

Minimising Impacts of Divorce

Subjects: Family Studies

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A paper on how to better support children and divorcees and reduce acrimony in divorce. This paper first highlights the numerous consequences a divorce has on all stakeholders involved before offering potential solutions on how we can minimise the negative effects.

Keywords: Divorce ; Parents ; Children ; Childless couples ; Acrimony ; Impacts

1. Introduction

In recent years, parental divorce has become increasingly common and rampant in Singapore. With the world having become increasingly interconnected, such occurrences can be partly attributed to Singapore being increasingly exposed to western norms. Supporters of divorce proceedings are seen by some as advocates of our progressive society to sanction freedom and equality for men and women. On the contrary, critics perceive an increasingly acceptant view of divorce being detrimental to societal stability and economic prospects. Indeed, the topic of divorce is a highly contested one where the multitude of stakeholders harbour varying viewpoints. However, regardless of opinions, divorce is here to stay. Our aim is to identify and minimise, if not eradicate the negative impact it has on all parties involved.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 exhibits data on the impact of divorce on directly involved stakeholders. Section 3 sets forth ideas on how we can support the above-mentioned stakeholders through divorce experience. Section 4 concludes.

2. Data

2.1. Impacts on children

A number of studies have been conducted which identified the impacts of divorce on children. As such, it is well documented that divorces limit a child's academic success, their income level well into adulthood[1] and increases their proclivity for mental illnesses and antidepressant consumption as well as their own divorces when they are older. Considering one's academic performance influences a variety of socioeconomic factors like fertility and birth rates[2], this fact is truly detrimental. What's more, children whose parents are divorced, are more likely to evade marriage and if they do marry, they have a higher probability of divorce[3]. This is possibly because witnessing one's parents divorce results in children viewing marriage as an unstable and potentially hazardous part of life. The above mentioned trends are only exacerbated in cases where the children were younger when the parents divorced with the impacts decreasing exponentially with age[4]. These findings are from sources across the globe and are only reinforced by Singapore's own study by the Ministry of Social and Family Development[5].

Furthermore, other studies have revealed other pernicious effects divorces have on children. These children tend to receive less emotional, monetary and hands-on support from their parents[6]. Divorced parents tend to have limited pride, love, inculcation of intellectual behaviour and praise of social maturity directed towards children. These homes tend to have fewer toys and heightened frequency of corporal punishment[7]. A divorce often paves the path to anxiety, fatigue and pressure, leading to a waning quality of parenting style[8].

2.2. Impact on Parents and Childless Couples

The impact that divorce has on children has been far more researched than the impact on parents because children are arguably the more vulnerable stakeholders. It is only recently that the impacts on parents and childless couples were discovered. For instance, as early as 5 years prior to a divorce, psychiatric treatment and antidepressant consumption rockets until it peaks when they divorce. Subsequently, the psychiatric treatment drops over the next 5 years to a level

corresponding to consumption levels 1 year before the divorce. However, in regards to antidepressants, whilst for fathers the degree of reliance follows a pattern similar to psychiatric treatment, where mothers are concerned, the consumption remains at its peak for another 5 years[9].

Further research has shown that the harmful effects of divorce on adults is reduced when the divorce occurs between childless couples as opposed to between parents[10]. In a divorce, mothers suffer greater economic cost (continuing for many years after the divorce) than childless women or fathers[11]. This issue could be attributed to these women having been out of the workforce for an extended period of time. They find it difficult to re-join as they care for their children. However, a father's sense of family satisfaction plummets (partly due to many fathers abruptly having limited access to their children after divorce) more than that of childless men and mothers[12].

2.3. Impact on Family relations

2.3.1. Father-Child Relations

Divorce is known to cause a dwindle in the standard of parent-child relations[13] with this issue being especially true for non-custodial parents (90 percent are fathers)[14]. In a study by the University of Wisconsin,36)[15] it was revealed that 20% of divorced fathers had not met their offspring over the last year and less than 50% had seen their children more than a couple times annually[16]. Worse still, contact with fathers slumps overtime after a divorce, though the severity of this decreases with the age of the child[17]. Considering a strong father-child relationship is vital for teenage accomplishment[18], the limited emotional support children receive from divorced fathers who are less-fostering[19] (as they have "considerably less opportunity to influence their children's attitudes and behaviour[20]") is noxious.

2.3.2. Mother-child Relations

Post divorce, children are bound to have a less inspiring home environment. The fact of the matter is that divorced mothers are inferior to married mothers in regards to their ability to provide emotional support to their children[21]. Contrasted with married mothers, divorced mothers are often less affectionate and open with their young ones, and often reprimand them more severely and more erratically - especially up to a year post-divorce[22].

2.3.3. Overall Effect on Family Structure

Divorces give rise to greater detachment between parents and children[23], even when contrasted with children living in married but discontented homes[24]. This situation is aggravated when there is conflict during the divorce proceedings[25]. In addition, divorced parents report an immense plummet in their approval of their former spouse's relationship with their offspring[26]. As such, the relationship between divorced parents deteriorates, which subsequently adversely affects the quality of the child's upbringing resulting in a downward cyclical spiral.

2.4. Perpetual Effects by Gender

After a parental divorce, girls on average tend to be more negatively affected than boys when living with their fathers[27]. Likewise, boys - especially those living with their mothers, tend to react with greater enmity towards parental divorce[28]. As such, there is an obvious indication that the parent-child relationship in children raised by parents of the opposite sex gravitates towards being more strained after divorces[29].

