

Peer Relationship Process of Children of Divorced Parents in South Korea in the Early 2000s: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This study explored the peer relationship process of children of divorced parents in South Korea in the early 2000s using in-depth interviews. The participants were 12 male and female adults who experienced parental divorce between 2002 and 2004. We identified three stages—incompatibility, sympathy, and ease—in their peer relationship process. The study shows the path through which the participants overcame their fear of self-disclosure and highlights implications that can be helpful in school counseling.

Keywords: *Children of Divorced Parents, Relationship with Friends, Peer Relationship Process, School Counseling, Qualitative Research.*

Introduction

According to the World Values Survey conducted in 1995–1998, called the Justifiable Divorce Index, the acceptance of divorce in South Korea was 4.13, ranking 22 out of 24 countries, including the US, Sweden, and Japan. This reveals the country's negative perception of divorce. In contrast, Japan ranked 11th, despite being an East Asian country (Inglehart et al., 2018). Additionally, a survey was conducted in 2008 to evaluate the perceived discrimination against divorced women across 17 countries. As many as 17,595 people were asked the question, "Are divorced women discriminated against?" South Korea had the highest ratio (World Public Opinion, 2008), with a majority (82%) affirming this statement (35% stated "very severe" and 47% stated "to some degree"). This percentage is higher than Egypt (80%), Turkey (72%), and Iran (51%), which are infamous for gender discrimination. Across the 17 countries, an average of 46% responded that divorced women were discriminated against. Explaining why South Korea figured higher than other countries where discrimination was considered common, the World Public Opinion suggested that South Korea may be more sensitive to such discrimination. Another reason may be the year of the survey (2008), which was not long after 2003 when South Korea's divorce rate soared in the aftermath of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and credit card crises, reaching an all-time peak (Statistics Korea, 2022). At the time, divorces increased rapidly because of the deterioration of financial stability in the country; however, there was strong social prejudice against divorce.

Social prejudice against divorced families creates behavioral patterns that make children of divorced parents avoid disclosing their parents' divorce to their friends (Jacoby, 2000). Furthermore, children of divorced parents have a greater fear of peer rejection than children of married parents (Fagan & Churchill, 2012).

As children and adolescents desire to belong to groups and seek to affirm their identity through those groups (Choi et al., 2023), they spend more time with friends than with family. Thus, friendships during elementary, middle, and high school years have a significant impact on the psychosocial adaptation of children of divorced parents (Ciarrochi & Heaven, 2008; Park, 2010; Wilkinson, 2010). However, in a sociocultural environment where two-parent families are considered normal and single-parent families are discriminated against as being pathological (Jang & Lee, 2011; Kim et al., 2005), children of divorced parents in Korea avoid disclosing their parents' marital status to friends, are more concerned about their image as perceived by friends, and face difficulties in forming relationships with friends

Self-disclosure contributes to the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships and promotes psychological well-being (Kim, 1995). Humans have a desire to express their emotions and suppressing this

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desire may lead to psychological tensions and mental health problems (Kim et al., 2015). Bae and Shin (2015) revealed that the quality of friendship influences social anxiety and affects the subjective well-being of elementary school students, with “self-disclosure” having a moderating effect. The relationship between friendship quality and social anxiety is not significant in groups with low self-disclosure; however, groups with high self-disclosure have more positive friendships that lead to lower social anxiety. Moreover, self-disclosure has a moderating effect in the relationship between friendship quality and subjective well-being where the positive relationship between friendship and subjective well-being was stronger in groups with high self-disclosure. These results indicate that the level of self-disclosure moderates the relationship between friendship quality, social anxiety, and subjective well-being. This implies that the quality of friendship must be improved if children have high social anxiety or low subjective well-being and self-disclosure should be promoted to reduce social anxiety and improve subjective well-being.

Since children and adolescents with a high level of self-disclosure, despite experiencing negative life events, report positive friendships (Swenson & Rose, 2009), research must be conducted to explore the process through which children of divorced parents avoid self-disclosure, face difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships, and overcome these challenges. This can provide meaningful data for adoption during school life. However, studies exploring these turning points are scarce. It is challenging to obtain in-depth content from children through interviews because of their limited cognitive abilities, fears of abandonment, self-condemnation, and reconciliation fantasies regarding parental divorce (Chai & Lee, 2011; Garrity & Baris, 1997; Johnston, 1994), which may raise ethical issues when conducting in-depth interviews. However, children of divorced parents in South Korea who are now adults may be expected to reflect on their experiences and calmly articulate them.

