

DIVORCED MEN'S LIVED EXPERIENCES AND THEIR COPING MECHANISMS IN THE ESWATINI KINGDOM: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Studies have shown that the impact of divorce on individuals involved is enormous but little attention has been given to how divorce affects men. This study therefore explored divorced men's lived experiences and their coping mechanisms. This phenomenological study used purposive sampling and snowballing techniques to select 12 divorced men from Eswatini Kingdom in Swaziland. Thematic data analysis was used to analyse the data. The following themes were formed 1) Psychological and emotional stressors in divorce 2) effect of divorce 3) coping mechanism and 4) personal analysis of the divorce process. In theme 1, public and religious views, emotional and financial stressors were the sub-themes identified. In theme 2, health and wellness, and family dynamics such as children, extended family, new spouse, and neighbours were affected. Adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms emerged as sub-themes for theme 3. Perceived contributory factors to divorce are infidelity, sexual incompatibility, lack of respect, irreconcilable differences, and emotional awareness such as the impact on self, and others emerged as sub-themes for theme 4. It is concluded that while some men bounce back from the divorce experience and can deal with its negative effects, some find it difficult to return to their previous level of functioning. It is recommended that government and relevant stakeholders should create/or strengthen the existing community-based networks like "lisango" to promote psychological well-being. And formulate policies that promote, mental health awareness and referral, gender equality, and upholding traditional values.

Keywords: Divorced men; lived experiences; coping mechanisms; policy and development

Introduction

Divorce and its aftermath have become a public health concern.¹ The concept of divorce is described as a legal dissolution of the marriage relationship or formal separation of a man and his wife according to established custom.² Over the past few years, divorce rates have increased significantly.³ In the United States of America, the divorce rate has doubled over the years. Cohabitation rather than marriage is more common among the populace.⁴ In a study conducted in Ethiopia in 2014, 2015 and 2016, the prevalence of divorce was 24%, 26% and 50% respectively.⁵

Many reasons motivate divorce action. For instance, western world orientation has significantly contributed to the surge of divorce in Africa by continually endorsing the spirits of individualism,

career advancement, self-interest, and gender equality, with media outlets promoting Western lifestyles.⁶ In Indonesia, television viewing has been found to be a contributory factor to divorce in most rural areas.⁷ Hence, advocated for policy regulation to limit the frequency and duration of certain programs.

Wilkinson and Finkbeiner (2021) further highlighted that marriage at a younger age, unrealistic expectations, arguments, unfaithfulness to one's partner, lack of fairness in the union, violence in the union, and unpreparedness for marriage life could be some of the reasons.⁸ Additional reasons for divorce included a lack of respect, jealousy, sexual rejection, infidelity, and abuse.⁹ Specifically, infidelity has been highlighted as one of the leading factors in divorce. Because of

this, experts have been admonished to always intervene.¹⁰ Similarly, reasons behind rising divorce rates were conducted in Nigeria. According to the survey, the main reasons for divorce among the participants were lack of sexual satisfaction, poverty, actions of impostor clergy, infidelity, and falsehoods from either of the spouses.¹¹

Perceived stress scores of both general, divorced and separated populations were compared among recently divorced Danes. In total, 1,856 divorces responded to the measure of the perceived stress scale and associated parameters. It was discovered that recent divorcees had a significant higher level of stress than the general population, further analysis revealed that younger age, lower educational level, low income, infidelity, former spouse divorce initiation, not having a new partner, and higher divorce conflict predicted higher stress levels among both male and female participants.¹²

In Eswatini, a man's contribution to the family is significant. In actuality, the man's identity is determined by his position of authority within the family. Men are the main decision-makers and breadwinners in this largely patriarchal society.¹³ Therefore, a man's opinions about himself and his self-image are influenced by his family's values.

Divorce therefore affects cultural socialisation as the position of the man will be affected within the family and community structures. Swati men were trained to be authority figures and the main provider in the family. Swati women were trained to be supporters in terms of caregiving for the children and home management. Therefore, women in this society were and are expected to be submissive to their husbands as the head of the family.¹⁴ A divorce will unbalance the system and put pressure on a man who will be seen as having failed to uphold cultural expectations.

