

**Experiences of Parental Divorce after Grade 12 –
An Educational Psychological Perspective.**

by

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ABSTRACT

Divorce is one of the most traumatic experiences that families can encounter. Children suffer when parents divorce and much research has been done on the effects that divorce has on young children in terms of their social, socio-economic and psychological development.

As a result of this extensive research, parents are aware that, if they divorce when their children are young, it may have negative effects on their children's development. Hence, some couples wait until they believe their children are mature enough to understand the situation and to deal with the consequences, thereby limiting any possible damage. These parents often wait for their children to complete their senior secondary education before moving forward with divorce proceedings. They believe that this is the right time to divorce.

This research study uses a Qualitative Research Paradigm to investigate the effects that waiting to divorce has on the young adult child and his or her relationships and future career opportunities. The theoretical framework for this study includes understanding Systems Theory, the family life cycle, the development of personality in the young adult and the nature and stages of divorce.

The research study shows that young adult children do experience hardship particular to their stage of development when their parents divorce. In particular, they find themselves caught between stages of their lives. They are on the cusp of two worlds – school and their future careers.

Interviews were used as a method of data collection. Three participants were selected to form part of the study and in-depth interviews were conducted to understand the experiences and perceptions of these individuals. The findings were analysed and recorded. The data was interpreted from which conclusions were drawn and recommendations made.

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CHAPTER 1

*“Contrary to what those who’ve never been there believe,
young adults whose parents are divorcing feel as much
pain and grief as do younger children”*

(Amato & Booth, 1997, p.219).

1.1 CONTEXTUALISATION AND ORIENTATION OF RESEARCH.

Divorce is defined as the legal dissolution of a marriage (Oxford Dictionary, 1994:430). The crisis of divorce is devastating to adults and children alike and often places the child in indefensible positions of insecurity, confusion, fear, anger and guilt (Ellis, 2001:51). It has been my experience during practical work in the MEd Educational Psychology course at the Child and Adult Guidance Centre (University of Johannesburg) that little consideration has been given to young people, whose parents postpone divorce until their children have completed senior secondary education. This problem was again highlighted when I began working as an intern educational psychologist at the Family Life Centre in Parkview, Johannesburg. The centre is extensively used by the Family Court for divorce mediation and as such, counsels children of all ages through this difficult period. Although there is extensive research and support material for younger children, there appears to be little research regarding the actual experiences of young people whose parents postpone divorce until their children have completed senior secondary education (Furstenberg & Kiernan, 2001:452). There appears to be a lack of support and understanding of the trauma experienced by this age group, as they reframe their beliefs, values and sense of security, in their home, community and future relationships. Parents, teachers and friends, often fail to understand the enormity of the emotional effects of divorce on these children (Cooney and Kurtz 1996:496). To compound their

difficulties, this is a time when most young people are also experiencing stress and conflict related to launching into tertiary education or into the world of work. At this age the reality of divorce has the possibility of either fitting into their current field of knowledge, or disrupting many aspects of their emotional domain (Louw, 1997:501).

The above-mentioned details initiated my need for a deeper understanding of these young people who require support and therapeutic intervention throughout the various stages of parental divorce. This age group appeared to confront different concerns from those of the younger age groups I had previously counselled. Both the school guidance counsellors and educational psychologists, consulted by divorcing parents, found this to be an area of limited reference and age-specific support (Thompson & Amato, 1999:42).

Erikson's theory of psychosocial development places these young people at the end of adolescence and at the beginning of young adulthood. During this stage of life, the young person needs to resolve the primary task of establishing a basic social and occupational identity. As they become more mature, the young adult strives to form strong friendships and to experience love. Successful resolution of this stage, later results in a sense of shared identity that emanates from love, companionship and intimacy. Unsuccessful resolution of these psychosocial crises, results in role confusion and isolation respectively. Erikson believed that these stages require the person to cope with and adapt to social realities in order to model a "*normal pattern of development*" (Shaffer, 2002:42). Although the reaction of each young person to their parents' divorce is unique, it "*shakes them to the core*" (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003:114). They question family values and their own chance of having a long-term, loving relationship. As with any other age, divorce can be "*emotionally overwhelming*" and act as the precursor to physical, psychological and

relationship problems. This in turn, has a negative influence on the young person's social, academic and occupational performance (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003:114).

These young people find themselves on the cusp of post-adolescence and young adulthood. Parents, who divorce at this stage, believe that they have done their duty in providing a secure family environment for their children and that they are now entitled to pursue their own happiness. Many feel that divorce will only have a very limited effect on their children who are becoming independent and starting a life of their own. Wallerstein & Blakeslee (2003:116) disagree and believe that these young people experience as many difficulties as do younger children. For this reason I wish to develop a greater understanding and body of knowledge of the experiences of these young people in the period proceeding, during and after parental divorce. To obtain information about these issues, I will ask: "What are the experiences of young people, whose parents delay divorce until their children have completed senior secondary education?"

1.2 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY.

The purpose of this research study is to explore and describe the experiences of three young people, whose parents postponed divorce until their children had completed senior secondary education. The objective is to utilise the knowledge gained from these families to provide recommendations, concerning divorce. This information will be useful to educational psychologists as well as to counsellors in secondary and tertiary institutions.

1.3 THE RESEARCH QUESTION.

Against the above background, the research question is framed as follows:

“What are the experiences of young people whose parents waited until they had completed senior secondary education before divorcing?”

1.4 ASSUMPTION OF THE STUDY.

It is important in this study to understand the social construct of the family and the stages of divorce. These are relevant to the developmental stages of the young person who has recently completed senior secondary education. The way in which a particular family interacts influences how its members construct their world, and how their world constructs them (Orton, 1997, p.42). The reaction of each individual to their parents' divorce is unique and depends on family circumstances, coping mechanisms and different personality strengths and weaknesses (Orton, 1997, p.104).

Several studies indicate that positive parent-child relationships can act as a buffer against the impact of divorce (Burns & Dunlop, 1998, in Richardson & McCabe, 2001, p.470). The ability of these young people to develop a healthy personality is influenced by the quality of the relationships they have with family members and the relationship their parents have with each other (Orton, 1997, p.104). Extended family and friends provide an important support system. It has been my experience that young people, who have just completed senior secondary education, confront different concerns from those of younger children experiencing recent parental divorce.

Developmental conflict experienced by these young people becomes exacerbated when there is conflict related to divorce. The break down of the family unit causes a sense of “*disequilibrium*” (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 1997, p.35; Minuchin, 1996, p.22). Conflict between parents is an overt stressor, which may result in decreased academic performance, fear, guilt, anger and aggression. Vulnerable children with special needs are often the most sensitive and at risk in these circumstances (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.125).

Conflict within the family, separation and divorce increases feelings of helplessness and vulnerability. The pain they experience is no less severe than that of younger children. Research indicates that the stress and trauma experienced during this time by young adults can be so overwhelming that it increases the possibility of young adult suicide (Mize & Ellis, 2003, p.5). Physical violence between parents also increases the risk of parent-to-child violence and tends to be associated with psychological and behavioural problems (Hughes, 1988, in Amato, Loomis & Booth, 1995, p.898). Divorce is often instrumental in forcing young people whose parents divorce at this later stage to fulfill a new and more stressful role within the family. Concerns about their own future become paramount (Mize & Ellis, 2003, p.14).

