Psychotherapy and Politics International

2026, VOL. *24*, NO. 1, 1–19
https://doi.org/10.24135/ppi.v24i1.14

Online ISSN: 1556-9195 Journal homepage: https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/psychotherapy-politics-international

PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

Understanding reasons for divorce in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

In the context of Singapore's multicultural society and dual legal system governing marriages in the general population and amongst Muslims, this article investigates the causes of divorce in Singapore. Based on a quantitative survey of 136 divorced Singaporeans, this article reports commonly cited reasons for seeking divorce amongst Singapore citizens. Two factors leading to divorce, as identified by survey participants, were adultery (25%) and difficulties in/with communication (14%). Results from this study may assist counsellors who are working with Singaporeans experiencing difficult marriages and contemplating divorce; as well as policy considerations to restructure the Court system to better serve litigants by bringing together all family members related to the divorce. The research is framed with reference to the introduction in 2024 of the divorce by mutual agreement scheme which was codified under the *Women's Charter 1961* (revised 2022).

KEYWORDS: Singapore; multiculturalism; divorce; dual legal system; *Women's Charter*; therapeutic justice

INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, Singapore has witnessed increasing rates of divorces. In 2005, 6,300 divorces were recorded; 10 years later, in 2015, the number had risen to a peak of 8,150 (James-Civetta, 2025). As a proportion of registered marriages in these years—21,501 (in 2005) and 23,805 (in 2015), these figures represent an increase from 29.3% to 34.23%. Although the number of divorces dipped between 2015 and 2020 (to 7,000), in the past five

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years they have risen again: in 2024 to 7,382. Commenting on these statistics and other trends, James-Civetta (2025) suggests that long-term stability in marriages is still a concern; and that divorces are happening later in marriages, and later in people's lives.

Singapore, a multicultural country, has a dual legal system that regulates family and marriages: one for the general population and another specifically applicable to Muslims, who represent a significant minority (13.6%) of the resident population. The *Women's Charter* (hereafter 'the *Charter*')—and a rare example of such a charter in the world—is the result of an Act of the Singapore Parliament passed in 1961, and revised in 2022; and contains the legislation on divorce applicable to the non-Muslim population in Singapore and is administered through the civil courts. The *Administration of Muslim Law Act 1966*, also passed by the Singapore Parliament, is, nevertheless, administered by the Syariah Court, an Islamic institution, and regulates divorce proceedings for Muslim Singaporeans. We note that this legislation, the research, and this article only refer to marriage of heterosexual couples. While consensual same-sex sex was decriminalised in Singapore, only as recently as 2023, same-sex marriage is still banned under the Singapore constitution.

National legal systems are based on one of four major legal traditions: civil law, common law, customary law, and religious law. While most countries operate under one legal system, others have systems that arise from a mix of civil law and common law traditions (for instance, Canada), religious law and secular law (Israel), or a combination of colonial law and local customary law (South Africa). A number of countries, including Singapore, apply Islamic law to specific areas of life such as marriage and divorce. Given the tensions in the world between those states that operate under strict Islamic law and those that operate under civil law (whether Napoleonic, Germanic, Nordic, or mixed, which comprises most of Europe and South America), or common law (such as the UK and North America), such a system may be considered as offering some hope for cross-cultural, religious understanding.

In Singapore, the *Charter* restricts divorce petitions from being filed within three years of the date of marriage, with the exceptions if the petitioner has suffered exceptional hardship or the spouse has been exceptionally unreasonable and cruel. Under the *Charter*, the court only grants a divorce if it is satisfied that a marriage has broken down irretrievably on one or more of the following grounds: (a) commission of adultery making further cohabitation intolerable; (b) desertion for a continuous period of at least two years; (c) unreasonable behaviour such as failure to provide financially, verbal abuse, refusal to have sex, habitual lateness in returning home, and disallowing the practice of religion; (d) a separation of at least three years with mutual consent; and (e) living apart for a continuous period of at least four years, without mutual consent. Divorced men are usually responsible for maintaining financial support for their former wives. Both parents usually have equal child visitation rights, although, and depending on the age of the child, custody is usually given to the woman. In 2022 a sixth ground or option was introduced, codified under the *Women's Charter (Amendment) Act 2022*, which allows couples to divorce by mutual agreement (DMA) without

attributing fault, provided that both parties mutually agree that the marriage has irretrievably broken down. As Thomas and Srinivasan (2024) suggest: 'The introduction of DMA as a sixth ground under section 95A(1) of the Women's Charter represents a significant departure from this fault-based system, which often exacerbated conflict between parties' (para. 1). Thomas and Srinivasan (2024) also argue that this shift was influenced by the ethos of therapeutic justice in family law, an ethos that views the law as a tool for promoting healing and wellbeing, rather than only as a system for punishment and blame.

