



**NANYANG
TECHNOLOGICAL
UNIVERSITY**

SINGAPORE

**FATHERHOOD, REIMAGINED: EXPLORING THE LIVED
EXPERIENCES OF SINGLE FATHERS IN SINGAPORE**

SHANTINI RAJASINGAM
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

2024

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A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University in partial
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

2024

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Shantini Rajasingam

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Amin (47, divorced, 11 year old son & 20 year old daughter)

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Abstract

Despite acknowledging the rise in ‘alternative’ family structures, the Singapore state continues to frame them as an ‘unfortunate’ and ‘unhealthy’ tendency in relation to the ‘ideal’ nuclear family comprising a married heterosexual couple with children, which also maintains close relations to its extended family. Consequently, non-traditional family forms, including those headed by single fathers, find themselves stigmatised. Within the limited literature on single parents locally, emphasis tends to be on single mothers, with single fathers severely underrepresented. These instances are problematic, for single fathers represent a unique group with their own set of experiences and challenges that, although may converge in some respects with their single mother counterparts, are also likely to be uniquely theirs, given the salience of gendered norms in a society like Singapore. Through in-depth interviews with 15 single fathers from diverse backgrounds, this study wishes to illuminate their experiences and challenges as primary caregivers. While single fathers constitute a small proportion of single-parents locally, many are committed to raising their children, and their experiences, contributions, and anxieties should not be disregarded. Concurrently, this research aims to advance the field of family studies and inform future policy, ensuring more targeted support for single fathers in fulfilling their parenting roles.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Family structures are undergoing profound changes globally, especially with the rise of non-traditional family arrangements such as single-parent households. In fact, the single-parent family structure itself has evolved considerably in the last few decades, with the emergence of single-*father* households. In Singapore, for instance, data from the Ministry of Social Development and Family (MSF) sheds light on this demographic shift. In 2022, MSF published rarely-accessible data on single-parent households in Singapore, defined as “two-generation household[s] with a household reference person who is a divorced/separated, widowed or never-married parent living with at least one child in the same household” (MSF 2022:2). Although the proportion of single-parent households was lower in 2020 at 6.0%, compared to 6.8% in 2010 and 7.3% in 2015, those with household reference persons who were divorced/separated parents increased from 43.3% in 2010 to 54.8% in 2020, suggesting a rise in the number of marital breakdowns. While a breakdown by circumstance is unavailable, approximately one in five single-parent households in Singapore are currently headed by fathers, a proportion that has remained relatively stable over the years: it increased very slightly from 18.9% in 2010 to 19.8% today. In 2020 itself, roughly two-thirds (63.1%) of these households had children aged 21 years and below (MSF 2022).

Typically, research on single parenthood has largely looked at single mothers, studying their experiences in various areas like work-family conflict, parenting practices, everyday life, support systems, as well as access to, and use of social services (Obreshkova and Goulart 2016). Contrastingly, single fathers have received far less scholarly attention, likely because the number of single mothers raising children has always been historically higher. Nonetheless, given the increasing number of single-father households, it is now gaining some traction in North America and Europe, reflecting the contemporary reality of the changing family. Of Asia’s family transition, however, there remains little exploration of how men’s roles within the family have evolved. While global trends in single fatherhood are observed, insights Western studies on single fatherhood may not directly translate to non-Western contexts like Asia due to cultural, socioeconomic, and policy particularities (Wong et al. 2004). Notwithstanding differences across Asian contexts, there persists a cultural ideal of the *ideal* family as a closely-knit unit comprising at least three generations, where parents, married children, and their grandchildren live together or in close proximity. This cultural ideal persists even as actual family configurations evolve in response to broader social, political and economic developments (Quah 2009).

Singapore is no exception: the nuclear family, comprising a married heterosexual couple with children, which also maintains close ties to its extended family, continues to be upheld as the normative ideal, with deviations like single-parent families often viewed as a threat to societal norms and values (Glendinning, Smith and Kadir 2015). As I will elaborate in the following chapter, the salience of ‘Asian/Confucian’ values including familism and traditional gender roles, state policies and societal expectations regarding marriage and parenthood within Singapore uniquely, yet persistently, influence the distinct experiences of single fatherhood.

Despite the growing presence of single fathers in Singaporean society, their experiences remain relatively underexplored within local literature on family dynamics. Existing studies tend to focus on broad demographic trends like low birth rates, postponed and non-marriages, and marital dissolution. The nuclear family is commonly used as the point of reference, reinforcing its very 'normality' compared to its deviations (Glendinning, Smith and Mumtaz 2015). Within the scant literature on single parents, emphasis also tends to be on single mothers; where single fathers are sometimes included, they are often subsumed under the umbrella term 'single parents' where they remain underrepresented (e.g. see Wong et al. 2004; Glendinning, Smith, and Mumtaz 2015). Family life is still largely viewed as the domain of women, and whether intentional or not, the marginalisation of single fathers not only diminishes, but arguably obscures the contributions and challenges faced by single fathers. Only one local study has thus far foregrounded the experiences of primary caregiving fathers; however, it examined the rise of stay-at-home fathers (SAHFs) within the context of dual-parent households, which would have different implications (see Arivalagan 2020).

Given the salience of traditional gender norms in Singaporean society, single fathers constitute a unique group with their own set of experiences and challenges that, although may have some overlaps with those faced by single mothers, are also likely to be uniquely theirs. Through semi-structured interviews, this research seeks to narrow this gap by centering the lived experiences of primary caregiving single-fathers in Singapore. This study employs the theoretical frameworks of 'doing gender' and 'hegemonic masculinity' to analyse these experiences, investigating how single fathers interact with, navigate and perhaps even challenge traditional gender expectations.

By highlighting this understudied population, this study wishes to advance the field of family studies and inform future policy to better support single fathers. While the majority of single-parent families are still headed by women, many fathers are equally committed to raising their children, and their experiences, anxieties and contributions should not be overlooked due to their minority status. In a society which often penalises single-parent families and assumes the 'natural' caregiving tendencies of mothers, this thesis also challenges these assumptions by demonstrating the equal dedication of single fathers. It is important to note that in advocating for single fathers, this thesis does not intend to suggest that single mothers are excessively supported, or that greater support for single fathers should come at the expense of single mothers. Pitting the two against each other serves little purpose. Instead, the goal is to promote an environment where both groups may be regarded with comparable empathy and support, empowering them to succeed in their parenting roles.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 The Particularities of Singapore's Context

Singapore presents a compelling case for studying single fatherhood. As a self-declared Confucian state operating on 'Asian values,' the family is upheld as the strength of Singaporean society, though not all families are equally regarded (Teo 2010). It is the 'traditional' nuclear family, comprising a married heterosexual couple with children, that has long been the normalised form of imagining the family. In 1991, concerned about the apparent speed at which Singaporeans were adopting individualistic 'Western values', the 'Shared Values' were institutionalised to establish a Singaporean identity rooted in 'Asian values.' The second Shared Value emphasised the 'family as the basic unit of society':

This family is the fundamental building block out of which larger social structures can be stably constructed [...] In recent decades many developed societies have witnessed a trend towards heavier reliance on the state to take care of the aged, and more permissive social mores, such as increasing acceptance of "alternative lifestyles", casual sexual relationships and single parenthood. The result has been to weaken the family unit. Singapore should not follow these untested fashions uncritically.

As recently as 2022, the state reaffirmed its commitment to "uphold[ing] the traditional family" which constitutes "the *bedrock* of our society," acting as a cultural counterbalance against 'modern' alternative forms like same-sex unions, single parenthood, and cohabitation, which are increasingly commonplace in the West (Tham 2022, emphasis mine). While state rhetoric idealises and reifies particular familial forms, state policies reflect this commitment by supporting the heterosexual, legally married, dual-parent nuclear family through various incentives and benefits (Quah 2016; Teo 2010). Access to public services and goods, including Housing and Development Board (HDB) flats, – where almost 80 percent of the resident population reside, – hinges upon "doing family" in specific, state-endorsed ways (Teo 2013). A legitimate family nucleus typically includes a married couple, though a parent with an unmarried adult child may also co-own a flat under certain conditions. Divorced couples generally must sell their flat and divide the assets, although sometimes divorced or widowed single parents with minor children may qualify as a 'family nucleus' if they have legal custody and care and control (HDB n.d.). Policies like the 'Assistance Scheme for Second-Timers (ASSIST)' also prioritise housing for these parents, though with specific criteria and limits. Despite policy changes allowing unmarried individuals over 35 to buy certain types of flats, marriage remains the normative prerequisite for flat ownership (Teo 2013).

In recent decades, there has been a notable cultural shift in expectations about men's roles both in the home and in the workforce. Specifically, the traditional ideal of fatherhood, characterised by moral guidance, discipline, teaching, and financial provision, has shifted towards nurturing involvement and equal co-parenting (Pleck and Pleck 1997). Dermott (2008) aptly described it as such: "Men's role within the family has been characterised as moving from outside to inside the home" (p. 32). There is therefore a newfound expectation of 'new fathers' who would also fulfil their fathering responsibilities within the household in terms of caring activities and father-child interaction, rather than contributing largely through their engagement in external

activities (especially through paid work). This cultural shift can be attributed, at least in part, to economic restructuring and the impact of feminism, which have seen more women entering and remaining in the workforce after marriage and children (Hunter et al. 2017; Pleck and Pleck 1997). The expectation that a single male income should be paid at a sufficient level at which he may provide a ‘family wage’ for his entire family has also diminished significantly. It was believed that as women became more like men through their engagement with paid work, men too would become more like women through their engagement in the domestic realm, including childcare. The latest edition of the *Marriage and Parenthood Survey* by Singapore’s National Population and Talent Division (NPTD) underscores broad support for gender equality in caregiving, with 99% of married respondents affirming the equal importance of both parents in caregiving, and with 95% supporting the equal distribution of household responsibilities. The proportion of those who believed that “ideally, the mother should take care of her children full-time” also fell from 40% to 24% for single respondents, and from 56% to 40% for married respondents between 2016 and 2021, indicating changing attitudes towards traditional gender roles. Similarly, the *Singapore Fatherhood Public Perception Survey* (2009) by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), revealed overwhelming consensus amongst its 2,220 respondents that “Singaporean fathers play an important role in their children’s lives and are active partners in shared parenting” (p. 3).

Yet, the extent of this purported cultural ‘revolution’ towards the ‘new father’ is challenged by empirical evidence that reveals an enduring gap between these cultural ideals and the actual practices of fathers. Studies in Western societies and Asia suggest increased father involvement, both in absolute and relative terms, though they are not truly sharing equally with mothers, especially in areas of caregiving and emotional support (Cheung and Hawkins 2014; Saxe 2008; Yeung 2010, 2012; Pleck and Pleck 1997). This entrenched gendered division of labour persists even when both parents work full-time, reflecting Hochschild’s (1989) notion of the ‘stalled revolution’: though women have made great strides in the workforce, especially into conventionally ‘masculine’ fields, men lag in making equivalent advances into ‘feminine’ roles within the home. *The Marriage and Parenthood Survey* revealed that mothers in Singapore spend roughly six hours on a normal weekday on childcare duties, nearly twice as much time compared to fathers who spend 3.6 hours. Though this gap narrows slightly on weekends, mothers still spend an average of ten hours on childcare, compared to fathers’ 7.7 hours. Despite paternal desires for greater involvement, Singaporean fathers predominantly identify as breadwinners, which remains central to Asian male identities (Yeung 2012). Unsurprisingly then, work responsibilities (63%) and financial pressures (53%) emerged as their primary parenting challenges in the *Fatherhood Public Perception Survey*. Despite available paternity leave benefits, only 40 percent of eligible Singaporean fathers had utilised the full two weeks from 2018 to 2020, fearing potential career repercussions (Lam 2023). This reluctance underscores the enduring influence of traditional gender norms that do not associate fatherhood with caregiving, and an unsupportive work culture, maintaining a gendered division of labour in heterosexual dual-parent households.

While the Singapore state has promoted women’s legal and financial independence, education, and workforce participation since the 1960s, these policy shifts are arguably more reflective of

capitalist development concerns than a genuine commitment to gender equality (Lim 2021). Despite strides in women's education and employment, gender role distinctions remain salient. State policies, in particular, continue to characterise Singaporean women as "choice-bearers and decision-makers" in childcare and domestic matters (Teo 2013:396). This is evident in the durational disparity between government-paid maternity and paternity leave. While women have been entitled to maternity leave since 2004, the provision of paternity leave was left entirely up to employers' discretion until 2013, when a one-week entitlement was mandated for married men. Currently, married mothers receive sixteen weeks of maternity leave, while fathers receive just two. Although there are plans to extend paternity leave to four weeks, the implementation of the additional two weeks currently depends on employers (Ang 2023); some of whom are adopting a "wait-and-see approach" due to business concerns (Koh 2024). While the expansion of government-paid paternity leave alongside maternity leave encourages greater paternal involvement, the prevailing durational disparity in leave fortifies women's primary caregiver role, even when there are no longer biological limitations, like in breastfeeding (Mathews and Tay 2023).

The domestic realm, encompassing household chores and childcare, is further cemented as 'women's work' through the influx of migrant female domestic workers into Singapore. The state facilitates the entry of women (and *only* women) from neighbouring countries like the Philippines and Indonesia to work as low-cost domestic helpers. Married, divorced or widowed women with children can claim tax relief on the Foreign Maid Levy for employing these women. As they must live with their employers and experience minimal restrictions on their working hours or tasks, they are offered as a 'logical' solution for working mothers (Teo 2010). The Grandparent Caregiver Relief is granted to working mothers who depend on their parents or in-laws for childcare assistance, while additional tax relief is also available through the Working Mothers Child Relief. However, single or male taxpayers are explicitly excluded from these benefits. These schemes normalise as well as reinforce the state's acknowledgement, acceptance and reproduction of specific gendered caregiving arrangements, particularly that caregiving is exclusively women's work and domain. It is *women* who must seek other women to take their place or arrange for alternative caregiving arrangements.

Enacted in 1961, the Women's Charter was designed to protect and advance the rights of women and girls in Singapore. Critics argue that it may unfairly penalise men in areas like child custody and access, spousal and child maintenance, and housing options, though others contend that child welfare remains the main consideration in divorce cases (Chan 2020). As such, mothers are not automatically awarded custody and control orders (Maricar 2020). The absence of a corresponding 'Men's Charter' arguably contributes to perceptions of bias. Despite its name, the actual scope of the Charter is much broader, covering a range of issues including spousal relationships, parent-child relationships, marriage, divorce, asset division, and child welfare (Singapore Statutes Online n.d.). To address misconceptions, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) proposed renaming it the 'Family Charter' to reflect its broader scope (AWARE 2010). Recent Charter amendments require women to pay alimony to former husbands if they are proven unable to support themselves due to disability

or illness (Parliament of Singapore 2016). This has been viewed positively, signalling a shift towards a more gender-neutral approach to marriage and divorce.

Nonetheless, gender disparity in parenting roles is most apparent in divorce and unmarried families. The ‘welfare principle,’ which prioritises a child's best interests in custody-related decisions, is a key tenet of family law in many common law jurisdictions, including Singapore (Chen 2011). This principle is explicitly expressed in s.3 of the Guardianship of Infants Act: “[w]here in any proceedings before any court the custody or upbringing of an infant...is in question, the court...shall regard the welfare of the infant as the first and paramount consideration.” Section 125(2) of the Women’s Charter reinforces this: “[i]n deciding in whose custody, or in whose care and control, a child should be placed, the paramount consideration is to be the welfare of the child.” A broad concept without clear definition, the welfare principle includes (though is not limited to), the physical, material, moral, and spiritual well-being of the child, as well as the child’s and parents’ wishes (Chen 2011). This principle has superseded the outdated ‘tender years presumption,’ which presumed that young children were better off with their mothers (Yaffe 1994).

In Singapore, joint custody arrangements in Singapore have increased from 70.6 percent in 2014 to 74.3 percent in 2016, meaning over 200 additional orders (MSF 2018). Under joint custody, both parents have an equal say in their child’s upbringing and must therefore agree on key decisions regarding their children. Less than 20 percent of custody orders favour the mother, while fathers are granted custody only 4.8 percent of the time. Additionally, despite joint custody, mothers usually have care and control of the child unless “in exceptional circumstances” (Lim 2020). As care and control determine who the child lives with, it is often mothers who handle their children’s daily matters, while fathers are granted access.

2.2 Theoretical Frameworks

In their seminal work *Doing Gender*, West and Zimmerman (1987) assert that our competence as members of society, whether as men or women, hinges upon the active performance of, or rather, the “doing” of gender. They describe it as an unavoidable feature of life, viewing the doing of gender as a “routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment” involving “a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine “natures”” (West and Zimmerman 1987:126). As opposed to being an inherent characteristic or trait within an individual, gender is therefore “something that one *does*, and does recurrently, in interaction with others” (West and Zimmerman 1987:140). Behaviours and roles perceived as ‘natural’ expressions of our gender therefore do not exist a priori, but are constructed through interactions, though gender also structures these interactions.

Despite considerable debate around the concept of ‘masculinities,’ scholars concur on several key points. First, masculinity is a cultural construct rather than a biological trait inherent to males. As elucidated by Connell (2000), “The patterns of conduct our society defines as masculine may be seen in the lives of individuals, but they also have an existence beyond the individual. Masculinities are defined collectively in culture and are sustained in institutions”

(p. 11). Second, multiple kinds of masculinities exist, though a single ideology often dominates. Third, masculinities are shaped by historical contexts, and gender practices can therefore be disputed and reconstructed as these contexts change. Fourth, men and masculinities differ in that “sometimes masculine conduct or masculine identity goes together with a female body,” with it being common “for a (biological) man to have elements of ‘feminine’ identity, desire and patterns of conduct” (Connell 2000:16-17). Underscoring the fluid and adaptable nature of gender expression and identity, this point is especially relevant in studying men engaged in work typically feminine-coded, such as single fathers who are primary caregivers.

