

TO DIVORCE OR NOT? YOUNG BLACK PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS OF DIVORCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

This article explores young black people's perceptions of divorce in the post-apartheid South Africa, with specific focus on factors that may influence a partner to decide whether to divorce or not. A theory of Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs is used to understand what is more valuable for young black people in terms of their needs in a marriage today. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with eight black unmarried third year students (four males and four females between ages 21 and 23 years old) at the University of the Witwatersrand in the year 2013. Data was analysed using a thematic content analysis to identify the key themes that emerged from the data. The findings indicate that most young black people would divorce their partner regardless of being financially dependent on them, as they feel emotional fulfilment in marriage is important than financial security.

Keywords: Divorce; financially dependent; Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory; perceptions; young black people;

Divorce has changed from an uncommon form of act before the 20th century to a relatively something common by the end of the 20th century (Amato & Rogers, 1999; Bouteillec, Bersbo & Festy, 2011; Coleman & Ganong, 2004; Gerstel, 1987). Historically, divorce was perceived as a deviant act even if the marriage was not emotionally fulfilling (Coleman & Ganong, 2004). In the world that we are living in today, however, Hughes (2005) and Kalmijn, Vanassche and Matthijs (2011) state that we have moved away from staying in an unhappy marriage and that the divorce may be easily instituted without any restrictions if one finds the marriage to be unfulfilling. In a study conducted by Phakhomova (2010), young people were interviewed on their attitudes towards marriage and divorce. It was found that only 12% of the young people believed that divorce should be avoided regardless of how strained the marriage is, while the other 36% of the participants were of the opinion that divorce should be an option if the marriage has fallen apart. These changes represent a major shift from cultural discourses in which people (especially women) were expected to stay in unhappy marriages as they were financially dependent on their husbands (Andre & Hummelsheim, 2009). Therefore, financial security was perceived as a primary need in a marriage. Today many women are working and as a result, they are no longer financially dependent on their husbands for them to stay in unhappy marriages (Amoateng, 2004; Palamuleni, 2010; Yondanis, 2005; Zwang 2007).

DIVORCE WITHIN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

Whelpton and Voster (2001) suggest that there is an increase of divorce rate in South Africa. In 2010, 22 936 divorces were recorded by the Statistics South Africa (2010). In terms of race, the black population was the highest, making up 35.6 % of the proportion of the divorces and the white population was presented as the lowest with 30.5 % relative to other populations. This is a big shift as compared to the 1996 statistics in which the white population was the highest with 1357 divorces and the black population was the lowest with 743 (Statistics South Africa, 2010). In consideration of the above statistics in 2010, it was evident that the divorce rate amongst the black population has been increasing post-1994, possibly due to changing socio-economic conditions and traditional values and expectations from marriage (Arowolo, 2010; Statistics South Africa, 1998, 2010). Hence it was of interest to explore young black people's perceptions of divorce in the midst of these changes.

It is argued in the existing literature that changes post-1994 have brought a number of changes, including the influence of Western values and norms on the family life amongst the black population (Arowolo, 2010). Louw and Louw (2007) make a distinction between the Western and the African values in that Western values are more individual-orientated, while African values are more collectively-driven.

However, Hook (2004) argues that generally the black population has become too Westernised due to all socio-economic changes post-1994. Some of these changes could have had an impact within emerging nuclear black families where couples no longer rely on extended family members to try and resolve their marital problems (Boesceille, Borsbe & Festy, 2011).

It was therefore the aim of this study to explore factors that young black people would consider in deciding whether to divorce or not as well as their perceptions of divorce. For this to be achieved, the researchers created scenarios during the interviews that enabled young black people to imagine themselves being married and factors that they would take into account in making the decision whether to divorce or not. Also referring to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory with regard to what young black people consider as important in marriage.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

The study was conducted by using a qualitative approach, which is defined by Neuman (2006) as an interpretative and critical approach to social science and research. According to Marsall and Rossman (2011) a qualitative method enables the participants to express their emotions, attitudes, views and also allows for context to be taken into consideration. This method was most suitable for this research study, as the aim was to obtain a rich description of perceptions of divorce by young black people in this context of post-1994. Perceptions of divorce were obtained by means of semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews do not limit the researcher to ask the participants questions based on the interview schedule, but may probe on aspects that emerge during the interviews (Struwig & Stead, 2001). It was important for the researchers to be able to shift away from structured interview questions so as to obtain in depth responses on any other relevant points raised by young black people on divorce. The interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed. The duration of the interviews ranged between 35 to 80 minutes.

