

Popular Literature on Post-Divorce Traumatic Experiences

Stabile Namwai Ngambi¹, Daniel Ndhlovu², Moses Changala³

^{1,2,3}University of Zambia

ABSTRACT: This study explored popular literature on post-divorced traumatic experiences. The study employed a qualitative approach where literature from different studies was analysed thematically. The findings of this desk study revealed that divorced persons experienced feelings of anger and sadness, psychological effects, loss of identity and self-esteem, loss of psychological support, physical and mental health, as well as disturbance in family function and parenting. The study also established that divorced persons resorted to substance abuse, had experienced financial survival issues and experienced gender differences in the institutionalization of mental health issues. The study concluded that divorce has adverse effects on the lives of those experiencing it. It, therefore, recommended that pre-marriage counselling should be taken seriously before the marriage is pronounced.

KEYWORDS: Divorce, divorced person, lived experiences

INTRODUCTION

Divorce is proving itself as an inevitable family transition of many lives in the world. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2019:851), “divorce is defined as a final legal dissolution of a marriage, that is, the separation of husband and wife which confers on the parties the right to remarriage under civil, religious and/or other provisions, according to the laws of each country”. Amato (2000) asserts that the most dramatic change in family life during the 20th Century in the world was the sharp increase in the rate of divorce resulting into about 40 percent of children in the world faced with likelihood of experiencing effects of divorce before their adulthood. Research undertaken by most scholars has tended to focus on the causes and effects of divorce (Amato, 2000). However, little is discussed on traumatic experiences that divorced persons go through. It is against this knowledge gap that this paper explored the literature on post-divorce traumatic experiences in order to gain some insights into the phenomenon. The study sought to bring to surface experiences of those divorced, how they are coping and ultimately propose some coping strategies.

The Concept of Divorce

While a variety of definitions of the term divorce have been suggested, this paper will use the definition suggested by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2019:851) which defines divorce as “a final legal dissolution of a marriage, that is, the separation of husband and wife which confers on the parties the right to remarriage under civil, religious and/or other provisions, according to the laws of each country”.

Theoretical Perspectives

Several theories have been suggested to explain the effect of divorce on adults and children. According to Nilsen (2020), these range from attachment theory, feminist theory and the more modern perspectives such as the parental loss perspective, the economic deprivation perspective, parental adjustment, the interparental conflict perspective and the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective. In this study, the economic deprivation perspective and the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective were used. While the economic deprivation posits that divorce driven by economic decline may affect children through less parental investment and increased parental stress, the divorce-stress-adjustment theory assumes that divorce is a stressful life change that both parents and children are impacted by (Nilsen, 2020). The two theoretical perspectives were selected because we wanted to explore both the psychological and economic experiences of divorcees.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study draws on and makes conclusions from the findings of other studies conducted about divorce. The literature search strategy for this paper involved searching electronic academic databases. To provide additional relevant literature, snowballing was used that involved searching through the reference lists of the literature identified through electronic database searches. Studies were included in the analysis of this paper if they dealt with the issue of divorce. The exclusion criteria involved

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the elimination of studies that were not written in English. Since this study took a qualitative approach, data were presented in themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results and discussion of the study under the following themes: feelings of anger and sadness, psychological effects, substance abuse, parenting, disturbance in family function, financial survival, physical and mental health, gender differences in the institutionalization of mental health issues, loss of identity and self-esteem and loss of psychological support. These themes are discussed in detail in the sections that follow.

Feelings of anger and sadness

According to Gaffal (2010), feelings of anger, betrayal and sadness were the experiences of the participants in the study conducted. For instance, one of the participants from Gaffal's study whose wife was having an extra-marital affair shared his experience in the following words:

"I experienced anger because she betrayed me and what she did destroyed my dignity ...My trust for women was damaged. I always thought I could trust women. I met her at church but after my ex-wife did that, I could not trust any woman. I was confused and sad."

Feelings of sadness were experienced by John and Sam for the fact that their marriages ended in divorce. John, who indicated incompatibility as the main reason for his divorce, stated the following, *"I am sad that marriage has come to an end and that am divorced"*. Sam, on the other hand, speaking from a Christian point of view confessed that *"divorce is the last option in the bible, ... I thought it was a disgusting thing, I was sad that we did not live up to the promise we made before God"*. The feeling of sadness was also shared by Dan and Jeffrey who admitted being sad and stated that their sadness came from parting with their children (Cohen and Finzi-dottan, 2015).

