CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 An overview

The adolescent is often described as a marginal man. He is no longer regarded as a child and yet he is not fully accepted as an adult. The founder of developmental psychology, Stanley Hall, viewed adolescence as a period of storm and stress, a time of conflict and upheaval where emotional instability and personality changes take place.

Freud (1949) proposed a psychodynamic theory which focused on the inner dynamics of the id, the ego and the superego. He believed that biological urges residing within the id push all individuals through five universal stages of psychosexual development: oral, anal, phallic, latency and genital. A person who has been successful in his or her previous psychosexual development will attain healthy sexual maturity during adolescence.

Freud’s theory was further refined by his daughter, Anna Freud, who also viewed the behaviour of adolescents as the end product of a sudden upsurge in sexuality. She believed that the increase in sex drive during adolescence results in an increase in impulsive activity, leading to aggressiveness, inquisitiveness, and egocentricity. This
leads to a disequilibrium or conflict between the id, the ego and the superego which in turn gives rise to stress and anxiety.

Erikson (1959, 1968) believed that adolescents are in the state of role-confusion. The lack of specific role definition leads to a disruption of self-concept and identity, resulting in a crisis. Failure to resolve the ego-identity crisis results in self-doubt and confusion which explains why adolescents are more vulnerable to self-destructive activities like substance abuse, delinquency and suicide.

Studies by Chiam et al. (1976, 1978, 1981) on adolescent problems in Kuala Lumpur, Seremban and Ipoh revealed that adolescents in Malaysia are generally shy, sensitive, easily hurt, and easily embarassed. They also lack self-confidence and suffer from inferiority complex. The findings also revealed that adolescents tend to dramatize their feelings so that when their goals are blocked or frustrated, they may think of ending their own lives or wish that they had never been born.

According to Hamburg (1990), being an adolescent in the late 20th century is more difficult than ever before because, as the average age of physical maturity is lowered due to better nutrition and healthcare, adolescence becomes much longer whereby many adolescents are physically matured but not cognitively ready to differentiate between right and wrong. The erosion of family and social support network, as well as easy exposure to drugs, alcohol and other negative influences, make the adolescents of the 90s more vulnerable to a wide range of deviant
behaviours like truancy, sexual promiscuity, drug abuse and the like. They are also more vulnerable to emotional maladjustment like depression and anxiety.

Therefore, it appears that adolescents need the support of their families and societies to tide over their 'storm and stress', to find their own identity and to finally emerge as a 'full man.' According to Larson (1972), the quality of parent-adolescent relationship is the most important single determinant of adolescent attitudes and behaviour because parents are viewed upon as role models by the adolescents. Hence, the absence of any one parent in a family may have significant impact on adolescent development.

1.2 Background of the study

Over the past few decades, family structures in both developed and developing countries have undergone dramatic changes due to the complexity of the modern society. One of the most significant changes is the spectacular increase in single-parent families headed by single mothers. The most frequently mentioned causes of father absence are divorce and/or separation, death, career demands and out of wedlock childbearing. Bumpass (1984) and Huber & Spitze (1988) estimated that approximately 50% of the American children live in single-parent homes at some point of their lives. Horn (1997) reported that in America, the number of children growing up in father-absent homes has nearly tripled between 1960 and early 1990. By 1994, 24 million American children were living without their biological fathers.
In Malaysia, father-absent households have also increased significantly since the 70s as a result of modernization and urbanization. Statistics from the Registrar of Marriage showed that one out of ten marriages ended in divorce. The socio-economic sample survey of households in Malaysia taken in 1991 indicated that out of every five surviving spouses, four were females. A recent survey by University Putra Malaysia (The Star, 29.12.97) indicated that 3.5 million children are currently living in father-absent homes, headed by 635,000 single mothers.

Traditionally, it has been assumed that families with both parents provide better environment for child development compared to single-parent families because each parent provides different sources of emotional support and practical assistance to a child. For instance, researchers have consistently found that mothers tend to be more verbal in their interactions with their children, while fathers tend to be more physical. Physical play with fathers has been found to help children learn to regulate their own behaviour and recognise the emotional cues of others. Amato (1993) indicated that fathers can influence child development through the provision of material resources and role modelling. Besides, fathers indirectly affect their children by their influence over the mother and the mother’s behavior towards the child. Accordingly, children brought up in father-absent homes are expected to experience a deficiency in paternal support that may increase the likelihood of problems such as poor academic achievement, low self-esteem and misbehaviour. In fact, many studies (e.g., Luckman & Regan, 1966; Zill, 1983; and Clark & Barber, 1994) have found that
children from single-parent homes demonstrate negative outcomes in conduct, psychological adjustment, self-esteem and social relations. They are also academically more inferior to their peers from two-parent families.

Studies have also revealed that the effects of father absence on children in general, and adolescents in particular, are dependent on variables like race, gender, the on-set of father absence and the socio-economic status and emotional state of the mother. Some studies even found that in families where parental conflict is high, father absence could be beneficial to adolescents' well-being. For instance, Amato and Rezac (1994) found that among boys from divorced families, contact with non-resident father decreased behavior problems when parental conflict was low but increased behavior problems when parental conflict was high.

King (1994) found that for black children, father visitation is associated with higher levels of reported behavioral problems.

