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## Culture Stress and Difficulties: Lived Stories of Teenaged Mothers in Macau

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## Culture Stress and Difficulties: Lived Stories of Teenaged Mothers in Macau

### Abstract

The traditional Chinese culture influences perspectives toward family, marital status, and living style in Macau SAR, where Eastern cultures meet Western cultures. Although the Western living styles and standards highly influence the daily practices of residents; broken marriage, single parenting, and divorce are considered taboo in the community. The purpose of this study was to understand how teenaged single mothers describe their sources of stress and difficulties in the city. Eight single mothers, who were at different stages in single parenting and broken marriages, were interviewed and asked to share their lived stories. Guided by the Ecological System Theory, analysis of the data indicated that sources of stress and the behaviors of individuals may be highly influenced by surrounding people, environments, and societies. The results of the current study can help social caring providers and policymakers to better understand not only lived experiences of single mothers, but also the social problems, difficulties, and source of stress of the particular groups of people in society.

### Keywords

Macau, Divorced, Ecological System Theory, Lived Stories, Narrative Method, Single Parenting, Stress

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### Acknowledgements

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## **Culture Stress and Difficulties: Lived Stories of Teenaged Mothers in Macau**

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*The traditional Chinese culture influences perspectives toward family, marital status, and living style in Macau SAR, where Eastern cultures meet Western cultures. Although the Western living styles and standards highly influence the daily practices of residents; broken marriage, single parenting, and divorce are considered taboo in the community. The purpose of this study was to understand how teenaged single mothers describe their sources of stress and difficulties in the city. Eight single mothers, who were at different stages in single parenting and broken marriages, were interviewed and asked to share their lived stories. Guided by the Ecological System Theory, analysis of the data indicated that sources of stress and the behaviors of individuals may be highly influenced by surrounding people, environments, and societies. The results of the current study can help social caring providers and policymakers to better understand not only lived experiences of single mothers, but also the social problems, difficulties, and source of stress of the particular groups of people in society. Keywords: Macau, Divorced, Ecological System Theory, Lived Stories, Narrative Method, Single Parenting, Stress*

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### **Background and Introduction**

In the contemporary Western societies, single parents are considered to be a type of family structure that should not be discriminated against (Jeynes, 2012; Tesler & Thompson, 2007; Yarber & Sharp, 2010). However, for society in the East, particularly in the Far East region, heterosexual relationships and traditional family structures are encouraged. People in East Asian regions usually consider broken marriages, becoming a single parent, underage sexual intercourse, teenage pregnancy, and divorce as punishments related to karma and taboo in relation to the family (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). As a result, divorced single mothers face a significant amount of stress, such as social stigma, financial difficulties, the discriminations from society. This study explored how these residents describe their lived experience.

Macau Special Administrative Region of China (Macau SAR) is well-known as a former Portuguese territory where Chinese and Portuguese cultures, customs, lifestyles, and residents harmonize together as an inter-cultural society. It was the site of this research study. Unlike other Asian societies and communities, Macau SAR is one of the few regions in China that have been highly influenced by Western cultures and norms, due to its colonized leadership by Portugal from the sixteenth century until 1999. Although the current population of Macau SAR society consists mainly of Chinese residents, a large number of daily practices, understandings, perspectives, behaviors, and norms related to marriage have been influenced by Western cultures (Lin & Lin, 2011; Selin & Davey, 2012). As a result of the intercultural perspective of the city, the general society advocated residents to select a marital status and lifestyle based on their own desires. In fact, the intercultural perspective and lifestyle are one of the strongest features of society. However, the perspectives of broken marriage, single-parenting and divorce are still considered as the taboos for residents in Macau SAR, particularly Chinese residents.

The number of divorced single mothers in Macau SAR has increased significantly within the past two decades. Current statistics reports indicate that divorce rose from 95 cases in 1990 to 1,479 cases in 2017. In fact, more than 70% of divorced single mothers entered the workforce in 2011 due to financial and economic concerns. Statistics also indicate that, in the same year, the city had 4,291 households consisting of single parents with under-aged children. With these social developments, single-parent families are considered a standard lifestyle selection established in the contemporary community, rather than a social problem (Statistics and census service, 2017).

