

## **No Good Choices: Concealing or Disclosing Single Motherhood in Korea**

**Yiyoon Chung**

Konkuk University

**Seohee Son**

Sookmyung Women's University

### **Abstract**

Little research has explored the context in which single parents in Korea conceal their identity. Using data from focus group interviews with 19 single mothers, this qualitative study conducted a thematic analysis to examine 1) how and why single mothers in Korea conceal their status as single mothers, 2) the consequences of mothers concealing their identity, and 3) their efforts to find a space where they can be true to themselves. The findings revealed that in Korea's strong collectivist and Confucian-influenced culture, single mothers experience societal stigma that implicitly and explicitly deters them from revealing their identity. Women who choose to disclose their single motherhood must actively "come out" and face the subsequent stigma directly, while those who choose not to disclose their single motherhood experience isolation, feelings of guilt, and lower levels of civic participation. There are no options that allow a mother to simultaneously be true to herself and remain free from societal shame—there is no good choice. However, the participating mothers fostered a positive social identity by attending support groups, building relationships, helping others, and increasing social and civic participation. The implications for social work research and practice in populations with concealable stigmatized identities are discussed.

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### **Introduction**

The negative consequences of the coronavirus pandemic have hit single parents especially hard. Following the peak of the coronavirus outbreak in Korea in February of 2020, the government recognized single mothers' disproportionate need for support and developed a policy that offered up to 10 days of paid leave (up to about \$500) for single working parents. However, according to the Korean Single Parent Association's recent survey (Choi, 2020), some mothers did not take advantage of the policy because they had concealed the fact that they were single mothers and were afraid the secret would be revealed if they applied for the benefit. This example highlights a rarely discussed mechanism—concealing their stigmatized identity—through which single mothers in Korea are sometimes excluded from policies designed to support them.

In Korea, 8% of all families with minor children were single-parent families in 2018 (Korean Statistical Information Service, 2020) and 66% of single-parent families were female-head families (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2018). Although Korea has the highest poverty rate of single parents among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (OECD, 2020) and the economic hardship of single mothers in Korea has been reported in many documents (Sung et al., 2018), the economic vulnerability of single-parent families has not received much adequate public attention. Recent studies have reported that single mothers in Korea face significant stigma, partly influenced by the public's negative perception of single mothers' vulnerable economic situation and looking down on the group (Park, 2018). Perhaps due to the stigma, discrimination, and social isolation single mothers face in Korea, they have been hidden and their voices have been silent. Because cultural norms about

what constitutes a “normal family” are very strong in Korea, the hidden experiences of single mothers, whose families are perceived as “non-standard,” must be investigated thoroughly.

The divorce rate in Korea has rapidly increased and is even higher than the average rate among OECD countries (OECD, 2020). However, many, if not most, single parents admit to concealing their single-parent status in certain settings including among friends, members of their extended family, neighbors, and work colleagues (Park, 2018). However, previous research on identity concealment have not been able to explain why some single mothers conceal their identities and others do not, and the impact of concealing their identity. Unanswered questions remain on why some single mothers prefer not to disclose their single-parent status at work even when the decision entails a significant economic cost. More detailed research on single mothers who conceal or reveal their identity is necessary to understand how to address the financial and social challenges they face.

Investigating the context in which single parents in Korea conceal their identity is important because hiding their identity can lead to significant negative consequences that harm single parents’ well-being. Having a concealed stigmatized identity may also influence their self-perception, behavioral outcomes, and health outcomes including depression and anxiety (Carpenter & Austin, 2007; Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013). Negative outcomes can occur regardless of whether concealing their identity is an active choice to remain hidden so they will avoid social stigma or if it is a passive choice to simply remain silent (Carpenter & Austin, 2007).

In this study, we explore how 19 single mothers who participated in a one-to-one peer-support program in Korea communicated with others about their identity as single parents in their everyday lives. We also examined the contextual influences on these interactions using data from focus group interviews to examine single mothers’ perspectives on their identities. Focus

group interviews are useful for a study of vulnerable people who may view the group context as an opportunity to discuss difficult experiences that they may be hesitant to reveal in individual interviews (Jarrett, 1993, as cited in Daly, 2007).

This investigation revealed the stigma, intolerance, and discrimination that single mothers face in Korea. In general, this study provides a contextual understanding of why people conceal their stigmatized identities, especially in countries with a strongly collectivistic and patriarchal culture. In Korea, where there is strong and persistent intolerance of individuals who diverge from mainstream norms, the implications of this study reach beyond single mothers—the findings are relevant to other groups such as LGBT individuals and people with mental illness.

