Gender and Divorce in Contemporary Singapore

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores specific dynamics that occur during the divorce process in an Asian society where traditional values remain relatively strong. Existing studies have shed light on the experiences of divorced women and men in other cultural contexts. For instance, Guru (2009) examines the experiences of divorced Punjabi women of Sikh Indian origins in Britain. She finds that although divorce can have devastating effects on women in terms of their exclusion from their community, it can also present some opportunities and optimism for their future because they are able to bring positive changes to their own lives and transform the cultures they live in. Cohen and Savaya (1997) explore the experiences of divorced Muslim Arab women living in Israel. They find that these divorced women cope with the negative effects of their divorce by relying on their inner strengths and the strength their children give them. Studies have also examined men's experiences of marital problems and subsequent divorce and their coping strategies. For example, Lawson and Thompson (1995) explore the causes of divorce among working and middle class Black men in the United States. They find that, ironically, causes of marital distress and subsequent divorce are associated with active problem-solving efforts Black men use to cope with social and economic marginality. White and Bloom (1981) examine the psychological effects of marital disruption upon men who were in the process of divorcing in the United States. Factors associated with men's poor adjustment to marital separation are found to include weak or nonexistent social networks outside the marital relationship, a variety of difficulties in the work setting, and a continuing relatively intense relationship with the spouse and children. Successful adjustment to marital disruption may require a set of distancing behaviors relative to the spouse, and adjustments in ways of meeting the needs of the children after divorce.

Bearing in mind that the categorical group of divorced men is not homogeneous, it is unsurprising that existing research on men's well-being after divorce has diverse results, with some research suggesting that divorce leads to a severe decline in overall well-being of women while men benefit from divorce, to alternative results suggesting that women are the main benefactors of divorce while men bear the bulk of the negative consequences of divorce.

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©Journal of Comparative Family Studies
Volume XLV Number 1 Winter 2014
That said, one salient pattern that emerges from studies of his divorce is the fact that a common strategy that men employ to cope with divorce is to plunge themselves into work and to address their emotional distress by partaking in “release” strategies such as drinking (Baum, 2003; Robertson, 2007).

Studies also suggest that men and women mourn differently during and after divorce. Research finds that men experience delayed mourning patterns and experience the highest levels of stress after divorce. Considering that men are seldom seen as victims of divorce and that male mourning is a non-masculine practice, mourning naturally becomes “illegitimate” (Baum, 2003). To be specific, men, especially fathers, experience the negative effects of divorce several times after divorce, starting by mourning for the failed marriage, to losing child custody, followed by receiving maintenance orders from the Court (Baum, 2003). It seems apparent that the mourning patterns observed among men are influenced by a variety of factors including individual and social perceptions of masculine behavior.

On top of male mourning patterns, studies on his divorce are increasingly attuned to the fact that economic shifts have influenced how divorce is experienced by men, especially since men in dual-income families no longer play the dominant “breadwinner” role (Featherstone, 2009; McManus & DiPrete, 2001). Taking into account the shifting employment patterns that lead to growing job insecurities for men, more scholars are re-evaluating whether men gain more from the divorce when they become more vulnerable in the labor market (Kalmijn, 2005). Men now are more likely to experience a period of unemployment, sickness or disability after the divorce, thereby suggesting that conventional binary understanding of divorce, where men are unlikely victims of divorce, is somewhat obsolete (Kalmijn, 2005).

Carbone (1994) examines feminists’ perspectives on divorce laws and procedures in United States. She finds that all feminists agree that existing law contributes to the relative impoverishment of many women and children and that, even when the rules purport to be gender-neutral, they are administered in systematically biased ways (Carbone, 1994).

There appears to be limited research that examines how divorced men and divorced women in dual-earner families in Asian countries experience divorce. This paper attempts to fill this gap by drawing on qualitative data from fourteen Chinese divorcees in Singapore, studying women who have had full-time employment prior to the divorce proceedings, and men who had been married to professional women.

**STUDIES OF DIVORCE IN SINGAPORE**

The rise in divorce rates in developed nations has been well noted in the literature. Women are now able to derive social and economic status independently through legitimate paid employment, without having to attain them through marriage (Dommaraju & Jones, 2011; Straughan, 2009). The 2000 Singapore census showed that 40.9% of all married couples were dual-earners and 40.2% were husband-breadwinner and wife-homemaker families (Leow, 2001). In terms of occupational structures, in 2012, 36% of managers and administrators, 42% of professionals, and 49% of associate professionals and technicians were women (Ministry of Manpower, Singapore, 2013).

With more women participating in the workforce, the Singapore government has implemented strategies to address the caregiving issue in the family. For instance, labor policies promote the sharing of childrearing duties to include foreign domestic helpers and
fathers. Despite state intervention, traditional gender-based norms and expectations remain stable as women continue to play caregiving roles to children and the elderly (Straughan, 2009; Sun, 2009).

