

A qualitative study of adolescents' experience on dealing with their parental divorce in Kerala.

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Abstract

In Kerala, divorce is still considered a stigma. It affects not only spouses but also their children. This qualitative study explored adolescents' experiences in Kerala in dealing with parental divorce. Participants were 20 adolescents of divorced couples, aged 17 to 19—data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. The findings show that adolescents felt more helpless due to the parents' divorce, feeling of losing their identity, and blaming their parents. Adolescents' ability to cope with crises, psychological and financial support from friends and relatives, and the willingness of divorced parents to communicate and assist and act as their parents helped youth to overcome the crisis and lead a everyday life.

Keywords: *Parental divorce, Teenage children, Life Experience,*

Introduction

According to statistics, divorce rates in Kerala increase dramatically year after year. Indeed, Kerala has the country's highest divorce rate. Divorce is a stressful experience triggered by a variety of factors and is associated with various circumstances and risk factors. It has a plethora of effects on the lives of couples, families, and children. Numerous social and psychological studies have been undertaken on divorce and its implications.

Moreover, parental divorce and implications of the development of children are also studied. However, there is a lack of research conducted exclusively on the impact of parental divorce on teenage children. When divorce occurs, society focuses on how divorce affects younger children and provides programs to support them; However, young adult children are usually ignored (Campbell, 1995). According to developmental psychologists, the adolescent period is a critical stage of one's development and requires the presence and consideration of one's parents.

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Therefore, special attention and care should be given to the effects of parental divorce on adolescent children's lives. Cooney and Kurtz (1996) found that adult children involved in divorce need professional services. This study tries to comprehend teenagers' life experiences following their parents' divorce decision and subsequent divorce.

Divorce influences the individual as well as their children as well. Children frequently face difficulties following divorce, including negative peer interactions, mental illness, and a lack of commitment in personal relationships, academic failure, suicide, substance abuse, and criminal behavior (Wallerstein & Lewis 2000). Having whole parents is a beautiful thing for all children. They never expected to be separated from their father and mother as the divorce was imposed upon them. Divorce has been shown to influence children, particularly teenagers, in numerous studies negatively. Parents' decision to divorce significantly impacts their children's personality development, with adverse psychological, financial, and societal consequences (Demo & Fine, 2010). The number of persons working professionally in settling marital conflicts, divorce-related mental health services, sex education, premarital counseling, and post-marital counseling has increased significantly during the last thirty years. Arbitration, counseling, and parental education program for divorced couples often become mandated (Fine, Ganong, & Demo, 2010).

Children may endure significant feelings of loss due to shattered families, ongoing conflicts between ex-partners, and their own tearing loyalties. During these difficult times, divorced parents have a special responsibility to regard their children's needs (Harvey & Fine, 2011). Some parents neglect to address their children's condition and treat them with the sensitivity they deserve during these trying times. Because parental divorce is linked to adult child divorce, the effects of divorce on children are a popular topic these days (Amato & Booth 1997). Generational divorce is quite prevalent. Furthermore, the impact of parental divorce increased the chances of their children getting divorced as adults (Amato, Kane, & James, 2011).

Researchers are increasingly unanimous in their belief that children will benefit from being raised by parents in a stable, warm, and supportive relationship. They are more concerned about how the breakdown of marital partnerships impacts children's socialization and well-being than about how a happy marriage benefits them (Furstenber, 1990). According to Heatherington (1987), young boys show increased behavioral discomfort shortly after the divorce, and even years later, they continue to show more signs of maladjustment. According to Gustavsen, Nayga,

and Ximing (2015), parental divorce increases the risk of abusive behavior in their children, especially adolescent girls. According to research, a person's childhood experiences may have significant consequences later in life. A child's childhood can be filled with instability and insecurity due to an extended family divorce. Drug abuse, criminality, and poor educational performance may result from this instability (Song et al., 2012). Several studies have found that children in divorced households are worse off than children in harmless families (Gustavsen et al., 2015). One of the reasons children from divorced homes earn less in adulthood, according to Mohanty and Ullah (2012), is the stress connected with their parental family structure.

