Choice and Connectedness: explaining divorcees’ experiences through kinship and self

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Abstract
This paper, based on my PhD research, examines the impact of divorce on divorcees' family relationships and the role family plays in divorcees' reconstruction of self-identity. With the individualization of family forms and practices, the maintenance of kin ties and relationships is largely based on personal choice and efforts. While individualization has a strong influence on family relationships and arrangements, individuals are still connected to their family in the way they develop their selfhood through their relationships with them. This paper argues that the development and articulation of individualized and connected selves through divorcees’ relationship with their family contribute to their empowerment process. Based on this theme, this paper makes use of empirical evidence gathered through interviews with 20 Singaporean and 20 Australian divorced individuals to examine how divorcees renegotiate their family relationships after divorce and weave a creative network of family support for self-sufficiency. This paper thereby demonstrates the different types of support family provides in helping participants cope with the crisis, redefine their lives and move on to fulfil new goals. Specifically, it also explores the key contribution of kinship in divorcees’ development of self and personal narratives, and the empowerment process.

Keywords: divorce, individualization, connected, family, self
Introduction
Research on divorce, with the use of both statistical and empirical evidence, has largely focused on the negative consequences of divorce, specifically in the areas of financial, psychological and physical well-being. In the area of financial disadvantages, divorcees suffer from a reduction of household incomes, increase of expenses associated with the divorce and single-income household, and loss of property due to the division of assets (Amato 2000; Clarke-Stewart and Brentano 2006; Levinger 1979; Marks 1996; McDonald 1985; Smyth and Weston 2000; Zagorsky 2005). Other research studies reveal that divorcees experience stress, emotional disturbance, separation distress, disorientation, alienation, low self-confidence, negative self-image and feelings of panic, fear, loneliness and helplessness (Albrecht 1980; Cherlin 1992; Clarke-Stewart and Brentano 2006; Davies et al. 1997; Demo and Acock 1996; Kitson 1992; Marks 1996; Mastekaasa 1994; Weiss 1975).

While the negative effects of divorce are often reported in family and divorce research studies and sometimes revealed through the responses of this research's participants, this paper shows that the divorce experience is anything but crippling. Even though divorce does bring about undesirable consequences such as financial loss, many of the divorced respondents still see their divorce as advantageous and empowering to them. There is an overwhelmingly positive tone when respondents discussed their lives after divorce. Salma, a Singaporean divorced participant, when asked to reflect upon her divorce experience, stated:

I think the divorce has benefited me. It has made me who I am, it helped me find who I was. I would never have changed anything. Even though there are financial challenges, I still think that it has advantaged me. – Salma, Singapore

In this paper, I show that divorce is an empowering experience for the respondents of this research and that family contributes a great deal to this process. Drawing on Anthony Giddens’ concept of a ‘fateful’ moment (Giddens 1991: 112), I show first that divorce is a critical moment (Thomson et al. 2002: 351) in a divorced individual’s life. Giddens describes fateful or critical moments as ‘times when events come together in such a way
that an individual stands at a crossroads in their existence or where a person learns of information with fateful consequences’ (Giddens 1991: 113). During this critical moment, individuals consider the consequences of their choices, make decisions about the path they will take, and engage in personal development projects. This is in line with the individualization thesis where theorists of late modernity have drawn attention to the way individualization has undermined traditional sources of identity, giving rise to ‘do-it-yourself’ biographies (Beck-Gernsheim 1999: 56), hence suggested that individuals are solely responsible for their own choices and determine their own life course. According to Giddens, such critical moments could be empowering experiences and have great impact on the development of self-identity (Giddens 1991). Thus this paper’s main argument is that divorce, being a critical moment, empowers divorcees, not cripples them. Divorce gives divorcees a second chance at life to rebuild their lives and fulfil new goals, and hope for a better and different future.

