The Long-Term Impact of Childhood Parental Divorce: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This research was aimed at examining the long-term effects of childhood parental divorce on children's mental health. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 7 Chinese adults aged between 22 and 24 who had experienced childhood parental divorce. The results showed that the adults who participated in the study had suffered psychological stimulation caused by the divorces of their parents in childhood, which led to a range of psychological problems, including depression, anxiety, loss of appetite, insomnia and self-harm. In addition, the study found that both the conflicts that occurred before and after the parents' divorce and the parenting patterns affected the child's mental health. Moreover, further researches could be promoted to investigate how the cooling-off period of divorce affected Chinese children's mental health.

Key words: Children's mental health; Childhood parental divorce; The long-term effects of parental divorce; The cooling-off period of divorce

INTRODUCTION

Fast-Rising Divorce Rates and Distressed Children

Parental divorce during Childhood is a stressful experience for children. Research suggests that childhood parental divorce has a potentially profound and lasting impact on both the psychological and physical health of children (Johnsen, Litland & Hallström: 2018). Amato (2000) claims that divorce is more like a decoupling process than a moment of a spouse leaving the family, which occurs before the event and has the possibility of having a huge impact on the future. Historically, there have been political and religious restrictions on divorce. Throughout the 18th and early 19th centuries, only wealthy males had the opportunity to file for divorce by Act of Parliament and eventually succeeded (Cambridge Family Law Practice: 2012). Divorce has been socially stigmatized in the past because marriage is regarded as the foundation of a family (Auersperg, Vlasak, Ponocny & Barth: 2019). According to the research of McTaggart (2015), it was not until 1875, with the advent of the Matrimonial Causes Act, that ordinary people had the right to divorce. During recent years, divorce has gradually become a more socially acceptable occurrence.

Numerous studies have shown that divorce rates have been increasing around the world in recent years. Between 1965 and 2017, the European divorce ratio rose from 0.8 to 2 per 1,000, according to Eurostat (2020). The Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2020) reported that the number of divorced couples registered in China increased from 2.678 million to 4.154 million in the decade from 2010 to 2019, a growth rate of 64.5%. Meanwhile, according to a report by Kwan (2021), the number of divorces in China exceeded a half of the number of marriages in 2019 (50.7%). These data all indicate that a growing number of children are suffering from family separation due to childhood parental divorce.

Parental divorce generally causes a huge stress on children, both physiologically and psychologically (Amato: 2000; Gulbrandsen: 2013; Johnsen, Litland & Hallström: 2018). Several studies have shown that

parental divorce in childhood affects the mental health of children in adulthood (Clark, 2013). According to Afifi and McManus (2010), the conflict and negative emotions associated with parental divorce bring adverse physical and psychological effects to children, such as tension, anxiety, loneliness, and depression. Hemminki and Chen (2006) also mentioned in their study that parental divorce during childhood contributes to children's risk of emotional stress, mental illness, antisocial behaviour and difficulties in getting along with family members. Therefore, it is significant to pay attention to and understand the impact of childhood parental divorce on the mental health of children.

Attitudes to Childhood Parental Divorce Internationally

Throughout history, a large body of research literature has shown that parental divorce during childhood has a negative impact on the mental health of children. To explore the children and their experiences of parental divorce, Johnsen, Litland and Hallström (2018) interviewed 12 participants from Norway between the ages of 10 and 13. The children who were interviewed expressed that their parents' divorce had caused them to lose their home and had left them in a constant state of negative emotions such as guilt, loneliness, loss and sadness (Johnsen, Litland & Hallström: 2018). Similar findings have been reported in the following studies. The conflicts that occur between parents before, during and after divorce have a negative impact on children's mental health and contribute to loneliness, guilt and low self-esteem (Barumandzadeh et al., 2016; Ottosen & Schwartz: 2013). The study of Strohschein (2012) compares the data from two interviews with 4474 children in Canada and found that children who had experienced parental divorce showed a significantly higher levels of depression when participating in the interviews than children who were in an intact family. Several studies in the past have referred to similar findings (Doherty & Needle: 1991; Aseltine: 1996; Strohschein: 2005). However, this result differs from the findings of Robbers et al. (2011). Using the Child Behaviour Checklist, the researchers investigated internalising and externalising problems among 6426 children who experienced parental divorce between the ages of 3 and 12 years and found no significant differences in the children's levels of depression before and after experiencing parental divorce.

