

Lone parenthood in the COVID-19 context: Israeli single gay fathers' perspective

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Abstract

This article focuses on Israeli single gay fathers, using the Stress Process Model (SPM) as a framework to investigate their fathering experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thematic analysis of 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Israeli single gay fathers during the third national lockdown revealed that their parenting experiences during the pandemic were shaped by both COVID-related stress exposure and interpersonal resources, which the fathers viewed as interactive. These fathers described three main pandemic-specific stressors: financial insecurity and workplace transformation, feelings of loneliness and isolation and health-related fears. Our findings highlight the cumulative effects of these stressors on the fathers' well-being. The fathers also described the ways in which their interpersonal resources (i.e., social networks and strengthened relationship with their children during the pandemic) facilitated their coping with the pandemic-related stressors. The study highlights the need for social workers to recognize the emerging family forms and to broaden their approach to parents during a time of ongoing community crisis, by addressing the differential effects on parents in diverse family structures.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, lone parenthood, parenting experiences, single gay fathers, stress, stress mediators

1 | INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on Israeli single gay fathers, using the Stress Process Model (SPM) as a framework to investigate their fathering experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the SPM, stress is viewed as a process combining three key components—stressors, stress mediators and stress outcomes (Pearlin, 1989; Pearlin et al., 1981). The SPM highlights how personal and social resources mediate stress outcomes (McLeod, 2012; Pearlin, 1989). Here, we demonstrate how the interplay between exposure to COVID-19-related stressors and the fathers' resources shaped their fathering experience and well-being. This investigation advances our understanding of the unique sources of stress experienced by single gay fathers

during the COVID-19 pandemic and generates insight into the micro- and macro-level processes affecting lone parenthood in an ongoing community crisis.

1.1 | COVID-19 and lone parenthood

In late 2019, the first cases of a novel coronavirus infection were reported in Wuhan, China, and in January 2020, this coronavirus was linked to a disease called COVID-19 (World Health Organization, 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020 due to its serious and rapid spread (World Health Organization, 2020). To contain the virus'

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spread, many countries introduced severe social restrictions, including lockdowns (Frank & Grady, 2020). Notably, these new circumstances have negatively affected the parenting skills and well-being of parents of young children (Brooks et al., 2020; Craig & Churchill, 2021; Harth & Mitte, 2020; Holmes et al., 2020). During the pandemic, parents have reported high levels of depression, anxiety and parental burnout and increased negative emotions, such as anger and worry (Kerr et al., 2021; Spinelli et al., 2020).

Single parents with school-age or younger children are among those most severely affected by the pandemic and its related social restrictions, partly due to their limited ability to secure childcare arrangements during the COVID-19 crisis (Hertz et al., 2021; Iztayeva, 2021). Studies focusing specifically on single fathers suggest that they have experienced increased stress levels during COVID-19, resulting from reduced work hours, economic hardships related to their status as sole providers and increased childcare hours, without instrumental or emotional assistance from a co-parent (Iztayeva, 2021). The increased stress among single parents during the pandemic may also be related to the additional burdens they face regardless of the pandemic, including financial hardships, limited ability to secure educational arrangements and role strains (Amato et al., 2016; Chiu et al., 2018; Hertz et al., 2021). Single parents must cope with tension between their dual roles as lone providers and lone caretakers (Amato et al., 2016), which is enhanced among single fathers, since social norms still emphasize their instrumental role as providers (Coles, 2015). Due to the relatively small numbers of single fathers compared to single mothers, the experiences of single fathers during the COVID-19 pandemic have not been widely studied (Craig, 2020).

In the present study, we seek to advance our understanding of the factors shaping the pandemic-related parenting experiences of single parents by addressing a distinctive subgroup of single fathers: Single gay men who are fathers by choice. Single fathers by choice, most of whom are gay men (Carone et al., 2017), are defined as men who willingly choose to parent alone via adoption or surrogacy and egg donation (Golombok & Tasker, 2015). To our knowledge, only one study has explored the parenting experiences of gay fathers in the context of COVID-19, and this study focused only on coupled gay fathers (Craig & Churchill, 2021).

