

An Investigation of Major Causes of Divorce: A Case Study of Thohoyandou, Limpopo Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT The whole world has embarked upon a large scale social experiment which is the demolition of marriage and the elevation of divorce. The escalation of divorce rate in Thohoyandou provoked the researchers to venture into a qualitative inquiry on the major causes of divorce in an attempt to answer frequently asked questions. Snowball sampling technique which overlooks probability theory was embraced and information was gathered through the use of an interview schedule. Data was analyzed using phenomenology analysis. Results shows affective dimensions of their marriage relationship, which encompass marital infidelity, lack of communication, parental intervention, prolonged distance between couples, and violence as the causes of divorce. In addition to the primary sources of divorce, sexual plasticity, religion, normalization of remarriage, higher expectations upon entering into marriage and lack of premarital understanding placed pressure on marital relationship.

INTRODUCTION

“We live in a divorce culture, reflecting three basic assumptions: marriage is optional – we assume that every adult is free to marry or not marry; marriage is contingent – we do not expect that all marriages will last a lifetime; and divorce is a gate away – we now accept that getting divorced can lead to other opportunities in life for both men and women. Marriage culture and divorce culture coexist uneasily in our societies, with one or the other sometimes dominates in a particular era, region, life stage, and family or individual” (Coltrane 2004).

The modern generation has enfolded an obdurate culture: the flattening of marriage and the promotion of divorce. Divorce is now part of the everyday life of humanity. It is embedded in our laws and institutions, our manners and mores, our movies and television shows, our novels and children’s storybooks, and our closest and most important relationships (Whitehead 1997). Marriage is no longer seen as a mark of adulthood, normalcy and a social obligation; instead it is seen as one of many paths to self-fulfillment.

Divorce is rampant across the globe. It is a social malady which is affecting both the rich and the poor. It has been seen as a critical aspect which disrupts many families and impedes the progression of the family standards of living. When two people get married, they usually do not envisage that the marriage will end in

divorce. A decision to get married means that the participants are interested in living together until death separates them. However this is not the case in many marriages. Research has been done and treatments have been tried, yet divorce is still persisting at an exorable rate.

The divorce rate has almost doubled since 1960. Based on projections of current divorce rates, between 40 and 50 percent of marriages today are likely to end in divorce or separation (Price et al. 2010). Statistics from the South African Department of Justice for 2013 indicates that divorce cases recorded has increased by 28 percent as compared to 2012. These results indicate that divorce is gaining momentum within our South African societies and reasons should be identified (Preller 2013).

The 2011 divorce cases for both males and females were mainly from individuals who had married once. About 80 percent of divorces for males and females were from first-time marriages, compared to approximately 10 percent from second-time marriages. About 2 percent of males and females were getting divorced for at least the third time. Research findings show that divorce is not an action against marriage since there is a high percentage of remarriage (Preller 2013).

Objectives

This is a descriptive study assessing problems encountered within the family institution

which ultimately makes the affection in relationships to be unendurable leading to divorce.

Literature Review

Historical Background of Divorce

The societal context of divorce has transformed radically within the past three hundred years. In traditional societies, divorce was permitted only for the most blatant violations of the marital compact. As societies transform the conceptions of marriage have altered and the reasons for divorce have multiplied. Prior to the eighteenth century, families were the sole instruments of socialization and education, as well as the basic unit of most economies; as such, an unstable marriage was a threat to the community. Therefore, marriages were expected to be stable (Giddens and Sutton 2013).

The first legal divorces were on strictly biblical grounds; adultery was usually the only acceptable cause, for adultery violated the basic function of marriage as a sanctified sexual union. Adultery had once been punishable by death. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, societal expectations of marriage shifted. The marital union began to be seen as a civil contract and barriers to leaving the union began to fall. The rise of the divorce rate coincided with the beginnings of the early feminist movement. During the twentieth century, increased gender equality resulted in a wider variety of options for women. Men and women began to discard old roles, initiating a period of difficult re-adjustment and placing additional stress on couples. As a result, divorce became a socially acceptable option (Giddens and Sutton 2013).

