

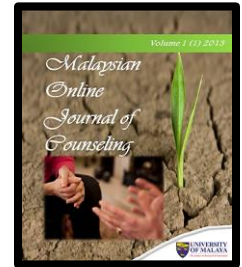
FROM NASTY TO HEALTHY DIVORCE: A MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPY MODEL FOR WORKING EFFECTIVELY WITH DIVORCING MALAY-MUSLIM COUPLES

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ABSTRACT

Divorce happens and it can happen to any married couples across cultures and contexts. In most societies, people tend to perceive divorce negatively. Hence, it becomes a negative concept or generally associated with the term “nasty divorce”. In truth, there are always two sides to a coin. This means that a divorce can be a nasty and destructive, or it can be what we would call a “healthy divorce”. In this paper, several theoretical perspectives on divorce and its consequences are explored to shed light on the changing societal view of divorce - from a nasty one to a healthy concept – in the Malaysian context. Informed by our understanding of these multiple perspectives and drawing on a real-life case scenario and life-cycle process on marriage and family therapy (MFT), a conceptual model for working effectively with Malay-Muslim clients in Malaysia is proposed. Some issues and challenges in the current practice of MFT in Malaysia are included.

Keywords: healthy divorce, family therapy model, Malay-Muslims, family life cycle, divorcing families, Malaysian perspective



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INTRODUCTION

Many marriages around the globe have resulted in divorce (e.g., United Nations Demographic Yearbooks 2010; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States 2012). The figures on the divorce percentage rate in various countries and regions from 1990 to 2010 are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1
Divorces and crude divorce rates by urban/rural residence in various countries and regions from 2008 to 2011

	<i>2008</i>	<i>2009</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2011</i>
European Countries				
- Turkey	1.4	1.6	1.6	1.6
- France	2.1	2.0	2.1	1.6
- Germany	2.3	2.3	2.3	2.3
- UK	2.2	2.0	2.1	n.a
Asian Countries				
- China	1.7	1.9	2.0	n.a
- Japan	2.0	2.0	2.0	n.a
- Singapore	1.4	1.4	1.4	1.5
- Kuwait	2.0	2.3	2.2	n.a
- Qatar	0.6	0.7	0.7	1.1
Other Countries				
- Egypt	1.1	1.8	1.9	n.a
- Australia	2.2	2.3	2.3	n.a
- New Zealand	2.3	2.0	2.0	n.a

Multiple Sources: (1) Calculated from data on numbers of divorces from United Nations 2011 Demographic Yearbook, (2) Eurostat, 2012.

This phenomenon does not exclude Malaysia, a multicultural country in the Southeast Asia region among which Malay-Muslims represent one of the major ethnic groups recorded at 50.4 %

(www.indexmundi.com/malaysia/demographics_profile.html). The number of divorces in Malaysia increased in between 2009 and 2010 from 27,891 to 28,035 divorce cases in all states respectively (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, JAKIM). In 2010, it was recorded that 135,548 couples registered for marriage and 20.7% of these marriages resulted in divorce. This indicated an average of 77 divorced couples each day or 3 divorce cases each hour for the year 2010 alone, an alarming trend which calls for proactive counseling measures, interventions and preventions. Among the states in Malaysia, Selangor has recorded the highest divorce rates at 5,342 divorce cases, followed by Johor, Kedah, Kelantan and Perak with 2,793, 2,693, 2,573, 2,223 cases, respectively. Table 2 presents the latest statistics on divorce in Malaysia.

Table 2:
Divorce Statistic among Muslims according to States In Malaysia, 2000-2010

State	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2010
Johor	1942	963	1627	1612	1690	1521	1647	1931	5342
Kedah	1168	1549	1133	1085	1474	1737	2006	2188	2573
Kelantan	1784	2042	1472	1926	1952	1900	2014	2257	2623
Melaka	394	384	530	588	553	601	1454	758	2793
N. Sembilan	625	564	629	684	638	807	867	907	2223
Pahang	1016	1042	894	917	616	1505	1541	1502	1704
Perlis	188	186	226	253	164	228	326	247	2140
Pulau Pinang	647	717	911	925	916	913	813	917	1273
Perak	1234	1103	1975	1363	1508	1475	1577	1551	1511
Selangor	2075	1878	1977	3158	3136	3030	3295	3722	1343
WP KL	499	721	798	885	1296	1250	1423	1141	1721
Terengganu	1005	1046	813	897	1172	1285	2464	1537	1138

Sarawak	486	602	634	652	826	820	974	910	1044
Sabah	433	311	161	570	514	582	923	924	523
WP Labuan	40	79	61	28	54	54	95	37	5342
Total	13536	13187	13841	15543	16509	17708	21419	20529	33239

Source: Malaysian Islamic Development Department, 2010

According to figures released by the Islamic Development Department (JAKIM), Muslim couples get divorced every 15 minutes in Malaysia. There were 27,116 divorces in 2009, up from 17,749 in 2005. Divorce rates among Muslims are now at an all-time high, making up about 82 per cent of total divorces in Malaysia (New Straits Times, 2011).

