FACULTY OF HEALTH AND OCCUPATIONAL STUDIES
Department of Social Work and Psychology

Chinese adults' perceptions about the influence of their parents' divorce on their childhood academic performance

Xinyi Shen & Hongjing Zhu

2017

Abstract

In this study, we aim to discover how Chinese adults' perceive the influence of their parents' divorce on their academic performance. A total number of 22 Chinese adult participants took part in the individual semi-structured interviews, and answers were analyzed by using content analysis. The results of the study show a partial consistence with previous research that there might be short-term negative influence of parents' divorce on their children's' academic performance. Yet these participants recounted that they were able to independently cope with the stressful situations related to their parents' divorce and reduce, or even remove, the negative influence on their academic studies in the long term. Other participants who regarded themselves as highly social and communicative and/or who received social support did not perceive any negative influence. We show that external factors, such as how parents handle the divorce and support from other family members, teachers and peers, might work together with participants' internal factors to result in reducing negative influences on academic performance and achievements.

Key words: Divorced family, Children, Perception, Academic performance

Preamble

We would like to thank for all respondents' voluntary participation in this research. If without your experience and perceptions, this paper would not have been possible. We would also like to show our great appreciation to our supervisor Pinar Aslan, for all precious and careful guidance and support throughout the whole process. Thank you!

Table of Contents

List of tables

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

In modern western countries, divorce between parents becomes one of the main reasons resulting in their children living in a single family (Cherian, 1989). Divorce between Chinese married couples are increasing and the subject of divorce has consequently been regarded as a social issue in need of more scientific attention in China (Dong etc. 2002). Compared with adults, children's psychological system is not yet mature and strong enough to independently adapt to the living environment after parents' divorce (Garmezy etc. 1984) in China. The welfare of young children who live in divorced families is receiving increasing attention from the public, communities, schools, and academic researchers, especially at this age when divorce rate is constantly raising worldwide (Dong etc. 2002). Scholars maintain that divorce implies changes of lifestyle and focus of young children, which might create different levels of psychological issues (Kalter, 1987). Yet, other scholars have argued that there are several benefits for children after their parents' divorce; for example, they no longer need to face the hostility between their parents which might create tremendous psychological harm than divorce itself (Zheng 2013). Another example is that children might savor one on one time with each parent after their parents' divorce (Zheng 2013). They might also grow up into maturity and strength to care for their own siblings (Zheng 2013). These are all benefits that parents' divorce could bring to children. However, children might find it hard to adapt to the changed living environment after parents' divorce, therefore in need of support and attention from parents, teachers, and social workers. Researchers from around the world have conducted studies about this issue and drawn various conclusions, mainly concerning children's psychological health and possible disorders in the future (Amato 1994; Cherian 1989; Demo and Acock 1988; Hammond 2015).

Compared with a more complete and sophisticated research system about divorce issues in western countries, China has relatively less experience in researching this issue (Xu etc. 2017). Chinese social workers has yet had more knowledge and

theoretical framework to look after psychological well-beings of Chinese children growing in divorced families because divorcing only becomes a common societal issue after 1990s (Xu etc. 2017). The divorce rate in China was low before 1990s, and the divorcing issue in China had not been such a serious social issue as in Western countries (Dong etc. 2002). According to old Chinese marriage philosophy, divorce was not an option. Yet, that is one of the reasons why Chinese children growing up in divorced families suffer from greater discrimination from the surrounding community, even resulting that they might be living in the marginal area of the society (Dong etc. 2002). Since the 1990s, with the Revolution and Open Policy of Chinese government which largely opens the world to Chinese people, the average divorce rate in China soars up to 2.7 percent in 2006, much higher than that in European countries, more similar to divorce rates in America (Xu etc. 2007). In addition, the development of the Chinese market economy highly increases the financial independency of Chinese women, making them less dependent on their husbands to provide financial support (Dong etc. 2002). Together with the new marriage law which sets free several limitations on divorce, the divorce rate has been rising in a rapid rate in China and has thus captured scholarly attention, in particular in regards to influences on children's well-being (Xu etc. 2007).

One of the most explicit influences of divorce on children would be the change in their academic performance before, during and after their parents' divorce (Fthenakis 2014). Since a healthy learning environment is essential for children to achieve sound academic performance in order to become an independent adult in the future, it is necessary for adults who are part of children's social environments to have knowledge on how divorce influences on children's academic performance (Garmezy etc. 1984). In order to gain more understanding about the influence of parents' divorce on Chinese children's academic performance and contribute to the current studies, this research project contributes to increased knowledge on how Chinese young adults perceive the influence of parents' divorce on their academic performance.

1.1 Research objectives and questions

The aim of the study is to explore how Chinese adults have perceived the influence of parents' divorce on their academic performance during their upbringing.

1. How do the interviewed Chinese adults perceive and experience the influence of parents' divorce on their academic performance?

2. How have these Chinese adults coped with their parents' divorce in relation to their academic performance?

1.2 Thesis structure

This thesis consists of five chapters aiming to explore Chinese adult's perception of the influence of their parents' divorce on their academic performance.

Chapter 1: The first chapter of the study will provide a basic introduction of the research background, address the research aim and research questions, and identify the significance of the research.

Chapter 2: In the second chapter, we present a literature review and a theoretical framework.

Chapter 3: In the third chapter, we introduce the methodology of the study, including the sampling process, data analysis approach, and a discussion on the validity and reliability of the study.

Chapter 4: In the fourth chapter, we present, discuss and analyze the findings of the study.

Chapter 5: The final chapter of this study provides a brief conclusion, together with a discussion on the limitations of the study and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER TWO THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Sense of Coherence (SOC)

The concept of Sense of Coherence (SoC) was brought up by Aaron Antonovsky in 1979 to investigate people's different reactions and coping strategies to similar stressful situations. According to Antonovsky (1979), there are three components of SoC: comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness. Comprehensibility is how people think of what happened around them to be logical, structured or not. Manageability means how people think of their capability to cope with the situation that happen to them with different coping strategies. Meaningfulness is how they perceive the meaning of specific duties and tasks from a holistic perspective. SoC can be a suitable theoretical framework for this research because it provides tools for analyzing coping strategies, meanings attached to academic tasks and goals, as well as the relationship between their academic performance and such coping and meaning-making.