As a self-proclaimed Confucian state that operates based on “Asian values”, the family is seen as the basis upon which the Singaporean society is built (Teo, 2009). It is therefore unsurprising that a rise in the number of “non-normative” or “deviant” families arising from divorce has become a call for concern for both the state and scholars (Wong et al., 2004). As Table 1 shows, there has been a slight increase in divorce rates, from 1.5 divorcees per thousand residents in 2001 to 2.0 divorcees per thousand residents in 2011 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2012). In addition, out of the 5,696 cases of divorce finalized in 2011, 4,595 of the divorce cases involved Chinese couples (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2012).

Under the common law tradition of “the tender year” doctrine and the discourse of “best interests of the child” that emphasize “[the] care that only a mother can provide”, studies also show that child custody tends to be awarded to mothers in Singapore (Ong, 1999, 2007). In other words, despite their new employment circumstances, women are usually given child

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Divorces &amp; Annulments</th>
<th>Resident Crude Divorce Rate* (Per 1,000 Residents)</th>
<th>Resident General Divorce Rate* (Per 1,000 Married Residents aged 20 years &amp; over)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Divorces</td>
<td>Annulments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
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<td>4,920</td>
<td>217</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
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<td>6,893</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

custody. Due to the continuity of women's caregiving role in the family, she becomes especially vulnerable when the marriage fails. Nonetheless, women more often than not, are the initiators of divorce. In 2012, 64% of the divorce cases were initiated by women, filing these cases under the Women's Charter. 1 56% of these women had stated “unreasonable behavior” as the impetus behind the divorce. In contrast, the top reason for initiating divorce by men was “separated for three years or more” (56%) (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2012).

Court Proceedings in Singapore

When a person decides to file for a divorce in Singapore, there are several requirements that one has to meet before a Court will grant a divorce. A person must have been married for at least three years before a Writ for divorce can be filed on the ground that the marriage has broken down irretrievably (The Law Society of Singapore, 2013). On the other hand, if it can be proven that one has suffered exceptional hardship or if the spouse has been exceptionally unreasonable and cruel, a Writ for divorce may be filed before 3 years of marriage (The Law Society of Singapore, 2013).

In addition, the Plaintiff (the person suing for divorce) and the spouse must be domiciled2 at the commencement of the divorce proceedings. Alternatively, either the Plaintiff or the spouse must have resided in Singapore for 3 years immediately before the commencement of divorce proceedings (The Law Society of Singapore, 2013).

The Court will only be satisfied that one's marriage has broken down irretrievably if the Plaintiff proves one or more of the following on a factual basis: adultery, 3 “unreasonable behaviour”, 4 desertion, 5 separation for three years 6 and separation for four years 7 (The Law Society of Singapore, 2013).

Divorce is a two-stage process in Singapore (The Subordinate Courts of Singapore, 2007a). In the first stage, the Court will deal with the divorce itself. This means that the Court will decide whether the marriage should be dissolved. In the second stage, the Court will deal with ancillary matters. The ancillary matters are issues relating to the children, maintenance, and matrimonial property or individual's property (The Subordinate Courts of Singapore, 2007a). One cannot remarry until Final Judgment has been obtained. This will only be granted at the end of the second stage of the divorce case (The Subordinate Courts of Singapore, 2007a).

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1 The Women's Charter was enacted by the Legislative Assembly of the State of Singapore in 1961. The statute governs family relations—such as the spousal relationship, parent-child relationship and the division of matrimonial assets - of non-Muslim Singaporeans (Leong, 2008). The family relations of Singaporeans who are Muslims are regulated by the Sharia Court system.

2 Treated Singapore as her/his permanent abode.

3 The Defendant (the person being sued) has committed adultery with another person (the Co-Defendant) and the Plaintiff finds it intolerable to live with the Defendant.

4 The Defendant has behaved in such a way that the Plaintiff cannot reasonably be expected to live with him/her.

5 The Defendant has deserted or left the Plaintiff for a continuous period of 2 years without any intention of returning.

6 The Plaintiff and Defendant have lived apart for a continuous period of at least 3 years and the Defendant agrees to a divorce.