Despite the plurality of masculinities, they are not equally valued, with one culturally dominant occupying the highest position within a hierarchy of masculinities. Conceptualised by Connell (1987, 2000) based on the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, ‘hegemonic masculinity’ is best understood as “the most honoured or desired” form of masculinity (Connell 2000:10). It is often equated with traditionally masculine traits of “being strong, successful, capable, reliable, in control (Kimmel 1994:63). Importantly, it is most strongly regarded as being “the *opposite* of femininity” (Connell 2000:31; emphasis mine). Although this ideal may not necessarily represent the majority of men, it nevertheless serves as a benchmark against which all men are measured. As the identities of fathers do not exist independently from their identities as men, fatherhood must be understood in terms of its intersection with (hegemonic) masculinity. As described by Dowd (2000),

Masculinity is a significant barrier to fathering, at least certain aspects of masculinity as currently constructed. Men are defined by limitation, by fear of being seen as gay or as acting like a girl. Ways of behaving, feeling, and communicating are proscribed by these powerful deterrents” (p. 190).

Indeed, so long as hegemonic masculinity is defined in contradiction to femininity, and nurturing and caregiving is understood as feminine and therefore unmanly, we may anticipate that there are tensions for fathers who actively engage in caring for their children, such as single fathers. While emotional/economic roles are often construed as separate, Dermott (2008) challenges this notion, especially in the family context. Despite the tendency to view breadwinning and caregiving as conflicting responsibilities, she argues that financial provision should be considered a form of caregiving, particularly a fatherly, or masculine approach to care. Emphasising a ‘provider versus carer’ model of fatherhood may therefore fail to capture the intricacies of contemporary fatherhood as it is practised in daily life (Hunter et al. 2017).

2.3 Do Single Fathers Mother?

Researchers have frequently questioned whether fathering and mothering are inherently distinct experiences, or whether it is possible for men who are primary caregivers to ‘become’ mothers (Doucet 2006a, 2006b; Rehel 2014; Risman 1986, 1998). Risman (1986, 1998) argues that primary caregiving fathers do indeed ‘mother.’ Surveying 141 single fathers with pre-teen children about their experiences as primary caregivers, the dynamics of the father-child relationship, and their overall role satisfaction, she found that the majority of the single fathers displayed parenting behaviours that closely resembled those of mothers rather than married

fathers, especially in terms of providing emotional support, nurturance and caretaking to their children (Risman 1986). Most of these fathers also expressed feeling comfortable and confident in their roles as single parents. As Risman (1998) elaborates,

The status of single parent overrides sex category for the expectations of and demands made on single fathers not only by their children but also by friends, family members, and the educational system — the consequences of gender structure at the interactional level, the situational demands, and the clearly expressed need of young children to be nurtured will create behaviours in men that are usually called "mothering." (p.48).

She argues that the similar caregiving expectations confronting all primary caregivers results in single fathers displaying behaviours traditionally associated with mothers. However, it may be too simplistic to suggest that hegemonic masculinity no longer influences their understanding and practice of fatherhood. To meet caregiving and nurturing demands without compromising their masculinity, men may adopt masculine identities that combine dominant masculine symbols with feminine aspects of parenting (Doucet 2006a; Aboim 2010, as mentioned in Randles 2018; Hunter et al. 2017; Molander 2021). Doucet (2006a), author of *Do men mother?* argued that men did not become mothers, with primary caregiving fathers themselves distinguishing paternal care from mothering. Her study sample comprised 118 Canadian fathers who self-identified as primary caregivers of their children. Notably, these fathers “actively work[ed] to dispel the idea that they might be gay, un-masculine or not men” by emphasising masculine forms of nurturance that value traits like autonomy, risk-taking, athleticism and problem-solving (Doucet 2006a:196). Others may develop hybrid paternal identities that merge distinct archetypes of manhood, such as provider and nurturing companion (Aboim 2010) or adopt identities that embrace emotional expressiveness alongside toughness (Randles 2018). None of this is to suggest that fathers are less capable of parenting than women, or that they cannot succeed as primary caregivers; rather, that we should avoid uncritically combining these distinct roles that are shaped by gender norms. Even in similar structural positions, their behaviours may differ by gender due to gendered expectations (Hook and Chalasani 2008). Despite the discourse of more gender egalitarian parenting and the emergence of the ‘new father,’ these hybrid masculine constructions of fatherhood are arguably rooted in the devaluation of ‘mothering’ and caregiving associated with femininity. This may explain why, despite the growing cultural focus on fathers’ nurturing roles, gender inequality persists through the persistence of gendered parenting arrangements (Randles 2018).

Doucet (2006b:697) also highlights how male "embodiment" issues in caregiving are key to our understanding of "fathering, caring and community life." Despite performing similar caregiving activities as mothers, primary caregiving fathers often viewed mothering and fathering as distinct identities due to their unique embodied experiences (Doucet 2006a; 2006b). Additionally, Doucet argues that the act of caring of children is "eminently social and occurs not only between carer and cared-for, but within larger sets of social relations within which caring gets done and within which it is perceived and judged by others" (p. 697). The fathers’ narratives revealed that they often felt scrutinised or suspected at least once as they moved through “estrogen-filled worlds,” predominantly female spaces, like playgroups, playgrounds, and schools (Doucet 2006b:704). They described feeling nervous and cautious

about how their actions might be easily misconstrued as potentially aggressive or sexually inappropriate, especially when in close proximity to pre-teen and teenage girls. As described by Mercuri (2018), masculinity and embodiment are intricately intertwined in the context of childcare: while hands-on caregiving practices may challenge traditional boundaries of father involvement, cultural meanings attached to male bodies, including aggression and sexual potency, may inhibit a full acceptance of men's physical engagement with children.

2.4 Perceived gender discrimination in the legal realm

Although the ‘welfare principle’ mandates equal consideration of both fathers and mothers in custodial decisions, its actual application remains contentious, as its inherent broadness and reliance on judicial discretion may allow for subjective interpretations (Donohue 2020; Sagiv 2015). Judges may also still hold onto “narrow views of “mothering”” (Donohue 2020:561) informed by heteronormative gender norms (Blair and Weiner 2005; McCabe 2021; Howe-Huist 2013; Yaffe 1994). As this narrow perspective still assumes the primacy of the mother-child bond, and considers ‘maternal care’ crucial for the child’s best interests, fathers seeking care and control must do more than demonstrate he is a good father; rather, he must also demonstrate that he is able to fulfil traditional maternal roles, and, if possible, that the mother is unable or unwilling to do so (Girdner 1981; Naidoo 2014). This perpetuates a relatively narrow view of caregiving, particularly in defining who ought to “mother” and how “mothering” can be done, potentially restricting fathers’ involvement (Donohue 2020; McCabe 2021). Though the number of fathers with primary or sole custody is gradually rising, single mothers still constitute approximately 80 to 90 percent of all single parents globally, albeit with variations across countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2016). Single fathers, especially those who are divorced, frequently express frustration with what they perceive as gender discrimination within the court system. The system is felt to be heavily biased towards mothers, treating fathers as ‘secondary parents’ who must invest considerable time and money to prove their parental competence in custody matters (Cook 2005; Coles 2009a; Risman 1986). Compared to their ex-spouses, fathers often felt like their shortcomings and weaknesses were excessively-examined, overstated, and more readily condemned (Cook 2005; Shorey and Pereira 2022). As such, they are likely to have become single parents under especially stressful circumstances. In fact, male interviewees in a local study on gender and divorce revealed a common experience of having “lost control” over their divorce due to unfair treatment by the Court and their lawyers, especially during child custody disputes (Sun et al. 2014:135). With women assumed to be natural caregivers, the fathers had to explicitly illustrate their parental fitness to negotiate child custody arrangements. Additionally, despite facing false allegations of child sexual abuse by their ex-wives, these men were also reportedly advised by their lawyers to accept rather than contest them (Sun et al. 2014). Mothers are therefore more frequently awarded custody and/or care and control orders, explaining why there are more divorced women than divorced men living with their children (Obreshkova and Goulart 2016).

2.5 Childcare and Work Responsibilities

Joan Acker's (1990, 1998) work on gender and organisations has been influential in revealing how organisational structures, practices and cultures contribute to the construction and reproduction of gender identities. As Acker explains, "the ordinary worker is a man, an abstract person who has few obligations outside work that could distract him from the centrality of work" (Acker 1998:197). This 'universal' (Ellingsæter 1995), 'abstract' (Acker 1990), 'ordinary' (Acker 1998) or 'ideal' (Williams 2000) worker is therefore characterised by his availability for continuous, full-time employment, as he is free from caring or domestic responsibilities that demand his time, energy and focus (Halford, Savage, and Witz 1997, as cited in Halrynjo 2009). Historically, women have been synonymous with caregivers, while men are viewed as 'ideal workers' insofar as they have been presumed to be naturally unencumbered by such responsibilities (Acker 1990, Halrynjo 2009). Though this idealised image of the 'ideal worker' may not align with the reality of many employees today, the pressure to conform to these expectations persists, especially for men in contemporary organisations (Halrynjo 2009; Tanquerel and Grau-Grau 2023). As employers have not yet sufficiently addressed caregiving responsibilities, caregivers remain disadvantaged, which negatively impacts their job performance and career progression (Williams 2000). While this issue affects caregivers regardless of gender, the disproportionate caregiving burden borne by women underscores their significant disadvantage in the workplace.

The substantial disadvantages experienced by women at the workplace, often known as the 'motherhood penalty,' are well-documented in the literature, and include a wage penalty and poor evaluations of competency, dependency, and commitment to their jobs (Correl, Benard and Paik 2007; Heilman and Okimoto 2008). Yet, little attention has been given to how fathers, particularly single fathers, may also experience workplace disadvantages for straying from the ideal worker norm. These disadvantages may include femininity and flexibility stigma, as well as job and career repercussions (e.g. Coltrane et al. 2013; Rudman and Mescher 2013; Tanquerel and Grau-Grau 2023). For instance, using nationally representative longitudinal data, Coltrane et al. (2013), found that men in the U.S. who made family-related work adjustments, such as seeking flexible work arrangements, reducing their hours, or taking career breaks, experienced significantly lower long-term earnings. Similarly, Rudman and Mescher (2013) confirmed that men who requested for family leave faced negative consequences, including perceptions of being inferior employees, salary reductions, demotions, decreased work responsibilities, or even termination during downsizing. They were also less likely to be recommended for rewards like promotions, salary raises, or leadership roles. Because the concept of 'work-life balance' remains highly gendered, they also faced a femininity stigma, leading to negative views about their competence and assertiveness. Conducting a survey experiment with 1,000 hiring managers, Iztayeva (2023) found that single fathers in the U.S. were especially vulnerable to hiring discrimination, as compared to single mothers and married fathers. By assuming primary caregiving responsibilities, the fathers were automatically perceived to be the least committed, reliable, and desirable of the three available candidates. They were also viewed as lacking promotability, and reduced work productivity as compared to married fathers. This study highlighted a 'caregiver penalty' unique to single fathers, where

assumptions about childcare responsibilities disproportionately impact their career prospects, contrasting with the more favourable evaluations for single mothers in comparable circumstances. These findings are consistent with Steffens et al. (2019) in Germany, which found that single fathers were not only perceived as less committed and career-motivated compared to married fathers, but also appeared the least competent and dedicated to their jobs compared to single mothers and other singles. This was especially noteworthy given that these evaluations were for a traditionally male-dominated role, where a gender bias favouring men may be expected.

Comparing single fathers in white- and blue-collar jobs in the United States, Iztayeva (2021) found that across different workplace environments, custodial single fathers were often not seen as ‘ideal workers’ due to their prioritisation of family over work. Despite their primary caregiver status, employers demanded their unlimited availability, compelling many to ‘let go’ of their ambition for career advancement to ensure consistent availability for caregiving, or make radical career adjustments. This was similarly observed by Esbensen (2014), who noted that single fathers sought jobs or created new roles to minimise work-family spillover, which occurs when work interferes with their ability to care for and spend time with their children, even if it meant a pay decrease. White-collar fathers, with more education, were generally more successful in negotiating flexibility or finding suitable roles. Blue-collar fathers faced greater challenges due to limited schedule control, resulting in frequent conflicts with supervisors. Nonetheless, those who remained in positions with minimal flexibility often relied on family support as a substitute for childcare to meet work demands and expectations, allowing them to ‘pass’ as ideal workers, to some extent. Despite these challenges, fathers did not view these experiences negatively. Rather, they expressed that becoming a single father allowed them to be more present in their children’s lives, especially if they had previously occupied a more traditional breadwinner role with limited childcare involvement.

2.6 Access To & Use of Social Support Networks

‘Social support’ is a broad concept which encompasses various forms of assistance, including instrumental (e.g. practical help with daily tasks like caregiving), informational (e.g. advice and feedback relating to personal and family matters), and emotional support (e.g. offering empathy, encouragement, and care) (Nunes et al. 2020). It is helpful to distinguish between *perceived* social support (i.e., an individual’s subjective assessment of the availability and adequacy of their support network) and received social support (i.e., the actual quantity of social support received). Perceived support is more consistently linked with favourable psychosocial outcomes for single parents (Haber et al. 2007, as cited in Zhou and Taylor 2022). While parenting is inherently challenging, “simultaneously producing stressors that beg for coping mechanisms and emotional rewards” (Coles 2009a:1), single-parenting likely heightens these stresses, making perceived availability of social support all the more important. Individuals with higher levels of perceived support generally face fewer adverse circumstances and are more resilient to stressful situations (Zhou and Taylor 2022). As such, understanding single fathers’ perceived social support is crucial in enhancing their outcomes.

Formal Support Systems

Although research on social support among single fathers is limited, existing research suggests that they are far less likely than partnered fathers or single mothers to possess comprehensive support networks that could potentially enhance their well-being and success as single parents (Ravanera 2007). Single fathers often encounter discrimination even after gaining custody of their children, reportedly having poor encounters with social and public assistance services. Such services have been described as being unwelcoming towards fathers, who felt they had to overcome far more bureaucratic hurdles and verifications than their female counterparts (Esbensen 2014; Shipe, Ayer, and Guastaferrero 2022; Shorey and Pereira 2022). They have also been described as irrelevant to the needs of single fathers, as they were not designed or organised with their specific needs in mind but were primarily intended for women with children (Coles 2003; Manqebo 2019). Consequently, single fathers often feel like they lack support in areas like parenting training, support groups and literature or resources that could guide them in their parenting roles (Coles 2015; Rhode 2018). Elsewhere, Baum (2016) notes that within social work practice and literature, fathers are mostly viewed in terms of their familial function, with little attention paid to their experiences, feelings and needs. These services have also been blamed for stereotyping along heteronormative gendered lines (Coles 2003; Haworth 2019; Janikowski 2021; Kullberg 2005). For instance, Kullberg's (2005) study in Sweden found that social workers assessed single fathers' issues and mental health as being more serious, yet less deserving of support compared to single mothers. Whereas mothers were evaluated as requiring greater assistance in more areas, and therefore had more varied social welfare services recommended for them, fathers were assessed as being more responsible for their situations. Support for fathers emphasised employment and debt repayment, whereas mothers were encouraged to build social support networks.

Research on single fathers and their use of services also reveals that their reluctance largely stems from the negative meanings associated with help-seeking, including the perception that 'not coping' suggests 'failure,' 'weakness' and may invite pity (Esbensen 2014; Shorey and Pereira 2022; Williams 2015). These notions are often understood as being in direct conflict with masculine ideals that value self-reliance, strength and emotional stoicism (Mnizak et al. 2020; Wester et al. 2007; Williams 2015). Hence, fathers often do not seek help due to their strong desire for autonomy in managing their own affairs (Coles 2009a; Esbensen 2014). Such instances arguably offer an opportunity for them to demonstrate as well as enhance their masculinity (Wester et al. 2007). It should therefore come as no surprise that Shorey and Pereira (2022) found that the fathers in their review consistently ranked economic needs as their top priority while emotional and mental needs were deemed the least important. Worryingly, single fathers reportedly have poorer self-reported physical and mental health, compared to partnered parents and single mothers, with less favourable risk profiles and a higher risk of mortality (Chiu et al. 2018). However, Williams (2015) noted that despite potential challenges to traditional notions of masculinity, several single fathers in her study viewed seeking help on behalf of their children to be more acceptable, with this perspective linked to the belief that prioritising their children's needs over their own was a sign of 'good' fathering. As such, this helped to mitigate the stigma associated with help-seeking behaviour.

Informal Support Systems

As with their utilisation of support services, men are likely to exhibit a strong desire for self-determination; yet many single fathers rely heavily on their families of origin for child-related responsibilities and care (Coles 2002, 2009a; Howe-Huist 2013). While their mothers and sisters commonly feature as main support providers, their support networks often include friends, neighbours, and other (single) parents (Esbensen 2014; Manqebo 2019; Naidoo 2014). These networks offer a range of support, including daily assistance and childcare, domestic chores, financial help, emotional support, emergency aid and listening/advice (Coles 2009a; Esbensen 2014; Howe-Huist 2013). For fathers raising daughters, these networks often include key female figures intentionally sought to help them understand their daughters and provide female role models or motherly figures, which they deemed essential for their daughters' development (Coles 2009b; Williams 2015). Access to these networks positively impacts their ability to manage the stressors of single parenthood, enhances their feelings of success, and allows for more positive interactions with their children, especially by granting them personal time (Coles 2009a; Esbensen 2014; Manqebo 2019). However, Esbensen (2014) noted that although fathers in her study readily and regularly sought practical assistance for daily life and childcare, they were more hesitant to seek emotional support, though they desired someone to speak to. This reluctance may stem from the perception that seeking emotional help is a greater sign of weakness. As a result, single fathers often possess not only smaller social networks, but also networks with less emotional depth compared to women's networks (Iztayeva 2021).

