



Relational Resilience in Māori, Pacific, and European Sole Parent Families: From Theory and Research to Social Policy

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This study reports findings and policy recommendations from a research project that applied a relational resilience framework to a study of 60 sole parent families in New Zealand, with approximately equal numbers of Māori, Pacific, and European (White) participants. The sole parent families involved were already known to be resilient and the study focused on identifying the relationships and strategies underlying the achievement and maintenance of their resilience. The study was carried out to provide an evidence base for the development and implementation of policies and interventions to both support sole parent families who have achieved resilience and assist those who struggle to do so. The three populations shared many similarities in their pathways to becoming sole parents and the challenges they faced as sole parents. The coping strategies underlying their demonstrated resilience were also broadly similar, but the ways in which they were carried out did vary in a manner that particularly reflected cultural practices in terms of their reliance upon extended family-based support or support from outside the family. The commonalities support the appropriateness of the common conceptual framework used, whereas the differences underline the importance of developing nuanced policy responses that take into account cultural differences between the various populations to which policy initiatives are directed.

Keywords: Resilience; Family Resilience; Relational Resilience; Sole Parent Families; Culturally Diverse Families

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This study was a component of a larger research program involving research providers in nine Government Ministries and the Family Centre Social Policy Research Unit. The research program was funded by the New Zealand Foundation for Research, Science and Technology. Study participant cultural groups included: Māori, the indigenous people of Aotearoa, New Zealand; Pacific, people who have immigrated from Pacific Island countries (largely Samoan, Tongan, Cook Island, Tokelauan, Niuean, and Fijian groups, and from Tuvalu, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, and island states of Micronesia); and Europeans, known in New Zealand by the Māori word Pakehā.

INTRODUCTION

New Zealand has one of the highest rates of one-parent families among economically developed societies, with over one in four families with children headed by a sole parent (Child Trends 2015; Statistics New Zealand 2014). Although many cope well, sole parents are, on average, more *vulnerable* than partnered parents to poor outcomes across a number of domains, including higher rates of hardship (Jensen, Krishnan, Hodgson, Sathiyandra, & Templeton, 2006), poorer mental health (Sarfati & Scott, 2001), and greater levels of exposure to violence and other forms of victimization (Morris & Reilly, 2003). Children growing up in sole parent families are also, on average, more vulnerable to poor outcomes, such as lower educational attainment, higher incidence of ill health, and a greater experience of poverty, partly due to the associated low family incomes (Mackay, 2005; Statistics New Zealand, 2012). Supporting people who experience periods of sole parenthood to achieve good social and economic outcomes is therefore critical.

In response to this issue a research program involving nine New Zealand Government Ministries and a Non-Government Organisation (NGO) Family Centre Social Policy Research Unit (FCSPRU) was established to develop new knowledge about sole parents and their families by identifying the factors that enhance or impede successful social and economic outcomes for the parents, their children, and the family as a whole. This study is based on a qualitative study carried out by the FCSPRU (Waldegrave et al., 2011) as a component of the larger study. The qualitative study reported in this article identified and investigated resilience factors displayed by a sample of sole parents who had already been identified as being resilient. The study's orientation and focus was strengths based and informed by a relational view of resilience that considers family resilience to be a property of a collective, functioning family unit. From this perspective, family resilience is viewed, not as an inherent, unexamined, attribute, but as a state that is achieved by a family's collective ability to access and mobilize internal and external resources that support their endeavors and achievements in fields such as employment, income generation, education, health, and social connectedness.

The rationale for carrying out this research with sole parent families known to be resilient was that it would enable identification of the relationships and strategies underlying the achievement and maintenance of resilience. The ultimate aim of this study, and the program as a whole, is to provide an evidence base for the development and implementation of policies and interventions that will support those sole parent families that have demonstrated resilience and assist struggling families to increase their capacity for resilience.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The concept of resilience in relation to human development and well-being is widely understood to refer to a dynamic process of adaptive functioning in the face of significant adversity. It was introduced into human development research in response to growing evidence of positive developmental outcomes being achieved despite significant adversity (Schoon, 2006). The concept was originally applied to the individual person (Kalil, 2003) and is well established in the field of developmental psychopathology.

The idea of family resilience has been developed and applied as a strength-based alternative to deficit-based models of family responses to stress and difficulty (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996), and to pathologizing approaches common in family-focused therapy and research (Walsh, 2002; Webber & Boromeo, 2005; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). In contemporary research, the strengths-based approach emphasizes family strengths and resources when studying negative factors, such as family problems and vulnerabilities (Silberberg, 2001).