There are many consequences of marital disruption for young adults. Adjustment problems do not only relate to emotional factors. Of major concern to the young adult is his or her financial vulnerability. This could limit the opportunity for basic necessities, advanced schooling and career progress. Cooney, Hutchinson & Leather (1995, p.160) site these as the most common reasons for relationship breakdown between fathers and their young adult children. However, this same disruption to family life may force the young adult to adopt new coping strategies (Mize & Ellis, 2003, p.14).

The relationship between the individual and his or her parents plays a significant role at this time in their life cycle as the majority of these young people still live at home. This is a crucial stage in preparing them for the independence required for separation from the family unit in order to start a future career, home and family of their own (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.286). Depending on how parents cope with the various stages of divorce, it will either enable or inhibit the young adult from becoming an independent, loving and self-actualizing member in the family life cycle (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.301).

1.5 DEMARKATION OF THE STUDY.

This research pays particular attention to the young person whose parents postponed divorce until their children had completed senior secondary education. Within the South African context, these young people are typically 18 to 19 years of age.

The terms 'young person' and 'young adult' refer to young people who are neither adolescents, nor are they as yet adults (Corsini, 1999, p.1082). Within the South African socio-economic context, many live at home and most young adults are still financially dependent on their parents for food, clothing, education and other basic necessities (S.A Stats, 2005). These young people are either in the final year of senior secondary education or at various stages of tertiary education. Some may already be a part of the world of work (Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana, 2002, p.83). These young adults are caught between two worlds. On the one hand, they fight for total independence and emancipation; on the other hand, they still thrive on the security generated within a loving, nurturing, financially supporting family system (Donald et al, 2002, p.83-87)). The ability to self-actualize, to develop age appropriate ego-strengths, morals and values is still influenced by their home and social environment (Berk, 1997, p.461). Yet

all too often, the young adult in a home of high conflict and recent parental divorce is faced with huge responsibilities and stresses uncommon to young adults who live in a more stable environment (Mize & Ellis, 2003, p.14).

The reason for selecting this demarcated area of study is that both school guidance counsellors and educational psychologists consulted by divorcing parents, found this to be an area of limited reference and age-specific support (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.115).

1.6 CONCEPT CLARIFICATION.

In order to facilitate greater understanding of this research study the meaning of specific relevant terms, which are used repeatedly, will be elaborated and clarified.

‘Divorce’ is the term used to describe the legal dissolution of a marriage. In contemporary Western society adultery, desertion, insanity, mental cruelty and an irretrievable breakdown of the relationship are given as reasons for divorce (Phillips, 1998, p.274). It is the legal term for a process which can span many months or even years and cannot be viewed as a single, dramatic life event. The various stages of divorce present unique and often stressful experiences for parents and children alike (Spalding, 1999).

The ‘family’ is considered to be those persons who are biologically and/or psychologically related; whom historical, emotional, or economic bonds connect and who perceive themselves as part of the household (Coltrane & Collins, 2001, p.38; Gladding, 2002, p.6).

The term 'custody' refers not only to where children live, but also to decision-making. Generally speaking, the custodian is responsible for making all decisions for the child until he reaches majority age. This responsibility extends from choosing the school he attends and what religion he follows to who he associates with. When custody is awarded to one parent, it is that parent who makes all the daily and major decisions regarding the child's life. That parent is the residential parent; in other words the child primarily lives with him or her. Joint custody requires that both parents make all major decisions relating to the child's life together (Schäffer, 2003, p.38).

'Access' is the right of the child to enjoy a balanced relationship with both parents after divorce or separation. The way this is achieved is through reasonable consistent contact with both parents. It is subject to the child's scholastic, recreational, cultural, religious, and sporting activities. As the child gets older, access for the non-custodial parent becomes more difficult (Schäffer, 2003, p.100).

The 'Family Life Cycle' is a term generally used to describe developmental trends within a family over a period of time (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999, in Gladding, 2002, p.10). Many of the important transitions in adulthood involve changes in family responsibilities and relationships. Changes in social trends have altered society's view of the traditional family life cycle (Weiten, 2001, p.463).

'Guardian' is the legally appointed person who protects, looks after and manages the affairs of a person who is incapable of acting for himself or herself e.g. a minor. Subject to guardianship both parents remain responsible for looking after and protecting the young adult until he or she reaches the age of majority (21 years of age). For example, both parents must give consent for the young adult to leave the country or apply for an

identity document. Both parents would also be responsible for signing indemnity (Schäffer, 2003, p.31).

'Maintenance' is the financial support given to the custodial parent to pay for expenses incurred by the minor child during the period of separation and after divorce proceedings have been finalised (Schäffer, 2003, p.70).

'Young adulthood' is the developmental period during which young men or women (who have recently passed through adolescence) strive to reach the height of physical and mental vigor and attain basic independence from their families. The psychosocial crises, that the young adult attempts to resolve during this developmental stage, involves transitions that place an emphasis on the individual's ability to achieve intimate, interpersonal relationships (Corsini, 1999, p.1082; Gladding, 2002, p10; Weiten, 2001, p.445). For the purpose of this research study, the terms 'young adult' and 'young person' are used interchangeably as the three participants were all 18 years of age when their parents divorced at the beginning of 2004.



'Development' is a word that refers to systematic continuities and changes in the individual that occur between conception and death. They are orderly, patterned and relatively enduring (Shaffer, 2002, p.2). This is different to 'developmental' which refers to a distinct phase within a larger sequence of development. It is the period characterised by a particular set of abilities, motives, behaviours or emotions that occur together and form a coherent pattern (Shaffer, 2002, p.38).

A 'stage' is a developmental period during which characteristic patterns of behaviour are exhibited and certain capacities become established. Stage theories assume that individuals must progress through specific stages in a particular order, as each stage builds on the previous one. Progress

through the stages is strongly related to age. Development is marked by dramatic transitions in behaviour (Weiten, 2001, p.445).

'Age of Majority' as promulgated in Act 57, of 1972 s 1, states that the age at which the child is considered to be an adult, in the eyes of the law, is 21 years of age. The Law Commission has recommended that this threshold be reduced to 18 years, subject to provisions for the continuation of some measure of parental authority in appropriate cases (Review of the child-care, project 110, para.4.3; Children's Bill, 2002 s 29).

'Trauma' is the result of a painful physical or mental event. It causes immediate damage to the body or shock to the mind. Psychological traumas include emotional shock that has an enduring effect on the personality. Examples are rejection, combat experiences, civilian catastrophes, and racial or religious discrimination. It also includes the destruction or permanent ending of a social relationship, as in the case of death or divorce (Corsini, 1999, p.898).

1.7 RESEARCH PARADIGM.

In order to provide an in-depth understanding to my research inquiry, I intend to use qualitative research in an interpretive, theoretical paradigm (Henning, 2004, p.20). I have selected this research paradigm in order to determine how a specific, identified group of young people have constructed their reality, related to a specific event in their lives (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004, p.44). Divorce is a major "*life event*" (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.300) that has the possibility of either fitting into their current field of knowledge, or disrupting many aspects of their physiological and psychological domain.

The Family Life Centre in Parkwood, Johannesburg is a non-governmental organization which offers services to all communities, individuals, couples, families and groups of people. Their aim is to facilitate community development and to counsel those who experience life crises. The centre will provide the appropriate setting bound by the theme of this inquiry i.e. the support of family members during the various phases of divorce.

1.8 RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN.

“The interest is in the process, rather than in the outcome in the context rather than in a specific variable and in discovery rather than in confirmation”
(Merriam, 1998, p.4).

