

[Original Article]

## Family Functions of Child-rearing Single-parent Families in Japan : A Comparison Between Single-parent Families and Pair-matched Two-parent Families

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### Abstract

In many cases of child-rearing single-parent families, one parent bears excessive burdens due to multiple roles including child-rearing, work, etc., and this is believed to make it difficult for him or her to maintain good family functioning. In this study, the family functions of child-rearing single-parent families were quantified with the objective of family support. A questionnaire survey was conducted using the Japanese-language version I of Feetham Family Functioning Survey (FFFS-J), and data collected from 57 single-parent families were compared with 57 two-parent families pair-matched in factors influencing family functioning. According to the overall family functioning scores, the family functioning of single-parent families was significantly lower than that of the two-parent families, making clear the need for support to the former in raising family functioning. In comparisons according to three areas of relationships, the "relationship between family and family members" was significantly lower for single-parent families. On the other hand, greater importance was placed upon the "relationship between family and subsystem," which measures a family's activities and interactions through strong relationships outside the family. In preceding studies, the importance was pointed out of connecting single-parent families with and promoting interaction with people living nearby in their communities. Therefore assessments will be made of the relationships between the family and those living in their close proximity, with the aim of promoting interaction so as to raise family functions.

**Key words :** single-parent family, Japanese-language version I of Feetham Family Functioning Survey (FFFS-J), family functioning, matched pairing, quantitative study

### 1. Introduction

In the family life cycle, the child-rearing stage is when parents acquire their role behaviors from interactions with their children, and family members build family bonds.<sup>1)</sup> However, this stage can also be one of crisis for families as they face multiple tasks to be accomplished, such as family system adjustments to their children's

growth and development, adjustments in domestic and work roles, and reorganization of relationships with relatives.<sup>2)</sup> For single parents, the division of roles by gender is inevitably impossible. Because a single parent is obliged to play multiple roles of child rearing, work, and others, he or she often becomes overburdened and struggles to maintain good family functioning.<sup>3)</sup> A high likelihood exists that the resulting decline in family

functions will end in crisis.<sup>4)</sup> Nevertheless, investigation into family functions of child-rearing single-parent families in Japan has not progressed.<sup>5)</sup>

Preceding studies examined the psychological and social influences of divorce on single-parent families, focusing on mothers with school-age children.<sup>5)</sup> Although only a small number of studies on the family functions of single-parent families have been conducted,<sup>6-8)</sup> the evidence suggested that it was necessary to support single-parent families by grasping the family comprehensively from an ecological point of view encompassing interactions with human, physical and social environments which surround the family.<sup>8)</sup>

For this study, a questionnaire survey of single-parent and two-parent families rearing children was conducted using the Japanese-language version I of Feetham Family Functioning Survey (FFFS-J),<sup>4)9)</sup> a family functioning scale developed on the family ecological model.<sup>10)11)</sup> By comparing the two groups, this study aims to assess family functioning of single-parent families with the aim of identifying effective support for them.

## II. Methods

### 1. Operational Definition of the Terms Used in the Study

“Family” is defined as a small group of individuals who mutually recognize each other as family<sup>4)</sup> and “child-rearing family” as a family with the first child younger than 18 years of age. Marital and blood relationships among family members are not taken into account here. “Single-parent family” refers to a family in which a parent without spouse or partner is rearing a child or children under 18 years old. “Family functioning”

refers to activities of a family performed for family members and society as a result of the family members’ role behaviors.<sup>4)</sup>

### 2. Instruments

#### 1) Questionnaire of Demographic Characteristics of Families

The self-administered questionnaire of family demographic characteristics was prepared based on the results of a literature review on single-parent families<sup>5)</sup> and a semi-structured interview to single-parent families.<sup>8)</sup> The survey posed questions on topics such as family structure, existence of family member(s) with disease/illness, family life cycle, annual household income, highest educational level, employment, marital status before and after pregnancy with the first child, and others. Single-parent families were also asked questions about when and why respondents became single parents.

#### 2) FFFS-J

FFFS-J is the Japanese version of a family functioning scale that was developed based on the family ecological model,<sup>10)11)</sup> which enables objective evaluation of sufficiency levels of family functioning. FFFS-J’s reliability and validity in assessment of child-rearing families have been examined and confirmed,<sup>4)9)</sup> and its applicability to single-parent families has been reported.<sup>4)6)7)9)</sup> The FFFS-J is a self-administered questionnaire consisting of 25 family functioning items and two open-ended question items.

