

A REACTION TO DR. JOHNSON'S LECTURE ON SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES

MA. LOURDES A. CARANDANG
Ateneo de Manila University

Single-parenthood has become a phenomena involving a large number of our workers' families here in the Philippines. A typical example of this would be a father who leaves his family to work abroad.

A critical factor in my own experience with these families is the effect that the father's leaving has on the mother. How will the mother deal with his absence and what are the dynamics that take place in that situation? What is the mother's attitude towards her own anger about being left by the father and having to take care of the family? Towards her added role as the disciplinarian and protector in case of physical danger?

Somehow, the role of the so-called "extended family" or the "family support system" is very important. The other members of the family like the grandfather, grandmother, uncles and aunties help buffer the situation a little bit and will not make the impact of the father's absence as stark as it is in a nuclear family. One other resource of the family is the presence of older siblings — "the ate and the kuya." This "sibling sub-system" is a very important source of security, not only for the mother, but most especially for the younger children.

I want to emphasize here that the child's age, sex and the developmental stage that the child is in during the father's absence is very important. At a very young age, say below the age of two, a child feels this absence without having a way of understanding why. The child simply absorbs this feeling but is not yet capable of "cognitive coping." An older child,

on the other hand, would have a more developed "cognitive equipment." This gives him a sense of equilibrium when somebody cannot explain things to him. At this stage, the child already starts to explain to himself why his family is like this.

In addition, a child, when dealing with any absence in the family, needs to have a more or less regular and predictable time with a parent or a caretaker. I would like to cite a case with a six-year-old boy who needed so much to identify with his father and was reaching out to him. Unfortunately, the father was not at home most of the time. I felt very strongly that the father had to give more of his time to his child, even for only fifteen minutes every week. The father complied willingly so he started to give fifteen valuable minutes to his child regularly.

On the other hand, you may have a situation where it is primarily the mother who goes out to work to support the family and takes care of the house as well. The impact of her husband's absence when he eventually takes off to go somewhere will not be felt as much as it would have if his role in the family were more active.

The same thing is true among couples in marital separation. Again here, the age level, sex and the developmental stage of the child are important factors. I usually get questions from parents like: "We are separating and it's final, but how can we prepare our children? Their ages are four and five, is it better to separate now or wait until they're about ten?"

We want to find out if we should stick it out because of our children." These are real life questions that have to be dealt with.

It is a very intense interest of mine to be able to enter into the child's world and see how he perceives what's going on around him. At times, a child has to give any explanation to himself, so long as he is able to reason out. For example, a child can say, "My father left because he hated me," or "My father left because he does not love my mother." It is important to look at the explanations they give in their stage of development, because some explanations they give may not be good for them in terms of their "self-concepts." A child may say: "My parents separated because I was a bad kid and I caused them to quarrel." These kinds of misconceptions are bad for the child's self-concept and need to be clarified.

The mother's competence in dealing with the situation of marital separation may also affect the family. She may use one of several coping mechanisms such as forming talking groups or sharing groups where she can be helped by others in the same predicament to consequently accept her feelings. They can look at their competencies as persons which will be a key factor in coping with the situation of separation.

When a family splits because of a job or because of marital separation, we need to get into the effects of the separation on the mother, the father and, especially on the children. These are important research areas which may elicit a lot of reactions from people because of their relevance to the present Filipino situation.