

SPLITSVILLE: A Play-with-Music

Exploring Improper Divorce Disclosure's Effects on Children

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ABSTRACT

Going through a divorce is a difficult time for a family, including the children. In this COVID-19 pandemic era, when the divorce rate in Indonesia soars high, I conducted a research to find out how it affects children or how children respond to it, especially when the decision to divorce is taken without their knowledge. To analyze it, I used theories from communication science. From the result of that research, I made a musical script which portrays my findings, in the hopes that readers or audiences can understand children's perspective of divorce. The findings are the fact that it makes children become aloof and lowers their self-esteem. Even though they have a lot of questions and uncertainties towards the future, they will choose to become distant to avoid the topic of divorce. The reasons being they are afraid that talking about it will bring more drastic change. Other than that, they do not trust their parents as much anymore, since they think that the parents have lied to them.

Keywords: divorce, children, communication, aloof, play-with-music, comedy

1. INTRODUCTION

Because of the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak, people are forced to do their activities at home to avoid infection. During this time, people spend a lot of time with their family. The increased time together is like a magnifying glass to relationship problems between the members of the family. Consequently, domestic problems arose which resulted in the sky-rocketing number of divorces (The Jakarta Post, 2020). Through this creative thesis, I would like to shine light towards the impact divorce has on children, specifically, the divorce disclosure. Therefore, I decided to make a comedy play-with-music about a child discovering that his parents are getting a divorce.

In August 2020, a video of people lining up to file a divorce in a religious court building in Soreang district, Bandung was trending. A staff member told CNN Indonesia that there were 592 divorce cases with possible increase that month. In Semarang, at least a hundred cases were filed every day in August. Other regions of Indonesia also reported that there was a big increase in the number of couple divorces. The head of the Indonesian Population and Family Planning Agency Hasto Wardoyo revealed that 28% of the cases were because of economic problems, while 50% resulted from long-term quarrels. The pandemic takes a toll on families' financial stability, which triggers fights (Hastanto, 2020). This shows that divorce is definitely one of the big impacts of the pandemic. While thinking about all this, one thing that crossed my mind was, "What about the kids?"

I am interested in how children react towards divorce. Tamara D. Afifi, a professor in the Department of Communication, University of California, investigated the impacts of divorce on adolescents. Adolescents are people ranging from age 10 to 19 (World Health Organization, n.d.). Divorce can be stressful for children if their parents do not handle it right. Some of the impacts of that might be change of personality, physical pains like headache and stomachache, and sleeping troubles (Afifi, Afifi, & Coho, 2009). In this creative thesis, I will be focusing on the change of personality and attitude, which I will explain further in Theory and Methodology. However, I will show some aspects of physical pains as an effect in the creative work.

One of the key events in the divorce process for the kids is the disclosure of the divorce. The amount of information about the divorce and the time they get it are very important. Oftentimes, parents will conceal the divorce until they feel like they have to tell the kids. This can be really dangerous because if their parents decide on getting a divorce, adolescents or children need some information about it or else they will feel afraid, uncertain, and untrusting toward their parents. Children who feel that the parents are holding information from them can feel like they are being deceived (Thomas et al., 1995). That could put a strain on the parent-child relationship and make things even harder for them. Other effects may include low self-esteem, which I will also discuss, but not focus on in this creative thesis. Instead, I am going to highlight the family's relationship and communication more. My plan is to take these negative, yet real, examples that have happened a lot in families and make it a comedy play-with-music, so that the audience may reflect on the situation.

In bringing up the issue of divorce, I am heavily inspired by Simon Stephens's play adaptation of Mark Haddon's famous novel, *The Curious Incident of a Dog in the Night-time* (Haddon & Stephens, 2012). The play revolves around an autistic 15-year-old boy, Christopher, who is trying to find the mystery of how his neighbor's dog was murdered. In doing so, he found out that his parents are separated, contrary to what his dad had previously revealed to him, which was that his mother passed away. Then Christopher writes his journey, and the audience is actually watching the play that Christopher had written about it. I am intrigued by how parents can conceal such a big life decision from the kids. Christopher ended up leaving his dad's house to live with his mother, before moving back to his dad's and I can only imagine how he feels. I wish to reveal more about how a secret separation like this takes a toll on the kids in my creative thesis.

