Coping with Parental Divorce: A Study of Adolescents in A Collectivist Culture of Malaysia

Melati Sumari, Sarada Devi R. Subramaniam & Norfaezah Md Khalid


To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2019.1679595

Published online: 19 Oct 2019.

Article views: 37

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Coping with Parental Divorce: A Study of Adolescents in A Collectivist Culture of Malaysia

Melati Sumari, Sarada Devi R. Subramaniam, and Norfaezah Md Khalid

Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

ABSTRACT
This study uses a phenomenological approach to explore how adolescents cope with parental divorce. A total of 15 participants aged 16 to 17 were selected for the interviews. The participant's daily activities were monitored for 12 months with the support of social media. Six themes emerged from the collected data: (1) Forgiving of parents; (2) Accepting parental divorce, (3) Maintaining contact with both parents, (4) emotional support from others, (5) Letting it go and moving forward with life, and (6) Appreciating the parent-child relationship. The study provides an insight into the characteristics of adolescents in divorced families, and how they maintain strong, healthy relationships with their parents following a divorce. The study is based on the actual experiences of the participants, and the findings raise awareness about how children are still able to maintain a good relationship with both parents despite the negative impact of parental divorce. The results of the study can also be used as a benchmark by family practitioners on how to help divorced families and promote healthy and functional parent-child relationships.

KEYWORDS
Adolescents; collectivism; phenomenology; parental divorce; social media; coping

Introduction
As divorce comes with an ambiguous loss, children of divorced parents often experience an unclear traumatic pain which can last for a lifetime (Czapiewski, 2014). When custody is given to one parent, it physically detaches the other parent toward leaving the family (Cancian, Meyer, Brown, & Cook, 2014; Votruba, Braver, Ellman, & Fabricius, 2014). This detachment will eventually affect the relationship between parents and children (Amato, 2014). The severity of the detachment becomes worse in many cases due to other consequences of divorce like changing schools or living environments which in many cases can take the child far away from the non-custody parents (Amato, 2014; Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014).

Past studies revealed that the consequence of divorce and the deterioration of the parent-child relationship could lead to intense feelings of grief in children (Bistamam et al., 2015; Clark, 2013; Czapiewski, 2014; Gierveld &
Merz, 2013). According to Czapiewski (2014), children are often more affected by the divorce than their parents, but the decision making is controlled by the adults in the legal dissolution of a marriage. The ending of marriage creates a massive change in the lives of children, and they yield very little power (Amato, 2014; Anderson, 2014). The absence of one parent and living alone with the other can create an environment lacking in parental care and love (Amato, 2014; Tartari, 2015). As the children’s world is fully connected with their parents, parental divorce is a traumatic stressor, and it reframes the parent and child relationship (Amato, 2014; Anderson, 2018).

With regards to adolescents, with age, they distance themselves from their parents and rely more on peer influence (Noller & Callan, 2015). Similarly, Hasim, Juliza, Mustafa, and Hashim (2015) conducted a phenomenology exploration on the new patterns of communication during marital conflict in Malaysia. According to Hasim et al., dysfunctional parent-child relationships can increase the chances that adolescents may turn to crime or have problems with addiction.

Although divorce is a traumatic experience for children, there are coping strategies that many use to help them to face the challenges. Some studies focused on coping methods used by adolescents in divorced families. Problem-focused coping and positive reframing is believed to lower the risk of mental health issues (Sandler, Tein, Mehta, Wolchik, & Ayers, 2000). A quantitative study conducted by Afifi, Huber, and Ohs (2006) revealed that ways of communication between adolescents and their parents were positively related to children’s ability to cope positively with parental divorce. Likewise, Plooy and Rensburg (2015) used a phenomenology research design and interviewed 15 young adults using the semi-structured retrospective interview to explore their experience of dealing with the divorce of parents when they were in their childhood and adolescence stages. Similar to Afifi et al.’s findings, Plooy and Rensburg also found that effective communication was a valuable coping strategy. Identical to Plooy and Rensburg’s methodology, Simonič and Klobučar (2017) also used phenomenological analysis to understand the coping experience of eleven participants with their positive religious experiences.

The purpose of this study is to understand the coping abilities of adolescents after their parents’ divorce. Hence, the study draws upon phenomenological methodology to gain an in-depth understanding of the living experience of adolescents in divorced families. It is believed that the phenomenological approach will be the most rational choice of methodology because the study is mainly interested in understanding the living experience of the participants. Furthermore, the goal of the research is to answer the research question based on the participants’ own experience. Therefore, the usage of phenomenological approach provides an opportunity to describe and understand the structures of experience (Neisser, 1959) of adolescents to
express what they experienced using their own words. By using the phenomenological approach, this study fills a literature gap in understanding the insight regarding some of the coping strategies used by adolescents through description of experience provided by the subjects in question.

