Negotiating Post-Divorce Familial Relationships: A Case of Singaporean Divorce Biographies

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the twentieth century in many Western industrialised societies, there have been dramatic changes to the traditional family form with the steady increase in divorce rates, ex-nuptial births, de facto unions, single-parent families, stepfamilies, blended families and households headed by homosexual couples (de Vaus, 2002; Cherlin, 2004; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004). Some of these drastic changes are also observable in other non-Western industrialised societies, including the Singaporean society. Divorce rates have been rising steadily in Singapore for the past decades. The crude divorce rate in 1980 was 0.8 divorces per thousand residents. It increased to 1.9 in 2003 and remained stable at the rate of 1.9 – 2.0 since 2005 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2012).

Prominent scholars like Anthony Giddens (1991, 1992), Ulrich Beck (1992), Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1999, 2002), and Zygmunt Bauman (2000, 2003) have theorised about the dramatic transformations of personal and family life, particularly its increasing individualisation, democratisation, flexibility and fluidity. These theorists have suggested that marital and familial relationships are no longer confined to traditional models but instead reflect individual choice and autonomy (Giddens, 1991, 1992; Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 1996, 2002; Beck-Gernsheim, 1999, 2002; Bauman, 2003). Marriage and family are decreasingly seen as unshakable, lifelong institutions but open to subjective interpretation and negotiation so that individual needs and expectations can be satisfied. As marital relationships – and even other personal relationships – are initiated by choice and managed democratically, they can also be terminated when expectations are not met and negotiations fail.

When a divorce takes place, it means that the earlier terms and conditions that were negotiated in the marriage have been violated or are not satisfied. Individuals involved exercise their choice to terminate the social contract that binds them. Like any other individual in a highly individualised society, the divorced individual standing at the crossroads of their existence has to decide on the trajectory they are going to take. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 1996, 2002) have conceptualised the 'do-it-yourself' biography to explain that individuals exercise choice and preference in designing and defining their personal life, including marriage and familial relationships. I extend this idea of 'do-it-yourself biography' by suggesting that the divorced individual has to design what I call *a divorce biography* and deal with the consequences of divorce, reorientate their sense of self, negotiate their personal relationships and make future plans. The concept of a divorce biography entails divorcees taking charge of post-divorce trajectories, encountering both challenges and successes along the way and developing strategies for self-sufficiency. However, in consideration of theorisations on community, personal relationships and family life put forth by scholars like David Morgan (1996, 2005, 2011), Jeffrey Weeks (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001), Ray Pahl and Liz Spencer (Pahl and Spencer, 2004; Spencer and Pahl, 2006) and Carol Smart (2007), I show how the idea of divorce biography goes beyond individual choice as held central to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's conceptualisation of 'do-it-yourself biography'. This paper examines how the elements of personal communities and context, besides autonomy, choice and individual preference, also play significant roles in a divorce biography.

As part of constructing the divorce biography, divorcees often find themselves having to negotiate their personal relationships. With the marital dissolution, divorcees typically experience changes in other marriage-related relationships and social networks. As Beck-Gernsheim (2002) asserts, 'one thing is certain after divorce: namely, that everything will become uncertain and fluid; nothing will

be the same as before' (2002: 33). Marriage creates a new nuclear family unit shared by the married couple. When a divorce takes place, the context that binds the couple, their families and friends together no longer exists. As a result, these relationships become vulnerable and call for more intense negotiation. Extending what Smart (2000) argues that divorce changes 'the moral terrains traversed by individuals, families and potentially wider society' and 'pushes people to negotiate new moral terrains on which they have to make decisions about how to act...' (2000: 10), this paper investigates how the parties involved have to decide how to proceed with these relationships. New rules, practices and agreements have to be worked out by all involved (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

In this paper, I focus on how Singaporean divorced individuals defined and organised their post-divorce family life and relationships as part of working out their divorce biographies. The theoretical foundation of this study rests on research on individualisation and community. By engaging and extending these conceptualisations, the paper examines the interplay of individual choice, kin affinities and context in the divorced respondents' maintenance of post-divorce familial relationships.

CHANGING POST-DIVORCE FAMILY LIFE: INDIVIDUALISATION AND PERSONAL COMMUNITIES

Though kinship is an ascribed status determined and bound by blood ties, individualisation has had an increasing influence on family forms, relationships and practices (Giddens, 1991, 1992; Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 1996, 2002; Beck-Gernsheim, 1999, 2002; Bauman, 2003). There are new ways of thinking about families and practising family life in various societies. Beck-Gernsheim (1999) argues that the 'maintenance of the family link is no longer a matter of course but a freely chosen act' (1999: 66). Individuals 'choose' their own families in a sense that they create their own family unit based on affinity and their own meaning of family (Weston, 1991). As Beck-Gernsheim (2002) describes, 'everyone lives out their own version of patchwork family' (2002: 34). Frank Furstenberg and Andrew Cherlin (1991) also observe that 'people actively create kin by establishing a relationship – by working at becoming kin' (1991: 93). The dynamics of familial relationships is therefore likely to change over time depending on the circumstances. Family relationships are thus becoming increasingly 'less standardised', more fluid and flexible and are constantly negotiated (Allan 2008: 4).

