

AN ANALYSIS ON THE FACTORS CAUSING CHILD SOCIAL ISOLATION: CASE STUDY OF A CHILD WELFARE INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the complex phenomenon of child social isolation in Malaysia, framed through Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. It explores the multifaceted contributors to social isolation, including familial dynamics, environmental factors and broader societal influences. Through qualitative analysis at a Malaysian welfare institution, the research examines the lived experiences of six children, highlighting the profound impact of dysfunctional family environments, adverse neighbourhood conditions and resource scarcity on their social isolation. This study also considers the unique challenges faced by refugee children, illustrating how displacement and socio-political factors exacerbate their isolation. Employing a multidimensional approach, this research not only provides a nuanced understanding of social isolation but also proposes targeted interventions aimed at addressing its root causes across various ecological systems. By integrating findings into practical strategies for community health programmes and educational frameworks, this study contributes significantly to the discourse on child welfare and offers directions for future research to enhance the social integration and development of isolated children. The findings advocate for a holistic approach, incorporating policy reform, targeted interventions and continuous professional education to support children facing social isolation, ensuring their development within a nurturing and connected community.

Keywords: *child social isolation, ecological systems theory, social work with children, family dynamics, child studies.*

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of children raised in isolation, whether by non-human entities or through deliberate human action, presents a compelling inquiry into the nature of human development and social integration. Historical and literary narratives present with stories of children nurtured by wolves, dogs, pigs, lambs and other animals, reflecting a longstanding fascination with the boundaries of human socialisation and identity formation (Steinberg & Scriarini, 2013). These accounts, spanning from the seventeenth century to the early twentieth century, underscore the diversity of contexts in which children can be isolated from human society (Newton, 1996). In Malaysia, this theme resonates with cultural tales such as *Dayang Senandong* and *Si Bongkok*, highlighting the societal implications of isolation due to physical appearance or familial decisions (Sulong, 1965; Puteh, 1958).

Beyond the realms of fiction and folklore, real-life instances of child isolation reveal the profound impacts of neglect and societal withdrawal on child development. Cases documented in the early 1940s of children suffering from severe impairments after years of isolation underscore the urgency of addressing this issue (Davis, 1947; Hughes & Kroehler, 2009). The prevalence of child isolation, whether through missing children reports or instances of neglect and abuse, suggests a critical area of concern in Malaysia, as indicated by statistics from the Royal Malaysia Police and the Department of Social Welfare (Royal Malaysia Police, 2021; Department of Social Welfare, 2019).

The intricate relationship between child development and social environment forms the cornerstone of this study. Utilising Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as a framework, this research delves into the multifaceted impact of social isolation on child development. This theory posits that a child's development is influenced by various environmental systems, ranging from immediate family and social settings to broader societal and cultural contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This paper aims to explore how isolation from these systems affects children's psychological, social and cognitive development, with a specific focus on the Malaysian context.

Addressing child social exclusion and isolation, this study defines key concepts such as 'child', 'childhood', 'social exclusion' and 'social isolation' from multidimensional perspectives. It acknowledges childhood as a pivotal phase for learning socially acceptable behaviours and examines how exclusion from social activities, local services and school resources contributes to the disadvantages faced by isolated children (Mohanty, Edvardsson, Abello, & Eldridge, 2016). By exploring the linkages between social exclusion in childhood and subsequent emotional and behavioural challenges, this paper seeks to shed light on the enduring impact of early social isolation.

In summary, this introduction sets the stage for a comprehensive investigation into child social isolation in Malaysia. By exploring the historical, cultural and empirical dimensions of this issue, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the factors leading to social isolation and its consequences on child development. Through the lens of ecological systems theory, this research endeavours to unravel the complex interplay between individual development and environmental influences, thereby offering insights into potential interventions and support mechanisms for socially isolated children.

A Multidimensional Definition of Child: Growth, Development, and Rights

The concept of a child encompasses a rich tapestry of definitions that extend beyond mere age or biological markers, weaving through psychological maturity, social roles and legal frameworks. According to Been and Garbarino (1992), the designation of an individual as a child is not solely contingent on chronological age but also on their level of maturity, reflecting both biological and psychological dimensions. Biologically, a child is identified as an individual in the developmental phase from birth to puberty, a period marked by significant physical and neurological changes that delineate the boundaries of childhood (O'Toole, 2016). This biological perspective provides a foundational understanding of childhood, emphasising the natural growth processes that characterise early human development.

Psychologically, the definition of a child expands to encompass the realms of behaviour and cognitive abilities, where childhood is characterised by ongoing development in thinking, understanding and emotional regulation. Children are often perceived as immature or childlike, not merely in terms of incomplete physical development but also in their capacities for decision-making and emotional expression (Trawick-Smith, 2018). These psychological understandings underscore the importance of nurturing environments that support the cognitive and emotional growth of children, acknowledging their evolving competencies and vulnerabilities.

Socially, the concept of a child is further enriched by the roles and statuses afforded to young individuals within their communities, families and societies at large (Giddens & Sutton, 2013). This dimension recognises children as integral members of social units, where their identities are shaped through relationships with family members, peers and the wider social networks. Within this context, children are seen as 'sons' and 'daughters', embodying specific familial and societal expectations that influence their socialisation and sense of belonging (Hughes & Kroehler, 2009).