By contrast, rules and procedures regarding marriage and divorce are stipulated in the Qur'an—a complete code of Islamic law pertaining to the duties and rights of a Muslim, and the foundation of all religious law (Denny, 1985). As noted above, in Singapore, the Syariah Court administers the *Administration of Muslim Law Act 1966*, and primarily adjudicates disputes pertaining to betrothal, marriage, divorce, and judicial separation in which both parties are Muslim. In particular, the *Administration of Muslim Law Act 1966* provides for the Syariah Court to administer the following types of divorce: *Talak*, *ta'lik*, *faskah*, and *khuluk*' (Syariah Court Singapore, 2014).

Talak, an Arabic word, means 'to release' or 'to divorce'; and, under the *Administration of Muslim Law Act 1966*, means 'to untie the matrimonial knot by articulating a word denoting divorce'. Under the Syariah Court, divorce through *talak* is the exclusive right of the husband who can terminate the marriage without cause by simply uttering the word *talak* to his wife. *Ta'lik* has a conditional marriage stipulation as declared by the husband on the Marriage Certificate. A *ta'lik* divorce can be determined only by a judge at a hearing before the Syariah Court. A wife seeking divorce on this ground has to prove that her husband had breached the *ta'lik* cited by him at the time of marriage. The *Administration of Muslim Law Act 1966* also recognises a woman's right to divorce by *fasakh* (divorce by judicial decree) on far wider grounds than those usually stipulated under *ta'lik* cases (Rahman, 2004; Syariah Court Singapore, 2014). The *Administration of the Muslim Law Act 1966* also allows a woman to divorce her husband by *khuluk'* (divorce by redemption); a process in which the wife redeems herself from the marriage by paying her husband a set amount of money as assessed by the Court in accordance with the status and means of the parties.

The Singapore Ministry of Social Affairs (1979) concluded that divorce did not happen suddenly but that a gradual deterioration of the relationship preceded the eventual resolve that the marriage was no longer tenable. However, the 1979 report did not identify any precipitating factors that finally led to one party filing for divorce. The original research undertaken by the first author sought to understand better the reasons and indicators for divorce against the backdrop of multiculturalism and a dual legal system governing divorce between the general population and Muslim Singaporeans.

In this context, the Parliament of Singapore and Ministry of Social and Family Development are at the fore of driving policy change. Currently, there is a Mandatory Parenting Programme

which is a consultation session for parents with minor children before they file for divorce. It is designed to encourage divorcing couples make informed decisions that prioritise the wellbeing of children. However, findings from the current study suggest that counselling sessions before divorce, regardless of whether or not children are involved, could be beneficial.

REASONS FOR DIVORCE

Internationally, divorce is not due to a single reason; rather, it is attributable to a number of factors (Lowenstein, 2005). Wolcott and Hughes (1999) identify three key reasons for divorce: (a) affective reasons, including communication problems, incompatibility or drifting apart, and adultery; (b) abusive behaviour, such as physical violence, alcohol and substance abuse, and emotional and verbal abuse; and (c) external pressures, including financial problems, mental health, and work and family interference. It has also been suggested that most divorces are initiated because of factors including falling out of love, changing personal needs, lack of satisfaction, and feelings of greater entitlement (which may have a correlation with socioeconomic status); whereas more harmful factors such as abuse and addiction are observed less frequently (Amato & Previti, 2003).