**Malaysian context**

In Malaysia divorce is a significant change that has contributed to demographic changes in Malaysian society (Evans, 2011; Roddin, Sidi, Yusof, Mohamed, & Razzaq, 2011), and there has been a steady increase in divorce in Malaysia (Fifth Malaysian Population and Family Survey, 2014). In a collectivist culture of Malaysia, maintaining marriage and family relationships is strongly encouraged. Generally, collectivist society puts a strong emphasis on the importance of marriage (Schwartz, 1994) and family is considered as a fundamental unit, that connects individuals to their society (Minh Thi, 2016) Consequently, divorce, which ends the formal marriage tie, is perceived as a social taboo because it may bring negative impacts on the people involved. Kassim (2007) noted that divorced women are subjected to stereotypes and prejudice and are judged as having failed to take care of their husband and family.

A limited number of studies has been conducted in Malaysia since the past ten years (2009–2019) to examine the issues related to parental divorce and its impact on adolescents. For example, Esmaeili, Yaacob, Juhari, and Mansor (2012) studied the effects of post-divorce familial conflicts on adolescents and found that the disputes were related to delinquency in adolescents. Mahmud, Yunn, Aziz, Salleh, and Amat (2011) used creative intervention to understand the emotional experience of children in divorced families. Ismail, Wan Ibrahim, and Asyraf (2014) used content analysis method to study divorce trends. In the most recent study, Abdul Ghani et al. (2017), also focused on the trends and factors that have contributed to the increased rate of divorce in northern Malaysia. No recent studies have been conducted to explore adolescents’ coping strategies in facing their parental divorce. This study investigates the coping mechanisms used by adolescents when faced with the divorce of their parents. Although separation is perceived negatively in a collectivist culture like Malaysia, the researchers are motivated to understand how some adolescents cope with parental divorce despite the negative findings of past research.

**Methodology**

**Participants**

In accordance to the need to explore the personal experiences of adolescents regarding how they cope with parental divorce, participants were recruited
using purposive sampling. Using this procedure, two non-governmental organizations that support the wellbeing of single mothers and their families were contacted. These two NGOs are Janagima Welfare Association of Selangor and Sai Shine Association of Kajang. They were informed about the study and the sampling criteria. The sampling criteria required participants to be adolescents with a minimum 2 years since the time of parental divorce. All participants were also required to be still studying and depending on their parents for various support. In other words, they could not be self-sufficient. There were 23 potential participants provided in the list. Only 15 adolescents met the criteria and were then selected. In terms of gender, there were seven male participants and eight female participants, and in terms of ethnicity, there were five Malay, five Chinese and five Indian participants. To obtain quality and descriptive information, only those aged 16 to 17 were selected for the study. All participants live under the custody of their mothers and have a minimum of two years living in a single parent family. Aside from gender and ethnicity, the sample is homogenous in the sense that they share similar family backgrounds and come from divorced families.

**Design**

The study used a phenomenological approach to explore how adolescents cope with their parents’ divorce. Groenewald (2004) described the core principles of phenomenological research and illustrated the usage of phenomenological methodology. In this literature, the origin of phenomenology was traced back to the philosophical method of phenomenology by Edmund Husserl (1859 – 1938). The research method used in this study refers to the term phenomenology and hermeneutics. Therefore, the study follows “The Dutch (Utrecht) school of phenomenology” which has the combination of descriptive and interpretive phenomenology (Dowling & Cooney, 2012).

Data were collected in the form of interviews and analysis of social media documents. Triangulation technique was used on the collected data to verify the information on the relationships between adolescents and divorced parents. Bracketing was used throughout the process to avoid conclusions being biased or influenced by preconceptions on the phenomena. The researchers’ own judgment on the coping abilities of participants was bracketed to give space for the researchers to freely interpret the findings. Similarly, the findings and theories from previous research was also bracketed to prevent the collected data from being twisted by the researchers’ potentially biased interpretations. The process of bracketing starts with the researchers listing down all their personal biases, past experiences and the knowledge of the researcher on the adolescent coping skills after parental divorce. Following this knowledge audit, the listed biases were made into a bracketed journal and was carried by the researcher throughout the process of the research to note down any sense of bias that may arise in the mind of
the researcher. To ensure the reliability and trustworthiness of the research, the process of data analysis fully depended on the words and evidence collected from the participants. The dominant assumptions from the personal experience of the researchers was cleared through bracketing to increase the validity and objectivity regarding the phenomena under study.