When a divorce takes place, divorced individuals find themselves having to find a new family since they have lost the nuclear family unit they set up with their former spouse. As pointed out by Beck-Gernsheim (2002), the divorced individual possesses autonomy in not just making the decision to end the unsatisfying marriage but also in the way they negotiate their post-divorce relationships, including familial relationships. Divorcees assert their individuality in choosing who to be close to and who to distance themselves from, deciding new rules in managing their post-divorce kin relationships, constructing a new family that is meaningful to them and organising family practices that work for them.

However, how else do divorced individuals maintain their post-divorce family relationships? There is another group of scholars who have gone on to refine the individualisation theses. These scholars have predominantly been concerned with how to understand relationships and communities, even as they exhibit increasing fluidity, flexibility, individual choice and personal preference (see for examples, Weston, 1991; Morgan, 1996, 2005, 2011; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001; Pahl and Spencer, 2004; Spencer and Pahl, 2006; Smart, 2000, 2007; Wilkinson, 2010). While acknowledging the increasing democratisation of personal relationships, they argue that individuals do not live out their lives solely based on liberal individualistic ideals – they also do so based on the meanings they draw from the community they live in.

Scholars such as Pahl, Spencer and Pevalin extend the individualisation theses by demonstrating that commitment remains a salient feature of modern relationships despite its increasingly democratic, open-ended and flexible nature (Pahl and Spencer, 2004, Pahl and Pevalin, 2005, Spencer and Pahl, 2006). They argue that individuals manage different types of personal relationships based on a complex and distinctive combination of choice and commitment (Pahl and Pevalin, 2005; Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Subscribing to Calhoun's (1998) understanding of community as a 'mode of relating' (1998: 391), they theorise personal community as a community comprising open-ended relationships constantly negotiated, centred round belonging and commitment, and are meaningful to people at specific point in time (Pahl and Spencer, 2004; Pahl and Pevalin, 2005; Spencer and Pahl, 2006).

During a life-changing event like divorce, personal communities comprising significant relationships including kin relationships play an especially crucial role. It is within these communities that individuals derive meaning to help them make sense of their experiences (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). The responses and commentary they receive from these significant others contribute to their reconstruction of narratives of self and renegotiation of identities. I show in this paper familial membership and obligation remains significant in post-divorce familial relationships even if their management reflects increasing democratisation, autonomy and flexibility.

While theorisations on individualisation and personal communities have been made within the Western contexts, I examine their relevance in non-Western contexts, specifically in the case of Singaporean society and explore how Singaporean divorcees work out their divorce biographies beyond individual choice and personal inclination but in close relation to their personal communities demonstrating a strong sense of familial obligation and under the influence of dominant family ideologies, norms and practices.

THE SINGAPOREAN CONTEXT

The role of social and policy context could not be disregarded in the discussion of personal and family life. In Singapore, the individualisation process is a 'guided' one where Singaporeans are expected to individualise their individual and family biographies, but within parameters determined by public structures and policies, and cultural constraints embedded in ethnic and religious traditions (Quah, 2011).

Singaporeans have always been encouraged to be independent and self-sufficient enough to fend for themselves and their families without relying upon the state for welfare support. This personal accountability and responsibility towards one's family is inculcated in Singaporeans through various state efforts in promoting communitarian and familial values and putting in place structures and policies to prevent dependence on the government (Chua 1995, 2004; Teo 2013). Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong explained in a 2007 Chinese New Year speech why the family should be the security net and first line of support when a crisis takes place.

> In many Western countries, generous state welfare benefits for the unemployed and elderly have weakened the family unit. When somebody loses his job, he falls back on state unemployment insurance. When he grows old, he relies on state pensions and medical care. As a result, family members often feel little responsibility to care for one another. Singapore must avoid these pitfalls (Lee 2007a).

According to him, when individuals turn to the government for support, the traditional responsibilities of the family will be undermined and family members will no longer depend on each other for help (Teo, 2013). To remind Singaporeans of their communal and familial duties, a set of Shared Values was introduced in 1988 (National Heritage Board, 2009) and more recently, in 2013, the Family Pledge (MSF, 2013).

While the Singaporean state claims that the family should be left alone to cope with their own affairs and it should not interfere to weaken the role and function of the family, it does not exactly leave them alone to individualise their family biographies. Its interventionist approach in regulating and governing Singaporeans' personal and family lives is evident in its policies, programmes, services and campaigns. Singaporeans do not really enjoy the liberty in deviating from state-sanctioned frameworks and are expected to do so under the guidance of the government and various moral authorities. Hence, a guided individualisation process for Singaporean families.