Legally, the definition of a child encompasses statutory protections and rights designed to safeguard their well-being and development. Legal frameworks establish clear age thresholds for various rights and responsibilities, aiming to provide a structure within which children's health, education and welfare can be secured. This legal dimension underscores society's recognition of the unique needs and rights of children, ensuring they are treated with care and respect commensurate with their stage of development.

Together, these dimensions offer a comprehensive understanding of what it means to be a child, highlighting the multifaceted nature of childhood that spans biological growth, psychological development, social roles and legal protections. Recognising the interdependencies of these aspects is crucial for addressing the needs and rights of children effectively, ensuring their holistic development and well-being.

Childhood Development and Environmental Influences

Childhood represents a foundational phase in human development, characterised by rapid growth and profound learning experiences. This period is crucial for acquiring the skills and behaviours necessary to navigate social environments effectively. UNICEF (2017) highlights the importance of creating a nurturing and protective environment during childhood, free from fear and harm, to support the healthy development of children. The experiences garnered in this stage play a pivotal role in shaping individuals into contributing members of society, instilling values, norms and the capacity for social interaction (Giddens & Sutton, 2013).

However, childhood is not merely a social construct; it is also a critical period for biological, psychological and emotional development. From prenatal stages to adulthood, humans undergo a series of developmental changes that are universal yet profoundly influenced by their environment (Wagner, 2014). These changes encompass physical growth, cognitive development, language acquisition and the formation of emotional intelligence. The environment in which a child grows, including family dynamics, educational opportunities and social interactions, significantly impacts these developmental areas.

The contrast between children raised in nurturing environments and those subjected to isolation and social deprivation is stark. Children who experience isolation, whether due to neglect, abuse, or other forms of maltreatment, face challenges in normal developmental processes, particularly in behavioural, cognitive and language development (Lasky, 2016). Such conditions can hinder their ability to form healthy social relationships, acquire language and communication skills and develop problem-solving abilities.

Recognising the importance of childhood as a stage of both vulnerability and immense potential, this paper explores the impact of social isolation on the pivotal areas of behavioural, cognitive and language development. By understanding the normative trajectories of these developmental domains, a better appreciation of the significance of supportive and stimulating environments in fostering well-rounded, resilient individuals can be developed. Moreover, highlighting the adverse effects of social isolation underscores the urgent need for interventions that ensure all children have the opportunity to thrive within a safe, supportive and enriching context.

Social Exclusion and Isolation in Childhood: Understanding Environmental, Familial, and Societal Contributions

Childhood social exclusion and isolation represent critical areas of concern, encompassing a range of detrimental experiences that impede children's access to social activities, local services and educational resources. Defined as a state of social disadvantage, exclusion involves the deprivation of resources, opportunities, participation and essential skills necessary for healthy development (Mohanty, Edvardsson, Abello, & Eldridge, 2016). This form of exclusion is intricately linked to the broader spectrum of social isolation, where children, devoid of meaningful social interactions, face compounded disadvantages.

Research indicates that the roots of child social exclusion often lie in family and household dynamics, particularly in scenarios where parents or guardians lack employment or access to educational opportunities for their children. These factors serve as primary contributors to the perpetuation of child disadvantages, underscoring the significance of socioeconomic and geographic variables in shaping children's experiences of exclusion and isolation (Daly, et al., 2008).

The consequences of emotional maltreatment and chronic social isolation extend into adulthood, influencing neural pathways associated with self-referential processing and emotional regulation. Studies have shown that individuals subjected to early emotional maltreatment exhibit heightened sensitivity to social exclusion, manifesting in alterations in brain regions such as the posterior-anterior cingulate cortex and ventral medial prefrontal cortex. These changes are linked to deficits in self-esteem, belonging, control and the perception of a meaningful existence, thereby increasing the vulnerability to psychiatric conditions in later life (Van Harmelen et al., 2014; LeMoult, Kircanski, Prasad, & Gotlib, 2017; Cassiers et al., 2018).

To address and quantify the scope of child social exclusion, the Child Social Exclusion Index has been developed. This tool evaluates the risk of social exclusion based on various factors, including parental, familial, household and residential characteristics. Its application has revealed a direct correlation between high-risk environments for social exclusion and adverse child health outcomes, such as increased rates of hospitalisations and mortality. The index serves as a pivotal resource for identifying regions where children are at a heightened risk of exclusion, thereby facilitating targeted interventions (Harding, McNamara, Daly, & Tanton, 2009; Mohanty, Edvardsson, Abello, & Eldridge, 2016).