1.2 | The Israeli context

In recent years, many Israeli gay men have chosen parenthood, mainly via overseas surrogacy arrangements. Their reliance on overseas surrogacy arrangements is related to the Israeli law that, until 2021, allowed access to surrogacy services in Israel only to infertile heterosexual couples and single women (Shenkman et al., 2019). Most Israeli gay men become fathers in the context of a relationship (Erez & Shenkman, 2016; Tsafati & Ben-Ari, 2018), and thus, single gay fathers by choice are considered a minority group among gay fathers. Israeli gay men's choice of parenthood is embedded in the cultural

context of Israeli society, which is considered a familistic and pronatalist society (Birenbaum-Carmeli, 2016; Fogiel-Bijaoui & Rutlinger-Reiner, 2013).

In Israel, as in many countries, COVID-19 prompted the implementation of several lockdowns, with country-wide school closures and severe social restrictions (Gresser-Edesburg et al., 2020; Levkovich & Shiran-Altman, 2021). These measures had serious social and economic effects, leading to economic crisis and vast unemployment, adding pressure to the lives of many people, particularly parents of young children (Gresser-Edesburg et al., 2020; Meoded-Kurabanov et al., 2021). Indeed, COVID-19 has immensely affected parents' well-being and experiences in Israel (Meoded-Kurabanov et al., 2021; Taubman-Ben-Ari & Ben-Yaakov, 2020). However, no research has addressed the effects of the pandemic specifically on Israeli single gay fathers. This study focused on the following research question: How do single gay fathers in Israel experience their fatherhood during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2 | METHOD

In this study, we employed a context-informed approach (Roer-Strier & Sands, 2015) utilizing an interpretive qualitative methodology that enables researchers to explore a phenomenon by examining meanings, perceptions and worldviews that are affected by institutional contexts and by participants' subjective interpretations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This type of investigation is conducted with the aim of exploring the behaviours, beliefs and worldviews of a specific group of persons within a particular social context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Here, we examined the experiences and perspectives of single gay fathers by choice in Israel, with regards to parenting within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.1 | Participants

The participants were selected by purposeful criteria-based sampling (Creswell, 2012). The major selection criterion for inclusion was self-identification as a gay man who had deliberately chosen single parenthood. The study included 15 self-identified gay men—all of whom were single fathers by choice of at least one child, between the ages of 37–66, and lived in Central or Northern Israel. All but one participant were secular Jews, and all except two had middle class or high social and economic status. Their children's ages ranged from 6 months to 17 years (mean = 7.14 years). Thirteen participants had become fathers via surrogacy, and all had accessed surrogacy services abroad. Two participants had become fathers through transnational adoption. Participants were recruited in three ways: first, by contacting participants from a former study of gay fathers conducted by the first author (Tsafati & Ben-Ari, 2018); second, through snowball sampling (participants referred us to other single gay fathers) and third, via a website designed for single fathers in Israel.

2.2 | Data collection

To explore participants' fathering experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews based on an interview guide designed by the authors. This guide comprised open-ended questions covering the following topics: pandemic-related challenges, fathering practices and coping strategies. At the beginning of the interview, all participants were asked a grand tour question (Spradley, 1979): 'Could you share with me your fathering experiences during the pandemic?'

The interviews were conducted in 2021 by the first author during the third national lockdown, between December 2020 and March 2021. The interview time was determined by the participants. The interviews were conducted via Zoom due to the lockdown and lasted between 1 and 2 h. All interviews were recorded, with the participant's permission, and fully transcribed. Additionally, the participants were asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire via e-mail.

2.3 | Data analysis and trustworthiness

Data were analysed utilizing the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the initial stage, the researchers read the interviews several times to become familiar with the data (immersion). In the next stage of analysis, open coding was initiated to facilitate the identification of basic units of meaning. Among and within the codes, links and hierarchies (subcategories) were established using axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). To establish inter-rater reliability (IRR), the researchers separately analysed the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This element was critical, because trustworthiness was achieved by examining IRR during the coding process, as well as by ensuring full transparency regarding all research processes involving the study participants and quotes from their interviews. Another major means of establishing trustworthiness was reflexivity, which the researchers applied to improve their understanding of the potential effects of their personal conceptions and values, as well as their social positioning as women and mothers, all of which could potentially impact the research process (Shaw, 2010). This procedure helped reduce any potential bias toward single gay fatherhood and enabled the researchers to better understand the feelings and accounts described by the participants. Overall, reflexivity helped blur the positionality gaps between the participants and the researchers during the interviews and during data analysis (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2011).

