UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES OF SINGLE MOTHERS USING NARRATIVE GROUP THERAPY

Zakaria Mohamad
School of Social and Economic Development,
University Malaysia Terengganu, Kuala Terengganu MY

Melati Sumari
Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, MY

Patricia Fenner
School of Psychology and Public Health, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia, 3086

Siti Aishah Mohamad Noor
School of Social and Economic Development,
University Malaysia Terengganu, Kuala Terengganu MY

ABSTRACT

Playing the role of a single parent is a challenging experience especially when women lead the family. Some of the challenges faced by single mothers include: raising children without a partner, the need to play the role of the partner as well as their own, working long hours to provide the financial needs of the family, balancing between work and family, and facing societal stigma. This study focuses on understanding the emotional experiences of single mothers who participate in group therapy. They receive financial aid from the Malaysian government were invited to attend in the group therapy facilitated by a professional counsellor. Twenty-four single mothers agreed to participate in group therapy. Of that number, only four single mothers agreed to be interviewed. Using a phenomenological approach, an in-dept interview was conducted with a representative of four single mothers. Participants’ art works and journal entries prepared during the group therapy, as well as researchers’ field notes, were also used to triangulate and support the thematic results of the interview. Two main themes emerged from the data analysis: (1) emotional disturbances, and (2) life without meaning. Result of the study show that narrative therapy helps single mothers in managing their emotional experiences.

Keywords: Narrative Therapy, Single Mother, Emotional Experiences.
1. INTRODUCTION

The formation of the family starts when a couple decides to go for marriage. According to Carter and McGoldrick (1989), at the first stage of the Family Life Cycle, a married couple learns to build commitment to a new system. In the second stage, where they have a young child, both learn to adjust to the system by making space for their children. They learn to share responsibilities including raising and rearing children, doing household jobs and sharing financial demands. Death of a spouse and divorce however affect both men and women in different ways (Trivedi, Sareen & Dhyani, 2009). According to Bernett, Smith and Hughess (2009), the death of a child or spouse is considered adverse events. Parenting tasks become a complicated and challenging experience after the death of a spouse (Glazer, Clark, Thomas & Haxton (2010). Glazer et al. (2010) identified five areas experienced by single parents after a spouse’s death: (1) grief associated with the loss, (2) parenting style changes, (3) the need to play the role of both father and mother, (4) family and friends’ support, and (5) finding support from a group. Due to grief and challenges after a divorce, participants in this study tried to find relief from family and friend as a coping strategy.

Similar to the death of a spouse, divorce also has an impact on a couple and their children (Fenner and Zakaria, 2019). A study by Leopold (2018) suggests that the negative consequences of divorce are transient in men and chronic in women. After divorce women were reported as having a lower household income (Smock, 1994), lower standard of living (Peterson, 1996, Zainab, 2014) and a lower chance of re-marrying (Wu & Schimmele, 2005). Stack and Meredith (2017) studied the economic hardship faced by single parents and its impact on their psychological well-being. Their study indicated the financial hardship, such as struggling to pay utility bills and fulfil basic needs, contributed to mental well-being. Participants also reported experiencing isolation, anxiety, depression and paranoia. Single women with low education may also experience greater pressure than women with high education and a stable job. A study by Simon, Beaman, Conger and Wei (1993) demonstrated women with low education level were at a higher risk of psychological issues and emotional problem.

In a developing country like Malaysia, the number of single mothers is large. The number issued by the Malaysian Department of Statistics (2014) indicated that there were more than 200,000 single mothers that year. Of that number only 83,775 registered with the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (2016). They are entitled to financial help depending on their economic status. Some of these single mothers may become head of the family either after a divorce or death of a spouse. Families led by single mothers is an essential issue because mothers are expected to nurture and raise their children, especially when they are at a young age. Single mothers that manage the family with limited financial support experience financial, parenting and psychological issues, and other problems. A study by Abdul Hamid and Salleh (2012) found that single mothers experienced four types of problems namely psychological, parenting, work-family conflict and financial constraint. The absence of fathers in the household may require the mothers to work long hours while still expected to play the mother’s role (Zakaria, 2019 et-al.). This can cause a sense of helplessness, loneliness, anxiety, guilt and anger. Women may experience social and emotional challenges at a time of life when parenting responsibilities are high. The adaptations often incumbent with these altered personal and social circumstances require preparedness and capacity to take on a range of new...
responsibilities not previously anticipated. Such demands are further exacerbated when ex-
husbands fail to provide financial child support or challenge claims to a joint matrimonial
property through the courts. Legal processes such as divorce, the establishment of child support
payments and property divisions are often costly at emotional and financial levels and are
invariably complex and protracted.

