect children's low level of negative emotional display (Lerner, 2015). See my further discussion in 9.1 Emotional-Related Maternal Practices in Chapter 9. However, negative parental behaviours, such as hostility, psychological control, and lack of sensitivity, could result in poor emotional regulation (Bell & Calkins, 2000). Parental hostility leads to children's more effortful control of their negative emotions, and parents' lack of sensitivity can lead to children's emotional dysregulation (Bell & Calkins, 2000). Furthermore, children with lower competences in emotional regulation show more adjustment issues after they start nursery or school (NICHD, 2004). In a nutshell, parental reactivity and negativity are important to children`s emotions and emotional regulation.

A tripartite model developed by Morris et al. (2007) revealed how family affects children's emotional regulation and adjustment, three main points were highlighted: children learn the skills of emotional regulation through observing and imitating parents; emotion-related parenting practices can impact children's emotional regulation; and children's capacity for emotional regulation can be influenced by the family's emotional climate which in turn can influence parenting styles, attachment relationships, and emotional expressiveness. Parents' behaviours and emotional coping strategies implicitly teach children what behaviours and emotions are acceptable, expected and how to manage them. Children learn certain behaviours that provoke emotions and how to react in a similar situation through their observation (Cole et al., 2009). This experience in the family builds a foundation for their emotional expression and development in the future (Morris et al., 2007).

Parents' beliefs in emotions and emotional expressions influence parents' emotional-related practices and further influence parent-child interactions at the emotional level (Eisenberg et al., 2018). Personal emotion theory (Thompson, 2011) advocates that a person's

theory about his own emotions is mainly established according to identity development during adolescence, which shapes a person's understanding and management of emotions, continuing to adulthood. Parents' emotional socialisation, especially their reactions to their children's emotions, is mainly influenced by their emotional theory. Gottman et al. (1996), for example, argued that parents' emotional philosophy reflects their emotional awareness and acceptance which differs according to specific emotions and, in turn, influences emotionally related parental practices. An empirical investigation (Jones et al., 2002; Lerner, 2015) of parental response to negative emotion concluded that punitive parental reaction leads to children's inappropriate emotional regulation and an overall lower level of social-emotional competence; parental minimisation of children's emotion could result in children's avoidant strategies; children's display of anger would increase when parents respond with a negative and dismissing attitude. Overall parents' negative reactions to children's emotions can result in emotional regulation difficulties.

The emotional climate of a family is reflected in the quality of relationships (such as attachment, marital relationships, and parenting styles) and the number of positive and negative emotions shown by family members (Lerner, 2015). A child might show emotional over-reactivity when the emotional climate is negative, intensive, and unpredictable due to frequent and unexpected emotional performances from other family members. In this environment, the child not only observes parents' emotional dysregulation but also feels emotional insecurity. By contrast, children feel accepted and nurtured when they live in a responsive and consistent daily environment, which contributes to their free emotional expression because they are confident that their emotional needs will be met, aware of what behaviours are expected and of the consequences when they misbehave (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Cowan & Cowan, 2019).

2.3 Single Parents and Children's Social-Emotional Development

2.3.1 Children in Single-Mother Families

Studies (Weinraud & Kaufman, 2019) showed that children from single-parent families tend to have unfavourable outcomes compared to those from two-parent families. For example, children from single-mother families are more likely to have behavioural problems, lower academic achievement, later marriage and earlier childbearing. Amato (2010) investigated the negative impact of divorce on children's well-being and found that children with divorced parents exhibit more behavioural and emotional problems, have lower academic test scores and school grades, and have more problems with social relationships. Children's unfavourable outcomes may be attributed to limited parental resources, parental mental health, insufficient parenting quality, and inadequate father involvement.

Family structure influences children's development in two ways: parental economic resources (such as parental income and education level) and parental resources (parental psychological well-being and parenting practices) which economic resources have a greater impact on children compared to parental resources (Thomson & McLanahan, 2012). However, studies (Thomson & McLanahan, 2012) found that parental economic resources cannot solely explain children's different outcomes, especially children's social-emotional development, in which parental resources play a more important role. Single parenthood, marital separation, family dissolution, as well as economic hardship and father absence associated with family structures, can negatively influence parental resources, which in turn have a detrimental impact on children's social-emotional development (Afifi et al., 2006; Goyal et al., 2010).

Single mothers faced economic hardship as only one adult could work and earn income compared to having two adults in the home, which could make more resources

available to children (assuming that adults pool their resources and use them on behalf of the family). Despite economic investment, parents also invest their time in childrearing as a resource (Waldfogel et al., 2010). Parental time is important to a child's health and development throughout early to middle childhood and adolescence. Children in single-mother families will likely be shortchanged regarding time and resources due to no division of labour within single-mother households (Waldfogel et al., 2010) because the single mother bears all the burden associated with childcare, the financial and organisational logistics of the household, and her welfare (McLanahan et al., 2013).

Meanwhile, the single-mother dilemmas bring mothers high stressors, resulting in them having a high risk for emotional distress and disruptions in parenting, which in turn disadvantage their children's development because children are exposed to poorer levels of maternal emotional and psychological conditions, even maternal depression. Lower levels of parental mental health could affect parenting practice, including parents' inattentive, harsh, or neglectful parenting. Divorce research (Weinraud & Kaufman, 2019) showed that divorced parents are more irritable and unresponsive in their interactions with children, and they show poorer supervision and erratic and sometimes punitive discipline. This insufficient parental quality, in turn, disadvantages children's social and emotional development. Studies (Jones et al., 2002) showed that parents' negative reactions to children's emotions can result in children's low-quality social-emotional function and emotion regulation difficulties.

Furthermore, children growing up with single mothers spend less time with their fathers than in homes where the father is present as when a father is resident, the quality of his parenting is likely to be an important input into a child's health and development (Waldfogel et al., 2010). A non-resident father could still be involved in the care of his child in principle, while in fact, his involvement will often, though by no means always, diminish as the child gets older (see 7.2 The Estranged Father-Child Relationship in Chapter 7).

Studies (McLanahan et al., 2013) found that by age five, nearly two-fifths of children of unwed parents had no regular contact with their fathers in the past two years, while another two-fifths were seeing their father regularly (the remaining one-fifth fell somewhere in between). McLanahan and Lee (2015) investigated the causal effect of the father's absence and showed that the father's absence influence children's school graduation rates, social-emotional adjustment, and adult mental health. The father's absence has a greater effect on boys, especially when the father's absence occurs during early childhood than later. In adolescence, the father's absence increases risky behaviour, such as cigarette smoking, drug use, or alcohol use. However, having a father actively involved in the child's upbringing, even if he does not reside in the household, can bring numerous benefits to the child's health and development (McLanahan et al., 2013). For example, the quality of a father's involvement has been associated with a child's cognitive development and language competence. In addition, father involvement has been linked with fewer child behavioural problems even when the father is a social father only (that is, the mother's romantic partner living in the child's household) (Bzostek, 2008).

While non-resident father involvement can be beneficial, it is important to acknowledge that it could also have negative implications. For instance, if fathers engage in behaviours that interfere with child health and development, or if there is a poor relationship quality between the father and mother, it could lead to lower-quality parenting behaviours on the mother's part (Waldfogel et al., 2010).

2.3.2 Single Mother Dilemmas

The literature above shows that children have better development outcomes in traditional families with two married parents. But what is it about single-mother families that disadvantage children's developmental outcomes compared to two-parent families? It is necessary to explore the plight of single-mother families further.

Being a mother can be challenging even for those women who are successful, well-educated, in good economic condition and with a partner (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015). It could be particularly demanding for single mothers who are their children's primary caregivers and sole breadwinners. In addition to often having fewer economic resources, single mothers frequently have fewer emotional resources due to the demands of raising a child without the support of a spouse or co-parent. Studies (Evenson & Simon, 2005) showed that raising minor children has greater pressure under certain social structural contexts, in particular, for single parents, parenting is associated with higher levels of distress. Single parents have to deal with difficulties arising from poor policies, employment, and income, which gives them stressful experiences that can potentially alter their parental attitudes and practices negatively (Letablier & Wall, 2018), which, in turn, disadvantages children's development.

The challenges for single mothers (Avison et al., 2007) are more distressing than those for married mothers over time, mainly because single mothers experience higher levels of pressure in multiple areas of life, including economic hardships, caregiving strains, work-family balance, and lack of support (see my later discussion with greater empirical details in 6.1 Feelings of Being a Single Mother in Chapter 6).

2.3.2.1 Economic Hardships

As discussed, family structure influences children's development through two aspects: through parents' economic resources, such as parental income and education level, and through parental resources, such as parental psychological well-being and parenting practices (Thomson & McLanahan, 2012). Economic resources have a stronger influence on the relationship between family structure and child development outcomes (Hao, 1996; Thomson & McLanahan, 2012). Studies (Bergström et al., 2013, 2015) investigated post-divorce families and compared children living in shared residences (in both parents' homes) to children living with only single parents and found that the former children experienced fewer

psychosomatic problems and better well-being, which suggested that children's lower wellbeing in single-parent families is not inherently associated with family composition, but to an important extent rather with single parents' disadvantage economic position. Therefore, studies called single-parent families at risk, specifically children at risk, because single-parent families, particularly those composed of single mothers, are disproportionately poor compared with other families (Weinraud & Kaufman, 2019).

Available literature (Chant, 2008) argues that global poverty shows characteristics of a female face, which is named "feminisation" of poverty. This means the poor population is increasingly female, and the percentage of poor households headed by women is increasing (Chant, 2008). Chant (2007) pointed out that the feminisation of poverty is characterised by a higher incidence of poverty, more severe and more permanent poverty among women, with single mothers facing a greater burden and higher obstacles to escaping poverty than men. Women have little social resources at their disposal to combat poverty as a result of the institutional culture of gender inequality. As a result, the income disparity and poverty experienced by single parents are significantly influenced by gender.

Research has shown that economic hardship can have a negative impact on both physical and mental health (Campbell et al., 2016). Brown and Morgan (Stack & Meredith, 2018) investigated the relationship between marital status, poverty, and depression in women over a period of two years. The results showed that single parents are twice as likely as married women to face financial difficulties, despite they are twice as likely to be in full-time employment, which leads to their higher levels of chronic stress, loneliness, and depression. Therefore, high levels of distress, low economic resources and a lack of stress-buffering resources may lead to poor psychological coping strategies among single parents despite making extensive efforts to meet their financial obligations (Stack & Meredith, 2018).

Studies (Walker & Zhu, 2011) of parental separation in the UK showed that the loss of paternal income upon separation accounts for the poorer educational outcomes of children from single-mother families rather than father absence per se. Harkness (2022) analysed the longitudinal data of 25 years and argued that the cause of single mothers' economic disadvantage is an accumulation of various economic disadvantages, which includes labour market penalties for motherhood combined with the cost of partner absence and child-related increases in financial needs to affect mothers' economic well-being. In addition, Li (2020) believed that the gender role of single mothers adds extra difficulties to their economic hardship in the Chinese context because single mothers are considered to be fragile, difficult to get along with, and encumbered by children. The social stereotypes make it more difficult for them to integrate into society, which leads to disparate treatment of single mothers in their working environment. Consequently, they would confront difficulties in social relations and career development, which would worsen their economic situation further (Li, 2020).

Although most of the research on single mothers has focused on children in low-income or poverty-stricken families, evidence shows that single-mother families with a higher income also face challenges and experience economic pressure (such as Chinese participant Boyu in 6.1.2 An Umbrella of the Family in Chapter 6). Ryan et al. (2015) found that young children in higher-income families were more detrimentally affected by the transition into a single-parent family than their peers in lower-income families. Besides, their psychological distress is also higher among divorced mothers than those never-married mothers (Hope et al., 1999). These findings suggest that single mothers and their children likely face risks and challenges across the economic spectrum and not solely at the lower income levels.

2.3.2.2 Caregiving Strains

Studies (Evenson & Simon, 2005; Hansen, 2012; Stanca, 2012) have shown that men and women with children in the home report lower psychological well-being than those without children, which is because raising children can be financially and emotionally draining. Parenting stress exists in the parenting process across family structures and cultures, and it is amplified by challenging life situations, including poverty, single parenting, and parental separation (Louie et al., 2017) (see later discussion in 6.2 Responsibility Overload in Chapter 6). General stress is itself a risk factor for depression, and it corresponds closely to factors for depression and anxiety (Turner et al., 1995, as cited in Liang et al., 2019). Therefore, adults faced with stressful life events such as the challenge of parenthood are exposed to greater stresses, especially as a single parent, which can contribute to later depression and anxiety (Flouri et al., 2018).

Liang et al. (2019) investigated depression and anxiety symptom prevalence among mothers with very young children. It found that both partnered mothers and single mothers experience parenting stress-related depression and anxiety. However, single mothers with young children are more predisposed to mental health disorders than partnered mothers. Lacking perceived social support is the most significant factor for depression and anxiety, which are caused by parenting stress (Liang et al., 2019). Single parenting stress may potentially lead to poorer physical and mental health conditions for the parents and, in turn, to children's later social-emotional and health disadvantages development (Liang et al., 2019).

Some evidence (Carlson & Berger, 2013) suggests that the parenting behaviours of single mothers differ from those of married mothers: single parents report less parental engagement than married parents. Looking across all of the time investments made by caregiving adults, children in single-mother families experience fewer total hours directly engaged with adult caregivers partly because non-resident fathers spend very little time with

their children, which results in single mothers spending more solo time with their children than married or partnered mothers (Kalil et al., 2014). Therefore, there is a greater care burden on single mothers.

Research (Senior, 2014) on parental costs and rewards showed that parenthood brings great joy and positive feelings, but mothers report less happiness, more stress, and especially greater fatigue in time with children than fathers due to mothers' more time investment. In the case of single mothers, the demands of single parenting may result in less joy and greater strain in time with children, but on the other hand, single mothers' time with children may also provide more intimacy, fulfilment, and security (Edin & Kefalas, 2005).

Linkages between single parenthood, parenting behaviours, and parents' emotional well-being may be attributable to several factors. Research shows that transitions into and out of relationships are associated with increased parenting stress and changes in parenting behaviours (Beck et al., 2010). In addition, single mothers receive less social support and experience greater strain than married mothers (Amato, 2000; Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Therefore, the greater care burden among single mothers may also leave less room for the more enjoyable and rewarding aspects of parenting.

2.3.3.3 Work-Family Balance

It is argued that a working mother, particularly a single mother, faces a conflict between her job and caregiving responsibilities due to reduced time for childcare and increased working-related stress, which may disadvantage child-rearing (Bertrand, 2013). Therefore, the work-family conflict is more severe, typically in employment and childcare responsibilities, which are irreconcilable for single mothers (see further discussion in 5.3.2 Social Networks in Chapter 5, and 6.1.1 A Mix of Joys and Pains in Chapter 6). However, maternal employment provides financial security, which is particularly crucial in single-mother families. In addition, research (Meier et al., 2016) showed that employed single

mothers have better emotional well-being than those without, which does not necessarily contribute to disadvantaged childrearing (Bianchi, 2011). For example, maternal employment may bring fulfilment and exposure to a social network outside the family (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2004), and these networks may serve as a source of ideas about parenting and social support (Augustine, 2014), which is an advantage that could be especially important for single mothers who do not benefit from the support of a residential co-parent. Employed mothers' better emotional well-being also comes from working itself because work provides fulfilment, an escape, connections outside the family, and a chance to be a role model to children (Meier et al., 2016). The positive emotional benefits of the work and the family security that it affords may spill over into parenting, creating more positive parenting experiences as well (Meier et al., 2016).

The irreconcilable conflict of employment and childcare responsibilities for single mothers may need a second consideration. Harkness (2016) showed how single mothers' mental health improved significantly more than that of partnered mothers when they entered paid work after the 1990s welfare reforms in the UK. Meier et al. (2016) compared the employment and mothering experiences of single mothers to those of partnered mothers and found that non-employed single mothers experience lower happiness, higher sadness and stress but the same level of fatigue compared to employed single mothers and partnered mothers. Their result that non-employed single mothers are generally worse off emotionally than other mothers suggested that the advantages of maternal work among single mothers are associated with better affective experiences in time with children, which in turn benefits children's development (Meier et al., 2016). Moreover, their result also reflected other challenges faced by the single-mother group, such as social disadvantages.

Therefore, although the work-family conflict for single-mother families is more severe, the primary source of mental strain for a single mother is not being a mother but handling the headship in the absence of a partner and shortage of support.

2.3.3.4 Lack of Support

Divorce research shows that separation from a partner entails a loss of social contacts and their positive effects (Keim-Klärner, 2022). The separation changes how everyday life is organised because the partner is absent from almost all the tasks, which adds a practical burden, especially for the one with custody. Empirical findings on social support after separation are inconsistent. Some studies find that divorced parents receive increased support from their own parents and continue to receive support from in-laws (see my later discussion in 5.2 Family Support in Chapter 5), while others find a decline in social support (Harknett & Knab, 2007). However, divorce is not the only way to become a single parent, so the results cannot be generalised to others who become single parents in different pathways. For example, widowed women receive more support from relatives and friends than those who divorced (Kalmijn, 2012).

Belsky's (1984) parenting process model identifies three domains of determinants contributing to successful parenting: parent contributions, which are defined as personal-psychological resources of parents; child contributions, which are defined as characteristics of the child; and lastly, contextual sources of stress and support, which are defined as the broader social context in which the parent-child relationship is established. The first two elements are contributions from parent and child, and the third one is considered as external support, more specifically, social support on both psychological and physical. Changes in any of the three domains impact parent functioning, but parent contribution is recognised as the most successful parent-child relationship buffer from stress (Respler-Herman et al., 2012).

Based on this model, we can tell that parenting is positively associated with social support (Taylor et al., 2015). For example, support from social networks could increase parental self-esteem and enhance the individuals' patience and sensitivity in parental practice (Lumino et al., 2016). The degree of social support mothers perceive can significantly reduce stress (Iguacel et al., 2021). Mothers who perceive more social support are less distressed in the mother role (Nair et al., 2020). Ostberg and Hagekull (2000) found that parents with high social support tended to experience low levels of parenting stress, which leads to more positive and effectual parenting (see later discussion in 5.3.2 Social Networks in Chapter 5).

Social support is an important parenting resource that enables single mothers to ease overwhelming parental demands. For example, single mothers can benefit much from social support (Balaji et al., 2007; Harknett, 2006), especially childcare support, which enables them to be involved in employment to balance family and work and pull out of poverty (Ciabattari, 2007; Cook, 2012). Since single mothers exhibit greater levels of anxiety, depression and stress than partnered mothers, which arises from a critical economic situation, the increased demands arising from the child's sole care and upbringing (Dor, 2021). Therefore, accountable support can buffer stress, so they have the confidence to cope better with increased life demands (Sartor et al., 2023).

While the challenges and disadvantages associated with single-mother families are widely documented in the literature, it is equally important to acknowledge that outcomes are not universally negative. Some research suggests that children raised in single-mother families can develop emotional resilience, strong relational skills, and secure attachments, particularly when supported by wider family, community networks, or emotionally available caregivers (Sia & Aneesh, 2024; Golombok, 2015). Moreover, the focus on negative outcomes overlooks the strengths, agency, resilience, and adaptive strategies that single mothers develop in response to their circumstances. The empirical chapters of this thesis will

show how the participants in this study, both in China and the UK, navigate the challenges they encounter in diverse and creative ways, often fostering emotionally supportive environments for their children despite limited resources or the absence of a partner. This study, therefore, seeks to move beyond negative narratives and offer a more balanced, nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of single motherhood.

Family experiences are shaped by and embedded in a wider social and policy context. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the single-parent phenomenon in a broader perspective. Studies (Conger et al., 2010) have shown a correlation between single parenting and poor social status, income and standard of living. However, it can be argued (Chisholm, 2017) that the connection is guided in large part by government policies and social support such as child support and advance maintenance, taxes and transfers, family transfers, maternity leave, leave shared between parents, leaves to care for a sick child, rest days, annual leave, and sick leave. There is a variation across countries in social policies that address the difficulties and inequalities faced by single mothers. Variations in governmental and social policies may be more pronounced when comparing countries with completely different government systems, such as China and the UK, which will be discussed and compared in detail in the following sections.

2.4 Cross-cultural Comparisons Between China and the UK

This section discusses and compares the differences between China and the UK in detail. It begins with the political, economic, and cultural aspects, which are the bedrocks that determine the differences. It is followed by the comparison of childcare provisions in the two countries, as they reflect the state's attitudes on attachment and children's social-emotional development. Lastly, collectivism and individualism as a perspective beyond the national level are discussed to examine and understand the different parental values and practices in these two social contexts.

2.4.1 Political, Economic and Cultural Context

The Chinese communist party refers to the current political system of China as the "socialist consultative democracy" (Liu, 2021). This system is based on a complex structure that is made up from the bottom of villages, autonomic prefectures, provinces, party chiefs, governors, vice premiers, premiers and president at the very top (Liu, 2021). This is a form of the bottom-to-top information channel through which the will of the common people is brought to government attention (Liu, 2021). The country's current system is a controlled transition type system from the overtly communist past of China to a gradually capitalist leaning China driven by a large middle class (Fan, 2022). China is a one-party state, and elections are held within the only party, the communist party congress for government executives (BBC, 2022). The party maintains tight control of the current process of transition of China's political and economic posture to prevent unforeseen upheavals that are expected as the continue to achieve more freedoms, including economic freedom (BBC, 2022). This is evident in policies such as the "one-child policy", which has altered China's demographic and social fabric in numerous fundamental ways in nearly four decades (1979-2015) (Cai & Feng, 2021).

These types of policies, however, can affect parenting attitudes, as a result of the intense parental focus of all expectations and effort on a single child (Dewar, 2019). Many forms of this intense parenting have been described, such as authoritarian parenting and tiger parenting (Li & Hein, 2019). Liang et al. (2019) interviewed about concerns of people who grew up as children in this period and found that children were more pressured about meeting parental expectations. However, an advantage of this can be argued to be the fact that Chinese children have higher attainments in areas such as business and academics compared to their counterparts from other ethnic groups (Kim, 2015).

In terms of the basic cultural influence that shapes Chinese society, Confucianism has an important role in traditional culture and should also be considered as a key factor that influences parenting attitude. The Communist Party has tried to revive Confucianism as the dominant guiding ideology in China and a symbol of a cherished indigenous tradition attached to a Chinese national identity (Wang & Anderson, 2014). Filial piety is regarded as the foundation of individual morality in Confucianism, which proposes that family harmony is the foundation for social harmony and that society is organised as an extension of the family (Goldin, 2010). The governmental promotion of behaviours such as avoidance of divorce and staying in the marriage, also caring for the young and the old in the family, are believed to bring social stability (Wang & Anderson, 2014). Under this circumstance, traditional familial values are dominant in China, with a very conservative view on parenting and family (Xu et al., 2005). Women never contemplated divorce since they hold the traditional belief of "marry a dog, stay with a dog; marry a rooster, stay with a rooster" once they get married (Zhang, 2019). Therefore, separation, divorce and single motherhood are regarded as destabilising phenomena in society. All attempts to seek a divorce run against the traditional culture and bring disgrace to the family, where women are expected to stay in a marriage, good or bad (Fu & Wang, 2019). Accordingly, single motherhood in China is associated with uncertainty, ambivalence, and precarity, all of which pose greater challenges to women's mental and physical health compared to UK mothers (Meier et al., 2016). The reality is that China is still a long way from establishing an effective social security system, therefore, espousing values like filial piety largely shifts the responsibility of caring for senior citizens from the Government to individual families (Wang & Anderson, 2014).

However, the prosperity of China has been changing the country rapidly since the introduction of the Open and Reform policy in 1978, including aspects of attitudes towards being parents, acceptance of divorce, and consequently, single motherhood. This is because,

with the economic prosperity, new generation of Chinese parents are better educated, they now turn to knowledge gained from books written by experts in the field of parenting instead of the old parenting way that rely on past personal experience or tradition to raise their children (Li, 2018). Furthermore, the younger generation of Chinese women has higher financial independence, which allows them to be more aware of their rights. Many place more value on the pursuit of happiness rather than staying in unhappy marriage relationships. Consequently, 74 per cent of divorces were initiated by women in 2019 (CGTN, 2019). The improvements, however, keep happening, including China making the divorce process easier and faster in 2003 by enacting a new divorce law that scrapped the requirement for permission from an employer to get a divorce (Yardley, 2005), and this move prevents single parents from losing their jobs. This is a significant step in single women institutional support because it can be argued that even if appearing not as an active process, it is at least a passive support because it stops single women from losing their jobs and becoming destitute if they insist on getting divorce. In further similar developments, China in 1992 passed the law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women (NPCSC, 1992).

The UK political system is a parliamentary system with monarchy albeit ceremonial and politics are conducted within a multi-party system (BBC, 2014). The most important power figure in Government is the prime minister, a member of parliament, who is chosen to form a government (Darlington, 2024). The Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Scottish National Party and the Liberal Democrat Party are the four major political parties in the British parliamentary system. They have a broad consensus in the area of the rule of law, the free market economy, the National Health Service (NHS) and possession of a nuclear deterrent (Darlington, 2024). In the present UK, families are a priority to both the public and the politicians. It currently rides high on the policy agendas of both the Labour and the Conservative Parties (Jenkins et al., 2009). Research (Doyle et al., 2023) shows that public

policy can affect parenting behaviours and achieve a positive outcome of children. In the UK, social supports like income support, employment and support allowance, jobseeker's allowance are available for single parents which is integrated into Universal Credit now (DWP, 2013). However, research by the charity Gingerbread (Rabindrakumar, 2018) suggested that despite this benefits, single parents are still "trapped" in low-paid and insecure jobs and a third of children in single families are living in the poverty. Politician (BBC, 2018) believed that the increase in child poverty is a direct result of the government's cuts to social security, changes to universal credit and their complete failure to tackle the scourge of low-paid, insecure work.

While the UK is a welfare-capitalist economy (Wenzelburger, 2018) with a more liberal and dynamic view about parenting styles and family structure (Chan & Koo, 2011) because of the feminist movements being more advanced and single mothers are eligible for a considerable amount of institutional benefits compared to countries like China. However, the UK government like China also gives incentives for the "stable" family form within its welfare system. For example, marriages that last more than 10 years are eligible for social security spousal advantages and benefits; married couples can get the benefit of tax shields or exemptions, but once a marriage is dissolved through divorce, their status becomes "single" and most likely will incur higher tax dues (seatons, 2020). These differences are bound to affect the level of support that single parents receive in both countries differently. These differences in support between countries may affect the parenting styles and consequently result in positive or negative child social-emotional development.

No matter which country people live in, the impact on individuals who are married is significant when a major change happens to them, such as a marriage collapse. They may experience adverse effects on their physical, emotional and financial wellbeing (Anderson,

2014), which in turn adversely affects their parenting as they nurture children and consequently impair parent-child attachment (Umberson et al., 2010).

External support, such as government policies may offset the negative impact of divorce, income decline, bad emotions and mental health issues have in single parents. For example, the welfare policy in the UK allows a single parent with one dependent child under five to claim a degree of income support, child benefit and child tax credit (Gingerbread, 2024). The welfare system provides support to these single parents who are oftentimes single mothers and out of work. The system also supports them to get a job through the introduction of tax credits for them ensuring that working (of over 16 hours a week) remains an attractive option, and by extending state support for childcare (Harkness & Skipp, 2013). The system appears to at least recognise that money influences child outcomes and parents' situations also do influence child outcomes (see my later discussion in 5.1 Institutional Support in Chapter 5). However, living in poverty does not necessarily guarantee poor outcomes in children, but it may make it more difficult to achieve good outcomes. Conversely, living in a relatively affluent environment does not guarantee good results for children, but it may reduce the possibility of poor outcomes. The general perspective, however, is that adequate support for the parent and child leads to positive child attachment and parenting.

The support for single parents from welfare provision in China is still evolving as the trend of the rising numbers of single parents becomes more significant. Although the institutional support is not as targeted as specific as in the UK for single parents, some improvements in policy have changed the social environment for single mothers. In China, all state obligations and benefits depend on the area where a person holds their "hukou" (the name given to the Chinese household registration system), including entitlement to a birth permit, social security, medical care, education, housing, land and pension provision. Only children born within the marriage can register for "hukou" to enjoy the social benefits and

obligations; those children born without marriage or born in excess of birth restriction are regarded as "unauthorised children" whose parents face having to pay a fine to enable their children registering for a "hukou" (BBC, 2015). In addition, unwed childbirth is regarded as socially taboo, although not clarified in law, it still brings stigma for both the mother and child, which then is accelerated by the "unauthorised" condition. Since the Population and Family Planning Law (NPCSC, 2001) was passed in 2001, it provides the same protection for single women's children and ensures that the children enjoy the same treatment as the offspring of married women. The one-child policy has been replaced by a 3-child policy in 2021, parents no longer need to pay fines for their "unauthorised children" to register "hukou" to access social services such as healthcare and education under the new policy (Mullen, 2021). In line with such circumstances, several initiatives have also been announced and are in the process of implementation, aimed at boosting the birth rate and "reducing the burden" of raising a child. These include encouraging local governments to offer subsidies or even incentives for childbirth (Global Times, 2021), extended parental leave (Zhou, 2023), no restriction for unwed mothers to receive maternal benefits (Wang, 2021), increasing women's employment rights, and improving childcare infrastructure (Mullen, 2021).

Although the 3-child policy aims at boosting the childbirth rate, which is a response to the state's shrinking labour pool and rapidly ageing population, allowing unwed childbirth and the related maternal benefits support could provide a more open social climate for single mothers. The series of initiatives that support the 3-child policy at least improve single mothers' situation and enable them to be able to have more social support, which in turn influences children's development. Children who live in an environment that is open and with more social support cannot guarantee an optimal development outcome, but adequate support for the parent and child will more likely lead to positive child attachment and parenting. The following section will discuss how different political, social and cultural backgrounds

influence the parent-child attachment and children's social-emotional development and further compare the resulting differences.

2.4.2 Attachment and Social-Emotional Development in China and the UK

Institutions that implement attachment theory in practices to foster children's social-emotional development are mainly childcare providers and schools, which manifest the national education and care guidelines. It is necessary to have a brief comparison of childcare provisions in the two countries to reflect the different extents of emphasis on attachment and social-emotional development from a societal and national stance, as well as to provide a broader view for understanding individual differences in the correspondent context.

The UK government launched the Early Year Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework as a standard for children's care, learning and development, as well as for practitioners to implement (DfE, 2014). It places a strong emphasis on personal, social and emotional development (PSED) and sets it as one of its three prime areas of learning and development (the other two are physical development, communication and language), which advocates that children learn to be strong and independent through positive relationships. PSED calls for fostering children's sense of belonging by adults/practitioners being sensitive and responsive to their needs, feelings and interests by supporting children's efforts and independence to form a warm and loving relationship (Read & Hughes, 2014).

EYFS emphasises that children's learning and development rely on their interactions in positive relationships and favourable environments (BAECE, 2012). To enable children to learn through interactions with relationships and environments, secure attachments are needed to support children's emotional well-being and reduce levels of anxiety. By attending to children's psychological and biological needs, parents and later nursery staff can provide children with a secure base, which helps foster a secure attachment and enables them to develop fruitfully in the long term (Page, 2016). Accordingly, EYFS (BAECE, 2012)

stipulates that each child needs to have a key person assigned in a setting. Their role is to help ensure that every child's care is tailored to meet their individual needs, to help a child become familiar with the setting, offer a settled relationship for the child and build relationships with their parents (Read, 2014).

The key person would develop a sense of what really matters to a child and their family. They are likely to have a powerful impact on the child's well-being by establishing an affectionate, reliable, and close relationship. This close relationship is achieved through responding sensitively to children's feelings and behaviours and meeting children's emotional needs (Elfer, 2012). The key person is essential to provide consistency and availability, which enables attachment and a positive relationship to grow. This approach is based on the belief that once children demonstrate high levels of well-being and involvement, they will easily progress to a higher level of learning needed for social-emotional development (Mondi et al., 2021).

In the Chinese context, after implementing the reform and opening policy in 1980, China experienced accelerating economic development and the influx of foreign culture. Every societal aspect has been influenced significantly, including traditional Chinese child-rearing beliefs, attitudes, and practices (Luo et al., 2021). Educators and parents are increasingly coming to realise the importance of social-emotional well-being and promoting children's social competence. Greater value has been put on independence, personal opinions, self-direction, and self-confidence for adaptation to globalisation (Luo et al., 2021).

Social-emotional development was recognised as an independent preschool curriculum for the first time in 2001, then refined with more guidelines on educating and caring for preschool children in Early Learning and Development Guidelines for Children Aged 3–6 Years (ELDG) in 2012 (Luo et al., 2021). The social development domain involves two aspects: interpersonal relationships and social adaptability (Ministry of Education of the

PRC, 2012). The content of the social development domain is similar to that of the EYFS in the UK. While the difference is that the EYFS highlights an individual's effort and independence, setting clear boundaries and allocating a key person to help each child reach these objectives. In comparison, ELDG emphasises cultivating qualities that enable individuals to better integrate into the collective. Early childhood education in China historically emphasised children's orderly behaviours and obedience in class (Luo et al., 2021). Classroom activities were constructed with highly structured teacher-directed group learning activities (Luo et al., 2021). The differences reveal the cultural difference between individualism and collectivism.

Culturally, apart from the Confucian cultural context, the collectivist versus individualist perspective as a cultural value is also worth considering in examining the differences between the two countries because cultural values provide norms and expectations for such things as education and childrearing, which results in different views and late emphasis on children's social-emotional development in China compared to the UK.

Triandis (1993) applied cultural syndrome to conceptualise cultural differences and defined it as a set of elements in a subjective culture, including shared attitudes, beliefs, categorisations, expectations, conventions, roles, definitions, and values. He identified collectivism and individualism as two examples of such cultural syndromes. Collectivism is the degree to which people consider themselves connected to or related to others (Mann & Cheng, 2013). In this case, people are driven specifically by the standards and ideals of their social or cultural group. Individuals who place a higher priority on collectivistic cultural values are driven by the norms and values of their social or cultural group (Mann & Cheng, 2013; Triandis, 2018). Alternatively, individualism is the degree to which people regard themselves as apart from other members of their social or cultural group. Individuals with

more individualistic cultural values are driven by their own interests, objectives, and advantages (Triandis, 1993).

Conceptually, collectivism and individualism are globally mapped to Eastern and Western cultures, which differ in terms of history, values, and beliefs. According to the cultural dimension model (Hofstede, 2011), Asian countries, especially China, have been described as traditionally collectivistic, whereas many Western countries, such as the UK, are highly for individualism. A collectivistic society, like the Chinese, facilitates interdependence, cooperative and group-oriented behaviours among people, and groups have priority over personal goals (He et al., 2021). Therefore, people conform to the collective norms and values, which emphasises interpersonal relationships (Triandis, 2018). Conversely, in an individualistic society, the UK, people are expected to be independent and autonomous, and their behaviours are largely based on their unique configuration of internal attributes (Huntsinger & Jose, 2009), such as defending one's personal space, acquiring goods and services for oneself, and establishing an independent identity (Triandis, 2018).

A meta-analysis study (van IJzendoorn & Kroonenberg, 1988) that is still widely cited today in attachment research compared the attachment classification across eight different countries and suggested that secure attachment is the most common type in all cultures. Archer et al. (2015) investigated the Chinese parent-infant attachment and showed that the distribution of attachment classification in the Chinese context is 62% secure, 13% avoidant, 16% ambivalent, and 13% disorganised. Meanwhile, Minnis et al. (2010) examined the attachment of young school-age children in the UK and showed that the distribution is 73% secure, 7% avoidant, 14% ambivalent, and 7% disorganised. The specific number/percentage of each classification in the two countries may vary with different investigation methods are implemented, but the results reflect that the majority are in secure classification, which is consistent with the global norms (Archer et al., 2015). It is argued that the variation of

attachment distribution within cultures is bigger than between cultures due to child-rearing practices and environmental factors (van IJzendoorn & Kroonenberg, 1988). However, in general, countries that are more culturally collectivist have higher levels of ambivalent classification, whereas individualistic countries that support independence have higher levels of avoidant classification (van IJzendoorn & Kroonenberg, 1988).

Attachment orientation is mainly measured in two dimensions: ambivalence and avoidance (Brennan et al., 1998). For adults, the ambivalence dimension refers to individual worries that a partner will not be supportive and available when in need, so more efforts are made to uphold the closeness. The avoidance dimension refers to an individual who distrusts a partner's ability and goodwill to be supportive and available when in need, so more efforts are made to maintain independence and self-reliance.

The explanation of the general difference in attachment categorise between collectivist and individualist culture could be that, in collectivist culture, people tend to perceive themselves more as interconnected and interdependent with one another (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), they are more concerned with fitting in the social group to maintain the social harmony (Kim & Markus, 1999). Therefore, connectedness to others partly provides their sense of self, which means part of their security needs is to see themselves as a social group. The request of reliance on others leads to an attitude of accentuating others compared to self and contributes to ambivalent attachment (Cheng & Kwan, 2008). In contrast, people from individualistic cultures tend to perceive themselves as distinct from each other, and their sense of self is more valued based on the degree of their independence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Therefore, their attachment ambivalence, which effectively means the reliance on others to fulfil their security needs, is lower among individualists. This less expectation towards others also means higher self-reliance for individualists (Cheng & Kwan, 2008).

Although the dichotomisation of cultural values of collectivism versus individualism is a useful conceptual framework for understanding parental attitudes, practices and their impact on attachment classification, it is necessary to take caution when considering similarities and differences between parents from different cultures because cultures are not homogeneous entities without individual variation (Bornstein, 2012). For example, to assume that individualistic cultures lack a concept of relatedness and that collectivistic cultures fail to recognise the concept of individual choice (He et al., 2021). Oyserman et al. (2002) did a meta-analysis of 50 existing individualism and collectivism studies and found that the two appear to be statistically independent rather than opposing concepts. For example, people in some societies that are typically thought of as being particularly individualistic (Australia) or collectivistic (South Korea) may actually be less so (Oyserman et al., 2002). Therefore, the individual difference also needs to be understood within the individualist/collectivist cultural context in which they occur in my study.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the importance of parent-child attachment and how it impacts children's social-emotional development for a lifetime through establishing a child's internal working model. Several factors are critical in influencing children's development, including parents' own attachment categorisation and parenting style. Attachment is proven to be intergenerational transmission, so it is not easy for parents to foster children who are out of their parental attachment category. Parents' attachment patterns are passed onto children through parenting practices. Their emotional philosophies, emotional interactions with children, and emotional reactions to others form the family climate and teach children what behaviours and manners are acceptable. It has a profound influence on children's social-emotional development, especially in children's capacity for emotional regulation. Studies showed that securely attached children tend to have a better capacity in emotional regulation.

However, external factors could alter the parent-child attachment and, in turn, children's social-emotional development. In my study, it is the conditions of a single-mother family. Literature has suggested that children have a lower developmental outcome in single-parent families compared to two-parent families. This is because of the single-mother dilemmas, including economic hardships, childcare strains, and work-family balance. Single mothers are the sole breadwinners for the families despite being faced with gender inequality, they are also the only parents in childrearing despite being faced with the stress of dual parental responsibility. Therefore, single-mother households are more fragile than two-parent families as a family structure. Consequently, the difficulties could alter single mothers' parental attitudes and practices and, in turn, disadvantage children's development.

Reviewed literature showed that single-mother dilemmas can be reduced to some degree by implementing social and institutional support, which, in turn, can benefit children's development outcomes. However, this is largely determined by government policies and social services, especially in the two different contexts, China and the UK. Literature has shown that the lack of support for single mothers exists to different extents in both countries. The level of difficulties of single mothering does not differ or diminish so much in two different cultural contexts, China, a collectivist country, and the UK, an individualist country. In comparison, there is more parental support from social services in the UK, while China is still developing in this aspect. So, Chinese single mothers may turn to families for support.

Chapter 3 Theoretical Framework

Introduction

This chapter discusses the theoretical framework of this study, which is Bowlby's attachment theory and Bourdieu's relational concepts of habitus, field, and capital. By presenting details and critiques, I explore the relational dynamic between these two theories and develop a more suitable framework for this study—combining the two. The combination enables them to complement each other to examine single-mother families from two perspectives: inside the families by using Bowlby and outside or socially constructed families by using Bourdieu. The combination also leads this research to a psycho-social study, so this chapter ends with noting the discipline location of psycho-social studies.

3.1 Attachment Theory

3.1.1 Historical Development of Attachment Theory

The historical development of attachment theory has to be traced in the context of child analysis, which had two separate approaches in the first half of the last century, led separately by Anna Freud and Melanie Klein (Donaldson, 1996). Klein, as a proponent of object relations theory, believed that play could serve as a vehicle for accessing unconscious in children, analogous to free association in adult analysis (Viner, 1996). In contrast, Anna Freud, as a proponent of ego psychology, focused on the child's developmental stage and ego functioning, and was more cautious in applying Sigmund Freud's analytic techniques, favouring supportive and educational methods instead (Viner, 1996; Donaldson, 1996). These differences reflected deeper theoretical disagreements that later shaped divergent directions in psychoanalytic thinking.

Anna Freud's development in psychoanalysis was under the tutelage of her father while living in Vienna. She followed Freud's child developmental model to conclude that the adult analytic technique could not be applied directly to children since young children are not able to engage in transference and free association to articulate their thoughts during the analytic process. Therefore, she proposed a pedagogical form of child analysis as an alternative. She took only older children as patients and solely relied on dream material for interpretation. She aimed at strengthening children by teaching them to abandon bad behaviours and by making them aware of the reasons and consequences of their behaviours. In her view, a child's neurosis/abnormal behaviour is caused by external factors which are located in parental dynamics and structures in society—the child could be reformed by remedial training, which is called psychoanalytical education (Donaldson, 1996; Viner, 1996; Solnit, 1997).

Melanie Klein had many other influences apart from Sigmund Freud, particularly Sandor Ferenczi and Karl Abraham. Klein developed psychoanalytic practice by applying the adult analysis technique with slight modifications for children to investigate their unconscious minds, starting with her son (Donaldson, 1996; Viner, 1996; Solnit, 1997). Her practices led her to challenge Sigmund Freud's theory about early development and offer her own theory of the infant psyche. Klein highlighted the importance of the mother-child relationship and argued it is the first bond an infant form. To overcome the difficulty of working with pre-verbal children, Klein developed a method that involved taking play activity as symbolic of mental content, which enabled her to infer the mental states from the actions of pre-symbolic infants. By taking children as early as possible into the analysis, she gained insight into the earliest stage of mental life and a wealth of details from children that Sigmund Freud and Anna Freud were not able to obtain from older children (Donaldson, 1996; Viner, 1996).

Anna Freud and Melanie Klein were both influenced by Freudian philosophy in their own way but differed in the different aspects of Freud's work they emphasised. Although Klein had recognised the importance of the relationship between caregiver and infant, attachment had not formed into an independent paradigm at this stage. Bowlby's later works acknowledged the importance of early mother-infant relationships but challenged Klein's emphasis on internal phantasy, arguing that real-life relational experiences played a more crucial role in shaping children's emotional development. His work focused on actual early relationships and environmental factors, which placed him closer to Anna Freud's developmental and observational orientation than to Klein's internal, interpretive framework. Bowlby was a teacher at Bedales School and Priory Gate School from 1928 to 1929. He declared, "the idea that certain sorts of experience in early childhood have that kind of effect on character and development was picked up there" (Senn, 1991, as cited in van Dijken et al., 1998).

The most significant experience in shaping his view and the source of culminating his divergence from Klein's thought was Bowlby's one-year fellowship in child psychiatry at the London Child Guidance Clinic (LCGC), during which he worked as a clinician. Bowlby worked with a psychiatric social worker and an educational psychologist as a team. He had benefited the most from the cooperation with social workers, especially Molly Lowden and Nance Fairbairn. They were the people who first introduced the notion to Bowlby that parents' own unsolved problems in childhood most likely would cause their children's ongoing problems (van Dijken et al., 1998). Thus, after Priory Gate, Bowlby again found some evidence for his conviction that many psychological problems, both in children and adults, resulted from a faulty or disrupted relationship with close relatives. In his paper "The Influence of Early Environment in the Development of Neurosis and Neurotic Character" which was based on his experiences in LCGC, Bowlby highlighted objective factors in a

child's early social environment, dividing them into potentially harmful specific events and the mother's negative emotional attitude (van Dijken et al., 1998). The most important among specific events is mother-child separation as a broken mother-child relationship in the first three years might cause child maladjustment and lead to delinquency (Bowlby, 1989, as cited in van Dijken et al., 1998). This theoretical conflict is considered as an important event in the development of the attachment paradigm (van Dijken et al., 1998).

Five papers draw the first basic blueprint of attachment theory: The Nature of the Child's Tie to His Mother (Bowlby, 1958), Separation Anxiety (Bowlby, 1960a), Grief and Mourning in Infancy and Early Childhood (Bowlby, 1960b), and another two unpublished manuscripts about defensive process completed by 1962 in the Tavistock clinic. Borrowing from Freud's view that mature human sexuality is composed of instinct, Bowlby put forward that a two-month-old baby's attachment behaviour is made up of many instinctive reactions which can tie the infant and mother together, it includes sucking, clinging and following, as well as smiling and crying. The idea that children need a close and continuing caring relationship to thrive emotionally had no theoretical support at this stage. Due to his dissatisfaction with the psychoanalytic view of the time (maternal love was derived from oral sensory satisfaction), he mined concepts from ethology. Bowlby introduced the ethological concept as an explanation, such as sign stimuli (external or intrapsychic) and social releasers that cause specific responses. As a result, the child would experience separation anxiety if there were a situation that activates escape and attachment behaviours at the same time (Bretherton, 1992). A well-loved child would immediately protest when separating from his parents, but more self-reliance will be developed later. Bowlby argued that both the adult and the infant would experience separation anxiety, grief and mourning once attachment behaviours are activated (Bowlby, 1960, as cited in Bretherton, 1992).