2.2 Coping strategies

According to past literature, coping strategies could develop through internal and/or external factors. First, there are two main internal factors which refer to a person's own mental ability and personality to protect him(her)self from adversities (Murphy 1987). The first internal factor is physiological factors, such as positive problem-solving abilities, optimism, curiosity, independency, and benefits from positive attention (George 2008). The second internal factor is psychological factors, such as religious factors, temperament factors, willingness to help others, social abilities, humor, flexibility, studying potentials, self-motivation, personal traits, self-value and confidence, calmness, solitude ability, determination, independent judgement, self-protected esteem, trust others, and so on (Brian 2008).

In this thesis, we use Benard (1999)'s summary of internal factors that could influence

a person's coping strategies to design the research and analyze participants' answers: 1) Social competence which refers to the ability to effectively communicate with others, pay attention to others' needs during social interactions, reacting to the problem with effective solutions, and so on; 2) Self-esteem and independency which include personal conviction, self-efficacy, and self-concept; 3) Sense of meaning and purpose which refers to the belief of a meaningful and unique life, including optimism, having goals, and the desire to live a consistent life.

According to the discussion above about three components of SOC and Benard (1999)'s summary of internal factors, there are common features for a more closely investigation to current research. The first common feature is that social competence and manageability both discuss individuals' coping strategies when facing different situations. The second common feature is that comprehensibility helps individuals to build up self-esteem and independency and increases individuals' comprehension about events that happen to them. The third common feature is that the sense of meaning and purpose discusses with the same scope as meaningfulness about how individuals consider the inter-relationship between their lives and themselves. The latter two features both contribute to the coping practices as adopted in the first feature. These common features allow the researcher to apply both the theory of SOC and Benard (1999)'s summary of internal factors when discussing the research findings.

For the external factors which refer to support to children from the family, schools, and the community, the most influential one would be the family's influence on a person's coping strategies, followed by schools and the community. For the external factors related to the family, researchers believe a sound relationship with family members and cohesion and perseverance within the family could all protect a person from adversities (Einat 2009). This thesis uses Olson, Mccubbin, Barnes, Larsen, Muxem and Wilson's (1983)'s theory about three characters of families that could positively help a person cope with stressful situations: 1) Being aware of key family

events and systematic celebrations which could help stabilize a person during adversities; 2) Family members with strong and long-lasting wills to control their lives; 3) Setting up and maintaining daily routines, caring and supporting, high expectations, and encouragement to join family lives.

Beyond the family, the external factors also include important components: schools and the community. For instance, teachers could provide motivational support and informational support to transfer their own positive experience to a child. Moreover, a sound relationship with teachers and a healthy social relationship with classmates could all help a person successfully establish effective coping strategies during stressful situations (Jay 2009).

A summary of the internal factors and external factors is presented in the table below.

Internal factors (Benard 1999)	Social competence	the ability to effectively communicate with others, pay attention to others' needs during social interactions, reacting to the problem with effective solutions, and so on
	Self-esteem and independency	personal conviction, self-efficacy, and self-concept
	Sense of meaning and purpose	the belief of a meaningful and unique life, including optimism, having goals, and the desire to live a consistent life
External factors	Family	Being aware of key family events and systematic celebrations
		Family members with strong and long-lasting wills to control their lives

		Setting up and maintaining daily routines, caring and supporting, high expectations, and encouragement to join family lives
	Schools	motivational support and informational support
		Peer relationship and support
	Community: volunteers, social workers	

Table 1. Internal factors and external factors that could affect a person's coping strategies under stressful situations. (Benard, 1999)

CHAPTER THREE LITERATURE REVIEW

The database used for searching previous studies is Jstor (https://www.jstor.org/), a database containing the majority of published journals and academic books, and Wanfang Data (http://www.wanfangdata.com.cn/), a Chinese database collecting research papers from Chinese universities and institutions. The key search terms are 'divorce academic performance', 'divorce children psychology', 'divorce young adult perspectives', and 'children coping strategies'. Previous research worldwide reveal that children may feel the anxiety, anger, self-doubt, or disbelief during and after the whole process of their parents' divorce. These feelings may affect their understanding and reaction to the rest of the world. The length and level of such effect depends on individual kid (Amato, 2014; Amato and Keith 1991; Cherian 1989; Demo and Acock 1988; Dong etc. 2002; Hammond 2015; Kalter 1987). The influence of the divorce on those children may manifest in their academic performance. Previous investigations were conducted to study how children behave and think after their parents' divorce, as well as proposing possible reasons behind the influence.

3.1 Research findings related to academic performance

According to preview studies chosen, children from divorce families may get distracted from their parents' divorce and stay away from normal communication with their peers (Dong etc. 2002). This may, therefore, affect their academic performance which requires communications with peers to make comparisons and achievements. What is worse, some children may start to lose interests in everything in their lives and pay low attention to their academic studies, resulting in a decreased academic performance (Elliott and Richards 1991). On the contrary, though, some children have even better academic performance at school, or their academic performance does not have much difference throughout the whole divorce process, making this topic even more mysterious (Potter 2010).

In terms of similar research in China to investigate the influence of parents' divorce on Chinese children's academic performance, the majority of the results show that parents' divorce generally had serious negative influence on children's academic performance. To be more specific, this negative influence is more serious with middle-school students, especially with their math study, regardless of their gender and age. Detailed behaviors manifested in those children are their sudden distractions during classes, hardly focusing on their study, not being able to complete homework on time, and steep decline in their scores (Lin 1992; Chen 1990).

Apart from investigating academic performance nearer the time of parents' divorce, previous studies also examined whether children's psychological development would have any change or recover throughout the time. According to the findings, even though children living in divorced families do have significantly different psychological disorders when their parents just got divorced, the more time passed after the divorce, the more heathy mental development these children would have (Su 1997). This finding is similar to that from Amato (2000)'s findings, both suggesting that even though parents' divorce can be a stressful incidence for children, most children could successfully adapt to the new living environment and alleviate the

influence of parents' divorce on them throughout time (Hu 2010). In this research, there will be analysis of participants' answers to find out their perceptions towards their psychological development and the relations with their academic performance.

