Grounded Theory Approach on Post-Divorce Social Adjustment Experience of Female Victims of Domestic Violence

Ki Sook Ko and Myoung Sook Kim

1Division of Christian Studies, BaekSeok University, Cheonan - 330-704, South Korea; ksko@bu.ac.kr
2Division of Social Welfare Studies, BaekSeok Culture University, Cheonan - 330-704, South Korea; soss1366@naver.com

Abstract

This study used the grounded theory of qualitative research method to approach the psychosocial experience and measure of post-divorce social adaptation of female victims of domestic violence. Participants in this study were women who got divorced due to the victimization by domestic violence, those who got helped from counseling and independent institutions and those who were attempting to adapt themselves to society. Total participants were 12 people.

Data collection period was from March to August 2010 and in-depth interviews were conducted three times. Data analysis applied open coding and axial coding based on the grounded theory.

The open coding analysis generated 9 categories and 31 subcategories. As a result of the axial coding analysis, the central phenomenon was ‘becoming an independent individual’, the causal condition was ‘the chain of violence’, ‘attempts to avoid divorce’ while the contextual condition was ‘things to bear after divorce’. The intervening condition was ‘social prejudice’ and ‘cause of psychological recovery’. The action/interaction strategy was ‘finding ways to survive’ and ‘laying foundation for self-reliance’ while the result was recovering personal value and happiness.

Keywords: Axial Coding, Female Victims of Domestic Violence, Grounded Theory Approach, Open Coding, Post-Divorce Social Adjustment

1. Introduction

As the divorce rate goes up in Korea, how the society sees divorce has increasingly changed as well. Fewer people are stigmatizing it while more are regarding it as a decision for a better life. In reality, however, divorced individuals go through difficulty adapting to their family and society despite such a trend. Divorce changes their position and role within a family, hampers the children’s growth and leads them to poverty.

One point we need to see is that all cases of divorce cannot be understood from the same viewpoint since the post-divorce life will present quite different phases depending on what caused it. The study especially focused on the social life of divorced women because of domestic violence. These victims may face triple distress. They suffer from anger, fear, depression and helplessness because of lasting violence throughout their marriage. They undergo chronic anxiety, fear re-appearance, post-traumatic stress and acquired helplessness even after divorce.

Moreover, they subsist under an economically stressed condition due to divorce since they fail to receive alimony or property division or go far as to shoulder debt. They also meet insufficient consideration and care from the society, making it difficult for them to have psychological stability and life with dignity in the society.

In the meantime, a new perspective on their post-divorce life is emerging where it can be another
opportunity for a new start and growth. Scholars assert that the life after divorce is a process to reorganize the life in overall psychosocial span and establish them as an independent self. In this context, divorce can be regarded as a course of family transformation. Though individuals and their family may suffer and be frustrated from the process, overcoming the hardship and accepting the change positively can help lead a better life.

It is obvious from the discussion that the post-divorce life leaves the individuals tasks to address. However, such challenges can serve as an opportunity to design own life and achieve psychological maturity and development. Likewise, the post-divorce life has both negative and positive sides, which can encourage the person and family to develop and grow their potential.

Previous studies were performed on adaptation to post-divorce life with focus on one out of the two; positive aspects (self-esteem, improved life quality, etc.); or negative one (depression, stress, etc.) based on quantitative study approach, and thus cannot avoid the limit that the adaptation is understood in one dimension. It will be appropriate to recognize divorce as a complicated matter with various issues as well as ongoing long-term adaptation process. In this light, adaptation to post-divorce life should be comprehended in a dynamic and multi-dimension.

Therefore, the study tried to identify what divorce means, what kind of psychosocial experience the female domestic violence victims have and how they cope with it down the road after divorce by applying the grounded theory approach, one of the qualitative study approaches to have overall, comprehensive and multi factorial understanding on their adaptation to society. This study can be used as basic data that help the victims' social adaptation and improve their life quality in the future.