7 The Plaintiff and the Defendant have lived apart for a continuous period of at least 4 years. No consent is required from the Defendant.
A maintenance order is a legal document that states the amount to be paid, when it is to be paid, to whom it is to be paid, and the method of payment (The Subordinate Courts of Singapore, 2007b). Based on Section 116 of the Women's Charter, "[a]n agreement for the payment, in money or other property, of a capital sum in settlement of all future claims to maintenance, shall not be effective until it has been approved, or approved subject to conditions, by the Court, but when so approved shall be a good defense to any claim for maintenance" (Leong, 2010). In other words, the agreement on the claims of maintenance and settlement for said maintenance are decided by the Court after both parties have presented the Court with relevant evidence to support their cases. In the event when a respondent fails to comply with the terms of a maintenance order, one can apply to enforce the maintenance order by lodging a complaint before a District Judge/Magistrate in the Family Registry (The Subordinate Courts of Singapore, 2007b). The person filing for the maintenance order is known as the Complainant, who has to first fill out the form known as the Magistrate's Complaint, before presenting it to a district judge to have it sworn or affirmed. After this, the respondent (person the Complainant is filing against) would be issued a summons by the Court to appear for the service of summons. The Complainant is required to pay for the fee incurred from the issuing of said summons.

**METHODOLOGY**

Data for this paper are based on semi-structured interviews, carried out between late 2011 and the beginning of 2013, with 10 female and four male Singaporean Chinese divorcees. 15 female interviewees were approached for this study but only 10 agreed to be interviewed. For the male interviewees, assistance to locate more interviewees was sought from the Thye Hua Kwan Family Center and HELP Family Service Center. Despite the widespread appeal for help, this study only received eight responses of which four later decided that they were still emotionally and mentally unprepared to discuss their divorce. This is understandable, as the topic is deemed to be sensitive. For those who turned down the interview, they cited reasons such as, "I feel that emotionally I am not ready to talk about my failed marriage" and "it is kind of a private matter and talking about it makes me sad."

The ten female respondents who agreed to participate were 36 to 44 years old. All of them have gone through divorce only once. With regard to their education level, seven of them are degree holders, one of them has A-Level qualification and two of them received polytechnic diploma education. All of them, except for one, work full time in corporations.

All four male interviewees, with the exception of one, have finalized their divorce at the local Family Court. The ages of the men interviewed ranged from 38 to 52 and all the

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1 One can apply for maintenance for his/her child from the other parent, if he or she neglects or refuses to provide the child with reasonable maintenance; for herself from her husband, if she is a married woman whose husband neglects or refuses to provide reasonable maintenance; for himself or herself from his/her parent, if over 21 and if still a full-time NSman (men doing national service in the military) or student.


It is commonly used as a pre-requisite for entry into universities in Singapore (http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/pre-u/pre-u-to-university/). Students are prepared for this examination in pre-universities or commonly known as junior colleges.

3 Interviewee is still in the midst of finalizing his divorce.

4 At the point of the interview.
interviewees have received tertiary education qualifications. All four men, with the exception of one, are engaged in full-time employment and were earning about SGD $5,000, on average. Of the men interviewed, three were parents prior to the divorce and the ages of the child(ren) involved ranged from 1 to below 5 years old. Of the men interviewed, two are still negotiating for child custody with the ex-wife and one had already lost child custody.

The shortest interview lasted 60 minutes, while the longest took 160 minutes. The interviewees were provided with informed-consent forms and the interviews were conducted in English. The interviews took place either at the interviewees' homes or at public locations convenient for the interviewees. All interviews were conducted in English. Each recounting of the interviews (below) is as spoken by the interviewee. The interviews with women were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Of the four men interviewed, three requested to have the interviews not audio-recorded. Various reasons were cited, ranging from discomfort, to receiving legal advice to refrain from leaving behind audio-recorded information. The only interview with a man that was audio-recorded was later transcribed. For confidentiality reasons, each interviewee was later given a pseudo-name identifiable only to the researcher. The interview data were analyzed to identify salient patterns and themes.

FINDINGS

The Court Process: Her Experience

The first prominent theme in the findings is that the experiences with the Court proceedings vary by gender. To begin with, all female respondents interviewed faced struggles in the Family Court during the divorce settlements concerning child maintenance, assets and alimony, which their ex-spouses constantly seek to renegotiate. Eight out of ten women interviewed revealed that they had faced more complex issues when there were long-term disagreements on ancillary matters (e.g., maintenance for the children and matrimonial property settlements), making the divorce process “complicated” and “emotionally tiring.” They found themselves filing for the enforcement of the maintenance order when their ex-spouses defaulted on their maintenance fee for months. These respondents describe that at some point during and after the divorce, they had to seek the service of lawyers in order to obtain their advice and to expedite the whole process, and incurred high legal costs, and lost precious time and energy.

Cindy describes how the whole divorce process took more than a year because her ex-husband disagreed on the amount of maintenance fee for their three children.

We couldn't agree on the maintenance because he said that $3,500 for three children is too much . . . finally we settled for $1,200 per month for three kids . . . and $1 maintenance for wife because I can work so I only ask for $1 just to keep the rights of the woman, but even for that he disagreed the $1 thing because he thinks that I can work so why should I claim the $1 thing . . . it is our government legal thing to protect our woman's charter in case one day I can't work due to illness or whatever, I can still ask him to pay for my maintenance . . . finally after many, many rounds of discussions and the

12 In Singapore, tertiary education refers to formal education for 17 years old & above. Tertiary education institutions include Junior Colleges, Polytechnics, Institute of Technical Education (ITE) and Universities.