During the critical moment of divorce, I suggest that despite divorced individuals being empowered to design their own life course and make life-changing decisions, family plays a significant role in divorcees’ ‘reflexive project of identity’ (Giddens 1991: 143) and contributes to the empowering experience of their divorce. Even with the waves of individualization sweeping across different parts of the world, Carol Smart argues individuals are not all that autonomous and isolated from others (Smart 2007). She suggests ‘the very possibility of personal life is predicated upon a degree of self-reflection and also connectedness with others...’ (Smart 2007: 28). According to Smart’s concept of relatedness, ‘without both formative and on-going relationships we do not develop our sense of personhood or even individuality’ (Smart 2007: 46). Individuals are related to their kin in the sense that they develop their individuality and selfhood through their relationship with their kin. This form of relationality influences the way they think, the decisions they make and the way they conduct their everyday lives. Their reflective selfhood is shaped by others’ responses towards them and these responses provide the context of their actions and decisions. This emphasis on the role of relationships in shaping the self provides a meaningful context for interpreting my own findings. The paper hence investigates the participants' individualized and connected selves through
examining how they negotiate their family relationships, and draw support from their family network. By doing so, this paper attempts to show that divorce, being a critical moment in the respondents’ lives, is anything but crippling, and kin contributes significantly to this empowering experience.

**Research methodology**

Qualitative research methodology is employed in this research as it is more appropriate in dealing with a sensitive topic – the ‘death’ of marital relationships. Interview is used as a research tool because it allows the researcher to address the complexity of divorce experiences and look at meanings in depth (Travers 2006). It gives respondents ‘a voice’ to reflect and explain in detail their divorce experiences. The researcher can then clarify, probe, verify based on participants’ revelations.

The researcher carried out purposive and systematic selection of respondents (Minichiello et al. 2008). Snowball and theoretical sampling strategies were adopted to recruit 20 Singaporean and 20 Australian divorcees through personal networks and divorce support groups (Minichiello et al. 2008). Face-to-face, one-to-one interviews were conducted with them. Each interview took about one to three hours. Respondents chose the time and venue of the interview according to their convenience and comfort. The interviews were free floating and semi-structured around open-ended questions on the reasons behind the divorce, divorce proceedings, impact of divorce on economic well-being, social relationships and emotional well-being.

There are 18 Singaporean female and two male Singaporean respondents. Out of 20 Australian respondents, there are 14 female and six male respondents. 32 out of 40 Australian and Singaporean respondents are aged 41 years old and above. The majority of the Australian respondents are Caucasians, while the majority of the Singaporean respondents are Chinese. The dominant religion amongst the Australian and Singaporean respondents is Christianity. A majority of the total number of respondents have children.

**An Individualized Self: choice and assertiveness**
Though kinship is an ascribed status determined and bound by blood ties, there has been increasing influence of individualization on family forms and practices. With the waves of individualization sweeping across different parts of the world, individuals exercise choice in the maintenance and negotiation of family relationships. Elisabeth Beck argues that one is no longer bonded to one’s family by an ‘obligation of solidarity’ but one chooses to maintain kinship based on personal inclination and efforts (Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Though one may be bonded to one’s family by blood ties, one may choose whom to be close with and whom to distant oneself from. This is especially evident in the respondents’ changing family relationships as a result of their divorce. Having been able to end an unfulfilling marriage and undergo the divorce process, they felt empowered and gained a new sense of confidence and assertiveness. They not only demonstrated this sense of assertiveness in the way they designed their life course but also the way they defined their social circle and relationships. When some respondents did not receive the support and affirmation of their divorce from their family, they chose to move away from these family members. Spencer explained his decision to distance himself from his family members:

They were angry with me when I first told them...they just decided to blame me. I cut off from them for 4 to 5 years...If people are not willing to listen, I quickly move on...We managed to reconcile somehow subsequently. But I have never been close to my sister subsequently...I never involved her in my family issues.
– Spencer, Australia

Participants also exerted their individualised self in the way they managed their relationship with the ex-spouse's family. Typically, one tends to be closer to and has a stronger sense of obligation towards one’s biological family than spouse’s family (Rossi and Rossi 1990; Stein 1993). Hence, married individuals’ relationship with their spouse’s family requires even more effort to maintain since their familial relationships are not given, based on biological ties, but created through marriage. When divorce takes place, one's membership in the spouse's kin network is terminated (Finch 1989). The social context being the marriage that originally binds two individuals and their families together is now missing. It thus requires personal choice, greater effort and initiative to
maintain such ties.