Generally, the perception of divorce in most societies tends to be one-sided because it has been associated with negative consequences. Hence, divorce is often known as a negative concept and often labeled as “nasty divorce”. However, this paper argues that divorce need not be viewed solely as a negative concept but also viewed from positive aspects, resulting in the term coined as “healthy divorce”. In doing so, we first discuss divorce from multiple theoretical perspectives including the traditional Malaysian perspective, marriage and family therapy (MFT), and Islam. The goal is two-fold: to challenge societal labeling of the term divorce and to promote the perception of divorce from a positive viewpoint. For some couples and families, a divorce maybe the healthiest alternative they have available. Next, we present a scenario of a divorce case experienced by a young Malay-Muslim as a platform for discussion. The aim is to understand the causes for divorce and to highlight some positive consequences from the divorce. Our main argument lies in the notion that divorce can have both negative and positive consequences depending on how it is handled by the divorcing couples, family and community. Finally, we propose a MFT model for working effectively with Malay-Muslim clients in Malaysia. We believe that this model is practical and psychoeducational because it guides practitioners in MFT to better help Malay-Muslim clients and it challenges the traditional beliefs about divorce, that is, from a nasty to a healthy concept.

UNDERSTANDING DIVORCE FROM TRADITIONAL MALAYSIAN PERSPECTIVE

A pool of resources from Malaysian literature such as newspapers, local journal articles, and Malay studies provide information on the definition of divorce, the main causes for divorce, popular reasons to file for divorce, and the consequences of divorce (Chan and Mustafa, 2008; New Straits Times, 2011). According to an English-Malay Dictionary of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, the term divorce refers to *perceraian*, which means dissolution of marriage from a legal perspective (Civil or Syariah law). Malaysians' perceptions of and reactions to divorce have changed over the past years.

In the old days, divorce was perceived by local Malaysians as a social taboo and those divorced couples, especially the wives, were subjected to stereotypes and prejudices. They were generally perceived as those who did not know how to take care of their spouses (Kassim, 2007). Thus, divorce became a hidden issue and divorce cases were not normally discussed in mass media but were confined to legal proceedings in the courtroom. Nowadays, the community's view towards divorce has changed. Divorce has become more commonplace and is recognized as something that may happen in one's life. Divorce issues and cases have become one of the hottest topics in the media sector. Unfortunately, Malaysian perspectives on divorce still tend to be one-sided, viewing all divorces as a negative life episode and as having negative effects on all concerned (Kassim, 2007). Divorcees also have to deal with children who face a host of problems as a side effect of divorce. Children display anti-social behavior and start to exhibit inappropriate behaviour (Rozumah, Krauss, Siti Nor, & Pei, 2011). Therefore, people's reactions to divorce also become negative and contribute to perceived negative consequences of divorce.

Some of the main causes of divorce are third-party interference (e.g., parents, in-laws, family members, and friends), extra-marital affairs and sexual relationships, lack of knowledge and skills in marriage (e.g., communication and inter-personal relationship), financial problems, and psychosomatic problems (Chan & Mustafa, 2008; Abeel, 1982; Kassim, 2007). Among the psychosocial problems presented in the Malaysian literature that become the popular reasons for couples to file for divorce are (Undang-undang Keluarga Islam Negeri-Negeri, 2011):

1. Sexual relationship problems (e.g., Erectile dysfunctions, unusual genital organs, *mati pucuk*) [the term *mati pucuk* is a Malay word and it refers to inability to perform sexual intercourse with a partner/spouse]
2. Mental illness (e.g., the husband is mentally ill or suffers from sexual-transmitted-diseases)

3. Forced marriages (e.g., the wife is forced into marriage due to underage factor, or mentally disturbed)
4. Financial constraints (e.g, the husband is financially not stable to support the wife and children)
5. Unfulfilled duties and responsibilities (e.g., the husband does not provide *nafkah zahir* (physical needs such as clothing, house, and food) and *nafkah batin* (love, a sense of belonging, and sexual fulfillment) for the wife and children for three years due to personal preference, negligence, or imprisonment)
6. Domestic violence and abuse (e.g., the wife is physically or mentally abused by the husband).
7. Other reasons deemed legal to dissolve a marriage from civil or syariah law perspective.

Divorce is a sensitive issue among Malaysians, thus it is very challenging to help couples, especially the Malay-Muslims, to deal effectively with their divorce issues in a constructive and positive manner. This highlights the need for a context-specific model of MFT that can work well with Malay-Muslim couples in dealing with divorce issues and its consequences. Before such a model can be proposed, divorce must not only be understood from a traditional Malaysian perspective, but from an Islamic perspective, and from selected MFT theories. These multiple theoretical perspectives may provide a solid foundation for our proposed model for working with Malay-Muslim clients towards healthy divorce.