On the other hand, Gottman (1977) defines child isolation as a state wherein a child experiences a significant reduction in social interactions and relationships, leading to feelings of loneliness and exclusion from peer groups and community activities. This can result from various factors, including family dynamics, neighbourhood conditions, and broader societal influences. The term encompasses both physical and emotional dimensions, recognising that isolation can occur even in the presence of others if meaningful social connections are lacking. Social isolation differs from mere physical solitude, encompassing emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of isolation. It can manifest as feelings of loneliness, social withdrawal, and a lack of belonging, significantly impacting the child's overall development and mental health (Loads, et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the impact of social isolation on child development cannot be overstated. Research by McNeil, Polloway, and Smith (1984) highlights the profound effect of the social environment on children's overall growth. Children raised in isolation, with minimal human contact, exhibit significant developmental delays, including impaired speech and social skills. The extent and quality of social engagement during periods of isolation are critical for the rehabilitation and reintegration of these children into society. Positive interactions, even in limited contexts, can facilitate recovery and adjustment, whereas negative or absent interactions can lead to long-term developmental and emotional challenges.

Xiong, Hong, Liu and Yong (2023) highlight the complex biological effects of social isolation on the brain, observed across various ages and animal models, despite the challenges in understanding these effects due to the complexity of social isolation in humans and differences in animal studies. It uncovers a pattern of socioemotional and cognitive deficits linked to social isolation, ranging from childhood to increased depression and anxiety in later life. Central to these findings are changes in neurotransmission, neural circuitry and glial cell development in specific brain regions, which are crucial for the negative emotional and behavioural impacts of social isolation. Notably, social isolation causes significant changes in the development and maturation of oligodendrocyte progenitor cells, influencing neural circuit formation and function, leading to various brain dysfunctions.

In summary, the phenomena of child social exclusion and isolation are multifaceted issues that require comprehensive understanding and intervention. These conditions not only impact immediate developmental outcomes but also have lasting effects on individuals' social, emotional and cognitive functioning. Addressing these challenges necessitates a multidisciplinary approach that considers the environmental, familial and societal factors contributing to child social exclusion and isolation.

Applying Ecological Systems Theory to Understand Child Social Isolation

Utilising Ecological Systems Theory, this research seeks to understand the diverse environmental elements contributing to child social isolation. Developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979, the theory offers a layered perspective on how various environmental systems from the immediate surroundings to broader societal contexts, influence individual development and behaviour. It categorises these influences into five nested systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, each playing a pivotal role in shaping a child's growth (Eamon, 2001).

Central to this framework, the microsystem; comprising direct environments like family, schools, and peer groups, serves as the core arena where children experience direct interactions that significantly affect their development (Jack, 2000). Positive engagements within this system are critical for fostering healthy development, whereas negative or deficient interactions can lead to social isolation.

The mesosystem links the microsystems, emphasising the significance of cohesive interactions across a child's life domains, such as the synergy between home and school. The exosystem extends to broader social settings impacting the child indirectly, for instance, parental employment status affecting the child's living conditions (Jack, 2000).

At a larger scale, the macrosystem encompasses cultural and societal norms influencing developmental contexts, including educational attitudes and social policies. The chronosystem introduces the element of time, acknowledging how life events and historical changes impact development, exemplifying how crises like pandemics can exacerbate social isolation among children (Eamon, 2001).

This study leverages Ecological Systems Theory to scrutinise the intricate environmental factors that culminate in child social isolation. By adopting this theory, the research highlights the crucial need for supportive and interconnected environments across all system levels to promote comprehensive child development. It aims to identify specific environmental barriers contributing to social isolation, advocating for strategic interventions to mitigate these barriers and foster environments where children can thrive, both socially and developmentally. This approach not only seeks to understand the breadth of factors leading to child social isolation but also underscores the importance of a holistic view in developing interventions that address the root causes of isolation across the different ecological systems. By applying this theory, the research objectives are addressed through an exploration of the complex interactions between children, their immediate environments, and the broader societal context.

Addressing Child Social Isolation within the Single-Mother Family Structure

Within families headed by single mothers, child social isolation emerges as a multifaceted challenge, meriting an in-depth exploration. Such households often grapple with unique socio-economic and emotional stressors, which, albeit inadvertently, can impede children's social development and their sense of belonging. It is imperative to dissect the dynamics prevalent in single-mother households to comprehend their contribution to child social isolation, particularly through the lenses of economic hardship, constrained social support, and the mutual emotional well-being of the mother and child.

The family, situated within the microsystem, represents the child's immediate and most influential environment. Single mothers, straddling the dual responsibilities of caregiving and breadwinning, may encounter heightened stress, potentially detracting from quality parent-child engagements. This demographic is disproportionately affected by economic challenges, often stemming from reliance on a singular income source, typically lower than that of two-parent families (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023; Daryanai, Hamilton, Abramson & Alloy, 2016). The resultant financial strain restricts children's access to socially enriching activities, such as extracurriculars, pivotal for peer interaction and skill development. Absence from these activities not only isolates them from their peers but also fosters a sense of alienation, exacerbating loneliness and social withdrawal (Stack & Meredith, 2018).

Navigating parenting without the broader support systems accessible to dual-parent families, single mothers occasionally face amplified stress and mental health challenges, affecting parent-child interactions and subsequently, the child's emotional security (Jain & Mahmoodi, 2022). The mesosystem, highlighting the interconnectedness of a child's life domains (e.g., home-school relationships), reveals that single mothers may struggle to foster these connections, potentially disjointing the child's social world (Liang, Berger & Brand, 2019). Children, intuitively attuned to their caregivers' emotional states, might retract socially, reflecting the isolation or stress perceived domestically.