**Procedure**

It was vital to ensure all adolescents willingly participated in the study, so all participants were briefed on the implications and consequences of the interview. Informed consent forms were signed that gave permission for the interviews. Ethical approval was obtained from the NGO’s. Because the researchers are affiliated with the University of Malaya, the study was also approved by the University Malaya Research Ethics Committee.

**Interview**

Each interview was conducted for between 45 minutes to an hour. The recorded interviews were converted into verbatim and transcribed immediately. Interviews took place over five to seven months. During the interviews, reflective notes to document any non-verbal behaviors of participants that may require more exploration were taken. The reflective notes were also used to probe research participants. Probing is a technique used to generate further explanation from the participants. For example, if participants appear tired, that helps researchers to investigate activities like sports and leisure activities. Participants were interviewed until the data is saturated.

The interview questions used in this research were subject to the guidance of the interview protocol. Questions asked during the interview referred to the interview protocol to ensure the consistency of findings and support their reliability across informants. In general, the interview questions in this study went through four stages. In the first stage, questions were asked to recall the participants’ lived experiences before their parents’ divorce. Questions such as “Did your parents fight often before the divorce?” or “What were causes of their fighting?”. These questions identified the negativity and positivity of parental divorce toward the living experiences of the participants. The second stage of the interview questions refers to the living experience of participants after the parents’ divorce. Examples of questions at this stage are “Did you move to a new neighborhood after the divorce?” or “How did the change of living environment affect you?”. At this stage, the researchers were able to identify the extent to which the participants were coping with the changes brought on by divorce. Questions during the third stage refer to the current living experience of the participants. Among the questions asked in this stage were “Do you have a lot of friends around your neighborhood?” or “Are you happy with your current house?”. These questions help to identify the
satisfaction of participants with their current life and their ability to accept the changes after their parents’ divorce. The final stage of the interview gave participants the opportunity to express any of their living experience that was not discussed during the interview. Generally, participants were allowed to speak freely by asking “Is there anything else you would like to tell me?”.

Document analysis

The fact that all the participants use smartphones allowed researchers to penetrate further in understanding the role of social media in their lives. For 12 months, the social media habits of the participants were examined to monitor their lifestyles through looking at their Instagram, Twitter and Facebook posts. In this study all participants are active users of social media. From observing social media usage of research participants, raw data related to the lifestyle and coping abilities of the participants were collected. These data come in the form of text messages, voice messages, images and videos. Close monitoring was done by capturing Instagram stories and Facebook stories as the participants uploaded images and videos with comments about their daily lifestyle. Social media data in this study was filtered based on the number of shares, likes, impressions, hashtag usage, followers and comments insofar as they were related to the coping ability of the participants.

Monitoring text messages of participants revealed a better explanation regarding the participants’ living experiences because most adolescents feel more comfortable in opening up about their emotions online (Wood, Bukowski, & Lis, 2016). Similarly, monitoring voice messages on social media gives the privilege for the researcher to understand the emotions of the participant based on their tone of voice. Pictures and videos uploaded by participants on their social media accounts or blogs are reliable sources of data, which is an evidence of the participants’ satisfaction toward their life. These data also revealed some information on the participants’ living experiences that were not discussed during the interview. Relevant data collected from social media were triangulated with the data from the interviews to have an in-depth understanding of the adolescents’ coping skills after parental divorce.

Data analysis

The researchers organized and analyzed the verbatim transcription of the data using NVIVO 11 software. The use of NVIVO 11 enables inductively coding the transcripts and adds to the reliability of the findings. The researchers read the transcripts multiple times to get familiar with each participant and interview. The significant phrases were identified and evaluated to create a pattern of combining clusters of meaning in the process of
creating themes, also known as “axial coding”. For example, phrases such as “Letting it go” was clustered into a group of similar phrases such as “moving on with my own life”. Because the identified themes in this study describe various facets that occurred on the dataset, subthemes that branch out from the main theme were created by the researchers. The outcome of the study to answer the research questions was developed from an analytic framework which combines the themes with the specific elements from each subtheme.

The raw data from social media was also triangulated with the data collected from the interviews. Combining social media data with the data collected from the interviews provided a balance in understanding the actual coping abilities of the participants after their parents’ divorce.

