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Development and Implementation of a Psychoeducational Group for Ghanaian Adolescents Experiencing Parental Divorce

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This article presents development and informal assessment of a 10-week psychoeducational program designed for 8 adolescent group members experiencing parental divorce in a rural community in Ghana. Group design, cultural considerations, program implementation, and impacts are described. The literature review pertaining to group work as an instrument for addressing parental divorce of adolescents is presented; group format and content within group sessions are discussed. The outcomes of this experience, as evidenced by a brief assessment questionnaire given before and after the group experience, indicate that completion of the group led to an increase in participants' knowledge of self-esteem, time management, anger management, peer relationships, educational goals, and psychological healing through spirituality. Implications for culturally informed group facilitation are discussed.

Keywords: *adolescents; cognitive-behavioral; cultural adaptation of group interventions; parental divorce; psychoeducational*

Studies indicate that the stress of parental divorce can have negative effects on the academic, social, and emotional development of children and that these children are at risk for a variety of negative developmental outcomes (Cecen-Erogul & Dingiltepe, 2012; Glenn & Kramer, 1985; Johnson & Wiechers, 2002). Children whose families have experienced divorce report higher rates of stress and risk factors than children of intact families (Cecen-Erogul & Dingiltepe, 2012; Winslow, Wolchik & Sandler, 2004). Studies report an increasing number of children and youth in Ghana being left to fend for themselves; leaving them increasingly at risk of being subjected to child labor, sexual exploitation, and teenage pregnancies (L. O. Gyekye, Arthur & Dankwa, 1996). Some of the short-term effects of divorce on children include guilt, anger, depression, anxiety, withdrawal, less social and school competence, and health problems such as eating disorders (Long & Forehand, 2002). As a result, a number of these children are likely to be more stressed,

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because they have no control over what is happening. In fact, some might even begin to exhibit a drop in self-esteem and self-confidence. This emotional turbulence interferes with other aspects of their lives.

Although most children adapt well to this transition, approximately 20% to 25% develop mental health or adjustment problems, a figure that is twice the rate experienced by children from continuously married families (Winslow et al., 2004). Female and male adolescents from single parent families have lower life satisfaction and psychological health than adolescents from intact families (Cecen-Erogul & Dingiltepe, 2012). Hetherington and Kelly (2002) indicated that about 75–80% of children from divorced families and stepfamilies do not have serious problems. Besides, it may be troubled marriages and not divorce that actually create problems. Kelly and Emery (2003) found that children display similar problems if their parents have a troubled marriage and remain together. This suggests that the problems of the children of divorce often begin years before the actual divorce. Regardless, divorce is stressful. Although most children possess the resilience to adjust, some children are more vulnerable than others (Guttman & Rosenberg, 2003). Divorce causes changes in the family system and the quality of parent-children relationships, and increases the risk of straining emotional ties between parents and children. Given the high prevalence of divorce in a rural community in Ghana, the low levels of support received, and the risks to their adjustment, a psychoeducational group was developed that could offer them the ability to communicate effectively with others, express their feelings, and connect with peers facing similar challenges. The group could also serve to teach members coping strategies, and build on their life skills and self-esteem.

Divorce Across the Globe

Divorce is defined as the disruption of the intimate relationship between a man and a woman, a splitting apart of two interdependent people into two independent agents (Schaie & Willis, 2002). Over 1 million children in the United States experience divorce annually, with one out of every two first marriages ending in divorce (Clarke, 1995). One of the results of divorce is the rise in the number of single parent families. In 2006, 12.9 million families in the United States of America were headed by a single parent, 80% of which were headed by a female (Navarro, 2008; United States Census, 2006). In 2005, a general household survey report indicates that about 1 out of 4 families with dependent children in the United Kingdom are single-parent families, 8 to 11% of which have a male single-parent (United Kingdom Statistics, 2006).

Researchers report a rise in the rates of divorce in sub-Saharan Africa (Takyi, 2001; Takyi & Gyimah, 2007) leading to single parent households. The status of single parenthood in Ghana has resulted from desertion, separation, divorce, or death of the other spouse (L. O. Gyekye et al., 1996). By desertion, a partner abandons the spouse and children without consent in violation of their legal or moral obligation. In a study conducted by Boateng (1996) 50 percent of single female parents in Ghana were divorced, 30% were deserted, 14% were victims of transfer (where a partner leaves the spouse and children to secure job position elsewhere), and 2% were widowed, all leading to single parenthood. According to the Ghana Statistical Service (2012), of the population aged 12 years and older, 42.9% were married while 42.0% had never been married. In addition, 10.2% had been married before but at the time of the census were separated, widowed, or divorced. The study further indicates that a higher proportion of males (48.9%) than females (35.6%) had never been married. On the other hand, females were more likely to be married (43.9%) than males (41.7%). Again, the proportion of females divorced or widowed was higher than that of males (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). Furthermore, divorce in Ghana has led to the disruption of the family and is characterized by a large number of broken homes, early child bearing and single parenthood, child delinquency, child labor, school drop-outs, and an increasing number of street children, posing serious problems to the society as a whole (L. O. Gyekye et al., 1996).

