

Single Parent Mothers: A Q-Methodology Study

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ABSTRACT

The current study will be an investigation of University of East London students' ideas, beliefs, and shared understandings on the issue of single parent mothers. A Q-methodology research was chosen for this study because it allows people's subjective opinions to emerge from data. Five students took part in this study. It was found that students have scored the negative Q-items as "unlike their point of view," whereas the positive ones as "like their point of view."

Key words: Q-methodology, single-parent mothering, society

INTRODUCTION

Q-methodology was introduced by William Stephenson^[1] during the time he was working as Spearman's¹ research assistant, when Spearman was formulating and refining factor analysis. Q-methodology studies people's opinions, beliefs, shared understandings, values, and attitudes in relation to specific subjects.^[2] In the past, Q-methodology questioned subjective understandings about emotions, such as jealousy,^[3] health and illness,^[4] and the reciprocity between gender and humor.^[5]

Stenner and Stainton Rogers^[3] have discussed jealousy by applying a Q-methodology study. They claimed that they have selected this topic because it is considered as a negative emotion, widely addressed as a "self-evident and self-evidently problematic trait of state."^[4] Jealousy was also considered for them as a paradigm of a drive, subject to intra- and inter-personal controlling mechanisms, as much as complex in relation to politico-moral mediators which are essential for this emotion to be properly understood.^[6,7] They have found that people were feeling jealous in relation to many reasons, such as innocence, helplessness, personal insecurity and inadequacy, guilt feelings, pride, competitiveness, or

suffering in silence. They concluded that the results show a complex interlacing of lay and scientific views into the shared understandings of jealous experiences, which tackled not the *opinionations* of the participants, but their attitudes, personalities, and schematizations.

Kitzinger^[2] in her article presents in a concise account the history and development of Q-methodology. She claims that aspects on feminism were incorporated to past Q-methodology studies. She considers the work of William Stephenson's,^[1] the work of Stainton Rogers^[4] and the work of Snelling.^[8] She discusses topics in relation to feminism, such as homophobia, racism, and sexism, to explore people's beliefs more broadly. However, as she concludes, although she was a great supporter of Q-methodology research, she did not employ it for long. Kitzinger argues the latter, because she thinks that it is difficult to explain subjective opinions in a diverse range of subjective perspectives which are not predefined by the researcher. Therefore, she claims, although a Q-methodology research is an excellent method for revealing a range and diversity of different perspectives, it does not actually enable exploration of how people actively construct and negotiate these different perspectives in interactions with others.

On the other hand, Snelling,^[8] according to Kitzinger,^[2] demonstrates in her article a sophisticated understanding of Q-methodology and her study on feminism provides an exemplary use of the method in researching people's

¹ Charles Edward Spearman (1863-1945) was an English psychologist who introduced experimental (quantitative) methodology in statistics for the study of psychological phenomena. His statistical contribution was that he invented factor analysis and the rank correlation coefficient.

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subjective perspectives, by exploring a diversity of different viewpoints. She identified five major aspects which she discussed in her article as mostly occurred. Her research demonstrates the multidimensional nature of the feminist construct. She concludes that further research is needed towards recognizing the multiple ways of approaching and conceptualizing feminism, to present its constructs as women experience it.

The rationale of this study will be to study feminism through Q-methodology in relation to single parent mothering, so to explore people's values and beliefs, as well as their shared understandings.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were University of East London students coming from different demographic backgrounds. There were two males and three females; one of them was the interviewer (the author of this paper), who was also taking part. Their age range was from 19 to 47.

Materials

The materials used for this Q-methodology study were a Q-distribution Grid rated from -5 to +5 [Appendix A] and 35 statements [Appendix B]. The Q-distribution Grid presented to participants in a page of A3 size and the statements were divided in five categories:

1. Young mothers
2. Single parent mums to mother
3. Social understanding of single mothering
4. Single mothers and benefits
5. Relatives' opinions to single mothering

Procedure

With a group of four confederates, the interviewer decided to generate five main subheadings which could be used for the elicitation of the 35 statements. The interviewer's assumptions and ideas on the subheadings were regarded as valid by his confederates and hence there were brought forth 35 statements in which all five confederates/participants have agreed, so to carry out the Q-methodology study.