The genre of my play is comedy. As a genre filled with humor, comedy serves a fun learning process towards the audience and makes it memorable (Helitzer & Shatz, 2005). The target audience I have in mind other than adolescents, are adults, specifically parents. Because of that, I will need a genre that can teach a lesson without being too niggling, and comedy does exactly that. I plan to make the show as memorable as possible so that the issue stick with them even after the show ends. People get to enjoy the play as they learn something deep about the importance of a wholesome family for children, how children view divorce, and how they react to it.

Even though it is reliant towards humor, comedy plays have been known to discuss heavy issues. The work that inspired me the most in this genre is Thomas Meehan's musical *Annie*. *Annie* is a comedy drama about an eleven-year-old orphan's journey of escaping her mean orphanage warden, Miss Hannigan, while finding her biological parents with the help of a billionaire, Oliver Warbucks. The story is set in the 1930s Great Depression and Annie brought positivity and hope that inspires people around her, from homeless people she found while escaping, Oliver Warbucks and his staff, to the President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt (Meehan, 1977). The musical discusses issues like child slavery, economic inequality, and fraud in manner that is funny and hopeful. This is what inspires me the most. I can see how comedy wraps these themes into a cheerful, positive story.

More recent examples of comedy plays discussing difficult issues would be *The Book of Mormon*, which premiered in 2011, and Laura Wade's 2018 *Home, I'm Darling*. Shaw and Welker studied the issues talked about in *The Book of Mormon* and produced a statement that this foul-mouthed musical about Mormon missionaries is a love letter from atheists to religion (Shaw & Welker, 2016). *Home, I'm Darling* tackles the issue of gender roles in nowadays society compared to the 1950s (Haynes, 2018). These two shows assure that heavy issues and comedy do mix well. The fact that playwrights still make comedies like this means that they are well-received by the audience. Therefore, I will try to deliver my play using comedy as the genre.

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I will deliver my play in a play-with-music. Dr. Millie Taylor from the University of Winchester explained that musical theatre is a form in which the emotional material and some narrative information is relayed through songs (Taylor, 2012). Although there have been differing opinions, thestage.co.uk wrote that play-with-music and musicals are the same. The different terms only suggest the directors' different preference in marketing the work (West End Producer, 2015). A musical brings the audiences to experience a lot of things at once. They get to understand the narrative information, make intra-textual associations, empathize with certain characters, getting the values presented in the play, all while being entertained by an element that naturally brings pleasure to human beings, music (Taylor, 2012). That being said, one of the reasons I want to make this a play-with-music is because I want to make it easier for the audience to grasp the depths of the characters and issues. I also would like them to enjoy the performance as much as possible even if the topic being discussed is difficult.

Another reason why I choose this form is because my target audience are Indonesians and I want them to enjoy the performance as much as they learn from it. Indonesia has their own take in musicals, seen from their traditional performing arts like *Ludruk* and *Ketoprak*. More modern examples of musicals in Indonesia can be seen from the works of *Bengkel Teater Rendra* and *Teater Koma*. I see that this form of art can convey emotional materials well enough for it to capture the hearts of Indonesian audiences. As Indonesians traditionally combine theatre performances with music, I believe they are more familiar and or more interested in plays-with-music than plays. Plays might be considered having less entertainment value. Moreover, the fact that *Teater Koma* is still actively drawing in so many audiences, I have faith that play-with-music is well-received by Indonesians.

Third and final reason is because I chose to set the story during the COVID-19 outbreak era, and I believe a play-with-music is the best form to deliver the story. I see that the pandemic is a unique situation. That is why I want to memorialize this pandemic situation with a play that explains a few aspects of the effects of pandemic, in the hopes that someday people would produce it, and remember this season. In this era, people are forced to stay at home and adapt their daily activities accordingly. I find this situation is best represented by a play, which also has a more limited setting than novels or movies. Jonathan Dorf, a co-founder of the publisher YOUTHplays, wrote that playwrights have to consider making set changes as minimal as possible. In other words, play scripts have to make the most out of the settings (Dorf, n.d.). Since people in this era are encouraged to stay at home and do their activities there, the place setting would be easy for the play to produce. Other than that, like I previously mentioned, the pandemic's stay-at-home era highlights domestic issues even more because families are stuck together for a longer amount of time, and the best way to project that is with a one-setting play.