UNDERSTANDING DIVORCE FROM THE ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

Talak is an Arabic word which means "to release" or "to divorce". Under Muslim law, *talak* means to untie the matrimonial knot by articulating a word denoting divorce. In Islam, there are several types of divorce:

1. *Talak Raj'ie* - A divorce that is revocable during *iddah*, without the couple having to go through the process of *nekah* (solemnization of marriage). *Iddah* is a probation period of about three times menstrual cycle (i.e. three months). A husband is allowed to reconcile with his wife (*ruju'*) during the *Iddah* period without the need for a new *Aqad* and *Mahr* – new contract of marriage and dowry. The *talak* that is uttered by a husband is classified as *raj'ie* (revocable) only if it is the first or the second divorce.

2. *Talak Bain* - A divorce where the husband cannot reconcile with the wife during the *Iddah* period, unless with a new *Aqad* and *Mahr*. *Talak Bain* falls under two categories: *Talak Bain Kubra* and *Talak Bain Sughra*.

a. *Talak Bain Kubra* is a situation where a divorce has taken place on three occasions - in other words, the husband has divorced his wife three times. The divorce is irrevocable. The husband may re-marry his ex-wife only if subsequent to the third divorce, the ex-wife has married another man and the marriage has ended in a divorce or death.

b. *Talak Bain Sughra* is a divorce that takes place less than three times but is irrevocable even during *iddah*. A couple divorced under such a circumstance must go through the process of *nikah* if they want to live as a couple again. *Talak Bain Sughra* occurs in the following situations:

i. Divorce decided by *Kadhi* (Syariah Judge)

ii. *Khulu'* (Divorce by Redemption)

iii. Decree of *fasakh* (dissolution of the marriage requested by a wife) issued by a Judge

In the event, a husband pronounces divorce three times in a single occasion, the current Islamic practice follows the Caliph Umar Ibnu Khattab- third Rashidun Caliphate, who ruled that all three divorces pronounced were effectively three divorces and were thus irrevocable. When such a situation occurs, the Judge shall hear the case of the couple concerned and make a ruling on the divorce.

3. *Talak Sunni* - *Talak Sunni* is a divorce in accordance with the tradition of the Prophet (pbuh) where a husband utters the *talak* on his wife in the presence of two witnesses at a time when she is not menstruating and they have not had sexual intercourse after her last menstruation.

4. *Talak Bid'i* - *Talak Bid'i* is a divorce uttered by the husband:

a. at a time when the wife is having her menstruation;

b. during the wife's postnatal period; or

c. during the period when the wife is not menstruating but the husband has had sexual intercourse with her.

If a husband utters the *talak* to his wife, the marriage between the two of them would automatically be dissolved and they become a divorced couple. At this stage, the wife would be in a state of *iddah*. If, during *iddah*, both parties wish to reconcile, the divorce may be revoked without having the couple to go through the process of *nekah*. Allah says,

When you divorce women and they fulfill the term of their (*Iddah*), either take them back on equitable terms; but do not take them back to injure them, (or) to take undue advantage; if anyone does that, he wrongs his own soul. Do not treat God's Signs as a jest, but solemnly rehearse God's favors on you, and the fact that He sent down to you the Book and Wisdom, for your instruction. And fear God, and know that God is well-acquainted with all things. (Holy Qur'an, Al-Baqarah 2:231)

This excerpt means that once the interim is fulfilled, a husband may reconcile with his wife equitably, or go through with the equitable separation. The couple shall have two equitable witnesses who witness the divorce before Allah. In accordance to Holy Quran: At-Talaq, 65:2.

Thus when they fulfill their term appointed, either take them back on equitable terms or part with them on equitable terms ; and take for witness two persons from among you, endowed with justice, and establish the evidence (as) before Allah. Such is the admonition given who believe in Allah and the Last Day. And for those who fear Allah, He (ever) prepares a way out. (Holy Quran: At-Talaq, 65:2)

According to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), the law of divorce is *makruh* (disapproved). This is in line with what the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said: "The lawful thing that is most detested by Allah is divorce". However, there are different laws for divorce when it comes to certain marital situations and problems. Therefore, the law for divorce can be obligatory (*Wajib*), recommended (*Sunat*), forbidden (*Haram*) or disapproved (*makruh*). In other words:

1. *Wajib*: Divorce becomes obligatory when the marriage involves such a conflict between husband and wife that two judges agree the dissolution of the marriage is appropriate.
2. *Sunat*: Divorce becomes a recommended practice when a husband can no longer provide adequate *nafkah* or maintenance to his wife (sexual, financial and emotional maintenance) or when she has engaged in forbidden behaviors such as adultery.

3. *Haram*: Divorce becomes a forbidden practice when these two situations occur: a) during menstruation, or b) immediately after marital consummation (Haron Din, 2007).