2.4 | Ethical considerations

The research was conducted in accordance with ethical criteria pertaining to the principles of informed consent and confidentiality, which served to ensure the ethical standards of the study (Eide & Kahn, 2008). To protect participants' confidentiality, pseudonyms were used. Ethical approval was granted by the departmental ethics committee of the faculty. All participants signed consent forms before the interview began.

3 | RESULTS

Analysis of the interviews yielded two main themes elucidating the experience of lone parenthood in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of gay single fathers. The first theme pertains to the various challenges that the fathers faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second pertains to the factors that facilitated their coping with these challenges.

3.1 | COVID-19-related challenges faced by the fathers

The interviews revealed three unique challenges of single parenting in the COVID-19 context, related to the social, intra-personal and inter-personal realms: (1) financial insecurity and workplace transformation, (2) feelings of loneliness and isolation and (3) health-related fears. Most of the fathers in the study ($N = 14$, 93.33%) described how these challenges were negatively impacting their well-being and parental agency.

3.2 | Financial insecurity and workplace transformation

Some participants ($N = 6$, 40%) regarded financial insecurity as a major challenge faced in single parenthood, which was further intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants emphasized that single fatherhood imposes an additional burden in the context of the COVID-19 crisis and its adverse impact on the labour market, because they are the sole providers for their children. While most fathers were well employed and financially stable, they were aware of their increased vulnerability, as single fathers, to the detrimental effects of pandemic-related job loss and the job insecurity experienced by many single fathers. This is reflected in the following quotations:

Personally, I am fortunate that my job has not been impaired by social restrictions. Yet for many single fathers, for whom financial difficulties are the hardest challenge they face regardless of the pandemic, the economic aspect of the pandemic has been the hardest challenge they have to cope with. Some of the fathers I know have lost their jobs due to the pandemic and, as single fathers, they have no one to support them and their children. For two parents, in the traditional family, economic constraints and concerns due to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as unemployment or loss of job security caused by the pandemic, are hard, but these concerns are amplified when you are the only parent your children can rely on. (Zvi)

Knowing that your child's welfare is dependent only on you is very hard. As a teacher, the pandemic has not

affected my economic status. But I know other fathers who have not stopped worrying about their job security ever since the pandemic has started. They are afraid that if they are fired, no one can provide for their children. (Dor)

While Dor and Zvi were not directly exposed to job or income losses, Rami was threatened with job loss because his job performance was impacted by the COVID-19 lockdown.

I had no one to look after my children during the lockdown and I used up all my annual leave days. My boss did not care about my special situation and threatened to fire me. Who would hire a fifty-year-old single father of five children?! (Rami)

Each being the sole breadwinner of his family, several fathers ($N = 5$, 33.33%) described the threat of job loss as a major pandemic-related concern, shaping their well-being.

At the beginning of the pandemic, I could not sleep at nights. Alongside the worries about contracting COVID-19, I was afraid that I would lose my job and would not be able to provide for my children. It affected me so badly that I could not even smile for weeks. (Rami)

Sharon lost his job in the wake of COVID-19 and emphasizes the immense importance of job security for single fathers.

I lost my job, and I was so shocked when I lost my job! So I decided to learn to be an English teacher, where there is a huge shortage of teachers. Teachers do not earn much yet they have job security. As the only provider for my son, I must have job security. I hope that in a year I will find a secure job. (Sharon)

Another key concern that emerged from the interviews was related to the fathers' need to cope with the pandemic-related demands of the job market, such as the new work-from-home policy.

I [now] have to work from home but it is very hard for me to work from home with my 2- and 5-year-old twins. So I pay for someone to care for them—almost half of my salary. And when she goes home, I stay with them, and I keep on working at nights until 4 a.m. I am so tired from all of this. I sometimes feel that I cannot survive it. The pandemic with all its implications has destroyed my life. (Guy)

It is very hard for me to work from home when my child is with me all day. He is still young and

needs a lot of attention. There should have been a public solution for parents who have to work from home. (Dor)

The above quotes demonstrate the adverse effects of lack of institutionalized support on working parents, especially single parents. The participants viewed the lack of institutionalized assistance as being rooted in social policies that disregard the unique hardships faced by sole parents, thereby linking their personal experiences in the labour market with the socio-political context.