After comparing the mental health trajectories of 2819 children aged 4-7 during 1994 and 1998, it was found that children who had experienced parental divorce during this period had a significantly higher levels of antisocial behaviour and aggression than those whose parents were not divorced (Strohschein, 2005). Several studies have reported similar findings (Baydar: 1988; Block et al.: 1986; Strohschein: 2012). The findings of Ängarne-Lindberg and Wadsby (2011) also suggest that children

who experience adverse parental divorce in childhood are more likely to develop emotional disturbances and antisocial behaviour in adulthood. Furthermore, Strohschein's (2012) findings suggest that children who experience parental divorce show significantly higher levels of hyperactivity and they are more likely to be irritable and inattentive. However, this contrasts the findings of Kerr and Michalski (2007), who did not find significant differences in children's hyperactivity levels before and after parental divorce by examining data from a longitudinal survey of Canadian primary schools' children between 1994 and 2000.

DISCUSSION OF THEORETICAL BASIS

The theoretical basis of this study is guided by Bowlby's attachment theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory. According to the attachment theory of Bowlby (1979), early relationships with caregivers have an essential role in a child's development and continue to influence social relationships throughout life. A similar perspective on this aspect is found in Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory. According to the ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979), a child's development is influenced by the interaction of the social and cultural environment in which the child lives.

Attachment theory proposes that relationships between people can be influenced by the type of attachment they have developed to relevant figures in their life (e.g., caregivers), (Bowlby, 1979). This means that if child experiences trust and love during childhood, he or she then is likely to feel trustworthy and worthy of being loved. In contrast, if a child's attachment needs are not met, he or she may develop a negative perception of themselves. Children who experience difficulties in developing secure attachments with their parents (e.g. children who have suffered rejection) have an increased likelihood of continuing to develop a negative self-image, which affects their relationships with the world around them (e.g. 'I am no good', 'others will reject me').

The theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposes a model of interaction that includes four systems: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the external system and the macrosystem. The microsystem is located in the most inner level of the environment and commonly indicates the direct environment in which children move and interact, and includes the families of children. At the second layer, mesosystems are the connections between the various micro-environments that promote children's development. For example, schools are considered as an intermediate system. Those systems in which the children are not immediately involved but which impact on their development are the external systems, which consist of the workplace of the child's parents. In the outermost level of the environment is the macro-system, which represents the

values and cultural resources of society. Instead of directly meeting the needs of children, the macrosystem supports the different environmental systems in the inner level.

Both attachment and ecological theories imply that the early relationship between parent and child has a profound impact on the future mental health of the child. Parental divorce results in children being separated from one or both parents for long periods of time. This long-term separation may cause the child to lack love and security. Arguments and even violence between parents further contribute to the child becoming a victim of the family. Studies by Amato (2010), Cummings and Davies (2002) have all highlighted the negative effects of childhood parental divorce on children's well-being and mental health.

Therefore, it is vital to understand the attitudes and thoughts of adults who have suffered childhood parental divorce. This can help educators to better help children who are suffering from similar psychological injuries.

The aim of this study was to investigate the long-term effects of childhood parental divorce on children's mental health. The research question for this study was: What are adults' perceptions of the long-term effects of childhood parental divorce on children's mental health?