Conformance to the state-approved family model – heterosexual, legally married, dual-parent nuclear family with children is necessary in order to gain access to public services and goods (Teo, 2013). Existing government policies pertaining to housing, childcare, marriage and family are largely catered to this mainstream family form. Such families are in fact rewarded with attractive incentives. For example, married couples with children are placed on priority queues when they apply to buy a government subsidised flat (HDB, 2014). A range of benefits under the Marriage and Procreation package is also provided to incentivise this mainstream family form (MCYS, 2004). Non-mainstream family arrangements and practices such as divorce, informal cohabitation, prenuptial births and same-sex relationships are on the other hand, seen as disruptive and undesirable, and should be avoided. Prime Minister Lee reminded the nation of the state-approved definition of family in a parliamentary session in 2007:

> Singapore is basically a conservative society. The family is the basic building block of our society. It has been so and, by policy, we have reinforced this and we want to keep it so. And by 'family' in Singapore, we mean one man, one woman, marrying, having children and bringing up children within that framework of a stable family unit (Lee 2007b).

In the case of divorce, the state and various moral authorities in Singapore remain cautious in their position towards the social phenomenon though divorce has become increasingly commonplace. They worry over the increasing divorce rates and view it as an indicator of the decline of the family as a social institution (Wong & Kuo, 1983; Straughan, 1999, 2009; Hing, 2004). Family legislation, policies and public discourse reflecting the state's conservative position contribute to the portrayal of divorce as a social ill that needs to be curbed. The existing policy context, to a large extent, disincentivises unconventional family arrangements and practices. The state's concern that any social policies and welfare programmes to support divorcees may be perceived as having a liberal and accepting perspective towards divorce has resulted in a lack of supportive measures for divorcees (Straughan, 2009). Divorcees as a result, receive little or no assistance and support from the government and are left alone to manage the legal process, financial costs, housing arrangements and childcare responsibilities. Though in recent years, their visibility in the public system has increased slightly with new assistance schemes for low-income divorced parents, the eligibility criteria for such schemes is strict and many find themselves unable to benefit from these assistance programmes. For example, the Home Ownership Plus Education (HOPE) scheme was introduced in 2004 to help young and low-income families. Under this scheme, only some divorced mothers with child custody are allowed to apply. Divorced fathers with or without child custody, divorced mothers without child custody, and divorced men and women with no children are excluded. In addition, not all divorced mothers with child custody could apply. Only those who are aged 35 years old or below, employed and have a monthly gross household income of S$1,700 or

less, and do not have more than two children are eligible to apply for this government assistance (MSF, 2014).

Singaporeans' social attitudes towards marriage and divorce are largely shaped by the government's pro-marriage, pro-family and pro-procreation stance. Though social stigma attached to divorce and discriminatory treatment of divorcees both in the public and private spheres have decreased over the years, a Singaporean divorcee still often has to cope with labels like 'failure', 'disgraceful', 'abnormal', 'incomplete', 'dysfunctional', 'deviant', 'strange', 'quarrelsome' and 'unfulfiled' (Subordinate Courts Singapore, 2003; Hing, 2004). Singaporeans' conservative attitudes toward divorce and single parenting are reflected in a series of longitudinal surveys on social attitudes commissioned by the government ministry, the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS).

According to the Survey of Social Attitudes of Singaporeans (SAS) 2003, 59 per cent of the population found divorce unacceptable and 75 per cent of the population felt that couples with children should not divorce (MCYS and Committee on the Family, 2004). It is interesting to note that the younger and more educated Singaporeans were more accepting towards divorce: 63 per cent of older Singaporeans aged 30 and above found divorce unacceptable, compared to 45 per cent of younger Singaporeans aged below 30. However, both younger and older Singaporeans agreed that divorce was especially unacceptable when the couple has children, and that divorce should not be the first option when a marriage broke down. The survey also showed that a lower percentage (45 per cent) of Singaporeans with post-secondary education found divorce unacceptable as compared to 66 per cent of Singaporeans with secondary and lower education (MCYS and Committee on the Family, 2004). Such data indicates social attitudes towards divorce though still largely conservative, are changing amongst the younger and more educated Singaporeans.

Despite that there have been signs indicating change is underway, the current social and policy context undoubtedly problematises Singaporean divorcees' navigation of the divorce process. While they have engaged in the individualisation process in constructing their personal and family biographies, they are faced with negative responses, structural obstacles, and in some instances, punitive measures for having moved away from the state-approved family model. With little or no support from the public system, they are often compelled to look for alternative sources of support for survival and self-sufficiency.

