



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Relational Self Perceptions in Family of Emerging Adults with Divorced Parents

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Although parental divorce is common in many countries, the consequences of parental divorce on children may last for a long time, especially in their emerging adulthood. This qualitative study explored the experiences and views of the relational self in the family from the perspective of emerging adults. Semi structured interviews were conducted with 20 emerging adults (19-27 years old, $M = 22.8$, $SD = 2.4$). Using thematic analysis, three key themes were identified: (1) family acceptance, (2) familial responsibility, and (3) family belonging. Results suggested that parents' divorce can affect the individual's cognition of the relational self in the family in their emerging adulthood. Our findings suggest that future efforts to understand the relational self of emerging adults from divorced families should consider the fundamentality of the relational self in the family, and it may lead to complicated experiences of self-cognition in emerging adulthood.

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INTRODUCTION

The relational self involves connecting knowledge about the self with knowledge about significant others, and each linkage embodies a self-other relationship (Musetti et al., 2021; Solomon et al., 2021). This category typically includes the nuclear family, parents and siblings, friends and relatives, and significant others. In addition, the relational self has primacy in different cultures and for different age groups (Magid et al., 2021). Emerging adulthood is a critical development period in one individual's life; the relational self plays an essential role in achieving tasks in this stage, reaching autonomy from the family of origin, achieving one's identity, and establishing positive relationships with others (Nowakowska, 2020). However, these tasks can be more challenging for emerging adults from divorced families. Therefore, a better understanding of the relational self is needed in families of emerging adults with divorced parents.

LITERATURE REVIEW**Emerging adulthood and parental divorce**

Emerging adulthood, a concept introduced by psychologist Jeffrey Arnett, refers to the distinct developmental phase between adolescence and full-fledged adulthood, typically from the late teens through the twenties (Arnett, 2007). This transitional period is characterized by identity exploration, instability, and self-discovery across various life domains, including education, work, and relationships (Booker et al., 2021; Mulvihill et al., 2021; Narain & Maheshwari, 2022). Arnett's framework provides a lens through which to examine how life experiences, such as parental divorce, can impact individuals during this crucial stage of development.

The consequences of parental divorce on emerging adults are multifaceted. Identity formation, a central aspect of emerging adulthood, can be significantly influenced by reshaping family dynamics (Becht et al., 2021). Emerging adults may grapple with questions about their self-concept, values, and goals, navigating the complexities of their changed family structure.

Independence and autonomy, crucial aspects of emerging adulthood, are affected by parental divorce. The level of parental support and the individual's coping mechanisms play a role in determining how emerging adults navigate the need for independence (Koepke & Denissen, 2012). Financial strain resulting from divorce can also impact educational and career choices, potentially hindering pursuits, or motivating individuals to succeed as a form of coping.

While the impact of parental divorce during emerging adulthood is substantial, it is essential to acknowledge the individualized nature of these effects. Despite the challenges, parental divorce can catalyze personal growth and development as emerging adults navigate the complexities of this pivotal life stage (Salmon, 2023; Shanholtz et al., 2021; Willoughby et al., 2020). Therefore, it is necessary to explore how emerging adults perceive their relational self-identity in the family after their parent's divorce.

Past research on self-related of emerging adults from divorced family

Some studies have paid attention to the subjective self-cognition of emerging adults from divorced families, such as self-esteem (Block & Spiegel, 2013; Meland et al., 2020), confidence levels (Jackson & Fife, 2018) and self-efficacy (Buchanan & LeMoyné, 2020). Moreover, due to the breakdown of the parental relationship, the intergenerational transmission of the relationship may hurt emerging adults' self-identity development in romantic relationships (Charvat et al., 2023). As the previous studies have worried, the self-cognition of emerging adults in divorced families may encounter various challenges in relationship development during this critical development period, and the source of these challenges is essentially the family crisis events such as parents' divorce. However, there needs to be more research on the self-cognition and orientation of emerging adults who pay attention to divorced families in the family. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct qualitative research more fundamentally to explore the relational self in the families of emerging adults, especially when they experience stressful events such as parents' divorce.