The Malaysian government helps these mothers by providing many types of assistance
including monthly allowance, skill training and free legal consultancy with the aim to reduce
the burden (Economic Planning Unit and United Nations Development Program, 2007).

2. METHODS

2.1. Data Collection

The phenomenological approach was adopted for this study to have a better understanding of
single mothers’ emotional experiences. The value of this approach lies in obtaining first-person
narratives and meanings (Lebar, 2009). Adopting a purposive sampling method, 24 participants
were recruited to join group narrative therapy through a promotion at a state government-owned
women’s support centre. Participants were required to be literate to read and understand printed
materials provided during sessions, willing to engage verbally in the group process, and be
either divorced single mothers or widowed between the ages of 30 and 40 years. All participants
received financial support from the government due to their economic status. Each participant
signed the Participant Information and Consent Form which explained the aims of the study,
the guarantee of anonymity and the right to withdraw at any stage.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in the Malay language on selected
participants of group narrative therapy. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.
The participants were given the transcripts of the interviews afterwards and asked to check for
its accuracy. Interview transcripts were then coded and analysed. The results were triangulated
with the image data from the group sessions, participant journal records and researchers’ field
notes to achieve a strong understanding of the participants’ experiences. The narrative group
therapy sessions and interviews were conducted in an all-purpose room at the Community
Service Centre in Kuala Terengganu area.

2.2. Group therapy

The structured narrative therapy programme was designed for eight weekly sessions of up to
two and a half hours duration each week. Due to a large number of participants, they were
divided into two groups. Each group consisted of 12 participants. A professional counsellor
facilitated sessions. The counsellor was not part of the research team to avoid a dual
relationship. The counsellor was mentored and supervised by an experienced narrative
therapist. They applied the art therapy technique to the basic principles of narrative therapy.
Exploring their experience within the group therapy through art was considered helpful in
instilling hope, nurturing interaction, the development of understanding and empathy
(Malchiodi, 2012).

2.3. Interview process

Of the 24 group narrative therapy participants, only eight agreed to be interviewed. However,
four subsequently withdrew, leaving just four participants. The interview method followed
Seidman’s (2006) principle of a flexible approach which balanced openness and focus, allowing
for rich storytelling to emerge. Examples of the questions posed included: “Can you share your
experience in the narrative therapy session?”, “How did you feel after the sessions?”, “Did you
experience any emotional impact from the therapy experience?”, “How was the experience of
using the art materials?” and “Do you have any thoughts related to the group and your experience as a single mother?” The individual interviews were conducted after the completion of the group process. Each interview session took between 60 to 90 minutes.

### 2.4. Additional data collection and analysis

In addition to the interviews, other data gathered during this study included participant artworks and journal entries prepared during the group process, as well as researchers’ field notes. The purpose of collecting this data was to support and triangulate the thematic results of the interview material. This additional data was used as points of reference to ascertain congruence between what was stated in the interview and what was painted, drawn and reflected upon by participants and observed by the researchers. Analysis of the interview data was carried out by the research team. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were analysed thematically with the aim of identifying patterns embedded within respondents’ narratives. For this study, the two transcripts of each participant were conflated into one. The themes represented the overall experience of the group process rather than any particular period. Data was coded manually, sorted into potential topics and refined based on the relationship between codes and themes.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Terengganu Family Development Foundation (2009) defines a single mother as either: (1) a woman whose husband has passed away and is responsible of taking care of their children, (2) a divorced woman who has custody of their children, (3) a woman who is not provided with financial maintenance or child support by her husband, (4) a woman who is in the process of divorce (which can last up to four years), (5) a woman whose husband is ill and requires intensive healthcare, unable to provide financial support, and (6) a woman raising the children of another family without the aid of a husband. Based on this definition there were a total of 21,837 women in Terengganu living as single mothers in 2011. This number increased to 24,318 in 2012 (Terengganu State Economic Planning Unit, 2012).