During group work with 10 single parents in a rural community in Ghana, Nkyi (2013) indicated that single parents appear to experience low income and economic disadvantages. He concluded that due to economic hardships and psychological distress, coupled with lack of resources, income generation and other economic programs that reduce poverty are of much importance to single parents. Studies indicate that experiencing parental divorce has been shown to increase the risk for alcohol use and likely tobacco use for adolescents (Griesbeck, Amos, & Currie, 2003; Menning, 2006). Indeed, Amato (1993, 2000) has reported that the family emotional stressors that often accompany marital discord may explain the increase in risk for substance use frequently observed among adolescents of divorced parents. Nkyi (2014), however, reported no significant differences in drug or alcohol use between children whose parents were divorced and those with intact families in Ghana.

Lauer and Lauer (1997) observed that children are likely to be more stressed, because they have no control over what is happening to them and see no long-term benefit to the disruption. As a result, they may also exhibit a decrease in self-esteem and self-confidence. The stress of divorce may lead young children to regress to more immature kinds of

behavior (Clarke-Steward & Brentano, 2006). Divorce may also precipitate a major crisis that requires professional help (Gillis, 1992). It is important to note that not all children experience these effects and may experience them at varying degrees, with some children actually exhibiting fewer problems following their parents' divorce.

Studies indicate that children experiencing parental divorce talk with friends and peers long before they talk with adults about emotional issues (Campbell, 2008). In a study by McIntosh (2000), parents indicated that they had little understanding about how the children in their families addressed separation issues. Arguably, stress experienced by children at separation would be reduced if parents were more open to hearing from children and listening to their opinions.

Benefits of Group Work for Adolescents Experiencing Divorce

Studies on effective groups designed for treating the psychological, social, and academic problems associated with children of divorce have been well documented (Cercone & DeLucia-Waack, 2012; DeLucia-Waack, 2011; Rose, 2009). Adolescents experiencing parental divorce gain many benefits from the psychoeducational group model. Psychoeducational groups offer members the opportunity to share their confusion, anger, guilt, resentment, anxiety, depression, and helplessness with others who are facing similar issues and thus serve as a powerful healing force (M. S. Corey & Corey, 2006). Members have the opportunity to learn from the feedback of other group members. The psychoeducational group format provides a means for learning and practicing social skills as well as managing psychological problems that may result from parental divorce.

Religion plays a significant role in the cultural practices of the Ghanaian community because of the belief that all human actions and thoughts have religious meaning and are influenced by a religious point of view (K. Gyekye, 1996). The religious is not distinguished from the non-religious or the secular from the non-secular. For example, when someone is mentally ill, it is unusual for his or her people to seek orthodox medical care. They would rather consult the native medicine person since the cause of the problem, in their estimation, is certainly from the spirit world. Regarding the norms of conversation, every Ghanaian is expected to conform to these norms because one loses face and affronts the face of his/her listeners when one fails to use the right euphemistic expressions in communication (Agyekum, 2010). For example, the Akan, a large ethnic group of Ghanaians, would say "wayi wokete agu aboutene" meaning "you have been divorced." This indirect manner of referring to the divorce helps both the speaker and the listener save face. Communal values (e.g., caring for others, sharing,

and solidarity) find their expressions in the family and guide the Ghanaian people's social relations, attitudes, and behaviors between the individual and the community. Some adolescents may not yet know these values. Thus, incorporating some of these cultural practices into the group work will enhance adolescents' spirituality and communication skills to understand some of the unique cultural practices in the Ghanaian culture. Sheckman, Vuerebrand, and Hertz-Lazarowitz (1994) suggested that small therapy groups have the potential to provide a social climate of cohesiveness and belonging as well as feelings of acceptance. They also promote development norms of self-expressiveness and self-disclosure, and opportunities for constructive feedback that often lead to positive interactions. Thus, a small psychoeducation and therapy group was the selected format to deliver the intervention. This article summarizes outcomes of a group psychoeducation program for Ghanaian adolescents facing parental separation or divorce. The intervention incorporates the cultural adaptations integrated into the sessions in order to make the CBT and other traditional, Western practices suitable for this group of children. It was believed that integration of the Ghanaian cultural values with Western-based, psychoeducational cognitive-behavioral interventions could help the participants deal with life stressors resulting from parental divorce.

