

Explaining the Lived Experiences of Children in Single-child Families: A Qualitative Study

Abstract

Background: Given Iran's decreasing fertility rate and the increasing number of single-child families in this country, a comprehensive examination of the unique experiences and challenges faced by only children is warranted. Therefore, this study aimed to explain the lived experiences of children in single-child families. **Materials and Methods:** In this qualitative study, a phenomenological approach was used to explain the lived experiences of children in single-child families in Ahvaz, Iran, between November 2023 and March 2024. Participants aged 18 and older were recruited to ensure they had sufficient life experience as a single child to meaningfully share their perspectives. Participants were selected through purposive sampling until data saturation was reached. Data were collected through in-depth, semistructured interviews with 18 eligible individuals who met the inclusion criteria. Data analysis was performed using Colaizzi's seven-step analysis method. **Results:** Two main categories emerged: a) positive experiences, which included three subcategories of "no competition," "financial well-being," and "intimacy with parents," and b) negative experiences, involving five subcategories of "parents' excessive sensitivity," "parents' excessive expectations," "loneliness and emotional dependence," "inability to understand certain feelings," and "negative societal views of only children". **Conclusions:** Based on the results of this study, it is evident that being an only child is associated with a range of challenges for individuals, families, and society at large. To mitigate these challenges, health service providers should undertake initiatives to educate and inform families and communities about the potential consequences of single-child families and offer evidence-based counseling interventions.

Keywords: Child, family, life experience, only child, qualitative research, reproductive behavior

Introduction

In recent years, significant changes have been witnessed in the structure and composition of families,^[1] characterized by a declining fertility rate over the past few decades and an increasing tendency for families to have only one child.^[2] The total fertility rate in Iran, which reached 6.9 children in the early 1980s, decreased to less than 2 children within 2 decades. According to statistics, the total fertility rate in Iran reached 1.8 children in 2021 and is projected to fall below 1.5 children by 2025.^[2-4]

A diverse array of factors has been identified as contributing to having only one child. These include family, cultural, social, and economic factors, along with previous negative experiences.^[5-8] In a study aimed at explaining the reasons for having only one child based on women's perspectives, Behmanesh *et al.*^[9] concluded that

women's decision to have only one child is influenced by media and social models that prioritize individualism. Another study highlighted delayed childbearing due to women's employment as a reason for the tendency toward having only one child.^[10]

In recent years, the increasing number of single-child families and their psychological, social, and economic consequences for families and society have been examined in the media and academic circles.^[4] In addition to the social problems associated with having only one child, such as an aging population and a declining workforce, some researchers have also focused on the individual and family issues related to this phenomenon.^[11] It is generally believed that only children have different personality and cognitive characteristics compared to those with siblings.^[12] The negative effects of being an only child include poorer problem-solving skills, excessive dependence, selfishness,

Mina Iravani¹,
Parvin
Esfandiarinezhad²

¹Department of Midwifery, Reproductive Health Promotion Research Center, Nursing and Midwifery School, Ahvaz Jundishapur University of Medical Sciences, Ahvaz, Iran,
²Student Research Committee, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Ahvaz Jundishapur University of Medical Sciences, Ahvaz, Iran

Address for correspondence:
Parvin Esfandiarinezhad,
Ph.D Student in Midwifery,
Department of Midwifery,
Student Research Committee,
School of Nursing and
Midwifery, Ahvaz Jundishapur
University of Medical Sciences,
Ahvaz - 6135715794, Iran.
E-mail: parvinesfa
ndiarinezhad@yahoo.com

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jealousy, isolation, lack of playmates, and excessive reliance on friends to fill the family gap.^[13] According to studies conducted in China, children from single-child families receive more attention and care and have access to better educational opportunities.^[12,14-16] On the other hand, some studies have pointed to physical problems associated with being an only child.^[17-19] For example, Meller *et al.*^[19] reported that children who are an only child are more likely to be overweight or obese.

The increasing number of single-child families and the declining total fertility rate below the replacement level in the country have resulted in an aging population and ultimately a decrease in development indicators. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the various aspects of childbearing. However, a few studies have been conducted on the lived experiences of only children and the impact that the phenomenon of having only one child can have on future generations. Therefore, this qualitative study aimed at explaining the lived experiences of children in single-child families. This study's findings can inform families and communities about the potential consequences of having only one child. These insights can also guide effective policy implementation to support the Ministry of Health's population goals.