Mary Ainsworth's contribution enriched Bowlby's theory, and she provided support with objective data from the empirical study, Uganda Project (Ainsworth, 1967) and Baltimore Project (Ainsworth et al., 1971, 1978), that helped Bowlby to further refine attachment theory. She developed the concept of maternal sensitivity that secure attachment was significantly associated with maternal sensitivity, which explains the nature of mother-infant interaction – how it leads to infant attachment security, and she believed this construct is universally applicable (Dawson, 2018). Furthermore, she developed the well-known Strange Situation Procedure (SSP), which put attachment into three classifications: secure, avoidant, and ambivalent attachment (Ainsworth et al., 2015). Consistent and sensitive caregivers can foster a secure attachment organisation. A secure child tends to experience less fear and show more cooperative and resilient interpersonal behaviours. Conversely, a child develops insecure attachment due to caregivers' inconsistent and insensitive responses to a child's needs (Thompson, 2001).

The famous attachment trilogy, Attachment (Bowlby, 1969), Separation (Bowlby, 1973) and Loss (Bowlby, 1980), shows the whole picture of attachment theory. Bowlby defined attachment behaviour as an outcome of evolution which can protect infants from danger, and attachment behaviours have their own motivation instead of serving a system of mating and feeding (Bowlby, 1969). Once the attachment system is activated, this secure base enables infants to explore the environment and return for reassurance (Ainsworth, 1967). If the caregiver can meet the infant's requirements, the infant will develop a working model based on the interpersonal interactions with the caregiver. Bowlby also emphasised the intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns (see my later discussion in Chapter 8 Intergenerational Transmission) which is discussed by later researchers, such as Main (Main et al., 1985), Belsky (2005), Verhage et al. (2016), van IJzendoorn and Bakermans-Kranenburg (1997, 2019).

3.1.2 "Mother Substitutes" – Fathers and Grandparents

In terms of the father-child relationship, Bowlby's thinking of fathers as an attached figure evolved in line with the publication of relevant research findings over time (Bretherton, 2010). The Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) (Steele et al., 2008) considered fathers of children at 18-months and proposed that the early father-child relationship was not significant. The sub-group of men in the AAI was an insecure category, but their partners were secure, who, in turn, facilitated a secure mother-child attachment. A meta-analysis (Van IJzendoorn & De Wolff, 1997, as cited in Brown et al., 2012) indicated that parental sensitivity is related to father-child attachment security. Still, this association was lower than with mothers.

However, an analysis (Brown et al., 2012) revealed some associations between father involvement, parental sensitivity, and father-child attachment security in children 13 months and age three separately. This research indicated that father-child secure attachment is related to both the father's involvement and sensitivity; it is relatively stable across early childhood, and the father's sensitivity is expected to increase over time. High levels of parental sensitivity and involvement can therefore build secure attachments for the father and child relatively quickly. Still, when fathers are not sensitive to children's needs, they can also develop secure attachments by increasing the amount of time with their children. Furthermore, the father-child secure attachment could affect the father-child relationship's functioning across the next few years (Holmes, 2006) because children who are securely attached to fathers show a greater sense of trust, comfort and emotional availability. These attachment behaviours and the emotional bonds that accompany them reinforce the father's behaviours and help them to behave more sensitively, feel confident about parenting, and develop high interactional synchrony with children (see my later discussion in 7.2 The Estranged Father-Child Relationship in Chapter 7).

Grandparents are a significant source of help for families, providing childcare and financial and moral support, especially after changes in the nuclear family, see my later discussion in in 5.2 Family Support in Chapter 5. For example, Harper and Ruicheva (2010) have argued that grandparents are important in sustaining the lone parent and contributing to the well-being of the grandchild. Especially in rising incidence of divorce and the emergence of complex reconstituted families, grandparents provide considerable stability and emotional and practical support to their children and grandchildren (Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2007; Harper & Ruicheva, 2010) (see my later discussion in 7.3 The Grandparent-Child Relationship as a Holding Environment in Chapter 7).

In Western culture, grandparenthood was experienced as a shorter time than in the previous generation. However, due to enormous social changes, including the second-wave feminist movement, more diverse family structures and modern divorce law, more and more grandparents play a direct parenting role in caring for grandchildren (Connor, 2006). Unlike Western culture, grandparenting has traditionally been part of childrearing practice in Asian societies (Li & Hein, 2019). On the one hand, the elderly are regarded as those with wisdom in a family because of their knowledge and life experiences, which enable them to educate young children to benefit the whole family (Sung, 1998, as cited in Li & Hein, 2019). On the other hand, because of the one-child policy in China (1979-2015) and the increasing number of dual-income families, raising the "precious single child" appears to have become an "intergenerational joint mission" among parents and grandparents (Goh, 2006, as cited in Li & Hein, 2019).

Three processes co-occur when children enter grandparents' care. Attachment relationships between grandchildren and grandparents develop or undergo revision, disruptions in attachments potentially occur between parents and children, and family members' internal working models of attachment and caregiving adapt to changes and

challenges (Poehlmann, 2003). Considering the childcare support given by grandparents, this model is also applicable to lone-parent families. The grandparent-grandchild attachment may be affected by several aspects, including the quality of care that the grandparent provides, grandchildren's age and original attachment pattern, the involvement of grandparents before grandchildren enter their care, and grandparents' lifestyle, which involves socio-economic stability, employment and social network (Poehlmann, 2003; Connor, 2006). When establishing the grandparent-grandchild attachment, the level of disruption in parent-child attachment would be affected by the age of the children, attachment styles, clarity around the length of separation and the reason, as well as grandparents' ability to support ongoing contact between adult children and grandchildren (Connor, 2006). Therefore, when children enter the care of their grandparents, their ability to form secure attachment bonds with grandparents may be affected by their previous and ongoing circumstances in the care of their parents, as well as the ability and willingness of the grandparents to attune to the children's needs (Connor, 2006).

3.1.3 Critiques of Attachment Theory

After the attachment theory was put forward by Bowlby in the last century, it has constantly been tested and criticised. Keller (2018) criticised it as a Western middle-class childcare philosophy (Keller, 2018) because it was formulated and based on most people from WEIRD (western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic) societies. Hence, there is a natural, unavoidable bias that cannot be used to measure parenting in other cultures: the universality of attachment theory is criticised for not taking into account cultural diversity in parenting strategies. Families all over the world value children, but the expressions of love and care vary in different cultural contexts through historical development and the production of different ecological conditions. Therefore, the critique of the universality of attachment

theory is that it identifies and privileges a particular Western viewpoint of development as the best for all children in the world (Keller, 2018).

Questions about the mother's sensitivity also received criticism. Keller (2018) argued that in the WEIRD social view babies are defined as independent agents with free wills and rights to a supportive social environment. In contrast, children in non-western traditional farmer families are calm, inexpressive, quiet and harmoniously well-integrated communal agents. So, in these different contexts parenting can easily be assumed to be unresponsive as well as harsh and emotionally distant. Therefore, under the universalist assumptions of the standard model of attachment sensitivity responsiveness seems to be an "ethnocentric" judgement about maternal quality.

Vicedo (2017) examined attachment theory from anthropologists and a cultural psychologist's perspective. She introduces Margaret Mead's view, an American cultural anthropologist, that a great diversity of behaviours exists beyond what Bowlby acknowledged, and attachment theory ignores the diversity of childrearing uncovered by ethnographic studies (Bateson & Mead, 1942, as cited in Vicedo, 2017). She criticised Bowlby's individualistic view of childcare and the claim that all maternal separation could lead to character, and emotional damage was an exaggeration which overstated the damaging effects. On the contrary, according to cross-cultural studies, the child would become a well-adjusted individual if cared for by many warm, friendly people (Mead, 1954, 1962, as cited in Vicedo, 2017).

Moreover, the way that Bowlby used the outcomes of maternal deprivation from extreme circumstances to extrapolate in regular mother-child relationships was not appropriate (Vicedo, 2017). The anthropologist Scheper-Hughes (2014) argued that maternal love represents various images, meanings, emotions and practices which are ubiquitous in different cultures and do not conform to a uniform, universal, and naturally occurring

environment. Different socio-cultural contexts influence maternal attitudes, emotions and parents' goals in childrearing and parenting practices. For example, in some instances, US middle-class mothers would like to see their children be independent, but these behaviours correspond to the avoidant category (Weisner, 2005, as cited in Vicedo, 2017).

Furthermore, the well-known SSP is a laboratory methodology that omits a variety of cultures (Vicedo, 2017). Mary Ainsworth's work did not involve an in-depth knowledge about the socio-economic or cultural context of the families and their beliefs about childrearing, yet she still concluded that maternal sensitivity is the determinant factor in shaping a baby's attachment. It might be due to a range of psychological factors, and social scientists turned towards a scientific model that after World War 2 aimed to develop universal laws of human behaviours that could be tested in a lab (Solovey, 2013, as cited in Vicedo, 2017). In addition, this methodology also encouraged psychologists to take the child as a unit of study rather than as a part of more complicated relations and networks. The reliance on laboratory experiments therefore resulted in a distorted vision of children as it neglected the role of context in child development (Vicedo, 2017).

Researchers such as Duschinsky et al. (2020) responded that although Bowlby's ideas were not well-grounded in sufficient supporting evidence this is often the case in the development of early theories across the sciences. They argued that Vicedo conflated Bowlby with attachment theory, not paying sufficient attention to the subsequent developments in this field, especially the cross-cultural studies that subsequent attachment theorists have conducted (Duschinsky et al., 2020). With the development of the attachment paradigm, the caregiving behavioural system has been theorised as different from the child attachment system which highly relies on social support and cultural processes (Duschinsky et al., 2020). Besides, how children respond to caregiving sensitivity in different cultures has been empirically explored (Mesman et al., 2016). Ainsworth has also recognised the effect of

cultural diversity and stated once in an interview that although environmental influence would not affect the infant's basic trust in attachment figure, the cultural difference might affect the expression (Ainsworth & Marvin, 1995).

However, cultural limitations are not the only criticisms of SSP, it has been criticised on ethical issues because the child was put under stress when facing separation and strangers in order to trigger the attachment system. This went against the ethical guideline of protecting participants from physical and mental harm (Ferdousi, 2015). According to Bowlby, attachment behaviours can only be observed when the child's feeling of threat or distress reaches a certain level which can be recognised by behaviours such as crying, calling, following and smiling; in turn, the caregiving behavioural system is expected to provide comfort after the requirement has been met (Bowlby, 1978). Marrone (1998) argues that this short separation simulates daily life as the mother sometimes needs to leave for a brief period and leave the baby with someone else.

Attachment theory has also been criticised by feminists such as Erica Burman (2016) in her book Deconstructing Developmental Psychology. She has argued that social and historical conditions provided an ideal soil for fostering ideas about regulating the role of motherhood. After men returned from the army in World War 2, in order to maintain the status of men in society, women began to be excluded again from those jobs that had previously been available "for the war effort", especially in heavy industry. Hence, it began to be used by the government as an ideological justification to keep women at home (Riley, 1979). However, it presented competing demands for mothering, a good mother should always be available and attentive; otherwise, far-reaching effects could be caused by any absence—only a selfish mother would sacrifice her child's development to fulfil herself. It follows that any of a child's psychological issues later in life are due to the mother. What emerges is an irreconcilable conflict between the figure of a working mother and a

responsible mother (Burman, 2016). This central role not only excludes women from employment in society but also shifts the onus of responsibility for childcare, welfare and development onto mothers (Marshal, 2020, as cited in Burman, 2001), which is essential for the maintenance of the social order. On the one hand, the mother fulfils children's emotional needs to allow children to form secure attachments; on the other hand, she provides the economic basis to ensure children's material conditions are secure and provides adequate nutrition to keep children physically healthy.

However, there is evidence to show that no harm is necessarily done when the child is cared for by a trusted and known person for part of the day, either a grandmother or a responsible babyminder (Holmes, 2006). Nevertheless, Bowlby pointed out in his later years that attachment is not exclusive to the mother and child (Bowlby, 1988). Most infants form more than one attachment. In fact, children often have several attachment figures in an "attachment hierarchy". Usually, the child develops a stronger preference for one caregiver, typically the mother, but possibly another person who is in the primary caregiving role as well, such as a father or a grandparent (Bowlby, 1988, as cited in Bretherton, 2010).

Summary

The universality of Bowlby's attachment theory across different world cultures remains a subject of immense debate. These debates centre on issues such as the effects of culturally influenced variabilities in maternal implementation of childcare methods (Posada et al., 2016). Bowlby argues that child-mother attachment is a lifelong phenomenon that evolves over the entire lifespan of an individual (Posada et al., 2013). This perspective emphasises that maternal sensitivity or quality of care is the crucial factor in this attachment relationship. Some critics of the universality of Bowlby's attachment theory argue that culturally driven maternal reactions to the child's behaviour may influence secure child attachment and end up not entirely in line with Bowlby's attachment theory (Posada et al., 2013). Bowlby was

himself aware of these different culturally driven child-mother attachment relationships. However, he elected to focus on the areas of commonalities in mother-child interactions across different cultures and social contexts that foster attachment. These commonalities may be less significant in areas of childcare, such as setting limits and anticipating and attending to a child's needs, which are important for the sustenance of child-mother attachment from childhood to adulthood (Posada et al., 2016). For example, Chinese families are more likely to employ stricter limits on their children based on parental and/or maternal wishes. Although decisions are taken with the child's participation, it is often to a lesser degree when compared to more liberal Western societies like the UK (Archer, 2012; Posada et al., 2013).

These criticisms are useful for pointing out that Bowlby may have overemphasised the causal relevance between secure attachment and positive parenting, especially parenting sensitivity. Furthermore, the concept of "monotropism" (that is, exclusive attachment of the child to one preferred figure) excludes men from having a role in childcare since Bowlby advocated that the father's primary role is to provide emotional support for mothering in the first three years (Bretherton, 1992). However, the parent-child attachment does exist in different cultural contexts, developed by different caregiving behaviours in different societies. The main point is the child's perception of caregiving behaviours that determine the development of attachment. After the parental caregiving system is activated, attachment will form when the child perceives caring as either sensitive or insensitive, which then further develops into trust through the caregiver's availability (Fitton, 2012). Researchers also suggest a secure attachment can also form in later childhood (Tizard, 1991, as cited in Burman, 2016).

Bowlby made a very significant contribution to attachment theory, child analysis, and psychoanalysis (Fitton, 2012) by revolutionising the view of mother-child bonds. Apart from theory development and exploration, Bowlby's ground-breaking contribution led to changes

in people's attitudes towards childcare. Although attachment theory started as an alternative to the scientific zeitgeist of the time, after a few decades it became more widely recognised, and today its principles are now enshrined in the theory of childcare practice. It also informs the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which contains 42 articles that emphasise children's rights and the expectation that parents and others will ensure that these rights are put into practice, even though some researchers have criticised CRC for assuming a certain version of childhood (Morelli et al., 2018).

Attachment theory emphasises the support that mothers need to provide sensitive, sustained, positive love for children, but in contemporary societies women need to go out and work, especially in single-mother families where work-family conflict and childcare responsibilities can pose irreconcilable demands (see my later discussion in 6.1 Feelings of Being a Single Mother In Chapter 6). Even for couple-parent families, the voice of "mother blaming" still widely exists in different cultures, see, for example, Li (2022) and Collins (2020). This irreconcilable conflict between two mother figures necessitates the need for professional childminders and the development of early-year services. Significantly Bowlby had already discussed this broader societal context, emphasising the role of social networks in the development of the mother-child relationship. He called on society to provide support to parents, especially the mother, "just as children are absolutely dependent on their parents for sustenance, so in all but the most primitive communities are parents, especially their mothers, dependent on a greater society for economic provision. If a community values its children, it must cherish their parents" (Bowlby, 1952, p.84).

3.2 Bourdieu's Sociological Perspective: Habitus, Capital and Field

3.2.1 Habitus

For Bourdieu, "the habitus as the social is inscribed in the body of the biological individual" (Bourdieu, 1985, p.113, as cited in Reay, 2004a). It is a set of predispositions, thinking and behavioural tendencies acquired over time through experiences. These propensities are rooted in the culture of a particular social group and embodied in the individual during the socialisation process beginning in early childhood. Habitus is durable and formed over a long period of time, like rock formations. It is not a set of beliefs or values that are held by choice; instead, it acts like a second nature, operating unconsciously ever-present and affecting our lives. This embodied culture serves as the foundation for a certain set of "durable dispositions", for example, the way of acting, taste in music, seeing, and making sense of the world. A key aspect is that habitus includes past experiences modified by present ones and a sense of a probable future, albeit early influences always bear more weight. It operates as a kind of tacit knowledge, enabling us to predict and deal with a wide range of situations without following rules consciously (Wacquant, 2014).

Habitus is both structured and structuring. On the one hand, it is the product of a person's position in the social structure; on the other hand, it shapes and reinforces the thoughts and behaviours of that position. It is the "immediate adherence ... to the tastes and distastes, sympathies and aversions, fantasies and phobias, which more than declared opinions, forges the unconscious unity of a class" (Bourdieu, 1996, as cited in Ray, 2010). It is "the product of structure, producer of practice, and the reproducer of structure" (Bourdieu, as cited in Wacquant, 2006).

Bourdieu made an important distinction between primary and secondary habitus. The primary habitus is a set of dispositions that are acquired through familial osmosis and familiar

immersion slowly and imperceptibly in early childhood (Wacquant, 2006). It is constructed by tacit and diffuse "pedagogical labour with no precedent", which constitutes our social personality as well as the springboard and matrix for the subsequent acquisition of any other habitus (Wacquant, 2006). The secondary habitus is built on the primary habitus and mainly results from one's education at school, university (specialised pedagogical labour), and other life experiences (Gabriel, 2017a). Wacquant (2014) argues that the distinction between primary and secondary habitus echoes Bourdieu's "the two modes of acquisition of culture", the familial and the academic, the experiential and the didactic. It indelibly stamps one's relation to cultural capital, "the first spawns the ease and insouciance that define excellence, the second bears the mark of effort and tension born of ascesis" (Bourdieu, 1984, as cited in Wacquant, 2014).

The primary habitus as an embodied history is internalised as second nature and forgotten as history. However, it always impacts the development of the secondary habitus and never loses its influence. Like the attachment pattern that forms in early childhood, habitus affects future socialisation in adulthood. The working model based on children's previous experiences with caregivers guides their later social interactions (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). Securely attached children have a positive interaction mode as they have a basic sense of trust when they encounter a social situation based on their experiences with sensitive caregivers. By contrast, insecure and disorganised children may turn their previous negative attachment experiences into new social interactions that could contribute to more social and behavioural problems (Van Der Voort et al., 2014) because these children tend to develop a sense of the self as incompetent (Bowlby, 1973).

In primary habitus, the patterns of action and perception passed down through the generations are a form of education tied to the parents' social position. Therefore, the primary habitus is about internalising the external as the parents' modes of thinking, feeling, and

behaving are linked to their social position and internalised in children's own habitus (Gabriel, 2017a). More specifically, parents' perceptions of the world, behaviours, ways of coping with different situations, and emotional regulation strategies implicitly teach children how the world looks like, what kind of behaviours and emotions are acceptable and expected, and how to manage them. Children learn certain behaviours and react in similar situations through their observation and mimetic actions (Cole et al., 2009). The experiences of learning from parents in the family build a foundation for children's development in the future (Morris et al., 2007). The longer a child is located within a particular set of relationships, the more likely they will develop a practical sense of behaving and acting in certain ways (Gabriel, 2017a).

3.2.2 Forms of Capital: Cultural, Social, Economic and Symbolic

Bourdieu (1990, as cited in Gabriel, 2017a) considered social development and change as occurring as a result of ongoing struggles over a variety of scarce goods and resources, which are not only economic but can also take on social and cultural forms. He developed a concept of capital to elaborate this idea, which is the currency that buys an individual a higher position or status in society. For Bourdieu, all goods, whether material or symbolic, have an economic value if they are in short supply and considered worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation. Unlike other uses of the concept of capital, Bourdieu's capital here is not a simple quantity of symbolic or material goods, defined once and for all, leaving only its unequal distribution to be measured. Instead, it is based on and involves a social relationship of domination that has important consequences within a specific field (Gabriel, 2017a).

Capital can appear in different forms depending on the field in which it operates, and Bourdieu proposed four distinct types of capital: cultural, economic, social, and symbolic, which are inter-relational and partly transposable (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital is

Bourdieu's most well-known concept. It can be institutionalised in the form of educational qualifications and can be converted to economic capital in certain conditions. Economic capital is inherited or created via interactions between the individual and the economy, and it can be immediately converted into money and institutionalised in the form of property rights. Social capital is created through social processes that occur between the family and the larger community and is comprised of social networks. Symbolic capital manifests itself in the recognition of individual status through authority and charisma, and legitimises other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). The exchange value of capital and its ability to be transformed from economic capital to both social and cultural capital via the expenditure of time and effort are central to the idea of capital (Gabriel, 2017a).

3.2.2.1 Emotional Capital

Bourdieu recognised the centrality of the mother, he wrote, "it is because the cultural capital that is effectively transmitted within the family itself depends not only on the quantity of cultural capital, itself accumulated by spending time, that the domestic group possess, but also on the usable time (particularly in the form of mother's free time) available to it" (Bourdieu, 1986, p.253, as cited in Reay, 2004b).

Although Bourdieu wrote that "devotion, generosity and solidarity work falls more particularly to women, who are responsible for maintaining relationships", highlighting the crucial role of the mother in affective relationships, he never clearly developed the concept of emotional capital in his work (Bourdieu, 1968, as cited in Reay, 2004b). However, women perform significantly more emotional labour than most men in the family, taking responsibility for the emotional aspects of family connections, responding to others' emotional states, and intervening to relieve distress. Lawler (2000, as cited in Reay, 2004b) points out that one of the significant roles of mothering is to balance the family's emotional budget and meet children's emotional needs. See later discussion in 7.1 The Ambivalent

Mother-Child Relationship in Chapter 7, and 9.1 Emotional-Related Maternal Practices in Chapter 9.

Nowotny (Reay, 2004b) developed the idea of emotional capital based on Bourdieu's conceptual framework. She argued that emotional capital is a variant of social capital but operates within a private nature rather than the public sphere. Emotional capital exists within the affective relationship of families and friends, which constitutes knowledge, contacts, relations, and emotionally valued skills and assets. These characteristics, at least, are partly held within any social networks that are affectively tied. An important difference between emotional capital and other capital is that emotional capital is acquired in the private sphere and therefore lacks the direct convertibility of other capitals, such as cultural and economic capital. However, the significant consequence of emotional capital's lack of value in the public sector is that it is primarily employed for family investments in children and husbands (Reay, 2004b).

As emotionally valued assets and skills, establishing emotional capital requires putting in love and affection, time, attention, care and concern. Regarding love and care as a relatively autonomous form of capital that is struggled for within the family is primal because loving and being loved is one of the earliest and most pervasive human desires (Gabriel, 2017a). Over time, emotional capital as an emotional resource is built up within the familial field and could be transferred and directed towards accumulating specific economic and cultural capital for children (Reay, 2004b). For example, mothers devote the skills they have gained from formal education to advancing their children's schooling by being supportive, patient, and committed.

Although families are vital for shaping children's lives, they are also active generators of their own social and cultural capital, especially when they lack economic capital, or it is not directly used. Drawing our attention to schools, we can see how children establish their

stock of social capital while in institutionalised education: they support each other with schoolwork and defend each other when encountering abuse and bullying, which gives them a sense of belonging. If a young child has a recognised position in a friendship network, it is easier for him to access other capital that others have already gained in related fields (Gabriel, 2020). Accordingly, young children learn and internalise their way of thinking and behaving from a wider community - they are social beings embedded in interdependent webs and networks that are constantly moving, changing and developing (Gabriel, 2020).

3.2.3 Field

The place where different types of capital interact is the field. It is a central pillar of Bourdieu's framework and also the area that connects the action of habitus to the stratifying structures of power. Bourdieu (1984) maps out a formula that elaborates the interconnections between habitus, capital and field: [(Habitus)x(Capital)]+Field=Practice. This equation states that one's practice results from relations between one's disposition (habitus) and one's position in a field (capital) within the current state of play of that social arena (field) (Manton, 2008).

A field, in Bourdieu's sense, is a social arena within which struggles take place. However, it is not merely a "battleground" for power relations; each field is a structured system with a unique logic of social positions occupied either by individuals or institutions (Yang, 2014). In Bourdieu's field theory, the position of an agent in a field can only be understood in relation to other positions in that field (Gabriel, 2017a). Agents follow an ordering of relations that is structural and objective within a field because individuals are placed independently of their will and intentions (Gabriel, 2017a). Any change of position in the field has to follow the rules that regulate the distribution of capital and the legitimate means to accumulate capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The field, as the physical and social spaces in which we live, structures the habitus (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Practical

sense establishes harmony between habitus and field, orienting social agents' practices without deliberation to follow the rules of that field (Bourdieu, 2000).

3.2.4 Critiques of Bourdieu

Scholars such as Tittenbrun (2018) have criticised Bourdieu's concept of habitus because it squeezes extra-economic phenomena into the economic straitjacket, thus leading to an overstretched concept of capital. Habitus is also criticised for its determinism, where individuals' agency is underestimated (Jenkins, 1982), especially in social change (King, 2000). King (2000) argued that habitus fails to provide an explanation of social change as it is determined by objective conditions, ensuring appropriate action for the social position in which any individual was situated. Therefore, any choice individuals make are always already pre-given by the habitus, which is itself determined by their objective, prior and, therefore, unchangeable position in the field. Therefore, there is no "upward social mobility", individual fate is fixed in a class trajectory and class trajectories contribute to overall social stability and their reproduction of social inequalities (Yang, 2014).

Bourdieu challenged the view of habitus as a form of determinism throughout his career and argued that the critique is based on a superficial and partial acquaintance with his total oeuvre (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). He (Bourdieu, 2000) wrote,

> Dispositions do not lead in a determinate way to a determinate action, they are revealed and fulfilled only in appropriate circumstances and in the relationship with a situation. They may, therefore, always remain in a virtual state, like a soldier's courage in the absence of war. Each of them can manifest itself in different, even opposite, practices, depending on the situation ... The principle of action is neither a subject confronting the world as an object in a relation of pure knowledge nor a "milieu" exerting a form of mechanical causality on the agent; it lies in the complicity between two states of the social history in bodies and history in things, more

precisely, between the history objectified in the form of structures and mechanisms (those of the social space or of fields) and the history incarnated in bodies in the form of habitus (p.149-151).

What Bourdieu means here is that habitus is not deterministic, the establishment of habitus involves the conjunction of subjective capacity and objective possibility (Wacquant, 2014) (This will be further discussed in Chapter 8 in Discussion section). He further articulated that "habitus becomes active in relation to a field, and the same habitus can lead to very different practices and stances depending on the state of the field" (Bourdieu, 1990, p.116). Yang (2014) further argued that the transformative potential of habitus may break the circle of Bourdieu's determinist account, where habitus and field are mismatched. When social agents enter a field that is outside their class trajectory, which Bourdieu called "deviant trajectory" (1996, as cited in Yang, 2014), the greater the distance between an individual's primary habitus and that of the field, the more likely it is that a full transformation of the primary habitus could happen.

Bourdieu's understanding of sociology as a "combat sport" exposes the underlying structures of social life: field structures habitus, habitus produces practice, and practice regenerates field (Wacquant, 1998). This mechanism seems developed in a fixed framework, but the notion of "disposition", which is central to Bourdieu's theory of the habitus, is based upon tacit and problematic assumptions which have never been tested empirically (Gabriel, 2017a).

Bourdieu has suggested bringing together sociology and psychology to better understand the social game in the field of social relations (Reay, 2015). Some of the psychological concepts he referred to are more accurately understood as psychoanalytic concepts, for example, "libido", "misrecognition", "defence mechanism", not to mention the ever-present psychoanalytic resonances of "habitus" and "dispositions" (Reay, 2015;

Gabriel, 2017a). However, Bourdieu's concept of habitus is criticised for not engaging sufficiently with the domain of the affective (Sayer, 2005, as cited in Reay, 2015). Aarseth et al. (2016) argued that Bourdieu's writing did not provide an understanding of how objective contradictions entwine with already felt emotional tensions and how the subject then handles these conflicts. Gabriel (2017a) further argued that Bourdieu's concept about the socialisation of subjective drives is insufficiently developed, although psychoanalytic concepts were introduced, which leads to a limited analysis of affects and a conceptual impasse in Bourdieusian scholarships' attempt in develop the psycho-social aspect of his theory.

Summary

Bourdieu's theoretical perspective can provide a useful theoretical framework for this study, where parents and children are viewed as relational and interdependent agents. Parents occupy a position in the social field, possessing different levels of cultural, economic, social and symbolic capital. When bringing up children, they invest their time, energy and emotions in the development of resources for the transmission of capital. At the same time, young children absorb and digest what parents provide them as their primary habitus and cultural capital, meanwhile forming attachment patterns. With time passing, children go to education for secondary habitus acquisition through pedagogic labours and other life experiences from a wider community. Their primary habitus, the product of their socialisation within the family, is continually reconstructed by their encounter with the outside world. Schooling especially provides them with a general disposition, which Bourdieu called "cultured habitus". Therefore, children's growth and development are processes of being influenced, in turn, by their primary and secondary habitus.

Eventually, children become civilised through self-regulation in contexts of family and wider communities (Gabriel, 2017a). Although the primary habitus is the product of children's early experiences, it is continually being shaped and re-shaped by their encounters

with adults, friends and peers, especially in schooling. As young children grow up, their habitus continues to evolve through processes of self-regulation.

Bourdieu's concepts can be related to Bowlby's attachment theory. A child's primary habitus and attachment pattern are both formed within the family in relation to parents, which set a foundation for the child's future. However, like primary habitus, the attachment pattern is not deterministic and can be reshaped by later experiences. The formed attachment pattern in early childhood can be seen as part of the primary habitus, which affects the child's competence in obtaining secondary habitus through social interactions. Children's social-emotional development can therefore be seen as a process that emerges from the complex relations between individualised and socialised habitus.

My research takes into consideration the extent of the wider institutional support that is available to single parents who face difficulties from poor policies, employment and low levels of income, which can negatively affect their parenting (Letablier & Wall, 2018) (see my later discussion in Chapter 6 Feelings of Being a Single-Mother). Belsky's (1984) model of parenting identified three main determinants: the personal-psychological resources of parents, characteristics of the child and contextual sources of stress and support. The first two elements can be regarded as the main contributions of the parent and child. The third one is considered as external support, more specifically, social support which may increase parental access to social resources. For example, establishing a wider network of social capital increases parental self-esteem and enhances sensitivity in parental practice (Lumino et al., 2016). According to Bourdieu, the volume of social capital possessed by a given agent depends on the size of the network of connections she can effectively mobilise and on the volume of capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) of those to whom she is connected (Bourdieu, 1986). By developing more social capital, single parents can potentially transform

it into other capitals that may directly lead to good parenting practices (see my further discussion in Chapter 5 Support for Single Mothers).

This study focuses on the relational dynamic of single-mother families and the interaction between single mothers and children within the field of these families. Attachment theory can be used to examine mother-child interactions in family relations. However, its theoretical limitations cannot be overcome when considering children's development and the relational dynamics of single-mother families in contemporary society. As social beings, single mothers are agents, and their practice can only follow an ordering of relations that is structural and objective in the social field. It goes beyond the assessing competence of attachment theory, which primarily focuses on mother-child dyad in families. Gabriel (2017b) has argued that attachment theory is still too narrowly based on the mother or parent and child dyad to capture the relational complexities of young children's social relationships with other significant people in their lives. Although Bourdieu's relational concepts provide a more comprehensive lens to evaluate single-mother families in a wider social context, the concept of habitus as the embodiment of dispositions provides insufficient details in exploring mother-child interactions and children's socialisation in single-mother families. As Nash (1990) has argued, the primary reference to habitus is to objective structures in which sociological explanations of group practices and strategies are formulated and embodied in individuals. Therefore, by combining Bourdieu and Bowlby, a more suitable theoretical framework for this study is developed.

At the early stages of this study, Bourdieu's sociological concepts provided an important theoretical starting point, helping me situate single-mother families within wider social structures and focusing on how various forms of capital shape parenting practices and children's development. In particular, it helped me identify the social and emotional capital that many single mothers and their children draw on, which is crucial in challenging deficit

narratives about single-parent families. At the same time, the application of attachment theory helped address the theoretical limitations of Bourdieu's concept of primary habitus in explaining the emotional and relational processes involved in the early socialisation of young children within the family.

However, as I engaged more deeply with the data, I found that this framework could not fully capture the emotional complexities, unconscious dynamics, and relational tensions that emerged from the data. I came to see that a psychoanalytic stance was needed to analyse the lived experiences of my participants. The framework of Bowlby and Bourdieu remains valuable for identifying attachment patterns and the intergenerational influence, and for identifying structural resources, such as emotional, social, and economic capital, that many mothers mobilise to improve their parenting practices, which in turn, benefit their children's social-emotional development. Yet, certain nuanced dynamics could only be fully understood through a psychoanalytic lens, particularly those that explore the interplay between psychic and social realities. For example, mothers' own understandings of their single-mother identity influenced their parenting practices (see 6.3.2 Guilt in Single Mothering), while the reflections on their own childhoods revealed attempts to break cycles of trauma and resist repetition compulsion as parents (see 8.1 Breaking the Circle). Similarly, the role of grandparents providing a holding environment for both mothers and children (see 7.3 Grandparent-Child Relationship as a Holding Environment) further highlighted the emotional dimensions of the single-mother family dynamics.

Therefore, while Bourdieu's concepts remain valuable, they ultimately took on a secondary role in this study, as the psychoanalytic stance enabled a more nuanced exploration of the emotional and relational processes underpinning single motherhood in this study. This theoretical shift reflects both the nature of the data itself and my own positioning as a

researcher. Moreover, offering an approach that attends to the interplay of the inner (psychic) and outer (societal) factors, which leads to the psycho-social nature of this study.

3.3 Psycho-Social Studies

This study aims to explore the impact of external factors (societal) on the internal aspect of single-parent families (mothers' internal world and mother-child interactions), that is, the complex relationship between society and individual psychology, which has been debated in social science and psychoanalysis. Therefore, it is necessary to note the disciplinary location of psycho-social studies.

The debate on the relationship between the disciplines of sociology and psychoanalysis has a long history. Clark (2002) pointed out that psychoanalysis, as a discipline and practice, has always been at the centre of philosophical and sociological debates because of its epistemological basis. The origins of sociology as a field precede psychoanalysis. Sociologists regard the "social" as the object of study, and they are interested in the relation between social structures and patterns of mental life in their own way, for example, The Metropolis and Mental Life (Simmel) and In the Condition of Anomie (Durkheim). Patterns of motivation of human action were central to their understanding of the "transition to modernity", which is the primary subject matter of the formative phase of sociology (Rustin, 2016). Later, the lives of some sociologists overlapped with Freud's, but none of them explored dimensions of unconscious and irrational motivation which Freud emphasised. Because of the methods and sensibilities of this discipline, the psychoanalytic field of investigation is in some way alien to sociology (Rustin, 2016).

As the founder of psychoanalysis, Freud primarily studied individuals' mental lives but believed psychoanalysis also provides an understanding of groups, societies, and cultures. For example, his belief in the relevance of psychoanalysis to societal phenomena is exemplified by his publications, such as The Future of Illusion (Freud & Strachey, 1962),

Civilisation and its Discontent (Freud & Riviere, 1930). In The Future of Illusion (Freud & Strachey, 1962), he explored how social norms, social values, and control are psychically internalised within the unconscious as the form of superego, while he explored how society and culture are embodied in psychic processes. In Civilisation and its Discontent (Freud & Riviere, 1930), Freud recognised the integrated relationship between individuals and society, he wrote, "just as a planet revolves around a central body as well as rotating on its own axis, so the human individual takes part in the course of development of mankind at the same time as he pursues his own path in life" (p.141).

Although Freud published on groups, societies, and cultures, sociologists regarded psychoanalysis as a form of psychology. However, Rustin (2016) pointed out that fruitful interactions happen from time to time between these two paradigms, which leads to remarkable outcomes in describing and explaining phenomena that neither could fully grasp alone. Since the 1990s, the social sciences have changed, partly because of the development of feminism. Traditional ideas about human rationality, which said that reason and passion were opposite, are being questioned. Emotions and feelings started to gain an equal interest compared with language and cognition. By recognising that the splitting between individual and society as unhelpful, psycho-social studies emerged as an embryonic new paradigm in the human sciences in the UK (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009).

Thus, psycho-social studies can apply psychoanalytic concepts and principles to illuminate core issues within the social sciences (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009). It informs the use of a series of new methodologies, such as free association and biographical interview methods, the application of infant observation methodologies to social observation, the development of psychoanalytic ethnography/fieldwork, and attention to transference-countertransference dynamics in the research process (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009). However, the contours of psycho-social studies as a subject remain indeterminate at present (Clarke,

2006). Frosh (2003) stated that psycho-social studies is a difficult subject to theorise because it is the meeting point of inner (psychic) and outer (societal) forces, something constructed and yet constructing, a power-using subject but also subject to power.

Psychological, sociological, and cultural aspects of our lives are therefore interconnected and influence each other. When we form relationships, experience emotions, and engage in actions in our social lives, each aspect can affect the others. In research scenarios, psycho-social methodologies recognise the critical role of our unconscious mind. It is the integration of social, cultural, and historical factors at our conscious level that contributes to our unconscious motivations and defences. The researcher and participant are seen as defended psycho-social subjects, their unconscious communications play a significant part in generating research data and constructing the research environment. The transference and countertransference between the researcher and the participant are the keys to reveal the inner world of research subject(s).

Researchers such as Melles (2005) have sought to parallel the analytic dyad with the research dyad, whereby the interactions between the researcher and participant are analogous to those between the analyst and analyst. The most notable one is the Free Association Narrative Interview (FANI) method which is proposed by Hollway and Jefferson in their Doing Qualitative Research Differently (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). They applied a series of psychoanalytic theories to qualitative interview research including clinical techniques of free association, transference, and countertransference. This is the approach used in my study and will be discussed further in my next chapter of methodology.

Chapter 4 Methodology

Introduction

Chapter 3 has articulated a combined theoretical framework of this study, Bowlby's attachment theory and Bourdieu's relational concepts of habitus, field and capital. This combination leads to a psycho-social foundation for this research. This chapter will discuss the ontological and epistemological position of this study, as well as the methodological approach and the method and analysis that was used.

4.1 Ontology and Epistemology

To conduct research, a clear understanding of ontology and epistemology is necessary to ensure that the research is carried out with a solid foundation and a well-defined perspective. Ontology is the study of reality and its nature, and it is closely related to epistemology, which is the science of how knowledge is acquired (Guthrie, 2010). A researcher's ontological and epistemological views, along with the subject of enquiry, will usually determine the type of research paradigm that will guide the conduct of the researcher's enquiry (Berg, 2014). Kuhn (1962, p.8) has defined the research paradigm as universally recognised scientific achievements that, for a time, provided model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners.

My overall qualitative approach is interpretivist and psycho-social. The interpretivist paradigm is based on the belief that there is no single reality because reality is constantly changing according to context, time and human experience (ontological view); therefore, the truth/reality needs to be interpreted with considerations for context and timing (Berg, 2014). The psycho-social perspective recognises the mutual impact of social and psychological realities on individuals, and in turn, how individuals shape social and psychological realities (ontological view); therefore, the interactive and intersubjective process is unique to each

individual in their context (Hollway & Froggett, 2013). In addition, the role and impact of

researchers within the process of data collection and analysis is acknowledged. These two

paradigms are suitable for this research since I am interested in single mothers' experiences in

China and the UK, and how their psycho-social experiences are shaped and informed by the

interplay between inner (psychic) and outer (societal) factors (Frosh, 2003). Therefore, this

study explores behavioural issues (different parental attitudes and their association with

childhood social-emotional development) in relation to social factors (the factors that lead to

these differences in China compared to the UK) and the mutual impact of social and

psychological realities on individuals (the generated different parental experiences in the two

countries). The interpretivist and psycho-social paradigms lead to the choice of a qualitative

method for this study.

4.2 Qualitative Research Methodology

Given the ontological and epistemological position of this study, qualitative methods

are employed to answer the research questions. Specifically, focus group interviews and

psycho-social interview methods. This study involved two groups of participants, twelve in

total (six in the Chinese group and six in the UK group). A pre-pilot focus group interview

was employed as an ancillary method with each group to explore participants' ideas about the

topic. This is followed by psycho-social interviews with each participant exploring the

parental support and their experiences of single parenting to understand what influences the

differences in their parental attitudes and their children's social-emotional development.

4.2.1 Pre-pilot Focus Groups

Focus groups are organised group discussions centred on a topic, monitored and

potentially guided by a researcher (Bloor et al., 2001). Because they enable quickly revealing

similarities and differences in perspectives, attitudes, preferences, and behaviours among

group participants, they provide an efficient and cogent means for generating (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017). This study first employed a pre-pilot focus group to explore the topic and generate ideas to help with subsequent in-depth interviews.

The history of focus group theory and practice is part of the more extensive history of qualitative research in behavioural science. Robert Merton (Stewart et al., 2007) defined the purpose of focus interviews as gathering qualitative data from people who have experienced some "particular concrete situation". The purpose of the interview will be a relatively singular topic of focus, which is the opposite of using survey research to gather statistical measures for numerous topics and variables. This is why focus groups are commonly prescribed for research that is either exploratory, clinical, and/or phenomenological (Calder, 1977, as cited in Stewart et al., 2007). In my study, I aggregated my participants to share their concrete experiences as single parents, which allowed me to have a relatively full picture of this group and some knowledge of each participant regarding their character and opinion prior to the in-depth interview.

A focus group study can also help better understand how group dynamics influence individuals' perceptions, information processing, and decision-making, such as "why" and "how" individuals accept or reject different ideas in a group (Stewart et al., 2007). It is hypothesised that stimulating interactions among group members can yield more information than individual interviews because live encounters with groups of people yield incremental answers to behavioural questions that go beyond the level of surface explanation (Fern, 1982, as cited in Stewart et al., 2007). This is also the shared belief among a diverse family of focus group users and providers. For example, in my study, the narratives about single-mother stigma emerged in the focus group interviews rather than in-depth interviews, which then contributed to forming one of the sub-themes (see 6.3 Stigma of Single Motherhood in Chapter 6).

The validity of data collected in a group setting is influenced by the extent to which participants are willing to openly communicate their thoughts and perspectives (Stewart et al., 2007). Three broad categories could affect participants' communication in a group: intrapersonal factors, interpersonal interactions, and environmental factors. Intrapersonal factors refer to variables such as demographic, physical, and personality characteristics that are unique to each individual (Stewart et al., 2007). These variables shape a person's behavioural dispositions, which in turn determines their behaviour in group situations. However, individual characteristics are just one aspect of group behaviour. The interactions between group members and their relative positions within the group also have a significant impact on group dynamics and performance. These interpersonal characteristics can affect group cohesiveness, compatibility, and homogeneity/heterogeneity, which can further influence group conformity, leadership emergence, power dynamics, and interpersonal conflicts (Fiske, 1998).

Interpersonal interactions are affected by expectations about how others will act or behave, which are determined by demographic characteristics (e.g., age, sex, and socio-economic status), personality traits, and physical characteristics (e.g., appearance) (Miller & Turnbull, 1986). Therefore, it is vital for the focus group moderator to determine the group objectives and ensure that the group members' expectations are aligned with and facilitate the research goals. The environmental factors could also affect the general pleasantness of the discussion and the level of rapport and participation, including spatial arrangement (Greenberg, 1976), seating arrangement, and interpersonal distance (Shaw, 1981).

It is necessary to draw the discussion to online focus groups. Due to the long-term impact of global pandemics, online focus groups are becoming a more popular and accepted method for collecting qualitative data. Krueger (1994) suggested six criteria for a proper focus group: it involves people, it occurs in a series, it has homogeneous participants, it

consists of a focused discussion, it has qualitative data, and the data are collected. Turney and Pocknee (2005) explored the dynamics of online focus groups using these criteria and found that online and in-person focus groups are grounded in the same principles. However, these two types have their unique strengths. For online focus groups, apart from the location, participants can remain anonymous, which offers a sense of comfort and makes them more willing to talk with a group of strangers.

For in-person focus groups, participants communicate with more nonverbal information, such as facial expressions, eye contact, and gestures, which provides researchers with a richer understanding of the data (Richard et al., 2021). Several studies (Brüggen & Willems, 2009; Synnot et al., 2014; Woodyatt et al., 2016) have questioned and compared the validity of the outputs of in-person and online focus groups, including the topic of health issues, intimate partner violence, marriage attitudes, etc., similar goals were achieved after a comparison of the two focus group types. Overall, engaging in online focus groups can result in a similar level of idea diversity as in-person focus groups (Richard et al., 2021). For this study, the focus group interview with the Chinese group was conducted online due to the influence of the global pandemic, while the UK group was conducted in person. To minimise the bias caused by the difference between these two types, participants in both groups were anonymised throughout the process.

