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Perceived Parental Bonding: A Comparative Study between Adults Growing up in Single Parent and Both Parent Homes

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Abstract: Parental bonding is an intense attachment in relationship that develops between the parent and child during the early years of life. Scientific literature asserts that parent-child bonding is an important predictor of the child's immediate habits, thoughts, and emotions and its long-term personal and social growth. The present study investigated perceived parental bonding in adults from single-parent and both-parent homes to understand if parenting conditions influenced the bonding relationship. Parental Bonding Inventory (PBI) was used to evaluate one's attachment to one's parent from the adult child's point of view. 200 adults with single parents (n=100) and both parents (n=100), with a mean age of 29.45 years participated in the study. Results from independent sample t-test showed that participants who grew up with single parents perceived lesser care and higher overprotectiveness from their father/mother, while those from both-parent homes perceived more care and lesser overprotection from their father as well as their mother. Further analysis revealed that individuals from single-parent homes reported affectionless control type of bonding to be persistent in their relationship, while those from both-parent homes reported optimal bonding with their parents.

Keywords: Parental bonding, Parent-Child Relationship, Parenting Conditions, Single Parent, Both Parents

1. Introduction

Relationships are the essence of human existence. Of all the interpersonal bonds that one cultivates and shares throughout one's life, parenting is probably the most demanding one. Parenting involves an intricate connection between the parent and the child, which sooner or later dictates the child's overall development. As parents govern and control their children's lives more than anything or anyone else, they have an unprecedented influence on the child's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors that go a long way (Shaunessy-Dedrick *et al.*, 2015). A parent is expected to always ensure the child's safety, transmitting moral and cultural values that prepare the child to be a healthy and productive adult. The levels of care and protection that a parent demonstrates towards the child are the key elements that direct the child's ability to form this essential bond with their parent (Kidd *et al.*, 2022). Since parental bonding is the very first relational bond to form, the initial patterns of attachment set here affect all other relationships that the child will ever build in the course of their life (Bosmans *et al.*, 2006).

It was John Bowlby (1958), an English psychiatrist famously known as the father of attachment theories, who first formulated an organized explanation of parental attachment and its lasting repercussions. His work established the foundations for the developmental models of attachment and psychopathology (Bretherton, 1992). Following his theorization, Mary Ainsworth (1970) conducted her analysis on parent-child attachment and proposed three invariant attachment styles: secure, insecure-avoidant, and insecure-ambivalent types. She believed that secure attachments lead to desirable outcomes, whereas insecure attachments had adverse effects on the child. After Bowlby and Ainsworth demonstrated the importance of parent-child relationship, a substantial number of studies began exploring the effects of parental behavior on child development (Bretherton, 1992). Today, experts have come to acknowledge that parenting practices have a domineering influence on attachment styles and their invariant consequences (Argyriou *et al.*, 2016). While effective parental practices (like care, support, responsiveness, emotional warmth, positive discipline, and having clear boundaries) are linked to healthy adjustment, interpersonal



success, pro-social behavior, and positive self-image in the child, ineffective parental practices (like high levels of control, overprotectiveness, higher expressed emotions, lower autonomy, poor communication, hostility, abuse, and neglect) are detrimental for the child (Neoh *et al.*, 2021; Raffagnato *et al.*, 2021). Problem behavior, emotional distress, academic failure, low self-esteem, addictions, interpersonal difficulties, social incompetence, maladaptive coping, and a host of mental health issues experienced throughout childhood, adolescence, and adult years are attributed to poor parenting (Kidd *et al.*, 2022; Sroufe, 2005; Xu *et al.*, 2018; Yanhong & Shumin, 2022).