The socio-economic status of women has a significant influence on socio-economic freedom. This freedom could likely give the women the choice to end a marriage where intimate partner violence is prevalent.³ Nevertheless, the complexities around divorce may negatively impact the man in an existing patriarchal system as it is in Eswatini culture.

The association between divorce and mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among Lebanese adolescents was explored. This cross-sectional study was conducted between January and May 2019 in which 1,810 adolescents

aged 14 to 17 years old was recruited. A simple randomization method was used to select the schools. The study showed that teens with divorced parents experience higher social fear and avoidance, depression, and suicidal ideation.¹⁵

Statement of Problem

Divorce men experience a lot of stress.¹⁶ This has strong implications for the well-being of the entire family members. Marriage is seen in many societies as a mark of achievements, independence and maturity. Considering the level of importance attached to marriage, once divorce occurs the victim is often abandoned and stigmatised.¹⁷ Men of African origin are considered to be tough, and, thus are not expected to overtly express their deep emotions.¹⁸ Additionally, men who seek counselling or therapy in the context of divorce have been considered incompetent and weak.¹⁹ Divorced individuals encountered dishonour, emotional and economic problems.^{5,20} All these problems push divorced men to accumulate unresolved conflicts without seeking professional support.

The inability of men to express their narratives and emotional struggles during divorce is highly worrisome. The state of the men's mental wellness during the process of divorce may trigger various mental health issues which include self-destructive, maladaptive habits, emotional trauma, psychoactive substance abuse, avoidance, depression and suicide.²¹ After divorce, either of the partners may need to relocate. Divorce-related relocation might have a negative impact on psychological and physical well-being, financial stability and educational attainment.²² In addition, children from divorced homes may not be close to their parents in the long run. Perceived loneliness from either of the parents may have a significant negative impact on mental health.²³ Hence, the need to explore lived experiences of divorced men will help the men to understand themselves and to avoid mental breakdown.

The study aimed to explore divorced men's lived experiences and their coping mechanisms in the Eswatini Kingdom, and its implications for policy and development. In view of the aim, the following research questions are stated.

- i. What psychological and emotional challenges do divorced men face?
- ii. What consequences does divorce have on men?

- iii. What coping mechanism do divorced men use?
- iv. What are the personal analyses of the divorce process?

Methodology

This qualitative study used a phenomenological design for an enquiry. Phenomenological design is often used to question people's thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Divorced men in the Eswatini Kingdom in Swaziland were recruited to participate in the study. These men were married according to Swazi law and customs and had been married for 3 years or more, before divorce. Purposive and snowball techniques were used to recruit 12 participants until data saturation was reached. In a qualitative study, saturation mostly occurs at around 12 participants in a homogenous group.²⁴ To be included in the study, participants must have been married for at least three years duration or more before divorce. The participant must be free of any form of mental illness. While men who were unable to speak either Swati or English languages were excluded.

An informal, in-depth interview was used to acquire the data. The information provided by participants was recorded on a tape recorder. The interview lasted from 40 minutes to an hour. The principles of confidentiality, privacy, and voluntary withdrawal of the participant were adhered to according to the Helsinki Declaration of conducting human research. The Human Research Ethics Council (HREC) granted ethical approval with the ethical clearance number NWU-00434-20-AI. The analysis of the data was thematic, and themes were developed in accordance with the study questions. This method identifies, analyses and reports patterns within data.²⁵

Results

Psychological and emotional stressors in divorce

There are four sub-themes under the issue of psychological and emotional pressures in divorce in this study: (1) societal expectations, (2) religious expectations, (3) emotional stressors, and (4) financial stressors.