Several respondents in this study exercised choice in the way they handled their relationship with the former spouse’s family after the divorce. The continuation of relationship with former in-laws after the divorce is contingent upon several factors. One of the factors that determine the continuation of such relationships is the quality of relationship during marriage. Based on Anne-Marie Ambert’s study of Canadian divorcees’ relationships with their former in-laws, those who had poor relationships with their former-in-laws prior to the divorce tend to end their relationships with their former-in-laws quite suddenly and quickly after the divorce (Ambert 1988). Likewise in this study, several respondents chose to terminate their relationships with former in-laws completely and swiftly because they did not enjoy a good relationship with in-laws during the marriage. Nadia stated her position this way:

In the first place, my relationship with his family was not very good…I avoided contact with his family after the divorce. I did not want to maintain any contact...

– Nadia, Singapore

Other reasons cited for terminating their relationships with former in-laws include: a) respondents wanted a clean break from former spouse and in-laws; b) respondents did not want children to have any contact with former in-laws; c) respondents did not want former in-laws' intervention in the divorce process; d) respondents did not receive support and affirmation from former in-laws; e) respondents received negative treatment from former in-laws, which included unfriendly and distant disposition, screaming and yelling, and accusing and blaming respondents for the marital failure; and f) respondents and former in-laws became uncomfortable and awkward with each other and did not know how to handle the relationship. In several cases, respondents indicated that their former in-laws' allegiance and loyalty were with the former spouse since the latter was their biological family. Since respondents did not receive former in-laws' support and approval, they chose to break off the relationship. John, a male Australian respondent related his experience:
Her sisters threatened to kill me and run me down on the road. I don't really want to know them anymore...After the divorce, I did not see them at all...All of them decided to support her. – John, Australia

While some respondents chose to terminate their relationship with their former in-laws, some chose to maintain contact with them. This is especially the case where children were involved and divorced participants took the initiative to maintain contact with former in-laws so that their children could have a relationship with the ex-spouse's family. Dorothy from Australia took initiative in bringing her daughter to visit her former mother-in-law so that her daughter could have a relationship with her grandmother. Other respondents continued to maintain a good relationship with their former in-laws because they were on good terms with the former in-laws during marriage and chose to maintain such ties even after the divorce. Lucinda, a female Australian respondent related her close relationship with her former in-laws:

His mum and I are very close...His mother would say that she really liked me a lot and I was like a daughter to her...I paid them a visit in Canada after my divorce...They treated me just like before. – Lucinda, Australia

Geok Choo from Singapore also enjoyed a close relationship with her former in-laws during marriage, hence motivating her to maintain contact with them after her divorce:

My relationship with my ex-spouse's family was very good during my marriage. I still meet up with my mother-in-law. We are constantly messaging each other and checking on each other. They still tell me they love me. – Geok Choo, Singapore

It is evident that participants in this study exercised choice and asserted themselves strongly when they negotiated and terminated their relationships with former in-laws after divorce. By defining their social circle based on their own terms, their sense of empowerment is thereby reinforced and their individualized and assertive selves are further developed.
A Connected Self: support and self-sufficiency

Even though the divorced participants' management of relationships with their family and former in-laws reflected heightened individualization, they were not completely autonomous and were closely related to their kin network. Having dissolved their marriage, many respondents lost their own nuclear family unit created through the marriage and former spouse's family. The breakdown and loss of familial relationships could result in an imbalance of kin network system and such imbalance is often compensated by divorced individuals having more contact with their biological family after the divorce (Anspach 1976). Many respondents turned to their biological family for support. They relied upon their creative and relational selves to define a social support network for themselves so as to ensure self-sufficiency. Like the American single mothers in the study conducted by Hertz and Ferguson (1997: 204) who pulled together ‘an ensemble of people who provide some combination of emotional and psychological support, economic contributions, and routine household chores and maintenance’, respondents of this study also tapped into their creativity to define a kin network of support, redefine family practices and outsource different aspects of family responsibilities across a support network of kin.