Setting and participants

The Witwatersrand University (popularly known as Wits) is situated at Johannesburg in Braamfontein. Wits is an institution that is attended by students from different racial, cultural and religious backgrounds. Eight unmarried black third year students (four males and four females, with an age range between 21 and 23 years-old) were selected from the School of Human and Community Development and the School of Social Science, which included disciplines such as: psychology, social work, sociology, political science and anthropology. The key assumption by the researchers for choosing this group of students is that they were most likely to understand this topic better as they may have studied this phenomenon in their courses. Researchers

were interested particularly on the perceptions of black students as they presented the least divorce rate in 1996 but are recently the highest with the divorce rate amongst other group populations (Statistics South Africa, 2010). The participants were recruited by the snowball sampling technique. This occurs when the participants who already exist in the study, recruit potential participants in the realms of the research study at hand (Cohen & Ariele, 2011).

DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic content analysis was used in this study. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic content analysis is used to make sense of the data by identifying, critically evaluating and reporting patterns or themes that emerge from the interviews. This form of data analysis has been found to be relevant for this study as it allowed an interpretative analytic style, which allowed the researchers to explore critically, analyse, grow thoroughly and familiar with the participants' perceptions of divorce and repeatedly reflecting on them. Researchers followed the steps of thematic content analysis as outlined by Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (2006).

First stage is the familiarisation and immersion with the data. This stage involved the researchers reading and re-reading the transcripts and listening to the audio-taped interviews, which helped to understand perceptions and attitudes towards divorce of young black people.

Second and third stages of data analysis is inducing of themes and coding. Data was categorised based on the emergence of themes. Various colours were used to highlight the different codes in all transcripts. The codes were then tabulated and categorised according to their respective colours. Following this process, potential themes were identified.

Fourth stage involved the researchers re-reading the transcripts to check for more themes and also critically evaluating the codes under respective themes to determine if there was an overlap and emergence of subthemes.

Finally, the initial themes from the transcripts were read and re-read thoroughly. Following the interpretation and understanding of the themes, they were condensed by eliminating those that were not closely related to the aim of this study. Only the selected themes were reported in this paper.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Maslow's hierarchy of needs was coined by Abraham Maslow, a psychologist from Brandeis University (Heyleghe, 1992; Zalenski & Raspa, 2006). According to Maslow, human beings have basic needs that need to be met first before achieving other needs. First basic needs on the hierarchy are physiological, which include food, sleep and liquids to sustain the body. Second is the basic need for safety,

which also encompasses financial security. Third basic need is the emotional needs whereby people long to be loved and love back, to also have a sense of belonging in relationships and society. Fourth is the self-esteem, which includes achievements and recognition. Finally, on the hierarchy is self-actualization which is believed to be the most fulfilling need of personal growth once other needs are met (Heyleghen, 1992; Zalenski & Raspa, 2006).

For this study's interest, the researchers only took into account two of the needs on the hierarchy, namely, safety (financial security) and love and belonging (emotional needs). To figure out which need from young black people is more important and, if not met in a marriage, will lead them to divorce a partner in the world that we are living in today.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study commenced only after the ethical clearance certificate was issued by the internal ethics committee of the University of the Witwatersrand. Also, the researchers adhered to all ethical considerations below:

An information sheet was handed to each participant, which informed students about the purpose of the research study before they could sign the consent forms. The students were also assured on their right not to be emotionally, physically and psychologically harmed during their participation in this study. Confidentiality and rights of the participants were not jeopardised. Pseudo names were used in the report to refrain from revealing the participants identity. The audio-tapes and transcripts were only accessible by the researchers, as agreed with the participants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the article focus on factors that young black South Africans would consider in deciding whether to divorce their partners or not. As mentioned earlier, the researchers created scenarios during the interviews that enabled young black people to imagine themselves being married and factors that they would take into account in making the decision whether to divorce or not. The key factor mentioned by the participants was that being financially dependent or independent on their spouses would highly inform their decision in whether to resort to divorce or not.