Given the importance of the parent-child relationship, empirical research that has explored factors that impinge on parental-child bonding opine that bonding relationships are a function of gender. That is, the dynamics of a father-son, father-daughter relationship differs significantly from the attachment that develops in a mother-son or mother-daughter relationship; and both parents exercise their supremacy on the mental and emotional growth of their child (Jia & Jia, 2016). Although a majority of studies in this regard emphasize the importance of maternal bonding on child outcomes, the implications of attachment between the father and the child cannot be ignored. Despite the mother being the primary caregiver who nurtures the child during early years, the father, who is stereotypically considered a symbol of authority has his own role to play in the child's personal and social progression (Cubis *et al.*, 1989; Gorman-Smith *et al.*, 2005; Hoeve *et al.*, 2011; Lansford *et al.*, 2014; Watson *et al.*, 2012). Thus, the association between parenting practices and offspring outcomes is equally determined by the father-child and mother-child relationship. It is therefore crucial that both parents are present with the child during the critical years of life as parental deprivation can thwart the assimilation of a holistic relational schema and create dysfunctional internal models that project into the child's real-life experiences. Apart from the need for the presence of both parents, studies have also pointed towards the need for consistency in parenting practices for better age-related competencies in the progeny (Winsler *et al.*, 2005). The father and mother must have a harmonious balance in their relationship with the child to avoid relational ambiguity, distress, and role confusion. Given this information, a considerable number of findings say that children from two-parent homes fare better in life than those growing up with single parents. Unlike both-parent homes, parental bonding in single-parent homes is found to be highly ambivalent, with greater levels of intimacy on one side and heightened conflict and control on the other (Walker & Hennig, 1997). Being a single parent can be challenging for any individual, even under the best of circumstances. The responsibility of raising a child alone, managing economic burdens, dealing with social stigma, and being solely accountable for everything that happens within the family can be exhausting and overwhelming for the parent. The pressure of this is not only felt by the parent but also by the child who is expected to understand the predicaments that exist at home (Stephen & Udisi, 2016). The uncertainties faced by children in single-parent homes can be destabilizing, creating paradoxes that swirl them in opposing directions of life.

The need for the present study comes from the fact that most research on parental bonding have inclined in the direction of studying younger age groups as parent-child bonding is considered vital during early years of life. Minimal inquiries have sought to understand the trajectories of early bonding and parental deprivation on the child's perception of this relationship during later years of life. The present research attempts to explore one's attachment to one's parent from the adult child's point of view to assert the enduring impact of parent-child bonding. It also focuses on understanding how parent-child bonding can differ in individuals growing up in one-parent homes and how parental dispossession can continue to affect the child's perceptions about this relationship during the adult years of life.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants and Procedures

The study included 200 male and female participants between 18 to 40 years, with a mean age of 29.45 years. Purposive random sampling was used to select the sample, with the criteria of those having both parents (n=100) and those having single parent (n=100) i.e., either the father or the mother. In the single-parent group, individuals who lost their parent (father or mother) before the age of 16 years were considered.

Data was collected from the sample by administering the Parental Bonding Inventory (PBI). The participants were categorized into two groups based on the parental conditions, i.e., those having single parents and those with both parents to compare and determine the type of bonding in the group. Individuals with impaired abilities and



those already exposed to similar research were excluded from the study. Informed consent was sought from those who volunteered for the study and confidentiality was assured.

2.2 Instrument

The Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI) developed by [Parker, Tupling, and Brown \(1979\)](#) was used to assess parental bonding in the participant group. PBI is a retrospective tool, intended for people above the age of 16 years. It consists of 50 statements answered on a 4-point Likert scale. The items measure the attachment of the child to each parent separately, i.e., 25 statements refer to the bonding with the mother and 25 statements refer to the bonding with the father. The statements are divided into two categories - "Care" (with 12 items each for bonding with father and mother respectively) and "Over-protection" (13 items each for bonding with father and mother respectively). The scores obtained on the test are categorized into four parental bonding quadrants, namely, Affectionate Constraint (indicating high care and high control), Affectionless Control (indicating high control and low care), Optimal Parenting (indicating high care and low control), and Neglectful Parenting (indicating low care and low control). The scale has good reliability and validity as reported by the authors.

3. Results

Table 1 shows the Mean scores of single-parent and both-parent samples on components of Parental Bonding and the independent sample t-test results.

	Parenting	N	Mean	SD	T Statistics
Father Care	Single Parent	100	19.67	5.860	t= -6.645; p= .001
	Both Parents	100	25.88	7.280	
Father Over-Protection	Single Parent	100	18.65	5.714	t= 6.103; p= .001
	Both Parents	100	12.78	7.736	
Mother Care	Single Parent	100	22.93	4.586	t= -4.813; p= .001
	Both Parents	100	27.02	7.155	
Mother Over Protection	Single Parent	100	20.43	5.721	t= 7.707; p= .001
	Both Parents	100	13.33	7.221	

Father Care: Participants from single-parent homes had a mean score of 19.67 while those from both-parent homes had a mean score of 25.88. The independent sample t-test revealed a highly significant difference in results ($t = -6.645$; $p = .001$) indicating that participants from both-parent homes had higher mean scores in father care.