In the process of coding, external checks were done among the researchers in providing an alternative perspective on the coded data. Any discrepancies in the coded data was referred back to the original interview transcript to ensure coding accuracy. Textural and structural description was developed from the emerged themes to convey detailed explanations about the lived experiences of the participants and answering the research questions.

**Reliability and validity**

The findings of this research have good reliability and validity because the collected data went through the process of triangulation, member-checking, and peer-review. In the triangulation process, the researchers used multiple sources to gain a more in-depth understanding of the data. Besides conducting face to face interviews, very close monitoring of social media was carried out for 12 months. The daily postings on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, account were observed and triangulated with the data collected from the interviews.

The research describes triangulation as an on-going procedure throughout the process of data analysis. Generally, the research had three different phases of triangulation. In the first phase, data triangulation was conducted by examining data collected using the same method from different participants. At this phase the researchers extracted important words, phrases or statements made by the participants.

In the second phase, data collected from different sources was triangulated. At this phase, the data from the interview was meshed with the data from social media and field notes. Comparison of data from different sources gave a more detailed description of the participants’ living experience as the findings are supported by personal video clips, images and voice recordings. The study identified that participants share more personal information on social media during the twelve-month monitoring period compared with the personal one-to-one interview, which only lasted for one hour thirty minutes for each session. In the second phase, triangulation was conducted in two
different stages. The first stage of triangulation was data collected from the same participants but from different sources. The second stage of triangulation was integration of data from different participants and different sources.

The final phase of triangulation was the “investigator triangulation”. At this phase, each researcher conducted their own data analysis. The interpretation of each analysis was recorded and compared during the triangulation. In general, the concept of triangulation was to improve on the reliability and validity of the findings. By keeping these in mind, the researchers cleared their own theoretical understanding and interpretation of the data throughout the process of triangulation. Therefore, a pluralistic approach was used by the researchers to seek a balance in understanding the living experience while comparison was made during the process of triangulation.

Member-checking, which is where researchers check that the data gathered from participants is accurate, was also conducted with the participants’ post-interview stage. Participants were encouraged to give feedback on the findings and add more information if necessary.

A peer-review was carried out with two professionals in a qualitative research field. By giving the interpretation of research findings for peer-review, the accuracy, reliability, creditability and validity of the study were ensured.

**Results**

Based on the data collected a total of six themes were identified that are indicative of the relationship between adolescents and divorced parents. The semantic topics were used to add extra depth to the data concerning the research question. The six themes that emerged from the data are as follows: (a) Forgiving of parents; (b) Accepting parental divorce; (c) Maintaining contact with both parents; (d) emotional support from others; (e) Letting it go and moving forward with life; and (f) Appreciating the parent-child relationship. Responses of participants during the interview and participants’ uploads on social media were quoted to validate the finding from the themes. Similarly, these quotes were grouped according to the data’s relevance to answering the research question. Therefore, the quotes in this study were interpreted to be exemplary of adolescent coping with parental divorce in Malaysia. Significant quotes used in answering the themes and research question was set as an example in explaining a rich and detail description on the participants living experience. Descriptive statements provided by the respondents about their experiences with coping with parental divorce are provided to illustrate the categories discovered through inductive analysis. Participants did not always stay on topic and the usability of interview transcript content varied from one participant to another. What is provided
in this article may be considered illustrative of primary themes, but not exhaustive in an effort to minimize repetition.

**Forgiving of parents**

Parental divorce is a traumatic experience for many children, and the consequences of divorce can have many negative impacts on the emotional development and lifestyle a child. In this research, most participants claimed that they were miserable when their parents divorced. They experienced a lot of changes to their living environment, and their emotional state was also affected. The participants all stated that they were upset and confused during the early stage of their parent’s divorce, but as they grew older, they accepted the reasons for the divorce. Hence, all participants claimed that they had forgiven their parents and now accept their divorce. Illustrating statements from the interview by participants related to the forgiving of their parents are provided below:

“I was only eleven when my parents divorced. I hated to have to go to Kedah (my hometown) and leave my childhood friends. I cried, but nobody cared. I was very angry with my mother and father. During that time my mother was always crying. I was confused and angry, but I could not show it because my mother was so upset. How could I show it? Now I understand why my parents divorced. My father was into drugs, so, my mother was scared for us. She asked for a divorce and moved far away for our safety. She made the right decision, and I already forgave her. Yes, I still talk to my father, and he is not like that anymore. Although I was angry when I was young, now I know my parents want me to be safe, and I have forgiven them”

Another participant commented about how she has forgiven her father:

“I believe past is past. For me, we just move on with life. So, for me, my parents’ happiness is very important. That’s why I call my step mother mama. I see her like my own mother. I am happy to see my father and mother living a happier life on their own way”

Similarly, on social media, the participants also came up with short phrases or captions which were related to their ability to forgive their parents. Generally, most participants encouraged their parents to move on with their life. Among the social media phrases and captions which supported the subtheme are;

“Move on with your life Dad. Call your friends out” – Instagram caption with a picture of his father with his school friends”.