For this research, I am doing secondary research. I collect resources from online journals such as *Human Communication Journal* and *Western Journal of Communication*. Additionally, I watch videos on children's response to divorce from their perspective. Through that, I would like to explore how an unanticipated discovery of parents' divorce affects children (Billy, in the creative work), why they become aloof afterwards, and what they might do about it. The purpose of this creative work is to reveal to the audience the effects of unexpected disclosure of divorce to children, the reason why they become aloof, and their actions afterwards.

The theories I am using in my creative thesis are in the field of communication science. There are two main scientific articles which became my source, both investigating children's reaction towards divorce. The first one is titled *Perceptions of Deception, Divorce Disclosures, and Communication Satisfaction with Parents* (Thomas et al., 1995). This study, conducted by Candice E. Thomas, an assistant professor in Ohio University, in collaboration with Melanie Booth-Butterfield and Steve Booth-Butterfield, associate professors from West Virginia University, talks about children's perceived deception to their parents' divorce based on how

they find out about the information, and how that affects their self-esteem and communication with parents. The second one is Tamara D. Afifi and Texas Christian University professor, Paul Schrodt's application Berger and Calabrese's Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) in family communication. Berger and Calabrese are both also communication science professors. Afifi and Schrodt talk about why children avoid talking about divorce even if they have a lot of questions about it in their Human Communication journal entry, titled *Uncertainty and the Avoidance of the State of One's Family in Stepfamilies, Postdivorce Single-Parent Families, and First-Marriage Families* (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003).

Both theories are related to children's reaction towards divorce. The first theory explains the effects that children get after the disclosure of divorce, especially when it has been kept a secret from them for some time. The two effects here are children becoming less communicative and insecure. Following the first effect, I want to dig deeper into why they communicate less with their parents when they must have so many questions and doubts. That is a personal question of mine which also aligns with the second theory. The second theory explores why children avoid asking or talking about their uncertainties related to the divorce, even when it could ease their mind. I am going to use these theories to build believable events in the story, as well as a believable character arc of Billy's.

The writers of the first article, through research, concluded that when parents are not fully open with the information of divorce, regardless of intention, kids may feel deceived or betrayed. That leads to what the writers suggest as deceptive communication. This is their definition and why they think it happens;

Current conceptualizations of relationally deceptive communication include omitting pertinent information as well as falsifying information. The "deceiver" omits or modifies messages in order to protect the receiver from information thought to be harmful, unnecessary, or frightening. It seems likely that many well-intentioned parents are trying to protect their children when they frame messages concerning the state of the marriage. (Thomas et al., 1995, p. 230)

Furthermore, when the belief of being able to trust their parents is broken, there would be negative consequences. They conducted research to discover those negative consequences, which is how the unanticipated disclosure of divorce affects the child. The first consequence is that the communication between the child and the news bearer are restrained. The second is that children's self-esteem is lower when they feel like they were deceived.

I believe that because children become secretive and have less communication with their parents, they get benched in the whole divorce process. The effect of that might be that the children have questions that when discussed may relieve their stress, and or suggestions that may help the parents, but none are not taken into account because they choose to avoid the matter and their parents. Therefore, I am looking into another theory below that answers why they avoid asking and talking, even if it benefits themselves and their parents.

The second theory I am using is Afifi and Schrodt's application of Berger and Calabrese's Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT). In their journal article *Uncertainty and the Avoidance of the State of One's Family in Stepfamilies, Postdivorce Single-Parent Families, and First-Marriage Families* (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003), they use the URT as a bridge in understanding children's avoidance manner in different kinds of families with different levels of uncertainty. URT itself talks about how human's interpersonal communication is a tactic to reduce uncertainty. With the increase of interpersonal communication between people, they develop predictions of one another, and that reduces uncertainty between them (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). This theory is applied in various other research in communication. The original theory uses strangers as subjects, and since then a lot of people have been discussing and using the theory for their own research, including Afifi and Schrodt. I am using this theory

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to answer the second statement of the problem, which is why children become aloof. Tamara D. Afifi and Paul Schrodtt investigated this in their scientific article I have mentioned above. Even if URT says people naturally communicate with others to reduce uncertainty, there are also times when they avoid this interaction. Related to children's uncertainty, there are two possible reasons why they avoid talking about it with their parents, which are the fear for the information and the mistrust they have to the parents.