The Context of Marriage Today

Marriage has evolved into a voluntary association, hence it automatically produce a discontinuous pattern. The changing economic and cultural trends provide an avenue through which marriage can exist in a very different context than it did in the past. More forms of marriage and more alternatives are socially acceptable. Within marriage, roles are more flexible and negotiable, although women still do more of the household work and childrearing (Cherlin 2005).

According to the social exchange theory, individuals aim for personal growth and deeper intimacy through more open communication and mutually shared disclosures about feelings with their partners. Proponents of the social exchange theory proffer that individuals may insist on changes in a relationship that no longer provides them with individualized rewards. They are less likely than in the past to focus on the rewards gained by fulfilling socially valued roles such as the good parent or the loyal and supportive spouse. As a result of this changing context, social norms about family and personal life count for less than they did during the days of companionate marriage and far less than during the era of institutional marriage (Cherlin 2005).

Grounds for Divorce

[Divorce Act 70 of 1979 of South Africa]

Adultery, malicious desertion, incurable mental illness lasting at least seven years, and imprisonment for at least five years after being declared a habitual criminal are factors which were recognized as grounds for divorce before the passing of the new law (Cronje and Heaton 2004). The Divorce Act 70 of 1979 provides two no-fault grounds of divorce which are the irretrievable breakdown and mental illness. Section 4(1) of the Divorce Act interprets irretrievable breakdown of marriage to mean two opinions. The first one is that marriage relationship must be normal. The last one relates the absence of prospect of the restoration of a normal marriage between the spouses. Section 5(1) indicates that mental illness without prospects of a cure constitutes a ground for divorce. Both partners, and one partner, must prove to the court that the marriage broke down so badly that there is no reasonable chance of getting back together (Cronje and Heaton 2004).

The reduction of the legal obstacles and the economic costs of divorce that came with no-fault divorce legislation might have had differential effects on families with disparate income levels. That is, we might expect no-fault divorce to be more attractive to low-income families who could not afford divorce under fault-base legislation.

No-faults Divorce

In the past marriage was recognized as practically indissoluble and it was granted only in

limited cases however today legal divorce is rampant in almost all of the developed and developing countries. The newly adopted laws make divorce more readily available by moving to “no fault” divorce (Giddens and Sutton 2013).

Prior to the passing of Divorce Act 70 of 1979, the law recognized only four grounds for divorce. It was only accepted in the presence of adultery, malicious desertion, incurable mental illness lasting at least seven years, and imprisonment for at least five years after being declared a habitual criminal. The conditional offering of legal divorce inhibits the chances of pursuing with divorce motives, thereby allowing the settlement of minor disputes within the family setup (Cronje and Heaton 2004).

Have the no-fault laws inadvertently contributed to higher divorce rates? This self-perpetuated cycle of divorce is inflicted by the liberalization of divorce laws (Starbuck 2002). The number of divorces doubled between 1980 and 1982 in New Zealand. Contrary to this view, the grounds of a no fault divorce are not necessarily the actual causes of marital breakdown but provides convenient categories into which attorneys could translate the complaints of their clients (Bird and Melville 1994).

Do It Yourself

Do it yourself entails the embracement of technological methods in which the settlement of divorce can be concluded without the involvement of an attorney. The government has provided an online divorce service such as www.edivorce.co.za, with all requirements on the same page. The duty of the individual furthering a divorce is to fill the requirements in the questionnaire and pay the required amount. This provision delivers an allowance that can be manipulated by the majority since it eliminates procedures that are time and cost-consuming (Preller 2013).

Nevertheless, the above proceeding point in itself could not be an effective or reasonable cause of marital breakdown. Of course it may act as an immediate cause or a way of escape from an already troubled relationship. It is only an open exit where individuals who are already looking for a way of elbowing their partners can stagger through that easier way. It is also a conceivable that the government considered do-it-your-

self as a reaction to the huddled situations in courts inflicted by people who need divorce (Bake 2013). Considering this view, divorce cases were rampant to an extent that the courts were failing to handle them timeously.