13 The interviewee became a freelancer after he lost his job due to his divorce.
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pain of talking to him about such things... I settled for $1,200 just to get out of the marriage . . .” (Cindy, age 41, Sales Manager in an IT corporation).

Cindy later on describes how her ex-husband subsequently failed to pay his child maintenance in full. “Probably the first two months he paid the full . . . subsequently he paid like a thousand . . . and then even recently he starts paying only $500 now . . . he doesn't pay the full amount.”

Subsequently, Cindy decided to apply to the Family Court for the enforcement of a maintenance order when the child maintenance that her ex-husband owed her amounted to $12,000 for the past three years. She revealed that out of the $12,000 she got back from her ex-husband, $2,000 was used to pay for her lawyer.

He has subsequently remarried already, he has his own family, his wife, no kids yet . . . have a house, a HDB flat and have a new motorbike you know . . . he goes on holiday. Why on earth can't he pay? That's when I decided to go to the Court and apply [for the maintenance order] because the money is the rights of my children and I will just take it. . . it is not a lot but I will just take . . .

Whitney decided to serve her ex-husband a maintenance summons when he defaulted with alimony for two months. In her interview, she also revealed that the divorce drained almost $30,000 of her financial reserves. “His income still remains the same but he tried to plead poverty. . . I hired lawyers for the divorce and the maintenance summons . . . I think eventually I spent about $30,000 on the divorce.” (Whitney, age 41, manager in a business development corporation).

Whitney also revealed the issues she had with her ex-husband over the sale of the matrimonial house; eventually a judge granted a legal delay in selling till her son became eight years old.

He wants to sell the house and I want to keep the house for the sake of my children so both of us have to present the case to the judge. He told the judge he needs to sell the house so that he can get another place to stay. . . I told the judge I must fight to keep this home for the sake of my boy because this is where he was born and I can't rob him of this house.

Ellie, an insurance agent who had been divorced for almost 10 years, described how she had to file for many maintenance summons during the initial years after her divorce.

I have to enforce my maintenance order because each time he did not pay . . . good thing he was a civil servant and later on he retired and set up his own PI firm hence he paid punctually through the years later on. But let's say he is a businessman or working in private sectors, I don't think he will want to pay. He did it because he needs the license to be renewed with the government and he knows he cannot forfeit the maintenance. (Ellie, age 45, Insurance agent).

She later described her experiences in the Family Court during the initial years after her divorce and felt that “endurance” was required for her maintenance order to be enforced:

First you have to put up the summons and then go for amicable reconciliations to get him to pay and after which if he still doesn't want to pay you have to go down for Court
hearings... you have to go down at least three times. So it's because of my job I got the
time to spare to go down once a week, so imagine if I have a fixed office job, it will be
very difficult and I think my boss will be very irritated with me... but I felt that if you put
everything in place and eventually it will flow though... and it did.

*Matrimonial Assets*

Sally, on the other hand, revealed that she was still in the midst of her divorce process
because of the complexity arising from her ex-husband's being unemployed and her high
income. Due to personal reasons, she declined discussing the details of her divorce
proceedings but described her whole divorce process as "exhausting" and "time-
consuming:"

We have many issues regarding assets divisions... the car is under his name but I am
paying for it... he wants to sell the matrimonial house but I don't think it is the right time
to sell the condo... you know... all these issues that we have not reach an agreement...
(Sally, age 41, Chief Financial Officer).

For Francesca, the issue was the division of their matrimonial assets. She revealed that she
had contributed a substantial amount to the intangible costs of their assets and felt that the
Court did not really take them into serious consideration when deciding on her share of the
matrimonial assets.

In a way I feel that the Women's Charter does not protect women completely... for
example you own a house with your ex-husband; you paid for the renovations and the
electricity and water bills and all sort of intangible costs... yet under the law you are not
automatically assumed to have 50% of the share of the house? It starts with 20%... they
will then account for additional contributions before you can even get 50% of the share
of the house. (Francesca, age 41, General Manager)

Eleanor worked as a part-time property agent during the time she was married. Her ex-
husband was a successful businessman and had no trouble providing her and their daughter a
comfortable lifestyle. However when she filed for divorce, her ex-husband refused to pay for
child maintenance and repeatedly defaulted on the payments. He has also contested on the
need for him to pay for spousal maintenance because she has a job. She feels that her husband
did that on purpose because he has grievances over the fact that she initiated the divorce:

He has the money... but I think he is just being stubborn and wasting my time and
money. My divorce settlement dragged on for years, and eventually we settled for $2000
for my daughter and $1 thing for me because I am just too tired with the negotiating... yet he still doesn't pay in full and sometimes he doesn't pay. And I have to keep going to
my lawyers to issue him the summons... each time I go to see my lawyer I have to pay. I
think he just did it on purpose... (Eleanor, age 37, Property Agent).