Cultural context of the study

The cultural context of this study is deeply rooted in the unique socio-cultural environment of China, where family dynamics and societal expectations significantly shape individual experiences and perceptions. In Chinese culture, the family unit is traditionally seen as the cornerstone of society, emphasizing collectivism, filial piety, and maintaining family harmony. This cultural backdrop provides a framework within which the experiences of emerging adults from divorced families can be understood.

Collectivism in Chinese society places the group's needs above those of the individual (Wang & Liu, 2010). Family harmony and cohesion are paramount, with an expectation that family members support and rely on one another. The disruption of this harmony through divorce can be particularly

jarring, as it contradicts deep-seated cultural values. Filial piety, a Confucian value deeply ingrained in Chinese culture, emphasizes respect for one's parents and ancestors (Li et al., 2021). This principle dictates that children should care for and honor their parents, creating a sense of duty and responsibility towards maintaining family stability. The obligation to uphold filial piety can lead to emotional strain, especially when individuals feel caught between conflicting parental demands post-divorce.

Despite the increasing prevalence of divorce in China, societal stigma remains significant. Divorce is often viewed as a failure to maintain family unity, which can lead to a loss of "face" (面子) for the individuals involved (Chen, 2023). "Face" represents social reputation and dignity, and losing face can result in social isolation and judgment from the community. This societal pressure exacerbates the emotional and psychological challenges faced, impacting self-esteem and social relationships.

Besides, the rapid socio-economic transformations in China have also influenced family structures and roles (Yan, 2020). As traditional extended families give way to nuclear families, the support systems that once buffered the impacts of family disruptions have weakened. Individuals must navigate this changing landscape, balancing traditional cultural expectations with modern societal norms (Hareven, 2018). The tension between adhering to cultural values and adapting to new realities adds another layer of complexity to their experiences.

Finally, the cultural emphasis on family and societal expectations shapes the relational self of individuals from divorced families. Their self-perception is heavily influenced by their interactions with family members and the broader community (Yang et al., 2022). Cultural factors contribute to the internalization of familial and societal expectations, affecting their sense of identity and belonging.

Although few people have paid attention to this before, the experience of parental divorce in China can be impacted by specific cultural values and beliefs for families. Therefore, this study emphasizes the experience of emerging adults in China.

Theoretical background

Andersen and Chen (2002) proposed that "significant others" are individuals who have close relationships with a person and significantly influence their life, such as parents, partners, and so on. On the other hand, the "relational self" refers to an individual's self-concept in relational contexts, specifically the self-concept formed through long-term interactions with significant others. The relationships between individuals and significant others can be transformed into memory links between the mental representations of significant others and the self (Anderson & Chen, 2002). These highly robust links make the relational self easily activated by information about significant others. When the relational self is activated, individuals think and evaluate themselves according to the standards of significant others and exhibit corresponding emotions, motivations, self-regulation, and behavioural responses.

The relational self is a dynamic process of social cognition that activates information and knowledge associated with significant others. Consequently, individuals unconsciously incorporate their relationship model with significant others into their current interpersonal relationships. This process is typically unconscious and does not necessitate personal attention or subjective motivation. Initially defined as self-related cognition resulting from interactions with significant others, researchers have expanded this concept to encompass self-perception in various social situations. Transference is believed to underlie the formation of the relational self, and the social cognitive model of transference. Andersen and Chen (2002) explores how individuals use schemas or mental representations developed in previous relationships to guide their feelings, thoughts, and actions toward newly encountered individuals. An individual's relationship with significant others

unconsciously influences their relationships with others. Anticipated adverse treatments arising from transference elicit coping strategies to protect oneself from unfair and exploitative exchanges (Andersen & Chen, 2002). This model can be applied to the relational self in families of emerging adults experiencing parental divorce, offering a novel theoretical perspective.

Present research

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the effects of parental divorce on the relational self of emerging adults within the unique socio-cultural context of China. This research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how parental divorce influences self-cognition and relational dynamics during this critical developmental stage. By conducting semi-structured interviews with 20 participants aged between 19 and 27 years, we aim to identify the core themes that emerge in their experiences and perceptions. Specifically, we focus on how family acceptance, familial responsibility, and family belonging are perceived and navigated by these individuals. Our goal is to contribute to the existing literature by highlighting the cultural nuances that shape the relational self in the context of parental divorce.