The easiest way, in which divorce can be processed, due to legal proceeding, has been emphasized by a Cape Town divorce attorney. In his own words “It is a lot easier for people to get divorced nowadays too, as the client has the option of going to his/her local regional court to get divorced whereas in the past he/she would have had to go through the high court to get a divorce, where it takes forever to get a court date” (Bake 2013).

In relation to laws pertaining divorce, the easier or harder the law is, has nothing to do with the dissolution of marriage but it is just a getaway of an unviable relationship. Spouses may choose to stay together under an empty shell marriage to safeguard their children. A closer examination of the different causes of divorce could make one to dismiss the external factors and support situations which are within the family institution. Strong and Cohen (2017) mentions that other factors challenging the stability of marriages today includes the changed nature of the family, social integration, individualistic cultural values, demographic factors, employment status and educational level of the spouses. Ethnicity, life course factors like age of marriage, cohabitation, remarriage and intergenerational transmissions were highlighted were children with divorced parents are said to likely fall victims of divorce as well.

Lamanna et al. (2015) say that demographic factors, economic factors, weakening social, moral and legal constraints, high expectations for marriage and interpersonal dynamics

METHODOLOGY

Approach

The study is qualitative in nature. Qualitative research is an approach which involves studying human behaviour: feelings, perceptions, attitudes, and experiences in their natural setting and how individuals explain their behaviour. Its main essence is to understand social life and meaning attached to everyday experiences by the actors themselves (Gravetter and Forzano 2016).

The researchers used qualitative paradigm because the study is concerned with how the divorced individual interprets their experience with their spouses in relation to the causes of divorce. In addition, the researchers were interested in obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the causes of divorce from the point of view of the divorced individuals.

Research Method

In an attempt to accrue the contributory factors of divorce, the researchers employed face-to-face interviews as a method of collecting data and an interview schedule as an instrument of data collection. An interview is a process in which a researcher and a participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study. An interview schedule involves a list of question read by the interviewer to the respondent with the interviewer writing down the respondent's response on the schedule. The central purpose of an interview is to gain an exceptional kind of information through extracting what is in the mind of the interviewee by reassuring the interviewee to participate (Gravetter and Forzano 2016).

Sampling

In this study non-probability sampling following snow balling technique to select the respondents from the entire population was the theme of the researcher. Non-probability sampling is an umbrella-term covering all forms of sampling techniques which are not conducted in accordance to the canons of probability theory. Snowball is a way of locating required participants through the use of identified subjects. It begins with a single individual and spread out based on links provided. It is based on an analogy to a snowball, which begins small but becomes larger as it is rolled on wet snow and picks up additional snow (Gravetter and Forzano 2016).

The researchers selected snow-ball sampling technique due to the absence of a sampling frame. The list of divorced individuals is rarely available hence the identification of one respondent makes easier for the location of others with the same characteristics. A sample of five inter-

viewees was earmarked, which constitutes those who have been divorced of Vhembe District and Thulamela local Municipality.

RESULTS

The 2012 divorce data reported 21 998 completed divorce forms received and processed by the end of September 2014 in South Africa (Stats SA). This indicates an increase of 1 018 (4.9%) divorces from the 20 980 cases processed in 2011. The results show that the total number of divorces generally fluctuated over the period 2002 to 2012, with the highest number observed in 2005 (32,484) and the lowest in 2011 (20,980) (Stats SA 2014). The above statistics excludes marriages that are not registered with the government. Several factors have been identified by researchers worldwide as attributes to divorce. At this point, nothing has been written on factors affecting Vhavenda families in Thohoyandou, Limpopo Province of South Africa. This section outline the results of the study soliciting factors contributing to divorce.