In this study, some respondents depended upon their kin network for financial, practical and emotional support after divorce. Teresa from Australia is one of the respondents who was well-supported by her family during the crisis:

   After the marriage broke up, I stayed with my godmother. I also stayed with my sister and husband...My sister got me a solicitor and she paid for the solicitor...My parents took us in, fed us, clothed us...looked after the children for me... When my husband came to fetch my daughter, my dad would be the one to go out to meet him...When I made the decision, they were there to support me...– Teresa, Australia

Siew Kheng, a female Singaporean respondent, also relied upon her connectedness with her biological family for financial, practical and emotional support after her divorce. She redefined her family unit by bringing her son back to her parents' home and living with them. She reorganised her family practices by engaging in activities with her parents,
siblings and relatives. She parcelled out family responsibilities by sharing her parental duties with her parents. She revealed:

My mother just asked me to go and stay with her. I have been living with my mother since then...My father even helped me fetch my son from child care and wash my son's shoes... There was a bond between my father and my son...My sisters, brother and sister-in-law all supported me. They made time for me... My son has more opportunities to play with his cousins and they build a bond...My father, brother and auntie helped me out financially. They lent me money, close to $20,000...When I received money from them, I felt very grateful to them. – Siew Kheng, Singapore

This form of connectedness with kin contributes to the shaping of respondents' self-identity and personal narratives. The divorced participants' family serves the crucial function of validating and supporting participants’ decisions. Such validation and moral support from family helps divorcees feel that they have made the right decision, and that they did not make that decision alone but made it with their family. Isabella from Australia expressed that:

They were supportive... Their supportive responses helped me know that I reached the right decision and I have taken action to leave. – Isabella, Australia

Approval and support from family play a significant role in divorcees’ explanations of their divorce and perception of self. As divorcees attempt to renegotiate their newly acquired identity as a divorced individual, their family supports that process by accepting and affirming the divorcee’s new identity. It is also through the affirmation and validation of life choices divorced participants received from their family that they develop the positive narratives of self, gain a positive self-image and possess increased self-confidence. Keanu, a male Singaporean respondent expressed that:

My mum was my greatest support. She didn't judge me...I guess I was encouraged by my family's...support. I woke up everyday and felt that there was hope...when I see them, they are my strength and my hope to push me on each day. – Keanu, Singapore
Conclusion
In this paper, the research findings on divorcees’ changing familial relationships have reflected heightened individualization where the participants demonstrate a strong sense of self in the way they construct, maintain and terminate their kin relationships after their divorce. It is evident that they actively exert themselves and make use of their newfound assertiveness as they determine their own social circle of kin after their divorce. They choose to maintain relationship with kin who contribute to the development of positive narratives of self by validating their decisions and supporting their identity as a divorcee. They break off or distance themselves from those who are unedifying and unsupportive of their divorce. Despite the strong evidence of an individualized self in the way these divorced individuals handle their kin relationships, they remain intricately connected with their family and depend upon them for support and validation during the crisis. They creatively design a support network which they rely upon for financial, practical and emotional support. The development of individualized and connected selves during the critical moment of divorce has contributed to the empowerment process experienced by the respondents. This paper has placed specific emphasis on the contributing role family plays during the empowerment process. With support from family, respondents move on to develop positive self-identity, and lead fulfilling and functional lives. It is hoped that this paper offers a new body of knowledge and fresh insights on the empowering consequences of divorce, and the contributing role family plays during the critical moment of divorce.

References


