

THE EXPERIENCE OF DIVORCE AMONG HONG KONG CHINESE FAMILIES:

Implications for designing culturally sensitive divorce interventions

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Divorce is one of life's most stressful changes (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1982). Preventive interventions such as divorce education programs have the potential of alleviating stress for both parents and children and reducing threats to their health and development (Pedro-Carroll, 2005). Although divorce education programs have proliferated since their inception in the United States in the mid-1970s (Schepard, 2004), they have yet to be developed in Hong Kong despite a dramatic increase in the rate of divorce over the past twenty years. Program designers are being challenged to develop programs that are tailored to the needs of diverse family groups (Pedro-Carroll, 2005) as interventions that 'start where people are', and respect and incorporate their cultural beliefs and practices, are likely to be more relevant and effective than those that are developed in one culture and transplanted to another (Resnicow, Braithwaite, Dilorio & Glanz, 2002).

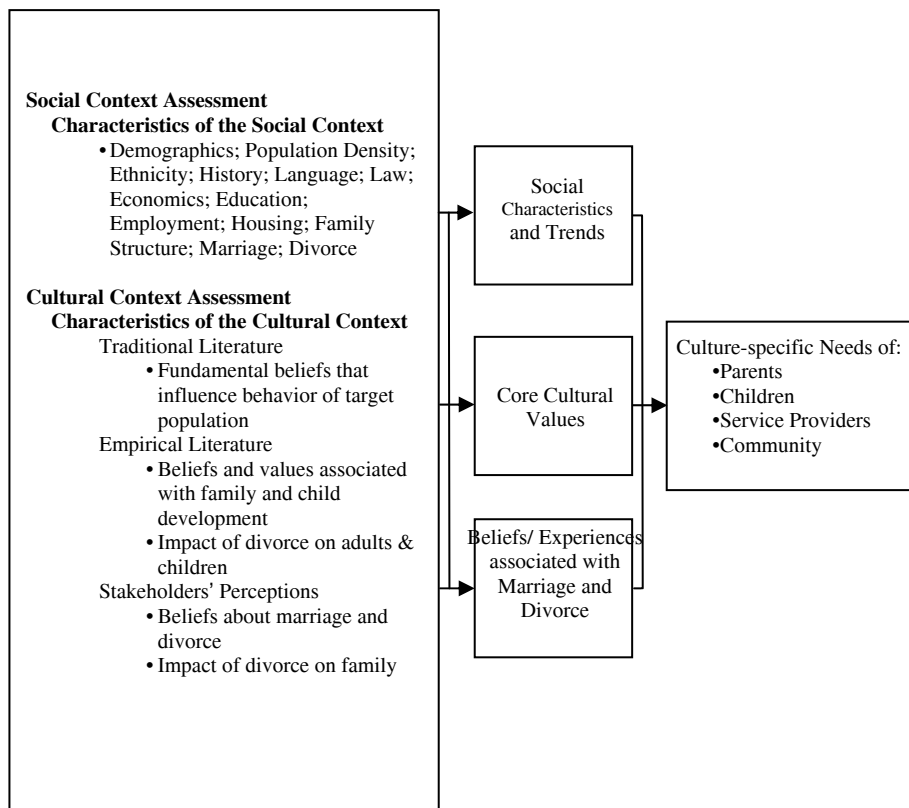
Ideally, culturally sensitive educational programs should include the primary dimensions of surface and deep structure. Surface structure involves the incorporation of observable cultural characteristics of a population into program materials and messages while deep structure incorporates beliefs about culture, social, psychological, environmental and historical factors, that influence perceptions and behavior (Resnicow et al., 2002). The present study was conducted to gain an understanding of the surface and deep structural

dimensions influencing divorce among Hong Kong families to acquire the knowledge required to design culturally sensitive divorce education programs for them.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to identify the culture-specific values and needs of divorcing Chinese parents and children as the basis for developing culturally sensitive psychoeducational interventions to promote their health and well being. The Socio-Cultural Values and Needs Assessment Model (Sullivan, Leung, Lau, & Dignam, 2002) provided the conceptual framework.