3.2 Proposed reasons behind previous findings

Researchers have proposed several possible reasons why children living in divorced families have different patterns of academic performance change, which include parents' bad handle, less care from peers and the society, and own personality of children themselves. First, Amato (2014) suggested those parents' poor handling aches prior and after their divorce may end up hurting children's feelings and make them suffer from anger and anxiety and even guilt. Parents' arguments and fights during the divorce may also be a reasonable explanation for declined academic performance, because these violent behaviors may distract children's normal learning activities. Therefore, it is worth investigating how the adults perceive their parents' handle aches in the divorce and how this handle affected their academic performance. Secondly, Reid and Crisafulli (1990) suggest that pressure from the whole society, including teachers, peers and the community, may let children feel anxious and distracted. Furthermore, apart from those reasons from outside world, (Xu etc. 2007) proposed that personality of the children themselves is also rather important to how they coping with their parents' divorce. Optimistic children will try to seek others' help and walk out of the depression in a relatively shorter period, thus having a greater possibility of keeping the usual academic performance improvement. On the contrary, more pessimistic children may avoid making contact with anybody else and stay depressed longer than others, which make the influence of divorce on their academic performance even worse (Xu etc. 2007).

CHAPTER FOUR METHODOLOGY

The fourth chapter will introduce the methodological approach of the study, including the research design, sampling and sampling procedures, reliability and validity,   and

data analysis methods.

4.1 Research design

Since the influence of divorce on children's academic performance can be a complex issue to deal with, interviews are a good choice to obtain in-depth information from participants. Therefore, this research project is a qualitative study with interviews to obtain primary sources. The interview guide was divided into three sections. The complete interview outline and questions can be found in Appendix 1. The first section asked for participants' personal information, and questions in the second section are semi-structured to have several pre-determined questions in order to obtain answers relevant to the research questions of the study. The interviews questions are open-ended, in order to encourage participants to elicit their own experience, opinions, and thoughts. Moreover, in order to understand each participant's coping strategies to analyze their answers from the second section, questions in the third section asked for their different coping strategies. All interviews were one-to-one and recorded using an audio recorder, and were later transcribed into written text. Since most participants were from China, the interviews were conducted via the Internet and telephone.

There are certain disadvantages about conducting the interview via skype and telephone. First, the researchers had less control over the whole telephone interview process, because the researchers could not observe the facial reactions of participants during a telephone interview, being less able to evaluate a participant was telling a truth or not (Kumar 2011). Second, it is less intimate to conduct the research via telephone or Internet, so that it is more difficult to make a participant elaborate on their answers than that in a face-to-face interview, especially in this study where participants needed to talk about their deep feelings and past experiences (Bhattacherjee 2012).

4.2 Sampling and sampling procedures

22 respondents participated in this study; all adults between 24-38 years old, who grew up in a Chinese divorced family. There was an online post about this research project with brief explanations of the research purpose and the principal of confidentiality. The participants were chosen from volunteers who decided to participate after seeing the post. The website for posting the need for volunteers, Douban (https://www.douban.com/group/dan/), is a popular Chinese information-exchanged platform. There are hundreds of news groups under the platform, and the information was posted in a group called 'single families' (translated from the Chinese version 'Dan Qin Jia Ting'). After seeing the post, people who were interested in the research directly contacted the researcher for further information by sending instant messages within the platform.

The total number of participants of this study is 22, among which 14 are females and 8 are males. Their ages range from 24 to 38 at the time of research. The average interview time is 32 minutes. All of them obtained at least a bachelor's degree before the interview, which might lead to a selection bias and will be discussed in details later in section 6.2. Another factor leading to possible selection bias is that recruited participants actively reached the researcher after reading the post on a specific internet platform, which might suggest their particular interests in this research topic. These participants cooperated with the interviewer effectively, and completed all questions in their interviews.

Among those interviews, 19 interviews were conducted via Skype (digital video conference software), and 3 interviews were conducted via telephone.

The geographical distribution and age when parents were divorced of all valid participants are presented in two tables below. First, most participants (72%) were from the Middle and Eastern part of China. Since the economic, educational, cultural, and societal conditions in different areas of China can be rather different, the

geographical locations could be reasons to explain external factors affecting participants' academic performance (Dong etc. 2002). Second, most participants (86.36%) indicated that their parents divorced when they were in primary school (from 7 to 12 years old) or in secondary school (from 13 to 15 years old). According to the developmental stages theory of Elliott and Richards (1991), participants might have different competence to cope with their situations and academic studies at different ages when their parents got divorced. Therefore, it is worth including information about their geographical locations and ages when parents were divorced.

4.3 Reliability and validity

In order to maintain the reliability of the study, interview questions were carefully designed to be precise and clear to the participants, excluding any possible misunderstanding or ambiguity. For example, all interviews were conducted in Chinese, and wording of all questions did not include any advanced terminology or difficult words.

Frequently appeared patterns found by text segments related to the research questions were identified to create themes of the answers, and all answers were classified into categories.

Furthermore, in order to ensure the validity of the research, the participants were reached again to check their answers to make sure interpretations are accurate about their answers, and the initial results of the investigation were presented to the participants for confirmation.

What is more, the involvement of external opinions from the supervisor and peers highly add validity and reliability for this research (Kumar 2011). The supervisor of the researchers kept providing opinions regarding the research methods and data analysis process, monitoring and maintaining the quality of this research. The fact that there are two researchers conducting the study enables the internal validity of the

research. In addition, the researchers has been transparent in describing every step of the research process in this thesis, including a description of participants and their contexts.

Finally, by discussing our thoughts and ideas on subjects related to our research questions, we aimed to bring preconceived ideas on divorce, Chinese families and children growing up in divorced families to surface before conducting the study. This has helped us be more objective throughout the whole research process, which delimits the risk of letting subjective opinions influence the data collection process and interpretation of the results.

4.4. Content analysis

We have used content analysis as an analytic strategy when interpreting and analyzing the data. Due to limited research time, not all interview content was transcribed. All interview audios were listened to several times and we made notes while listening, followed by a transcription of answers which were relevant to our research questions. The next step was to put all response into categories based on themes that arose from interpreting and analyzing the answers. The notes made while listening to the interviews were read repeatedly to find possible links between these answers, which formed sub-categories under the main categories. The categorizing process was done by repeatedly reviewing all transcripts to ensure that they were relevant and appropriate (Bhattacherjee 2012).