In order to answer the research question, *“What are the experiences of young people, whose parents delay divorce until their children have completed senior secondary education?”* a qualitative case study research design will be used. *“A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates contemporary phenomena within its real-life context”* (Yin in Merriam, 1998, p.27). The purpose is to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and of the meaning that those involved make from the experience. This form of research design occurs within a particular context, or bounded system (Creswell, 1998, p.61). It can be distinguished from other forms of qualitative research by the intense description of the interaction between the context and the unit of analysis (Henning, van Rensburg & Smit, 2004, p.40).

The case studies of three young male participants will be analysed in order to gain a deeper understanding of their experience of recent parental divorce. The product of this research requires a variety of detailed data collection methods that are rich in description. This will help

the researcher to elicit the participants' "voice" and to become sensitised to "slumbering variables" when formulating each theme (Henning, 1995, in Henning et al., 2004, p.8). The Family Life Centre in Parkview, Johannesburg, will provide the appropriate setting bound by the theme of this inquiry. The interviews will be conducted in English.

Data sourcing will require that three young participants, "whose parents waited until their children had completed senior secondary education, before divorcing", to share their experiences. This can only be done once the researcher has a sound knowledge of relevant literature (Babbie, 2001, in Henning et al., 2004, p.40). The topic will be introduced by the question.

"Tell me about your experience of your parents' divorce, which occurred soon after you had completed senior secondary education?"

In order to capture a richness of depth and design validity, these methods will include a detailed literature study and an open-ended, unstructured interview. The researcher will also use biographical information and artifacts to facilitate the process of triangulation (de Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delport, 2002, p.275; Huberman & Miles, 2002, p.14). Metanotes will describe non-verbal observations of the participants' body language during the discussion of their divorce-related experiences. These will be recorded in a reflective journal. The interviews will be audio taped and then transcribed.

This qualitative research design meets the precondition stipulated by Merriam (1998, p.31) for a sound case study design in that it pinpoints a particular situation i.e. *"What are the experiences of young people, whose parents delay divorce until their children have completed senior secondary education?"* It also provides a rich description of these experiences and is

heuristic in that it brings understanding and new meaning to what is already known.

In order to do this I will need to evoke responses to what Henning et al. (2004, p.44) refer to as “*underlying expectations and implicit rules*”. These are factors, which direct and construct one’s social world and social interactions. The ‘*lifeworld*’ or ‘*Lebenswelt*’ (Henning et al., 2004, p.9) of these young people is in the process of change and will be unique to each participant (Pezzin & Schone, 1999, p.289). Qualitative content analysis is the process whereby one codes, categorises, extracts and constructs data derived from the transcripts of the interviews. This qualitative research method enables one “*to see the whole*” (Henning et al., 2004, p.106) and requires a far deeper understanding of the meaning between the relationships of categories. As the researcher explores the data for possible themes, she constantly checks to see if categories relate to the research question and whether important aspects have been overlooked. She also considers which information has been moved to the foreground, and which has taken a less important position in the analysis. A comparison of the analysed data will be used to ensure a richness of information. This approach will hopefully enable the researcher to find patterns, or common themes amidst the experiences and perceptions of these young people.

Precision, open communication, the pragmatic usability of the knowledge gained will support all tenants of validity and reliability (Koala in Henning et al., 2004, p.151). Ethical considerations will be of paramount importance throughout the research process.

1.9 SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS.

In this criterion-based selection (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p.69, in Merriam, 1998, p.61), participants will have the following attributes:

- They will be able to converse in English (first or second language).
- These young people will be from families where the parents waited until these young adults had completed senior secondary education before divorcing.
- Each participant should be 18 or 19 years of age and no longer fit the typical adolescent profile.

1.10 CHAPTER LAYOUT.

Chapter 1 explores the contextualisation and orientation of the research study. It introduces the purpose and objectives of the inquiry. The research question is then stated. This is followed by the assumption and demarcation of the study. Concepts are clarified and the research paradigm affirmed. The research design, methodology and selection of participants are then described. Chapter 1 concludes with a summary of the chapter layout.

Chapter 2 reviews literature that is pertinent to the study. The concept of divorce is explored from a social constructivist perspective. How people interpret this experience is seen as being central to how they construct both their inner and outer reality within a specific system that is dynamic and ever-changing. Systems Theory, with particular relevance to the family system, is then described. Divorce changes the family system irrevocably and affects each member regardless of where the individual finds himself in the family life cycle. The literature reviews the stages and stressors of the family life cycle pertinent to the young adult. The stages

and consequences of divorce follow this discussion. The chapter concludes with the critical stages of personality development (Erikson, 1982).

Chapter 3 elaborates on qualitative research design and describes the methodology applied in this study. This includes the selection of participants and methods of data collection. The researcher used content analysis and constant comparative data analysis to arrive at pertinent themes relating to the experiences of the three young adult participants. Both are described and briefly discussed. The role of the researcher, ethical considerations and the importance of various facets of trustworthiness conclude this chapter.

Chapter 4 gives a brief overview of salient points related to the method of data analysis. The researcher then introduces the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the process of data collection and analysis. These are discussed at length and supported by raw quotes from the data and authenticated by literature where possible. Links to former chapters are made where applicable. A detailed sequence showing a constant comparative method of analysis appears in appendices D-G.

Chapter 5 concludes the study and pertains to recommendations and a validation regarding the uniqueness of the study. This is followed by a brief discussion of both the purpose and the limitations of this particular study. A conclusion is then given.

1.11 CONCLUSION

The researcher hopes to stimulate a greater awareness of the experiences of young adults whose parents divorce soon after their children have completed senior secondary education. The case studies

will show that the young adult child experiences as much pain and grief, as do younger children, whose parents divorce. This is a particularly difficult time for the young adult as many struggle to cope with a developmental life crisis parallel to experiencing the trauma of a family life crisis. The uniqueness of the experience of these young adults requires greater understanding throughout the various stages of parental divorce as well as more age appropriate support and therapeutic intervention.

Young adults who have just completed senior secondary education average 18 to 19 years of age. They appear to confront different concerns from those of younger age children whom I have previously counselled in relation to parental divorce. Both the school guidance counsellors and the educational psychologists consulted by divorcing parents, found this to be an area of limited reference and age-specific support (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.115).

The aim of this research is to explore and describe the experiences of three young adults whose parents waited until their children had completed senior secondary education before divorcing. This is already a period of transition and major economic decision-making. The young person has to decide whether to continue to tertiary education or to enter the world of work. Future plans relating to the transitions young adults have to make can be severely handicapped if parents neglect to support them physically and emotionally through this difficult period (S.A. Childcare Act, 2005).

Family and individual therapy appear to be the best intervention strategies available for supporting adjustment and re-establishing balance and harmony to the family-of-divorce subsystem (Donald et al., 1997, p.35). Sadly, economic and cultural circumstances prevent a large number of these young people from availing themselves of therapeutic interventions.

Understanding and responding to children's divorce-related needs is imperative at any age in resolving developmental issues of divorce. It is for this reason that I hope to make available to parents and school counsellors the valuable insights gained from this research.

In this chapter the contextualisation and orientation of the research study was first discussed. The purpose of the inquiry and research question was then stated. These were followed by a demarcation of the study. The concepts used throughout the study were clarified and the research paradigm was affirmed. The research design, methodology and selection of participants were then described. Finally, a summary of the chapter layout and the conclusion brought this first chapter to an end. Literature that is pertinent to this study will now be elucidated upon in Chapter 2.



CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

“Contrary to what those who’ve never been there believe, young adults whose parents are divorcing feel as much pain and grief as do younger children”

(Amato & Booth, 1997, p.219).