## **Backgrounds**

### **The Korean Context**

Korean families have been strongly influenced by Confucian familism. The idea that the family is the basic unit of society is central to Korean society, and the individuality of a family member is less important than the collective goals of and benefits for the family (Lee & Son, 2018). This focus on family has also defined the values of family members and their way of life. With such a strong emphasis on the contemporary “normal family” ideal in which two parents and their child(ren) constitute the normal family, many Koreans view divorce as a deviation from this family ideal (Ok et al., 2006). Thus, the stigma associated with divorce is pronounced. Divorce is not considered simply a life event experienced by an individual; rather, it has a collective meaning related to families and relatives (Ok et al., 2006). In essence, divorce entails a loss of family honor and is socially taboo for Koreans.

The social and economic costs of divorce remain high, especially for women in a patriarchal society such as Korea (Park & Raymo, 2013). Discrimination against single mothers

is greater than discrimination against single fathers because deviant behaviors are even less permitted for women than for men. In addition, Korean society is still prejudiced against women who live alone (Han, 2014). Even widows are not free from this type of discrimination in a social atmosphere characterized by a patriarchal and kinship-oriented culture (Lee, 2007). Within this context, single mothers suffer from both open criticism and quiet gossip from people around them. In terms of the economic costs, many women in Korea are more likely to experience career interruption after marriage due to childbirth and child rearing. As a result, achieving economic independence is very challenging for single mothers (Sung et al., 2018). Although in 2017, 84.2% of single parents were employed, the average monthly household income of single parents was only half that of all households (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2018). Low-income single mothers inevitably rely on public assistance, and these single mothers are more likely to experience perceived discrimination (Kim, 2019).

### **Concealable Stigmatized Identities**

Individuals' identities are constructed based on several characteristics, including gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and family structure (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013). These identities have social meaning and affect an individual's self-concept. Further, social identities are a mechanism through which power and resources are assigned to individuals given that policy and politics treat groups of people with distinct social identities differently (Schneider & Ingram, 1993).

An identity can be stigmatized when the wider society perceives it as problematic or diverging from social standards (Goffman, 1963) and thus it is socially devalued and negatively stereotyped (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013). Stigma is often associated with negative beliefs about a group (i.e., stereotypes), the endorsement of negative stereotypes as real (i.e., prejudice), and

unjust or prejudicial treatment of people who hold a certain status (i.e., discrimination) (Dovidio et al., 2000; Martin et al., 2009). Goffman (1963) explained that concealing one's stigmatized identity is the primary method individuals use to avoid stigma and to restore "normality"- an interactional order that functions to secure the predictability, reliability, and legibility of order.

Concealable stigmatized identities (CSI) are identities that can be hidden from others (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013). Quinn and Earnshaw (2013) divided stigma into three categories: internalized, experienced, and anticipated stigma. People with CSI can experience all three types of stigma. Previous empirical research has suggested that each of these three types of stigma are associated with increased psychological distress, although anticipated stigma is the strongest predictor of behavioral outcomes (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013). A person has multiple identities, but some identities are central to defining the self-concept—shaping individuals' feelings, thoughts, and experiences—while others are a relatively small, peripheral part of the self. Relative to privileged identities, CSIs tend to be more central identities because dealing with the disadvantages associated with stigmatized or oppressed identities requires time and attention (Goodman, 2011). The literature has also shown that stigma often results in shame and fear, and concealing one's identity to avoid stigma often leads to negative health outcomes (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013); however, the consequences of concealing identity for individuals' civic capacity and the implications for broader society have received much less attention. Therefore, further research on vulnerable groups of people who conceal their identity is needed to explore the implications for social policies and social work practice.

### **Coping Strategies for Stigmatized Identity and Social Support**

Single mothers often encounter situations where they must decide whether or not to conceal their identity. Their decision to reveal or conceal their stigmatized identity may bring

about different outcomes. Having strong social support is closely related to improved well-being for individuals who have CSI (Beals et al., 2009). Korean mothers, however, often have a limited social network after divorce or bereavement (Han, 2014). They frequently lose their relationships with extended family and friends, both because they voluntarily distance themselves from these relationships, often concealing their single mother status to avoid stigma and because they are rejected by the people around them due to their single motherhood (Lee, 2007; Sung, 2017). As a result, compared to mothers in two-parent families, single mothers are more likely to be isolated and less likely to receive sufficient social support from their prior social networks.

In contrast to distancing themselves from past social networks, single mothers may establish new relationships with others who share similar experiences and where they feel safe enough to voluntarily reveal their identity as single mothers. Many single mothers in Korea participate in self-support groups where they receive social support including advice and information (Sung, 2017). Social support from a group with similar experiences can empower vulnerable people to resist stigma, prejudice, and discrimination (Cragree et al., 2010). To address the social stigma they experience, single mothers can use different coping strategies by selectively revealing their identity in safe environments, such as in self-support groups.