METHOD

Subscribing to qualitative research methodology, my study takes its object of analysis, the lived experiences of Singaporean divorced respondents. It attempts to understand how the respondents make sense of their divorce experiences; and analyse the meaning–context where these experiences occur.

Snowball sampling strategies were used to recruit 32 Singaporean respondents through personal networks and divorce support groups (Minichiello, Aroni and Hays, 2008). Face-to-face and one-to-one interviews were conducted with them at a time and venue according to their convenience. Common venues include respondents' home and office, researcher's office and cafes. The interviews were semi-structured around open-ended questions on impact of divorce and post-divorce trajectories. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Each interview took about one to four hours.

All 32 respondents are Singaporean citizens or permanent residents. See Table 1 for characteristics of sample. Out of the 32 respondents, 27 are female. One limitation of this study is that the male divorcee's perspective could not be adequately discussed since there are only five male respondents. Male divorcees who have declined the interview indicated that they 'do not want to think about the divorce' and would like to 'move on from the divorce'. Except for one respondent who is aged 28 years old at the point of interview, the rest of the respondents are 30 years old and above. Majority of the respondents are in the age group of 31-40 years. The respondents are mostly Chinese, with two Malays and seven Indians. There are 27 divorced parents. Almost half of these divorced parents have only one child from the marriage.

Income and property ownership were used to delineate socioeconomic differences between the respondents. All the respondents possess the life chances and lifestyles normally associated with the lower and upper middle classes. Except for one unemployed respondent and one retiree, the other 30 respondents are gainfully employed with 27 of them earning an annual income of at least SGD 24,000. Almost all the respondents are homeowners at the point of interview. Eight out of 32 respondents are not homeowners. The majority of the respondents – 16 out of 32 own a government subsidised 3-room or 4-room flat.

Out of the 32 respondents, the majority of them were legally divorced with just one respondent still undergoing the divorce process at the point of interview. 20 respondents are plaintiffs who filed for the petition to dissolve the marriage while the remaining 12 participants responded to the divorce papers served to them. 23 out of 32 respondents had been divorced for five or less than five years. Nine respondents had been divorced for more than five years. One of these nine respondents had been divorced for 19 years at the point of interview. Majority of the respondents' marriage lasted between six and 20 years.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics (n=32)

Characteristics	No. of Respondents
Gender	
Female	27
Male	5
Age (years)	
25-30	2
31-40	15
41-50	10
51-60	4
60 and above	1
Ethnicity	
Chinese	23
Malay	2
Indian	7
Religion	
Buddhist	5
Christian (Protestant and Catholic)	15
Muslim	5
Hindu	3
Others	4

Income (Singapore Dollars per annum)	
No income	2
24,000 and below	3
24,000-48,000	8
48,001-72,000	9
72,001-96,000	3
96,001-120,000	6
120,001 and above	1
Home ownership	
Non- homeowner	8
Government subsidised 3-rm flat	7
Government subsidised 4-rm flat	9
Government subsidised 5-rm flat	1
Government subsidised executive apartment	3
Private condominium	4
Number of children	
0	5
1	13
2	6
3	5
4	3

FINDINGS

Coping with Negative Responses of Family Members

During fateful moments like divorce, personal relationships become more vulnerable and enter a 'dangerous time' (Finch & Mason, 1990: 240). Due to the change in circumstances and context, personal relationships require a more intense process of negotiation, maintenance and reconstitution. Social networks inevitably undergo significant transformations.

For many respondents of this study, managing post-divorce familial relationships is a tug of war between asserting their individuality and adhering to familial values and obligations. While divorce appears to be a highly individualised decision, many divorced respondents often found themselves having to account to their family about their decision to dissolve the marriage, and deal with their feedback and responses. The affair was not all completely autonomous. Smart's (2007) concept of relationality shows that relationships with these significant others could be a source of resentment as well as support. Personal communities could provide 'social companionship and supportive resources' (Wellman, 1982: 65), but at the same time contribute to the stress level experienced by individuals during fateful moments (Wilcox, 1981). In the case of divorce, interaction with members of personal communities could shape divorcees' sense of self in both positive and negative ways. Not all divorced respondents of this study received affirmation of their decision from their kin. In some cases, family members were divided in their opinions towards the marital dissolution. Split loyalties, negative commentary and disapproval shown by particular kin could, at times, result in divorcees' negative interactions with them.

Several respondents revealed during the interview they found themselves having to manage difficult familial relationships when they faced negative responses by their immediate kin or distant relatives concerning the marital dissolution. They chose to move away from certain family members, including their parents when these kin members failed to demonstrate approval and acceptance of

the divorce. This is the experience of Suvitha, a Singaporean Indian lady in her forties. At the point of interview, Suvitha had been divorced for four years since her 15-year marriage ended.