GROUP DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The Setting

The setting for the program was a small town in the central region of Ghana with a population of approximately 5,000 people. It is about 35 kilometers north of Cape Coast, the capital of the Central Region of Ghana, situated 165 kilometers west of Accra on the Gulf of Guinea. The location was chosen due to convenience, because it is a rural community and participants were available and willing to engage in the psychoeducational group therapy experience. The author coordinated the group and was the primary leader of the group sessions. The group took place at the local school classroom of the small community.

Participants

A total of 37 potential participants were interviewed during the screening process to enter the 10-week group program. Two prerequisites for joining the group were to be an adolescent whose parents were divorced or were in the process of divorce and to have parents agreed to the child's participation. The other criteria were attendance at an

individual screening and orientation meeting and the child's ability to read, speak, and write in the English language. Of these 37 potential members, 27 individuals were excluded from the group because they did not meet the conditions and the criteria and were not aligned with the purpose and goals of the group work. Out of the 10 participants selected, 2 members were also disqualified because they were absent for the first two sessions of the group.

The group was comprised of 6 female and 2 male adolescents between the ages of 13 and 16 from the junior and high schools, some of whom live with their biological mothers, grandmothers, and other maternal family members. The interview and screening were based on a questionnaire that included demographic information (e.g., age, education level, availability of social support, sexual abuse history, and effects of separation/divorce on the present situation). The leader selected candidates who understood the benefits and goals of the group; were ready and willing to abide by the group rules, were ready to maintain the confidential nature of others' disclosures, and could read and write English. Parents/guardians were fully informed of the extent and nature of the study and gave their permission to allow their children to participate in the group work. No fee was required for participating in the group. Once all the members had been selected, there were two preliminary sessions designed to be acquainted with one another and to prepare the members for the group work.

OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT

Data were gathered before and after the group experience via questionnaire that measured the participant's personal reactions, ideas, and attitudes about their well-being and growth as a result of their experience of parental divorce or separation, and knowledge about certain topics to be discussed during the group process. The questionnaire was comprised of 10 statements (see Appendix A) developed by the author and group leader and included suggestions solicited from scholar practitioners involved in adolescent research. Next, the questionnaire was pilot tested with a small group of adolescents experiencing divorce ($n = 15$). Final revisions were made to the questionnaire after the pilot testing. Students rated each statement using a four point, Likert-type scale with values given to each answer, thus: 1 = *Strongly Disagree*; 2 = *Disagree*; 3 = *Agree*; 4 = *Strongly Agree*. Their answers were compared at pre- and posttest to evaluate improvements as a result of the group experience.

Group Goals

Goals for the group were adapted from goals described by Cercone and DeLucia-Waack (2012) and O’Gorman (2011) and aimed to: (a) normalize common experiences of children of divorce; (b) clarify divorce-related issues and help children improve their understanding of what a divorced family is; (c) provide a safe and supportive environment to express feelings of anger, sadness, and grief; (d) develop problem-solving, communication, anger management skills, and promote positive perceptions of themselves; and (e) help children achieve healthy relationships with their parents.

Procedures

As previously discussed, the criteria for joining the group were to be adolescents experiencing family separation or divorce and attendance at an individual screening and orientation meeting. Those who qualified after the screening and the interview were accepted into the group study. The author advertised for the group through contacts with religious groups in the rural community 6 weeks prior to the group’s projected starting date of June 2013. After completion of the interview, screening and selection of the participants, and parents/guardians informed consent and child assent were given, children joined in the group work.

The leadership team was comprised of the main leader (author) and three other co-facilitators trained by the leader and who were certified trained teachers with Bachelor’s Degrees in education. The leader’s qualification was 6 years of professional counseling experience with adolescents.