2.1 INTRODUCTION.

The experience of divorce requires that new personal and social knowledge be constructed. The young adult is then more able to incorporate the experience into his or her personal frame of reference relative to his or her developmental stage in the family life cycle. This is an interactive process where the meaning cannot be separated from its particular social context (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2002, p.100). The aim of this chapter is to explore literature relevant to the experiences of young people whose parents waited until they had completed senior secondary education before divorcing.

Two broad theoretical perspectives will first be discussed in order to gain a deeper insight into how these young people made meaning of this experience within the particular social context. The theoretical perspectives concerned are a constructive perspective and a systemic perspective. I will then clarify the understanding of the family as a system. This will be followed by a discussion on family life cycles and family stressors. The stages of divorce will then be reviewed relative to family systems. In order to understand how these young people experience their parents' divorce requires an explanation of their particular developmental phase. The literature review will focus on information relevant to the

experience of parental divorce, which occurs at a critical developmental phase. The aim of the research is to explore how the three male participants perceive and construct an understanding of the way in which they experienced their parents' divorce. I will conclude this discussion with an overview of the intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences of these young people.

For the purpose of this study, my interest will focus on the research question, which is ***“What are the experiences of young people whose parents wait until they had completed senior secondary education, before divorcing?”*** The three participants in this study were 18 years old when their parents divorced. They are white South African males from middle to upper-middle income group families. Before their parents' divorce, each member of the study sample had expected to follow senior secondary education with a form of tertiary education e.g. college or university. Developmentally, they are ending post adolescence and are on the brink of young adulthood (Erikson, 1963). The young adults and their parents are both experiencing a family crisis and a critical developmental stage in the family life cycle simultaneously (Coltrane & Collins, 2001, p.575; Hanna & Brown, 2004, p.38).

The social context in which these young adults experienced previous developmental stages has changed irrevocably. Constructivism recognises that the way in which we interpret each experience is central to how we construct both our inner and outer reality (Donald, et al., 2002, p.99; Vorster, 2003, p.80; Milner & O'Byrne, 2002, p.19). They see the world as being conceptualised in terms of perceptual systems which means that the boundaries and characteristics of the young adults' new world will be demarcated by the products of their individual experiences (Meyer, Moore, & Viljoen, 1997).

2.2 A CONSTRUCTIVE PERSPECTIVE.

Central to this postmodern paradigm is the recognition that human beings are able to construct new forms of social knowledge within the context of their socio-economic, ideological and cultural background (Engelbrecht, Green, Naiker and Engelbrecht, 1999, p.6, 7; Vorster, 2003, p.80). This perspective suggests that people create their realities through the meanings that they construct about that which they observe and experience. From this perspective an objective reality can never be truly known, because it is believed to be subtly transmuted by the observer who acts in accordance with his or her own reality and who looks for corroboration of that reality (Prochaska & Norcross, 1999, p.439-440).

The first principle of constructivism is that *“the individual is an active agent in the process of experiencing”* (Donald et al., 2002, p.100; Mahoney, 2003, p.6). The second acknowledges the individual’s need for order and their ability to cope with change. It emphasises developmental processes in learning to manage overwhelming challenges. By creating order and exploring meaning of the experience, the individual has the potential to live life more fully within changing social contexts (Mahoney, 2003, p.8, 9, 33). This enables the individual to construct new knowledge and beliefs about his or her world through interaction with family and society.

The work of developmental psychologists such as Piaget (1953) and Bruner (1964) shows that knowledge is a continuous reconstruction of new, rich and more complex, connected meanings. The product of each individual experience demarcates the boundaries and characteristics of the individual’s perceptual world. This new body of knowledge is inextricably linked to the social context in which it has been accumulated, mediated and integrated (Donald et al., 2002, p.73). In this manner,

individual knowledge is developed through each lived experience (Donald et al., 2002, p.101).

Construction of new knowledge is through a process of self-regulation and transformation. It may also extend to what Poplin (1988) refers to as "*holistic constructivism*", which takes into consideration the role that feelings, passions and intuition play in influencing the meaning inferred and meaning interpreted. These realities are actively constructed rather than simply passively received (Donald et al., 2002, p.100). They differ according to the different levels of human existence and relate to the levels of individual, social, physical and transcendental existence. The relationship between these levels of existence is seen as "*dynamic and overlapping*" (Spalding, 1999, p.13). It facilitates the development of consensual reality regarding aspects of the self and the other.

Lyddon & Bradford (1998) state that the degree of trustworthiness of personal beliefs and constructs is "*measured against the generalisability of other realms of experience*" and human existence (Spalding, 1999, p.13). The experience is also "*coloured by the product of each unique personality*" (Spalding, 1999, p.13) their ability to learn, the developmental stage, socialisation and worldview (Donald et al., 2002, p.101). Vygotsky, a post-revolutionary Soviet psychologist and cognitivist rejected the assumption by developmental psychologists such as Piaget and Perry, who stated that learning can be separated from the social context in which it occurs. He believed that the development of cognition is related to the social construction of knowledge and that knowledge can be reconstructed in different contexts at different periods of our lives (Donald et al., 2002, p.104).

2.2.1 Social Constructivism.

As social creatures we are unable to separate our socially constructed reality from our symbolic thinking. We actively organise our thoughts and make meaning of our experience by creating stories. Knowledge is constructed and passed on through different discourses that people use within particular social contexts. It is more than just a way of speaking. It involves underlying values, assumptions about the way things are and an understanding of the world as experienced in a particular context (Mahoney, 2003, p.6; Phillips, 1998, p.151). Knowledge is not fixed; it is shaped through social interactions and the nature of the mediation the individual experiences. Individual adjustment and internalisation of the discourse related to recent parental divorce is associated with the developmental level, family structure, degree of flexibility and the availability of information (Minuchin, 1996, p.66; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.31).

As an introduction to this study, the researcher used a Constructivist paradigm to explain how families construct new knowledge regarding their past, current and future family system, within a particular social context. Systems Theory will now be used to explore our understanding of families and the complex interactions between them and their social context (Shaffer, 2002, p.559; Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.162). A systemic perspective views different levels of the social context as systems, *“where the functioning of the whole is dependent on the interaction between all parts”* (Donald, et al. 2002, p.83; Gladding, 2002, p.10; Prochaska & Norcross, 1999, p.359).

2.3 SYSTEMS THEORY.

Systems theory will be discussed briefly in order to provide a foundation for a more detailed discussion of the family system, with particular reference to its structure and function. “Disfunctionality” in the family system will then introduce the main theme of this study i.e. divorce and the effect it has on the family system. The family life cycle describes the developmental stages a family progresses through and the various stage-related stressors. This section concludes with a discussion of general life stressors.

The basic concept of Systems Theory is similar to the understanding of ecological systems. It is interested in the interrelationship and interdependence of individuals and how change in any one level leads to change in the whole system (Donald, et al. 2002, p.83). The structure of the family is based on the interactions, rules and relationships among family members that determine its organisation within a specific context (Hanna & Brown, 2004, p.78; Prochaska & Norcross, 1999, p.359). Divorce requires that new subsystems develop and existing boundaries be modified. Spousal and parental transactions change and need to be renegotiated as part of the functioning of the newly formed subsystems (Minuchin, 1996, p.65, 90). Of particular interest to this study is how family and social systems influence the young adults’ interpretation of their experience of parental divorce.