Although there are research studies that have focused on family therapy and counseling regarding family issues in East Asian regions (Chan, 2011), most of this research studied how parental status affects the educational achievement (Dos Santos, 2019a), social welfare (Plumm et al., 2016), and financial concerns of children (Peng, 2018), as family therapy and counseling are still being developed in these regards, with few public and academic concerns involved (Amato et al., 2015; Cooklin, 2002). In fact, broken marriages, single parents, and divorce are considered taboo in the community, and only a few qualitative research projects on these topics are available; it seems that people are generally reluctant to share personal information about these issues. Therefore, this particular group of people, is underrepresented in the field of social services, social welfare assistance, and research in society. In conventional two-parent households in East Asia, women usually take the roles of housewives and childcare providers, while divorced single mothers need to work and look after their children at the same time. As a result of the dual responsibilities of parenting, divorced single mothers encounter significant levels of stress and conflict in regard to work, family, children, society, and school (Woessmann, 2015).

The purpose of this study, drawing on qualitative interviews with divorced single mothers and using a narrative approach, was to provide a preliminary perspective on the sources of stress for single mothers by examining the mothers' shared lived stories. As most of the current research literature consists of studies about how children and minors are impacted by a single-parent family status, this research sought to highlight some of the unforeseen factors that play roles in regard to single mothers' sources of stress and difficulties in an East Asian city with a significant amount of traditional Western customs and daily practices. Readers with interest in understanding contemporary family issues in Macau SAR will benefit from understanding the background and social welfare problems examined in this study. As a result, the research study was guided by one research question, "How do teenaged single mothers describe their sources of stress and difficulties in Macau SAR?"

Although the majority of the population in Macau SAR consists of Chinese residents, some of their traditional customs, daily practices, and behaviors are still highly influenced by Western cultures (Dos Santos, 2018). The reason behind this phenomenon is the fact that Macau SAR was a Portuguese overseas territory for nearly four centuries. One of the most significant elements of Westernized cultural practices is the religious practice of Catholicism among local Chinese residents. Although Catholicism does not encourage people to re-marry or divorce, divorce may still be exercised under an agreement between both partners. After the completion of the data analysis process, the researcher discovered that most single mothers face different sources of stress during life in Macau SAR. This idea also reflects Yarber and Sharp's notion (2010) that social perspectives, religious backgrounds, and social norms influence the decisions and practices of single parents and divorced people in contemporary society (Yarber & Sharp, 2010).

It is worth noting that there seem to be no recent studies about the single parents' issues and problems in Macau SAR. Studies about these issues as experienced in Taiwan and Japan could be found. However, the unique cultural background in Macau SAR does not have

significant connections with these nations. Therefore, the results of this research study serve as one of the first projects in the current literature database.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this study, the researcher employed a theoretical framework based on the Ecological System Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). The theory indicates that the behaviors and activities of individuals are affected significantly by environmental elements, such as social networks, financial resources, discrimination, and social changes. Bronfenbrenner (1986) illustrated his theory with the idea of Russian dolls, in order to explain how an ecological system reflects the social problems in society. In other words, Ecological System Theory outlines different levels of influential factors for individuals and family systems, including 1) the microsystem; 2) the mesosystem; 3) the exosystem; and 4) the macrosystem. A large number of research studies in the fields of social work, education, and adult learning have employed this theory to explore the relationship between individuals and society in regard to parental factors (Darling et al., 1989; Darling, 2007; Dos Santos, 2016).

#### **Microsystem**

In social work and education, a microsystem refers to the elements with the closest relationships with individuals, which affect their everyday activities, such as family members. This system is also the closest element to individuals themselves (Langer & Lietz, 2014).

#### **Mesosystem**

A mesosystem refers to interactions and connections between family members and close peers. Although these critical elements do not have the closest relationships with individuals, they may still have considerable influence on the daily activities and behaviors of individuals (Langer & Lietz, 2014).

#### **Exosystem**

An exosystem refers to the connections between individuals and their living social environment, community, and local society. Unlike in a mesosystem, individuals in an exosystem usually do not actively engage with essential elements on a daily basis. However, such influential elements exert a certain level of effort in regard to changing the minds and behaviors of individuals (Langer & Lietz, 2014).

#### **Macrosystem**

A macrosystem refers to the cultural background and overall environmental setting in which individuals live. Individuals usually do not have close activities and interactions with any critical elements in the macrosystem. Examples of such elements include governmental policies, elections, legal system reforms, and individuals' ethnicities, among other aspects (Langer & Lietz, 2014).

Researchers have indicated that this theoretical framework is useful in understanding how the marital status of individuals influences their stress, daily activities, and behaviors at four different levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Langer & Lietz, 2014).