Hawley and DeHaan (1996) propose the following definition of family resilience based on an integration of the individual resilience and family resilience literatures:

Family resilience describes the path a family follows as it adapts and prospers in the face of stress, both in the present and over time. Resilient families respond positively to these conditions in unique ways, depending on the context, developmental level, the interactive combination of risk and protective factors, and the family's shared outlook. (p. 293)

For the purposes of this research, Walsh's family resilience framework provided a particularly useful template (Walsh, 1996). In Walsh's framework, family resilience is systemic and relational, with the focus on "interactional processes that must be understood in ecological and developmental contexts" (Walsh, 1996, pp. 261–262). Relational resilience is a property of a collective, functioning unit, such as a family, and:

involves organizational patterns, communication and problem-solving processes, community resources, and affirming belief systems. Of particular importance is a narrative coherence that assists members in making meaning of their crisis experience and builds collaboration, competence, and confidence in surmounting family challenges.

Walsh's elaboration of key processes in family resilience is organized around the three dimensions of her framework: (1) *Belief systems* that facilitate making meaning of adversity, provide a positive outlook, and values of transcendence and spirituality; (2) *Organizational processes* characterized by flexibility and connectedness, and that facilitate the mobilization of social and economic resources; and (3) *Communication processes* characterized by clarity, open emotional sharing, and collaborative problem solving (Walsh, 2002). Within this framework, a family's resilience is marked by its collective success in meeting and overcoming challenges and crises. Consequently, the focus is on demonstrations of strength, coping, and success rather than family damage and dysfunction.

Family resilience in adverse circumstances does not simply refer to intrafamily capacities. It also involves transactions with the social environment, engaging with extended kinship networks, community, and larger systems to mobilize external resources, such as support services, schools, health care, income support, housing, and childcare (Walsh, 2006). A family's resilience depends in part on their organizational practices to access external assistance and, as importantly, on the availability of such support for their well-being and success.

STUDY METHOD

In view of the developmental and ecological contexts in which relational resilience is achieved, and the importance of relationships, networks, narrative, and meaning systems, the study of family resilience is ideally suited to the application of qualitative research methods (Fraser, Richman, & Galinsky, 1999, p. 13). While quantitative methods certainly have their place in studies of family resilience, and have been used to study organizational and communication patterns (Walsh, 1996), for a study such as this, with a strong focus on exploring areas such as family belief systems, meaning systems, narrative processes, and different cultural practices, qualitative methods are the most appropriate ones to apply.

A further consideration pertinent to this research is the strong representation of Māori and Pacific families in the study and the associated need to take seriously the issues of cultural perspectives, cultural etiquette, and protocols, as well as language. The need for careful analysis of the research process with its power issues is increasingly coming under scrutiny across the range of social research in New Zealand (Finau, 2002; Hudson, 2009; Pihama, Cram, & Walker, 2002; Smith, 1999, 2000; Tamasese, Peteru, Waldegrave, &

Bush, 2005; Teariki, Spoonley, Tomoana, Te Whakapakari & Te Mana Tangata, 1992). It raises the specific need for culturally appropriate research methods when research is carried out with Māori and Pacific communities. This extends the concept of resilience in this study to include cultural factors alongside individual and family ones. The research method must give central place to the world views of the participants if it is to reflect authentically their concepts and their experiences. The critical concern is to provide a research process and context in which Māori and Pacific participants can express their own experiences, opinions, and understandings using their own language, be it English, Māori, or a Pacific language, from their own world views.

The inclusion of the child's voice is important for learning about family experience, and particularly so in single-parent families, where the child(ren) are more clearly in the role of significant other. As Ridge (2003) argues, there is very little research on children's experience of family in their own voice. If family resilience is a relational property of the family group to which all members are potential contributors, then it is important to include their perspective in the study.

Other similar studies, such as those in Australia by Geggie, DeFrain, Hitchcock, and Silberberg (2000), Webber and Boromeo (2005), and in Brazil by Yunes (2007), have used a grounded theory, inductive approach, based on the argument that they were exploratory rather than theory driven. In this study, a sequence of manifest and latent analysis was used in which the initial manifest, coding, and analysis are explicitly informed by the theoretical framework, whereas the subsequent latent coding and analysis allowed for use of an inductive approach to facilitate the identification of protective factors and processes that might not have been suggested by the framework.