Policy makers do not pay attention to single parents' needs during the pandemic. We have no one to replace us and to support us, and we have to cope with work from home and care for our children alone at the same time. (Sharon)

Some fathers ($N = 5$, 33.33%) described the difficulty of leaving their children in the care of babysitters for many hours, emphasizing their desire to spend more time with them.

I have to be at the hospital and attend my work for many hours and it breaks my soul to leave them with a babysitter. But I have no choice. I pay half of my salary to a babysitter whom I trust. (Shlomo)

The above quote highlights the tension between the demands of the job market and the domestic realm. Several fathers ($N = 9$, 60%) described the conflict they experienced between their simultaneous roles as both breadwinners and caretakers. They emphasized that this conflict, which is a constant issue faced in their single parenting, was heightened during the pandemic.

As a single parent, I have always had to care for my children and provide them with financial security at the same time. It was always hard, but during the pandemic it became unbearable to juggle between these two tasks. (Rami)

3.3 | Feelings of loneliness and isolation

Another key challenge that emerged from the interviews was the fathers' deep feelings of loneliness and social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly during national lockdowns, which they ascribed to their single-parent status. Some fathers ($N = 7$, 46.66%) stated that limited physical contact with their elderly parents during the pandemic was a leading cause of their feelings of loneliness. Their elderly parents were a major source of both emotional and instrumental support for them and for their children, and this support was cut off due to the need to protect their parents from COVID-19 by refraining from physical contact with them—intensifying the fathers' feelings of loneliness. The following quote strongly reflects

the adverse impact of the lack of parental support during the pandemic on the well-being of the fathers and their children.

Before the pandemic, my mother used to come and babysit my daughters once a week so I could go out. Now she has stopped coming because of Covid, and I cannot go out. She used to come over during the holidays and it was a win-win situation, but now she is afraid to come. We are a small family. My daughters have only her, and the lack of her presence feels so lonely. My daughters miss her a lot. It is hard for all of us. (Eldar)

Many fathers ($N = 9$, 60%) emphasized that in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, they felt a growing need to be in a relationship with a partner with whom they could share their feelings and their daily life experiences, as painfully expressed by Rami.

During lockdowns, it was so hard to be all alone with all the responsibility on me and with no one to share my feelings. I felt a deep desire to have someone to talk to and to lean on. Before the pandemic, I did not care much about my relationship status. But now with all the social restrictions, I feel so lonely because I have no one who is an adult who I could talk to. (Rami)

For some fathers ($N = 8$, 53.33%), feelings of loneliness were amplified during the pandemic due to the imposed social distancing from other single parents, who represented a major source of support for them.

My relations with other single fathers have been dissolved. It seems that everyone is busy with themselves and with their own survival. Our community [of single fathers] has been shattered. We have no community anymore and even our internet site is inactive now. (Gal)

Dani, a father of 8-year-old twins, also expressed his feelings of loneliness, emphasizing the negative effects of social distancing on his children during the pandemic.

We [my children and I] do not get to go out that much and the kids are mostly at home. It is not easy for either of us. We are a small family, and our extended family is small as well, and this isolation makes us feel very lonely. (Dani)

3.4 | Health-related fears

Anxiety and fears related to contagion of COVID-19, isolation and hospitalization were found to be a leading concern for the fathers. Having sole responsibility for their children's upbringing, most fathers ($N = 12$, 80%) expressed deep concern about the potential

impacts of the virus on their health, fearing they would be separated from their children.

As a physician, I am in a direct and close contact with covid patients. Before getting vaccinated, it scared the hell out of me. After all, I am a single parent and cannot afford to be sick and hospitalized. I am 48 years old and, at my age, covid can be really complicated and sometimes require hospitalization. Before getting vaccinated, I was afraid on a daily basis of getting sick and hospitalized, and that I would have to be separated from my daughters. Twice, I was sent to isolate at home because of exposure to covid patients, and it wasn't easy. I was so frightened to contaminate them and their babysitters. It was a nightmare. Those days were the hardest days I had ever experienced since I have become a parent. But now, with the vaccine, I feel relieved. (Shlomo)

The fathers frequently mentioned death anxiety associated with COVID-19. They were extremely concerned about the possibility that their children would be left alone in the world if they were to die.