ETHICS

Several ethical issues were involved in the study. The study received ethical approval from the UCL Institute of Education Ethics Committee after application. The participants in the study were all provided with an information leaflet about the study before the study began and signed a consent form after reading it in detail. Before signing the consent form and before the interviews began, the researchers informed the participants that that they could withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason. The researcher also assured the participants that all data recorded during the interviews would be kept anonymous to protect the participants' privacy. The data collected during the interviews were only utilized for the purpose of the study. The consent forms were signed and sent back by all participants before the interviews began. During the study, the data collected will be stored in the researcher's password-protected computer. At the end of the study, the researcher will permanently delete the relevant data from the computer.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design of this study is based on a qualitative research approach. Compared to quantitative research, qualitative research has the capacity to investigate human phenomenological experience and potentially offer richer data when it comes to describing complex experiences (Denscombe, 2017). The aim of this study was to investigate the long-term effects of childhood parental divorce on children's mental health. Based on this research aim, the researcher selected qualitative study which showed more details of the participants' emotions and thoughts. The study used semi-structured interviews to collect the attitudes and perceptions of adults who had experienced parental divorce in childhood on the issue of parental divorce affecting children's mental health in childhood. According to Flick's (2009), the value of semi-structured interviews is reflected in that this type of interview assists researchers in collecting interviewees' subjective opinions and experiences. A similar perspective was also mentioned in the study by Gray (2018), that the researcher learns in depth and detail about the experiences, emotions, feelings and attitudes of the participants through semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, both Denscombe (2017) and Clark, Flewitt and Alderson (2014) claim that semi-structured interviews are suitable for low-budget and small-scale studies because the flexibility and responsiveness of semi-structured interviews are effective in assisting researchers to save time and money. The interview was conducted and recorded via Zoom.

Participants

A total of seven adults from China who had experienced parental divorce as children participated in semi-structured interviews for this study. The participants were all between the ages of 22 and 24. Young people in this age group are typically just out of university and about to start work or postgraduate studies. They have some unique perspectives on the social phenomenon of childhood parental divorce compared to teenagers who have less life experience and adults who have been working for a long time. Through the interviews, the researcher will ask respondents to recall their early experiences in order to explore the perceptions of children who experienced parental divorce as children. All 7 interviews were recorded using zoom software.

During the participant recruitment period, the researcher contacted 6 schoolmates who had experienced parental divorce as children via WeChat. Verbal consent was acquired from these 6 participants after a brief introduction of the research information and purpose. Afterwards, the researcher sent them the study information leaflet, consent form and interview questions (see appendix 1, 2 and 3) and stressed that if they decided to change their mind, they could withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason. All 6 participants signed the consent form and took part in the interview. In addition, following a recommendation from a schoolmate, the researcher contacted via WeChat another female graduate student who was interested in participating in the study. After introducing her to the research and sending her the research information leaflet and consent form, she also willingly agreed to participate in the study. As a result, a total of 7 adults who experienced parental divorce during childhood were interviewed.

The names of the participants will be replaced with random letters of the alphabet. The researcher will also notify the participants of this information prior to taking part in the interviews.

Interview Schedule

The type of interview in this study was an individual semi-structured interview. The interview questions will be based on the participants' childhood experiences of parental divorce: 1. When did your parents get divorced? 2. Who did you live with after your parents' divorce? 3. What changes occurred in your life? 4. What was your attitude towards your parents' divorce? 5. Did your attitudes towards your parents change after their divorce? 6. Did the divorce of your parents have an impact on your perception of marriage and love? 7. Do you think living in a single parent household has had any impact on your relationships with friends? 8. Does the divorce of your parents have an effect on how you make friends? Do you prefer to be friends with people who have the same experiences as you? 9. Has the divorce of your parents had any impact on your studies? For example, in terms of grades or goals. 10. Would you have studied harder or done something special to get your parents' attention? If so, please tell us about your experience.

Interview Procedure

At the beginning of the interview, the researcher briefly introduced herself to the participants. Afterwards the content of the consent form was reconfirmed with the interviewees. The researcher emphasized that participants could stop the interview at any time during the interview. After this, the participants answered the researcher's interview questions individually.

Analytical Approach

The study utilized thematic analysis to provide a detailed analysis of the research data, and the study of Braun and Clarke (2006) indicates that thematic analysis is typically applied to qualitative research, which highlights the understanding and identification of themes and patterns in the data collected. The researcher coded the data to focus on crucial elements of the interviews after familiarizing with the information collected. These codes assisted the researcher in providing a brief outline of the critical points that frequently appeared in the transcribed data. After coding was completed, the researcher further identified and combined the codes to generate themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), reviewing the themes to ensure that the themes accurately represent the data is one of the important steps in thematic analysis.