2.7 Fathers Raising Daughters

Single fathers frequently describe the complexities of raising daughters. One of the earliest studies on single fathers was by Mendes (1976), who conducted "an exploratory, comparative case study of thirty-two single fathers" (p. 439). The findings revealed that fathers faced particular stressors in raising daughters alone. Specifically, they expressed concern about their daughters' sexuality, though they were apprehensive about discussing sexuality and sexual norms with their daughters. Believing that such information was best shared with their daughters by women rather than themselves, they often sought guidance from their female networks. Fathers were also anxious about how their daughters would navigate their sexuality during adolescence, especially without the daily supervision and guidance of their mothers. Additionally, they also worried about their daughters' lack of female role models, though not all could specify the type of role model they desired for their daughters. Similarly, fathers relied on the women in their lives to teach what they viewed as 'feminine' behaviours and expectations to their daughters. While fathers' parenting of daughters and sons do not appear vastly different in practice, the biggest difference perhaps is in how single fathers *perceive* their own parenting. Some fathers believe that daughters need a distinct type of nurturing compared to sons, making it difficult to meet their unique empathy, intimacy, and sensitivity needs, especially during puberty years (Coles 2001, 2009b; Esbensen 2014; Greif 1994; Rhode 2018; Janikowski 2021; Shorey and Pereira 2022). Fathers often struggle to fully comprehend or relate to the physical and emotional changes their daughters encounter, finding it much easier to connect with their sons, with whom they feel they can relate to in all aspects. For example,

Coles' (2009b) study on black single fatherhood found that those raising daughters felt inadequate in several aspects. For one, they believed daughters needed a different degree or type of nurturing than sons and were concerned about providing the same nurturing a mother might offer, especially when they reached puberty. They felt guilty about being unable to "relate to" or "understand" their daughters' experiences, including menstruation, and were concerned about their issues relating to dating, sexual activity and the risk of early pregnancy. They also felt remorseful about being unable to fully engage in gender-specific activities like shopping, dressing-up, and applying make-up with their daughters. Feelings of inadequacy are sometimes worsened by remarks from friends, family, or co-workers who questioned their ability to parent without a mother, and sometimes scrutinised their father-daughter relationship, a point further supported by Douct (2006b). Hence, those fathers often felt less close and less satisfied with their parenting compared to those raising sons, feeling "uncertain," "frustrated" or "stressed" (Coles 2009b:68). Despite these challenges, fathers reportedly felt most comfortable teaching their daughters how to respect and protect themselves, choosing respectful partners (Coles 2002; Shorey and Pereira 2022), and inculcating independence, including financial and emotional independence from men (Coles 2009b). As touched on above, to address their perceived inadequacies and concerns, fathers often create a network of support with women such as their mothers, sisters, girlfriends, ex-partners, or other women or single mothers they knew and leaned on (Coles 2009a, 2009b; Shorey and Pereira 2022). Others may also rely on sources not commonly included in studies on coping, including parenting forums, blogs, and other online resources (Shorey and Pereira 2022).

Chapter 3: Methodology

Given the lack of in-depth knowledge about the lived experiences of single fathers in Singapore, especially within a societal context that strongly emphasises marriage, the nuclear family and gender roles, a qualitative approach employing semi-structured interviews was best suited for this purpose. Recognising that every single father has a unique, though equally important story to tell, this data collection method would give voice to, and offer deep insight into their thoughts, feelings and lived experiences of being single fathers.

As part of the preparation, a pre-identified interview guide was created based on four broad categories was created for an in-depth exploration of the following topics of interest: (a) self-definitions of ‘good’ fathers; (b) transition into single fatherhood and difficulties encountered; (c) (in)adequacy of formal and informal support systems available; and (d) single fathers as gendered selves. The nature of semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility in following the participants’ leads during the interviews and uncovering elements that were not previously considered. Instead of adhering to a rigid schedule, it is a discursive style of interviewing which recognises the interview process as a dialogue between the researcher and participants who work together to co-construct the knowledge produced (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). As the research progressed, it was also possible to improve or modify the interview guide as new themes emerged.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was chosen as the methodological approach to analysing the interview findings. Grounded in the belief that individuals are experts of their own lives, a phenomenological study seeks to “determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (Moustakas 1994:19). According to Creswell (2013), “phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon,” in this case, single fatherhood in Singapore (pg. 76). This approach is therefore primarily interested in a participant’s personal perception or account of a phenomenon than with producing an objective statement of it. While participants try and make sense of their experiences, the interviewer endeavours to make sense of their making sense (Smith and Osborn 2015). In seeking to understand single fatherhood from the standpoint of the fathers themselves, this approach therefore granted them a voice to verbalise their experiences, on their own terms.

The interview began with a series of general non-threatening questions in order to create a sense of rapport between the interviewer and the participant, before delving into more sensitive and detailed questions. In order to access their lived experiences, establishing rapport and openness were especially important (Creswell 2013). Throughout the interview, there was also a deliberate effort to regularly seek clarification and reflect on the responses provided to ensure the credibility and reliability of the participants' responses.

3.1 Respondent Selection and Interviews

Respondent recruitment began after I had gained approval from Nanyang Technological University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

As Coles (2015) rightfully pointed out, the definition of a 'single father' varies across studies. As such, who qualifies as a single father may differ from one study to the next, underscoring the researcher's responsibility to specify what they mean when using the term 'single father.' In this study, 'single fathers' were defined as Singaporean men who were at least 21 years old; who had been the main caregiver for a child below the age of 21 years old; and who lived together with their dependent child(ren) for the majority of the time, either alone or within a larger household, without the mother present. While some researchers contend that fathers who stay with extended families are not 'truly' single fathers, Coles (2015) challenges this definition for treating them as though they "were cheating some idealised type of single fatherhood when in fact, they are legally single" (p. 146). As there is no such distinction when measuring the parenting statuses of single mothers who may also live with extended families, single fathers in this study simply refer to men who reside with their children, but separately from their children's mothers.

Initially, the study intended to only recruit participants who had been the main caregivers for their children for at least a year at the time of the study, to identify the impact of single fatherhood over a relatively fixed period. However, this criterion was later relaxed to include two fathers who had been primary caregivers for approximately 7 months prior to the interview, given their keenness to share their experiences. As single-fathers are a relatively inaccessible population, their inclusion was valuable for understanding the immediate challenges of single fatherhood, as compared to a retrospective view of their transition into this role. As the other participants had already been single fathers for an extended period, this comparison also allowed for an analysis of how the challenges may evolve over time. No distinctions were made between fathers who became single-parents due to being unwed, divorce, separation, or widowhood, whether they had sole legal custody or joint custody where the children are under their care for the majority of the time, or whose partners were incarcerated. As the first study of its kind to focus exclusively on single fathers, including fathers of varied circumstances aimed to provide a broader understanding, especially since the different pathways to single parenthood could significantly impact their experiences and challenges.

Purposive sampling was used to gather participants who met the study's inclusion criteria. This method is particularly helpful in identifying individuals directly involved in the research problem and are therefore especially informative to the study (Palinkas et al. 2016). Initial attempts to recruit informants through personal social networks resulted in only three fathers. In the second wave of recruitment, I emailed various non-profit organisations (NGOs) and voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) that supported (single-parent) families in Singapore. A recruitment poster detailing the study was circulated together with key information, as follows:

NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY SINGAPORE

LOOKING FOR INTERVIEWEES!

Experiences and challenges of single-fathers in Singapore

Eligibility Criteria

- Singaporean aged 21 – 60 years old
- Main caregiver for a child/children under the age of 21 for at least one year at the time of the study
- Child/children should have lived or are living with you without the mother present for at least a year

Details

- In-person/Online interview at your convenience
- 45 minutes – 1 hour
- Compensation of \$15 through PayLah/PayNow/Cash

If interested:

- Email Researcher (Shantini): shantini002@e.ntu.edu.sg

This study has been approved by Nanyang Technological University Institutional Review Board (NTU-IRB).
Should you have questions on participants' rights in the study, please contact NTU-IRB at IRB@ntu.edu.sg.
NTU-IRB Reference Number: IRB-2023-457

Through this method, two organisations directly referred 3 clients who met the study's inclusion criteria and expressed interest in participating. The Centre for Fathering also played a significant role in circulating the recruitment poster within their network. Through this approach, another two respondents were recruited.

Snowball sampling, a method commonly used to locate hidden populations (Johnson 2014), was subsequently used. An initial participant referred to another single father he knew and introduced me to a Facebook Group for single parents in Singapore, resulting in the recruitment of two additional fathers. One father reached out via email after he had heard about my study through word-of-mouth. Relying on referrals from initially sampled respondents to other persons believed to have the characteristic of interest, this method proved effective. Additionally, three fathers responded after seeing the recruitment poster in the Telegram channel 'SG Research Lobang', an open channel connecting individuals to local research studies.

Once initial contact was established, either via email or on Facebook Messenger, a preliminary screening was conducted with potential participants to ensure they met study inclusion criteria. In total, 15 single fathers were interviewed (see Appendix A). While the majority of respondents became single fathers after their divorce with their child(ren)'s mothers, four fathers became single fathers after the death of their spouse, while one father had been separated from his wife for a year and was set to undergo his divorce process soon. As recruitment proved difficult, the ethnic and class composition of the respondents does not reflect that of Singapore's demographic breakdown. Most of the fathers were overwhelmingly Chinese, and mostly from the middle and upper-class backgrounds.

Interviews were conducted between the period of July 2023 – December 2023, and ranged between 45 minutes to 2 hours, although most interviews took about 1.5 hours. All interviews were carried out at the fathers' convenience, either at locations most suitable for them, or online via Zoom if they preferred. Two interviews were conducted within the father's homes while two others were conducted at the public spaces closest to their homes (caffeshop and nearby park) on their request. Two interviews were also conducted on the organisation's premises; for one of the interviews, the counsellor was present due to organisational concerns, although he did not participate in the interview. The remaining eight interviews were conducted online via Zoom.

Before each interview session, participants were provided with a detailed Study Information Sheet and Consent Form, ensuring that they had all the necessary information. They were encouraged to seek clarifications before providing their written consent for the interview. Just before the interview commenced, I made it a point to emphasise their voluntary participation in the study and assure them of their right to refrain from answering any questions they found uncomfortable. I also reassured them of the study's strict confidentiality practices, including full anonymity in sharing their experiences and the removal of any identifying information in all notes, documents or research works.

3.2 Data Analysis

With consent, the interviews were audio-recorded through the 'Voice Memos' application on the iPhone, with the recordings stored in a password-protected computer accessible only by the student researcher. Using an audio recorder allowed me to devote my full attention to the participants during the interview, although I also made notes throughout the interviews which served as additional data during the final analysis. The interviews were transcribed at the conclusion of each session using *Otter.ai*. During the transcription process, all names of children, work and any other identifying information were deleted or changed to protect the identities of these fathers.

3.3 Self-Reflexivity

Despite initial concerns that my position as a younger female student interviewer might hinder open and honest discussions with my male participants, my gender did not seem to impede my connection with the fathers in my study; in fact, it may have been advantageous. Many of them initially expressed curiosity and some degree of caution regarding my interest in their experiences, questioning the motivations of my research. As a significant number of them were also raising daughters, being honest about my own background as a daughter raised by a single father played an important role in establishing a sense of mutual recognition, credibility and trust between us (Massoud 2022). Fathers were more forthcoming about their experiences once they knew about my own. This openness also granted me access to private Facebook Groups that would have otherwise been closed to me. At the end of the interviews, several fathers inquired about my personal history, including about my relationship with my father and my teenage years, and sought advice on raising teenage daughters, indicative of the

trust between us. Recognising the sensitivity and personal nature of the information being shared, I also made an intentional effort to demonstrate empathy and respect throughout the interview process. It was especially important to create a supportive and non-judgmental environment so that fathers felt comfortable enough to be open and vulnerable about their often challenging experiences.

3.4 Limitations

Although I had initially aimed to recruit 20 participants, locating a sufficient number of fathers who were both willing and eligible to participate was challenging. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is primarily concerned with an in-depth account of individual experience (Creswell 2013). As a result, studies that use this method often have small sample sizes to allow for a detailed analysis. The selection of respondents commonly reflects and represents the homogeneity in respondents' experiences instead. There is no rule about how many participants should be included, with this number varying depending on several factors like the depth of analysis of a single case study, the richness of individual cases, and pragmatic limitations like time constraints or access to participants (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2014). For these reasons, the study's recruitment process concluded at 15 participants.

Recruiting participants from a more diverse background proved difficult, especially given their relative inaccessibility. Minority Indian respondents, as well as those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are underrepresented. I am therefore unable to further investigate how race and class might differently impact their experiences. Some VWOs, which worked with single parents, did not have single fathers who fit my inclusion criteria within their networks, especially in terms of being the main caregivers of their children. As the sample size is both limited and non-random, the findings are also not generalisable outside the research scope to the entire population of single fathers in Singapore, and should instead be viewed as foregrounding the experiences and feelings of an understudied population group. Insights gained may also point the way for future studies about the single fatherhood experience.

Chapter 4: Fathers as Gendered Selves

To explore how hegemonic notions of masculinity may influence their parenting roles, fathers were asked to describe the traits they associated with a good father, and whether their opinion of fatherhood had changed since becoming single fathers. They were also asked if they believed mothering and fathering to be different and if men and women cared for children differently. Overall, most fathers emphasised traits that align with traditional masculine role expectations, though they also attempted to incorporate nurturing qualities typically associated with femininity into their parenting roles. From their narratives, it is clear that while many fathers viewed these roles as either biologically unique or so deeply entrenched in socialisation and cultural norms that they appeared natural, they also recognised their flexibility and adaptability in specific circumstances, such as single fatherhood.

4.1 Single fathers' definitions of being a good father

The question “In your opinion, what qualities make a good father?” aimed to uncover the characteristics these fathers associated with good fatherhood and whether they aligned with conventional, hegemonic notions of fatherhood. Given that all participants were previously married, I was also interested in whether their views of fatherhood and traits they valued had since becoming single fathers. As the following quotes indicate, some fathers continue to emphasise traditionally masculine traits, describing a good father as one who provides for, protects, and guides his family:

Jeffrey: [D]efinitely supporting the family financially, ensuring that they have a house to stay...[A]t the same time, I think, especially because I have a daughter, I would want her to feel that she is being protected.

Iskandar: Number one would be to be the protector of your family...I'm not saying that the women can't do this role, but because biologically, men are stronger, I think in terms of keeping your family safe from the harshness of the world...that is the role of a father. Second thing, of course, would be to provide a strong male figure in the family. I believe that fathers instil some form of male confidence for both sons and daughters, and it makes children feel safe to grow up in the situation that they are in, knowing that their fathers are always there to protect them from the harshness of the world.

James: I think it's just natural for most men, when you feel ownership over your family, over your household, you would naturally want to provide and protect the household *lah*, and those family members, and you would want to try and guide them.

Their views align closely with hegemonic notions of masculinity, emphasising traits like protection, strength, authority and reliability. Notably, Iskandar's belief that good fathers should be “protector[s]” of their families is arguably two-fold: not only does it entail physical protection from external dangers, but it also involves emotional stability and assurance. Although emotional support is often associated with mothers, this was deemed important to the extent that it allows children to feel “safe” and “protect[ed]” from the “harshness of the world.” Other fathers, however, described traits more commonly associated with feminine ways of showing care:

Johnson: Patience and understanding. And spending quality time together.

Saad: I think time *lah*, I think this is very important, and you have to understand your kids well, and you have to always be there for them.

Henry: Patience, love. Your children's needs evolve as they get older, but I think the few consistent qualities are set ground rules, be consistent, be affectionate, and communication. I feel these are a couple of foundational building blocks, and I think if you can get four of these things correct, then you should probably be in a good place.

While hegemonic masculinity usually expects men to distance themselves from all feminine-coded activities, these fathers evidently challenge this expectation by incorporating traits traditionally associated with femininity into their definitions of good fatherhood. In doing so, they described 'good fathers' as those who displayed patience, understandingness, affection, and spent quality time with their children. To this end, their perspectives highlight the emergence of the 'new father', who plays a more involved and emotionally supportive role in the home (Dermott 2008). Most fathers, however, described using a combination of both traditionally masculine and feminine traits, reflecting a more nuanced approach to parenting:

Wilson: I think a good father need[s] two qualities. One is the need to discipline the child, especially in the growing up years. Another one is also not to be so 'hard' in a way. Sometimes there needs to be some sort of 'soft' love being shown to him, like asking how [he/she is], that kind of assurance that need[s] to be given to him or her [so] that it can build the trust between one another."

Mitch: By default, the father has to be a good provider, yeah? So, he's got to place providing for the family above what he wants to do. After that, comes the part where he needs to be there for them for some emotional support.

The articulation of both traditionally feminine and masculine traits suggests an expansion of their roles and responsibilities as fathers, as opposed to a complete rejection of their conventional roles. As the quotes above indicate, while Wilson first identified discipline as central to good fatherhood, he also recognised the importance of demonstrating emotional sensitivity and comfort, traits commonly associated with femininity. Likewise, Mitch saw financial provision as a "default" role of good fathers, but also acknowledged the need to attend to the children's emotional needs. While most fathers did not view a shift in their understanding of fatherhood, having already been generally involved before becoming single parents, those who had previously focused largely on breadwinning experienced the most dramatic shift. As Iskandar described, it involved a "steep learning curve" that required a fundamental redefinition of his parental roles and responsibilities:

Iskandar: I see it as a very steep learning curve, because you need to unlearn whatever that you assume to be motherhood and fatherhood, and re-learn what fatherhood is based on the situation or context that you're currently in. And also, I need to be there

for my children's emotional support, knowing that a divorce affects not only the parents, but I think it affects the children more.

As single parents, many fathers in this study felt compelled to be 'tough' and strong with their children, though not all the time. The interviews suggest that they often struggled with understanding when and how to transition between or integrate maternal and paternal traits, perceiving the two as being in conflict with each other. As Mitch shared, a key challenge of single-parenting is "balanc[ing] between being a disciplining father and their friend." While he found it easier to take on the role of a strict disciplinarian, it was harder to be a "friend" to his daughters. Interestingly, several fathers explicitly mentioned the need to balance these roles, implying that being a father and a "friend" were viewed as distinct as opposed to integrated aspects of their fatherly duties. Reflecting on his single fatherhood journey, Rajan similarly admitted his failure in striking this balance for his daughter:

Rajan: I don't know how to sit down and talk to my girl like, 'How are you?' I never gave her a hug. I didn't know it was important. I've seen mothers, like my mother, they've got very good tolerance. They know when to pamper. I didn't know all that, you know? I didn't know that sometimes you need to pamper the child and other times you have to be firm. I was always being firm and being the no-nonsense father.