In comparison, de Graaf and Kalmijn (2006) observe that in the Netherlands common reasons for divorce range from more serious factors such as violence and infidelity to less acute ones involving mutual deterioration of marital affection in the relationship (e.g., growing apart, not enough attention). Burns (1984) and Eells and O'Flaherty (1996) report that the most common reasons given by both men and women for the breakdown of their marriages centre on the affective qualities of the relationship, including communication problems, which implies that the 'affective' domain is the most important and prevalent reason for divorce; and, therefore, the most useful domain in which to seek resolution.

A longitudinal study by Karney and Bradbury (1995) confirms that adverse marital outcomes can be linked to deficits in central competencies such as communication, problem solving, and coping. Studies by Schwartzman-Shatman and Schinke (1993) and Kozuch and Cooney (1995) also found that emotional estrangement resulting from an absence of emotional support, lack of common interests, incompatibility, and deficiencies in relevant relationship skills, such as a paucity of communication, is more frequently cited as a cause of divorce rather than acute problems such as alcoholism or physical abuse. Bodenmann and Cina (2006) confirm that daily stress is a reliable predictor of divorce, with most of their study participants study reporting trivial daily events as important reasons for their decision to divorce. In Amato and Previti's (2003) study, infidelity was the most commonly reported cause for divorce, followed by incompatibility and drifting apart. It was noted that specific reasons

for divorce varied by gender, social class, and life course variables such as age at marriage (Bumpass et al., 1991; Elder, 1994).

According to Thompson and Walker (1991), women were more likely to be aware of relationship problems sooner, and to initiate discussion with their partners. For their part, men tended to withdraw from any form of discussion of relationship problems (Albrecht et al., 1983; Gottman, 1994; Kitson & Holmes, 1992) which may explain why wives are more likely to initiate divorce proceedings. In a longitudinal study conducted in America, Kitson and Holmes (1992) found that frequent reasons for divorce included alcoholism, a lack of communication or understanding, getting married at a young age, problems with in-laws and relatives, and extramarital sex; other reasons included constant arguments, inflexibility, stubbornness, over-commitment to work, insufficient time spent together, and conflict over roles.

Other consistently cited reasons for divorce included basic unhappiness, loss of love, incompatibility, mental illness or emotional problems, and spouses' personality traits (Burns, 1984; Cleek & Pearson, 1985; Gigy & Kelly, 1992; Noller et al., 1997; Wolcott, 1984). However, Gottman (1994) argues that marriages that appeared to be unhappy or have elements of dissatisfaction might not necessarily be the same ones that result in divorce. He cautiones that the causes of divorce are not one-dimensional; rather, a constellation of factors that cascade toward marital dissolution. This is supported by Thomas and Ryan (2008), who also found that the circumstances leading up to divorce are multifactorial.

Reasons for divorce under the Women's Charter

The reasons for divorce under the *Charter* were categorised primarily into four broad areas: unreasonable behaviour (54%); separation, i.e., living apart for three years or more (43%); desertion (2%); and adultery (1%) (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2018). 'Living apart' is one of the top reasons for divorce because as long as there is proof that the couple has been living separately for at least three years with mutual consent, or four years without mutual consent, divorce becomes a relatively easy 'no fault' legal process.

However, statistics compiled about the reasons for divorce actually refer to the grounds for divorce as defined under the *Charter*; they may not be the actual reasons the marriages failed, as Wong and Kuo (1983) contend in their study of divorce in Singapore. Under the advice of their lawyers, petitioners would apply for divorce on grounds generally considered to be sufficient by the court, irrespective of any underlying motivation for divorce. It is thus expedient for couples to seek divorce on the least embarrassing or less socially objectionable grounds such as separation rather than, for instance, adultery, which requires a burden of proof and can be challenged in court. Thus, and perhaps not surprisingly, the two most frequently cited grounds for divorce under the *Charter* are 'prolonged separation' and 'unreasonable behaviour' (Chan, 2008). Chan (2008) delineates three reasons that could account for the use of 'unreasonable behaviour' as a ground for divorce: (a) there is no

requirement for allegations of unreasonable behaviour to be sustained over a specific period; (b) the ease in satisfying the court of the fact of unreasonable behaviour since the petition is based on the petitioner's inability to tolerate the spouse's behaviour; and (c) there is no need for explanation to justify why the marriage failed.

