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To cite this article: Jessica Chan Lai Cheng & Jeffrey E. Pfeifer (2015) Postdivorce Adjustment in Singapore: Factors, Themes, and Positive Growth, *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 56:6, 429-450, DOI: [10.1080/10502556.2015.1058657](https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2015.1058657)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2015.1058657>



Published online: 10 Sep 2015.



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## **Postdivorce Adjustment in Singapore: Factors, Themes, and Positive Growth**

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*Although there is a fairly large literature on postdivorce adjustment in the United States, comparatively little research has been conducted on the topic in Singapore. In addition, the majority of research to date has focused on the negative impacts of divorce and has tended to ignore potential positive growth opportunities that might result from the experience. This study seeks to address this gap in the literature through a thematic analysis of interviews with divorcees in Singapore. Specifically, this study identifies factors contributing to positive postdivorce adjustments within the multicultural, multiethnic, and multireligious context found in Singapore. A review of participant responses identified 15 specific factors related to the potential for experiencing a positive postdivorce adjustment. Further review indicates that these factors can be grouped into 6 themes that could specifically inform counselors and other mental health professionals working in Singapore to assist with the adjustment process.*

**KEYWORDS** *positive growth, postdivorce adjustment, Singapore divorce*

Over the past 40 years a fairly extensive literature has evolved with regard to the psychological, emotional, and cognitive impacts of divorce on children (see, e.g., Breivik & Olweus, 2006; Lee, 1997), partners (see, e.g., Mandell, 1988; Togliatti, Lavadera, & Benedetto, 2011), family (see, e.g.,

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Jacobs & Sillars, 2012; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2007), and society (see, e.g., Kramrei, Coit, Martin, Fogo, & Mahoney, 2007; Pett & Vaughan-Cole, 1986). Although it appears that the literature provides a comprehensive overview of postdivorce adjustment, it could be argued that there has been comparatively little research on the application of these findings to countries outside of the United States, such as Singapore (Straughan, 2009). Recognizing and responding to this research deficit is important for a number of reasons. First, as in many countries, the divorce rate in Singapore is continuing to climb (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2012) and with this increase comes a need for culturally specific research on the psychological impacts of marital dissolution (Hsiao-Li Sun, 2014). This is especially important given the diverse and unique cultural and religious demographic of Singapore (see, e.g., Lim et al., 2005; Teo, 2009; T. Wong, Yeoh Brenda, Graham, & Teo, 2004). Second, studies from a number of countries indicate that the direct application of research findings on postdivorce adjustment conducted in the United States might be limited and as such requires additional local evidence to better inform initiatives such as counseling, support groups, and therapeutic intervention (see, e.g., Brinkgreve, 2003; King, 1998; Yilmaz & Fişiloglu, 2005).

In addition to the preceding, it could also be argued that the current literature represents a heavy emphasis on identifying the conditions under which individuals will experience negative consequences as a result of a divorce rather than on potential positive growth that might occur postdivorce (see, e.g., Portes, Smith, & Brown, 2000). Although there is clearly a need to identify and respond to these negative outcomes, there is at least some indication that individuals might also eventually adjust favorably to the divorce process and, in fact, often make positive personal transformations as a result of the experience (Kramrei et al., 2007; Tschann, 1989). Given this evidence, it is suggested that in addition to understanding the potential negative psychological aspects of divorce, counselors and other mental health professionals might also profit from a deeper understanding of the factors and themes that encourage postdivorce positive growth.

This research, therefore, seeks to fill this gap in the literature by investigating the experiences of Singaporean divorced individuals in an attempt to distill some of the positive aspects of the adaptation process against the backdrop of multiculturalism and a dual legal system governing divorce. Specifically, the goal of this study is to gain a greater understanding of how divorced individuals in Singapore transition through, and adapt to, their new postdivorce lives in a healthy fashion. Although there have been a limited number of studies on divorce in Singapore (e.g., Foo, 2005; Quah, 1994; A. Wong & Kuo, 1983), this represents one of the first major empirical investigations on postdivorce adjustment since a Ministry of Social Affairs Report (Ministry of Social Affairs, 1979). Among other things, this report highlighted the fact that reactions to divorce appeared to be closely associated with the

level of emotional involvement between a husband and wife at the time of marriage. Specifically, both men and women with higher emotional involvement were more likely to feel “sad” and less likely to feel “happy” when the divorce was finalized. Although informative, it might be argued that this finding is limited in terms of its ability to inform initiatives aimed at decreasing the negative psychological impacts of divorce on individuals in Singapore.