Divorce should not be treated lightly. However, if staying married brings more harm than good, then a divorce can ease the upheaval in the house. Hence, the couple may part and move on with their own lives. As Allah says,

"...retain her on reasonable terms or release her with kindness....." (Holy Qur'an, Al-Baqarah2:229)

Islamic law forbids a wife from asking for a divorce from her husband without solid and approved reasons. In line with this, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, "Any woman who asks for divorce from her husband without any reason permitted by syara', the sweet smell of paradise shall be forbidden to her." (Narrated by Abu Dawud). The hadith also applies to a husband who divorces his wife without good reasons.

It is clear that Islam strongly discourages divorce because the negative effects of divorce outweigh the positive effects on the affected couples, their children, families and the community at large. Children from broken homes are often associated with social related problem such as substance abused, early initiation in premarital sex and delinquency (Low, 2009). However, there are real-life scenarios that highlight the positive effects of divorce (refer to Namou, 2010, pp. 30-31 for details). This will be discussed in the following section after the review on the MFT theories. The purpose of review is not only to understand the applicability but to also assess the suitability of selected theories to be used as framework for counseling Malay-Muslim clients.

UNDERSTANDING DIVORCE FROM ATTACHMENT THEORY, STRUCTURAL FAMILY THEORY AND BOWEN FAMILY SYSTEM THEORY

Attachment Theory, Structural Family Theory and Bowen Family System Theory (Bitter, 2009) are each used widely in the literature to conceptualize divorce cases (Nichols, 2010). Indeed, they are the most cited theories in couple and family journals (Shaker, Heshmati & Rahimi, 2010; Terimourpour, Bidokhti, & Pourshahbaz, 2011; Egeci&Gencoz, 2011).

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory, founded by John Bowlby (1969), is a widely used approach for counseling couples and family members. The theory operates on the basis of behavioral and quality of attachment between couples or family members (Day, Gilbert, Settles, & Burr, (1995). Therefore, this theory is suitable for counseling Malay-Muslim couples during marital separation because Malay-Muslim culture emphasizes strong attachment and cohesion among married couples and family members. In response to marital separation, spouses frequently experience a wide range of contradictory and confusing emotions. These uncertain feelings are often the result of an attachment response that spouses draw upon as they deal with the stress associated with divorce. The attachment to the former spouse is composed of emotional bonds of ease, comfort and security that develop between marital partners (Kitson, 1992).

Divorcing Malay-Muslim couples experience attachment issues during *Iddah*. Insecure attachment behaviors such as anxious, ambivalent, and avoidance are most likely to occur when couples are distressed, ill or afraid (Egeci & Gencoz, 2011). For example, high avoidance in insecure behaviors means to create an emotional distance or gap between couple and reliance on self. This behavior is common to the Malay-Muslim culture whereby they tend to avoid any discussions on marital issues when they are in distress, resulting in emotional gap between spouses. Therefore, attachment behaviors and the quality of attachment between spouses are normally re-assessed before reaching the final decision to divorce during the critical stage of *iddah* (especially for *Talak Raj'ie*).

Structural Family Theory

Another culturally relevant theory for counseling Malay-Muslims is Minuchin's structural family theory (Minuchin, 1974). This theory emphasizes three key concepts: subsystems, hierarchical arrangements and boundaries within a family (Nichols, 2009). Subsystems refer to two or more people or an individual member who must have both autonomy and interdependence with other subsystems. Hierarchy is the rank or order in the family, an appropriate separation of generational family subsystems resulting in members playing a different role. The concept of boundaries is essential because it is believed that various types of boundaries separate the subsystems of the families in different ways. It determined the kind of territory and shared space within the family. A flexible boundary system results in the family being functional at its optimal level of functioning.

From a Malay-Muslim perspective, a couple who has divorced needs to create a new structure within the family, for example, a newly divorced woman will have to play an individual role in the parenting subsystem, be the head of the new family hierarchy, and negotiate different boundaries with her former spouse.

Bowen Family System Theory

Bowen Family System Theory (1976) is another suitable theory that can be applied for counseling Malay-Muslims divorcing clients. The theory focuses on the notion of eight interlocking concepts: differentiation of self, triangle, nuclear family emotional process, family projection process, multigenerational transmission process, sibling position, emotional cut-off and societal emotional process (Bowen, 1976). However; for the purpose of this paper, only multigenerational transmission will be discussed due to its importance in the Malay-Muslim family system. Multigenerational transmission can be defined as a process “occurring over several generations, in which poorly differentiated persons marry equally immature partners, ultimately resulting in children suffering from severe psychological problems” (Nichols, 2009 p.462).

In a Malay-Muslim family, the concept of multigenerational transmission is evident where the woman who marries the man is considered married to the family and the rules and regulations within the family (Banks, 1974; Djamour, 1959). The man, considered as the head and leader of the family is also responsible for taking care of his parents especially his mother. At times, conflict occurs among the husband, his wife, and his mother. The husband’s relationship with his mother is considered fused once he cannot readily balance the needs of his mother, wife and children.