## Parental Stress

Researchers indicated that single mothers were more likely to experience significant depression and negative lived experiences than married women and parents from two-parent families. Single mothers also usually face poverty and inadequate resources (Cairney et al., 2003). Researchers have shown that each family and each parent within a family have their own ways of handling physical and psychological stress, negative feelings, and concerns (Butcher et al., 2008). Researchers (Cooper et al., 2009) completed a study on how single mothers handled stress after a divorce or separation. The research discovered that some single mothers did not know how to locate appropriate financial and social support from community centers and welfare departments. Without physical and psychological support from social workers and associates, single mothers usually experience higher levels of stress than women in two-parent families. Copeland and Harbaugh (2005) reported that women might face high levels of stress when they change their status from non-married to married. Stress could also increase when women divorce or separate from a two-parent family, shifting to single-parent status (Copeland & Harbaugh, 2005).

Single parents usually receive less supports (both internal and external channels) than two-parent families, due to extended working hours, social discrimination, less socialized networking, and social isolation. Unlike two-parent families, in which spouses support each other financially, single parents usually need to make extra income to satisfy the gaps in expenses (Weinraub & Wolf, 1983). In addition to financial stress, single parents usually need to deal with the stresses of time management. Even if the marital status and workplace discriminations of female professionals are being decreased, the earnings of female professionals are still significantly lower than that of male professionals. As a result, single mothers may have difficulties handling the balance between family time and work, due to unbalanced time management.

Researchers further indicated that single parents usually have the intention of seeking a romantic relationship with other single parents, as both parties may have a mutual understanding and similar life experiences (Plumm et al., 2016). However, it is worth noting that not all children from single-parent families accept their parents starting a new romantic relationship. Children may be confused, due to the invasion of a new romantic partner (Amato & Keith, 1991). Some of them may even ignore and reject this romantic relationship. As a result, single parents need to handle the ignorance and rejection of their children in addition to financial and social difficulties (Hetherington, 1981). As a result, the research study is guided by one research question, "How do teenaged single mothers describe their sources of stress and difficulties in Macau SAR?"

## The Researcher

Luis Miguel Dos Santos is an Assistant Professor at Woosong University, South Korea. Prior to this position, the researcher has worked in different types of social caring and counseling service for minorities. The researcher has completed his Doctor of Education at Northeastern University, Boston, USA. The researcher has worked in several urban school districts in Macau SAR, Hong Kong SAR, People's Republic of China, and the United States. During the teaching voyage in the urban environment, the researcher observed the social problems and social inequalities of minorities (Dos Santos, 2019d), single parents, LGBTs (Dos Santos, 2020a), disabilities (Dos Santos, 2020b), students with special needs (Dos Santos, 2020c), adult learners, evening students, and returning students (Dos Santos, 2019b, 2019c; Dos Santos, 2020; Dos Santos & Lo, 2018). As a result, the researcher wanted to understand how single mothers in Macau SAR described their lived stories and how this sharing may help

other readers and social caring providers to develop better services and policies to minorities in the society. In the current database, the researcher found that most of the research projects and governmental reports tended to be quantitative and statistical reports. As qualitative research studies would better capture the background and lived stories sharing of individuals, the researcher wanted the opportunities to connect several single mothers in Macau SAR for lived stories sharing. The outcomes of this research study provide a blueprint and a direction to social caring providers, policymakers, and related professionals to understand these serious social problems in society. Furthermore, findings suggest ways to reform and enhance the current policy and services, which better fit the demands and needs for these minorities in society.

## **Methodology**

To address the study's research question, "How do teenaged single mothers describe their sources of stress and difficulties in Macau SAR?" a narrative research method was chosen. The researcher believed lived stories, and experience sharing would be the most appropriate way to capture information from the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). This research study explored eight lived stories regarding the sources of stress and difficulties of female divorced single parents impact the participants' lives in Macau SAR, an East Asian society.

### **Narrative Methodology**

The researcher employed the narrative approach advocated by (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) to collect data from participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The narrative approach usually concerns individuals' lived stories, interests, life experience, passions, and even negative feelings. In the perspective and understanding of participants, participants understand their lived stories and life experience in terms of stories. Participants live with their previous stories, tell stories of those lives, re-state stories with potential changes, and relive the changed lives. In the narrative approach of single parents' lived stories, the researcher wanted to explore more than single parents' stories related to their self-efficacy (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995); in addition, the researcher sought to explore their perspectives of others, and their understanding of the society in which they live, where the Eastern cultures met the Western culture. In this way, the participants of this study were able to describe the social issues and social problems of this diverse city (Tang & Dos Santos, 2017).