At the beginning, until I got vaccinated, I was terrified that I might contract the virus. After all, I am fifty years old and, at my age, people die from covid. I was very anxious about my possible death, such that I could not sleep at nights and barely ate. I kept on thinking that my kids are still young and still need me, and I was worried that something might happen to me and they would be left alone in this world with no one to look after them. (Rami)

While most fathers ($N = 12$, 80%) described that death anxiety was an integral part of the experience of lone parenthood, irrespective of the current pandemic, they emphasized that the pandemic had heightened their awareness of their possible death.

The fear of dying and leaving your children alone in this world afflicts single parents anyways. Yet, whereas before the pandemic I avoided thinking about it, the pandemic made me stop denying the horrible possibility that I could die and leave them alone in this world. It is a horrifying thought. (Shai)

Several fathers ($N = 7$, 46.66%) stated that their personal worries and concerns negatively affected their children's well-being, emphasizing that as single parents their emotional state has a dominant influence on their children.

Ever since the pandemic started, I started to suffer from acute depression. My children often see me worried, anxious, and depressed and it gets to them. It affects them. I can tell that it adversely affects them. After all, I

am their only parent and if I am not emotionally available for them, they have no one else to turn to. (Gal)

In summary, our analysis demonstrates that the participants described and constructed their pandemic-related experiences via narratives of job and financial insecurity, feelings of loneliness and health-related fears. The participants ascribed these experiences to their single-parent status. Participants referred to the increased responsibility that they regularly shoulder due to their dual roles as both the sole caregivers and sole providers for their children and emphasized that the conflict they often experience between these roles was exacerbated during the public health crisis caused by the pandemic. The participants' accounts of the unique challenges they face in the wake of COVID-19 were related to the intra-personal, inter-personal and social realms—demonstrating the multilevel factors shaping the experience of lone parenthood in the context of the current pandemic.

3.5 | Factors facilitating fathers' coping with the pandemic-related challenges

Most fathers cited two major factors that facilitated their coping with the pandemic-related challenges: formal and informal support networks and their enhanced intimate relationships with their children.

3.6 | Formal and informal support networks

Many fathers ($N = 10$, 66.66%) described their reliance on external support—both formal and informal supports—as a means of coping with pandemic-related challenges. Some fathers regarded therapy and professional counselling as a significant source of support that facilitated their coping with COVID-19-related anxieties and fears, as reflected in Rami's words.

I was afraid that something might happen to me, and that my children would have no one to care for them, so I called a psychological emergency hotline and talked to a professional volunteer about my fears and anxieties. Talking and sharing my fears made it easier for me to cope with my fears and, after that conversation, I felt a little bit relieved. (Rami)

Gal emphasized that professional help is especially important for single parents.

I do not know how people can handle all that stress without professional help. I think that every single parent must turn to therapy—whether personal or familial—or to psychiatric assistance in order to strengthen single parents' coping with the stressors of the pandemic outcomes. (Gal)

Along with the importance of professional help, some fathers emphasized the benefits of informal support networks. For example, Dani described his interactions with other parents as a major source of both emotional and instrumental support, enhancing his sense of belonging among other parents in his community.

I keep in touch with other parents and with my children's teacher via WhatsApp, and it is really helpful to share with them our [the parents of his children's classmates] frustration and fears, and to be updated on school routines. It helps me help my children to comply with their teacher's demands and with zoom learning, and it also helps me feel connected to other parents who have children of my children's age. (Dani)

This example suggests that support from other parents was essential for reducing parental and personal stress. Multiple participants ($N = 8$, 53.33%) described support from peers, particularly from other single parents, as a key factor that diminished their feelings of loneliness and facilitated their coping with the pandemic outcomes.

I have a close friend who is a single mother; she is a mother of twin girls of my daughters' age. We became very close during the pandemic. We stayed together during the lockdown and divided our parenting missions between us. Our daughters were together all the time, and therefore they did not feel lonely. We did everything together—had joint meals, watched movies together, and our girls played together. Being with her made it much easier to cope with the lockdown and its outcomes. Neither me nor my daughters felt lonely or bored. It was and still is a great relief to have her around. (Eldar)

Some fathers ($N = 8$, 53.33%) described both instrumental and emotional assistance that they received from their support networks, which helped reduce their feelings of loneliness and mitigate their anxieties and fears. Our data also revealed that support provided to the fathers affected the whole family, reducing the children's sense of loneliness and isolation and thus contributing to the children's well-being.