Little research has sought to identify the contexts in which single mothers conceal their identity and whether and how the social support provided by single mothers' social networks can protect single mothers from a stigmatized identity. To fill this gap in the literature, this study examines the social networks of single mothers who participated in a single-mother peer-support program in Korea. We focus on the social interactions within these networks and how they are related to single mothers' identity construction.

## **Method**

## Data Collection

Data for this study were gathered from 19 single mothers who participated in a one-to-one peer-support program for single mothers in Korea.<sup>1</sup> The institutional review board at the home university of the first author (in Korea) approved the study. Focus group interviews were conducted in November 2018 and lasted 2–2.5 hours. Participants received informed consent forms and the questionnaire to review before the group discussion. The discussion questions asked about their experiences of being single mothers, their experiences with the peer-support program and other support programs for single parents, and policies they would recommend to meet the needs of single parents. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Seven focus group interviews were conducted: four mentor groups (one bereavement group and three divorce groups) and three mentee groups (one bereavement group and two divorce groups). The groups consisted of two to four people and were homogeneous in terms of both participants' marital status (i.e., divorced or widowed) and their roles in the peer-support program (i.e., mentor or mentee) because interviewing homogeneous groups creates a comfortable group dynamic and produces high-quality data (Krueger, 1994). Most of the participants in each group knew each other through their involvement in the peer-support program. Although some researchers have recommended that focus group participants should be strangers (Carey, 1994, as cited in McLafferty, 2004), other researchers have noted that the presence of acquaintances can create a supportive atmosphere and encourage open discussion

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<sup>1</sup> "Supporters of Single Parents" was a peer-support program for single mothers created in 2018 by a non-government, non-profit organization called the Korean Single Parents Association. The program's goal was to help single parents construct social networks via one-to-one matches between single parents who volunteered to serve as mentors and mentees who had recently become single parents or were in crisis. The aim is that these networks will provide social support and empower single parents. The program is unique in terms of focusing on forming social networks among single parents and being operated by a non-government organization that was formed and managed by single parents themselves. To be mentors, single parents had to participate in training programs that covered ethics and role playing as a peer supporter, understanding welfare policies, and counseling skills.



(Powell et al., 1996; McLafferty, 2004). In addition, because we were interested in the role of social support from individuals with similar experiences, we focused on the experiences of single mothers in the one-to-one peer-support program.

Twelve mentors and seven mentees participated in the interviews (see Table 1). On average, participants were 50 years old, had been single parents for 10.2 years, and had 2.1 children. Ten mothers had at least one child over age 18, and 14 mothers had one or more children under age 18. Most of the mothers were employed. None of the mentors received benefits from the National Basic Livelihood Security Act (NBLSA) program, a public assistance program in Korea, whereas 29% of the mentees received this benefit.

### **Analysis**

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyze the data from the interviews. The two researchers who facilitated the focus group discussions read the transcripts repeatedly to develop a holistic sense of the data. For the analysis, one author used the MAXQDA software program to help with the analysis while the other author used an MS Word file to create codes by copying and pasting relevant text segments into the codes. Both authors independently coded the data and compared their codes. If there was disagreement, the authors discussed the discrepancy until a joint decision was reached. The authors continuously checked the preliminary coding scheme by expanding, collapsing, and creating new codes. This iterative process of coding helped establish the final coding scheme. This final coding scheme was used to code the entire set of interviews and became the grounds for elaboration of the themes. This negotiated agreement approach is useful in exploratory research and contexts where more subtle meanings are discovered (Campbell, 2013). The data were also analyzed across and within participants to generate potential themes. Negative case analysis (Creswell, 2007) was used to

ensure methodological rigor.

## Results

### **Concealing Single Motherhood or Avoiding the Topic**

The single mothers who participated in the study described concealing their status as single parents or simply avoiding the topic when talking with others. Some hid the fact that they were single mothers from members of their extended families, colleagues at work, neighbors, and sometimes even their therapists. A few hid their status as single mothers from almost everyone they knew except members of the peer-support group. For example, one mentor said:

No one knows, even now... Even now, no one in my office knows about this. No one in my [extended] family knows. So naturally, I can't attend any family functions, and the fact I can't speak about it has become a wall. (Mentor K)

One mother noted that she had not even told her therapist that she was a single parent:

I didn't really reveal myself much. They came to the conclusion I was a positive, confident person who is doing pretty well for herself. There were no more answers for my problems. Because I didn't reveal my inner truth. Yeah, it wasn't a place where I could talk about it. I didn't want to talk about it either. (Mentee A)

While some women had concealed their divorce only during the initial period after they became single, others continued to conceal it for years after their divorce. An interviewee who had been a single mother for 11 years said that immediately after her divorce she was hesitant to tell anyone she was a single mother because, as she explained, "I myself didn't want to admit to anyone that I was a single parent" (Mentee F). Notably, two mothers who had volunteered to help others as mentors had completely concealed their single motherhood since getting divorced, which challenges the idea that a lack of understanding of the importance of social support is a

reason for concealing identity.