Research Questions

The research was designed to address three specific research questions:

1. What are the intrafamily dynamics, processes, and behaviors that show positive adaptive functioning in the face of adversity?
2. What are the external and internal resources that help enable positive adaptive functioning in the face of adversity?
3. What are family-based dynamics, processes, and behaviors that facilitate effective engagement with external resources that help enable positive adaptive functioning in the face of adversity?

These questions were addressed through in-depth interviews using questions designed to obtain from adult and child respondents, by narrative means, information about their life histories and experiences as heads or members of sole parent families, both in and out of work. Analysis focused on the repeating themes in the responses of sole parents and their children that identified the source of their resilience and ability to achieve good social and economic outcomes.

Sample

The target sample was 60 sole parent families comprised of 20 headed by a Māori parent, 20 with a Pacific parent, and 20 with a European parent. When all family types are taken into account, including those without children, census data show that 15% of Europeans are sole parent families; comparable proportions for Māori and Pacific families were 34% and 33%, respectively (Superu 2015). The majority of children living in sole parent families in New Zealand were represented in those headed by European, Māori, and Pacific sole parents.

Interviews were to be conducted with each of the 60 custodial sole parents and with 30 of their children (10 from each cultural group) aged 7–15 years. The 60 families were identified as having demonstrated resilience through their known success in having overcome the difficulties and challenges associated with their situation such as: being poor; having poor health; living in deprived neighborhoods; being subject to violence; being subject to discrimination on the basis of factors such as ethnicity, sexuality, and/or socioeconomic status. The identification and selection process was guided by the resilience factors indicated by Walsh's family resilience framework and the demonstration of positive social and economic outcomes. These included: belief systems that enabled them to develop positive meanings out of adversity, a positive outlook, and a transcendent sense of larger values, purpose, and future goals; organizational patterns that demonstrated flexibility, connectedness, and attain at least minimally adequate social and economic resources through work, mobilizing kin, networks, and/or social security bodies; and communication processes that demonstrated clarity, open emotional sharing, and collaborative problem solving.

Families that met most of the resilience-related criteria outlined above were identified by Māori, Pacific, and European members of the research team through their contacts in the communities concerned and with the assistance also of organizations of care and support such as Family Start, Plunket, Birthright, Te Kohanga Reo, Aoga Amata, Pacific churches, Pacific community networks and organizations, and marae. The community knowledge of the researchers and these organizations was vital in identifying sole parent families considered to be either higher or lower on the resilience spectrum.

Participants were recruited with the help of the organizations noted above, in the Wellington, Horowhenua and Manawatu, and Marlborough regions of New Zealand. Most of those interviewed were mothers, but two of the Māori custodial parents interviewed were fathers, as were the three Māori noncustodial parents interviewed. All households were sole parent headed households on modest incomes. The final sample recruited and interviewed is shown in Table 1.

Interviews

Interviews were guided by a semi-structured question line developed by the research team in consultation with members of the other work streams for this overall research program and with ad hoc advisory groups drawn from the Māori, Pacific, and European communities in the greater Wellington area with which the researchers had the closest and most frequent contact.

The Māori advisory group consisted of the Māori member of the research team and marae-based kaumatua/elders who possessed a wide range of experience and understanding in working with Māori communities. They provided advice on networking and other issues when needed by our research team. The Pacific advisory group consisted of the Pacific members of the research team and Pacific community and church leaders with

TABLE 1
Interview Sample Composition

Ethnicity	Custodial parents	Noncustodial parents	Children age 7–10	Children age 11–15	Total
Māori	18 females, 2 males	3 males	4	5	32
Pacific	20 females	0	5	6	31
European	20 females	0	6	7	33
Total	60	3	15	18	96

experience of working with Pacific communities, and knowledge of their languages, conditions, and challenges. The European advisory group consisted of the European members of the research team and representatives from service and church-based organizations involved and experienced in the provision of support to European sole parent families.

The question line broadly covered the three dimensions of Walsh's Family Resilience Framework: belief systems; organizational patterns; and communication processes. The question line provided a guide for the interviews and served to ensure that the necessary areas were covered. In many interviews respondents spoke about some matters before being asked. This occurred naturally in the course of the flow of their narrative, and it was left to the interviewer's discretion whether or not they returned to matters that had already been covered when the interview reached the question concerned on the question line. The interviewers were experienced Māori, Pacific, and European fieldworkers who interviewed respondents belonging to their own ethnic group. The interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Analysis

Analysis of the qualitative data was undertaken by Māori, Pacific, and European members of the research team. Intercoder reliability between the ethnic groups was developed prior to interviewing. Analysis focused on the repeating themes in the responses of sole parents and their children that identify the source of their resilience and ability to achieve good social and economic outcomes. Data analysis followed a categorization strategy in which interview transcripts underwent two stages of coding (David & Sutton, 2004, p. 204):

1. Manifest coding according to interview schedule areas of questioning and a coding scheme developed in parallel to the questionnaire development;
2. Latent coding (*Ibid.*) according to themes that researchers develop as they engage with the transcript data, guided by the family resilience framework, the quantitative research, and the wider literature.