METHODS

Online semi-structured interviews were conducted with emerging adults from divorced families to understand the nature of their experiences better. The study sample were recruited using online recruitment, consisted of 20 participants, including sixteen females and four males. The researchers posted recruitment invitations on personal social media, including Weibo and Douban, which are popular and have a large number of active users in China and added some tags like #父母离婚# (Parental divorce), #离婚子女# (Children experiencing divorce) and #自我感知# (Self-perception) to improve the possibility of being viewed. Inclusion criteria were as follows: 1) Participants and their parents must be Chinese nationals living in China; 2) Participants experienced parental divorce in childhood or adulthood; and 3) Participants have graduated from high school or universities or are currently studying in colleges/universities. Exclusion criteria were as follows: 1) Having any language, speech, or hearing impairments that would hinder communication; and 2) Not agreeing to participate in the study. The mean age of participants was 22.8 (SD = 2.4, range = 19-27) years. Table 1 provides participant demographics.

Table 1: Participant demographics, N = 20

| | Mean or % |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| Age | M= 22.75(SD = 2.4, range =19-27) |
| Currently in a relationship | 55.0% |
| Never in a relationship | 45.0% |
| Number of relationships in the last 5 years | M=2.09 (SD=1.24, range = 1-5) |
| Age of parental divorce | M=13.53 years (SD = 6.90, range=1-24) |
| 0 to 12 | 40.0% |
| 12 to 17 | 20.0% |
| 18 and over | 40.0% |

An in-depth, semi-structured interview form consisting of two parts was developed. The first part included questions about participants' age, sex, education level, and romantic relationship status. The second part consisted of critical questions designed to discover relational self and romantic relationships in individuals from divorced families.

The researcher conducted all interviews. The researcher followed the interview guide but remained responsive to interview dynamics, asking further questions for more in-depth information when needed. Due to the pandemic, interviews were conducted online, lasting an average of 70.35 minutes (SD = 9.51 minutes, range = 57-91 minutes). After completion, interview data were transcribed for analysis.

Thematic analysis was used according to the stages defined by Braun and Clarke (2012). The first stage involved transcribing interviews and identifying *in vivo* codes. Codes were determined based on recommendations by Saldaña (2014), and similar codes were grouped to generate subcategories, categories, and themes. After coding and analysis, the researcher conducted a complete member check, sending the coded transcripts back to participants for verification. All participants agreed with the accuracy of the coding.

Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from the organization belonging to. Confidentiality of research data was guaranteed. Participants were informed about the study's aim and importance and included after providing written and oral consent. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time.

RESULTS

Emerging adults understanding of the relational self in the family was the focus of our analysis. We generated three key themes: (1) family acceptance, (2) familial responsibility, and (3) family belonging.

1. Family acceptance

Family acceptance refers to the degree of support, understanding, and affirmation that family members provide to the family. The participants indicated a lack of acceptance within the family dynamic. On one hand, it highlights an inferiority complex towards the family, while on the other hand, it demonstrates social anxiety stemming from familial breakdown. It is presented in detail below.

a. Inferiority complex in family

The interview materials conveyed the idea that "I am different from others" and "my family is different from others' families." In the process of growing up, children gradually realize what other families are like, including the families of their classmates or friends. When these children see their same-age peers experiencing a complete family or a harmonious family atmosphere, and they do not have one, this situation instills a sense of inferiority complex. As participants shared:

"When I was in the third grade, I made a friend (from a harmonious family), and she invited me to her home to play. Can you imagine that I didn't know what other people's family atmosphere was like until I went to her home? My family is not normal. But before that, I thought everyone's family was the same as mine, thinking that all kinds of quarrels at home were normal."