My daughters enjoyed the time we spent together. Her [the single mother's] daughters had friends to be with, play with, and sleep with. They were not alone and it made it a lot easier. (Eldar)

Some fathers ($N = 5$, 33.33%) mentioned support that they received from their families, which enabled them to address their own needs and mitigated their feelings of isolation.

I take my children to my father, and they are all happy to see each other. We sit outside on the porch. My father even looked after them twice so I could go for a walk. It was really helpful for all of us. (Dave)

We live next to my parents and to my sisters; therefore, we meet a lot. It was really helpful both for me and for my daughters to see them. It reduces our isolation from the world. (Yotam)

The above participants viewed their family support as a crucial source of help for them and their children during the pandemic. However, as mentioned above, the need to protect their elderly parents from COVID-19 by refraining from physical contact with them prevented many fathers from receiving the support that they normally received from their parents. Thus, it is not surprising that most fathers in our study did not view their parents as a significant source of support for them and their children during the pandemic, leading them to rely primarily on support from other parents in their community.

In summary, a central finding that emerges from our data is that both professional and informal supports contributed to the fathers' enhanced ability to manage unique pandemic-related challenges and stressors. Our analysis suggests that social support resulted in diminished feelings of loneliness and social isolation among the fathers and their children—which, in turn, heightened their sense of well-being.

3.7 | Strengthened father-child relationship

The interviews suggest that the pandemic led to intense parenting experiences that enhanced the intimacy between the fathers and their children, in a way that challenges traditional views of fathers as primarily fulfilling instrumental roles. Alongside the realization that the pandemic's restrictions make parenting more intensive and demanding, the fathers also realized that this experience provided an opportunity to strengthen their relationships with their children, thereby increasing their emotional well-being in the context of COVID-19.

There are benefits to this situation [Zoom learning and home working] as well. We spend a lot of time together and our relations have become closer. I enjoy being with and spending a lot of time with my son, and the time we spend together has become a very important source of happiness and joy for me in these gloomy days, and it keeps me optimistic. (Sharon)

One father described that the intensive relationship with his children was a source of empowerment.

We go through this pandemic together, and it helps us to feel less isolated, lonely, and anxious. As a parent, it teaches me that I am stronger than I had thought. (Stivan)

Interestingly, all 15 participants noted that being able to care for their children and to support them in the midst of a pandemic endowed them with sense of parental competency and agency, as caring

encompassed both instrumental and emotional practices and maintenance of daily routines.

I try as much as I can to keep them busy and to make them comply with their Zoom studies. Moreover, I find myself tutoring them, and teaching them a lot of new subjects like history and geography that they barely study at school. I keep a regular schedule with them as much as I can. I wake them up in the morning and make them get dressed and then I keep an eye on their Zoom standings, and I insist that they complete their homework before they watch TV. In the evening, we dine together. And in my free time, I try to expand their education. Keeping a regular schedule and adhering to daily routines helps us go through all of this and makes me feel a more competent parent. (Shai)

The parenting practices described by this participant reflect his engagement in involved fatherhood during the pandemic. Many fathers ($N = 12$, 80%) stated that the increased time they spent with their children also had positive effects on their children.

We were together in isolation several times. And during the lockdowns, we were together and I tried to keep them busy by making them play with each other, and draw paintings, and listen to music. So they did not just watch TV all day long. Keeping a daily schedule and adhering to daily routines had positive impacts on them. They were not bored, they did not fight a lot with each other, and they were not lonely. (Shlomo)

One father described that the stronger relationship established with his children had beneficial effects on both his and his children's ability to cope with the pandemic outcomes, attributing the strengthening of their relationship during the pandemic crisis to his single-parent status.