### **Contextual Factors that Discourage Mothers from Talking about Single Motherhood**

The participants discussed Korea's unique cultural context in which the traditional two-parent family structure is highly valued. The societal stigma that single parents, especially single mothers, continue to experience is strong and multi-faceted, and thus it implicitly and explicitly encourages single mothers to conceal their identity and remain silent and hidden. The mothers identified three main aspects of the Korean context that discouraged them from talking about single motherhood: (1) the patriarchal culture and societal intolerance of differences leading to rejection, isolation, blame, prejudice, and discrimination; (2) a lack of understanding from those who were not single parents; and (3) internalized stigma and predicted stigma against single mothers. Under this context, mothers concealed their identities in hopes of, for example, remaining free without having to "explain everything" to connect others, receiving equal treatment, receiving a more nuanced understanding of who she was as a person rather than being judged solely on the stigmatized identity, being free from gossiping, and sharing similar experiences with others, which is consistent with Goffman (1963)'s notion of restoring "normality."

#### ***Rejection, Isolation, and Blame***

The single mothers recounted experiencing prejudice and discrimination (enacted stigma) in a variety of settings such as interactions with families, friends, and religious groups. Confucianism revolves around the family and emphasizes the importance of family honor. "Saving face" is an important concept with regard to keeping family matters private. Individuals who fail to meet societal and family expectations might be ashamed, so they may be reluctant to reveal their problems, even to family members. This cultural context explains the limited ways in

which single mothers in Korea build and utilize social support to address the challenges they face as a single parent. For example, one mother commented, “I have my family and my siblings, but I have a personal, unique kind of hardship. I cried so much by myself” (Mentor A). Sometimes the discrimination they experienced was blatant and institutional. One mother who had been divorced for 12 years shared her experience of being isolated by a religious institution:

In canon law, because I got a divorce, my child can't be baptized. .... I visited all five of the churches in my neighborhood and met with all of the priests there. But they all said no. I had to repeat the phrase “I got a divorce but I want to baptize my child” in all five of those churches... five times. Something I didn't want to tell anyone. But the priest here where I live now said, “Oh, that's nothing,” and “it is fine.” So my child got baptized there, late, but baptized. (Mentor K)

The participant reported that this experience subsequently led her to conceal her single motherhood in some other situations. She explained, “We're still a very conservative society and a patriarchal one. This might be an excuse [for concealing identity], well, but it makes me feel like it'll be hard to deal with the looks people would give me.”

The mothers also described a patriarchal culture in which even family members ostracized women for being divorced. Even for widows, there is a long cultural history of blaming the death of a man on his wife's bad luck. As Mentor B explained, “In the old days, people called a widow the bitch who ‘gobbled up’ her husband.” Although this view has weakened over time, the interviewees' comments clearly showed that single mothers are still blamed for the breakup of their families. A participant whose husband died by suicide recalled:

When I became alone, I was first ostracized by my in-laws, and I was ostracized by my own family, and that's the thing, I didn't want to live anymore. .... My sister-in-law said

some things that were completely cruel and heartless. (Mentor A)

Some of the mothers reported that parents or friends who were ashamed of their divorce told them to conceal their single motherhood. While close friends and family members may have made these recommendations out of concern for the mothers, they were still discouraging the women from being authentic and living freely. A mother described this type of discouragement:

When I first started working, I said I lived alone. Since I'm not formally divorced, people around me questioned why I should tell others that I live alone? They said "What good comes from that? That's not even a good thing." So I told them "If I don't tell them, I can't tell the truth," right? If I lie, how could I spend 8 hours together [with my coworkers every workday]. (Mentor L)

### ***A Lack of Understanding***

Some mothers tried to share their experience with their families and friends when they became single mothers. However, they said it was difficult to share their issues and build rapport with those who were not single parents because most people did not understand their situation and had little empathy. The lack of understanding from close friends and family led the mother not to share their experiences with those who did not have similar experiences. Mentee C commented, "I am telling my friends about this like it's nothing but honestly, it's something. They always either have a complete family or are unmarried." The single mothers felt like they were not fully understood by those around them. One of the mothers in the program described this disconnection: "Other people, when I tell them about myself, no matter how much it seems like they understand, there is always a little something where they just aren't on the same page" (Mentor D). Another mother described a similar disconnection from her close friend, saying, "I wish I could call someone, just a phone call, but no matter how close a friend they are to me, I

couldn't because that friend has an unbroken family" (Mentor A).