“My parents separated when I was very young. I feel that in a moment of my childhood, I grew up and realized that my family wasn't complete. I suddenly became aware that I was from a so-called single-parent family, probably when I was around seven or eight years old. From that time until high school, I resisted talking about my family. Even now, I rarely discuss this aspect with others.”

b. Social anxiety

Being raised in families that are not whole, individuals often develop a heightened sensitivity to social interactions, becoming vigilant about the words and actions of others. This heightened awareness can lead to feelings of anxiety and concern.

“I don't want to be bullied because I don't have a father.”

“I'm worried about how others might judge my family.”

“When I was young, I was very afraid that people would gossip about me or my mom just because my parents got divorced.”

Moreover, individuals from divorced backgrounds encounter challenges in achieving “family acceptance” as a result of the societal and cultural stigma prevalent in their surroundings. Some participants believe that they experience shame and resistance towards their families precisely due to these stigmas and biases. One of the participants said:

“Some media outlets always seem to enjoy discussing how children from divorced families are. In reality, even though we didn't have any problems from the very beginning, they portray it as if we do. I don't want to be labelled.”

2. Familial responsibility

Family responsibility is a theme that has a far-reaching influence on emerging adults' fundamental relationship self in China. The study participants showcased their engagement in family responsibilities by offering emotional support to their parents. However, this type of support left them feeling conflicted. Furthermore, they expressed optimistic expectations regarding providing elderly care for their parents.

a. Caught in the middle

It was reported that a prolonged and intense conflict or an ongoing state of tension existed between parents prior to divorce. Despite feeling fearful and repulsed by their parents' conflicts, the individuals took on the role of mediator within the family.

“I feel that the only person who can unite this family is me.”

“I feel like I'm always acting as a referee between my parents, calming my mom down before mediating with my dad.”

“I'm very sensitive to my parents' relationship. Once I sense that something's off, I quickly change the subject or encourage my dad to go out and do something. It's just to prevent them from arguing.”

Some participants in the study experienced a situation where, despite their parents' conflicts, both sides had consistently treated them well. However, when the closest individuals in their lives, their parents, turned against each other in deciding on divorce and entangled them in

ongoing marital disputes, even pressuring them to take sides, they found themselves in a dilemma.

"I know that my mother's affair is wrong, but it is a mistake as a wife. She has been doing well as a mother for me. But I think my mother did something wrong, which is intolerable to my father. Therefore, I am caught in the middle and don't know what to say or do. I feel that what I can do is only to respect their decision. "

"At that time, my dad asked me to persuade my mom not to divorce, and my mom asked me to persuade my dad to divorce. I'm caught in the middle, which is particularly uncomfortable. Even now, I'm like a megaphone. Why can't they handle in person? Everything makes me pass around in the middle, which is very annoying. "

Moreover, certain participants expressed the sentiment that following their parents' divorce, they became scapegoats subjected to projective attacks from the resident parent due to shared characteristics with their former spouse.

"When my mother and I can't reach a consensus on some things, there may be disputes. Whenever this happens, my mother always said to me that 'you are so stubborn just like your father'. I was very sad to hear that. I am the scapegoat after their divorce. Obviously it's not my fault. I can't decide who I look like or who I don't. "

Participants whose parents have remarried and established new families after divorce also encounter the sensation of being caught in the middle.

"I think I am just like a sandwich cookie between the two families (stepmother's family and mother's family). My mother always told me all kinds of bad things about my stepmother, and my stepmother also beat around the bush and said unpleasant words about my mother to me. I feel that their hatred is deep, and it was really difficult for me to be sandwiched between them when I was a child."

b. Filial responsibility

Filial responsibility pertains to individuals' duty, care, and obligations toward their parents, especially in terms of providing support, care, and respect as their parents age or face challenges. In this study, participants demonstrated a cheerful and eager willingness to take on caregiving responsibilities for their parents in the future, influenced by their parents' divorce.

"Actually, they are getting older, and I can't just stop considering them as my parents because they got divorced, right? In the future, I'll still need to do what I should do for them."

"My mom has been in poor health all along, and her emotional state may have worsened after the divorce. So, I've been taking care of her all this time."

"At that time, no one could help her except me. I asked a famous doctor to get traditional Chinese medicine strenuously for her, and the curative effect was not bad for my mother. "

Nevertheless, for participants whose parents divorced when they were very young, mainly when the non-custodial parent remained out of contact for an extended period, they did not express positive commitments or willingness towards the non-custodial parents.