Societal expectation

Cynical views and ideas of divorced men are prevalent in society. Men who have been divorced tend to fail. Eleven of the participants (92%) reported that others had a bad opinion of them because they were divorced. One participant (8%) said the community had no unfavourable attitudes. *"In addition to being difficult, getting a divorce carries a stigma within the society since people tend to assume that you did something wrong..." (P3). Another participant said, "I recall once applying for a personal loan when one of the credit department employees called me over the loudspeaker and offered to check the box for a divorcee as I had neglected to do so" (P5).*

Religious expectations

Different theological perspectives on divorce have distinct vantage points. Although, all the participants claimed to practice Christianity. Religious orientation plays a significant role. *"You don't have friends in the ministry, so this is where I was having trouble. Pastors are reluctant to interact with those who are suffering" (P12). Similarly, participant 5 stated that "I persisted in my Christian life, but I felt cut off from the church" (P5).*

Emotional stressors

According to the study, 20% of the participants acknowledged having considered suicide, whereas 80% of participants said they had never considered it. *"You feel like you have no life after divorce and are constantly judged" (P7).*

Financial stressors

A fair property and assets settlement may necessitate court action.²⁶ This covers the assets the couple gathered throughout their marriage life. The distribution procedure is a significant source of monetary stress. Participant 5 reported, *"I had three cars when I was married, but after the divorce, I lost everything and my financial situation returned to zero" (P5).*

Effect of divorce

This theme gave rise to two sub-themes. Health and well-being, as well as the dynamics and composition of the family. The family unit and dynamics have five sub-cluster themes, namely: children; extended

family, siblings and neighbours; new spouse; biological parents and the ex-spouse.

Health and Wellness

The results showed that 75% of the participants experienced problems linked to their health. These included a decrease in weight, high blood pressure, and irregular glucose levels. Some of the participants were referred for pharmacology and therapeutic support after the divorce. Participant 4 indicated, *"At one point, both of my legs were swollen and I was unable to walk, and when I arrived at the clinic, I was informed that these were physical signs of serious depression. I was then advised to go to a psychiatric facility and seek counselling and assistance, which I did. However, I was then informed that they should first address the physical symptoms before beginning counselling"* (P4).

Family unit and dynamics:

Children

Participants who had children from their divorced marriage appeared to miss the children. Participant 7 said that, as part of his divorce experience, He was feeling lost, useless, and hopeless, but *"The thought of my boys was one of the things that helped me survive. The thought of my boys prevented me from leaving Eswatini to begin a new life because I was already missing the children since we stopped living together in the same house. If I live far away from them, I wondered how I can be a true father"* (P7). This affirmed the bond that comes with being a family unit that shares norms and values. When the family becomes dysfunctional the unit is destabilised.

The neighbours, siblings, and extended family

This sub-theme focused on the lived experiences of divorced men in the context of the extended family, siblings and neighbours. According to participant 7, *"I kicked her out of emotion, she left, she called the police on me, they arrived, and the family came loaded. She then started shouting and neighbours ran over."* (P7). In the African cultural context, neighbours are part of the family unit and influence the dynamics of the family.

New Partner

According to one of the participants, who discussed his remarriage following divorce, the impact also extends to the new partner: *"...When my new wife showed up, my feelings began to flare up, and now I'm terrified that everything will fall apart once more because she seems so composed and grounded. I advised her to assist me because I am trying to deal with a lot right now, so don't be surprised if I become emotional. Now that we are at peace, I'm working to flush out these memories one at a time, and I can talk to her if I start to feel reminded of any of the painful recollections. We're talking, and that's helping the healing process. We used to avoid talking, but now I've mastered the art of communication, something I lacked before. I'm studying."* (P8).

Biological parents

Participant 12 emphasized the stigma associated with divorce *"...There was a lot, but my mother's pleasure in the fact that I was living a successful life crushed my heart after the divorce because I was the only son she had. She was explaining to me how she would view her mates and other things now that her son is divorced"* (P12). Also recalling how his divorce and subsequent remarriage harmed his connection with his mother. Another participant said, *"My mother reportedly indicated she doesn't want to interact with my new wife"* (P9).

The ex-partner

According to the study, the effects of divorce might manifest themselves in the ex-spouse, particularly if she is still alive. 55% of the participants admitted to having times when they missed their spouse, either because of the children they shared or because of memories of pleasurable sexual encounters. Only 27% of respondents said they didn't miss anything about their ex-partner. When questioned if a man who divorced his wife ever misses her at any time. Participant 4 declared that *"...I miss my ex-wife because I have created amazing memories that we always had"* (P4). Participant 7 was asked if he remembered his ex-wife with such memories, he said, *"Because it wasn't always unpleasant, you had to bounce back from it, which is incredibly difficult at times. At other times, I felt like I remembered her for the intimate moments we had. We were very good friends"* (P7).