However, there has been limited research in the last two decades to explain the trend for prolonged separation and unreasonable behaviour to constitute the main legal reasons for divorce. Wong and Kuo (1983) comment that it is quite unlikely that separation and desertion are the real reasons for divorce. The only study to examine the real causes of divorce found that for the 55 divorced respondents who were interviewed, differences in values constituted the most common cause of divorce (24%) (Quah, 1999). The problems identified with the former spouse related to their differences in 'ideals', 'goals', and 'outlook in life'. Another 20% cited differences in character or personality such as 'communication breakdown' and 'bad temperedness', leading to a realisation that they could not get along well and had 'compatibility' problems (Quah, 1999). A further 20% cited the presence of a third party or infidelity as the cause of divorce. Thus, the decision to divorce often involves a much more painful undertaking than the cited reasons may suggest. Quah (1999) also found that the final decision to divorce was taken by the respondent after careful consideration of the overall deterioration in the marital relationship.

Wong and Kuo's (1983) study also identifies gender differences pertaining to the reasons given for divorce: women tended to view infidelity, behavioural problems, and financial indiscretion more seriously than men; while men considered personality problems to be slightly more important.

Reasons for divorce under the Syariah Court

In contrast to the reasons outlined in the previous section, in 2017, the four reasons identified for *Muslim* divorces included infidelity/extramarital affair (23.5%), desertion (10.3%), financial problems (10.1%), and domestic violence and abuses (8.6%) (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2012). Given the context of the current article, it is pertinent to evaluate the reasons for divorce in Singapore as delineated by the *Charter* and those that come under the Syariah Court. In the specific context of divorce, while there may be varied and legitimate reasons given for it, those that are publicly cited may not be the real underlying causes of marriage break-ups.

METHODS

This part of the article discusses the design of the original research, including the recruitment of respondents and the collection of the data.

Research design

A specially designed survey was employed to obtain the indicators for troubled marriages and reasons for divorce (i.e., the divorcees' perceptions of the key reasons for the dissolution of their marriage and indicators of marital instability). The use of a survey provided assurance of confidentiality and anonymity, thus enabling the divorcees to feel more at ease to re-visit issues, both positive and negative, as well as to respond more readily and spontaneously to the selected tool.

The survey was developed in 2010 by the first author, with mentoring from a psychiatrist, a psychologist, and a quantitative research specialist who all have extensive experience in setting research questions. The survey questionnaire comprised two sections. Section A collected descriptive data about the respondents and the non-participating ex-spouses (i.e., gender, age, occupation, race, religion, education level and monthly income, housing, number of children, age of children, years of marriage). Section B listed the indicators of marital instability drawn from past research (Amato & Previti, 2003; Gottman & Levenson, 2002; Matthews et al., 1996; Stanley & Markham, 1998). Respondents were asked to select those indicators relevant to them and to add their own.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by Swinburne University's Ethics Board.

Recruitment of respondents and data collection

A purposive sampling approach was undertaken in distributing the questionnaire to divorcees residing in Singapore. Copies of the questionnaire, each accompanied by an information sheet providing (a) the rationale for the research; (b) an assurance of confidentiality and anonymity; and (c) the contact information of the researcher, were posted via return mail to seven counsellors providing couple and family therapy and one family service centre who had agreed to assist with recruitment. These counsellors were working across Singapore and were known to the first author. The counsellors identified potential respondents from amongst their clients and provided them with the information sheet. If, after reading the information sheet, the individual was interested in participating, he or she was provided with the survey questionnaire and a pre-paid envelope. On completion, questionnaires were posted back to the researcher. Participants were not provided with any reminders to complete the survey. In total, 280 questionnaires were distributed to divorcees.

Respondents

Of the 280 questionnaires, 144 (51.4%) were returned by post. Eight questionnaires were deemed void, as the handwriting could not be deciphered, leaving a total sample of 136 participants. The final sample comprised 89 women (65%) and 47 men (35%). The mean age of the respondents was 42.3 years (female mean = 41.5; male mean = 43.9). Approximately half the sample (52%) came from the 30 to 44 years age group. The men ranged in age from

26 to 65 and the women from 24 to 70. The 2018 figures on divorces granted under the Singapore *Women's Charter* indicate that 49.3% of male and female divorcees were between the ages of 30 and 44, and Muslim divorcees for the same age-group stood at 49.9% in 2017. Thus, this sample reflects the national statistics for 2017/2018 for divorce in terms of age (see Table 1).