The emotional health of single mothers is intricately linked to their children's social development. Elevated stress, anxiety, or depression levels may precipitate less responsive, more controlling parenting styles, failing to meet the child's emotional and social needs (Fatma, Hidayat & Zahro, 2022). Moreover, children in single-mother households often shoulder additional emotional or practical burdens, distancing them from peers and curbing their engagement in age-appropriate social endeavours (Skubiejūtė, 2019). At the macrosystem level, societal stigmas and stereotypes surrounding single motherhood can contribute to children's feelings of exclusion and isolation, further impacted by societal attitudes that affect the mother's self-esteem and mental health, in turn influencing the child's social experiences (Mariani, Özcan, & Goisis, 2017).

Acknowledging the chronosystem involves recognising the influence of significant life events and transitions, such as parental separation or loss, on development. For children in single-mother families, these events are substantial stressors, potentially exacerbating social isolation. Maintaining household stability and consistent routines can ameliorate these impacts (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023; Pryor & Trinder, 2004).

Targeted interventions for addressing child social isolation in single-mother families necessitate a comprehensive approach, focusing on economic aid, bolstering social support frameworks and enhancing the emotional well-being of both mother and child. Initiatives should include social-emotional support for single mothers, improved community resource access, and child-centric social connectivity programmes. Additionally, societal stigmatisation needs addressing to foster inclusivity for diverse family structures.

The interrelation between child social isolation and single motherhood, enriched by an understanding of ecological systems theory, indicate the need for multifaceted strategies to support social integration and holistic development in children from single-mother households.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative design to investigate social isolation among children in care settings, using methods that delve into their behaviours and experiences to uncover nuanced insights (Shaughnessy, Zechmeister, & Zechmeister, 2015; O'Reilly, Ronzoni, & Dogra, 2013). Conducted at a child welfare institution in Penang, Malaysia, recognised as a "safe place" under the Child (Amendment) Act of 2016 (JKM, 2016), this research aims to understand the dynamics of social isolation in children who have faced neglect or abuse.

To achieve this study's goals, observations and semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection methods. Observations captured interactions and non-verbal cues within the institution to understand social isolation. Semi-structured interviews provided in-depth views on the children's experiences and emotions related to isolation, complementing observational data with personal narratives. The researcher played a key role, not just in data collection but in interpreting and reflecting on the data, ensuring a nuanced understanding of social isolation among the children, which informed this study's conclusions and recommendations.

Given the vulnerable status of the participant group, stringent ethical measures were adopted to safeguard their interests throughout the research process. Consent was obtained from both the children, in an age-appropriate manner and their legal guardians. The study's purpose, methods and potential impacts were explained clearly, ensuring comprehension and voluntary participation. To protect participants' identities, all data were anonymised. Personal identifiers were removed or altered in the presentation of findings to maintain confidentiality and respect privacy.

Special attention was given to minimise any potential psychological distress. Interviews and observations were conducted sensitively, with an emphasis on creating a safe, comfortable and non-intrusive environment for the children. Acknowledging the sensitive nature of the topics discussed, arrangements were made to provide immediate emotional support to participants if distress was observed during or after the data collection process. This included access to counsellors and psychological services within the institution.

The research protocol received approval from USM's Human Research Ethics Committee to ensure adherence to ethical standards in research involving children. Children were encouraged to share their experiences and views without any pressure,

ensuring they felt heard and respected. They were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any adverse consequences. This process verified that the study's benefits outweighed any potential risks to participants.

RESULTS

This research delves into the lived experiences of six children at a Malaysian child welfare institution, examining the multifaceted nature of their social isolation. The group, consisting of four boys and two girls, including two refugee children, showcases a broad spectrum of backgrounds. Among them, communication hurdles were evident, with one girl communicating through gestures and two boys requiring the assistance of informants. Notably, three children were undocumented and participated in *Sekolah Tahfiz*, blending academic and Islamic religious instruction, a unique aspect of their educational journey within the institution.

A central finding was the profound impact of dysfunctional family environments on the children's sense of isolation. Recurring issues like parental neglect and/or abuse, lack of familial bonds, absent fathers, unemployment, and substance abuse emerged as significant factors. This theme was particularly strong among four children, linking their social isolation directly to these family-related challenges. This finding highlights the profound impact that immediate family conditions can have on a child's sense of social belonging and isolation.

However, the narratives of two refugee children presented a contrasting picture. Despite facing their own set of challenges, they maintained close familial connections, suggesting that factors beyond family dysfunction can also lead to isolation. These cases highlighted the role of external environmental pressures in shaping their experiences of isolation, thus adding a layer of complexity to understanding social isolation among children in care settings.

This study further identified the broader environment, both inside and outside the home, as a critical determinant of social isolation. For instance, two refugee children spoke of their original communities being riddled with stress, anxiety, and danger, prompting their families to keep them isolated for safety. Moreover, three children attributed their sense of isolation to inadequate living conditions, underscoring that danger is not the only factor that can lead to isolation; neglect and resource scarcity also play pivotal roles.