This study focuses on teens' experience dealing with their parents' divorce. For the research questions, I use self-concept theory as my theory guide. The foundation of the notion of self is the evaluation of people's interactions with others around them through the fundamental question, "Who am I?"

Method

Data were collected from 20 participants. They were college students in Kerala, ranging from 18 to 19. Data were collected in two stages. First, I expanded the survey to include features in the informants. The young adults' age (18 to 19 years) and marital status (unmarried), and an objective sample were used to determine the features. Selected participants were scheduled for face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured interview schedule and were given appointments over the phone at their convenience.

I used the qualitative method with phenomenological approaches to grasp human beings' actual nature based on their subjective orientations. This study has made a point of examining how adolescent children deal with their parents' divorce situations. It's tough to discover the Kerala divorce phenomena, particularly for teenagers anxious about their parents' divorce.

Result

The Family structure and Family Relations established in Kerala is not just a relationship between parents and children. This is a much more comprehensive network of joint families—

relationships with uncles, aunts, grandmothers, grandparents, nephews, nieces, and nephews. The conflict erupts when a family member announces his divorce. The word "divorce" has always been associated with a negative connotation for the couple and their family members. Adolescents who have experienced this condition face the stigma of divorce from their parents. However, it shows children the negative experience and the positive aspects of divorce.

This study focuses on teenage children's perceptions of their parent's divorce, broken down into two parts. One is children's experiences during the divorce process, which is to say before the divorce is finalized the decision to divorce is made. And the second one is teenagers' experience following the official divorce of their parents.

The Pre-Divorce Experiences

A couple with children may not decide for divorce on a sudden cause. Divorce may end the continual persecutory and painful aspects of married life. Many couple put off divorce for the sake of their children's future. Thus, the children believed they would not be divorced despite their parents' disagreements. In that situation, the parent's decision to divorce later in life can create a slew of complications for their children.

Participants in the research shared three main perspectives on their parental divorce decisions. The first is the feeling of losing his identity. The second is a feeling of helplessness, and the third is blaming any of the parents or both.

The feeling of losing his identity

Even though Kerala has made significant progress in human development and social position, the general people in Kerala are still resistant to divorce. Divorce is still seen as a negative in society. As a result, divorced parents' children are often considered pity. The following is the response of two teenagers who took part in the study when asked how their parents felt after learning of their divorce choice.

"...Mom and Dad would occasionally cause problems at home, but only close relatives and neighbors knew about it. None of my friends, classmates, or teachers knew about this. No matter the problems, I never thought my dad and mom would get divorced, and I was blown away when

I found out they were going to get divorced. I'm worried about how my friends and teachers will see me then. I was even afraid of how I would introduce myself to someone else. I felt like my identity was being undermined..."

The other participant responds as

"...Being the daughter of a divorcee seemed to be a negative thing. I thought that for a reason. There are children of divorced parents in my college, none of whom are my friends, but other students, particularly my friends, considered them weak. They often emphasized that their parents divorced. They would smear them with false stories, and I, too, believed those stories. When I learned that my parents were divorcing, these thoughts ran through my mind. Even though I had never done anything wrong, I was truly concerned about how society and friends would treat my identity following my parents' divorce..."

As each child grows and reaches adolescence, their identity becomes more stable. It is from that identity that teenagers make their friends and acquaintances. The parents' social position and their social acceptance all influence the identity of their children. Therefore, teenagers fear that differences in their parents' identities will also affect their identities. Concerns about society's generally negative attitude towards divorcees and realizing that their parents are getting divorced make teenagers more concerned about their identity.

Feeling of helplessness

Adolescents who took part in the survey said that their parents' choice to divorce left them feeling powerless and dissatisfied. The majority of the respondents desired to live peacefully with their parents. They were, however, vulnerable to stopping their parents from divorcing.

Verbatim of two of the participants as follows

"...My parents' divorce would never have been acceptable to me, and I would have been concerned about the changes in my sister's and my lives if they divorced. As a result, I made every effort to avoid divorce. I expressed my anxieties about my and my sister's futures to them.