Research projects with the narrative approach are rich in anthropological directions. Lived stories and life experience occur narratively. Therefore, lived stories and life experience can successfully be studied narratively. The narrative approach in social science background is not only about seeking out and hearing lived stories of participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this research study, narratives are an entering point for exploring cultural understandings as well, and how they impact life experiences (Dos Santos, 2020d, 2020a).

### **Participants**

A purposive sampling strategy (Merriam, 2009) was employed to invite the participants to take part in the study. The eight participants are all members of a non-profit organization. It is worth noting that the non-profit organization is a mid-size and non-religious based organization with the mission to provide family and children services. The non-profit organization welcomes all local and non-local residents who engage with family issues. The organization has registered social workers and human service providers who have experience in referral and family counseling. At the time of the interviews, participants were between 18

and 19 years old, divorced, and single parents. Seven of the participants had one child, while one participant had two children. The researcher, as a professional worker in the field of social caring, invited the potential participants via personal contact. It is worth to note that the researcher is not a registered social worker who may practice family and professional counseling to the participants. The researcher did not have prior engagements with the participants.

The researcher sent individual letters of invitation with the purpose of the research study, interview questions, and the letter of agreement to each participant. Then, the potential participants responded. Eventually, all potential participants agreed to take part in the research study. Detailed demography is listed in Table 1.

*Table 1. Detailed Demography of the Participants*

Name	Age	Occupation	Family Members	Brief Background
Amy	18	Saleslady	Grandfather, parents, one child	Her father works as a sailor; the interactions of fatherhood were absent during her early age.
Betty	18	Saleslady	Father and one child	Her mother died in her early childhood due to illness. Her father is a traditional Chinese who is a closed-minded person.
Catherine	18	NGO worker / University student	Parents and one child	She was born in mainland China. Catherine's family is an immigrated family outside of Macau SAR; their family expectations and practices are not influenced by the western traditional customs and practices.
Denise	18	Public relation worker	Parents and one child	Denise was born in a mixed family where her father is a Portuguese, and her mother is Chinese.
Edith	19	Waitress	Boyfriends and two children	She is engaging in a romantic relationship.
Fiona	19	Housekeeper	Parents, grandparents, and one child	She was born in Macau SAR. However, her parents and grandparents are originally from northern mainland China where the family norms and practices are different from the cultures in Macau SAR.
Georgina	19	Saleslady / University student	Parents and one child	Although Georgina has come to Macau SAR for nearly 10 years, she still cannot master the local oral and written languages (e.g., Cantonese).
Helen	19	NGO worker	Mother, step-father and one child	Her father died 5 months after her birth. Because she grew up in poverty, her family members expected significant financial income after her secondary school graduation.

## Site

The study context is Macau SAR, China, one of the most well-established hospitality and tourism-oriented city located in southern China. According to the latest Population By-Census of 2016, as of August 2016, the city has a population of 650,834, up by 17.8% from 552,503 in the 2011 Population Census Besides the significant population in a tiny-size city setting, the city also has a diverse population by ethnicity. The city has 95.7% of the Chinese



population, 1.0% of Chinese-Portuguese populations, 0.6% of Portuguese population, 0.4% of Chinese-non-Portuguese population, 2.3% of other populations, and 0.2% of Portuguese-other population (Statistics and census service, 2017).

Besides the diverse population in the city, Macau SAR is also a city where Eastern and Western religious practice met. According to Cheng (1999), Catholicism, Christianity, Daoism, Buddhism, and Chinese folk religions are several of the remarkable religious practices of the residents in Macau SAR. Like many westernized colonies, a significant amount of the local residents are the fellows of Catholicism. In addition, besides the beliefs and religious practices are influenced by the westernized religions, the daily practices, beliefs, understanding, language, and perspective of families are also influenced by the Portuguese and the western cultures. As a city with westernized-oriented cultures, it is expected that the local residents should have open-minded perspectives for non-traditional families (Cheng, 1999).