Biographical Profile of the Respondents

The researchers interviewed seven respondents who provided data based on their experience on marital dissolution. Of the respondents interviewed, three were male and four were females. Gender balance reduces the problem of a one-sided approach. It prevents a masculine or feminine way of viewing marital dissolution. The period of marriage and number of children were also of value to the researchers for analysis. Except for two respondents, all marriages ranged between one and five years before they got divorced. Thou two respondents did not have children, the rest of the respondents have between one to five children.

Religious Beliefs of the Respondents

The researchers solicited religious beliefs of respondents' in order to note the gap of divorce between religions. The majority of interviewed subjects were affiliated to religious beliefs governing the behaviour of its members. Just below half of respondents reported that they are Christians, and twenty nine percent of respondents were just church goers. Only fourteen percent

were African traditionalists and fourteen percent had no religious affiliation.

Marriage Systems

Most of the respondents entered into marriage at their liberty without anyone forcing them. Only two couples unintentionally entered into marriage terms due to unplanned pregnancy. However this is different from a forced marriage, since the relationship was not created through the intervention of an external influence.

Culture and Divorce

The researchers sought to understand the view of societal norms and values concerning marital dissolution. On the bases of Venda norms and values governing divorce, it is a shameful state for anyone to divorce and to indulge in any actions which ultimately result in marital dissolution. However, the researchers noted a ruinous attack of the family in this modern age. Cultural beliefs are no longer governing the conduct of humanity. One interviewee echoed this as follows *“our culture is no longer having an impact upon the life of people. We are acting and behaving against what our grandparents taught us”* (Promise). However, it is clear that a new way of living has been adopted.

Narratives given by respondents as major attributes of divorce from the highest to the least factors is marital infidelity, lack of communication, prolonged distance, violence and in-law interference. All respondents nominated marital infidelity and lack of communication as factors which have a profound effect on marital relationship. Almost three quarters of the respondents reported violence and prolonged distance between spouses as major factors in their marital dissolution. Few respondents mentioned in-law interference as a factor that played a role in their marital dissolution.

Marital Infidelity

Cheating, adultery or infidelity proved to be the most prevalent cause of divorce in Thohoyandou. All respondents, women and men, reported adultery as the supreme factor which ruined their marital relationship. Thanks narrated his ordeal in this way, *“how can it be that our marriage could*

continue while the so- called my wife was impregnated by another man. It shows that she never loved me from the beginning”.

Lack of Communication

All respondents specifically mentioned communication breakdown as a factor which contributed much in their divorce. Humble asserts that *“all troubles started when we created a communication breakdown between us. This breakdown paved a way for my husband to look after other relationships tuning his back on me”*.

Communication breakdown as noted by interviewees can be viewed from different dimensions. It constitutes the incapability as couples to find enough time to express their childish whims together, sharing intimate thoughts or personal feelings with each other. This has been seen by respondents as destroying the degree of intimacy required between a husband and a wife. One interviewee affirms *“my husband had no value in having more time with me expressing our hearts to each other as a husband and wife. He took more time with his friends and ultimately the relationship had to be terminated”* (Sincere).

Prolonged Distance between Spouses

The study shows that prolonged distance between a husband and wife is a contributory factor to divorce. Only women raised the concern of distance maintained by their husband as a source of many problems. One respondent aired her views as follows *“problems began when my husband failed to come back home as often as he used to do”* (Faith). Coupled with communication breakdown, prolonged distance inflicted conflicts within the family.

Violence

The findings of this study indicated an equal number from both genders reporting violence as a substantial aspect which necessitated divorce. About three quarters pointed violence in the family as a ruinous weapon which destroyed their marriages. Wait argued that *“I failed to continue staying with my wife because she was quick to respond violently”*. This respondent pointed an encounter of verbal harassment.

Promise indicated that, she experienced physical and verbal harassment from the relatives of the husband. This abuse was rooted in property ownership, as the relatives of the husband wanted to confiscate the property. She said *“I was the subject of the day in the whole family and there was no reason for staying since I became a stranger in the family”*.