I am going to use the same theory to answer my third statement of the problem also, which questions how Billy deals with the divorce. Billy has a lot of uncertainties about the divorce. The only way that he can reduce his uncertainties is by talking or asking about it, as suggested by URT's original premise. Therefore, as an answer to my third statement of the problem, he has to open up and reveal his thoughts to his parents. Because it is still hard for him to do so by talking, he is writing a short story, recounting the disclosure in his perspective for the parents to read, along with all his questions and thoughts in it, as a means of communication.

2. OUTLINE OF CREATIVE WORK

Theme

The theme of my play is divorce changes children. The first act centers around the parents' secret from Billy, which is the process of divorcing. Billy is a curious, lively, and imaginative child. When he found out about the divorce, he was deeply wounded by the decision and the fact that it was hidden from him. He became quiet, distant, and stressed. Moreover, he is unable to trust his parents like he used to. In the second act, he has sleep problems, physical pains, and lack of motivation. Billy becomes distant and avoids talking to his parents about anything serious, especially the divorce.

Plot

Billy Sutanto is a ten-year-old boy who is in a lockdown with his family at home because of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Miss Siska, Billy's English teacher, made him the head of English Club and a representative for a regional short story competition, something Billy is very proud and passionate about. One day, he discovers that his dad, Joe's guitars are missing, and he finds it strange that Joe acts indifferently to it. He decided to find out where the guitars are and turn the investigation into a mystery short story. Billy and his best friend, Owen, arrive at the conclusion that Wendy, a friend of Joe and Lydia, stole the guitars. When the boys capture Wendy and violently force him to drink what they thought was truth serum, Joe and Lydia are forced to tell Billy that they have been going through the process of divorce, unbeknown to him, and Wendy is their divorce lawyer. The guitars are in Joe's new rented apartment where he will stay when the divorce is finalized.

Billy is inevitably hurt by the revelation and starts becoming a distant and quiet boy. He also has physical pain, like stomach-ache and lack of sleep, but does not talk about it to his parents. Billy knows he has to help his parents reunite, so he set up a plan to make them remember the good old days. However, that did not work since it triggers a fight between Joe and Lydia. It adds to Billy's stress. He also gives up on writing the short story, because the disclosure has him stressed about too many things. He blames himself for not knowing that Joe and Lydia are having problems, even when they all live in the same house. Furthermore, he is afraid of the future of his family, so he refuses to write or imagine the ending. Owen encourages him to keep on writing and spill his thoughts to his parents. Billy listens to him, and he writes the story according to his perspective and hopes for the parents to reunite. After showing the

end result to Joe and Lydia, the three have a heart-to-heart conversation about what they have been feeling. Suddenly, they received the news that Bob, Joe's brother, had passed away because of COVID-19. In grief, Billy helped Lydia comfort and show affection to Joe again.

Characters

- Billy Maximillian Sutanto

Age: 10 years old

Billy is a cheerful, smart young boy and the only child in the house. Billy has a close relationship with his parents, shown by how he knows his parents' personalities and how the parents are not afraid to tell him how they feel about things. He is very passionate about English and writing. Miss Siska made him the president of the school's English Club and the school's representative in the regional short story competition. The boy is highly imaginative and can get stuck inside his imagination sometimes. Owen, his best friend, usually helps him with rational thinking before he makes decisions based on his ideas.

- Joe Sutanto

Age: 38 years old

Joe is Billy's Dad and Lydia's husband. He works as a musician in a wedding band and a freelance jingle composer for commercials. His unsteady job became a bigger problem in the pandemic when his wedding gigs drastically decreased. Joe is a phlegmatic, peace-loving man. He cannot stand being in arguments and would rather avoid talking about problems than face it head on, contrary to Lydia's straightforwardness. Joe loves his family very much, but he has trouble with taking initiative. Therefore, he might seem uncaring or ignorant.