4.2 Mothering vs Fathering: Different or the Same?

While some fathers felt that the roles of fathers and mothers were biologically unique or deeply entrenched in cultural norms and expectations such that they appeared inherent, most believed that these roles could be flexible, especially in situations of single fatherhood. In their responses to these questions, and in the overall content of their narratives, it was clear that they attempted to incorporate feminine-identified nurturing attributes with masculine role expectations into their parenting identities.

Different but fluid when necessary

Several fathers believed that there existed biological or other inherent differences between fathers and mothers, inevitably resulting in natural differences in their parenting behaviours. Interestingly, only one father explained the difference between mothering and fathering as being in the direct connection the mother has with the child via the body, particular through the physical acts of pregnancy, giving birth and breastfeeding:

Sean: Women can give birth...Some functions are biologically unique and also physiologically unique...I will need to consider biology and physiology, because mothers do [also] breastfeed. So, by virtue of that, people, even myself as laypersons, will find it a lot more convenient to ascribe the caregiver role and associate the caregiver role with that of women.

As a result of this physical connection between mothers and their children, mothers are commonly perceived to have a closer bond with children. Generally, fathers articulated that mothers were more nurturing, patient and sensitive to their children's emotional needs, as compared to fathers who seemed to focus more on the physical aspects of providing for and protecting their children. Having said that, they believed that these roles were fluid to the extent that fathers too could embrace nurturing qualities too, as summarised by Mitch:

Mitch: [W]e are not natural nurturers...We are protectors, we are providers, and the nurturing gene is mostly in women. So, for me, I went back to my default mode, throwing myself in the job, making sure I did the job well and I [got] money coming in, but I forgot the nurturing part where I need[ed] to be there emotionally for my children, and need[ed] to be the mother and father as well...The emotional nurturing caregiver part was not something that I did when my wife was around. It [was] something I needed to adopt after my wife passed away.

Although he did not consider himself a “natural” nurturer, with his “default” tendency having been to double down on work to attend to his daughters' physical needs, he realised that he also needed to address their emotional needs in his spouse's absence. While he believed that mothers inherently possess a “nurturing gene,” he believed that these traits were fluid to the extent that fathers too could learn to be nurturing with some effort. Likewise, Jeffrey noted that mothers are naturally more sensitive to their children's emotional needs, though fathers could also “put in effort” to learn to meet their emotional needs, as he had done after becoming a single father:

Jeffrey: Mothers would be more attuned to the needs of the children, more sensitive to the children or things that the child is going through. I think maybe fathers in general are just not so good at such things. We are more focused on the physical well-being of the child, 'Got eat? Got sleep? Got go to school today?', but how is the child feeling? What does the child really want?...[Men] can *lah*, but must put in effort. That's what I'm trying to do now.

Although many fathers initially found it challenging to engage in the emotional and nurturing aspects of parenting, which they felt did not come naturally to them, they actively sought to improve in these areas. As single parents, this was deemed crucial as being open and communicative with their children was deemed essential to building a trusting relationship. For instance, Wilson mentioned that he had to actively learn to be more patient with his son, believing it would allow for more open communication:

Wilson: [A]t the start, I was not quite a patient person. In the past, my wife would be there to guide me, to remind me that I have to be patient [but] after she left, I need[ed] to learn to be patient...being patient, it's something I see that can help me communicate well with him. So, I see that there's a need to be more patient, and be intentional as well, so slowly I've grown.

Four fathers raising preadolescent children were also keenly aware of their children's need for reassurance and affection. Perhaps contrary to popular belief, they openly expressed their affection to their children through both verbal affirmations, such as saying 'I love you', and physical actions like hugging, kissing, wrestling with, and carrying their children. Henry, for example, shared that he makes a conscious effort to "be more expressive" with his daughter to ensure that she feels secure and loved:

Henry: I deliberately make it a point to tell her I love her every day and also make her feel safe, because that's one thing I heard: children need to feel safe. I think especially given my circumstances, I didn't want her to feel insecure, like someone's going to leave...[B]y nature, I'm not that expressive, but with her, I feel I want to do it because I thought it might be better for her. So, I was more expressive than I would normally be.

Different but due to cultural norms and expectations

Unlike these fathers who viewed differences between fathering and mothering as biologically unique but adaptable, others rejected these essentialist claims, highlighting the ways in which gendered roles in parenting are very much a product of cultural norms and expectations. Although fathers like Sean (highlighted above) acknowledged biologically and physiologically unique characteristics between fathers and mothers, he argued that "caregiving is not an exclusively maternal role"; rather, gendered role functions are largely "ascribed onto us, and also passed on from the generations and reinforced." Others similarly challenged the notion of

inherent differences in the parenting behaviour of men and women by highlighting the rising involvement of fathers in caregiving in contemporary times. For example, contrasting the behaviour of fathers of today with his own father, Mitch believed that the roles of fathers are largely “influenced by the times that you're living in”:

Mitch: My dad was a 100% alpha male. I could never expect any emotional support from him when I was growing up... When I was my daughters' age, he was a father and I expected him to father, but... Men nowadays, my age, or younger than me, are not as alpha male category as they are. They are always available to show emotions.

Henry also acknowledged the evolving role of fathers today, though he noted that there still persists some cultural bias against fully embracing involved fathers:

Henry: Culturally, I think there is a bias, but I can also see that it's changing. I mean, among my generation, all the fathers are hands-on. All of them change diapers. If you compare that to my father's generation, none of them are hands-on. It's also not possible because most wives are also working now, so they need to chip in. I think it's changed and hopefully with this change, perceptions would also change.

Henry observed a shift in the expectations of fathers in Singapore today, observing that fathers are now increasingly “hands-on” in tasks such as changing diapers, which may have been viewed as primarily a mother’s duty before. As he reflected, this shift is indeed attributed in part to evolving societal expectations as well as practical considerations, including the growing presence of women in the workforce, necessitating a more equitable division of labour at home. Sean also described a similar shift in traditional gender roles and expectations, particularly regarding parenting and caregiving responsibilities due to various societal changes:

Sean: [T]here are a few levellers going on right now, in twenty-first century Singapore. Firstly, it's education... I think, in terms of graduates, women are more than equitable... [W]hen it comes to careers, of course, women still have some catch[ing] up to do, but if you compare it to twenty/thirty years ago, I think there's a significant improvement. Whereas men, thanks to the changing roles of women, are also beginning to, in my opinion, realise that we need to start being more of a team player... and it's also helped, to be fair, by government policies and government positions, narratives, rhetoric, schpiels... 'Yes, we want fathers to be more involved', and they put their money where their mouth is and improve paternity leave and there are many other community programs with involvement with fathers...

Perceived limitations of fathers

Despite their best efforts, several fathers believed that they could never truly become mothers or replace the mothering done by women due to perceived limitations, such as in providing emotional support:

James: That's where I'm still a father [laughs]. I mean, women do have a lot of strengths... emotional, the softer side, and that would be absent. I mean, I can try to be

there for them *lah*, but still I can't help being a man, right? I mean, it's easier to comfort a young child. Like, my 6 year old, he cries, just hold him, that kind of thing, but in terms of the more complicated, sophisticated kind of emotional nurturing you can get from a woman, *um*, I can't replace the mother. I'm not a woman and I can't replace a woman.

Rajan: ...I don't know how to sit down and talk to my girl like, 'How are you?' I never gave her a hug. I didn't know it was important. I've seen mothers, like my mother, they've got very good tolerance. They know when to pamper. I didn't know all that, you know? I didn't know that sometimes you need to pamper the child and other times you have to be firm. I was always being firm and being the no-nonsense father.

Others felt that their natural inclination to emotionally-charged situations was to behave in ways often understood as traditionally masculine. Looking back, Sean noted that he tended to react to his daughters' distress by using problem-solving strategies, though he wondered if this tendency was the most appropriate response to their needs. Commenting on this ongoing struggle, he shared:

Sean: When it comes to things like emotional attunement, sometimes I don't know whether to take a problem-solving approach... [I]t feels like my kids don't want that at the moment. I'm still learning to be a soundboard for my kids, like, someone you can vent to. To just sit there and just listen. There's no solutioning, there is no analysis, which I like to do all the time, and there is no paraphrasing...I still have to very, very consciously apply those conversational mechanics. I need to find a way to apply it, so that's something that I am learning at the moment.

This observation closely aligns with the findings of Doucet (2006a) who made the argument that fathers in primary caregiving roles often revert to “masculine ways of being” (p. 115) when confronted with emotional situations. Fathers often respond in ways that could be considered practical and measured as they focus on identifying and fixing the problem, as opposed to mothers who tend to offer more emotional responses. Although Sean's initial approach prioritised “solutioning” and “problem-solving,” he acknowledges the value of “just listen[ing]” when his daughters need to “vent” when upset or angry about without the need for immediate solutioning. Though this remains a challenge, he is actively trying to be more conscious of his inclinations and work towards being more emotionally supportive of his daughters' needs.

Fathers raising daughters

Perceived differences between fathering and mothering were more apparent in speaking to fathers raising daughters. Daughters seem to present unique challenges for the father, especially in terms of managing issues relating to their adolescence, puberty and sexuality. Some fathers described the difficulty in being unable to completely relate to their daughters' experiences and feelings owing to their gender, making it difficult for them to sometimes empathise with and properly address their emotional needs. For one, Sean confided that he was currently navigating a delicate situation concerning his older daughter, who was found to have been engaging in

acts of self-harm. Reflecting on the situation, he verbalised the difficulty he faces in granting his daughters the support they need due to a lack of first-hand experience as a teenage girl:

Sean: I fully acknowledge that I was never a teenage girl before, so I wouldn't know what it's like to go through [what] my daughters are going through. This is something that's difficult for me to empathise [with] and if it's difficult for me to empathise, obviously, I would approach it from a very functional, cognitive approach, and it doesn't holistically address their needs. I've thought of having a female presence in the house. That was actually fulfilled by my helper. On one hand, she function[ed] like a caregiver, and on the other hand, she function[ed] like an older sister to my kids. Their behaviours were somewhat more regulated when she was around...[N]ow...when there's no female presence in the house, maybe some of these dysfunctions are coming out. I don't know.

In his confession, Sean acknowledged his difficulty in fully identifying with his daughters' experiences as teenage girls, which may hinder his ability to meet their emotional and developmental needs during this crucial period of their lives. In seeking to bridge this gap, he considers the importance of having a female presence in the household, noting the positive impact that his previous helper had in offering caregiving and sisterly support to his daughters. As such, he wonders if her absence might explain the changes in his daughters' behaviours, implying the importance of female figures in their lives. Iskandar too described his difficulties in connecting with his teenage daughter, who perceives him as being unable to understand her friendship issues and interests:

Iskandar: My daughter sometimes has friends and girl problems. Sometimes she's in a very bad mood, but she [feels] that I'm not the best person to talk to. I'd say, 'What did your friend do?' 'My friend did this to me.' 'Okay, tell me what to do.' She'd say, 'No *lah*, it's not something to do *lah*. You won't understand.' I mean, my son is easy...when he goes for football matches, I will support him. We support the same football team. [S]ometimes, she tells me, 'You do more things with *abang* [older brother] than me.' I mean, I want to be a part of that. I send you to ballet and all that, but you don't want me to watch your performances...' 'I'm shy...no fathers come and watch...I don't want you to be the only man there.' [A]fter a while, I told her that whether [she] want[s] me to come or not, I would still come...[S]he has learnt to understand that I have my limitations. I can never be a woman, but I am the best that she has right now.

This excerpt illustrates the complexity of navigating the father-daughter relationship, with his daughter's reluctance to share her emotional struggles underscoring a perceived disconnect between them. Iskandar contrasts this relationship with his relationship with his son, with whom he connects more easily due to shared interests ("[M]y son is easy.") Despite these challenges, Iskandar expressed his commitment to supporting his daughter at her performances, even if it meant going against societal norms and being the only father present. Although he acknowledges that he may never fully understand his daughter's struggles due to gender differences, his unwavering determination to bridging the gap between them demonstrates his steadfast dedication to being the best support system he can possibly be.

These findings echo those of Doucet (2006), namely that circumstances may prompt mothers and fathers alike to reconsider their taken-for-granted beliefs about what it means to be a good ‘father’ or ‘mother.’ Indeed, as the findings above indicate, becoming single parents resulted in significant shifts in the ways in which they viewed their roles and how they interacted with their children, underscoring the fluidity of gender as a social construct. Both men and women can, and often *will* adapt their behaviours as circumstances dictate, contesting the notion that roles are inherently fixed by biological or cultural norms. Having said that, however, enduring cultural norms and expectations continue to impose distinct responsibilities for fathers and mothers. This explains why even in situations where fathers perform comparable caregiving roles as mothers (i.e., as single fathers), they never consider it as ‘mothering’; rather, they emphasise the ways in which their parenting continues to differ from that of mothers.

Shopping for daughters

The challenges associated with raising daughters appear to be primarily emotional, with fathers generally expressing being comfortable and confident in practical aspects, such as shopping for their daughters. Particularly, they described an extremely pragmatic approach which focused on their daughter’s immediate needs and comfort:

Ryan: [D]efinitely, I would take her and make sure she buys. Because every time I wash the clothes, I can see and know, 'That one is worn out.' I would take her and sometimes there's the sale going on, so I can get it for her. Make sure that she buys the right one... I tell her, 'Buy, since they're selling the undergarments cheaper and you feel comfortable wearing [them].' 'I feel kind of shy.' I say, 'Go and try it first. See whether you can wear properly or you ask the sale's lady to measure for you. Every time I try to buy extras so that she doesn't need to buy later on.

Describing how he would take his daughter to buy new undergarments, especially during sale periods, Ryan’s approach illustrates a highly rational mindset towards shopping. He clearly prioritises her comfort and ensures that she purchases extras to avoid future shopping trips. Although shopping is traditionally seen as a ‘feminine’ activity, the men in this study seem to embrace it with a rational shopping mindset commonly associated with traditional masculinity. They often approached shopping as a practical activity fulfilling a practical need for their daughters, as opposed to a gendered task (in spite of their gendered differences). As such, Ryan, for instance, remained unbothered when he sometimes received strange looks from salespeople, focusing on the ordinariness and necessity of the task: “My daughter. I'm paying, so I must see what she buys, correct?” Recalling the time his daughter got her first period; Derek demonstrated a similar pragmatic approach when shopping for sanitary products:

Derek: [W]hen she got her first menses, I brought her to Sheng Siong. I was like, 'Wah, so many brands.' She felt embarrassed, but for me, it's like, 'Which brand should I get?'...I just looked at my daughter. She [was] embarrassed, so I just [got] every brand, and I bought it back home. From there, I just told her, 'Whichever you are most comfortable with, tell me, I'll just get the brand from there.'

Confronted with a variety of brands and unsure about the most suitable choice for his daughter, Derek's decision to purchase multiple brands of sanitary products indicates a highly rational approach towards shopping. He prioritised his daughter's comfort by opting for a trial-and-error method, allowing her to choose the brand which best met her preferences and needs. Sean channelled similar energy, describing how he was subscribed to mailers from 'Young Hearts,' a store selling female intimates and sleepwear, so that he could shop for his daughters. Additionally, he shared that it was "not an issue" for him to shop for his daughters in public, even enjoying doing so:

Sean: I like shopping for nightgowns, like oversized tees and nightgowns...Because my younger daughter loves teddy bears, I would try to find stuff that has bear prints on them. That's something I enjoy doing, and I wouldn't mind going to shops where teenage girls or mums would go to buy.

Overall, these narratives emphasise a clear willingness on the part of the fathers to actively engage in shopping activities traditionally considered feminine. They approached the highly feminine domain of shopping with both rationality and practicality, and even if they sometimes received strange stares from salespeople or other shoppers in those traditionally feminine-coded spaces, this did not dissuade them.

Additionally, in terms of sexuality education, several fathers raising daughters surprisingly expressed feeling confident and comfortable in teaching their daughters about the importance of protecting themselves and making informed decisions in their future relationships. Sean, for instance, shared that he adopted an open approach to discussing these issues with his daughters, covering a wide range of topics including bodily autonomy, reproductivity, and relationship dynamics:

Sean: At the end of P1, I already told [my older daughter] about the importance of saying 'no' and protecting her body. Very occasionally, I would talk about the birds and the bees to both children. This is not awkward, it's not one-on-one now. It's just, very openly. Then I also tell them about the psyche of some men. Like, some men may think that they're entitled to women, they don't believe in consent. So, I teach them consent, body confidence. I also describe very dispassionately the reproductivity. I just talk about it, because it's just physiological and chemical reactions. I also talk to them about things like, managing relationships and love, and there's different kinds of people, different kinds of love language[s]. So, it's a very cerebral and cognitive approach to this...and lots of humour also, so at least it's not [an] awkward topic.

From this, it is clear that he uses an approach comprising factual information, humour and open dialogue to educate his daughters on issues which might otherwise be awkward or uncomfortable. Similarly, two other fathers, Ryan and Simon, also echoed that they have openly spoken with their daughters about sexuality and sexual intercourse; "the birds and the bees" as is it is commonly referred to:

Ryan: [I told her] you must know about the birds and the bees, and also you must know what your sexual education [is] all about, and you have the right to say 'No.' Anything that is inappropriate, you must say 'No.' You cannot wait. You cannot be quiet about it. You must say 'No, no, no,' at least three times.

Simon: I make her think, 'Do you want to have a baby now?' She says, 'Huh? No.' 'Why? You don't know how to take care of [a] baby.' 'True.' 'Then are you going to get yourself in this kind of danger?' 'No.' I'd pose questions to her to let her think about the consequences of what may happen. [I]f she [doesn't] know, I'd explain to her...[W]ee talk about things such that she understands the pros and cons, as well as the consequences of what things could happen.