4.5 Ethics of the study

Since the researchers needed to directly contact targeted sample participants, there were several ethical principles to consider beforehand. Sample participants were provided with a consent form with the aim of the research, all the research details, how the data would be used, confidentiality of their response, and possible influence of the research on the participants. They were asked to carefully read and consider the

information letter handed to them before agreeing to participate. There was no force or monetary rewards for the participants. They were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from participation at any time of the research process. When necessary, there were oral explanations of terms on the content form (Kumar 2011). For an overview of the participants in terms of age, gender and age when parents were divorced, see the table below.

No. of Participant	Age	Gender (F=Female; M=Male)	Age when parents were divorced
IP 1	25	F	8
IP 2	28	M	7
IP 3	26	F	17
IP 4	27	F	13
IP 5	29	M	18
IP 6	25	F	14
IP 7	27	F	8
IP 8	24	F	12
IP 9	25	M	18
IP 10	29	F	11
IP 11	34	M	13

IP 12	26	F	10
IP 13	24	F	11
IP 14	28	F	15
IP 15	32	M	13
IP 16	31	M	8
IP 17	30	F	7
IP 18	24	M	12
IP 19	38	F	14
IP 20	27	F	7
IP 21	29	M	15
IP 22	25	F	10

Table 2. Overview of participants.

CHAPTER FIVE FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this section we describe and analyze participants' perceptions of how their parents' divorce have influenced their academic studies. In doing this, we focus on how internal and external factors have influenced their perceptions. The results of this section are divided in two main themes: 1) social support and communication and 2) independence, age and manageability. The main theme of Social support and Communication is further divided into six subthemes: 1.1) family, 1.2) school, 1.3) communication, 1.4) seeking refuge in an imaginary world, 1.5) meaningfulness, and 1.6) coping strategies and parents' educational levels.

5.1 Social support and communication

The main theme of the findings is social support and communication, which is also interpreted as the interrelationship between internal and external factors as in Benard's theory in analyzing coping strategies. Communication is derived from Social Competence which refers to respondents' perceptions of their ability to effectively communicate with others and react to stressful situations, in order to conduct academic studies when their parents were divorced. Thus, in this research, more emphasis was put on participants' perceptions about their communication with the outside world under these circumstances. On the other hand, social support refers to external factors, such as family members, teachers, and peers, which affect respondents' social competence. According to the findings, there is an inter-relationship between respondents' social competence and social support; thus, to clarify the findings, this section is first presenting further three sub-categories: family, school, and communication, followed by 1.4) seeking refuge in an imaginary world, 1.5) meaningfulness, and 1.6) coping strategies and parents' educational levels.

5.1.1 .1 Family: parents and other family members

The results of this study showed that family members play a significant role in helping or inhibiting children of divorced parents to communicate with others in dealing with their parents' divorce. In other words, social support from respondents' family could be an essential factor which positively influenced their academic studies.

Findings based on this investigation are consistent with previous studies, showing that participants with relatively strong support from parents or other family members could better cope with stressful situations and their academic studies during and after their parents' divorce. The results of this study showed that how parents managed the divorce was important for how the participants perceived the influence of their divorce on their academic studies. For instance, some participants perceived that their parents handled the divorce in a more positive manner. A frequent answer among the participants was that their parents maintained the most important family routines even

after their divorce, such as having a family tour every summer and spending the spring festivals together.

    '[…] our father never stopped visiting us during the Spring Festival […] we played fireworks […] and went to climb the same mountain […] Our mum even prepared same kinds of food and drinks every time we were about to climb […] I felt secured and loved […]' (IP1)

According to these participants, these routines maintained a notion of continuity and a sense of belonging. Consequently, these participants did not think their parents' divorce had anything to do with their academic performance. This is backed up by the theory of Sense of Coherence: having their parents' efforts in effectively communicating with them and building up stable surroundings, participants could comprehend what happened around them to be logical and understandable (Antonovsky 1979). According to participants' perceptions, this comprehensibility could largely help participants smoothly get through their parents' divorce and reduce the negative effects on their academic performance.

Also, these participants found their surroundings unchanged after their parents' divorce, so they did not have to adjust to a new environment, which made them feel safe, at home and allowed them to avoid confusion and stay focused on their studies. Another important aspect is that these parents actively communicated with their children during and after their divorce, making sure that their children understood what was happening, which is also a key in comprehensibility, according to SoC (Antonovsky 1979). Participants described parents who went to school to talk to teachers on how to best collaborate in order to reduce negative influences on the divorce on their childrens' academic studies. These participants tended to show more positive attitudes towards their academic studies at school, because they could better understand what happened between their parents, and they learnt from their parents about how to effectively communicate at school, all contributing to their steady academic performance. This is consistent with comprehensibility in Antonovsky

(1979)'s SoC theory regarding how individuals think of their encounters as logical or structured; the more logical they perceived what happened to them after their parents' divorce, the better they were able to leave out its influence on their academic achievements.

In contrast, participants who did not feel supported by their parents thought that the parents did not care enough about their psychological wellbeing when they were divorcing. Fights and quarrels, custody battles involving taking the children away from their original home (especially when it occurred without any prior signals) had negative influence on their academic studies, because they could not focus on their studies while their parents were in a disorderly relationship. Having to adapt to new schools and environments could contribute to worsening their academic performance, especially if it meant losing one of the parents in the process. This shows a lack of comprehensibility and manageability according to Antonovsky (1979)'s SoC. Moreover, some of the respondents expressed difficulties to concentrate on their studies at home even before their parents formally divorced, due to the 'cold atmosphere' between their parents (who were in the process of separation). These participants concluded that if parents had paid more attention to them, they would have had more comprehensibility between their parents and recovered much more quickly from the negative influences of the divorce. They also pointed out that negative coping strategies which they developed during this time, e.g. having aggressive behaviors at school lowered their self-esteem, which in turn affected their academic studies negatively.

