Emotional Experiences of Young Adults Who Have Experienced Interparental Conflicts

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ABSTRACT--This study aimed to explore and gain an in-depth understanding about emotional experiences of young adults who have experienced interparental conflicts. A qualitative research using phenomenological research design was used to explore the emotional experiences encountered by 5 young adults who have experiences with interparental conflicts. To collect research data, the researcher perused 3 stages of in-depth interview sessions with each young adult. Other forms of data were also obtained through observations and participants' journals. The method of data analysis was guided by a simplified version of Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen's method as discussed by Moustakas (1994). Three common themes were found when the researcher analysed the research data to investigate emotional experiences of young adults who experienced interparental conflict. The three themes were: Negative emotions, positive emotions and lack of emotions. Outcome of this research provided additional insights to understand young adults' emotional experiences when going through interparental conflicts. Implications of the study and recommendations for future researchers were discussed.

*Keywords--*Interparental Conflicts, Young Adults, Emotional Experiences

I.   INTRODUCTION

Marital conflict is a significant problem in Malaysia families. In Malaysia's context, divorce rate has been rapidly increasing. According to Syariah Judiciary Department Malaysia (JKSM), divorce statistics among Muslims has risen by 2.3 times from 20,916 cases in year 2004 to 47,470 cases in year 2012, whereas Department of Statistics Malaysia shows a rise of 2.7 times of divorce cases from 3,291 in year 2004 to 9,020 cases in year 2014 among non-Muslim families (Boo, 2014). In year 2014, marital conflict (*tiada persefahaman*) is found to be the biggest cause of divorce among Malaysian population (National Population and Family Development Board, 2014). These statistics only represent cases of reported conflicted families which go through divorce, which is a portion of the real number of families who are troubled by marital conflict. Without information about unreported family conflicts, the real amount of families and individuals who experience family conflicts is unknown.

There is a lack of researches that explores interparental conflicts' outcome on young adults, as most previous research focuses on the association of interparental conflict with children's and adolescents' functioning and psychosocial adjustment (Booth & Amato, 2001; Buehler, Lange, & Franck, 2007; Chappel, Suldo, & Ogg, 2014; Cummings & Davies, 2002; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Demo, 1996; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Katz & Gottman, 1993; Li, Cheung, & Cummings, 2016; Parsa, Parsa, Ahmad-Panah, & Ghaleiha, 2015; Spyrou, 2013; Zimet & Jacob, 2001). These research studies the short term effects of interparental conflict on children and adolescents,

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and only a few are prospective longitudinal studies that examines long-term effects persisting into adulthood (Booth & Amato, 2001; Yu, Pettit, Lansford, Dodge, & Bates, 2010). The paucity of research based on young adult population is a significant gap in understanding the phenomenon of interparental conflicts, therefore the aim of the current research was to understand young adults' perspective about interparental conflicts.

Also, to the researcher's knowledge, there are very few studies that explores the phenomenon of interparental conflict from young adults' perspective in Malaysia (Kwan, Mellor, Rizzuto, Kolar, & Bt. Mamat, 2013; Ong, 2010). Hence, an investigation in Malaysia's context is warranted.

Before one delves deeper to discuss "emotional experience", one might ask "What is emotional experience?". Emotional experience is the conscious part of emotion as it is felt by the individual (Lambie & Baker, 2003). In other words, emotional experience reflects the subjective *feelings* felt during an emotion episode. Emotion feeling is a key psychological component of emotions and consciousness (Izard, 2009). There are possibilities for an individual to have changes in bodily and behavioural state from an antecedent event, yet at the same time to somehow not *experience* that emotion through repression (Lambie & Baker, 2003). This study will explore emotions at the level of subjective feelings, not at the level of physiological changes and repressed feelings.

II.   METHODOLOGY

2..1   *Research Design*

A phenomenological research design is chosen as the best fit for this study as it enables the researcher to understand the lived experiences in a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2007). Phenomenology aims to provide a composite description of the "what" and "how" participants experience in a phenomenon (Knapp, 2015; Moustakas, 1994).