The coding process focused on the following questions:

- What are the repeating themes in the responses sole parents give when identifying the source of their family's resilience and ability to achieve good social and economic outcomes?
- What are the repeating themes in the responses the children of sole parents give when identifying the source of their family's resilience and ability to achieve good social and economic outcomes?
- What are the intrafamily dynamics, processes, and behaviors that show positive adaptive functioning in the face of adversity?
- What are the external and internal resources that help enable positive adaptive functioning in the face of adversity?
- What are family-based dynamics, processes, and behaviors that facilitate effective engagement with external resources that help enable positive adaptive functioning in the face of adversity?

The manifest coding process was informed by the family resilience framework outlined above and focused upon the identification, description, and analysis of the respondents' narratives around the broad areas of belief systems, organizational patterns, and communication in the achievement of positive social and economic outcomes that the

question lines were designed to obtain. The manifest coding scheme was clearly structured according to the Walsh framework, with the addition of codes relating to respondents' relationships with external agencies and support providers and to respondents' views about the effectiveness of the support and programs provided. The manifest coding scheme also included identifiers for case family, gender, age, ethnicity, and other demographic and socioeconomic markers and factors for resilience, such as education and income.

The latent coding process brought an inductive approach to the transcript material following its categorization during the process of manifest coding. Codes were developed both to represent themes and subthemes explicitly linked to the manifest codes, and to represent new themes and subthemes that were not explicitly or obviously linked to the manifest codes. The latent coding process integrated the elements of the framework, including the role(s) of external support factors, to provide coherent accounts of the interrelationships between the elements of the framework, including external sources of support for individual families, by ethnicity, by family type, and by other types of differentiation identified as significant during the latent coding and analysis process.

Transcript coding and data analysis were assisted by use of the qualitative data analysis program, QSR NVivo (QSR, 2008), as appropriate. Transcripts of each of the three ethnicities were coded and analyzed independently by researchers from each ethnicity.

FINDINGS

Becoming Sole Parents

The pathways that these respondents had taken to being sole parents were very similar across the three populations. The interviews, as narrated by the sole parents, uncovered stories of infidelity, substance addictions, abuse, and generally unsupportive behavior by the respondents' former partners. Nearly a third (32%) had always been sole parents, having never entered a relationship with the other parent.

Challenges of Sole Parenthood

The challenges faced by these sole parents were also similar across the three populations. Some challenges followed from the negative experiences and conditions that led those who had been in relationships to leave them. The challenges found in each population in varying degrees included: insufficient income, children's health, housing, family/whānau relationships, lack of employment skills, lack of suitable employment for sole parents, and lack of partner support. Drugs, alcohol, and family violence had been features of many relationships. For the most part the sole parents had left these behind when they became sole parents, but some were still learning to remain free of drugs and to limit alcohol. Health was an area of challenge which varied across the populations. Pacific sole parents and their families had the highest incidence of physical health problems, but they showed no serious mental health problems. European respondents identified a range of physical and mental health challenges. Interviews with Māori respondents revealed very few health-related challenges.

Typical was the comment of one mother who had children with asthma, which she attributed to her cold housing:

It's freezing. And I've got heaters and dehumidifiers. And I worry. I worry a lot about them being sick. And how the home's not good enough for them. But where on earth could we move to...?
(Jenny)

Although housing for some was adequate, for many it was not good, and sometimes substandard and crowded. It was apparent that for quite a number, the medical needs of members were often not met. Some of those not employed considered that the Ministry of Social Development's Work and Income section did not let them know their full entitlements as sole parent beneficiaries and stereotyped them as though they were wanting to take advantage of the system. All these issues were experienced as barriers to a full and happy life, but each research family had demonstrated resilience in the face of these difficulties.

Coping and Resilience

The family dynamics, processes and behaviors, and the external and internal resources that supported the positive adaptive functioning of the sole parent families included in this study are discussed under the three broad areas of the Walsh Family Resilience framework: Belief systems, Organizational patterns, and Communication processes. The contribution and participation of children in the processes involved are also discussed.