Iris, a full-time property agent with two children, revealed that her ex-husband claimed that
he does not have the money for child maintenance because of his new family, and often either
does not pay in full or defaults on the payment altogether. Initially she did try to issue a
summons to get him to pay but eventually she gave up. She explained why:

I guess I just can't be bothered anymore, just so sick of talking to that man. He gave me
sole custody and doesn't even want to see his children. Initially I still want to fight for the
maintenance for my children because after all they are his flesh and blood he still has to share some financial responsibility at least. But now I just can't be bothered to waste the time and money to chase after him. I am very busy with my job and it is paying well although it is commission-based. *(Iris, age 40, Property Agent).*

All respondents had issues concerning ancillary matters such as maintenance for the children and the matrimonial property settlements during their divorce proceedings. Eight out of the ten women expressed that their disagreements with their ex-husbands dragged on after their divorces had been finalized. More often than not, their ex-husbands delayed payment of child maintenance, refused to pay in full and defaulted the payment of their child maintenance altogether. Hence, these respondents had to file for enforcement of the maintenance orders (i.e., summons) which was exhausting for them because, apart from work and caring for their children, they had to find the time to consult their lawyers and appear in Family Court. The two remaining respondents who did not face such problems expressed that there was no resistance from their ex-husbands with regard to child maintenance and property assets' divisions; hence they did not have to pursue legal actions against them after their divorces.

**The Court Process: His Experience**

*Frustration with Lawyer and Child Custody*

Ironically, all male interviewees also spoke of having lost control over the divorce. They attributed this loss of control over their divorce to the highly impersonal and bureaucratic way in which the Court and their lawyers handled it. Men who sought to regain control often dismissed their lawyers and this is well described by Eugene who dismissed his lawyers twice after seeing that they were “not doing their job” at presenting “the truth.” By dismissing his lawyers, Eugene was confronted with more challenges:

- They [the Court] prioritize two things... gender and Court efficiency over truth.... My lawyer ask me to admit for my own good, but they don't know that I am legally trained... In the army do paralegal... So I discharged him... I represented myself... the lawyers on the other side and the judge don't seem to like it and say that I am uncooperative because I disrupt the order... *(Eugene, age 45, Maritime industry freelancer).*

Other men, in some sense, willingly gave up control over their divorce to their lawyers. The men spoke of their divorce in terms of doing “damage control” rather than trying to “win.” To contest aggressively with their ex-spouse’s lawyers is seen as undesirable:

- I left everything to my lawyer... so long as she doesn’t ask too much I’m okay with it... like she wants our house and everything I just give up because no point trying to fight... I just want to get it over with. *(Samuel, age 52, Project manager).*

On top of the highly impersonal divorce process that undermined the men's sense of control, another pattern emerged with regard to how child custody was contested. Three male interviewees were accused by their ex-wives of having sexually abused their own children. As the Court prioritizes safeguarding the interest of the child, allegations of sexual abuse would strongly influence the Court's decision in assessing child custody matters. Ben, who had lost child custody, describes what he perceives as a flaw in child custody allocation:

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14 The child involved was less than 5 years old.
How can someone who uses her child to threaten other people be a suitable person to raise children? ... by accusing me of sexually abusing my own child ... she can have sole custody over my child when I didn't do it ... she can demand more alimony to maintain her own lifestyle rather than raising the child ... not all women are competent mothers. (Ben, age 38, Manager).

Like Ben, Eugene and Charles were also accused of having sexually abused their own children. Charles, who is still negotiating for child custody, describes how allegations of having committed child sexual abuse affected his ability to resume the "involved" father role.¹⁵

I don't have high hopes that I can get child custody or even joint custody... [Interviewer: Could you explain why?)] child custody usually goes to the mother ... also she accuse me of sexually abusing my child ... after she accuse me of sexually abusing my child ... I have to constantly monitor how I interact with my child cause I don't know what she" takes note of." (Charles, age 38, lecturer).

To put it differently, Charles had to alter his behavior to demonstrate parental fitness by becoming “passive" and “uninvolved". As male parental fitness is not a given, being accused of child sexual abuse further undermines the men's parental fitness. As demonstrated in Ben's case,¹⁷ such accusations are an effective strategy in denying men from gaining access to the child(ren). It is unsurprising that men face the biggest challenge when negotiating for child custody.

Apart from being denied child custody, the fact that the men are accused of sexual deviancy has other social consequences that Eugene highlighted:

I discharge my lawyers because they tell me to admit something I never do... what would people think if they hear that I...¹⁸ how can I admit something I never do? People won't know the truth if I admit I did it when I didn't... This accusation will follow me when I look for work... (Eugene, age 45, Maritime industry freelancer).