Table 1. ***Distribution of Divorcees by Age Group***

Age	**Number of respondents** (*n* = 136)	**Percent**
Under 25	1	0.7%
Age 25–29	9	6.6%
Age 30–34	18	13.2%
Age 35–39	28	20.6%
Age 40–44	25	18.4%
Age 45–49	17	12.5%
Age 50–54	17	12.5%
Age 55–59	9	6.6%
Age 60 and over	6	4.4%
Nil response	6	4.4%

Most respondents were Chinese (61%), followed by Indians (≈20%). Closely linked to ethnic distribution are respondents' religious beliefs. While 47 respondents (35%) were Christians, 27 (20%) were Buddhists/Taoists, and 20 (15%) were Muslim. Nineteen (14%) did not identify with any religion; 6 (4%) indicated as 'other'; and 4 (3%) did not respond to the question.

At the time of divorce, 70% of respondents had at least one child, with 44.5% having two children or more. Divorcees having two children (38%) formed the largest proportion of the sample. It would appear that having children in the family did not prevent divorce. Given couples are usually granted joint custody of the children, the wellbeing of the children may not be considered as great an obstacle.

FINDINGS

Time taken for divorce

Only two individuals were able to obtain a divorce within a year of marriage. Such incidents are rare in Singapore because the *Charter* stipulates that an application for a divorce cannot be filed within the first three years of marriage under exceptional grounds, as explained earlier. Studies of divorce in countries such as the United Kingdom and America have identified the first three years of marriage as the most 'dangerous' period, after which the likelihood of divorce lessens. Clarke (1995) found that, in the USA, half of the marriages that end in divorce had lasted for less than seven years. This pattern of divorce in Western marriages is quite different from the Singaporean median length of marriages of 13 years (Subordinate Courts Research Bulletin, 2003), as evidenced in the present sample. However, the average length of 12.02 years amongst participants does not reflect a national trend; according to the Singapore Department of Statistics (2020), the median duration of marriage for divorces is 10.4 years.

On average, the participants in the research sample took 2.5 years to contemplate their divorces. There was no difference between the genders in the average length of time taken from the decision to the divorce (t (126) = .34, p = .78). However, for both genders there was considerable variability in the length of time (1 month to 20 years), which suggests that the divorce was not decided hastily. Indeed, on average, male respondents took about 29.4 months while female respondents took approximately 31.5 months to consider the divorce before commencing proceedings.

Common indicators of marital instability

Respondents were asked to select from a list of indicators that had contributed to their own marital instability. The five most commonly selected were: (a) frequent quarrels; (b) lack of communication; (c) personality differences; (d) loss of trust; and (e) unreasonable behaviours (see Table 2). The most common indicators that emerged were nagging/complaining (unreasonable behaviours), frequent quarrels, and a lack of communication. Communication breakdown was, in fact, the biggest marital problem identified among both men and women in this study. However, the communication issue was perceived somewhat differently by men and women, with three significant gender differences on the factors reported.

Chi-square analyses showed that a lower than expected proportion of women reported nagging and complaining ($\chi 2$ (1, n = 134) = 5.20. p < .05) in comparison to men ($\chi 2$ (1, n = 134) = 9.20, p < .01); while women reported irresponsibility ($\chi 2$ (1, n = 134) = 7.59, p < .01) as significant factors affecting their marriages (see Table 2). These results differ from past findings (e.g., Wong & Kuo, 1983).

Table 2. ***Most Common Indicators of Marital Instability***

Indicators	Gender					
	Men		Women		Total	
	n = 45	%	*n* = 89	%	*n* = 134	%
Frequent quarrels	22	48.9	51	57.3	73	54.5
Lack of communication	22	48.9	49	55.1	71	53.0
Personality differences	23	51.1	45	50.6	68	50.7
Incompatibility	20	44.4	43	48.3	63	47.0
Loss of trust						
Unreasonable behaviour	20	44.4	40	44.9	60	44.8
Loss of love	25	55.6	34	38.2	59	44.0
Verbal and emotional	10	22.2	44	49.4	54	40.3
abuse**						
Nagging/complaining*	21	46.7	24	27.0	45	33.6
Irresponsibility**	8	17.8	37	41.6	45	33.6

Note: *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$; Nil response = 2.