Belief Systems

Those interviewed overwhelmingly displayed very strong positive attitudes and values. These values were based, in varying combinations, on underlying family traditions and values, cultural frameworks, and spirituality. Beliefs and values of their family of origin were identified by many who linked their own belief systems and positive outlooks to their own upbringing. One European mother said:

Like you don't lie, cheat or steal. And my parents agreed on those kind of core values, you don't lie, you don't cheat, you don't steal. (April)

A Pacific mother put it this way:

The key thing was . . . knowing my family. Knowing myself. Like my grand-aunty and my grandmother used to talk about family stuff, . . . they would tell us stories about our family. . . . It was just some of the stuff I still remember and also the values of being Samoan . . . [to] be grounded. Knowing where I come from, the importance of my family, and one of the important ones is just knowing my place. My place within the family. (Samual)

Explicit expressions of church-based spirituality were found among many respondents in each population, but were most widespread among the Pacific parents. Spirituality in a broader sense was also clearly apparent among both Māori and Pacific parents in their expression of cultural values and practices associated with caring and love, reciprocity, service, and obligation. One Māori mother explained how she often drew strength from her mother's strong spiritual beliefs.

My mother was the one that guided us over the hurdles and she always pointed us to God and even when she was alive not so long ago she used to tell me to instill that in (my son), but she did that, she did that for me. (Peti)

At the same time, a few parents, particularly European and Māori, had consciously adopted value systems that were actually contrary to those of their upbringing, and had done so to escape the negative consequences of those upbringings. Some of these had come from violent or conservatively religious households.

The values that were most frequently mentioned among Māori participants were related to whānau (extended family), concepts such as manaakitanga (caring), aroha (love), and whānautanga (maintaining whānau relationships). The need for hard work, acceptance of one's lot in life or humility, and respect for others were also mentioned. Education was considered an important value, particularly for their children.

Positive views about education and employment were strong among all three cultural groups—even among those whose own educational and employment experiences had not been good. These views reflected a strong desire for their children to do well at school and also for the parents themselves to improve their own education and future employment prospects. A particularly strong example was Heather, who had left school at the end of the fifth form, gone flatting with her boyfriend at the age of 17, and had her first child at 19, followed by another child. In the 6 years since becoming a sole parent she has gained a nursing degree while on the DPB (a government transfer payment to single parents not fully employed) and with a Training Assistance Allowance (to meet tertiary costs of education study and employment-related training). Heather was soon able to register as a midwife and busy completing the final stages of her training:

So part of my training for my degree is this year I have to do 880 hours [hospital placement]. . . . So I have done my first half of the year placement in the hospital on 12 hour shifts, so hence I had to rely on quite a bit of childcare there. Doing day and night shifts. Umm, and I am currently on call, so I've now got 440 hours to do for the second half of the year. I am out with an independent . . . Lead Maternity Carer, so midwife, out in the community. So umm, I am on call for births 24/7 and umm, spend my days doing clinics and post natal visits and stuff really.

Beliefs in the value of hard work and the transformative power of education were common across all three populations.

Organizational Patterns

The findings for the three populations with regard to accessing resources and sources of support that contribute to achieving and maintaining resilience are very similar, overall, with regard to *strategies*, but different as far as *tactics*, or the processes of mobilizing these resources were concerned. For example, the relational basis of family resilience was evident in the strategies used by the European, Māori, and Pacific sole parents interviewed and were revealed through the ways in which they accessed and combined the resources and sources of support available to them. Where their tactics differed was in the types of support they were most likely to use. For example, although Māori sole parents did use external sources of support, they tended to focus on support relationships with family, in preference to other agencies, to a much greater extent than European and Pacific sole parents. For example, when Māori respondents were asked how they would manage financially if there was no Domestic Purposes Benefit, most of them said that they would not be able to survive if they were not working and if they did not receive support from their whānau (extended kin). Fortune's response is typical:

If I didn't have the whānau support, no, I wouldn't of made it but because I had such good whānau support from both whānau, that's how I made it, cos they'd buy my boy clothes and make sure we had food, you know I had so much support so I never felt the struggle as a sole parent with [son].

Although Pacific and European sole parents made greater use of support from external agencies than Māori, they also spoke of support from family. For example, most Pacific participants described being well-organized, either sharing chores or taking charge of their lives and taking care of their children. Being organized may mean having a roster and having meals planned:

The household is quite structured. There's a roster . . . there is no abuse, no shouting because the kids know what to do.