Although these theories are popular in the literature, there are cultural issues and challenges in terms of their application in the specific cultural context of Malaysia. In order to highlight these issues, we present a divorce case study from a client’s perspective as a platform for further discussion. The case is presented with the following aims:

1. To understand the meaning of being a single parent
2. To explore the experiences as a single parent
3. To understand the impact of divorce on the life of a single parent

The Case of Fatimah

Fatimah, a 29 year old postgraduate student was formerly married and currently lives with her 6-year old son. She was married in 2005 at the age of 22. Her marriage lasted approximately four and a half years and her divorced was finalized in December 2009. A custodial arrangement between both partners was observed. The divorce was precipitated when Fatimah discovered her husband was having an extra marital affair. Subsequently, both partners experienced lack of intimacy and diminishing love for one another.

After her initial feelings of isolation, humiliation, depression, and anger, Fatimah decided to try to save her marriage. She asked her husband to join her in seeking the counseling advice from the Malaysian Islamic Development Department. Her husband refused and divorced her via a Short Message Service not long after. Fatimah then plunged into depression, blaming herself for the failed marriage and isolated herself from friends and community. After the divorce, Fatimah moved in with her mother and other family members to help her recover from her breakdown and emotional turmoil. Fatimah's divorce case can be diagrammatically represented in Figure 1.

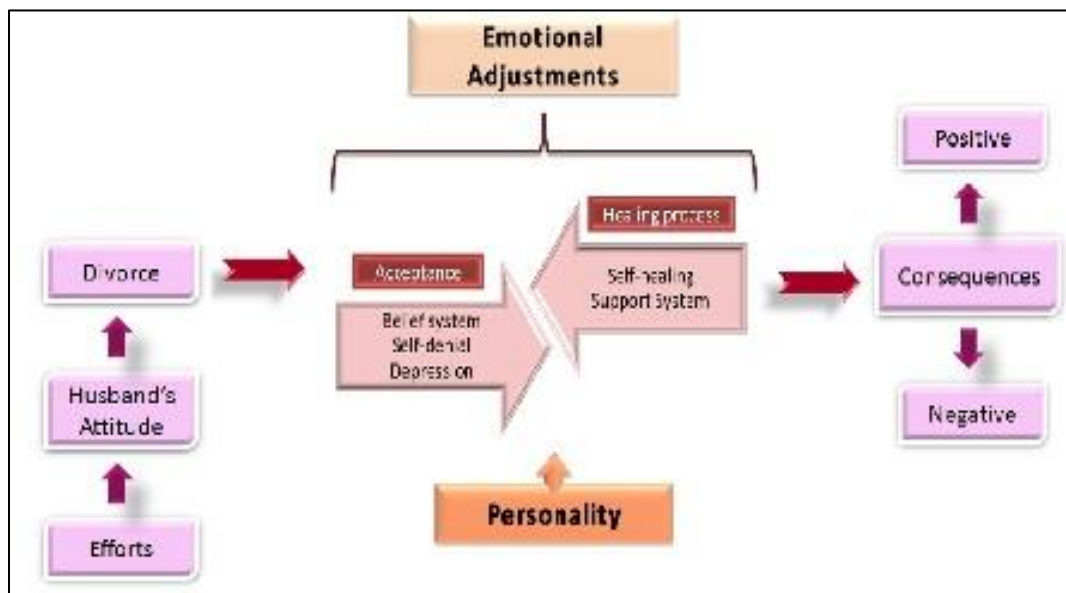


Figure 1 – The process of Fatimah's divorce Case

The interview with Fatimah revealed that during the first stage of divorce, she appeared to be in self-denial and her defense mechanism was on the alert (Corey, 2005) resulting in irrational thoughts. On the other hand, the emotional and moral support from her mother provided Fatimah some insights and the acceptance of being a single parent. At the early stage, Fatimah was

overtaken with depression, became emotionally unstable and unprepared to accept her new status (Wade & Cairney 2000). According to the McKenna model (1999), using the Stages of Survivor Grief, Fatimah was in Stage 1 and Stage 5. Stage 1 involves the shock, sadness, fear of being alone and dissociation from the society. At this stage, it is important to have a strong familial support to boost the healing process. Stage 5 is a depression stage where Fatimah was unable to work either effectively or efficiently. Fatimah needed all the support, empathy and attention to ensure she understood and accepted her new status, that of a single parent. The post-divorce taught Fatimah to always instill a positive behavior towards life. In order to push herself forward, she was more focused into the spiritual need, read personal growth and motivational books, joined a support group as well as embarking on pursuing her postgraduate degree. As a consequence of the divorce, Fatimah found her freedom: freedom from spousal duties, her confidence level remained intact, she was well-groomed, and most importantly, she found a new meaning to happiness. These were the results of accepting her new life.

