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Premature Cognitive Commitment between Divorced Mothers and Daughters in the Early 2000s in South Korea: A Qualitative Study from the Daughters' Perception

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Abstract

This study explored the premature cognitive commitments of divorced mothers and their daughters toward each other in South Korea in the early 2000s from the daughters' perception. I conducted in-depth interviews with nine adult women who experienced parental divorce in childhood during the 2002–2004 period, revealing certain premature cognitive commitments that divorced mothers and their daughters had toward each other, such as "I can't let my mom see that I'm struggling!" and "My daughter comes home late or stays out overnight to hang out with friends owing to her father's absence." Based on my findings, I discuss potential implications for counseling divorced families.

Keywords: *Divorced Mothers and their Daughters,Premature Cognitive Commitment, Parentification, Family Counseling; Qualitative Research.*

Introduction

According to the World Values Survey conducted in 1995–1998, the Justifiable: Divorce index that represents how accepted divorce is in a country was 4.13 in South Korea, giving it a ranking of 22nd out of 24 countries, including US, Sweden, and Japan, in terms of negativity toward divorce. In contrast, Japan ranked 11th, despite being an East Asian country (Inglehart et al., 2018). In addition, in a 2008 survey on the ratio of perceived discrimination against divorced women involving 17,595 people from 17 countries, South Korea had the highest ratio (World Public Opinion, 2008). To the question, "Are divorced women discriminated against?", 82% of Koreans claimed they are, 35% stating that the discrimination is "very severe" and 47% "to some degree." This percentage is higher than that of Egypt (80%), Turkey (72%), and Iran (51%), which are infamous for severe gender discrimination. On the other hand, 46% on average responded that divorced women were discriminated against across the 17 countries. Regarding the reason behind South Korea's figures being higher than in countries where discrimination is common, World Public Opinion suggested that South Korea may be more concerned regarding such discrimination. Meanwhile, the year 2008, when this survey was conducted, was not long after 2003, when South Korea's divorce rate soared in the aftermath of the so-called IMF (International Monetary Fund) and credit card crises, reaching its all-time peak(Statistics Korea, 2022). At the time, divorced families increased rapidly because of the deterioration of financial stability in the country; however, there was strong social prejudice against divorce.

Divorced mothers, faced with the reality of a Korean society that considers divorce a sin6 and does not easily accept women as breadwinners (Kim et al., 2005), tend to depend emotionally and instrumentally on their daughters. This is because mothers communicate more with their daughters (and vice versa), than their sons about people and events around them, and display deeper affection toward daughters (S. Lee et al., 2006; Pickering et al., 2015). However, in parent-child relationships within divorced families, exchanging affection and intimacy is merely a cultural ideal; in reality, intimacy needs are not easily fulfilled under such circumstances. In general, many divorced women face difficulties in parenting owing to the burden of playing a dual role in the absence of spouses (Ryu et al., 2006; Wallerstein et al., 2013). It is reported that the household income of divorced women in South Korea was the lowest by class in the early 2000s (Song, 2006). Furthermore, Korean society is pervaded with negative perceptions that divorce is caused by flaws in individual personalities, willfulness, or faults as parents (Park, 2005). In this context, divorced women

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and mothers experience social withdrawal (Lee & Ok, 2001; Ryu et al., 2006), feeling guilty and stressed about the lack of time available to spend with their children after completing.

income- generating activities and household chores (Al Khataybeh, 2022; Jeong & Yoo, 2001; Ok et al., 2002). The difficulties faced by divorced women in performing parental roles may lead to the parentification of their children (Ehrensaft et al., 2007; Hooper, 2007; Kim & Lee, 2010). Parentification refers to the role reversal between parents and children such that the children are expected to take care of their parents from a young age (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973). If the willingness to take care of their parents is not balanced with meeting their own needs, these children may not be able to form an existential relationship with their parents (Chase, 1999; Goldner et al., 2022). Negative social perceptions toward divorce affect not only children's view of parental divorce but also their lives after the divorce (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). The serious negative perceptions toward divorced women in Korean society in the early 2000s served as premature cognitive commitment, tying together divorced mothers and their daughters(Roe et al., 2009), potentially leading to premature cognitive commitments toward each other. Since cognition, which encompasses perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, values, and expectations, is important in family communication (Schwebel & Fine, 1994), studying mother-daughter premature cognitive commitments precipitated by the specific situation of a divorced family from the perspective of the daughters may provide valuable insights.