In this study, 57% of women and 49% of men reported issues pertaining to a lack of communication; 55% of women and 49% of men reported frequent quarrels; and 51% of both men and women reported personality differences and incompatibility. Additionally, 49% of women and 22% of men reported verbal and emotional abuse. However, these results must be considered in light of the overall larger number of women (*n* = 89) compared to men (*n* = 47) who participated in the study. Nevertheless, such factors are all signals of a marriage in distress and are consistent with that of an American longitudinal study (Amato & Previti, 2003).

Personal examples of events leading to divorce

Respondents were asked to nominate what they saw as the main factor leading to the divorce and to provide an event to illustrate this factor. Their free responses were grouped according to the issues identified and are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. ***Main Indicator: Specific Personal Examples That Led to the Actual Divorce (*****n** ***= 136)***

Main indicators mentioned and examples given	**Main indicators cited by respondents in their personal accounts**		
	Men (%)	**Women (%)**	**Total (%)**
Adultery	9 (7%)	23 (18%)	32 (25%)
Relationship problems	9 (7%)	9 (7%)	18 (14%)
Communication difficulties	8 (6%)	9 (7%)	17 (13%)
Desertion	2 (2%)	11 (9%)	13 (11%)
Incompatibility	8 (6%)	4 (3%)	12 (9%)
Abuse (emotional/physical/ sexual/verbal)	0	9 (7%)	9 (7%)
Financial challenges	2 (2%)	7 (5%)	9 (7%)
Sexual problems	1 (1%)	4 (3%)	5 (4%)
Others	9 (7%)	12 (9%)	21 (16%)

As shown in Table 3, the highest indicator (25%) cited among personal accounts was adultery, with more women indicating that it was adultery that led to the actual divorce than men. This was followed by relationship problems (14%) and communication problems (13%). These three indicators accounted for 52% of the events identified. The present findings are contrary to the officially stated reasons for divorce (i.e., desertion and unreasonable behaviour [54%] and living apart/separation [43%]). This contradiction is partially explained by the fact that the reason for divorce is presented publicly in court. It is likely that divorcing couples prefer a smooth and trouble-free divorce, without having to air their private life to the court. The citing of less dramatic reasons for dissolution of marriage (separation and unreasonable behaviour) may be inflated in the court system as these are less contentious issues and, therefore, less embarrassing to both parties. However, from the respondents' reports, it would seem that the quality of their emotional and sexual relationship plays a crucial role in divorce. Thus, lack of intimacy and communication appears to be a significant factor for divorce in Singapore.

Predisposing factors for divorce

Nineteen indicators of marital instability were recognised in this study. The five most frequently mentioned reasons were: communication issues, financial issues, personality differences and incompatibility, abusive behaviour, and lack of passionate love and growing apart (see Table 4).

Table 4. ***Predisposing Factors for Divorce***

Indicators of marital instability	**Men** ***n = 45***	**Women** ***n = 89***
Communication issues	22 (49%)	49 (55%)
Financial issues	11 (24%)	33 (37%)
Personality differences and incompatibility	23 (51%)	45 (51%)
Abusive behaviours	10 (22%)	44 (49%)
Lack of passionate love and growing apart	25 (56%)	34 (38%)

Note: Nil response = 2.

DISCUSSION

The present study supports the view that the act of marriage dissolution is a dynamic process, and it is often not possible to pinpoint any single reason for divorce. This is clearly evident from the data obtained where respondents nominated a range of factors that they saw as the main reason leading to the divorce, including adultery (25%); relationship problems (14%); communication issues (13%); desertion (11%); and abuse (7%). This compilation of reasons for divorce, as a constellation of multiple, sometimes complex and often dynamic, reasons, is consistent with earlier models of divorce such as Wolcott and Hughes (1999).