Psychological effects

A review of studies revealed that divorced people experience mental health challenges that affect them psychologically. Mbedzi (2018 citing Preller, 2013) explains that strong emotions like pain, stress and depression characterise the life of a divorced person. This might result in the affected persons experiencing an increase in social isolation, economic problems and a concomitant lower standard of living, difficulties in raising children, risk of health problems, and psychological distress among others. The following extract from Mason et al. (2012) study illustrates this:

"I think loneliness was the biggest thing. Because now you always have someone next to you by your side and it's like there is no one there" (Mark). Sam, on the other hand, said that *"You feel like you are lonely and that the significant part of you has been ripped off. Your family is gone, you are all by yourself. After divorce, I had nothing to look forward to. My whole life just came to a stand-still."*

It can be noted from the above sentiments that the divorce process itself prompted loneliness in some people. Because couples are used to being together, divorce creates a situation where the two must live apart; a situation that fuels loneliness in people. This is consistent with Mooney et al. (2011) quoted in Mbezi (2018) who argues that divorced persons also experienced lower levels of psychological well-being, such as depression, anxiety, a poorer self-concept and self-esteem.

There are also feelings of fear that emanate from divorce. This might be attributed to the fact that the other person might no longer be available to take care of and provide for their children. Added to this is the feeling of failure that normally accompanies divorce. Affected individuals, especially men, might consider themselves failures because they perceive themselves as having failed to save their marriage from breaking as a result.

The lived experience of the divorced are also well elaborated by Galatzer-Levy and Kraus (1999) who explain that a divorced person experiences social and psychological changes in individual and in family relationships that can extend over many years. They assert that the loss which is a critical component of divorce tends to be analogous to bereavement but, together with grief, there are other powerful effects like rage, sexual jealousy, and unrequited love.

Galatzer-Levy and Kraus (1999) further stress that there are clear and distinct patterns of social and psychological problems for men and women after divorce. They state that women are overcome by a sense of guilt, self-blame and sadness caused by the ending of a relationship. For men, on the other hand, they indicate that it is not so culturally acceptable to express their distress and, therefore, emotional problems are frequently obscured, leading to somatization of stress. They explain that health problems that develop are often aggravated by drinking, smoking, and over-working in the aftermath of divorce.

Additionally, Emery (1994) asserts that a divorced family is still a family, even though the spouses are no longer sharing the same residence but still sharing relationships. Ahrons (1995) asserts that divorce remains a crisis of the family transition. Unlike other

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crises, the crisis of divorce does not occur suddenly but is preceded by a period in which marital conflict escalates and marital satisfaction decreases. This process starts long before marital separation takes place.

Hagestad and Smyer (1982) describe divorce as a multi-faceted process of multiple social and psychological ceasing and concluded that the longer the marital relationship, the greater the number of bonds that need to be severed. They described the divorce process as an orderly or disorderly process depending on whether the social and psychological bonds of marriage are dissolved before the legal separation takes place

Substance abuse

The results showed that people experiencing divorce, especially women, might be prone to alcohol and drug abuse and tend to find solace in liquor. For instance, one participant had this to say:

Alcohol was my escape gate it was my coping mechanism, it was my friend, and I could forget. I was in my second marriage. I wanted it to work and yet I could not leave with this man, he lied to me, he was a con artist. He went as far as putting a gun on my head, I thought I was going to be dead. On another episode, he pushed me into my cupboard and set my clothes alight and closed the doors.

As Pieterse (2002) observes, these women normally tend to have trust issues and fail to be emotionally sound. Even though some of them move on, the trauma of life after marriage is never forgotten. A distinction is made between women who are widowed compared to those who are divorced. A divorced woman tends to harbour resentment, feel unloved and unwanted, especially if she is not economically independent. On the other hand, a woman who is widowed tends to integrate well and fully fast. The process of community divorce tends to take long. On the other hand, divorced economically independent women tend to be drug addicts and alcohol abusers as they claim to find solace and comfort in these substances.

Parenting

Mnyango's (2018) study states that divorce experience affected men in many areas. The study found that the greatest challenge experienced by those divorced was the ability to take care of the children who were living apart from them. Fathers mostly had challenges visiting their children owing to factors such as distance to and from the children's place of residence. Visits had to be arranged beforehand and then supervised, and sometimes the mother cancelled arrangements to visit the children. These are the issues that men go through post-marriage times. One of the affected participants in Mnyango's (2018) study shared his experience in as follows:

"I visit them every alternative weekend; Saturday and Sunday, that means I have to travel from Durban to Pretoria to go and see them. But it is not working because of the difficulty of living in Durban, the cost involved going to see them, it was agreed that she will be paying for every alternative trip I made to see the kids. She is not doing that; she is not paying for any single trip. It is made in the court order. Despite making earlier arrangements, most of my visits are cancelled. My contact rights to my children have been denied"

Research by Reginald Phumlani and Alpaslan (2018) shows that men lost custody of children after divorce. This is because the courts are perceived to rule in favour of the women when it comes to issues of children's custody. One of the participants lamented the loss of the relationship with his children and lamented that the judicial system was unfair in judgment because it focused on gender instead of parenting skills that the couple possesses. He explained that the fact that one is female does not guarantee that one is good at parenting. The study has shown that men have psychological challenges due to missing their children. For example, they miss cooking, helping their children with homework and even just having fellowship with them. It has demonstrated that men who have access to the children are less stressed compared to those with limited or even zero access to them (Reginald Phumlani and Alpaslan, 2018).