Materials and Methods

This qualitative study elucidated the lived experiences of single children using a phenomenological approach. It was carried out between November 2023 and March 2024. Purposive sampling was conducted at Ahvaz Jundishapur University of Medical Sciences in Iran and its affiliated healthcare centers. Participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: being a single child with more than 18 years of age and expressing a willingness to participate in the research. In-depth, semistructured interviews were conducted with individuals who met these criteria and who were capable of providing detailed and relevant information on the study topic. The exclusion criteria included becoming a single child due to the death of a sibling, a specific illness, parental divorce, death, or migration.

Some participants were students at Ahvaz Jundishapur University of Medical Sciences. The students were identified by asking professors and other students. Interviews with these students were conducted at the Doctoral Students' Office of the School of Nursing and Midwifery at Ahvaz Jundishapur University of Medical Sciences. This room was quiet and private, providing a comfortable environment for the participants. Others were invited to participate in the study via telephone after being identified through healthcare centers, and the interview room was a secluded, quiet space in the healthcare centers that was used exclusively for special consultations. The interview location was chosen in agreement with the participants. Moreover, interviews were conducted without the presence of parents so that participants could speak more freely and share a deeper understanding of their lived

experiences with the researcher. This was because some participants might not have been able to discuss certain issues in the presence of their parents.

A strength of this study was that no gender restrictions were imposed in this study, and both male and female participants were included. Participants over 18 years of age were recruited to ensure that they had had sufficient time to experience life as a single child and that they were capable of sharing their experiences.

In qualitative research, sample size is determined after reaching data saturation, which was attained after 15 interviews in this study. However, to ensure reliability, interviews continued with three more individuals, exceeding the initial saturation point of 15. The interview guide included the following general questions: 1. What are your experiences of being an only child? 2. What are the strengths of being an only child for you? 3. What are the weaknesses of being an only child for you? Based on the participants' responses to each question, subsequent probing questions were formulated: "What do you mean by ...?" or "Could you elaborate?". Each interview lasted from 45 to 60 minutes. After obtaining the participant's permission and assuring them of confidentiality, the lead researcher audio-recorded the interviews. Then, they were transcribed verbatim.

To maintain the methodological rigor of the study, Guba and Lincoln's^[20] criteria for credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were employed to ensure the validity and reliability of the data. To enhance the credibility of the findings, rigorous data analysis was conducted, including prolonged engagement with the data and member checking with the participants and the project supervisor. To improve transferability, individuals of both genders and with maximum diversity in terms of age, education level, and economical status were invited to participate in the study. To guarantee dependability, the researcher accurately recorded and reported the research stages to enable others to follow up on the research. The confirmability of the findings was ensured through careful and step-by-step control by two external reviewers with notable expertise in qualitative research.

In this study, Colaizzi's^[21] seven-step method was used to analyze the data. In the first step, the interviews were transcribed and reviewed multiple times. The second step was dedicated to extraction of important phrases containing deep meanings from the participants' experiences. Then, common concepts and their underlying meanings were extracted as codes (117 codes) in the third step. In the fourth step, the extracted codes were categorized based on conceptual similarities. The fifth step involved a comprehensive description of the phenomenon under study. In the sixth step, by incorporating all opinions, a complete description of the desired experience was obtained. In the seventh step, to ensure the accuracy of the data, the participants were contacted again and questioned about the extracted findings.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Deputy of Research at Ahvaz Jundishapur University of Medical Sciences. We then obtained an ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of Ahvaz Jundishapur University of Medical Sciences (Ref. ID: IR.AJUMS.REC.1402.374). Following the receipt of introductory letters from the university, written informed consent was obtained from each participant. All participants were assured of complete confidentiality of their data throughout the study. They were also informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Finally, participants were informed that they could access the research findings upon request.

Results

The aim of this study was to explain the lived experience of children in single-child families. According to the findings, the participants' age ranged from 19 to 29 years. They also had different educational levels, which are detailed in Table 1. The experiences of these individuals were categorized into two main themes (i.e., positive experiences and negative experiences), eight categories, and 23 subcategories, which are discussed in detail [Table 2].

Positive experiences

No competition

One of the most common themes raised by the only children participating in this study was the lack of competition within their family. This meant that without having to strive for attention, they were the center of their parents' attention. Parents provided support in various areas, and their love was not divided. Here are some quotes from the

participants to illustrate this point: *"It is really great that all of my mom's attention is on me"* (Code 5).

"My parents pay so much attention to me that I feel like I am the most important person in their lives" (Code 10). *"Whenever I have a problem, my mom and dad are very supportive, which helps me overcome difficulties easily"* (Code 1).