The questionnaire’s 25 multiple-choice questions cover three areas of relationships. The first is “relationship between family and family members” (10 items), which measures functionality of relationships among parent(s) and child(ren) and between spouses/partners; the second, “relationship between family and subsystem” (eight items),

which measures a family's activities and interactions with whom the family has strong relationships, such as friends, relatives, and others; and the third, "relationship between family and society" (six items), which measures the level of family members' activities outside the family, such as school, work, and others. (One item out of the 25 does not pertain to any areas.) Each of the 25 family functioning items contains three questions: (a) How much is there now?; (b) How much should there be?; and (c) How important is this to you? Respondents are asked to rate each question on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (little) to 7 (much), which are then compiled to give an "a score," a "b score," and a "c score" (each ranging from 1 to 7 points). The absolute value of the difference between the "a score" and the "b score" is calculated for each family functioning item, and this becomes the item's "d score" (ranging from 0 to 6 points). This "d score" represents the discrepancy between the perceived actual family function ("a score") and the perceived expected family function ("b score"), thereby indicating the perceived discrepancy for the family functions.

The term "spouse/partner" includes the person who assumes the functions of a spouse, and respondents were not questioned concerning the legal status of their union, whether they cohabitated and their blood relations. When no spouse or partner was present, respondents were asked to reply to the questions based on how much they want the functions met.

The higher the d score (a family functioning score), the lower the degree of satisfaction with family functioning; the higher the c score (an importance score), the more importance respondents attach to the functioning.<sup>4)9)</sup> This study analyzed

raw d and c scores for each questionnaire item, average overall scores for d and c scores, and item average scores for each area of relationships. Average overall score for d and c scores were calculated as the sum of d scores divided by the total number of items (ranging from 0 to 6 points), which indicated overall family functioning scores, or as the sum of c scores divided by the total number of items (ranging from 1 to 7 points). Item average scores for each area of relationships were calculated as the sum of d scores of each area divided by the number of items in the area (ranging from 0 to 6 points), or as the sum of c scores of each area divided by the number of items in the area (ranging from 1 to 7 points).

The two open-ended question items were "What is most difficult for you now?" and "What is most helpful for you now?" These items have been reported to contribute useful narrative data.<sup>4)9)</sup>

### 3. Data Collection Procedures and Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in a prefecture in Japan with a percentage of single-parent families<sup>12)</sup> comparable to both current and estimated future national averages. Because many single-parent families use day nurseries,<sup>13)</sup> day nurseries in two cities in the prefecture were listed for the study. We randomly selected 38 day nurseries from the list, then asked their operators to look at the questionnaire, explained to them the purpose, content, and significance of this study, and asked for their cooperation. We obtained cooperation and consent from 15 day nurseries, where we surveyed a total of 768 families. (The precise number of participating spouses/partners in those families, however, was unknown.)

A set of materials—including a letter requesting participation in the study, a self-administered

FFFS-J questionnaire, questionnaire of demographic characteristics of families, a small gratuity (a child's toy), and a return-mail envelope—was distributed to each participant family via nursery staff. Participants were asked to write their replies at home. In the case of single-parent families, one parent responded to the questions, and in two-parent families, both parents were asked to reply to the questions. The questionnaire was either returned by mail or dropped off in boxes at the day nurseries according to the nursery staff's preference.

In order to conduct this study, we obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the university. We explained to participants in writing our purpose and methods, including our guarantee of their anonymity and their right to refuse to participate, and they responded to and returned the questionnaire only if they were willing to participate in the study. The questionnaire was anonymous, so that no respondent could be identified. The survey was conducted between July and November 2007.

#### 4. Statistical Analysis

Statistical analysis software for Windows, SPSS 15.0 (SPSS Inc.), JMP 6.0 (SAS Institute Japan), and Excel Statistics 2006 (Social Survey Research Information Co., Ltd.) were used. We excluded questionnaires from our analysis in which respondents did not reply to questions at all or were not classified as child-rearing family. Preceding studies<sup>14-16)</sup> identified factors influencing family functioning: namely, existence of family member(s) with disease/illness, family life cycle, and sex. Accordingly, we pair-matched single-parent families with similar two-parent families using these factors.