The last identifiable theme is the additional support from other family members, in particular grandparents. A typical case (IP20) is a participant being raised by only the grandparents, instead of the parents, after the parents' divorce when being 7 years old. She described how she obtained social and financial support from her grandparents, as a compensation for parents absence. Even though she felt occasionally depressed about her situation after her parents' divorce, she was still able to continue her

academic studies and obtain top grades at school. Other participants also described that support from their grandparents, aunts and uncles, especially emotional and financial support provided them with a sense of belonging, thus motivating them to better achievements in their studies. These supports from family members helped participants actively build up their manageability to cope with the situation and achieve sound academic performance later on.

According to findings presented in this section, social support from external factors – parents and family members – can have a significant role in assisting students to build up their comprehensibility and manageability in dealing with their parents' divorce, hence possibly affecting children's academic performance. These findings are consistent with exiting theoretical framework proposed by Antonovsky (1979) and Benard (1999). Briefly summarizing, if obtaining effective communications and care from parents or other family members, participants generally indicated a better understanding of their situations and better coping with academic studies after parents' divorce, and vice versa. Nevertheless, what should be added to the existing framework is that external factors and internal factors worked synthetically when achieving the positive or negative effect, rather than mutually exclusive as in Benard (1999)'s framework.

5.1.2 chools: teachers and peers

The school environment becomes the second significant external factor to have influence on children's academic performance after their parents' divorce, in that school is where most studying activities occur and where children spend most of their time after leaving home (Xu etc. 2007). One of the main identifiable theme from the interview transcripts is that respondents indeed felt different at school after their parents were divorced. The younger the participants were when their parents were divorced, the stronger they felt they were different from other children at class. This feeling most often seemed to participants whose parents divorced when they were in primary school. For those participants, they recounted that they felt as if being

specially, or even unfairly, treated by teachers and classmates; they were sensitive and scared that anybody would find out about their parents' divorce. For them, studying became less important, and worrying about social crisis – such as being isolated by classmates and losing confidence when with friends – became the priority. This is a lack of manageability in them to deal with their parents' divorce in that they did not have a sense of belonging in both family and school, which is consistent with Antonovsky (1979)'s framework that manageability is an essential component to help individuals feel a sense of coherence.

In addition, teachers' assignments sometimes gave participants stress after their parents' divorce. The following words are extracted from the transcription of a participant IP15,

'… I was unkindly asked to compose a short essay about how my mother loved me while I did not actually have one. I did not want to tell the teacher my parents were divorced, because I feared that she would tell the rest of the class. … I did not want to be laughed at by my classmates. … At least she (the teacher) should be trained to know there is a tiny possibility that one of her students did not have a mother. … No, I wasn't sure my classmates would laugh at me or take care of me. But I did not want to risk it. … I had to fake the essay by describing my aunt. She cared about me a lot….'

According to the extracts above, it can be seen that teachers could influence the participants negatively. However, according to this participant IP15, his academic performance was not seriously affected by this, because he believed he was strong and independent enough to face such challenges. This shows that internal factors could play a role to reduce the negative influence of external factors on one's psychological health, which is consistent with Benard (1999)'s theory about the importance of internal drives to cope with external stressful situations.

Another implication from the extracts above is that the teacher, according   the

student's description, seemed not to be properly trained in how to deal with children of divorced parents, which should be a responsibility of the educational system. To reduce the negative influence of parents' divorce on these children's academic performance, teachers need to make sure that their social situations are considered when communicating with them.

5.1.3 ommunication

The findings showed that the participants indicated that they would most likely directly face the problem instead of neglecting it, and to seek sufficient support from other people until they found reasonable solutions for their problem, which showed an effective manageability of those participants and helped them build up a sense of coherence for their lives (Antonovsky 1979). These individuals thought they could recover from their parents' divorce without feeling too much struggle, and they believed their parents' divorce had little to do with their academic performance, regardless of whether their academic performance was perceived as good or bad. Particularly, those who sought others' help and asked for others' opinions when in difficult situations thought others' experiences and knowledge were very important and applicable to their own issues. Therefore, seeking help from others and having effective communicative skills could be regarded as positive coping strategies for those participants, which contribute to less negative influences of their parents' divorce on their academic performance. The following extractions from transcriptions can be used to illustrate the above discussions:

'…My friends were nice to support me when I was really down. … I lived in the school dorm for a whole semester during my parents' divorce … They knew how to care for my feelings and not let me feel discriminated against. […] Later, about three years after, I met a guy who told me his parents were divorced as well, and his mom was married to another guy, and now the three of them were living happily together. After hearing this, I felt much less alone in my situation, and it felt like parents' divorce was common and not a big deal…' (IP16)

'[…] No, to be honest, I don't think my parents' divorce affected my studies much. […] It would be an excuse for bad academic performance if I said so. […] Studying is about self-motivating. You can't blame anyone for your own failure, including your parents.' (IP3)

A typical effective communicative strategy for these participants seemed be to talking directly to their parents instead of hiding their feelings of being hurt. These participants recalled their efforts to communicate with their parents; by doing this, most of them gained more insights to their parents' marriage and their own situation after parents' divorce. They believed these efforts of having open communications with parents also helped them find their focus in regards to their academic studies and kept them from being negatively affected by their parents' divorce. Yet, what should be added here is that all participants from this research who actively reached their parents obtained effective communications and positive results from their parents, leaving a possibility unclear and unsubstantiated that not all parents are able to conduct effective communications with their children even if their children actively want to. In other words, in a case where parents are perceived as hard to talk to, the communication skills of children might be negatively affected. This, again, is consistent with the finding above that Benard's internal and external factors could interrelate with each other: the level of parents' social support might affect children's ability to communicate with them. This co-working of internal and external factors contributed a great deal to assist participants to establish their manageability in coping with their academic studies after parents' divorce.

The participants who did not talk to parents or others about their feelings described more negative outcomes of parent's divorce in terms of their temporary academic failures. One of the participants (IP2) described that since he felt he could not talk to his parents, he showed aggressive behaviors at school to 'make sure the world did not forget about his existence'. IP2 also added, '…but those behaviors did not last very long, about a semester, because my grandparents later picked me up at school and   let

me live with them; "I felt much more loved and cared for […] I stopped those behaviors and tried to focus on my studies….". In this case, IP2 was initially lack of social competence to deal with stressful situations and performed badly with his academic performance; however, later with his grandparents' social support, he was able to build up his meaningfulness with his life and to focus on his academic studies (Antonovsky 1979). This finding further shows that external social support could facilitate the building-up of internal social competence, contributing to further academic achievements, which supports the existing theoretical framework.

