

The Impact of Divorce on Hmong Children and their Transition into Adulthood

By

Lyvong Vue

McNair Mentor: Lynn Amerman Goerd

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Abstract

When children experience the divorce of their parents, the issues that lead to the divorce as well as the implications of the divorce are likely to have lasting effects on the children as well as their chances for a healthy transition into adulthood. Within the context of the Hmong people in the United States, there may be additional implications to the experience of divorce and the healthy transition into adulthood. Four people were interviewed in this phenomenological research study to help contribute to the understanding of the experience of divorce in the Hmong community.

The researcher found that many of the experiences seemed consistent with what divorce would have been on most children, particularly the increasing disadvantages, shifting emotional responses, presence or absence of role models, and early maturity and independence. In addition, being Hmong did add to the experience of divorce for the interviewees. In particular, the cultural implications added complications such as added responsibilities for children and negative reactions from the family clan. Despite these economic, cultural and psychological impacts, these interviewees were particularly resilient and seemed to have a relatively healthy transition into adulthood. These dynamics should continue to be explored, however because they may have more negative implications for other members of the Hmong community.

Introduction

Studies on divorce and the influence of divorce on children already exist, but such a topic, by default, cannot generalize different backgrounds into one umbrella. The objective of this study was to focus on a particular group, in this case Hmong adult children of divorced parents, and to understand their experiences. It is important to gain perspective through the lens of other cultural groups in order to understand that different cultures bring various layers and experiences within the topic of divorce. The United States consist of many cultures; it is in the best interest of scholars to understand the complex dynamics of diverse cultural experiences. The Hmong experience served as a gateway to other cultures. The data uncovered will build on new knowledge on the topic of divorce.

This research project contributes to the understanding of the experience of divorce in the Hmong community.

Literature Review

The review of the literature includes the topics of divorce and the impact on children, Hmong cultural context, and the experiences of Hmong children in the United States.

Divorce and Impact on Children

At the highest level of an intimate relationship, marriage is commonly the result. Within a relationship, usually comes a child. A strong healthy environment, surrounded by both parents, gives the child the best opportunity to develop properly. When this process is disrupted, there is often dysfunction. Early marital issues are the destructive building blocks that will have an impact on children down the line. Lack of commitment,

infidelity, and conflict or arguing are major factors that lead to divorce (Scott, Rhoades, Stanley, Allen, & Markman, 2013).

Divorce alters the life experiences of children of the United States of America. More than one million children experience parental divorce every year, and about 40% of all children will experience parental divorce before reaching adulthood (Amato, 2000). Relevant factors surrounding divorce include step parents as gate-keepers, permitting or not permitting biological father-child contact, and both biological parents shifting attention to new children and new marriage (Wallerstein, J. S., & Lewis, J. M., 2009). Most divorced mothers experience financial difficulties, along with emotional stress of divorce, combined with the responsibilities of being a parent to her children. A high number of mothers shift their focus from their children to bettering self for economic independence and building intimate romantic relationships. During this period of adjustment, adolescent children are likely to engage in troubling lifestyles (Wallerstein, J., Lewis, J., & Packer Rosenthal, S., 2013). As complex as this topic may be, it becomes even more multifaceted in the context of the Hmong culture.

Cultural Context

In traditional Hmong culture, the commitment to family caregiving has been deeply rooted; in contrast, the western culture encourages independence. A Hmong person belongs to a family, that family belongs to a clan, and the clan belongs to the Hmong people. The family is at the core of traditional Hmong society, and a typical household consists of people from several generations. The clan system is socially and culturally important. The family and kinship system are the backbone of the Hmong community, around which Hmong culture is organized. The Hmong recognize kinship

through the male line, and the household is the basic economic unit in the patriarchal Hmong social system (Yoshikawa, 2006). The Hmong male role model is essential to younger Hmong males in preserving and carrying on the Hmong tradition.