By employing the 1979 findings, this research aims to more specifically identify the myriad of factors affecting positive postdivorce adjustment and subsequently assess their impact on an individual’s personal growth while also providing insight into the development and implementation of interventions (e.g., counseling, postdivorce workshops). Although the majority of research on marital dissolution has focused primarily on experiences of distress, rather than potential positive postdivorce outcomes or growth (see, e.g., Amato, 2000; Gove, 1973; Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007; Trovato & Lauris, 1989), the opportunity to examine potential positive outcomes is supported by the work of a number of authors (Emmons, 2003; Shantall, 2003; Veevers, 1991) who have suggested a new rhetoric, in which the perception of divorce as disaster is perhaps more properly replaced by a perception of divorce as an opportunity for development and personal growth.

This personal growth approach is certainly in line with Richardson’s (2002) recommendation that researchers study individuals who are able to adjust and positively develop through the divorce experience with a view to identifying and teaching relevant skills that might subsequently enable more people to do likewise. Evidence for this approach also comes from the work of a number of researchers who have found that a marital breakup could also function as an impetus for personal insight regarding preferential subsequent partners (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). In addition, a number of authors argue that personal growth (often referred to as stress-related growth or postdivorce” growth) is a phenomenon in which people might move beyond their previous level of psychological functioning as a result of highly stressful life experiences (Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998). Several researchers have noted that the painful struggle to come to terms with a stressful event can be a source of potential benefit, but for growth to take place some degree of psychological discomfort must occur (e.g., Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2002). To gain a more detailed insight into how positive change could result from the dissolution of a relationship, however, it is important to first review the factors that have already been empirically identified as significantly influencing postdivorce adjustment.

## FACTORS INFLUENCING POSTDIVORCE ADJUSTMENT

To begin with, research indicates that a number of factors can influence how individuals react to a divorce, including age (see, e.g., Chiriboga, 1982),

gender (see, e.g., Kalmijn & Poortman, 2006; Thabes, 1997; Wallerstein, 1986), social support (see, e.g., Garvin, Kalter, & Hansell, 1994; Weiss, 1975), coping style (see, e.g., Chiriboga, 1989), degree of attachment to one's ex-spouse (see, e.g., Reibstein & Reibstein, 1998; Weiss, 1975), presence of children (see, e.g., Amato, 2000), length of separation (see, e.g., Chiriboga & Cutler, 1978), and perceptions of independence and self-esteem (see, e.g., Colletta, 1979). Although these factors have often been studied within silos, there is some evidence that they are integrated and that this cross-factor effect could lead to identification of especially vulnerable groups. For example, Williams and Dunne-Bryant (2006) examined the effects of marital dissolution on adult well-being and found that postdivorce negative consequences are especially likely for younger females with infants and a limited social support network.

In addition to the preceding, research indicates that the experience of divorce and its subsequent impact on health and well-being vary across a range of demographic, contextual, and psychosocial factors (see, e.g., Williams, 2003). For example, a number of studies found that having high levels of social support, education, and income, as well as exiting an unhappy marriage, all seem to reduce the negative impact of divorce on psychological well-being (Marks, 1996; Ross, 1995). Among other things, these factors could affect an individual's cognitive understanding, vulnerability, and psychological capacity to cope with the trauma of divorce. Amato (2000), for example, found that the impact on psychological well-being due to marital dissolution is best conceptualized within a divorce-stress-adjustment perspective that suggests that a decline in well-being postdivorce is associated with both the loss of resources (e.g., economic benefits, emotional support, and health regulation) and the stressors induced by the transition itself. Although the preceding research indicates a number of consistent factors, at least with regard to samples from the United States, it should be noted that there is less consistency with regard to the research on gender as it relates to postdivorce psychological adjustment. Specifically, although some studies indicate that divorce is worse for women's mental health than for men's (Aseltine & Kessler, 1993; Simon & Marcussen, 1999), others find only small or negligible gender differences (Booth & Amato, 1991; Williams, 2003).