“Will always pray for your happiness” – Phrases under a picture of a child praying for her parents in Facebook story.
**Accepting parental divorce**

The ability of participants to forgive their parents is linked with their acceptance of the divorce. Despite the negative implications of divorce, most participants accepted their parents’ divorce positively. The participants claimed that before the separation their parents were always fighting, or that they were living in fear. These factors both improved following the divorce, and the participants believe that their house is peaceful at present. The participants also stated that both parents are now happier and are moving on with their own lives. Seeing their parents happy, the participants believed that divorce was ultimately the right choice for them.

“Before the divorce, my father and mother always fought. Sometimes my father beat my mother. I had to hear the beating sound. So, I would bring my two sisters, young sisters to the room. I didn’t want them to see the fight. Now they don’t fight. My father still comes to our house, and my mother still talks to him. But I don’t see them fighting. Although I miss him, it’s ok. At least they are happier now. Anyway, in Islam, we don’t question our parents’ decision. We follow what they say. If they say they want to get divorced, we accept their decision. Of course, if I had a choice, I would want to stay with both parents, but I know they are happier now. They don’t fight anymore, so that is important for me. I think my parents made the right choice.”

Another participant said that she has accepted her parents’ decision because she believes it is in line with her religious teaching. She was quoted as saying:

“In Islam, we always respect our parents’ decision. We don’t question them back. So if they decide to get divorce, we children just respect their decision. So for me I accept their decision and I am not angry with them”

Acceptance of parental divorce was identified on social media through the good relation the participants had with their stepmother and siblings. It was identified that most of the step-sibling follow and comment on each other in social media. Among the statements related to “accepting parental divorce” on social media are;

“Merry Christmas Sis. Trying to contact Dad. Is he there?” – WhatsApp massage sent by a participant to her stepsister.

“My family” – Caption under a family picture taken with stepmother and siblings on an Instagram story.

“Congratulation Mom. My love to the new born sister” – hashtag on Twitter.

**Maintaining contact with both parents**

All participants in the study admitted that they are still in touch with both parents. As all the participants are living with their mothers, the focus was
placed on their relationship with their fathers. In the early days, the participants hardly met or talked, but in the last few years, they have all agreed to speak to their fathers again. Although they do not always meet physically, most participants keep in touch through social media. Most participants claim that their fathers also show interest in their progress and still view or comment on their posts. Similarly, most participants stated that their fathers send voice messages or make video call whenever they miss them. Statements illustrating the contact with both parents are provided below.

“After the divorce, my sister and I always cried because we missed our father. My father would come home to see us maybe twice a month. He gave us money, played with us, then he left, and we would cry again (laugh). Nowadays it’s different. My father video calls us every day. We use WhatsApp. He doesn’t like chatting so he video calls to see our face, hear our voice. He also comes home every week. Sometimes twice a week. He says he misses us”.

Another participant said:

“….my father video call us every day. Sometimes he even speaks to my mother. My father always calls and ask if I have enough money. He pays for my tuition fee and house rental. He still helps me and my mother in many ways”

“Maintaining contact with both their parents” were very visible on social media as participants keep updating and posting their activities with parents. Among the social media statement which supports the theme are;

“Lunch with dad, dinner with mom” – Instagram caption posted under a collaged picture of having lunch and dinner.

“Already at airport. Take care Dad. Call you later after arrival” – A WhatsApp massage sent to a father from the airport with a picture of the participant with his mother.