Table 1 presents the necessary information about the four interview participants. All names are pseudonyms. All are from the Malay ethnic group; three are divorced, and one is a widow. They have been single mothers from between 6 to 10 years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Period of single mother status</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aminah</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Eight years</td>
<td>Malay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hani</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Six years</td>
<td>Malay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siti</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>Ten years</td>
<td>Malay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruhani</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Eight years</td>
<td>Malay</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two main themes emerged from the analysis: emotional disturbance and a life without meaning. Emotional disturbance consisted of 10 sub-themes. Life without purpose consisted of 6 sub-themes. The main themes, sub-themes and participants’ narratives are shown in table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Participant’s narratives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional disturbance</td>
<td>Difficulty in moving on</td>
<td>I think all this is fate. It is preordained that our marriage ended. But I did feel angry because I had to put up with my ex-husband for quite a while. Indeed, he did not want a divorce, but as I did...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Theme</td>
<td>Sub-theme</td>
<td>Participant’s narratives</td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regret and frustration</td>
<td>I was aggrieved how my ex-husband treated me. Why can’t we live a good life like the others but then all this mess stemmed from my ex-husband who failed to manage, weak, and could not afford to practice polygamy. That’s my personal opinion (Hani)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stressed with new wife’s intervention</td>
<td>My ex-husband did not want a divorce, but I did because his other wife was always bothering and giving me a lot of pressure. Sure enough, there is no pressure for him but me, it could affect my work, especially when it came to the matter of finance in business and utility payments (Ruhani)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband’s provocation</td>
<td>My ex-husband provoked me to go to court and file for divorce if I did not like him anymore. But his provocation was not the reason why I filed for divorce; it was the fact that he could no longer accept me (Hani)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disturbed mind</td>
<td>Sometimes I can control the feeling, sometimes not. At times I lost my temper only because my one child threw a tantrum for the reason that it reminded me of my ex-husband who did not care at all about the children. There were times when I felt that way when I was upset (Hani)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadness for the children</td>
<td>It saddens me every time I thought of my children. I was willing to sacrifice everything for them, had I educated myself I would have a job and a pension to support them (Aminah)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheated by sweet promises</td>
<td>Only God knows how I felt, but I remained patient, and I did not show the pain. I was sad because since we were together, I worked hard selling nasi lemak (national rice dish) by the roadside. Not only was I sad because he married another but also because he did not fulfil his promise. I thought his attitude would be better after the marriage. I was wrong (Hani)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distress over too much responsibility</td>
<td>The status of a single mother was a little bit hard to accept in the early stages partly because you cannot talk to a husband anymore. In the early stages of divorce, I felt so alone and lost when it came to managing my family. Like now, I felt like carrying a dead weight burden with all the children’s problems (Hani)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of financial and social support</td>
<td>In the early stage of my husband’s death, I felt very badly because the children were still small as well as the heavy responsibilities to be shouldered. But when I think of my children, it gave me an extraordinary strength (Siti)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10) Sad for being regarded as the cause of divorce</td>
<td>Before this, I always cried when people asked me because I loved my ex-husband, loved my family. In the early days of separation, my children wanted me to reconcile with my ex-husband. They wanted to be a family like before. Sometimes it choked me when the children blamed me because I was the one filing for divorce (Hani)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A life without meaning</td>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>Of course, I felt lonely. Still feel the loneliness and the longing for my husband (Siti)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distraction from loneliness</td>
<td>Sometimes the loneliness was there, but I did not indulge in it. If I felt lonely, I made myself busy with things to do (Aminah)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of loss</td>
<td>Sometimes during the school holidays, I felt sad, and I cried. I used to go for holidays together with my husband and children just like everyone else. I sometimes reminisced and thought of other people who have a husband. My children could no longer call their father like before. Frankly, I felt lost without a husband,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Main Theme | Sub-theme | Participant’s narratives
--- | --- | ---
 | | a loss for me. But I have fought and tried to keep our marriage (Hani)
No one to turn to | | I did not feel lonely during, but at night I certainly felt alone without a husband. Even though my children were around, it was not the same. I could talk to my husband, but now without him, I am all alone. Speaking to the children was not the same as talking to a husband (Ruhani)
Never ending struggle | | I did not work and relied solely on the husband, that’s why I had to file for ‘taklik’ (for divorce) to get the support from SWD (Social Welfare Department). The income would still be insufficient even if I worked. I tried to find another job like working in a restaurant to raise my children (Aminah)
Lack of excitement and fun in life | | Sort of unhappy, bleak, grim. Sometimes I felt it is better for me to keep quiet than to talk (Aminah)

Table 2 presents the development of the study’s two overarching global themes built from the nine sub-themes. An issue was determined when two or more participants discussed the same experience during their interviews. The central theme – emotional disturbance – was created from the ten basic themes including difficulty moving on, regret and frustration, stressed with new wife’s intervention, husband’s provocation, disturbed mind, sadness for the children, cheated by sweet promises, distress over too much responsibility, loss of financial and social support, and grief at being regarded as the cause of divorce. The central theme of a life without meaning was constituted from six fundamental issues, namely loneliness, a distraction from loneliness, sense of loss, no one to turn to, never-ending struggle, and a lack of excitement and fun in life.