The leader served as an educator and facilitator. As an educator, he encouraged the members to think for themselves. He educated by providing information and facilitating interaction by bringing up topics, clarifying comments, and encouraging members to share. He helped the members to create a trusting climate that enabled them to be more involved in the sessions. He taught participants general group guidelines and ways to participate actively, showed empathy, understanding, and shared insights with the group. He employed the skills of blocking and redirecting to avoid rambling during the sessions. The leader summarized the themes of the group discussions at the opening and closing of each session. The leader combined cognitive-behavior therapy (integration of cognitive, behavioral, affective, social, and contextual strategies for change); person-centered counseling (e.g., active listening, reflection, empathy, inspiring; enthusing; praising success) and

active teaching techniques (e.g., psychoeducation, feedback, modeling, role play, and problem solving; see G. Corey, 2005; Gladding, 2005).

Group Format

The group was comprised of 8 members and was closed. The group met on Sundays, once a week, for 90 min for a total of 12 weeks (3 months including the screening and interview process). The leader used the first 40 min to educate the members about a scheduled topic, while members discussed the topic and asked questions during the next 30 minutes, and gave feedback to each other for the final 20 min. This was a structured group led by the leader and three co-facilitators. In order to provide culturally appropriate experiences and integrate Ghanaian spiritual and religious practices, each session started with prayers (see Appendix B for an example).

Each week the members participated in a check in to indicate how the week went. They were asked to tell the group one “UP” and one “DOWN” event for the week. An “UP” was something that happened during the week that was particularly positive and good. A “DOWN” was something that happened during the week that was particularly negative and bad. The members participated in feedback. Feedback was very structured and each member followed a script with the statement: “can I please give you feedback?” All feedback had to be positive. Members and group facilitators were allowed to give feedback to a peer member or to the group as a whole. The psychoeducational format included the use of cognitive restructuring techniques, interpersonal communication skills training, and strategies for enhancing coping skills (Choate & Henson, 2003).

After parental divorce, children’s view of the world and appraisal of themselves as persons changes drastically (Amato, 1994). Some of the common assumptions held by some of the members are that they will not be able to go to school due to financial problems and some feel they are unloved. A member provided objective evidence that some people in their extended family did not love him. Other members shared assumptions such as “I am not lucky,” “Where is God?,” “Why do I experience such problems?”

One of the major focuses of the structured groups was on changing cognitions. Cognitive restructuring exercises concentrated on changing self-talk and disputing irrational beliefs. Self-talk is defined as sub-vocal speech that usually serves to direct one’s actions and evaluate one’s behavior (Meichenbaum, 1977). The leader encouraged the members to converse with one’s self. The leader introduced cognitive restructuring in the session. The goal of the cognitive restructuring was to reduce distress by having the members identify, evaluate, and

modify these negative thoughts. The leader helped the members to (a) identify the sequence of change (b) recognize their inappropriate self-talk, (c) restructure the content of their self-talk, and (d) to repeat their readjusted self-statements.

The leader distributed a handout on self-talk that contained examples of negative self-talk in the left column. In the right column, an example is provided on how to change the negative self-talk to positive or coping self-talk. The leader asked members to read the first example and describe the differences between the types of self-talk. The leader also asked for personal examples of negative self-talk (e.g., I am not loved, I am a failure, I am hopeless) and demonstrated ways to change these to positive or coping self-talk (e.g., I am loved, I am a conqueror, I am hopeful). He further asked the members how negative self-talk affected their feelings about themselves. Next, members worked as a group to discuss the available evidence in favor or against each possible interpretation and end up with the most rational or helpful one(s). The group leader and the other facilitators pointed out how the way we interpret an event can negatively affect our thoughts and behaviors. Next, participants were asked to select a positive or coping thought to help increase their self-esteem: *“I am strong,” “I am not hopeless,” “I can make it, even though my parents are divorced,” “I can complete my education because I am loved.”* The courage that some members had to disclose their thoughts and feelings seemed to help other group members take risks in disclosure which helped them reflect on their thoughts and then decide, with the group leader’s support, how to cognitively and constructively restructure these thoughts.

Group activities were also designed to provide the members with opportunities to practice the learned skills in a variety of ways. The leader closed every weekly session by summarizing what occurred in the session and told the members to tell the group about what they heard and learned in the session. Participants were encouraged to share their experiences and insights gained that would be useful to them for the week. The leader also met the members individually three times before the termination of the group to help the individuals who needed some personal support that was not addressed in the group work.

OVERVIEW OF THE GROUP SESSIONS

Session 1: Introduction and Goal Setting

The first session of the group was structured and characterized by the establishment of group and individual goals. The leader then welcomed the group members warmly by addressing the need for inclusion.