Validity and Reliability

According to the research of Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2002), reducing bias is one of the optimal methods to improve interview validity. These biases stem from participants' misunderstanding of the interview questions and also from the researcher's own attitudes and expectations. Therefore, in order to collect high quality data and thus enhance the validity of the research, the researcher is expected to treat the interviewees in a friendly manner, actively answer the participants' questions and reduce the possibility of their misunderstanding of the interview questions. Furthermore, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2002) claim that one effective method of enhancing the reliability of research is to ask participants questions in the same order and format. Based on this, the researcher interviewed 7 participants in the same order of interview questions as mentioned in 3.3 Interview schedule.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis of the interviews regarding the perceptions of adults who experienced parental divorce in childhood on the impact of childhood parental divorce on their children's mental health ultimately identified 5 main themes and 12 sub-themes, as shown in Figure 1. These themes are discussed separately in the following sections.
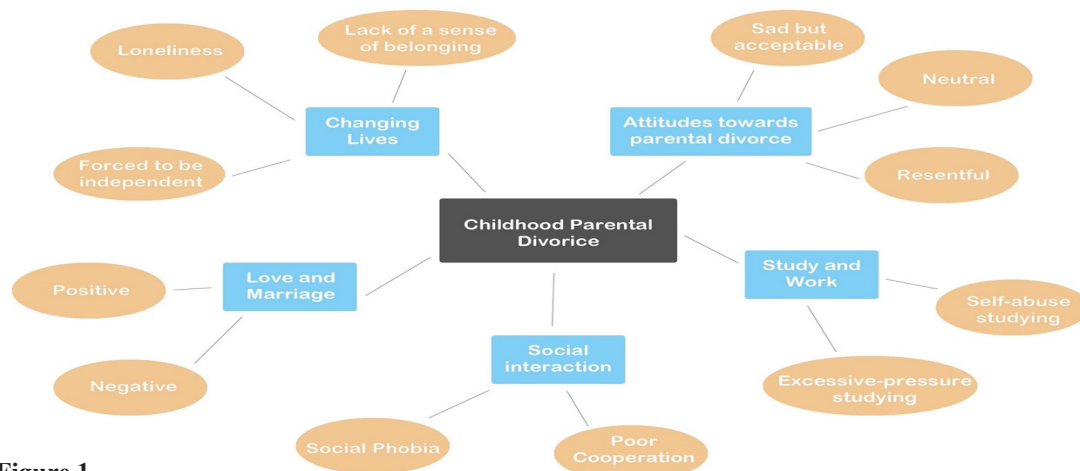
Figure 1
Main themes and subthemes identified from participants' interview responses.

Theme 1: Changing Lives

Each of the seven participants highlighted how their lives had been changed dramatically by their parents' divorce, but there were differences in each participant's focus, so there were 3 sub-themes when the analysis was generalised.

Loneliness

All participants mentioned in their interviews that their lives had become very lonely after the divorce of their parents. For example, they said in their interviews that

> After my mum and dad divorced, I lived with my mum. But she was very busy at work. As far as I can remember she rarely spent time with me even on weekends. I felt really lonely. (Participant A)

> In fact, after my parents divorced, I lived with my grandparents. My parents rarely cared for me, they just gave my grandparents and me money every month. I was afraid that my grandparents would be sad, so I always seemed happy, but in fact I really felt lonely, and I didn't know why my parents didn't care about me. (Participant D)

Forced to be independent

Four participants all mentioned that they had been forced to become independent at a very early age because of the separation of their parents in childhood. They said in the interview that

> My parents fought all the time before the divorce. Sometimes they would get so angry that one would just not return home and the other would stay in their room crying. So, I learnt to cook for myself at an early age because when they fought nobody would cook for me. (Participant C)

> I used to go home alone from the second year of primary school because my dad was very busy with his work. (Participant G)

Lack of a sense of belonging

5 participants reported in their interviews that they had no sense of belonging after the divorce of their parents. 2 of the interviewees said the following in their interviews

> Although I lived with my dad after my parents divorced, he soon remarried and had another child. When he got angry, he would beat me up and I was so scared that I called my mother and begged her to take me back. I then lived with my mother, but a year later she remarried too. I felt like I was an extra person. The world didn't have a home for me. (Participant G)

> My mother remarried when I was in third grade, and she and my stepfather soon had a son. I often felt that they were a family, and I was just an unimportant person. (Participant B)

Theme 2: Attitudes towards parental divorce

There were differences in the attitudes of the 7 participants towards the divorce of their parents and their attitudes towards their parents after the divorce. There will be 3 sub-themes here.