This study selected daughters of divorced mothers as the research participants after considering previous findings that adolescent daughters maintain closer relationships with their mothers than sons do in terms of information and affection (S. Lee et al., 2006; Pickering et al., 2015), and that daughters tend to be more physically parentified than sons since they are often entrusted with household chores or childcare (Kim & Lee, 2010). Meanwhile, it is difficult to obtain in-depth information from children in artificial settings such as interviews. Additionally, children have limited cognitive abilities, as well as fear of abandonment, self-criticism, and reunion fantasies regarding their divorced parents (Chai & Lee, 2011; Johnston, 1994), which may cause ethical problems when conducting in-depth interviews. However, the daughters of divorced mothers who had been children in the 2000s are currently adults and, thus, are capable of calmly reflecting on and talking about their experiences as children and adolescents from an adult's perspective. Accordingly, I intend to explore the premature cognitive commitments of divorced mothers and their daughters in South Korea in the early 2000s from the perspective of the daughters, in the context of the prevailing serious negative social perceptions toward divorce, and examine the groundless and mistaken beliefs daughters had about their mothers and the wrong impressions their mothers seemed to have about them. I expect my findings to hold implications for countries that continue to have severely negative social perceptions of divorce, such as Egypt, Turkey, and Iran, and yet have lower sensitivity toward the issue than South Korea and, thus, might face more difficulties in revealing the premature cognitive commitments between divorced mothers and their daughters (Mansoor and Paul, 2022). The research question devised for this purpose is: What were the premature cognitive commitments held by divorced mothers and their daughters about each other in South Korea in the early 2000s?

Methods

The purpose of this study was to reveal the premature cognitive commitments between adolescent daughters and their divorced mothers in South Korea in the early 2000s from the perspective of the daughters. For this purpose, a qualitative approach was considered appropriate because a structured questionnaire cannot completely reveal the events and actions in the participants' experiences as well as the norms, expectations, and perceptions concealed within them.

Research Participants

Considering that the year 2003 was when South Korea's divorce rate peaked (Statistics Korea, 2022), I selected research participants from among those whose parents divorced in 2002–2004, who had been in elementary school (aged 7–12) during this time, and whose custodial parent after divorce was their mother. Since preschool children may misconstrue the situation of their parents' divorce owing to insufficient development of cognitive abilities (Hetherington, 1993), I selected women who experienced parental

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divorce in elementary school, when they could perceive the situation somewhat accurately. Moreover, elementary school children may have the cognitive maturity required to comprehend parental divorce but lack sufficient coping skills, unlike adolescents (Ju, 2002). Accordingly, exploring the premature cognitive commitments between mothers and children whose parents divorced in elementary school is expected to yield practical implications. I posted a notice recruiting participants at three healthy family support centers located in A city, South Korea. After recruiting participants from the three centers, I used the Parent-Adolescent Communication Inventory (PACI) to measure the level of communication between the participants and their mothers during adolescence. Since the minimum score is 20 points instead of 0, those scoring lower than 40 were considered to have a low level of communication with their mothers in adolescence and selected as pilot participants. Meanwhile, considering the evidence that a stable home environment after parental divorce serves as a protective factor for children's psychological wellbeing (Hong, 2004; Wallerstein et al., 2013), I examined the post-divorce adjustment of mothers and ultimately selected a total of nine research participants: three whose mothers adjusted to life after the divorce without difficulties, three whose mothers adjusted after overcoming difficulties, and three whose mothers tended to be maladaptive. Data were collected in July and August 2023. Table 1 shows the ages, educational attainments, and occupations of the participants as well as their mothers' educational attainments, occupations, source of income after divorce, and interaction of the participants with the non-custodial parent. Since this study explores confidential information, the participants' identities were masked using alphabets for privacy.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants

Symbol **(gender, age)**	**Educational attainment, occupation**	**Age at the time of parental divorce**	**Mother's educational attainment, occupation**	**Source of income after divorce**	**Interaction of the daughter with the non-custodial parent**
A (female, 28)	University graduate, nurse	9	University graduate, nurse aide	Mother's earned income (child support not paid by father)	Regular interaction from immediately after the divorce
B (female, 27)	University graduate, elementary school teacher	8	University graduate, elementary school teacher	Mother's earned income, little child support from father	Regular interaction from 1 year after the divorce
C (female, 29)	University graduate, pharmacist	9	University graduate, nurse	Mother's earned income, little child support from father	Regular interaction from immediately after the divorce
D (female, 26)	Junior college graduate, social worker	7	High school graduate, restaurant worker	Mother's earned income (child support not paid by father)	Regular interaction from middle school
E (female, 29)	Junior college graduate, daycare teacher	10	High school graduate, insurance planner	Mother's earned income, little child support from father	Irregular interaction from 1 year after the divorce