Emotional support from others

The participants also stated that they spoke about parental divorce to people other than their parents. For example, 12 out of 15 participants have met with counselors. In the early stage of parental divorce, most of the participants had strained relationships with their parents resulting from the changes to their lives. However, this group of participants managed to handle the negative implications of divorce with the support of coping strategies introduced by their counselors. The participants confessed that they experienced complicated emotions after their parent’s divorce. Therefore, it was a valuable healing experience to meet someone who understood their feelings and the complications they faced. The statements related to accepting emotional support from counselors are as follows:
“Yes. I saw a counselor. When I was young, I used to see him often, but now I see him less. Of course it helps. Counselors are professionals, and when they talk, they know what they are talking about, and I feel good talking to them. Emotionally you feel relieved talking to them ... you know; sometimes they do other things to create joy while talking. Like when I was young, my counselor took me to a room full of toys while talking to me. I never understood why, but I just followed the flow. Now as I grow older, I came to know that there is this thing known as play therapy (laugh).”

Beside counselors, participants also gain emotional support from friends and neighbors. Example of participants’ statements are:

“I always talk to my friends about my problems. They are my friends from primary school. They know me from young, so the know how to calm me down”

“my neighbours, they are more like my own family. They treat me like their own child. Sometimes when I have a problem, I will talk to them. They always try to help. I am lucky to have neighbours like them.”

Through social media it was identified that the participants also received emotional support from their friends and counselors. Among the social media captions and postings related “emotional support from others” are;

“Me & my coach” – Instagram caption under a picture taken by participant with his counsellor in school during performance.

“Thanks for being there when I needed you the most” – Hashtag on Twitter with a picture of participant hugging a group of friends.

“Happy moments” – Facebook story with pictures of participant celebrating birthday with friends.

Letting it go and moving forward with life

The study identified that all participants are reluctant to dwell on memories and have their own lives to manage. Most agree that worrying about the past is not going to help them. Moreover, the participants have already adjusted to the changes brought by divorce, and most are confident that their parents are living a happier life after the divorce. Therefore, the participants agreed that it is best to leave the memories behind and move forward to plan for their future. The participants also confessed that their relationship with their parents is not as intense as before. As the usage of mobile technology and social media have become a standard way to stay connected, it has improved the relationship between children of divorced parents. An example of letting it go and moving on with life is provided below:

“Nope, being sad all the time is not right. Of course, I was sad at the time when my parents divorced. But it’s over now; I think it is normal to be sad when parents’ divorce, but you can’t ruin your whole life being sad and thinking why they divorced right? It’s time for me to move on. I have my own life, you know. I have to think
about what I am going to do and so on ... I am not the same small kid who used to cry. I know that my life has a different path and I have to start my journey. So, I have to stop worrying about my parents and think more about what I am going to do after my schooling life. Besides, they are happy now. Living their own lives in their way. So why would I want to be sad? It is better that I move on with my own life."

Another participant was quoted as saying how she learns to move on with her life:

“I and my mother are happy now. But actually, both of us are very busy with our life. For me, I wake up early and go to school, then I have my sports and other school activities. In the evening, I have tuition. So I have no time to think and worry about my past.”

Most participants in this study completed their high school and are on the verge of enrolling in a college or university. On social media, their posting on Twitter and captions on Instagram pertaining their university life describes the ability of participants to move on with their life. Relevant postings and captions on social media related to “Letting it go and moving forward” are as follows;

“Bye! Bye! school, UTM here I come” – Hashtag on Twitter with a collage picture of a participant in front of his old school with a picture of the participant at the entrance of University Technology Malaysia (UTM).

“Dream come true” – caption on Instagram post and pictures of participant seating in a lecture room of University Malaya in Instagram story.

Appreciating the parent-child relationship

All participants shared their opinion on their current relationship with their parents. Most believe that they have a significant relationship. Even as adolescents the participants claimed that they miss their parents from time to time, and spending time with either of their parents means a lot to them.

“I am a Muslim, and I pray for my parents every day because in Islam the parent-child relationship is always number one. It is very, very important. Next to Allah because when we were babies, they protect us, give us food and clothes. For me, this relationship is very important. A person must respect and help their parents all the time.”

Another participant shared about the good relationship between the parents even though that they are divorced.

“Although my parents have divorced, they still take good care of me. My father gives me monthly allowance and pays for my tuition fee. He even pays for our house rental and the car. My mother, also gives me monthly allowance. They always have time when I need something from them. They are good parents”
Similarly, on social media many participants related their emotions and gratitude toward their parents upon moving into campus life at University. Among the appreciating statements posted by participants on social media are:

“Thanks mama, thanks papa. Thanks for all the support. Missing you” – posted by a participant on Facebook with a picture of his college background and a love emoji.

The participants believed that their attitude toward their parents has also changed over the years. It seems that the participants undertook more responsibility toward house chores because they knew that their mothers were tired after work. Similarly, most participants who helped with the house chores claimed that their parents treated them like adults and appreciated their efforts in helping them with the housework.