When asked how her family members responded to her divorce, she recounted how affected her parents were:

> My parents were shocked because they were traditional people. My dad was upset. My mum was visibly upset and shaken. She did not know how to relate to me.

The reaction of Suvitha's sister was even more negative. She kept away from Suvitha as she blamed her for the breakdown of the marriage.

> My younger sister kind of drew line. For her, it was either black or white. She decided to stay out of the whole thing and chose not to communicate with me. I did not talk to her for a very long time. Only recently that we started to communicate with each other.

Suvitha stayed away from her parents and sister during the initial period after her divorce as she felt any interaction with them would not be helpful to her post-divorce adjustment and well-being. She expressed that she could not handle the negativity in her interaction with them. She also 'avoided going to family gatherings and participating in social events for the longest time'. Suvitha's distancing away from relatives is in part driven by her relatives' unwillingness to support and affirm her of the divorce. It is also mostly motivated by her own perceptions towards herself and her divorce.

> I was sad and felt like I let my family down. I tried keeping things together for the longest time. I tried to cover things up because divorce is a no, no in my family. Divorce is something that should not happen in my family. I felt that I let them down. I was the eldest and I felt that I really have broken something …

> The rest of the family shunned away and did not want to have anything to do with me. I was hurt. I understand that it was difficult for them to understand at their age. But it was hard for me when they thought that I could have done better and it was my fault.

> My whole setting was a perfect marriage setting after all. Two educated people, my ex was successful, lived in a landed property, four healthy kids, what could go wrong? How could it go wrong? These were the thoughts of others.

Suvitha carried a sense of guilt, shame and regret for breaking her family tradition and giving her family a bad name. The responses by her family members directly affected her sense of self and attributed to her sense of failure. When she described her family members' reactions towards her divorce, her sadness in bringing disappointment and disgrace to her family was palpable. This was a common response that I observed among several of my respondents.

> *Mavis*:   I just feel that I have let my family down. Because of my broken marriage, I made my parents sad and upset my family... It is very sad. I should not let them suffer for me.

> *Geok Choo*:   I asked my mother how she was going to tell her brothers and sisters...I told her because of me, she is now embarrassed in front of her siblings... I brought her shame... I made her lose face in front of

her family. I did not want to go for Chinese New Year reunion and gatherings for a few years after my divorce. I don't want to face my relatives and I don't want my mother to have to explain about my divorce to them.

Vasuki: When I met my relatives, they asked me where my husband was. That was when I realised my parents have not told them about my divorce. I realised they were embarrassed to let them know. Divorce is a shame in my family. I have brought my parents shame. So I decided I won't move in to stay with them because I don't want the relatives to ask why I am living there... I don't want them to lose face.

Narratives that reflect the respondents' sense of regret, disappointment, inferiority and shame were especially prominent amongst respondents who came from a tight-knit family that upheld traditional family values and disapproved of divorce. Divorce in these families is still seen as a loss of face and a shameful act. These narratives demonstrate the internationalisation of negative perceptions of divorce prevalent in their social environment. These respondents described the event as a symbol of personal failure.

Instead of breaking away from their family completely, respondents like Suvitha, Geok Choo and Vasuki remained in contact with their family members. However, they exercised a certain amount of reflexivity and autonomy by minimising contact with them and avoiding family gatherings like Chinese New Year reunions, Hari Raya Puasa or Deepavali celebrations for a few years till they were ready to meet their relatives again. This avoidance of family gatherings and events is not just the experience of female respondents. Ah Teck, a Singaporean divorced man in his forties, did not want to attend the Chinese New Year family gatherings during the initial years of divorce so as to avoid questions about his divorce by his relatives. He broke away from family traditions and practices and only resumed them when he was ready to interact with his kin.

In the early years of my divorce, I deliberately travelled during Chinese New Year ... By the time I spent Chinese New Year with relatives, it has been a few years after divorce ... The curiosity has died down and the relatives just accepted that I am single again.

Another male respondent, Peter, in his fifties related similar post-divorce experience.

During Chinese New Year gathering, I just went at the time where not many people were there. I just went for a short while and left. Nobody asked me any questions. It is best that they don't ask me questions because I myself get very irritated.

Male respondents like Ah Teck and Peter asserted their sense of self strongly in their maintenance of post-divorce familial relationships. They preferred to resume their interaction with relatives after they had 'sorted their lives out' and moved on from the divorce. Their desire to 'retreat' into their safe cocoons away from their family network was largely motivated by the negative attitudes commonly associated with male divorcees. As Peter put it aptly, 'Any divorce, you would think that the man is in the wrong. Maybe majority of the men are in the wrong. So they think I am in the wrong'. Like other female respondents, their negotiation of post-divorce familial relationships was undoubtedly not without tensions and contradictions. While attempting to express their individuality in constructing their divorce biographies, both female and male respondents found themselves conforming or negotiating with dominant family values and traditions. Out of obligations to maintain familial ties and responsibilities, they would eventually reconnect with some of their

family members even though these family members were not entirely supportive of their marital dissolution. In some instances, the respondents wanted their children to continue to be surrounded by relatives and not lose more relationships than they already had as a result of the divorce.