Resentful

4 of the 7 participants had an attitude of opposition and resentment towards their parents' divorce. They stated that

> Although my parents had always fought before their divorce, I had considered whether it would be a good choice for them to separate. But when they finally got divorced, I found that I

couldn't accept their divorce. (Participant C)

> In fact, I'm really against the divorce of my parents. Their divorce brought my world crashing down. I envied those children who had good family relationships. (Participant D)

Neutral

2 of the participants interviewed were neutral about the divorce of their parents. One stated that

> As far back as I can remember, they were fighting and smashing things. At first, I was scared and would cry. But then I realised that even when I cried, they were still arguing and wouldn't stop to comfort me. And then I moved to my grandparents' house. They didn't tell me about the divorce in advance. But when they told me the news, I accepted it calmly. (Participant F)
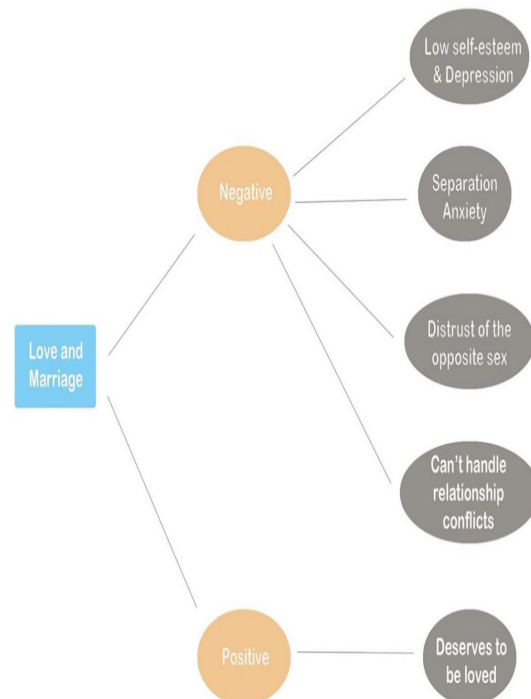
Sad but acceptable

One participant indicated that she had a relatively good acceptance of her parents' divorce. She said that

> In fact, my parents divorced when I was 4 years old. I have almost no memory of my father. When I was little, I was also very upset about why I didn't have a father, but my mother gave me a lot of love. So, I have a good acceptance of their divorce. (Participant E)

Theme 3: Love and Marriage

The third theme is more complex. Therefore, the themes are first divided into 2 sub-themes and then further subdivided into 5 more specific sub-themes. To help readers better understand before showing examples from the dataset, Figure 2 is shown.

Figure 2
Subthemes and further subthemes for theme 3: Love and Marriage

Specific Sub-Themes	Example
Low self-esteem & Depression	I am very lacking in confidence in romantic relationships. Probably because my parents rarely cared for me as a child, so when my ex-boyfriend came to me and asked if I wanted to be his girlfriend, I said yes to him very easily. I compromised a lot after that because I was afraid of being dumped by him, but he eventually cheated on me. (Participant B)
	My parents' divorce has made me have some low self-esteem since I was a child. I was always subconsciously trying to please people, especially in romantic relationships. (Participant D)
Separation Anxiety	The reason I broke up with my ex was because she felt I was extremely dependent on her and was making her breathless. After that I had consulted a doctor who told me I had separation anxiety. (Participant G)
	The reason I broke up with my ex-boyfriend was because he didn't reply to my messages when he went out for three hours, I couldn't contact him and became anxious, I kept wondering why he didn't reply to my messages. Was he cheating on me? I met with him later and grabbed his phone to check his chat history. He thought I was being unreasonable and couldn't tolerate my behaviour, so he finally broke up with me. I was so angry that I thought he must have cheated on me. For the next two months, I was trapped in a state of agitation and sadness, crying every day, losing my appetite, and losing 3kg in a month. (Participant A)
Distrust of the opposite sex	The reason my parents divorced was because my dad cheated on my mom. This has resulted in me difficulty in fully trusting the opposite sex. (Participant A)
	My father betrayed my mother and the incident hurt me a lot. In fact, in junior and senior high school I even loathed the opposite sex approaching me. Trusting the opposite sex was difficult for me. (Participant C)
Can't handle relationship conflicts	My parents have been quarrelling for as long as I can remember, but rarely communicating. So, when my boyfriend and I have conflicts, I often don't know how to handle the conflict. I'm afraid that I can't handle it well and cause a break-up between my boyfriend and me. So, I often lower my self-esteem to please my boyfriend. I know it's bad, but I'm afraid of breaking up. (Participant F)
	Because my parents are divorced, I am longing for a happy and stable family life. But at the same time, I am worried that when there is a conflict with my future partner, whether we will quarrel as well as my parents. How to handle conflicts is still a challenge for me. (Participant D)
Deserves to be loved	Although the role of my father was missing from my childhood, my mother invested a lot of love in me. She showed me that I was deserved to be loved. (Participant E)