On the other hand, my parents were unwilling to give up, and I became helpless. I was assured that they would continue to treat me the same after the divorce, but I couldn't believe it..."

The same way another respondent says

"...I never imagined my parents would divorce so soon. Even if my father insisted, I was confident that my mother would refuse. My mother used to say that she would agree to divorce if we were placed in any job. But as soon as I found out that my mother and father were getting divorced, I was shocked. I went into a state of not knowing what to do. My thoughts were inundated with anxiety from not communicating my issues with my closest friends, and I spent days alone in my room. I felt so helpless..."

The above narratives point out that parents' divorce during adolescence makes them helpless. During adolescence, children are at the height of their learning and think seriously about their careers. Moreover, adolescence is also a stage where many mental and physical changes occur in growth. Parents are the closest thing they can get to supporting and trusting them at this time. Therefore, when parents decide to divorce, a sense of helplessness arises in the children.

Blaming the parents

The participants were tense because of their perceptions of the stigma of divorce, and they frequently blamed their parents. Blaming the parent is a way of mourning the death of two important figures in one's life: father and mother. They want to experience both parties' love. But they are unable to intervene because both parents have decided to divorce. Adolescents tend to blame their parents or any one of the parents when they know their parents' decision to divorce. They bring thoughts to such a point of view as an after-result of feelings such as losing one's identity and being helpless in life due to their parents' divorce. In this research, respondents share the same.

"...I believe my parents got divorced due to the single insistence of the father. My mother told my father several times to stop his illicit relationships. But he did not. Finally, the mother was forced to take the divorce decision. My father is the only reason for all my current situation..."

Here is a participant's response to the question: "How did you feel about your parents' decision to divorce?"

"..It's hard to accept because it's their fault, not mine." I was just a victim at the time, I believe. Is it my fault every time they fight? Yes, they use their ego, but I think they can live together if they change their ego..."

Adolescents from divorced households face a wide range of psychological issues. This circumstance frequently results in a breakdown in communication between parents and their children.

Post-divorce Experience

This section looks at how teenagers' perceptions have changed since their parents' divorce became formal, as well as how they have dealt with the emotional and psychological anguish of their parents' divorce. Teenage children of divorced parents have highlighted three major themes to discuss their life after their parents' divorce. Acceptance of reality is the first. Family and friends have offered financial and psychological help are the second. Fruitful communication and meeting up with the parents is the third.

Accepting the reality

When asked about the life experiences of teenage children after their parents' divorce, the adolescent children of divorced responded that they were slow but mature enough to accept the facts.

"...When my father and mother divorced, I was devastated, and for a few days, I only left home for necessities. I was terrified to look my family and friends in the eyes because they would inquire about my father and mother's divorce. But, over time, I came to terms with reality, and I began to prepare myself to answer queries from others..."

Another respondent says

“...even before my parents were officially divorced, they lived apart. And although I lived with my mother, my father and I used to meet in town; and we used to talk on the phone. However, I was afraid that the divorce would ruin the relationship. I was more interested in how friends and villagers would treat me. I was worried they teased me. I did not tell anyone that my parents were divorced. But in a short time, I overcame that situation and realized the reality...”

The first step in overcoming any crisis is to enable the mind to accept reality. It is when teenagers are ready to stand on their own two feet and can make decisions independently. Therefore, adolescents can more easily overcome the immediate crisis caused by parental divorce. But young children who are entirely dependent on their parents may not be able to do this.

Support from the friend circle

When the researcher asked how you overcame the situation created after your parents' divorce, participants in this study responded that support from their peers helped them overcome the crisis caused by their parents' divorce.

“...In the early days of my parent's divorce, I did not like to go out of the house or talk to people. I was afraid that people would ask me something about my parents' divorce. But slowly, I adapted to the situation and started to go out. Some people asked me unnecessary questions, but my friends kept me attached. I spent more time with them, went to the movies, went to the park, and came home late. So I'm slowly escaping from divorce's hostile atmosphere in the home...”

Most participants said that spending time with friends and psychological support has helped teenagers recover from their crisis due to their parental divorce.