By convention, a two-tailed p-value less than

.05 was considered statistically significant. The Mann-Whitney U test was used to compare two independent groups, and the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to compare two paired groups. The Pearson's chi-square test was used to compare proportions across the groups. If any of the expected frequencies were less than or equal to 5, the Fisher's exact test was employed instead of the Pearson's chi-square test. The Friedman test was used for comparing more than two dependent groups, and the Scheffe's multiple comparison was conducted as a post hoc test.

#### 5. Content Analysis

The Berelson's content analysis<sup>17)</sup> was used to extract various categories from the replies to the open-ended FFFS-J questions, and the number of categorically classified-recording units was calculated. Two researchers performed content analysis for enhancing the rigor of analysis. For the intercoder reliability test, an independent coder was employed and separately coded all transcripts, and Scott's pi coefficient<sup>18)</sup> was calculated.

### III. Results

#### 1. Participant Family Demographics

A total of 378 families, or 49.2%, returned their questionnaires. Of these, 57 were single-parent families (8.6%) (four males and 53 females) and 587 were two-parent families (88.8%) (271 males and 316 females). The marital status of 17 people was unknown (2.6%). This study analyzed valid replies for all 57 single-parent families, as well as those of the 57 two-parent families who pair-matched the single-parent families using factors influencing family functioning.

Basic characteristics of the single-parent

families and the two-parent families are shown in Table 1. No significant difference was found between the two groups in respondents' age, employment, number of children, age of the first child, and family type; however, significant differences existed between the groups in educational level, annual household income, family size, marital

status before and after pregnancy with the first child, and number of working people. More precisely, single parents more often failed to finish high school, had less annual household income, had fewer family members, became pregnant before marriage, and had fewer working family members in the household than did parents in the two-

Table 1. Demographic Data of Participants

Characteristics		Single-parent Families	Pair-matched Two-parent Families				
		( <i>n</i> of family = 57)	(n of family = 57)				
		<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)				
Sex	Male	4 ( 7.0)	4 ( 7.0)				
	Female	53 (93.0)	53 (93.0)				
Family type	Nuclear family	44 (78.6)	43 (78.2)				
	Extended family	12 (21.4)	12 (21.8)				
Family life cycle	Rearing preschool children	43 (75.4)	43 (75.4)				
	Rearing school-age children	14 (24.6)	14 (24.6)				
Family member with disease/illness	Yes	15 (26.3)	15 (26.3)				
	No	42 (73.7)	42 (73.7)				
Employed	Yes	53 (96.4)	53 (94.6)				
	No	2 ( 3.6)	3 ( 5.4)				
Highest educational level*	High school or less	29 (50.9)	20 (35.7)				
	Higher than vocational school	28 (49.1)	36 (64.3)				
Marital status before and after pregnancy with the first child***	Married after pregnancy	20 (35.1)	15 (26.3)				
	Became pregnant after marriage	26 (45.6)	42 (73.7)				
	Unmarried	11 (19.3)	0 ( 0)				
Reason for being a single parent	Divorce	43 (75.4)					
	Unwed mother	10 (17.5)					
	Death by disease	4 ( 7.0)					
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Age (years)		32.8	5.3	23 to 43	33.3	4.9	23 to 49
Family size***		2.7	0.9	2 to 6	3.9	1.3	3 to 8
Number of children		1.4	0.6	1 to 3	1.5	0.6	1 to 3
Age of the first child		5.1	2.6	1 to 13	4.5	2.6	0 to 11
Number of working people in the household***		1.2	0.5	0 to 3	2.2	0.6	1 to 4
Annual household income (in 10,000s of yen)***		333.3	252.8	70 to 1200	508.3	337.6	200 to 2000
Duration of marriage (months)		51.4	40.4	6 to 186			
Time since becoming a single parent (months)		36.9	27.1	2 to 144			

Note: Several cases were excluded from analysis due to incomplete data. Percentages may not add up to 100% because of rounding. \* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$  (Pearson's chi-square test, Mann-Whitney U test). Asterisk (\*) appears only in items for which significant differences were observed between single-parent families and two-parent families.

parent families. As for the data relevant only to the single parents, their marriages had lasted an average of 51.4 months. The reason most (75.4%) became single parents was divorce, and they had become single parents an average of 36.9 months before the survey.