The leader invited the members to introduce themselves by announcing his or her name. Participants were encouraged to define their present problems and their expectation of the group work. Confidentiality, attendance and punctuality, respect for each member, more intimate interaction with the group members, and member's rights and responsibilities were addressed. Each member was asked to list personal goals and topics he or she wanted to be discussed in the sessions. Poverty, self-esteem, anger, parents' divorce, making good friends, prayers, communicating well with others, and learning effectively were the major and common themes and topics that emerged. The topics for the sessions were built around these emerging themes.

Session 2: Impact of Divorce on Members

In the second session, each member was asked to provide three examples of challenges associated with divorce that entered their lives. The leader invited the members to write three negative things of divorce and effects on children. Each member read what she/he identified. Some of the experiences about divorce on children identified by the members included poverty, anger, inability to talk to father or mother, no good role models, inability to pursue further education, poor adjustment issues, and lack of support from either the father or mother. At the end of the session the group members were helped to understand how their positive thinking can affect their actions positively, and how their negative thinking about parents' divorce can affect their actions negatively.

Session 3: Time Management and Study Skills

The leader facilitated group discussion of general time management strategies, including the need for clarifying priorities. The leader and the co-facilitators distributed sheets of papers to group members to write their weekly study time table. Each member was called to read out his/her time table aloud to group members for feedback. Members were asked to write a new weekly time table during the week for the next session.

Session 4: Building of Self-Esteem

The fourth session focused mainly on helping the participants to identify the causes and barriers to good self-esteem, to understand themselves, and to discuss their strengths and weakness. Cognitive restructuring was employed to help the members change their thinking

about who they think they are as a result of their parental divorce. Each participant used a worksheet to describe their qualities and strengths, read them aloud, and received compliments from the other group members.

Session 5: Communication Skill

According to Agyepong (2010), the acquisition of communicative competence is the overall knowledge and is one of the skills needed in speaking and listening or appropriate communication. The leader taught group members effective communication in our Ghanaian cultural community. For example, teaching them to mention the names of elders in the family and other people with the proper titles. We taught the members how to communicate well with the elderly and to identify their own style of communication (e.g., passive, aggressive passive-aggressive, and assertive). Culturally appropriate communication styles were emphasized and encouraged.

Session 6: Anger Management Skills

The leader employed anger management techniques to teach members how to control anger. Techniques include recognizing anger, taking a time out, deep breathing, and exercise, expressing anger appropriately, and thinking of the consequences of anger. Two members were asked to role play how to manage anger in an aversive situation. The first party was to recognize an aversive situation and make a time out. He was asked to say "Time out." First the first party insulted the other party and that resulted in an aversive situation. The first party then called a time out. The other person also returned the gesture and said "Okay, time out." The person who called time out left the aversive situation and returned 10 min later to work on the problem with the other party.

Session 7: Coping With Peer Pressure

The leader educated the group members about peer pressure and how to cope with it. The members generated some examples of situations in which they feel pressured by their peers (e.g., drinking of alcohol and the engagement in premarital sex). The leader and co-facilitators discussed ways to say "No" to peers. First look directly at the person and say, "No, thanks." Or say "I'm sorry, I won't do that." If the person persists, they were instructed to leave the person politely.

Sessions 8 and 9: Spirituality, Healing of Past Hurts, and Forgiveness

These sessions were focused on three main issues: (a) moral virtues (b) relationship with God through prayer and Bible studies; and (c) healing of past hurts. The leader indicated that the members should exhibit qualities of patience, kindness, fairness, humility, generosity, honesty, and respect for other people, especially the elderly. Prayer was emphasized as essential for God's help and protection in their life. The leader incorporated 1 week of Bible studies for the adolescents that included other children in the rural community. Regarding forgiveness, the leader assisted members to let go of the past hurts, rejections, hostilities, hates, and fears in their lives.

Session 10: Termination/Closure

The members completed the posttest survey before other agenda items were carried out. After the posttest survey, the leader, cofacilitators, and members reviewed the progress they had made in meeting their personal goals through review of the posttest survey. A candle (signifying light that overcomes darkness) was lit and put in the center of the group. Members prayed, thanking God and praying for each other. Members gave positive feedback to each other and ended with saying "Goodbye."

OUTCOMES

This group experience aimed to provide Ghanaian adolescents experiencing parental divorce with psychoeducational and therapeutic support. Basic demographic information was collected along with pre- and posttest questionnaire data based on the main topics of the group sessions. Each participant completed the pretest and posttest surveys to evaluate outcomes of the group intervention. The questions focused on the individual group members' feelings, attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, and behavior changes after the group intervention as compared to responses before group began. The participants' answers indicate the degree of group members' improvement and gains made in the group. While no inference of significance can be made given the small size of the group and the brief questionnaire given, we can confidently report the outcomes of this group experience were positive for the youths (see [Tables 1 and 2](#)). We will discuss the implications of these improvements next.