On the other hand, she is still fighting with some negative emotions when dealing with the emotion of her only child as she constantly fears for the safety of her child and his well-being. Facing the society resulted in a social stigmatization: a lack of self-esteem and fear of being labeled incompetent in her marriage. Her irrational belief and thoughts towards men added to her problems.

Accordingly, it is a natural development in the family life-cycle process whereby divorce is one of the major disruptions to the normally healthy development phase as experienced by Fatimah (Carter and McGoldrick, 1999). The Family Life Cycle Stage for Divorcing Families has four main phases: the decision to divorce, planning the breakup of the system, separation and the divorce. The second stage was the post-divorce which involved the single parenting with or without the custody of the children. At each stage, there is a transition of emotion which includes the development process of each partner and their child. In this study, the emotional transition could be seen as the adjustment for Fatimah to accept her new status as a single parent and to get herself out from the depression, emotional turmoil and self-denial. The development process has its effects on Fatimah as a single parent.

In relation to Fatimah's case, according to Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) her child is grouped in the elementary-school age which is most affected by the impact of divorce. The child will experience the hardest time compared to the other age group since he could already grasp what is happening around him. However, he does not have the adequate skills and knowledge to face the problems.

Hence, the child may feel guilty, responsible; go into self-blaming, grieving and yearning for the other parent who lives apart from them. Concurrently, Fatimah's child might develop fantasies that he could remedy the relationship between his parents. Psychologically, the child will be most affected once the divorce gets bitter and out-of-hand. He may develop school and/or peer problems characterized by poor performance, problematic behavior with peers or authority, and/or somatic symptoms (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

FROM NASTY TO HEALTHY DIVORCE: TRANSFORMING THE SOCIETAL STEREOTYPES

In a Malay-Muslim family, the man is the head and leader of the family (Holy Qur'an, Surah An-Nisa 4:34). Therefore, the Malay-Muslim family can be considered as a structured family system. In the process of divorce, the theory says that the changing structure should be given extra attention to avoid a severe disequilibrium within the family subsystems (Simons & Sprenkle, 1985). However, this is not applicable to the Malay-Muslim culture. The Malay-Muslim family unit does not involve a structural change in the family unit, but only involves the change in roles and responsibilities. For example, although the woman in the family is the breadwinner, the house-husband remains the head of the family. This does not mean the role of the wife is not recognized because Allah SWT says:

O mankind, indeed. We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted. (Holy Qur'an, Surah Al-Hujurat 49:13)

In most divorce cases, the Malaysian society tends to view divorce in a negative manner. This leads to mistreatment of divorced couples and their children. For example, a single mother is negatively viewed as a home-wrecker. These stereotypes can easily affect the psychological well-being of children who come from broken or divorced families. Divorced families are often associated with conflicts and issues which revolve mainly around financial problems, social problems faced by their children, and dysfunctional families (Anjli Panalal, 2005; Mellott, 2010; Mohd Ismail, Robiah, Syarifah, Kamarul Azmi, & Ahmad Kilani, 2006; Sassler, Cunningham, & Lichter, 2009).

However, there are attempts to change the negative view of divorce (Kasim, 2007; Namou, 2010). For example, there was a case of Norma, a Malay-Muslim divorced wife, who looked at divorce in a

positive perspective after empowering herself in the early stage of divorce. According to Norma, healthy divorce can be achieved by allowing for healthy relationships with her mother in law, former husband and his new wife. She realizes the importance of raising children well, having the insight not to be led by personal insecurities and, most importantly, confiding in God to walk a loving and strong path. She mentioned that “Even though my marriage ended with a divorce, it was a good marriage as my ex-husband was responsible in his duties as a husband and father” (Namou, 2010, p.31). This highlights the healthy side of a divorce in one of the Malay-Muslim clients. The factors that contribute to this healthy divorce, as communicated by Norma, are “a healthy attitude towards marriage and love” and “look[ing] at any failed love relationship ... as the responsibility of both parties involved” (Namou, 2010, p.31). Norma’s thoughts and perspectives on the current issues and challenges faced by many Muslim women, especially those in the specific cultural context of Malaysia, have been published in a book, *A Walk Through Life* (2007).

Such depiction of a healthy divorce story is a platform for us to help divorcing Malay-Muslim couples deal with their divorce issues in a positive and constructive manner, especially couples with children. However, most existing MFT therapies are based on Western theories and this poses some challenges for Malaysian counselors to use the models as a framework for working effectively with Malay-Muslim clientele. Therefore, the following model is proposed. We believe that the model is culturally sensitive to the needs and values of Malay-Muslim client population. The model can also be used as framework in family counseling.