Theme 4: Social interaction

All 7 participants reported statements that indicated the effects of parental divorce on their social interactions, and two sub-themes were identified as representing these effects: 1. social phobia. 2. poor cooperation with others.

Social Phobia

After reflecting on their time as students, all 5 interviewees said that they were not good at socialising with people and were even afraid of speaking in public at student age. They said that

It was difficult for me to actively communicate with people. When I was a child, my school organised group activities, I would wait for the teacher to assign me to a team and would not actively invite people to join my team. (Participant A)

When I was younger, I had low self-esteem. I was afraid of being the extra one in group activities at school. But I was also afraid to communicate with others. So, I never had to be the leader of any school activities when I was a student because I was afraid to talk in a crowded place. (Participant E)

Poor Cooperation

4 of the participants mentioned that they were not good at cooperating with others. For example, as they had said in the interview

I am better at working alone than in a team. (Participant B)

I became independent at an early age because my parents divorced in my childhood. I was used to handling tasks on my own. This has also led to me being challenged to work with others. For me, it is more efficient to work and study alone. (Participant G)

Theme 5: Study and work

The final theme identified for the seven participants covered the impact of parental divorce on children's future study and work. Two sub-themes were also identified: 1. Self-abusive studying. 2. Excessive-pressure studying.

Self-abusive studying

When discussing the impact of divorce on the future of children in terms of study and work, two participants expressed that they studied and worked self-abusively and longed to prove themselves. For example, they stated that

As mentioned before, I lived with my grandparents after my parents divorced. The absence of my parents made me constantly remind myself that I could only rely on myself. So, I was very strict with myself, both as a student and now. I can't accept that I am worse than others, and when I fail an exam, I lose my appetite and suffer from insomnia. One of the worst was that I cut myself on the arm with a pencil sharpener after failing an exam. (Participant D)

In fact, I stayed up all night to work for two days last week. My colleagues say that I am too crazy about my work. I have been like this since I was a student. I was desperate to prove to my teachers and leaders that I was excellent by getting high marks and completing some important work. (Participant F)

Excessive-pressure studying

The rest of the interviewees all reported that they had been studying under excessive pressure for a long time. In their interviews they said that

My mother was very strict about my studies. After my parents divorced, my dad had another child very quickly. My mother was very discontented about this. She used to say to me, "You have to be better than that child! Otherwise, your dad will completely ignore you. "Every time I heard this, I felt very uncomfortable and stressed. (Participant C)

I always felt that after my mum and my dad split up, she pinned all her life's expectations on me. If I didn't do well in exams,

she would criticise me and say I didn't work hard enough, but I studied really hard. When I was in primary school, all the other kids were playing at weekends while I was in tuition classes all the time. (Participant A)

In this chapter, the 5 themes and 12 sub-themes identified from the interviews are described in detail. In the next chapter, the researcher will discuss how the above theme relate to the research questions.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to investigate the long-term effects of childhood parental divorce on children's mental health. Through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the study revealed that the interviewees with relevant experiences who participated in the study had all experienced different levels of psychological stimulation because of childhood parental divorce. During the interviews, the 7 participants interviewed who had experienced childhood parental divorce all demonstrated a range of mental health problems in the areas of romantic relationships, social interactions, work and study, such as depression, anxiety and social disorders. The participants interviewed had generally experienced loss of appetite, insomnia or self-harm. These findings are similar to those who have investigated the effects of childhood parental divorce on children's mental health (Strohschein: 2012; Ottosen & Schwartz: 2013; Johnsen, Litland & Hallström: 2017; Barumandzadeh et al.: 2016; Doherty & Needle: 1991; Aseltine: 1996; Strohschein: 2005). However, the results of this study have not found higher levels of antisocial behaviour, aggression and ADHD in children who have experienced childhood parental divorce. Therefore, this aspect is inconsistent with the findings of some studies mentioned in the introduction (Block et al: 1986; Baydar: 1988; Strohschein: 2005; Ängarne-Lindberg & Wadsby: 2011; Strohschein: 2012).