Table 1 Pretest Scores

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Q1</i>	<i>Q2</i>	<i>Q3</i>	<i>Q4</i>	<i>Q5</i>	<i>Q6</i>	<i>Q7</i>	<i>Q8</i>	<i>Q9</i>	<i>Q10</i>	<i>Total</i>
A	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	14
B	3	3	1	1	1	1	3	1	1	1	16
C	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	10
D	1	1	1	1	1	3	1	1	1	1	12
E	1	1	1	1	1	3	1	1	1	1	12
F	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	1	12
G	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	12
H	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	2	1	12
Total	10	10	8	8	10	12	12	10	10	10	100

Note: For purposes of convenience of interpretation the following scores categories are given:

Score categories	Total Scores
Strongly Disagree	1–10
Disagree	11–20
Agree	21–30
Strongly Agree	31–40

Table 2 Posttest Scores

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Q1</i>	<i>Q2</i>	<i>Q3</i>	<i>Q4</i>	<i>Q5</i>	<i>Q6</i>	<i>Q7</i>	<i>Q8</i>	<i>Q9</i>	<i>Q10</i>	<i>Total</i>
A	3	3	3	2	3	2	3	3	2	3	27
B	3	3	2	2	3	2	3	2	2	3	25
C	3	2	3	3	3	2	2	2	2	3	25
D	2	2	3	3	2	3	2	2	3	2	24
E	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	28
F	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	2	3	3	28
G	3	3	3	3	2	2	3	2	3	3	27
H	2	3	3	3	2	2	3	3	2	3	26
Total	22	22	22	22	20	19	22	18	20	23	210

DISCUSSION

Parental divorce is a difficult experience and can have many consequences for children's psychological development. Outcomes of the group work demonstrated the value of a structured, collaborative approach for enhancing the skills of adolescents experiencing parental divorce. A psycho-educational group intervention characterized by the integration of cognitive, behavioral, affective, social, and contextual strategies for change was employed (Jaycox, Zoellner, & Foa, 2002). This technique aimed to address the adolescents' erroneous cognitions and to engender emotional processing of the divorce.

The results of the study indicate that after the 10-week program, participants demonstrated improvements in many areas, including increased general satisfaction with self-esteem, time management, anger management, and religiosity/spirituality. On the statement "I know my good and bad qualities" (Self-esteem), all eight participants showed an improvement on posttest regarding personal good and bad qualities (self-esteem). Research on adolescents experiencing parental divorce and high maternal distress reported lower self-esteem (Amato, 2005; Amato & Afifi, 2006; Esmaeili & Yaacob, 2012). Adolescents may blame themselves for their parental conflict, which causes feelings of guilt and lower self-esteem. A possible explanation is that the adolescents' involvement of peer group work involved building strengths and sharing painful experiences. Activities such as role-playing gave group members the opportunity to discuss how to work through fears and consider all possible outcomes of any given situation. Another possible explanation for this is that self-esteem like self-concept is a relatively stable dimension that tends to resist change over a short period of time. Self-esteem has, however, consistently been shown to be a reliable measure of mental health, of the ability to cope with problems, to function under stress, to act efficiently, and to form relationships with others (Smilansky, 1992). It is therefore quite possible that even a slight positive change in self-esteem could have a positive ripple effect on the psychological functioning of the individual.

The posttest indicates gains for group members on the statements "I know how to manage and plan my time table well" (time management) and "I know what my goals for school are" (education goals). One possible explanation for the improvement in their time management and education goals may be that group counseling with adolescents has been shown to be effective for a variety of issues, including classroom behavior and self-control (Larkin & Thyer, 1999), and academic underachievement (Hong, Lin, Wang, Chen, & Yu, 2012). The psycho-educational activities could have influenced their behavior to learn to manage their time and have a positive outlook about their education. Furthermore, social activities coupled with problem-solving skills could have played a role in helping these adolescents understand the importance of education and enhanced their perception about taking their time seriously. The posttest improvement of members on time management and educational goals may indicate that these members previously lacked the motivation to study and had few or no goals in pursuing their education before the program started. The lack of good role models coupled with their parental divorce may have affected their academic studies. Studies indicate that educational difficulties and academic achievement have been found to be a problem among

children of parental divorce compared to children of intact two-parent families (Amato, 1994; Amato & Keith, 1991)