Another consideration in this study is to avoid recruiting pre-existing or purpose-constructed groups. This issue has garnered much attention among scholars who use the focus group method. Kitzinger (1994, as cited in Bloor et al., 2001) argues that by using friendship groups, researchers can obtain "naturally occurring" data because the group provides the social contexts in which ideas are formed and decisions are made. Participants in pre-existing social groups are more likely to bring up comments about shared experiences and even

question the differences between other people's beliefs and behaviours, promoting discussion and debate within the groups (Bloor et al., 2001).

However, the information shared openly among the group members results in the researcher having limited control of the assurances of confidentiality, which brings up the problem of over-disclosure (Bloor et al., 2001). The very nature of the focus group enables participants to disclose information which they would generally remain silent about. After revealing more personal information or declaring experiences in a relatively public scenario, participants can subsequently feel uncomfortable about what they have revealed (Bloor et al., 2001). This feeling could be magnified within the setting of pre-existing groups. By contrast, a focus group consisting of strangers allows people to speak more freely and openly without fear of repercussions, minimising post-group discomfort and problems (Bloor et al., 2001). For example, in my study, participants clearly stated that they preferred to be more open about their personal experiences of single parenting with strangers (myself as a researcher and the rest of the participants in the group) rather than their friends.

Moreover, the presence of acquaintances or friends in a focus group can influence the group dynamics and inhibit responses due to their shared tacit information (Stewart et al., 2007). However, when participants are strangers, they are compelled to explain and articulate their viewpoints within the group, thereby enhancing the information value (Morgan, 1998, as cited in Stewart et al., 2007). Therefore, for ethical and research quality reasons, this study ensured that the participants were not acquainted with each other prior to recruitment.

4.2.2 Psycho-social Methodology

Considering the psycho-social ontological and epistemological stance of this study, a psycho-social approach is needed rather than questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, which may take the narrative provided in interviews at face value and not consider unconscious interpretations (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). Psycho-social studies have

introduced new methodological approaches to qualitative research, such as biographical narrative interview and free association narrative interview techniques (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009). Both BNIM and FANI are methodologies focusing specifically on the theory and practice of the interview that draws direct inspiration from psychoanalytic theory and practice (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). By using a psycho-social perspective in practice, the researcher and participant are both conceptualised as co-producers of meanings (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009).

4.2.2.1 Biographical Narrative Interview Method (BNIM)

BNIM is designed to explore the lived experience of individuals and collectives, focusing on the "inner" and "outer" world and how they interact through a person's history (Wengraf, 2008). It has a particular emphasis on the subject's biography and life story (Wengraf, 2008). BNIM involves three sub-sessions in the interview procedure. Sub-session 1 involves a Single Question Designed to Induce a Narrative (SQUIN) to allow the interviewee to talk freely about the objective life events. For example, "Please tell me the story of your life, all the events and experiences that have been important to you personally. Begin wherever you want. I won't interrupt. I'll just take some notes for afterwards" (Wengraf, 2008). The researcher is required to remain silent until the interviewees complete their narrative.

Then, with sub-session 2, follow the order of the topics raised and the words the interviewee used to form questions to identify the Particular Incident Narrative (PIN). For example, "You said 'XXX', can you remember a particular 'XXX'… how it all happened?" (Wengraf, 2018, p.218). Sub-session 3 is a follow-up interview that provides the opportunity to ask further non-narrative questions. Sub-sessions 1 and 2 are usually carried out on the same occasion with a break in between. Sub-session 3 is optional (Wengraf, 2008). The data analysis of BNIM follows a rigid two-track interpretation procedure to identify the

interviewee's objective life event chronologically, as well as how the interviewee interprets the life events in the interview (Wengraf, 2008). The analysis of a lived life and the telling-of-the-old-story bring two tracks of results together, producing a case account to convey the dynamics and significance of the case (Wengraf, 2008). The focus of the analysis is on the sociological context in the interviewee's narrative and how this interacts with the lived experiences (Gabb, 2009). I chose not to use BNIM because this study focuses on participants' experiences of being a single mother rather than their whole biographical lived experience. Therefore, FANI is more appropriate for this study.

4.2.2.2 Free Association Narrative Interview Method (FANI)

FANI method is created by Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson (2013), which draws on narrative approaches where the subject is seen as a storyteller rather than a respondent to the interviewer's questions. It focuses on the interaction between the social and psychic, providing a rich analysis of the complexity of individuals' social and cultural processes rather than suggesting generalisability across a larger population (Roseneil, 2006). FANI considers the overlap of psychotherapy and research interviews, which leads to the form of a relatively complete psychoanalytically informed model of qualitative research (Archard, 2020). The combination of focusing on both the social and psychic dimensions of experience is an important feature of current trends in the use of "psychoanalysis outside of the clinic" (Frosh, 2010).

There is no simple step-by-step guideline for undertaking FANI and subsequent analysis. However, a few principles of implementing FANI can be identified, and they are: start with an open-ended question, such as "Tell me about your experience of X", to elicit the participant's story using a free association technique or biographical interview technique to allow the interviewee's ideas and thoughts to free-flow, then use the participants' ordering

and phrasing to elicit further narratives. Meanwhile, avoid asking "why" questions to prevent participants from intellectualising their answers (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013).

I chose to use FANI in a modified approach in this research to explore participants' experiences of being a single mother in the context of their histories without digging too much into their whole biographical story. For this study, I wanted to explore the different parental support for single mothers in the two countries and how these supports affect my participants' single parenting and their children's social-emotional development. I am interested in how the social constructions, cultural expectations and their historical/childhood experiences affect my participants' parental attitudes and reactions to single parenting in two social contexts (China and the UK) and how this is intertwined with their psychic processes in their internal emotional worlds.

I also focus on how the conflicts and ambivalences of their unconscious psychic processes are revealed, which manifests in their parental practices intergenerationally and influences their children's social-emotional development. Accordingly, participants' biographical experiences are important in providing an intergenerational context to understand their parental attitudes and parenting practices. Although previous experiences are important and relevant, I do not seek to gain their whole lived experience. Therefore, I used a modified version of FANI in this study, which still follows the FANI implementation and theoretical principles. I used one open-ended question to elicit participants' narratives regarding their experiences, both in their biography and as single mothers.

However, how can one talk about and reveal himself defencelessly on sensitive topics, such as participants' private experiences in my study? Furthermore, how can one fully understand another person's feelings? How can I, as an interviewer, understand participants' feelings during interviews? These two questions lead to FANI's two fundamental theoretical

principles: first, taking participants as defended subjects, and second, using a clinical approach to collecting and analysing narrative data.

4.2.2.2.1 The Defended Psycho-social Subject

Hollway and Jefferson (2013) showed a concern for the socially constructed nature of interview dialogue, which is an effective means to understand the subjects' defences and inner conflicts. They take participants in research as defended subjects, which means participants are not able to articulate the reality— "tell it like it is", and they are not fully self-aware of their motivation and its influences on their acts and words. So, the interview narratives need to be evaluated from a psycho-social aspect as the social world is mediated by shared social discourses and the communally organised meanings formed within them. Considering interview accounts as products of different discourses helps researchers comprehend how people organise and make sense of their experiences in the corresponding social context (Archard, 2020).

Anxiety, a fundamental proposition in psychoanalytic theory, generates subjects' defences and inner conflicts (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). It is viewed as being inherited in human beings and is evoked by threatening conditions to the self (Curtis, 2018). Anxiety triggers defences against threats, which operate at a largely unconscious level. The unconscious dynamic defends against anxiety-provoking thoughts and impulses from consciousness area response to inner conflicts. It could significantly influence people's actions, lives and relations (Curtis, 2018). The processes that keep unwanted thoughts from entering consciousness are defence mechanisms. Defence mechanisms are unconsciously used to protect a person from anxiety arising from unacceptable thoughts or feelings, and they prevent our ego from becoming overwhelming due to self-deny or distorting the reality of the situation (Freud, 1992). Some of the defence mechanisms include denial, repression, projection, etc.

Defences act more stringently when the most complex and sensitive elements of the unconscious have been approached (Whitehouse-Hart, 2012). Hollway and Jefferson incorporated the idea of the defensive subject into their narrative interviews and claimed that the participants might disguise some of their feelings due to defence mechanisms, either consciously or unconsciously, rather than telling a whole story when involving sensitive and emotional topics (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). A subject would use a range of defence mechanisms to deal with conflicts and conscious and unconscious anxiety generated, such as denial, repression, regression, and intellectualisation. Isaacs (1952) suggested that our experiences of anxiety and identification are filled with our unconscious phantasy (the ph-spelling represents Melanie Klein's proposed unconscious phantasy).

Moreover, psychic conflicts are generated not only intra-psychic for an individual but also inter-subjective, which is the result of exchanges between subjects. In research, it means the mental boundaries of the interviewer and interviewee are penetrable. Freud said, "the unconscious of one human being can react upon that of another without passing through consciousness" (Freud, 2005). Interviewers and interviewees come to interview situations with their own anxieties, defences, and histories, both of which will be affected by the projections and introjections of ideas and feelings coming from the other party, which can influence the material generated in the interview. For example, although an interviewee participates in the research voluntarily, unwanted emotions and uncomfortable feelings could still be triggered and brought back when talking about certain experiences. So, the interviewee may not "tell it like it is", which is the result of his defences against those feelings (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). For an interviewer, the predisposed demands for research purposes could lead to the interviewer's anxiety, collected data tending to be interviewer-oriented expectations, so the interviewer may not "catch it like it is", which is the

result of the interviewer's unconsciously seeking to control the research situation caused by

his defences against research anxiety (Whitehouse-Hart, 2012).

Our impressions about each other, therefore, do not arise from the "real" relationship.

Instead, the behaviours and speeches in the interaction are mediated by our internal fantasies,

which come from our historically significant relationships. Therefore, language is insufficient

in understanding human emotional experience, and it can be truly understood only through

our feelings instead of our conscious awareness (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). This leads to

the second theoretical principle of FANI—a clinical approach to interviewing and analysing

data.

4.2.2.2.2 A Clinical Approach

FANI uses a series of psychotherapeutic techniques, such as free association,

transference, and countertransference, that provide an avenue for researchers to go beyond

the prediction and explore the discourse in a deeper way (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013).

- **Free Association**

In clinical settings, psychoanalysts' primary responsibility is to understand patients by

working on recognising and perceiving their defences/resistances and looking for

interpretations of them. By using the free association technique, patients are allowed to talk

about whatever comes into their minds at a given period, regardless of coherency or

(ir)relevance to the content at the time, because associations follow the pathways defined by

emotional motivations rather than rational intentions (Quinodoz, 2013). Unconscious

motivations are the product of attempting to avoid or manage anxieties. A patient's concern is

revealed by all his attempts to defend against the anxieties. So, the free association enables

analysts to deliberate about incoherence in the discourse (such as contradictions, avoidances,

and elisions) caused by the patient's unconscious efforts to defend against anxieties

(Quinodoz, 2013). Freud (Thurschwell, 2009) believed, "The importance of free association

is that the patients spoke for themselves, rather than repeating the ideas of the analyst; they work through their own material, rather than parroting another's suggestions" (p.24). By doing so, analysts elicit patients' narratives that are led by unconscious logic instead of constructed based on conscious logic (Quinodoz, 2013).

In a research scenario, an interviewee's concern cannot be approached through traditional and highly structured methods that are preoccupied with coherence because it would interrupt the unconscious logic and mute the emotional motivations (Archard, 2019). Hollway and Jefferson (2013) stressed the concept of respecting the narrator's Gestalt, a whole is more than the sum of its parts, to suggest the link between free association and Gestalt, which is to elicit a person's intact life by allowing him or her to speak a stream of arising thoughts out loud rather than destroy it by following other concerns.

In Hollway and Jefferson's study (2013), a double interview is employed to collect data. The initial interview is participant-led with open-ended questions to elicit the interviewee's stories through using a free association technique to allow the interviewee's ideas and thoughts to flow freely. The interviewer follows up by using the interviewee's ordering and phrasing to elicit further narratives rather than offering interpretations, judgements or imposing relevancies, which could destroy the interviewee's Gestalt; at the same time, asking "why" questions are avoided to prevent participants from intellectualising their answers. The interviewer becomes almost an invisible catalyst instead of a highly visible asker (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013).

The virtue of encouragement of free association in FANI is that narratives are experience-based storytelling. The whole story that is told, the manner and the details, and the points that are emphasised all represent the choices made by the participant (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). These choices often can divulge information that is beyond expectations for both interviewers and interviewees. The unconscious and emotional significance of materials

lies beyond the teller's intentions and can be brought to the front when an interviewee makes unconscious associations with the questions being asked (Archard, 2020).

- **Transference and Countertransference**

Transference and countertransference are the most important tools for an analyst to identify and interpret a patient's defences and resistances in a clinic. Transference refers to the patient unconsciously transferring emotional histories and emotionally significant relationships onto the analyst. Countertransference refers to the analyst's responses to these transferences and their own transferring of emotionally significant relationships (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013).

FANI uses these two techniques to access unconscious material. Within the FANI method, transference could help to understand how a participant's past relationships, along with his own wishes, anxieties, fantasies, and emotions from a significant person, may be replicated and projected onto the researcher. Countertransference could help a researcher understand the interactions that occur in interviews and look at his own avoidance, redirection, anxieties and emotions that are projected onto the participant and worked through the research project (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

In research interviews, what people say about their feelings may not be accurate. The conditions in which they are performed could shape their accounts, and this inarticulate feeling may be lost when they try to describe them in words (McDowell, 1992). Bollas (2017) believed that there is a fundamental split between what we think we know and what we know but are not able to think. Bollas (2017) stated that "as in all our relations with people, we somatically register our sense of a person; we carry their effect on our psyche-soma, and this constitutes a form of somatic knowledge, which again is not thought" (p.192). This somatic knowledge is unthought-known, which refers to the unconscious and can be learnt through techniques of transference and countertransference.

Bondi (2014) defined transference in psycho-social interviews as "partial transference" because a full transference, according to Casement (1985, as cited in Bondi, 2014), involves three elements: a "here and now" relationship between analyst and patient, "there and then" histories of the patient's relationship pattern, and "there and now" concerning the patient's life outside the clinical setting. While in an interview scenario, a researcher is more likely to be concerned with the content related to the research aim, his or her scope would not be as wide as an analyst in a clinical scenario. When identifying and interpreting a participant's resistance and defences, the researcher may take limited insight, for example, he or she might think further to seek interpretation away from the conversation but just limited to the participant's life in the present (there and now). Whereas in a clinic, a patient's resistance and defences, along with unconscious, reveal themselves through the free association technique, so the analyst could understand how a patient's early relationships with parental figures (there and then) manifest in the current therapeutic relationship (here and now), allowing unconscious dynamics to be interpreted.

Hunt (1989) argued that qualitative research provides a favourable environment for the development of transference and said, "the close ties which emerge in the relationship between researcher and key informant are particularly conducive to the mobilisation of transference" (p.57). However, some scholars have been more cautious. For example, Thomas (2007) insisted that it is impossible for researchers to gather enough information in one-off or repeat interviews to interpret the transference. Bollas (2017) also argued that the development of the transference interpretation could only happen through the unconscious communication between the analyst and patient in an analytic setting, in which the unconscious receptivity of the analyst plays a key role. If a researcher provides a participant with a full transference of interpretation, which involves making statements or interpretations that link the participant's current experiences to their past histories based on the researcher-

participant relationship, it could create confusion for the participant and blur the boundary between the research and therapeutic setting. This goes beyond the scope of the researcher's role (Bondi, 2014). However, to conduct psycho-social research, I believe that researchers inevitably engage in unconscious work, which includes unconscious transference relationships with participants, but we can manage our responses consciously to these unconscious communications. As Bondi (2014) argued, it is important to stick to the purpose of our research encounter while avoiding confusion for our participants; meanwhile, we should also trust the work done by our unconscious mind.

The term "countertransference" has been used in three ways in psychoanalytic literature (Holmes, 2014), they are "interfering countertransference", which refers to elements of an analyst's own neuroses that hinder the therapeutic process (Freud, 1910), "useful countertransference" refers to the elements of the patient's neuroses that are transferred to the analyst unconsciously, which serves as a useful tool for the analyst to understand the patient's psychic world (see, for example, Pick, 1985), and a "third" (Ogden, 1994) that is something intersubjective and co-created containing elements from the previous two but also a product of the interaction between analyst and patient (for example, Ferenczi, 1955). Social and qualitative studies mainly focus on the second meaning (useful), which is based on the Kleinian notion of projective identification. It refers to a process by which feelings congruent with a subject (participant/patient) are induced from or put into another person (research/analyst) (Ogden, 1979).

Freud's (1912) metaphor of using a telephone can explain how this mechanism can be better understood:

> the analyst must turn his own unconscious like a receptive organ towards the transmitting unconscious of the patient. He must adjust himself to the patient as a telephone receiver is adjusted to the transmitting microphone. Just as the receiver

converts back into sound waves the electric oscillations in the telephone line which were set up by sound waves, so the doctor's unconscious is able, from the derivatives of the unconscious which are communicated to him, to reconstruct that unconscious, which has determined the patient's free associations (p.115-116).

Since the analyst's receiver picks up vibrations from the patient's unconscious, knowledge about the patient's inner world could be provided, which is a similar process to researcher and participant, so countertransference is described as a research tool (Holmes, 2014).

Previous studies have shown how participants' feelings and emotions were put onto them. For example, Clarke (2002) described how his feeling was induced during the research process due to the participant's projective identification. Marks and Monnich-Marks (2003) argued how they were forced to become the object of the participants' defence of shame because participants project their feelings onto the researchers, which are so difficult to bear that they are repressed or denied. However, some scholars also suggested that the use of countertransference in qualitative research indicates a lack of care in distinguishing between clinical and research settings. Strømme et al. (2010) pointed out that the researcher-participant relationship is the opposite of the therapeutic setting because it is the researcher's desire that drives the research process, while in the therapeutic setting, it is the patient who initiates the process with his spontaneous speech and free associations. Frosh and Baraitser (2008) argued that the interviewer's feelings in relation to research are far removed from an analytic situation, which may lead to the misuse of psychoanalytic terms. Nevertheless, in clinical settings, as Casement (1985) noted, psychoanalysts may be unconsciously influenced by their own needs, such as training requirements, earning a livelihood, or seeking personal and professional growth, while research participants may not consciously expect anything in return from researchers. Accordingly, taking part in research and therapy both speaks of the

human wish for deeper self-understanding (Holme, 2014). In addition, if the researcher's stirred thoughts and feelings can be sustained rather than obliterated (as does the patient in the clinic), these thoughts and feelings are useful in deepening the understanding of the participant's subjective experience (Bondi, 2014). They should be analysed and used as corroborative evidence, cross-compared with other data from the research rather than being considered in isolation (Holmes, 2014).

4.2.2.3 Reflexivity

Given the anxiety exchanged between interviewers and interviewees, as both are defended subjects, interpretations of narratives should be based on research relationships between the interviewer and the interviewee (Ogden, 2004). Therefore, reflexivity is an integral part of psycho-social research.

Clarke and Hoggett (2009) defined reflexivity as the capacity to be suspicious of one's own presuppositions. Frosh and Baraitser (2008) described reflexivity as requiring the researcher to "keep an honest gaze on what s/he brings to the research process: how s/he sets it up, what is communicated to the subject, what differences of race, class, gender etc. might prevail and what impact they might have, and how her/his actions might influence the subject's own active meaning-making activities" (p.359). Therefore, the analysis process is slowed down compared with the traditional method since the interviewer is required to write "structured summaries" of the interviewee to ground the analysis in all the available material, including what was not said or could not be said, contradictory aspects in narratives, and digressions and parapraxes, such as slips of the tongue (Archard, 2020). The integrity of psycho-social studies relies on its own concern with ethics and reflexivity (Frosh, 2018). Reflexivity requests researchers to stay engaged in critical self-awareness throughout the research process and refers to various feedback loops during the process of interpretation (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008).

The importance of the analyst as a "neutral blank" screen for the patient's projections in the analytic process is diminishing, so the analyst and patient cannot be regarded simply as separate subjects who take one another as objects (Ogden, 2004). From this stance, the intersubjectivity of the interviewer and interviewee co-exist in the unconscious dynamic with both sides as separate individuals with their own thoughts, feelings, and sensations (Ogden, 2004). So, the co-produced data can be regarded as the intersubjective analytic third (Green, 1975, as cited in Ogden, 2004) which is the unique dialectic product generated within the setting by separate subjectivities of analyst and analysand. Although self-scrutiny is difficult and complex due to the researcher and participant simultaneously influencing each other, it is still an essential component of social science study (Archard, 2019). Moreover, the researcher's critical self-reflection is necessary to monitor the whole research process (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). For the researcher, it is enhanced by the use of others (peers, colleagues, supervisors) as a sounding board, offering what, in psychoanalytical practice is known as the perspective of the "third". The researcher uses detailed field notes to record what happened during the interview, as well as mark those materials that cannot be captured by audio recording and transcription alone, such as feelings. Field notes enable the researcher to question, "Why has this person said this?" "Why at this moment?" "Why did I respond in this way, and how did it reflect the interview?" (Roper, 2003). This is where consideration of transference and countertransference comes into play because the psycho-social interviewers need to constantly question their own reflexivity throughout the whole process by asking, "Why did they make me feel like that?" "How did I deal with it?" and "How did that affect the interview?" (Morgan, 2010). By doing so, the researcher engages in sustained self-reflection on methods and practice, emotional involvement in the research, and relationships with the participants.

4.2.3 Critique of the psycho-social Method

Frosh and Baraitser (2008) have been critical of researchers who attempt to utilise the FANI method to adopt clinical concepts, such as transference and counter-transference, to conduct data analysis because these concepts were developed within the clinical settings and relationships, which cannot be exactly duplicated in a research setting. Once the participant transfers or projects the feelings onto the researcher, as in the clinic, there is a risk that the concepts will be misused when interpreting the interviewee's unconscious anxiety. Hollway (2008) replied to the critique and argued that the dynamics of transference and counter-transferences are felt and noted in the interviews since both researchers and participants have expectations towards interviews, potentially developing considerable interest and satisfaction as the interview proceeds. So, the focus should not be on rational-transparent subjects. Instead, the researchers use these dynamics to understand the participants as well as unconscious intersubjectivity.

Scholars have argued that Hollway and Jefferson pay little attention to how people compose themselves differently in different contexts or how broader social discourses are constitutive of subjectivity rather than only shaping it (see, for example, Archard, 2020). Hollway (2006) turned the argument around and accused the post-structuralists of not taking sufficient account of psychological processes. She argued (Hollway, 2006) that the formation of selves within their life settings are not only mediated by complex material, discursive, and relational influences but also by dynamic, intersubjective, unconscious processes. Frosh et al. (2003) similarly argued that a rigorous awareness of the constructive activity of social processes and an equally potent analysis of the agentic struggles of individual subjects is needed. FANI acknowledges the complexity of human subjectivity and the interplay between conscious and unconscious elements, which is a more rigorous way of understanding psychological and social processes (Hollway, 2008).

Frosh and Baraitser (2008) have also criticised FANI placing researchers in the position of "experts" who recognise interviewees' unconscious meanings or with more insights to recognise interviewees' inner experiences than the interviewees themselves. According to them, FANI comprises "strong individualising tendencies and top-down, expert-knowledge epistemological strategies", which are accompanied by "an interpretive practice that seems always to know best, or at least to know subjects better than they know themselves" (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008, p.347). However, Holmes (2014) has argued that even the most well-analysed analysts still make mistakes, and "it cannot be correct to assume a fully objective, transparent, and self-knowledgeable analyst/researcher". In terms of the concept of the defended subject, it has been argued that the attribution of anxiety to the interviewee actually is an unrecognised feature of unconscious anxieties and desire from the non-clinically trained researcher (Frosh, 2010, 2018; Frosh & Baraitser, 2008).

4.3 Method

4.3.1 Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval was given by the Essex University Ethics Committee prior to this study being conducted (Appendix 1). Other ethical issues include making sure that participants did not know each other in advance to provide a level of control regarding the confidentiality of issues discussed in the focus group interviews. Also, participants were made aware that participation in all the interviews was voluntary, and they were free to opt-out at any time and could refuse to divulge experiences that they felt uncomfortable about without any consequences. According to the nature of the FANI method, participants were allowed to associate freely, so this participant-led interview format may bring up some sensitive and distressed material during the interviews. However, this was always under the direction of the participants and never provoked by the interviewer. Hollway and Jefferson

(2013) proposed the FANI ethical principles of honesty, sympathy, and respect, which were also followed.

4.3.2 Participant recruitment

Twelve participants (six from China and six from the UK) were recruited through the convenience sampling method by applying the criteria as follows:

- Over 18 and hold British/Chinese citizenship.

- University students or graduates (undergraduate and beyond) who have studied full-time or part-time.

- Have a job (part/full time) with regular income.

- Single mother: with a child(ren) under eighteen, with no mental and physical illness or serious medical history, bringing up a minor child(ren) alone due to divorce, separation, death of spouse, etc.

- Can access the internet with a device (tablet or laptop).

The recruitment process started by the end of 2021 and began with the Chinese group first because I could not travel back to China and talk to people in person due to international flights between China and the UK being suspended from 2020 to 2022, caused by the global pandemic. So, the situation back then made the recruitment and data collection process difficult with the China group, and it took more time than the recruitment of the UK group. Ultimately, Chinese participants were recruited via different online single-mother groups such as WeChat and Weibo by sending an e-flyer. Once a volunteer expressed interest in participating, further conversation was developed for interview logistics.

The recruitment of British participants started in the summer of 2022. The participants were recruited at Essex University by sending invitation emails to potential participants using the university directories and advertising physical flyers on notice boards in the University (Appendix 2). Then, I had a short conversation with each volunteer in person on campus who

expressed interest in joining my study, provided them with more details about my study and discussed interview logistics before conducting the study.

To protect the participants' identity, a pseudonym was created and used consistently throughout all documentation.

Twelve single mothers, six on each side, were interviewed and chosen on a first-come-first-served basis. The participants' details are listed in the Appendix 5.

4.3.3 Data Collection

4.3.3.1 Focus Group Interviews

Since the recruitment of Chinese participants started first, the focus group with this group also started first. The interview was conducted online via Zoom on a Tuesday at 1 pm UK summertime, while Beijing time was at 8 pm (7 hours ahead). Most participants joined from home after work. Although it was online, the general talking atmosphere was relaxed and pleasant. Participants immensely enjoyed the discussion, a few participants had tears in their eyes while talking. The focus group interview lasted for almost two hours.

The British focus group interview was conducted face-to-face. It took place on a Friday at 12.30 pm in a pre-booked group study room in the Albert Sloman Library of the University. This location was chosen because the participants are familiar with the library, so it would give them a comfortable feeling when joining the interview. I set the room in advance. Tables were arranged in a circle to allow participants to see each other easily. Each table was set with a name tag of a participant, a piece of paper, a pencil, and a bottle of water to better serve the interview objective and facilitate the discussion. As with the Chinese group, the safe and inclusive atmosphere enabled participants to talk relaxed and comfortably. A good rapport was established within the group, participants were open to expressing their opinions and perspectives. The focus group interview lasted for around one and a half hours.

Since the pre-pilot focus group served as an ancillary purpose in my study, allowing me to explore the topic and assist with later in-depth interviews, I prepared a few questions based on the research objectives.

1. How long have you been a single mum, and how old is/are your child/children?

2. How do you feel about being a single parent, and why do you feel that way?

3. Has there been any change in your mindset since becoming a single mum, mentality, or psychologically?

4. What kind of difficulties have you been confronting?

5. Every single mum has had to overcome some difficulties. If you look back on the way you came through, are there any moments you feel it would have been great if there had been some support at that time, and what support do you wish you had had? (Or now, what kind of support do you wish you had?)

6. Have you gained anything from today? This can be the most important thing you hear from other people or what you say.

4.3.3.2 Psycho-social Interviews

After completing the focus group interviews with the British and Chinese groups separately, I transcribed the recordings and then conducted the psycho-social interviews with each participant (twelve in total, six on each side). Participants were invited to choose a time and location based on their comfort. With British participants, some of them agreed to meet me at their homes, whilst others preferred to meet in a pre-booked room on campus. The interviews with Chinese participants were all conducted online via Zoom. Each interview lasted approximately one to two hours.

In Hollway and Jefferson's study (2013), they conducted two interviews with each participant. They used the free-association technique within the first interview to allow

participants' ideas, perceptions, and stories to emerge as much as possible in their own words, followed by the second interview to ask some more structured questions.

Learning from their experience, I also conducted two interviews with each participant and, on occasion, three interviews. The original design for the interviews was to be one week apart, but this was not always possible due to practical constraints, especially since my participants are single mothers, unexpected circumstances always overlapped with their hectic schedules. So, the gap of some interviews was up to several months.

In my first interview, only one open question was used to let participants talk about their stories freely. So, the whole story, the manner and details, the points that are emphasised, and the standards of behaviours all represent the choices made by the participant (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013).

As discussed previously (see 4.2.2 Psycho-social Methodology), I used a modified version of FANI in this study. I still followed the FANI implementation and theoretical principles, but I used one open-ended question to elicit participants' narratives about both their biographies and experiences as single mothers. According to the research objectives, this question needs to develop narratives that can reflect participants' single parenting experiences and relationships with primary caregivers, which manifest attachment patterns and provide biographical context, and the expression of deep non-narrative emotions and feelings. So, the question was designed as "Can you tell me the story of your life and single parenting experiences—all the events and experiences that have been important to you personally and how they have been for you?" Most of the participants chose to share their stories with me in a chronological manner, a few participants started with their important relationships first.

But overall, their stories covered these aspects: relationships with parents, with child(ren), and with ex-partners. During the interview, I drew on techniques created by Hollway and Jefferson, such as encouragement, parroting (using the participant's own words

to encourage further information) and asking, "Can you tell me more about it?" until they had nothing further to say. At the end of the first interview, I checked with each participant how they felt it had gone and reminded them that we had a second interview to follow up in our discussions. I also wrote my field notes, including observations, my feelings and understandings from the interview.

The second interview was more structured. According to Hollway and Jefferson (2013), the follow-up interview should be more structured because it provides an opportunity for the researcher to pursue the generated themes from the first interview. Besides, the researcher would gain a preliminary and tentative interpretation of some non-verbal information as well, including the participant's inconsistencies, avoidances, contradictions, hesitations, silences, and emotional tone changes. The second interview would be a chance for the researcher to look for confirmation and further understand the participants' meaning frame (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). Therefore, I used a series of tailor-made questions to verify some themes and preliminary interpretations generated based on the focus groups and first interviews. For example, a preliminary sub-theme of "changing of parenting" emerged after the first interviews as participants reflected on and compared their own parenting practices with before. This sub-theme was confirmed in the second interview by obtaining more data, including resilience (this is discussed in Chapter 8), and grandparent-grandchildren relationship (discussed in Chapter 7).

After looking for confirmation and further understanding of the participants' meaning frame by using tailor-made questions, I used an open question to elicit more stories about their children, especially those that reflect their children's social-emotional development. The question was, "I would like you to tell me more about your child(ren) and your child(ren)'s life story so far. Anything you would like to share with me." In addition, a series of prompts

that targeted children's social-emotional development were prepared, including the aspects of emotional regulation, empathy, self-discipline, self-awareness, and social skills.

The whole process provided a buffer zone for me and my participants. It enabled us to build relationships, especially for the second interview, because it resumed an established relationship rather than starting as strangers initially, helping to reduce the ego defence level (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). Additionally, I noticed that the average time of the second interview was longer than the first one. By the end of the second interview, some participants even expressed the desire to be friends with me. I believe it was because participants had an experience of being paid attention to and taken seriously through their own self-styled accounts. Their preparedness to speak about their intimate thoughts shows their expectation of my research requirements and the value of this approach (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013).

Online interviews with Chinese participants were recorded through Zoom. Face-to-face interviews with British participants were recorded using a camera borrowed from the University and then transferred to a password protected laptop. All recordings were done with the participants' permission.

4.3.4 Data Analysis

Hollway and Jefferson (2013) talked about the principle of Gestalt, which states that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This principle applies not only to eliciting the wholeness of the participants' life stories during the interviews by using the free association technique but also to the researchers' internal ability to hold the data together in their minds during the data analysis process. In their own study, they analysed data through a process of free association and completed a case study. Their procedure (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p.69) included the:

- Information provided in the interview.
- The free association made by the interviewee between two pieces of information.

- Shared cultural assumptions of the interviewee and researcher.

- Application of sociological knowledge.

- Application of psychoanalytic knowledge.

However, I did not use detailed case studies in my analysis. This is first because of the practical limitations. It would have taken a huge amount of word count to do so in my thesis, as I have twelve participants. Then, my study is embedded with a deeply sociological perspective, so a thematic analysis is needed instead of a purely psychoanalytical analysis. To underline the sociological aspect while providing coherence regarding the psychoanalytic aspect of my study, I conducted data analysis from two perspectives to ensure that my study identifies prominent patterns and is coherent with the psycho-social approach.

I used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to analyse data generated from focus groups and psycho-social interviews to recognise key patterns in the data, which emerged inductively first. The data was then analysed from the psychoanalytic aspect to recognise the interplay between the external and internal worlds (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009).

Braun and Clarke (2006) recognised the active role of the researcher in utilising thematic analysis of identifying, selecting and reporting patterns/themes within the research, which helps to reinforce the epistemology and ontology of my study and acknowledge the role of the researcher in producing knowledge in a psycho-social study.

Based on the exploratory nature of my study, which aims to develop an understanding of the content of data, I employed an inductive approach to coding the data by following Braun and Clarke's (2006) five phases guide to identify key themes. In phase one, I familiarised myself with the data by transcribing all the interview recording material in person. Transcribing each interview allowed me to become immersed again in the participants' stories and feelings. I made notes around patterns and points of interest. Also, I made self-reflexive notes on my feelings and understandings referring to the field notes,

which is the preparation for the latter psychoanalytical data analysis. In phase two, codes were created inductively based on the previous notes that I made. I used Nvivo software to support my data analysis. In the third phase, generated codes were grouped into themes and sub-themes on the basis of their relevance to the research questions. Then, I took the preliminary themes to supervision to discuss the potential alternatives with my supervisor. This enabled me to have a different perspective and helped me to define and refine my themes in the fourth phase.

In the last phase, I went back to collated data extracts for each theme to re-read and re-arrange them again to better reflect the study objects and my thoughts, meanwhile confirming they were coherent, internally consistent, and fit well into the broader overall "story" of my study. After themes were defined and refined, they were able to identify the "essence" of each theme to determine what aspect of the data each theme captures (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The definitions and names of my themes evolved during the writing and recording of my findings. This was an important part of the analysis as it facilitated the development of my findings about the data. Therefore, developing themes and writing up the findings and the analysis occurred in an iterative backwards and forward manner. Earlier steps of reading transcripts and generating codes were sometimes revisited as themes were further refined. A table summarising final themes, subthemes and codes can be found in Appendix 8.

After conducting the thematic analysis, I carried out the psychoanalytically informed analysis. A psychoanalytic lens recognises the interplay between external and internal worlds, and it ensures meaningful data is not lost by allowing different parts of the text to be related to each other, identifying any contradictions and unusual or disjointed language (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009). In my study, in order to sustain the subtle links among different interviews and maintain the emotional experiences of the interviews, which formed the very basis of a

psycho-social approach, I re-examined and re-focused my analysis back onto the interviews as a whole, where some inconsistencies were allowed to come up to the surface. For example, a few participants behaved differently in focus groups and in-person interviews, and this inconsistency showed the conflicts between their inner and outer worlds. Chinese participant Xie was very active and positive in the focus group interview, but the following psycho-social interviews were conducted one year apart due to her constant rescheduling of the interview with short notice. However, with my suggestion of withdrawing from my research, she refused. This inconsistency was then confirmed by her in the interviews as her avoidance, which contributed to an important aspect of intergenerational transmission that is discussed in Chapter 8.

Another example of this is the emergence of the sub-theme "stigma of single motherhood" in Chapter 6. British participants D and Ja were full-time students dependent on the welfare system. They became single mothers after their previous relationships ended at a young age. In my research journal, I noted: "D is very confident with her parenting practices, as she said, my grandmom and my mom are single mothers, so I don't think it's a problem for me. However, she doesn't seem confident when recounting her past relationships, she tends to look at the floor when discussing it, then glances at me as if to gauge my reaction. Her glances suggest something deeper." "Ja was very talkative, sharing in detail her unstable and difficult childhood caused by her mother, who she said was a promiscuous sex worker. She spoke without much emotion, almost as if describing someone else's life. She laughed while covering her mouth when mentioning how her mother was punched when she was 4, as though she found it amusing. Then she paused, looking directly into my eyes. I initially thought she was about to ask me something, but I quickly realised she was waiting and observing my reaction. Sometimes, she would pause longer if I didn't react in time until I said something. These pauses seemed to convey something unspoken."

Apart from sensing inconsistency and hesitation in both participants, I developed a vague sense of discomfort that I couldn't quite identify. I couldn't fully understand the source of my discomfort until another British participant, E, withdrew from the study. She was the youngest in the group and the only participant who became a single mother outside of a prior committed relationship. During the British focus group interview, E introduced the topic of stigma. Initially, this did not become a theme, despite a few participants engaging in the discussion, because I felt that the stigma E described did not apply to the others in the group who had become single mothers due to the end of their previous relationships. E withdrew from the study after the focus group, and I only confirmed it after several months of silence on her part. It was then that I recognised the discomfort I felt was tied to a sense of shame—shame associated with being a single mother. The shame was partly my own but was denied at first. Because single moms carry a stigma in Chinese culture, which is something I did not want to accept for me being a single mother. In the meantime, my discomfort was partly the projection from the participants. Although people hold a more diverse perception of family and marriage in the UK, single mothers still carry a certain stigma in British society. D's glances and Ja's pauses were their class-related hesitation and checking my reactions. They projected their class-related shame feelings on me and were identified by me. All these, along with E's withdrawal, contribute to the generation of the sub-theme of "stigma" discussed in Chapter 6.

Chapter 5 Support for Single Mothers

Introduction

This chapter will explore the available support participants use in two groups to help them cope with the difficulties of being a single mother. Three categories of support were identified: institutional support, family support, and other forms of support, including support from children's schools and mothers' social networks. Mothers can access all three types of support but at different levels across two groups, and the support for British mothers is more varied than their Chinese counterparts. For the Chinese group, family support, especially grandparents, is the most important source of support. For the British group, family and institutional support complement each other, becoming the main support for mothers.

5.1 Institutional Support

Institutional support in my study includes all kinds of support guided by governmental and social policies, which reflects the legislation and welfare system the state has undertaken to protect the health and well-being of its citizens, single mothers in this study. Three institutional supports emerged: child maintenance, spousal maintenance, and welfare support. Child maintenance is a common support for participants across the two groups. Three out of six participants in both the Chinese and British groups receive child maintenance consistently every month from their ex-partners. Apart from child maintenance, British participants also receive spousal maintenance and welfare support.

5.1.1 Child Maintenance

Child maintenance is common for mothers across the two groups, which is regulated and protected by legislation in the two countries. In the Chinese group, most of the participants became single mothers due to divorce by agreement, with custody granted. Both

parties should agree upon child maintenance when signing the divorce petition and submitting it to the local marriage registration authority, no matter whether the child maintenance is paid later. Three participants receive child maintenance. The following series of conversations took place in the focus group interview, which shows that mothers are aware of their legal rights regarding child support payment.

> *Yulu: I just heard a few mothers talking about their maintenance. Because we are still discussing the agreement, I wonder how much everyone's child support is monthly. 3000 yuan1?*
>
> *Rainbow Mama: We used to get 1200 yuan; our salaries were around 7000 yuan per month. He only gave 1200, but he never consistently paid it. He would only pay when I apply enforcement.*
>
> *Xie: Ours is 1000 yuan because he's a freelancer with no stable income.*
>
> *Boyu: Mine is also 1000, which is very little. He was only starting pay after enforcement.*
>
> *Yulu: This is horrible. What can you do with 1000 yuan? Isn't it too outrageous if the father earns 10,000 yuan every month and gives 1000 to the child? Can this maintenance be higher? It's too unacceptable.*
>
> *Rainbow Mama: Maintenance is 15% of the man's income, it's a national standard.*
>
> *Xie: The nation will not let you go beyond 20%.*
>
> *Boyu: It's less than 20,000 yuan a year in total. You can't really do anything with it.*
>
> *Yulu: Why does the civil law doesn't protect us who is taking the child?*

From these conversations, we can conclude that mothers are not only aware of their rights as custodial parents but also know how to assert their rights when violated, although they need to sometimes apply for enforcement. Mothers are also aware that the level of

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[1] 1 Chinese yuan = 0.11 English pounds as of October 2024.

maintenance is not proportional to the actual cost of raising a child. But at least it is a form of support that is their legally protected right. In the British group, most of the participants became a single mother through divorce by agreement as well. Below is a conversation between two participants, Ju and O, that also took place during the focus group interview. The conversation happened because O said she was the only one paying the house mortgage, but it was a joint account, so Ju suggested she should claim her rights of spousal and child maintenance. O chose not to go to court because she wanted to maintain a relatively good father-daughter relationship.

> *O: I'm having to do multiple jobs at my PhD so that I can pay the mortgages because he doesn't pay anything towards the house.*
>
> *Ju: Was the mortgage in the joint pay?*
>
> *O: Yes, I know I can go to court and everything. But I'm just like…*
>
> *Ju: Then he should pay the spousal maintenance and child maintenance.*
>
> *O: Now he's officially started paying child maintenance because I am supposed to see a CSA* [Child Support Agency, replaced by Child Maintenance Service (CMS) in 2012]. *Literally I just said to him, I wanted 200 pounds. This is someone who earned lots of money. I said I just want 200 pounds for her every month, and he was like, why? You're the one that asked me to leave, and then I said don't worry, child maintenance said you give us 600 pounds per month. So, I called him and said to him, Look, this is what they've said, I asked for 200, which one would you rather give me?*
>
> *Ju: Why are you so nice though? Let them do the job because that's your rights.*
>
> *O: I know it's my rights. But I'm still trying to maintain a relationship between him and her.*

Comparing the conversations of the two groups reveals that child maintenance is a common support in the two countries. The Civil Code of China (National People's Congress,

2021), which entered into force in 2021 was the first unified civil law framework that integrates most of the former civil substantive laws in China. According to it, divorced non-custodial parents are obliged to pay for child support in part or whole to custodial parents. The amount and duration of such payment shall be determined by both parents through agreement, or where no such agreement is reached, adjudicated by the people's court through judgment (National People's Congress, 2021). There is no standard formula for calculating the amount of child maintenance. Courts will need to assess the family conditions and the child's needs. Each parent is supposed to cover half of the costs. According to the further Interpretation of the Civil Code (National People's Congress, 2021), for one child, 20–30% of the fixed monthly salary may be ordered to pay for child maintenance and support if the non-custodial parents have a fixed income, and for two or more children, this percentage can be increased to 50% of the monthly salary, though this is not strictly followed in practice. The Chinese participants in my study divorced before the new Civil Code took effect in 2021, so they may need to re-apply to the court to increase the amount of child maintenance.

In the case of the UK, child maintenance is a regular financial support, which is protected by the Child Maintenance and Other Payments Act 2008, paid by one parent to the other to contribute to a child's everyday living costs. It is payable for children who are either under 16 or under 20 and in full-time education (but not higher than A-Level or equivalent). A child maintenance agreement can be made through a family agreement regarding the amount and frequency of the payment, through a Child Maintenance Service (CMS), or through a court order. The level of child maintenance also depends on the paying parent's income and is worked out in a weekly fashion. Generally, for one child, the amount is 12% of the weekly income if a paying parent's gross income is up to £800 a week and 16% for two children. A reduction in child maintenance can be applied if the paying parent has overnight contact to reflect the shared care. 50% can be reduced if the stayover is more than 175 nights.

It seems the level of child maintenance in China is higher than in the UK in order to maintain the best interest of the child, but it is not feasible to compare because the calculation standard in China is based on the paying parent's total income every month, including pension and other incomes, whereas in the UK, the calculation standard is based on the amount after the deduction of pension and unearned income. However, the regulation of a share-care-reduction for paying parents in the UK can be seen as an effective support for custodial parents and children. On the one hand, it enables custodial parents to have more potential working time to improve their financial condition; on the other hand, it can promote the relationship between the non-custodial parents and children, which, in turn, benefits children's development. When children have stayovers with non-custodial parents, the quality and time of parenting from non-custodial parents are more likely to be maintained.

As previously discussed in the literature review, such as McLanahan et al. (2013) have shown that children lost regular contact with non-custodial parents, especially fathers, and fathers' insufficient involvement in single mothers' families is one reason that leads to children's unfavourable outcomes. Regardless of the execution of the payment of child maintenance in both countries, the UK child maintenance system seems to have recognised the importance of the parent-child relationship for children's development and tried to promote it from an economic and legislative perspective.