"If I had a sister or brother, my parents' love would definitely be divided, which I cannot accept at all" (Code 9).

Financial wellbeing

Only children generally enjoy better financial circumstances. In this study, participants also mentioned the quick fulfilment of their desires and the availability of various amenities. *"Whenever I want something, they get it for me very quickly, while my other friends and acquaintances who are not only children are not like this"* (Code 4).

"For as long as I can remember, I have had all kinds of gadgets and facilities, from toys and entertainment since I was a child until now that I am an adult" (Code 7).

Intimacy with parents

Only children often have a close and intimate relationship with their parents. This allows parents to be aware of various issues related to their child, and these children often consider their parents their best friends. *"Not having siblings has made my relationship with my mom and dad very close, and I can easily share anything with them"* (Code 11).

"Maybe if I had a sister or brother, it would not be like this, but now I feel like my mom is my best friend and no one can replace her" (Code 8).

Table 1: Demographic information of the participants

Participant Code	Gender	Age	Education	Father's occupation	Mother's occupation
Code 1	Female	20	Undergraduate	Employee	Employee
Code 2	Male	27	Master's degree	Employee	Employee
Code 3	Female	19	Undergraduate	Employee	Housewife
Code 4	Male	24	Master's degree	Self-employed	Employee
Code 5	Female	19	Undergraduate	Self-employed	Employee
Code 6	Female	22	Undergraduate	Employee	Employee
Code 7	Male	25	Master's degree	Employee	Employee
Code 8	Female	29	PhD student	Employee	Housewife
Code 9	Female	22	Undergraduate	Self-employed	Employee
Code 10	Male	23	Master's degree	Employee	Employee
Code 11	Female	20	Undergraduate	Employee	Employee
Code 12	Female	19	Undergraduate	Employee	Employee
Code 13	Male	26	Master's degree	Self-employed	Housewife
Code 14	Male	22	Undergraduate	Employee	Employee
Code 15	Male	21	Undergraduate	Employee	Employee
Code 16	Male	27	Master's degree	Self-employed	Employee
Code 17	Female	19	Undergraduate	Employee	Employee
Code 18	Male	28	Master's degree	Self-employed	Housewife

Table 2: Themes, categories, and subcategories extracted from interviews

Theme	Main category	Subcategory
Positive experiences	No competition	Being the center of attention
		Overwhelming support
	Financial well-being	Undivided parental love
		Quick fulfillment of wants
	Intimacy with parents	Availability of various facilities
Negative experiences	Excessive parental sensitivity	Parental awareness of children's issues
		Considering parents as best friends
		Worry about the future
	Excessive parental expectations	Worry about health
		Worry about relationships
		Excessive control
		To be the best at everything
	Loneliness and emotional dependency	To fill free time with various classes
		To devote oneself to parents
		To care for parents in old age
		Feeling lonely
		Excessive dependence on parents
	Inability to understand certain emotions	Lack of experience with aunts, uncles, etc.
		Lack of experience with sibling support
	Negative societal views of only children	Inability to do household chores
		Social incompatibility
		Being sensitive and easily hurt
		Being selfish and stubborn

"I am very close with my dad, and even if I had a twin brother, I do not think I could have a relationship as good as this with him" (laughing) (Code 7).

Negative experiences

Excessive parental sensitivity

Due to various reasons such as fear of losing their child, parents of only children often exhibit excessive sensitivity toward their child. This sensitivity manifests in different ways, including worry about the child's future, health concerns, concerns about the child's relationships, and excessive control. This can be burdensome for both the parents and the child. *"My parents try not to show it too much, but sometimes in their conversations, they say: 'What if we are not around one day, what will happen to our child?'" (Code 11). "It is just us and this one child. What if, God forbid, we cannot get him anywhere, what will happen to his future?" (Code 2).*

"They are very careful about everything, even about what I eat or drink. They constantly say: 'Do not eat this, it is bad for your health. Do not stay up late, you will get sick. Do not use your phone or tablet too much, it will hurt your eyes'" (Code 14).

"Recently, they have gotten much worse. They are so sensitive about my friends that they say: 'You should only be friends with someone whose parents we know and approve of' (said sarcastically)" (Code 6). "They are sensitive about everything. Even when I go out with my friend, they call so many times asking, 'Where are you? What are you doing? When are you coming home?'; so much so that even my friend gets annoyed" (Code 3).

"I am sick and tired of hearing 'Go here, do not go there, do this, do not do that, lest something bad happen to you'" (Code 15).