A review of the preceding research on factors influencing postdivorce adjustment also indicates that many of the findings contain within them elements of personal resilience. For example, in a study on marital disruption and depression, Aseltine and Kessler (1993) identified emotional reactivity as one of the strongest predictors of postdivorce depression. These findings certainly appear to be in line with Flach (1988), who defined resilience as the psychological and biological strength required to effectively manage change. It could be argued, therefore, that having resilience enables individuals to search for and develop strengths and resources that allow them to grow following stressful life events. Given these findings, it appears that, beyond

the initial negativity, there is the distinct possibility that an individual can arrive at positive gains postdivorce under certain circumstances, especially if they are resilient. What remains less clear, however, is what specific factors are related to resilience within the context of divorce, especially within the cultural, religious, and legal diversity found in Singapore. As such, the empirical identification of these circumstances becomes an important pursuit that begins by reviewing the related literature.

## POSITIVE POSTDIVORCE ADJUSTMENT MODELS

Although research indicates that postdivorce adjustment is often a painful and negative experience, researchers have also found that the experience could lead to a number of positive outcomes (see, e.g., Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). Based on these findings, a number of models have been developed to assist in identifying the potential positive aspects of postdivorce adjustment. W. Waller and Hill (1951), for example, proposed one of the earliest models for positive postdivorce adjustment by identifying four successive stages: (a) breaking old habits, (b) attaining a reconstructed life, (c) seeking new love objects, and (d) completing one's readjustment. In addition to being developmental in nature, this model argues that the postdivorce process is one in which behavioral change could lead to positive growth.

Other research indicates the potential for positive postdivorce adjustment through various models, including a situational state determined by the presence of certain conditions (Kessler, 1975); a process similar to the Kubler-Ross (1969) grief model, which proposed stages of grief of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance (Froiland & Hozman, 1977; Wiseman, 1975); a series of developmental stages in emotional identification and adaptation; a set of legal and personal or emotional developmental stages (Kressel, 1980); or being reflective of the dynamics of family adaptation (Ahrons, 1980; Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987). Ahrons (1980), for example, argued for a model that takes into account the total family's functioning in the divorce adjustment process. Working within a systemic context, the process is defined as moving from individual to family awareness, systemic separation and reorganization, and finally, family redefinition (Ahrons, 1980; Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987). Emery (1994) also identified similar phases in the renegotiation of family relationships postdivorce and suggested that these play a significant part in the postdivorce adaptation of former partners.

Given the preceding, the overarching purpose of this study is to address the gap in the literature on postdivorce adjustment for Singaporeans as well as to contextualize the findings within the more positive framework suggested by authors such as W. Waller and Hill (1951) and more recently Tashiro and Frazier (2003). Specifically, the study aims to identify the factors that have led to a positive postdivorce adjustment outcome for Singaporeans

who have recently dissolved their relationship. It is suggested that this process of identification might lead to future research regarding how these factors could be proactively employed to develop programs and other initiatives aimed at assisting with the positive adjustment of postdivorce individuals.

## METHOD

### Participants

The sample for this study was made up of 19 participants (14 women, 5 men) who had been granted a divorce in Singapore, and included both Muslim ( $n = 2$ ) and non-Muslim divorcees ( $n = 17$ ) under the Syariah law (Syariah Court Singapore 1966) and the Women's Charter (1961), respectively (for a discussion on legal issues related to Muslims, see Maeder & Pfeifer, 2014). A number of counseling professionals and counseling interns assisted in the recruitment of participants by identifying individuals who had been involved in a divorce and who would be willing to be interviewed about their experiences. Once identified, individuals were informed about the purpose of the study and asked whether they would agree to participate in a semistructured interview. It is important to note that the study sample is representative of the multiethnic and multireligious composition of Singapore, as it included participants from the three major cultural backgrounds (i.e., Chinese, Malay, and Indian) as well as the four major religions (i.e., Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism). In addition, the cultural composition of the sample approximated the percentage breakdown of the general population. Specifically the sample included 2 Malays and 4 Indians, with these two groups making up almost a third (32%) of the sample, and the 13 Chinese participants made up the remaining two thirds (68%) of the sample. The sample also included interethnic marriages ( $n = 3$ ) and both amicable ( $n = 2$ ) and acrimonious divorces ( $n = 17$ ).