## 2. Family Functioning Scores and Importance Scores in FFFS-J

Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the d and c scores of the single-parent families were .83 and .89, respectively, while those of the two-parent families were .85 and .86, respectively,

Table 2. Comparison of Family Functions (d Score) and Attributed Importance (c Score) Between Single-parent Families and Two-parent Families in Each of the 25 FFFS Items

Item No.	Family Functioning Items (Area)	d Score M (SD)	c Score M (SD)
1	Discussion of concerns and problems with friends (II)	0.9 (1.2) 0.8 (1.1)	4.6 (1.9) 4.7 (1.5)
2	Discussion of concerns and problems with relatives (II)	0.8 (1.0) 0.6 (0.9)	5.0 (1.7) 5.4 (1.5)
3	Time spent with spouse (I)	2.5 (2.1) ]** 1.4 (1.6)	3.6 (2.2) ]*** 5.5 (1.3)
4	Discussion of concerns and problems with spouse (I)	2.5 (2.0) ]*** 0.7 (1.1)	3.4 (2.2) ]*** 5.7 (1.4)
5	Time spent with neighbors <sup>a</sup>	1.4 (1.3) 1.4 (1.2)	3.0 (1.5) 3.1 (1.3)
6	Time in leisure/recreational activities (I)	1.8 (1.6) 2.0 (1.8)	5.0 (1.6) 5.0 (1.3)
7	Help from spouse with family tasks (I)	2.5 (2.0) ]** 1.5 (1.5)	3.7 (2.2) ]*** 5.7 (1.5)
8	Help from relatives with family tasks (II)	1.1 (1.2) 1.0 (1.2)	5.3 (1.8) 5.0 (1.8)
9	Time with health professionals (II)	1.1 (1.5) 0.9 (1.4)	4.0 (2.1) 4.5 (1.7)
10	Help from friends with family tasks (II)	0.8 (1.1) 0.6 (0.9)	3.2 (1.9) 2.5 (1.6)
11	Problems with children (II)	1.6 (1.6) 1.3 (1.4)	5.0 (2.1) 4.9 (1.9)
12	Time spent with children (I)	1.8 (1.6) 1.5 (1.6)	6.0 (1.2) 6.2 (1.0)
13	Time children miss school (III)	0.6 (0.8) 0.4 (0.9)	4.6 (2.3) 4.4 (2.1)
14	Disagreements with spouse (I)	0.7 (1.0) ]** 1.2 (1.3)	2.4 (1.8) ]*** 4.5 (1.9)
15	Time you are ill (III)	1.6 (1.9) 1.8 (2.0)	4.6 (2.5) 4.8 (2.2)
16	Time spent on housework (I)	1.7 (1.6) 1.7 (1.7)	5.1 (1.4) 5.6 (1.5)
17	Times you miss work (III)	1.0 (1.5) 1.1 (1.3)	5.1 (2.0) 5.0 (1.9)
18	Times spouse misses work (III)	0.6 (1.0) ]* 0.9 (1.2)	2.8 (2.1) ]*** 5.0 (1.9)
19	Emotional support from friends (II)	0.9 (1.4) 0.6 (0.9)	4.3 (2.0) 4.4 (2.1)
20	Emotional support from relatives (II)	1.2 (1.7) 0.6 (1.0)	5.2 (1.8) 5.1 (1.9)
21	Emotional support from spouse (I)	2.8 (2.4) ]*** 1.2 (1.6)	3.6 (2.3) ]*** 5.9 (1.4)
22	Time your work routine is disrupted (incl. housework) (III)	1.8 (1.9) ]* 1.1 (1.3)	4.4 (2.0) 4.1 (2.0)
23	Time spouse's work routine is disrupted (incl. housework) (III)	0.8 (1.3) ]* 0.4 (0.9)	2.7 (1.8) 3.2 (2.0)
24	Satisfaction with marriage (I)	3.0 (2.0) ]*** 1.4 (1.5)	3.7 (2.0) ]*** 5.8 (1.3)
25	Satisfaction with sexual relations (I)	2.3 (1.8) ]*** 1.0 (1.3)	3.1 (1.7) 4.0 (1.9)

Note: Upper row: single-parent families (n = 57); lower row: two parent-families (n = 57). I = Relationship between family and family members (relationship with family members), II = Relationship between family and subsystem (relationship with subsystem), III = Relationship between family and society (relationship with society). \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001 (Wilcoxon signed-rank test).  
a. Does not pertain to any area.

thereby also confirming the internal consistency in this study.