## **Data Collection**

Interviews are one of the most common data collection approaches in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). According to Seidman (2013), participants are less likely to share lived stories and sensitive information with a stranger (e.g., the researcher). In order to build a committed relationship with the participants and collect rich lived stories from them, the researcher decided to conduct three semi-structured, face-to-face, and one-on-one interview sessions with each participant individually (Seidman, 2013). Each interview lasted approximately 90-120 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. To protect the individuals' identities, all the participants provided a pseudonym (e.g., Amy, Betty, Catherine, Denise, Edith, Fiona, Georgina, and Helen).

The researcher conducted data analysis according to (Merriam, 2009) and Thomas's (2006) guidance for narrative methods. The researcher first transcribed all the voice records into transcripts and then thoroughly read each transcript. Following the procedure of the general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006), the transcripts were re-read several times as prescribed by the theoretical framework.

The researcher employed open-coding (Merriam, 2009) to narrow the large-size transcripts into first-level themes. Thomas (2006) indicated that data should be further reduced. Therefore, the researcher further employed the axial-coding (Merriam, 2009) to narrow down the themes. After the researcher narrowed down the data into themes based on the directions of the theoretical framework, the researcher translated the data from Chinese to English for reporting. However, before further steps, the researcher sent both of the English and Chinese transcripts to the participants for confirmation.

It is worth to note that the themes and subthemes in this study are based on the direction of the theoretical framework.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Human protection in narrative research is a responsibility for privacy. Unlike other research methods with observations and focus group activities, narrative researchers need to establish an intimate relationship with the participants to share lived stories and life experience. Protecting participant identities allowed them to remain anonymous in the living community. It is worth noting that this study was approved by the Woosong University research department (WLI/2018/09) and supported by the Woosong University.

All prospective participants were invited to participate in this study through a personal invitation letter voluntarily. First, the researcher sent individual letters of invitation with the purpose of the research study, interview questions, and the letter of agreement to each

participant. Then, the potential participants responded. Eventually, all potential participants agreed to take part in the research study.

In addition to the personal identity, the study data was stored on a personal password-protected computer. The audio files, written transcripts, signed agreements, and transcribed interviews were accessible only by the researcher. All the paper-based documents, such as signed agreement, were stored in a password-protected drawer. The researcher was the only one with access to the data in the abovementioned items and assigned a pseudonym to protect the identity of each participant.

### Interview Language Usage

Due to the mother tongue of all the participants is Chinese language, they were allowed Chinese to express their lived stories and life experience to the researcher. In order to report this research study to academic journals, the researcher needed to translate all the interview transcripts into English language after the completion of data analysis. In order to show the translation did not contain any misinterpretation, the researcher sent both Chinese and English transcripts to the participants for confirmation. As a result, all participants agreed and approved the information for their transcripts.

### Findings

The findings of the study were categorized into superordinate themes and subthemes using a theoretical framework structure (Thomas, 2006). The interview analysis yielded three superordinate themes and six subthemes. It is worth noting that the superordinate themes are based on the directions of the theoretical framework because the framework provides the leveling of stress of the individuals Bronfenbrenner (1986). The subthemes, however, are categorized based on the data from the participants. The following part outlines the details of the relationship.

The first set of themes comprises the microsystem as the superordinate theme, with (1) the perspectives of family members and (2) the lack of child caregiving skills as the two subthemes. The second set comprises the mesosystem as the superordinate theme, with (1) the misunderstanding of peers, (2) discrimination from co-workers, and (3) the negative reactions of older family members as the three subthemes. The third set comprises the exosystem as the superordinate theme, with discrimination from the public as a subtheme. After conducting a detailed data analysis, the researcher discovered that none of the participants expressed any information or sources of stress related to the macrosystem within the theoretical framework. Therefore, the superordinate themes did not yield any data regarding the macrosystem. Table 2 outlined the themes and subthemes connections.

Table 2. *Superordinate Themes and Subthemes*

Superordinate themes	Subthemes
First superordinate theme: Microsystem	1) The perspectives of family members 2) The lack of child caregiving skills
Second superordinate theme: Mesosystem	1) The misunderstanding of peers 2) Discrimination from co-workers 3) The negative reactions of older family members
Third superordinate theme: Exosystem	1) Discrimination from the public

## Microsystem

A microsystem refers to people's everyday closest interactions and engagements with individuals. The first superordinate theme identified among the participants' responses relates to the importance placed by divorced single mothers on the perspectives of family members and their lack of child caregiving skills. In discussing this theme, the participants emphasized the significance of the understanding and acceptance of family members. They further discussed the significance of looking after their newborn children as a primary objective. Thus, the two subthemes identified within this superordinate theme are: (1) the perspectives of family members; and (2) the lack of child caregiving skills.