Finding a New Family

In my interviews with the respondents, many revealed that they wished their marriage had worked and that they would have preferred a nuclear, dual parent family form. However, when the marriage broke down and they lost the family unit they had set up with their former spouse, they reconfigured their family life and went on to find a new family where they felt they belonged.

In their new family arrangement, they continued to subscribe to the same family values that they had had in their former nuclear family form. They continued to seek intimacy and find a sense of belonging, connectedness, care and support as well as a sense of responsibility and obligation in this reconstituted family set up. Often, they modified their family structure to include members of biological and extended families and created a new configuration of kin ties for themselves. They redefined what family meant to them and who was included in this newly configured family set up, thereby deriving a sense of belonging and connection. They demonstrated that their definition and understanding of a family could also thrive within an alternative arrangement.

In this study, 15 out of 32 Singaporean respondents moved back to their parents' home after the divorce. Six of these 15 respondents made a permanent move and did not plan to acquire their own housing. Often, these respondents reorganised their familial network and practices to include their biological kin. It has been observed that the close physical proximity of biological kin's residence and social context emphasing mutual dependence and support within families are two main motivating factors behind Singaporean divorcees' inclusion of biological relatives in their post-divorce personal community. Siew Kheng, a Singaporean divorced mother in her thirties, is one of them.

When Siew Kheng, a Singaporean female respondent in her thirties, left her marriage of ten years with her two-year-old son, she moved back to her parents' home. Having sold her marital property, Siew Kheng and her son did not have a place to live. However, Siew Kheng's mother readily welcomed them to live at her home. At the point of interview, Siew Kheng and her son had been staying with Siew Kheng's parents for seven years. Siew Kheng had no intention of moving out and was comfortable with this new living arrangement. She had reconstructed a post-divorce personal community that included her biological parents, siblings and auntie. This personal community is now her new immediate family. By moving back to her parents' home to live, she resumed her former identity as a child to her parents, the obligatory ties to her parents as well as the lifestyle of an unmarried person living with her parents.

Siew Kheng's closeness and emotional bond with these members of her redefined personal community actually increased after the divorce. Her family members such as her parents, siblings and auntie have also adjusted their family practices to include Siew Kheng and her son.

> My mother just asked me to go and stay with her. I have been living with my mother since then.
>
> I have three sisters and one brother … They made time for me. They kept me company and we went out together. My auntie would also spend time with me and talk to me … My father even helped me fetch my son from childcare and washed my son's shoes.

>This kind of living arrangement benefitted me. There was a bit of bond between my father and my son. When my parents need me, I am there … I would travel to other countries for holidays with my son. My auntie would come with me too because my uncle passed away …
>
>Now I have more time with my family and siblings … My family bond is better with my brother and sister. I have a better understanding of my auntie as well. My son built bond with his cousins.

While Siew Kheng had lost the nuclear family she had built with her ex-husband due to the divorce, she managed to reconnect with her biological kin by staying with her parents. Her contact with them increased and bonding with them strengthened. With her ex-husband no longer being a barrier to these relationships, she was able to spend more time with her blood kin and enjoyed a closer relationship with them. Siew Kheng also reorganised her family practices by engaging in activities with her kin and parcelling out family responsibilities to them. As shown in her narratives, Siew Kheng has creatively tapped on the resources extended to her by her biological kin and made use of such family support to survive through the crisis and construct her divorce biography. She received financial assistance from her parents when she was experiencing financial difficulties as a result of the divorce. She commented that 'luckily with family support, [she] could pull through'. These supportive and obligatory gestures demonstrated by her family members fit right into her definition of a family and made her feel that she and her son were still part of a family.

Unlike Siew Kheng, some respondents' move back to their parents' home was only temporary. During the initial period of post-divorce adjustment, these respondents returned to live with their parents in order to seek some form of stability and assistance, be it financial, accommodation or childcare. They moved out after they had either re-established themselves financially and could afford their own accommodation, or when they found it hard to live with their biological family.