5.1.2 Spousal Maintenance

I observed that spousal maintenance is one of the differences between the two. According to the Civil Code of China, divorced non-custodial parents do not have to pay spousal maintenance other than child support for childcare and school expenses (Chen et al., 2021). The Civil Code (National People's Congress, 2021) states that both parties are equal and have equal rights to earn a living by working. Therefore, there is no alimony or spousal support in the Chinese context. In the UK, the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973 (which applies

in England and Wales) gives courts the power to order that one party pay spousal maintenance to the other after a marital relationship terminates (Hunter, 2019). The court operates a discretionary and periodic payment scheme when determining the terms of a financial settlement between a husband and wife. The level of payment is assessed by balancing the parties' incomes against their respective needs (Redmayne, 1993).

The Civil Code of China does not take spousal maintenance into account, which is out of the consideration of equality between both parties, but the result leaves custodial women and children at a high risk of post-divorce poverty (Kuang et al., 2022). Therefore, domestic gender division of labour still prevails, which leads to an unequal financial position at the end of the marriage (Hunter, 2019). Furthermore, the penalties in the labour market for mothers exacerbate women's financial status after divorce (see, for example, Harkness, 2022). Thus, the consideration of equality may entail denying and neglecting non-financial contributions to the welfare of the family.

In the case of the UK, the order of spousal maintenance is considered out of women's potentially unequal financial situation. It recognises the fact that the breadwinner usually maintains the income, earning capacity and pension savings throughout the marriage, so the husband is often in a better position to recover from or improve the financial position post-divorce (Hunter, 2019). Marriage is seen as a partnership of equals as well, but there is no discrimination between financial and non-financial contributions to the family welfare. Therefore, when it comes to the case of divorce, meeting the future needs of children and then of adults is the first consideration. Accordingly, relationship-generated economic disadvantage is compensated where possible (McFarlane, 2006, as cited in Hunter, 2019).

5.1.3 Welfare Support

Another form of support that emerges in British narratives but not in the Chinese group is welfare support, the keywords of which include child benefits, universal credit, and

council houses. Participant E became a single mother with an unplanned pregnancy when she was 20 years old as an undergraduate. Her parents could not help her with childcare because they worked abroad. So, she took care of the newborn with herself unemployed. She said,

> *I couldn't work, I was stuck on Universal Credit. I didn't have any family around me.*

I did not have the opportunity to have E's financial condition revealed much more because she withdrew from my study after the focus group interview. The reason for her withdrawal and the consequential effects will be discussed in detail in the next chapter (Chapter 6). She introduced the topic of universal credit into the interview at the beginning, enabling me to explore this data further.

Another participant, Ja, is a single mother of three children, one of whom is diagnosed on the autistic spectrum. When we conducted the interviews, she was enrolling in an undergraduate programme. She revealed her financial situation during the individual interviews. Her monthly income is just over £2000 a month, which consists of universal credit, child benefits, living and care allowance for the autistic child, and child maintenance from her ex-partner. She commented on her financial condition as below,

> *It's not great, but we get by. We have a roof over our heads, we eat, you know, I've got a car running, we have the Internet, the house is warm and clean, and we've got clothes. But I can't go on holiday, and I do struggle, so it's not terrible, but not great. I don't have a job, and I'm a student… So, we do get by, but obviously, I have to budget. Budgeting is a big thing. If I didn't get child maintenance, and we didn't get disability money, I wouldn't be able to come to university, and I wouldn't be able to run a car.*

Participant D is the other participant who lives on universal credit. She is a single mother of seven from two marriages. Four of her children have started working, and three are under the age of 18. Her monthly income is over £2000 as well, which consists of universal credit, child benefit, and child maintenance. Besides, she is the only participant who lives in a

council house among all the three participants who rely on government welfare support for living. As she said,

> *I survived on benefits, and as little as they are, if it weren't the fact that I get the single parent benefit, I would be absolutely screwed [laugh], really, I wouldn't be able to do anything at all. The same with the student finance in my undergraduate, I used it to pay for childcare.*

Universal Credit (UC) was legislated in the UK in 2012, researchers Thornton and Iacoella (2022) have argued that it represents a deepening of conditionality in the British welfare state. UC is one of the important components of the welfare benefits system in the UK and is designed to simplify the existing benefits system, merging six benefits for claimants into one monthly payment (Thornton & Iacoella, 2022). It encourages paid employment over financial support provided by the state with the assumption that paid employment offers a route out of poverty (Carey & Bell, 2022), which is designed to change the "dependency culture" among long-term welfare benefit claimants (Garrett, 2018, as cited in Carey & Bell, 2022). Millar (2019) has criticised UC for placing self-responsibility and individual obligations in the labour market at the centre of the welfare reform, which ignores single mother's social obligation to childcare. The nature of childcare in some circumstances, such as children under a certain age or with a disability, prevents mothers from entering the labour market, and mothers are stigmatised (Carey & Bell, 2022). Also, the unfair discrimination of UC against minority groups, especially young and working-class lone mothers, undermines parenting capacities and children's well-being (Carey & Bell, 2022).

Although the welfare support-related narratives did not appear within the Chinese group, I explored China's existing social welfare system to see whether there is support similar to UC. Also, it could avoid the potential bias generated by the sample because no Chinese participant discussed welfare support.

Given geographical reasons, regional variations in social programme design and implementation are significant in China. The central government in China delegates responsibility for welfare provision and social protection to local governments (Leung & Xu, 2015) because local governments have enhanced understanding and knowledge of local residents, which enables them to better allocate resources to meet local social and welfare needs. Local governments are primarily responsible for welfare provision, whereas the central government maintains a minimal level of social protection (Mok & Wu, 2013). Therefore, the decentralised approach to welfare development inevitably leads to regional disparities and welfare variations in China (Mok & Qian, 2019).

The social security system (SSS) in China is an official system by which the government provides basic living for all its citizens through the distribution and redistribution of national income by legislation (Gu et al., 2021). An individual's access to SSS is tied to one's employment condition because social policy is regarded as a tool to enhance productivity (Walker & Wong, 2005, as cited in Mok & Qian, 2019). In order to access SSS and obtain better services, formal employment is necessary for individuals. Every employee should have a "four plus one" mandatory security scheme activated through employment, "four" means four forms of insurance, including pension, medical, unemployment, and work-related injury, and "one" means one housing provident fund (Gu et al., 2021). People who are not engaged in formal employment, such as self-employed, have the option to activate the security scheme by themselves and pay a certain amount monthly to access the services when in need. People who are aged 60 or older in urban and rural areas with no work capability, no means of income, and no legal supporters are eligible to apply for subsistence allowance (Gu & Chu, 2021). In 2022 (Yang, 2022), the average standard of subsistence allowance allocated by the central government is 711 yuan per person every month in urban and 530 yuan in rural

areas [1 Chinese yuan = 0.11 English pounds as of October 2024, accordingly, 711 yuan = 75.94 pounds, 530 yuan = 56.61 pounds].

When conducting interviews, Chinese participants in my study were in full-time employment. Therefore, they were entitled to social security services but not a subsistence allowance, and the level of services provided varied based on the fiscal capacity of the local government in their respective regions. Therefore, to be eligible for institutional support, mothers must either be formally engaged in the job market or lose their work capability. That is to say, there is almost no type of support for Chinese mothers compared to their UK counterparts. This is why the welfare-related narratives do not appear in the Chinese group, and it cannot reveal whether Chinese participants are in a wealthier or better condition than their British counterparts. According to mothers' discourses, single mother difficulties are universal in the two groups, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, Chapter 6.

The lack of support for Chinese mothers can be explained in two main ways. First is the cultural obstacle. Women who choose divorce or unwed single motherhood are still heavily stigmatised by traditional familial cultural norms (Kuang et al., 2022). Under this circumstance, only women who get married were granted child delivery permission by the local government in the past. Furthermore, only children born with the granted delivery permission can register for social benefits and obligations, including access to education (Mullen, 2021). Although the newly launched Civil Code (National People's Congress, 2021) regulated that children born out of wedlock shall enjoy the same rights as children born in wedlock, single motherhood is still not widely accepted. In reality, Chinese mothers are less likely to go to university while undertaking childcare responsibilities like their UK counterparts. Instead, they tend to finish all their education before moving on to the next phase of life, such as marriage and childbearing. Therefore, in China welfare support is underdeveloped culturally and institutionally.

From the interviews, we can tell that British mothers have more choices of institutional support than the Chinese group. Although only three mothers were eligible for living on UC, the rest of the participants were eligible for another relatively ordinary benefit, child benefit. It does not serve as a social safety net like UC, but it is available support from the government. Participant Flo said,

I was able to do the child benefit payments online, and I got a back payment, which was wonderful. And that does every month. It's not a lot, but it's something, and that's really good.

The reasons for becoming a single mother are varied. However, it is crucial that women are aware of the institutional support available to them when in need, as it can help them navigate life challenges without significantly impacting their children's well-being. This was evident in the case of the British participant Ju and O, where O, despite not seeking the spousal maintenance available to her by law, was at least aware of its existence. The availability of financial, institutional, and legislative support gives participants the confidence and means to choose single parenthood as well as serves as a last protection for mothers when they are facing less than ideal circumstances in life.

5.2 Family Support

For both Chinese and British participants, family support, especially from grandparents, becomes one of the most important forms of support. After the family dissolution, grandparents emerge as crucial support systems for single mothers in childcare and finance when adult partnerships fall apart (Mayall, 2009). Grandparents' assistance is essential in finance and childcare. For example, British participant Flo used to work as a full-time schoolteacher before she enrolled in a PhD programme, she and her ex-husband have been paying the mortgage on their house together. The marital dissolution occurred right after her enrolment in the study. So, she had to decide to sell the house because she could not

afford the mortgage alone. However, her parents helped her by paying off the mortgage, so she did not have to move. She said,

> *If it hadn't been for my parents' help, we probably wouldn't still be in our family home, which would mean a huge shock for the kid, and it would have been awful for him. So, thankfully, we were able to keep it, thanks to my parents.*

Flo's parents not only helped her out with the mortgage but also helped her cover her son's swimming fee. As she shared,

> *They've enabled him to go swimming because they paid for his swimming lessons. And now my dad takes him to the swimming lessons, which gives me a break.*

The Chinese participant Tong did not have a stable income after her family dissolved because her start-up business failed then. She returned to the job market and started a full-time job, requiring her to travel on business trips often. So, she left her child to be cared for by her parents. As she remarked,

> *My parents take good care of him and feed him very healthy and nutritious food. They also enrol him in sports and art classes. For example, he does fencing and painting every week. Because I just got back to my full-time job and have to pay liabilities, my parents helped me cover all his expenses.*

Besides providing financial assistance, childcare is the most important aspect of grandparents' support. For instance, in the Chinese group, participant Rainbow Mama is a full-time police officer. After her divorce, she sold her old flat and bought a larger house, enabling her parents to live with her and assist with childcare while she worked. She said,

> *My job conflicts with childcare because I have to go to work at any time if I get a phone call. So, I can't care for her, especially with school picking up and dropping off. It's just not possible. I moved to this bigger house and asked my parents to help care for my daughter since they are retired. This is a two-floor house. My parents live on*

the first floor, and my daughter and I live on the second. We live together but remain

independent and private.

Participant Boyu works as a physician. During her marriage, she lived on a property that belonged to her ex-mother-in-law. After the family dissolution, she moved out to a rented flat for a short period and then bought a property just a five-minute walk from her parents' place so they could help care for her daughter while she was at work. She said,

The first thing I thought of after getting divorced was buying a property—a place of

my own where no one has the right to kick me out. So, after the divorce, I worked

really hard and then bought a flat next to my parents. Although the house is not big,

it's mine, and my parents can also help me take care of my child.

The same goes for the British group. Participant O maintained a very good relationship with her ex-in-laws since she was dating her ex-husband as a teenager. After marrying, she and her ex-husband bought a house in the same area as her mother-in-law. Although the marital separation happened and her partner moved out, her personal relationship with her in-laws remained. So, her in-laws would still help her with childcare, and her daughter would have weekly stayovers at grandparents. As O shared,

She will now sleep at Gramma's house because it is 9 minutes from me, and she knows

she can always drive her home … We split school. I drop her off every day, but we

split the collection. Her grandparents were away for the last two weeks, so I had to

take time off work to collect her from school every day. Grandma would collect her on

Tuesday, but they were away. So, I showed up on Tuesday, and she said she was not

happy seeing me pick her up. I was like, thank you.

For participant D, her parents' help with childcare released her from caring responsibility, so she had spare time to study at the university. She said,

My parents really helped me. My mom has lots of qualifications in childcare, and she

can do therapeutic stuff as well. But yeah, so if it wasn't for my parents, I wouldn't

have been able to go to the university.

From the examples above, we can see that mothers rely on grandparents for support with childcare, especially those with full-time jobs in the Chinese group. Following the marital dissolution, one Chinese participant's parents flew to her place every year and stayed for a few months to help with childcare because they live in different cities. Two Chinese participants switched to a bigger house and became co-residents with their parents, while the rest moved close to or initially lived close to their parents. In the British group, no participants moved house after becoming a single mother to obtain parental assistance with childcare, not to mention co-residence. Only two of them initially lived near the older generation. It is observed that Chinese grandparents in my study take more parental responsibility compared to their British counterparts. According to the studies (Li & Liu, 2020), the phenomenon of parent-grandparent co-parenting is prevalent in contemporary urban China regardless of marital conditions. Full-time employment entails parents under pressure from work and life, leading to limited childcare time and energy. Chinese grandparents show a strong willingness and a keen sense of responsibility for rearing grandchildren because the traditional Chinese familial culture believes that family belief and wisdom can be inherited through the grandparents-grandchildren bond (Dolbin-MacNab & Yancura, 2018). Therefore, Chinese grandparents often take some burden of child-rearing as a support for parents which becomes more significant when adult partnerships fall apart.

5.3 Other Forms of Support

5.3.1 Schools

In British narratives, children's schools are often depicted as a source of support. While the support is aimed at children, it also has a positive indirect impact on participants, particularly during times of change. The support that mothers found beneficial includes access to professional counselling services, flexible regulations, and a strong connection between the school and the family to help deal with crises.

For participant Flo, her son was distressed after the family dissolution. The headteacher of his school saw his unusual emotions and behaviours and allocated him counselling for nine sessions. Flo remarked,

I was walking him to school, and it was the day he was going to be picked up by his dad. And he realised he didn't have his phone on him. It meant he couldn't reach me if he needed me when he was at Dad's. He was freaking out because he thought, what if I need you? What do I do? What if Dad doesn't let me call you? Because in the past it got to the point where Dad had to bring him home early because they'd fallen out with each other. And the head was there on the gate with the kids coming in and said, right, I've seen now that there's a problem that was very out of character for him. So, then they agreed that he could have counselling. I think it was helpful for him to be listened to by an adult and also appreciate that, well, daddy doesn't do that, but mum does, and this lady does, and school is a safe place, and home is a safe place.

During the family crisis, Ju's daughters were in primary school. She was low on energy to take care of them as usual, but she recalled how the school offered her flexibility in schedule and a lot of support. Ju shared,

I often dropped my kids off late to school during that term, so they frequently arrived late. The school understood our situation and didn't mark them as tardy. Sometimes, I forgot to pack their lunches, and in those cases, the school allowed them to eat in the teacher's office. The school provided a lot of support and care for us during that time.

Participant O also maintains a close relationship with the school, which enhances her effectiveness as a parent, she said,

She went with me to all the schools and liked her one, and that's where she is now. It's a really small school, but the school is really good because if she doesn't listen to me at home sometimes, I say to her, that's fine, I'm just going to speak to the school. She gets scared and does it.

The examples demonstrate that schools are crucial in supporting single mothers, acting as a buffer to mitigate the negative impact of family changes on children's well-being. When a family crisis directly affects children's well-being or indirectly impacts them through the mother's state, schools offer support and assistance to minimise the adverse effects of the family crisis on the child. By maintaining a close relationship with families, schools can provide tailored support to children, including professional counselling, based on their family situations. This support for children can be viewed as a form of support for mothers, as family crises inevitably negatively affect children, which mothers worry about and strive to prevent.

5.3.2 Social Networks

The school is not mentioned in Chinese narratives, but the social network is a common source of support for mothers in both groups. Participant Rainbow Mama in the Chinese group has two close friends whom she has known since college. Her friends provided emotional support during her divorce, and now she turns to them for help with childcare when needed:

We need someone to talk to and listen to us, so support between good friends is very important. When you are feeling down, having someone to talk to can greatly alleviate negative emotions. I have two good friends who were with me when I went through my divorce. Now, sometimes, when my parents are unable to take care of my children, and I can't manage on my own, I occasionally ask them for help.

Participant Ivy lives in a city different from her parents. Every year, her parents fly to her place and stay for a few months to help her with childcare. But when her parents were away, her neighbour was her most important support. Ivy's daughter and the neighbour's child are about the same age. They grew up together and later attended the same primary school. Ivy is engaged in a full-time job, and the work time doesn't allow her to collect the child. Her neighbour runs a community supermarket, providing flexibility for dropping off and collecting children. So, when Ivy's parents were away, her daughter would be picked up by the neighbour after school and stay at the neighbour's until Ivy was off from work. Ivy said,

My neighbour has helped me a lot over the past few years. Our children's birthdays are just one day apart, so we often hang out together. I moved closer to my relatives three months ago, but we still take our kids to get together on weekends. Our relationship has remained strong.

In the British group, participant Flo has a group of three mothers with children of similar ages. Their children can meet up often and grow up together because of the maternal social network, which contributes to children's social development. Meanwhile, it gives Flo social time without worrying about childcare. Flo said,

We've got quite a tight little group where there are two other mums and me. We hang out and have coffee, and our kids play together, and one from each mum is in the same

class as him. It helped that I could have a social life when they played. At this age,

that makes a huge difference.

Participant Ju received a lot of support from friends after the family crisis. She wanted to take her daughters on a trip to dispel the negative emotions and loosen up her mind. When her friends in Tokyo and Hong Kong heard about her plans, they invited her to visit and offered free accommodation. Ju took her daughters on a month-long trip across Asia. The support from her friends restored her confidence during a difficult time and allowed her to set a positive example for her daughters. She shared,

Friends' support is invaluable. Their support made me realise that divorce is not the

end of the world. Instead, there is a bigger world waiting for me. It also helped my

children understand that parents' divorce is not an end road. I am very fortunate that I

could use my savings and rely on help from friends. It allows me to focus on caring

for myself and my daughters rather than worrying about finances.

Social networks are an important source of support for single mothers. As discussed in the literature review (Keim-Klärner, 2022), separation from a partner entails a loss of social contact and its positive effects. Therefore, social isolation and the loss of social support are considered major consequences of divorce (Keim-Klärner, 2022). However, Keim (2018) has argued that social isolation among single parents is rarely found, and the loss of contact through separation can be replaced with new friends or by intensified existing relationships. In my study, the separation changes how everyday life is organised for mothers because the partner is absent from almost all of the tasks, which adds a practical burden for them daily. However, participants established a new structure and replaced the previous structure, such as Chinese participant Ivy and British participant Flo. Ivy's neighbour and Flo's small group are the personal relationships they built after marital dissolution. These new relationships enabled them to seek support, both for their social and childcare needs. With Chinese participant

Rainbow Mama and British participant Ju, the marital separation pushed them closer to their existing friends, and the intensified relationships, in turn, provided them with childcare and emotional support.

The examples of these four participants are just a microcosm of single mothers' various social networks. It reflects how single mothers are able to look for support through the new structure of their social networks, which includes emotional support that is available for conversations about feelings and instrumental support that can provide practical help (Vonneilich, 2022). Support from social networks can reduce the negative effects of a crisis, in my study, it is the family crisis and mothers' daily practical burden (Vonneilich, 2022). Furthermore, mothers' social networks increase social capital of single-mother families. Bourdieu (1986) has argued that the volume of social capital possessed by a given agent depends on the size of the network of connections she can effectively mobilise and on the volume of capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) of those to whom she is connected. By developing more social capital, single parents can potentially transform it into other capitals that may directly lead to good parenting practices, which contribute to children's social development.

Discussion

In this chapter, I have investigated the different types of support that participants have been using to handle the challenges of single motherhood. Comparing the two groups indicates that British participants have a wider range of support options compared to those in the Chinese group, highlighting one of the findings of this research.

After the participants' adult partnership ends, family members, especially grandparents, become an important source of support for both the Chinese and British groups. For the Chinese group, family support is the most significant form of support for mothers, while for the British group, family and institutional support complement each other. In some

cases, institutional support may be even more important than family support. However, this doesn't mean that there is no institutional support for Chinese participants. Both groups receive institutional support in the form of child maintenance, which reflects the recognition of the importance of financial conditions in children's development by the respective states. It's also worth noting that the British group has more options for spousal maintenance and welfare support compared to the Chinese group.

The difference in institutional support reflects the cultural values towards family and marriage in the two social contexts. In the British context, marriage is seen as a partnership with each party having equal rights, but it recognised females potentially unequal financial position in the family, which is caused by the division of domestic labour and penalties for motherhood in the job market. Therefore, relationship-related financial disadvantages would be compensated where possible post-divorce. In the Chinese context, females are not encouraged and expected to be single mothers under the familial cultural background. Therefore, there would not be enough institutional support for single mothers. On the one hand, lacking enough support increases the practical difficulties for single mothers. So, seeing the difficulties could potentially prevent more females from becoming single mothers. On the other hand, single mothers, as a minority group in this unfriendly social environment, are less likely to be accepted and taken care of by social policy.

A well-designed institutional support system for single mothers means that the state accepts the phenomenon of being a single mother, which conflicts with the mainstream cultural value of family and social harmony, which sees family harmony as the foundation for social harmony and society is organised as an extension of the family (Goldin, 2010). In summary, this unfriendly social environment and insufficient institutional support reduce the possibility of being single mothers, and the phenomenon of single-mother groups being marginalised further encourages inadequate institutional support. Therefore, grandparents'

support becomes the most significant support, or to some extent sole support, for single mothers in the Chinese context. The mothers are pushed back to their original family, and familial harmony is achieved again.

However, the difficulties faced by single-mother families, such as economic hardships, caregiving strains, and work-family balance, are not unique to single mothers (Liang et al., 2019). Instead, they are common in married families as well. Single mothers are in a disadvantaged social status simply because they experience more stress than married mothers, which is a result of the disadvantaged single-mother family structure (Avison et al., 2007). Social development and changes are a result of ongoing struggles over a variety of scarce goods and resources, which are not only economic but also take on social and cultural forms (Bourdieu, 1990, as cited in Gabriel, 2017). An individual living in a society inevitably needs to struggle for goods and resources; the more capital an individual has, the higher position or status the person has in society (Gabriel, 2017a). A married family possesses more social and cultural capital than a single-mother family since two people can bring more to the family than a single person. Amato (2000) has argued that children have better developmental outcomes in traditional families with two married parents than in single-mother families because children grow up with the support of capital and social resources from both parents in a nuclear family.

In my study, institutional support for the British participants partly offset the direct shortage of economic capital in single-mother families caused by the absence of partners. The absence of partners also leads to the reduction of other forms of capital, including social, cultural and emotional capital. Since at least one form of capital shortage is remedied partly, it can be converted to other forms through expenditure of time and effort (Bourdieu, 1986). For example, when mothers are less distressed financially, they are more likely to invest better emotional capital. Meanwhile, their university enrolment enables them to build up

cultural and social capital with the desire to exchange more economic capital afterwards. While in the Chinese group, the offset of negative influences from partners' absence is achieved mainly through family support.

Furthermore, cultural factors moderate single mothers' receiving support, affecting mothers' capacity to access support. People in a collectivistic society tend to develop interdependence, cooperative and group-oriented behaviours (He et al., 2021), whereas people in an individualistic society are expected to be independent and autonomous (Huntsinger & Jose, 2009). Individuals in a collectivistic society are concerned with fitting into the social group and maintaining social harmony (Cheng & Kwan, 2008), so there is a strong need to seek social and environmental approval, which leads to part of their self-esteem and security needs being provided by connectedness with others (Cheng & Kwan, 2008). By contrast, the sense of self of people from individualistic cultures is more valued based on the degree of their independence (Cheng & Kwan, 2008). Therefore, British mothers are more likely to use as many sources as possible to support their individuality and independence. In contrast, Chinese mothers, in order to avoid being judged by others due to their single motherhood, are less likely to reach out to seek support compared to their British counterparts. The action of being a single mother threatens the collectivistic norm, breaking traditional cultural values so that single motherhood may be more difficult in the Chinese collectivistic context compared to the British context. Therefore, Chinese mothers may have a more urgent need for support than British mothers.

Summary

This chapter explored and identified the various types of support the participants in the two groups used to help themselves cope with the difficulties of single motherhood in China and the UK. The various types of support include family, institutional, and other forms of support, including children's schools and participants' social networks. Mothers in both

groups are able to access these forms of support but at different levels, especially institutional

support. Different levels of institutional support reflect the cultural values towards family and

marriage in the two social contexts and the overall attitudes towards single motherhood in the

two states and societies. The difference also leads to participants' different experiences of

being single mothers, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 6 Feelings of Being a Single-Mother

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I explored the differences in parental support between Chinese and British participants who were managing the challenges of raising children on their own in the two countries. The varying levels of support led to different experiences and emotions for the participants. This chapter focuses on the subjective feelings and experiences of these single mothers. Their stories reflected their parenting attitudes, styles, and concerns about their children living a fatherless life. The practical challenges of single parenting bring participants a sense of responsibility overload. Moreover, the stigma of violating traditional marital norms resulted in emotional stress, together with the guilt of letting children live a fatherless life, bringing participants to emotional overload. Despite these challenges, the mothers strive to be open and honest with their children and try to be "good enough" mothers as a way to cope with their predicament.

6.1 Feelings of Being a Single Mother

6.1.1 A Mix of Joys and Pains

Participants, no matter which group, all used different words expressing the same perception of single parenting as very challenging and tough. Here are some examples of the narratives from Chinese participants:

Boyu: (I) just feel tough because there is no other half to keep the family together.

Ivy: I have been a single mum for four years, it's rushing (around), tired, and quite tough, (it is) tough, I think.

Yulu: I think every mum who has come to this point and decided to raise the child alone is a choice made from responsibility and strength. And [pause], feeling the pressure at the same time.

And from some of the British participants:

Ju: There are lots of challenges, emotionally, physically, you know, mentally, yeah, quite a lot in terms of the practical side and daily life.

E: It is hard when you get on your own. Uh, resilient as well. Obviously, being a single mum, you face a lot of obstacles and being the only person who can support your child, you just have to get on with it and do it. It's challenging.

O: Anybody that can be a single parent can do practically anything else in the world… Because I think it is the hardest job you could have in this world.

Meanwhile, both groups shared a common perception of fulfilment and achievement after being able to raise the child alone:

Rainbow Mama (Chinese Participant): I have a sense of achievement because what I have done has achieved my standard (which is my) original intention and purpose.

Xie (Chinese Participant): after going through it and looking back, I feel I am stronger than before, because I have achieved something I was not able to do at a younger age. My child is my biggest strength. For her, I will overcome all the difficulties in the future.

O (British Participant): Because for someone who has never had anyone, having a child is a very fulfilling thing for me; it filled this void I've always had.

E (British Participant): I think it is rewarding. Because I was the only person who raised mine, she's just this beautiful little thing because of me, and that makes me feel so proud of what I have achieved.

The perceived tough feelings for participants emerge from two aspects. First, the practical difficulties, such as finance and childcare, cause them to feel stressed. For example, the Chinese participant Ivy could not pick up her daughter after school because she gets off work late, so her 7-year-old daughter could only wait for her at the neighbour's. She said,

I feel guilty about it. What if she feels sick one day and still has to wait for me at other people's houses? My parents can't help me with childcare because they live in a different city, and professional childcare is expensive.

British participants confronted the same difficulties. When we conducted the interview, Participant E worked for a charity while she pursued a master's degree at the university, her daughter was four years old. Before her daughter reached school age, she could not work and had to rely on government benefits. She said,

Financially, I couldn't work because I wanted to look after her, so I was stuck on universal credit. My parents are in Portugal, and I was back here, so I didn't have any immediate family around. It was a really difficult time for me.

6.1.2 An Umbrella of the Family

Certain participants do not face financial difficulties and receive help with childcare from their parents or relatives. However, they still encounter stress from other sources. One such source of stress for the Chinese participants is their profound apprehension and anxiety about the unpredictability of the future. A good example is the Chinese participant, Boyu. She is a doctor. She and her father, also a doctor, run a medical clinic as a family business. Her mother is a retired accountant. Boyu had been a single mother for four years when we conducted interviews. She lives in her house near her parents with her 7-year-old daughter Xinxin. Boyu can provide Xinxin with good material conditions thanks to her decent income and assistance from her parents in finance and childcare. But she still holds deep anxiety

about an uncertain future. She used the word "protect" to describe her perceived

responsibility as a single mother. She said,

> The road ahead is dark, so I have to make every step solid. I must work harder to
>
> make more money to protect my child and my parents.

While other participants did not use the exact same term, a similar meaning was

conveyed. The concerns of uncertainty and the resulting anxiety about the future that

participants expressed stemmed from fierce competition for their children's education,

worries about their ageing parent's health, and uncertainty about future marriage prospects.

Chinese single mothers see themselves as an umbrella against the uncertainty of the

future for their loved ones, which partly increases their anxiety and stress. This explanation

can be traced to Confucianism. Children are expected to achieve prestige for the family

through education since they are young because the cultural factors establish a strong moral

undertone of being a good student and embodying duties of self-perfection as well as duties

to family and society (Hau & Ho, 2010). Therefore, people pay great importance to

education, and it is believed that parents are responsible for providing their children with

resources to help with their children's achievement in education. Children start schooling at

six for a nine-year compulsory education, which with long hours and heavy content. In order

to attain a good academic performance and not fall behind fellows at school, parents would

either pay for supplementary tutoring to help children become more academically competent

among peers or tutor children themselves after school.

For ageing parents, the concept of filial piety is highly regarded and considered the

foundation of individual morality in Confucianism. It advocates reverence for the older

generation and responsibility for caring for senior citizens, especially one's parents (Goldin,

2010). Therefore, although a pension insurance system has been established in China, the

responsibility of taking care of senior citizens primarily falls on individual families. This

includes providing emotional support, spiritual comfort, and financial assistance if necessary. When parents are seriously ill and hospitalised, it is expected that their children will care for them at their bedside instead of sending them to a care home.

In my research, Chinese single mothers face practical difficulties of work-childcare contradictions in their daily lives. They have to work harder to maintain finances and prepare for future uncertainties. As a result, they often rely on grandparents to provide childcare. However, this can have a negative impact on grandparents' health (Chen & Liu, 2012), which, in turn, increases the uncertainty of the future for single mothers as their parents age. In addition, single mothers have to pay extra fees for supplementary tutoring or tutor children by themselves after school if their children have difficulty following schooling or want to maintain their good academic performance (Xue & Fang, 2018), which would lead to even more pressure for a single parent, either on time or finance. These factors put a great deal of pressure and responsibility on single mothers, making their situation more challenging.

6.1.3 Personal Empowerment

The British participants showed an appreciation of the freedom and control that comes with single parenting, which does not appear in the Chinese group. Some examples are mentioned below:

> *Ju: ...after that, freedom, amazing freedom, like sky-high freedom. I don't need to worry about when I get in the house. That cloud in the house is gone.*
>
> *Ja: ...it was like a sense, amazing sense of freedom, you know what I mean? This newfound sense of freedom and, you know, the confidence to start to build and stuff like that...*
>
> *O: For the fact that I don't have someone controlling my womb, and how well I progress in a career that I've always been so amazing because he was always threatened that a woman could...*

Flo: So, I think that's really hard because, to the point, it's a kind of power balance in the relationship, you know, how much they can control you.

The appearance of this different perception or polarised perspective may have been driven by sociocultural influences of Confucianism and feminism within both societies.

In Western developed societies, feminism has evolved from a political movement to philosophy over the course of more than a century. It is a set of beliefs and ideas that are more than just a political position but now permeates every aspect of life (Staz, 2004). Reproduction and family, one of the essential topics in feminism, affects females' views on parenthood and family structure (Okin, 1989; Staz, 2004). The perception of the family evolves from a hierarchical institution based on a fixed status to a set of relationships between individuals based on the contract, and the related terms can be altered and negotiated by the parties involved (Staz, 2004). Individuals determine what families they want to create and how long they want to stay in. With this contract-based view of marriage and childbearing, the British participants in my study tend to hold a more liberal and dynamic view of parenting and family structure.

Although feminism has developed as a modern idea, it has not fundamentally changed family relations, which are rooted in a patriarchal society. At home, women still do most of the domestic labour—tending the house, raising and caring for children (Bianchi et al., 2012). Staz (2004) has introduced the concept of the motherhood penalty: women who raise children fall behind their unmarried counterparts in salary and position. So, women are more likely to be placed in an economically disadvantaged position in the domestic sphere. Additionally, mothering is passed down through generations via an unconscious method that also perpetuates and contributes to the continued inequality of women at home and at work (Chodorow, 1978a). Nancy Chodorow (1978b) explained that mothering is reproduced unconsciously in girls—not in boys—due to different object-relational experiences and the

ways these experiences are internalised and organised. Girls establish their identification through engagements and similarities with the females who mother them. By contrast, although boys are mothered by females, they establish their identification with cultural ideals of masculinity rather than interactions with female carers. Thus, men define themselves by separating from others and being independent from others (female caregiver figures), while women are more likely to engage in mothering practices. Accordingly, the psychic division between male and female and the structure of gendered personalities are shaped in a stable and self-perpetuating cycle, which leads to the reproduction of this sexual and familial division of labour. Therefore, feminists (Okin, 1989) argued that this "cycle of vulnerability" has influenced the lives and choices of women.

However, one of the outcomes of feminist movements and struggles is that family matters are now discussed in the public sphere instead of being considered so private (Staz, 2004). As a result, issues such as child-rearing, family reconstruction and deconstruction and domestic poverty that were once considered domestic matters are now supported by laws and national welfare policies. For instance, in the UK, married couples or civil partners are entitled to marriage allowance, while families with children are eligible for benefits and financial support that includes child benefits, disability living allowance for children, childcare support, guardian's allowance, and parents' learning allowance, among others.

6.2 Responsibility Overload

6.2.1 Parental Attitudes

Different perceptions towards single parenthood result in different parenting attitudes. The Chinese participants showed worries regarding the impact of family separation and lack of the father's company on the child's psychological development, as shown in the following narratives.

Ivy: I have read many books about children growing up in single-parent families because I'm very worried that the lack of fatherhood could disadvantage my daughter's growth.

Yulu: I am worried she may feel less than other children due to our separation, so I haven't told her yet, but I want to minimise the negative impact of separation on her.

Boyu: My colleague once joked with me that my daughter may marry an old man in the future because she lacks fatherhood. I am quite worried about this.

By contrast, the British participants expressed their enjoyment of raising children alone because they took full charge of it and were the first to witness their children's growth.

O: Satisfaction, because I get all the quality time. I get to be the one with her all the time, even though it's hard. I still get to see the good and the bad. So, I'm the first one that knows everything, you know, the key one that she will automatically come to if there's any issue.

Ju: I think I take more responsibility for what every day is like, you know, decisions.

Ja: I could be a parent to my full potential without having this negative influence.

Although the enjoyment expressed in the British group seems to be opposite of some of the worried concerns from the Chinese group, they are the two sides of the same coin, that is, the responsibility overload, which is the commonality between the two groups. Responsibility overload is one of the dilemmas for single mothers. It means that they are the only breadwinner for the family and dual parents for their children. McLanahan and Sandefur (2009) have argued that two-parent families create a system of checks and balances for parents to act appropriately. Parents can pressure each other to spend time with their children, have good relationships with their children, and monitor each other's discipline of the children. In single-mother families, participants are cautious about the responsibility of dual parenting. British participant O described it as indecisiveness:

Because I was always the strict one when we were still together, and her dad was very lenient. So obviously, when he's not around, I have to be kind of in a middle ground. But at times, I feel almost like, oh gosh, I really need to be strict, I don't want her to feel like, it's just you and you know, to make everything be at peace. You just want to be almost just giving and feel like I don't want an argument and stuff. So, it is this indecisiveness.

Another British participant Ju felt stressed about her parenting, attributed to her being the major influence and source for her teenage daughters' establishing identity at such an age. Such great responsibility overwhelms her sometimes. She said,

When there were two people, another person can share part of the responsibilities and the consequences if the decision was not appropriate. But now, everything is on me, and it's hard to tell if the decision is right, so it is very pressured. We always chat things over, and most of their perspectives of seeing the world come from me, so I feel that I have a greater responsibility.

6.2.2 Parenting Styles

Because dual parenting generates indecisiveness, worries, and stress, participants often choose to communicate with their children, which helps to establish a more authoritative parenting style rather than authoritarian (Baumrind, 2013). And it fosters a more democratic relationship between parent and child. This pattern is evident in both groups, particularly when children encounter challenging situations that they may not be able to handle effectively.

For example, Chinese participant Boyu's daughter (Xinxin) made friends with a popular girl in her first year at school. But later, the girl started bullying others. When Xinxin gradually became popular at school because of her good academic performance and being friendly and kind to other children, she received jealousy from that girl. She didn't allow

Xinxin to have other friends at school and wanted to be her only friend. Boyu was concerned about it when Xinxin told her what had happened, so they had a conversation:

I said this girl is a little overbearing and likes cliques. We should be kind to others. What do you think? She said this is wrong. Why am I only allowed to play with her? Why should I listen to her? I still have other friends at school.

Participant Xie's 7-year-old daughter encountered a situation at school that offended her. A boy in her class liked to push and shove girls, she was one of them. But the situation got worse later, and she did not know how to deal with it. So, she told mother, and Xie taught her by talking it over:

He touched his private parts in front of the girls and then used the same hand to touch other girls... Of course, I reported it to the teacher, but I also said to my daughter if he did so again, you should call other girls, stick him in the corner and beat him up. Just target the legs and arms, don't hit the face and private parts, neither the back nor the chest. Then she asked me, what if I break his teeth? I said no worries, I will be responsible for it, you know my good friend is a dentist, and her husband is an orthopaedist... I told her that we don't take the initiative to mess with others, we do our best to get along with other children at school, but we have to stand up for ourselves when things go wrong.

Similar things happened with the British group. British participant O's 6-year-old daughter encountered bullying at school. She explained it to her daughter and taught her the coping strategy. As she shared,

There was a time when she had a big issue in school with one of the other kids where she was being bullied. The boy turns out he's got ADHD, so now he's getting support. I had to explain to her that some people are just difficult, some people are not always kind, and you just have to try and be kind. And when you should, you can't hit him.

You have to tell him that his behaviour is not good. You tell the teacher, and you stay away from him and don't play with him. And that's what she did until they got one-to-one staff for him, and then she plays...Fun enough, now that boy is one of her best friends, and I'm like, this is the same person that was bullying you last year. She said yes, but he is nice now.

Another example is British participant Flo, her 11-year-old son M, who came across a friendship issue when his best friend moved to another town. Flo utilised her personal experience to assist M in overcoming the challenging time.

I talk with him through my friendships. A year ago, somebody decided they didn't want to be my friend. It was okay because that's their decision. But it still affects your feelings, and M liked this person as well. I said I feel a bit sad about it, but I've got other good friends, and I'm going to lean on them for support. You see, friendship issues even happen when you're grown up. And it's good to model these things.

Studies (Froiland et al., 2013; Aunola et al., 2015) showed that parenting style has a primary role in children's social-emotional development because parenting styles reflect parents' attitudes and behaviours toward children, including parents' responses to children's emotions and parental expressivity (Shaw & Starr, 2019). Baumrind (2013) categorised parenting style into three types based on the dimensions of parental responsiveness and demandingness: authoritative, authoritarian and permissive parenting. Authoritative parenting is high in responsiveness and demandingness, authoritarian parents have low responsiveness and high demandingness, and permissive parents with high responsiveness and low demanding behaviour. Among these three types, authoritative parenting is related to children's capacity for better overall emotional regulation (Mortazavizadeh et al., 2022) and can boost children's social competence (Brody et al., 2002).

Participants' parenting practices therefore reflect some authoritative parenting characteristics, which are high responsiveness and high demandingness. When children confront complex events, such as bullying or friendship issues, participants provide their children with affection, warmth, and autonomy to support their individuality and rationality. Subsequently, children tend to be more agentic, autonomous, prosocial and cooperative in their development (Mortazavizadeh et al., 2022). Besides, the warmth and positive interactions between participants and their children forms a positive family climate (Shaw & Starr, 2019) which contributes to children's high levels of social competence and low levels of hostility and internalised problems (Mortazavizadeh et al., 2022).

6.2.3 Good Enough Mothering

One more factor contributing to participants' authoritative parenting is their open and honest attitudes toward their children regarding the family situation, parental capacity, and even their personal relationships. This emerges as a common theme amongst both groups. For example, Chinese participant Tong's family dissolved after her partner passed away. So, she moved back to her childhood city from Beijing, where she could have her parents help with childcare. When we conducted interviews, her son was five and in the second year of nursery. He lived with Tong's parents daily so that Tong could focus on work and then spend time with him on her holidays. But the separation was difficult when it came to the end of the holidays. Tong chose to be upfront:

> *I told him I had to take the financial responsibility. Grandma and Grandad helped me take care of him, so I must go out to make money. Everything we use and eat needs money. I asked him to allow me some time to re-establish my career in this city because he currently does not have schooling pressure. I am trying my best to make a solid career foundation so that I can have a work-life balance later when he starts schooling, so we can spend more time together.*

Chinese participant Rainbow Mama became a single parent when her daughter was 2, and she was 8 when our interviews happened. This participant was honest when her daughter asked why the parents separated:

I tried to find a child-friendly way to tell her that we had separated. I said it was because we could not find a way to live together, but that has nothing to do with you. Later, when she started school, she found out some other children were also living with one parent. Thanks to my honesty, she did not feel it was shameful.

With the marital separation, British participant O also chose to be honest and use a child-appropriate approach to tell her daughter when she was 5. Meanwhile, she kept up the routine of co-parenting, which allowed the daughter to have enough time to digest the news and come up with her understanding of parental separation:

I used her as an example. I said that sometimes when you've been unkind, you have time out. That's what's happened. Mommy and Daddy have been unkind to each other, so we need a timeout, but there will not be an end to the timeout. Daddy moved to a new house, which means there are two houses, you might stay over at Daddy's sometimes, but you will always be at Mommy's, it will always be your home. Mommy and Daddy are not going to kiss, cuddle, we might hug sometimes, like Christmas, that's what the nice people do, not because mommy and daddy are going to be husband and wife, we will always be your mommy and daddy because we made you together, we both love you. So, she knows that very much.

Last week, we were reading a book about Frida Kahlo. She just read out to me and said, "So what does that mean when she said her mummy and daddy broke up?" And before I answered it, she was like, "You and daddy then." I went, "Yeah, actually, it's just like mommy and daddy, we just broke up." Then she went, "It means you don't love each other anymore. What is love either?" Then I was like, "Yes, that is just like

mommy and daddy, but you see Frida Kahlo become a fantastic painter. So, it impacts

her, and you never know if it's impacted you in a way anyway."

Another British participant, D, practised honesty in her parenting, especially when it came to setting boundaries, discipline, and rules. For instance, she would explain all the possible options when her child faced a difficult decision and then allow the child to make their own choice. She believes that if her children are willing to confide in her, she can provide guidance and suggestions to the best of her ability. She said,

I would rather you tell me the truth about something you've done badly than lie to me.

I can be in there when it all goes wrong, I can give advice if they want, and I can help

pick up the pieces. So, for instance, when my son got his girlfriend pregnant, OK,

she's pregnant. What do you want to do about this? Let's talk about what the options

are. But there's nothing's off limits. Because I think if you're honest, to the extent that

depending on the child's age, if you're honest with them about everything in their

lives, then you must allow them to talk to you without going, oh my God, this is the

end of the world, it's a tragedy.

Winnicott introduced the concept of "good enough" mother (Winnicott, 1953, p.94) to argue that the good enough mother makes active adaptation to the infant's needs, an active adaptation that gradually lessens, according to the infant's growing ability to account for the failure of adaptation and to tolerate the results of frustration.

In the early days of an infant, a mother usually adapts to be in tune with the child's needs, which generates the child's illusion of being omnipotent. For example, a hungry baby cries, and his hunger is sensed by the sensitive mother. When the mother immediately breastfeeds the infant, it gives the child an illusion that he or she has the power to control the external world because the infant thinks he creates the breast and milk based on his or her

will. The temporary illusion of omnipotence protects the infant's immature ego from unthinkable anxiety in his or her stage of absolute dependence (Winnicott, 1953).

However, when the baby's ego integration and capacity to survive has increased because of sufficient experience of illusion, the infant's disillusionment must take place for healthy development to occur. A good enough mother must help the infant to develop the ego, relinquish omnipotence, and sense reality, for example, through weaning. At a certain age, the mother must provide the baby with other nutritional intake rather than breast milk to enable his or her body to grow. Another example is the mother's need to satisfy her own needs, such as leaving to work, to enable the baby to know the mother is independent rather than his or her extension. Winnicott called these "must dos" of the mother as "de-adapts" or "fails". It is these "de-adapts" and "fails" that lead to the baby's better ego development. Therefore, Winnicott said that the mother's main task is disillusionment (Winnicott, 1953, p.95). Part of the function of the healthy mother is to "traumatise" the baby gradually with her "de-adapts" and "fails" to wake the baby up from the illusion of omnipotence and realise the real world. In Winnicott's language, another way of putting this is that the mother fails and then mends her failure, which paradoxically teaches the baby and the growing child the meaning of her reliability (Winnicott, 1968).