Against this backdrop, this study explored the peer relationship process of children of divorced parents in South Korea in the early 2000s to collect basic data that can support such children in functionally adapting to school life despite the prejudice against divorced families. A school is a place for learning and a ground where minors develop psychologically and socially. Examining the peer relationship process in schools from the perspective of children of divorced parents may help them navigate school life with confidence. The results of this study could provide implications for countries, such as Egypt, Turkey, and Iran, where prejudice against divorce is expected to be severe, yet the sensitivity to this prejudice is lower than in South Korea, making it harder for children of divorced parents to reveal their difficulties. The research question was, “What was the peer relationship process of children of divorced parents in South Korea in the early 2000s?”

Methods

This study investigated the peer relationship process of children of divorced parents in South Korea in the early 2000s. A qualitative research method is suitable for exploring the unique subjective experiences related to forming and maintaining friendships of children from divorced families. This is because understanding and capturing the events, actions, and inherent values, norms, expectations, or perceptions experienced by the research participants through structured questionnaires is difficult (Rothbard & Shaver, 1994)

Research Participants

The research participants were adults who had been in their childhood between 2002–2004 and had experienced family dissolution due to financial circumstances during that period. This is because childhood is the period in which parental divorce has the greatest impact (Carlile, 1991). The participants were recruited by posting a recruitment notice at three Health Family Support Centers in A City, South Korea. We explained the research topic to those who contacted us and applied voluntarily to participate in the study.

First, among the eight sub-domains of the Korean Inventory of Peer Relationship (KIPR), we used the apathy scale and the social inhibition scale to measure the level of peer relationship problems during childhood and adolescence and selected those who scored 40 points or higher. Moreover, according to Cheo and Kim (2003), who examined peer relationships among adolescents by sex, female students have

more best friends or close friends than male students and form more intimate friendships; thus, we ensured an equal ratio of male and female participants in this study. Considering that the study results (Hong, 2004) revealed that a stable home environment after parental divorce acts as a protective factor for the child's psychology, we selected 12 participants (6 women and 6 men), including those who adapted without difficulties after parental divorce, those who adapted after overcoming difficulties, and those who showed maladaptive behavior. Data were collected from March–May 2024. The characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1. In this study, the participants were identified using symbols to anonymize their personal information.

Table 1. Characteristics Of Participants

Symbol (gender, age)	Educational level, occupation	Age at the time of parental divorce	Custodial parent's educational level, occupation	Source of income after divorce	Interaction with the non-custodial parent
A (female, 28)	University graduate, nurse	9	Mother (University graduate, nurse aide)	Mother's earned income, child support from father	Regular interaction from immediately after the divorce
B (female, 27)	University graduate, elementary school teacher	8	Father (University graduate, elementary school teacher)	Father's earned income, child support from mother	Regular interaction immediately after the divorce
C (female, 27)	Junior college graduate, social worker	7	Mother (Middle school graduate, restaurant worker)	Mother's earned income, little child support from father	Regular interaction two years after the divorce
D (female, 30)	University graduate, bank clerk	10	Mother (High school graduate, insurance planner)	Mother's earned income, little child support from father	Regular interaction three years after the divorce
E (female, 29)	University graduate, daycare teacher	8	Mother (Middle school graduate, beautician)	Mother's earned income (child support not paid by father)	Irregular interaction two years after the divorce
F (female, 30)	High school graduate, accounting clerk	10	Mother (Middle school graduate, welfare center restaurant worker)	Mother's earned income (child support not paid by father)	Never met after the divorce
G (male, 30)	University graduate, social worker	10	Father (Middle school graduate,	Father's business, income, little child support from mother	Regular interaction immediately after the divorce

			president of a small construction company)		
H (male, 29)	University graduate, pharmacist	9	Mother (University graduate, nurse)	Mother's earned income, child support from father	Regular interaction immediately after the divorce
I (male, 29)	Junior college graduate, automobile maintenance technician	9	Father (Middle school graduate, car mechanic)	Father's earned income (child support not paid by mother)	After the mother's remarriage, contact only on big occasions for the mother's family
J (male, 27)	University graduate, social worker	7	Mother (High school graduate, restaurant worker)	Mother's earned income (child support not paid by father)	Irregular interaction five years after the divorce
K (male, 28)	Junior college graduate, staff of a music video company	9	Father (High school graduate, president of a small electricity company)	Father's business, income (child support not paid by mother)	First contact four years after the divorce. Never met after mother's remarriage
L (male, 29)	High school graduate, part-time job at a convenience store	10	Mother (Middle school graduate, care worker)	Mother's earned income (child support not paid by father)	Irregular interaction 10 years after the divorce