While Ryan emphasised the importance of boundary-setting, empowering his daughter to firmly assert her boundaries and protect herself, Simon sought to empower her daughter to make informed decisions by getting her to understand the possible consequences and risks of her actions, including having sexual intercourse. Despite perceived limitations in other aspects of relating to their daughters, fathers generally expressed confidence in educating their daughters about bodily autonomy (Coles 2002; Shorey and Pereira 2022). Arguably, this tendency aligns closely with hegemonic ideals of masculinity that define fathers as protectors, particularly of their daughters, as several fathers had similarly emphasised in their definitions of a good father. As men themselves, fathers seemed well-aware of the potential dangers their daughters may experience, especially if they were naive and easily impressionable. This is best represented by Darryl, who articulated concerns about his daughter's interactions with boys: My main concern is boyfriend[s] because boys are boys. They do sh*t things...if you are a parent of a daughter, you are like, 'Oh, shit, what the f*ck? Why did this happen? How do I handle this? What to do?...' Your mind would start to cloud, because I was young before." As such, fathers strove to protect their daughters by fostering their independence, guiding them in making sound decisions for themselves.

Previous studies on single fathers also suggest that they often feel out of place and uneasy in places considered "estrogen-filled worlds" (Doucet 2006b:704), which are spaces predominantly occupied by children and female caregivers. To explore this further, respondents were asked if they had ever felt uncomfortable in public spaces as single fathers. Surprisingly, all participants did not feel uncomfortable in public. Although one father mentioned that he occasionally received strange looks when he was out shopping for undergarments with his daughter, or dining out with her, these instances did not bother him. Iskandar also revealed that his daughter frequently expressed reluctance about him attending her dance performances because of his gender:

Iskandar: 'I send you to ballet and all that, but you don't want me to watch your performances'. 'I don't want'. I said, 'Why?' 'I'm shy'. 'But why?' 'You know there, no fathers will come and watch. Only mothers come and watch. I don't want you to be like, the only man there'. I said, 'Then how? I mean, I'm willing to do all these for you, but you don't want me to be a part of it.' 'You don't understand.' Yeah, but after a while, I

told her that whether you want me to come or not, I will still come. She just had a dance performance. I just went over there. In the sea of mothers, I am the only father, but I don't care.

Despite often being the only father in “the sea of mothers” at his daughter's dance performances, Iskandar expressed that this did not bother him as his priority was to be present and supportive of his daughter in her endeavours. Another father, Ryan shared that his daughter often received questions from other parents about whether he had behaved inappropriately towards her:

Ryan: My daughter has friends in the school. The mums and dads would ask, especially the mums, they found out my daughter was [raised by a single father]. That time, the case[s] in Singapore, it was like, fathers raping daughters, molesting, they would ask my daughter, 'Eh, does you father touch you in a very inappropriate way?' 'My daughter was wondering, 'Why are they asking me this question?', so she came and told me. I told her to tell them the truth. You know, 'Sometimes when you were young, I had to shower you, no choice. And sometimes when you are sleeping in your room and when you get scared, you come and sleep beside me.' I said, 'Tell them the truth, there's nothing to hide.' I was first angry about this, but I look[ed] at it. They were just concerned, so I shouldn't blow it out of proportion. I should take it with a pinch of salt. They were concerned, let it go. We cannot blame them, because the social stigma is there. These kinds of things happen.

The questioning from other parents suggest that men, especially those in primary caregiving roles, are viewed as possible threats to their children's safety. Their suspicion emphasises how caregiving is inevitably a deeply embodied experience, with the bodies and actions of fathers subject to scrutiny and suspicion. Although his initial response was anger, Ryan was able to later reason that the parents were well-intentioned and were just looking out for his daughter's well-being, especially given prevailing social stigma against single fathers. Importantly, by pointedly discussing how he had bathed his daughter when she was young or let her sleep beside him when she was afraid, he arguably challenges the assumption that any physical interaction between a father and daughter must be viewed with suspicion. Rather, (single) fathers too may frequently engage in physical acts of caregiving and physical displays of affection. His decision to directly and honestly address these concerns with his daughter and encouraging her to “tell them the truth” indicates an awareness of the social stigma surrounding single fathers as well as a desire to challenge them through transparency and education, as opposed to minimising them.

Chapter 5: Discrimination in Various Spheres

Fathers described instances of perceived discrimination in various spheres of their lives, particularly institutional discrimination within the family court system, workplace, and the policy realm, in addition to everyday discrimination due to prevailing stigma against single fathers.

5.1 Battles with the family court system

Divorced fathers in the study overwhelmingly described themselves as subject to gender discrimination within the judicial system. They often expressed their frustration with the system, believing that judicial discourses often questioned their ability to fulfil parental roles and responsibilities. Unlike their ex-spouses who seemingly benefitted from a presumption of parental competence, they felt subjected to heightened scrutiny and criticism. Consequently, many felt compelled to actively demonstrate their parental ability and contributions as parents during divorce proceedings. This mirrors the findings of Sun, Chong and Lim (2014), who noted that Singaporean fathers frequently felt they had to overtly demonstrate their parental capabilities in order to negotiate child custody disputes. Iskandar, who has care and control of his 13-year-old daughter and 16 year-old-son, recounted instances during his divorce where he felt unfairly judged and discriminated against due to his gender. As Muslims married under Muslim law, the spouses were first required to attend counselling sessions under the 'Marriage Counselling Programme' after his ex-spouse filed for divorce at the Syariah Court. While both of them were expected to attend, Iskandar was reportedly not informed about the mandatory counselling sessions, resulting in his absence:

Iskandar: I didn't attend any of the counselling [sessions] because I didn't know...After three [sessions]...suddenly the Syariah Court called and asked, 'Why didn't you attend?...We already informed your wife.' I said she didn't inform me, but they didn't see it as something reasonable. They said, 'It's your responsibility to ask your wife when it is...' How am I supposed to when I didn't even know I was supposed to attend?

Despite not being uninformed about these mandatory sessions, Iskandar was blamed for his lack of awareness. Even after successfully rescheduling the counselling sessions for both him and his ex-spouse to attend, he still felt unfairly treated by the counsellor and mediator during subsequent mediation sessions. From his perspective, he felt they exhibited biases towards his ex-spouse and held prejudices against himself, despite their expected neutrality. These biases seemed apparent in their questioning, which he interpreted as assuming his incompetence and irresponsibility as a father and spouse, rather than objectively exploring the claims against him:

Iskandar: When I attended the counselling sessions, even the counsellor took a very biased point of view...She was supposed to be a neutral party, but the moment she asked me questions, it [was] always like, 'Your wife said that you are an irresponsible father. Why are you irresponsible?'...I didn't manage to state my stand. It [was] always answering to the fact that whatever had been mentioned by my wife, I had to be

accountable for all the things she said. When we went for mediation, my ex-wife wrote an affidavit of all the things she claimed I did. The mediator simply asked me, 'Why didn't you work for the past eleven years?'...I said 'That's not fair. You didn't even ask for proper documentation.' [T]wo rounds of mediation, and both times, I was put down. I got very depressed, knowing that I couldn't get my voice out, and that at this rate, I [was] going to lose my kids, because she [applied] for sole custody... I felt that [was] very unfair for me, because I didn't do anything wrong.

Despite the lack of proper documentation or evidence supporting the accusations that Iskandar had been an irresponsible father or unemployed for the past eleven years, he felt that they believed in his ex-wife's claims, placing the burden of proof and accountability on him. Beginning with the presumption that he was guilty, this approach undermined his ability to fairly present his own perspective and defend against the accusations. Concerned about the possibility of losing full custody of his children due to these biases, Iskandar chose to seek legal representation after consulting with friends who had also undergone divorce. However, as the excerpt below illustrates, even this decision presented several challenges:

Iskander: I went to see a few Muslim divorce lawyers...they were not supportive...they told me, 'I can defend you, but you have to admit you are an irresponsible father.' They just assume that men would be the cause of divorce...I have other female friends who got divorced, and their lawyers were actually more helpful...I got to know of the top lawyer for Muslim divorces, [name redacted]... He listened to me, but he said that he would not come cheap...\$18,000...I was thinking...'Why is the victim having to fork out money to defend themselves while the other party [has] the court of law fighting for her?'

The advice he received from the lawyers to admit to the allegations rather than contest them illustrates an unsettling bias within the legal system, namely the presumption of guilt concerning male clients, especially in their roles as husbands and fathers (Sun et al. 2014). Ironically, despite seeking legal support to ensure fair representation for themselves, fathers like Iskandar may still encounter biases and a lack of advocacy for their rights. Nonetheless, he was eventually able to engage a lawyer who was willing to advocate for him, successfully succeeding in refuting his ex-wife's allegations. Yet, this was arguably only possible because of his financial capability and his ability to provide proper documentation of his household contributions over the years through careful record-keeping ("I am...very meticulous...in documentation, so whatever bills I pay, I would print...and file every single thing...My lawyer asked [for] evidence that [I] actually paid all the bills...I [had] ten years' worth."). In a legal system seemingly stacked against fathers like him, Iskandar had to shoulder both the financial burden and the burden of proof in order to defend himself. Despite the urge to dismiss Iskandar's struggles as an isolated situation, reports from other fathers indicate otherwise, revealing a noticeable pattern in their challenges. Their collective frustration with the family court system and the legal battles endured align closely with the conclusions of scholars like Shorey and Pereira (2022), who established that single fathers frequently felt unfairly disadvantaged in the eyes of the law. Saad, who had only been divorced seven months prior to our interview, related a similar experience during his court proceedings:

Saad: [W]hen they asked me a question...they just cut my answer short and [told] the judge, 'That's not what's happening. My client' – my ex-wife – 'says a different thing.' They don't listen to guys much...They also didn't get the facts right *lah*. A lot of things that she said...were untrue...but there is no way for us, as guy[s], to explain. They would never buy it. [B]efore I left, I told them...'If you're just here to listen to what women have to say...why would you invite me?'...My ex-wife's...demand[s] [were] also quite ridiculous...but my mind was not straight anymore...I just want[ed] peace...I [told] her, 'Tell your lawyer what you want, let them draft whatever they want and let the Court agree. Whatever the Court tells me...I will just do it.'

His account further underscores how the court system seemingly prioritises accusations made by ex-spouses, even when “they didn’t get their facts right,” and their claims were unsupported by evidence. Like Iskandar, Saad described feeling frustrated by the lack of opportunity to advocate for himself and extremely disadvantaged during the entire process. However, unlike Iskandar who chose to engage a lawyer to dispute his ex-spouse’s allegations, Saad simply chose not to attend subsequent court appearances. While a divorce is undeniably stressful and taxing for all parties involved, it is arguably exacerbated by feelings of unfairness and double standards in family law proceedings.

All fathers in the study had, in some way or another, verbalised that they were well-aware of prevailing gender biases and discrimination within the court system which commonly favours mothers in care and control orders, oftentimes without even being directly questioned about it. In fact, one father went so far as to describe it as an “unconscionable contract,” a concept used to describe terms that are unfair and overwhelmingly one-sided in contract law. The “Women’s Charter” was also singled out by three fathers, who considered it to be in favour of mothers. Nonetheless, most fathers believed that the main factor explaining why the court had granted them care and control was because their ex-spouses had consented to this arrangement, as opposed to their perceived superior competence for the role. This seemed to be common knowledge among many of them, as articulated by Henry:

Henry: I'm sure you already know courts have a bias against fathers, especially [those] with children of young ages. It's fathers who need to prove they are a better parent. Mothers are, by default, somehow the better parent. I think the only reason why I could get [care and control] was because my ex did not fight for it. If we fought for it, I don't think I would have won, especially at five years old...Fathers have to prove they are a better parent.

Despite the legal mandate that the child’s welfare be the primary consideration, fathers, including Henry, frequently expressed that courts presumed children were better off in the care of their mothers. While mothers were automatically viewed as “the better parent” due to their gender, fathers had to “prove they [were] a better parent” to be considered for care and control of their children. Consequently, many of them believed it was difficult for fathers to obtain care and control unless they could prove their ex-spouses’ inadequacies as mothers or negotiate an agreement where the mother agrees to grant them care and control. This sentiment was similarly echoed by several other fathers, as included below:

Sean: It [had] to be done by consent, so both parties [had] to enter into a draft consent order, and after that, we [applied] to the courts when we [were] filing for divorce...In order for men to have full care and control, I think it has to be done by consent, especially for daughters.

Wilson: It [was] a mutual agreement between me and my ex-wife... my ex-wife didn't want...that's why it [was] given to me.

James: Why do I have my five boys with me? Most of the time, the woman, the mother...will get the children if she asks for it. 95%, or 99%...unless the mother is somehow incapacitated or has some major thing that she's definitely not available. The short answer is, she did not ask for the children, that's why they're with me...My divorce is so-called not a 'disputed' divorce, it's considered 'consent.'...That means we both discussed and agreed to [the terms], there was not a dispute in court.

The fathers quoted above explicitly highlighted the importance of “consent” and “mutual agreement” in their discussions. Additionally, Henry and James also emphasised that their ex-spouses did not “fight” nor “ask” for care and control of their children. Collectively, these references underscore how maternal custody is commonly prioritised unless there are exceptional circumstances preventing their ability to care for them, or if both parties are able to reach an agreement. Through their sharings, there was a keen awareness that if their ex-spouses had sought care and control orders, they, as men, would have likely been unable to successfully contest and secure this arrangement for themselves, especially given their children’s young ages and gender, especially if they had daughters. These sharings allude to the prevailing influence of the ‘tender years’ principle, which presumes that the well-being of young children is best ensured by being with their mothers (Yaffe 1994). An understanding of this disparity likely heightens fathers’ feelings of insecurity and hopelessness during divorce proceedings, especially given the real possibility of losing custody and the inability to get care and control of their children. For instance, Jeffrey, who had been separated from his spouse and was awaiting his divorce process, voiced serious concerns about his uncertain future, especially regarding his daughter’s living arrangement:

Jeffrey: [I]t's very important that I am still able to live with my child and take care of my child...Our divorce is actually uncontested, but in order for it to be uncontested, you must agree on all those things...So, I thought I have to give a little bit more, because if I don't accept some of the things she [said], I'm not sure I can get [care and control]...I have the impression that no matter what, the court would give the mum at least half...regardless of what has happened...unless there is proof [she] totally isn't fit or is in jail, but...it's very difficult...Now [the arrangement] is five days, why after the divorce, it becomes three days? It is something she wanted...[I]f I want to contest, what if I lose? I worry about that. I think there is some stigma...The mum, by default, is the one who should be taking care of the child...and that's why people like me are handicapped.

Believing that he would stand a better chance in court if he were a woman, Jeffrey’s comments further foregrounds the perception that the legal system inherently favours mothers in disputes. While mothers are commonly assumed to be better caregivers, fathers seem to face significant

barriers when seeking care and control orders. Anxious about the possibility of losing complete care and control and/or custody of his daughter if he and his wife were unable to reach an agreement, “If I want to contest, what if I lose?”, Jeffrey felt compelled to accept some of her demands. When asked for an example of a compromise he felt inclined he had to make, he highlighted her proposed custody arrangement, which would reduce his time spent with their daughter from the current five days to three. Knowledge about the existence of gendered biases and discrimination may therefore also inevitably influence how fathers negotiate with their ex-spouses. Collectively, their sharings draw attention to the difficulties men encounter in navigating divorce proceedings within a legal framework that may be inherently tilted against them.

5.2 Workplace Challenges

Single fathers also reportedly experience unfair treatment in other spheres of their lives, including the workplace. Despite being aware of their primary caregiver status, they described general inflexibility in accommodating their caregiving responsibilities, especially in comparison to the support (married) mothers seem to receive at their workplace. Case in point, although Iskandar’s workplace generally allows remote work most days, important occasions requiring physical presence at work arguably expose prevailing gender biases that seem to disproportionately affect single fathers like himself:

Iskandar: [M]others can just say ‘I can’t, because I have children,’ but me [and] another single father, even when we say that we can’t, our boss would say, ‘[T]ry to come down.’ They’ll never say that to the women who are mothers. They just assume that men are able to handle this better...They would say, ‘Eh, make arrangements *lah*, send your kids over to your parents.’ What about the people who are mothers? They have husbands. How come single fathers have to do this and married couples don’t?

While mothers seemingly receive more leniency, including being excused from in-person meetings due to their caregiving responsibilities, fathers like Iskandar frequently encounter greater resistance when making similar requests. This is even though many of these mothers are married and could therefore possibly rely on the assistance of their spouses during such situations. Despite expressing legitimate concerns about leaving his children unsupervised after school, the dismissive responses Iskandar encountered, including being told to rely on his extended family for support, suggests a lack of empathy for the unique challenges faced by single fathers. Unlike mothers, single fathers are somehow expected to handle their work responsibilities without difficulty, even when there are scheduling conflicts. Regardless of their primary caregiver status, this suggests that single fathers are still measured against, and therefore expected to adhere to the ideal worker norm, which demands uninterrupted availability at all times and the prioritisation of career over personal life. Understandably, this poses difficulties for single fathers who must somehow navigate these conflicting demands. Other respondents recounted similar instances of resistance, especially when they made requests for time-off work due to child-related reasons:

Amin: We are not given the same relaxation at [the] workplace. [A] single mother can just say, 'Hey, boss, my son is sick, I need to pick him up from school'...but when it comes to us...you know, the expression on their face is like [they are] not happy.

While being a single parent inevitably leads to more unexpected family demands due to the absence of a co-parent (e.g., attending to a child who is unwell), Amin's experience similarly highlights how single fathers are still expected to prioritise work commitments over family obligations. Consequently, they frequently encounter greater inertia from employers when needing to attend to family emergencies, such as when their child unexpectedly falls ill. James, who has five sons, described the pressure he continues to face in the workplace to put work before his family obligations:

James: I still get questions...'If there's something really, really urgent at work, can you stay and finish the job before you go?' I say, 'No, I can't, because I have to pick up my youngest from childcare. [It] close[s] at seven [pm], there's no alternative'...this guy, mid-60s, he found it very unacceptable that I would prioritise...to pick up my children, over work. He kept emphasising, 'What if it's very, very urgent, there's something that you must stay and get it done?' I said I can't, at most I'd just bring it home, and after the children sleep, I start working again...he found it difficult to accept that *lah*. I think bosses also feel the same way...they expect the men...to be more focused on work and to be there when they call.