Father Over-protection: The single-parent participants had a higher mean score of 18.65 than both-parent participants who had a mean score of 12.78. t-test confirmed a highly significant difference in the result, showing that father over-protection was more among single-parent participants ($t = 6.103$; $p = .001$).

Mother Care: t-test showed a highly significant difference between single-parent and both-parent participants ($t = -4.813$; $p = .001$) revealing that those from both-parent homes (mean=27.02) perceived higher mother care than those from single-parent homes (mean=22.93).

Mother Over-protection: Participants in the single-parent group (mean=20.43) perceived higher mother over-protection than those from both-parent group (mean=13.33). The differences in the scores are highly significant as shown by the independent sample t-test ($t = 7.707$; $p = .001$).

Table 2 shows the varied styles of bonding with the father in single and both parent groups.

Bonding Styles	Count and %	Single Parent	Both Parent	Total
	Score	Group	Group	
Affectionate	Total Count	11	23	34
Constraint	%Score	11.0%	23.0%	17.0%



Affectionless	Total Count	76	25	101
Control	%Score	76.0%	25.0%	50.5%
Optimal Parenting	Total Count	4	44	48
	%Score	4.0%	44.0%	24.0%
Neglectful	Total Count	9	8	17
Parenting	%Score	9.0%	8.0%	8.5%

When understanding the different styles of bonding that the participant sample had with their father, it can be seen that on the overall basis, 50% of the participants reported affectionless control bonding with their fathers, while 24% revealed optimal parenting. 17% perceived an affectionate constraint type of bonding and 8.5% felt that their father was neglectful in parenting them.

In the sample having only single-parent, it is seen that 76% of the participants saw affectionless control bonding, while only 4% perceived optimal parenting from their father. It is also observed that 11% of the sample with single parents reported affectionate constraint from their father and 9% of them reported neglectful parenting.

In the sample with both parents, it can be seen that nearly half of them reported having optimal parenting from their father and only 8% of them said to have neglectful parenting. It is further observed that 23% of them perceived affectionate constraint while 25% of them felt affectionless control type of bonding with their father.

Table 3 shows the varied styles of bonding with the mother in single and both parent groups.

Bonding Styles	Count and %	Single Parent	Both Parent	Total
	Score	Group	Group	
Affectionate	Total Count	15	17	32
Constraint	%Score	15.0%	17.0%	16.0%
Affectionless	Total Count	72	28	100
Control	%Score	72.0%	28.0%	50.0%
Optimal Parenting	Total Count	6	44	50
	%Score	6.0%	44.0%	25.0%
Neglectful	Total Count	7	11	18
Parenting	%Score	7.0%	11.0%	9.0%

In bonding relationships with the mother as a whole, 50% of participants reported having affectionless control and 18% of them reported having neglectful parenting. One-fourth of the sample revealed optimal parenting from their mother and 16% of them felt that their mother exercised affectionate constraint.

44% of the participants with both parents reported having optimal parenting while 17% of them said that they had affectionate constraints from their mother. 28% of the sample responded saying the bond was affectionless control and 11% of them reported neglectful parenting from their mother.

In the single-parent participant group, it can be seen that nearly three-fourths of the participants experienced affectionless control from their mothers. And only 15% of them reported having affectionate constraints while 6% and 7% said to have optimal and neglectful parenting from their mothers respectively.

4. Discussion

The present study examined parental bonding in single-parent and both-parent homes as reported by an adult child growing up under these conditions. The results obtained confirmed that there is a significant difference in the perceived parental bonding of these individuals (as noted in Tables 1, 2, & 3). Participants from single-parent homes reported significantly lesser care and higher over-protection from their father/mother, and those from both-



parent homes felt that both their parents were more caring and less over-protective about them (as evident from Table 1). Empirical inquiries have made known that abnormal parental bonding, in the form of suboptimum levels of care and/or extreme levels of protection, can increase vulnerability to psychiatric disorders later in life (Kidd *et al.*, 2022). The findings of this study are in-line with prior research that validates how one-parent children tend to feel unduly stressed in the interpersonal connection with their parent, having an adverse effect on their perception of this relationship. The reason for it may stream from numerous factors like relational ambivalence, poor personal support, loneliness, economic hardships, over-expectations, excessive attachment, and so on (Chapman *et al.*, 2004; Stephen & Udisi, 2016).