For other respondents who did not move back to their parents' home like Siew Kheng, their contact with their biological family also increased significantly after the divorce. The increase in frequency of contact was brought about by various reasons. Significant family members especially parents were quickly co-opted for practical assistance in childcare and household responsibilities. For several female respondents with children, they expressed that they would not have gone ahead with the divorce or managed to survive the crisis without the support of their family. Aslinda, a 31-year old mother of one, commented, 'Can you imagine if [my mother] does not support me? Then who is going to look after my daughter?' Similarly, Soo Lin, another mother of twin sons in her forties, related, 'I went back to my mother's place and asked her if she would agree to look after my children. Once she agreed, I decided to go ahead with the divorce'. Likewise, the support they received and the increased interaction they had with their family members helped compensate for the imbalance of their kin network and loss of significant family figures due to the divorce in both their and their children's lives and provided the companionship, intimacy, connection, emotional bonding and belonging that they would have otherwise expected their marital relationship to provide if they were still married. This could be observed in the experiences of the Singaporean male divorcees as well. Male respondents like Ah Teck and Peter drew tremendous support from their immediate family members to overcome the challenges of the crisis and cope through the initial years of divorce

A handful of the divorced respondents not only formed a new family with their biological kin and relatives, but also with their former in-laws. This is not commonly observed though. Most of the respondents made a clean break from their former in-laws, especially when their relationship with their former in-laws was not close during the marriage. The case of Lilian, a Singaporean Chinese female respondent in her forties, is atypical. Though Lilian and her ex-husband have parted ways, Lilian remained in touch with her former in-laws who lived in South Africa. She enjoyed a good

relationship with them during the marriage and even after the divorce. Whenever her in-laws passed by Singapore for a stopover, they would meet up with Lilian and her children. Lilian and her children have also made a few holiday trips to visit them in South Africa. Together with her former mother-in-law, sisters-in-law and their family, they have even gone on a family trip together to Indonesia. They kept in touch through phone calls and emails throughout the year. Lilian explained why she has been maintaining her relationship with her former in-laws:

> I decided to let my children keep in touch with that side of the family so that they don't feel rootless… Their kindness to my children really touched me. They had never said anything bad about the father to my children. Even though they were all not on talking terms with my ex, they continued to show us kindness… One of the amazing things my mother-in-law did was to create a scrapbook for my kids to show them the family tree, family stories, how their father grew up. The reason why his family wanted to keep in touch with the children is that they don't want the children to feel they have lost half of their genetic make up, half of their world.

Lilian is one of the few respondents who remained on good terms with her former in-laws. Even when the original context that promoted the development of their relationship was missing, they persisted in keeping the relationship going. This can be explained as the former context, which is the marriage, has now been replaced by a current context – the children. Both Lilian and her former in-laws have taken the initiative and exerted efforts to maintain the relationship for the sake of the children. The adults involved have wanted Lilian's children to continue building and enjoying their relationship with their father's side of family. As discussed, the continuation of relationship with former in-laws is also contingent upon the quality of pre-divorce relationship – since Lilian's relationship with her former in-laws has been good during the marriage, there is a greater motivation on both sides to maintain their relationship after divorce.

DISCUSSION

It has been pointed out earlier that divorce is a highly individualised act and divorcees possess autonomy when they design their divorce biography – choosing to terminate or agreeing to end their marriage, crafting a new path, dealing with the consequences of divorce, reorganising their lives, reorienting their sense of self and setting new goals. This is in line with the position of scholars who have theorised about individualisation and increasing democratisation of personal life (Giddens, 1991, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 1996, 2002). This expression of individuality can also be observed when they redefine their personal community, including post-divorce kin relationships as discussed in this paper. The empirical findings of this study show that divorced respondents like Siew Kheng, Suvitha, Ah Teck and Peter possessed autonomy in managing their post-divorce relationships with kin. Having ended an unfulfilling marriage and undergone the divorce process, the respondents gained a new sense of confidence and assertiveness. They not only demonstrated their newly found assertiveness in the way they designed their post-divorce trajectory, but also in the way they defined their family life and relationships. They decided on keeping kin relationships that provided them with the recognition and help they needed and distancing, even if it was just temporarily, from unsupportive kin.

Despite the rise of autonomy in managing post-divorce personal life and relationships, Singaporean divorced respondents of this study remained connected to their kin in the sense that these significant members of their personal community influenced their decision-making, construction of divorce biography and development of self. This paper's examination of the divorced respondents' renegotiation of their post-divorce familial relationships supports the claim advanced by a group of community scholars on the continuing prominence of intimacy, commitment and belonging despite

the increasing democratisation of personal and family life (see for examples, Weston, 1991; Morgan, 1996; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001; Pahl and Spencer, 2004; Smart, 2007; Gilding, 2010; Wilkinson, 2010).

Part of the construction of divorce biography involves redefining their family unit that provides them with a sense of belonging, working out family practices that are meaningful to them, continually seeking and developing committed and intimate personal relationships. During marriage, most married individuals anchor their self-identity in 'us' and see themselves as part of a couple (Jamieson, 2005: 194). When the divorce takes place, divorcees find themselves having to renegotiate their self-identity. In societies like the Singaporean society where the pressure to be part of 'us' is intense, the pressure faced by individuals who uncouple themselves is also intense. Through developing, maintaining and leveraging their close relationships with members of their personal community, the divorced respondents re-established a sense of 'we-ness' with other significant others, and acquired the intimacy, sense of belonging, care and support they desired and sought. This article has demonstrated that many respondents like Siew Kheng, Peter, Lilian, Ah Teck, Soo Lin and Aslinda having lost the family unit formed through marriage and other marriage related relationships, turned to their biological kin and other relatives and constructed a new personal community with them to compensate for the imbalance of their social network system and loss of established relationships. They reconfigured their family unit and redefined their family relationships in a manner that *worked for them*.