3.1. Central theme 1: Emotional disturbance

In the early stages of a husband’s death or divorce, most women experienced emotional distress as they assumed a new status and were forced to carry out their roles and responsibilities as head of the family. Emotional disturbances occurred when a woman felt angry with her husband that eventually led her to plead for a divorce. Some participants expressed regret and frustration that separation occurred as a result of their husbands’ behaviour and attitudes towards their families. The husbands failed to fulfil their roles as providers for their wives and children, and at the same time wanted to practice polygamy (sub-theme 2). Participants reported being stressed by disturbances caused by a new wife who took over their place in the marriage to their former husband. These women were seen to be meddling in their households, and it ultimately affected not only the relationship but also the family business (sub-theme 3). The provocative behaviour of some husbands towards their wives (the participants in this study) was nominated as the principal reason for divorce by some participants. The participants felt challenged and unappreciated by their husbands (sub-theme 4). The divorce experience was often disturbing and led to difficulties in dealing with emotions. This situation arose when single women failed to control the behaviour of their children on top of what they saw as their husbands’ lax attitudes (sub-theme 5). Coupled with this they felt regretful towards the children who were often casualties of the divorce process on a variety of levels, including financial. The single mothers felt the situation might have been better if they, as women, were educated and had steady jobs (sub-theme 6). The rollercoaster of emotions was further exacerbated by feeling cheated by the sweet promises of their former husbands. They felt their patience was never rewarded and their husbands did not change, even after marrying a new wife (sub-theme 7). Accepting the status of a single mother was overwhelmingly challenging. Facing the needs of their children added to the stress. This situation occurred because the participants were in financial hardship. After losing a person on whom they could rely, participants felt hopeless and often disappointed. This
situation caused further emotional distress since losing a husband meant that they alone needed to undertake the roles and responsibilities for the upbringing of their children (sub-themes 8 and 9). The participants talked about the stressful experience when asked about the causes of their divorces. This was made more difficult when their children called out for a reconciliation and to resume life as a family (sub-theme 10).

3.2. Central Theme 2: A life without meaning
The overwhelming experience of loneliness from the loss of a husband was also reported in this study (sub-theme 1). Despite the isolation, the participants moved on with life, primarily for the benefit of their children. Various dimensions of this experience became evident in the data. When feeling lonely, the participants busied themselves with activities as a coping mechanism (sub-theme 2). One participant expressed a sense of loss in the absence of her husband when observing other men in the presence of their families. She became overwhelmed with sadness (sub-theme 3). Another participant reported feeling alone, especially at night with no partner to share her everyday experiences and difficulties. The presence of children was not the same as having the presence of another adult whom they called husbands (sub-theme 4). As well as financial hardship participants reported a lack of pleasure and happiness in their lives, they even felt shame with their single mother status. This led to self-isolation to avoid others from knowing their feelings (sub-themes 5 and 6).

3.3. Supplementary data findings
Data gathered in addition to the interview transcripts constituted images made in the narrative group process, participants’ journal entries and researcher’s field notes. An example of the art content in this supplementary data is shown below. In Figures 1-3, images made in the fourth group session depict the lifecycle and metamorphosis of a butterfly. This topic was used as a metaphor for human development. Figures 1-3 show participants’ representations of this lifeline/storyline in images. The images focused on the early development of divorce or following the death of a husband to a now-single mother. The metaphor provided a stimulus for discussion about the experience. Another narrative impetus was provided through the storylines of a cat. Three visual narratives are presented here of the image data supporting the oral narratives of participants. One is by the participant, Ruhani, and two different stories are by the participant, Hani.

![Figure 1 Life cycle of a butterfly - Artwork of participant Ruhani](image-url)
Understanding Emotional Experiences of Single Mothers using Narrative Group Therapy

A translation of the text seen in the image is as follows:

1) Did not know how to make the best decision (feeling empty)
2) Gradually becoming open-minded but still unable to accept fact.
3) Still felt sad/frustrated/weak.
4) Started to accept fate/fact.
5) Accepted with an open heart and able to move on and be independent

Early experience found that Ruhani felt empty and unable to make decisions. She felt distraught and could not accept her new reality. She felt bereaved, disappointed, weakened and powerless to go on living with her children. Emerging from the cocoon (metaphorically) she came to accept her life as a single mother and became head of the family to her children. Ultimately the cycle ended with the adult butterfly stage symbolising life in the present. Here she was better equipped to face her predicaments with an open mind and heart, becoming more independent and able to continue life with her children. In the aftermath, Ruhani was content to view the narrative arc of her life in favourable terms.