The current study is guided by research question "What are the emotional experiences of young adults who experienced interparental conflict?".

2.2   *Sampling*

Criterion sampling was decided to be the best fit for the current research, where participants who have experienced the phenomenon is studied (Creswell & Poth, 2007). Four sampling criterions are outlined when recruiting participants. The four criterions were (1) Participants' age: The current study aimed to recruit young adults aged 18-24 years old. (2) Participants' nationality: This study aims to explore emotion dynamics of Malaysian young adults. Hence, only participants of Malaysian nationality will be recruited. (3) Participants' exposure to interparental conflict: In this study, participants who have witnessed at least two to three interparental conflict episodes annually within the last three years were recruited. (4) Participants' educational background. The current research selects participants who are studying or have graduated from college and universities. This criterion enables the researcher to seek participants who have the ability to understand the purpose of the research and express their thoughts and feelings.

2.3   Data Collection

The current research adopted a three-interview series as a guide to collect data. The first interview "focused on life history" , the second interview collects information about "the details of the experience" , and the third interview explore participants' "reflection on the meaning" (Seidman, 2013). Each interview was spaced three to seven days apart, and each interview sessions took approximately 90 minutes, as suggested by Seidman (2013). Observation during interview sessions was also employed as a mean to collect research data. Observation is a systematic research tool which can be used to address research questions and produce trustworthy research outcome (Merriam, 2009).

2.4   Data Analysis

The current study will analyse data as guided by a simplified version of Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen's method as discussed by Moustakas (1994).

III.   FINDINGS

3.1   Negative Emotions

Throughout young adults' experiences with interparental conflicts, young adults experienced negative emotions such as anger, fear, guilt, helplessness and sadness.

Anger was experienced by young adults throughout their experiences with interparental conflicts. Anger was described with "get really angry immediately when they start fighting" "triggered", "pissed" and "annoying. Anger among young adults who experienced interparental conflicts took form in emotional reactivity, such as difficulty in managing anger and responding reactively towards family conflicts. Anger was also expressed when participants spoke about their disagreements with one or both parents, such as disagreeing with their parents' values and opinions, methods of handling conflicts and parenting. Young adults also experienced anger when they were involuntarily involved or asked to intervene in interparental conflicts, such as being asked to pass messages between their parents who refused to talk to each other, and listening to parents' badmouthing the other spouse. In the context of parents' behaviour of badmouthing, young adults experienced anger towards the alienated parent when they fully believed the badmouthing claims, yet changed to be angry at the badmouthing parent when the realize they are all false claims.

Fear was experienced by young adults throughout their experiences with interparental conflicts. Young adults described their sentiments with "fear" and "frightening experience", and the perpetuating parent was described with "monster" and "fearful figure". The researcher found that young adults experienced fear when they witnessed or were involved in family conflicts. They spoke about fearful feelings towards the perpetuating parent, and felt scared as they attempted to stop the perpetuating parent with violence. They also felt scared and became hypervigilant in their conversations with the reactive parent, fearing that a mistake in the conversation might cause more conflicts.

Guilt was observed to be experienced by young adults from narrations of "regret", "feel bad", "feel very sorry", "I blame myself a lot for what happened between my parents". In young adults' experiences with interparental conflicts, guilt was experienced in poor and distant parent-child relationships, self-blame for disharmony in the family and when they had to choose sides in conflicts.

Young adults described experiencing helplessness with sentences such as "we don't know how to stop (them)" and "I don't know who to go to or anything". As interparental conflicts occurred, young adults felt helpless went they were asked to intervene in their parents' conflicts, such as listening to parents' badmouthing and passing messages between parents. Helplessness occurred when young adults witnessed their parents' conflicts, and wanted to stop their parents' fight and quarrels but did not know how to. Prolonged helplessness about the family conflicts led young adults to give up on intervening in interparental conflicts. During their struggle with interparental conflicts, participants felt helpless when they did not receive support and guidance.

