

The Experiences of Parental Divorce on the Psychological Well-Being among High School Students in China

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Abstract

High school students in China who have experienced parental divorce may face significant psychological and life challenges. The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the impact of parental divorce on the psychological well-being among Chinese high school students. This qualitative study adopted a descriptive phenomenological approach. A total of eight participants were selected through a purposive sampling technique in Qinghai Province, China. The data was gathered using a semi-structured interview to gain in-depth understanding and to obtain sufficient information from the participants. The research data

were collected to answer two research questions: 1) what are the experiences of high school students from parental divorced families? 2) how does parental divorce affect high school students' psychological well-being? The following themes were identified in high school students who experience parental divorced in their families: 1) difficulties adapting with new family environment, 2) becoming overly independent, and 3) rising economic problems after the divorce. Four themes were also identified on how parental divorce experiences affect students' psychological well-being: 1) low life satisfaction and happiness, 2) emotional instability, 3) sense of insecurity, and 4) arising of mental health risks and problems. The study will prepare organizations that provide mental health services and school counsellors to a better understanding of the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of high school students who are affected by parental divorce and provide them with necessary supports.

Keywords: high school students, psychological well-being, mental health, parental divorce, Life challenges

Introduction

Since China's reform movements and opening up of the government, the economy and society have evolved swiftly. In accordance with the degree of urbanization, people's living conditions has continually improving. Simultaneously, there is a big societal issue, resulting more individuals getting a divorced, and the number of divorce rates are rising year after year (Zhang, 2020). According to Zhang (2020), currently China's divorce rate is high as the United States, 3.2 per 1,000 people in 2019, higher than developed European countries such as the United Kingdom and France, and even higher than Japan and South Korea, which have consistently ranked among the highest divorce rates in the last two decades. The fast-paced life has brought a lot of pressure to people (Hu, 2018).

According to Huang (2019), there are numerous factors that lead to increasing rate of divorce in China. The main factor is the abandonment of feudal thoughts by the Chinese people themselves. Secondly, the increasing admiration for the western individualism of women's economic independence and status promotion that led to an increase in women's right to speak freely on marriage, which made women to have higher expectations and requirements for the quality of a marriage. Unlike now, in the last century, people followed the concept of marriage from the beginning to the end (Zhang et al., 2020).

Despite the fact that more people respected the cause of a divorce, and understand the need for it, there is still a social discrimination that negatively impacted the development of children who live in divorced families (Hu, 2018). Zhang et al., (2020) discovered their research that children in families with divorced parents are likely to be discriminated by their classmates, and the adverse impact of this discrimination is the generation with psychological problems. The survey shows that nearly 80% of children in single parent families have psychological problems, and the crime rate of children in single parent families is higher than that the children in normal families (Christopher et al., 2017). People considered divorce to be a taboo subject. Huang (2019) pointed out that when discussing of children from separated families, terms with negative emotional connotations are frequently used such as "sad," "sin," "strange," etc. People's perceptions of the children from divorced parents have traditionally

included negative traits such as "inferiority complex," "vulnerability," "isolation," "indifference," "sensitivity," "willingness," and "selfishness" (Huang, 2019). Huang (2019) also found out that single parents are to be blamed for their children's bad behaviours, and the single-parent household becomes an easy target for prejudice. Divorce has a negative connotation that can harm a person's reputation and career (D'Onofrio & Emery, 2019).

Children who live with divorced parents need to bear the pressure from the family members, as well as social discrimination, which put them in a dilemma. Divorce has traditionally been seen as an unnatural condition of marriage and family, and it is frequently referred to as "marriage failure." It is widely assumed that "children from divorced homes" are more or less impacted by their parents' divorce, resulting in various psychological development issues (Tullius et al., 2021).