In a short summary for the relationship between social competence and social support, a key feature regarding individuals' social competence and their academic performance was the relationship between the amount of care they received from others and their social strategies in studying and living. To be more specific, participants who thought they were constantly cared for and supported by friends and family members tended to develop more effective social strategies to deal with difficult situations than those who could not find sufficient attention and support from others. In other words, when participants recalled how they actively sought help from others about their parents' divorce and their academic performance, they also recalled the fact that they received enough support from close friends and family members. This led to a positive cycle for them, as they could solve their problems, either regarding their academic studies or private life. The respondents who did not receive sufficient care and support through their relationships with close ones, recalled feelings of frustration and anger of having to go through the difficult experience of parent's divorce alone. In turn, they chose to be silent about their situation because they did not think anyone would care. These participants also described that they experienced a decline in their academic performance because of the lack of support from close ones. These finding suggests that the internal factors (individual coping strategies) work together with external factors (support from peers, family members, teachers, and social workers), and they were inter-related in terms of influences on participants' academic performance during and after parents' divorce. Therefore,

current findings not only support the existing theoretical framework proposed by Antonovsky (1979) and Benard (1999), but also contribute to the framework by adding up the synthetic effects of external and internal factors, which is significant in helping participants build up their comprehensibility and manageability to cope with their studies after parents' divorce.

5.1.4 *eeking refuge in an imaginary world*

Some participants described how that they tended to escape to an imaginary world where their lives were "normal" and their parents were still together. This escaping to an imaginary world could be interpreted as the oppositive to communication with others. However, these imaginary periods did not last very long, normally less than a week just after their parents' divorce. What is more, these participants thought their imaginary worlds were positive coping strategies for them and made them feel better. The following interview extract from an interview with IP8 illustrates this:

'… I had nobody to talk to about the sudden change of my life. … I was scared that my classmates would laugh at me after they knew about my situation. So, I pretended nothing had changed and everything was normal. … That made me feel so much better and secured. … I did not feel like hiding away from my actual life. I felt I was living in that imaginary world. … For me, that imaginary world worked as a good preparation for me to figure out how I needed to face the real world's problems…' (IP8)

When asked why they did not seek help from others or talk to their parents, most of these participants said they thought they could independently solve their problems, which show that they attached a special meaning to independence; though as adults they thought that these coping strategies were less effective than those involving open communications with friends, family members, or teachers. This finding showed the importance of communication with others for those children in order to understand their situations, which is consistent with Antonovsky (1979)'s theory of SoC to show

the significance of manageability and comprehensibility.

5.1.5 Meaningfulness

Meaningfulness and the sense of meaning and purpose of individuals refers to their belief of a meaningful and unique life, including optimism, having goals, and the desire to live a consistent life. We aimed to investigate participants' philosophy about the meaning of their lives and how optimistic they felt during parent's divorce. Most importantly, all participants were asked whether they thought their optimism or pessimistic attitudes were, in any ways, related to their academic performance after their parents' divorce.

Participants recounted that even though they were confused about the meaning of life and academic achievement in the short term after their parents' divorce, yet they could gradually have more control over their studies as time passed by after their parents' divorce. This shows that the negative influence on academic performance does not necessarily indicate failure in regards to long-term academic performance, as most individuals were able to recover from stressful situations. This finding is consistent with Antonovsky (1979)'s theory of SoC to indicate the importance of meaningfulness: respondents could stay motivated because they attached meaningfulness to their academic tasks and duties.

The participants had the ability to recover from stressful situations and feel optimistic about life despite their tough experiences related to parent's divorce.

'Yes of course it hurt at first [...] frustrated really […] but I knew, I always knew, I had to be strong. I could not give up. Giving up means losing everything, losing hope. That's terrible […] Continuing my study, yes, I knew that was the right thing to do […]' (IP5)

The results also showed that parents, teachers and the community played a positive role in guiding them to have more control over their studies and life. In other words,

as suggested before in existing theoretical framework (Antonovsky 1979; Benard 1999), family members, school teachers, peers, and the community could provide necessary external social support for children and strengthen their sense of meaningfulness and help them build up their manageability of their studies, which stable their academic performance.

5.1.6 Coping strategies and parents' educational levels

A key finding in this investigation is the relationship between individuals' sense of meaning and their parents' educational level, which is another evidence to show the inter-relationship between social support and social competence. Some participants thought their parents, with their higher education (above bachelor degree), could explain clearly and in an open manner about their divorce to their children, resulting in a better coping from those participants. Also, after effective communications with their educated parents, these participants felt less responsible for their parents' divorce, thus moving faster towards a more positive direction, which significantly contributes to their later success in coping with their academic studies.

'[…] now I think about it, my parents were so afraid that I felt responsible for their divorce. They kept apologizing to me and assured me that it was never about me and they would love me together just like always. […] I guess that was how I was able to let go of their divorce and get on with my normal studies. […]' (IP3)

This finding shows that the internal factor works together with external factors to have effects on participants' academic performance.

Most importantly, this finding has not yet been included in the original theoretical framework proposed by Benard (1999), so that the parents' educational level can be added to the existing list of external factors, contributing to the existing framework to make it more well-rounded.

5.2 Independence, age and manageability

Respondents mostly indicated that the level of their independency at the time of their parents' divorce was closely related to their manageability of the situation as in Antonovsky (1979)'s theory of SoC. Some of the participants expressed that their parents' divorce had a particularly negative influence within a short period after the parents' divorce. The main reason for the negative influence was the sudden changing environment after parents' divorce, and they found it difficult and depressing to face the new environment alone. Therefore, they had to make efforts and take time to adapt to the new environment, which reduced their time and energy used for study. Yet, the older respondents were at the time of their parents' divorce, the more independent they could be to handle the situation, minimizing the negative effect of their parents' divorce on their academic performance. One of the participants, who got rid of the negative influence of his parents' divorce relatively fast was 17 years old when his parents divorced. According to himself, he only needed to adapt to the new school within several months after his father transferred him to a new neighborhood. He felt he was already independent when it came to studying, and because of this he did not think the influence of his parents' divorce lasted long.