Financial stability versus emotional fulfilment: "I would rather be happy and poor than being rich and not happy"

All the participants in the study emphasised that being emotionally satisfied in a marriage was far more important than staying in an unhappy marriage for financial reasons. However, Maslow's hierarchy of needs suggest financial security should be

met first before emotional needs can be desired. In the quote below, Thabo clearly states that he would not stay in a marriage for finance yet not experiencing love or being emotionally satisfied.

Thabo: *“I would sacrifice finance for mental well-being and emotional satisfaction because who wants to remain in a loveless relationship, in a multi-million dollar house, because you will just remain alone” (Male participant).*

Thandi: *“I would leave that marriage because I don’t believe that there is any amount of money that can really buy happiness” (Female participant).*

Simphiwe: *“Yeah, like you know if now I’m depending on you, and I am really not happy, I am really not happy, I will choose to be happy than having being dependent on you” (Male participant).*

It was evident in the extracts above that emotional well-being and satisfaction was more important than being financially secured in a marriage for all the participants. In terms of the existing literature, Waite and Gallagher (2002) reported that women often remain in unhappy marriages due to their financial dependency on their husbands which was reinforced through cultural discourses, but female participants in the current study spoke about their readiness to leave such marriages despite their financial dependency on their partners. With reference to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, it is clear thus far that it is ideal for emotional needs to be fulfilled regardless of not having financial reserves.

Thandi: *“If money is what is making me stay in that marriage, it means that you need to find a way for you to make sure that you are able to do something to generate an income outside of this man, outside of this marriage. And if this means being a street sweeper, if this means being a cleaner you must be a cleaner” (Female participant).*

Lebogang: *“Money is an attainable thing. Okay, money is an attainable thing. So, if you are saying to me, myself, personally, would I get out of that marriage? (If she is unhappy, but financially dependent on her partner) Yes, I would get out of that marriage because I feel like I can go out there and work for myself” (Female participant).*

Female participants in the study were confident that they would make ends meet to sustain themselves as opposed to staying in an unhappy marriage for financial support as the prime reason. This was in contrast with Waite and Gallagher’s (2002) argument that women stay in unhappy marriages due to fears of experiencing financial deprivation after divorce. Findings in the current study show that women are shifting away from staying in unhappy marriages for financial support from their partners. It was evident that today women have come to occupy the working world, granting them a sense of independency in supporting themselves financially. This lessens their chances of staying in unhappy marriages for financial support from their husbands.

Like their female counterparts, emotional fulfilment in a marriage was also important for male participants in the study. For example, Thabo said, *“I would sacrifice finance for mental well-being and emotional satisfaction.”* For Connell (1995, 2002), this represents a shift in masculinities in which some men are slowly valuing emotional fulfilment in relationships. For such men expressing one’s feelings and emotions is no longer seen as a ‘sissy stuff’ but something that is worth celebrating (Davies & Eagle, 2007).

Clearly what young black people value the most in marriage is no longer in conjunction with cultural views coupled with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. As we draw back to Thandi’s quote we witness that being financially stable would not be entirely neglected, however this need may be met once one is emotionally-fulfilled even if it means getting a divorce.

Financial independence in a marriage: “You don’t get married to the person if you are dependent on them hundred per cent!”

This imagined situation of being financially dependent on a partner did not seem to sit well with young black people in the current study. They portrayed it as a risk to get married without independently generating some source of income as shown in the quotes below:

Thandi: *“Money cannot be a binding factor, hence hopefully when I get into a marriage I bring my stuff with me. If I were to leave I would take my stuff with me and not be with someone because of the money, I think that would be very ignorant of me, and I think that would be very, uhm, it will result in a lot of trouble, if I was gonna be completely dependent on him”* (Female participant).