This social phenomenon of parental divorced children, does irreparable harm to children's mental and physical development (Tullius et al., 2021). With China's rising divorce rate, the number of children living in divorced families is also rising (Zhang et al., 2020). If parents fail to fulfil their children's psychological and emotional needs, there will be an increasing number of children who will experience negative emotions. The children will be the biggest victims as a result of their parents' failed marriage (Zhou, 2018). Similarly, Zhang (2020) stated in her article that the experience of parental divorce in minors has a long-term negative impact on the socio-economic status and other aspects of the life development of children in adulthood. Children who have experienced their parents' divorce or family reorganization are more likely to end their studies earlier and give up in pursuing higher education.

In addition, the continuous rising of divorce rate will cause some social problems (Christopher et al., 2017; Hess, 2021; Zhang et al., 2020). For example, the divorce of a husband and wife often brings harm to their children and parents, which may harm their parents' support, children's education, and growth (Zhang et al., 2020). Furthermore, children of divorced or separated parents are more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviour, live in poverty, and experience family instability (D'Onofrio & Emery, 2019). Tullius et al. (2021) reported that adolescents who experienced parental divorce during their adolescence were more likely to have emotional and behavioural issues.

At present, although people realized the high negative impact of divorced parents among children is huge; unfortunately, little research has been done on high school students. Therefore, this paper explores the impact of parents' divorce on high school student's psychological well-being in hoping that parents, schools, and society could pay more attention and care for the psychological well-being of high school students who have experienced divorced families.

Methodology

Research Approach

This study aims to explore and understand the experiences of parental divorce on the psychological well-being of high school students in China. Marshall and Rossman (2006) state that "in order to fully understand the meaning of human experience, one must examine

the lived experiences and the ways we understand those experiences to develop a worldview” (p. 104). The purpose of this study is to explore and to understand how parental divorce affects the psychological well-being of high school students by giving them the opportunity to express their emotions and feelings. As such, a qualitative research design is appropriate. In this study, a social constructivist research paradigm was used and the research tradition of phenomenology was utilized as the framework.

Participants

This phenomenological study interviewed high school students who came from parental divorced families. Participants in this study were required to meet the below inclusion criteria:

1. Participant must be a high school student in Qinghai Province, China.
2. Participant must come from parental divorced families.
3. Participant must voluntarily want to be involved in this study, be able to be interviewed in person by the researcher and be willing to sign the consent document.

Sampling Methods

This study used interviews as the primary method to understand the phenomenon. According to Merriam (1998), interviews are the most common method used in collecting data in qualitative research. In phenomenological study, the researcher usually uses open-ended questions to gather the data. Marshall and Rossman (2006) note that in qualitative phenomenological study, the researcher, as main investigator, will play both roles as a collector of data and a data analyst.

Qualitative studies often work with a small number of participants. The smaller sample size of qualitative research allows for greater study of the data's depth and complexity (Farrugia, 2019). The qualitative researcher conducts interviews with participants who can aid in understanding the investigated phenomenon. In this study, the researcher used purposeful sampling method. According to Creswell (2013), purposive sampling is the main strategy utilized in qualitative research. Purposive sampling is an assumption in which the sample is studied by the researchers to gain in-depth understanding of the sample and which allows the researchers to obtain as much information as possible (Creswell, 2013). Purposive sampling seeks in depth information regarding the phenomena or cases that are being studied.

Data Collection Method

For this study, researchers obtained information on Haidong Minhe high school students who come from divorced families in Qinghai Province, China. This school has approximately 1200 students. This study was supported by the school principles and teachers. In order to find suitable participants for this study, researchers purposely selected potential participants and contacted them by telephone, invited them for a short interview in the school's individual counselling room, and explained the content of this research to the participants.

During the process of data collection, the participants were provided with procedures and purpose of the study. The researcher also informed the participants about confidential ethics

of the research and assured participants that their identities would not be exposed throughout the study or in the final report. Each participant also was assigned with a codename to preserve confidentiality. The participants' name, contact information and their assigned codenames can only be accessed by the researchers. All of these information will be destroyed when the research is completed.