Resource availability, or the lack thereof, emerged as another crucial factor influencing these children's experiences of isolation. Across the board, participants identified low socioeconomic status, inadequate access to basic necessities, educational barriers, and a lack of supportive services as key issues. The intertwined nature of family dysfunction, environmental challenges and socioeconomic disadvantage was evident, collectively shaping the resource landscape accessible to these children. While four of them felt the direct impact of family dysfunction on their access to resources, the remaining two were affected by their unstable environmental conditions, restricting their access to the necessary support.

In essence, this study sheds light on the intricate web of factors, spanning dysfunctional family settings, adverse environmental conditions and scarcity of resources, that contribute to the social isolation of children within welfare institutions. The findings emphasise that social isolation is not a straightforward phenomenon arising from a singular cause but is rather the result of a complex interplay of various familial, environmental and socioeconomic factors. This nuanced understanding challenges us to consider broad-spectrum interventions that address these interconnected issues to mitigate social isolation among vulnerable children.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study, focused on child social isolation in a Malaysian welfare institution, compellingly align with and extend Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. This theory suggests that a child's development is deeply influenced by their interactions across varying layers of their environment, from immediate surroundings to broader societal contexts (Eamon, 2001). By examining the lived experiences of children from diverse backgrounds, this research highlights the profound impact of these ecological systems, offering a nuanced understanding of how individual, familial and societal factors intertwine to shape experiences of social isolation (Clair, Gordon, Kroon & Reilly, 2021). This discussion elucidates the specific roles of these systems, proposing targeted interventions at each level to mitigate the adverse effects of isolation.

Dysfunctional Family Dynamics and Microsystem Contributions to Child Social Isolation

The results from this study provide a critical examination of the factors contributing to social isolation among children residing in a Malaysian welfare institution, with particular emphasis on the deleterious effects of neglectful parenting and the lack of essential resources. These factors significantly shape the microsystem of the children, affecting their development and social well-being. This study highlights that issues such as parental neglect, abuse, unemployment and substance abuse within the family are prevalent, deeply affecting four out of the six children examined, leading to pronounced feelings of isolation and a diminished sense of belonging.

At the microsystem level, the family unit, home environment, and immediate social interactions are fundamental in shaping a child's development. This assertion is supported by Antony (2022), who emphasises the profound influence of these immediate environments on a child's well-being and social integration. This study's findings reinforce this perspective, revealing that dysfunctional family dynamics and unsafe neighbourhoods are significant contributors to social isolation among children, thus highlighting the direct impact of the microsystem on their well-being. Such insights validate and expand upon the ecological systems theory, which posits that the quality of a child's immediate environment is a crucial determinant of their developmental outcomes (Lopez et al., 2021).

The impact of dysfunctional family environments on children's social isolation illustrates the pivotal role the microsystem plays in child development. The direct connection between family-related challenges and social isolation not only corroborates but also extends ecological systems theory, suggesting that interventions need to target these fundamental family dynamics effectively to mitigate social isolation.

Supporting these findings, Campos-Gil, Ortega-Andeane, and Vargas (2020) also acknowledge the influential role of microsystems, such as family and school environments, in shaping children's stress and well-being. Their research underscores the impact of the socio-physical environment on children's lives, reinforcing the notion that immediate family and home settings are instrumental in influencing a child's psychological health and social functioning. This body of evidence collectively underscores the need for targeted interventions at the microsystem level that address both the structural and relational aspects of a child's immediate surroundings to foster healthier developmental outcomes.

Mezzo and Macrosystem Influences on Child Social Isolation

This study's findings highlight the significant role of the mezzo and macrosystems, showcasing how educational engagement, socioeconomic status and access to support services intricately connect to shape children's experiences of isolation. These findings illustrate how broader environmental challenges and socioeconomic disadvantages amplify the complexities at the mezzo and macrosystem levels, pointing out how external pressures and community resources, or the lack thereof, profoundly influence social isolation. This interplay between educational settings, socioeconomic factors and community support aligns with the principles of ecological systems theory, which stresses the impact of larger social structures on individual development (Clair et al., 2021).

The results underscore that child social isolation is not solely a consequence of immediate environmental factors but is also shaped by broader systemic influences. The interactions between educational engagement, socioeconomic status and access to support services across the mesosystem and macrosystem levels reveal how deeply social isolation is embedded across different layers of the ecological framework. These insights call for comprehensive interventions that tackle not only immediate environmental issues but also broader societal and cultural factors to effectively mitigate social isolation.

Supporting this perspective, Jefferson, Barreto, Verity, and Qualter (2023) reinforce the importance of understanding how educational engagement and socioeconomic conditions intersect at these systemic levels. Their research discusses the impact of loneliness on learning outcomes and emphasises the critical role schools can play in fostering supportive and inclusive environments. This aligns with the need to enhance the quality of educational systems as part of the mesosystem's influence, demonstrating how educational institutions can act as pivotal platforms for reducing social isolation among children. Together, these studies advocate for a multidimensional approach to interventions, one that integrates enhancements in educational environments with broader socioeconomic and community support strategies.