Research Procedure

This study was conducted with approval from the Korea National Institute for Bioethics Policy (KoNIBP), designated by the Ministry of Health and Welfare (IRB NO.: P01-202307-01-009). We explained the purpose, content, and methods of research to the participants before the interviews and encouraged them to describe their experiences honestly. Moreover, we obtained written consent for recording the interviews and assured them in writing that the recordings would not be used for purposes other than research. We guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality and informed the participants that they could withdraw at any point during the study. We used unstructured, open-ended questions in Stage 1 of the interview process to obtain as much data as possible. We asked questions regarding the process of parental divorce, post-divorce life experiences, and relationships with peers. Subsequently, a structured questionnaire was used in Stage 2, enquiring about the participants' ages, education levels, occupations, ages at the point of parental divorce, the custodial parent's education level, occupation, source of income at the time of divorce, and their interaction with the non-custodial parent. In particular, we conducted interviews with a focus on the peer relationship process during school life.

Data Analysis

We transcribed the interview recordings and compared the audio with the transcripts for accuracy. We ensured consistency, truth value, neutrality, and applicability, in accordance with the evaluation criteria set by Lincoln and Guba (1985), to minimize errors in qualitative research. We used an interview guide to maintain consistency. For truth value, segmenting and coding of the transcribed data were performed

through discussion between the co-authors. One of the researchers had experience conducting qualitative studies and the other was a divorce mediation commissioner in the Family Court. However, we consciously avoided any influence from preconceptions about the peer relationship process of children of divorced parents to ensure neutrality. We attempted to secure an adequate number of cases to guarantee study applicability and determined that sufficient data had been collected when no new data appeared. During the analysis, we made efforts to correct potential errors (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by comparing them with previous studies.

We analyzed the collected data using inductive qualitative content analysis. This method is often used when prior information about the research problem or question is limited or sporadic and involves deriving codes and categories by analyzing collected data without using predefined codes or categories based on the researcher's or related prior research (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Content analysis involves coding (unitizing and categorizing) to determine the meaning of the data. Unitizing involves continuously identifying valid units of information relevant to the research questions and extracting the smallest units of information for classification, while categorizing involves organizing units into comprehensive forms with certain relationships (Srnrka & Koeszegi, 2007). The data analysis followed the procedures of inductive qualitative content analysis by Cho and Lee (2014). We repeatedly listened to the recorded interview content and described the language used by the participants exactly as expressed. Next, we repeatedly read the interview transcripts and field notes to gain a sense of the data. We carefully read the statements of the participants to identify important or interesting content related to the "peer relationship process" and reduced the content. Furthermore, we assigned categories to each segment of interest identified during the reading process. The frequency of each category was considered important as it represents the weight of respondents' opinions, with higher frequencies indicating greater importance. Existing categories were either eliminated or integrated or new categories emerged as we continued to read the data. By identifying relationships between the categories, higher-level categories were derived while grouping similar or semantically related categories. We selected excerpts to quote or parts to interpret while reading the contents classified under the same category.

Results

Unitizing the interview data and extracting the key concepts revealed three stages of the peer relationship process—incompatibility, sympathy, and ease. Initially, the participants felt a "sense of difference" with friends who came from intact families due to their unique environment created by parental divorce. Thus, interacting with friends resulted in a sense of "incompatibility." However, as they became acquainted with peers from other families with divorces, they could reveal their family status without the fear of prejudice and rejection, leading to a relationship of "sympathy." Finally, the participants could overcome their feelings of intimidation through supportive relationships with friends in similar situations and develop social skills, becoming "at ease" with children from intact families. As such, the peer relationship process for children of divorced parents evolves, which illustrates pathways for overcoming vulnerability to self-disclosure among children of divorced parents.

The Incompatibility Stage

Participant E experienced parental divorce in the second grade of elementary school. Her mother struggled with loneliness and went through repeated cohabitation and separation with men since E was in the fifth grade. E was nervous about her friends finding out about this. Participant F never met her father since her parents got divorced when she was in fourth grade; she never heard from him or knew where he was. Both E and F felt ashamed of their parents' divorce and nervous about the possibility of their friends viewing them negatively if they found out about their parents' divorce:

I used to hide the fact that my parents were divorced when I was young. I couldn't talk about it because I was ashamed. I was extra careful not to hear other people say, "I'm a kid without a dad." (E)

This anxiety was affected by children's sense of self-centeredness, perceiving that their sorrow was unique and difficult for others to understand (Vartanian, 2000):