“Nowadays my father comes and sees us every week. Mostly on Sunday mornings, we always go for breakfast or watch a movie. My mother won’t come to breakfast, but she sometimes joins us going to the cinema, and everyone is very happy. Sometimes when I am very happy, I also cry. I feel thrilled if I go out with my father and mother together”.

On social media, there were many pictures of participants doing house chores together with their parent. Among the statement related to participant being responsible are:

“Helping mom in kitchen” – caption of a picture in Instagram when a participant and his mother taking a selfie in kitchen while cooking.

“Together we can do it” – a hashtag picture on Twitter of participant cleaning a storeroom with his father.

The age factor may also be one of the reasons why this group of participants appreciate their parents more. Most are aware that in future they need to leave their homes to pursue further studies or a career. The upcoming detachment is also a critical factor in why they value every moment of being with their parents.

Well, after my Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), which is a national exam for secondary 5 students in public schools’ results, I am applying for nautical studies. So, I will most likely be based in Alam, Melaka or Singapore. I will wait and see who makes me an offer first. But for sure I know, I won’t be in Malaysia forever. Nautical study means working on a ship and travelling the seas. So nowadays, I always spend a lot of time with my mother. I know she also misses me. My father, well we do go out once in a while for tea or lunch. He gives all the manly advice, and I listen to make him happy. But it is more with my mother. I am more attached to her.
“I don’t choose sides. For me, they are my parents and I love them. Of course I spend more time with my mother because I stay with her. But whenever I get a chance to meet my father, I will always go and see him.”

On social media there were postings that relate the participant’s emotion missing their parents. Statements and posting of participants missing their parents are;

“Memories are a timeless treasure of the heart” – posted on Facebook stories with pictures taken with parents

“Some memories never fade” – Instagram caption with a picture of a participant hugging her mother.

**Discussion**

Wilkinson, Basto, Perovic, Lawrentschuk, and Murphy (2015) highlighted the revolution of social media which changed individual’s way of living from the way we receive news, conducting business, education method and the way relationship is being conducted. This statement supports Giedd (2012) who commented on the differences faced by adolescents born in the last 15 years in the way they learn and interact compared to 570 years ago when Gutenberg popularized the printing press. Similarly, this study is related to previous literature on the development of mobile technology and the importance of social media in the daily life of adolescents. Therefore, the study uses social media as a part of its data triangulation. The participant’s daily lifestyle was monitored using Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook for 12 months. Social media information was triangulated through a cross verification with data from the interviews.

During the 12-months of social media monitoring, the study identified that most adolescents have a good relationship with their non-custody parents. Although parental divorce creates a physical gap between adolescent and one of the parents, the existence of social media allows parents to follow the progress of their child. These findings differ from other studies from the 20th century such as Hetherington, (1978), Burns (1981) and Furstenberg and Nord (1985) which concluded that over time the non-custodial parents are less present in a child’s life. Most adolescents in this study confessed that their non-custodial fathers still support them financially and that they are aware of the needs of their children and cooperate in their development. However, this study identified that the modernization of communication technology through social media and the large expansion of smartphones has helped to overcome the barriers faced by non-custodial parents and allow for more contact with their children.

Most participants in this study maintained contact with their non-custodial parents through video calls and voice messages. They also uploaded selfies, progress and achievements on social media which are seen by both
parents. This study agrees with Du Plooy and Van Rensburg’s (2015) ideas on the difficulties that adolescents face in forgiving their parents during the early stage of a divorce. However, as time passes they mature and develop more self-awareness, which allows them to forgive their parents.

Although the adolescents were in a state of shock after the divorce, they were able to adapt due to the counseling support they received. Adolescents confessed that counseling empowered them to reason in forgiving their parents and raised their self-esteem to resolve the adverse effects of divorce. Moreover, the study identified that the current generation of adolescents wishes to have a good relationship with both their parents. As such, they avoid conversations on divorce. The study also identified adolescents that claimed that divorce was their parents’ choice and they do not wish to question their decision. These findings fit well with Yárnoz-Yaben and Garmendia (2016) who highlighted that the current generation of adolescents generally wants to stay out of their parent’s disputes.