In addition to this, a majority of the participants from single-parent homes viewed affectionless control (indicating high control and low care) as a dominant bonding style with their parent (as seen in Table 2 & Table 3). On the contrary, participants from both-parent families attributed optimal parenting (indicating high care and low control) to their father (Table 2) and mother (Table 3) respectively. Studies point out that while the dimension of parental overcontrol interferes with one's ability to be independent, parental care acts as a buffer against feelings of indifference and rejection in the bonding relationship. And the feelings of being controlled, protected, or attached to the parent have far-reaching consequences on the mental health of the child (Kidd *et al.*, 2022; Raffagnato *et al.*, 2021). The results of the present study support previous research which says that individuals growing up with both parents exhibit stronger relational bonds and hence experience a greater sense of emotional comfort and satisfaction (Vandeleur *et al.*, 2009). And this obviously has a direct impact on how they perceive their relationship with their parent. The presence of both parents can bring in an aura of balance and completeness at home, creating healthy boundaries, with two people being there to shoulder responsibilities within the familial context. This being absent in homes tutored by one parent, the child can feel embittered towards the parent who is burdened trying to cope with things all by themselves. In many instances, such parents themselves need help to cope with and manage their volatile emotions, loneliness, and depression (Chapman *et al.*, 2004; Cock & Shevlin, 2014; Conner & Scott, 2007). Since children growing up with one parent are deprived of the opportunity to look up to another parent for emotional care and support, there is relational enmeshment that eventually develops in single-parent homes. The parent who feels overly responsible for the child may get too involved, inhibiting the child from attaining personal autonomy, psychological maturity, and emotional independence. This can in turn hinder the process of separation and individuation in the child that is a requisite for a healthy outlook on the self, for self-initiation, self-regulation, relatedness, and personal competence. Children in such conditions are left feeling entangled to their parent, powerless, inadequate, dependent, dissatisfied, and guilty, the states of which may persist into their adult life (Hann-Morrison, 2012; Yanhong & Shumin, 2022).

Though there is enough research stressing the importance of having both parents during critical years of development, there is still a lack of concrete evidence to clarify the factors that affect parent-child bonding in one-parent homes. While past research has established that children raised by both parents have advantages in several areas that ensure their superior growth and adjustment (Thomson *et al.*, 1994), some studies have found no significant differences in the behavioral outcomes of children with single or both parents (Schmuck, 2013). Along with this muddled cognizance, there is also a lack of evidence in explaining the longitudinal effects of parental bonding on children at different stages of life (Richter & Lemola, 2017). The present study emphasizes the need for additional research in this direction to shed light on factors that contribute to the pathos in single-parent homes and capture the challenges that these families face to help deal with them effectively.

5. Strengths and Limitation

The present study is unique in its approach and adds valuable information to the existing knowledge about parental bonding and its trajectories. It goes beyond the stages of childhood and adolescence and looks into the period of adulthood to understand the long-term impact of parental deprivation on the perception of this bonding relationship, which hitherto has not been much explored. However, it does not consider the causes of parental loss like death, divorce, or abandonment, nor differentiates between father-only and mother-only homes, where the dynamics of bonding may differ. The effect of gender on the bonding relationship is also not within the scope of this research. They pose a limitation in the study as each of these aspects has its own implications for the individual left behind. Further investigations are required in this direction to establish a distinct and clearer understanding of the influential factors that define parent-child bonding in single-parent homes.



6. Conclusion

Healthy parent-child bonding is obligatory for the health and well-being of a child. The quality of parent-child interaction eventually influences the quality of all other relationships that the child will ever develop during the course of their life. Though the presence of both parents is important for a holistic relational schema in the child, a lot many families are deprived of this convenience due to the loss of a parent. Life for a single parent is as perplexing as life for a child growing up in such homes. The difficulties that crop up consequently can destroy the fabric of a very primary relationship that lays the foundation for a flourishing life. It is, therefore, necessary that children growing up in single-parent homes receive early care and support from the larger society so that their growth is not compromised. Although the long-term impact of parental loss is yet to be established, from whatever is known about the demoralizing effects of losing a parent, proactive measures should be taken to identify and help needy kids to resolve issues that can jeopardize their growth and development.

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Ethics Approval

Ethics approval was sought from the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Informed Consent

Written consent was obtained from the participants.



Does this article screen for similarity? Yes

Conflict of Interest: The Author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to this research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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