### Procedure

A semistructured interview design was employed to gather information from the sample based on the findings of a number of previous studies examining postdivorce adjustment. McLeod (2003), for example, suggested that using face-to-face interviews could generate sensitive qualitative data that would add richness and complexity to the participants' personal experiences. In addition, M. A. Waller (2001) argued that such a narrative approach allows for the exploration of subjective experience of divorcees and might "reveal protective factors not apparent even to participant-observer researchers" (p. 290). Finally, Braud and Anderson (1998) suggested that a qualitative methodology allows for the honoring and verification of participant experience.

Given the preceding, as well as the complexity and sensitive nature of the divorce experience, the semistructured interview design provided the most suitable platform to assist with the identification of factors related to a positive postdivorce experience as well as ensuring that the research experience was a positive one for participants discussing a sensitive and important issue. To achieve this, interviews focused on allowing participants to provide a narrative regarding their postdivorce experience within a framework that asked them to include their perception of factors that they believed were related to any subsequent positive impact they experienced.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As stated earlier, prior to this research the only study covering postdivorce adjustment in Singapore was conducted by the Ministry of Social Affairs (1979). The study relied in part on data obtained from the High Court where divorce cases were filed. In the thirty years since this study, however, the social and economic scene in Singapore has undergone tremendous change and, as such, it was important to reinvestigate many of the findings from the initial study as well as to identify trends.

As demonstrated by the following results, an analysis of participant responses resulted in a number of factors emerging as crucial contributors to a positive postdivorce adjustment process. In addition, both internal and external factors were identified as playing a part in the process. Internal factors such as having a positive outlook and practicing self-reflection indicated the importance of identifying specific factors that might be related to resilience within a divorce context. External factors such as actively seeking assistance from friends and family as well as seeking professional assistance or joining social support networks provide additional insight into how participants not only managed to cope with divorce, but to also grow as a result of the experience.

### Factors Contributing to Positive Adjustment

Analysis of participant responses culled from the semistructured interviews resulted in the identification of 15 factors that appeared to contribute to the positive adjustment of Singaporean divorcees, including five demographic factors, four relationship factors, two attitudinal factors, and four support network factors. It should be noted that many of the 15 factors identified in this study share a number of similarities with the 17 strength responses identified by Veevers (1991) as well as other researchers (e.g., Caldwell, Bloom, & Hodges, 1983; Chiriboga, Roberts, & Stein, 1978; Cohen & Savaya, 2003).

## DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS

Review of participant responses indicates that there are a number of demographic factors related to a positive postdivorce adjustment. Included among these factors are age, duration of marriage, having access to adequate income and material resources, having a tertiary education, and holding nontraditional gender role beliefs.

*Age.* As with previous research on postdivorce adjustment (e.g., Chiriboga, 1982), age was identified as a significant factor for participants in this study as well. Like previous studies, younger individuals in this sample were more likely to report a positive postdivorce experience than older individuals. Specifically, over half of the participants interviewed who reported that they were well adjusted at the age of divorce were under 36 years of age. According to the information provided during the interviews, it would appear that younger divorcees have more opportunities and time to forge new relationships and focus on their careers. In addition, they appeared to display more flexibility and versatility in accommodating changes in their lives.

*Length of marriage.* As with previous research, having a shorter marriage was also identified by participants as an important factor related to positive postdivorce adjustment (e.g., Goode, 1956; Kurdek & Blisk, 1983). For participants in this study, marriages fewer than 10 years in duration were more common among male than female participants in the well-adjusted groups. In addition, interviews indicated that shorter marriages tended to be perceived as less habituated. Specifically, these participants suggested that they felt they had not really fallen into any type of predictable routine with their partners and, as such, had an easier time adapting to their lifestyle postdivorce. Participants also indicated that because their marriage had not reached a mature stage, they felt less emotionally and physically dependent on their ex-partner.

*Access to income and resources.* Having access to adequate income and material resources was another positive factor in post-divorce adjustment identified by participants, especially female participants. Wang and Amato (2000) and others (e.g., Cohen & Savaya, 2003) suggested that women usually suffer more financially after divorce, especially if they adopt a stay-at-home lifestyle during their marriage to look after children. According to the work of Sayer and Bianchi (2000), perceived access to income and resources plays a direct role in the decisions of some women contemplating divorce. Interestingly, this finding appears to apply more to Western societies with high labor costs where it might be necessary for many women to stop working to look after their children, as they are not able to secure external child care. In Singapore, however, many women continue to work after marriage and even after children arrive. For example, in the 1995 Survey on Women Returning to Work, it was reported that almost all women surveyed planned

to rejoin the workforce after their maternity leave (Ministry of Labour, 1995). Since then, labor regulations have been eased to include flexible working hours and the building of more crèches (i.e., day care facilities), allowing more women to rejoin the workforce after maternity leave. Interestingly, more male than female participants emphasized the importance of this factor for their postdivorce adjustment. Given this situation, it is perhaps not surprising that the women in this study appeared to indicate less concern with access to income and resources as a divorce-related stressor than samples from the United States.