Results

Creswell (2013) found that to determine saturation, data should be gathered until each category or theme is saturated. In this study, data saturation was reached at eight participants. All the audio interviews were transcribed by the researchers and a reflective journal was also used during the interview process. The interview transcription and the reflective journal were referred to in the coding process. After the interviews had been transcribed, they were sent to each participant to validate accuracy. Table 1 below is a summary of the participant demographics.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Participants

Category	No. of Participants							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Age	17	17	17	17	18	17	18	18
Gender	Boy	Boy	Girl	Girl	Girl	Boy	Boy	Boy
Lived on Campus	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No
Yrs of PD	12	11	5	0.5	3	14	9	5
Live with M/F	F and SM	F	F	M	M	F	M and SF	F

Note: PD-Parent's Divorce; M-Mother; F-Father; SM- Stepmother; SF- Stepfather.

Research Question One

This section aims to answer the following research question: What are the experiences of high school students from parental divorced families? Three themes were identified which are: 1) difficulties to adapt with new family environment, 2) becoming overly independent, and 3) Rising economic problems after divorce.

Theme One: Challenges to adapt with new family environment

All participants have experienced difficulties in adapting to a new family environment after their parents' divorce. Most participants need to adapt living with their single parent after the divorce or they need to adapt living with new step-parent. No matter what kind of a new family environment, it is a challenge for their growth.

For children that are living with a single parent, they claim that their home was no longer warm. A family without a father or mother was considered incomplete. One of the biggest challenges is adapting to the separation of a loved one. One participant said: "After my parents got divorced, I was given to my father by the court, but I missed my mother very

much. In the years before their divorce, I often cried alone secretly. My grandparents do not allow me to contact my mother, and it was difficult for me to see not to able to see my mother or her relatives again. It is so painful. "

Children who need to adapt of living with their stepfather or stepmother, were living a cautious life. They were afraid of being rejected by their stepfather or stepmother, and they were more likely to be ignored by their biological father or mother. They felt that they were not needed and not accepted by their stepmother or stepfather's children. One participant said: "After my parents divorced, my father remarried. My stepmother has a daughter. My father is always busy with work. Although my stepmother is very kind to me, compared with her daughter, I feel I don't belong in this family. I even feel it's painful to go home. I prefer to stay in school. "

Theme two: Becoming overly independent

After the divorce, most children's ability to be independent will grow rapidly. Many children, especially those with younger brothers or sisters, will take the initiative to care of their younger siblings. In addition, they will also undertake some housework, such as washing clothes, cleaning the room, cooking, etc. In this study, a female participant said: "after my parents got divorced, my mother took me and my sister to live alone. My mother works very hard every day, so I go home every day to help my mother with my sister's homework. On weekends, I help to clean the house and cook." Another male participant said: "I will cook for my grandfather and take care of him. My father has gone to other cities to work, and my grandfather also needs someone to take care of him."

Theme three: Rising economic problems after divorce

Half of the participants said that the family's economic situation had deteriorated after their parents' divorce. A few said that the family's economy had not changed, and only one participant said that the family's economic situation had improved. According to the data analysis, children who follow their mothers after divorce are more likely to experience economic problems, especially for housewives with no jobs. One participant said: "after my mother and father got divorced, I lived with my mother, but the court asked my father to pay for my living expenses which about 1500 yuan per month. My father did pay on time in the beginning, but after that, he always refused to give me money and even avoided answering my phone call, which made me very embarrassed and this has increased my mother's financial burden." As for the participants whose family situation has improved after divorce, the participant said: "after my mother married my step father, our family's economic conditions have gradually improved. My real father always drank alcohol and sometimes gambled, so our family's economic situation was very poor before the divorce. I think the main reason for my parents' divorce is economic problems."

Research Question Two

This section aims to answer the following research question: How do parental divorce experiences affect students' psychological well-being? From the interviews, four themes were identified which are: 1) low life satisfaction and happiness, 2) emotional instability, 3) sense

of insecurity, and 4) arising of mental health risks and problems.