Excessive parental expectations

Having invested all their time and energy into a single child, parents of only children often have high expectations. These expectations can manifest in various areas, such as academics, where they expect their child to achieve the best results. Parents may fill their child's time with various classes, including academic, artistic, and athletic, leaving little room for rest or leisure. In some cases, parents expect their child to disregard their own dreams and aspirations and follow the path that the parents have chosen for them. Some parents constantly emphasize to their child that they must care for their parents in old age, just as the parents have always cared for them. These pressures can have a significant negative impact on the child's wellbeing. *"If I get a low grade, they get really upset and argue with me, asking, 'You cannot say that I have ever skimmed on you, but you are not studying?'" (Code 12).*

"Ever since I can remember, they have enrolled me in various classes alongside school, even if I did not want to go because it was mandatory" (Code 6).

"They do not consider that I am a human too, and that I want to live my own life. They expect me to be completely at their service, do whatever they want, go wherever they approve, and even when I am free, they say: 'Do you have a problem with us that you do not want to be with us and prefer to hang out with your friends?' It is hard to deal with" (Code 15).

"They always say: 'What if we get old, will you put us in a nursing home? We only have you. You have to take care of us'" (Code 10).

Loneliness and emotional dependence

Only children often feel lonely and, due to their solitary upbringing, develop a strong dependence on their parents. *"I always feel lonely. If I had a sister or brother, it would be great. Sometimes you need someone to confide in. You cannot tell your parents everything" (Code 5).*

"Because I am always alone at home with my mom and dad, I am very dependent on them. I feel like I cannot live without them" (Code 6).

Inability to understand certain feelings

Due to the absence of siblings, only children usually fail to

experience certain feelings such as being an aunt or uncle or the feeling of being supported by a sibling.

“When I see my friends talking excitedly about their nieces or nephews and showering them with affection, I am surprised. I cannot really understand it” (Code 8).

“When I hear people talking about the things their siblings do for them, it is interesting to me because I have never had anyone to support me. It has always just been me, my mom, and my dad” (Code 4).

Negative societal views of only children

From the perspective of only children, society has a negative view of them. They are often stereotyped as being unable to do household chores, socially awkward, sensitive, selfish, and stubborn. *“Sometimes when I am in a group and we are talking about housework, others say in a mocking tone, ‘Do you even have any idea how to do that?’” (Code 17).*

“Everyone thinks that because we were alone at home, we cannot get along with others in society and that we are difficult people” (Code 7).

“I often hear from people around me that ‘So-and-so is so sensitive, you cannot talk to them without them getting upset.’” (Code 15).

“Sometimes when we discuss different topics in class, if I have a different opinion, everyone says: ‘You are all selfish and stubborn; you just want things your way’” (Code 11).

Discussion

The present study aimed to describe the lived experiences of only children. Data analysis revealed two main themes: positive experiences and negative experiences. These will be discussed below.

In the present study, positive experiences emerged as one of the main themes. In single-child families, all parental love and attention is showered on that one child whose desires are met excessively. This is in line with McMenamin's^[22] research which also showed that only children do not engage in any competition to attract their parents' attention, which can boost the child's self-confidence. Furthermore, since only children receive a higher level of parental attention and support, they feel more secure compared to other children. Of course, although excessive support could be identified as a positive experience for only children, some studies have shown that it can prevent individuals from experiencing the consequences of their mistakes and can foster a sensitive and vulnerable disposition.^[23-25] Another positive experience of only children was financial wellbeing. There is no doubt that economic factors influence couples' decisions about the number of children, and one of parents' priorities is to provide the best possible opportunities for their child. Couples believe that economic wellbeing guarantees their child's success in various areas. Falbo and Hooper^[26] showed that only children enjoy more privileges and resources. Considering the resources

available to only children, Shao *et al.*^[27] demonstrated that only children exhibit better academic skills and higher life satisfaction. Fazelimehr and Rezvani^[28] reported that only children have higher motivation, academic progress, and life satisfaction compared to their otherwise similar counterparts, which is consistent with the findings of Shao *et al.*^[27] However, Yang *et al.*^[29] found no difference between only children and other children in terms of academic self-efficacy. Therefore, it can be concluded that having abundant resources alone cannot lead to individual success but can increase overall life satisfaction. While the participants in this study reported intimacy with their parents as a positive experience, it should be noted that excessive intimacy can be both beneficial and harmful, as reported by Mortazavi *et al.*^[30] It is beneficial in the sense that parents are informed about various aspects of their child's life, but in some cases, this leads to parental interference in all the child's affairs, creating challenges between the child and the parent.