2.3.1 The Family System.

The family system is a dynamic entity in which the continuous development and changing interaction of each individual creates a process of continuous change within the family unit as a whole (Gladding, 2002, p.5; Weiten, 2001, p.462). The interactions of the family system are central to how the individual constructs both his inner and outer reality

(Berk, 2003, p.559; Milner & O'Bryne, 2002, p.19; Prochaska & Norcross, 1999, p.359, 360; Voster, 2003, p.30, 80; Weiten, 2001, p.464).

The definition of a family has changed considerably in the last decade, as the traditional middle-class nuclear family no longer reflects the true diversity of family life (Gladding, 2002, p.7; Weiten, 2001, p.464). As mentioned in Chapter 1, the family is considered to be those persons who are biologically and/or psychologically related, whom historical, emotional, or economic bonds connect and who perceive themselves to be a part of the household. Genetic relatedness is no longer a priority (Coltrane & Collins, 2001, p.38; Gladding, 2002, p.6.). It could also refer to single parents, divorced couples, remarried people, those who are: childless, gay or lesbian, blended families, grandparents, aging or multigenerational families to name a few (Gladding, 2002, p.25).

Systems Theory defines three subsystems. They are: the spouse subsystem, the parental subsystem and the sibling subsystem. The rules of relationships create boundaries between the subsystems of the family system. These are essential for controlling and maintaining organisation. Their "*invisible demands*" (Minuchin, 1996, p.50) organise the system and have an impact on the growth and development of each family member (Becvar & Becvar, 1996, p.188; Donald et al., 2002, p.83; Hanna & Brown, 2004, p.38; Mahoney, 2003, p.89).

Bateson (1971) in Gladding (2002, p.5) and Prochaska and Norcross (1999, p.360) use the term 'cybernetics' to explain the "*rules, sequences and feedback*" which operate directly and indirectly to create a system where family members mutually influence each other through various patterns of communication. Their behaviour is regulated by transactional patterns that imply a set of covert rules, roles and relationships (Berk, 2003, p.559; Milner & O'Bryne, 2002, p.19; Voster, 2003, p.30, 80; Weiten, 2001, p.464).

The interactions of family members create a unique family dynamic that influences family functioning. Most family system constructs believe that these fall into three broad categories (Twaite, Silitsky & Luchow, 1998, p.219):

- a) Interdependence and cohesion: This describes the way in which relationships are structured in order to create a balance between the degree of closeness and autonomy.
- b) Homeostasis: This describes the process of maintaining a sense of constancy and equilibrium by putting in place structures to control the internal and external behaviour of family members.
- c) Adaptability: This explains how family members cope with change.

Communication is essential for the transfer of information between systems and subsystems. The more information and constructive communication there is, the more open the system becomes. The higher the level of interaction and organisation, the more the system is able to function in a dynamic, complex manner. The breakdown of communication can cause families to become dysfunctional (Prochaska & Norcross, 1999, p.361).

Depending on the tension between each individual and the family as a whole, interaction between the subsystems can be temporarily or permanently disturbed (Bezuidenhout, 1998, p.21; Donald et al., 2002, p.83; Mahoney, 2003, p.6; James & Gilliland, 2001, p.104; Twaite, Silitsky, & Luchow, 1998, p.219). Divorce often requires that new subsystems develop and existing boundaries be modified. Spousal and parental transactions change and need to be renegotiated as part of the functioning of the newly formed subsystems (Gladding, 2002, p.267; Minuchin, 1996, p.65, 90).

Thompson and Amato (1999, p.162) make four corresponding assumptions about divorce and social systems' perspectives.

- Changes in one part of the system bring about changes in other parts. In the same way, divorce has changed the path of many lives and societies' understanding of families.
- Although the number of divorces has changed society in many ways, it cannot be seen to be the sole cause. When the elements of either system are involved in reciprocal cause and effect relationships, periods of profound change are eventually followed by a new equilibrium.
- Changes in social trends and in divorce have mutually affected each other.
- A high-level of marital discord in society has contributed to a greater acceptance of the high divorce rate.

The three young participants in this study explore the tension that exists within the structure of their families, for dealing with internal relationship difficulties and family stressors. As each unit of the family system interacts, relationships are both constructed and destructed in a circular fashion (Gladding, 2002, p.25; James & Gilliland, 2001, p.11). Through trial and error, connected experiences, self-preservation and the continual search for meaning (to mention but a few), each of the three young adults has created new meaning of their physical and social environment. This is vital for cognitive growth and emotional development as the context of meaning, in this case regarding divorce, may differ from one system to another (Donald et al., 2002, p.100; Weiten, 2001, p.501). Having explored the family as a system, the researcher introduced the notion of disequilibrium within the family system. The effect of divorce on the family system will now be considered.

2.3.2 Divorce and its effect on Family Systems.

Divorce, as the central theme to this study, requires that the researcher examine a variety of divorce-related concepts. These will now be discussed from a family system's perspective.

As a construct, divorce most often creates severe "*dissonance*" (Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana, 1997, p.35) within the family system as the sense of order and known experiences undergoes irrevocable change (Hanna & Brown, 2004, p.38; Minuchin, 1996, p.99). Divorce is the legal dissolution of a marriage and the underlying contributing factors are often complex. In contemporary western society infidelity, incompatibility, desertion, insanity, mental cruelty and an irretrievable breakdown of the relationship are given as some of the reasons for divorce (Gladding, 2002, p.267; Phillips, 1998, p.274). Although litigation is still the most common form of divorce, mediation is growing as an appealing alternative. Divorce mediation is a process of dissolving a marriage or union in a non-adversarial way. It is primarily concerned with interpersonal conflict resolution and focuses on the "*best interests*" of the child (Emery, Laumann-Billings, Waldron, Sbarra, Dillon, 2001, p.323).

There are many explanations that contribute to each individual's concept of divorce, its causes and consequences (Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.162). For this reason it is imperative that parents appreciate that "*it is not that they divorce, but rather how they divorce, that is crucial to the adjustment of children of any age*" (Ellis, 2001, p.51). The reason for this is that the individual develops from both cognitive and emotional stored experiences based on socially constructed needs, norms, values and beliefs (Donald, et al. 2002, p.100; Mahoney, 2003, p.7; Phillips, 1998, p.153; Twait, et al., 1998, p.220). In this way the individual learns to interact with others.

In order to renegotiate and maintain healthy parent-child relationships, after the divorce, requires that boundaries in the parent-child subsystem remain flexible. Men are usually more able to disengage from spousal and parental transactions when divorce occurs as society still expects that the children stay with the mother (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.380). This implies that she is expected to stay more committed to the previous system (Minuchin, 1996, p.100). Regardless of who initiated the divorce process, two subunits are formed. One involves the child, the custodial single parent and their interactions with the ex-partner. The other subunit involves the interactions and relationships of the non-custodial parent, the children and the ex-partner (Carter & McGoldrick, 1988 in Gladding, 2002, p.267).

Stressors and rewards are possible in both subunits. For custodial parents rebuilding social networks and financial resources is extremely stressful, but the reward for success is a renewed sense of personal confidence. The non-custodial parent often finds it difficult to rebuild social networks and to remain involved in their children's lives. Successful resolution of these stressors engenders the use of confidence and an ability to implement creative problem-solving skills (Gladding, 2002, p.267). Bezuidenhout (1998, p.6) on the other hand, describes many interrelated factors which play a significant role throughout the various stages of divorce, which lead to the "*disorganisation*" of the family system.

Dysfunctionality in the family system results from the development of dysfunctional sets of responses by members of the family to stress. These behaviours "*are repeated without modification whenever there is family conflict*" (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1996 in Gladding, 2002, p.216) and are common in dysfunctional divorce subunits.