Seltzer (1991) revealed that maternal education moderates the effects of father absence on a child's well being. A mother's education is an indicator of her resources in terms of income, ability, beliefs and parenting styles.

It was also found that children adjust better in the custody of a parent of the same sex. (Camera & Resnick, 1988). Therefore boys will have poorer adjustment in father-absent homes compared to girls.
Therefore, it appears that the effect of father absence on adolescents is dependent on a wide spectrum of variables and this project paper undertakes to investigate the linkage between father absence and adolescent development in a Malaysian context.

1.3 Statement of the problem

Many researchers have linked father absence to adolescents' behavioural and emotional problems. For instance, Duncan et al. (1994) revealed that adolescents from father absent homes are less cooperative and more likely to engage in antisocial behaviors. Besides, they are also more aggressive and more likely to abuse alcohol and marijuana compared to adolescents in two-parent households.

Adams et al. (1984) observed that boys who grow up in father-absent homes are more likely to have trouble establishing appropriate sex roles and gender identity. Burton et al. (1960) gave evidence that boys brought up by single mothers are relatively more feminine and more dependent than those from two-parent homes.

In a study of 146 adolescent friends of 26 adolescent suicide victims, Brent et al. (1995) revealed that adolescents living in father-absent homes are more likely to commit suicide because they are more likely to suffer from psychological disorders like emotional distress, anxiety and depression. Besides, they are also more likely to have trouble falling asleep and to suffer from frequent nightmares.
In a study of 700 adolescents in America, Metzler et al. (1994) discovered that adolescents from father-absent homes tend to engage in greater and earlier sexual activities compared to their peers from two-parent families. Adolescent girls from father-absent homes are found to be more promiscuous than those from father-present homes.

Karl (1997) noticed that adolescent boys are generally harder hit by father absence. They tend to have trouble concentrating in school, to do poorly in intelligence test and to have difficulty with mathematics. Besides, father absence increases the likelihood of a boy becoming violent.

All the above studies showed that father absence has a negative impact on adolescent development. However, these studies were conducted in western societies with circumstances different from those that are found in Malaysia. There is no evidence of any in-depth studies on the effects of father absence on the adolescents in Malaysia. This is mainly because, until very recently, divorce and broken homes are viewed upon as a social stigma and to get the adolescents and their custodian mothers to participate in such studies is not an easy task.

However, the escalating incidence of social ills and crimes involving our adolescents over the past few years revealed that there is a strong evidence of gradual erosion of family and parental influence on the adolescents in this country. It is
therefore the concern of this project paper to examine to what extent are the adolescents’ maladjustment and misbehaviour caused by father absence in the family.

1.4 Objective of the study

The objective of this study is to investigate the effects of father absence on the personality development, psychological and social adjustment as well as the academic achievement of two adolescents from single-mother families. It is also the objective of this study to ascertain whether the effects of father absence on Malaysian adolescents are similar to those revealed by studies carried out in the west.

1.5 Major research questions

With respect to the statement of the problem and the objectives of the study outlined above, the following research questions are raised:

1. What are the problems faced by the subjects?

2. What are their personality traits?

3. To what extent has father absence affected their academic achievements?

4. To what extent has father absence affected their self-concept?

5. To what extent has father absence affected their psychological adjustment?

6. To what extent has father absence affected their social adjustment?

7. How do the subjects perceive their future career, marriage and family life?
1.6 Definition of terms

Adolescent: This refers to an individual who is in the transitional period between childhood and adulthood. The beginning of adolescence is usually marked by menarche in girls and spermatoza in boys.

Father-absent homes: This refers to homes which are headed by single-mothers. The father could be absent as a result of divorce, separation, death or separated from the family by geographical distance due to career demand. In this study, the cause of father absence was due to death.

Personality: This was defined by Allport (1937b) as ‘the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his unique adjustments to the environment.’ Therefore, personality refers to the distinctive characteristics and traits of an individual.

Self-concept: This is defined as an organized configuration of the individual’s perceptions of his own abilities, characteristics, attitudes and traits.

Academic achievement: Academic achievement is measured by grades obtained from public examinations like UPSR, PMR and SPM. In the UPSR, year six pupils are required to sit for four papers which are graded from A to E. Upon completing
their lower secondary education, students are required to sit for PMR. Seven or eight subjects are offered in this examination and each subject is graded from A to E. Form five students are required to sit for their SPM which is graded based on the points scored for the best six subjects. Each subject is graded along a nine-point scale, a score of one being excellent while a score of nine is considered a failure. The maximum aggregate for six subjects is 54 while the minimum is six.

1.7 Significance of the study

With the escalating rate of divorce in this country, it has been projected that the number of children living in father-absent homes will increase significantly in the next millennium. The findings of this study may be useful in guidance and counselling services in Malaysia. The data could provide valuable information to single mothers, counsellors and teachers and give some indications of the areas in which guidance is most needed.

Although a few studies have been carried out to investigate the causes of adolescent problems in Malaysia, no study has attempted to relate adolescent problems to father absence in the family. The findings of this study will therefore provide a better perspective on the effects of father absence on adolescence and contribute to a better understanding of the anxiety, stress and confusion encountered by adolescents from father-absent homes.