In-law Interference

The contribution of in-laws cannot be negated even though only a small number of respondents offered a radical view on it. The in-laws jealously and intentionally created a horrific snare to catch their daughter in-laws. One interviewee reported the contribution of the in-laws as they tried to take the property of their children uncontrollably, claiming that they had toiled for a long time, raising their son. The matter did not go well with the interviewee and the ball began to roll even through the gate of divorce.

Plastic Sexuality

Respondents mentioned that freedom of sexuality accorded to individuals, regardless of age, is a devastating issue. Interviewees indicated that, it is now a shameful state for someone to get married before engaging in sexual activity. Promise said *“Modern societies have adopted a culture of sexuality in which teenagers are free to sexualize and stigmatization is eminent to those who abstain”*. This freedom has wiped out the sacredness of sex, hence a multiple partners practice is viewed as normal.

Over-expectation of the Marriage

Over expectation prior the marriage and lack of understanding allowed the respondents to plunge into marriage with preconceived ideas which later on had to be restructured as a result of the nature of realities of life. The majority of the respondents had vague understanding of the constituencies of marriage prior entering their marriages.

DISCUSSION

Demographic Variables

According to Lamanna et al. (2015), there are various factors that bind married couples together.

In the same way there are features that detach the unity between the married couples. From the results of this study, these factors are far from the experiences around the globe. The result of this study on demographic factors reveals that most of these couples were married at their early twenties or prior the age of twenty years. It can be deduced that they either did not have more time to know each other before marriage. In cases where spouses marry at an early age, mostly one spouse may economically depend on the other. Studies affirm that the age at which one marries is a predictor of marital stability (Strong and Cohen 2017). When couples marries at a later stage, they are matured and their marriage is based on sound decisions. Most of these couples who marries later are economically well-off which places less pressure on marriage itself due to financial constraints (Knox 2016).

The study could not verify lack of children as articulated by Lamanna et al. (2015) as a contributing factor to divorce as all respondents except for two did have children as many as five. It means that in this study having children or not was not identified as a factor putting pressure within marital unions. This is confirmed by Stats SA (2014) reports alluding that 3.7 divorces involve couples with minor children. In 2012, 12 083 (54.9%) of the 21 998 divorces had children younger than 18 years. The number of children affected by divorce shows that 35.5 percent were from the black African population group; 28.2 percent from the white population group and 22 percent from the coloured population group. There were 19 713 children affected by divorce indicating that, on average, there was one child per divorce.

Religion and Divorce

Studies says people who attend religious groups together have the highest rates of successful marriages than those who are not members of religions (Giddens and Sutton 2013). The reasons hopefully emanate from the values that religious people should abide to as many religions values love, unity, togetherness which are pillars of a good relationship. Most of the respondents in this study are religious people though information on their spouses was not solicited on this factor. In many cases when people varies in religion, of which it is the case in many

marriages around Vhavenda where women may go to church, mostly Christians and husbands are non-believers it creates havoc as between the couple as they have different values, beliefs and norms that guides their behaviour. What the other deems correct, the other member may view it differently and this creates disunity within the family. Researchers so still concurs with Knox (2016) who says that being different in education, race, religion, social class, age, values widens the gap between spouses and it may leads to divorce. Number of divorces by way of solemnisation of marriage. From statistics in South Africa, 4 432 (20.1%) of the 2012 divorce cases were from marriages that were solemnised by religious rites and 16 629 (75.6%) by 'civil' rites. In comparison, the marriages that are eventually dissolved are mostly solemnised by civil rites, which also follows from the fact that most marriages are solemnised by 'civil' rites. A similar pattern was also found among all population groups, although the magnitude differs. Over 90 percent of divorces for the black African (91.2%) and the coloured (91.9%) population groups were solemnised by 'civil' rites, compared to 87.2 percent for Indians/Asians and 50.5 percent for the white population groups. Although the percentage for civil rites marriage is slightly higher than the religious rites, it can still be concluded that religious marriages are also ending in divorce.