Today, many of the Hmong call the United States their new home. In the United States, English fluency can act as a barrier, which puts many Hmong at a disadvantage (Toft, Hollister, & Martin, 2013). There were positive correlations between many indices of social adjustment and both measures of English fluency (Westermeyer & Her, 1996). Hmong Americans had a very high unemployment rate, experienced many acculturation problems, and were among the poorest and most passive Asian Americans (Yang, 2003). The disconnection of a new ethnic group in a new environment also resulted in their offspring struggling to adjust.

Hmong Children in the United States

As for the early experiences of 1.5 generation (children born in Southeast Asia) and second-generation (children born in the United States) Hmong children, issues of adjusting to school and western culture were identified (Lee, 2001). For the Hmong children, many of them were torn between two different cultures. Hmong elders expect their children to preserve the Hmong culture by following traditional ways. The expectations for Hmong youth are to be fluent with the Hmong language, well versed in cultural practices such as formal etiquettes, and rituals. As for western culture, the sophisticated lifestyle of the youth in the United States consists of independence, brand name clothing, and speaking English. At home, they are not Hmong enough; in school, they are not American enough. They feel culturally despised by everyone, including the Hmong community and materially deprived in affluent American society (Austin &

Willard, 1998). This classic case of culture clash left many Hmong youth without a sense of identity. Lack of identity meant lack of belonging. Just like their parents, the Hmong children experienced their own disconnection from the dominant culture.

Purpose and Research Question

This research is intended to contribute to our understanding of the experience of divorce in the Hmong community. Specifically, the research explored these two questions: 1) What are the dynamics of divorce on Hmong children of divorced parents, whose parents divorced when they were a child, and 2) What factors have influenced their transition into adulthood?

Methodology

Research Design

The research design used in this study was qualitative research, specifically phenomenological research. The phenomenological procedures, according to Moustaka (2007), consist of identifying a phenomenon to study, bracketing out one's experiences, and collecting data from several persons who have experienced the phenomenon. The researcher then analyzes the data by reducing the information to significant statements or quotes and combines the statements into themes.

The sampling technique was purposive sampling. The sample size consisted of four young Hmong adults who experienced divorce of parents when they were children. Three variables were operationalized: age, divorce, and children. Young adult was defined as between the age of 18 and 25. Children were defined as being between 5 and 15 years old. Lastly, divorce was defined as the permanent separation of parents, whether they were married legally or culturally since many Hmong couples consummate

their marriage traditionally but not legally in the U.S. The primary means of data collection was semi-structured interview with audio recording. The participants were identified through the author's cultural ties to the Hmong community of Minneapolis and Saint Paul Minnesota. After the participants agreed to participate in the study, the participants signed a consent form that acknowledged the overall purpose and any potential risks of the study. To protect the identity of the participants, aliases were assigned to all participants and consent forms and audio recordings were filed away separately in secure places. The interviews took place within a private setting and lasted approximately sixty minutes. The specific interview questions included:

1. Describe your life before your parents divorced?
2. When did the divorce become a reality for you? How did you respond to the divorce?
3. Describe your life after your parents divorced?
4. How has your parent's divorce impacted your life as an adult?
5. Was there a significant event or person that impacted your life after your parents divorced?
6. Do you think being Hmong made your experience with divorce different from others?

Data Analysis

The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and initially uploaded into Nvivo software, a program used to analyze qualitative data. Due to technical issues, the analysis process changed to traditional pen and paper practice. Common themes shared by the participants were identified and then arranged conceptually. The process of interpretation was done through a persistent commitment of thorough review of the transcript. The analyzer engaged with the text until the experience was understood. The

idea was to capture the meaning behind the experience of the participant. (Smith, 2008). Some parts of the interview were richer than others and so warrant more commentary. Some of the comments were attempts at summarizing or paraphrasing, some were associations or connections that come to mind, and others were preliminary interpretations (Smith, 2008). After each text was analyzed, the common themes were classified.

Results

Major themes that surfaced from the four interviews of adult children of divorced parents are disadvantages, emotional reaction, role models, maturity/independence, and cultural implications and are organized by research question.

The Dynamics of Divorce on Hmong Children

The themes that surfaced in relation to the dynamics of divorce on Hmong children included the increasing disadvantages they experienced and their shifting emotions.

Increasing disadvantages.