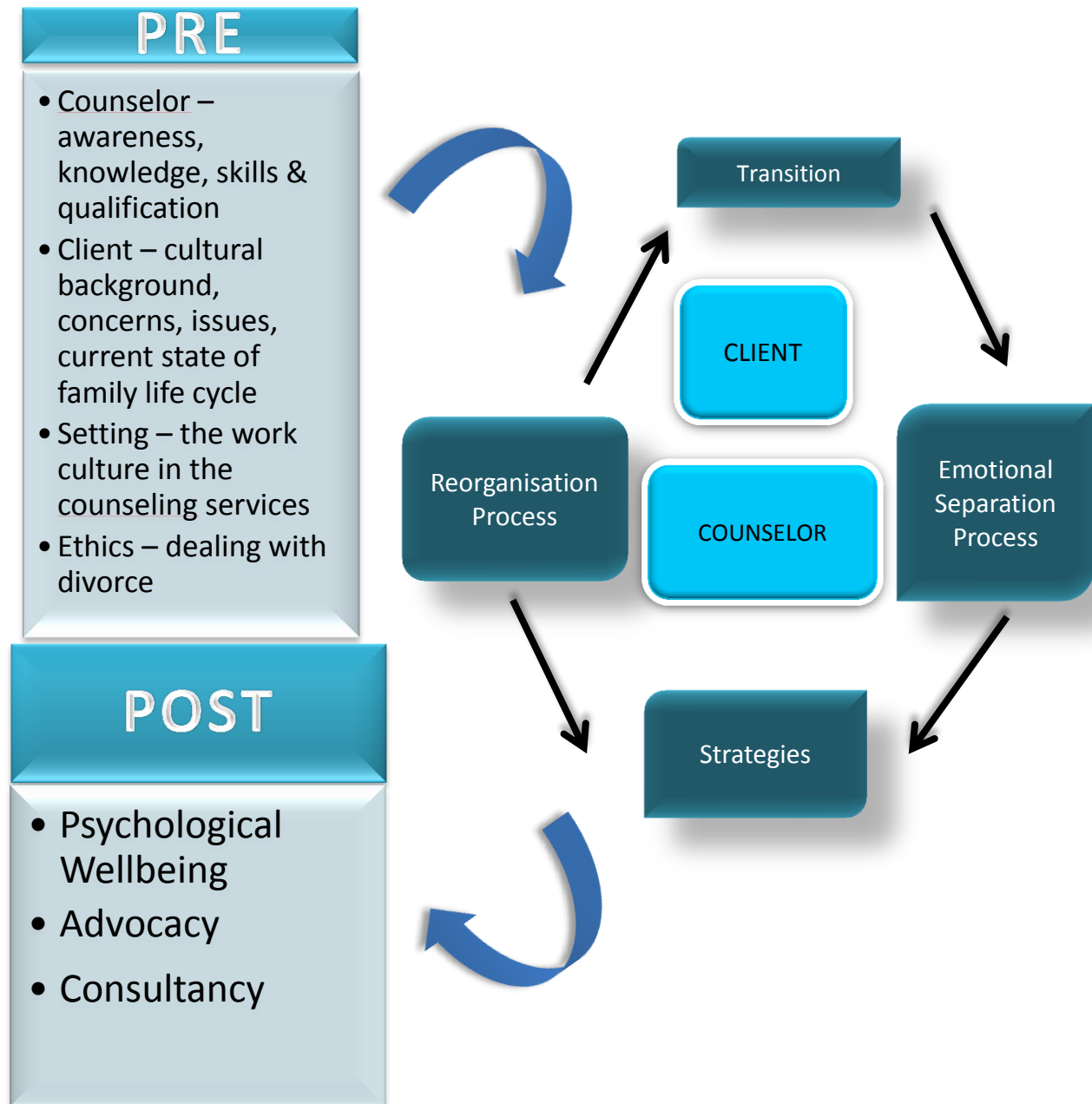


Figure 2 – Proposed model

Based on Figure 2, the proposed counseling process model for divorced families is divided into three different stages: pre-divorce, during and post-divorce stages. In the pre-stage of conducting counseling sessions with divorcing couples, it is important for the counselors involved in the sessions to be multiculturally competent (awareness, knowledge and skills) so that he or she can understand the uniqueness of each client's background and be well equipped to conduct the sessions. Ethical issues are an iterative and dynamic process that needs to be given an importance

in the entire data collection and analysis period (Silverman, 2005). A counselor conducting the session will get involve in some ethical issues that have the potential to re-stimulate painful memories or unresolved emotional conflicts (Ravindran, 2003). It is highly important for a counseling session to be conducted in an ethical manner, whereby; confidentiality is given a high regard. The work culture and counseling setting play a major role in molding the early sessions with clients.