- Lydia Hermawan

Age: 38 years old

Lydia is Billy's mom and Joe's wife. She is a superior, confident, and straightforward person. She makes catering food orders and sells them online during the pandemic. Other than that, she is also a full-time mother, who has to take care of household stuff. A lot of times, she feels overwhelmed by the burden. She feels like Joe has not helped her enough.

- Owen Wijaya

Age: 10 years old

Owen is Billy's best friend. He is a rational person and sometimes has a hard time understanding Billy's imaginative point of view. He lives next door to Billy and his mother, a divorced single-parent, allows him to play with him even during pandemics because she is often working in the office.

- Wendy Ong

Age: 41 years old

Wendy is Joe and Lydia's divorce lawyer. Billy and Owen do not know who he really is because Joe and Lydia only say that he is 'a friend'. He wears a suit every time he goes to their house, something Billy sees as strange and therefore nicknaming him Weird Wendy. He is a professional guy.

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- Bob Sutanto

Age: 35 years old

Bob is Joe's little brother. Bob is a single businessman, who likes to have fun, but is serious about his job. He is very caring towards Joe, Lydia, and Billy. He has been unhealthy and in the end of the play, it was revealed that he had Coronavirus. He passed away because of it.

Conflict

The conflicts of the play are both man vs man and man vs himself, the prior being the dominant one. The man vs man is Billy going against his parents' decision to divorce and everything he does to stop the separation. The latter is Billy's internal struggle of overcoming his anxiety of the uncertain future by talking to his parents about the divorce and his insecurity that comes up from not knowing about this.

CONCLUSION

In this part, I would like to explain how my creative thesis has answered my statement of the problem. The statements are how unanticipated discovery of parents' divorce affect children, why they become aloof afterwards, and what they might do about it.

Firstly, the unanticipated discovery of divorce changes Billy from a curious child into a distant one with less confidence. In the first act, Billy is a chatty character, with curiosity and active imagination. This is shown from his initial intention of looking for his dad's missing guitars, which he believed are stolen, and from his conversations with other characters. After his parents reveal to him that they are divorcing, he becomes reluctant to have conversations, especially ones related to the divorce. Owen brought it up unintentionally and Billy tells him to go home. Wendy tries to calm him down and give advice, but he does not respond much. His mom and dad also try to have a conversation about it with him, but again, he quickly ends the conversation or changes the subject. Other than that, Billy is less confident in act two because in the song "How Could I Be?" he questions his right to question his parents' decision. Also, he is shown to be insecure because of his idealism, which makes him unable to realize his parents' problems beforehand.

The second statement's answer is Billy becomes aloof because he is afraid of the future, and he does not trust his parents anymore. In the second act, Billy avoids having conversation about the divorce even when he has many questions and thoughts that he shares only in the solo song "How Could I Be?". However, the reasons appear in the third scene of act two. When Owen asks him why he has trouble finishing the ending, he says that he thinks the future is scary and he does not want to imagine it. This is the reason he has been uninterested in having conversations about the matter. He is afraid of the future. The second reason is there is mistrust between Billy and his parents. Because he has been lied to before, Billy cannot trust what his parents say anymore, even if they have apologized for the lie. He says this to Owen, when he asks him to ask his parents about the problem thoroughly. He implied that he cannot trust them because they lied to him before.

Last but not least, I have shown what Billy does to deal with the divorce. He does not agree with it, so he has made several attempts to get his parents back together. The first one is recollecting memories from old family trips' documentation. This leads to a fight between the parents. The effort does not work and brings Billy even more stressed because he is not revealing his questions or thoughts to his parents, but rather only secretly trying to imply that he

does not want them to break up. The second attempt, inspired by Owen's encouragement, he writes the short story from the events of the disclosure in his perspective, as well as the ending that he hoped for, where they get back together. He then presented it to his parents, as a way to open up the conversation he has been avoiding. This strengthens Joe, who initially already has second thoughts of the divorce, but was still in doubt. Joe talks to Lydia about another way out to sort out their problems. Lydia, who was sure about divorcing, finally softens after Joe presents his thoughts and they agree to work things out without divorce. Afterwards was Uncle Bob's sudden passing, where Billy made his final attempt of reuniting his parents by leading Lydia to comfort Joe physically, taking her arm and putting it on Joe's back.

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