The Singaporean respondents' narratives have shown that the way they individualised their post-divorce personal community was 'guided' by both personal preferences and dominant family values and state policies. While asserting their individuality in negotiating their kin relationships – keeping supportive family relationships and distancing from negative ones, the respondents and their family members still demonstrated a strong sense of familial connectedness, commitment, responsibility and obligation. This is especially so when one family member experiences a crisis. Such a critical moment often calls for the involvement of other kin to help the particular family member in crisis. Since state support for divorced individuals is limited and the Singaporean state has persistently driven home the message that the family should be the first line of support in times of vulnerability (as cited on the website of Singapore's Ministry of Social and Family Development, www.msf.gov.sg), Singaporean divorcees often find themselves having to turn to their kin for help to navigate the crisis. Narratives of Siew Kheng, Soo Lin, Aslinda and other respondents reveal how their biological kin came together to pool their resources and support them through the undesirable consequences and changes resulted from their divorce.

This only goes to show that divorce, though an expression of individualism, does not always work to undermine the forms of solidarity and community that anchor us to society. It is almost a truism to say that divorce does create breaks in personal relations. However, this paper has empirically demonstrated divorce also helps build new forms of kin, solidarity and personal community as divorcees creatively form new connections with their family and reconfigure their family unit for a continuing pursuit of belonging, emotional bonding, mutual dependence and support. Objecting to popular and scholarly assumptions that divorce signifies the decline of family life, this paper has shown how family life for these divorced respondents continues to thrive in different forms despite the loss of marriage and other marriage-related relationships. In some instances, family life becomes more active and intimate as the crisis brings family members together and creates a stronger bond. In the case of Singaporean divorcees, family support becomes especially vital in an unsupportive policy environment and aids their navigation of divorce.

Specifically, this paper has placed emphasis on the influential and contributing roles of kinship in divorcees' formulation of personal narratives and development of personhood. The divorced individuals do not renegotiate their newly acquired social identity as a divorced person on their own – they do so through their personal relationships with these significant others in their lives. Divorced respondents like Siew Kheng, Aslinda and Soo Lin consulted the 'experts' in their lives and discussed solutions with them. Together with these significant family members, they contemplated their next move in the construction of their divorce biography. They sought their kin's recognition of the decisions they made and drew support from them to cope with the challenging consequences of divorce. This is especially desired since they made a life-changing decision that is still not widely accepted in the society they are located. At the same time, my respondents' narratives reveal negative responses from their kin also affected their perception of their decisions and themselves.

This paper has highlighted that the act of choice needs to be understood in relation to one's social contexts. Budgeon (2003) has pointed out aptly that 'the sovereign self is an illusion' (2003: 74); one does not make decisions based solely on choice but under various constraints and in relation to the context and community one belongs. To better understand the experience of divorce, the specific contexts that the divorcees are located have to be considered. The empirical evidence collected in this study has been discussed with reference to the Singaporean context. Though my participants have exercised individual choice and acted according to their personal preferences in dissolving their marriage and charting a different life course, their perception of themselves and their divorce experience are largely influenced by the policy and social contexts. They alternated between feeling liberated from the unsatisfying marriage and guilty for letting their family down and bringing them shame. Their narratives reveal how they have internalised the negative perceptions of divorce commonly held by the wider community they belong. This sense of guilt and shame is clearly a result of their socialisation process in the relatively conservative Singaporean context. Divorce is still commonly perceived as wrong, irresponsible and unfortunate, especially when children are involved. Divorcees undoubtedly suffer from varying degrees of stigmatisation (depending on their familial, work and social environment) and struggle with internal dilemmas and tensions. This tug of war between pursuing their individualistic ideals and fulfilling societal expectations, norms and values are evident in their narratives.

However, it is important to note that there have been signs of a changing social and policy environment for Singaporean divorcees and their children with recent efforts by the government and community to improve their condition. Societal attitudes towards divorce are also less negative amongst the younger generation. Having said that, more could be done to fill the gaps in existing policy system and support divorcees and their children in a proactive, timely and effective manner. Social support is especially important when divorcees could not turn to their kin network for help, either because their family members were unable to offer assistance or they were unwilling to do so. My research provides sociological reasons for policy review so that divorce related risks could be reduced and managed, and productivity and resilience could be attained more swiftly and effectively by divorcees and their children.

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