We have a menu every week. On Monday it's toast; Tuesday, roast chicken, potato salad; Wednesday, French toast; Thursday, I cook something simple. On the weekend I cook. So I save. (Paul-ette)

Speaking of external sources of support, one European mother was very clear that the system itself could make it easier for parents by making sure information was available as soon as they came in contact with any agency. Parents would not have to rely on coming across information haphazardly over months:

And also access to resources. You mentioned the library, but actually, you know, a package that kind of, when you're a single parent, um, here are some things you might want to know. You might want to know that you might qualify for an accommodation supplement. If you're having difficulties with the children you might want to know that these books are particularly good for, you know, prepubescent children. (Karla)

In martialling resources, whether from family or from external sources, the parents of all three populations displayed a common commitment and skill in managing and, where necessary, creating the relationships and networks involved. For European and Pacific parents this skill was applied to sources of support external to their families, whereas for many Māori parents the skill was applied, in some cases, to the maintenance or reestablishment of longstanding family relationships and networks, and in others to the establishment of new ones when they needed to escape relationships that had proved destructive for them.

Most parents had some form of employment, with some working full time but most part time. Beliefs in the value of hard work and the transformative power of education were, as already noted, common across all three populations. Overall, Pacific families referred to their work ethic more often than the other groups and had the most employed. Despite their high participation in work, the sole parents found it difficult to obtain suitable employment with satisfactory hours for parenting and managing household tasks. Willingness and ability to work longer hours was also influenced often by shortage of adequate good-quality childcare that covered the full hours of employment and also by what were perceived as high abatement rates for the Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB) to single parents not fully employed as their work income increased.

Although a number had taken advantage of training and educational allowances to improve their educational qualifications and others wished to, opportunities to improve their credentials—and hence their employment prospects—had declined since the Training Incentive Allowance benefit ended. The parents generally regarded well-paid employment as key to improving their economic well-being, a view shared by their children. Employment was also associated with stability and self-worth, as one European mother said:

Employment, maintaining work when all sorts of other things are crumbling around you, can actually be quite a stabilizing influence. (Karla)

Communication and Decision making

In families from each population, household management and decision making functioned in a cooperative manner but with the parent clearly in charge. The extent to which children influenced household decision making tended to grow congruently with age. In all groups, parents were proactive in maintaining relationships and communication with their children, and passing on their values to them. For many Pacific and Māori participants, communication and decision making were likely to include family members beyond the immediate parent and child unit, whereas for European participants it occurred mainly between the parents and their children. As one Māori mother explained, her grandparents' ability to communicate effectively in challenging situations functioned as a key whānau resource. She recalled how they would always talk to the whānau (wider family) whenever they were experiencing hard times or if there was some challenging event the whānau had to deal with:

... they [her grandparents] were able to talk about anything and everything, they always came to a conclusion on how they were going to deal with something, cope with something. ... And they spoke about it, they didn't bottle it up. We always had like family meetings in the lounge. (Terehia)

The possibility that Pacific parents might have more directive or hierarchical parenting practices than European, and, perhaps Māori parents, was not borne out by the findings, which showed all to be similarly open to involving their children in decision making.

The Views of Children

Prominent in the interviews with children were their views about (1) family financial challenges and the value of parental employment; and (2) relationships with parents, highlighting the support and appreciation of their custodial parent.

Family financial challenges and parental employment

Interviews with children revealed them to be clearly conscious of their often limited financial means, but also very philosophical about their situations. Many of the children of European, Māori, and Pacific sole parents were aware that they had fewer material possessions than other children they knew, and although they would have preferred to have acquired similar possessions, they expressed the view that they had enough for their needs. Some children said it was hard not having the right gear for sports or being unable to participate in school trips because their family could not afford them. The children in all groups supported the idea of their custodial parent engaging in paid employment mainly because of the economic improvement this would bring to their families, for many, also because they thought it made their mothers happier. [See also Ridge (2002, 2003) for accounts of this response from children.]

All Māori child respondents were happy for their parent to go to work; even the younger ones were aware that if mum went to work then they might have more money to buy things. A nine-year-old boy remembered when his mother did not have a job:

Umm, it was really hard for us to get food that we liked, cause there was, this was just after my dad left, umm, we didn't get the food that we liked, we only got all the cheap stuff, but we had to eat it otherwise we would starve. And I think for about 3 days we didn't have the TV because we should have paid our bills. And yeah, that's what it was like. ... Yeah, it was really hard.