Barcaccia, Schneider, Pallini, and Baiocco (2017) identified that bullying and physical violence has a negative cognitive consequence on a child’s development. Also, Turner, Finkelhor, Shattuck, Hamby, and Mitchell (2015) found that the aggression and violence can cause psychological harm for adolescents as they can experience difficulties in forgiving and moving on with their lives. The adolescents in this study witnessed physical abuse, and although they were able to forgive their father for their wrong doings, in reality, it is difficult for them to accept them back into their lives. The adolescents confessed that they lived in fear before the divorce, and some still feel traumatized when they meet their fathers in person.

Consequently, this finding defers from Reiter, Hjörleifsson, Breidablik, and Meland (2013) who concluded that higher divorce rate does not affect the emotional wellbeing of adolescents. This study finds that the emotional relationship between the father and child following divorce is not consistent and changes based on the cause or conflict of the divorce. In the case of physical violence, the adolescents supported their mother and took parental divorce positively. This group of adolescents are against physical violence as they grew up in fear of seeing their mother get physical abuse by their fathers.

The study also has some limitations. First, participants are Malaysian only. Because Malaysia is a multiracial country, the participants in this study are from different religions, cultures, and races. As such, the findings cannot be generalized to specific ethnic group in Malaysia, but rather the data may have transferable results to the wider and diverse population. Second, variables such as years of parental divorce and participants’ age during the divorce or number of siblings were not analyzed in this study. Dilemmas related to the methodological issues were also encountered during the research. Although the researchers were prepared before each interview, question raised on the
influence of interviewer’s subjective self-presentation and personal aims could have influenced the outcomes of the study.

**Conclusion**

The current generation of adolescents is known as generation Z (Cilliers, 2017; Mohr, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2016), and it is recommended that any phenomenology study involving adolescents should include social media as a part of the data analysis. The usage of social media increases the reliability of the study because generation Z are renowned for their high usage of computers and internet. The use of social media apps and smartphones is second nature in their daily lives. Using social media in the research gives the opportunity to validate and cross check the verbatim transcript with the information collected from social media monitoring. The study concludes social media is a powerful measurement tool of triangulation. Any undiscussed issues or hidden truth from the interview will be exposed during the monitoring of social media as it gives the researcher direct access to the daily lives of the participants. Along with the revolution of time and modernization, it is also recommended that social media monitoring is vital in any future studies on human development.

The study recommends the use of smartphone and social media by adolescents from divorced families. It is apparent that the current generation of adolescents can have direct contact with their non-custodial parent due to the availability of social media. Hence, the study concludes that parental divorce is perhaps no longer the main reason for non-custodial parents not taking an interest in their child’s development. It is evident that the vast expansion of mobile technology can connect adolescents with their parents irrespective of distance. Sending voice messages, video calls and uploading selfies has become the modern way of communicating for parents and adolescents. The study investigates how some adolescent children still have balanced familial relationships despite the negativity of divorce, and it identifies that the advancement of social media is a crucial factor in maintaining a successful relationship with both parents following divorce.

The study also identified that the adolescents in divorced families that had the experience of seeking professional counseling have a better relationship with their parents compared to those without exposure. Therefore, the study recommends that counseling services are promoted for adolescents from divorced families to help foster good relationships with their parents. With the raising of the divorce rate in Malaysia, school counselors must be more accommodative to the needs of students from divorced families. The role of a school counselor is critical as they have direct access to the students from divorced families and they are the easiest access to counseling support for the students. Hence, the study concludes that the enhancement of counseling
services can help forge better relationships between adolescents and their divorced parents. Adolescents who receive counseling support are more mature and can rationalize the problems faced by their parents. Maturity in understanding their parent’s problem is vital for adolescents to maintain good relationships with their parents.

As divorce may lead to various adverse effects on adolescents, it is recommended that future researchers analyze strengthening methods to overcome the negativity of parental divorce. In general, the process of marriage dissolution focuses more on the problems faced by parents and the needs of the child are often neglected. Therefore, the study recommends that the authorities implement a standard requirement for all divorce applicants to attend a conflict management workshop which highlights the consequences of divorce on children. If this was a mandatory requirement, it could help parents to understand the effects of divorce on children. It is essential for parents to know the implications of divorce toward their child before the legal dissolution of marriage. Despite the separation caused by divorce, parents should still uphold their responsibilities toward their child’s well-being to ensure a better and healthier society.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Dr Marcus Griffin from the American Proofreading Center for his professional assistance in proofreading this article. The authors would like to thank the Non-Governmental Organization mentioned in this study, for their assistance in identifying the participants.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

The study is part of a more extensive study funded by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education under Fundamental Research Grant Scheme [FRGS FP 049-2015A].

References