James too seems to encounter opposition from colleagues and superiors who seem unable to understand nor accept that he would place family over work commitments, despite being aware of his responsibility to his five sons. Their persistent emphasis on the urgency of work tasks suggests a lack of consideration for his parental responsibilities. Despite offering to continue working from home once his children go to bed, thereby allowing him to fulfil both work and family duties after working hours, their unwillingness to embrace this approach indicates an expectation that work comes first, regardless of circumstances. These instances, coupled with James' observation that colleagues and superiors typically expect men "to be more focused on the work and to be there when they call" underscore the enduring influence of hegemonic masculinity, particularly the importance of work in men's lives. Despite the greater domestic and childcare responsibilities borne by single fathers, they are not afforded leniency in the workplace and continue to be judged primarily on their professional achievements.

Fathers may also face unfair treatment and discrimination during the job application process due to their status as primary caregivers. When asked if they had ever felt discriminated against because of their marital status, several fathers referred to challenges encountered in the job market. Sean, for instance, was reportedly advised by multiple recruiters to conceal his single fatherhood status on his job applications:

Sean: They told me to lie, 'Employers don't want to hear that.' My opinion is, if the employers are that liability-seeking from the get-go, then it's a red flag for me. I need to declare this upfront, otherwise what happens if I need to take leave?

Although Sean chose to disclose his status as a single parent, anticipating the need for flexible work arrangements, the advice he received to conceal, and lie is telling of the persistent bias

against single fathers in the employment market. While single fathers are still expected to adhere to the ideal worker norm in the workplace, prioritising work over family responsibilities, those seeking employment are evidently viewed as deviating from this norm, resulting in harsher evaluations of their professional competencies. Unlike married fathers who often stand to benefit from a ‘fatherhood bonus’ when they have children, single fathers are viewed as liabilities, seemingly less dedicated and less committed to their jobs, rendering them undesirable candidates. Amin, who was also in the midst of looking for a new job, also felt that his competency for the position was frequently questioned during his interviews due to his status as a single father:

Amin: I think prospective employers look at it very differently. They always ask, 'So, how are you going to cope?' [A]t this current [job], I've been with for seven years, so I know my work [like] the back of my hand, but in a new situation, it might take me a year or two to actually know my ground, so this is their concern.

Once again, the very questions posed by prospective employers, “So, how are you going to cope?” – indicates scepticism on their part regarding the ability of single fathers like himself to successfully manage their work and family responsibilities. Although he has proven his competency in his current role despite being a single father, from his perspective, prospective employers seem wary about whether he would be able to succeed in a new position. While all new employees naturally require some time to become familiar with and “know [their] ground” in a new role, single fathers may not receive the same level of grace due to their primary caregiver status. Rather, they appear to be quickly deemed potential liabilities based on the assumption that their caregiving responsibilities would hinder their ability to fulfil their work commitments. Ryan echoed a similar sentiment, though he noted a difference in the way local and multinational companies viewed single fathers. He expressed that the latter tended to be more “broad-minded” and therefore accepting of single fathers and their unique parental responsibilities:

Ryan: I came across some local companies, they asked, 'Oh, you're a single father, so you cannot travel? You cannot go [for] this?'...[M]ultinational companies, I don't see discrimination...most of them are very broad-minded...Some local companies...are so particular [about] these things. They can basically single you out as a single father, 'Are you going to be a problem?'

His observation suggests that Singaporean companies may have more ways to go in creating a supportive workplace environment for single fathers compared to multinational companies, which appear to be more inclusive and accepting. While further research must be done to substantiate this claim, perhaps there is some truth to this statement, given that all the fathers who shared about unfair workplace practices were employed by local companies at the time of the interview. These findings strongly corroborate with those of Izmayeva (2023), who discussed how single fathers often have their competence and dedication to the workplace questioned, encountering a ‘caregiver penalty’ owing to their primary caregiver status. Although this penalty is also similarly experienced by (single) mothers, it appears to be more pronounced for single fathers. They are viewed not only as violating traditional social roles

compared to single mothers, but also as the ideal worker norm and the gendered logic of work organisations (Halrynjo 2009; Iztayeva 2023; Tanquerel and Grau-Grau 2023).

5.3 Policy Discrimination

Three of the state's pro-family social and public assistance policies were also flagged for their inherent biases against single fathers, particularly because they assumed and perpetuated the idea of mothers as primary caregivers in society. As illustration, Sean foregrounded the Working Mother's Child Relief (WMCR) and the Foreign Domestic Worker Levy (FWDL) as two policies that explicitly benefit working mothers, overlooking the needs and contributions of single fathers. The following quotation, included in full, depicts how these policies are viewed as being biased against fathers who, like him, struggle to maintain their employment stability alongside caregiving responsibilities:

Sean: I personally became more acutely aware of the Working Mother's Child Relief [WMCR] Why are you incentivising caregivers to support their employment security, when I'm the one facing employment insecurity in relation to caregiving? I'll become a statistic in unemployment if I cannot manage it, and me having three jobs in 2018, changing [them], was a testament to this...[T]he genesis of the WMCR is to get stay-at-home mums to re-enter the workforce, but at its crux...it's about balancing full-time employment security with caregiving responsibilities...[A]n extension would be the Foreign Domestic Worker Levy [FWDL] which only applies to working mothers, but...when you hire a foreign domestic worker...essentially...it's meant to augment the caregiving resourcing in your household so that you can...stay working. I realised that I needed a helper, so I hired one...shouldn't I be incentivised too? [I]f I didn't have a helper, my employment security would be affected...[I] know that if my kids were sick, I've got a helper at home to look after them, rather than need[ing] to take emergency leave and rush home.

Reflecting on his own circumstances, Sean questions the fairness of policies like these, beginning with the WMCR, which incentivises female caregivers to continue working after having children. Despite being especially susceptible to employment insecurity due to their primary caregiving roles, male caregivers like himself are ineligible for similar forms of financial support. Unable to rely on the everyday assistance of a spouse, many of these fathers must either manage these demands alone or arrange for external assistance. Indeed, tax incentives like the WMCR and the FWDL, designed to promote women's continued employment while raising families, both reflect as well as reinforce the patriarchal belief that women are primarily responsible for the household. By explicitly stating that 'single or male taxpayers are not eligible' for these policies, they not only reduce men to secondary roles, but also overlook the challenges and needs of fathers who assume primary caregiving roles. As Sean reflected, the FWDL could have eased some of his financial burden when he opted to hire domestic help to minimise work-family conflicts. However, as such policies cater specifically to working mothers, single fathers are explicitly excluded based on their gender. Equally, Henry highlighted a similar oversight in policies, but in terms of eligibility for preschool subsidy:

Henry: If you're working and your kid is in kindergarten, you get \$300 off per month, subsidised by the government. When I got divorced, the kindergarten told me I had to ask for a different approval, because I'm technically not [a] working mother...I'm [a] working father...There [was] a form I need[ed] to fill up to ask for approval to continue to get that grant. It [was] not given automatically...I feel that single fathers are being penalised. If I [were] a single mother, I do not have to jump through this additional hoop.

In this context, Henry was describing the government Basic Subsidy for full-day preschool expenses for infants (2-18 months old) and children (18 months-6 years old). The subsidy amount varies based on the applicant's employment status and the child's program type i.e. infant care or childcare (Made For Families n.d.). As Henry's daughter was in full-time childcare and his ex-spouse (the applicant) was working full-time, they qualified for a monthly subsidy of S\$300 to offset her childcare fees. This serves as yet another instance of a policy designed with mothers in mind, as they are presumed to be the primary carers of their children. When Henry and his ex-spouse were married, the couple was able to use this subsidy to offset their daughter's childcare costs, contingent on his ex-spouse's employment. However, once they got divorced and Henry had assumed care and control of his daughter, this subsidy did not automatically continue owing to his gender. Tailored at working mothers, it leaves fathers like Henry in an exceptional position. Fortunately, unlike policies like the FWDL which explicitly exclude fathers regardless of caregiving status, Henry was eligible for this subsidy after filing for an appeal. Even then, the fact that he had to navigate additional bureaucratic red tape and explicitly prove his primary caregiver status due to his gender underscores the enduring belief in traditional gender roles. Though single fathers may become the main caretakers of their children post-divorce, they may remain excluded from many benefits. Ultimately, their position reveals the highly gendered nature of many of the state's pro-family policies, restricting their access to the very assistance intended to ease caregiving responsibilities.

5.4 Schools

Though some fathers articulated positive experiences with their children's schools, especially following a divorce or widowhood, others felt that schools also exhibited certain prejudices, particularly with regards to presumptions about gender roles, parental involvement, and family structures. Three fathers concurred in their experience of how schools tended to prioritise communication with mothers as opposed to fathers, putting them in an awkward predicament as the main caregivers:

Amin: Um, school, they can be quite...biased. They always want to speak to the mother first. I had to email...the court order to tell the school, 'Hey, I'm in-charge, so you better talk to me,' you know? I do not want to be a mockery.

Sean: [T]his is soft discrimination, informed by stereotypes...[W]hen I'm like, dealing with the school, doing day-to-day communications, they only involve the mothers.

Henry: [W]hen I call the school or the school calls me, they immediately think, 'Oh, you are [name redacted]'s mother', right? They think the number given must be the

mother's number, [it] cannot be the father's number...[I]t's so engrained, the perception, that the primary caregiver, the one on the phone, must be the mother.

The school staff's inclination towards communicating directly with the child's mother as opposed to the father reflects ingrained assumptions about mothers as primary caregivers. Additionally, this tendency also underscores the pervasiveness of the idea of the 'normal' family structure in Singapore, characterised by dual-parent households where childcare responsibilities largely fall on mothers. Even when schools are aware of the parents' marital status, there persists an assumption that it is mothers who are primarily responsible for their children's daily activities. Though Henry brushes this off as a "small thing" which irritates him sometimes, it could nonetheless be construed as an example of "soft discrimination, informed by stereotypes" as pointed out by Sean. Despite being actively involved in the lives of their children, prevailing societal assumptions about gender roles in parenting undeniably undermine their contributions, relegating them to secondary roles within their families. These subtle biases may sometimes be a source of tension for these fathers who must continually assert their role as primary caregivers. For fathers already navigating strained relationships with their ex-spouses, the tendency to communicate directly with mothers may also worsen acrimony between them, as evident from Amin's concern about being undermined via the school's direct communication with his ex-spouse, stating "I do not want to be a mockery." Additionally, Ryan, a widower, expressed that the teachers in his daughter's primary school would sometimes make remarks that were insensitive:

Ryan: When my daughter [was] in primary school, she would sometimes come back home crying. Sometimes the teacher would say, 'Eh, your skirt is torn, ask your mother to sew.' I [had] already told the school...my daughter's mother passed away, so be sensitive.

The teacher's seemingly innocent comment, requesting his daughter to have her mother mend her torn skirt, emphasises the clear taken-for-grantedness of the dual-parent family structure in larger society. Although Ryan had communicated his daughter's circumstance to the school, her teacher still continued to direct requests to a maternal figure, indicating a lack of sensitivity as well as awareness regarding the heterogeneity of family dynamics. Another father, Iskandar shared that he felt unfairly targeted by teachers during parent-teacher meetings:

Iskandar: [T]he teachers...tend to assume that because I'm a single father, I don't have control over my children ...[W]hen I approach a teacher, they will be like, 'Do you know what your kid is doing at home?'... I don't see them asking other parents the same way. [T]hey would be like, 'Yeah, [do] you know that you need to observe your kids more?' that kind of thing, and they say it in a condescending way...and it's not for big things, you know, it's just...giving the results.

Although his children generally performed satisfactorily in school without serious academic or behavioural issues, Iskandar noted that teachers frequently questioned if he knew what his children were doing at home and advised him to be more watchful. His experience suggests that there exists a prevailing assumption that single fathers are not as actively involved in their children's lives as mothers or two-parent households, and incapable of effectively managing

and guiding them. Despite the unique circumstances of each father's experience illustrated, together they emphasise the presence of gender biases and stereotypes in their interactions with schools. Educators and personnel must be more mindful of diverse family dynamics outside of the state-endorsed 'normal' family, moving away from preconceived notions and biases rooted in traditional gender roles, to create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students.

Chapter 6: Access and use of support systems

In this chapter, I explore community and government services available to fathers, including financial assistance, childcare, counselling services, support groups, and parenting education programs. Additionally, I also examine the role of social and familial support networks in providing daily care, financial assistance, and emotional support. As noted, ‘social support’ is a broad concept which support is a broad concept which encompasses a wide range of assistance, including instrumental (like practical help with daily tasks like caregiving), informational (like advice and feedback relating to personal or family matters), and emotional support (like understanding, encouragement, and care) (Nues et al. 2020). As perceived social support (i.e., an individual’s subjective assessment of the availability and adequacy of their support network), as opposed to received social support (i.e., the actual amount of social support received), is more consistently associated with positive outcomes for single parents (Haber et al. 2007, as cited in Zhou and Taylor 2022), understanding this perception is crucial in improving outcomes for single fathers.

6.1 Formal Support

Fathers were first asked about their current or past experiences using community and government services and public assistance during their time single-parenting. Those who had not utilised any of these services were also asked for reasons for their non-engagement. Seven fathers had no experience with any of such services. Five fathers had experience with case management and counselling support, two fathers had attended support groups organised by a local church, one father was solely receiving financial assistance through the state’s ‘ComCare’ initiative, while two were receiving both financial assistance and case management support concurrently. Those with some experience generally found the help they received to be beneficial, though insufficient. Johnson expressed gratitude for the support and guidance provided by his social workers and counsellors, crediting them with helping him navigate the emotional turmoil of his divorce, especially in the absence of emotional support from his own family:

Johnson: They really helped me. I think one of the reasons [why] I [could] pick up quite fast emotionally during the very difficult part...God sent me a lot of wonderful [and] helpful people. It's like, 'Eh, I am not alone,' even though family-wise, nobody really encouraged [me]... It's not like they're just doing their job. They really go out of their comfort zone...to help you, to advise you, to encourage you, to pick you up.

Johnson described receiving “no encouragement or motivation” from his family after his divorce. His immediate family, including his mother and sister, disapproved of his divorce, with his mother particularly upset about concessions made to his ex-wife, such as selling the house to her below market value. Lacking familial support, coupled with the emotional strain of accepting his marital breakdown, Johnson’s physical and mental health significantly deteriorated during this time, resulting in depression. As such, he credited his social worker and counsellor with being crucial to his ability to “pick up quite fast” after his divorce. They provided crucial care and encouragement, as well as advice and guidance on career decisions

and parenting concerns. Henry, who attended the ‘Positive Parenting Programme’ (also known as ‘Triple P’) also found it useful in improving his parenting competence:

Henry: [Y]ou see what are the best practices and then you evaluate those against your own methods, and then you realise, okay, maybe this part, I should do better. It’s useful [and] it’s helpful to reflect [against] your own style, and to know some of the best practices.

‘Triple P’ is an evidence-based programme which teaches parents techniques to promote their children’s (aged up to 16 years) psychological, social and emotional development. Designed as a tiered system, it offers varying levels of support tailored to parents’ needs. Notably, MSF’s evaluation studies have shown that the programme has positively improved parenting and child outcomes in Singapore (Kok 2016). Others, like Wilson and Mas, found the financial assistance from the ComCare initiative as “adequate” and “helpful.” Mas also received educational assistance for his children, such as tuition support and reimbursement for their EzLink cards for public transportation, which alleviated some of his financial concerns.

Notably, there was an overwhelmingly negative sentiment in response to the use and support provided by these formal networks. Two fathers, in particular, recounted negative experiences in their interactions with these networks. For example, Saad applied for financial assistance from the ‘COVID-19 Recovery Grant’ upon resignation from his last job. Introduced in January 2021 to offer “temporary financial support to lower- to middle-income employees and self-employed persons who experienced involuntary job loss, no-pay leave or significant income loss,” resulting from the pandemic’s economic impact, this grant was extended until December 2023 to help those negatively impacted by the ongoing economic climate. Lamenting that “it’s easy to find a place to ask for help, but it’s not easy to make them understand what you’re going through,” Saad described their lack of empathy in his interactions with them:

Saad: I am applying for COVID-19 recovery grant because technically yes, I lost my job, I am not working anymore, but they ask me, ‘Eh, why did you quit?’ or ‘Why do you say you have no time? Even after the divorce, you can do this and that. You can tell your boss you can leave work first.’ I said, ‘This is not my company, I can’t just do that. I have to respect the working hours and stuff.’ It’s hard to get them to understand what you’re going through.

Shantini: They asked you to go and get a job?

Saad: Yeah. They keep asking me, ‘Oh, you can do this, you can do that.’ For them to say it’s easy but for me to do it, only if he’s in my shoes then he would understand.

His remarks suggest clear frustration at the lack of understanding and empathy he had encountered during his grant application process. With his daughter no longer attending her student care centre after school and lacking alternative caregiving assistance, Saad resigned from his last job to be available once she finished school. Yet, the questions and suggestions he had received appear dismissive of his unique circumstances and challenges faced as a single father. Amin and his son also previously received counselling support from the Family Service Centre.

In light of his experience, he said, “They should not stereotype single fathers.” When asked to explain what he meant, he shared that they tended to presume their perceived shortcomings as single fathers:

Amin: They keep on prob[ing] questions to make sure that we are good enough to be a single father. I do not know whether it is in their system to probe, or they just want to probe because they want to probe. I don't know.

Shantini: Do you have an example?

Amin: 'I mean, you are working, so what time do your kids eat?' The way you asked was different. You should be asking in such a way that, you know, 'So, who is helping to make sure that their food is there?' It's a very different way of questioning. They already have that assumption when [they ask].