Accordingly, it is essential for the counselor to be aware of the possible issues, presenting problems and emotional turmoil faced by clients. In the proposed model, the client will experience a transition which involved emotions and reorganization of self and family. The counselor will have to redefine the emotion of the client, empathize, and ultimately allow the client to achieve catharsis. By achieving catharsis, the client is able to understand her individual cognition by changing the way she thinks, feels and behaves towards her ex-spouse and others. The acceptance of the family plays a major role in assisting the client to go through the process of divorce. The systemic separation is another issue that the counselor has to consider while conducting a session with the client. By understanding this structure, it enables a healthy relationship between the client and counselor to achieve the objective of assisting and preparing the client going through the divorce process. Another transition phase is the reorganization process faced by clients – former spouse relationship, co-parenting relationship and establishing new boundaries. It is crucial for the divorcee to understand and respect the new role that they each played with the new boundaries (Minuchin, 1981). Meditation, psychoeducational workshops, co-parenting seminars and divorce therapy are amongst the proposed strategies to assist clients in the process of divorce.

Finally, it is hoped that the proposed model will introduce a healthy behavior, positive emotion and cognition of the clients. However, it is to be noted that the stabilization process will take approximately 1 to 3 years depending on the psychological well-being of the client. Once the client has achieved catharsis, accepted his or her new roles and established new boundaries, the clients will more often than not, assist in advocacy and act as a consultant for other divorced couples.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN THE PRACTICE OF FAMILY THERAPY IN MALAYSIA

Although the model looks promising, there are some issues and challenges that counselors need to be aware of in the practice of family therapy in Malaysia. First, MFT is an emerging specialty in the Malaysian counseling profession (See & Ng, 2010). This poses some issues and challenges in the practice and training of MFT among local counseling practitioners. Second, among the reported issues and challenges in the practice of MFT was a lack of trained professionals in the specialized field of MFT (Salim, 2004; Salim & Aga Mohd Jaladin, 2005). Most professionals among the counselor educator community have training in general counseling and psychotherapy, however; very few of them are specialized in MFT. Third, there is a lack of trained and qualified educator/trainers in MFT in counselor education and training institutions for the training of MFT professionals (Aga Mohd Jaladin, 2008; Ng & Stevens, 2001; See & Ng, 2010). This explains why there is a lack of counselor education programs with a specialized focus in MFT in the local universities. In most institutions that offer counselor education programs, marriage and family counseling is offered as one of the elective subject/courses. Only recently, MFT is being newly introduced as a specialised counseling program at graduate level at USIM (1990s).

In addition, most practitioners involved in counseling divorced couples are not formally trained in counseling or psychotherapy fields, but their training is mostly in religious studies or law. According to Doherty (2002), one of the dangers faced by married people is having individually trained therapists who are incompetent in working with couples. If an incompetent trained therapist can harm their clients, what about practitioners who have never been trained in counseling and psychotherapy?

This poses some issues regarding their competencies in working effectively with divorcing couples or families. How do they engage with marital issues and divorce when counseling Malay-Muslim clients who seek help from counselors? This highlights the need for more available resources and outreach programs for divorcing family and more research in MFT area in the Malaysian context. At present, Malay-Muslim couples are required to attend a two-day pre-marital course organized and conducted by Malaysian Islamic Development Department. However, there are no available courses or programs targeting those who are already married and those who intended to file for divorce. Those who filed for divorce are required to come for counseling as part of the legal proceeding for divorce. However, as mentioned earlier, there are issues regarding the qualification and competencies of Malaysian Islamic Development Department counselors in providing effective counseling for divorcing couples and families. This explains why we propose the model or

framework discussed earlier so that it can assist practitioners who are working with divorcing couples.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper is to promote a positive outcome of divorce because Malaysian culture generally views divorce as unhealthy. It is undeniable that some marriages can be saved if the couples are ready to make changes. However, if either parties cannot stay within the marriage, divorce may be the only available option. Thus, if divorce takes place, divorcing couples should be helped and guided to make sure that the negative effects of divorce can be avoided.

In summary, not all divorced couples and children suffer from the divorce. If divorcing couples, especially those who have children, understand the tasks and responsibilities as parents, they can adjust and function well over time. According to Hetherington (1982), empirical studies have shown that women excel in being more competent, fulfilled, better adjusted and are more often happier compared to when they were in the first marriage, by being married to a new man from a higher socio-economic background and found a partner whom they believe complements them.

Divorce also provides an option for people in miserable marriages. Montenegro (2004) states that women are more likely to mention that they enjoyed their new found freedom and status, and being freed from their domineering husband. For children, parental separation might be better than remaining in an intact family where there is a continuous conflict. Two people who are antagonist to each other will have an adverse effect on the children. It is also believed that permanent separation and divorce are better to creating a healthier relationship. For men and women, it could mean to be better off financially and the freedom of carrying on with their hobbies as well as meeting new people.

Finally, divorce may be a good lesson for the couple to improve themselves in the future. If one or both of them remarry, they can use their past marriage experience as a guide to develop a healthier and better relationship. Their failure in the first marriage does not mean that they will fail in the new marriage. Hence, learning from failure is an important quality that separates winners from losers.

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