Johnston and Campbell (1988) further explain that after divorce, there is an experience of what is referred to as "mother competitor" who actively participates in the battle for custody and in their father's brainwashing campaign which is negative on the divorced spouses as well as the children. This war is where the mother talks ill of the father to the children and vice-versa. This damages children's perception of their parents and the marriage union at large. For adults, divorce can have many meanings, the escape from unhappy abuse, a tragic disappointment, or a fresh start with new possibilities. Absorbed in the emotional, legal, and financial issues of divorce, those with children may not even realize what impact this transition means to their children. One study points to the fact that it is not divorce that has an impact negatively on the life of the children but how their parents deal with the co-parenting issue. This process can have a substantial and enduring effect on the adjustment of the children (McDonald, et al., 2000). Furthermore, literature indicates that many divorced individuals experience negative feelings towards their ex-spouses long after the divorce has been finalized (Traina, 2004:32). The co-parenting process, however, demands that both parents need to be there for their children.

Disturbance in family function

Divorce, although permitted in traditional Islam society, has been a rare and socially unacceptable occurrence until relatively recently. A divorce is often a traumatic event for people of any culture but for Gulf Arabs where there are strong ties to a family

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and tradition, it can be a politically disturbing and stigmatizing life event, especially for women, whose status in society centres around spousal and maternal roles (Al Gharaihen and Bromfield, 2012). Family is central to people and a breakdown of an interfamily marriage often between couples has negative consequences across an entire extended family network.

Arising from divorce, most spouses must cope with a new life and adjust to a new lifestyle. Thus, the preceding assertion disturbs the family and divorced individuals must adjust to this new phenomenon. There are various theoretical perspectives on the family which have different and often contradictory implications for how the family will be approached. While every social scientist or researcher is free to subscribe to the perspective of his or her choice, Viljoen (1996) advises that this should only be done while familiar with alternative approaches.

It also needs to be recognized that the choice of anyone's perspective begins to colour the world view of the researcher. According to Muncie et al. (1995) and Carrington (2002), there are several functions of the family and if the family is disturbed, what was envisaged as a goal in a family is disrupted. Suggestions that family is a crucial institution in modern society are not new. From the functionalist perspective, society is upheld by social institutions, each of which has well-defined functions to perform. Based on Parson's structural functionalism, two core functions are assigned to the family, namely primary socialization of children and the stabilizing of the adult personality which, in turn, would lead to a stable, healthy society. Thus, divorce has a huge impact on the family and ultimately disturbs the family.

Financial Survival

This dimension of divorce looks at the divisions of assets of the marriage, as well as post-divorce maintenance, which can often cause as much or even more conflict than custody issues. Economic divorce also considers the legal costs of litigation. King quoted by Van Zyl (1997:8) refers to this legal process (litigation) as an expensive ritual and further claims that the costly litigation of courts is beyond the reach of an average citizen. This was well illustrated in a study by Pieterse (2002) who observes that one of the participants referred to the costs as "frightening" and another, together with his ex-wife had spent almost three times the value of their joint estate on legal costs before they opted for mediation. Thus, it can be contended that through an economic divorce, the parties to the marriage are left with almost amputated economic footing and find it difficult to cope with the pressure that comes with single parenthood and single living.

Due to the generally low economic and education levels of women, divorce makes them experience diverse financial challenges. Those who remain with the children have failed to educate them. Others have ended up in prostitution while the children end up in the street and become scavengers, sellers of good and street kids.

Physical and Mental Health

A study by Henig (2013) revealed some of the lived experiences of the divorced person. Henig argues that compared to adults in stable marriages, divorced couples on average, experience both poor physical and mental health and that they also experience more social isolation and loneliness. Some divorced persons go on to enter new romantic relationships that are believed to help divorced persons rebuild self-esteem and happiness. For others, new love relationships produce greater feelings of loneliness, unhappiness, and lower self-esteem. Henig's study discovered that several divorced persons continue to depend on their previous spouses for emotional support and practical matters and this results in them struggling to adjust to the divorce status.

Wallerstein (1986) in Henig (2013) states that the most surprising findings in their 10-year follow up on divorced families was that in most families, divorce resulted in an enhanced quality of life for only one of the partners, often, the wife. Wallerstein indicates that notwithstanding the passage of a decade, only 16% of divorced men had improved psychologically, 12% had deteriorated, and 17% remained unchanged. Wallerstein states that this may be partially explained by the fact only 35% of the men had sought to dissolve their marriages, and the remaining 65% of divorced men had opposed their wives' initiation of the divorce. Wallerstein further states that men and women, who had initially desired the divorce, were more likely to have enhanced the quality of their lives than those who had opposed it".