2. Study Method

The participants of the study were the women who ended marriage due to domestic violence, received help from a consultant or institute for independent living and are trying to adapt to the society. They were introduced from individuals and organizations like the 1366 shelter, self-reliance gatherings, many domestic violence consulting agencies and shelters from domestic violence.

The data were collected from March to August 2010, during which intensive interviews were done three times. Each interview was tape-recorded upon their consent, which was written down within 24 hours. For ethical consideration, the study purpose was explained and agreed upon before data collection.

Data analysis applied open coding and axial coding based on the grounded theory. The opening coding stage read the interview material to distinguish units of meaning and named abstract meanings that each meaning unit's statements represent as concept. This was made abstract as subcategories, which were turned to categories. The axial coding stage, on the other hand, contextualized the categories of social adaptation experience and set up the relation among categories with focus on the axis.

3. Result Analysis

Analysis of the opening coding presented nine categories and 31 subcategories and the explanation on them is as follows:

3.1 The Line that Separates Life and Death

3.1.1 Violence without Mercy

The participants suffered their husband's violence without mercy or qualms after getting married. The violent act became aggravated after they drunk and even exerted oral and physical violence against their children. And this continued even when outsiders are around.

“He pushed my head against the wall strong enough to be diagnosed three-week hospitalization. He threw anything and beat me hard and left bruise” <participant 2>.

3.1.2 Psychological Abuse

The participants hated subtle psychological abuse and sexual humiliation more than physical violence. The husbands used violence in the way not to leave bruise or injury to avoid backlash and humiliated them with unmentionably indecent words in front of their children.

“He held back beating when I speak of divorce. Then, he simply started to cuss with unmentionable profanity and hit me on the back or body that has a lot of flesh with a towel wound not to leave bruise” <participant 3>.

3.1.3 Despair and Suicidal Attempt

The participants were despaired and depressed due to violence and driven to an extreme situation where
they tried to kill themselves. They indeed lived between life and death, thinking of dying right away numerous times.

“I tried to kill myself many times. I found myself with a rope and wrote in my diaries that I want to die. I always thought of dying”<participant 9>.

3.2 Attempts to Avoid Divorce

3.2.1 Back Home
They left home because of violence but went back with dissuasion from people around and their circumstance such as concern about what their husband would do to their daughter after drinking or business failure.

“I wound not come back without my kids. It would be better if it was a boy, but it is not. The father becomes a dog after drinking”<participant 5>.

3.2.2 Fear about Divorce
The participants cannot decide divorce right away under such a harsh condition as they will have to live separate from their kids or, even though they do, enduring the society’s disapproving perspective and living on a tight budget can be another huge obstacle lying in front of them.

“Of course, it is fear. The finance. I will be ashamed to see mom and dad and I don’t think I can live as a divorcee now. Will I be able to support my kids? What do I have to do? I am worried about things like that”<participant 11>.

3.2.3 Feeling Left for Husband
The participants think their relationship with the husband may improve, seeing they act well after exerting violence against them and often become hesitant to divorce.

“He is very nice and kind after hitting me. He humbly begs pardon, writes a memo and shed tears. So I get to have big “if” and hesitate to get divorce”<participant 10>.

3.2.4 Effort to Improve Relation
The participants gave various attempts to restore, improve their relationship and avoid divorce. Some waited for their husband to change while living together only on weekend.

“I thought he would change someday, be different when we have two kids and so on and waited, but...”<participant 5>.

3.3 Standing on My Own

3.3.1 Living My Own Life
They determined to break free from the dark wall and divorce for a new life. They finally found it difficult to expect the husband’s care anymore and living as it is would drive the body and mind of them and their kids abnormal.

“If I keep living with someone like him simply because I fear about how people would see me, my life would be... They are not me. Living with my husband is even worse than enduring their eyes”<participant 8>.

3.3.2 A New Start with Children
If they were hesitant about divorce because of their children, it is also the children that made them decide divorce. They do not want to raise their kids under the husband’s violence.

“I wanted to live with my kids even if I starve to death. I do not know if that is good to them or not. But I want to do so”<participant 2>.

3.3.3 Divorce with the Help of Shelter
The participants took refuge in a shelter with the kids from the violent husband and could go through divorce proceedings with the help and consulting of a legal expert at the shelter.