The emotional experience of sadness was described by young adults with "sad", "get affected" and "cry". Young adults reported experiencing sadness during their witness of their parents' fights and arguments. Sadness was also experienced in poor and distant parent-child relationships. Young adults felt sad when they did not have a receive love from the parent and felt helpless about improving the parent-child relationships. In young adults' experiences with interparental conflicts, sadness was experienced when they engaged in wishful thinking.

3.2 *Positive Emotions*

Throughout young adults' experiences with interparental conflicts, young adults experienced positive emotions such as relief and empathy.

The emotional experience of relief was narrated with words such as "feel good", "relief" and "makes me feel much better". It was found that participants associated relief with these coping methods: seeking social support, escape-avoidance and positive reappraisal. Relief was also experienced when they talked to others about their experiences, found friends with similar experiences with interparental conflicts, had good family relationships, distanced self from family conflicts, and engaged in self-improvement.

Empathy for others was narrated with "I can totally relate to that kind of people", "respect people's pain", and "I know how you (peers with similar experiences) feel". Young adults described having empathy for people with similar experiences due to their personal experiences with interparental conflicts. They reasoned that their first-hand experiences made it easier for them to relate with them.

3.4 *Lack of Emotions*

Young adults recalled feeling indifferent towards their parents' conflicts, which was described with "don't feel anything", "don't care whatever mom wants", "don't care if she angry at me or not" and "don't have any thoughts". Young adults spoke about indifference towards their parents' conflicts during childhood, because they were too young to understand that their parents' communication patterns were not normal compared to other families. Young adults also expressed indifference and a lack of strong emotions when they received information about their parents' new relationships and remarriages. Parents' wishes, upsettedness and the health of their marital relationship was disregarded, and there was a lack of emotional attachment and respect for the parent who neglected them.

IV. DISCUSSION

4.1 Discussion of Research Findings

Young adults in the current study addressed several aspects of their emotional experiences throughout their experiences with interparental conflicts. In regards of the first theme, where young adults experienced negative emotions, was similar to past studies. Findings about cause attribution eliciting anger paralleled with findings by Weiner (1986), which associates anger with causal attribution. This finding about emotional reactivity concurs with emotional security hypothesis, which suggests that a child's sense of emotional security is derived from the quality of parents' marital relationship, and the goal of preserving emotional security is regulated via emotional reactivity (Davies & Cummings, 1994). Previous experience with interparental conflict is one of the factors that contributes to a child's appraisal of family conflicts (Grych & Fincham, 1990), and negative appraisals creates expectations about course of conflicts, which increases sensitivity to conflict. Previous studies concurred with the current study's finding about the emotional experience of fear, suggesting that interparental conflict is anxiety provoking for children when the arguments are intense and persistent, left unresolved, involve physical violence, and/or the content of conflict is concerning the child (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Thompson & Calkins, 1996). Distress and fear is experienced when children make appraisals about interparental conflicts leading to potential harm and threat (Folkman, 2013; Folkman & Lazarus, 1984; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Findings of the current research also concurred with past studies that suggests that shame and guilt is related to self-blame among children who experience interparental conflict (Grych & Fincham, 1990). Helplessness are experienced when there is low efficacy expectation, which leads to decreased coping efforts (Compas, 1987; Grych & Fincham, 1990). This echoes with findings of the current research, as helplessness was experienced when young adults felt incapable of stopping family conflicts. The finding about sadness also echoed with past studies, where it was found that appraisals about threat was associated with depression among young adults who experienced interparental conflicts (Keeports & Pittman, 2017). It was also suggested that appraisals about harm and loss elicit sadness (Folkman, 2013).

Pertaining to the second theme, where young adults experienced positive emotions throughout their experiences with interparental conflicts, was similar with previous studies. Cognitive reappraisals of events was found to enhance positive emotions (Giuliani, McRae, & Gross, 2008; Wang et al., 2014), whereas distraction was found to be associated with decreases in depression and anxiety symptoms (Roelofs et al., 2009). Previous studies argued that prosocial mediation of conflict between parents or sympathetic care to a distressed parent may be derived from problematic goals, putting the child at risk of being involved in parents' conflict or parentified to care for the parent, and should not be considered as effective emotional regulation (Thompson & Calkins, 1996). Although the emotional experience of empathy observed in the current research was not facilitated by parentification of children, it is worth noting for future research and psychotherapy practices.