The group as a whole indicated a reasonable increase in their level of managing anger, moving from the “strongly disagree” category, to the “agree” category on the statement “I know what makes me angry and how to cope with anger” (anger management). This is of considerable importance because as members develop positive self-esteem, they are able to learn to manage their anger (Long & Forehand, 2002). Indeed, the negative concept they have about themselves vis-à-vis their parental divorce could contribute to the pain they go through. Sometimes students lack accurate perceptions of the skills or support they have, such adolescents will use defense mechanisms to cover up their pain. The use of problem solving skills, self-disclosure, and feedback could protect the members from the pain associated with the lowered self-image. When the individual members’ overall evaluation of themselves, including feelings of general happiness and satisfaction are enhanced, they are more likely to feel connected and value themselves in spite of the loss they are going through.

One key area worthy of note that improved in the group is spirituality/religiosity among members. Spirituality is considered one of the primary constructs of health in Ghanaian culture. The limited evidence that exists suggests that spirituality may play an influential role in health-related behavioral choices and beliefs in these members’ worldview. In Ghana, religion plays some role in moral practice and one’s relationship with the Supreme Being (K. Gyekye, 1996). Our psychoeducational program offered teaching strategies that provided members with opportunities to develop a personal definition of Ghanaian cultural values, namely spirituality, and explored factors that contribute to discovering one’s meaning and purpose in life. One possible explanation is the members’ belief in God, their spiritual beliefs and practices and prayer could have enhanced their positive social behaviors and values. It appears that members were more open to the discussion of the core elements of spiritual and religious issues. This finding is also consistent with previous work in Lebanon and the United States of America (Edlund et al., 2010; Ghandour, Karam, & Maalouf, 2009) showing the protective nature of religiosity. This outcome indicates that for the Ghanaian adolescents in our group, their religious or spiritual life might have a significant impact on their mental health.

The session on divorce appears to have had little effect on the group. These adolescents may assume that they were unlucky to have experienced parental divorce. It appears that the extended family of Ghanaian children could play a role in the child’s life that helps reduce social isolation and loneliness. Consequently, talking about

their parents' divorce might have been of little concern to the group members. Adolescents' experience of parental divorce may not necessarily lead them to a long period of grief because of the extended families' involvement in the child's relationship. This is consistent with the findings by Nkyi (2014) that emotional deprivation is not a serious problem in Ghana because the traditional practice of extended family ties creates strong commitment for all family members. Nevertheless, it also appears behavior problems are fewer when the adolescent stays with extended family members even when there is divorce. Other possible explanation is that the members were afraid to give voice to their feelings as they did not want to bring "shame" to their families and might have felt pressure to "save face" of their families. It could be concluded that the group session on divorce may not have been enough to address all aspects of the members' needs.

An adolescent whose peer group engages in pro-social activities is also more likely to engage in socially sanctioned activities. Although research indicates that mastering the interpersonal skills is necessary to sustain meaningful peer relationships (Parker & Asher, 1987; Selman, Watts, & Schultz, 1997). Lerner (1982) suggests that one way in which youth become producers of their own development is by helping each other learn how to take feedback from others and respond to them. The response scores for this item appear to be low compared to other topics. It may suggest that more time is needed to build their skills with peers. Three months was too short to offer such adequate skills.

There are several characteristics of this program that need to be highlighted. The group was carried out with a population at risk because of experiencing parental divorce; characterized by grief, anger, low self-esteem, and low socioeconomic status. Studies conducted by Cercone and DeLucia-Waack (2012), DeLucia-Waack (2011), and Rose (2009) reported the effectiveness of group work for treating the psychological, social, and academic problems associated with children of divorce. Cognitive-behavioral interventions used to teach coping skills and strategies to deal with life stressors appear to be an effective technique that fit well into the psycho-educational approach that we used (Chen & Rybak, 2004). Research supports the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral techniques for modifying children's self-perceptions when used by properly trained individuals (Hattie, 1992). The other strength of this psycho-educational program that is worthy of note is the structured format of the sessions (Chen & Rybak, 2004) that were built by the leader to achieve predetermined goals in a short time. Through structured activities, the psycho-educational model addressed the members' identified needs and built on their skills. The use of role plays, skill techniques, education, and group activities to teach coping

skills and strategies to deal with life stressors among these members was appropriate. Furthermore, the psycho-educational group was supportive in nature and that may be why these members tended to respond better to this program (Remocker & Storch, 1992).