*Education.* Having a tertiary education also appeared to be beneficial to adjustment postdivorce. Specifically, the majority of participants in this study with a tertiary education identified themselves as having experienced a positive postdivorce adjustment when compared to those with secondary education or less. Participants indicated that having a tertiary education allowed them to feel better placed to not only survive, but to thrive in their postdivorce roles. References to a number of specific positive aspects were made, including a belief in one's independence, confidence in one's ability, and increased levels of strength and self-determination.

*Gender roles.* Holding nontraditional gender roles in which both males and females are able to interchangeably adopt stereotypic practices also appears to contribute to positive adjustment according to participants. According to those interviewed, this factor allowed both partners to be more flexible and less dependent on the assigned rigid roles, as discussed in the findings of Bloom and Clement (1984). Both male and female participants suggested that more liberal attitudes toward gender roles assisted them in effectively taking on their ex-spouses' responsibilities without discomfort or shame, especially with regard to childrearing responsibilities. Specifically, it was suggested that flexibility in assuming dual gender roles provided them with a higher level confidence with regard to being a single parent.

#### RELATIONSHIP FACTORS

As with the demographic factors already identified, a number of relationship factors were also found to directly affect the positive emotional, psychological, and physical adjustment to divorce, including the degree of marital distress, perceived level of attachment, the type of relationship they have with their ex-spouse, and level of involvement in initiating the divorce.

*Degree of perceived marital distress.* Level of perceived marital distress had a clear influence on positive adjustment according to the responses provided by participants. Perhaps not surprisingly, participants who reported high levels of marital distress were more likely to report higher levels of psychological and emotional adjustment postdivorce. Interestingly, of the seven participants who indicated that they had been in abusive marriages, six reported that they were now "very well adjusted." Retrospective reports

by these participants indicated that marital turmoil and subjective distress constituted significant stressors in their marriages. They recalled the immense pain of their long marital problems and the attendant defensive actions, and added that when the divorce process was over they experienced immediate positive changes in their health and psychological status. Not surprisingly, the relationship between a high level of predivorce distress and the reassuring feeling of relief postdivorce was overwhelmingly obvious for most participants.

*Perceived level of attachment.* According to participants, having a lower level of attachment to their partner was another factor that culminated in a more positive postdivorce experience. It appeared that when there was only a low level of perceived attachment to their spouse, the emotional bonding was weaker and the marital dissolution was easier and more comfortable without much rancor or distress. As a result, divorcees with a lower level of attachment were less likely to harbor anger, love, or hate for their ex-spouses and were less likely to have to go through complex grief issues, thus making their adjustment easier. In such cases, the divorce was often perceived as simply breaking the legal bond between spouses. In contrast, the two women in this study who reported a strong attachment to their ex-spouse also indicated that this bond made it very hard for them to adjust even after several years of divorce.

*Relationship with ex-spouse.* Having a positive relationship with one's ex-spouse also contributed to the positive adjustment within this sample. According to participants, the positive relationship meant that there was emotional closure and willingness on both sides to work on the divorce and adjust to a different postdivorce relationship. Some participants had established amicable arrangements with their ex-spouse that permitted agreeable visitations and joint responsibility for their children, resulting in less stress for both parties. As it is more likely in Singapore for women to be granted child custody under the Women's Charter (1961), it appears that female participants appreciated the advantages of maintaining cordial relationships with their ex-husbands as it would be less stressful for all concerned. Such cordial relationships would help to prevent prolonged legal custody contests that might otherwise involve great financial and emotional costs. According to participant responses, a positive relationship with an ex-spouse would also have the added benefit of encouraging joint decisions concerning their children's welfare. In summary, the nature and quality of the relationship that a divorcee has with the ex-spouse pre- and postdivorce seems to have some influence on the divorcee's level of adjustment. Indeed, it appears that a low level of attachment and a positive working relationship with the ex-spouse, especially where children are involved, contributes to positive adjustment.