“Starting from the egg, I was unable to make any decisions at that time. Empty. I could not think. In the larva stage, a bit open-minded but still unable to accept the reality. Then, came the cocoon where the feeling of disappointment was still there, but no longer strong. Coming out of the cocoon marked the beginning of acceptance of the fact. Eventually like a butterfly, acceptance came with an open heart and an open mind, and I able to survive independently” (Session 4 - Ruhani).

Figure 2 Artwork of participant Hani

A translation of the text seen in the image is as follows:

1. The beginning of the divorce
   - Felt sad for breaking the marriage that had been built for 22 years,
   - Felt a bit relieved due to the support received from other parties for child support.
2. After the divorce came the problematic situation to support the children who were still in school.
   - Starting to search for work nearby to keep an eye on the kids.
3. Starting to accept and think about the blessings in disguise.
4. At this stage able to accept what happened.
5. Felt free. Felt happy and grateful for everything.
Wanted to double up the effort to improve themselves and their children.

**Figure 3** Artwork of the cat story by participant Hani

A translation of the text seen in the image is as follows:

| Went through a life filled with love. Ya Waadu’ (means in Asma Ul-Husna The Most Loving) Be a person with good luck, loved and in a harmonious marriage | No matter how hard life was without a husband, Putih (the cat) fought hard to keep raising the children. |

Figure 3 shows a drawing done by participant Hani depicting her emotional journey represented through the storyline of a domestic cat. One emotion expressed was frustration after losing her husband; however, she gained strength and spirit from her children. At first, Hani did not seem to be able to accept losing her husband but, despite feeling great sadness, she ultimately accepted the fate as per her statement:

“You know when he's not around I felt a bit down. But when I think of my son, I became strong again. Sometimes I felt frustrated, why he had to die and not others. But that was before, now I have accepted it.”

The narratives of these four women demonstrate some of the emotional transitions experienced after divorce or the death of a husband through to a period of changed circumstances. In the early stages of this transition, a raft of powerful emotions was experienced including anger, anxiety, sadness, depression and frustration. Feeling dislocated and lost without a dependable partner was a depleting experience, leaving these women feeling weakened. This emotional cluster as a reaction to radical life change is consistent with Ishak et al. (2009), who found that balance and emotional stability are central factors in survival amongst single mothers. Without this stability tasks such as the upbringing of children were potentially overwhelming.

Appropriate expression of emotion, self-awareness and confidence in relationships with others are capacities humanistic therapies have addressed over decades, especially in the face of existential challenges (Spinelli, 2007). Narrative therapy, as utilised in this study, potentially provides opportunities for single mothers to understand better and safely share the many emotions they experience. At the heart of this approach is an empowerment intention for which the humanistic therapies are apposite (Cooper & McLeod, 2015). Narratives of the self are socially contextualised, and these dimensions are critical in successfully dealing with challenging emotions during difficult and sometimes unexpected transitions (Kirkmayer, 1989).

Experiences of stress, depression and loneliness are recognised as predisposing factors to poor mental health when experienced over a prolonged period. Poor mental health can cause
subsequent impaired decision making if timely professional help and other supports are not available (Ismail, 2011). In addition to being a study of the emotional problems of a small group of single mothers, this investigation acted as a pilot study of narrative therapy as potential support to women in transition. Culturally appropriate emotional support allows the opportunity for single mothers to mobilise their agency and be active in decision making (Jeanne, 2003). Further studies need to be developed to flesh out a fuller picture of the experience of these women and the role that contextual factors external to spousal matters may play. Because of generating further knowledge, the function and positive part of other family members, the broader social milieu and the Social Welfare Department may be additional factors to investigate.

4. CONCLUSION

Using the narrative therapy approach to unpack the experiences of this group of women, has resulted in fresh, if not limited, research outcomes. Considering the increasing rates of women affected by marital disruption within the Malaysian context, such studies are timely. This study has demonstrated an excellent approach to better understanding the experience of women in this growing minority group following divorce and loss of a spouse. There are 2 important themes discussed namely emotional disturbance and a life without meaning considered as emotional experiences among single mothers. After going the treatment, narrative therapy potentially provides opportunities for single mothers to understand better and safely share the many emotions they experience. At the heart of this approach is an empowerment intention for which the humanistic therapies are applied. Narratives of the self are socially contextualised, and these dimensions are critical in successfully dealing with challenging emotions during difficult and sometimes unexpected transitions. More importantly, this approach and experience provide these women with an opportunity to speak and be heard to find a sense of belonging and understanding from women much like themselves regarding marital status and emotional experiences.

REFERENCES