Coping strategies

The participants reported that from their experience, adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies were employed to help them deal with the stressors.

Adaptive coping methods

The men's adaptive coping strategies included attending church and praying. Although the divorced men would have loved to remain active in the church, several participants remark that the unfavourable attitudes of the clergy and churchgoers drive them away from the church. Other participants used social gatherings, running, walking, reading, and watching TV to cope. Participant 4 said, *"She inspired me to start jogging, so I would get up early to go the gym. I continued to play the piano, which is one of my all-time favourite activities and which also served to relax me and gave me a chance to empty myself before God"* (P4).

Maladaptive coping methods

A few of the participants used alcohol or smoking as a coping mechanism. In this study, 25% of the participants resorted to alcohol as a means of coping. Participant 9 reported that *"...I felt like I had overindulged at one point and thought I ought to adjust a bit. You can understand the stress since I used to stay up until three in the morning at home before heading to work. I consider myself fortunate to still have a job. Because I had been drinking, I would fill sick notes explaining why I was ill and ask someone to cover for me. My reputation was damaged, I missed work frequently, and many negative things kept happening to me"* (P9).

Personal analysis of experience of the divorce process

Participant inquiry into the divorce process and the lessons learnt from it constitutes personal analysis of experience with the divorce process. This subject gave rise to the two sub-themes of perceived divorce contributory reasons and emotional awareness. Perceived contributory factors to divorce.

Perceived contributory factors to divorce

The study identified four sub-theme clusters, namely infidelity, irreconcilable differences, lack of respect and emotional regulation, and sexual dissatisfaction or differences in sexual experience and

incompatibility. Participant 7 shared, *"The most significant problem, with me being the less experienced party, was the matter of sexual experience"*. Another participant said, *"Even though it is not expressly stated in the Bible, sexual discourse is considered sinful in churches. As a young person, I was unable to approach my elders and inform them that ABCD (sexual matters) is an issue, even though doing so might have been beneficial"* (P8).

Infidelity

Participant 2 discovered something disgusting, *"My neighbour and my wife were caught by me in my bedroom"*. Another participant said after discovering that my wife was cheating on me, *"Being cheated on as a man is embarrassing...In fact, she didn't seem upset that I discovered who she was cheating on me with when I finally did"* (P8).

Irreconcilable differences

Another reason for divorce was incompatibility. Participant 6 indicated, *"Even though we were deeply in love, I still think that we were somewhat incompatible as a couple up until this point. Although we were delighted, there were several factors that prevented us from being compatible"* (P6).

Lack of respect and emotional regulation

In Swati culture, women are given certain responsibilities and obligations. When men do these, it is considered to be witchcraft (udlisiwe), a sign of being enchanted, or a sign of extreme disdain. These include responsibilities like cooking, cleaning, and changing diapers. Participant 7 discusses his personal story. *"...She slapped me one day for not cooking, stating that I should have known that she was at work while I was at home. She claims she buys food and takes care of everything, but I don't do anything, so I got angry and hit her. My ex-wife told me that I am meant to be a wife...."* (P7).

Emotional awareness

This sub-theme covered how divorce affected the divorced man and other people around him. Some individuals claimed to have emerged from the

experience stronger and wiser. Others described how it has affected their families and social circle.

Impact on self

Participant 4 came to the personal conclusion that divorce was difficult. *"....However, falling out of love or having your heart shattered by someone you love is a very negative life experience. To break the heart of others should be avoided if possible. I am suggesting that divorce should only come as a last resort for survival. People who have experienced heartbreak early in life, in my opinion, have a better grasp on how to handle it in the future. If the heartbreak comes later in life, the individual may not be able to cope with second marriage"* (P4).

Impact on others

Friends and family members may experience bewilderment after a divorce. Participant number five recounted his story, *"I lost friends, the environment changed, I was left alone with no one to talk to or seek guidance from. You could overhear people making fun of you in the hallways. When this happened I felt disappointed in myself and completely shut down"* (P5).