There are some benefits to being a single parent in this situation. I do not have someone to fight with about the children's rearing. I am the one who is in charge, without martial conflicts or debates. Besides, the fact that I am their only parent makes them feel more close to me and strengthens our relationship. The emotional ties that we have established during this period has strengthened our ability to cope with social restrictions and lockdowns and other constraints of the pandemic. (Yotam)

Over half of the fathers in the study ($N = 8$, 53.33%) acknowledged the benefits of lone parenthood with regard to the father-child relationship in the context of COVID-19. These fathers viewed the lack of a co-parent as a factor diminishing family tensions and

enabling strengthening of their relationship with their children during the pandemic.

In summary, our analysis reveals that both professional and informal support networks played prominent roles in facilitating the fathers' ability to cope with the consequences of the pandemic-related social restrictions, including lockdowns. Our data also reveal that the fathers' strengthened relationship with their children played a significant role in promoting their well-being by diminishing their sense of loneliness and isolation during the pandemic and providing them a source of happiness and empowerment.

4 | DISCUSSION

This study focused on the pandemic-related parenting experiences of a distinctive subgroup of single fathers that has received relatively little scholarly attention: gay single fathers by choice. Our findings elucidate the particular challenges encountered by gay single fathers by choice in the COVID-19 context as well as the factors mediating their effects on these fathers' parenting and well-being.

The fathers in our study described three main pandemic-specific stressors: financial insecurity and workplace transformation, feelings of loneliness and isolation and health-related fears. Our findings highlight the cumulative effects of these stressors on their well-being, reflected in their reports of reduced sense of parental competency along with feelings of helplessness, frustration and anxiety. Similar pandemic-related stressors have been previously reported by both single and partnered fathers (Brown et al., 2020; Craig, 2020; Iztayeva, 2021; Patrick et al., 2020).

We viewed the COVID-19-related stressors experienced by the fathers through the lens of the SPM, which emphasizes the need to consider the structural contexts of people's lives, including their statuses, when analysing the stress process (Pearlin, 1989). This led us to identify two contextual factors that impacted fathers' stress exposure: their single-parent status and the lack of institutionalized support for single parents during the pandemic. This combination of factors intensified the fathers' pre-COVID-19 vulnerabilities as sole parents during the pandemic. Interestingly, none of the fathers mentioned their sexual orientation as a factor impacting their pandemic-related parenting experience, suggesting that from their perspective their single-parent status, rather than the status of gay parenting, is a crucial factor during the pandemic.

One major challenge described by the fathers was related to the role conflict that they regularly experienced between their dual parental roles as primary financial providers and childcare givers. The fathers emphasized that the role strain they encountered pre-COVID-19 was exacerbated during the pandemic due to the preventive public health measures, such as the 'stay-at-home' policy that required them to perform both family and work tasks at their homes (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Schieman et al., 2021). Consistent with the SPM (Katerndahl & Parchman, 2002; Pearlin et al., 1981), our findings indicate that the fathers' role strain was embedded in contextual macro-level factors, including the job-market inflexibility and reduced welfare

programs that characterize current Israeli social policy, similar to in other Western countries (Iztayeva, 2021; Strier, 2015). Indeed, research shows that macro-level factors increase single fathers' vulnerability to work-family conflict during the COVID-19 pandemic (Craig, 2020; Iztayeva, 2021). Role strain also reportedly dominates single mothers' experiences during the pandemic (Glennon et al., 2021; Hertz et al., 2020). These findings highlight the constraining aspects of sole parenthood and the importance of social policy in shaping parents' well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, many fathers also mentioned the advantages of single parenting, which they associated with less family conflict and the strengthening of their relationship with their children during the pandemic. This suggests that many perceived their lack of a partner as both a barrier and a benefit of lone fatherhood.

In accordance with the SPM, which highlights the importance of stress mediators in determining the stress outcomes (Pearlin et al., 1981), we found that the fathers perceived two major factors as facilitating their coping with the stress-provoking pandemic-related conditions. One such factor was related to formal and informal support systems. The fathers emphasized that the support they received from mental health professionals, as well as from other parents in their community (particularly other single parents), played a key role in mitigating their feelings of helplessness and loneliness, thereby enhancing their well-being. This finding supports previous evidence linking informal support with parents' well-being during the pandemic (Brown et al., 2020; Craig & Churchill, 2021). For some fathers, these social networks compensated for the lack of support from their elderly parents (who served as their major source of support pre-COVID-19) due to the need to protect them from the pandemic by avoiding physical contact with them. The need to avoid physical contact with their elderly parents during the pandemic is of particular significance in the socio-cultural context of Israeli society, whereby adult children tend to have close relationships with their parents and regard them as an important source of support (Katz & Lavee, 2005; Nadan, 2021).