Against that background he thought it was very important that his mother now had a paying job:

Really important [that mother works] cause dad doesn't give us much money to help with the family, well not that I know of, so if mum didn't work we wouldn't have light, we wouldn't have food, or maybe a little bit, cause nana will help, we wouldn't have TV, we wouldn't have hardly anything of the stuff we have in here. (#13 Boy, age 9)

Two Māori sibling respondents said that their parent currently works and they are happy about that: "Glad mum works rather than being on a benefit. I can't see her stopping work anyway she'd never stop and be on the benefit, yeah it's just not how she is sorta thing."

Two Māori respondents whose mothers were not currently working believed it would be much better if their mothers were working. As one of them said:

Better if she works so she's not sitting at home thinking about everything and getting all stressed out. ... Will give her something to do, she's always stuck and always waiting for someone to come along with a car and go somewhere.

Relationships with parents

Overwhelmingly, the children interviewed expressed considerable support and appreciation of their custodial parent. They were usually very protective and sensitive toward them and were often aware of the pressures they faced. A fifteen-year-old boy whose father had committed suicide was very appreciative of his mother, in the absence of his father. When asked what life was like in his family he said:

Well it's not bad. . . . Umm, well there is not that much arguing, it's not like money isn't the biggest deal, well it is kind of. So if I need a uniform and stuff, or something like that. Ummm, mum is always there for us, like if we need anything. Umm, it kind of sucks not having a dad. You know I don't really know what it is like to have one. Otherwise she's done a bloody good job. (#10 Boy, age 15)

He was very supportive of his mother and thought that he and her other children were more supportive than other people she knew, apart from her boyfriend. *Moral support yeah, like if mum is not happy, like I won't do anything bad to irritate her at all. . .* (#10 Boy, 15)

Their attitudes toward their noncustodial parents were varied and reflected the degree of contact they had, the treatment they had received from them in the past, and the nature of their present relationships with them. Some children supported their parent's (usually their mother's) decision to separate because of the other parent's behavior. In a few cases children expressed the wish that their parents be together.

For some, relationships with their fathers could be difficult or nonexistent. One European boy's father was in prison and he knew very little about him: "Oh, well he goes to church in jail, he's just trying to be good so he can get out. I really don't know that much." One Pacific boy, living with his paternal uncle, had regular telephone contact with his father living in the United States. But his feelings for his father were ambiguous:

I don't see him, he just calls.

Has he been there a long time? (Interviewer)

Yeah.

What do you think about your Dad? (Interviewer)

Can I pass on that?

So would you like to have contact with your father? (Interviewer)

Kind of.

Children's evaluations of their noncustodial parent could be influenced by the facts of their parents' separation and its circumstances. For example, a European mother had sometimes wondered whether it would have been better to have remained with her husband for financial reasons. But that feeling was dispelled when her daughter affirmed her decision, by telling her that although she loved her father, she should never regret having left him.

For one European 13-year-old girl, contact with her father could be problematic, and because he did not treat her very well she was allowed to decide herself whether she would see him or not:

He just gets really angry, and like he takes it out on me, but he doesn't actually recognize that he is hurting me and that's over the phone and on the internet, on MSN and so my mum said, that if it was okay with me, I wouldn't talk to him for a while. And yeah, so the last time I talked to him was about 2 months ago maybe, yep.

However, in most cases children did enjoy time with their fathers and having regular contact. One European boy, who spent weekends with his father, commented that he might prefer the custody arrangement some of his friends had, involving alternate weeks with each parent.

POLICY ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has demonstrated that the sole parents who participated took many initiatives and were very competent at bringing up their children despite the difficult life situations they had experienced. They also stated what helped them become resilient and where the barriers and challenges were. Analysis of their responses identified particular areas in which the development and implementation of appropriate policies could assist sole parent families to improve their well-being in a positive way that neither pathologizes nor stereotypes them. These areas are outlined below.

Drawing on Values, Beliefs, Culture, and Spirituality

Values, beliefs, and both cultural and spiritual resources were identified as important for building and sustaining a positive and resilient outlook among sole parents of all ethnicities represented. To counter the high risk of negative outcomes in sole parent households and enhance family resilience, this study suggests that policy making and interventions could be strengthened by recognizing and encouraging these positive shared belief systems and by supporting initiatives, organizations, institutions, and cultural groups that serve to foster them.

It is crucial for such efforts to be attuned to each family's cultural and spiritual orientation and resources. An initiative like Whānau Ora in New Zealand which is driven by Māori cultural values to empower communities and extended families (whānau) to support families within their cultural community context offers a positive example.