“I thought living my own life would be better than now and asked for the divorce proceedings. The 1366 shelter introduced me a legal consultant and gave me lots of help”<participant 7>.

3.4 Things to Bear after Divorce

3.4.1 Body Covered with Bruise and Injury
The participants ended their marriage, dreaming of a new life. However, a pile of tasks to bear and address are lying ahead. The entire body was wrecked and they went bankrupt since they could not get alimony.

“I brought nothing out from home when I split up, but just my body” <participant 4>.

3.4.2 Ardent Maternal Love
The participants cried over the violent husband and gulp back tears with their heartbreaking feelings for their kids. The apologizing and heart-wrenching feeling for them is way more difficult to bear than being abused.
“It is indeed heart breaking. I cried a lot. It is painful and suffering to feel that I haven’t done much for my kids. That is more miserable than being hit and I am very sorry for my kids” <participant 2>.

3.4.3 Anger and Fear about Husband

The participants shivered with anger, thinking about the pain and humiliation they experienced from divorce. They kept revenge in their mind on the husband by making a decent life afterwards. They also had extreme fear that he would someday come back to abuse them again as the very existence of him is carved as fear.

“I want to proudly have a better life with a better man. I also want to kill him. This can be revengeful thought. I have everything in my mind” <participant 1>.

3.4.4 Sexual Trauma

The participants had sense of despair and helplessness in the relation with a different man because of the victim mentality and sexual abuse that the ex-husband inflicted. When they meet a new man, they fail to continue the relationship, suspecting he would act like the ex-husband and distrusting him.

“It is difficult to go out with someone else because of the aftereffect. I am naturally poor at it and now I have a wall that keeps me from meeting someone. I think I have victim mentality” <participant 7>.

3.5 Indifference of Family and Society

3.5.1 Inhospitality of Family

The participants rarely had economic aid from her parents or the husband after divorce and another participant were coldly treated by her own mother.

“My mom told me to go back and nagged me for 20 days asking me why I came here or I belong here no more. So I came back” <participant 6>.

3.5.2 Discomfort at Work

They could not confide her divorce to their colleagues because, if they do, the colleagues would make groundless speculation about the cause. This means women’s divorce is still the target of prejudice.

“I talked to the company about it but not to the business partner as I am afraid of the weird eyes and non-sense speculation. They would have thought I had an affair rather than violence” <participant 2>.

3.5.3 Inconvenience of Resorting to Legal Service

The participants experienced difficulty and inconvenience going through legal proceedings or using related service regarding violence and divorce. They felt the community service center is unkind when they asked about social welfare service they are eligible to after divorce and barely knew how to deal with the notices that were sent from the police station or court.

“I know there will certainly be a welfare service that the community center can advise about. But they only say yes or no” <participant 11>.

3.6 Ways to Survive

3.6.1 Cutthroat Life

The participants tried to have a start-up or get a job without much preparation. However, the reality was far from their expectation. They were too old, inexperienced to get a job or had no special knowledge. One participant invested in a business with her alimony, only to fall victim to scam.

“I cannot get a job because I have neither talent nor expertise. I am most worried about kids’ education and my life” <participant 5>.

3.6.2 Fighting Alone

The participants fought a fierce battle of life alone to survive. They worked as a housekeeper to make a living, gave small allowance to the kids and tried to save the rest to make a house deposit.

“My child is a high school student. Even so, I give him only a thousand won and save the rest under no condition. And I do not withdraw a single coin once deposit is done. When I need to spend, I earn again and tried to save the rest again to make a house deposit” <participant 6>.

3.6.3 Earnest Help and Cooperation

It was the shelter that offered the participants a big help and comfort against the desperate condition after divorce. It provided more comfortable place to rest than their parents’ house as there were women in the same shoes, who also helped cope with their current situation each other. They could also rely on religion and new friends they met in the shelter.