The Role of Community Support in Mitigating Child Social Isolation

The importance of community integration and support in preventing child maltreatment and social isolation is a central theme emerging from this study, which delved into the lived experiences of six children at a Malaysian welfare institution. This research illustrates that community resources significantly alleviate social isolation, echoing the findings of Guterman et al. (2009) and Gracia and Musitu (2003), who discuss the critical role of community social support across various cultural contexts. The observation that parents of abused children were often disengaged from community resources further underscores the necessity of robust community support systems in combating social isolation and maltreatment.

The experiences of the children in this study, particularly the four who directly linked their social isolation to dysfunctional family dynamics such as neglect, abuse and substance abuse, highlight the severe impacts of inadequate community engagement. The contrasting experiences of two refugee children, who maintained familial connections despite significant external pressures, further complicate the narrative, suggesting that social isolation can stem from a variety of sources, not solely from family dysfunction. These children's experiences underscore the role of the broader environment, both inside and outside the home, as critical determinants of social isolation, where factors like community stress, anxiety, and resource scarcity play pivotal roles.

Supporting this, Rodriguez-JenKins and Marcenko (2014) emphasise the importance of community ties and resources in reducing social isolation among children, particularly those within the child welfare system who face heightened parenting stress. Their findings suggest that community support not only alleviates immediate stressors but also contributes to a sustained reduction in child maltreatment and isolation.

This study points to the necessity for interventions that are comprehensive and community focused. By strengthening community integration and enhancing support mechanisms, there is a significant opportunity to not only support at-risk families but also to foster an environment that mitigates the root causes of social isolation. Therefore, interventions should be strategically prioritised to enhance community resources and support systems, ensuring that they are accessible and effective in addressing the complex factors contributing to social isolation among vulnerable children. This approach will not only tackle the symptoms of social isolation but also address its underlying causes, providing a robust framework for promoting the well-being and social integration of children facing these challenges.

Environmental Safety and Social Isolation

The significance of environmental safety in influencing social isolation among children is profoundly evidenced in this study, which explores the lived experiences of six children at a Malaysian child welfare institution. Confirming the findings of Elliott et al. (2005), this study demonstrates that exposure to violence, unsafe neighbourhoods and adverse living conditions significantly exacerbate children's feelings of isolation. Particularly, four out of the six children reported that dysfunctional family dynamics coupled with unsafe environmental conditions; marked by abuse, neglect, and fear, played a crucial role in their experienced social isolation. This underscores the urgent need for interventions that address not just familial issues but also environmental safety and community support systems, which are essential in reducing the impact of such isolative factors.

In support of extending intervention scopes, Geprägs et al. (2023) emphasise that effective strategies must encompass not only immediate familial adjustments but also enhancements in the broader environmental and community frameworks to mitigate isolation effectively. This aligns with the present study's findings where not only direct threats like violence but also indirect factors such as inadequate living conditions and resource scarcity significantly contributed to the children's social isolation.

The situation of two refugee children, despite maintaining familial connections, highlighted how external pressures from their original volatile communities necessitated isolation for safety, further complicating the interplay between personal safety and social isolation.

Moreover, research conducted by Moylan et al. (2010) enriches the understanding of the multifaceted impact of violence on child development. They delineate how exposure to domestic violence and child abuse contributes to a spectrum of adolescent behavioural problems, including notable tendencies towards social isolation. This suggests a compounded effect of direct traumatic experiences and the long-term social consequences they engender, highlighting the critical need for comprehensive interventions that address both prevention and recovery. These should not only aim to shield children from immediate harm but also ensure long-term support mechanisms are in place to foster resilience and social integration.

Hence, this study's findings advocate for a multidimensional approach to interventions, underscoring the need to create safer environments and more supportive communities as integral components of reducing social isolation among children. By adopting such comprehensive strategies, it can better support vulnerable children in overcoming the challenges posed by both their immediate and extended environments, paving the way for improved social engagement and enhanced overall well-being.

Neglect, Social Support, and Social Isolation

This study elucidates significant factors contributing to the social isolation experienced by children in a Malaysian welfare institution, pinpointing neglectful parenting and insufficient resources as key elements. These insights are pivotal for understanding the intricate factors that foster social isolation, emphasising the urgent need for comprehensive support networks tailored to at-risk families. This study reveals the profound impact of dysfunctional family environments marked by parental neglect, abuse, unemployment and substance abuse on children's sense of belonging and feelings of isolation, particularly affecting four of the six children.

This finding aligns with research by Landry, Asokumar, Crump, Anisman, and Matheson (2022), which demonstrate a significant correlation between childhood abuse and diminished perceived social support, leading to heightened loneliness. This indicates that adverse early life experiences, such as abuse and neglect, can leave long-lasting impressions on social relationships and individual perceptions of isolation. These insights underscore the necessity for interventions that extend beyond addressing immediate needs, targeting the deeper systemic issues that underpin social isolation. Effective strategies should both amend immediate family dynamics and improve broader social and material conditions to foster supportive environments for vulnerable children.