The third theme, where young adults experienced a lack of emotions throughout their experiences with interparental conflicts, was similar with previous studies. The emotional experience of indifference parallels with previous research which suggests that long duration of conflict may overwhelm the child with more distress, causing the child habituate with the conflict in time (Grych & Fincham, 1990). However, numbness and the lack of strong negative emotions should not be taken as successful coping with interparental conflict, as it might be an indicator of denying attachment (Parmiani, Iafrate, & Giuliani, 2012). Although young adults in the current

research spoke about being indifferent towards their parents' upsettedness in poor parent-child relationships, but they also spoke about experiencing anger, fear, guilt and sadness.

4.2   Implications for Mental Health Professionals

It is important to have a deeper understanding of young adults' emotional experiences when they are going through interparental conflicts, as it can help mental health practitioners avoid errors in their diagnosis and strategize treatment plans for clients. As suggested by Takimoto (2017), covert interparental conflict was found to be significantly and positively related to suppressed emotion regulation among young adults, which means emotional experiences still occurs despite efforts of holding back emotional response. For instance, a lack of difficult emotions does not necessarily point to successful and adaptive coping. It is suggested that mental health practitioners to have patience when exploring the emotions of the client, instead of taking positive emotions and lack of difficult emotions at face value.

Findings about elements of experiences with interparental conflict that elicit positive emotions such as relief, empathy and hope highlighted healing contributors in young adults' experiences with interparental conflicts. Identifying healing contributors that facilitates positive emotions can help mental health practitioners increase efficiency in their counselling work with clients, such as helping them find appropriate support systems, find ways to connect with others and learn to draw healthy boundaries, instead of engaging in maladaptive ways of coping.

Mental health practitioners can use findings from the current study in their clinical work with spouses who are struggling with marital conflict. Information about elements of marital conflict that facilitate negative emotions in their offspring could be given to parents in conflict through psycho-education. Psycho-education for parents in conflict could provide information about appropriate co-parenting after separation and how to divulge information about family events to children in an appropriate manner.

4.3   Suggestions for Future Research

Firstly, the researcher would like to echo with Demo (1996) about the importance of investigating the role of interparental conflicts on offspring well-being in families, regardless of the marital status of parents. It is important to investigate the impact of interparental conflict, instead of solely focusing on divorce.

Secondly, it is recommended to use findings from the current study to develop a framework to understand the emotional experiences of young adults who have experienced interparental conflicts, such that it details about the emotional experiences and elements of interparental conflicts that elicit emotional experiences is uncovered. To the researcher's knowledge, an integrated theoretical model that conveys the complex and multifaceted processes through which interparental conflict may confer long-term developmental risk was developed for children and adolescents, but not for young adults (Harold & Sellers, 2018).

Thirdly, the researcher would like to recommend that future researchers investigate the relationship between coping strategies with young adults' adjustment and well-being when experiencing interparental conflicts. The current research found that emotion-focused coping such as wishful thinking and blaming others led to emotions such as sadness and anger. Problem-focused coping such as attempts to intervene and solve problems led to helplessness. Other problem-focused coping such as escape-avoidance from interparental conflicts and seeking social support elicited relief. Meaning-focused coping such as positive reappraisals also elicited the emotion of

relief. The diversity of emotions elicited by different coping strategies shows the complexity of the phenomenon, which warrants further investigation to enrich education and training resources about coping with interparental conflicts.

Lastly, further investigation about the phenomenon of interparental conflict in Malaysia is also recommended. After intensive search on previous studies relevant to young adults' experiences of interparental conflicts in Malaysia, only two studies explored the phenomenon of interparental conflict from young adults' perspective in Malaysia (Kwan et al., 2013; Ong, 2010). Therefore, it is recommended to have more investigation about the issue of interparental conflicts in Malaysia.

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