**Perspectives of family members.** The participants discussed the way in which their family members, including their own parents, could not accept the short lengths of their marriages. In other words, the perspectives of their parents on their broken marriages are one of the sources of stress for these participants. As Amy explained, "My dad believed I was not serious enough for marriage. He did not talk to me for more than a year." Betty shared a similar experience by saying, "My father did not talk to me after I divorced and returned to my home." In addition to the perspectives of parents, the opinions of siblings were identified as another source of stress. Edith noted, "My youngest sister always asks me about my husband." Helen said, "My younger brother is very concerned about how I will be a father to my son." Georgina and Fiona are from traditional families with strong East Asian family perspectives, and both of them discussed stress and pressure in relation to their grandparents. Georgina said, "Two of my grandmothers looked down on me and asked me to leave their home due to my unsuccessful marriage." Fiona said, "I used to spend three or four days at my maternal grandmother's apartment every week, but my grandmother asked me to leave her home." By striving to understand the lived stories of each participant, one of the most significant sources of stress was identified as the negative perspectives of family members.

Meanwhile, some participants regarded the unconcerned attitudes of their family members as another source of stress. The family members of Catherine and Denise did not convey any particular feelings after they divorced. Catherine said:

After I signed the divorce agreement at the lawyer's office, my mother did not ask me anything about what had happened to my marriage or why. I am not sure what my parents and family members think about my divorce. I understand that they do not want to hurt my feelings, but not saying anything is not the right approach either.

Denise shared the same sentiment:

My parents and siblings never asked about what happened, so I am not sure if they like or dislike what I did. I care about the feelings and perspectives of my beloved family members, but every time I ask them, they somehow avoid the topic.

In short, parental perspectives usually positively and negatively influence the participants' understanding of their roles and concepts about divorce under the strong impacts of the East Asian cultural bias and understanding. Although divorce can be life event and activity between two individuals and children, family members' perspectives and points of views also take important roles under the East Asian perspectives and situations.

**Lack of child caregiving skills.** Unlike mature and prepared women with lived experience, the teenaged participants did not possess any caregiving skills or experience in regard to caring for their newborn babies. Five of the participants even needed to make weekly payments to their parents for their caring services. Georgina said, “My mother needs me to pay for caring services on top of food provision for my son.” Helen also lamented, “My child is her [Helen’s mother] grandchild, and I am her daughter, but she still needs to charge me.” These participants expressed negative feelings due to financial conflicts among their family members.

In contrast to this, Catherine and Denise said they needed to look after their children themselves, as none of their family members was willing to assist. Denise stated, “I asked my mother and grandmother to look after my child during my working hours, but my mother said it was none of her business.” Catherine said, “My parents dislike my child because of my unsuccessful marriage. They try their best to avoid even having to touch my child.”

In short, some participants argued that due to their divorced status, some of their parents were not willing to support their (i.e., both participants and their children) costs of living. Although some decided to work, they continued to face the conflicts between family responsibilities and work stress.

### **Mesosystem**

A mesosystem refers to the interactions and connections between family members and close peers. In addition to interactions and connections regarding parents and grandparents, sources of stress for participants may also be related to their peers, co-workers, and distant relatives. Beyond the closest family members of the participants who currently live in the same household, the second superordinate theme identified among the responses of participants involves people they interact with on a daily basis. The researcher found three subthemes among the collected data: (1) the misunderstanding of peers; (2) discrimination from co-workers; and (3) the negative reactions of older family members.

**Misunderstanding of peers.** Almost all of the participants reported that their peers looked down on their broken marriages and their single-parent status. Four participants reported that their peers had accepted them marrying at a young age but not their broken marriage. Amy said, “My best friend still cannot accept I am divorced.” Edith also shared a similar experience, noting, “My best friend is quite traditional. She does not understand why I decided to divorce my husband after such a short-term marriage.” Betty said, “Several of my best friends at school congratulated me when I got married. But now I know that they are laughing at me.”

Another four participants reported that their peers looked down on their single-parent status. Betty said that two of her former classmates took her single-parent status as a joke. She said, “My classmates came to my house and looked after me right after I divorced. However, they shared all my stories with other classmates over a social media chat room.” Helen shared another story about negative reactions from her peers, recounting, “My classmates came to the hospital and took several pictures of my child. However, they posted the pictures in a chat room group as a joke.” After sharing some of the difficulties they had encountered to their best friends and peers, almost all participants felt betrayed.