Notably, several participants reported having difficulty sharing the fact that they were a single mother with their therapist in a traditional therapy setting. For example, Mentee F said she felt that she needed to "explain everything" about herself (Mentee F). She further described, "I feel it is too hard for me to make them understand my story and what I'm saying." In an effort to restore a sense of normality, these mothers felt that they needed to explain their situations to a therapist but found that it was too difficult. Therefore some mothers hid their single motherhood to a therapist while others disclosed it and endured the pressure to "explain everything."

### ***Internalized and Predicted Stigma***

The negative stereotype of and prejudice toward single mothers in Korea led the participants to internalize the stigma. They observed that others perceived them as having low standing in society because of their family structure. One participant described how she had internalized negative feelings about being a single mother:

I revealed my situation in the beginning, but society didn't respond according to my wishes and my will, and remaining as a single parent for this long... it exhausted me. At first, like you, I didn't think it [divorce] was something to be embarrassed about, but... I've kind of started to become embarrassed. And I have no presence, too. (Mentee D)

One of the program's mentors said she "covered up" her single motherhood because she feared how others would react to her admission, explaining, "I'm covering it up from my coworkers. It's because I don't have any reasons to tell anyone. And I know there will be more negative reactions if I do tell" (Mentor G). She further described her fear of being discredited if she revealed her single motherhood to her co-workers:

At work or in an interpersonal relationship, the moment I say that, in that moment, those

people would make conclusions about me: “That’s why she worked like a dog.” “That’s why she did this” or “That’s why she did that.” ... Those people who used to say I’m amazing and confident will be looking at me differently. Even though I’m somewhat stable at work now, I think it’s better to carry the guilt I know I can carry, rather than the pain [of the stigma]. (Mentor G)

This mother hid her status as a single mother to prevent being judged solely on the stigmatized identity rather than on a more nuanced understanding of who she was as a person or a worker. The goal of concealing her identity was to achieve normality and to gain respect, which would allow her to receive the equal treatment she was due.

The participating mothers also reported that when they shared their identity as single mothers with others, they felt they had to explain themselves and their experiences to prove the normality of their family to others. The single mothers were especially worried about other people gossiping about them and losing respect for them. For example, one mother lamented, “It happens in a way like, in front of me they smile, but later they go talk about me, ‘You know that person... that’s what happened to her’” (Mentee G).

Notably, even within the single mothers’ support group, the normality or similar experiences played a role in the group dynamics. Some mothers were reluctant to share experiences that would expose them as a minority within the group. For example, a widowed mentee recounted, “I couldn’t admit my husband committed suicide in front of all these people who got divorced... So I just sat there as if I had gotten a divorce too” (Mentee B). She also noted that the experience of her husband’s suicide exacerbated the negative influence of the stigma on her self-image and self-confidence as a single mother. Having experienced a husband’s suicide or domestic violence added another layer of stigma, which created divisions

among the single mothers in the groups and contributed to a “hierarchy of single mothers” based on the degree of social normality. Another mother stated that these internal divisions based on different layers of stigma kept some single mothers from joining the support group. She noted:

First off, all single parents’ situations are the same. Whether you got a divorce, or your partner died, or there was abuse or alcoholism, everyone has something. But even from there, things get differentiated. “I’m a little better off than them.” This kind of thing exists, so not all of them come [to the support group]. (Mentee E)

### **No Good Choices**

The social and cultural contexts and stigma in Korea created a dilemma for women as they decided whether and how to communicate with others that they were single mothers. A single mother has two choices: The first option is to actively and intentionally tell people that she is a single mother. This active choice has sometimes been referred to as “coming out” (Mentor K). Revealing her stigmatized identity will likely increase her feelings of authenticity and improve social support, but it may also lead to more direct discrimination. The second option is to conceal her status or simply avoid mentioning it to circumvent the negative stigma attached to single mothers. For single mothers who did not actively choose to reveal their stigmatized identity at the time of their divorce—that is, those who simply did not tell anyone they were getting divorced—once the divorce was far in the past, they felt that they had no choice but to lie. The societal stigma that single mothers experienced not only encouraged them to conceal their identity but it also worked as a force to turn an act of not actively disclosing single motherhood into active concealment. They felt that they had no option that allowed them, as a single mother, to both be true to themselves and be protected from shame. One mother described the impossibility of this middle position—neither lying nor revealing:



When you have a relationship with someone for a long time it's probable that you [will] get found out. But otherwise what if they ask what my husband does and I just mumble my answer or change the subject? And I do that multiple times, then they should already know, and it makes me a liar. Then it makes me tell another lie too. Uh well, my husband is on a business trip, he's overseas. And with that, my relationship with that person, that's as far as it goes. (Mentor L)

Another mother outlined the disadvantages of both concealing her identity and revealing her identity:

I didn't have people to really talk to about my deeper problems. And when I had someone to talk things over with, it ended up just like spitting in my own eye, and these relationship scars have piled up and have become deeper wounds. (Mentor F)

### **The Consequences of Identity Concealment**

The participants who chose not to reveal that they were a single mother reported experiencing feelings of isolation and other psychological difficulties. Although some mothers said they had deliberately chosen this option to avoid the even deeper pain that might result from others' negative judgments, concealing their identity had negative consequences for their well-being, including relationship building and social participation.