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F	University graduate,	8	Middle school graduate,	Mother's earned income (child support not paid by father)	Irregular interaction from 2 years after the divorce
(female, 28)	bank clerk		beautician		
G (female, 26)	High school graduate, accounting clerk	7	Middle school graduate,	Mother's earned income (child support not paid by father)	Never met after the divorce
			welfare center restaurant worker		
H	Junior college graduate,	9	Middle school graduate,	Mother's earned income (child support not paid by father)	Irregular interaction from 8 years after the divorce
(female, 29)	dental hygienist		restaurant worker		
I	High school graduate,	7	Middle school graduate,	Mother's earned income (child support not paid by father)	Irregular interaction from 10 years after divorce
(female, 27)	skincare beautician		care worker		

Research Procedure

This study was conducted after review and approval by the Korea National Institute for Bioethics Policy (KoNIBP), designated by the Ministry of Health and Welfare (IRB NO.: Blinded for peer review). I explained the purpose, content, and methods of research to the participants prior to the interviews and encouraged them to honestly describe their experiences. Moreover, I obtained written consent for recording the interviews and provided assurance in writing that the recordings would not be used for purposes other than research. I guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality and informed the participants that they could withdraw from participation at any point in the study. The interviews were conducted using unstructured questions in Stage 1 to obtain extensive data; questions were related to the process of parental divorce, life after divorce, and relationship with their mothers. Subsequently, a structured questionnaire was used in Stage 2, enquiring about the participants' ages, educational attainments, occupations, ages at the point of parental divorce, their mothers' educational attainments, occupations, source of income at the point of divorce, and their interaction with the non-custodial parent. In particular, the interviews were conducted with a focus on the premature cognitive commitments that the participants felt had existed between their mothers and themselves.

Results and Discussion

Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that the daughters held a premature cognitive commitment gainst their mothers regardless of their post-divorce adjustment, which was "I can't let my mom see that I'm struggling!" Meanwhile, they felt that their mothers also held a premature cognitive commitment against them, which was "My daughter coming home late or staying out overnight to hang out with friends is because she wasn't raised properly owing to her father's absence."

Premature cognitive commitment of daughters against their mothers: "I can't let my mom see that I'm struggling!"

All nine participants held the belief that "I can't let my mom see that I'm struggling!" Feeling sorry for their mothers, who were acting as both primary breadwinners and their caregivers after the divorce, they were conscious that sharing their concerns would only add to the pressure on their mothers.

Since my mom depended on me so much, I couldn't really tell her about my struggles. It would have only upset her more. So, I used to love hanging out with my friends. The toughest part was having no one to turn to when I got home, no one to listen to

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what I had to say. I felt that I had no one by my side, so I felt pressured at home. (A)

I guess I used to watch my mom's expression when she got home from work without even realizing it. We weren't struggling as much financially as other divorced families, but for some reason, as a child, I just thought that my mom was someone who was struggling, someone who needed my care, and someone I shouldn't trouble, even though no one ever told me not to. (B)

My mom has also been a great father to me, and I respect her for that. But for as long as I remember, I've always thought that I shouldn't honestly share my struggles with her, because it's bad for her. So, I sorted out my struggles by talking to my friends instead. (C)

I wanted to snap at my mom or vent my anger every once in a while, but my mom seemed to be struggling so much that I could not say much to her. I would reach out more to my friends instead. I never had any heart-to-heart talks with my mom. I just met up with my friends whenever I was in a bad mood. (D)

It wasn't easy for me to share my concerns with my mom since she was already struggling by herself without my dad by her side. It seemed that it would only make me a bad daughter. When my troubles gave me a headache, I went out and hung out with my friends instead of sharing them with my mom. Maybe that's why home still doesn't feel so cozy to me. (E)

When I was young, I felt strongly that I shouldn't be a burden to my mom. Come to think of it, it's sad that a child so young had to think that way. But at the time I thought I was doing the right thing, even though no one told me to. I felt sorry about revealing my troubles and difficulties to my mom, who was already enduring her struggles alone. (F)

Since my mom had her own problems, I tried not to rely on her, so she wouldn't feel burdened, taking matters into my own hands. (…) I never talked to her about my problems. (…) I didn't think I should let it show that I was struggling. And I didn't really know what she was feeling, because she tended to keep to herself since I was young. I still don't really know what she thinks or how she feels. I was more comfortable with my friends because they were good listeners and would always be there for me whenever I needed them. (G)