#### 1) Family Functioning of 25 Items

Table 2 shows d and c scores from 25 items for both single-parent and two-parent families. In comparing these two groups' d scores, a significant difference emerged in 10 items; in eight of these, single-parent families had significantly higher scores than two-parent families. These eight items were "3. Time spent with spouse," "4. Discussion of concerns and problems with spouse," "7. Help from spouse with family tasks," "21. Emotional support from spouse," "22. Time your work routine is disrupted (incl. housework)," "23. Time spouse's work routine is disrupted (incl. housework)," "24. Satisfaction with marriage," and "25. Satisfaction with sexual relations." Seven of the eight related to the respondent's spouse/partner.

Significant differences were also observed in c scores between the two groups for the following seven items, all of which related to respondents'

spouses/partners, and in all of which two-parent families scored higher than single-parent families:

"3. Time spent with spouse," "4. Discussion of concerns and problems with spouse," "7. Help from spouse with family tasks," "14. Disagreements with spouse," "18. Time spouse misses work," "21. Emotional support from spouse," and "24. Satisfaction with marriage."

#### 2) Family Functioning of Three Areas and Overall

Table 3 shows item average d and c scores for each area of relationships and overall. Comparing the two groups in each of the three areas, single-parent families exhibited a significantly higher item average d score in the area of "relationship between family and family members," while two-parent families demonstrated a significantly higher item average c score in the same area. Comparing the two groups' overall family functioning, the average overall d score was significantly higher in single-parent families, whereas the average overall c score was significantly higher in two-parent families.

Table 3. Comparison of Item Average d and c Scores and Average Overall d and c Scores Between Single-parent Families and Two-parent Families

Area	Item Average d Score	Item Average c Score
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Relationship with family members (10 items)	2.15 (1.18)	3.97 (1.31)
	1.37 (0.88)	5.37 (0.87)
Relationship with subsystem (8 items)	1.05 (0.76)	4.57 (1.17)
	0.80 (0.56)	4.56 (1.01)
Relationship with society (6 items)	1.05 (0.74)	4.04 (1.42)
	0.94 (0.73)	4.43 (1.45)
	Average Overall d Score	Average Overall c Score
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Overall (25 items)	1.50 (0.71)	4.14 (1.03)
	1.08 (0.62)	4.79 (0.80)

Note: Upper row: single-parent families ( $n = 57$ ); lower row: two-parent families ( $n = 57$ ). \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$  (Wilcoxon signed-rank test).

Tables 4 and 5 show item average d and c scores in each of the three areas of relationships for both single-parent and two-parent families. The item average d score for single-parent families was 2.15 in the area of “relationship between family and family members” and 1.05 in each of the other areas ( “relationship between family and subsystem” and “relationship between family and society” ). Comparing results in the three areas, the item average d score was significantly higher in “relationship between family and family members” than it was in the other two areas. The item average c score of single-parent families in the area of “relationship between family and subsystem” was significantly higher than that in the area of “relationship between family and family members.”

3) Contents of “The Greatest Difficulties” and “The Most Helpful Things”

Table 6 shows the top five categories extracted from respondents’ replies to the open-ended questions regarding “the greatest difficulties”

and “the most helpful things.” Because the Scott’s pi coefficient was more than 70% (ranging from 78.3 to 94.1%) for both open-ended questions, the intercoder reliability of this study’s content analysis was confirmed. Single-parent families listed “shortage of time,” “financial problems,” and others as the greatest difficulties, and “presence and cooperation of relative(s),” “presence and cooperation of child(ren),” and others as the most helpful things in their family lives.

IV. Discussion

1. Characteristics of Single-parent Families

According to 2005 statistical data,<sup>12)</sup> the percentage of single-parent households was 8.4% in the prefecture where this study was conducted, while the national average was 8.3%. These figures are roughly identical to the percentage of single-parent families (8.9%) before pair-matching was performed between single- and two-parent families

Table 4. Comparison of Item Average d Scores Between Areas of Relationships

Area	Single-parent (n = 57)	Two-parent (n = 57)
	M (SD)	M (SD)
Relationship with family members (10 items)	2.15 (1.18) ]*** ***	1.37 (0.88) ]*** **
Relationship with subsystem (8 items)	1.05 (0.76) ]	0.80 (0.56) ]
Relationship with society (6 items)	1.05 (0.74) ]	0.94 (0.73) ]

Note: \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001 (Scheffe’s multiple comparison after the Friedman test).