Gender differences in the institutionalisation of mental health issues

Literature has been revealed that there is a high institutionalisation rate of men compared to women in mental health facilities. Findings show that there is a higher admission ratio of divorced men to married men, as well as a higher admission ratio of 17 of divorced women to married women. Further, it was found that even though divorced and separated women attempt suicide more often than divorced and separated men, the deaths from suicides among men were discovered to be higher. It is noteworthy that separated and divorced men have higher mortality rates than separated and divorced women from many causes not limited to homicide, which includes motor vehicle accidents, and cirrhosis of the liver (Bloom et al., 1979; Verbrugge, 2004 in Henig, 2013). A study discovered that men were better adjusted than women in the three years after the divorce. They were also better off financially, had more stable and satisfying jobs, and had experienced less psychological stress and more psychological satisfaction in the previous months (Clarke-Stewart and Bailey, 1989 in Henig, 2013).

Henig (2013) argues that women tend to initiate separation and divorce more frequently than men, this shows that men are "more out of touch" on emotional and relational matters than women. Irrespective of gender, "leavers" initially fare better in terms of emotional wellbeing than those who have been "left" and who frequently feel rejected (Bickerdike 2000 cited in Smyth, 2004).

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Jordan 1988 (cited in Smyth, 2004) found that men appeared to be generally “unaware or unprepared for separation” and often “shut down” feelings about the relationship soon after its end. As a result, they frequently carry unresolved feelings of grief and hurt for several years after the initial marital separation. These feelings may impact men’s physical and mental health.

Loss of identity and self-esteem

A study by Boon's (2005) disclosed that the source of grief in divorce is that the other person is still physically within reach, although metaphysically removed from one’s life. The study further showed that midlife women seem to be negatively affected by divorce processes. Despite the influence of the feminist movement, the ‘marriage and motherhood mandate’ remains prominent and very powerful and divorce may represent a significant failure in the important roles of wife and mother. Linked to this is the loss of social identity, status, and self-image for divorced women whose social standing and identity are still likely to be strongly connected to that of their husbands. Loss of self-image is embedded in the perception that one is inadequate or unacceptable, and thus rejected in marriage, the most intimate of relationships (Kitson and Holmes, 1992 in Boon, 2005).

Every divorced woman has the task of redefining oneself to gain a new self-identity and image. The loss of social support from family, friends and church following a divorce is often not easy to deal with. A divorced woman loses her spouse and experience diminished support from the in-law network. The mutual friends of the couple may also be lost forever. The loss of a spouse through a divorce is very disruptive for women who do not have other people with whom they confide. This lack of support may tend to continue for the rest of their lives. As researchers, we believe that women seem to lose out since they usually focus so much on their marriages. In the African setting and, especially the Zambian setting, most women consider marriage as their full-time career and others even abandon their careers to be full-time wives to take care of their spouses and children, a situation which makes them more vulnerable should their marriages end in divorce.

Loss of Psychological Support

Psychological divorce is defined as the “separation of self from the personality and influence of the ex-spouse. Research has shown that men experience a lack of psychological support compared to women. Mnyango and Alpaslan's (2018) study discovered that men found it very difficult or even unacceptable, to articulate deepest feelings, worries, fears, insecurities, emotional pain, and grief associated with divorce. This may be because numerous societies still uphold the traditional constructs of masculinity, to the detriment of men's mental health, which dictates to men that they should support and protect the family as part of their marital role. As a result, it is quite difficult for men to show their emotional side in public.

Research has also showed that married men have few confidants and that men confidants are usually their wives. Therefore, once the marriage is ended, they lose their confidants. Furthermore, the primary source of emotional support for men is their wife and children and once that marriage relationship is ended this ends too. According to Evans (2015), women could have a wider circle of confidantes to whom they can turn. Women have mothers, sisters, pastors, and counsellors they can confide in. Women have a greater propensity to forget close relationships with their friends, who would provide solace and to whom they would go to seek post-divorce counsel.

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to explore the lived experiences of divorced persons. The paper has argued that divorce is a life experience that is accompanied by psychological effects such as feelings of anger, betrayal, sadness and confusion and might lead to mental health challenges like depression. The paper has also shown that divorce might lead to substance abuse, disrupt family bonds, is financially straining and has a toll on the parenting of children. In addition, evidence from this study seems to suggest that there are gender differences in terms of the effect of divorce on the mental wellbeing of men and women. The important implication of these findings is that pre-marriage counselling should be taken seriously as an essential prerequisite to marriage.

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