“The shelter goes on a trip once a year. I like it when I go out, play and talk. People like us cannot afford to do that because of money. So, it is like a vitamin” <participant 7>. 
3.7 Cause of Psychological Recovery

3.7.1 Kids, the Source of Strength to Live

The participants believed that their children were the source of strength for life after divorce. When they were exhausted and felt like dying, they brought back the will to live not to hurt their children again and encouraged themselves to be a good mother.

“I thought this is not right. I have got to try again. I want to live now. I thought I would be able to sleep in peace if I die. But that is not right. I already hurt their feelings by divorce. I do not want them to grow up without mom” <participant 9>.

3.7.2 Reinterpretation

The participants gradually began to recover psychologically by reinterpreting their past and violent experience. Although violence is a bad enough experience, they grew strong and mature through the course of overcoming it. They were not tied in the past. Rather, accepting the reality, they were grateful for being alive.

“I think I became strong through violence. Of course, I am not saying it is good. I could not avoid it but after all that, I became strong and mature” <participant 11>.

3.7.3 Power of Religion

They were comforted by religion when they go through hardship. Religious life helped them not forget gratitude and think there is always a reason to exist as a human. When they were swayed, they depended on the bible and get a grip.

“It was helpful. I had faith back then and that comforted me, making me think I also have things to do and feel grateful” <participant 7>.

3.8 Laying Foundation for Self-Reliance

3.8.1 Gaining Confidence

The first step for the participants to build foundation for self-reliance was gaining confidence. They were sometimes quite discouraged by the question what female violence victims can do. However, they started to feel confident as they get along with people, obtain license or certificate, get a job and begin to accept where they are now as it is.

“I felt timid because I got beaten and divorced. Now I have a job and I am not alone. And I got confidence back by getting a license” <participant 3>.

3.8.2 Establishing Economic Foundation

The most important thing for independence in reality is establishing the financial foundation. Fortunately, the participants could have basic necessities of life in the shelter and prepared for life after that by saving seed money from work.

“I am planning to rent a house by saving up for two to three years here. I pay only monthly rental and save the rest” <participant 8>.

3.8.3 Help from Family

Helping hand of their family and relatives also contributed to building the foundation. Their family was supportive on their side and there was a father-in-law who took care of the kids’ tuition.

“They were supportive for me. They cried with me, worried with me and took care of things to eat because they are my family. They also call to ask if I am doing fine” <participant 3>.

3.8.4 Help of Social Service Institute

Police, welfare facilities and institutes also helped them to be self-reliant. The police drove the violent husband away from the victim, the chief of a welfare house brought necessities of life and many agencies related with women provided psychological therapy and material support.

“We have nothing to eat at home. But the chief brought us food such as soy sauce, laver, hot pasta, rice and snacks, etc. I didn’t have money because I did not receive alimony. It was a big help indeed” <participant 8>.

3.8.5 Self-Development and Job

The ultimate goal for the participant to be independent is a job. They worked and studied at the same time to get a license or certificate. With various job-related trainings provided by the shelter, they found their capacity and developed it.

“I could learn from the training program the shelter offers. I think it is really good. The camp is a valuable experience to us. It is very, very costly to go to a camp like that when my life is like this” <participant 7>.

3.9 Recovering Personal Value and Happiness

3.9.1 Becoming a Noble Individual

Now, participants are not ashamed of themselves. They were busy trying to hide their situation, thinking divorce
is a sin. However, they said they can say it without losing dignity. They want to speak about love and hope instead of tear. They are on the road of recovery.

“I found myself stronger than before all of a sudden when I look back. I was afraid of asking for a document at a community service center and a bulky man. But, I am confident in everything I do and feel strong”<participant 6>.

3.9.2 Change and Growth

The participants built a financial base, improved their situation and got to have the power to face the real world. In addition to raising themselves up, they have plans to help other women suffering from the kind they had gone through by using their talent and skill. They saw themselves reflected from the female domestic violence victims they meet during volunteering services and became determined once again for change.

“I personally would like to do a dance therapy. Because I know how many bruises the violence victims have and how miserable their life is, I want to make their life bright with that kind of program” <participant 9>.