#### ***Holding on to Pain***

Mentor I noted that many single mothers were suffering from concealing their identity, explaining that, "They pretend they are not single parents. But then they must lie. It's difficult." Another participant said that the most challenging thing for her was not being able to share her genuine experiences and feelings with others. She recounted,

The pain and difficulties I have to bear because of my divorce—I can't tell my parents

because I feel bad for them. Or the things that happen at work, since my coworkers don't know I got divorced so I can't say anything there, and my friends aren't in my situation. I can't even say it myself, so I just let it sit inside me. I think that was the most difficult thing. (Mentor G)

Another participant described repressing her negative emotions. Mentee A stated, "Empathy was impossible to find [from other people who are not single parents]... I just buried it deep inside me and lived my life as well as I could." These mothers lived with the emotional pain of hiding their problems rather than facing the stigma attached to single motherhood.

### *Isolation in Relationships*

Single mothers who were not able to share their identity and true experiences with others became isolated and had a limited social network. Mentor K said, "How can a relationship go forward when there are lies and secrets? That's the end of a personal relationship." She described a situation where this dynamic played out: "A coworker said something like, 'We've worked together for three years but I still feel like I have no clue who you are'." Similarly, Mentor G described the consequences of her decision to conceal her identity as "a double whammy" because she had to face both the challenge of being a single mother and the challenge of not sharing her true experiences with others. She stated, "I'm being excluded as a single parent, but I'm pretending to not to be a single parent. It's like I'm doubly excluding myself. I realized that I inadvertently gave myself a double whammy." Notably, she perceived the situation as the result of her individual decision. She added that concealing her identity as a single mother also entailed a third disadvantage—feeling guilty about the decision to "lie." She observed, "I do have a person at work I'm close with who is like-minded, but I couldn't show her all of me, and there definitely is guilt that comes from that."

***Limits on Social and Civic Participation***

Some interviewees reported that concealing their identity limited their social activities and political participation. For example, Mentor K recalled her limited social activities during the first five years after her divorce: “My days consisted of work, home, work, home, over and over. I didn’t go anywhere at all.” She felt like she should speak out against prejudice toward single parents and advocate for policy support but felt unable to do so both because she was hiding her single motherhood at work and with her extended family and because she thought the stigma against single mothers would not change. The following quote shows that single mothers’ experiences of stigma and the consequences (such as concealing their identity) can disempower women and negatively affect civic participation and political efficacy:

Why would I not [raise my voice about necessary policy to support single parents]? ...

Because the anxiety comes first. If I start speaking on behalf of this issue and if I just so happen to be featured in the media, what would I do? No one around me knows about my situation, and I am going to have to continue my career too... I’m not stepping up, and then who will look out for us instead? Even if I speak up, will it change? There is the idea that nothing will change, it will stay stagnant. (Mentor K)

**Building a Positive Social Identity by Strengthening Solidarity among Single Mothers**

The mothers described building their own social network of women with similar experiences so they could be authentic and foster a positive social identity. Having the space to disclose their identity and discuss their experiences freely helped single mothers improve their self-image and overcome the psychological and emotional challenges they had experienced. These positive experiences allowed them to be confident that they could take good care of their children and themselves. Although the mothers differed in terms of how open they were with

people outside the group, they joined the group to freely disclose their identity without being judged, to feel comfortable with themselves, and to build relationships and connect with others. Mentee C said, “Here, I can talk comfortably about the stuff about myself. I couldn’t talk about this with other people.” One of the mentors expressed a similar sentiment:

Single parents with kids, working and living, we live within society, but we are isolated. If you have no one around you to talk to, that’s what it means to be isolated.... In a situation like that, if someone comes up to you, acting friendly, encouraging you, telling you you’re doing enough, and listening to you, the act in itself. (Mentor B)

Another participant said she had been isolated for a long time, but when she participated in a support group (before joining the focal peer-support program in this study) and revealed her identity as a single mother, she was deeply impressed by the positive response she received from group members. The initial positive response encouraged her to continue participating in the group meetings and eventually brought about fundamental changes in her life.