Conflict that involves the parent-child dyad creates a triangulated situation. For example, siding with one parent is automatically seen as attacking the

other. “Detouring” also creates a rigid triad. This occurs when stresses in the parent subsystem are negotiated through the children. A third form of triangulation occurs when one parent joins a child in a “*rigidly bound cross-generational coalition*” against the other parent. Each of these rigid triad relationships has the potential to create a dysfunctional post-divorce, extended family system (Minuchin, 1996, p.101, 102).

However, this is not always the case. The new family system has as much potential to be healthy or dysfunctional as the old. Becvar & Becvar (1996, p.199) explain that although the family structure changes after divorce, it also offers new opportunities for development that may not have been possible in the previous family system. Minuchin (1997) believes that the organisation of the family structure needs to adapt in order to support the developmental tasks at each stage of the family life cycle (Gladding, 2002, p.18; Voster, 2003, p.95; Hanna & Brown, 2004, p.78).

It is important, for this study, to understand the concept of the ‘family’ from a Systems Theory perspective as the above information has shown. Of further importance is a description of the various stages of the family life cycle as well as age-specific stressors. These concepts are clarified in the next section of this paper.

2.4 THE FAMILY LIFE CYCLE.

‘The family life cycle’ is a phrase commonly used to describe the developmental stages or trends which families progress through over time (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999; in Gladding, 2002, p.10; Weiten, 2001, p.463). This section will emphasise the unique psychosocial developmental progress of the individual and the family, from an interconnected, systemic perspective. An essential element of this model is the “*tension between the person as individual and the family as a*

system" (Donald et al., 2002, p.83; Gladding, 2002, p.10). This will require that the researcher also consider stage specific stressors.

In order to provide a stage-critical family life cycle model, it is essential to integrate developmental tasks of the individual, relative to their particular stage in the family life cycle. The dynamic process model proposed by Becvar & Becvar (1996, p.132) integrates individual and marital developmental theories. This prevents a one-dimensional approach to a complex system that exists and develops in an ever-changing world (Becvar & Becvar, 1996, p.131; Shaffer, 2002, p.540).

Not only has the definition of the family as a system changed (described above in 2.3), but so too have the boundaries of development in family life cycles. The previously conceived notion that stages in the family life cycle have clear age-related developmental changes has had to give way to a more flexible structure. Boundaries have become more fluid. For example, marriage and having a family are no longer the only options available to young adults (Weiten, 2001, p.462). Ostrove (1998) in Weiten (2001, p.462) explains that generations raised in different historical environments (technology, the AIDS epidemic, aging, terrorism and materialism) often have different expectations and therefore think differently and age differently. The product of each individual experience demarcates boundaries and highlights possible alternate choices. These may or may not be known to the individual at different developmental stages (Kelly, 1963 in Spalding, 1999, p.12).

The experience of parental divorce is characteristic of the individual's perceptual world and personal frame of reference within a specific context. According to Meyer, Moore and Viljoen, (1997, p.21) objective reality can never be truly known, as the observer incorporates the experience into his or her own personal frame of reference, within a specific context. This theory supports the notion that different external realities, as well as

parallel realities, can exist alongside each other. All these factors have contributed to changes in relationships, family responsibilities and major developmental transitions (Weiten, 2001, p.462).

The life cycle of the individual is intertwined with that of the family. The family is viewed as a facilitator that promotes development and affords stability. *“It is a system where individuals impact on one another in an interactive and circular way”* (Gladding, 2002, p.25). These *“complimentary and competitive experiences”* are influenced by the social context in which they occur. They are also influenced by the individual’s unique cultural perceptions (Gladding, 2002, p.26; Weiten, 2001, p.262).

A general system’s perspective of contemporary individuals and family cycles is that external and internal pressures influence relationships and that their functions and interactions, change over time (Weiten, 2001, p.464).

These functions can include social, emotional, economic and reproductive purposes to mention but a few. In this manner, individual knowledge is developed through each lived experience (Donald et al., 2002, p.101). The family life cycle proposed by Carter and McGoldrick, (1999) in Gladding (2002, p.11) is based on the work of Evelyn Duvall (1977) and has been modified to suit contemporary western society. It conceptualises the family life cycle as having its origin in the developmental stages of the unattached young adult and traces six progressive stages. Each stage contributes towards the physical and psychosocial development of the individual within the family system as a whole.

The stages range from *“single young adults, leaving home”* to *“the new couple who is ready to join families in marriage”*. These couples then become *“families with young children”* and over time evolve as *“families with adolescents”* and *“families launching children and moving on”*.

"Families in later life, moving into retirement" conclude the developmental stages of the family life cycle.

My interest is particularly how young people experience a critical developmental stage in the family life cycle and a major family life crisis concurrently. In a large number of cases, parents believe that it is in the child's best interest to wait until they have completed senior secondary education before divorcing (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 2003, p.127). As this model emphasises the family as a whole, it is imperative that one also consider the uneven nature of individual emotional, cognitive and moral development (Becvar & Becvar, 1996, p.129; Gladding, 2002, p.25) relative to the quality of interaction between these young people and their parents.

The focus of this study is on three young males from middle to upper middle class economic backgrounds. They described their parents as being middle aged i.e. *"not yet 50"*. These young adult children are in the first stage of the family life cycle and their parents are between stages four and five of the family life cycle. For this reason I will discuss the young adult and their parents in detail. I will only briefly mention the other stages of the family life cycle as proposed by Carter and McGoldrick, (1999); in Gladding (2002, p.11-18).

2.4.1 Stage One: The single young adult. Leaving home.

Most of these young adults are single and many are contemplating a life independent of home. The period of being *"between families"* (before young adults form new families) has become protracted as marriage is often postponed until their later twenties. Contributing factors are increased career opportunities for women, a higher standard of education required in the workplace and the importance a positive sense of self and

personal autonomy in *“the world beyond school”* (Becvar & Becvar, 1996, p.130; Shaffer, 2002, p.540; Weiten, 2001, p.464).

To develop a personal identity requires that the young person gradually learns to detach from the emotional ties to his or her family of origin and then to re-align with them on a different level (Gladding, 2002, p.11; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995, p.52). Developmentally, these young people are ending post-adolescence and are on the brink of young adulthood. Many theorists believe that Erikson was overly optimistic to believe that adolescents have resolved the crisis of identity formation by 18 (Shaffer, 2002, p.441). This phase often facilitates the development of an emotional maturity that enables the young person to formulate a value system less influenced by others. An increasing number of young people choose to cohabit either as a group, or as a young couple (Gladding, 2002, p.11; Shaffer, 2002, p.540).

Remaining single is also growing in popularity as a lifestyle choice (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.370; Shaffer, 2002, p.540). It requires that the individual develop a social network and encourages a healthy physical, psychological, vocational and recreational dimension to their lives. The most important benefit for these young people appears to be a personal freedom of choice and action (Gladding, 2002, p.12). Although most post-adolescent children long for this period of independence, it is not without its own share of stress and anxiety.

2.4.1.1 Stressors experienced by young adults and their families.

Choosing from tertiary education options, dealing with an unwanted pregnancy, raising a child, choosing an occupation or coping with poverty and unemployment are all typical challenges for the young [South African] adult (James & Gilliland, 2001, p.104). Statistics South Africa (2005) reports that only 12% of all 18 to 24-year-old young adults are employed.

Fulmer, (1988) in Gladding (2002, p.22) states that although the process of forming a family is extremely protracted in families where there is strong financial support, low-income family formation is accelerated to the extreme. Negative socio-economic factors can either precede divorce or be a consequence of divorce (Gladding, 2002, p.23).