Three of the four participants identified the deficiency of money as one of those disadvantages. For Mai, this meant that she had to take on more obligations even as a child. “I think we as kids, we had to take on more responsibilities. Like, it was more um, we had to be the other half for my mom. Translating, helping her find jobs, working ourselves, helping with the household. Like income for the household or cleaning up doing chores around the house.”

Cher and Seng shared similar experiences. “It was very hard because money has always been an issue in my family, and my mom worked very hard to put food on the

table,” “I mean, we were poor and we didn’t have any income. We only had one income coming in so, I mean yeah, we had less.”

A disadvantage that was identified by one participant was the lack of academic support because his father was not present. Seng believes that the absence of his father shaped his struggling academic career. “Let’s see, I guess not having a father determined my outcome in school.” Interviewer, “How so?” Seng, “Well, because there is nobody there to help me.”

Shifting emotions.

With such a sensitive topic, emotions were expressed. Tou shared his experience of how he felt in the absence of his father. “Well, when I was younger, I say about eight years old when I started realizing that things around me existed. I started to see my dad with another woman and another family. And I saw my mom alone lots of nights and lots of days and that really, it made me feel, I didn’t know what the feeling was but now that I’m older I understand it was an emptiness, it was something missing while growing up. So that affected me at an early age. I was eight.”

Divorce had an unhealthy impact on Cher. “I was an angry kid for a long time. It took me a while to get rid of the hatred I had towards my dad for not being there for me and my family.” But it was also a healthy change “I always thought that my family would be okay without my dad. At that time, I was glad that I didn’t see my dad as much anymore. I guess I responded to the divorce by being happy that my dad was out of my life.”

Factors that have influenced their Transition into Adulthood

The themes that surfaced in relation to the factors that have influenced their transition into adulthood included the presence or absence of role models, maturity/independence, and cultural implications

Presence or absence of role models.

Role models, or the lack there of, was a common subject matter that surfaced during the interview. For Tou, by default, he followed in his older brother's footsteps and thought it was the norm. "I always thought I was living right. Until I started analyzing my family, my brothers and sisters and I saw that a lot of my older brothers weren't living like how, or weren't handling their family situations like how other men would. And I look back at how my dad was never there for them and I felt like that reflected a lot of their personalities and a lot of their ways of doing things. Analyzing my older brothers. I felt like that was the right thing. As I got older, I saw that that wasn't how you're supposed to be doing things. And I felt like I was on the same path. But now that I recognize that, I'm doing okay."

Cher expected his father to be his role model but because his father was not in the picture, he did not look elsewhere for guidance. "After my parent's divorce, as I got older I then realized how much the absence of my father while growing up affected me. I was a rebel without a cause. As a teen I hung out with my friends all the time, and did things I wasn't supposed to be doing. I didn't have a father figure in my life so I kind of just did whatever I wanted."

For Seng, he looked to his older brothers as father figure since his father was absent from the role. "As far as I can remember, my dad has been in and out of the house. I

guess I've looked up to my older brother as a father figure, try to follow in their footsteps."

Cultural implications.

All interviewees identified cultural implications as a result of divorce and the reaction from the family clan. This is Tou's perspective on the issue, "They always think that you are not going to grow up to be someone successful. And growing up, I've always had that, I always had older, other Hmong parents talk down on me, my family, my mom, my dad."

Mai stated, "You are from a divorce [sic] family so people kind of look down on you like, oh, something bad happened between you and your parents so you're scarred or something so it, you just kind of walk around like you are scarred and people didn't want to be around you kind of, especially the older people."

Cher stated, "Yes, I think so because of our culture mostly views children with divorced parents as if they will follow in their parents footsteps. Automatically the family is considered shameful and unwanted."

Seng shares an actual experience and then he gives his perspective on the absence of his father. "I guess in the Hmong culture, we do this thing called *ua neeb* and my aunt from my mom's side had threw a party and I guess at the time, my grandma from my mom's side was over too, and while hanging out with my cousins and them, I guess she came out and grabbed them and told me and my siblings to step away because we have no father." Seng continues, "In the Hmong culture, a divorced woman is, she is looked down upon because she is divorced. She is deemed somebody who is not worth anything

and it made it hard because my mom is just a woman and what could we do? Even though we live in the United States, we are still following the Hmong culture.”