In my study, single mothers could not provide children with a two-parent family especially when children see other children have their dads come to school events. So, they would question, to some extent, participants' reliability. However, the difference between mechanical perfection and human love is that human beings fail and fail, but the mothers are always mending her failures in the course of ordinary care (Winnicott, 1968). Participants in my study display the truth to their children honestly and openly. They show children their failure to maintain a two-parent family, such as Chinese participant Rainbow Mama. They also show children their limited parenting capacity, such as Chinese participant Tong and

British participant D. By doing so, they teach children to confront reality and provide support throughout, such as British participant O. As British participant Flo said below,

He used to see all adults as superheroes, like his dad as Superman. Now, he can see that people have flaws. I think he sees me as a superhero, and I'm trying to encourage him not to, but to see me as a flawed person as well because that's a big pressure.

By gradually "traumatising" children with these relative failures and with immediate remedies, children would adapt and extend their knowledge about reality, which gives them a sense of security. Eventually, children would have a feeling of having been loved. This love is not an illusion. Instead, it is rooted in reality.

6.3 Stigma of Single motherhood

The stigma associated with being a single mother is present in both Chinese and British communities, and it puts immense emotional pressure on the affected individuals. A couple of narratives are listed as examples:

Yulu (Chinese participant): I hope society can be more inclusive and doesn't look at us with tinted glasses as if we were street rats. I do feel inferior as a single mother, it's not just because I'm divorced, it's because I'm a divorcee with a child. Together, these two things make me feel that I'm inferior to others.

Flo (British Participant): We are the parents that stay to raise the child, not the one that left, so why is the stigma on us. We're doing everything we can for everyone and not the man who doesn't want a child. We are the one who do all the works, but the society considers us to be the [inaudible]…

Goffman (1986) described stigma as a discrepancy between a person's virtual social identity, in which they may see themselves as normal human beings who deserve to be accepted, and their actual identity, whereby their identity claims are discredited and spoiled. This discrepancy can generate a huge amount of shame feelings. In my study, these shame

feelings for participants are reflected in their disappointment in the failure of romantic heteronormativity, the guilt for violating the traditional norms of being a good mother, the humiliation in the decline of received respectability as per social standards. The following discussions will articulate each aspect in detail.

6.3.1 Disappointment in Heteronormativity

Family ideology (McGlynn, 2006; Hockey et al., 2010) presents us with the ideal family form: the heterosexual couple fall in love, get married, and then have two children as the crystallisation of their romantic love. Among the overall twelve participants in my study, five Chinese and four British participants became single mothers due to divorce, one Chinese was widowed, one British due to the partner leaving in pregnancy, and one British due to separation from a cohabiting partner. More specifically, eleven mothers had children with a civil marriage or cohabiting relationship. I mentioned the reasons for their single parenting to illustrate that most of the participants in my study followed the traditional heteronormative social norm. However, idealised heterosexuality is often in conflict with real-life experiences (Hockey et al., 2010). For example, in the narratives below:

> *Flo (British participant): With my husband, I wanted the child, and I really did, I worked myself mentally to go, "I would make you one because I will give you my [inaudible]", and I assumed as a result, we'd like to split our days and our weeks, and we do it like a part-time job each, and he'd be as hands-on as he said he would be, and it just didn't manifest by that. And he suddenly went to straight traditional roles that never even occurred to me that we would do that. So that was a surprise.*

> *Tong (Chinese participant): We hit it off. We took a stroll and chatted every evening after dinner, even after having our kid. Although I did most of the house chores, I never got tired. There were quarrels sometimes, but we never let it last overnight. It was a perfect marriage, and I thought life would keep going like this. I never thought*

he would choose to end his life, not to mention the hideous features of his family

afterwards. It was an unexpected shock for me, it left me with no choice but to face it.

For Flo and Tong, life did not turn out the way they had anticipated, which brought them losses. The embodied sense of disappointment diffuses between the lines of their narratives. Smart (2007) has argued that poor interpersonal relationships in themselves come with feelings of shame and that being single is perceived as a failure. Since women tend to be considered as better at relationships and emotions, this sense of shame is gendered, which is then deepened by the defeat of the ideal husband-baby-home trajectory (Morris & Munt, 2019).

In order to defend against the sense of shame which is generated by the failure to live up to the conventional and dominant heterosexual marriage, participants split and projected their unwanted feelings towards former partners by judging their irresponsibility in the previous marriage.

> *D (British Participant): The only three jobs he did were to put the rubbish out every Monday morning, mow the lawn, and change the clocks. He was another massive child. Sometimes, I give myself a treat and don't do house chores for a week, but that really isn't any service to train him to do it.*

> *Yulu (Chinese Participant): He made zero contributions to the family. I was the only breadwinner. Meanwhile, I had to take care of the child because he didn't care about the kid. There were many mornings when he would still be sleeping when I left to drop off the kid at the nursery and still in bed upon my return. He showed no regard for his responsibilities.*

Participants in my study were all beneficiaries of free-choice marriage. They had freely chosen their marriage partners instead of marrying men they didn't know due to arranged or forced marriage. So, there must have been some merits about the men that

appealed to my participants at the time of choice, and that was part of the reason they chose to marry them in the first place. However, in all my interviews, participants spent a great deal of time pouring out their grievances instead of reflecting on both sides. The marital relationship is dynamic and results from the interactions between both parties. It is impossible that one party possessed all the badness that caused the marriage to dissolve. Therefore, I will suggest that the shame complex is so overwhelming for my participants that they split the unwanted feelings and projected them on to their former partners.

Splitting and projection are key concepts in the object relation school of thought. Klein (1946), for example, believed splitting and projection are mechanisms that emerge since infancy to protect an infant's ego development. In the absolute dependence phase, an infant, in his phantasy, would split the mother's breast into a good breast, which is gratifying because it provides enough milk on time, and a bad breast, which is frustrating because it is unable to do so. In states of frustration and anxiety, the infant's destructive impulse projects outward to destroy the bad breast. Thus, in the young infant's phantasy, the frustrating breast is divided into fragments. Meanwhile, the good breast is introjected and idealised as inexhaustible and always bountiful (Klein, 1946). Love feelings are attached to the good breast, while frustration, hatred and persecutory anxiety are attached to the bad breast.

This twofold relation implies a division between love and hatred in relation to the object, which can only be maintained by splitting the breast into its good and bad aspects (Klein, 1946). Splitting the object and projecting through the destructive impulse characterises the paranoid-schizoid position, which emerges in the first six months of infancy. With the development and integration of the infant's ego, the baby is able to perceive the good and bad breasts as actually one breast. The perception of wholeness emerges meaning that the infant develops into a depressive position, which occurs in the second quarter of the first year and continues to mature throughout life. The depressive position enables feelings of

sympathy, empathy, and concern for others to develop, which contributes to an integration and mature ego as an individual (Steiner, 1988).

In my research, the failure of heterosexuality generates frustration for participants, which is deepened by the automatic failure to follow the conventional marital norm as they are regarded as outsiders. Being an outsider in social groups could cause them to feel persecuted because they do not conform to social norms. They enter marriage with the imagination of an ideal picture of heterosexual marriage, which they later find out is not conforming to reality. In order to protect themselves from feelings of disappointment, frustration and persecution after marital dissolution, they project their destructive impulses. By projection, the whole situation and the unwanted feelings are denied at the same time. That is to say, the positive experiences from their previous marriage are denied as well. However, not only the situation and unwanted feelings are denied, but it is also the relation which is denied. It is the denial of the part of themselves (participants), of their previous marital investments and experiences, and of their feelings towards their previous marriage.

Klein believed that the depressive position continues to mature throughout the lifespan (Steiner, 1991), which means an individual would keep moving between the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions in different life encounters for ego development and integration (Steiner, 1991). During infancy, the course of the infant's ego development depends on the degree of balance between the introjection of the good breast and the projection of the bad breast, which can be achieved in the early stages (Klein, 1946). A good balance in projection and introjection experiences enables the infant to realise the wholeness of the breast, which includes going from fear of loss of the good breast to experiencing the loss of the good breast and developing the ability of wholeness (Steiner, 1991). So, in life encounters, moving from the paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive position requires dealing with the loss of objects.

In my study, it was the loss of marriage, which includes the loss of marital intimacy, of idealised dominant heterosexuality, of the security of conforming to the social norm, and of the previous anticipations of the future life. In order to reach the depressive position, mourning is needed to face the painful reality of loss (Steiner, 1991). Freud described the process of mourning as going over every memory connected with the bereaved and reality-testing it until, gradually, the full force of the loss is appreciated (Steiner, 1991). "Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libidos shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object" (Freud, 1917, p.244, as cited in Steiner, 1991).

Through the mourning process, participants are more likely to move to the depressive position to see the positive and negative experiences in the marriage as a whole, abandon the unrealistic idealisation of heterosexuality, accept the loss of positive aspects in the previous intimate relationship, recognise their parts and contributions to the marital dissolution and accept their limitations. By doing so, would be more likely to be able to confront the shame and persecuted feelings of violating the social norm of a good woman and a good mother.

6.3.2 Guilt in Single Mothering

Klein (1946) argued that the synthesis between the loved and hated aspects of the complete object gives rise to feelings of mourning and guilt, promoting important advances in the infant's emotional and intellectual life. Freud (Freud & Riviere, 1930) defined guilt as the expression of the conflict of ambivalence, the eternal struggle between love and the destructive impulses or death instinct. Guilt is only applicable in relation to manifestations of conscience that result from super-ego development. The choice of ending the civil marital relationship means significant and irreversible destruction of the fact of marriage. Participants' destructive impulse was so enormous that its influence spread to their children—changing from living in a two-parent family to living in a single-parent family, who are the

products of their civil marriage and their relations with ex-partners. The destruction and hatred toward marital relations are dangerous and subsequently have disadvantaged their children, therefore giving rise to guilt.

Participants' feelings of guilt were manifested through their attitudes toward dual parenting responsibilities and compensation for children's material conditions.

Boyu (Chinese Participant): Single parenting means a combined role of mother and father, it's hard… So, I work harder to make sure she has a good life because I don't want my child to feel materially inferior due to her father's absence, despite her already lack of fatherhood. For example, everyone else wears new clothes in new year, I can't stand it if my daughter doesn't have new clothes to wear. I must guarantee to meet these most simple and basic (requirements). Otherwise, I feel very sad because I couldn't give (her) a complete family, and now even worse off materially.

O (British Participant): When you're on your own you feel you have to be both parents. But there are always moments where I feel guilty, even in the good moments, It's terrible. Because I initiated the separation, and other people probably would have stayed because people have different boundaries. The guilt also comes when I have to work because when the other person's gone financially, you're the only one. You must work, and you also have to study to make yourself better. So, when I'm spending less time with her, I feel bad because, Daddy doesn't spend time with you. The only other person who can spend time with you is Mommy, and now Mommy is split across work, study, and so many other things. So, the guilt is always there.

Participants were concerned about their children being materially inferior compared to children in two-parent families, so they worked harder to maintain the previous living conditions as much as possible or even better. However, their concerns were actually about the father's absence in their children's lives and other subsequent deprivations related to it

rather than just material conditions, such as the father's company and emotional support for children. By working harder to keep the material conditions and being dual parents, participants take over paternal responsibility while also emotionally denying the fact of the father's absence in the family.

Denial is a defence mechanism that an individual employs to deal with emotional conflicts and internal or external stressors by refusing to acknowledge some aspect of external reality or experience (Di Giuseppe & Perry, 2021). Denial avoids admitting or becoming fully aware of feelings that an individual believes would bring out adverse consequences, such as shame, grief, or other painful affects (Di Giuseppe & Perry, 2021).

In my research, participants employed some form of emotional denial to avoid confronting the significant guilt toward their children, which was caused by their destructive impulses toward the marriage. However, the danger of denial lies in the fact that participants' behaviours are reactions to their guilt of violating traditional good mother norms rather than responding to or facing reality, which is that their children are living in and will be growing up in a single-parent family.

6.3.3 Loss of Cultural Respectability

Culturally, participants lost respectability for failing to follow the conventional husband-baby-home trajectory of a good woman, then further stigmatised for violating the traditional parenting norm of being a good mother as they let their children live a fatherless life, especially in the Chinese context. Stigma indicates a physical or moral discrediting that reduces the individual from a whole person to a tainted, discounted because of their deviance from society's conception of normality (Goffman, 1986). In the context of Chinese single motherhood, stigma originates from the deeply rooted and widely held cultural values that uphold the moral logic of self-discipline for social and family order (Mo, 2017).

In recent decades, China has experienced rapid social and economic changes, which have transformed social-cultural and demographic characteristics (Mo, 2017). With economic advancement, individualism has become increasingly influential, leading to a great upsurge in China's divorce rate (Mo, 2017). However, juxtaposed with this is the traditional cultural emphasis on familism, which still lingers in Chinese society. China used to be dominated by Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, emphasising the importance of holistic solidarity and harmony in society and families (Mo, 2017). The deep-seated Confucian family emphasises the moral logic of self-discipline for social and family order. Marriage is deemed a solemn and important event for every individual and is expected to last for a lifetime (Ruan, 1991). Therefore, divorce is discouraged and seen as a highly undesirable social and moral option. And single motherhood is considered a shame for the mother herself as well as her family (Kuang et al., 2022).

Kuang et al. (2022) have argued that cultural norms and people's perceptions of stigma have directly contributed to single mother's negative emotions in Mainland China. In Hong Kong, where people's expectations towards marriage consist of a mixture of both Western and Chinese traditions due to Western colonial influences, single mothers also experience stigmatisation attributed to cultural factors. For example, Rudowicz, (2001) has examined the social pressures on single mothers in Hong Kong, which concentrates on their personal burdens, custodial pressure, and stigmatisation. It showed that stigmatisation has the most extensive effect on single mothers' well-being. A couple of Chinese narratives from my study can be used for illustration.

> *Boyu: There are always people who come to gossip; they like to pry into other's privacy. A couple of people asked me straight on my face if I was divorced. That's really irritating. I was like, I don't eat at yours or spend your money, mind your own business.*

Yulu: I don't want other people to know about my marital situation. Because once they

know they will be very nosy and ask me questions, like why I got divorced? Why do I

have to explain to them? Does it have anything to do with them?

The dominant Chinese norms and values define acceptable attributes and behaviours

for social members and legitimise mechanisms of societal control. However, in my study,

Chinese participants failed to display attributes considered important and therefore, they

experienced stigmatisation. They are confronted with social exclusion and status devaluation

(as Yulu said in previous content, the street rats). Subsequently, they lost respectability, which

led to their feelings of shame.

6.3.4 Loss of Class Respectability

Stigma is contextual in nature and embedded in the norms and values of each distinct

culture (Falk, 2001). Compared to their Chinese counterparts, the stigmatisation in the British

group is more related to class. In the UK, single mothers have been labelled as having

unregulated female sexuality with the potential to disrupt the social order (Smart, 1992).

Especially during the austerity period (2010-2019), single parents were equated with

irresponsible, benefits-dependent, working-class families (Tyler, 2011, as cited in Carroll &

Yeadon-Lee, 2022). At this time, the conservative policy of the British government linked a

series of social problems, including poverty, to educational underachievement and anti-social

behaviour, a decline in marriage and the rise in lone-parent families and lack of male role

models (Morris & Munt, 2019). Therefore, as marriage was suggested as the remedy to the

problems faced by society, the blame for state-induced structural poverty was automatically

shifted to the individual morality of single mothers (Morris & Munt, 2019).

"Chav" culture also came to prominence in mainstream British media. "Chavs" are

characterised as young people from a low socioeconomic background with brash and loutish

behaviour, usually clothed in branded sportswear (Bennett, 2013). The TV series Little

Britain (BBC, 2003-2006) highlighted the figure of the "chav mother" as a young unemployed teenage mother who lives in a council house with several mixed-ethnicity children from different fathers — a "chav mother" is seen as an irresponsible, sexually profligate, "dirty white" single mother (Morris & Munt, 2019). Tyler (2008) has argued that people's shame and disgust of the "chav" figure represented class antagonism and heightened class hatred. It reflects broader enduring class divisions and moral panics projected onto teenage mothers, such as the label of "undeserving poor" (Morris & Munt, 2019).

In addition, the dominant ideology of a "good" mother is inherently classed judged according to middle-class nuclear family norms (Miller, 2005, as cited in Carroll & Yeadon-Lee, 2022). It conveys that a good mother should be able to optimise her children's life chances or face moral censure for irresponsibly reproducing cycles of deprivation (Jenson, 2018, as cited in Carroll & Yeadon-Lee, 2022). It requires mothers to follow the trajectory of higher education and employment prior to child-rearing at the right age and marry or cohabit with their children's father so that they can provide sufficient advantages to offspring. Otherwise, mothers who do not follow become vulnerable to being categorised as "bad" parents (Carroll & Yeadon-Lee, 2022).

In my study, a couple of narratives show the shame of possible class decline brought about by becoming a single mother.

> *Flo: If it hadn't been for my parents' help, we probably wouldn't still be in our family home. We'd probably be renting now instead of trying to find a mortgage in this climate. If I hadn't had that sewn up, I would have to go back to teaching, and then that would have come to affect the PhD because, you know, I won't take my kid to move to the council house. So, thanks to my parents...I've always raised him and said, look, you are white, and you are male, and you are middle class, and so you are always going to be in a position of privilege that you were just born with. If you see*

somebody near you who isn't white, or who isn't male, or who isn't middle class, who

needs your help, you're going to help them because you've got the hidden power.

British participant Flo was a full-time teacher in a primary school for 15 years and the head of a department. Her father is a veteran, and her mother was also a teacher before retirement. She categorised herself as middle class, teaching her son to take on "middle-class male responsibility". She used to have a decent life before the divorce because she used to earn a good income (as she described). She and her former partner lived in their own house and paid the mortgage together. Just after she switched to a part-time job to focus on her PhD program, her partner filed for divorce. She planned to sell the house and rent with her son temporarily because the mortgage was too much to pay by herself. But her parents helped her pay off the mortgage so that she could keep the home and continue the PhD. It can be seen from her narrative that divorce not only brought her temporary financial difficulty, but also shame and anxiety, and is manifested by her words about the council house. If she takes her child to a council house, it will go far away from improving her child's life chances. So, an extra "bad" mother label may be added to her. To avoid it happening, she may even choose to return to a full-time job rather than continue her PhD study because of the higher income. By doing so, the resultant humiliation, loss of respectability, and shame could be avoided.

Participant E may further illustrate this point. E is the only child of her parents and was born and raised in the UK. Her parents moved to Portugal because of work during her adolescence. So, she stayed in the UK to study during term time and flew to Portugal out of term. She found herself pregnant during her final year of undergraduate at 20. She contacted the father and was informed that he decided to abandon his parental responsibility and rights. In the end, she decided to keep the baby rather than adoption. When we conducted the interview, she was 25, and her daughter had reached school age. In the focus group interview, she revealed the stigma of being a young single mother caused her emotional difficulties.

I had all my friends and a lot of travelling, and I lived the life that you are supposed to live when you're in your early 20s. Being a mom was the last thing I wanted to do because of what society puts on us as a single parent … the stigma of being a single mom really affected me, and I couldn't get myself out of that for a long, long time … I thought I'd never date again, I didn't think I could get a good job, I didn't think I would be able to study, I thought I was gonna be poor, like all the stuff the society puts on single parents. And also, because I was so young, there was that judgement of being not only a single mum but a young single mum. I used to be confronted in Tesco, "Oh, how old are you? You don't look old like having a babe". From random people, from strangers.

In her narrative, a couple of words precisely match the "chav mother" characteristic discussed above: "poor financially", "young", "unable to get a good job", and "unable to study". E refused to be a single mother before she found out about her unplanned pregnancy because that was socially stigmatised (*what society puts on us*). After becoming a young single mother, she experienced the stigma and was afraid of being trapped in it. And even be judged by random people on ordinary occasions.

A few more background information that was recorded in my research diary is necessary to be brought out for discussing this point further. After the focus group interview, I contacted her several times over a few months for follow-up individual interviews, but she did not reply to any of my messages. This meant she withdrew from my study just after the focus group interview. I reflected and checked on my interactions with her to find out if there was any inappropriateness that resulted in her withdrawal. Before the focus group, we had a nice chat in a cafe on campus. In the focus group interview, although she was not active and most of the time would only speak when I asked for her opinions, she had conversations with other participants, including answering questions and commenting on others. According to

the video recording, she seemed relaxed in that environment. So, the reason is less likely to be between her and me. Since I guaranteed that participants did not know each other before the interview, it is also less likely caused by other participants. Therefore, the possible explanation left would be herself and the topic of my study.

E is the youngest among my participants. She is the only participant who has a child without a partnership. And she is the only participant who had never worked full-time before having a child. She raised the topic of stigma in the group and had others' responses to it. It shows the significant influence of the stigma upon her. She was unable to be involved when others discussed their former partners, child maintenance, and marital life because she did not have related experiences. Another topic she found herself relating to was the lack of childcare support. At the end of the focus group, she said it was inspiring to learn about others' struggles, which enabled her to know that she was not alone.

However, there is an inconsistency between her limited engagement and speech: she did not find a sense of belonging with this group and did not identify with it. She was unable to be involved in most of the discussions, only mentioning the topic of stigma which might re-emphasise her predicament and remind her of shame. Therefore, her withdrawal and no responses might be because she tried to avoid confronting and wanted to escape from these feelings. Scheff (1997) argued that shame is a central emotion that ties together individual and social aspects of human affect as a barometer of morality, a means of regulation and distance, "allowing us to regulate how close or far we are from others" (p.12). Although I was not able to explore further details regarding her class and family information, this non-verbal information provides further evidence of the importance of stigma in my study.

Discussion

For participants in my study, the feelings and emotions of being a single mother are complex. Because single mothers who seek to support themselves and their children usually

find themselves in a dilemma. This dilemma results from childcare, emotional and responsibility overload which is common across both groups. Participants who work only part-time can hardly earn enough to support themselves and their families, such as British participant Flo. To maintain her living conditions, her parents provided financial assistance to help her pay off the mortgage and keep the house. However, participants who work full-time may still not earn enough to afford professional childcare, such as Chinese participant Ivy. She had to leave her daughter with a neighbour for a couple of hours before she was off to work rather than purchase expensive childcare services. Therefore, participants feel sad and guilty about not spending enough time with their children. In addition, this guilt and sadness are deepened by expectations about the traditional good mother: maintaining income and efficient childcare seems to become a mutual contradiction where single mothers are trapped. This leads to the first layer of emotional and responsible overload for single mothers in my study.

The second layer of emotional and responsible overload for my participants is caused by the subsequent effect of their destructive impulses towards the previous heteronormativity. The dominant marital norms require a good woman to follow the husband-baby-home trajectory (Morris & Munt, 2019). The marital dissolution can bring about their destructive impulses against this traditional trajectory. Subsequently, they are punished and blamed for it, which comes from their superego and external environment. The superego is the internalised external social values that motivate us to behave in a socially responsible and acceptable manner (Freud, 1935). Freud (Freud & Riviere, 1930) argued that the development of the superego could form a conscience that manifests guilt. Although participants violated the traditional trajectory, the social values of being a good woman and a good mother were internalised even before the family dissolution happened. Therefore, the violation makes them feel guilty, mainly towards their children.

The dominant social norms believe that children who grow up in a two-parent family usually have better developmental outcomes than a single-parent family (Amato, 2014). Their violation had a prolonged impact on their children. Klein (1948) argued that anxiety is inextricably bound up with guilt, which leads to the reparative tendency. Therefore, some participants, such as Chinese participants Boyu and Xie, tried to remedy negative effects on their children by dual-parenting and providing material compensation. However, by doing so, participants unconsciously denied the reality of children living in fatherless households. In contrast some participants, such as Chinese participant Tong and British participant O, are open and honest with their children. They display truth to children by showing them their failure at following the conventional trajectory and their limits in parenting capacity. By doing so, they help and teach children to confront and adapt to reality.

Participants' violating behaviours are also stigmatised by the social environment, which brings them significant emotional difficulties and emotional overload. Family ideology (McGlynn, 2006) presents us with one ideal type of family form: the heterosexual couple married with two children. In Chinese society, family solidarity and harmony are highly emphasised based on the Confucian tradition (McGlynn, 2006; Mo, 2017). Therefore, the idea of the "normal" versus the "abnormal" family or the functional family versus the dysfunctional family is constructed. However, the ideology of the traditional family fails to recognise that some people nowadays do not choose to or are not able to live their lives according to the ideal family type or traditional norm. So, the idealisation of the conventional family lead to understanding any negative experiences within families as individual problems rather than seeing them as resulting from the ways in which the family is constructed as a social institution based on unequal power relations (Punch et al., 2013).

Mill (in Punch et al., 2013) has argued that if the family is seen as a problematic institution, then difficult or negative occurrences would become public rather than personal

troubles. However, the state is interested in trying to define problems on an individual rather than social level so that it can blame individual families rather than the structure of society (Punch et al., 2013). So individual parents become stigmatised because they represent the possibility of alternative values and expectations. Durkheim (in Falk, 2001) has argued that this process is indispensable for the existence of any society because it affirms cultural values and norms. Therefore, the stigma of single motherhood is less likely to be reduced because stigmatisation is always needed to reproduce the social functioning of any society (Falk, 2001).

In the UK, social problems become less visible in wealthier families (Punch et al., 2013), but in working-class families, social problems are easily linked to family problems without recognising the political, social, and structural causes of such problems. Individuals in poor families can be labelled as deviants, where their problems conveniently become defined as individuals rather than social problems that require a political and social solution (Punch et al., 2013). Thus, in my research, single mothers with lower socioeconomic status face a great deal of stigmatisation, becoming individual scapegoats for social problems that need a collective response.

Although both Chinese and British participants in my study have to deal with difficulties arising from the dilemma of childcare and emotional and responsibility overload, they make efforts to be "good enough" mothers. Their parenting style reflects characteristics of authoritative parenting, which is high in responsiveness and demandingness (Baumrind, 2013). They show affection, warmth, and autonomy through authoritative parenting when children are confronted with difficult situations, which helps to encourage self-reliant, self-controlled, explorative, content children (Horowitz, 1995), contributing to better level of emotional regulation. This is further discussed in Chapter 9 Children's Social-Emotional Development in Single Mother Families.

However, there is a slight difference regarding single parenting attitudes. Chinese participants have a higher level of anxiety towards an uncertain future and see themselves as an umbrella for their parents and children against unknown future risks, which heightens their emotional stress compared to their British counterparts. While British participants show more appreciation of the freedom and sense of control that come with being single parents. This difference may result from two aspects. First, the more advanced feminism movement in the UK has brought about a more "liberal" and dynamic view of parenting and family structure. Second, the welfare institutional support in the UK enables British participants to have a great degree of choice in their decision-making processes.

Summary

This chapter explored the varying attitudes and perceptions towards single parenting from Chinese and British participants. Although these two groups of participants are from different social and cultural contexts, the common dilemmas of single parenting shared within the two groups lead to similar perceptions of single parenting being tough and challenging. In addition, other shared emotions are guilt towards children and emotional stress caused by stigma. Confronting emotional and practical difficulties, participants make efforts to be good enough mothers and show some characteristics of an authoritative parenting style. However, some important differences in attitudes emerged between the two groups. Chinese participants tend to be more anxious about the future and have a higher level of worry regarding childrearing. In contrast, the British counterparts hold more positive attitudes toward being a single mother and are satisfied with having more control over childrearing. These differences can be explained by the sociocultural influences of Confucianism and feminism, as well as different levels of institutional support within both societies. The next chapter focuses on how different parental attitudes lead to changes in the

parent-child relationship in single-mother families, which plays a significant role in children's social-emotional development.

Chapter 7 Parent-Child Relationship in Single-Mother Families

Introduction

The previous chapter explored mothers' subjective feelings and experiences of single parenting among two groups, reflecting their parental attitudes, practices and concerns about their children living a fatherless life. This chapter will explore the changing dynamics of the mother-father-child triadic within single-mother families, focusing on the mother-child and father-child relationships and their substantial impact on children's social-emotional development. In a two-parent family, the mother-father-child dynamic safeguards relationships among family members and fosters children's social-emotional development. While in single-mother families, there is a noticeable pattern where the father's gradual withdrawal leads to a closer mother-child relationship. Family dissolution negatively affects children, and the estrangement from the father adds extra emotional challenges and stress. The increased closeness in the mother-child relationship can create unavoidable ambivalence and tension. Fortunately, grandparents provide a holding environment that alleviates the negative impact on children. The new emotional dynamic among grandparents, children and mothers creates a collaborative parenting approach, greatly benefiting children's development.

7.1 The Ambivalent Mother-Child Relationship

7.1.1 Closeness Versus Independence

Affectionate interactions between mothers and children appear in participants' narratives, reflecting mother-child closeness. For example, mothers and children are sensitive

to each other's emotions as they live together most of the time, like British participant Flo and Chinese participant Yulu.

> *Flo: Sometimes, he goes, I'm going through a lot at the minute, mummy. So, if I take it out on you, you know I don't mean to, and I love you. And you go, that's absolutely fine, and that makes it all worthwhile ... sometimes it does feel because it is just him and me, and we are both very empathetic. So, we both feel each other's feelings quite deeply. And I know if I'm having a stressed day and I haven't said I'm stressed because of this, then it will affect him, and then he will suddenly be crossed and stressed as well, and we kind of bounce negatives and positives off each other.*

> *Yulu: Since we live together, we are quite sensitive to each other's emotions, so she can sense my emotions. When she senses that I'm sad, she gives me a cuddle. I feel she is older than her age sometimes.*

For the Chinese participant Boyu and her 7-year-old daughter, their affectionate interactions are reflected more in actions than in language. As she shared,

> *Yesterday, she came home with a bag of crispy pork, which was her school lunch. She said, Mum, this is really yummy, so I boxed it up and want you to taste it. This isn't the first time she's brought food home. Once, she took out a big takeaway bag with only three prawns inside and said, everyone got four at lunch, I ate one and thought it was super, so I took the rest three home for you to try. I was very touched, but I also felt it was funny. I asked, aren't you afraid of what others might say? She replied, my mom paid for it, why should I care? I never taught her to do so, but she did it to express her love to me and my parents.*

Affection has been linked to closeness and satisfaction, leading to a stronger parent-child attachment relationship, better self-esteem and lower stress for the child (Field, 2010). Reay (2004b) pointed out that one of the significant roles of mothering is to balance the

family's emotional budget and children's needs, especially their emotional needs. Therefore, women perform significantly more emotional labour than most men in the family, taking responsibility for the emotional aspects of family connections, responding to others' emotional states, and intervening to relieve distress (Reay, 2004b).

Although affectionate interactions bring closeness to the mother-child dyad, mothers still try to foster their children to be independent, which is one of their core parenting practices across the two groups. For example, the Chinese participant Boyu, her daughter (Xinxin) was spoiled by the grandparents, so she would guide Xinxin by saying:

Mom can spoil you, you don't have to do anything, clothes ready for you to wear and food ready for you to eat. But Mom, Grandma, and Grandpa can't accompany you for your whole life. People must learn to be self-reliant and independent because we can't always be there with you. So, now she does a lot of things by herself.

Another similar example from the Chinese group is participant Yulu, she said to her daughter:

I tell her that I am willing to do anything for her, but in the future, I won't be able to protect her all the time, so she needs to learn skills to take care of herself.

For British participant O, her 6-year-old daughter (N) was anxious and shy in social situations. So, O registered her daughter in a drama club to help N overcome her anxiety and shyness by performing arts.

For the first performance, all she had to do was be a sheep and go Baa, but she couldn't. So, I asked her, why can't you say Baa? She went because sheep don't talk, why do I have to talk? Well, obviously, that's not the reason. The reason is that she's shy and doesn't want to stand in front of everyone. So, on the day of practice, she had a toy the whole time, and she kept saying I want to go to the toilet so she could be very avoidant, like trying to escape the situation. And then she did her first

performance, and she cried all through the performance in front of everybody. And I

was like, well, that didn't go well, but I would never take her out because she has to

face it.

We can tell from these examples that the closeness of the mother-child relationship gives children a sense of emotional security. Based on these secure feelings, mothers teach and discipline children with rigour and set boundaries and rules to foster their independence, which comes out of love and consideration of children's future development in the long-term.

However, the closeness can generate ambivalence because parents and their children experience a dynamic state of closeness and encouragement to independence, and they may simultaneously experience positive and negative emotions toward each other (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998). For example, the Chinese participant Yulu, after the family dissolution, her 7-year-old daughter stays with her during weekdays and at the father's house over the weekends. She is stricter about the child's academic performance than the dad, so it was hard for her when she found that the daughter preferred the dad over her because of her strictness:

I don't allow her to slack off in study. There is no way I can let her do that … I am

strict with her schooling, but I am worried she hates or doesn't like me. I can't accept

that I am her mother, and she hates me the most because her dad takes her to play on

weekends, but she has to study when she stays with me. So, it was embarrassing when

I learned that she likes to stay with her dad more than she does with me because he

doesn't care about her studies.

Similar to the Chinese group, British participant O felt ambivalent about her parenting practice of enrolling her daughter in the performing arts club because her daughter performed differently without her presence:

She must perform twice for performance number two, in the morning and evening.

Her grandparents saw her in the morning, and I was in the evening. They saw her

first, and they sent me the video. No shyness, nothing. She did everything. When me

and Daddy went, there was shyness. So, I then thought, is it me? Because she doesn't

want to disappoint me that she ends up being shy.

There is an ancient Chinese saying "fu mu zhi ai zi, ze wei zhi ji shen yuan" (parents' love for children manifests in their long-term plans for their children's future). This saying suggests parents should guide children to foster abilities, such as resilience, independence, courage, which can prepare their children to reach the socialised goals in the future rather than indulging and spoiling children (Leung & Shek, 2011). As seen in the examples, Yulu is strict with her daughter's academic performance, and O does not compromise about her daughter's social shyness. Mothers set rules and limits for children which stems from their consideration for their children's future. Therefore, ambivalence can be observed in the mother-child relationships. Luescher and Pillemer (1998) used the concept of intergenerational ambivalence to describe the contradictions of the parent-child relationship, evidenced in institutional resources and requirements, such as status, roles, and norms, and at the subjective level, in terms of cognitions, emotions, and motivations.

In my study, this ambivalence manifests in three ways. Firstly, it is between mothers' firm insistence on limits and children's autonomy; secondly, between mother-child closeness and mothers' intentions to foster children's independence; thirdly, the contradictory emotions expressed towards each other. This ambivalent tension between parents and children tends to be heightened when they cannot maintain an appropriate balance between them (Connidis, 2015). Therefore, in the examples, Yulu's daughter preferred her dad, who does not limit her to studying. O's daughter performed better when her mother was not present. In a two-parent family, the other parent could share the mother-child ambivalence, and the balance of closeness and independence is more likely to be maintained.

Winnicott (1964) has suggested that the father tempers the ambivalence generated within the mother-child bond. In the case of Yulu and O, if the father could align with the mother and offer guidance to the children in a manner distinct from the mother's approach—such as by explaining the rules and discussing the value of education and performing arts—he would act as a mediator of the mother-child conflicts and alleviate the resulting tension. This would provide the children with an additional perspective from the father, beyond the mother-child relationship, which might help them adhere to the rules more effectively.

7.1.2 Overly Dependent Children

Closeness can also result in the child becoming too close to, or to say, overly dependent on the mother in a single-mother family. For example, British participant Flo, her 11-year-old boy, still has sleepovers in Flo's bed sometimes.

He and I were always very close because I was the primary caregiver, with his dad leaving, we got closer … on special occasions, such as New Year's Eve, he would have sleepovers in my bed. And he'll move over onto my side of the bed, and I'm like, I've got no room. I'm ready for that to finish, but there's no way he's ready for that to finish. But I know I'll look back, and I'll think those were lovely times, and he won't always want to do it.

Another example is the Chinese participant, Boyu. She has a mild heart condition and had a heart attack while disciplining her daughter once, which panicked the child.

When I was disciplining her, I lost my temper and felt chest pain. I sat down, clutched my chest and asked her to find me my medication. I didn't realise how much this affected her until a few months later I felt unwell again. She was scared and nervously asked me, Mom, are you feeling unwell again? Do you want me to get your medicine? You can sit down and rest. She never made the same mistake again after I disciplined her that time.

Additionally, the closeness between mothers and children can sometimes be excessive for mothers, as seen with Chinese participant Rainbow Mama and British participant O.

Rainbow Mama: She likes to ask me, Mom, do you really love me? If I didn't answer, she would pretend to say, Hmph, the baby is angry. Then, I comforted her by saying, don't be angry, Baby. She would go, that's all you can say. It makes me feel like I am a scumbag who always talks sweetly in a relationship [laugh]. Sometimes I feel it is quite annoying. She's so melodramatic that she almost asks me every day. Maybe this is her way of expressing closeness, but it makes me seem unaccountable.

O: She doesn't like sleeping over at people's houses. Sometimes I want a break, and I'm like, please sleep over, for example, her grandma's or my cousin's. She has a meltdown. So, for me, I'm like, it seems like you're overly attached here. You need to be securely attached to know about permanence that I will come back.

I will now use a psychoanalytic perspective to discuss this overly dependence in mother-child relationships. Freud developed the concept of the Oedipus Complex in his theory of the psychosexual developmental stage (Freud & Strachey, 2011), which was later developed further by other psychoanalysts. Freud believed that when a child's development reaches the phallic stage, he becomes acutely aware of finding himself in a triangular situation consisting of his mother, father, and himself. His rivalry with his father for his mother's love and attention, as well as the jealousy and hatred that arouses him, leads to his wish to get rid of his father. He then becomes threatened by his father's powerful capacity for retaliation, which might take the form of an attack on the child's sexuality, specifically, fear of castration (Feldman, 2005). During the child's development, the Oedipus Complex is resolved by the development of the super-ego, which results from the internalisation of the same-sex figure that strives to suppress the urges of the id and make the ego act upon these idealistic standards. The successful resolution of the Oedipus Complex leads to the formation

of a child's identity and personality (Freud & Strachey, 2011). Within the triangular relationship of mother, father, and child, the father functions as a role to separate the omnipotent fusion of mother and child in the child's phantasy (Feldman, 2005).

Margret Mahler (Mahler et al., 2018) further argued that the father's role facilitates the separation-individuation process. Separation and individuation are complementary developmental processes that develop object constancy and influence interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics (Mahler et al., 2018). Healthy object constancy is a balance of self and others, cooperation, and competitiveness (Mahler et al., 2018). If the father's role is not available or absent, it may lead to a fixation, resulting in a negative impact on the formation of the child's identity, which, in turn, affects children's social-emotional development. Negative outcomes include existing in an undifferentiated state between others and the external environment, lack of ego identity, lack of boundaries and distinctiveness from one's caregiver and family, enmeshment, dependency and fusion in relationships, and reliance on external objects to regulate thoughts, behaviours, and emotions (Mahler, 1985, as cited in Glover, 2018). Glover (2018) reported a clinical case of family therapy in her studies, which involved a housewife mother, three children and a business father who was always absent for months. Three children showed confusion in their self-identity and exhibited emotional dysregulation and difficulty verbalising their emotions.

In the examples above, Flo's 11-year-old son was already very close to his mother, but their relationship became even closer after his parents divorced, as shown by their continued co-sleeping during his school years. Studies (Palmer et al., 2018) have indicated that a child's anxiety, lower self-esteem, and daytime dependency behaviours are linked to their inability to sleep alone at night. The father's presence could play a crucial role in the child's separation process, encouraging the child to be less dependent on the mother and more self-reliant. In the case of the Chinese participant Boyu, her daughter became extremely anxious and fearful

about her mother's illness, which led to her correcting a mistake out of panic. An available father could at least help alleviate the child's anxiety, reducing her panic and fear. For participants Rainbow Mama and O, the father's absence intensified the desire for maternal closeness (Burgner, 1985, as cited in Jones, 2007). This led to Rainbow Mama's daughter frequently seeking verbal reassurance of her mother's love, while O's daughter struggled to have sleepovers at others' homes.

7.2 The Estranged Father-Child Relationship

The father-child relationship plays an important role in children's social-emotional development. Although my research focused mainly on mothers, discourses about fathers kept appearing and repeating in both the UK and Chinese groups. According to the findings of my study, as a non-residential parent in a single-mother household, the father has a profound impact on the children's development. Even with those unwilling to see their children for a long time after the marital relationship ends in conflict, lingering fatherhood influences are still left with their children, both negative and positive. There is a clear pattern of estranged tendencies regarding the father-child contact and relationships shown in both groups. When I conducted interviews, all the children in the British group kept in contact with their fathers monthly, no matter the frequency. By contrast, in the Chinese group, half of the children lost contact with their fathers for at least more than a year, no matter the reason.

The findings of my study show that several factors affect the father-child relationship during the family transition and post-transition phases. Firstly, the change of marital status directly affects the father-child contact, which is further influenced by later maternal and paternal civil status in the post-transition phase. Secondly, how the parents separated and ended the marital relationship affects the parental relationship, which further impacts the father-child relationship, as well as children's views about father figures, even male images, and marriage.

7.2.1 Affected by the Marital Status

For British participant Flo, the separation process of her marriage was neat and fast. The shared responsibility and cooperation in parenting, living arrangements, and child maintenance were well discussed and settled. The father-son relationship was originally good before the marital separation so that the father could stick with the agreement at the beginning of the separation. The father agreed to take his son (M) twice a week, including attending swimming lessons every Wednesday and a sleepover at Dad's on the weekend. However, the father-son relationship was affected when the father re-partnered and developed a closeness with his new girlfriend. It often happened that the girlfriend was present when the father and son spent time together, which lead to the decline of both the quantity and quality of fathering involvement. So, the more intimate the father and the girlfriend were, emotionally and physically, the more pushed out the son felt. As Flo shared,

> *I can see that M's behaviour goes downhill, and he's building himself up for seeing his dad a couple of days ahead, although it's only once a month and not overnight because he has no idea which daddy he is going to see. If he's going to be happy and buy him things, if he is going to be part of him and his girlfriend, or if he is going to be cross and sent to the room. Then, afterwards, he either needs to vent and get everything off or decompress and switch off completely for a while. Then, he needs lots of hugs and becomes very clingy. M feels he is not in his dad's favour anymore.*

The marital separation confronted the child with emotional challenges. Then, the gradually estranged father-son relationship, along with the father's unpredictable temper, caused the child to struggle more, which later affected his performance at school.

> *One day, the head teacher was at the gate with the kids coming in. She saw M was very panicky and anxious at the gate because he could not find the phone, and that was the day he was picked up by his dad after school. He said without his phone, he*

could not contact me if he needed me when he was at his dad's. So, the head teacher

said, right, I've seen now that there's a problem that was very out of his character.

Then they agreed that he could have counselling, and he had nine sessions.

According to Flo's narrative, although the child did not reveal many details to the counsellor regarding the breakdown of his relationship with his father, it was helpful to the child that he felt he had been listened to and given attention to by another adult. Still, the paternal conversion caused so much emotional overwhelming that the child refused to remember the positive memories that happened with Dad,

Before separation, we were a good family, which shows M how a family and marriage

should be. What happened to all of us was a surprise, including M. But he struggles to

remember that as a positive, and I'll say to him, the man I married was a really lovely

man. And I will list the things he used to do that were lovely as a husband and a

father. And I'll talk about that as a fond memory because it is. He's just a very

different man now. M says, you know, the new dad is not the same as the old dad.

The paternal estrangement, along with the family transition, brought the child confusion and hard times. I could not tell from the interview how the paternal estrangement impacted the child's perception of marriage and family, but the mother-son relationship provides a space for him to talk things over.

He very much thinks he's gonna get married to a boy or a girl he doesn't know. He's

gonna have two children. He hasn't decided on the name yet. Sometimes, he'll tell me

it's the boy or the girl in his class that he's gonna get married to. And I always sort of

frame it in a, you know, a future partner, if you want a partner, or a husband or wife if

you want one, you don't have to stay with me. And now I very much feel that I'm

asexual, so I'm not interested in anybody. And he says, well, I'm bisexual, so I'm

interested in both men and women. So, we're very open about this at the minute.

Unlike the growing apart father-son relationship in Flo's case, the Chinese participant Tong's son experienced a sudden loss of the relationship with his father. Tong happened to be a single mother due to her husband's death. Her husband chose to end his life because of the overwhelming pressure caused by the failure of their family start-up business due to the COVID-19 economic recession. Therefore, Tong decided to move back to her childhood city with her 5-year-old son, Lele, so she could have her parents help with childcare while rebuilding her life. Our interviews happened one year after she had moved back. According to Tong, when the dad had just gone, one of the influences upon Lele that came to her concern was that Lele appeared to become very submissive. He would please others intentionally, especially with adult males.

> *He was very happy playing with my nephew when we visited my cousin, but they were too excited to sleep at bedtime. So, my cousin's husband disciplined them. When I went to check on him a few moments later, I found him forcing himself to lie straight on the bed, don't dare to move, with tears rolling down. I knew he didn't want to sleep and was doing that to please my brother-in-law. Also, there was another time when my friend and I were hanging out with our families. On that day, Lele said he would bring the camera and take photos of my friend's husband so he would be liked by him.*

We can tell this little boy was confused and did not understand what was happening to his life. He might think he did something wrong that suddenly caused his father to disappear. The feeling of loss and grief, even abandonment, was so overwhelming for him that he tried to fix the situation from his perspective. He approached other adult males to look for the feeling of fatherhood to avoid someone else leaving him again. Therefore, Tong felt stressed when participating in social activities, especially seeing other children play in their father's presence.