You know how you have to write down your family background in elementary school? I was really ashamed to write that. I couldn't exactly lie so I ended up writing the truth but I kept it hidden [...] I was so young at the time [...] I thought I was the only one going through that kind of experience. I was embarrassed, afraid that something might happen if I told the truth [...] (F)

Social prejudice against divorce and divorced families makes children of divorced parents hesitant about telling about their parents' divorce to their friends (Jacoby, 2000). This is to protect themselves from probable negative perceptions. Another participant who felt ashamed of parental divorce stated that he had been intimidated until he met peers whose parents were divorced as well:

I hadn't told anyone, even all through middle school. I was almost in my senior year of high school when I first shared the truth (with friends in similar situations). I really envied friends who lived with their parents. (G)

The participants experienced a sense of incompatibility when their friends talked about pleasant experiences with their parents. Participant I, whose mother walked out because she was exhausted with childcare and wanted to "find herself," alleviated this feeling of incompatibility through aggressive behavior:

My parents got divorced when I was in the first semester of third grade, and I became really violent in the second semester. I beat up my friends when they talked about their moms in front of me. I hated to hear about moms because I knew I had to live without mine. I threatened my friends that I would kill them if they mentioned the word "mom." In a way, I think those kids were the ones who got hurt because of me. (I)

Children of divorced parents reportedly show more aggressive tendencies, both emotionally and socially, and have lower levels of sociability compared to children from intact families (Gestwicki, 2015). Intimidation or aggressive tendencies can hinder the formation of intimate peer relationships (Rubin et al., 1993). Children and adolescents with high social anxiety levels receive less peer acceptance and support (La Greca & Lopez, 1998). They show negative outcomes in terms of personality development and academic performance (Joo & Kim, 2014). This highlights the importance of self-disclosure among children of divorced parents. Failing to do so may lead to social anxiety, low subjective well-being, and low achievements in terms of peer relationships, personality development, and academic performance, respectively. Therefore, there is a need for counseling interventions to facilitate self-disclosure among children of divorced parents.

The Sympathy Stage

As participants who felt ashamed of their parents' divorce realized that there were others with similar experiences, their interactions with friends transitioned from the incompatibility to the sympathy stage. They had felt intimidated; however, once they discovered peers in similar situations, they could engage in self-disclosure:

I would always have a friend around me whose parents got divorced. I realized I wasn't the only one, and there are cases similar to mine. After that, I was able to talk openly with those friends. (A)

After my homeroom teacher in middle school openly (and inconsiderately) talked about my family situation, other kids with divorced parents reached out to me. [...] I hadn't wanted to talk about my family before that but being with kids in the same environment helped me talk openly about my family; they too felt comfortable talking to me. (H)

I tend to avoid friends living with their parents. At the time, I just assumed they wouldn't understand me because they live with their mom and dad. So, I didn't talk at all. But I could talk about things to friends whose parents were also divorced, because they would relate to me, which made me feel like a load had been lifted off my chest. (B)

I used to think that I was responsible for my parents' divorce. But talking to other kids from divorced families made me realize it wasn't my fault. I could finally break free from guilt. (D)

I was living with my mom, but still, I was so afraid and anxious that my mom would abandon me as well. Talking to my

friends in similar situations helped relieve this fear and anxiety. (C)

Intimate relationships formed voluntarily with selected peers reveal higher levels of trust and honesty compared to general relationships formed with multiple peers (Kim & Oh, 2006). However, the participants could form intimate relationships with selected peers because of “sympathy” for the shared experience of parental divorce. Their statements imply that interacting with peers whose parents are divorced is likely to progress into mutually supportive relationships as they do not feel embarrassed. B’s statement that “a load has been lifted off my chest” shows that she could disclose her situation to peers in similar situations without the fear of prejudice or rejection, helping her deal with her emotions and alleviate psychological tension. As such, intimate peer relationships provide emotional support and alleviate psychological difficulties (Crawford & Manassis, 2001). These results suggest the need to establish a venue within schools for children of divorced parents to share their concerns and support one another.

The Ease Stage

The universal image of a friend is someone with whom one can be “at ease.” However, for children of divorced parents in this study, this friend emerged only after they had recovered from their psychological wounds. The participants could be “at ease” with their peers from intact families after having gone through generalization in which they realized that they were not the only ones with divorced parents.