Maturity and independence.

Three of the participants thought divorce had a positive impact on their transition into adulthood. Divorce left Tou in poverty but he learned to appreciate the important things and to give back to the less fortunate. “I’ve always felt that when you don’t have much, you see the world from a different angle than the people that has a lot and it kind of makes you give more to the people that don’t have much.”

For Mai and Seng, divorce meant that they had to grow up faster than her peers but it was a blessing in disguise, “I think the hard thing about it was that we had to grow up so fast and we had to know responsibility very fast. That was the hard thing but at the same time I thought that was a positive thing too because it made you aware of what adulthood was, and responsibility.”

Seng shares Mai’s positive gain, “I think I matured faster than I should, than if I were to have, or if my parents weren’t divorced yet. It taught me a lot. It taught me a lot about how to be independent and not depend on others, I guess.”

Discussion

Dynamics and Factors Consistent with Common Experiences

Many of the dynamics expressed by the interviewees seemed consistent with common experiences of children whose parents become divorced. These include increasing disadvantages and shifting emotional responses. For all of the participants in the study, divorce led to financial difficulties for their household. Some found themselves taking on more mature roles by joining the workforce to fill the void of the missing

parent's presence. In one case, one of the participants believed he was academically disadvantaged because his father was not available. This participant felt that the additional help outside of the classroom was non-existent and resulted in his academic struggles. The participants also described shifting emotional reactions to the divorce. At least one of the participants expressed emptiness as his emotional reaction when he recalled that something was missing during his parent's divorce.

The participants also described impacts on their transition into adulthood, which appear to be typical. These include the presence or absence of role models, and early maturity and independence. Regarding role models, they described either not having a role model such as a father figure or having dysfunctional older brothers to look to for guidance. A third type of role model was described as being neither good or bad. The participant just simply stated that he looked up to his older brothers because his father was not present.

Lastly, all of the participants shared that the divorce, although negative at first, helped them mature at a faster pace and helped shape their character in a strong sense.

Dynamics and Factors Particular to being Hmong

The participants identified many dynamics and factors which were particular to being Hmong. One common experience was the feeling as if they were marked as inferior, especially due to the mother being devalued as a result of divorce. They described this as being talked down upon or treated as inferior by an elder speaking or treating the participants and their parents in a condescending manner.

The participants also talked about the increasing responsibilities they had, especially regarding translating. Many children were expected to translate English to Hmong for their parents and this was just exacerbated after the divorce.

Limitations

There were many limitations to this research, particularly relating to sample size and the method of phenomenological research. The small sample size is consistent with phenomenological research, but limits the scope of understanding. Also, the research cannot be used to generalize the population but instead is intended to understand a unique group's experience.

There interview questions seemed relevant, but did not capture the whole experience. Participants were encouraged to only reveal what they were comfortable with sharing. There are still deeper issues that remained private because of the personal and psychological ramifications.

Another limitation was the lack of published work on the Hmong culture. This made it especially difficult to confirm many cultural norms. It also appears that this issue is only relevant to early generation Hmong families and those that still choose to follow the Hmong culture in the United States. As the Hmong start to acculturate and assimilate to western culture, the more these issues particular to the Hmong community will start to disappear.

Lastly, language was a limitation due to the fact that not all Hmong words or ideas can be articulated in English. To accommodate this, the researcher conducted part of the interview in Hmong when it seemed to be appropriate and useful.

Future Considerations

This study can be used as a building block in continuing the research on the topic of divorce and children and can focus on addressing questions that remain after this study. For example, many of the participants were still puzzled by why their parents decided to divorce so future research might focus on the parents of Hmong children. Future studies could also look at the early generations and their issues compared to the newer acculturated or assimilated generations. A study of this magnitude deserves the proper time, funding, dedication in order for this experience to be fully understood. Lastly, this study may also become the gateway to future studies on they dynamics within other cultures or lifestyles.

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