An important consensus emerged among respondents, namely the perception that single fathers remain largely invisible in public imagination. As such, many expressed that single fathers were severely lacking support in society, with existing support mechanisms deemed insufficient in addressing the challenges and needs of single fathers in Singapore; a sentiment widely echoed elsewhere too (e.g. Coles 2003; Manqebo 2019). In fact, when asked if they were aware of any groups or organisations that helped single fathers, most expressed scepticism about their very existence, as aptly captured by Henry: “No *leh*. Is there one? I have no idea. I wanted to look for single fathers like me who have care and control [of] young children. I cannot find a single one.” Several fathers also described the perceived disproportionate level of support granted to single mothers as compared to fathers, despite both groups encountering similar challenges, and requiring comparable levels of emotional, financial and job support. Becoming acutely aware of these disparities only after becoming a single father, Iskandar declared that though he “always thought that Singapore is pro-family,” it appears to only support specific familial forms; that of dual-parent households and, to some extent, single-mother families. Reflecting back on his single fatherhood journey over the last fourteen years, Rajan described a prevailing societal assumption about the primary caregiving status of mothers, effectively obscuring the existence, contributions, and therefore potential needs and concerns of single fathers in Singapore:

Rajan: I don't see anybody even talking or broaching the subject. We probably need more education. The community needs to know that as much as there are single mothers, there are single fathers...maybe they're ignorant it's an issue. [T]he community thinks the child is always with the mother, and the mother is always taking care, but...we have divorced parents, and the father also fights for custody now, because the father also loves the children. And when the spouse dies, the father also takes charge. [M]others also pass away, right? It cannot just be fathers [who] passing away...There's no empathy. Nobody talks about it, or maybe they just thought, 'Father has the child, but he probably had no choice,' rather than fathers also want to do [it].

Rajan's statement is telling of several things, particularly the profound lack of awareness and understanding surrounding the roles, experiences and struggles of single fathers in Singapore. Although fathers too can play a significant role as primary caregivers, whether through legal

battles post-divorce or taking charge after the mother passes away, the prevailing assumption is that caregiving responsibilities primarily fall on mothers. This misconception often results in single fathers being overlooked or misunderstood as secondary and/or absent parents, or even having begrudgingly accepted their role with “no choice.” With such misconceptions, it should therefore come as no surprise that resources and support services are disproportionately allocated towards single mothers, with single fathers insufficiently recognised or supported (Baum 2016). The following statement from Amin encapsulates this sentiment shared by most fathers, emphasising the lack of visibility and empathy for single fathers in larger society:

Amin: I don't see any advertisements about single father[s]. We've seen advertisements for single mum[s], helping out single mum[s], donations for single mum[s], you know? Single father[s] how?

Aligned with previous findings, a key reason why single fathers had not used any of such services was therefore primarily because these services did not seem to be for them. Rather, they were perceived to be overwhelmingly directed at single mothers than fathers, with the former deemed to be much more in need of support than single fathers (Coles 2003; Baum 2016; Manqebo 2019).

While most fathers were not aware of help available for single fathers, two fathers were able to identify an example each. Although James was aware of and had tried to join a support group by the Care Corner for fathers undergoing divorce or divorced, he was told that there were no vacancies available at that time, with him being told to apply for the next round. Iskandar also highlighted the ‘Centre for Fathering,’ as an example of an organisation which provided targeted support to (single) fathers locally. Indeed, established in 2000, it is a non-profit organisation which works alongside state institutions with the aim of promoting active and involved fatherhood in Singapore. He shared that he had previously engaged with it while writing a work article on how companies could better support single fathers in Singapore. Despite acknowledging that it was good that there was a dedicated organisation looking into fatherhood-related issues locally, Iskandar expressed disappointment in what he perceived to be the organisation's lack of proactive advocacy for single fathers in wider society:

Iskandar: [As] a single father, I [knew] exactly the kinds of questions I want[ed] to ask. They [were] not prepared...I ask[ed] them, 'Can you name me a few companies that have proven to have a very good support system, or best practices for single fathers?' They [said], 'We don't exactly know unless they share with us, and that is where we give awards to them.' I said, 'Okay, but do you actively approach companies to find out?', then they were like, 'Not really.' [T]he fact they exist and are institutionalised is good, but I think in terms of being proactive, pushing certain messages, and really going to the nitty gritty of what the problem is, it's not there...Fathers are having difficulty with work-life balance, but do you know what exactly this balance is? It's not just about childrearing...It's about people's perceptions, about how they blend in at work, and whether the benefits and perks are fair for them. [T]here's no difference between being a single father and mother...but why are single fathers not looked upon as people that require as much help as single mothers?

His inquiries into existing workplace support mechanisms for single fathers revealed a seemingly passive approach in identifying companies with best practices and addressing the unique challenges confronting this population. This is true; the Centre for Fathering annually awards outstanding companies the ‘Great Companies for Dads’ award, recognising their commitment to implementing “family-centric policies and programmes that enable fathers to thrive in the workplace.” Foremost, individuals self-nominate their companies for this award, rather than these companies being actively sought out for consideration. While the organisation advocates for better work-life balance for fathers, Iskandar rightfully notes the concept’s nuanced nature, going beyond simply managing childcare responsibilities, especially for single fathers. As discussed earlier, they face additional challenges, including gender biases in the workplace. Yet, sufficient attention has not yet been paid to these unique challenges, resulting in fathers being viewed as not requiring “as much help as single mothers.”

Apart from the perceived inaccessibility and irrelevance of existing support systems, several fathers also highlighted a personal barrier which prevented them, as well as possibly other single fathers, from readily seeking help: namely, their pride and reluctance to do so. Instead of asking for assistance, they seemed to desire independence when it came to managing their difficulties. As such, despite his emotional troubles post-divorce, Iskandar expressed that he had not sought help for himself, in part because as “single fathers, usually [we] don’t do that.” Two others explained their decision to forego help using the phrase “men being men,” implying that it was not in their nature as men to do so. Taken together, these statements illustrate how conventional views about masculinity may strongly discourage single fathers from seeking help, even if they may stand to benefit from doing so. Indeed, traditional masculinity emphasises traits such as strength, self-reliance and emotional restraint, with discussing emotions or seeking help often taken as contradictory to these ideals (Mniszak et al., 2020; Wester et al. 2007). At the same time, however, fathers stressed that support networks needed to work both ways, as summarised by Amin: “[W]e also need more organisations to reach out, but the problem here is, men being men, they don’t reach out. So, it needs to take two, you know?” Although fathers may not willingly seek help for themselves, they believed that support needed to be both readily accessible and specifically designed for single fathers, which could perhaps encourage men to seek help in times of need.

6.2 Informal support systems

In an attempt to better understand their use of informal support networks, fathers were asked if they had friends, family members, or other people they could turn to in times of need or support. Oftentimes, these networks of support were frequently mentioned alongside other descriptions of their daily lives and difficulties encountered, especially within the context of work, demonstrating the significance of these networks in helping these fathers manage their caregiving demands. Fathers used these networks to varying degrees; while a few had no substantial social support systems, others heavily relied on them, though the majority fell somewhere in-between. In spite of their variations, most fathers had some form of a reliable support network, with only a few lacking such a network altogether.

Daily Life

Most fathers in the study had established some sort of support system for themselves and their children for daily tasks like childcare assistance, although this support also tended to extend to other domestic tasks like cooking, basic cleaning and laundry duties. While fathers primarily relied on the support of their immediate family, especially their own mothers, it sometimes also extended to include their siblings, extended family members, ex-wives, or friends. Like many other fathers in this study, Rajan credited his mother's support as crucial to his successful management of his work and caregiving responsibilities, as articulated below:

Rajan: Of course, I, one person alone, definitely couldn't do everything...When I am at work, who is going to tend to her? Who is going to look after her once she comes back from school? Or if there is any emergency, who else am I going to turn to?

Shantini: How did you manage?

Rajan: I have my mother around...When she finished school, she went straight to her grandmother's house. There was food, and she was safe there. My mother kept an eye on her welfare, and when I finished work, I [went] to fetch her and bring her back home.

Managing all aspects of parenthood alone undeniably presents a host of challenges, especially given that caregiving responsibilities may clash with work commitments. As Rajan reflected, the support of his mother was critical in bridging this gap and providing essential assistance that ensured his daughter's safety and well-being after school hours. This underscores the importance of reliable support networks to successfully manage the complexities of single parenthood. Others too, emphasised the "critical" importance of their mothers' support, without which, they did not believe they would have been able to succeed in their personal and professional lives:

Henry: I think family support is critical. I could not have done this if I didn't have my mum's help...I think family support is a huge indicator of whether things get better...it's impossible for one person to go and work and look after [the child].

Stephen: My mother willingly [came] and live[d] in just to help to take care of my daughter. If my mother [did] not come to help to take care, I would not [have been] able to complete nursing school and become a nurse later on.

To this extent, the support of their family is crucial in enabling them to 'pass' as ideal workers to some extent in the workplace. With family members assisting them with childcare and domestic tasks like cooking of meals, fathers could focus more on the demands of their jobs without being overwhelmed by their primary caregiving responsibilities, thereby proving themselves as committed and career-focused workers, to some extent. Stephen also acknowledged the help he had received from his in-laws' in terms of taking care of and spending time with his daughter during the weekends:

Stephen: I [would] go over to my in-laws' place and put my daughter with them. She [would] play with the cousins...They'd bring them out for food, drink, or badminton or

swimming...while I would go down to the McDonald's or the library nearby just to study. [D]inner time, I would go back...chit-chat a bit, then I would bring my daughter back. So, it's like, I have to fully utilise my relations with my in-laws and other relatives, such that I can use that help to take care of my daughter...In this sense, my daughter grew up happily. She didn't have any issues.

Not only did the support of his in-laws grant him free time to study when he was still in nursing school, the stability they offered also likely contributed to his daughter's overall happiness and well-being, creating a nurturing environment for her growth and development. For the few who still maintained relatively positive relationships with their ex-spouses, they were also identified as another source of support for fathers, as shared by Jeffrey:

Jeffrey: [W]e have been split for some time, but we are still co-parenting together...You can separate the part about having a spouse from having a child. So in a way, despite your lack of personal relationship with the spouse...if you need to discuss something or need help...you take care of the child together.

Some reconfigured their living arrangements upon becoming single parents, often by moving back in with their mothers, or having their mothers move in with them for childcare and household assistance, though this arrangement often had their advantages and challenges. For example, Johnson described the difficulties he encountered in terms of how his mother viewed his divorce and her approach to discipline, which often entailed physical punishment which he did not necessarily agree with:

Johnson: ...[T]he way she discipline[d] her children, us, and the way I think I should discipline my daughter is different...When we first moved in, she would scold my daughter very badly...[A]t first she slapped, then I told her, 'Don't slap her.' Then maybe beat her hand, her leg. I told her, 'Don't beat,' then she would tell me, 'I am her grandmother, why cannot? I can discipline her.'

This reflects a clash of generational parenting norms, where Johnson sought to discourage such methods despite his mother's belief in her authority as a grandmother. Similarly, Amin highlighted generational differences, noting that his mother was from the generation of elders who "don't reason out, they just shout," as a method of discipline. To manage this, Amin strategically positioned his mother as a source of supervision and provider of home-cooked meals rather than a disciplinarian in his absence, emphasising practical roles that could minimise potential conflicts: "I've learnt how to position my mum in helping. Two things: one is to be the CCTV camera in the house with what he's doing, the other one is the cooking of food."

Not only did these support systems provide crucial logistical support for fathers, they also granted them opportunities to carve out essential pockets of "me time", with this personal time considered rare yet important amidst their numerous responsibilities. For instance, James valued the time he had to himself on Fridays and Saturdays while his children spent time with their mother, with this time deemed important for his mental well-being:

James: [I] use it to process my thoughts and emotions, which I didn't have time to feel during the week, or the time when it occurred, because I had to deal with urgent matters, so I kind of like, put it on hold inside the brain, you know, KIV [keep in view].

Acknowledging the difficulty of striking a balance across various aspects of life, including personal time, work commitments, and family responsibilities, this draws attention to the importance of external support in granting him some time for himself in the midst of his numerous obligations. Support networks are also therefore arguably important in granting single fathers the chance to prioritise self-care and their own well-being.

Coping Independently

Many also believed in splitting domestic tasks with their children as a way of managing their workload and teaching them independence, which they took to be valuable to their children's development. Although this strategy was perhaps most crucial for fathers without significant social support, most described fostering independence in their children as both necessary and desirable. Acknowledging that he "had a hard time juggling work, paying the bills on time and making sure the groceries were there," Mitch gradually taught his daughters valuable skills to manage household tasks more efficiently. In his words, he stated:

Mitch: I slowly trained them how to check whether something [was] running out, maybe the garbage bag, or maybe rice, and then I used to ask them to give me the list and I would do an online order through the Internet. Slowly, I told them to stay with me when I was doing the order, and I trained them to do it. Then they were also proficient in doing it, and there was a time when they would just come to me and tell me, 'Dad, there's some groceries that we need to order,' then I would just [switch] on the laptop for them and they would just [order]...Other than that, I've also taught them how to read and understand mails I get. That's still an ongoing process. Sometimes they come across mail they don't understand, and they would clarify with me.

Not only did doing this allow him to lighten his workload, it also equipped his daughters with practical life skills, fostering independence and responsibility in them. As I spoke to more fathers, I soon came to the realisation that fostering self-sufficiency and independence in their children was a recurring theme that emerged in response to task overload, although the exact methods by which they sought to do so differed. For example, Iskandar took it upon himself to have a whiteboard to remind his children of their daily chores:

Iskandar: I assign, so they just have to refer to the whiteboard to know what their duties are for today. I only tell them to do chores that affect them only. So, for example, they vacuum their own rooms. It means [that] if they don't vacuum their own room, it means that they are going to sleep in a dirty room. It's got nothing to do with my daughter having to do work for my son or vice versa. That is one way to eradicate biasness. So, my daughter can never say things like, 'Why am I doing it for *abang* [older brother]?' or my son cannot say, 'Why is *abang* doing it for *adik* [younger sister]?' Yeah, so in a way that, 'If you take care of yourself, everything's okay.' Vacuuming,

and like putting their laundry into the washing machine, but I will wash it. And then when doing the dishwashing, you wash your own plates.

Pointedly, he only made sure they were responsible for chores that were relevant to them, with him taking care of the rest of the general chores (“I do everything [else]. I do the laundry, I mop the floor, I take care of the cat”). Similarly, James highlighted the ways in which his sons, especially his older sons, were encouraged to be responsible for their own matters:

James: For example, my older boy would cook for himself, they would go out and do things for themselves *lah*, you know? Look after their own schoolwork. Like, after school, come back, right? I don't have much [time]. I only got a few hours with them. It isn't possible to go through with every one, you know, all five of them. So the older ones have to be more independent *lah*.

Additionally, he shared that they were responsible for tidying the living room and their own spaces and have been taught to help him in loading the washing machine and also transferring the laundry to the dryer in his absence. There is evidently significant task overload for single fathers, who alone have to manage all aspects of their household and family life. Acknowledging the limited time he has to spend with each of his five sons, he evidently relies on his older ones to take on more domestic responsibilities and be more independent in tasks like cooking, managing their own activities and their schoolwork. Likewise, Amin shared that although he drops his 11-year-old son off at school every morning, he has taught him to take the train home by himself after school:

Amin: When we first shifted here, it was quite hard. We did some trial runs during the school holidays, just to prepare him...I have bought a GPS track watch for him. I have actually introduced this to the fathers that [are] actually having care and control...we go to make sure that we are at the top of things, knowing where our kids are, at any point of time. That GPS watch tracks them [in] real time, and we can do two-way calling or two-way video calling.

By teaching his son how to come home from school independently, Amin has sought to inculcate a strong sense of self-reliance and confidence in his son. Not only does this empower his son, it also arguably helps single fathers like himself to better manage work commitments alongside their children's routines. His proactive approach, including conducting trial runs and using a GPS track watch, also underscores his commitment to ensuring his child's safety and well-being when he is unable to be physically present. Collectively, these examples emphasise a parenting approach focused on cultivating independence, self-reliance and specific life skills in their children. This explains why, in response to the question, “What have been some of the rewarding moments of your single fatherhood journey?”, Iskandar mentioned his son and daughter becoming more self-reliant in their tasks, demonstrative of their growing maturity:

Iskandar: [L]ooking at how my kids are becoming more independent, and they do it because they want to help me. So, when they see that the dishes are dirty, they would just clean it.

While promoting independence might seem contrary to traditional notions of nurturing and protective care, which often involve the parent holding onto, and maintaining a close relationship with the child, this approach may be viewed as an integral aspect of nurturing for fathers (Docuet 2006a).

Emotional/Mental Support

Notably, the interviews revealed that support networks often extend beyond merely physical assistance. Beyond practical aid, fathers also underscored the importance of emotional support throughout their solo fatherhood journey, with this form of support both desired and as well as required. These support networks were particularly important, considering how most did not view formal systems to be accessible sources of support. Fathers who had access to, and actively relied on their networks for emotional support and advice found it to be beneficial, describing it as a positive experience. Although family support was primarily sought for daily assistance, fathers tended to have more diverse emotional support networks, including friends, community members like church peers or mentors, as well as other (single) parents/fathers. Their mothers featured most prominently, indicative of how fathers may receive multiple forms of support concurrently from the same sources of support.

Help with daughters

My interactions with the fathers also highlight how support systems, especially those which included their mothers, sisters, and female friends, were very helpful in providing guidance and assistance in helping fathers navigate unfamiliar situations, especially in relation to raising daughters (Coles 2009a, 2009b; Shorey and Pereira 2022). As Sean put it, speaking to other mothers and female friends who could empathise with their daughters' experiences provided "free advice" that could offer clarity for single fathers. Similarly, when Iskandar's daughter unexpectedly got her first menstrual period and needed a pad, Iskandar was uncertain about how to respond. Unfamiliar with brands or types of sanitary products, he reached out to a female friend for guidance on what to do:

Iskandar: [My daughter] just came up to me, 'I need a pad.' I thought she was joking. I said, 'Why do you need a pad? You're still a baby to me,' and she was like, 'No, I seriously need a pad now.' I was like, 'Oh, okay, I'll go and buy now.' I went but I [didn't] know what to buy...there are so many brands. I asked her, 'What brand?' and she said, 'Any brand *lah*.' She also didn't know. Then what size and all that? I called one of my good friends, out of the blue.... 'Can you help me out?' She said, 'Okay, wait there...I'll come down.'