Figure 1. Socio-Cultural Values and Needs Assessment Model



Methods

The social context assessment involved a description of the characteristics of the social context of Hong Kong society obtained through a review of literature on demographics, population density, ethnicity, history, language, law, economics, education, employment, housing, and family structure and function. The cultural context assessment, which involved a description of the cultural context, was comprised of three components: (1) a review of published literature on traditional Chinese culture to identify core cultural beliefs; (2) a review of research on dating, marriage, childrearing and separation and divorce to identify Chinese beliefs and values associated with family and child development; and (3) the collection of primary data, from local stakeholders, to describe beliefs about marriage and divorce, and the impact of divorce, on Hong Kong families.

Primary data on the experiences of divorcing Hong Kong families were obtained from stakeholders of separation and divorce through 10 homogeneous focus group and 13 key informant interviews (n=85). The purposive samples were comprised of divorced men, divorced women, children of divorce, adult children of divorce and professionals from education, law, social work, psychology, medicine and clergy of various denominations, who provide services for divorcing families. The children who participated ranged in age from 12 to 15 years while the adults were between 27 and 58. The parents and children, and 92% of the professionals, were ethnic Chinese. All were Hong Kong residents.

Data Analysis

Content analysis of the published literature, and thematic analysis of the primary data, resulted in the identification of the major social characteristics and trends influencing Hong Kong families; core cultural values; and beliefs, values and experiences associated with

marriage, separation and divorce. From the integration of these data, needs of divorcing parents, their children, the professionals who work with them, and the broader social community were derived.

Conclusion and Implications

Divorce for Chinese families is difficult and emotionally intense. Shame and stigma contribute to families' keeping divorce a secret, even from their children, a reluctance to seek help, knowledge deficits about divorce, post-divorce parenting and existing support services, and inadequate social support. The experiences of divorcing families are strongly influenced by the social and cultural context in which they occur. Changes in the social context have contributed to a decline in marriage and increase in divorce, a weakening of family solidarity and an increase in social problems. Traditional cultural values have contributed to the perpetuation of the taboo of divorce and the stigma associated with it, the secret of divorce, and the reluctance of divorcing families to seek and use social support—all of which compound their adjustment problems. Families generally lack knowledge of the types, purpose, value and availability of support services, and they have difficulty distinguishing among the roles of various service providers. Most support services offer practical, rather than emotional, assistance and they are primarily geared to the needs of women. Help seeking for emotional problems is heavily stigmatized. When help is sought, it is often as a last resort and when people feel desperate. Negative attitudes of social service providers further contribute to families' feeling demoralized. Findings also indicate that there are wide variations in the knowledge level of the service providers. Additionally, many lack knowledge of community resources for divorcing families resulting in their inability to refer them to services that they may require.

To normalize divorce and post-divorce families, facilitate help seeking, assist families acquire the knowledge and skills they need to restructure their families, promote adjustment and prevent harm to their children, an array of culturally sensitive divorce education programs and support services are needed for both divorcing parents and children. Prior to the development of divorce education programs, existing programs and services need to be identified and publicized so better use may be made of them, duplication can be avoided, and future resource development can be targeted to areas of highest need.

Divorcing families are complex and working with them requires the expertise of service providers from a variety of disciplines. Professional development programs are needed for all service providers to ensure their knowledge is current, to promote interdisciplinary collaboration, and to strengthen a system of referral so that families' needs can be matched with the providers who are best able to meet them.

Despite the dramatic increase in divorce, public attitudes in Hong Kong remain negative and contribute to adjustment problems. Community-wide, public education campaigns are needed to normalize divorce, single-parent families and post-divorce co-parenting. Also needed is public awareness of resources to support all families through predictable developmental and situational crises in addition to those targeted specifically for families experiencing marital conflict, separation/divorce and remarriage.

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