I kept my parents’ divorce a secret up until middle school. Most of my friends from middle school had parents who were divorced. But in high school, I no longer felt ashamed because I had seen others with divorced parents in middle school. There were a few kids in high school whose parents were divorced. So, my friends from high school are more diverse, some with divorced parents, and others with married parents. These days I talk about my parents’ divorce with ease. (J)

There weren’t so many divorced families back when I was young so it [the situation] was like a hot potato. But now it’s so common that I easily reveal that I grew up without a mom. (L)

I used to resent my parents for getting divorced and making my life miserable. But seeing my friends with divorced parents living so diligently made me stop being so resentful and live my life. Finally, I was able to treat kids living with their parents without reserve. (K)

Talking and relating to friends going through similar pain as me was a great consolation; those friends helped me become more cheerful and bright. I also got along with kids living with both their parents with ease. (F)

During adolescence, the frontal lobe develops intrapersonal intelligence, which is the ability to understand and express one’s psychological and emotional state. It enables individuals to feel their emotions, distinguish the categories or types of those emotions, and effectively resolve related issues (Gardner, 1999). Furthermore, it is related to interpersonal intelligence, that is, the ability to perceive and understand others’ dispositions, moods, intentions, and motives, and cope with them effectively and harmoniously. This is because thinking and considering other people’s perspectives requires intrapersonal intelligence (Gardner, 2005). During the sympathy stage, the participants could express long-standing emotions, such as resentment toward their parents, anger, fear of abandonment, and guilt, which they were unable to share with others. By interacting with other children in similar situations, they could reflect on their inner selves without being afraid or hurt, thereby, developing intrapersonal intelligence, which was suppressed by social prejudices. They were able to promote self-esteem and felt at ease when interacting with children from intact families. This is because they experienced that there was not much difference in the emotions, perceptions, or values of their peers, regardless of their parents’ marital status.

The participants developed intrapersonal intelligence during the sympathy stage through which they developed interpersonal intelligence, that is, the ability to form amicable interpersonal relationships and effectively solve interpersonal problems. Subsequently, they befriended children from intact families. Participant F’s statement, “Those friends also helped me become more cheerful and bright,” illustrates how support from peers in similar situations can change a fearful state of mind and help develop social skills. These findings suggest the need to help children of divorced parents realize that their situation is not unique,

instead is something that anyone can experience.

Discussion

The peer relationship process of children of divorced parents in South Korea in the early 2000s, when there was severe social prejudice against divorce, can be divided into the incompatibility, sympathy, and ease stages. These results are significant in determining how the vulnerability of children of divorced parents, who struggle with self-disclosure, can be overcome beyond the results of previous studies that suggest social anxiety and low subjective well-being among children of divorced parents (Fagan & Rector, 2000; Sterrett et al., 2009). Based on the results of this study, we make the following suggestions.

Schools should provide a stable environment for children of divorced parents to express their concerns and emotions freely. It is necessary to provide a platform that enables students to realize that it is natural to feel loss, sadness, loneliness, and worry after the divorce of their parents, and encourages them to express these feelings (Carlile, 1991). Thus, there is a need for group counseling interventions for children of divorced parents in schools. Group counseling is a mutual support activity among peers. It is easy to conduct in schools and can exhibit positive effects. Group counseling would make students feel relieved, realizing that their issues are not strange, that they are not alone, and that this experience can be shared and related (Cohen et al., 2017). This can reduce negative perceptions toward parental divorce and improve children's self-esteem. Children of divorced parents can adapt positively to parental divorce by expressing themselves, overcoming isolation and anxiety, and learning coping strategies (Openshaw, 2011). It is advisable to conduct group counseling in small groups to facilitate close interaction and encourage the formation of intimate support networks. Most importantly, since adolescence is a period characterized by the emergence of autonomy, in which individuals try to be independent (Erikson, 2008), group counseling may be useful for students reluctant to engage in individual counseling with school counselors.

Previous studies have reported that peers are not prejudiced toward children of divorced parents (Ball et al., 1984; Kim, 2005; Song & Sung, 2003), unlike teachers. This implies that there is a need for interventions to help children of divorced parents realize this so that they do not assume that their peers will view them negatively.

Considering that children of divorced parents may have difficulty seeking external support because of economic constraints, psychological difficulties, and spending a significant amount of time at school, schools are an ideal environment for group counseling. There is a need to help children of divorced parents perceive school as a place of healing, instead of as a place of alienation.

Despite these implications, this study has certain limitations. The qualitative approach used makes it challenging to generalize the findings appropriately (Doolittle & Brannen, 1995). Therefore, conducting quantitative research on the peer relationship process of children of divorced parents and validating the generalizability of related variables derived in this study is suggested for future studies. This will provide implications for school counseling.

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