In the interviews, interviewees generally mentioned that parental conflicts were extremely acute prior to the divorce. This is consistent with what was mentioned at the beginning of the introduction section. More than the moment when one parent leaves the family, divorce is a process that has a potentially huge impact on both the pre-event and the future (Amato, 2000). Constant violence or conflicts between parents results in children experiencing mental health problems and painful emotions, including guilt, confusion, sadness, anger, fear of abandonment and conflicts related to misunderstandings and loyalty (Amato: 2001; Tremblay, Barr, & Peters: 2002; Amato: 2010), long before their parents' divorce. As the research by Melli and Brown (2008) shows, children with high levels of parental conflict are more susceptible to negative emotions than those with less conflict between parents. A similar argument is mentioned in the findings of Sandler, Miles, Cookston and Braver (2008) and Davies and

Cummings (1994): the seriousness of children's mental health problems is closely related to conflict between parents. Therefore, while focusing on the impact of parental divorce on children's mental health, it is also essential to consider the impact of the conflict caused by parents in the process of divorce on children's mental health. In contrast to intense conflict between parents, which has a negative effect on the child's mental health, quality parenting is effective in guarding the child's mental health. A considerable number of studies indicate that children's well-being is closely related to effective and high-quality parenting (Hetherington, Bridges & Insabella: 1998; Amato & Keith: 1991) and that parents require positive communication and expression of their love for their children (Pedro-Carroll: 2010; Kleinsorge, & Covitz: 2012; Kelly, & Emery: 2003). Long-term quality parenting reduces stress and protects children's mental health when they experience parental separation (Clark, 2013). Therefore, whether or not parents end their marriage is not the only element that determines the mental health of a child. Parents' parenting patterns towards their children before and after the divorce, as well as their level of conflict, are significant factors.

On 29 May 2020, the Third Session of the Thirteenth National People's Congress of China (2020) voted to adopt the Civil Code, article 107 of which stipulates that within 30 days from the date of receipt of the application for registration of divorce by the marriage registration authority, any party who does not wish to divorce can withdraw the application for registration of divorce from the marriage registration authority. The Divorce Cooling-off Period became known to the public for the first time. According to data from the Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2020), the divorce rate in China has risen in recent years and the cost of divorce is so low that the divorce cooling-off period system was therefore legislated. The legislation on divorce cooling-off periods is aimed at reducing casual and impulsive divorces, maintaining family stability and protecting the interests of minor children (The National People's Congress Standing Committee of the People's Republic of China: 2020). Although the legislation on divorce cooling-off periods is intended to protect children, its practical effectiveness is debatable without a complete resolution of the conflict between the parents, a divorce cooling-off period has the potential to negatively affect the children's mental health. Therefore, whether children's mental health is affected during the divorce cooling-off period is an option for future research. In addition, a control group could be formed between children from families who eventually choose not to divorce and children from families who eventually choose to divorce after the divorce cooling-off period. The development of the mental health of these two groups of children could be investigated and analyzed.

The limitations of this study are mainly included in two points. Firstly, due to time and other factors, only 7 participants eventually participated in the interviews. This contributed to the small sample size of the study and the lack of comprehensive data collection. Secondly, the gender ratio of the interviewees was unbalanced. 6 out of the 7 participants were female. Therefore, the data collected was not enough to reflect the general perceptions of Chinese males.

CONCLUSION

The study interviewed adults about the impact of childhood parental divorce on children's mental health, and it aimed to investigate the long-term effects of childhood parental divorce on children's mental health. The results indicated that childhood parental divorce has different degrees of negative impact on children's mental health. The conflict created during the divorce process and the parenting patterns of the parents affected the child's well-being. Further research about whether children's mental health is affected or not during the cooling-off period of divorce is a direction for future research.

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