I can feel he is sad and grieved when his friends' fathers are present. But he is very understanding and strong, so he puts up with it, which stresses me out because I don't know how to make him feel better in that situation, and I feel helpless. I love him, but there is always a void I am not able to fill because his dad has gone. He will be absent from Lele's entire growth, which is a non-reversible fact.

The topic of where Dad has gone finally came up in their conversation, which started with Lele's dream during the Chinese New Year. That was the first time the mother and son discussed this huge life crisis.

He woke up in the morning and seemed unhappy. He told me Dad had come into his dream. In the dream, his dad was playing with him in the old house, and Grandpa was standing in a space suit like an astronaut. Then he asked me, Mum, where did Daddy go? I said, he has gone to heaven and become an angel. He knows whatever is in your mind, so tell him you miss him, and he will protect you from there. Don't forget to ask him to protect me as well. Then he was so proud and ran to my parents, saying Nana and Papa, do you know that my dad is an angel in heaven now? He is an angel.

It is reassuring to see that while processing her own emotions of bereavement, Tong was able to contain her 6-year-old's emotions regarding loss and grief and then provided an acceptable explanation for him to process (mothers' containing of children's emotion is further discussed in 9.1.2 Mothers as Containers in Chapter 9). According to Tong, with the love and care of her and grandparents, Lele gradually adapted well to the new environment. However, he would still intentionally please other adult males, as she observed in the interaction between Lele and her new partner, whom she had just dated when we conducted the interview.

My boyfriend and Lele get along pretty well, he likes to drag my boyfriend to play with him. When my boyfriend played computer games, he waited quietly and didn't

bother him until he finished. Once he finished, Lele would run to him happily and ask,

"Can you play with me now?" Lele is very sensitive and good at reading the room in

social situations. He would put others' needs before his. I feel worried because he is

so little. He should be carefree instead of prioritising others.

In these two examples of British participant Flo and Chinese participant Tong, the very fact of family change has a significant influence on children, which is deepened by the change in the family structure, causing transformation and change in parent-child relationships. Since the parent-child relationship is built intimately in a private sphere, both parties depend on each other and have intertwined influences in the long term, making both parties vulnerable and receptive to each other's impact (Maes et al., 2012). Although the reasons for single parenting differ in my study, the significant impact on parent-child relationships, particularly the father-child relationship, remains similar.

7.2.2 Living with Trauma

The children of British participant Ju and Chinese participant Boyu not only suffered from family transition but also were affected by the dramatic conflicts that happened between parents, which left them with traumatic feelings and further influenced their perception of the father figure and male image.

British participant Ju was divorced because of the infidelity of her partner. Her eldest daughter, aged 12, witnessed the infidelity for a long period before Ju discovered the affair and the marital separation. Consequently, the child had a difficult time dealing with the situation, causing her to struggle both at home and school.

The teacher told me she wasn't doing well in school. She quarrelled with friends and

shouted at them, which meant emotional instability. She was bullied by some girls

during that time. The way she fought back was by yelling at others. So, she was

reported, and it made her very depressed because the truth had not been discovered,

and she felt it very unfair. Then she hated all the teachers and classmates, and she didn't want to go to school, or she pretended to be sick. She could not build friendships with other children because she didn't trust them and felt she was an outcast.

The negative effects of the family situation reached a peak when the dad moved out after the marital separation because the two children displayed regressive behaviours. They gained a lot of weight by comfort eating; they could only fall asleep when in Ju's bed for three months; and they became very clingy and demanding to Ju due to feeling abandoned by their father.

It was a Saturday morning. I was downstairs to get some water after getting up. Suddenly I heard the scream and cry because they woke up without me in bed, they thought I was gone too. So, I ran up and reassured them. For the past three years, I have cared for their souls. I want them to know I will never leave and will always be their harbour. I must build up the safety net for them again.

Consequently, Ju's two daughters, especially the eldest, do not have a good relationship with her father, which further affects her perception of male figures and marriage. She would have speeches about becoming homosexual due to the disappointment and distrust of men. Besides, the living arrangement and shared parenting responsibility between custodial and non-custodial parents was well arranged, but she resisted visiting her father. Furthermore, her idea of celibacy appeared after witnessing the hurdles and difficulties that Ju suffered during the process. However, the father-daughter relationship gradually started to ease with the efforts of Ju and Ju's friends. She is willing to visit her father and has stayovers occasionally.

I told her that both men and women can misbehave in any relationship. So, her liking of women over men should not come out from that. My best friend's partner helped my

eldest to rebuild the trust in men. He is very close to my eldest, and they chat a lot. She told me that because of him, she started to think there were still good men out there. And now she has a lot of friends at school, both boys and girls, which I finally feel relieved about.

Coincidently, Chinese participant Boyu's marriage ended for the same reason as Ju. her partner kept their then three-year-old daughter at the paternal grandparents' house in another city to force her to divorce. Boyu had the daughter back after they had a legal agreement. Then, the father, as the non-custodial parent, moved to another city and never visited the daughter. A series of conflicts, quarrels, and dramatic events at the end of the marriage left this little girl traumatised.

I wanted to take her to Disney Park on my annual leave, but she refused. She didn't want to go to that city because it's where her paternal grandparents live. She went, I remember Dad taking me there when I was small, and he wouldn't let me return. I had a fever at the grandparents' while it was snowing outside. So, until now, she keeps saying that she has a bad dad and resists going to that city.

Boyu intended to minimise the negative influences that Xinxin has experienced. She provided good material conditions, had her parents help with childcare to build intergenerational bonds, took her on holiday every year, and helped her learn new sports. However, the trauma led to Xinxin's confused perception of a father figure.

It was just after the separation that she returned home from nursery one day and asked my dad if she could call him Daddy. She said other kids in the nursery have a daddy. Since you are a male, why can't I call you daddy? My dad said, you can't call me daddy because I am your grandpa, but I can love you and care for you like daddy can. I felt so sad at that moment like I got stabbed in the heart. Although I have tried my best, there is something that is non-repairable and irreplaceable.

Afterwards, Xinxin's perception of the father figure moved to an alternative solution. She asked Boyu to find her a new dad and questioned Boyu's decision about her previous marriage.

She did not understand the difference between a stepfather and a biological father. She thought the man, whoever I married, would automatically become her dad. So she went, Mummy, find me a new daddy who is really good to me. She also asked me why I married his dad. If I had married someone else, she would not have suffered.

Boyu did not want to sow the seeds of hatred in her daughter's heart, so she guided Xinxin to have a positive mindset regarding the perception of her father and events that happened.

I told her that Daddy and I do not live together anymore. You may find it's hard to forget those bad things, but Daddy used to be good to you when you were little, he just changed afterwards. Try to look at the good side. Good things are happening in your life, think about how happy you were on holiday. You have been to many places, made so many friends, and so many beautiful things worth remembering. You can choose to put those in your memory instead of harm.

According to Boyu, with love and care from her and her parents, Xinxin adjusted to the new lifestyle well and had a smooth transition to primary school. Boyu felt relieved at first that the father's absence did not severely impact Xinxin's academic performance and school adjustment. However, a recent conversation with Xinxin made Boyu worry again. In the conversation, Xinxin talked about her perception of marriage and husband. Boyu realised that her divorce had a significant and lasting impact on her daughter, which she referred to as a "traumatic effect".

Xinxin asked me if she could have a child without getting married. She told me that I looked quite content without a husband and that if she were to marry someone who

turned out to be difficult in the future, she would have to go through the trouble of

getting a divorce. She made me think. I would rather she live the life she wants than

be stuck in an unhappy marriage. There are so many medical options available for

her to have a biological child. Indeed, marriage is not a necessary option. But I felt

sad that she would not have had this idea as little as her age if it had not been for me.

Kelly （2007) has shown that although it is not easy for children to accept the decision

of their parents' divorce, children are relatively successful with the divorce after an initial

transition period. Amato (2010) argued that three specific aspects contribute to the negative

influence on children's well-being rather than the fact of divorce itself. They are the nature of

the divorce process, the change in the parent-child relationship, and the family transition in

the post-divorce phase. Based on Amato's argument, Maes et al. (2012) conducted a focus

group study with 22 children to explore their experiences and meanings constructed on

parental divorce. The study concluded that what matters for children in family change is a

clear explanation of the family change during the transition phase and a well-settled living

arrangement in the post-transition phase (Maes et al., 2012). A clear explanation of the family

change during the transition phase reduces the possibility of children feeling they are not

loved and dismisses their doubt about whether they caused the family breakdown. A well-

settled living arrangement in the post-transition phase gives children a sense of security and

the feeling of mattering to their parents.

From the examples above, we can see that some children had partial explanations but

were not given a clear explanation regarding the changes in their families. For instance,

British participant Ju explained the father's behaviour and interpreted it as misbehaving in the

relationship. However, the overall context was unclear for children, including the reason for

the family crisis, the change in the father's attitude and why the daughters passively got

involved. According to Maes et al. (2012), children feel confused during the transition

process if the changes in the family are not clearly explained. They would come up with the conclusion that the parent who left does not love them anymore, which further leads to self-blame and eventually causes emotional distress. The timing of Ju's explanation of the family crisis to the daughters was not clearly stated in the interview, but apparently, her daughters felt abandoned by their father without any clarification.

This feeling of loss of their father's love resulted in their behavioural issues at school and home. Related evidence can also be found in the case of Chinese participant Tong. Death may not have been discussed before for a 5-year-old in an age-appropriate way. So, her son behaved submissively without clearly explaining the father's sudden disappearance. He might think that what happened was because he did something wrong. Therefore, he tried to repair the situation by pleasing others. He made up his story around things he knew, increasing the danger that he would blame himself (Dunn, 2001, as cited in Maes et al., 2012).

Another factor that places extra emotional distress on children during family transition is that children feel they do not matter to their parents anymore. Children want to feel they matter to others, especially parents: feeling validated by specific others contributes to children's identity formation, which benefits their psychological well-being (Marshall, 2001). The perception of mattering to others develops through interpersonal interactions and functions to provide individuals with a sense of social meaning and relatedness (Josselson, 1994, as cited in Maes et al., 2012). Children want to feel they are counted in the transition stage, especially through a well-settled living arrangement and co-parenting responsibility in the post-transition phase. Studies on whether to involve children in the decision-making process in divorce, such as Holt (2018), pointed out that seeking children's voices improves their ability to cope with divorce and improves the outcome of decisions. Smith et al. (2003) argued that children are active constructors of their own experiences and as persons whose perspectives and interests may not necessarily coincide with those of their parents or other

adults responsible for making decisions. McIntosh et al. (2008) also argued that children's involvement can benefit parent-child relations and parental alliances. In a nutshell, seeking children's voices offers parents the opportunity to demonstrate that their children matter by considering their interests (Maes et al., 2012).

British participant Flo's example aptly illustrates this case. The living arrangement and cooperation in parenting were well-settled at the beginning of the post-transition phase, but they were affected by the later paternal re-partnering scenario. The son could not continue doing things that were important to him, such as going to swimming classes with his father, and the father did not give him enough attention when he had stayovers. The reduction of the quality and quantity of fathering made the son suffer from the feeling of not mattering to his father. So, he was forced to adjust to the new arrangements which were formed based on his father's interests instead of his. The son might deduce that he does not count at all (Maes et al., 2012), which leads to his emotional difficulties that were then manifested in his behaviour at school.

7.3 The Grandparent-Child Relationship as a Holding Environment

Grandparents have a variety of functions with their intergenerational families, especially in grandchildren's lives. In my study, when adult partnerships fall apart, grandparents step in to fill the missing parts of single-mother families. However, they are not merely a substitute or for previous two-parent families. Instead, grandparents work collaboratively with single mothers to help raise the child in a manner conducive to healthy development. Especially in family crises, grandparents provide children with a holding environment to offset the negative impact of family dissolution on children.

I will now use the Chinese participant Tong as an example. As described, she moved back to her childhood city to have her parents help with childcare while rebuilding her life. At the beginning of moving back, she lived in her childhood house with her son (Lele) and

parents. Lele was enrolled in a new nursery locally, and the grandparents played a major role in caring for him because Tong was busy with promotions. According to Tong, Grandad's parenting with kindness and firmness created a healthy environment for Lele and also established an appropriate male role model. The grandad would set firm boundaries to foster Lele's independence instead of being permissive and spoiling him, showing he could be gentle and express empathy, kindness, and understanding when maintaining boundaries:

> *I used to give him whatever snacks he wanted because I wanted to compensate him. But my dad can balance assertiveness and compassion very well. He now has a regular daily routine and eats very well and healthy. My dad is good at handwork, Lele now loves handwork as well. He has grown a lot with my parents, especially with the masculinity of my dad. There was a time he was on a video call with his paternal grandma. She became emotional while talking because she missed him. So, he said, don't cry, Nana, crying is useless. You can call me whenever you miss me.*

Tong talked with the nursery, and both agreed that Lele does not need to participate in activities that require the father's involvement. So, Lele would have a day off to go to parks or museums with Grandad. According to Tong, with love and care from his grandparents, plus a fixed daily routine, Lele adapted well to the new nursery during the transition period. He enjoyed learning new things and making friends in the nursery. He gradually processed his understanding of father's death, and he took the initiative to talk about it.

> *A couple of weeks ago, he came back from the nursery and said, I knew he passed away; otherwise, he would not have disappeared for so long time without coming to see me. Then he went to watch TV as if nothing happened.*

Drawing on Winnicott's concept of the holding environment, I argue that the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren in single-mother families can be understood as providing a psychological holding function for both grandchildren and single

mothers. Winnicott (Ogden, 2004) used the word "holding" to depict an image of a mother cradling her infant in her arms tenderly and firmly, and when the infant is in distress, tightly holding him against her chest. A holding environment is an environment that fosters and protects the natural maturation and development of the child's unique individuality, which includes the mother's physical holding of the baby and a more complex aspect of holding, which is the environmental provision of holding that facilitates the child's development (Bahn, 2022; Winnicott et al., 2011).

The holding environment enables a mother to hold an infant well, fostering her confidence and the child's eventual independence through prompt recognition and resolution of the baby's needs. Through repeated experiences, the infant internalises the mother's nurturing ability and learns self-regulation in challenging circumstances (Bahn, 2022). Winnicott categorised infants' reliance during the nurturing phase into three stages: absolute dependence, relative dependence, and independence (Bahn, 2022). The mother-infant relationship is not the only holding environment, an individual experiences many other potentially influential holding environments throughout life, enabling him to develop and mature in ways that allow individuality to be nourished within the context of relating to others (Bahn, 2022), such as those provided by grandparents in my research.

In Tong's case, she returned to her parents' house with Lele after the family change. Her parents provided a holding environment for her and her son. She was emotionally supported by her parents so that she could recover from the crises gradually. The benefit of her recovery could benefit her relationship with her child, creating more positive mother-child interactions. On the other hand, the grandparents also provided a holding environment for Lele. Grandad established a male role model. He parented Lele with kindness, firmness, and a regular daily routine, filling the missing paternal function. This holding environment gives Lele a sense of security. He can rebuild his inner world by internalising the good

qualities of the reliable environment provided by his grandparents, which enables Lele to recover from the devastation and process the huge loss of his father.

Another example is the Chinese participant, Boyu. As described previously, her daughter (Xinxin) was left traumatised by parental conflicts at the end of the marriage and was also confused about the father figure. After Boyu's divorce, they wanted to compensate and spoil Xinxin more because they felt regret that she couldn't grow up in a two-parent family. They planned holidays with Xinxin every year.

> *She is very affectionate with my mom but unreasonable with my dad. But if my dad is not at home, she looks and asks everywhere for him. My mom and I didn't understand why she was not affectionate with my dad but looked for him everywhere when he was not home. She said that as long as Grandpa is around, she feels safe and knows no one will hurt her. She doesn't need Grandpa to be with her all the time, but just being able to see him is enough. My dad gives her a lot of sense of security.*

By the time Xinxin started school, three years had passed since the marital separation. Boyu was worried about Xinxin's adjustment due to her family situation and lack of fatherhood. However, she was surprised by the teacher's feedback on parents' meeting. This suggested that Xinxin had healed and grown well with grandparents' love.

> *The teacher said Xinxin is very engaging at school, which leads to good cognitive and academic performance. Besides, she is very confident, she can stand up for herself when things go wrong. She is also accountable when allocated some duties. From what I heard, children like her, so she was nominated as the monitor in her class.*

Similar to Tong's case, Xinxin's grandparents act like a shock absorber for her, which weakens the links between family dissolution and stress, and hence the extent to which negative emotional and behavioural outcomes follow divorce. In both cases, grandparents provide the holding environment at the right time and place. Children were consistently

embraced by the holding environment provided by grandparents until they overcame the problem and found solutions: Lele could talk about the father's death, and Xinxin obtained affirmation from the teacher.

Also, for the British participant Flo, the family dissolution brought her son (M) emotional difficulties, and Grandad became an important confidant for his son during that period.

I think the fact that he's got somewhere else he can go has been really important, particularly early on, and I think both he and Grandpa have enjoyed M being able to vent about his dad and having someone to listen to. I think he's been really good. And he's picked up their mannerisms. So, my dad clears his throat in a certain way, and M does that now.

Studies (Tan et al., 2010) have shown that grandparents are important confidants for children facing family changes, and children who feel emotionally close to their maternal grandparents are less likely to have adjustment problems—that is, to be depressed, anxious, worried, aggressive, or difficult at school. In Flo's case, it is helpful for M to have opportunities to talk about what is happening within the family to his grandad which can help to reduce his stress. According to Flo, Grandad is the person who takes M to swimming class every week rather than the father after the family changes. So, M has a closer relationship with his grandfather.

My dad takes him to the swimming lessons, which gives me a break. And he gets sleepovers there. And that feels special because when you get your grandparents, it's special, isn't it? You get fed on your favourite food, and you get to stay, you get to do things you might not get away with at home. Certainly, their grandchildren get away with more than me and my brother ever did. Like, if they don't like a thing that's being served at the table, they'll get something else. The other day, his cousin didn't like the

pudding that was being served, so they ended up chopping up a chocolate cake that

wasn't on offer to everybody else. And you go, this is, this is good, man, this is good.

Grandparent involvement has been associated with reduced adjustment difficulties among children from lone-parent families compared to those from two-parent families (Tan et al., 2010). A close relationship between the grandparent and M exerted a protective effect on him when he is faced with family transitions (Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001). Besides, M has opportunities to get closer to other maternal family members and learn about the history of extended families.

It's basically the extension of the family. So, it's an extension of me, and he gets to ask questions about me when I was little. And it's quite fun to find out what your mum was like when she was little. Also, by seeing them, he also sees his cousins more because they come over more, which means he gets to see his cousins more, and they have a really lovely relationship.

Ross et al. (2005) conducted an empirical study to explore grandparents' function in children's perspective and indicated that grandparents have particular roles as connectors, bringing together family history and shared characteristics. Here, grandparents established a holding environment for M by playing the more symbolic role of historian, providing firsthand accounts of family histories, practices and rituals of the past (Kornhaber, 1996, as cited in Tan et al., 2010), more specifically, about his mother. Knowing his mother's history enables M to find a sense of connection and belonging to the big family, which serves as a wider safety net for him during the family transition period. This wider safety net could "hold" him and give him a sense of security.

In these three cases, grandparents held the children's startled souls, which were caused by their family situations. Grandparents wrapped themselves metaphorically and spiritually around children, creating a sense of safety and certainty with concrete things such

as regular daily routines, planned holidays, and family histories so children know what to expect from the environment, which brings predictability to their world. Internalizing the predictable outside world enables children to develop on the right track again.

Discussion

This chapter has discussed the mother-child, father-child and grandparent-child relationship during and after the family transition process, including the changes in the three relationships, the factors that caused the changes and children's emotional responses to these changes. After the family dissolution, a clear pattern of estranged father-child relationships emerged, and closer but ambivalent mother-child relationships appeared in both Chinese and British groups. The family dissolution and subsequent changes in parent-child relationships bring children emotional distress and difficulties. These findings are in line with the existing literature, which shows the substantial similarity of the negative effects of divorce across societies characterised by very different histories, divorce rates, and social acceptance of divorce, (see, for example, Albertini & Garriga, 2011). However, the grandparent-child relationship comes into focus in single-mother families as an indispensable part that provides a holding environment which mitigates the negative impact of family dissolution on children. This finding also responds to the existing literature.

Later development in attachment theory (Bowlby, 2012) identified that the child can form an attachment bond with both mother and father in a typical mother, father, and child family. Both the mother-child and the father-child attachment are important, and they affect the child's personality in different aspects. The mother contributes to the child's attachment bond through a sensitivity to interaction and caregiving, while the father contributes through a sensitivity to exploratory play and distress (Palm, 2014). More specifically, with the child becoming more independent, the mother is the primary attachment figure for providing an enduring secure base and haven of safety in times of distress, while when times are

favourable, the father becomes the primary attached figure for providing exploration and excitement (Newland & Coyl, 2010). Although mother and father have different roles, they are equally significant. Besides, there are some overlaps between these two attachment roles. The mother's sensitivity to play and distress and the father's sensitivity to interaction and caregiving also contribute to the child's attachment bond. These two roles are not gender-specific (Newland & Coyl, 2010).

It is important to note that while the father-child and mother-child attachments are significant, the former is more susceptible to external factors (Belsky, 1996). Because the natural mother-child bond starts earlier and is closer biologically from pregnancy to the early months of the baby's first year, it is more insulated from external influences (Feldman, 2012, as cited in Palm, 2014). Therefore, the father-child attachment requires a longer process and extra effort to establish compared to the mother-child attachment (Belsky, 1996, as cited in Palm, 2014). This perspective explains the tendency of the alienated father-child relationship shown in my study. When participants were asked to tell life stories about their children in the interviews, many participants started by recollecting their pregnancy, and they would recall how their babies wriggled and kicked in their tummy before birth.

Palm (2014) has suggested that in the traditional relationship between mother, father and child, the mother functions as a gatekeeper to either support the formation of the father-child attachment by inviting the father to be involved in the parenting or dismissing the father-child attachment by discouraging the father's involvement and developing a close mother-child relationship. In my study, mothers encouraged fathers' daily involvement in childcare proactively before the marital relationship breakdown. After the marital dissolution, most of the participants still expressed their attitudes toward maintaining the father-child relationship. Although mothers did not discourage the father's involvement, the mother-child bond became tighter and closer, which was the result of the reduction of father-child contact

and the increase of mother-child daily interactions. Therefore, to some extent, the father-child attachment was severely reduced.

However, the father does not have a passive role in the formation or dismissal of father-child attachment: the father's sensitivity to exploratory play and distress contributes to the attachment formation (Newland & Coyl, 2010). Lundy (2003) refers to this as fathers' mind-mindedness, which is the ability to understand their children. A better mind-mindedness of the father contributes to his better understanding of his children's thinking, which supports the father-child interactions and more likely leads to a secure attachment. In the examples above, we can see fathers more or less losing some of their sensitivity towards their children. M's father (British participant Flo's case) did not take his son to swimming lessons anymore (exploratory play). In Ju's (British participant) and Boyu's (Chinese participant) cases, the fathers did not perceive their children's emotional distress as they used to do, so some children were traumatised. Other factors that happen in fathers' lives reduce their sensitivity and capacity of mind-mindedness of fathering as well, which causes the distancing of the father-child relationship (such as the re-partnered of M's father).

The father-child relationship is also sensitive to the father-mother relationship and the family situation. These factors interact with each other and change over time, influencing the father-child relationship (Palm, 2014). In a two-parent family, the father indirectly contributes to the father-child attachment via investing in the mother-father relationship. By supporting the mother and modelling the mother-father relationship, the father becomes the protector and co-provider of the family. The father's contribution can add stability and a sense of safety in the family environment, which then leads to the attachment processes for family members to the family unit. The mother-father relationship, along with the triadic interactions between the mother, father and child, supports the relationships in the family system, including the

father-child relationship. It creates a sense of family as a larger secure base that protects individual relationships between the family members (Dukes & Palm, 2019).

In my study, after the family breakdown, the father-mother-child triadic family structure is replaced by the mother-child dyadic relationship, along with the grandparents-child relationship providing additional support. Meanwhile, the residential status of the non-custodial father keeps him from regular daily interactions with children, and the investment and maintenance of the mother-father relationship is lessened than before. The sense of family as a larger secure base for the child is replaced by the mother-child and grandparent-child attachment. Moreover, the father-child relationship in a family unit is replaced by this very attachment may be further diluted if family change occurs with marital conflicts.

In conclusion, the closer mother-child attachment in the single mother-headed household in family transition may reduce the importance of the father-child relationship when the father's involvement in childcare is not as proactive as it used to be. After the dissolution of the marriage, the father's sensitivity to children's requirements may reduce, and this reduction leads to further estrangement of the father-child relationship. During the family transition period, children did not have a clear explanation of the family breakdown from their parents; living arrangements were not well-settled for some children; and with the witnessing of marital conflicts, children showed emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Fortunately, grandparents provide support as a holding environment that offsets the negative influences. Therefore, family dynamics were transformed from a triadic structure of mother-father-child to a mother-child dyad with grandparents' assistance. The relationships between family members, mother-child, father-child, and mother-father relationships, are no longer protected by the family umbrella. Instead, the strength of the mother-child attachment and the father-child attachment become the factors that determine the parent-child relationships.

Children seem to have recovered and returned to the right track of development in my study, which raises the question: does it mean that the father is just a functional role that can be replaced by other significant figures who can provide the same function for children, such as grandparents? According to some psychoanalytic literature, a father's role is to provide an "outside" perspective, also known as the "third position", especially during the Oedipal stage of development, where the father helps to break the mother-child symbiosis and supports the child in forming his sexual identity (Feldman, 2005). However, from the perspective of attachment theory, a child's attachment to the father can be central too, and the effect on the child's attachment status can be as much as the mother's. The secure attachment with the father can offset the insecure attachment with the mother and vice versa (Music, 2017). What matters is that the father is there for the child in a harmonious relationship. Although with a non-custodial and non-residential status, the child can still benefit from a loving and thoughtful father-child relationship that provides nurturing, clear boundaries and a relatively harmonious and stimulating environment.

Summary

This chapter explored the relational dynamics of parent-child relationship within single-mother households, emphasizing its pivotal role in children's social-emotional development. It focused on the dynamics of the mother-child, father-child, and grandparent-child relationships. The characteristics of these relationships in single-mother families are delineated, including the ambivalent nature of the mother-child bond, stemming from the fluctuating balance between closeness and autonomy; the distant connection between father and child, arising from the father's non-custodial status and reduced involvement in maintaining the relationship; and the supportive role of the grandparent-child relationship, offering a stabilising environment that counteracts the negative impacts of the aforementioned changes. The subsequent chapter will explore the intergenerational

transmission of the grandparent-parent-child relationship within single-mother families and its implications for children's social-emotional development.

Chapter 8 Intergenerational Transmission

Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the dynamic changes in the parent-child relationship in single-mother families and their impact on children's social-emotional development. One key factor that influences the parent-child attachment relationship and affects children's development is the attachment category that parents fall under. Research has shown that attachment patterns can be transmitted from generation to generation (Music, 2017). This chapter will explore how attachment patterns are transmitted intergenerationally through mothers' parenting practices. Van Ijzendoorn (1992) defined intergenerational transmission parenting as the process through which, purposefully or unintendedly, an earlier generation psychologically influences the parenting attitudes and behaviour of the next generation. After family dissolution, participants reflected on their own childhood experiences, both positive and negative experiences, then made efforts to break the negative transmissions and inherited good parenting practices by mentalisation (Fonagy et al., 2018), which is mother's ability to understand and interpret behaviours of themselves and their children's expressions of mental states. Consequently, the adulthood-childhood boundary became blurred, to some extent, through the intergeneration transmission process in single-mother families.

8.1 Breaking the Circle

8.1.1 Traumatic Experiences

Breaking the cycle of intergenerational transmission is not an easy task for participants with traumatic childhood experiences. In this section, I will illustrate how participants have managed to break the intergenerational transmission of trauma by discussing the examples of British participant O and Chinese participant Yulu.

British participant O was brought up by her aunt since she was 11. She experienced various abuse from her aunt's family members at different levels, including financial, physical, and sexual abuse during childhood. In order to survive as a kid, she did not stand up for herself:

> *If I'm really, really angry, I cry, and I walk away because I don't want to hurt people's feelings. Because I know when I let it go, I would really hurt your feelings. So, I would rather not say anything, but I wish I had that confidence where I could express myself because I'm certain if I'd had that, all this time all these people have abused me, I would have said something. But I just always held it.*

Chinese participant Yulu experienced a similar childhood in which she witnessed constant domestic violence from her dad against her mum. Then her mum would take it out on her by humiliating, cursing and criticising her.

> *Since I started school, my dad would drink heavily and often beat my mom, and sometimes me. I hate him. My mom used to say that if it weren't for me, she would have divorced him a long time ago, and that she would leave once I got a job and married. But even though I now have a decent job and am married, she still hasn't left him. I feel betrayed and deeply disappointed in her. Looking back on my childhood, my parents either spoke to me in a commanding tone or gave me the silent treatment. If I ever behaved like a spoiled child, for example, by pouting, they would accuse me of not speaking properly.*

As young children, O and Yulu did not have enough power to revolt against their main caregivers who were authorities in their childhood families. Although the memory of the events of childhood abuse was available in explicit and chilling details, the associated affective experience was repressed (Fraiberg et al., 1975). Fraiberg et al. (1975) have argued that a parent's conflicted past would likely be repeated with his or her child referring to this

repetition as the ghost, which represents the repetition of the past in the present. The ghost appears in the details of everyday parent-child interactions in areas such as feeding, sleep, toilet training, or discipline, depending upon the vulnerability of the parental past. For instance, in the narrative from Yulu:

A few days ago, I took my daughter skiing for the first time. She was so scared that she couldn't stand up and kept crying, demanding reassurance in a tearful tone. I suddenly felt irritated and yelled at her, telling her to stop calling me and to hold the pillar and stand up. I was on the edge and about to explode. Right after, I realized I shouldn't have yelled at her, but it happened without thinking. In that moment, I felt like I was my mom, acting exactly how she would.

Yulu had seen a psychotherapist for over two years when we conducted the interview. She began to understand how her childhood experiences had influenced her parenting, and she realised that she had duplicated many of her parents' characteristics, especially her mother's short temper and her father's domineering approach. Although she is aware of it and has tried to control it in daily interactions with her daughter, they still break through like a ghost without notice. Her past intruded in unguarded moments, which made her find herself re-enacting the scene from another time with another character. As a child, in order to survive her ego, child version Yulu formed a pathological identification with the dangerous and assaultive enemies of the ego who were her parents.

The mechanism that happens here to help a child survive the inescapable threat is identification with the aggressor, which was first proposed by Sandor Ferenczi (1998) and later developed by Anna Freud (Fraiberg et al., 1975). According to Anna Freud (1992), a child identifies himself or herself with an anxiety object by introjecting some characteristics of the anxiety object to assimilate the anxiety experience which he or she has just undergone. By constantly repeating the process of internalisation and introjection of qualities from the

main caregivers, the child is making their characteristics and opinions his or her own (Freud, 1992). In Yulu's case, ultimately, she transformed herself from a person who endures anxiety passively, her child version, into a person who inflicts anxiety upon her daughter, her adult version.

The concept of identification with the aggressor was originally proposed in a more traumatic child sexually abusive context. In his famous article Confusion of the Tongues Between the Adults and the Child, Ferenczi (1988) explored how a sexually abused child develops an identification and terrible compliance with the abusive parent due to the traumatic and pathological relationship with him or her. In addition, out of the need to love and be attached to the parent, the child would rather identify with the parent than relinquish him or her, even if the parent's actions upon the child are devastating (Ferenczi, 1988). According to Ferenczi, identification with the aggressor is a response when one confronts overwhelming and inescapable threats—traumas. In order to survive, he or she subordinates to the aggressor mentally, then anticipates the aggressor's desires and behaviours. In order to survive, the child submits to and complies with the aggressor (Frankel, 2002). Hoping to survive, he or she senses and "becomes" precisely what the aggressor expects of him or her in his or her behaviour, perceptions, emotions, and thoughts (Ferenczi, 1988). He or she disappears as part of the external reality like a chameleon.

In an abusive parent-child relationship, the abused child surrenders to the parent by dissociation from his or her feelings and uses his or her ability of identification to remake his or her mind and behaviour fit in with the image of himself or herself in the mind of the parent (Frankel, 2019). The child introjects the external reality and creates fantasies in his or her mind to help himself or herself endure what has happened. However, his or her inner self, along with hope for and belief in good objects, still lives on deeply inside. Thus, both abusive and non-abusive aspects of the parent are introjected.

Through introjecting the non-abusive aspect, the child attempts to preserve the good part of the relationship by regressing to the happy state that existed prior to the trauma. By introjecting the abusive aspect, the child creates an abusive figure in his unconscious fantasy, which allows him or her to keep fighting against what he or she dares not do in reality. Or by projecting the figure onto agents in the outer world to fight against it (Frankel, 1998, 2002, 2019). In addition to internal fights or external fights, introjection perpetuates the child's experiences of trauma, which is the underlying reason for the child's continuing traumatic response. Identification with the aggressor can therefore become an unescapable destiny for the child (Frankel, 2002).

In O's case, we can see how this habitual and refractory nature of identification with the aggressor impacts her profoundly and manifests in her parenting, as she said below,

> *I am not an affectionate person, I'm very an instrumental type of love [sic]. Parenting her makes me realise that I don't know how much I need the emotional part to offer to her. But her dad has that, I've learned from her dad to be more emotional and declarative of my love, to say it to her, for her to feel it, to affirm her feelings for her.*

Ferenczi (Frankel, 1998) identified that, in the moment of trauma, the child splits his personality into three parts—an injured child named Soul who is yearning for a rescue, a suddenly maturing child named Orpha identifies with the aggressor and self-soothing at the same time, and a soulless body that performs mechanically. Due to this splitting, the child is able to dissociate himself from the unbearable, painful and fearful feelings and also from the external reality (Frankel, 2002). We can imagine that in those traumatic moments, O dissociated her uncomfortable feelings to repress the injured Soul while her Orpha was forced to suddenly age and maturely function to observe and detect the external environment in order to surrender herself to brutal reality. She is so used to relying on her child Orpha in her development that she continues it in her later parenting.

As she said, she has an instrumental type of love and did not know how many emotions she should offer her daughter at the beginning of parenting. According to Ferenczi, the trauma-induced splitting would continue as a permanent state that leads to the child's loss of contact with his feelings and emotional spontaneity (Frankel, 1998). In the long run, "emotional life vanishes into unconsciousness and regresses to pure body-sensations, detached intellect is all that remains to adapt to further potential traumas" (Ferenczi, 1932, p.203, as cited in Frankel, 1998). The withdrawal, avoidance and dissociation from affection involvement were defence mechanisms that protected her, but it inflicts anxiety upon others in interpersonal relationships that need emotional involvement, especially in parenting her daughter.

In addition, in order to survive an abusive childhood, what O dissociated are not only those unwanted feelings generated from traumatic experiences but also those wanted desires to defend herself, which she thought may "*hurt people's feelings*" (as she said in the first quotation of this section) (Masud et al., 2019). In the process of identification with the aggressor, dissociation of certain perceptions and thoughts could protect the child from further harm because revealing them in the immediate situation may put the victim in a more dangerous place (Frankel, 2002). By sensitively scanning and observing the reality, O's Orpha child recognised that both her true feelings and thoughts are incompatible within that situation, they must be, therefore, kept out of awareness. So, she established a barrier to dissociate her perception of defending herself and self-disclosure. Accordingly, she identified with the aggressor, repressed and interpreted her thoughts of self-defending as threats to the aggressor. As Ferenczi (1932, p.118, as cited in Frankel, 2019) commented, "in order to ensure silence, also internal silence: forgetting, repression".

Luckily, both O and Yulu had psychotherapeutic interventions after growing up. O had the opportunity to correct her experience by seeking a psychotherapist during her studies

at university, and she has now trained as a clinical psychologist. They were allowed to safely express and re-experience the emotions in transference to the therapists. In turn, they were made aware of their childhood issues and reshaped the mothering experience in the therapeutic relationship. During parenting, both of them expressed explicitly that they don't want their children to experience what they had gone through in childhood.

> *O: I've never been physical with my daughter, but there was only once, and that was in an emergency where she was running in the middle of the road, and I almost died that I had to scream. But then I felt bloody guilty even though I was doing it to save her. I think part of my childhood made me so overprotective of certain things around her, like abuse and things like that. I'm very cautious, maybe too cautious. But I couldn't, I couldn't make her feel the same way that I've ever felt, you know…*

> *Yulu: I didn't have a nurturing and loving childhood; my parents were never affectionate towards me. Now that I am a mother, I never want my daughter to experience what I did. I want her to feel loved and cared for. I want her to feel safe to express her emotions whenever she's with me.*

Although some of their narratives still suggest that O and Yulu are reproducing some aspects of their childhood experiences, a commonality that cannot be ignored here is O and Yulu's awareness of their childhood issues. By being aware of and remembering those experiences, O and Yulu identify with their childhood version of self, not aggressors anymore, and it is this recognition of childhood pain that becomes a powerful deterrent against repetition in parenting (Fraiberg et al., 1975). According to Fraiberg, a parent who does not remember childhood conflicts may find himself in an unconscious alliance and identification with the fearsome figures of that past. In this way, the parental past is inflicted upon the child (Fraiberg et al., 1975). We can tell from O and Yulu's daughters that the

transmission circle has been broken to some extent, at least from the perspective of affectionate avoidance in O's case, and emotional availability in Yulu's case.

> *O: She is extremely affectionate and intuitive. I'm not usually a quiet person. But when I'm quiet, if she walks into the room, she goes, oh, why are you quiet? What is wrong with you? She automatically reads the room. And I'm like, oh, I'm just feeling a bit sad today. And then she said, well, come here, let me give you a hug, so you're not sad. She is sensitive and aware of the emotions. Even when she doesn't want to play with other children in the park, she would come to me and tell me why, she goes because I'm very shy.*

> *Yulu: Once, I came home late and hurried my daughter to take a bath. After her shower, she stood by the bathroom door and cried. I assumed it was because of my bad temper, so I walked over and hugged her. She then started crying harder and said, "I am very sad and upset today. Grandpa yelled at me after school, and you came home late." In that moment, I felt like a successful mom because she was willing to tell me what happened and express her emotions to me.*

Although other participants did not explicitly mention childhood abusive experiences, they conveyed an intention of either not wanting to inflict the same childhood pain on their children or wanting to parent their children better, which means breaking the cycle of intergenerational transmission. So, what exactly is this childhood pain they are referring to? And what are they trying to prevent from being passed down to their children? We can find answers to these questions from Ferenczi.

8.1.2 Disappointing Childhood Experiences

Identification with the aggressor is a widespread phenomenon that can be applied to the explanation of those without severe traumatic experiences. There are some events in many people's development that cause traumatic experiences or function traumatically, to

some extent, but they have never been recognised or appeared prominently. Two situations are unavoidable and almost happen to everyone. It is the threat of emotional abandonment and unequal power relations (Frankel, 2002). Ferenczi held the view that emotional abandonment is the worst trauma, which drew support from subsequent studies, including Bowlby (1973), that attachment is our basic need, and Fromm (1956), that overcoming separateness and aloneness is the deepest need of human beings.

Therefore, in parenting, even the subtle threats of emotional abandonment would activate the child's identification with the aggressor. Regarding unequal power relations, identification with the aggressor is a universal coping mechanism adopted by those who perceive others as stronger and, hence, a threat. A clear sign is that the person on the short end of the power differential would automatically put his thoughts and perceptions aside, comply with the dominant person's expectation, and become awed, meek, dumbstruck, or gullible. In the following paragraphs, I support my argument with examples from Ju and Ivy.

British participant Ju's parents both worked in academia until they retired. During her childhood, her father was often away on business trips for research, and her mother, though mainly responsible for her care, was strict and frequently worked overtime. Ju's childhood memories reveal a lack of paternal companionship and significant maternal pressure due to her mother's high expectations for her academic performance. Ju unconsciously internalized her parents' behaviours. As a parent, she was strict with her daughters and had a strong drive at work. She was anxious and impatient when dealing with her daughters' negative emotions, a pattern she didn't recognise until her marriage collapsed. She said,

> *It was a turning point for me, I started to consider the type of parenting I received. I remember that when I was a child, my parents were rarely there for me, emotionally. As a result, I felt very lonely throughout my childhood. Although my mum's pressure helped me achieve great performance in my studies and later in my career, I was*

always very stressed and anxious. This made it difficult for me to cope with my

daughters' negative feelings.

From Ju's narrative, we can tell that her mother invests Ju with her own grandiose aspirations and expectations (Frankel, 2002). As a daughter of intelligent parents who both work in academia, Ju probably carries her parents' wish, at least her mother's, for continuation. In this case, there would be tension passed on to Ju if she did not identify with her mother's image of her, and this tension conveys the potential threat of emotional abandonment. Therefore, in order to keep the feeling of connection and attachment, Ju identified with her mother by fulfilling the expectations and dissociating her own feelings which later became an issue in parenting her daughters.

Chinese participant Ivy's father worked in the army, and her mother was a government servant. Similar to Ju's story, Ivy had a comfortable material upbringing but lacked paternal companionship. Her mother, though not as strict as Ju's mother, was rarely physically affectionate with Ivy. One treasured memory Ivy had was of her mother talking things over with her in bed before sleep when she was in primary school. However, this physical affection diminished as she grew older. Additionally, her mother emphasized the parent-child hierarchy, a common aspect of Chinese culture, particularly among older generations (Yim, 2022). Her mother did not allow her to cry, which would result in criticism for not being strong enough. In her memories, her mother was always very serious. Reflecting on her childhood, she said,

I always envied other girls whose mothers were more like their friends. I wished my

mom could be more tender, easy-going, and playful. Instead, she was always very

rational when I felt sad. She would bring up facts and reasons to stop my tears, which

made me feel rejected because she didn't empathise with me. Most of my relatives on

my mom's side are very rational and lack empathy. Furthermore, I would often do

things to make my parents happy because I believed I would be happy if they were

happy. I think this is why I've been adept at observing and understanding others'

thoughts and feelings before taking action since I was young. It has made me

somewhat of a people pleaser, but I don't want my daughter to experience the same.

Ivy's mother could not be intimate enough for her to seek comfort. When her mother tried to be rational by bringing out the facts and reasons to stop her from crying, what she was doing was minimising the event, discounting Ivy's reactions, and ignoring Ivy's yearning for help. Ferenczi said (1932, p.138, as cited in Frankel, 2019), "children get over even severe shocks without amnesia or neurotic consequences if the mother is at hand with understanding and tenderness and with complete sincerity." However, the suffering becomes aggravated when parents deny the child's suffering because the adult's denial equals abandonment (Ferenczi, 1988). Ivy mother's denial after her suffering left her with "traumatic aloneness". She was left alone at that moment, with nobody to think about and help her, so she had to deny her feelings to protect herself from that suffering. And if the reason for her suffering was because of her mother, then together with denial, it would be what Ferenczi called "double shock" (Frankel, 2019).

Although Ju and Ivy did not ever articulate being abused, they identified with their main caregivers by developing their behaviour without conscious realisation in their childhood. But during the process of parenting their children, the parenting they received as a child is recalled, and the parent's own childhood experience is revived, which may bring back traumatic conflicts that reveal repressed anxieties. Although some associated affective experience in childhood was repressed, those experiences have not undergone total repression. By recognition, they identify with the childhood self instead of their parents. It is from this very moment the pattern has been broken. By being aware of the less supportive childhood, Ju and Ivy began to identify with their childhood self instead of their parents.

Their recognition of the pattern would pry open the seemingly tightly sealed circle and ultimately lead to breaking the generational pattern by these participants being less likely to inflict their pain on their children. The narratives regarding their children's development and daily interactions below show this process:

> *Ju: My eldest daughter once had a conflict with a child at school, and she texted me in the toilet asking for help. I texted her back and listed different solutions along with the consequences of each one. My younger one is more confident compared to her sister. She would stand up for and defend herself in a very mature way. But both of them would tell me, and I would contact the school if it got serious. The school and I agree that we are a team and work closely to help with my daughters' growth.*

> *Ivy: My daughter is 9, but she still burrows into my arms like a baby every now and then. We have special names for each other. We would talk things over regarding what happened at school. I am her first choice when she feels bad. Besides, although I separated from her dad, they are still very close. He still spoils her like a princess, letting her ride on his neck.*

The conflicted past of Ju and Ivy cannot be guaranteed to be eliminated completely. If it could, they should have grown up in another pathway totally different from the original pattern, which would have been a different story. However, in Ju and Ivy's case, their children grow up on a different pathway from theirs. Ju maintains a close relationship with the school and builds positive communication. Her daughters trust her availability and would go to her at the first point when they need suggestions. All these facts she could not receive from her mother when she was young. Furthermore, Ivy's daughter receives physical affection from her, and they have special names for each other, which is like their shared secret. Compared to her mother, Ivy is not resistant to developing a more loving and caring mother figure physically, verbally, and emotionally for her daughter. We can tell from these

cases that although some aspects of the participants' conflicted past would still emerge even within a strong parent-child love bond, their children are less likely to carry on the oppressive past of their parents, and the generational patterns are less likely to be repeated.