Participants were asked to read through the Q-items provided and familiarize themselves with them. They were told to sort the items in three piles: On the first pile, they should put the statements they agree with and place them on the right hand side of the grid; on the second pile, they should put the statements they disagree and place them on the left hand side of the grid; in the middle of the grid, they should put the third pile of statements regarded as neutral and ambivalent. They were asked to study the statements again, so to be sure they have selected the right ones for the correct pile of the grid. Participants were then asked to look at the right hand pile

and select two statements they think as most likely to their view and place them under the +5 marker. On the left hand side pile, they were asked to do the same by selecting the two most unlike to their view and place them under the -5 marker. After that, they asked to return to the right hand pile and select three statements so to place them not as significant as before onto the +4 marker. They were asked to do the same with the left hand pile, by selecting another, not so significant statements and put them on the -4 marker. Eventually, they were finally asked to continue with the rest of the process by moving toward the 0 position, until all Q-statements were positioned. Once they had completed the entire grid, they were asked to see whether they have placed each statement on each box of the grid and also to see whether there were to be made any adjustments and alterations should have felt necessary toward most accurately portraying their views. After completing the study, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation and cooperation, while also asked should they have any further questions to address them to the interviewer.

Participants by taking part in this Q-methodology research study have felt confident for having the chance to present their subjective opinions and experiences and place them in positions most likely and unlikely to their point of views.

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

After completion of the study, it was found that participants have shared their understandings more in position (0). They have generally shared six numbers out of 35 which means they had the same 13 statements out of 35. In relation to the other statements, they have scored three common responses in the rates of -4, -3, and +4 and two responses in the rates of -5, -3, -2, -1, +1, +2, +3, +4, and +5.

In position (0), the participant D seemed to express the same subjective opinions on the statements "*Single mothers are more likely to come from working class background*" (07), "*Single mothers should stay at home to raise their child*" (08), and "*Single mothers should continue their career once their child is born*" (12), which they understood as non-salient issues on single parent mothering. On the other hand, three participants (A, B, and C) have scored the same Q-statement "*Single mothers have babies in order to get a council flat and benefits*" (15) in position (0). In position (0), participants A, B, and C demonstrated a shared understanding under the possible framework of *single mothering as a burden for social services*, whereas the possible framework of understanding for participant D was that *the more the single mothers are the more the problems among the working classes*. In combining the Q-statements of the position (0), the possible framework of their shared understandings should probably refer to *single mothering as a negative impact for the society*.

In the other Q-statements, most of the participants have scored on the same Q-grid position and their shared understandings seemed to be quite frequent. That was to mean that participants (B and C) in position -5 have scored the Q-statement of 30 (*“Single parent mothers should be forced to get married and have a family unit”*) twice. However, in position -3, participants C and E not only scored two Q-statements (19 – *“Single mothers do not have the ability and the experience to raise a child”* and 20 – *“Young mothers prefer to socialize with friends rather than at home with baby”*), but they have also shared their understandings twice. The statement in position -5 could have the framework of understanding that *couples with children should not be allowed to divorce*, whereas by banding together the statements 19 and 20 of position -3, a framework of understanding would sound like *single mothers are quite inexperienced to nurture children all by themselves*.

On the other hand, participants have placed Q-items demonstrating little in common. Participants A and C have placed in position +4 the Q-statement 14 (*“Single mothers are more likely to work hard because they have more responsibilities”*), while the same participants have placed in position +3 the Q-statement 22 (*“Young mothers enjoy playing childlike games with their children more”*). One participant (D) placed in position +4 the Q-statement 14 (*“Single mothers are more likely to work hard because they have more responsibilities”*), which they considered as “most like to his point of view,” in relation to the Q-statement 17 (*“Single mothers are a class of their own”*), which they placed in position +1. The participants who scored Q-item 14 as “likely their point of view” could present a framework of understanding such as *single mothers try harder financially so to provide the best for their children*. On the other hand, the participant by having expressed their likeness in the Q-item 17, they implied a framework of understanding sounding as *single mothers should be believed they belong to a different social class*. By banding these two frameworks together, there appeared the understanding that *single parent mothering demonstrates an independent social status which should be accepted from society*.

Furthermore, one participant (B) placed in positions -4 and -1 the Q-statements of 06 (*“Single mothers should not get any help or benefit”*) and 01 (*“Single mothers should not expect help from their families”*) considering these of a common understanding. “More or less unlike to his point of view” were the positions -4 and -1 for that participant, who disagreed with Q-items of 06 and 01, implying that they did not accept an idea such as *single parent mothering should be left abandoned without any help whatsoever*.

Finally, in observing the two angles of the grid (-5 and +5), there was one participant (C) who placed the statements 30 (*“Single parent mothers should be forced to get married and have a family unit”*) and 24 (*“Young mothers are just as capable as older mothers”*), implying that the range between

these two Q-items sometimes does not represent their point of view, whereas some other times it does. The participant speculated these two angles as “most unlike and most like to his point of view,” which could be bound under a framework of understanding such as *society should check the reliability and the heft of the single parent mothering and provide immediate solutions in this problem*.