When I went there with my 7-year-old kid, to me it felt like I was coming out of the closet, or something. Because absolutely no one knew I was a single parent living like this, and my family didn’t want me to reveal that, so all I left the house for was work. So, when I was invited to a group support program by a single-parent association, I needed courage even with that decision to join it. What do I have to do when I meet those people in the group? Do I have to explain myself? (Mentor K)

The mother continued by describing how revealing her identity and connecting with others without having to prove normality to them had a positive influence on her life:

The program worked out really well for me. Part of it was when I first arrived no one asked for me to explain myself. It was rather “Oh, it’s good you came; we’re happy

you're here." It was so warm. That warmth I couldn't find anywhere else, the warmth I would have to look for by myself elsewhere was just being given freely here. I always tried to hide and be inconspicuous, but it has been different there. (Mentor K)

Having space to share their true experiences with others offered the participants the opportunity to build solidarity and gain social support. This opportunity, in turn, positively affected the construction of their self-concept and the re-assessment of past experiences and difficulties. It also reinforced their desire to help others and foster a sense of solidarity. Participants also found that the program increased their sense of empowerment, self-confidence, and growth. For example, Mentor F recalled how participating in the group had helped her change her perspective on the difficulties she had experienced: "Talking with my mentee made me feel a certain way. Having gone through the difficult situation that I was living in could actually be a stepping stone for my own personal growth." Similarly, Mentor G recounted,

It [the support I provide to my mentee] may be so tiny but even that really tiny thing might be huge to her and empowering. I could possibly be a person of meaning to someone else. That in itself, a sense of making a contribution to "us, together" or to the community, has given me some sort of self-contentment. .... This gave me a sense of self-efficacy and fulfillment. (Mentor G)

Mentees also expressed a growing desire to build solidarity with other single mothers. Mentee C said, "I don't know when I'll be in that position [of being a mentor for somebody], but I hope to care for other people." She also described an instance in which she had attempted to help another single mother, a woman who had two stigmatized identities—she was not only a single mother, but also a member of an ethnic minority. Based on her own experience with the support group, she tried to respect the woman's right to self-determination and emphasize the

importance of social support. She also emphasized her right to claim government assistance:

Look, my daughter's friend is mixed race, and her mom is also a single mom. She only speaks Vietnamese, and when I told my daughter to get in touch with her so I could inform her about the aid she could be receiving as a single parent, she said the mom was refusing point blank. I think she should be able to have access to aid, but then I wonder what prevented her from revealing her single mother status. It's not about asking for a total coming out. But there is a little bit of "maybe she should come out about this" kind of thinking. So, it makes me want to help others a little, too. (Mentee C)

### **Discussion**

This study reveals a very understudied topic of how context affects which choice Korean single mothers make when there is no good choice to reveal or not to reveal their stigmatized identity, as well as how they cope with the ramifications of their choices. Using data from focus group interviews with 19 single mothers, we explored 1) how and why single mothers in Korea conceal their status as single mothers from other people, 2) the consequences of this action, and 3) single mothers' efforts to find a space where they can be true to themselves and build relationships with others without judgement. In Korea, where patriarchal values and the "normal family" ideal remains dominant, being a single mother can be a stigmatized identity that serves as the basis for prejudice and discrimination. The results showed that single mothers experienced the social stigma, shame, and fear. Although the mothers' experience of being a single parent was central to their self-definition, multiple contextual factors prompted many to conceal their identity and remain silent. This is consistent with the research in Singapore (Wong et al., 2004) but different from the recent literature based in the United States (Bock, 2000).

Single mothers in Korea must often choose between "coming out" their stigmatized

identity and experiencing direct stigma or obscuring their status and experiencing “a double whammy” that entails both facing the challenges of being a single mother and not being true to themselves. Single mothers who chose to conceal their identity to avoid shame and restore a sense of “normality” to their lives felt that they were not their authentic “true” selves (Goffman, 1963). Concealing their identity also generated shame and fear. The mothers feared that people would despise them once they knew their secret, and this fear functioned as a major driver of their decision, limiting the spaces in which they could build their social networks and participate in their communities. The example described in the introduction—single mothers not taking advantage of the coronavirus policy benefit—is just one example of these implications. Mothers who concealed their identity as single parents also experienced a third disadvantage: feeling guilty about their decision to “lie.”

Concealing one’s identity may not be perceived as a lie in the sense of intentionally providing false information but may be perceived as simply omitting information. Interestingly, the results of a survey of nationally representative sample of single mothers in Korea (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2018) showed that 10% or fewer respondents reported concealing the fact that they were single parents. Practitioners and researchers in the field (Park, 2018), however, have reported much higher rates of single mothers who conceal their identity as a single mother. Our study helps explain why this discrepancy may exist. Some single mothers who simply did not tell others about their single motherhood may not perceive their behavior as concealing, because they did not lie; they simply omitted information about their status. Thus, they may not report the experience of concealing their single-mother status in surveys. As a result, surveys may not provide an accurate measure of how many single mothers conceal their single parenthood given the current Korean context.