*Involvement in initiating the divorce.* Being the initiator of a divorce also emerged as a significant factor in the level of positive postdivorce

adjustment for participants. Twelve of the 19 participants in this sample had initiated their divorce, and their interviews suggested that all 12 had a psychological advantage over their spouses and felt vindicated when their divorce petition was granted. To a certain extent, initiating the divorce appeared to have given the participants a measure of control over the situation, which in turn gave them strength and time to process the loss and the pain of divorce. For example, one woman, on the advice of her children, left her husband to prepare for her divorce and when it was finally granted felt no distress at all. Noninitiators who played a more passive role and had the decision made for them continued to struggle to come to terms with the divorce despite having been divorced for many years. Perhaps, as suggested by Gray and Silver (1990) and others, they felt victimized in a life change that they either did not want or were unsure they wanted and felt they had little or no control over this change.

#### ATTITUDE TOWARD DIVORCE

It could be argued that an individual's attitude towards divorce is influenced by his or her values, beliefs, family, society, culture, and conceptualization of marriage (Riggio & Weiser, 2008). It has been suggested that this attitude is central to the divorcee's adjustment because it can affect inclinations, thinking and feelings, prejudice, fears and convictions about divorce, and adjustment (see, e.g., Lamela & Figueiredo, 2011). Two specific attitudinal factors that emerged from an analysis of participant responses revolved around the extent to which one views divorce as a normal event, and the perception of personal strength one holds.

*Perception of the divorce.* Based on responses, it appears that viewing divorce as a normal event and not a personal failure assisted participants in the adjustment process. This finding is not surprising given the work of Wang and Amato (2000), who reported that adjustment was associated positively with having favorable attitudes toward marital dissolution. This study appears to confirm the findings of Wang and Amato, with nine of the participants indicating that having a positive outlook contributed to their adjustment. Even with the participants who adjusted well, the varying attitudes on divorce (ranging from associating divorce with moral failure due to religion, family upbringing, and prevailing social mores to having a cavalier acceptance of divorce) meant that the degree of adjustment was not uniform. Ultimately, it appears that how one perceives divorce depends on one's view of the marriage. According to respondents, such an attitude is influenced by one's family values, the legal system, religious beliefs, and societal acceptance of divorce as normal. Participant responses indicate a belief that being married or divorced is an important label for a person's social identity; hence, whether divorce is perceived as a *de facto* failure rests very much on the level of stigma attached to it.

*Perceptions of personal strength.* Participants indicated that a belief that one has a high level of personal strength is also an important postdivorce factor. This finding appears to align with the work of Dreman (1999), who found that an individual's attitude toward divorce is influenced by personal variables such as temperament and perceptions of how others might view you. Analysis of responses in this study clearly indicated that respondents were very aware of how the perceived attitudes of others affected their decision making and behaviors. One female participant, for example, remained in a state of despair for many years because she could not open herself to her family, people at work, or to the community for support due to the attitudes she believed they held toward divorce. She had always been physically and emotionally dependent on her husband; once this support was removed, her postdivorce adjustment was affected negatively.

#### SUPPORT NETWORKS IN DIVORCE

Support networks play an important role in the level of postdivorce adjustment and can lead to increased levels of positive growth following the dissolution of a marriage (McDermott, Fowler, & Christakis, 2013). In this study the presence of this support was found to assist divorcees in adjusting to the psychological distress after divorce. Specific support networks identified include perceived level of social support, presence of children, engagement in meaningful activities, and seeking professional help.

*Perceived level of social support.* Having a social support network was a recurrent theme and the most frequently cited factor influencing positive adjustment observed in the study. Social support from friends, families, and religious communities was a major theme for 14 of the 19 participants. Interestingly, the support cited most often by female divorcees in the sample appeared to be primarily practical and emotional in nature, usually in the form of help and advice in managing children and the household, as well as having someone to empathize with. Male participants, in contrast, tended to report that they had fewer social support networks and that these networks tended to be more friendly in nature rather than emotional and empathetic.

*Presence of children.* The presence of children was another factor identified by participants in the study as an important factor for postdivorce adjustment. For these participants their children were the focal point of their lives, and others saw children as a source of strength and hope for tomorrow. This positive outlook might have come about because there was less discord over parenting styles, child custody, and support. According to respondents, children provided both psychological and emotional comfort to the divorcees and, for some, a source of physical assistance. More important, although these divorcees might have lost their spousal role, they managed to retain their parental role and they reported that this helped to give their lives purpose.