In short, although marriage is a personal concern, due to the East Asian perspective, some peers and friends could not accept early marriage and divorce. The negative reactions and feedback from peers, however, created stress for the participants.

**Discrimination from co-workers.** Several participants also indicated that their single-parent status had affected their workplace roles. The traditional family and marital status of

individuals played a significantly influential role in their performance. Catherine and Helen stated that some of their co-workers discriminated against them in terms of their professional positions. Catherine said, "I used to work as a receptionist for a non-profit organization center. However, after I divorced, the center director transferred me to a rural community center with fewer than three workers." Helen also used to work in a community center for family issues. However, after she divorced, the center director immediately asked her to resign. Helen said, "Divorce is not a happy situation in life but, after I divorced this man, all I received were negative opinions from my co-workers."

Two other participants, Georgina and Denise, said their co-workers liked using their mature family status to challenge their single-parent status. Georgina recounted how several of her co-workers liked to share with her their family pictures and used aggressive language. Georgina said, "Two of my co-workers always show me their family pictures and ask me where my former husband is." Denise also shared a similar experience, saying, "Several of my female co-workers like to gossip about my misfortune."

In short, besides the negative feedback from peers, some also faced opinions from their co-workers who could not understand their personal situation. Such negative opinions might be created due to the East Asian perspectives about family structures and orders. The reactions from co-workers, therefore, created some sources of stress to the participants.

**Negative reactions of older family members.** Four participants reported that their elder family members encouraged them to re-marry immediately, as the single-parent status is considered to be both a disadvantage and a taboo in traditional Asian cultures. All conversations about re-marriage were reported to have been initiated by the uncles and aunts of the participants. Edith said, "Without my permission, my uncles and aunts gave my contact information to the divorced sons of some of their friends for a blind date." Helen stated that her uncle brought her to the home of one of his co-workers for a dinner date. She said, "My uncle asked me to bring a document to the home of his co-worker for an urgent online conference call but, when I arrived, I saw that a dinner table had been arranged with two glasses of wine."

In short, as divorce is not a positive life situation under the East Asian perspective, many participants faced stress and unwilling encouragement about re-marriage from their older family members. Although none wanted to make changes due to their mental understanding of marriage and love, they still needed to obey the arrangements from their family members.

## **Exosystem**

An exosystem refers to the connections between individuals and their living social environment, community, and local society. Aside from negative perspectives and a lack of understanding from their closest family members, peers, classmates, and co-workers, single mothers also face significant stress regarding the public and society. For the final set of themes, the researcher identified discrimination from the public as the subtheme.

**Discrimination from the public.** More than half of the participants shared their experiences regarding discrimination from the general public. Two participants described a negative experience at a Parents' Day activity in a community center. The participants stated that the participating families, parents, and hosts in such community activities looked down on their status as women who were divorced single parents. Helen shared:

I am a member of that community center. I brought my child to a Parents' Day activity because I wanted to exchange ideas with other parents in my

community. But a group of mothers pointed at me and laughed because of my young age. I could even hear some mothers calling me a dirty woman.

Helen's experience was a negative one that increased her stress level, thereby creating a negative experience as a divorced single mother in a traditional East Asian society. Denise also shared a similar experience during a community activity:

The community activity invited all members of the public to share their difficulties in a relaxed setting. As I am a single mother, I asked my sister to come with me. However, the host of the activity did not allow the three of us to enter and even labeled us as lesbians. The three of us were not even allowed to enter the location.

In addition to discrimination from community centers and services, three of the participants shared negative experiences with food services. Betty recounted a negative experience with a restaurant promotion:

As a divorced mother, I try my best to focus all my energies on my child. Once, I brought my child to a restaurant for a family promotion deal, but the restaurant challenged my family type as I did not have a husband. Although I explained that I am a divorced mother with enough financial resources to pay for the meal, the restaurant still refused to serve us the promotional deal.

Catherine shared another similar experience in regard to food services:

My mother went with my child and me to a Christmas family buffet. However, upon reaching the reception area of the restaurant, the waitress asked my husband to come instead of my mother. I explained that I am divorced, but they maintained they only offer the family buffet to traditional male-female families. My question is this: If the husband was working in another country, would they have still refused to serve us?