In short, women remain assumed to be natural caregivers, while men have to actively demonstrate parental fitness to the Court in order to negotiate for child custody.

The Coping Strategy

Women: Family and Friends as Important Social Network Support

The second theme that is salient in the interview data is that women and men cope with the divorce process in gendered ways. All female respondents brought out the importance of having support from family and friends. Those who have indicated that they had received such support said it helps them gain confidence and feel contented with life after the divorce. They feel that social-network support is one of the key factors that allow them to handle the stress of divorce and aid them with moving on with their lives.

¹⁵ Charles is still in the midst of negotiating for child custody, and his interactions with his child are monitored by a professional to evaluate his case.
¹⁶ Counselor/facilitator assigned to evaluate Charles’ case for child custody.
¹⁷ Ben had lost child custody for the same reason.
¹⁸ Use of coarse language to describe the accused act of sexual abuse.
Judy was divorced six years ago and felt that her family is an important aspect of support through her divorce. “The family is important because none of my family members was against it (the divorce) or against the idea. They all heard my story and supported what my decision was.” (Judy, age 41, Personal Assistant).

She also described how her independence was a source of strength for her while going through the divorce. This characteristic of hers was due to her family upbringing.

I have been very independent since young. I didn't feel that if I don't have a man in my life I will crash. My family is very strong minded, we don't ask for help and we all think we are 'pa buay si' (Not easily defeated in Hokkien) ... my sisters and brothers will not pity me, they understand that if I need help I will go to them and they will always help. But we will never pity each other ... they will always say 'can one lah ... Judy can do it...' Just like when any of my siblings got problems I also think that they also can do it. So it is that kind of upbringing that makes me feel that I am not emotionally weak.

Not only nuclear family but also extended family members proved to be an important source of support for some women. Ellie received help from her uncle when she decided to move out of her matrimonial home with her two daughters during the divorce.

I know I have to move out because I am very sure I want divorce ... I know I have to shift a few times till the whole divorce is over ... I don't have parents and my brothers were staying in HDB flats... one thing very unfortunate is that in the HDB flat nobody can really house you ... because if they are married the most they have are three or four rooms, how many rooms can they spare me? ... But I have an uncle who has CPF20 and [is] single and I got some money so I got his help to buy a three-room flat in his name ...” (Ellie, 45, Insurance agent).

Nonetheless, Ellie mentioned one incident that she felt was a structural constraint for her during her divorce with respect to the living arrangement even though she has received help from her uncle:

My ex-husband complained to the HDB because he found out that I am staying in a flat that is not in my name ... I got fine all over ... I got income tax fine and I also got the HDB fine ... it was around five to seven thousand I can't quite remember.

Cindy described how her best friend was the first one she turned to upon discovering her ex-husband's extra-marital affair:

My immediate reaction was to take all my kids and ran to another place. I actually went to Miao's place, my good friend's place... I told her what happened and we didn't know what to do ... I stayed over her house for a few nights.” (Cindy, 41, Sales Manager in an IT corporation).

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19 The term HDB refers to Housing and Development Board—statutory board in Singapore that is in charge of public housing, known as “HDB flats”. As of March 2008, 82% of the population in Singapore resides in these HDB flats.

20 CPF refers to the Central Provident Fund, which is compulsory saving for employed Singaporeans. One’s employer has to contribute to that fund in addition to his or her own contribution. For example, between September 2012 to December 2013, the latest allocation and contribution rates for an employed individual earning more than $1500, aged 35 years old and below, is 20% of his monthly salary, and 16% of his monthly salary paid in addition by his employer. Hence, his CPF is credited with 36% of his monthly salary in total (http://mycpf.cpf.gov.sg/Employers/Gen-Info/cpf-Contr/ContriRates-Sep2012_Dec2013.htm).
She also mentioned that after her divorce was finalized, it was the same friend who helped her to become better off financially:

Miao and her husband have been investing on property for many years... when I was still married, my ex-husband and I owned our matrimonial home, a 5-room HDB apartment, and also a condo in Bukit Timah which we bought as an investment property. When I was going through my divorce, my friend and her hubby advised me to sell our matrimonial home and split the money and bought over my ex-husband's share of the investment property so that my kids and I can move in the condo. It was the right move as the condo was at about $700k when I took over my ex-husband's share; I stayed there with my kids until I moved to another condo last month. I sold the condo at about $1.2 million and basically made a substantial profit... so my friend advised me to invest on some properties.... I was staying in a HDB flat and driving a Honda when I was married, and now I am staying in a condo in Bukit Timah and driving a Lexus, so can you imagine how much my friend Miao has helped over the years?... I had a good income as a sales person, but because of my friend I was financially secured as a single mother and basically very comfortable on my own. (Cindy, 41, Sales Manager in an IT corporation).