Table 5. Comparison of Item Average c Scores Between Areas of Relationships

Area	Single-parent (n = 57)	Two-parent (n = 57)
	M (SD)	M (SD)
Relationship with family members (10 items)	3.97 (1.31) ]*	5.37 (0.87) ]*** ***
Relationship with subsystem (8 items)	4.57 (1.17) ]	4.56 (1.01) ]
Relationship with society (6 items)	4.04 (1.42)	4.43 (1.45)

Note: \*p < .05, \*\*\*p < .001 (Scheffe’s multiple comparison after the Friedman test).

Table 6. The Top Five Categories of Replies to the Questions About “The Greatest Difficulties” and “The Most Helpful Things”

Replies to “The Greatest Difficulties”				Replies to “The Most Helpful Things”			
Single-parent Families ( <i>n</i> = 35, number of recording units = 68, <i>pi</i> = 78.9)				Two-parent Families ( <i>n</i> = 34, number of recording units = 56, <i>pi</i> = 94.1)			
Rank	Category	Number of Recording Units	%	Rank	Category	Number of Recording Units	%
1	Shortage of time	10	14.7	1	Shortage of time	9	16.1
2	Financial problems	8	11.8	2	Relationship with spouse	7	12.5
3	Anxiety about family’s future	7	10.3	3	Nothing in particular	5	8.9
3	Child rearing	7	10.3	3	Worries about spouse/partner	5	8.9
3	Housing problems	7	10.3	3	No mental elbowroom	5	8.9
Single-parent Families ( <i>n</i> = 44, number of recording units = 76, <i>pi</i> = 93.4)				Two-parent Families ( <i>n</i> = 34, number of recording units = 58, <i>pi</i> = 78.3)			
Rank	Category	Number of Recording Units	%	Rank	Category	Number of Recording Units	%
1	Presence and cooperation of relative(s)	22	28.9	1	Presence and cooperation of spouse/partner	18	31.0
2	Presence and smiling face of child(ren)	18	23.8	2	Presence and cooperation of relative(s)	14	24.1
3	Presence and cooperation of friend(s)/acquaintance(s)	15	19.7	3	Presence and smiling face of child(ren)	12	20.7
4	Utilization of social resources such as day nurseries	7	9.2	4	Talking and consulting with friend(s)/acquaintance(s)	4	6.9
5	Presence and cooperation of boyfriend/girlfriend	3	3.9	5	Presence of and support from family	3	5.2

Note: Berelson’s content analysis. *pi* = Scott’s *pi* coefficient.

in this study. As demonstrated above, it can be said that this study's questionnaire was collected with no bias in the percentage of single- to two-parent families.

The single-parent families who participated in this study showed a number of salient characteristics. First, the main reason they became single parents was divorce (75.4%). Second, the percentage of marriages after pregnancy was significantly higher in this group than among two-parent families. Third, the duration of marriage was short, averaging just 51.4 months. According to 2004 data,<sup>19)</sup> most divorces occurred following less than five years of cohabitation between the parties, and the main reason for becoming a single parent was divorce<sup>20)</sup> (79.9% of single-female-parent households and 74.2% of single-male-parent households). These figures closely resembled the results of this study. A preceding study<sup>21)</sup> pointed out that families in which pregnancy preceded marriage suffer from fragile family functions in the realms of economic activities, division of roles, and the establishment of trusting relationships, which often lead to divorce. Therefore, among participating single-parent families, many couples who married after pregnancy divorced after a brief marriage.

It has been pointed out that the major problem for single-mother families is poverty.<sup>22)</sup> This was borne out as well by the annual household income of single-parent families in this study, which was significantly lower than that of two-parent families. Single-parent families also had significantly fewer working family members than two-parent families. Consequently, the number of working people in a family is considered to be a contributing factor to poverty. Poverty is also linked to another factor, namely, parents' years of education.

A correlation exists between educational level and income,<sup>23)</sup> and single parents reported significantly fewer years of education than did respondents from two-parent families. Moreover, financial problems ranked high among single parents' replies to "the greatest difficulties" question in the FFFS-J. Because a family's economic functioning influences the health care of its members,<sup>24)</sup> the nursing professions must be aware of families' economic condition when providing care. When assessing a family's health, they should also assess the financial situation and support the family as needed in collaboration with other professionals such as social workers.