Theme One: Low life satisfaction and happiness

To assess the impact of parents' divorce on the children's mental health, researchers mainly study the participants' current life satisfaction and well-being. It is normal for a mentally healthy child to feel happy. However, according to the data of this study, we found out that most participants were not happy, and they are feeling dissatisfied with their current life.

Almost all participants mentioned that their parents' decision to get a divorce made caused them extreme pain. Most participants admitted that they understood their parents' decision for the divorce, and also agreed that the divorce is better for their mothers and fathers, but the real victims are their children. One participant said: "When my father first told me that he was going to divorce with my mother, I told him that I could accept it because they were always arguing. Even if I stopped them, there was no way to save their marriage. But I felt very painful because I had no home after their divorce. A home without parents was just a place for me to rest and sleep. I even hated staying at home alone."

In addition, the participants' dissatisfaction with life was also reflected in the change in the quality of life. Usually, the mother was responsible for most of the housework before the parents' divorce, but after the divorce, their child needed to undertake more housework and take care of the elderly or younger siblings at home, which was challenging for their current life and reduced their satisfaction.

Theme two: Emotional instability

The experience of parents' divorce will affect the emotional stability of the children. Especially when their parents have just made the decision to get a divorce, in the beginning of the divorced, boys are more likely to get out of control compared to the girls, mainly because they are prone to quarrelling with others, fighting with classmates, and even easily affected by their negative emotions. In addition, according to the data of this study, boys living with their father after divorce are more likely to have a sense of disgust with their father and are prone to have more conflicts with their father. Some participants believe that their parents' divorce was caused by their father's bad habits example alcoholism, domestic violence, and weak personality. However, participants rarely believed that their parents' divorce was due to their mother's problems.

For most participants, their parents' divorce caused great emotional fluctuations. Before their parents' divorce, they were easily to get afraid and being sad; after divorce, they are more likely to get emotional because it was hard for them to accept their parents' divorce. They easily fall into negative thoughts and even blame themselves by thinking that they are the reason for their parents' divorce. In addition, the emotional instability of high school students caused by divorce from their parents will also affect their academic performance, mainly in the inability to concentrate during class.

Theme three: Sense of insecurity

In this qualitative study, the study found that participants generally lack a sense of security

and trust in others in interpersonal relationships. At the same time, they easily feel insecure, especially in friendship. They are always afraid of losing friends and getting into conflicts with others.

The impact of parents' divorce on high school students' sense of security is that they seldom take the initiative to talk about their problems and feelings to others. In this study, most participants said that they were afraid of others' negative views of them, so they always hid their pain and negative thoughts. One participant said, "I usually cry when I am alone in the middle of the night and recall memories of being abandoned by my mother. I often lose sleep because of this, but I didn't tell anyone. It's my secret. "

Another participant linked his lack of interpersonal security to his childhood experience of being bullied by other children in the village as a result of his parents' divorced. "I would hide my parents' divorced because when I was in primary school, the children in the village knew about my family. They teased me, joked that I didn't have a father or a mother. They would bully me even if we met on the roadside. They even encouraged me to break into my neighbours' houses and steal their belongings. I had no choice, so I followed them to steal money, but later I apologized to them.

Theme four: Arising of mental health risks and problems

According to the data of this qualitative study, a few participants suffering from serious depression had felt unhappy for a long time. Severe depression causes them to be reluctant to communicate with others, and they do not feel anything in life that could make them excited and happy. One participant said that he did not feel the meaning of his existence and often had negative thoughts.

In addition, anxiety and insomnia were also common among participants. Most participants mention that they often suffered from insomnia and that it is easy to recall painful memories of the past before going to bed. Some participants said that they would always recall the memory of their mother leaving them, and they feel anxious about their future. Half of the participants experienced insomnia once a week and participants with serious mental health experienced insomnia about three times a week.