Likewise, many NGOs are built on strong value and belief systems and are often more trusted than public service agencies. Policy developers could well consider targeting and devolving resources from central and regional government to cultural groups and NGOs specifically to support sole parent households in need. This would replace the all too common deficit approach.

Making Key Resources More Accessible

Sole parents often carry alone considerable responsibilities for their households that are usually shared in other household types. Thus, their access to resources especially for their children is critical. A number of important areas of services were identified which need to be well resourced and easily accessible to benefit parents and children. Drug and alcohol dependence assistance was one area of need, as was stopping abuse services and relationship support and advice to sole parents. Such services should be prominent in communities with referral to them as soon as difficulties emerge.

Although some study participants experienced the government department of Work and Income as a helpful organization, some from each group also reported negative and stereotyping interactions from staff. If government services were to adopt an approach to enhance family resilience, then their staff orientation and management could be reoriented to act as useful resources for sole parent families to draw on in managing their lives. They would maintain the role of providing income and benefit support, but also provide a range of helpful social support alongside employment help. Because they are in the unique position of being in contact with so many sole parents, they could pass on really helpful information and enable greater social contact for sole parents. They could, for example,

renew their image by thickening access to helpful community groups and services through packaging attractive “handy hints” information.

Education, Training, and Employment

Most sole parents in this study preferred to be employed, but needed flexible employment hours that did not compromise their responsibilities as parents. They also needed good-quality childcare that would cover the full hours of employment and travel to and from work. Governments can facilitate these goals by setting the example and providing flexible hours of employment in the public service on a large-scale basis. They can also lead promotional drives with employers about the need for greater working hours’ flexibility. Furthermore, they can help all parents in the labor market with children, and sole parents in particular, by providing well subsidized, easily accessible childcare with well trained, early childhood educators comprehensively for all children.

Many parents sought opportunities to improve their lives through study and to help their children achieve the same. It is clearly beneficial to support sole parents to take such opportunities and this could be facilitated by sole parent study allowances to make tertiary study affordable. This should improve educational aspirations and facilitate movement from the benefit to employment. Investment in organizations that promote the education of parents and children in sole parent households can be expected to lift their life opportunities and reduce future welfare costs.

Housing

Housing was the largest single cost for these sole parents, as for most low-income households, yet decent and affordable housing is essential for families to feel secure. Security and suitability of housing could be improved through social housing that is well tailored to meet the needs of sole parents, with a full range of different social housing products for rentals as well as home ownership. Mortgage assistance programs developed specifically for them, combined with educational assistance, would increase housing equity and access too often denied to them.

For some cultures, as with Māori and Pacific sole parents, the availability of larger, four or more bedroom, units would enable families to live in higher concentrations of extended family housing, if they choose to. Another need identified was for a greater availability of safe houses for mothers to escape from family violence with their children—or for fathers who have been violent to their partner and/or children to move to, so the mother and children can remain in their family home.

Investment for Children’s Positive Development

The policy areas discussed here are all directly applicable to the well-being of the children in sole parent households. This research has also demonstrated the positive contribution that children often make to the resilience of their families. Investment in organizations that promote the well-being of children through educational opportunities, cultural and sporting participation, and holidays or experiences beyond their own home can be expected to lift their life opportunities and reduce future welfare costs. This type of investment should be widely available and easy to access.

DISCUSSION

This research with sole parent families known to be resilient was carried out to identify the relational strengths and strategies underlying their achievement and maintenance of

resilience, and to provide an evidence base for the development and implementation of policies and interventions both to support those families that have achieved resilience and to assist struggling families to increase their capacity to adapt positively to adversity.

As reported, the study has identified and examined the ways in which the known contributors to family resilience that are summarized in the Walsh framework of relational resilience are actually used and applied in the lives of resilient sole parents. As a result of this it has been possible to identify ways in which these parents might have been enabled to achieve more for themselves and their families, and the external services that supported them. It has also been possible to suggest ways other sole parents can achieve a greater sense of well-being for their families and the external supports that would help them. Section 5 of this study addressed those matters by identifying policy issues that arise from the findings and proposing policy responses to them.

Although this study did not set out to formally test Walsh's framework, its findings do generally support the framework's value as a model of the key processes upon which relational resilience is based. This conclusion is supported by the commonalities shown by the three populations included in the study regarding the importance of purposeful relationship building and maintenance in the processes of maintaining family cohesion and purpose, and mobilizing internal and external sources of support. The study, at the same time, underscores the importance of developing nuanced policy initiatives that are responsive to the cultural values and differences of varied populations and their social contexts.

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