## 2. Family Functions of and Support for Single-parent Families

Regarding the overall family functioning scores, family functions of single-parent families were significantly lower (i.e., the average overall d scores were significantly higher) than that of two-parent families; thus, the need to support single-parent families is evident in order to raise their level of family functioning. Comparing the two groups' family functioning scores in each area of relationships, family functions of single-parent families were significantly lower (i.e., the item average of their d scores was significantly higher) in "relationship between family and family members" than that of two-parent families. Furthermore, when single-parent families' item average d scores were compared in the three areas of relationships, their functioning in "relationship between family and family members," which is designed to measure relationships among parent(s) and child(ren) and between spouses/partners,<sup>4)9)</sup> was also significantly lower than their functioning in the other two areas. The item average d score of single-parent

families in "relationship between family and family members" was 2.15 for this study, while a preceding study<sup>25)</sup> that also used FFFS-J found scores averaging 1.8 among mothers with hospitalized children younger than 18 years of age. In other words, the family functions of single-parent families in this area is lower (i.e., their item average d score is higher) than that of mothers with hospitalized children. This discrepancy further emphasizes the importance of supporting single-parent families in the area of "relationship between family and family members." Because single-parent families lack a spousal relationship, the lack of the relationship is likely to affect scores in this area.

Regarding the 25 individual item scores, family functions of single-parent families were significantly lower (i.e., their d scores for these items were significantly higher) for eight items than that of two-parent families; seven of these eight items concerned respondents' spouses/partners. A preceding study<sup>26)</sup> using interview surveys with divorced mothers of minors revealed that the single mothers did not have negative attitudes toward marriage and in fact wished to find a good partner for romance or remarriage. Among the single parents in this study, an average of 36.9 months had passed since they had become single parents, so that the negative feelings toward marriage induced by divorce may have been ameliorated somewhat. Thus, their low family functioning concerning spouses/partners can be explained by the continued presence of needs unmet by spouses/partners in their lives. This view is supported by a survey<sup>27)</sup> on rates of remarriage within five years after divorce: among divorced population aged 30 to 34 years old—those in the same age group as the respondents in our study—

men's rate of remarriage was 35.9% and women's 30.1%.

Furthermore, replies to the FFFS-J question about "the greatest difficulties" peculiar to single parents made clear that the family functions they perceived as having declined due to the absence of a spouse/partner were financial function, including paying for the house, and child rearing function. These results are consistent with those of a preceding study<sup>8)</sup> demonstrating that divorce decreases the number of family members and that it becomes difficult for a divorced parent to function well in the multiple roles of work and child rearing. It can be said that as their functionality declined, single parents' worries about the future and their need for consultation increased.<sup>28)</sup> In view of these trends, the following measures<sup>8)28)</sup> may be regarded as supportive of the main concerns of single parents: (1) providing and ensuring the use of social resources and services in cooperation with their communities; (2) disseminating information about such resources and services; (3) solving housing problems in order to improve or maintain quality of life; and (4) enhancing child-care consultations and home visits by professionals such as counselors, nurses, and social workers.

Apart from economic and child-rearing functions, in preceding studies it was pointed out that single-parent families were more susceptible to degradation of health care functions.<sup>8)</sup> However, since pair-matching was performed in this study regarding the presence or absence of family members with disease/illness between single-parent and two-parent families, it is believed that health care functions of single-parent families did not indicate a lower level than

that of the two-parent families. One of the characteristics of this study was pair-matching of influencing factors on family functions between single-parent and two-parent families, which enabled clarification of any actual declines in family functioning. Through this study, with the exception of economic- and child-rearing functions, no significant disparities in family functions could be clearly determined on a quantitative basis. This evidence corresponds to the result of a preceding qualitative study<sup>8)</sup> that indicated family functioning in single-parent families which have experienced divorce do not necessarily show a decline when compared to their family functioning prior to the divorce.

When asked how much importance they attached to each area of relationships, two-parent families valued "relationship between family and family members" significantly more than did single-parent families (i.e., the item average c score of the former area was significantly higher). In addition, when the single-parent families' item average c scores were compared in the three areas of relationships, they valued "relationships between family and subsystem" significantly more highly than "relationship between family and family members" (i.e., the item average c score of the former area was significantly higher). We attribute these results to the absence of a spouse/partner and his or her cooperation in single-parent families. This is why single-parent families instead place more value on another area of relationship with whom the family has strong relationships outside the family, that is "relationship between family and subsystem."