As for the health risks of high school and provincial high school students who have experienced parents' divorce, a small number of participants have committed suicide and self-mutilation, and half of the participants said that they had suicidal thought but did not take action.

Discussion

Research has shown that parental divorce has a negative impact on children's psychological, physical, and social problems (Tullius et al., 2021). According to Yan and Tan (2018), the dissolution of a marriage will result in the unsound development of a child's personality. Besides that, the discordant family atmosphere puts children in a depressed and tense family environment. Parents' conflict or even divorce will have a negative impact on children's

mental health to a great extent (Tullius et al., 2021). Parents' conflicts and divorce will also lead to the risk of mental illness, which is harmful to the healthy development of children (Zhao, 2021). Even if they grow up, children who grow up in bad family relationships are at risk for long-term mental illness (Zhao, 2021).

High school students are in a critical period of physical and mental development. If parents do not provide their children with adequate care and love during this special time, a slew of parent-child issues will arise. For instance, the conflict between teenagers and their parents will intensify (Zhang, 2020). The study discovered that post-divorce parent-child conflict has an impact on the quality of parental support, which in turn has an impact on the parent-child relationship (Zhang, 2020).

This study also found that divorce can cause implications for the household economy. This theme is consistent with the work of Tullius et al. (2021). Their studies show that adolescents who have experienced parental divorce at a young age (before the age of 10-12) are frequently impacted by the socioeconomic impact of divorce such as living in a small home, living in an unstable community, and studying in schools with low academic performance for a relatively long period. Because these living conditions, high school students who experienced post-divorce status may be associated with higher risks behaviours such as substance abuse, emotional and behavioural difficulties, low academic performance, and involve in crime.

Parental divorce also can give impact to children' mental health. According to Olofsson (2019), children who are from divorced families have lower general well-being than those from loving families; they face greater anxiety and depression symptoms, lower self-esteem, and are more stressed out. According to Liu (2022), she holds the idea that parents' divorce is a bad childhood experience, will have a negative impact on children's mental health. The whole study is based on the view that adolescence is an important stage of human development. At this stage, people are prone to negative emotional disorders. World Health Organization (2020) reported that depression is the second leading cause of suicide for people aged 15-29.

Parents' conflicts and divorce will also lead to the risk of mental illness, which is harmful to the healthy development of children (Zhao, 2021). Children who grow up in a single-parent family as a result of divorce are more likely to develop an inhibited personality. This is particularly harmful to children's healthy development (Yan & Tan, 2022). According to Zhu (2019), nearly 5000 senior high school students in various provinces and cities in China were surveyed on their mental health by means of an online questionnaire and field investigation in 2018. According to the statistical results, 41.8% of senior high school students had mild mental emotions, and 25.6% of senior high school students had mental health problems of different degrees, such as low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, mental panic, and so on, 5.1% of high school students have serious mental diseases, and only 27.5% of students have a healthy mental health.

Zhu (2019) observed in her research that divorced families are constantly exposed to new people and things during their children's development due to a lack of communication and

care. Due to lack of parental supervision and management for an extended period, some pupils may develop undesirable behavioural habits such as being greedy for pleasure and feeling unenthusiastic in life and may even go on the path of breaking the law and committing a crime. Furthermore, some parents may not provide adequate care for their children and fail to communicate with them. In the long run, their estrangement grows, making it increasingly difficult for them to get along with one another. Once such students have problems such as excessive learning pressure, lovelorn, and depression, they will close their inner thoughts without knowing how to communicate and talk with their parents, and their parents won't understand their children's thoughts.

Conclusion

This research has expanded the literature, which investigates the live experiences of parental divorced high school students on their well-being. The results show the value of qualitative methods for addressing unrepresented subjects in research and clinical practice. Moreover, this study can help to empower the high school students from divorced families through garnering a richer understanding of their experiences is found through research. There is significance in adding to the existing literature so that clinical practitioners and academics might expand their knowledge base to include an accurate description of this population.

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