8.2 Maternal Mentalisation

Studies have shown that attachment patterns can be transmitted intergenerationally (see, for example, Music, 2017). Parents' behaviours are partly determined by what type of attachment classification they fall under, which could affect their children's attachment type (Van Der Voort et al., 2014). However, there seems to be a contradiction between attachment and psychoanalytic perspectives regarding intergenerational transmission. The former approach argues that parents cannot raise children out of their own original attachment category. The latter contends that generational repetition can be broken by being aware of and recognising the conflicted past, although parents occasionally reproduce it in their relationships. Fonagy and Campbell (2016) therefore proposed the concept of mentalising to integrate psychoanalytic and attachment perspectives, which is defined as the impulse to seek to understand and imagine other people's thoughts. The mentalising model concerns the caregiver's understanding and reflection on the infant's internal world. Through the lessons in reflection and self-reflection that are part of child-caregiver interaction, mentalising claims a vital relationship between attachment processes and the growth of the child's capacity to understand interpersonal behaviour in terms of mental states (Fonagy et al., 2002, as cited in Fonagy & Campbell, 2016).

In the context of intergenerational transmission, maternal mentalisation and reflection are variables for attachment alteration (Iyengar et al., 2019). Mentalisation is a person's ability to understand and interpret behaviours of self and others as expressions of mental states such as feelings, thoughts, fantasies, beliefs and desires, and the reflective function is this person's socio-cognitive capacity when operating the mentalisation process (Fonagy et

al., 2018). Fonagy (1991, as cited in Iyengar et al., 2019) argued that a mother with substantial trauma but good reflective function would still be able to have securely attached children. In contrast, a mother with diminished reflective function in the same condition would more likely have insecurely attached children.

By mentalising and reflecting on attachment-related experiences, individuals with unresolved trauma transit toward attachment security based on their increased understanding and resolution of past and present traumatic experiences, which is called earned security (Iyengar et al., 2019). During this process, individuals keep reorganising the attachment pattern (Iyengar et al., 2019). In order to activate this process, individuals should be first aware of their different patterns of thinking and behaving, then focus on applying change toward a healthy outlook related to the trauma. However, an individual may not be able to enact this process completely. Therefore, the reorganisation process constantly changes, like the sneaking out ghost, but it holds promise to correct maladaptive thinking patterns (Iyengar et al., 2019). Individuals who have experienced difficult parenting or adverse life events but can overcome the effects of these experiences, demonstrate balanced integration, and attain secure attachment later in life showing a strong ability for emotional resilience (Fearon et al., 2010). In addition, their ability to self-evaluate and reflect on personal history can positively affect the outcome of their children's attachment.

I will use participants Ja and Xie as examples, both of them displayed some form of insecure attachment. British participant Ja did not have a favourable childhood for the first 13 years when she lived with her mother. Her mother was a sex worker and with different partners constantly changing brought her the feeling of instability. At age 13, she moved to live with her father, which gave her a more favourable and stable environment. According to Ja's discourse, her father was from the East End of London but was a gentle, supportive, and

kind character. As she said, "I feel like I blossomed from there". When reflected on her childhood she said,

> *My mum is a very traumatised person herself. It come to light that she was abused by her father. And this is why she acts the way that she does. She never had any help or therapy and never spoke to anybody about it. It was my aunt who actually told me so ... She is not a bad person, she's just a very, very damaged person ... There were times when I felt loved by her a lot. Lots of times. If I ever see her, I feel loved by her, and I still feel that now. But I also can see that she's very troubled and makes bad decisions... I think my childhood trauma has always been there with me, and I've always thought it through in my mind. I think, in a way, it's kind of made me who I am. It sorts of showed me the person that I don't want to be. So, all those mistakes that I've seen my parents make. I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to be that parent.*

Chinese participant Xie was raised by her maternal grandparents because her parents divorced in her childhood. Her parents kept quarrelling in the marriage, and she did not have a good relationship with her dad afterwards. She did not talk to her father until when his clock was about to strike. Her mother was the oldest of four, so she worked hard to care for the family. She barely spent time with Xie, and she was domineering. In Xie's childhood recollection, although she was close to her grandparents, she felt lonely. In this circumstance, she is more likely to identify with her mother and inherit some of her mother's qualities, including hard work, strength, resilience as the oldest child, and her mother's domineering attitude that was reflected in our conversation.

> *My parents divorced when I was in high school. I was the one who talked them into it because they had been arguing and separating for years, and there was no point for them to stay together anymore ... My father is just an ordinary dad from the working class. He is a kind person but did not have much education nor a sense of*

responsibility in marriage because he liked to go out and drink, and he did not care

for me. My mother is the eldest of her siblings, and she had to care for the younger

ones. So, she has a strong personality ... Occasionally, I reflected on myself and

thought my marriage had followed my mother's footpath, which might be because I

inherited her personality ... But life is all about solving problems one after another. It

may be fine when my daughter grows up and has a family. This is destiny. No one can

escape the fate that was chosen for them. I'm stronger than I was before, which is the

silver lining.

As shown in these two narratives, when asked to reflect on their childhood experiences and its influences on their adulthood, Ja provided a more integrated reflective perspective than Xie. Ja took a reflective stance with evidence of taking in and using new information to arrive at a new understanding ("My mum is a very traumatised person herself. It comes to light that she was abused by her father. And this is why she acts the way that she does"). She also demonstrates the ability to tie past and present together to serve her future development ("It sorts of showed me the person that I don't want to be. So, all those mistakes that I've seen my parents make. I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to be that parent"). However, although Xie demonstrated some reflection ("my marriage had followed my mother's footpath, which might be because I inherited her personality"), she did not tie her past experience and present understanding together to derive accurate thoughts about the future. Instead, she used both optimistic ("I'm stronger than I was before, which is the silver lining") and pessimistic ("No one can escape the fate that was chosen for them") attitudes. The interviews about their children's development can further develop this point.

Xie's marriage broke down due to her husband having an affair with her best friend, and they agreed to transfer the joint marital assets. So, she went through civil litigation to fight for her financial benefits and end her marital status. According to Xie, while going

through the separation process, she had prepared to answer questions from her daughter (Yiyi) regarding her father's absence, but Yiyi did not bring the questions out that much.

Once, she asked me if her dad and I divorced. After confirming the answer, she never asked me again about the divorce. I think she knows what the word divorce means. Children can easily access information from the internet compared to when we were kids. They can figure things out by themselves.

When we conducted the interview, the father had not come to visit Yiyi for more than a year. According to Xie, it doesn't affect Yiyi's emotions that much, which might be because the maternal grandparents provided help with childcare since Yiyi's infancy, so it alleviated and reduced the negative influences of the father's absence. However, we can still read between the lines of her narrative.

I was working out at home once. She joked with me if I was making efforts to become slimmer to find her a stepfather. Then she asked me if her dad had passed away. I said, what if he passed away? She said, then you can find another one, but only if he treats me nicer, and you should really work on your weight.

Xie felt comforted that Yiyi could make jokes about it, which shows that "she has got used to her life now, and she is happy with it". However, from the above quotation we can tell that the disappearance of the father raises Yiyi's concerns. She brought up the topic of her father in a witty and sardonic way to cover her concerns about the father and longing for care from him, which may be the result of her sense of her mother's attitude toward her father, so she chose a way that could minimise the uncomfortable feelings both of her and her mother's. In addition, an atmosphere of inconsistency pervades throughout Xie's actions and words which are reflected in my countertransference. In the focus group interview, Xie acted strongly and resiliently. When other participants expressed their grief about the loss of their

intimate relationships and worries about the uncertain future, she encouraged the group and cheered others up by saying,

> *Our children are our strongest force, we will overcome any difficulties for the sake of them. During the process, they can learn from us that no matter how hard life is, we are still persevering and have faith that everything will be okay in the end.*

However, afterwards, when I tried to conduct individual interviews with Xie, she behaved in a quite avoidant way. Interviews with her were completed one year after the focus group. Because she always cancelled the interview with short notice, we had to keep re-scheduling the arrangement. The interview was re-arranged five times within one year, but none was successful. The communication between us was on and off. She would keep silent for weeks without responding to my messages, then apologised for the late response weeks later with the proposal of a new schedule. Therefore, I suggested she could withdraw if she did not want to continue participation. However, she never asked to opt out of my project, even with my suggestion.

From Xie's discourse, Yiyi is a happy and carefree child. She is outgoing, humorous, and has some close friends at school. Her academic performance is not the best in the class, but she is popular. However, I felt resistance when I explored deeper. Xie could not tell the names of Yiyi's close friends. She perceived the happiest or saddest scene for Yiyi was when Xie did or did not buy her what she wanted. Besides, the daughter never had huge emotional ups and downs. The words Xie used the most to describe Yiyi's emotional coping skills were "normal and ordinary". Plus, Yiyi rarely asked about the father, so I wonder if it is adaptation or dissociation, in other words, she blocked her feelings. My doubts developed further by learning how Xie coped with her grief when we talked about her actions of avoiding interviews in the first year. She said,

The marriage collapse is just an experience, like all other experiences in our life. I was not willing to speak it out last year, but I rarely had moments of emotional breakdown. My cool head helped me with challenges for all these years. I have got over it. Now, I can talk about it as if it is someone else's story. I take it lightly.

Having suffered life events such as a betrayal by family and best friend, plus loss of assets, a rational mind is undoubtedly necessary. But she seldom allowed herself to grieve, and there was no sign of her mourning in our conversation. Is her strength and resilience a defence against her true feelings? Since she felt lonely while raised by her grandparents, her childhood emotions might not be well-contained, so she defended her uncomfortable feelings by avoiding and denying them, which continued into adulthood and was manifested in the interviews.

Therefore, it is reasonable to doubt if her daughter identified with Xie, and the figure of Yiyi that appeared in the interviews was the projection of Xie's idealisation, and her daughter's true feelings were neglected. Fonagy (Fonagy & Campbell, 2016) has suggested that the development of mentalising depends on interaction with more mature and sensitive minds. Since Xie has repeated her mother's marital status, it is more likely that some qualities of Xie could be passed on to and repeated by her daughter unconsciously as well. Therefore, Xie is less likely to be able to alter the attachment pattern and halt the generational transmission of parenting patterns.

Both Ja and Xie display forms of insecure attachment, but Ja is more likely to halt the generational transmission of patterns of parenting. Compared to Xie, Ja shows a greater ability to re-evaluate the past and present and generate new conclusions, which can benefit her relationship with her children. In contrast, Xie may not be able to reflect on the needs of her and her children: she tends to misinterpret and deny her feelings, which are generated from the past. Although Ja may not be able to fully reorganise her attachment patterns the

very fact of reorganising is an advantage to her children, developing the possibility of a secure attachment (Iyengar et al., 2019).

To summarise, I have argued that attachment and psychoanalytic perspectives can be integrated together to interpret my findings. The unresolved traumas of parents may cause them to unconsciously inflict their pain upon children, leading to their children's insecure attachment. Children identify with their parents to survive childhood by internalising their parenting behaviours, including social-emotional strategies. The insecurely attached children become parents with those imprints of the past continuing to foster the next insecurely attached generation. The capacity for mentalisation and reflection enables parents to be aware of and recognise some of these insecure patterns. This then helps them to re-evaluate themselves and their parental history, contributing to their increased understanding and resolution of past and present traumatic experiences.

8.3 Heritage of Good Parenting Practices

Maternal mentalisation can help mothers to stop the intergenerational transition of repeated patterns by enabling them to pass on the values and beliefs of good parenting practices. These practices are generated from self-reflections on their own history, including childhood experiences, life experiences, and events, and their consideration of children's future in the long term. British participant Ju remembered her mother diligently studying a second language in the late 40s to get a job promotion. This memory encouraged her while she was experiencing huge emotional shock and fluctuation during the family dissolution, which inspired her to be a role model for her children. She said,

> *My mum worked really hard for three months to pass the exam and get a promotion in her 40s. It wasn't until I reached the same age that I realised what she did was impressive. Just imagine, in the old days, how hard it was for a woman in her middle age to fight for her career while also taking care of the family. My mum led by*

example showing me it was possible. She made it, and I believe I can do it as well. I want to do something that would inspire and encourage my daughters so that if they ever face difficulties in life, they can go, oh, mum did it, so I can do it too.

Inspired by her mother's resilience and perseverance, Ju chose to go back to university. She enrolled in a master's programme in psychology, which helped her better understand and adjust psychologically to the family transition. What she did, in turn, benefited her adolescent daughters' adaptation to family shifts as well. She said,

I know they are very proud of me because they showed off to their friends. My eldest likes to go to the university with me. There was once she was misrecognised as a first-year. She was so proud and went, Mum, can you believe I am just 14, but they talked to me like I was 18. Since then, she has been very motivated and engaged at school. She was very into Russian politics, she borrowed many books about Russia from our university. All of a sudden, she feels she is a big girl.

When participants reflect upon childhood experiences, they not only value the benefits but also modify the negative aspects of their own parenting. Chinese participant Rainbow Mama is a police officer. She is keen to pass the National Judicial Examination while working and devotes extra time after dinner to study for the exam, setting a strong example of dedication for her daughter. Reflecting on her own childhood, Rainbow Mama recalls how her mother's love of reading influenced her, a trait she internalised and subsequently passed on to her daughter through her parenting. She said,

My mum loves reading. When she was young, she spent most of her wage on buying books instead of clothes, which was always laughed at and looked down on by my paternal relatives. It was remarkable in the old days that she was the only woman in my paternal family with an undergraduate degree. My mum was tough on me. She used to scold and smack me when I was a kid, but she showed me the importance of

reading and learning for a lifetime. Now, I tell my daughter to keep reading and

learning. But I am also aware of my mother's shortcomings. I pay attention to avoid

making the same mistakes in my parenting. Only if we can do so can the original

family's negative influence on us slowly be eliminated.

Participants were using their own history as a parenting resource, but they did not just share descriptions of the experiences but also their understandings and interpretations of the experiences, along with their coping strategies. British participant Ju used to avoid her negative emotions by immersing herself in work as a distraction. In turn, she did not have a good strategy with her daughters. She would feel agitated when children showed negative emotions, even impatient and yelled at them when they became difficult. But after the marriage crisis, she realised the importance of dealing with negative feelings. She also emphasised the importance of resilience in confrontation with life challenges:

When my daughters feel bad, I suggest they make a plan to get over it. You know life

is not a fairy tale, there are right and wrong, good and bad. I can't block out all the

dark side. They need to know the complexity of the world. The most important thing is

knowing how to deal with it, I mean difficult people and situations. Also, to learn how

to take care of self when in those situations. Yelling doesn't help, and for parenting, it

is not conducive to their growth. Resilience is critical when dealing with crises.

Franceschelli et al. (2019) defined parenting as the process of intergenerational transmission of values and beliefs to the next generation by parents using a range of available resources and named it retrospective parenting. They argued that parenting is crucial for children's capacity to build up a certain level of resilience in adversity because parents equip children with high aspirations and a sense of resilience through daily narratives to help them face future challenges. Participants in this study shared their life experiences and offered valuable advice to their children through daily interactions and narratives. By sharing

experiences along with coping strategies, participants effectively modelled to their children the process of understanding life's challenges, extracting meaning from experiences, and devising strategies to overcome them within various social contexts (Franceschelli et al., 2019). This approach not only provided practical guidance but also imparted important life skills and resilience to their children.

One important aspect of retrospective parenting is parents' restorative practices. Franceschelli et al. (2019) argued that parents consider their children's future life chances as a way to make up for what they have missed out in their own lives while growing up because of the difficulties, changes, and adaptations they have to face. Therefore, participants in my research reflected upon their own histories with a restorative purpose and passed their experiences on to their children through parenting practices in order to attempt to minimise the possibility that their children would go through the same hardships. By providing important reflections on life experiences, participants tried to raise children's awareness about the upcoming possible difficulties and prepare them for hardships. With this preventive mechanism and progressive insight into the future, parents' past is connected with the hope for their children's future, and parents' values and beliefs are passed on to their children, which contributes to their resilience in both the present and future (Franceschelli et al., 2019).

8.4 The Blurred Adulthood-Childhood Boundary

The intergenerational transmission of attachment pattern, values and beliefs can be seen as an important part of the process of children's socialisation because children receive those values and beliefs from their parents. This argument can be supported by sociological thinking on childhood which conceptualises childhood and child-adult relations in past and present societies (Wyness, 2012). Prout and James (2015) have listed some of the ways childhood and adulthood have become dichotomised: children are innocent, wild and irrational while adults are cultural, complex, fully developed, cognitively and emotionally

sophisticated. Therefore, children are uncompleted projects waiting for continuous involvement with socialised adults to be civilised and cultured before they are qualified as full members of society (Wyness, 2012). From this perspective, children lack agency since they are conceptualised in a way that emphasises their becoming, instead of who they are, and childhood is a preparatory stage for competent adulthood.

However, Prout and James (2015) set out what they believed to be the new paradigm of childhood studies. With this new paradigm, children-centred research emerged, and children are reconceptualised from the innocent Rousseauian child of nature to a constructed, agentic and knowing child (Spyrou et al., 2019). Qvortrup (2009) argues that childhood is a structural form of social construction, it is an independent unit embedded in the social structure. Like other units (adulthood, old age), childhood is a result of relations between prevailing structural forces, including economic, political, social, cultural and technological, which are named parameters. As a unit, childhood gains an equal position as other units to be observed and studied instead of being seen as a preparatory stage that is attached to adulthood. Thus, as one of the components of the overall social structure, childhood is a permanent structural form that allows children to grow within this structure, and eventually leads them into adulthood, generation by generation.

The time length and displayed form of this structure may vary according to different cultural contexts, but the differences would not remove the existence of this structural segment (Qvortrup, 2009). It is because of this stability that childhood allows various displayed forms to happen, which are attributed to, on the one hand, relations of different parameters, especially cultural and, on the other hand, children's agency. James and Prout (2015) defined agency as "children are and must be seen as active in the construction of their own lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes" (p.7).

In my study, children show their agentic capacity and subjectivity, although stories were told by their mothers, my participants. I will still use examples of British participant Ju and Chinese participant Rainbow Mama to illustrate this point further. British participant Ju took her daughters on holiday to Tokyo after her marriage ended in 2019. Upon arrival, they got lost in the underground system. When Ju tried to find the way to their hotel, her two daughters got into an argument. Exhausted from travelling, saddened by the family dissolution, panicked by being lost and the language barrier, their emotions finally erupted at that moment in that foreign country.

> *We sat on our suitcases, stared at each other, and didn't know where to go. Then we burst into tears. We hugged together and cried our eyes out on the platform. We didn't care about people passing by. I felt there were only three of us left in the world. They supported me through the whole crisis. They knew about Dad's affair even before me, especially my eldest, she found it out first when she was 10, but they didn't tell me because they wanted to protect me. Although I was the adult who dealt with it ultimately, they got my back throughout. I really appreciate it.*

Chinese participant Rainbow Mama introduced the idea of Christmas to her daughter when she was young, and they celebrate it with grandparents every year. The daughter knows that to have Santa's gifts, she needs to be a good girl. When the girl was 8 in 2022, she prepared a gift for Rainbow Mama and put it under the Christmas tree as Santa's gift.

> *When we opened the presents on Christmas morning, I found an extra one under the tree, which had not been there the night before. Then she said, "look, Mummy, Santa has a gift for you too. You have been a good mum this year". It turned out she bought it when she went to the supermarket with my dad. And she wrapped it up and put it under the tree. I don't know when she knew presents were not from Santa, but she never asked me.*

From these examples, we can see that children are social actors in their families. Ju's daughters were involved in the crisis earlier than she was. They evaluated what was happening in the family based on their observations of adults and understanding of family life, then decided how to maintain family relationships from their capacity. Rainbow Mama's daughter took the idea of Santa's gifts and used it as a way to express her love for her mother. If children were just passive receptors in these two cases, they would not take the initiative to act upon their mothers: to protect Ju from heartbroken feelings, and to give praise and affirmation to Rainbow Mama. As Mayall (2000, p.21, as cited in James, 2009) writes, "It is clear enough that children are social actors, they take part in family relationships from the word go; express their wishes, demonstrate strong attachments, jealousy and delight, seek justice" (p.41).

My research also shows that the change in perception of children's role as social agents manifests in participants' practices, although they do not realise it. In Ju's case, during the holiday, she felt there was something created beyond the pure mother-daughter relationship. She said,

> *I still love them, but I feel like we've gotten each other's back now, not just the mother and daughters, they would think about me and do something for my good. They are very considerate.*

In Rainbow Mama's case, she introduced the adult world to her 8-year-old through appropriate media, including movies, TV series, and music.

> *I like to watch movies and TV series with her, not limited to kid-friendly ones. For example, she loves the newly launched horror series called Wednesday. She is a big fan of Leonardo DiCaprio because he's handsome. When we watched movies together, we talked about things over, like what was right and wrong and why some characters*

behaved in a certain way. I don't think blocking children from the adult world is right.

I wanted to have conversations with her like my peer.

These two mothers did not treat their daughters in a passive manner. Rainbow Mama brought up the idea of communicating with her daughter like a peer. In Ju's case, although she did not verbalise it, the feelings and experiences she perceived and described should not be explained as an unchanging and static power relationship. Moreover, another example of British participant O shows children's ability to negotiate in a family, which further illustrates children's agency. British participant O used to take her daughter to play football after school. But then, her 6-year-old did not want to continue.

She said she wasn't making enough friends. She herself said I'm not making friends.

She made one or two, but she was like, I just don't enjoy it because I don't know if I

can be friends with him. And then I said OK.

Jensen and Mckee (2003) argue that families today permit more individual choice and facilitate negotiated relationships because modern childhood is often portrayed as offering enhanced democratic relationships between parents and children. From the examples above, we can see that participants' parental practices and attitudes support children's agency, gradually undermining the notion of children being passive recipients in the domestic sphere, which is one of the limited spheres in which children can involve themselves socially.

In addition, children's agentic capacity also manifests in the mother-child collaborating to achieve a better life in single-mother families. For example, British participant Flo stated how her 11-year-old son took care of her when she was ill:

We both had a cold nearly a month ago, but I had it way worse than him. So, he made

me dinner pretty much every night. I mean, the kitchen was a mess, but he made egg

on toast, and he made pasta with pesto, and repeated that quite a few times. He made

me go upstairs and lie down in bed, he tucked me up with the teddy bear and left me

to sleep. So, then he could have a telly for himself downstairs.

Another British participant D, her children are the help she could turn to when it is

necessary.

There's an option. For instance, I might say to my 17-year-old, I need to do XYZ.

Could you look after the little ones for me? I popped down the corner shop or

something. But if he says no, I can't because I'm going out. Well, that's fine because

that's not his responsibility. I chose to have them. I then chose to be a single parent.

These examples show that although mothers' work patterns structure children's use of

time, mothers and their children can collaborate to achieve a better life in mother-child

families. Mayall (Arditti, 1999; Mayall, 2009) argued that because space at home may be

more equally shared, they may become more equal partners. One of the primary concerns

regarding parenting in single-parent families is the impact of altered dynamics between

parents and children following the dissolution of the marital partnership (Arditti, 1999).

Research (Weiss, 1979, 1980, as cited in Arditti, 1999) indicates that the mother-child family

structure tends to reduce the social distance between mothers and children. Consequently, the

boundaries between parents and children in single-mother households are characterised by a

level of openness distinct from that found in two-parent homes, where the parent-child

hierarchy is typically shaped by an implicit coalition of two adults holding a more dominant

position over the children. This hierarchical structure may diminish in single-parent families,

leading to a situation where children are elevated in status. As a result, mothers may negotiate

some decision-making control, and children are more likely to be viewed as "junior partners".

Intergenerational transmission studies have tended to mainly focus on how and why

the nature and quality of parenting are intergenerationally continued or discontinued (see, for

example, Belsky et al., 2009) and then use research findings to help individuals with adverse

parenting histories provide a healthier rearing environment for the next generation and, relatedly, how individuals who experienced high-quality parenting can retain positive capacities (Kerr & Capaldi, 2019). In addition, most theoretical frameworks for intergenerational transmission studies are developed by placing children in a position of being observed, such as biological theory (e.g. investigation of the correlation between gene-environment and intergenerational parenting transfer (Knafo & Jaffee, 2013), social learning theory (e.g. examination of the association between harsh and negative parenting and coercive relationship dynamics (Snyder, 2016).

Bowlby's attachment theory advocates parenting behaviours that can ameliorate insecure, secure, and disorganised attachments that are transmitted across generations (Kerr & Capaldi, 2019). However, meta-analysis indicates that although there are cross-generation similarities in attachment, sensitive parenting does not adequately explain them, which also calls into question the theory that attachment explains the stability of intergenerational transmission in these parenting behaviours (van IJzendoorn, 1995; Verhage et al., 2016). More specifically, caregiver sensitivity could explain only part of the intergenerational transmission, thus leaving a "transmission gap" (van IJzendoorn, 1995, p.398). This gap refers to those parts of attachment pattern alteration that cannot be explained only by caregiver sensitivity. Scholars explored other possible mediating mechanisms within the gap and found that the most important additional mediators are the effects of the context in which the parent-child interaction occurs, therefore, more contextual factors such as family functioning, couple relationships, and support should be tested (Verhage et al., 2016).

Children have therefore not been placed in an agentic position in dominant intergenerational transmission studies to examine if they have an important influence in the parenting process. Alanen (2001, p.21, as cited in Punch, 2020) has suggested that it is through "childing" and "adulting" practices that "the two generational categories of children

and adults are recurrently produced and therefore they stand in relations of connection and interaction, of interdependence". The pairing concept of childhood-adulthood mutually constitute and reciprocally presume each other in an interdependent relation, although it is an asymmetric power relation between children and adult in social practices (Alanen, 2009). Alanen (2009) argued that the concept of generational order is helpful for explaining a system of social ordering specifically for children in society, one that circumscribes particular social positions for children to act and participate in ongoing social life. This may explain why children have been absent from conventional intergenerational transmission studies.

Discussion

This chapter discussed the intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns, parenting values, and beliefs in single-mother families, which is an important aspect affecting children's social-emotional development. For my participants, after becoming mothers, their own childhood experiences are revived while parenting their children, which recalls the parenting they received as children. The fact of participants' recognition of their childhood pain, especially for participants who have severe traumatic childhood experiences such as physical, emotional and sexual abuse, becomes a powerful deterrent against the repetition of trauma in parenting. Through being aware of and remembering those traumatic experiences, mothers alter their psychic position as vulnerable children who can only identify with aggressors to survive in childhood to the position of repairing who identify with their childhood version of self to start reshaping the traumatic experiences. Mothers intend to shield their children from similar painful experiences, and their intention is reflected in their employment of retrospective parenting. Through participants' reflection and mentalisation function, they chose to modify the negative aspects, which bring back traumatic conflicts that reveal repressed anxieties, to keep their children from the intergenerational transmission of

childhood pain. Meanwhile, they inherit and pass on the positive aspects that can benefit their children long-term, such as fostering their resilience and life-long learning.

According to the literature, securely attached children internalise effective emotion regulation strategies within the attachment relationship and are able to successfully employ adaptive emotion regulation strategies outside the attachment relationship when the attachment figure is not present (Brumariu, 2015). In my study, although the traumatic patterns or insecure attachment can still be reproduced occasionally in mothers' parenting practices, mothers attempt to recognise and reorganise the pattern that can be internalised by children. This is advantageous to their children's attachment outcome as their children have more opportunities to become securely attached (Iyengar et al., 2019).

Families are changing in Western societies as people live longer, marriage and cohabitation are less stable, and people have fewer children (Mayall, 2009). In China, under the influence of modernisation along with the one-child policy, a similar tendency is present as well (Xu & Xia, 2014). Therefore, the diversity of families attracts renewed academic and policy-related attention. The traditional conclusion is that family disintegration negatively affects children and leads to less desirable developmental outcomes in the future. Amato (2014), for example, compared children with divorced parents and continuously married parents and found that exhibit they displayed more conduct and emotional problems, obtained lower academic scores and had more problems with social relationships.

However, with the paradigm of the new sociology of childhood arguing that children are not passive recipients, it is necessary to re-consider this traditional conclusion. More specifically, children construct the environment into a more favourable form based on their knowledge and capacity to minimise the impact of negative life events on them. Intergenerational transmission can thus be seen as a "structuring structure" because what has been transmitted forms a parenting style, one that is related to the social-cultural related

context or habitus—along with children's agentic capacity, it reshapes what they have received and shapes what they are creating. For example, in the previous chapter (Chapter 7), I portrayed a series of consequences on children's social-emotional behaviour that was caused by the changed mother-father-child triadic relationships, such as the regressive behaviours displayed by Ju's daughters, the resentment towards the father displayed by Boyu's daughter, and the emotional difficulties shown by Flo's son. However, children ultimately can deal relatively well with these negative influences with external assistance, such as counselling and support from family and friends. So, in my study, children's less desirable developmental outcomes in single-mother families are not determined by these circumstances because children can attempt to make the best of these outcomes (Maes et al., 2012; Mayall, 2009).

Morgan (2011) has proposed the concepts of family practices, which regard family as a verb that highlights family life as a set of activities in the processes of "doing" by family members. It emphasises the "active doing" and "everyday" aspects of parenting. He argues that through "practice", social actors "are reproducing the sets of relationships within which these activities are carried out and from which they derive their meaning". Therefore, there is a sense of commonality in family experiences, one which, in some measure, cuts across differences in class and ethnicity (Morgan, 2011). If we consider family practices as a process, children have more space to act as agents in family contexts in the mother-child household. In my study, children participate in keeping the family going as a healthy, productive unit, engaging in various work, such as doing housework in Flo's case, caring for family members in D's case, and maintaining affective relations in Ju and Rainbow Mama's cases. Therefore, the parent-child relationship in a mother-child family becomes more democratic. Scholars argue that democratising parent-child relations reduces the social space between parents and children (Wade & Smart, 2005, as cited in Mayall, 2009).

Scholars such as Postman (1985) have argued that the boundary between children and adults is blurred due to television, dual-parent careers and family breakdowns: the emergence of electronic media revealed the secrets of adulthood for children, which bridged the distance and distinction between childhood and adulthood. As the line between child and adult becomes blurred, concepts that distinguish the adult from the child, such as independence and responsibility become unclear (Aphek, 2002). Therefore, childhood as a separate and carefree realm is coming to an end (Postman, 1985). Indeed, children's practices at home might have gone beyond the boundary of adulthood and childhood in my study, such as taking care of adults, looking after siblings, and doing house chores. In addition, according to participants' narratives, their children have advanced emotional development compared to their peers (see next chapter, Chapter 9), being more capable of dealing with complex family situations. Therefore, children have more adult qualities in my study, which contradicts some of the traditional views of childhood as innocent, carefree, enjoying play, and being excluded from the adults' public area.

I will now draw on Bourdieu's concept of habitus to further develop my discussion on children's agentic roles in family practices and how it contributes to the "structuring structure" of intergenerational transmission. In my study, the child inherits the attachment patterns, beliefs, and values from the family, which contributes to establishing his or her primary habitus, defined by Bourdieu as a set of predispositions embodied in the individual during the socialisation process beginning in early childhood (Gabriel, 2017a). So, to some extent, establishing a primary habitus can be seen as the result of a passive intergenerational transmission process. However, the formation of a children's secondary habitus, especially its continual reconstruction of a primary habitus, should not be considered as a passive process. Without children's agentic capacity, such as active learning and engaging with others, it is

almost impossible to happen. Moreover, even the acquisition of primary habitus is not passive; instead, it involves a child in a process.

As discussed in the theoretical chapter, Bourdieu argued that habitus is not deterministic, the establishment of habitus involves the conjunction of subjective capacity and objective possibility (Wacquant, 2014). In my study, it is the complex relation between children's agentic capacity and familial environmental context. Through active learning and internalisation in the family environment, children's habitus is formed over a long period, which acts as a matrix or springboard for the subsequent acquisition of other habitus. In a similar way to the primary attachment pattern, it functions as a foundation for later interpersonal relationships.

Significantly, even the attachment model is tentative in its approach (Tizard, 2009). Fonagy et al. (2018) have suggested children would develop the mentalisation capacity to understand others' emotions and behaviours in the attachment processes. This active subjective capacity partly helps to form the child's attachment pattern, which constitutes both a motivational resource and a built-in hindrance to gaining new patterns. When children become parents, through maternal mentalisation, which is the manifestation of different kinds of habitus, they can re-recognise their original pattern, modify negative aspects and pass on positive ones in the intergenerational transmission process. Bowlby himself claimed in the last part of his life that attachment is not irreversible, "the central task is to study the endless interactions of internal and external factors, and how the one is influencing the other not only during childhood but during adolescence and adult life as well" (Tizard, 2009). Just like the habitus, past experiences are modified by present ones and a sense of a probable future, albeit early influences can sometimes bear more weight.

In the mother-child family, children also bring social capital (created through social processes that occur between the family and the larger community, comprised of social

networks) into the family sphere, which they possess during the secondary habitus acquisition outside of the family, especially at school, and can be undertaken as a contribution to the family's welfare as well (Gabriel, 2020). Children can access a variety of information more easily than in the past and discuss it with parents. Although they still rely on their parents economically and materially, they have relatively more intellectual freedom. Therefore, in the mother-child family structure, responsibilities and the notion of reciprocity are more flexible, and there are more processes of negotiation within family relationships than normative rules (Finch & Mason, 2003).

Summary

This chapter discussed the intergenerational transmission in single-mother families, including parenting practices, attachment patterns, and how single mothers shield their children from repetition of childhood pain. Through participants' reflection and mentalisation function, they chose to modify the negative aspects, which bring back traumatic conflicts that reveal repressed anxieties, to keep their children from the intergenerational transmission of childhood pain. Meanwhile, they inherit and pass on the positive aspects that can benefit their children long-term, such as fostering their resilience and life-long learning. I also argued that children are not passive recipients in the transmission cycle, they are involved in this structuring structure through their agentic capacity. In my next chapter I will focus on children's social-emotional development in single-mother families.

Chapter 9 Children's Social-Emotional Development in Single-Mother Families

Introduction

The previous chapter discussed an important aspect of children's social-emotional development: the intergenerational transmission of attachment in single-mother families. By using retrospective parenting, mothers reflected on their own childhood experiences in an effort to prevent their children from experiencing the same pain they went through, such as traumatic experiences and insecure attachment patterns. This chapter will explore children's social-emotional development. With mothers' emotional-related parenting practices, children develop socially acceptable emotional regulation skills. Children also seem to have a sensitive awareness of emotions and display advanced and sophisticated emotional competence beyond their age.

9.1 Emotional-Related Maternal Practices

According to the literature (see, for example, Morris et al., 2007), family affects children's emotional regulation and adjustment through three aspects: children learn the skills of emotion regulation through observing and imitating parents, emotion-related parenting practice can impact children's emotional regulation, and children's capacity for emotional regulation can be influenced by the family emotional climate which can influence parenting style, attachment relationship, and emotional expressiveness. Mothers in my research are role models for children to learn emotional coping strategies through teaching by example. In addition, mothers act as a containment that helps children digest their negative emotions. Their emotional-related practices thus contribute to children's social-emotional development, especially children's emotional regulation capacity.

9.1.1 Mothers as Role Models

Mothers across the two groups are the main role models and learning resources for children to obtain emotional regulation skills, especially as children see how mothers cope with negative emotions and deal with the pressures of being a single mother. For example, the father of Chinese participant Xie, after marital separation, was diagnosed with late-stage cancer and passed away very soon. Later she lost her job. Although she did not show much emotional turbulence in our interview, she described herself as apathetic and world-weary at that time. In her words, "I just let my days drift along and take one day at a time". She realised she had to pull herself up after a few months because she found her daughter (Yiyi) was affected by her. Yiyi lost interest in studying and spent a lot of time browsing TikTok on the phone. Therefore, she got back to the job market, started job hunting, and learnt psychology sessions online, she also did exercises at home, such as rope jumping. She said,

> *My state was affecting my child. If this continued, it would not only be me but also my child. I shouldn't let the negative energy pass on to her, what passes on to her must be the positives. We should let our children learn from us that no matter how hard it is, we are still hanging in there, and we are confident that everything will be fine one day. Teach by example, we can influence our children.*

With British participant Ju, she never used to show her emotional vulnerability in front of her children in the past because she believed it was the way to protect them. After the family dissolution, she went to counselling for a few sessions and learnt that it is healthy to show her vulnerability to her children in an appropriate way, which can promote her children's emotional capacity, and it should be part of her parenting.

> *My counsellor told me they have to know, they have to know sometimes you are emotional, you can cry in front of them, but the most important thing is, they know you will be ok afterwards.*

British participant O experienced an emotional downturn after separation. During that time, in addition to maintaining her daughter's daily routine, she made herself a to-do list every day to cheer herself up. She believed this would be a good opportunity for her to model and teach her daughter emotional coping skills.

It's an opportunity for them to learn how to regulate that if it ever happens in the future. Because, if they've never experienced it, and then they go through it, they will just be like, what do I do? Do I just collapse? But if they have memories, ok, I remember when mum was sad a long time (ago), crying about this, but then she got up, she made a list of what she was going to do, then she went on and did it. They look at that, oh, ok, I need to sit down and think about it, you know, do what my mum does obviously if it's a healthy option because some people don't do it in the right way.

In these examples, participants' behaviours and strategies of coping with their emotions implicitly teach their children what kind of behaviours and emotions are acceptable and expected, and how to manage them. Xie pulled herself up by returning to the job market and doing exercises. Ju chose to seek help from professionals, and O demonstrated her strategy of making lists. Their children learn certain emotional behaviours and how to react in a similar situation through observation (Cole et al., 2009). Children learn emotional regulatory processes from parents: this experience in the family builds a foundation for their emotional development in the future (Morris et al., 2007).

9.1.2 Mothers as Containers

Mothers' emotional practices also promote children's emotional regulatory skills (Morris et al., 2007). When children experience negative feelings and emotions, mothers provide positive guidance, help them with their emotional coping strategies, and serve as a containment to help their children process the emotions.

For example, Chinese participants Boyu and Rainbow Mama have a daughter. When I conducted the interviews, their daughters were the same age as 8. Both were learning to play a musical instrument, one was a flute, and the other was a piano. When children encountered frustration and became very angry with themselves because they couldn't play the notes correctly during practice, these two participants patiently remained by their children's side and offered positive guidance. Below are their narratives:

> *Boyu: When she struggles to play it correctly, she becomes frustrated, impatient, and sulky. So, I said, take your time, watch and follow the teacher's demonstration a few more times. You've seen that losing your temper doesn't solve the problem. In response, she questioned, why can't I get upset? Why can't I let out my frustration first and then solve the problem? I explained that you can, but dwelling on the same issue doesn't lead you in the right direction.*

> *Rainbow Mama: Learning the piano made me realise that my daughter is short-tempered. Once, she learned a really difficult piece and couldn't play it right with both hands. She got so angry with herself that she cried. I didn't know what to say, so I sat beside her and stayed with her. Maybe sitting next to her gave her a sense of security, so she gradually calmed down and smoothed this over alone.*

British participant Ju said that when her daughters encountered negative emotions, she suggested they do something else as a distraction, and she used this strategy herself when her marriage collapsed.

> *When there is too much negativity, I would say, let's do something to shift the focus. My eldest likes playing guitar, and the younger one likes painting. So, engaging in these activities can distract their attention, and they won't be thinking about the negativity all day long.*

Most of the effects on children's psychological development in the family context occur by affecting children's ability to emotional regulation (Eisenberg et al., 2003), which means initiating, maintaining, and modulating the occurrence, intensity, and expression of emotions (Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2004). As well as the emotional coping strategies mentioned above, participants contain their children's emotions when they have an emotional meltdown. Chinese participants Yulu and Tong, for example, showed a good empathetic capacity and containment when their children were having a meltdown.

> *Yulu: There was a time I went back home late, and I rushed her to take a bath. After the shower, she stood in the bathroom and cried. I thought it was caused by my bad temper, so I walked to her and wanted to give her a cuddle. She hugged me tightly and cried even harder. Then she said, "I feel really upset today because grandpa yelled at me today. Then you came back this late and said that you want to spank me." I felt I was a successful mom at that moment because my child was willing to confide in me, and I let her emotions vent.*

> *Tong: He cried badly when I had to leave for work after the New Year holiday. He asked why couldn't I take a day off? I said parting is for a better reunion. If I don't go to work, how can we go out and travel? The pandemic restriction has been lifted this year, and I have promised you a trip to Disney, so I have to make money. You did not need a ticket when you were two, but now you've grown up. Let me give you a cuddle, and don't cry. At least I still have a job, a lot of people lost their jobs during the pandemic. So, I always say to him that parting is for a better reunion.*

I will use Wilfred Bion's concept of containment to further discuss how mothers' containing function contributes to their children's social-emotional development. Containment is the capacity of one individual to receive in himself projections from another individual, which he then can sense and use as communication, transform them, and finally

give them back to the subject in a modified form, which eventually enables the person to sense and tolerate his own feelings and develop a capacity to think (Malcolm, 2001). In working with psychotic patients, Bion came to the realisation that his patients had deposited in him some sensations and perceptions they could not process by themselves, such as incomprehensible words or grunts. Bion called these raw sensation material beta elements, which can only be thrown out. Bion had to take the alpha elements and transform them by his alpha function into a different category of mental elements—alpha elements—and give them back to his patients (Malcolm, 2001).

Bion uses the mother-infant metaphor to illustrate what occurs at an unconscious level in the psychoanalytic relationship, which perfectly demonstrates how a mother helps with an infant's emotional development. Given his insufficient emotional coping function, the infant projects the emotional experiences that he can't process, which are his beta elements, to the mother. The mother does the unconscious psychological work by using her alpha function, working on the infant's unbearable experience and returning it to him in an acceptable form, which are the alpha elements, for the infant's capacity (Ogden, 2004). If the mother is not emotionally available to the infant, she will return his intolerable emotions in a manner with the original meaning stripped off. Accordingly, the infant would internalise the experiences of his mother's inability to contain his projected feelings and, in turn, attack the mother-infant link. By contrast, a well-contained child would develop the ability to tolerate the emotional complexity generated by uncertain and doubtful situations (Ogden, 2004).

In my study, given the lack of sufficient capacity for emotional regulation, children became overwhelmed by different experiences, such as frustration due to musical instrument practices for Boyu and Rainbow Mama's daughters, and separation anxiety for Tong's son due to the mother leaving to work. So, they project these feelings and sensations that are too hard for them to cope with and understand to mothers. Mothers take these feelings and, in

turn, provide children with comfort, encouragement and company. Some in a verbal form, such as Tong, interpreted the separations as for better reunions, some with physical intimacy, such as when Yulu hugged her daughter in arms. In the mother-infant metaphor, the mother uses her alpha function to transform the infant's raw sensations and raw emotions into something that can eventually be assimilated by the infant in his mind and become elements for further development (Malcolm, 2001).

Once alpha elements are taken in by the baby, the maternal function has been internalised as well, so the baby can use them as building blocks for emotional and intellectual development (Malcolm, 2001). In my study, when containing children's emotions, mothers process those unwanted and overwhelming emotions for their children and then return the experience to children in a modified form (Finlay, 2016). With these experiences, children use mothers' emotional availability and internalise the sense of being contained, gradually contributing to their capacity for self-regulation. Eventually, children will develop the ability to regulate their own emotions and use the same emotional coping mechanisms when confronting similar situations in the future.

9.2 Children's Social-Emotional Strategies

Children learn emotional coping and regulatory skills by observing their mothers' behaviour. Mothers' emotional practices, particularly when children face negative emotions, allow children to practice the skills they've observed with guidance and support. Over time, children develop the ability to understand emotions and create their own emotional regulation strategies. Based on mothers' accounts, children in my study seem to demonstrate sensitivity in emotional understanding and display advanced emotional capacity beyond their age.

9.2.1 Understanding Children's Emotions

Understanding emotions and emotional experiences is the precondition for emotional regulation and is at the core of social-emotional competence (Malti & Noam, 2016). The term "emotional understanding" refers both to monitoring/awareness of one's emotional states and to discerning/understanding others' emotional expressions (e.g., recognising, appraising, and labelling other's feelings) (Brumariu, 2015). Studies showed that securely attached children report greater emotional awareness (Brumariu et al., 2012), are better at identifying and labelling emotions (Steele et al., 2008), and have better knowledge of emotional regulation strategies than insecurely attached children (Colle & Del Giudice, 2011).

In my research, mothers in both groups reported that their children are sensitive to recognising others' emotions and are empathetic in expressing care for other people. For example, Chinese participant Yulu's 7-year-old daughter likes to use her phone to listen to e-books. The week we conducted the second interview, her phone went dead after her daughter used it. She was informed by the technician that the mobile was too worn to be repaired. Yulu was upset because the old mobile was too old to turn on, so she lost all the data in the old phone, including photos she treasured. Her emotions built up until the second day when she had an argument with her boyfriend. Yulu's daughter witnessed her upset throughout the event over the days, so she raised a conversation and said,

> *Mom, you've been unhappy for two days in a row. I accidentally broke your phone, but it wasn't on purpose. How can you be mad at me for so many days? I was surprised by what she said, and I replied, I'm not mad at you. She said, but you're very unhappy, and you don't want to talk to anyone. At that moment, I realised that my daughter is very sensitive, she picks up on a lot of subtle things. So, I explained to her, Mommy is just in a bad mood; it's not because of you; please don't take the blame.*

Chinese participant Rainbow Mama often has emotional related conversations with her 8-year-old, she was surprised by her daughter's emotional expression once they watched the movie of My Neighbour Totoro when her daughter was 6.