It is quite prominent in the findings that the help women received from their social network enabled them to handle the stress of the divorce. The help that they received mostly came in the form of emotional support, childcare support, legal advice and advice on housing and asset management. As most of the women (nine out of ten) are financially independent, they expressed that they do not really need help financially, but they also feel that their financial independence should not release their ex-husbands from financial responsibilities, particularly with regard to their children. Hence, they are willing to sacrifice their time and money to fight for their children whenever there are defaults on child maintenance.

The Coping Strategy

Men: Avoiding Involving the Family of Orientation and Delayed Mourning Behaviors

In sharp contrast, men experience divorce in a highly private manner. Most interviewees had deliberately withheld information of their ongoing divorce from their families and made the divorce public only after the process was finalized. Various reasons were given, for example, to avoid further complications when more people were involved, or discomfort in letting their family know of their situation. Interestingly, male interviewees also discussed the difference between how men and women handled divorce:

I didn't want to involve my family in this mess... [Interviewer: Can you elaborate a little more?] What's the point of involving more people...everyone becomes unhappy because they all want different things... my ex-wife, her whole family was involved... sisters aunties... they became part of the fight... why make things difficult... in the end those who are hurt are not just us but our families... like her mother... I treated her mother like my own mother and she was very sad about the divorce. But what can I do?” (Samuel, age 52, Project manager).

By not involving their families in their divorce, the men saw it as a strategy to protect their families from the perceived and real emotional and psychological harms accompanying divorce and to fulfill the male “protector” role. For instance, Ben explained:
[My ex-wife] asked for divorce but she keeps disturbing my family . . . harassing my mother and sister by making ridiculous demand . . . I looked for her family and they avoided me . . . I eventually moved out from our matrimonial home to get her to stop bothering and messing with my family . . . I went and live with my mom but didn't let other people know of my divorce . . . I even tried to keep my mom from knowing too much . . . I didn't want her to worry.” (Ben, age 38, manager).

Apart from the gender-specific strategies that the men used to cope with post-divorce challenges, the men also reported experiencing what Baum (2003) proposes to be a delayed male mourning pattern. They remarked that they have difficulty expressing their emotional distress:

Before this interview, I still wasn't sure if I was ready to talk about my divorce . . . because I am a man I cannot openly show my emotions . . . after my divorce, I went into depression for a while . . . like now although I feel hurt talking to you about this . . . I have to keep it inside.

(Charles, age 38, lecturer).

Men with children tended to be more emotionally affected than their childless counterparts. Though Ben and Charles speak of having gone into, and subsequently recovered from, depression after the divorce, Ben who had lost child custody spoke of having gone into depression a second time after losing custody, while Charles spoke of foreseeing another trauma if he is unable to obtain joint custody. Eugene explicitly articulated how their gender affected the possibility of seeking emotional support or professional counseling that women can “naturally” turn to for help:

With guys they joke around and tell you that there is plenty of fish in the ocean so I should move on . . . it is very different between guys and women . . . the type of emotional support that you need is not there [Interviewer: are any of your male friends divorced? Maybe they can help?] I have some friends who are divorced but they tell you the same thing . . . there are a few guys who will support you, it's still different [Interviewer: What about professional help?] Guys won't go there . . . even though we know it is bad to keep everything inside, but how many guys would go for counseling . . . we don't even know what to say . . . for woman it's different. (Eugene, age 45, maritime industry freelancer).

Some men also experienced financial loss and experienced job insecurity. Eugene, who was employed in the public sector, had lost his job as a result of the ongoing divorce. Even after securing new jobs, Eugene and Samuel reported a dip in income received from their new/current jobs. Unlike the other interviewees, Samuel, who is financially well-to-do, was able to quit his job to cope with the divorce while the other men were unable to do so. Although the men were able to secure new jobs relatively quickly, it was clear that they did experience some form of paid-employment instability after the divorce.

Shared Parenting after the Divorce: Her Frustration

The third theme that is prominent among the female respondents was the changing role of fathers after divorce. Shared custody in Singapore is commonly practiced by having the children stay with their mothers on weekdays. On Friday evening or Saturday mornings, their ex-husbands will pick up the children and have them until Sunday evenings when they have to send the children back to their mothers again. What seems evident from the interviews is that these women feel that their ex-spouses took over the children just to have
fun with them, neglecting other parental responsibilities. That is, their ex-husbands would often bring them out to play over the weekends, neglecting the other aspects of parenthood, such as children's welfare and discipline. Some also mentioned that most of the time their ex-spouses would not take the children when they were sick on weekends.