Major challenges are experienced by young adults who do not have the confidence to separate from their family of origin nor the social skills required to establish meaningful relationships with others. A poor sense of self, pressure to move out of the family home and customary pressures to marry, can lead to frustration, anger, loneliness and depression (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.370; Gladding, 2002, p.12). These stressors are all compounded by parental divorce during this on-going stage of identity formation.

2.4.1.2 Divorce stressors for young adults and their families.

When parents divorce soon after their children have completed senior secondary education, these young people are faced, simultaneously, with two of life's major stressors. Divorce is a major family life crisis and becoming a young adult is a critical developmental stage in the family life cycle. Situations that make extreme demands on the individual, over which he or she has little personal control, are extremely stressful. Divorce and single parenting are second only to the death of a spouse, as most stressful life events. Stressors that accompany divorce are of particular relevance to the well-being of each family member as there are many potential negative events that result from this family crisis. Frequent changes in residence, diminished financial resources, social stigmatisation and parental depression often accompany a series of adjustments and losses (Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.4, 7; Neuman, 1998, p.306, 332).

2.4.1.2.1 *Relationship challenges.*

The ability of children to adjust to parental divorce correlates directly to the quality of relationship he or she has with both parents before and after the divorce. It is also closely associated with the amount of child support received (Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.113). Disruption of parent-child relationships e.g. the lack of a father, deprives the child not only of a role model but also of one of the most important, enduring relationships of his or her life. Losing contact with one parent (usually the father) or troubled relationships with both parents or step-parents is common. Children who cannot express their emotions feel even more alienated and misunderstood. Divorce often challenges parent-child relationships and can exacerbate what would have been normal age-appropriate difficulties. This is particularly evident when divorce occurs during the young person's transition to adulthood (Neuman, 1998, p.2, 251, 387; Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.7).

2.4.1.2.2 *Economic stressors.*

Very few families emerge from divorce without experiencing financial strain. In most cases the joint income has to stretch to support two households instead of one. Economics are adversely affected when the principal breadwinner is no longer the income provider. Diminished financial resources often mean that the family will have to take on a different standard of living. In most cases single parents have to work away from home, which places huge stress on appropriate supervision and guidance of children of all ages. The family may even have to change homes and the children attend different schools (Neuman, 1998, p.32, 46, 47, 333; Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.4).

2.4.1.2.3 *Conflict.*

Some stressors are evident long before divorce e.g. conflict between parents. While conflict most often precedes marital separation these families sometimes find there to be a marked decrease in conflict soon after the separation and divorce. However, this is not always the case and conflict may persist long after the divorce. Research also indicates that some children are protected from conflict during the marriage but that levels of conflict appear to increase significantly during and after the divorce (Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.11, 12). Most children experience the period leading up to the divorce as extremely stressful. This may have a temporary negative effect on physical health vulnerability, cognitive, motivational and emotional development (Leuckens & Fabricus, 2003; 55, pp.221-228; Weiten, 2001, p.421). This can be expressed as depression, anxiety, poor results or behaviour at school or promiscuous sexual activities. Custody battles and financial support are the most common reasons for conflict. Increased levels of stress appear to decline to pre-divorce levels within a year or two (Neuman, 1998, pp.32, 297; Thompson & Amato, 1999, pp.11, 12).

Recent research indicates that most children are extremely resilient and cope well socially, psychologically and academically with the many stressors related to parental divorce (Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.4). Of far greater concern are the emotional long-term effects of severe conflict on children whose parents stay married (Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.13). Of great interest in more recent research is how these young people cope with their own intimate relationships and marriage (Refer to paragraph 2.5.2.6).

2.4.2 Stage Two: The new couple. Joining families through marriage.

During this period the new couple assesses their compatibility through dating. This may involve several relationships before the young adult decides to marry. (Gladding, 2002, p.12). The young adults in this study are at the beginning of this stage. Their family of origin has disintegrated and the three young males are anxious about their ability to sustain long-term relationships. Stressors relating to finding a life partner and trusting in the permanence of a relationship are more evident in children whose parents have divorced (Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.41; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.342).

2.4.3 Stage Three: Families with young children.

This developmental stage and its related stressors are not relevant to the focus of this study.

2.4.4 Stage Four: Families with adolescents.

Each of the young adults in this study experienced the end of this developmental stage during their parents' pre-divorce deliberation stage. Many parents consider this stage of the family life cycle to be the most "*active, challenging and exciting*" (Gladding, 2002, p.15). However, stressors related to parenting exacerbate tensions between the parents if the marriage is already troubled. Conflict often arises between adolescents and their parents over issues relating to their need to be both assertive and independent. During this stage the older adolescent begins to establish his or her own identity. Parents have less influence and stronger relationships develop with peer groups and siblings (Gladding, 2002, p.15; Weiten, 2001, p.465).

Adolescents become more acutely aware of parental conflict and the possibility of divorce. Many question their own ability to nurture intimate relationships and to hold a marriage together. Ongoing parental conflict may inhibit their possible future vision, normal emotional development and security in terms of the possible loss of their home and friends (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, pp.101-107).

2.4.5 Stage Five: Parents launching children and moving on.

Becvar & Becvar (1996, p.130) refer to this stage as the “*launching centre*”. The parents of the three young adults in this study were at this critical stage in the family life cycle when they chose to divorce. As with their young adult children, they also experienced two crises in the family life cycle simultaneously.

During this phase the young adult often leaves home in order to study further, to follow career goals or to marry. A more modern trend has developed where young adults stay in the family home for longer periods due to a shortage of financial resources, unemployment or the need for emotional support. Tension within the family can increase when the process of disengagement is delayed for too long (Gladding, 2002, p.16).

At this stage, parents tend to keep their homes in order to create a secure base to which their children can occasionally return (Becvar & Becvar, 1996, p.130). The negative connotations of “*empty nest*” syndrome are often juxtaposed with the positive experience of couples rediscovering each other, themselves, their interests and new occupational challenges (Gladding, 2002, p.170; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995, p.270). Unfortunately, this is a period of vulnerability and couples may go their separate ways if their lives are no longer compatible (Gladding, 2002, p.16).

2.4.5.1 Stressors experienced by these families.

The children in these families are most often young adults. The most common stressors in middle-income group families relate to finance and to their children's newfound independence. Unless parents have provided for tertiary education, or the young adult is awarded a scholarship, college or university education can be prohibitive. Employment of the unskilled young adult is virtually impossible in the current economic climate. Stressors related to retrenchment of the older parent also pose concerns.

This is a common life cycle stage in which couples experience an imbalance of emotional, economic and sexual resources. It is at this stage that some couples realise that they have little in common. If the marriage relationship is not successfully renegotiated it can end in divorce (Becvar & Becvar, 1996, p.130; Coltrane & Collins, 2001, p.506; Gladding, 2002, p.17).

The transition from family responsibilities to becoming a couple once again requires major personal adjustment. Some couples are ready to pursue their freedom and feel resentful of situations that prevent their children from leaving home. Others experience an *"empty nest"* and a sense of loss of self. They battle to adjust to the child's need to live an independent life. Men's lives change less during midlife as most still go to work. They do not have to reinvent themselves, as do women who have sacrificed their identity for their children. It is often during this period that individuals either accomplish their greatest achievements or become acutely aware of missed opportunities. Mental and physical decline become more obvious (Gladding, 2002, p.17; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995, pp.271, 310).