The frameworks of understandings have been identified in relation to the participants’ personal views and aspects. They indicated that participants feel neutral about aspects regarding single mothers as a social disadvantage or discrepancy. On the other hand, participants have felt as most unlikely to their point of view ideas such as “single mothers should not receive any support from society or individuals,” as well as they considered as unfair that single mothering may sometimes look as an unnatural situation toward upbringing children. In parallel, they “voted” as most likely to their point of view aspects like single mothers are a valuable example to many couples, because they try harder under the circumstances to be in balance with their children and society. Finally, participants have felt that single mothering should be examined within the range of people’s subjective opinions, in order both, single mothers and society, to be able to cooperate.

CONCLUSIONS

What is generally observed, by interpreting the results of this Q-methodology study is that participants have scored most of the negative statements as “unlike to their point of view,” whereas toward “their point of view” statements with positive meanings. They have also scored, as neutral and non-salient, statements with ambiguous meanings; that is to say, statements demonstrated a positive and negative or without an appreciation in the framework of understanding points of view, which were of a doubtful or uncertain interpretation.

However, there are some other factors, Werner^[9] argues, which should be taken into consideration, to understand better how ideas are shared in such a research, as well as the starting points through which participants are embarked to score toward either the “most likely” or “most unlikely to their points of view.” Such factors are the family background, the social status, religious beliefs, and education. These factors impose on individuals and influence their points of view. An overall discussion of such factors could be a constructive starting point, in order a Q-methodology study to appreciate more of an individual’s shared understandings and subjectivity.^[2,10]

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APPENDIX A

Q-Distribution Grid

Not at all like my point of view				Neutral/no salience				Most like my point of view			
-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5	

APPENDIX B

- Q-statement 1: *"Single mothers should not expect help from their families."*
- Q-statement 2: *"Single mothers are victims of bad parental relationship."*
- Q-statement 3: *"Single mothers are not able to make a good career due to parenting."*
- Q-statement 4: *"Single mothers are a financial drain to society."*
- Q-statement 5: *"Children with ASBO (Anti-Social Behavior Order) are more likely to come from a single mother families."*
- Q-statement 6: *"Single mothers should not get any help or benefit."*
- Q-statement 7: *"Single mothers are more likely to come from working class background."*
- Q-statement 8: *"Single mothers should stay at home to raise their child."*
- Q-statement 9: *"Single mothers are responsibility of the society."*
- Q-statement 10: *"Single mothers have a better ability to understand and relate to their child's problems."*
- Q-statement 11: *"The ability at a single mother should get a great achievement award."*
- Q-statement 12: *"Single mothers should continue their career once their child is born."*
- Q-statement 13: *"I wouldn't mind to have a single mother as my neighbor."*
- Q-statement 14: *"Single mothers are more likely to work hard because they have more responsibilities."*
- Q-statement 15: *"Single mothers have babies in order to get a council flat and benefits."*
- Q-statement 16: *"Young mothers can be productive as single parents."*
- Q-statement 17: *"Single mothers are a class of their own."*
- Q-statement 18: *"Single mothers should be able to receive as many benefits as they want."*
- Q-statement 19: *"Single mothers do not have the ability and the experience to raise a child."*
- Q-statement 20: *"Young mothers prefer to socialize with friends rather than at home with baby."*
- Q-statement 21: *"Young mothers can cope having children at a young age."*
- Q-statement 22: *"Young mothers enjoy playing childlike games with their children more."*
- Q-statement 23: *"It is inconceivable to have young mothers as single parents."*
- Q-statement 24: *"Young mothers are just as capable as older mothers."*
- Q-statement 25: *"Single mothers cannot mother boys properly."*
- Q-statement 26: *"If you are born with the ability to raise a child, being a single mum does not make a difference."*
- Q-statement 27: *"Having a single parent mum gives the child more one to one upbringing."*
- Q-statement 28: *"Single mothers need a father around."*
- Q-statement 29: *"There is no difference between a single mum and a single father to raise a child."*
- Q-statement 30: *"Single parent mothers should be forced to get married and have a family unit."*
- Q-statement 31: *"Single mothers are victims of a bad parents' relationship."*
- Q-statement 32: *"Family should take on the fathers' role for single parent mothers."*
- Q-statement 33: *"Single mothers raise their child better with family support."*
- Q-statement 34: *"Families see single mothers as a burden."*
- Q-statement 35: *"Being a single mum does not have any effect on the family or the relatives."*

Brief Biography

Dr. George Varvatsoulis is a Chartered Psychologist (CPsychol) and works as a cognitive behavioral psychotherapist in NHS (National Health System), England. He is also a British Psychological Society (BPS) Applied Psychology Supervisor and an Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) Supervisor. He has published 68 papers in peer-reviewed journals and three books. His research interests are psychology or religion, evolutionary psychology, and cognitive behavioral therapy.