3.9.3 Recovering Social Relation

When they were beaten, they isolated themselves from friends and acquaintances. However, they restored the relations with them through independent life. They proved that inner peace and happiness can be realized by having relations with others.

“The biggest change from breaking free from abuse and having an independent life is that I get to meet friends and people that I stopped contacting”<participant 4>.

According to the axial coding result, the central phenomenon of the study, ‘becoming an independent individual’, was ‘the response to what the women victims’ social adaptation experience will be like after divorce. The causal condition of the main phenomenon was ‘the chain of violence’ and ‘attempts to avoid divorce’. The contextual condition referring to the condition that affects the main phenomenon was ‘things to bear after divorce’. The intervening condition mitigates or changes the strength of the central phenomenon while stimulating or disrupting action/interaction strategy. The study’s intervening condition was ‘social prejudice’ and ‘cause of psychological recovery’. The action/interaction strategy means intentional and specific action to deal with a phenomenon. The study’s action/interaction strategy was ‘finding ways to survive’ and ‘laying foundation for self-reliance’. The result, which is generated when action/interaction is added to the central phenomenon, was ‘recovering personal value and happiness’. A Figure drawn with the axial coding can be suggested as follows.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, female domestic violence victims tried their best to avoid divorce though they are placed on the border of life and death in the chain of violence. However, they ended their marriage at last and made efforts to stand alone as an independent human in the real world where they still face social prejudice and indifference caused by divorce and had to struggle and suffer to survive. Throughout the process, causes of psychological recovery such as their children, reinterpretation and religious faith were found helpful. The women upgraded their personal value and happiness by becoming a noble self, changing and growing and restoring the social relations while having confidence and laying financial foundation for independence.

Based on the result, the study makes practical suggestions to help their post-divorce social adaptation as below.

First, the victims suffer from fear, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder about their husband even after divorce. We need to try to help them receive medical experts’ medical attention. To this end, the shelters and consulting agencies that care for such
women’s mental health should improve their function. The government, for its part, needs to provide realistic support and measures for their psychological health to realize the goal.

Second, we witnessed that the society still holds prejudice against divorced women. Public offices and social service institutes also need to raise awareness and change their attitude on the domestic violence victims and divorced women.

Third, the study also identified that the shelter service is significantly helpful for the women to lead an independent life. Nonetheless, physical and psychological services provided by the consulting agencies and shelters are not sufficient enough to help the women’s return to society and self-reliant life. Therefore, such services should be enhanced while financial, housing and psychological support should continue to help their successful independence after they are released from the shelters. To help their long-term independence, the study proposes to establish a management system that will provide comprehensive and continuous services instead of constrained or limited ones.

Forth, the study confirmed that the children are unfathomably important in their life. More meticulous legal measures and support should also be designed for women that have to raise children alone after divorce.

The study made a suggestion for follow-up studies in the years to come. Many of the study participants have used the shelter service before and adapted to the society with its multi-dimensional help. If future studies are performed on women victims who do not rely on the shelter service, the quality of data will improve and the scope will be extended.

5. References

1. Shin JE. The oppression and the process of conscious changes of female domestic violence victims through experiences at a group shelter. Anthropology of Education. 2012; 15(2):123–52.
2. Ryu EJ. A study on the life history of battered women: Based on self-reliance and adaptation. Korean Journal of Family Social Work. 2009; 26:5–34.
3. Schuler CK. Choice’s women make after divorce: Relational dream versus individualistic dream as a primary focus for a new sense of self [PhD. dissertation]. The Wright Institute 97; 1990.
4. Sung JH. The study on the adjustment of divorced women. Korean Journal of Family Social work. 1999; 4:93–116.
5. Chung MH, Kim EY. The development of an integrated group therapy model for divorced families’ better adjustment. Journal of the Korean Home Economics Association. 2005; 43(3):161–83.
6. Choi EH, Lee YH. Study on changing process of women’s self-awareness after divorce. Korea Family Welfare. 2010; 28(4):119–50.
7. Corbin J, Strauss A. Basics of qualitative research techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory. 3rd edition. SAGE Publications, Inc.; 2008.