Additionally, the contrasting experiences of two refugee children who maintained close familial ties amidst challenges highlight that isolation can also arise from factors beyond family dysfunction, such as external environmental pressures. This complexity enriches our understanding of social isolation, demonstrating its potential roots in broader environmental and socioeconomic factors. Research by Speidel et al. (2021) supports this, exploring the impact of pre-migratory adversity on refugee children's mental health and illustrating how greater social-emotional capacities can mitigate the adverse effects of such challenges.

This study also points to resource scarcity, inadequate living conditions and limited access to supportive services as pervasive issues impacting the children's social interactions. These findings are complemented by research from Chen (2023), which links parental depression to increased internalising and externalising problems in children, exacerbated by parenting stress and maltreatment. This relationship indicates that interventions need to not only address family dysfunction but also enhance resource availability and environmental stability for children.

Therefore, parental depression affects child behaviour both directly and indirectly by worsening conditions of neglect and insufficient support. Addressing these issues necessitates interventions that improve both the psychological health of parents and the environmental conditions faced by children. By enhancing family dynamics, boosting resource availability, and ensuring stable, supportive environments, it can more effectively counter the factors leading to social isolation among vulnerable children. This approach would involve targeted mental health interventions for parents, supplemented by broad-based community support initiatives that help families overcome socioeconomic and environmental challenges contributing to isolation.

The Multi-layered Impact of Single-Motherhood on Child Social Isolation

The exploration of child social isolation within single-mother families reveals a complex interplay of socioeconomic, emotional and societal factors that collectively impact children's social development and integration. The economic hardships frequently faced by single-mother households are a primary concern, directly limiting children's participation in social and extracurricular activities, which are critical for social skill development and peer interaction. This economic constraint not only isolates children from enriching social environments but also engenders feelings of otherness and exclusion, contributing to a cycle of social withdrawal and isolation. This was further supported by Stack and Meredith (2018), who found that financial hardship among single parents significantly hindered their social interactions, exacerbating feelings of loneliness and psychological distress. The lack of financial resources acts as a tangible barrier to social participation, but the associated stigma and embarrassment also serve as substantial social and psychological obstacles. This dual burden of financial and emotional strain contributes to the prevalence of social withdrawal and isolation among children from financially stressed single-mother families, highlighting the need for targeted interventions that address both economic and emotional well-being to break this cycle of isolation.

Psychologically, the stress and mental health challenges prevalent among single mothers can significantly impact the quality of parent-child interactions, thereby undermining the child's emotional security (Lim, Van Hulst, Pisanu, & Merry, 2022). These conditions can stifle children's social initiative and engagement, contributing to a pattern of internalised social withdrawal that is evident within the familial microsystem. This dynamic underscores the critical need to address maternal mental health as an essential component in mitigating child social isolation. Research by Agnafors, Bladh, Svedin, and Sydsjö (2019) further highlight this issue, finding that younger mothers are more likely to experience symptoms of postpartum depression, which correlates with higher reports of internalising and externalising behavioural problems in their children. These findings highlight the

interconnectedness of maternal well-being and child development, emphasising the importance of supporting mental health in mothers to foster healthier social and emotional outcomes for children.

Societally, the stigmatisation of single motherhood significantly exacerbates children's feelings of isolation and adversely affects maternal self-esteem and mental health, creating a cycle that impacts both parent and child (De Falco, et al., 2014). This issue, deeply embedded in the macrosystem, highlights how broader cultural and normative forces shape the experiences of single-mother families. It underscores the urgent need for societal attitude shifts towards more inclusive views of family structures. Research by Torres-Mackie (2020) reinforces this point, demonstrating that children of single mothers may experience psychological issues such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and even substance abuse, which are often intensified by societal judgments. This study also illustrates how the stigma associated with single parenthood varies depending on its origins, indicating that societal attitudes play a crucial role in the well-being of these families. The necessity for cultural transformation is clear: embracing more inclusive societal views can significantly improve the social and psychological health of single-mother families.

The exploration of social isolation within single-mother families further enriches the discussion by identifying specific socioeconomic, emotional and societal factors that exacerbate isolation. This nuanced understanding highlights the need for targeted interventions that provide support across different levels of the ecological system, addressing economic hardships, enhancing maternal mental health and combating societal stigmatisation of single motherhood. By acknowledging the unique challenges faced by single-mother households, interventions can be more effectively tailored to support the social integration and well-being of children in these contexts.

IMPLICATION

This study, grounded in ecological systems theory, elucidates the multifaceted nature of child social isolation, which is influenced by various environmental factors at multiple levels. The complex interplay among familial, educational, socioeconomic and community factors highlighted in this study necessitates a holistic approach to interventions. By tailoring strategies to meet the specific challenges faced by children in welfare institutions, particularly those from single-mother households or experiencing unique environmental pressures, it can more effectively support their social integration and developmental needs.

Family Dynamics and Microsystem Interventions

The significant role of family dynamics in exacerbating child social isolation, particularly through neglect and substance abuse, underscores the need for integrated interventions focusing on both micro and macro determinants. Family support programmes should aim to enhance family functioning by addressing substance abuse, unemployment and parenting skills. Parenting workshops and family therapy can effectively rebuild familial structures by fostering positive parenting skills and resolving interpersonal issues. Armenta and Huerta (2015) highlight the benefits of parent education in improving overall parenting skills and utilising community resources, supporting the need for these targeted interventions.