Divorce is a possible outcome of marital instability. In this study, 45 of the 136 respondents in this study (men = 21 [46.7%]; women = 24 [27%]) reported nagging as the most common indicator of marital instability (Table 2). While, traditionally, Singaporean men refer to their wives as ‘nagging’, this survey revealed that women, too, saw their husbands similarly. Nagging, a term often used as a way of naming and shaming one’s spouse, is often born of frustration and resentment; historically and generally, it is more commonly used by men as a power play and, as such, it is an expression of patriarchy. In this study, the respondents’ memories might have been triggered by the listing of ‘nagging and complaining’ among the

pre-coded reasons in the questionnaire. Hence, it is conceivable that for the majority of these respondents, their memories of nagging and complaining might have been subsumed by bigger issues which became the predisposing and precipitating factors having a more direct bearing on the marital breakdown. It is also possible that in acrimonious break-ups, some divorcees may have glossed over or been unaware of their own role in nagging and complaining. The findings on communication issues are consistent with studies by Burns (1984) and Eells and O'Flaherty (1996) which identified communication issues as the most common reason given by both men and women for the breakdown of their marriages. Kitson and Holmes (1992) also found that people in America with a higher level of education and social status were more likely to complain of a lack of communication and understanding.

Incompatibility issues were raised by 8 (6%) men and 4 (3%) women (Table 3); while half the respondents, 23 (51%) men and 45 (51%) women, selected 'personality difference' as indicators of marital instability (Table 2). These two predisposing themes of 'communication' and 'incompatibility' are consistent with the work of Wolcott and Hughes (1999). In general, they believe that the perception of communication problems as the main reason for marriage breakdown could be an attempt to articulate an array of marital issues connected with emotional erosion in the relationship, such as not being understood; the feeling that needs are not met; a loss of affection and companionship; and feeling lonely and unappreciated (Wolcott & Hughes, 1999). Such issues, when not communicated, can bring about deeper emotional and psychological problems.

It is necessary to highlight the distinction between the precipitating factors that triggered divorce, as documented in this study, and the legally accepted reasons for divorce under the *Charter* and the *Administration of Muslim Law Act* summarised earlier. It has been noted in this research that the official reasons given do not always reflect the actual reasons for divorce. Many respondents identified the factors that led to divorce as personality differences (51%); lack of communication (53%); loss of trust (47%); loss of love (44%); and frequent quarrels (55%), which are quite different from those cited in the actual divorce proceedings. Frequent quarrels, communication problems, and loss of love and trust are not legally acceptable grounds for divorce.

Sun et al. (2014) found that although men and women might go through the same divorce process, the perceptions and concerns vary significantly by gender-based roles and norms in the family. In general, they believe that the perception of communication problems as the main reason for marriage breakdown could be an attempt to articulate an array of marital issues connected with emotional erosion in the relationship, such as not being understood, the feeling that needs are not met, a loss of affection and companionship, and feeling lonely and unappreciated (Sun et al., 2014). Such issues, when not communicated, can bring about deeper emotional and psychological problems which, if not resolved, may result in divorce.

Communication is not cited as a reason for divorce in the *Charter* or the *Administration of Muslim Law Act*. Furthermore, interestingly, adultery constitutes only about 1% of the reasons for divorce under the *Charter*. However, while communication was cited by 14% of survey respondents as an indicator leading to divorce, adultery was cited by 25% of the respondents (nine men; 23 women)—the primary indicator that led to divorce. Although adultery has often been identified in past studies as the main cause of divorce, few divorcees in this study sought to end their marriage on this ground. One reason could be the 'stronger stigma to adultery hence causing the couples to prefer other grounds for divorce' (Ministry of Social Affairs, 1979, p. 27). While adultery is not legally prohibited, we suspect that divorce petitioners prefer to avoid going through the onerous process of having to prove it in court when they can instead fall back on meeting the legal requirements by using prolonged separation or citing unreasonable spousal behaviour.

Implications for policy and practice

On the basis that Singaporean society considers divorce to be undesirable, it is reasonable to suggest that government agencies would promote education about marriage as well as the implications of divorce. The findings of this study lend support to the development and implementation of public education programmes, in upper secondary school, junior colleges, and tertiary education in Singapore, that underscore the importance of building a strong family life through, during, and after marriage, and provide avenues for counselling as interventions at the pre-marital stage and when difficulties begin to arise in the marriage. Public education could be extended beyond school settings to include ongoing media advertising campaigns to promote awareness of seeking counselling when divorce is being contemplated and to help with adjustment after divorce.