When it comes to self-esteem and independency, participants described various factors as relevant to how they were influenceed by parent's divorce;

The results indicated that the participants were trying to use their inner power to maintain a meaningful environment during parent's divorce. The participants aimed to be independent in regards to their academic studies, which is exemplified by their ambition to save money for tuition fees. 'I received my living expenses directly from my dad […] I tried to save them up for future studies, like college, because I wasn't sure for how long I would continue to receive money […]' (IP3) In addition, some of the participants described that they worked even harder with their academic studies because they thought they could not rely on any of their parents to give them a bright future so they had to build one by themselves, or they thought they should work

harder because they did not want to let their parent – the one who owned the   custody – down.

'They (the parents) did not seem to care about me at all, at least from what I could perceive. I gradually started to believe that the only way to have a bright future was to study hard, really hard. […] I studies for myself. Good scores would get me into good university. […]' (IP18)

The discussions above show both internal factors that could come from participants themselves and external factors that were perceived to influence their academic performance after their parents' divorce. Participants who thought themselves to be more independent could recall their better coping with their academic studies, leading to more academic achievements. Besides, participants who were older – especially teenage age – tended to perceive themselves to have higher levels of independency than those who were younger. This is a new finding that was not included in the existing framework as proposed by either Antonovsky (1979) or Benard (1999). Therefore, this could be added to the original list of internal factors and counted as an original contribution to the existing framework.

CHAPTER SIX CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

6.1 Conclusions

In this study, we aimed to explore how these Chinese adults perceived influences of their parent's divorce on their academic performance. 22 participants from China took part in the study. They were all adults who had completed higher education. We have investigated the participants' coping strategies during their parents' divorce as well as influence of internal and external factors on such strategies. The theories used for analyzing the findings are Antonovsky (1979)'s theory of Sense of Coherence (SoC) and Benard's model of coping strategies.

The findings are partially consistent with previous research regarding the negative

influence of parents' divorce on participants' academic performance in the short term. Most participants experienced confusion, frustration, and depression after their parents' divorce, and these negative emotions affected their academic studies in the short term after parents' divorce.

The overall findings could be divided into two main themes: 1) social support and communication and 2) independence, age and manageability. First, we found that communication with and social support from parents, teachers and peers was important for the respondents to understand and manage difficult situations related to parent's divorce. This shows the importance of communication and social support to help individuals build up comprehensibility and manageability, as in Antonovsky (1979)'s theory of Sense of Coherence (SoC), in dealing with their parents' divorce and academic studies. Some participants who chose to hide from the reality also admitted that these were bad coping strategies, and effective communications might reduce the negative influence of their parents' divorce on their academic performance. Second, we showed that how the participants chose to communicate with others regarding their problems was related to the amount of social support they perceived from their social surroundings. This, too, showed the interrelationship between internal and external factors as in Benard's theory of coping strategies. Participants who show great social competence and find effective ways to communicate with others could alleviate the negative influence of their parents' divorce on their academic studies, and these individuals are normally more independent and optimistic about their lives, in return obtaining more social assistance and support from peers, teachers, other family members, and so on. In addition, those who chose to hide their feelings and dealt with their stress alone are were on the one hand independent, but on the other hand, they perceived this coping strategy to be ineffective as it resulted in declining academic performance.

Most previous research suggest that negative coping strategies lead to pessimistic attitudes or worse academic performance of children after their parents' divorce

(Kalter 1987). However, findings from this research show several different stories: participants with negative coping strategies show positive attitudes towards life and could improve their academic performance in the long term. Some participants tried to manage the perceived negative influences of parents divorce independently, by for example seeking refuge in an imaginary world. However, as adults they perceived such coping strategies as less effective in comparison to communicating with family and friends about the perceived difficulties. Nevertheless, these participants thought that although their strategies might have affected their academic performance negatively in the short term, in the long term, they learned to manage and take control over their academic studies and obtain reasonable academic achievements.

The most significant finding of this research is how external factors might work together with internal factors to influence participants' academic performance after their parents' divorce. First, for those who are independent and sociable, the external factors tend to have minimal influence on their academic performance after their parents' divorce. Yet for those who are strongly reliant on external environment and care about others' opinions, especially for those whose parents were divorced when they were in primary school, parents' divorce seemed to have strong negative influence on their studying environment or pessimistic attitudes towards study, resulting in the worse academic performance. Second, parents' bad handle or good handle of their divorce had significant influence on their children's academic performance in the short term after their divorce. Compared with those parents who patiently communicated with their children about their relationship and cared about the emotional and studying needs of children, some parents did not pay attention to their children's psychological wellbeing nor a stable studying environment, resulting in worse academic performance in the short term during and after their divorce. In addition, support and care from other family members, teachers, and peers were also important in helping participants feel less alienated and more motivated to make academic achievements.

6.2 Limitations and suggestions for future investigations

There are two main limitations of this investigation, calling for further research into this issue. First, posts calling for volunteers for this research were sent to platforms where most visitors are well-educated, and participants of this investigations all received higher education: they have a larger chance to recall a later successful academic performance after their parents' divorce in the long term, compared with those who did not receive higher education. In other words, opinions from the sample participants represent those who managed to get rid of the negative influence of their parents' divorce on their study performance in the long term. Opinions remain unknown from those who did not receive higher education. Therefore, it is suggested for further investigations to collect more data from those who were less successful with their academic performance in the long term.

REFERENCES

Antonovsky, A. (1979). *Health, stress and coping*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Amato, P. R., & Keith, B. (1991). *Parental Divorce and Adult Well-Being: A Meta-analysis*. Journal of Marriage and Family, 53(1), 43-58.

Amato, P. R. (1994). *Life-Span Adjustment of Children to Their Parents' Divorce*. The Future of Children, 4(1).

Amato, P. R. (2014). *The consequences of divorce for adults and children: An update. Drustvena Istrazivanja*, 23(1), 5.

Bauserman, R. (2002). *Child adjustment in joint-custody versus sole-custody arrangements: A meta-analytic review. Journal of Family Psychology*, 16(1), 91-102.