Conclusions and Implications for Group Counselors and Mental Health Professionals

This article has focused on psycho-educational group work with adolescents affected by parental divorce in a rural community in Ghana. Based on the outcomes of the group intervention, several implications for counselors and other health professionals could be drawn. First, interpersonal skills, socializing techniques, and strategies to practice new skills and behaviors are important. Such techniques might enable participants to challenge and modify maladaptive beliefs and behaviors related to safety, trust, self-esteem, and relationships. The negative impact of divorce on children could also be minimized. The ongoing formation of groups in communities might empower these adolescents to face crises and difficult situations. Such programs might equip them with much needed support. There appears to be a tendency for collectivistic communities with extended families (such as in Ghana) to overlook the importance of counseling and psycho-educational interventions. However, the outcomes of this experience appear to indicate that group members benefited from being able to learn to how to experience love, caring, and acceptance and perhaps even open a door to real relationship with others. In such programs we can instill hope through learning to attend to the needs and concerns of others, and giving them the opportunity to learn, gain self-esteem, and increase their sense of meaning in life.

Second, all culturally competent and effective counselor should be especially sensitive to the cultural dynamics that may impact their work with such groups. Integration of spirituality and religiosity in group work with Ghanaian clients could be of great value in the counseling process. The counselors' ability to communicate, to listen, and to be patient, creative, and sensitive to the needs of the clients has great impact on the group members. Counselors should recognize the culturally-appropriate ways of speaking to, and expressing themselves to these adolescents. Counselors should be aware of the social and age distance between themselves (the elder) and the adolescents across the entire social fabric. Thus, counselors working with Ghanaian adolescents must have the ability to listen and motivate the clients to speak. Building effective therapeutic relationships with clients to gain trust and confidence is essential.

The other implication for counselors and health professionals is the recognition of the financial and economic burdens in working with this group. The counselors' ability to offer clients financial help will have great impact on the counseling relationship (e.g., giving them money to buy food). Contrary to ethical guidelines in the United States of America, it is customary sometimes for counselors in Ghana to provide money to low income or poor clients. Some of the clients see a counselor as provider and a helper who should offer financial help to the client. Indeed, clients come to counseling with different needs that include material and financial needs that they expect the counselor to provide, sometimes. This was important as most of these adolescents live with their grandparents or their mothers in poor environments. It appears that a combination of culturally adapted cognitive-behavioral, person centered and psycho-educational set of techniques can be effective to assist Ghanaian adolescent children of divorce.

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APPENDIX A

PRETEST AND POSTTEST QUESTIONNAIRE

This is a questionnaire designed to measure what you are thinking at this moment. There is of course, no right answer for any statement. The best answer is what you feel is true of yourself at the moment. Be sure to answer all of the items, even if you are not certain of the best answer. Again, answer these questions as they are true for you **RIGHT NOW**.

Scale: 1= *Strongly Disagree* 2= *Disagree* 3= *Agree* 4= *Strongly Agree*

1. SELF ESTEEM: I know my good and bad qualities
2. TIME MANAGEMENT: I know how to manage and plan my time table well.
3. EDUCATION GOALS: I know what my goals for school are.
4. ANGER MANAGEMENT: I know what makes me angry and how to cope with anger
5. COMMUNICATION SKILLS: I know how to express my feelings and needs in a way that respects the rights of others
6. PEER PRESSURE: I know how to make good friends.
7. SPIRITUALITY: I have no hurts against my parents.
8. DIVORCE EFFECTS: I feel comfortable to talk about my parents' divorce.
9. LIFE SATISFACTION: I have a bright future.
10. EVALUATION: I feel it is important to attend the program

APPENDIX B

PRAYER

O loving and creating God, bless families hurting with the pain of separation and divorce. We know that when two people are married, they mean it for life. Yet, at times, with some people, and in some very complex situations, it just doesn't happen that way.

Give peace and courage to all who have experienced the disruption caused by divorce or separation. Help us to accept our feelings of pain, rejection, and grief.

Help us, above all, to believe in your presence, and to believe in God as a source of strength and compassion.

Help all of us to be sensitive to emotional, spiritual, and physical needs of children who have divorced or separated parents. Enable us to reach

out in love. May people be aware of the pain of separated and divorced families and always welcome them in spiritual and social activities.

Especially we pray, O God, that as we continue to recognize Jesus in the group work, we will grow in confidence and build our self-esteem.

God of power, you watched as Your Son Jesus died on the cross. Be with us and as we journey on together. Help our parents to get money to take care of us in our education. Comfort us and help us to remember that we are not alone, in each other and in you. Grant us the light of your love in the darkness of our situation today. Amen.