Ryan and Simon also recognised their limitations as men raising daughters, especially given their lack of firsthand experience with similar developmental stages and perceived inappropriateness of discussing certain topics with them. Ryan, for one, acknowledged his constraints in discussing sensitive aspects of feminine hygiene and personal care with his

daughter. As such, he emphasised the important role his sister played in providing her with the appropriate guidance she needed in these matters, such as how to shave her legs:

Ryan: [W]oman's hygiene, I cannot share with her, because it's inappropriate for me to see her naked and tell her, 'Eh, you cannot do this, you cannot do that.' This is where my sister comes in...My daughter asked me once before how to shave her legs. I told her it's better you ask my sister because she will be able to advise you to use the cream or which [way] to use and everything. I said, 'These kinds of hygiene practices that you ask [are] very interpersonal to you...ask my sister, because sometimes woman-and-woman can talk better...That's where the father part is lacking, in a sense.'

Likewise, Simon recognised that his mother's support was crucial in educating his daughter about her period and the proper use of pads, topics he considered to be "not within [his] scope." Mas also echoed a similar sentiment, describing such matters as "girls' stuff" that was best handled by his sister:

Simon: I let my mother deal with it...I know [that] I don't know how to deal with it. It's not within my scope, so I let my mother teach her how to use the sanitary pad [and] the story of having a period, things like that.

Mas: Normally, if [it's] 'girl's stuff', I ask my sister to help me to communicate with them, because I am not going to ask them about the period thing and all that.

Others, like Ryan and Saad, turned to close friends they needed help:

Saad: ...I keep my friends – like, a small number of friends, like maybe two or three of them –, then whenever I'm stressed, and I don't know what to do, I'll just contact them. Sometimes they would just come down, come over and talk. I think during the divorce, at times I [felt] like really, I should just give up.

Ryan: I got this friend of mine. He also recently got divorced. He's got two kids. So most of the time we'd meet up and he would talk to me and I would talk to him. His kids know my daughter and my daughter knows his kids, so sometimes we would go down to his place for the weekend, just to have lunch, dinner, watch movies. Every evening he'd call me. He also stays in Yishun, so we'd go to Orchid Country Club and have a few beers there. So, we'd chat and everything. He's like a good family friend to us. When I was travelling, 'Eh, any problem, you ask your daughter to call me,' you know? 'If she wants to come over, she can come over and sleep, doesn't matter,' so there is an understanding there.

Other fathers expressed reluctance about sharing their worries and concerns with their immediate circle of friends, perceiving them as being unable to fully understand their experiences. Ryan's narrative above suggests that perhaps the reason why he could find comfort in this particular friend may be partly due to their shared experience of single fatherhood, despite differences in their exact circumstances. For example, Stephen shared he found it difficult to seek support from his friends who could not relate to his experiences:

Stephen: [A]s a newly widowed man, I don't know what I need, then they themselves, their families are all 'intact' [so] they don't have any of the experiences I've had. I also don't know what I need, they also don't know how to help. In the end, a few months after my wife passed away, I [didn't] really keep in contact with them."

Despite their well-intentioned efforts, the perceived lack of understanding of his needs and experiences resulted in a sense of disconnect, ultimately leading to them drifting apart. Noticeably, many fathers in this study actively sought emotional support by participating in informal support networks with other parents or fathers navigating similar circumstances. When asked about how they discovered these groups, all of them shared that they had found them independently. As such, although Stephen was not able to receive the support he needed from his immediate circle of friends, he was able to find comfort and understanding in his current support group, which consisted of others who had similarly experienced widowhood:

Stephen: We met because of a Facebook group for widows and widowers. Since I found this group, we have found some support where we have common topics to talk about. We help one another. There are also some activities [that] we organise in our smaller groups.

Through a Facebook group for widows and widowers, he was able to connect with others who shared common struggles and found a supportive community where they could openly discuss their feelings and organise activities together. Finding some comfort in shared experiences was articulated by many other fathers, including Jason and Amin:

Jason: I also tried to seek support, like going for counselling or support groups in the church. I also joined a WhatsApp group for people who have been divorced...at least you have a place to share with people who understand what you're going through also.

Amin: [T]urning to friends who [were] in the same [situation]. We have a group chat...and I do reach out. Learn how they manage it and listen. Listen, and then learn and then try to do it their way, because it is already a tested method and they are doing it.

Both Jason and Amin call attention to the value of peer support from individuals with similar life experiences. While Jason emphasised how these platforms provided him with a safe place to express his feelings and receive support from those who could empathise with his situation, Amin highlighted how these platforms facilitated the exchange of advice and strategies that could be used to navigate their circumstances. In a similar vein, James also emphasised how the chat group he was in allowed him to learn from the experiences of others, emphasising the value of experience-sharing among men:

James: [I]t kind of helps to learn more about other scenarios that other men are facing in their lives. It's more of an experience sharing *lah*, your own scenarios with each other, and comparing the outcomes or your difficulties...[A] lot of things that maybe happened to someone else are not applicable to me or what I've experienced are not applicable to someone else...but it does help to identify certain potential pitfalls or

potential traps or potential difficulties *lor*, in those who are undergoing this journey, or about to start this journey.

Even though the individual circumstances of each father may differ, the insights gained from their conversations could nonetheless aid in identifying “certain potential pitfalls...traps or...difficulties,” allowing them to better anticipate and prepare for these possibilities. Members of these online communities often acknowledged their helpfulness, especially in the absence of formal support systems and limited social support. Yet, they were also frequently described as having limitations. For one, online interaction was perceived to be insufficient for developing deep, genuine connections amongst one another, quite unlike physical support groups that would gather often in-person. Additionally, some of these groups were sometimes considered irrelevant to their needs as single fathers as they included both single mothers and fathers without care and control of their children. Moreover, as several fathers shared, the discussions in these groups often centred around legal matters, whereas many of these fathers were looking for more emotional and day-to-day support. Perhaps this preference stems from the fact that most of them have been single parents for several years now; as such, their primary concern was not ongoing legal issues related to divorce and custody and/or care and control matters. Though these legal issues sometimes emerged over the years, they were not deemed the main focus for many of these fathers. Nonetheless, their discussions underscore the importance of peer support providing both emotional and practical guidance in helping these fathers navigate their journeys with greater clarity and resilience. Recognising that there was a lack of support groups specifically tailored for divorced fathers like himself in Singapore, one father, James, actually took it upon himself to create a Facebook group of his own:

James: I actually started this Facebook group called 'Singapore Divorced Men.' See if there's anyone who wants to join it *lah*, so I have a screening with questions. Those who want to join, first of all, they must be men, and also residing in Singapore.

From the above, it is clear that fathers found support and encouragement from other parents or fathers who share comparable experiences. Not only did these connections provide fathers with a safe space to talk about their struggles with people who could relate, they also facilitated the exchange of useful advice and mutual learning.

Lack of support

Unsurprisingly, those who lack any such support risk experiencing loneliness and isolation, especially since they have nobody to speak to or find comfort in. Though Iskandar desired emotional support for himself, he did not seem to receive it from family and friends, who “assumed me to be the guilty party...so they are more on her side, even my own relatives.” Even though he tended to rely on his parents for emotional support, he described them as being unable to fully empathise with his feelings of loneliness:

Iskandar: [E]ven though I try to convey [that] I'm lonely, I tell them, 'Eh, you know, sometimes I can go for hours without talking to anyone,' because they have gone

through this bad episode with my ex-wife, they are very against me remarrying or getting myself in a relationship...[T]hey will say, 'If you want to live a happy life, just be single.' They only see it from one dimension. They don't see it as I need someone to talk to. I'm not even talking about marriage.

Although Iskandar has attempted to subtly point to his feelings of loneliness, his parents appear to understand it solely in terms of romantic relationships, dismissing his broader emotional desires for companionship and social interaction. Consequently, he described loneliness as one of his hardest challenges that has not been sufficiently addressed. In his words, he described how “if my kids are in school most of the time, I can go for like, maybe 10 hours straight, without talking to anyone.” Only a handful of fathers in this study expressed reluctance in seeking emotional support for themselves. Wilson, for instance, chose not to share his troubles with his friends, to avoid “dampen[ing] the mood” and “burdening” them with his worries and concerns:

Wilson: Friends, I prefer that we just keep it as really friends, in a way. I mean, if they want to share their problems, it's okay, but I try not to bring my problems to them. I have certain standards, or certain things that I require of myself when approaching friends, so I prefer to keep it that way.

Shantini: What do you mean by ‘certain standards’ you have?

Wilson: Not to share things that they might find burdening...What I would share [are] happy moments that do not dampen the mood, because it's not right [for me] to burden them [with] my worries [and] concerns.

Expressing that he had certain “standards” that dissuaded him from sharing things that were not entirely positive. Wilson evidently preferred to share “happy moments that [did] not dampen the mood.” Interestingly, he described that it was not “right” for him to burden them with his worries and concerns. Likewise, despite acknowledging a lack of close friends he could speak to openly about his struggles, Rajan confessed that even if a friend had asked him how was feeling, he likely would not have done so:

Rajan: I don't really share my problems...I don't think I had friends like that...I can't think of anyone really sitting down with me and asking me, and probably, I wouldn't have shared also. That seems to be my nature.

Describing it as his “nature” not to share his problems with others, including his friends, Rajan instead chose to “just soldier on” by himself as a single father. Significantly, while fathers generally expressed reluctance about seeking formal support for themselves, only a minority did the same when it came to seeking support through their informal networks, especially from those formed among individuals in similar circumstances. While it is true that single fathers may readily and openly seek assistance with practical aspects like daily life and childcare as compared to emotional challenges from their social networks, fathers in this study seem more willing to do so amongst those with shared experiences. Most fathers in this study emphasised the importance of emotional support and actively sought it, especially when unavailable from

their immediate family or friends. At the same time, they recognised the potential reluctance of other single fathers in similar circumstances to seek such support. As a result, towards the end of the interviews, when respondents were asked, “Do you have any advice for other single fathers?”, many fathers stressed the importance of reaching out for help in times of need and seeking assistance for themselves. As put by Stephen, although “men are less likely to talk openly,” those struggling “must quickly voice out; don't drown themselves in sorrow, in grief, and like a whirlpool, unable to get out of it.” Similarly, recognising that fathers are likely to hesitate to admit they need help, Sean encouraged fathers to be vulnerable: “It’s very important for single fathers to accept that they don't know anything, and because they don't know anything, it is therefore an indicator that they have to continuously and actively seek information. You have to be compelled to do that.” Hence, it appears that fathers, as “men being men,” are generally less inclined to seek assistance for themselves, even in difficult times, if they can help it. This demonstrates the prevailing influence of hegemonic notions of masculinity that attribute help-seeking behaviour to weakness and expect men to manage their challenges alone and with stoicism.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Even though the family is celebrated as the strength of Singaporean society, not all families are given the same recognition or appreciation (Teo 2010). Rather, it is the ‘traditional’ nuclear family, comprising a married heterosexual couple with children, that remains highly valued, both in discourse and practice. Despite the gradual shift towards more egalitarian attitudes towards parenting and fathers’ wishes to be more involved in parenting, cultural and societal norms in Singapore still prioritise mothers as primary caregivers, with fathers assuming a secondary or supplemental role. By shedding light on the experiences of single fathers and the challenges they face, this paper contributes to the existing literature on single fathers and single parenthood, more broadly. Theoretically, it also advances the literature on hegemonic masculinity by illustrating how its pressures and expectations may adversely affect not only women but also men.

Drawing on the theory of hegemonic masculinity, this study suggests that single fathers in Singapore face gender biases at various spheres due to prevailing societal gender norms, which significantly impact their caregiving experiences. Contrary to popular belief, single fathers are able to adopt and practise caregiving traits traditionally associated with mothers, although there are some differences from mothers. Hegemonic masculinity also shapes the ways in which they understand and approach fatherhood and caregiving activities. All of the fathers are evidently committed to raising their children, striving to do their best to fulfil their parental duties to the best of their abilities. Single fatherhood is commonly described as a lonely, isolating and difficult journey for many due to the perceived lack of social support, underscoring the importance of strengthening the support systems for these fathers. Additionally, they may also benefit from various forms of assistance, including access to important information, mentorship, guidance, and financial aid. Although the findings of the study are not generalisable, they nonetheless offer important insights into this understudied population. Future studies could seek to be more inclusive by including fathers from more diverse socioeconomic and racial backgrounds, in order to explore how gender might intersect with class and race to influence their experiences.

Drawing on the theory of hegemonic masculinity, this thesis illustrates that single fathers in Singapore are confronted several unique difficulties that have their roots in traditional masculine norms. First of all, fathers face gender biases and/or experience gender discrimination in a number of settings, including family courts, the workplace, and school. There are also some who believe that biases exist even at the policy level. Policies that support families (‘pro-family’ policies) tend to favour mothers, who are usually assumed to be primary caregivers, effectively excluding fathers who may also engage in similar behaviours. Additionally, fathers are frequently faced with a work environment that seems to be based on gender differences and continues to expect their uninterrupted availability despite their caregiving responsibilities. It should therefore come as no surprise that many of them have struggled with work-family conflict, especially in the early parts of their single fatherhood journey. Consequently, many have had to make significant career adjustments to better handle the simultaneous responsibilities, particularly in terms of looking for more flexible roles or hours. Others also shared about how they had to make mental adjustments, giving up some

career goals or ambitions in order to better manage their responsibilities. Notably, for those looking to be employed elsewhere, the intersection of their gender (male) and parenting status (single father) also appears to have a significant impact on the employability of single fathers. Consequently, single fathers suffer from a caregiver penalty owing to their unique position of men as caregivers.

Additionally, the thesis has also demonstrated how their perceptions of fatherhood are very much influenced by masculine norms. While the fathers generally described "good fathers" using traits more typically associated with the "new father" who is more actively involved in childcare both physically and emotionally, their descriptions also often included traits more commonly associated with men, such as providing, protecting, and guiding. Contrary to popular belief, single fathers are able to adopt and practise caregiving traits traditionally associated with mothers. However, despite performing similar caregiving roles as mothers, fathers did not perceive themselves as 'mothering', frequently explaining this by highlighting inherent differences between mothers and fathers. Although fathers could attempt to emulate the roles and behaviours of mothers (as they had similarly done), they believed that men could never fully replace mothers. Fathers raising daughters faced additional challenges due to their perceived inability to fully relate to what their daughters were going through. Fathers also briefly touched on the occasional feelings of suspicion or judgement in public settings, especially as they entered female-dominated spaces. Nonetheless, none of the fathers appeared too affected or discouraged by it, attributing it to societal misconceptions and preconceived notions about single fathers. Fathers were surprisingly comfortable buying 'female' products for their daughters (including sanitary pads, bras and underwear) and educating them about bodily autonomy, though they struggled to provide them with the emotional support they wanted/needed.

Simultaneously, single fathers indicated that social services did not provide them with enough help; social services are often seen as unwelcoming and inadequate. It may be argued that these services, which are usually created with women in mind, fall short in addressing their particular needs. Without official support networks, fathers are often compelled to rely on their informal networks of support. These networks offer a range of support services, ranging from more practical assistance to emotional kinds of support. Fathers who had some kind of access to support networks were arguably better positioned to handle the transition to becoming a single father.

Given the distinct challenges confronting single fathers, coupled with the perceived lack of available social support, there is a clear and urgent need for more targeted forms of support that can help to alleviate some of the challenges for these fathers. Despite their general disinclination towards help-seeking behaviour, the thesis underscores the urgent need for targeted support for single fathers. As their narratives suggest, being a single father is often a lonely experience for many, especially given the lack of empathy they might experience from those around them. As a result, fathers may stand to benefit from support groups or practical assistance hubs that can offer timely guidance at different junctures of their parenthood journeys. Policy reforms should also focus on gender-neutral parenting policies and fairer legal

frameworks to reduce systemic biases and enhance access to housing, financial assistance, and parental benefits. Additionally, reducing social stigma through policy interventions and societal recognition is crucial to improving single fathers' emotional well-being and social acceptance. For instance, men could qualify for FWDL if they can demonstrate that they are the primary caregivers in their families. Similarly, the WMCR could be reimagined as a 'Working Parent's Child Relief,' extending eligibility to any parent serving as a primary caregiver. Overall, these proposed interventions aim to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for single fathers navigating their roles and responsibilities.

While the findings of the study are not generalisable, they nonetheless offer important insights into this understudied population. Future studies could seek to be more inclusive by including fathers from more diverse socioeconomic and racial backgrounds, in order to explore how gender might intersect with class and race to influence their experiences.

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Appendix A

	Pseudonym	Age	Marital Status	# of children	Age of child(ren)		# of years as a single parent
					Male	Female	
1	Wilson	29	Divorced	1	6		3
2	Johnson	45	Divorced	1		8	2
3	Mitch	54	Widowed	2		21, 23	7
4	Iskandar	40	Divorced	2	16	13	6
5	Sean	40	Divorced	2		10, 12	6
6	Mas	39	Divorced	6	13, 14, 16	18, 17, 15	13
7	Amin	47	Divorced	2	11	20	<i>7 months</i>
8	James	46	Divorced	5	6, 9, 11, 12 and 14		3
9	Ryan	55	Widowed	1		16	9
10	Stephen	44	Widowed	1		13	5
11	Saad*	30	Divorced	1		9	<i>7 months</i>
12	Jeffrey	39	Separated	1		4	1
13	Henry	44	Divorced	1		9	4
14	Rajan	55	Widowed	1		24	13
15	Darryl	49	Divorced	1		16	7

The table includes the following information: the participant's age, marital status, the number and age of children in their custody, and the length of the time they had been solely raising their children.