Another mediator of the pandemic-related stress noted by the fathers was the strengthening of their relationship with their children due to the increased time they spent with them and their greater involvement in their daily routines. Our findings align with earlier reports suggesting that most parents feel closer to their children during COVID-19 than before the pandemic (Kerr et al., 2021). The parenting practices described by the fathers in the context of COVID-19 demonstrate involved fatherhood practices that reportedly characterize gay fathers (Erez & Shenkman, 2016; Shenkman et al., 2019). These practices expand gender and parenting concepts, while undermining dominant concepts of masculinity (Shenkman et al., 2019; Tsfaty et al., 2020). These fathers' engagement in involved fatherhood challenges traditional gender roles and represents the evolving concepts of fatherhood that encompass both nurturing and caring practices alongside the traditional instrumental roles (Doucet, 2012; Lamb, 2013; McGill, 2014; Strier, 2015).

All fathers in our study emphasized that being able to fulfil their dual parental roles as primary financial providers and childcare givers during the pandemic endowed them with sense of parental

competency and agency, which in turn enhanced their well-being. These findings corroborate previous findings suggesting that the more gay fathers view themselves as competent parents, the less they are likely to experience adverse mental health outcomes (Shenkman & Shmotkin, 2020).

Our overall findings suggest that the fathers' exposures to specific pandemic-related stressors were shaped by interpersonal resources that facilitated their coping with these stressors and that their experiences of stress and coping resources were interactive and not two distinct entities. This corroborates Antonovsky's (1987) concept of salutogenesis, positing that stress and coping are a continuum that constantly interact. Our findings also suggest that the fathers' interpersonal relationships, particularly those related to the parent-child dyad, enhanced their perceived parental competency and empowerment. This finding undermines traditional perceptions of masculinity, in which men's activities in the public arena are considered the major components of their coping resources (McGill, 2014).

4.1 | Limitations, conclusions and implications

One major limitation of this study is that it was based on a relatively homogeneous sample comprising middle-class, secular and educated fathers, thus limiting the transferability of its findings and interpretations. A second limitation is that it explored single fathers in a specific social and cultural context. This limits the interpretations of our findings to the Israeli context, although certain aspects may be applicable to other contexts. Despite these limitations, this is an important study that gives voice to single gay fathers by choice, a group that has not received scholarly attention in the COVID-19 context. In future studies, it would be beneficial to investigate more heterogeneous samples of single gay fathers in the context of COVID-19 and to compare the pandemic-related parental experiences of single fathers in various family structures. This could generate insights into the diversity of fathering experiences among single fathers during a pandemic.

The present study enriches our understanding of the ways in which COVID-19-stressor exposure shapes the fathering experience of single gay fathers, elucidating both the stressors faced and the resources that mediate their effects on the fathers' well-being. In line with the SPM, which highlights the multi-dimensional and contextual character of parental stress (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020), the findings show how lone parenthood amplifies pre-existing vulnerabilities in the context of a major community crisis, such as COVID-19. Our study also demonstrates how social support, both formal and informal, and intensive fatherhood may moderate pandemic-related stressors. The SPM model provides a conceptual framework for understanding both stressors and coping, and their specific manifestations among single gay fathers. This study expands the current body of knowledge regarding the effects of community crises on single gay fathers' experiences, showing that these experiences are contextual and relational and demonstrating how the inter-personal dimension promotes their perceived well-being.

On a practical level, our findings emphasize the need for social workers to recognize the variety of family forms and to broaden their approach to parents in a time of pandemic, by addressing the differential effects on parents in diverse family structures. Social workers who provide services to parents and their families during community crises must consider the unique stressors faced by single parents and the specific resources at these parents' disposal. This would enable them to develop interventions tailored for these parents' needs, based on a pluralistic approach that takes into account the unique challenges facing diverse family forms. By doing so, they may promote the well-being of parents and children in contemporary families during community crises. Our findings also highlight the need for policy-makers to implement policies designed to assist working parents, particularly single parents, during the pandemic crisis.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of the study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publically available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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