2.5. Sibling Relationships

Divorced children have a greater propensity to have an antagonistic relationship with their siblings than those in married families[30].

3. Supporting Stakeholders

3.1. Directly Supporting Individual Stakeholders

3.1.1. Children

Divorces are known to inhibit a child's academic success, their income level and increase their proclivity for mental illness and subsequent antidepressant consumption. In addition, experiencing a divorce as a child increases the likelihood of them divorcing their partners later in life. Moreover, they tend to receive less emotional, monetary and hands-on support from their parents. These homes tend to have fewer toys and a heightened frequency of corporal punishment.

To better support children of divorced parents, the government should contemplate on implementing a multitude of policies that neutralise the above-mentioned issues. Potential solutions include assigning a social worker to visit regularly for at least a year post divorce to ensure the child is not subjected to abuse and to watch over the child's mental status. I suggest a minimum of one year given the fact that it is known that divorced parents (especially mothers) tend to punish their children more severely and erratically up to a year after the divorce[31].

To ensure children receive sufficient support from their parents, court rulings should push for joint custody or at least mandated weekly visitations. This is because currently, 90% of non-residential parents are fathers[32] and the majority of custodial parents are mothers. Unfortunately, this leads to an adverse effect as it frays father-child relations which is known to be pivotal for adolescent success[33]. By sanctioning joint custody or by ensuring compulsory weekly visitations, the father is kept relevant allowing them to be more fostering[34] as they would have more 'opportunities to influence their children's attitudes and behaviour'[35].

In regards to making divorced homes more 'fun' and 'homely', the government can allocate subsidies directly to divorced parents for purchases from toy stores or they can incentivise private charities to do so.

3.1.2. Adults

Recent research has granted us a better comprehension of the sort of issues divorcees face. These include the proclivity for psychiatric treatment and antidepressant consumption that begins rising 5 years prior to a divorce and remains at a high level after. Moreover, in a divorce, mothers experience greater economic cost (continuing for many years after the divorce) than childless women or fathers. However, a father's sense of family satisfaction plummets more than that of childless men and mothers.

To address the mental illness issue, doctors could be instructed to monitor their patients and the level of reliance on antidepressant and psychiatric treatment. If the demand for such treatment suddenly surges over a few years and the patient is married, early intervention to reduce parental conflict which may ultimately lead to a divorce, may be warranted in the form of counselling.

With men and women having biological and social-cultural differences, they tend to suffer differently from a divorce. As such, a gender-specific approach to target the impacts of a divorce seems appropriate. For mothers, financial support takes precedence while for fathers, social support. Potential policies to address divorced mothers' plight could be subsidised childcare (though it runs the risk of growing into a welfare state) for divorced mothers along with more skills to allow them to regain relevancy in the workplace. For fathers, the previously mentioned court ruling of joint custody to ensure fathers remain relevant in the life of the children would be an avalanche of help. On a side note, if these policies are implemented and turn out to effectively support the divorces, there would be a wonderful additional benefit which would be that children would be cared for by more nurturing and essentially more capable parents[36].

3.2. Strengthening Family Structure

3.2.1. Pre-Divorce

One potential solution from this angle would be enforcing policies that ultimately delay divorces to minimise the impact on children. It has been determined that parents from a higher socioeconomic standing have a lower likelihood of divorcing than parents with lower socioeconomic standing[37]. Moreover, I am a strong advocate of believing that the impact of a divorce is greater on children from low-income families. This is because wealthier families have more resources and typically fewer children to share it among, meaning they face less financial turmoil. As such, incentivising education and financial stability before one marries would aid in delaying divorce[38] and lowering its frequency

Another solution to look at would be how to minimise parental conflict. It has been found that when there is parental conflict especially during the divorce proceedings, the ramifications on children is intensified[39]. What's more, divorced parents report an immense plunge in their approval of their former spouse's relationship with their offspring. This further strains the relationship between divorced parents which subsequently reduces the quality of the child's upbringing, resulting in a downward cyclical spiral. To prevent such a predicament, mandatory counselling for at least a year, requiring the attendance of both parents, should be enforced. These sessions could cover a number of concerns including how both parents are in fact pulling their weight and are contributing in different ways to support the child. This implementation would improve the sturdiness of the family structure as there'll be less conflict between parents and between parents and children.

3.2.2. Post-Divorce

After a divorce, there is still action that can be taken to ensure a conducive upbringing for the child as well as foster a healthy relationship between the parents. Considering that fathers have a higher proclivity to drift away from their offspring if deprived of legal custody^[40] and that adults who are closer to their fathers tend to be better-off and more content with life, irrespective of their relationship with their mothers^[41], keeping the father relevant in the child's upbringing is quintessential to ensure the child's success while warding off issues like depression.

Furthermore, it has been discovered that parental divorce tends to strain the relationship of a child and the opposite-sex parent far more than the child and the parent of the same gender. As such, with all other factors equal, a child should live primarily with parent of the same sex while the other parent has heavy visitation rights so that they still have the opportunity to strengthen their relationship while ensuring the child is in the best environment.

4. Conclusion

In the final analysis, while there are those who argue that divorce proceedings should be liberalised, I counter argue that this is foolish because it is shown to have calamitous outcomes on children^[42]. Instead, I believe that we can best support children and divorcees by strengthening the family structure and cohesiveness. As Singapore becomes increasingly exposed and influenced by western norms and is tempted by change for the sake of change in the name of progress, I hope that we continue to take the pragmatic route so as to maximise the benefits to our people.

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