Bernhard L. and Werner, G. (2009) *Resilience a conceptual bridge between coping and development*. European Psychologist, 14(1): 40 – 50.

Bhattacherjee, A. (2012) *Social Science Research: Principles, Methods, and Practices. Textbooks Collection*. Book 3. http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/oa_textbooks/3.

Brian, W., Simon, D., and Ann-Marie, W. (2008) *Considering resilience in the rehabilitation of people with traumatic disabilities*. Rehabilitation Psychology, 53(1): 9-17.

Cherian, V. I. (1989). *Academic Achievement of Children of Divorced Parents*. Psychological Reports, 64(2), 355-358.

Demo, D. H., & Acock, A. C. (1988). *The Influence of Divorce on Children*. Journal of Marriage and Family, 50(3).

Dong, Q., Wang, Y., & Ollendick, T. H. (2002). *Consequences of Divorce on the*

Adjustment of Children in China. Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, 31(1), 101-110.

Einat, S.M. (2009). *The Role of Creative Thinking in Resilience after Hurricane Katrina*. Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts, 3(2): 112-123

Elliott, B. J., & Richards, M. P. (1991). *Children and divorce: educational performance and behaviour before and after parental separation*. International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family, 5(3), 258-276.

Erikson, E. H., and Erikson, J. M. (1998). *The Life Cycle Completed: Extended Version.* New York: W. W. Norton.

Fthenakis, W. E. (2014). *Divorce as a Family Transition Interventions for Divorced Parents and Children*. Family and Conciliation Courts Review, 30, 34-49.

Garmezy N., Masten A. S., & Tellegen A. (1984) *The study of stress and competence in children: A building block for developmental psychopathology.* Child Development, 55: 97 – 111.

George, A. B. (2008). *Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience: Have We Underestimated the Human Capacity to Thrive after Extremely Aversive Events?* Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, S(1): 101-113.

Hammond, J. M. (2015). *Children of Divorce: A Study of Self-Concept, Academic Achievement, and Attitudes.* Elementary School Journal, 80(2), 55-62.

Henderson, N. and Milstein, M. M. (1996) *Resiliency in school: Making It Happen for Students and Educators*. Eric Doment Reproduction Service.

Hetherington, E. M. (Ed.). (2014). *Coping with divorce, single parenting, and remarriage: A risk and resiliency perspective*. Psychology Press.

Jay, F. (2009). U*nmarried, Nonresident Fathers' Involvement with Their Infants: A Risk and Perspective*. Journal of Family Psychology, 21(3): 479-489.

Kalter, N. (1987). *Long-term effects of divorce on children.* American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 57(4), 587-600.

Kumar, R. (2011). *Research Methodology: a Step-by-step Guide for Beginners*. London: Sage.

Mandemakers, J. J., & Kalmijn, M. (2014). *Do mother's and father's education condition the influence of parental divorce on child well-being?* Social Science Research, 187-199.

Mcleod, B. D., Wood, J. J., & Weisz, J. R. (2007). *Examining the association between parenting and childhood anxiety: A meta-analysis.* Clinical Psychology Review, 27(2), 155-172.

Potter, D. (2010). *Psychosocial Well-Being and the Relationship between Divorce and Children's Academic Achievement*. Journal of Marriage and Family, 72(4), 933-946.

Reid, W. J., & Crisafulli, A. (1990). *Marital discord and child behavior problems: a meta-analysis*. Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 18(1), 105-117.

Wadsby, M., & Svedin, C. G. (1996). *Academic achievement in children of divorce.* Journal of School Psychology, 34(4), 325-336.

Xu, A., Zhang, J., & Xia, Y. R. (2007). *Influences of Parents' Divorce on Chinese Children: A Model with Academic Performance as a Mediator. Marriage and Family Review*, 42(3), 91-119.

Zheng, L. L. (2013). *Case Study on the Education of Well-developed Children from Divorced and Single-Parent Families*. Master Dissertation, Education Management Department, Sichuan Normal University.

APPENDICES

Appendix A. Interview outline and questions

First of all, thank you very much for your participation. All interview content will be protected and kept in confidentiality. In the final report, all participants will be coded without any disposure of names or personal details. The data will be used in this study only.

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can withdraw from the interview at any moment of the research.

The aim of this research is to investigate Chinese adults' perceptions on the influence of their parents' divorce on their academic performance. The research results could help us have better understanding of the psychological well-being of Chinese children living in divorced families, so that parents, teachers, and social workers could better look after these children and build up a healthier learning environment for them.

Section 1. Personal information

1.1 Gender:

1.2 Age:

1.3 Location to receive the fundamental education:

1.4 Age when parents were divorced:

Section 2. Perceptions of the influence of parents' divorce on academic performance

2.1 Were you satisfied with your learning environment at school during your parents' divorce? If yes, identify factors. If no, identify factors. Please talk in detail about your opinions.

2.2 How do you think your school and teachers treated you?

2.3 Were you satisfied with your learning environment at home during your parents' divorce? If yes, identify factors. If no, identify factors. Please talk in detail about your opinions.

2.4 Who did you live with after your parents' divorce?

2.5 How was your relationship with your father (mother), the parent you no longer lived with, after your parents' divorce? Was there any change in that relationship before and after the divorce?

2.6 Were there any influence of their divorce on your academic study, in any aspects?

2.6.1 Can you tell me the influence in more detail?

2.6.2 How long did the influence last?

2.6.3 How did you face those difficulties?

2.7 Who gave you the most attention and care after your parents' divorce regarding your academic study? This person could be your parents, grandparents, teachers, social workers, and any relatives.

2.8 How do you think your parents handled their divorce?

Section 3. Test for participants' coping strategies

3.1 Do you often communicate with your parents and express your opinions to them?

3.2 Do you often tell yourself not to give up while in difficult situations?

3.3 Do you seek help from other people when in difficult situations?

3.4 Do you often have people to support and care about you when you are confused and depressed?

3.5 How do you normally cope with your difficult situations? (Provide the following options if necessary)

    3.5.1 Use others' experience to conquer the difficulties

    3.5.2 Find positive parts from the tough situations

    3.5.3 Step back from the difficult situations

    3.5.4 Dream about the super-power to solve difficulties

    3.5.5 Make efforts to change the situation and let things move towards a more positive direction