> *In the movie, there is a scene where Totoro's tree suddenly grows very large, and the music in that scene is very moving. She suddenly turned to me and said, Mom, hearing this music, I feel like my heart is jumping out. So, she can express her feelings with words. She is quite sensitive to emotions. She can easily sense changes in your emotions and will adjust her way of speaking to you accordingly.*

Another Chinese participant, Tong, described her 6-year-old son (Lele) as not only sensitive to her emotions but also in social situations. She said,

> *Lele is very sensitive in unfamiliar environments and is very good at reading people's moods. For example, when my boyfriend first came to our home, Lele wanted to play with him. He saw my boyfriend playing computer games, so he watched from a distance. Only after my boyfriend finished playing did Lele approach him.*

Similar within the British group. Participant O said her 6-year-old daughter is very good at reading the room.

> *She's so intuitive. It's scary. Like, I could be quiet because she knows I'm not usually a quiet person. If she's been with her grandma and she comes into the house, and I'm quiet. She goes, oh, why are you quiet? What is wrong with you? She automatically reads the room. And I'm like, oh, if I just said to her, I'm just feeling a bit sad today. And then she said, well, come here, let me give you a hug. So, you're not sad. So, she is really sensitive and aware of emotions.*

British participant Flo's 11-year-old is another example. He can recognise his emotions and express them through words.

He's very sensitive, but he's also very emotionally literate. He knows lots of words to
describe how he's feeling so that he can say, Mummy, today I'm feeling a bit like this.
So, if I'm a bit grumpy with you, please don't take it personally, and you go
absolutely. And then I could say the same things to him. I'm a bit stressed today, so if
I'm a bit short with you, I'm sorry. And so, he picks up on all of these.

From the participants' perspective, children are reported to be very sensitive to being aware of one's emotional state, because of the closeness of the mother-child relationship, so children are able to observe mothers' emotions. A couple of examples below show mothers' contribution to allowing children to explore their feelings freely and to helping children identify and label emotions, which enables children's social-emotional development. British participant D has an open mind for both positive and negative emotions. She believed children would learn and develop their own strategy from exploration:

I remember when I was about 11, and I'd seen a film, and someone had the upper bed
and swept everything to the side. And I thought I'm going to do that. So, I was
marched up to my bedroom, and I swept everything off my bed, and then I sat there.
I've got to pick it all up now. It was pointless, but I was given that freedom. I could
march up the stairs and sweep all my things off without my mum saying, Oh my God,
you've broken stuff. She allowed me to do that instead of saying I'm not taking that
because it was a mess. So, I think that's probably something I've done with my
children. You can do that, but you're going to learn from that.

British participant O is a clinical psychologist. She taught her daughter different ways of managing emotions based on her profession which allowed her daughter to explore the emotions fully.

She has diaries in which she writes things. Like, today I feel a bit happy and why I'm
happy. It's always something she's been quite good with because, I guess, maybe I am

a psychologist. We've always worked on being able to express our emotions. Like she will tell you I'm feeling really angry, for example, I'm like, what do you mean by anger? And she will even give you the synonyms. She'll be like, I'm upset, and she will tell you why. And then I'm like, what do you want me to do about it? And she will give you something like, oh, I don't know, maybe we can go for a walk. Why don't you just give me a cuddle? She tells you.

The British participant Flo used to work as a full-time schoolteacher for 15 years, so she was aware of the importance of helping children deal with different emotions in her career. She continued to incorporate these practices into her parenting.

I tried doing a naughty set with him when he was about 5, and there was absolutely no point because he would do more without me doing anything. We would practice putting teddies in the time out, so he'd explain to the teddy what the teddy had done wrong, and he's going to come back in 3 minutes, and then he'd go back, give the teddy a hug and say this is what you did, you need to go and apologise to whichever another teddy.

Flo would help her son (M) explore emotions daily, and she realised that her parenting practices had enabled her son to have better emotional competences than the dad until the father-child relationship was estranged after the marital separation.

Very early on, when Dad had come around to visit after he'd moved out, I was trying to get the two of them talking, and M could describe with tons and tons of words all the different emotions that he was feeling, and all that his dad could say was I feel sad. The difference between M's generation and his generation of men is that M's generation is raised to be able to explain how they feel, and therefore, by putting it into words, they don't feel the need to react by hitting things or going off and having

an affair. Of course, generations can get a chance, you know, but I encouraged him to

talk. So, it's on him.

Reflecting on Bowlby's notion of an internal working model, Schwartz (1993) has argued that what an infant internalises and later encodes as maternal representations are maternal functions. Three maternal functions are identified as central to the mothering relation for children's psychological growth: security functions, regulatory functions, and recognition functions (Schwartz, 1993). These three functions are both subjectively experienced within mother-child interactions so as to be internalised and represented unconsciously as one aspect of self and other in relation. In my study, mothers help their children to recognise what is happening to them by labelling and verbalising their emotions. So, children's feelings, intentions, and actions become meaningful with responses from mothers (Benjamin, 1988, as cited in Schwartz, 1993). It is through recognition of their feelings and behaviours by mothers that children are able to develop self-in-relation, which contributes to children's social-emotional development.

9.2.2 Emotional Regulation

One of the major aims of children's social-emotional development is to learn how to manage emotions in ways that could adapt to society and the environment (McCabe & Altamura, 2011). Through observation of mothers' strategies, children in my study show various degrees of emotional regulation. For example, for British participant Flo's 11-year-old son, meditation is one of his emotional regulatory strategies which he learns from Flo.

I did it with him when he was little; he likes the idea of meditation because it's very

grown up. When he's really distressed, he will take himself up to his bedroom, and he

will lie on his bed, and I'm not allowed in the room, but I think he screams or shouts

into the pillow or something, and he might take a while to calm himself down. And

he's got Alexa up there, so he'll put some music on. I've heard him ask Alexa for some meditation before.

For British participant O, her 6-year-old daughter (N) has learnt appropriate ways to regulate her emotions.

She never went through a terrible two. It started when she was five. I called that terrorist five. She would just get so upset and tell you that I'm angry, so I'm not doing this, I'm not doing that. And she might stamp her feet and slam doors, imagine slam doors… Now she's learned. We have a calm box in her room where she can pick different things to calm her down, like a stress board, coloured timer. She's learned to count to 10. So, we've learned so many ways to manage her anger and emotions.

With daily practices of emotional management skills, N is now able to regulate her emotions efficiently.

This morning, she was upset when I said she couldn't have the game because I didn't like the fact that she was haggling it with me, and she said OK, and she just went to her room and had laid down on her bed, and then came back down 5 minutes later. So, I don't have to say anything. She knows now and she just takes herself off or she just does lots of drawings and things.

Also, with the Chinese group. Participant Yulu used to guide her 7-year-old daughter to speak out her feelings, when she was little, then calmed her down if she was angry or gave her a cuddle for reassurance when she was sad, which later was internalised by her and became one of her regulatory strategies.

She wouldn't talk when she cried or got angry in the past. So, I would guide and ask her, are you feeling grievance? Or are you angry? Then she would tell me what was going on with her and how she felt, and then I would hug her tightly. Funny enough, she was angry with me a couple of days ago. She said, I'm angry, and I don't expect

you to hug me, so I will give myself a butterfly cuddle. Then she patted herself on the

back with two hands like flapping butterfly wings.

For participant Rainbow Mama's daughter, speaking out to her mother is still the major emotional regulatory strategy for her 7-year-old.

She doesn't get angry very often. Sometimes she cries for a while and then tells me,

Mom, I'm angry, or Mom, I feel sad. She's a bit of a crybaby.

The attachment system performs a safety-regulation function by encouraging children to ask for help from their parents when it is triggered by emotionally upsetting or distressing circumstances (Brumariu, 2015). However, attachment is more than just a system for handling emergencies. Moreover, it serves as a secure base that equips children with the self-regulation capacity to explore and master everyday situations (Waters & Cummings, 2000). From this aspect, Zimmermann et al. (2001) argued that parents play the role of "external organisers" for children, and the parent-child relationship provides a supportive environment for children's emotional socialisation, the product of which is emotional regulation competence. In my study, the function of safety-regulation of the attachment system is activated when children are confronted with negative, emotionally provoking situations, so children turn to mothers for emotional regulation, such as telling mothers about situations, crying and looking for reassurance.

In addition, studies (Contreras & Kerns, 2000) showed that securely attached children can openly express their emotions, learn (within the attachment relationship) effective ways to manage negative emotions in stressful situations, alleviate their distress, and return to exploring their environment through repeated interactions with carers who are sensitive, flexible, and encourage a range of emotions. Meanwhile, ambivalently attached children tend to express negative feelings more intensely in an attempt to attract attention to their inconsistent attachment figure (Brumariu, 2015). And avoidant attached children tend to

minimise their negative feelings to maintain the relationship with an attachment figure who is intolerant of attachment behaviours (Brumariu, 2015). In the examples, British O's daughter slammed doors when she was angry, Flo's son locked her mother outside his room, Chinese participant Yulu's daughter expressed her dissatisfaction with her mother, and Rainbow Mama's daughter spoke out of her negative feelings. All these signs show that children feel safe to show themselves in front of mothers. Children therefore learn about emotions and the emotional regulation strategies in the interaction with mothers through a variety of socialisation methods, such as directly being taught (in O and Flo's cases), communicating about their emotions (in Rainbow Mama's case), and the way they are helped to modulate their emotional responses (in Yulu's case).

9.2.3 Advanced Emotional Development

A comprehensive understanding of emotion and emotional regulation can be simplified into two main components. The first component is one's own emotional responses, which include bodily functions and physiological regulation (Malti & Noam, 2016). Children in my study appear to develop socially accepted regulation strategies, as discussed in the previous section. The second component are responses to multifaceted social experiences and interactions, which involve understanding others' emotions and expressing one's own emotions in an age-appropriate way (Malti & Noam, 2016).

In both groups, participants reported their perceptions of their children's advanced emotional development, which means children express their understandings and emotions ahead of their ages. For example, Chinese participant Tong, her 5-year-old son (Lele), had a cold and a high temperature when she travelled on business in another city for a month. She didn't know it until Lele had recovered from the illness. The grandma told her that Lele didn't allow them to tell Tong, which may have caused her to worry.

He told my mom I couldn't come back anyway, so telling me would only worry me, so

he asked my parents not to tell me until he felt better. He didn't answer my video calls

during those couple days I thought he was angry with me because I was away, but

later he told me it was because he didn't want me to see him sick to get me worried.

Chinese participant Boyu perceived her 7-year-old daughter's advanced emotional development since she was three. After the family dissolution, her daughter often brought up conversations regarding her perception of marriage, her husband, and how she would like to have a child without getting married. Boyu said,

I feel that Xinxin is very emotionally advanced for her age, and this has become

apparent after the family dissolution. She is very sensible at her age compared to her

peers. I didn't think as much as she does when I was her age, not even to say whether

to get married or have children in the future.

A couple of quotes from the British participants, Flo and O, can be used as examples to illustrate similar perceptions from the British counterparts.

Flo: He's been really stressed with the SATs. I can see it's the same thing that shows

before he sees his dad. I think it's because he's always been able to express himself

from a young age. He's always had a wider vocabulary and understanding than all his

peers, and he and I always have very open conversations. So maybe he starts

processing those emotions a bit earlier than his peers… I think he is more advanced

than his peers at his age, which hopefully is only a good thing.

O: For a 6-year-old, she's very intuitive and mature, even intellectual. Because the

school says she's above, she's meant to be in year two, but she does the year three

curriculum. And her reading is a 10-year-old.

Studies (see, for example, Hetherington, 2003) have argued that adolescents from divorced and remarried families are precociously independent. In my study, participants

perceived a similar perception of their children having advanced emotional development in both groups. Part of the reason might be that children experienced important family changes when participants went through significant marital events or transitions. Children's exposure to a more complicated situation allows them to develop emotional competence in the related aspect compared to peers who do not. Meanwhile, children witness their parents' coping mechanisms when confronting life events, providing them with learning opportunities. In addition, children in a dissolved family have more opportunities to deal with complex social situations, such as Chinese participant Yulu's daughter. When we conducted the interview, she was in a relationship with her new boyfriend but hadn't officially introduced him to her daughter apart from a few times of outings together. Her daughter tried to promote their relationship. As she recounted:

> *We haven't seen each other recently. My daughter took my phone and sent him a voice message, saying, "Uncle, why don't you come over for dinner tonight, and tomorrow we can go to the park together." This was the first time she sent him a voice message. I think she knows about our relationship because she saw our photos on my phone. But she has never said anything or asked me about it. Instead, she helps me quietly.*

The British group participants showed more sophisticated situations than the Chinese group. Participant D had divorced twice with children from two marriages. She keeps a civil relationship with her ex-partners, which provides a friendly environment for the fathers to visit the children and for them to maintain connections with their fathers. And the girlfriends of her ex-partners would have a chat with her if they passed by her house. She believes that parental relationships should be separated from the parent-child relationship. Her practices set an example for her children.

> *I think I've maintained a pretty good relationship with my ex-husbands. They can see that you can still have a relationship with somebody you don't have to live with that*

person. So, they learnt that you don't have to be in the same house to be able to maintain a relationship. My oldest daughter has split with her partner, and she has a shared caring responsibility with him. They put in so much work and work well together to ensure the children's care is shared.

Participant Ju's ex-husband has remarried and has had a newborn. Ju's daughters have stayovers at the father's sometimes and are often involved in family events on the father's side. Ju commented that her daughters have good interpersonal skills:

I am not curious about what happens at their dad's house, and I never asked. They never talked much about it, either. I feel they know what should be said and what shouldn't. Managing complex family relationships smoothly requires many social skills, and they are doing very well.

Peers and siblings appear to be one important factor contributing to children's advanced emotional development in the British group, which does not emerge in the Chinese group. British participants disclosed that their children could talk to school peers who have shared experiences of family shifts that promoted their children's social-emotional development. Ju said many of her daughters' friends at school had experienced family dissolution or parental separation, which provides her daughters with opportunities to learn from and compare notes with others.

My eldest has a friend whose stepfather is very supportive. He would buy her things and take her out, so my eldest used him as a reference to set standards for her future stepfather. She has another friend whose stepmother is not nice, so my daughter helped to give advice on how to deal with her. Children chat at school, compare notes, and learn from each other. My eldest had her best friend stay over last night. Their conversations showed a lot of street smartness, which was very impressive.

Also, participant Flo's son shared his experiences with a peer, which benefited his mental state.

A few months ago, he told his closest friends at school, with somebody who was feeling a bit down, that he talked about his parents not being together anymore. He really opened up, and they were able to bond over this shared history. Because of my generation, nobody was divorced, and none of our parents were divorced. But pretty much everyone in his class is divorced or on a second marriage.

Participant D has seven children from two marriages, and the age gap between her eldest and youngest is 21 years. She said growing up with siblings of different ages and having an opportunity to witness their life events could benefit her children, especially the youngest two, who are aged 15 and 12.

If one has an argument with that one, it's going to be a different argument, a different outcome to argue with another one because they're going to deal with it separately, so they learn different ways of dealing it with different people. So, they're probably more socially adept than I would be because they've had this mini-society. Because they learn about other people's relationships and practice all those relationships in a safe environment. I think when you've got lots of children, they sort of support each other.

A considerable amount of emotional regulation for young children occurs via parents' intervention, but as they develop, they will switch to other socialisation methods, such as peers, instead of relying on parents (Silk et al., 2003). In Ju and Flo's cases, their children turned to supportive friends, which moderates the effects of stress caused by family transitions and complicated family relationships. Rodgers and Rose (2002) have drawn attention to the importance of peer relationships for preadolescent and early adolescent children, and girls are more likely than boys to confide in and utilise their friends for social support. Furthermore, Vygotsky's proximal development zone (ZPD) can be used to interpret

children's advanced emotional development with the help of friends. ZPD is a zone between a person's current independent problem-solving capacity and the area far beyond. Within ZPD, the person's ability can be improved under guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978). In my study, children are able to talk to more knowledgeable peers who have a shared history and observe siblings with more experiences. This enables children to obtain the skills they need for dealing with family shifts and complex situations, which also serves as a protective function against stress.

The absence of peers and siblings in promoting children's advanced emotional development in Chinese narratives may result from cultural differences. Chinese culture values familial harmony as a moral obligation (Xu & Xia, 2014). As such, the family structure in China is more traditional and less varied than in the UK. Since the mainstream values still uphold the traditional family structure, the stigma of single mothers and living in a single-mother family remains (Kuang et al., 2022). Therefore, Chinese children who live in single-parent families are less likely to confide in peers at school than their British counterparts. Another one is the political reason the one-child policy was employed in China between 1979 and 2015. Chinese children who are born under this policy have less opportunity to experience growing up with many siblings than their British counterparts. In my study, all the Chinese participants were born during this time period. With the experience of growing up as an only child, they are more likely to continue it with their children. Therefore, Chinese children lack the opportunity and experience to develop social-emotional competence through interactions with siblings at home.

Summary

This chapter explored children's social-emotional development in single-mother families across Chinese and British groups. According to participants' narratives, children in two groups are sensitive to monitoring and discerning others' emotions. Parent-child

attachment is central in children's emotional development and adjustment, securely attached children report greater emotional awareness (Brumariu et al., 2012), are better at identifying and labelling emotions (Steele et al., 2008), and have better knowledge of emotional regulation strategies than insecurely attached children, such as cognitive engagement (Colle & Del Giudice, 2011). Children's sensitivity to emotions can be regarded as securely attached, which might be because of the closeness of the mother-child relationships in daily interactions.

Mothers' emotional-related practices in my study contribute to children's social-emotional development, such as modelling emotional coping strategies, containing children's negative emotions, and helping children to recognise and label their emotions. It is through maternal functions of regulation and recognition (Schwartz, 1993) that children are able to internalise maternal functions by repeating interactions and learning and developing emotional capacities. From this perspective, a secure attachment between mother and child is reinforced. Although no individual child fully falls into one "secure" and "insecure" attachment category, children in my study can openly express their emotions, both positive and negative, towards mothers, which is a strong indication of secure attachment (Brumariu, 2015). This developmental outcome echoes mothers' intentions to try to break the intergenerational transmission patterns, which have been discussed in the previous chapter, from insecurity to security.

Children internalise emotional regulation strategies within the attachment relationships and are able to successfully employ adaptive emotion regulation strategies outside the attachment relationship when the attachment figure is not present (Brumariu, 2015). In my study, children appear to display high degree of emotional development ahead of their age when mothers are not present. They also exhibit the capacity to deal with complex social situations. On the one hand, this may be due to children's experiences of

exposure to complicated situations that other children are not exposed to, such as family dissolution, parents remarrying, and living with stepparents and stepsiblings. All these complex situations allow children to learn and practice skills emotionally and interpersonally. On the other hand, the mother-child relationship is more democratic compared to the mother-father-child structure. Therefore, children have more opportunities to have conversations beyond their age with their mothers, contributing to children's advanced emotional development that is ahead of their age.

Chapter 10 Conclusions

Introduction

This chapter synthesises the key findings and discussions of my research to answer my research questions and discusses its broader implications. With modernisation and industrialisation in contemporary societies, various structural forms of family are changing. As one of the family types, single-mother family is prevalent in China and the UK. Single mothers face a range of difficulties compared to married mothers, and children who grow up in single-mother families are argued to have less than ideal developmental outcomes. Previous studies in China and the UK that focused on single mothers and single-mother families have examined the economic conditions (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018; Li, 2020; Harkness, 2022), social networks (Balaji et al., 2007; Lumino et al., 2016; Keim-Klärner, 2022), mental health (Harkness, 2016; Liang et al., 2019; Park & Lee, 2020), and childrearing (Waldfogel et al., 2010; Meier et al., 2016; Frosch et al., 2021). However, there are very few studies that compare single motherhood between the two countries. Therefore, this cross-cultural study attempts to fill this gap by making a theoretical-empirical contribution to understanding the structural changes in contemporary families.

I now want to briefly recap my research questions guiding this study. The aim of this study was to explore and compare the differences in parental support for single mothers in China and the UK, identifying how these differences affect parental experiences of single parenting and its impact on children's social-emotional development in both countries. The research questions were:

- What are the differences in parental support between China and the UK?

- How do they affect single mothers' parental experiences and social-emotional development in childhood?

The study objectives were:

1. To explore what constitutes parental support for single mothers in China and the UK.

2. To identify the differences in parental support between China and the UK.

3. To identify and compare how differences in parental support between China and the UK affect parental experiences and children's social-emotional development.

The impact of support on mothers in the two countries has been investigated and compared directly through interviews with mothers, collecting data from 12 participants (6 on each side). It explored what constitutes parental support for Chinese and British single mothers and identified the differences and similarities of different types of support between the two groups. Given that individual and family well-being are entangled and complex processes, I focused on the relational and emotional dynamics between children and their parents in single-parent families.

10.1 Differences in Parental Support Between China and the UK

Through exploration, I identified three categories of support that mothers used to overcome life difficulties: institutional support, family support, and other forms of support, including children's schools and mothers' social networks. Mothers from both Chinese and British groups were able to access support in these three categories but at different levels. A comparison between British and Chinese mothers reveals that British participants have access to a wider range of institutional support than the Chinese group, including child maintenance, spousal maintenance and welfare support. Child maintenance and family support is a common support for single mothers across the two groups despite the different levels of benefit in both countries. Family, especially grandparents, become important for finance and childcare for the two groups after the participants' adult partnerships fall apart. For the Chinese mothers, family support is a core support if non-payment of child maintenance occurs.

The common institutional support of child maintenance in both countries reflects that both states recognise the importance of favourable financial conditions for children's development. However, British groups have more options for spousal maintenance and welfare support, which is not available in the Chinese context. This distinction highlights the influence of different cultural values towards family and marriage in both social contexts. In the British context, people tend to hold more "liberal" attitudes towards family, marriage being seen as a partnership with each party having equal rights (Hunter, 2019). The British welfare-state recognises women's potentially unequal financial position in the family brought about and reproduced by the domestic division of labour and the disadvantages of motherhood in the job market (Hunter, 2019). Therefore, relationship-related financial disadvantages can be compensated, to some extent, through post-divorce arrangements.

However, in the Chinese context, the traditional concept of the family plays a significant role in Chinese culture, social order and welfare ideology which views families as cells in society (Hämäläinen et al., 2019). Females are not expected to become single mothers under this familial cultural context. One important consequence is that there is insufficient institutional support for single mothers as this might indirectly encourage more females to become single mothers, threatening the traditional cultural values of familialism and social harmony. Today's Chinese welfare approach is therefore a difficult balancing act between traditional Confucian values based on collective harmony, Communist ideology, and modern individualism (Hämäläinen et al., 2019).

Over the past few decades, the spread of self-centred individualism has influenced modern family life in China, challenging the core values of the traditional family: unlike industrial countries, it does not have a governing system based on a Western democratic ideology. Instead, it relies on families rather than a social security system to care for the young, the old, and the vulnerable (Xu & Xia, 2014).For Chinese single mothers, the growing

tension between traditional family values and modern individualism increases the disadvantages of the one-parent family structure.

In my research, I found that institutional support for British participants partly offset the direct shortage of economic capital in single-mother families. A single-mother family is more likely to possess less economic capital than a traditional married-mother family and emotional and financial difficulties can become more severe for single mothers as they experience more stress. However, at least one form of capital shortage can be partially converted to other forms, including social, cultural and emotional capital, through the expenditure of time and effort (Bourdieu, 1986). When mothers are less distressed financially, they are more likely to invest more emotional capital in their children. It could also potentially provide them with more time, which enables them to study and socialise with others to accumulate cultural and social capital. However, it is important to note that in the Chinese group, it was mainly family support that mitigated the negative impact of partners' absence on mothers' financial resources.

10.2 Single Mothers' Parental Experiences and Children's Social-Emotional Development

The varied support for single mothers in China and the UK stems from distinctive government systems, providing an explanation of why mothers have different experiences of single motherhood in these two different cultural contexts. Chinese mothers perceived higher levels of anxiety and stress towards an uncertain future is a direct result of insufficient institutional support and the values that stem from a traditional culture of familialism. The reinforcement of these values intensifies the stigma of single motherhood in a Chinese context because single mothers' behaviours violate the Confucian tradition of family solidarity and harmony (Mo, 2017).

In the British context, single mothers are labelled with a stereotype of lower socioeconomic status, which carries enormous stigma. Social problems are less visible in wealthier families (Punch et al., 2013), but in working-class families, they are unproblematically linked to family problems without recognising their political, social, and structural context. Individuals in poor families can be labelled as deviants, where their problems conveniently become defined as individual rather than social problems that require a political and social solution (Punch et al., 2013). Due to the development of a more advanced feminist movement, British mothers feel more confident to discuss family matters such as child-rearing and domestic poverty in the public rather than private sphere.

In my research, I discovered that the father-mother-child triadic family structure was replaced by the mother-child dyadic relationship, along with the grandparents-child relationship providing additional support. I used the relation between Bowlby's attachment theory and Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capital, to explore the tensions in these relational dynamics, developing a more appropriate theoretical framework for my study. Both the mother-child and the father-child attachment are important as they affect the child's personality in different aspects. The mother contributes to the child's attachment bond through sensitivity to interaction and caregiving, while the father contributes through a sensitivity to exploratory play and distress (Palm, 2014). Bourdieu's relational theory suggests that attachment theory does not take into consideration wider societal factors on single-mother families, though it can provide more finely grained details about the child's socialisation process within individual families. Their combination provided a more suitable theoretical perspective to explain how children's development in single-mother families are affected by the interactions between individual inner psychological processes and social structures.

Changes in the mother-father-child dynamics in single-parent families also negatively affects children's social-emotional development. After the family dissolution, there is a marked tendency for closeness and ambivalence in the mother-child relationship but estrangement in the father-child relationship, not only in families where the marital relationship ends in conflict but also in those families where it does not. However, grandparents provided additional support and a holding environment that can offset some of these negative influences. This form of support for single-mother families can serve as a holding environment that helps to ameliorate some of the disadvantages in family structures. Therefore, one of my important research findings was that the family system was transformed from a triadic structure of mother-father-child to a mother-child dyad with grandparents' assistance. The relationships between family members, mother-child, father-child, and mother-father relationships, was no longer protected by the family umbrella. Instead, it led to a new emotional dynamic among mothers, children, and grandparents, greatly benefiting children's development.

Mothers in both groups find themselves in a dilemma due to expensive childcare, emotional stress, and responsibility overload. Participants who work only part-time can hardly earn enough to support themselves and their families and those who work full-time may still not earn enough to afford full-time childcare. Therefore, maintaining income and affordable childcare seems to become a dilemma where single mothers are trapped. After having a child, a woman is still more likely than a man to take time from work to take care of children, which leads to the possibility of missing out on opportunities to advance her career. Women are therefore far more financially vulnerable in the case of separation or divorce due to these earnings penalties (Harkness, 2022).

Participants also felt sad and guilty about not spending enough time with their children. Traditional norms of good motherhood requiring a good woman to follow the

husband-baby-home trajectory deepen this guilt and sadness. Some participants tried to remedy the negative effect on children by providing material compensation and becoming dual parents, taking over paternal responsibility but also unconsciously denying the fact of the father's absence in the family, which is their mechanism of defence against anxiety and guilt. In contrast, there were mothers who chose to be more open and honest with their children, showing that with their limited capacity for parenting they could help them confront and adapt to reality. One of the commonalities between both groups, regardless of cultural difference, is that mothers use self-reflection about their childhood experiences to inform their parenting practices.

A recurring theme of self-reflection is again evident in the revival of mothers' own childhood experiences while parenting their children. An important finding was that their parenting practices showed their intention to break the inter-generational transmission cycle of trauma. By employing retrospective parenting and maternal mentalisation mothers reflected on their childhood experiences, shielding their children from the intergenerational transmission of childhood pain and to stop, what Ferenczi called, the mechanism of "identification with the aggressor". Although traumatic patterns can still be reproduced in mothers' parenting practices, they attempt to recognise and reorganise them to become "good enough" parents or mothers.

This intergenerational transmission can be seen as part of children's socialisation process because children inherit and internalise attachment patterns, beliefs and values from their parents which contributes to establishing what Bourdieu referred to as primary habitus. The establishment of a primary habitus can sometimes be seen as the result of a "passive" intergenerational transmission process. However, I have suggested that the formation of the primary habitus should not be considered a passive process. Without children's agentic capacity, such as active learning and engaging with others, it is very unlikely to take place.

Through active learning and internalisation in the family environment, children's primary habitus is formed over a long period, which acts as a matrix or springboard for the subsequent acquisition of secondary and other habitus.

Furthermore, the adulthood-childhood boundary becomes blurred through the intergeneration transmission process in single-mother families as children possess more adult qualities that contradict the traditional view of childhood as innocent and carefree. Intergenerational transmission can thus be seen as a "structuring structure" because what has been transmitted forms a parenting style, one that is related to the social-cultural related context or habitus—along with children's agentic capacity, it reshapes what they have received and shapes what they are creating. In both groups of participants, children were able to develop a more sophisticated repertoire of emotions than their peers, one more capable of dealing with complex family situations. This might be due to children's experiences of exposure to complicated situations such as family dissolution, parents remarrying, and living with stepparents and stepsiblings, allowing them to learn and practice skills emotionally and interpersonally.

In single-mother families children are also able to express their agency with less constraint in a more democratic parent-child relationship, with British children having more opportunities to learn and practice their emotional and interpersonal skills than their Chinese counterparts. Chinese children grow up in mainly only-child families with no opportunities to learn from and develop skills from siblings. Despite these differences, the commonalities between both groups were significant. I found that the boundaries between parents and children in single-mother households are characterized by a level of openness distinct from that found in two-parent homes, where the parent-child hierarchy is typically shaped by an implicit coalition of two adults holding a more powerful position over their children. This hierarchical structure may diminish in single-parent families with mothers relinquishing some

decision-making control over their children who are more likely to be considered as "junior partners".

Children in both groups were also sensitive to monitoring and discerning other people's emotions, developing socially acceptable skills for emotional regulation. Mothers' emotional-related practices, such as modelling emotional coping strategies, containing children's negative emotions and helping children recognise and label their emotions enable children to learn and develop emotional capabilities, contributing to their social-emotional development and the formation of secure mother-child attachments. Children are therefore more freely able to express their emotions towards their mothers in both positive and negative ways, a strong indication of secure attachment (Brumariu, 2015).

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Approval Letter from the Ethics Board

24/10/2021

Ms Yu Zhao

Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies

University of Essex

Dear Yu,

Ethics Committee Decision

Application: ETH2021-2103

I am writing to advise you that your research proposal entitled "The Association of Institutional Support for Single Parents in China Compared to the UK with Parenting Attitudes and Its Association to Early Childhood Social-Emotional Development" has been reviewed by the Ethics Sub Committee 3.

The Committee is content to give a favourable ethical opinion of the research. I am pleased, therefore, to tell you that your application has been granted ethical approval by the Committee.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further information or have any queries.

Yours sincerely,

Marita Vyrgioti

Appendix 2 : Recruitment Flyer

Are you a single mother?

Your experiences, emotions, and thoughts are very important and valuable for this study

What is this study about?

This study aims to examine the association between the institutional support for single mothers and children's social-emotional development

Why participate?

- You will contribute valuable information to better our understanding of single mother's living conditions and children's social-emotional development.
- you may help those who are facing dilemmas in single parenting

Who can participate?

- Over 18
- British citizenship
- University students or graduates (undergraduate and beyond) who have studied full-time or part-time.
- Have a part-time job with regular income
- Single mother
  - with a child(ren) under eight
  - with no mental and physical illness or serious medical history
  - bringing up a minor child(ren) alone due to divorce, separation, death of spouse etc.
- Can access the internet with a device (tablet or laptop)

If you are interested in participating or want further information, please feel free to contact:

Yu Zhao, PhD student researcher in Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies, University of Essex
Tel : +44 7529149630
E-mail : yz20586@essex.ac.uk

University of Essex
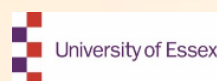
Appendix 3 : Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

For the study of:

Institutional Support for Single Parents in China Compared to the UK: Parenting Attitudes and Its Association with Social-Emotional Development

Hello,

My name is Yu Zhao, and I am a PhD student researcher in the Department of Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies at the University of Essex. You have been invited to participate in this research project. Before you decide if you want to take part or not, I want to tell you why this research is being done, and what you can expect, what you will contribute, and how your data will be processed if you take part. Please feel free to ask if there is anything that is not clear about this study.

Thanks for reading this.

The Research

This research is being undertaken by Yu Zhao, supervised by Dr Norman Gabriel, Senior Lecturer at the University of Essex. The study aims to explore the institutional support and social networks for single mothers, and how it can affect parenting and children's social-emotional development in two different social contexts (the U.K. and China).

This study will compare institutional support and social networks for single mothers and children's social-emotional development in both countries. Then make recommendations on adapting the parental support in each country based on observed differences and comparative advantages from the other country (U.K./China). It will also contribute knowledge to support suggestions for improving parental support across both countries.

This study will collect information about single mothers' experiences of parenting practice, parenting attitude, parent-child attachment, living conditions etc.

Do I have to take part?

Taking part in the research is entirely voluntary, and it is up to you to decide whether to participate. If you decide to take part, you will be asked to sign the 'consent form' and be given the opportunity to clarify anything that is still unclear. You are free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

What will happen if I take part?

After you decide to participate, you will be given the 'consent form'. You only need to sign this form if you agree to take part in the study. You will be given a copy of the consent form to keep.

Six participants have been recruited from Essex University by sending invitation emails through the university directories. You have been recruited because you are a single mother who meets this study's inclusion criteria of good mental and physical health and currently studying in a university or have achieved a university degree.

A discussion group will be arranged for all participants to discuss and share their opinions and perspectives about this topic. The time for the discussion group will not be more than an hour.

This will be followed by two individual interviews with you separately at times and places convenient to you. Interviews will be like a conversation; you are free to talk about your thoughts, feelings, experiences and emotions about being a single mum, how and what you have got for support, what you have done etc. While people sometimes find it helpful to talk about their stories to researchers, this research is not the same as counselling. However, I can give you some useful contacts that can get more help if you need to. The time for an interview varies, depending on how much you want to say, but most interviews will last at least an hour. If there are any questions you do not feel comfortable answering, you do not have to. You are free to change your mind about being interviewed at any time.

The form of conducting the group discussion and interviews will depend on the current pandemic situation, based on the national restrictions and your willingness to participate. It is hoped that the group discussion can be held in a booked study room on campus, and interviews can be conducted either on campus or at your home if you don't want to travel. If the interview is conducted on campus, you will be paid for the cost of your travel, but please keep your receipts. However, if the national restrictions for Covid become stringent, it may be conducted online through Zoom. This will be similar to how you participated in your online meetings and classes and therefore you will need a device (tablet or laptop) along with an internet connection.

Before conducting each of these three activities, whether face-to-face or online, I will ask you if you are willing to be videoed or audio recorded; the records will be transcribed later.

Participating in the research is not anticipated to cause you any disadvantages or discomfort. There are no immediate benefits for people participating in the project; it is hoped that this work will positively impact institutional support and social networks for single mothers. The study's results will be shared with you at your request.

What happens afterwards?

After the interviews, the recordings will be labelled with a code number then anonymously transcribed. You can also choose a pseudonym for yourself. A copy of your transcript will be made available on request. The recording will be deleted after transcribing.

I will produce a report to summarise the key findings and recommendations; sometimes, quotes from the interviews will be used in the reports. The research results may also be published as academic articles. Any results will be fully anonymised, and you will not be identifiable.

Personal computer and USB are handled by the Data Protection Act (1998). According to the University's Research Data Management Policy, research data will be retained for ten years after this project is completed and are made available for access and re-use where legally, ethically and

commercially appropriate, taking note of any relevant safeguards. At the end of the retention period, the data will be shredded confidentiality. The Data Controller will be the University of Essex, and the contact will be the University Information Assurance Manager (dpo@essex.ac.uk).

This study may need a transcription service; then, the transcriber will be required to sign documentation binding them legally to protect the data's anonymity.

What if there is a problem?

Given the nature of this study, it is highly unlikely that you will suffer any harm by taking part. However, if you have any concerns about any aspect of the study or have a complaint, in the first instance, please contact the principal investigator of the project, Yu Zhao, using the contact details below. If you are still concerned and think your complaint has not been addressed to your satisfaction, or feel that you cannot approach the principal investigator, please contact the departmental Director of Research in the department responsible for this project, Matt Ffytche (mffytche@essex.ac.uk). If you are still not satisfied, please contact the University's Research Governance and Planning Manager, Sarah Manning-Press (email: sarahm@essex.ac.uk). Please include the ERAMS reference, which can be found at the foot of this page.

Contact details

Thank you again for agreeing to take part in this research. Please retain this Information Sheet for future reference. If you have any questions about any aspects of the research, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yu Zhao, PhD Student Researcher in Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester

Tel: +44 7529149630 or Email: yz20586@essex.ac.uk

Norman Gabriel, Senior Lecturer in Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies,

University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester

Tel: +44 (0) 1206 874944 or Email: n.r.gabriel@essex.ac.uk

Appendix 4: Consent Form

Consent Form

Title of the Project: Institutional Support for Single Parents in China Compared to the UK: Parenting Attitudes and Its Association with Social-Emotional Development

Please initial box

1. **I confirm that I** have read and understand the Information Sheet dated xx for the above study. I have had an opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these questions answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without giving any reason and without penalty.

3. I agree to take part in the project. Taking part in the project will include being interviewed and recorded (audio).

4. I understand that the identifiable data provided will be securely stored and accessible only to the members of the research team directly involved in the project (Principal Investigator: Yu Zhao, PhD Supervisor: Dr Norman Gabriel), and that confidentiality will be maintained.

5. I understand that my data will be fully anonymised, my words may be quoted and used for research publications, reports and other research outputs.

Consent form (version 2)   Date 22/10/2021   Page 1 of 2
ERAMS reference: ETH2021-2103
This form is the same as the English translation of the Chinese version.

6. I understand that my identity will be kept confidential, the data collected about me will be used to support other research in the future and may be shared anonymously with other researchers.

7. I agree to take part in the above study.

Participant Name   Date   Participant Signature

_____ _____ _____

Researcher Name   Date   Researcher Signature

_____ _____ _____

Project contact details for further information:

Yu Zhao, PhD Student in Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester

Tel: +44 7529149630 or Email: yz20586@essex.ac.uk

Consent form (version 2)   Date 22/10/2021   Page 2 of 2
ERAMS reference: ETH2021-2103
This form is the same as the English translation of the Chinese version.

Appendix 5: Participants' Profiles

Chinese Group				
Pseudonym	Approx. Age	Child(ren) Gender and Age	Location	Occupation
Tong	30's	Boy, 6	Southern China	Art teacher
Ivy	30's	Girl, 7	South-western China	Office administrator
Rainbow Mama	30's	Girl, 8	Northern China	Police officer
Yulu	40's	Girl, 7	North-eastern China	TV presenter
Xie	40's	Girl, 7	Southern China	Public relations officer
Boyu	30's	Girl, 7	North-western China	Physician
British Group				
Pseudonym	Approx. Age	Child(ren) Gender and Age	Location	Occupation
E	20's	Girl, 4	England	Charity staff, Full-time MA student
O	30's	Girl, 6	England	Clinical psychologist, Full-time PhD student
Flo	40's	Boy, 11	England	Schoolteacher, Part-time PhD student
Ju	40's	Girls, 12 & 9	England	Accountant, Part-time MA student
Ja	30's	Boy, 10 Girl, 8	England	Full-time BA student
D	50's	Females, 34 & 25, Males, 32 & 30, Boys, 17 & 15 Girl, 12	England	Full-time PhD student

Note: All participants are anonymised using their agreed pseudonyms.

Appendix 6: Focus Group Interview Schedule

1. How long have you been a single mum, and how old is/are your child/children?

2. How do you feel about being a single parent, and why do you feel that way?

3. Has there been any change in your mindset since becoming a single mum, mentality, or psychologically?

4. What kind of difficulties have you been confronting?

5. Every single mum has had to overcome some difficulties. If you look back on the way you came through, are there any moments you feel it would have been great if there had been some support at that time, and what support do you wish you had had? (Or now, what kind of support do you wish you had?)

6. Have you gained anything from today? This can be the most important thing you hear from other people or what you say.

Appendix 7: FANI Interview Schedule

First interview question:

Can you tell me the story of your life and single parenting experiences—all the events and experiences that have been important to you personally and how they have been for you? There is no rush, and I won't interrupt you. I will just make some notes, in case I have any questions for you after you have finished telling your story.

So, please, can you tell me the story of your life and single parenting experiences—all the events and experiences that have been important to you personally and how they have been for you? Begin wherever you like.

Potential prompts, following participant's narrative order and language:

Parents

1. What was your home life like as a child?

2. What was your relationship with your mother/father like in childhood?

    (For example, did you have an affectionate relationship with your parents?)

3. Were you closer to one parent more than the other?

4. How do you describe your parents' relationship?

  Ex partner(s)

1. How do you describe your relationship with your ex-partner(s) throughout your marriage/partnership?

2. How was your day-to-day life within the marriage/partnership?

    (For example, the divide of household and childcare responsibilities.)

3. How do you describe your relationship with your ex-partner(s) now?

Children

1. How you felt when you first became a parent?

   (For example, did having a child change your sense of who you were?)

2. What difference did having children make to your life?

3. How does becoming a parent change your attitude towards your own parents?

The second interview:

The second interview started with a series of tailor-made questions generated based on the analysis of each participant's first interview to verify and explore more data for the generated preliminary interpretations and themes. This is followed by the below question to elicit more data about their children. The narrative question is:

I would like you to tell me more about your child(ren) and your child(ren)'s life story so far. Is there anything you would like to share with me?

Potential prompts, following participant's narrative order and language:

Emotional regulation

1. How does your child express emotions and feelings? (For example, with words? Are they appropriate?)

2. In what way does your child show his/her loss of temper, how does he/her get angry? How does your child cope with emotions?

   (For example, know how to calm himself/herself down when angry, know how to comfort himself/herself when upset or sad.)

3. What makes your child feel happy? Feel sad? Feel frustrated? Feel Scared? Feel Worried?

Empathy

1. In what way your child show care for other people's feelings?

2. How are your child feelings towards others expressed?
    (For example, emotionally/physically/verbally)

3. Is your child sensitive to others' feelings? Can you explain it?
   (For example, does he/she look sad when someone is hurt? If a family member or friend is sad, angry or upset.)

4. Is your child aware of your emotions and empathise in an appropriate way?

Self-discipline/responsibility

1. Is your child overly/too competitive/over-zealous or submissive? Can you explain it? (For example, always want to win in whatever situation)

2. Does your child understand the notion of honesty and dishonesty? Can you give an example. (For example, does your child lie a lot?)

3. How does your child stand up for himself/herself?

4. How does your child cope with potential challenges in the classroom and daily life and learning?

5. How responsible is your child? Does he behave the same way at school and at home regarding responsibility? (For example, take the response of the fault he causes)

6. Does your child think of good and bad of different options? Give me an example where your child thinks about good and bad in a situation.

7. Does your child consider the consequence for the actions?

8. How independent is your child? (For instance, can take good care of self.)

Self-awareness

1. How confident is your child?

   (Very confident, confident, not very confident, unconfident)

2. What's your child think about his/her own appearance?

   (For example, does your child think he/she is good looking/handsome/pretty?)

3. Tell me your child's self-image and how does it affect your child?

   (For example, how do you experience your child's self-image. Does it affect your child's relationship. How do they see themselves? How does your child interact with other people.)

4. How does your child express the feelings about themselves?

   (For example, happy with who/how he/she is? Or satisfy with himself/herself?)

5. How does your child feel about their academic achievement?

Social skills

1. What does your child feel about go to school?

2. How easy does your child make friends? Does your child often get asked out to play?

3. Does your child prefer to play with older/younger children, or with grown-ups?

4. Does your child have best friends?

   (Tell me some details, for example who are they? How do they become best friends?)

5. If your children have problems with friends, do they tell you?

6. Has your child ever had a social conflict with other children? How did your child cope with it?

7. Would you describe your child as a sociable or unsociable, and can you describe why?

8. How helpful is your child towards other people?

9. Are you aware of any incidence where your child been bullied?

10. Are there any occasions where your child ever been ostracised? Can you explain it?

Appendix 8 Themes, Sub-themes, and Codes

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Support for Single Mothers	Family support Social network Welfare support	• Support from family members and in-laws. • Support from mothers' social networks. • Policy-related support. • Support from children's school.
Feelings of Being a Single-Mother	Perception of single parenthood Attitudes to single parenthood Stigma	• Tough, pressure, anxious, and personal achievement. • Worker harder to maintain finance, protection of families, sadness of not spending enough time with children, and honesty with the situation. • Maternal worries of lacking fatherhood company.
Parent-Child Relationships	Mother-child With non-custodial parent Grandparent-child	• Too close/bonding to the major parents. • Mothers' disciplinary and guiding function. • Spoiled by grandparents (positive and negative influences: secure attached/unconditional love, self-centred). • Grow apart relationship with non-custodial parents negatively affect children. • Children's father figure.
Intergenerational Transmission	Forms of parents' care and communication with children Reflected parental practices	• Parents' own childhood experiences. • Role-model of life events. • Mothers' educational function.
Children's Social-Emotional Development	Agentic child Advanced emotional development Deal with complex relationship Impact from peers and siblings	• Mothers' emotional support function. • Impact from parental separation. • Children's emotional regulation (observation of mothers, modelling) • Live with hurts.