“My father never reached out to me, not to mention providing any support for my life and study. Do you think I will take care of him in the future? Our only connection is in the blood.”

“My impression of my dad is already blurred, almost like a stranger. I definitely wouldn't take care of a stranger in their old age.”

3. Family belonging

Family belonging encompasses the connection, attachment, and inclusion individuals experience within their family unit. The study revealed that a majority of participants from divorced families reported a diminished sense of belonging to their families. The most frequently discussed theme in the interviews was the absence of a feeling of attachment security. This was predominantly attributed to the divorce of their parents, which resulted in the upheaval and instability of family life, leading participants to grapple with emotions of betrayal and a sense of homelessness.

“For me, family used to mean that we stay together, but after their divorce, there's one home with dad and another home with mom. So, where does my home belong?”

“I've always remembered them saying they would always be there for me, and now you see, it's quite a joke. To put it seriously, this is betrayal.”

“Other kids receive care, understanding, and support from their parents. What I received from mine was endless arguments, and even after the divorce, the turmoil didn't stop. This isn't what I believe a home should be like.”

Moreover, individuals from reconstituted families formed after parental divorce express feelings of abandonment and exclusion, experiencing a notable lack of a sense of belonging.

“In the new home, whenever I tried to do some household or anything, my stepmother stopped me. Just think about it, it's as if she treats me like a guest or an outsider to stop me. Not to mention many other times, I have no idea what they are talking about.”

“My stepmother is actually kind to me, but there are always some details in some things that make me feel that I am not a member of this family.”

DISCUSSION

From the findings presented above, individuals form self-judgment and understanding through interactions with other. Within the familial context, parents, as prominent social entities, shape the individual's self-perception (Rohmalimna et al., 2022). Research indicates that parental divorce puts pressure on emerging adults, impacting their self-perception within the family context.

Firstly, divorce is viewed as an abominable act that deprives emerging adults of their psychological needs, potentially leading to social anxiety, especially during childhood. Previous studies have highlighted the negative consequences of divorce on children's personality and socialization

(Aslantürk & Mavili, 2020; Prakash & Roy, 2022). This study further reveals societal biases and stigma against divorce, in addition to the divorce event itself, influence participants' self-perception. While divorce is acceptable in some societies, it carries a stigma in others (Sheykhi, 2020). Previous research primarily focused on the stigmatization of divorced women, with limited attention given to societal biases affecting children of divorce. Society may unfairly stereotype these children, attaching a sense of shame to their family situation and impacting their interactions with teachers, peers, and even family members (Hu, 2018; Olofsson, 2019; Salter, 2018). Despite efforts to correct these prejudices, creating a fairer environment for divorced children remains crucial to reducing the possibility of internalizing stigma and prejudice.

Secondly, participants in this study feel sandwiched between their parents, assuming stressful roles and consciously or unconsciously taking on family responsibilities. Bowen's family systems theory explains this as the experience of triangulation resulting from parents involving children in disagreements or loyalty conflicts. Before divorce, a child's involvement in parental conflict may act as a means to defuse tension. However, after divorce, triangulation behaviors can place youth in a confusing and distressing position. Unbalanced family structures can negatively impact self-acceptance, positive relationships, and personal growth. Furthermore, this study finds that children of divorce exhibit a positive attitude towards filial responsibility. In Chinese societies emphasizing collectivism, familism, and interdependence, filial piety becomes a cardinal rule, shaping family obligations. However, filial responsibility, when linked to parentification, can harm children's development, leading to pathologies such as depression and excessive guilt.

Thirdly, participants in this study exhibit differences in their perception of family belongingness. Most perceive a low sense of belongingness following their parents' divorce. Positive feelings of belonging help children navigate the challenges of transitioning to adulthood. However, those in married stepfamilies also report low levels of family belonging, feeling excluded and misunderstood. Attachment insecurity is experienced due to a lower sense of family belongingness, despite some participants believing that divorce did not impact their sense of belonging to the family.