*Engagement in meaningful activities.* Engaging in meaningful activities helped fill the divorcees' leisure time and provided them with another way of coping and gaining support with the postdivorce experience. In terms of engaging in meaningful activities, participants strongly recommended seeking employment, particularly for those who have never worked and those who have stopped work after getting married. They saw this as potentially pivotal in providing a new life pattern that could decidedly facilitate postdivorce growth.

*Seeking professional help.* Seeking professional help from counselors, psychiatrists, lawyers, doctors, and court mediators was cited frequently in the study as contributing to positive adjustment. Although participants believed that seeking professional help was particularly useful, many did not approach counselors for help themselves after the divorce. This situation is perhaps related to the fact that seeking psychiatric help and other forms of counseling is still not widely accepted in Singapore and seems to carry with it a stigma, especially for men. Indeed, even female participants expressed deep concern and fear over others discovering that they were undergoing counseling. The pertinent question then to ask is this: What holds men and women back from a process that has the potential to provide support and emotional adjustment? Krehbiel (2009) explained that many men have an underlying belief that runs counter to the notion of pursuing personal counseling. He postulated that it could be a cultural predisposition that mitigates against the vulnerability necessary for seeking therapy.

### Themes Identified as Contributing to Positive Postdivorce Adjustment

An analysis of the preceding information provided by participants was also performed according to the six-phase thematic framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify the main thematic components that might be related to positive postdivorce adjustment in Singapore. This framework was deemed to be the most useful for assessing participant responses due to the fact that it is adaptable to a variety of contexts as well as providing a flexible, yet formulaic, approach for identifying narrative themes. As per the overarching purpose of this study, the framework was employed to specifically cull and identify themes related to positive postdivorce adjustment.

Based on the interviews, six themes were identified as contributing to positive postdivorce adjustment. These themes reflected a set of beliefs, attitudes, and feelings held by participants with regard to what they believed contributed to a positive experience subsequent to the dissolution of their relationship. The six themes are described in detail next, including brief verbatim excerpts of participants' personal narratives to provide personal context as well as to exemplify the richness of the data collected. Although six themes were identified, it is important to note that

three (i.e., having a positive outlook, practicing self-reflection, and preoccupation with child-raising) were derived from female participant's narratives alone.

#### THEME 1: HAVING A POSITIVE OUTLOOK

Perhaps least surprising is the finding that participants identified a positive outlook as one of the most significant contributors toward the possibility of achieving any type of positive postdivorce growth. What is surprising, however, is that this theme was only identified by women in the sample and not by men. Specifically, female participants indicated that they perceived the divorce as being a learning experience. By focusing on the positive gains after divorce (e.g., freedom, absence of conflicts, ability to start anew, and rediscovery of self), female participants suggested that they were better able to move on. Based on the narratives provided, it appears that the female participants who reported the highest levels of postdivorce positive adjustment were also those who demonstrated a high level of determination, strength to set their own agendas, and ability to take charge of their lives. For example, one female participant aged 36 said:

Personally, I feel that divorce is a very unfortunate thing, but there are positive outcomes and it really depends on how you manage it. You can feel afraid and lonely and you won't know what's going to happen, but at the same time you find that you are independent and you can still have better relationship with friends so it's how you really manage and it how you look at it positively.

#### THEME 2: PRACTICING SELF-REFLECTION

Self-reflection helped participants come to terms with the breakdown of their marriage. They turned to self-help books to have a better grasp of the issues in their marriage, and this enabled them to come to terms with the divorce, and with understanding came acceptance and empathy, leading to a less painful adjustment. Another participant started reflecting on herself and her marriage while attending a support group program at church. Through the process, she was able to better understand and accept how her marriage had broken down. One of the female participants aged 44 said:

I was able to reflect on the marriage, what went wrong, how it went wrong. I was able to accept my part in the failure in the marriage. But more importantly, I was able to confront myself. And how my childhood made me who I was in the marriage, and what I did wrong and how it contributed to the death of the marriage.