Two-parent families placed significantly more value on seven items than did single-parent families (i.e., the item average c score of the

former area was significantly higher). All seven items concerned spouses/partners. This result corresponds to that of the FFFS-J open-ended question about "the most helpful things": two-parent families tended to reply as "presence and cooperation of spouse/partner," while single parents more often cited relatives and children. A preceding study<sup>8)</sup> of single-parent families with preschool children found that support from relatives, friends, and acquaintances was essential in lessening their excessive burdens and that sufficient support particularly from relatives helped maintain family functioning. Support from the relatives of single-parent respondents in this study was also considered to contribute to family functioning. Furthermore, the review of English literature outside of Japan on single mothers rearing children<sup>29)</sup> suggested that it is important to understand these mothers' chronic fatigue, multiple roles, and struggles in relation to their life backgrounds, and that it is necessary to connect them with and promote interaction with people living nearby in their communities. All these insights suggest the necessity of understanding the characteristics of single-parent families in order to provide them with support and raise their levels of family functioning. It is necessary to focus on the daily lives of these families and to encourage their interactions with relatives and others around them.

### 3. Limitations of the Study

This study examined single-parent families' actual conditions by comparing them with two-parent families pair-matched in known three factors influencing family functioning. It is possible, however, that factors unknown or unique to single-parent families also influence family

functioning. The FFFS-J incorporates questions concerning the relationship with spouse/partner, and it may be difficult, in families in which no spouse/partner is present, to provide a response. Moreover, while an explanation is provided concerning the method for responding when no spouse/partner is present,<sup>4)6)7)</sup> in situations such as single-parent families or others with family structures that differ from the typical husband-wife relationships, the possibility also exists that differences will occur in the dynamics of the family system. Further study may be required to determine whether or not the same instrument can be applied to assess the family functions of families having diverse structures. This study also analyzed results from four single-male-parent families together with those of 53 single-female-parent families; thus, some of its generalizations may be limited. We wish to continue our study of single-parent families by increasing the number of single-male-parent families included in future investigations.

## V. Conclusion

This study revealed that compared to two-parent families and mothers of children with health problems, single-parent families exhibited lower family functioning in the area of "relationship between family and family members" due to the absence of a spouse/partner, and that they placed a high value on relationships and activities involving relatives with whom they have close bonds. The nursing professions must understand these characteristics of single-parent families and the need to assess their situations by focusing on financial function, child rearing function, and relationships with relatives, all

of which tend to decline in single-parent families. Finally, nursing professions must try to improve family functions of single-parent families by making use of social resources in collaboration with their communities and encouraging interactions with their relatives.

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## 日本の子育て期のひとり親家族の家族機能：ひとり親家族とマッチングしたふたり親家族との比較

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キーワード：ひとり親家族, Feetham家族機能調査日本語版 I (FFFS-J), 家族機能, マッチング, 量的研究

子育て期のひとり親家族は、子育てや就労などの多重役割をひとりの親が担う場合が多く、その負担が過剰となるので家族機能を良好に維持することが難しいと考えられる。本研究は、子育て期のひとり親家族の家族機能を量的に明らかにし、家族支援に役立てることを目的とした。Feetham家族機能調査日本語版 I (FFFS-J) を用いた質問紙調査を実施し、ひとり親家族57名、家族機能の影響要因でマッチングしたふたり親家族57名のデータを比較した。家族機能の総得点をみると、ひとり親家族のほうがふたり親家族よりも家族機能が有意に低く、この家族機能を向上する支援の必要性が明らかになった。これを3分野別にみると、ひとり親家族の“家族と家族員との関係”が有意に低下していた。一方、重要視している家族機能の分野は、家族と相互関係が強い家族外のひとびととの関係や活動を測定する“家族とサブシステムとの関係”の分野であった。先行研究では、コミュニティで身近に暮らすひとびととひとり親家族を繋ぎ、相互作用を促進することの重要性が指摘されている。これらより、家族の近くで暮らすひとびととの関係性に焦点をあてて家族をアセスメントし、相互作用を促すことでひとり親家族の家族機能の向上に資することが求められる。