I often thought that I was a burden to my mom. She never expressed that kind of feeling, but it just seemed that way to me. So, I tried not to depend on her as much as possible, and instead found consolation in my friends when I was going through a hard time. (H)

I used to envy my friends who grumbled or whined to their moms. I believed that I shouldn't even if I wanted to, because I shouldn't add to my mom's struggles. I thought that was my duty as a daughter because my mom is a divorcee. (I)

What caused the daughters of divorced mothers to have this kind of belief? Their sympathy for their mothers having to take on the additional role of their fathers after the divorce kept them from speaking openly to their mothers regarding their emotions, needs, and wants. However, a study on the exchanges between mothers and adolescent children showed that the value attributed to information related to their children's lives, such as "when children talk to their mothers about what matters to them and ask for opinions," was extremely high for the mothers, whereas the value attributed by children listening to the same information from their mothers was the lowest (S. Lee et al., 2006). There is no connection whatsoever between a mother's status as divorced or the breadwinner of the family and the extent to which she values information and communication about her child's life. The belief that "I can't let my mom see that I'm struggling!" is an arbitrary and independent judgment made by daughters regarding their mothers' empathic skills and affection, accepting the prejudice of Korean society at the time that "divorced mothers represent the failures of the marital system in the patriarchal Korean society, and thus, they have no ability to protect their children" (Kim et al., 2005; Woman Donga, 2007). Nevertheless, the daughters felt alienated, and complained that their moms did not understand what they had not shared in the first place.

Premature cognitive commitment of mothers against their daughters: "My daughter coming home late or staying out overnight to hang out with friends is because she wasn't raised properly owing to her father's absence."

The mothers of the participants were harsh with their daughters for coming home late or staying out overnight to hang out with friends, blaming their behavior on the fact that they were being raised without

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their fathers. Mothers failed to understand the fact that adolescents find their identities by being part of a group, spending increasing amounts of time with their friends rather than family(Oh et al., 2009). They watched over their daughters anxiously because of the overreactive responsibility that arises from the “father’s absence.” They lost confidence, thinking that their daughters would not have acted in this way if they had a father to co-parent with, and that their role as a mother is insignificant in the relationship with their daughters. The pressure of having to raise their daughters properly made them stricter and more controlling.

I think I attained puberty late in high school. So, I hung out with my friends and didn’t go home until late. My mom would throw a fit. I was a girl, and she didn’t want anyone else to know my father was absent. She would say to me, “If your father were here, would you have come home so late? Are you going off the rails because you’re raised without your father?” I think she felt this huge sense of responsibility because of my father’s absence, so she struggled to keep me from going off the rails or something. (A)

My mom was worried that people around me would know my dad was absent, so she set a strict curfew even after I went to college. Whenever I broke my curfew, she would scold me, “Do you want everyone to know you don’t have a father?” I thought she was too fretful, since kids who had a father had no curfew. (B)

My mom wouldn’t allow me to sleep over at a friend’s place. She would also hate it when I came home late. When I would come home late after hanging out with my friends, she would be furious and say, “You’re ignoring me because I’m not your father.” I couldn’t really understand her, but I would get home early for a while after that just to avoid giving her a hard time. I didn’t really understand why she acted that way at the time, but now I think she just controlled me like that because she felt she had to be more responsible without my dad around. (C)

My mom tried really, really hard to ensure we weren’t raised as spoiled brats. She would say to us, “I have to be your father figure too, so you’ve got to listen to me even when I’m lecturing, all right?” (D)

My mom set a curfew until I got a job. I wasn’t allowed to stay out overnight, of course. Once I asked her if I could spend the night at a friend’s place, but she said, “You wouldn’t do that if your father were here.” She looked so helpless and weary that I just canceled my plans with my friend. I still think it’s absurd that I wasn’t allowed to spend the night at a friend’s just because my parents were divorced, when all my other friends constantly had sleepovers. (E)

Whenever I came home late or said I wanted to stay out overnight, my mom said she didn’t raise me well because I had no father. I felt it was unfair that I wasn’t allowed to do the things that my friends, whose parents weren’t divorced, could freely do at the time. I could easily lose track of time talking and hanging out with my friends until it got dark, but my mom just didn’t get it. (F)

Even when I was older than 20 years, my mom would call me at 9 or 10 at night when I was out with friends. She even asked my friends what time they would send me home. When I got home late or spent the night away from home, she accused me of disregarding her. (G)