Culture

The Vhavenda culture originally did not have the word divorce as a man never owned a woman. A woman was married to a family and the bride price was paid by either the father of the bridegroom or the family will use cattle that married a sister to the bridegroom. In this manner, the sister-in-law will call the bride *muvhuye*, meaning she came here because of my cattle. When conflict arise between the husband and a wife, it was the issue to be settled by the whole family as the wife did not belong to the husband but to the family. Even after death of a husband, she would not leave her marital home but she was given to any other member of the family to be a wife, either a brother or a cousin. Collectivism was viewed as important rather than individualism as seen in other cultures. Respondents agrees that culture has lost value and so is the

primary roles of the family where caring, sex and socialization is replaced outside the family (Strong and Cohen 2017).

Lack of Faithfulness

As indicated in the results, respondents experienced infidelity from their spouses. Unfaithfulness is becoming more common in marriages worldwide. As women works outside the home and some men find themselves working away from their homes, chances for couples to cheat from each other becomes increasingly high. Knox (2016) mention that 6,069 adults who participated in an Oprah. Com survey an affair was the top reason respondents said they would seek divorce.

Infidelity, in biblical terms adultery and more commonly known as cheating, occupied the summit on divorce hierarchical ladder in South Africa (Preller 2011). On the basis of this study, coupled with an investigation conducted by Preller, the common threat to the stability of marriage has been identified as adultery. Males within the Vhavenda do not view adultery as a problem when they commit it thou they find it unacceptable committed by women. They grew up in patriarchal structures where men can marry as many women as they can afford. As women embrace the Christian values coupled with economic pressures of the work economy and modern diseases, they find sharing a husband difficult. As women do not allow their husbands to marry more wives, except for the powerful, they resort to extra-marital affairs which leads to divorce.

Communication

Communication breakdown was one of the major factors that were raised by respondents for this study. Communication breakdown may be the results of problems that partners are unable to handle or inability to agree on certain decisions. People always have different priorities and interests but failure to incorporate or explore them in a peaceful way in order to have a single vision to be implemented proved to be detrimental to a marriage relationship. The difference in priorities amongst married couples has been viewed as one of the top ten causes of divorce in South Africa (Preller 2013). However in this study this issue on its own is not a matter

of concern. Interviewees indicated that it is normal to have different interests but the worst enemy if failure to transform different opinions into one vision. When this occur it leads to communication breakdown resulting into divorce. Knox (2016) agrees that managing differences and conflict in relationships helps to reduce negative feelings that develops. He added that some partners respond to conflict by attacking, blaming and failing to listen to the partner's point of view.

Violence

The study indicated a high prevalence of violence within the family. Most respondents mentioned incidences of physical abuse, emotional and financial abuse. This dark side of the family is eminent when people are unable to resolve their problems within the marriage. Thou both male and female were found to resort to abusive behaviours, the highest rate is found in the male counterparts. The findings of this research tend to be in line with the views chronicled by Bake (2013) who cited verbal harassment and physical violence among major causes of divorce in the whole world: "*A high divorce rate in my opinion may well mean that there will be less crimes involving domestic violence, which is a serious offence to be guilty of in our law*" (Bake 2013).

CONCLUSION

Numerous studies have identified multiple factors associated with the risk of marital failure and the perceived causes of marital breakdown. In this study, the researchers found that infidelity, lack of communication, in-laws interference, abuse or violence, and a prolonged distance between spouses are among the major contributory factors of marital dissolution. In addition, sexual plasticity, religion, lack of understanding of marriage, high expectations, placed pressure on marriage as an institution.

The findings of the study revealed that the majority of the respondents entered into marital relationship without a clear understanding of their required responsibilities as mothers and fathers. The majority viewed marriage as a way of fulfilling personal motives, gains and soothing sexual desires without bearing the burdens and commitment associated with marriage as a family institution.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Future studies should use quantitative methods to generate data that can be generalised to the whole population to verify factors and new challenges facing marriages today as meaning and expectations of marriage continues to be challenged and under threat. As the role of extended family members diminishes, future research should solicit ways that can address challenges facing nuclear families in rural areas where services of psychologists are not only limited but community members are not familiar with their services.

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