Sipho: *“There is a sense of that I own this woman, because she has got nothing, because she depends on me, everything, even her clothes are of my own money, so do you stay in a relationship because of your family, or do you consider your own, your own life? Maybe your own life is at risk. So personally I would say, you don’t get married to the person if you are dependent on them hundred per cent, the best way is to somehow find a source of income for yourself you know, get a job somewhere”* (Male participant).

Thandi and Sipho asserted that it was important for both partners in a marriage to attain their own assets. For some young black females, for example, Thandi in the quote above insisted that she would get into a marriage while she is financially independent. Similarly to Thandi, this view was supported by other female participants interviewed in the study:

Ntombi: *“In as much as we would like to deny it, we live in a different age now. Like where you actually need to be educated to get a job, and you need a job in order to maintain your sustenance, like get your car first. Maybe that is why people have these checklists that they have to tick off before they can even start thinking about marriage”* (Female participant).

All these quotes illustrate that it was important for women to attain their own assets before getting into a marriage. This view contradicted the dominant traditional view that women get married so as to gain financial stability from their spouses (Amoteng, 2004; Zwang, 2007). The view about women being financially independent was also supported by male participants in the study. Of course this represents some shift in terms of gender dynamics that some men encourage their female partners to be financially independent in marriage, dispelling the view that men feel threatened by women who are financially independent (Mamabolo, 2009).

In consideration to Maslow's theory it is evident that although there are all these changes and emotional fulfilment being a priority in a marriage for young black people post-1994, financial security is not neglected but still desired. Therefore, the hierarchy of needs is not fixed and is changing as traditional values in marriages are changing amongst the black population.

Negative societal connotations on divorcees: "There is no point in being disgraced about being a divorcee or ridiculing people because they are divorced."

So far the findings indicate that young black people would divorce their partners if they were not satisfied emotionally. The researchers in the study went further to ask the participants how they would feel if society labelled them as failures after divorcing their partners. All the participants acknowledged that divorce was a taboo in the pre-modern era as illustrated in the quotes below, but things have changed in the 21st century:

***Sipho:** "Back in the day to get divorced you would be viewed as a in a certain light like you couldn't there were, how can I put it? There were negative social connotations" (Male participant).*

***Lebogang:** "In the past, it (divorce) was that thing of it was less spoken of, it was, well still divorce wasn't considered, It was taboo, because you would still be considered to be ideal by your community or your family, someone wouldn't marry you after divorce, you know all these things" (Female participant).*

***Ntombi:** "You know! I know in some cultures they even you are not allowed to even stay in the community anymore, they shun upon you – like you become excluded from so many things" (Female participant).*

However, during the discussion most of them did not agree with how people viewed divorcees as failures. Some participants argued against all these negative perceptions directed at people who decide to divorce:

Thabo: *It's illogical, it is not rational for them to even care about it, because of you do something for your own benefit and you get stigmatized for it, you shouldn't care" (Male participant).*

Researcher: *So what do you think of people who are prone to stigmatise divorcees as incompetent, failures? And like you are saying your aunt's mother-in-law advised her to go back and fix it.*

Ntombi: *I don't think that's good. I think people who do that are people who are stuck in traditional pre-modern times, for me it's just ridiculous, it's not contributing anything to the person's life – who is going through the divorce. And it is just negative, I don't support it" (Female participant).*

Themba: *"So I feel like it is very judgmental for people to have or to attach labels and stigma to people who get divorced. Because - you know – you don't know what's going on in that marriage. Like I said earlier on, every marriage is different. So you don't know what is going on in that marriage."*

Bontle: *"stigma doesn't take into account, someone's personal experience and what they are going through, so to say for instance, call someone a divorcee, incompetent before knowing the details of divorce would be a bit ignorant and sad you know" (Female participant).*

It was evident that the participants were against negative views associated with people who go through divorce. For example, in his quote, Thabo asserted that *"as a divorcee you need not care what society says, especially if your decision on divorcing a partner is at your best interest."* For all the participants marriage was about being emotionally happy as opposed to conforming to cultural discourses that expected them to stay in unhappy marriages. Also, young black people's willingness to divorce and their defence on negative connotations associated with divorcees coincide with the need for love and belonging. As they shift away from believes of divorce being taboo, they seem to be seeking for acceptance and a sense of belonging in society as well regardless of leaving their marriages.