## THEME 3: SOURCES OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

This theme addressed various forms of social support, which was the most widely mentioned factor in positive adjustment after divorce, cited by 14 out of the 19 participants. Under this main theme, there were seven subthemes: support from own family, support from friends, religious and spiritual support, support from employer, support from domestic helper, support from professional services, and support group for divorcees. Conversely, the lack of it was cited by five participants as a reason for their negative adjustment after divorce.

Family support was a factor cited by three participants as contributing to their adjustment. One woman was grateful that her family was there for her. They were not moralizing but gave her objective advice and unconditional support. For another young female divorcee aged 30, emotional support from her family came in the form of letting her know that they loved her no matter what her decision was for the future. This strong and nonjudgmental assurance gave her great comfort and solace. She said:

My family gave me very good emotional support so that really help. I knew that through times like this no matter what I did; what decision I made they did not judge me and they still love me for who I am. They don't care whether I am divorced.

Support from adult children helped two participants, both females, in their positive adjustment. One woman aged 71 confirmed how her children supported her during the divorce. She commented:

My son and daughter . . . they support me. . . . My daughter didn't like what her father was doing to me. She felt that I should have divorced him earlier. My son kept asking me, "Why don't you divorce him?" He said that such father is useless.

## THEME 4: ENGAGING IN MEANINGFUL ACTIVITIES

Filling leisure time with meaningful activities was yet another way some participants coped with divorce and life changes. Participants across all groups found engagement in meaningful activities a contributory factor in their positive adjustment. These activities occurred in various organized settings such as line-dancing groups, religious activities, or attending courses. Such activities, according to Kitson (1992), could lead to the possibility of meeting new friends, which might further help in adjustment. Other activities that were found to be both meaningful and helpful included caring for children.

One female participant aged 32 believed that yet another way of coping with loneliness and life changes was to fill her leisure time with activities,

both structured and unstructured. She explained how the hobbies and leisure activities kept her from dwelling on her divorce.

But I was not going to sit and mope anyway. I would join yoga classes, read, listen to music, sew and do some research for the course that I have signed up for.

For three participants, all women, it was a combination of different activities that kept them occupied. One of them, aged 62, shared:

So I looked after my grandchildren, volunteer work, help friend, visit the old aged home, there are many things to do.

#### THEME 5: FOCUSING ON CAREER

Ten participants shared that, following their divorce, they began focusing their energy on their careers. Some worked very hard to divert their attention away from the divorce, whereas others found working a meaningful activity rather than a distraction. To them, work gave them a certain structure, and this helped heal the postdivorce wounds. Although work is traditionally the main focus of men, this study revealed that 6 of the 10 participants who cited work as a distraction from their divorce were women. Perhaps this is because men might not necessarily view devoting more energy into work as a coping strategy but rather as a part of their normal routine. In contrast, women who have to juggle home and work demands during marriage would likely sense a difference if they begin to focus more on their careers after their marriage ends.

One participant aged 32 said she worked very hard to divert her attention away from the divorce, and confessed that she literally drowned herself in work. Another found working a meaningful activity rather than a distraction. She described how it gave her life a certain structure, and how pouring her energies into her work helped heal her postdivorce wounds.

But I think having a job would help a lot. Your time is structured from morning to evening. Your mind is occupied and it doesn't float all over the place, you can focus on your task at work. That's important.

#### THEME 6: FOCUS ON CHILDREARING

Other than devoting time to work, spending time with children was mentioned by some female participants as a meaningful activity they occupied themselves with after their divorce. They saw their children as a source of motivation and joy, keeping them busy and helping to take their minds off the pain of divorce.

Two participants were obviously very involved in the upbringing of their children. One of them revealed:

The boys had been keeping me so occupied; I think I have no time to think about the divorce I think my children give me a lot of joy, many things to look forward to especially watching them growing up. That is one thing that I focus on.

Taken as a whole, it is clear that the results of this study add to our knowledge of how Singaporeans experience and respond to the issues related to divorce. As can be seen by the contributions of participants in this study, although there are a number of factors that play a significant role in the postdivorce experience that mirror findings from samples in the United States, there are also other important factors that appear more related to the culture, milieu, and legal aspects of Singapore. In addition, this study provides important insights into the various factors and themes that appear to dictate the extent to which the dissolution of a marriage could eventuate into a strong and positive personal growth experience rather than a long-term negative experience. It is suggested that knowledge of these factors and themes might assist counselors and other mental health providers in helping men and women in Singapore to more positively respond to the challenges and strains that often accompany the dissolution of a marriage.

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