My mom told me that I should behave well and be careful in front of others because people might think I wasn’t raised properly since I’m from a divorced family. So, she told me to come home early and never to sleep over at a friend’s house. I envied my friends who could freely spend the night at each other’s place without worrying what others might think. (H)

While my other friends enjoyed staying up late chatting and having sleepovers at one another’s places in middle and high school, I couldn’t just because my parents were divorced. I was locked behind invisible bars, believing that doing those things would only add to my mom’s struggles. I still regret not being able to do those things at the time. (I)

According to J. Choi and Kim’s (2003) study of adolescent peer relations based on sex, female students have best friends or close friends than male students do, and tend to build more intimate and reciprocal friendships. In other words, they formed closer emotional ties by sharing secrets with their friends. In particular, the positive peer relations of children from divorced families can be an important protective factor against internalizing and externalizing problems (Chester et al., 2007; Yi et al., 2005). Moreover, adolescence is the period wherein people explore themselves away from their parents and communicate

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more with their friends (Choi, et al., 2023). However, the participants may have expressed this desire late because this period in adolescence was delayed by parentification. "Good" daughters who did not share their concerns or desires because they cared about their mothers were forming emotional ties with their friends instead of confiding in their mothers, which the mothers unfortunately misunderstood as a "problem" caused by the "father's absence." This premature cognitive commitment led mothers to have distorted perceptions of their caring daughters as disregarding them, failing to accept their daughters as they are and ultimately alienating them. Participant A, who had enrolled at a university in another city, returned home and entered a local university when her mother asked her to help with her younger sibling, who was showing problem behaviors. Having returned home, A talked to her mother "for the first time" about the absence of true communication between them.

I sometimes just didn't want to go home when talking to my friends. But my mom wouldn't understand. She would keep pestering me to come home. I just couldn't stand it any longer, so I ended up talking to my mom. I told her that talking to a friend who is also going through the same stuff makes me feel better; that I also need someone who listens to what I have to say, since my mom keeps badgering me, and my little brother only relies on me, so I don't have anyone to talk to at home. That's why I'm meeting my friends, so I can let it all out to them, and my mom won't even try to understand this. When I said all this to her, she seemed taken aback, and said she had no idea how I felt since I never told her. Once I became honest with her, I could talk to her about many other things, too. (A)

Unlike the other eight participants, Participant A confessed to her mother that she had been suffering with the belief, "I can't let my mom see that I'm struggling!". In turn, A's mother realized how her daughter felt "for the first time," understood why her daughter was coming home late or staying out, and was able to form an honest and existential relationship with her daughter. A's case implies that, for true communication between divorced mothers and their daughters, family counselors must help them realize that the daughters' belief of "I can't let my mom see that I'm struggling!" is a premature cognitive commitment.

Conclusions

This study showed that the context behind the premature cognitive commitments eld by divorced mothers and their daughters toward each other is as follows: The daughter's perception that her mother has no ability to protect her → the daughter does not show her struggles to her mother/the daughter depends emotionally on friends rather than her mother → the mother's misunderstanding that her daughter is defying her because of her father's absence, and the mother's loss of confidence as a result. This is based on the premature cognitive commitment that daughters have against their mothers, as well as the premature cognitive commitment that mothers have against their daughters. Therefore, it is necessary to correct the groundless beliefs that hinder communication between mothers and daughters and promote mutual understanding. First, family counselors must help the daughters realize that human beings have a need to depend on as well as to take care of others, such that they learn that telling their mothers about their struggles is not being inconsiderate. The daughters must be made to realize that expressing their struggles to their mothers is also about better perceiving their mother's needs. Second, for a mother anxious about her daughters spending more time with friends, family counselors must remind them that they were also once adolescents who spent more time with friends than family, thereby reducing their anxiety while stressing that parents and children must be adequately separated in order to build a sound and healthy relationship where they can fully maintain their independence and sense of self. This study explored the premature cognitive commitments between divorced mothers and their daughters using qualitative methods and examined how such premature cognitive commitments interfere with communication between mothers and daughters. This study has practical significance in that it can provide counseling guidelines for existential-relationship-building based on true communication between divorced mothers and their daughters. However, a limitation of this study is that the number of research participants was somewhat small as it considered only two criteria: the level of communication with mothers in adolescence and the degree of adaptation of mothers after divorce. Therefore, it is expected that more research participants be secured in future studies to present more comprehensive details of premature cognitive commitment between mothers and daughters that did not appear in this study. Additionally, it also has the limitation that it approached mother-daughter communication only from the perspectives of daughters. Therefore, further

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research is expected to elicit the perspectives of the mothers themselves as well as more diverse family members, including sons and fathers.

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