Black people becoming Westernised: "I believe Westernization played an impact in making divorce more applicable."

Although young black people in this study felt that they would opt for divorce in an unhappy marriage, but some acknowledged that the reason for this was because they were no longer rooted in their traditional beliefs of persevering in an unhappy marriage as Africans.

Thandi: *"Well specifically in South Africa its different and it worked you know, people stayed together their whole lives, but not anymore, more and more people are losing their culture, more and more people are losing that link to the soil you know" (Female participant).*

Thato: *“I believe westernization played an impact in making divorce more applicable, because history would indicate that, we were able to resolve things, with or, with or, if you couldn't, you could remain civil in a relationship, or in a marriage, for the sake of kids or, the sake of security” (Female participant).*

Thandi felt that culturally people maintained marriages, but since there was a shift away from these cultural norms, it was no longer the case. Thato argued that the reason for this was because Westernization has taken its course amongst black people. The assumption is that in contrast to the African culture, within the Western culture there are no pressures of staying in unhappy marriages and therefore divorce has not been taboo. Hence the fact that in the current study young black people are liberal about divorcing a partner is associated with black people becoming Westernised.

Furthermore, it was also argued that many black people were neglecting their traditional beliefs and practices by employing Western interventions like consulting with psychologists as opposed to asking the elders for advice during marital difficulties.

Lebogang: *“In modern day marriages, even if there is a level of consultation that takes place it is not necessarily taken from // or the advice is not necessarily taken from elders, but they will use people like psychologists and psychiatrists” (Female participant).*

Thabo: *“Speaking to psychologists who are looking at the west and how they do things. But we are not speaking to people who have actually practically gone through marriage” (Male participant).*

It seems there are a number of aspects that are no longer practised in order to avoid divorcing a partner and this was expressed as problematic.

Ntombi: *“It's quite tricky because I honestly do value the way in pre-modern times how they used to value marriage and how they used to take it so seriously. However, I feel like they went a bit too extreme” (Female participant).*

Ntombi asserted in her interview that she was in favour of how marriage was viewed culturally, despite feeling uncomfortable about certain things, such as oppression of women in some marriages.

CONCLUSION

The participants asserted that they would rather divorce a partner if they found themselves unhappy in a marriage. Both males and females felt that feelings of happiness were more important than staying in a marriage solely for financial stability. While literature suggests that women would rather stay in unhappy marriages (Bouteillec, Bersbo & Festy 2011; Kumar & Quinsumbin, 2012), this study contradicted this dominant view as all female participants were prepared to separate with their partners irrespective of being financially dependent on them. It is important

to note that male participants' views were different as compared to existing views in the literature that men are not generally interested to speak about their feelings and emotions. It emerged in the current study that men valued feelings and emotions in relationships as well as encouraging their partners to be financially independent rather than depend on them. All these changes show that gender dynamics are not static, but change as changes are also taking place in the post-apartheid South Africa.

Traditional priorities in a marriage coincided with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, whereby people were expected to stay in marriage for financial reasons even when they felt emotionally dissatisfied. However, in the midst of all the changes that prevail in this study, what is perceived as more important in a marriage has clearly been redefined. Thus, the extent at which emotional fulfilment weighs heavily in a marriage today once it is not experienced, divorce becomes an option even if it means experiencing financial deprivation.

It was also evident in the participants' responses that negative connotations associated with divorcing a partner should not be a reason for them to stay in unhappy marriages, confirming that in the world we are living in today we have moved away from the pressures of staying in marriages (Hughes, 2005). This shift to divorcing a partner was believed by many of the participants to be due to them being Westernised. Therefore, the disregard of the black cultural beliefs and practices of marriage and divorce was reported to be one of the reasons for an increase of the divorce rate amongst black population.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES



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