This study does not examine the behaviors of single mothers per se but rather how the context of stigma affects which choice they make. The results show that given the current context in Korea, single mothers have no “good” choices: either they reveal their identity and face the stigma or conceal it and feel isolated, alone, and inauthentic. In addition, the results suggest that single mothers’ behaviors are not simply the outcome of an individual decision, but rather are situated in and structured by contextual factors. As a social outcome, concealing one’s identity has widespread and patterned consequences in Korea. Because concealing identity is a social outcome that is rooted in social structures and therefore requires collective actions, it cannot be addressed by simply encouraging single mothers to engage in a specific individual behavior, such as actively revealing their status as a single mother; instead, society as a whole is responsible for actualizing reform. As Hayward (2006) noted in her explanation of power and responsibility, even if people cannot be morally responsible for creating a given relation of domination, the people whose actions helped produce that relationship are obligated to attempt to understand and change it. By providing an explicit description of the current structural constraints, this study takes one step toward creating a social context in which single mothers in Korea do not feel pressured to hide their identity.

Single mothers may try to avoid the negative effects of concealing their identity by finding a space in which they will be treated normally, not as a curiosity. The study results show that through their participation in a one-to-one peer-support program, the single mothers in this study felt a sense of solidarity and supported each other both emotionally and instrumentally. They also resisted the stigma of being a single mother by finding a space where they could be true to themselves and share their authentic experiences. In sum, we found that peer support can help single mothers construct positive identities.



According to Quinn and Earnshaw (2013), two contextual factors help people reveal a concealable stigmatized identity: receiving a positive reaction from others the first time they reveal their CSI, and having a role model who provides a positive image of the group. This study found a single mother who was able to share her experiences and identity quite freely and positively. Mentee C recounted having a positive interaction with the public welfare agency and having a positive role model. Perhaps these experiences contributed to her decision to disclose her single motherhood as well as her efforts and desire to help others in need. Future research should explore the contexts in which single mothers are comfortable enough to reveal their stigmatized identity.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

There are some limitations of the current study. Because the sample was restricted to those who had participated in a peer-support program, the mothers in this study are not representative of all single mothers in Korea. More research on different populations of single mothers is needed to reveal the larger context of single mothers. For example, the experiences of single mothers who fully conceal their stigmatized identity and are completely isolated from other single mothers may be different than their peers who are somewhat more open. In addition, single mothers who are in the early stage of single motherhood may have different experiences from those who have been single mothers for longer. Furthermore, the current study did not examine the construction of the multiple dimensions of single mothers' identities. Future research should disentangle the identities of single mothers as women, and as people who are divorced, widowed, or unwed, and should examine how these aspects of identity intersect with other identities including those related to income, education, race, and ethnicity.

### **Implications for Social Work Research and Practice**

This study makes important scholarly and practical contributions to the field of social work. First, we build on research on stigma (Goffman, 1963; Dovidio et al., 2000; Martin et al., 2009) and extend this literature by documenting the unique context of stigma in Korea. Specifically, we focused on how concealing one's identity and the detrimental consequences can impact the well-being of a vulnerable population which has been largely ignored, especially under the influence of collectivism and Confucianism. Second, we build on the research on concealable stigmatized identity and its negative consequences for health outcomes (Goffman, 1963; Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013). Specifically, this study 1) expands our understanding of the focal outcomes to include relationship-building, empowerment, and social and political participation, and 2) documents how single mothers respond to social pressure to remain silent. Lastly, the research addresses a gap in the literature on single mothers in Korea: the stigma attached to single mothers and their identities.

This study provides new insights into an understudied mechanism through which single mothers in Korea are disadvantaged. The results show that economic support alone will not be sufficient to support single-mother families. It is crucial to foster a context that reduces the stigma attached to single parents, as well as many other groups who are considered different from the mainstream. The results also have implications for social work services for other populations with CSI in and beyond Korea.

Broader public policy plays a fundamental role in shaping the context within which the stigma attached to single motherhood operates (Jun, 2019). Changing the culture that stigmatizes single mothers is necessary. It is also important to educate the public and monitor the media, which often conveys negative images of single parents. However, it is not easy to change the culture, and certainly campaigns and education may not be sufficient policy tools to achieve this

goal. Policies can either alleviate or reinforce stigma, marginality, and shame. If a selective public assistance program with low eligibility, strict eligibility requirements, and meager benefits teaches its clients to be silent rather than raise their voices about their policy needs, it will be a policy failure even if it is economically efficient. With respect to the long-term goal of policy to help single-parent families, a policy that disempowers single parents and induces passivity will be ineffective and inefficient (Mettler & Soss, 2004). Public policy should be designed in ways that treat clients with respect, enable them to be proud of who they are, and empower them to live without discrimination.

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