These findings can provide counsellors with greater awareness in identifying the common indicators of divorce. Armed with this information, counsellors will be better able to intervene and help reduce the prospect of divorce by working with clients in three critical areas: (a) pre-marriage preparation; (b) when marital problems surface; and (c) when divorce is being contemplated.

Limitations of the original study

As a cosmopolitan society with three major Asian ethnicities, marriages in Singapore exist both within and across ethnic groups and social strata; however, a limitation of this research is that the study sample primarily comprised Christian marriages, with lower representation of other religious groups. As the sample size studied is equivalent to about 2.4% of the 2014 divorces in Singapore, the researcher had to ensure statistical significance when attempting investigations into sub-clusters within the sample; thus, detailed investigation within racial and cultural sub-groups was not possible. Many participants did not provide personal accounts to illustrate their personal experiences despite these being requested; thus limiting,

although not invalidating, quantitative analysis. Further research is needed to explore differences across cultural and religious groups to make the conclusions more immediately applicable to a wider population.

In addition to broadening the sample to include more diversity, there remains a strong need for longitudinal research to explore reasons for divorce and make comparisons of divorce experiences of couples whose divorces were conducted under civil law and Syariah law, respectively. In addition, there is a need for better documentation of marital development over time, involving (a) homogeneous samples from each of the ethnic groups—Chinese, Malays, Indians; (b) longitudinal designs reflecting indicators for divorce over time; (c) data that reflect age, sex, income, period from the divorce decision till the actual filing for divorce, and duration effects; (d) transitions from pre-marriage to post-divorce adjustment; and (e) further examination of predisposing and precipitating factors.

CONCLUSION

This original research aimed to provide new information on reasons for divorce in Singapore. The quantitative analysis yielded new insights regarding factors underpinning divorces in the context of Singapore. The data revealed that the causes of marriage dissolution extend beyond officially stated reasons. Indeed, a range of other causes of marriage break-ups, along with the many underlying factors that germinated the idea of divorce, were identified. However, the two key factors identified that are not discussed in the *Charter* or the *Administration of Muslim Law Act* are adultery and communication. Given the findings of the original study on these issues, the new divorce by mutual agreement scheme is to be welcomed. It is hoped that the research reported in this article contributes to a better understanding of the issues of divorce in Singapore, and provides a base from which both counsellors and policymakers can better understand and manage the complex phenomenon of divorce in Singapore.

Earlier in the article, we acknowledged that the divorce by mutual agreement scheme was influenced by therapeutic justice, a form of justice that is underpinned by four concepts:

- **problem-solving**, by which the focus shifts from seeking to assign blame to finding collaborative solutions to disputes;
- **the lens of care**, to which laws, procedures, and agreements are subject in order to understand their potential impact on the wellbeing (or otherwise) of the individuals involved;
- **positive consequences**, by which the goal is to minimise anti-therapeutic consequences, such as the likely increase of conflict, trauma, and/or stress, and to promote therapeutic consequences, such as recovery and healing; and

- **multidisciplinary collaboration**, which recognises that experiences such as divorce, separation, and co-parenting involve people and professionals beyond those involved in the law.

It is hoped that, in some small way, this article both represents and contributes to the advancement of this approach with regard to working with the consequences of divorce in Singapore and beyond.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Professor Kris Geldhill, Professor of Law at Auckland University of Technology, for his comments on an earlier draft of this article.

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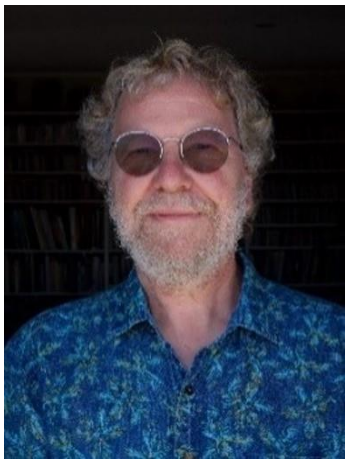

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