Judy recalled one minor incident that she feels indicated how easy fatherhood has become for her ex-husband after the divorce:

He just brings the boys out to play on weekends. So it's like you make good efforts to take care of your children on weekdays and make sure they are clean and healthy without a single scratch. Then on weekends he will come and bring them out to play until come back all dirty and full of mosquito bites because they went to the zoos or parks or something... and you're like 'what did you do to them? (Judy, age 41, Personal Assistant).

Ellie felt that her husband used to be inconsiderate with their schedules when he took their two girls on weekends.

When they [the children] are younger sometimes he will come, bring two out and then only send one back and kept my younger girl with him because the older one wants to come back and does her school work. Sometimes he was either late picking them up or late sending them back. I was quite angry as I have appointments and the girls have school the next morning and he shouldn't decide to send the children back as and when he feels like it.” (Ellie, age 45, Insurance agent).

Cindy decided that it was important to keep her husband's financial irresponsibility from her children because she wants them to have positive impressions of their father after their divorce. However she described her frustrations during the times when her ex-husband seemed to create a negative impression of her when the time spent with them over the weekends seems more fun in comparison with the time the children spend with her.

My ex-husband is really good at having fun with the children, he will bring them out to play on weekends... bring them swimming, cycling, and to all kinds of places... they enjoy his company... so I am not that 'fun' in comparison because I think being a parent is not just about having fun with your children, there are other responsibilities like making sure you have time to coach them for their studies, making sure they do well in school, teaching them the right values... but I feel that my ex-husband is all about having fun with them and nothing else. He does not even pay for their monthly maintenance in full... In fact I have been paying for most of my children's expenses and their expenses are not just food and clothes... they have piano classes, ballet classes, tuitions, Berries classes... He only knows to pick them up to go out and play on weekends. (Cindy, age 41, Sales Manager in an IT corporation).

Dawn described that she was quite upset when her ex-husband blamed her for her son's PSLE results when he felt that their son did not meet his expectations.

My son score 244 for his PSLE [Primary School Leaving Examination] last year and everyone told me it was really quite good... I was quite happy about it until my ex-husband called and scolded me for not putting in more efforts on our son's studies. I was quite shocked by his comments at first and eventually I got quite depressed over it. Then my ex-husband's sister called, consoled me and asked me to ignore him... she said that
it is typical for her brother to behave this way. (Dawn, age 38, Part-time tuition teacher).

Finally, two female interviewees shared how their ex-husbands “outsourced” their responsibility to their own parents whenever they do not have the time. Francesca described her irritations when she had to send and pick her daughter to her ex-husband’s parents’ house:

Although it is not every weekend that I have to send my daughter to her ye ye (grandfather in Mandarin) and nai nai (grandmother in Mandarin). But sometimes I just feel that why we even bother to have shared custody when he doesn’t even want to spend time with his own daughter? Whenever I discuss this with him, he will give me excuses that his parents want to spend time with their granddaughters, but I know that it is not exactly true because he likes to go out on Friday and Saturday nights to drink with his friends so he just dump her to his parents.” (Francesca, age 41, General Manager).

Eleanor described how her ex-husband would take her daughter out for lunch on Saturday mornings and send her to his parents’ house till Sunday evening when he has to send her back.

I confronted him initially... I told him if he has no time for our daughter on weekends he can just bring her out for lunch or dinner and send her back instead of dumping her to his parents. And he says I am being unreasonable because I don't want her to spend time with her grandparents... I feel that my daughter should spend quality time with him instead of his parents because I don't want my daughter to drift apart from her own father because of our divorce... but he just doesn't get it. (Eleanor, age 37, Property Agent).

CONCLUSION

While most existing studies have examined women's and men's experiences with divorce separately, in this paper we compare and contrast these individuals’ experiences in the same cultural and legal context. We argue that while both parties go through the same divorce process, the perceptions and the concerns vary and are shaped significantly by gender-based roles and norms in the family.

Drawing on the interview data with Singaporean-Chinese divorcees, we have found clear gender differences in the areas we examined (experiences with court proceedings, coping strategies, and shared parenting); we also found clear gender differences in the reactions toward divorce settlements. We suggest that these differences are a function of the prevailing norm of male-breadwinner female-homemaker model. Specifically, among all negative experiences, the professional women interviewed complain about the maintenance orders their ex-husbands fail to meet and the difficulty of attaining proper matrimonial assets. Men with professional ex-wives, instead, report frustration with the court process, especially the failure to win child custody. The coping strategy also reveals differences. While professional women receive strong emotional and practical support from their networks of family and friends, men exhibit delayed mourning behaviors and attempt to shield their families from being involved.

We have also found that the post-divorce parenting experience is different for the women. In particular, almost all women feel that the father’s “fun parenting” of the child is unfair, in that the fathers do not seem to have the same responsibilities toward parenting as they do. Finally, the data indicates that in the Chinese community in Singapore, family members, especially grandparents, function as a source of childcare support, when there are children involved in the divorce process.
REFERENCES