Negative experiences emerged as another key theme in the present study. Single children identified excessive parental sensitivity as a negative experience. Parental concern for a child is natural, but if the concern is excessive, it becomes bothersome. It seems that in the Iranian society, psychosocial stress has reached such a high level that it is discouraging people from having children. According to a previous study, concern for the future of children is one of the main reasons for the reluctance to have children.^[31] In Tehran, for example, concern about the future of children was reported as a barrier to childbearing in 83.2% of cases,^[32] which is more noticeable in the case of only children. Singh *et al.*^[33] showed that parents of single children control their children excessively. Jalili *et al.*^[34] also reported that parents of only children show excessive control and strictness toward their children, which is consistent with the present study. It should be noted that excessive control creates anxiety and depression in children.

Excessive expectations were reported as a negative experience causing distress among only children. Farnoudian *et al.*^[25] demonstrated that parents of single children project all their aspirations onto their only child, expecting them to excel in all aspects of life. This can lead to perfectionism, a personality trait characterized by striving for flawlessness, setting extremely high standards, and a tendency toward critical self-evaluation.^[35] Such perfectionism can be detrimental and harmful. Shojaei and Yazdkhasti^[36] found that while parents of only children provide more resources to their only child, they have correspondingly higher expectations, which sometimes do not align with the child's abilities and talents. In families with multiple children, responsibilities such as caring for sick parents or alleviating parental loneliness are divided among the siblings. However, in single-child families, these responsibilities fall solely on the one child, which can impose a heavy emotional and psychological burden. Lee and Hwang^[37] also confirmed this finding in their study, stating that as single children are allocated all the family's

resources and opportunities, they also experience greater pressure to succeed.

Sense of loneliness and emotional dependency was common among single children, a finding consistent with the studies of Shojaei and Yazdkhasti^[36] and Rolan *et al.*^[38] Krynén^[39] argues that single children may become better at enjoying solitude and finding self-entertainment, but prolonged isolation can lead to withdrawal, excessive reliance on virtual spaces, and depression. While loneliness can have positive aspects, the psychological implications should not be overlooked. Guillem *et al.*^[40] believe that only children develop a strong attachment to their parents due to the limited social interactions within the home, which can foster excessive dependency. Interestingly, extremes in the variable of dependency can be seen in single-child families, with some children experiencing neglect due to parental overwork, leading to a lack of attachment.^[41]

Only children often express regret about not having siblings, wishing they had a brother or sister.^[41] The longing for a sibling, coupled with the experiences of having aunts, uncles, and cousins, can uniquely impact an individual's physical and emotional wellbeing, potentially leading to detrimental effects.^[30] This is an issue that families should seriously consider. Moreover, the participants in this study reported being deprived of the experience of receiving emotional support from a sibling. Fletcher^[42] argued that single children miss out on the opportunity to learn and develop certain skills, such as emotional support, as interaction with siblings is the first and best environment for a person to experience and learn such support.

Another issue that troubled single children was the negative societal perception of them. Because these children often have their needs met quickly and easily, they may expect the same from society and may not learn the importance of patience and effort to achieve their goals. Dehdari and Ebrahimi^[5] indicate that single children may exhibit more undesirable personality traits such as selfishness. Dehdast and Adibzadeh^[43] found that adults who were single children were less involved in social activities compared to other adults. Individuals can learn about social interaction and adjustment within a family setting, particularly through relationships with siblings. Single children, on the other hand, are deprived of this opportunity. Sadeghi and Roshannia^[44] maintained that single children have weaker social and communication skills compared to their peers who are not single children. Liu *et al.*^[45] demonstrated that being a single child may hinder children's growth in certain cognitive and social areas. However, another study showed that since both parents are more likely to be employed in single-child families, children attend preschool from a very young age and learn some socialization skills.^[41] A limitation of this study was that it only included single children residing in Ahvaz. However, living in marginalized and disadvantaged areas can significantly impact individuals' lived experiences.

Conclusion

Based on the results of this study, being a single child is associated with various challenges for children, parents, and society. Therefore, it is recommended that healthcare providers undertake educational and counseling initiatives to inform families and communities about the consequences of having a single child and how to effectively address and manage the aforementioned challenges. Furthermore, it appears that most positive and negative experiences related to being a single child depend on the family and environmental conditions in which the individual is raised. Future studies are recommended to recruit different ethnic groups and single children residing in marginalized and disadvantaged areas.

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Conflicts of interest

Nothing to declare.

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