“...Some days, I stayed at a friend's house instead of going home, and going to my house felt like going to a death house. It was my friends who kept me close and gave me the courage...”

Adolescents are more likely to be influenced by their peers than anyone else. So often, when there is a problem in life or facing a crisis, they share it with their best friends. They trust each other and give courage.

Communication with parent

The researcher asked what your parents' attitude towards you after divorce. The answer is that some are considered well, and those are not treated well.

"... After the divorce, I thought my father would not care about me, but he would call me and make occasional video calls. He would come and see me at least once a month, and he would pay for my education and pocket money. He's doing everything he can for me. He is not coming home, but he fulfills all my needs as a father..."

At the same time, some parents do not pay any attention to their children after divorce.

"...When my father wrote the divorce agreement with my mother, my father agreed to pay for my education, and my father decided to come and see me when I wanted to see him. But I have only seen my father once or twice since the court declared the divorce, and he did not pick up the phone when I called. My father really disappointed me, and now only my mother and my mother's family can help me continue my studies..."

Some parents maintain a good relationship with their children even after divorce. They do the best they can for their children. It helps in the growth and personal development of children. But some parents isolate children from their lives and deny the child's right after divorce. It can cause problems in children both mentally and emotionally.

Discussion

Adolescents discuss parental involvement in sharing thoughts about divorce. Participants recognize the importance of divorced parents in creating their children's identity. As role models for many, their parents play an essential role in their quest for self-identification. For teens,

setting a good example is necessary for self-reflection. Role figures play a crucial role in the future development of children, both mentally and physically. Respondents shared about the changes in the lives they experienced as children of divorced parents. Through the time-consuming process, they can gradually gain a new status. The participants in this study found it is challenging to confront the consequences of their parents' divorce. However, teens can always be motivated to stand up and be loved if they interact significantly.

Self-Concept Theory asserts that a teenager's self grows due to new experiences that they assign meaning to. Because the self may define the circumstance independently of external forces, it is dynamic and ever-changing. Informants' self-perceptions evolved following their parents' divorce. It had a negative perception of itself before growing into a constructive self. They demand the presence of a motivator and guide. This positive construct has the effect of enabling adolescent informants to tolerate their parents' divorce situation.

These psychological experiences result from self-exploration of the physical environment and peer reflection. Adolescents acquire this psychological experience by examining the viewpoints and opinions of teenage role models. Attitudes toward positive thinking and composure are effective in lowering defensive behavior. Informants can obtain guidance or suggestions on maintaining the highest possible standard of relationship quality.

A person's ability to accept their flaws is seen as a sign of self-acceptance. Adolescents whose self-acceptance has been cultivated can perceive their happiness through the prism of their own identity. Their sense of self-acceptance isn't just passively accepting teenage labels from separated homes but an active attempt to keep improving their self-potency. A new perspective on self-concept emerges when teenagers from separated families recognize themselves as such. They no longer demand that the environment behaves in a certain way (accepting their situation by not looking at the divorced family background). The experience of objectively accepting oneself shapes a person's ability to manage themselves. Young people believe they are good people because their parents show them they are. In dealing with their single parent, teens develop a more positive frame of mind when they take a more wholehearted attitude. In the face of the divorce debate, single parents have become significant others for teenagers. A single mother or father can still provide their teenage children with all the love they need, even though they are no longer part of a whole family.

Conclusion

Adolescence is one of the most critical stages in a person's development. By the end of adolescence, the child begins to be considered by society and family as an adult, and his opinions are valued. Therefore, the child's crisis during adolescence may be reflected in the rest of his life. Studies have shown that divorce affects divorcees and their children. This study showed that parental divorce is thus reflected in the life of adolescent children. Through the experience of adolescents, this study shows that parents' decision to divorce causes identity crisis and helplessness in their children's lives and that divorced parents put their children at risk. But teenage children can accept reality after their parents' divorce and return to everyday life through innate qualities and accessible protective factors. Mainly the responsible approach of divorced parents and the help of friends all enable children to overcome the crisis. This study assesses that adolescent children of divorced people can get back to life with more energy if society's attitudes change and more professional services are ensured.

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