Holistic Approaches and Policy Recommendations

An advocacy of comprehensive approach, acknowledging the complexity of social isolation within ecological systems is needed. Policymakers and practitioners should implement strategies that enhance social resilience and connectedness, integrating these programmes into community health centres to ensure accessibility. Local governments can provide critical support by allocating resources and funding to expand these services, addressing environmental risks, and promoting social and educational development. Adabanya et al. (2023) underscore the necessity of collaborative community efforts and informed policymaking for public health improvement, reflecting the need for these comprehensive strategies.

Supporting Single-Mother Households

Addressing the challenges in single-mother households requires a multifaceted strategy focusing on economic, social and emotional support systems. Financial aid initiatives that alleviate economic burdens can enhance children's access to developmental opportunities. Coupled with programmes to bolster maternal mental health and emotional well-being, these interventions can foster a supportive environment essential for mitigating social isolation. Marryat and Martin (2010) affirm the critical impact of maternal mental health on children's well-being, highlighting the effectiveness of mental health programmes in supporting both mothers and children.

Community-Based Support Systems

Programmes offering social and practical assistance to single mothers can reduce isolation and stress, facilitating connections with other families and diminishing feelings of loneliness. Educational and social activities tailored for children from single-mother families can provide critical opportunities for social interaction and skill development. Aylward and Williams (2023) provide empirical support for the effectiveness of community-based support systems like the Acorn parenting programme, which enhances maternal well-being and the parent-child relationship.

Challenging Societal Stigma

Societal interventions should challenge and transform the stigmatisation of single motherhood through public awareness campaigns, educational programmes and policy reforms. Cheung (2024) stresses the impact of self-stigma and societal attitudes on single mothers, reinforcing the need for interventions that promote inclusivity and support diverse family structures.

Development of Diagnostic Tools

The creation of a diagnostic tool tailored to the Malaysian context, similar to the Child Social Exclusion Index, is imperative. This tool would help identify high-risk areas for child maltreatment and social isolation, enabling targeted interventions and efficient resource allocation. This approach is supported by Fansuri and Azman (2022), who emphasise the complexity of child social isolation in Malaysia, highlighting the need for a culturally sensitive diagnostic tool.

Overall, the intricate issue of child social isolation requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the economic, emotional and societal challenges prevalent in different ecological environments. By leveraging the insights provided by ecological systems theory, targeted interventions can be crafted to support the social integration and development of children, particularly those in single-mother households. This holistic perspective is vital for enhancing the well-being and social experiences of these children, providing a foundation for future policy and community interventions.

CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the complex nature of child social isolation in Malaysia, employing Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to offer a nuanced understanding of its multifaceted causes. Through a detailed examination of family dynamics, environmental factors and broader societal influences, this study contributes significantly to the discourse on child welfare and the design of targeted interventions.

The profound impact of dysfunctional family dynamics, adverse neighbourhood conditions and resource scarcity are identified as primary drivers of social isolation. This study also highlights the additional challenges faced by refugee children, emphasising how displacement and socio-political factors intersect with familial and environmental circumstances to exacerbate isolation. This rich, qualitative insight deepens our understanding of social isolation's complexity but also acknowledges that these findings, derived from a small sample at a single institution, may not be generalisable across all Malaysian contexts or other cultural settings.

This study's limitations include its small sample size and focus on a specific population, which may introduce selection bias and limit the generalisability of the findings. Future research should expand the sample size and include children from varied backgrounds and settings to enhance representativeness and depth. Incorporating quantitative measures alongside qualitative methods could provide a more robust framework for understanding the dynamics of social isolation. Additionally, adopting a longitudinal study design would allow for an exploration of how social isolation evolves over time, offering critical insights for developing timely interventions.

Despite these limitations, this study provides a foundation for actionable strategies in both local and broader contexts. It underscores the urgent need for holistic interventions that address both micro and macro-level factors. Policymakers and practitioners are encouraged to integrate findings into community health programmes, enhance family support services and foster educational and extracurricular opportunities that promote social integration. The specific challenges highlighted in this study call for culturally sensitive tools and approaches tailored to the unique Malaysian setting and potentially other similar environments.

The complexities uncovered in this study advocate for a comprehensive approach that encompasses policy reform, continuous professional education and targeted interventions. By embracing strategies that address immediate familial needs and broader systemic issues, stakeholders can more effectively support children facing social isolation, ensuring their development within a nurturing and connected community. Future research should continue to explore the effectiveness of specific interventions and the role of community-based supports, broadening the scope to include diverse cultural and environmental settings. This ongoing effort to understand and mitigate social isolation is vital for the well-being of all children, requiring a collaborative approach across disciplines and communities.

In conclusion, while this study offers significant insights into child social isolation within a Malaysian context, acknowledging its limitations and the need for further research is essential. The journey towards alleviating child social isolation demands continuous improvement, innovation, and collaboration, with a steadfast commitment to the well-being of every child in a supportive and connected community.

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