Discussion

Most of the participants stated that they occasionally found it difficult to cope with mental health issues. Particularly, depressive symptoms when faced with divorce-related pressures the individual actually caves in. One participant was referred for counselling, and two of the participants had to be put on antidepressants. Many men may experience psychological, physical, financial and educational adjustment following divorce.^{22,27} According to Kostense (2024), the overall implication of divorce experiences may negatively impact individual and national growth in the long run. Eswatini's patriarchal culture may be a contributory factor to the pressures associated with divorce and stigmatisation. No male wants to be linked with failure, according to the findings of this study, this has made it harder for men going through the divorce process Eswatini.

With respect to societal and religious demands, the lived experiences of divorced men from Eswatini tend to depict emotional suffering brought on by external hegemonic masculinity. This impacts

divorced men's notions of "self," which further destabilises their identities as it is internalised by them.¹³

The idea of divorce establishes a foundation for divorced men to be seen as having failed in their parental responsibilities. In addition to their dominating role as a supplier, divorce is costly and this increases their financial problem. Since men are not supposed to show any sign of weakness, even when they feel as though their world is whirling aimlessly, such men are supposed to display stoic identities. Thus, the patriarchal society in which men from Eswatini live places them in a situation where they cannot seek help. Therefore, repressing several pressures has led to an increase in psychological distress.²²

The negative coping mechanisms used by men as found in this study were consistent with a previous study.²¹ Divorced men often engage in self-destructive, maladaptive behaviours which include substance misuse, avoidance and suicidal attempts. Two participants expressed thoughts of suicide, and some participants admitted to drinking alcohol to try to calm their emotions.

The study revealed that divorced men do not open up to discuss their issues. Men are less likely than women to have a close confidant they can talk to when frustrated. This view is supported by Clarke-Stewart and Brentano's study.²⁸ Long-term effects of this include a propensity for divorced men to repress their feelings and avoid seeking professional assistance.^{29,30} This attitude may lead to depression and suicidal ideation which could impact national development.

According to this study, adultery, sexual dissatisfaction, disrespect, and insurmountable differences are the perceived causes of divorce. This is the same as the sensation of inadequacy that was identified by a previous study.³¹ Ngwasheng and Mbedzi (2024) have called for a comprehensive approach by relevant stakeholders to address the menace of infidelity to be specific.

One of the participants stated that men who divorce very early in their life are likely to adapt and remarry successfully. The majority of the participants confirmed what was referred to as "serial divorce." Participants concurred that after a first divorce, subsequent ones may not be traumatic. This was in contrast to a previous study that suggested someone who has previously divorced could be reluctant to

pass through the divorce process again.³² Although one of the participants said that going through the divorce process made him stronger, another said that it was traumatic and that he would never want a divorce for his enemies. Divorce has the potential to change one's cognitive perception of others as well as one's self-awareness.³³

Limitations

It is impossible to generalize the results of qualitative research investigations to larger populations. This study demonstrates that the majority of participants are both urban inhabitants and tertiary educated. It would have been highly beneficial to perform a comparison study on divorced men without formal education who reside in rural areas to learn about their personal experiences.

Conclusion

It's important to note that while some men recover from the trauma and damaging effects of divorce, others never do. This affects their ability to regulate their emotions and leads to negative consequences. The effect of divorce extends beyond just oneself to a great number of people whose lives depend on the divorcee. Considering the negative impacts of divorce, the spiral effects could have a negative

impact on the national development of a nation from the mental health and productivity point of view, to mention a few.

The majority of the participants were divorced with children at the time. The effects of the divorce trickle down to the children. The interviews revealed that divorce is a painful experience that is equivalent to starting life all over again. The findings of the study on the lived experiences of divorced men in the Eswatini Kingdom show that divorce has a lasting negative impact on the health and well-being of the divorced individual, children and society in general.

This study presents practical suggestions on how communities, individuals, and policymakers should mitigate the challenges posed by increasing divorce rates. These suggestions stress the need for community-based networks to be developed, gender equality to be promoted while upholding traditional values on marriage, and access to culturally sensitive psychosocial counseling. For example, the need to provide male-friendly spaces "lisango" (a meeting ground for men) where men may express themselves without worrying about being mocked. This will serve as a form of group therapy for men and provide a network for support and experience sharing. It's important to give divorced men the support they need to manage their stress, the shame associated with divorce, societal and religious conceptions about divorce.

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