In short, due to the East Asian cultural bias, tradition and understanding about family structure, some members of the public still could not accept divorce, single parenting and early marriage due to personal decision and preference. Although all participants' personal decision about their marriage status always followed the legal orders, the stress and depression were continued due to cultural bias and discrimination.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The theoretical framework for this study is based on the Ecological System Theory created by Bronfenbrenner (1986), which indicates that sources of stress and the behaviors of individuals may be highly influenced by surrounding people, environments, and societies (Langer & Lietz, 2014). The results of the current study can help social caring providers and policymakers to better understand not only lived experiences of single mothers, but also the social problems, difficulties, and source of stress of the particular groups of people in society. Recommendations for practice describe how participants, related family members, residents, social workers, care providers, and policymakers may best apply the information garnered from this study to their professions.

### **Discrimination from Family Members**

The participants believe that one of the most significant sources of their stress is the disrespectful perspectives of their family members. Unlike in Western societies, East Asian family members tend to live together as large-sized family cohorts, even after marriage. Each family usually occupies a small apartment or unit within the same area. The female participants in this study are supposed to live with their children in the living unit of their male partners after marriage. However, their divorced single-parent status has affected the understanding of their family members in regard to married women and mothers, based on their cultural perspectives. This behavior echoes notion (Hardet & Crow, 1991; Plumm et al., 2016) about the elements children feel about their parents' behaviors in regard to romantic relationships (Butler, 2015). As Denise said, "My parents and siblings never asked about what happened, so I am not sure if they like or dislike what I did. I care about the feelings and perspectives of my beloved family members." Participants reported that most of their family members decided to avoid the reality of their broken marriages because it is not something positive that should be promoted. As a result, most family members neglect them. Catherine even recounted how her family members intolerantly avoid touching her child.

### **Discrimination from Surrounding People**

Participants also face stress from outside their families. East Asian people tend to live as a cohort in a bonded society, particularly within Chinese traditions. Although Portuguese culture has significantly influenced the daily practice of residents in Macau SAR, their perspectives about family and marriage remain unchanged. Participants also expressed the way in which the perspectives of and understanding from their peers, co-workers, and older family members created another significant source of stress (Dos Santos, 2020d). For example, Catherine was demoted because of the perspective of her supervisor regarding her status as a divorced woman. Betty's peers fueled gossip after her unsuccessful marriage. Edith's relatives looked down on her broken marriage and referred her to other male divorcees (Holyfield, 2002). The cited evidence is not a matter of individual or isolated cases related to a tiny proportion of participants. Instead, such activities and behaviors reflect the current situation of a minority group of women in contemporary society in Macau SAR.

### **The Effects of the Status of Young Divorced Single Mothers on Their Daily Lives**

Unlike individuals from two-parent families, single mothers need to act simultaneously as mothers and fathers to their children. Thus, their stress levels and responsibilities are expected to be much higher than female parents in two-parent families. In East Asian societies, a reasonable number of activities may be restricted for single mothers because of their status. For example, Catherine's employment was changed without any notice, due to her status. Because career opportunities for single mothers are limited, Catherine could not express any negative opinions about this, as financial resources are essential to her. Moreover, several single mothers discussed the way in which their status negatively affected their choices in regard to sharing opinions and enjoying family life within society. For example, Helen and Denise encountered negative experiences with regard to family activities at community centers. Even though both participants discussed the way in which being divorced was not their own choice, none of their peers accepted their status. Betty and Catherine also experienced similar forms of discrimination at restaurants because of their status as single mothers.

The Ecological System Theory created by Bronfenbrenner (1986) indicates that the behaviors and activities of individuals are highly influenced by environmental elements, such

as social networks, financial resources, discrimination, and social changes, among others. In the current study on teenaged, divorced single mothers in Macau SAR, participants indicated that their sources of stress were mostly at the levels of their microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem. One of the most significant discoveries of this study is that, even though Portuguese cultures and traditions influence the daily practices of people's lives in Macau SAR to a great extent, most behaviors, understandings, and perspectives of marriage and family continue to remain faithful to traditional Asian practices.

Finally, this study supports existing literature regarding divorce and parental stress as tools for understanding the behaviors of teenaged, divorced single mothers (Plumm et al., 2016). Through a narrative of interview transcripts, perspectives, and lived stories of individuals, insights emerged as to their similarities and differences within a holistic picture. Future researchers could coordinate with family members of participants, individuals in their early 20s with similar backgrounds, and the divorced male partners of the participants, in order to enhance our current understanding of the situation.

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