In addition, children's age at the time of parental divorce is a critical factor that affects how much the divorce influences their development. According to Table 1, the 20 participants varied significantly in their age at the time of parental divorce. The ages ranged from early childhood to late adolescence, reflecting a broad spectrum of developmental stages. Younger children, who experienced parental divorce during early childhood, may face different developmental challenges compared to those who went through the divorce during adolescence. Early childhood is a formative period where the primary attachment relationships are crucial for emotional and social development. A disruption during this time may lead to significant impacts on the child's sense of security and relational self. On the other hand, adolescents may already be in the process of forming their identity and may experience the divorce differently, possibly affecting their views on relationships and independence.

From the perspective of "social-cognitive transference," past assumptions and experiences in meaningful relationships influence interactions with new individuals. Cheung et al. (2019) argues that the prevailing family pattern in China emphasizes relational dynamics, harmonizing and optimizing the self and family interests. Further investigation into specific forms of self-concept in Chinese society is warranted. In China, children's self-perception within their original families, shaped through interactions with significant others, primarily parents, serves as the foundational basis for self-concept narratives (Huang, 2019). This study confirms this aspect in the context of the relational self in the families of emerging adults from divorced families.

IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATION

The findings of this study have several implications for understanding the development of the relational self among emerging adults from divorced families in a Chinese context.

The study underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity when developing interventions for children of divorce. In East Asian cultures, where collectivism and familism are predominant, the relational self is more deeply integrated into family dynamics. Interventions should account for the high value placed on family cohesion and filial piety. Programs aimed at supporting children of divorce should include components that address the cultural expectations and familial obligations unique to these societies.

The societal stigma associated with divorce in China can exacerbate the psychological and emotional challenges faced by children of divorce. This stigma not only affects their self-perception but also their social interactions. There is a need for public awareness campaigns and educational programs to reduce the stigma associated with divorce. These efforts can help create a more supportive environment for children of divorce, reducing the risk of internalized shame and promoting healthier self-concepts.

The study highlights the varied impacts of parental divorce on children, depending on their age at the time of the divorce and their subsequent family arrangements. Younger children who experience divorce may face different challenges compared to adolescents. Psychological support services should be tailored to address these developmental differences. For instance, younger children may need more support in building a secure attachment, while adolescents might benefit from programs that address identity formation and relationship building.

A sense of family belonging is crucial for the healthy development of emerging adults. The study found that children from divorced families often experience a diminished sense of belonging, which can lead to attachment insecurity. Interventions should focus on fostering a sense of inclusion and belonging within the family. This could include family therapy sessions that work on rebuilding trust and communication among family members, especially in reconstituted families where stepfamily dynamics are involved.

Policy makers and practitioners should consider the unique challenges faced by children of divorce in non-Western contexts. Policies that provide financial, educational, and psychological support to single-parent families can alleviate some of the burdens these families face. Additionally, schools and community organizations should be equipped with resources to support children of divorce, ensuring they have access to counseling and extracurricular activities that promote social inclusion and emotional well-being.

The study's findings suggest several avenues for future research. Comparative studies could explore the experiences of emerging adults from divorced families in different cultural contexts to understand the influence of cultural norms on the relational self. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how the impacts of parental divorce evolve over time and affect long-term outcomes such as career success, relationship stability, and mental health.

While the study offers valuable insights, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. The data collection was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have influenced participants' responses. Online interviews, while necessary for health and safety, limited the observation of non-verbal cues and may have affected the depth of data collected. Future research should consider using a combination of online and offline methods to mitigate these limitations and achieve a more comprehensive understanding.

CONCLUSION

This study explores how emerging adults who have experienced their parents' divorce perceive and understand the relational self within the family context. Significant others play a crucial role in developing emerging adults, particularly in forming relationships. In families where parents are at the core, the relational self is imbued with transference, influencing the self-cognition of emerging adults across a broader spectrum of interpersonal relationships. The family's relational self in the cognition of emerging adults is impacted by the consequences of their parent's divorce experience. While these consequences are not entirely antagonistic, they should be considered when addressing the prevention of mental health issues associated with the family background of emerging adults.

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