2.4.5.2 Stressors related to parents who choose to divorce at this stage.

Stressors associated with divorce can lead to several adjustment problems for parent and child alike. Parents carry a double burden. Running parallel to the pain and grief they experience is a need to consider their children's social, psychological and educational well-being after the divorce (Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.4).

Being the single residential parent can be overwhelming. Some parents try to be the “super parent” in an attempt to keep family life the same as it was prior to the divorce. Others battle to set limits for their children and slip into chaotic parenting. Competing with a non-residential parent and the quality of current and future relationships with children and ex-partners can cause extreme distress. Added to these stressors, single parents have less time, more pressure and less support than other parents. The need for continued financial support for older children, diminished financial resources, changing of residence and the need to be employed are all negative outcomes of divorce for parents and children alike. Each situation alone has the potential to cause higher levels of anxiety; cumulatively, the level of stress has the ability to precipitate any number of physical and psychological disorders (Thompson & Amato, 1999, pp.4, 97, 98, 100).

2.4.6 Stage Six: Families in later life and the stressors they experience.

These families and the stressors they experience are not relevant to this study (Gladding, 2002, p.18; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995, p.326).

Both predictable and unpredictable crises are major contributors to family stress. Many occur at a point of natural family evolution. They require the

negotiation of new family criteria and boundaries. Nearly all relate to a weakening of bonds between adults and children in our society (Minuchin, 1996, p.63).

Section 2.4 above has focused on the family life cycle and the developmental tasks and stressors which tend to be linked to each particular stage. General stressors, which are not stage specific and require adjustment throughout the course of family life, will be discussed in the section that follows.

2.5 GENERAL STRESSORS.

General stressors emanate from both emotional and physical experiences and are usually divided into two categories:

The first category consists of anticipated crises and often relates to particular developmental stages of individual family members in the life cycle e.g. certain birthdays, menopause and retirement (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995, p.118). Personality-related differences and situational factors may cause each member of the family to develop at different rates and in different directions. Patterns of socialisation also influence family structure and when there is a change in gender-related roles and rules a power shift can increase family conflict (Coltrane & Collins, 2001, p.575; Hanna & Brown, 2004, p.38). Adjustments have to be made throughout the course of family life in order to prevent low parental quality, as this reduces the well-being of children and *“divorce often reduces it even further”* (Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.43; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995, p.118).

Many factors are not stage specific and are discussed as a second category. They relate to *“unexpected twists of fate”* (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995, p.118) that can occur at any time in the family life cycle. No person escapes some form of personal tragedy or traumatic event.

Some are predictable, like the death of an aging parent, while other traumas such as the death of a child are seldom contemplated. Even the strongest families are deeply affected by environmental and systemic stressors such as violence, imprisonment, socio-political, socio-economic and natural disasters. Biological stressors such as physical, emotional and psychological disabilities can also occur at any stage of the family life cycle (Bezuidenhout, 1998, pp.5-8; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995, p.118).

Becvar & Becvar (1996, p.196) view these unexpected crises as challenges that necessitate a change in the original family structure, in order for the family to return to full functionality. Actions and reactions to stressors can be either direct or indirect (Berk, 2003, p.559) and stressful events create different anxieties in each member of the family (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995, p.117). This study focuses on how three young adults experience parental divorce, which occurred soon after they had completed senior secondary education. Data from several studies indicates that life events and life stressors have an important influence on personality development (Becvar & Becvar, 1996, p.128; Breggin, 2000, pp.47-64; Cavanaugh, 1997, p.300 Orton, 1997, p.104; Weiten, 2001, p.445). Having concluded the discussion on general stressors the paper continues and now introduces the development of personality of the young adult.

2.6 THE DEVELOPMENT OF PERSONALITY IN THE YOUNG ADULT.

It is crucial that the reader have a clear insight into the complex process of personality development, as described by Erikson. This will facilitate a greater understanding of the different social and emotional conflicts each person faces at various stages of life and the influence they have on personality development. This section will first discuss ego psychology and then the various stages of personality development. Particular

emphasis will be placed on the stages of personality development most relative to the young adult. The section concludes with a brief discussion on the possible influence divorce has on personality development.

2.6.1 Ego psychology.

Erikson (1982) sees the development of the personality as being a continuous, dynamic and lifelong process that is grounded in a connection between the influences of society and the inner maturation of the individual. He is described as an “ego” psychologist or analyst, and believes that man grapples with different social and emotional conflicts, or “*ego functions*”, at each stage of life. Ego psychology infers that the ego is far more than “*a simple arbiter*” trying to find a safe and satisfying balance between the continuous antagonistic demands of the id and the superego (Prochaska & Norcross, 1999, p.48; Shaffer, 2002, p.42). It also experiences periods that are conflict-free (Hartmann et al., 1947) during which the individual is able to adapt to reality and to master his environment (Hendricks, 1943 in Prochaska & Norcross, 1999, p.48).

Unlike Freud, ego psychologists place far less importance on sexual urges and highlight the significance of cultural influences in the stages of personality development. They do not negate the role conflict plays when impulses strive for immediate gratification, but rather assume the equally important influence of the ego when striving for adaptation and mastery (Prochaska & Norcross, 1999, p.48; Shaffer, 2002, p.42).

Successful resolution of these conflicts enables the person to adapt favourably to their environment and to portray normal patterns of emotional, behavioural and personality development. If the particular stage is unsuccessfully negotiated the development of the ego becomes impaired. A developmental crisis results when there is an imbalance between the individual’s coping skills and the task to be achieved. This

could be due to a lack of skills or knowledge; faulty defense mechanisms; the lack of resources and support systems, or the inability to take risks (Corey, 2001, p.71; James and Gilliland, 2001, p.104). Divorce affects children according to their coping mechanisms in their particular stage of development. Many problems and concerns attributed to divorce have their roots in the period of family interaction before the divorce and in the ongoing conflicts in many families after the divorce (Bryner, 2001, p.210).

Erikson proposed eight psychosocial stages, which are based on the epigenetic principle of developmental ascendancy and importance. These personality traits evolve over the entire lifespan and are biologically determined. They occur within a particular social context and are unique to each individual. This theory proposes that each stage reflects the struggle between two antagonistic tendencies. Both personality traits will be experienced *"in varying degrees"* throughout the lifespan of the individual. These usually involve *"transitions in important social relationships"* (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.285; Weiten, 2001, p.445). The manner in which the individual experiences these crises lays the foundation for future behaviour. The ego's prime motivation in the development of personality is to adapt to and to master an objective reality. Striving to resolve a particular developmental crisis invariably leads to personal social and emotional growth (Corey, 2001, p.73; James & Gilliland, 2001, p.104; Prochaska & Norcross, 1999, p.48).

2.6.2 The stages of personality development.

The first four developmental crises only become important in the life of the young adult if they have been impaired i.e. they were not successfully negotiated during the relevant developmental timeframe. As they are not the focus of this study, they will only be mentioned briefly.

2.6.2.1 Trust versus Mistrust.

Erikson believes that trusting oneself and others is essential in forming a healthy personality. Hence the foundation of psychosocial development is grounded in the first two opposing tendencies experienced by an individual i.e. trust versus mistrust. Successful resolution engenders hope and feelings of comfort and security in the infant (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.286). This enables him or her to progress to the next developmental stage.

2.6.2.2 Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt.

In this second stage the child moves from being completely reactive to becoming more responsible for his or her actions. Depending on their environment, the child either becomes more autonomous or experiences shame and doubt. The unsuccessful resolution of this stage sees the young child retreating to the solace of the first stage (Corey, 2001, p.74).

2.6.2.3 Initiative versus Guilt.

As the child becomes more confident they begin to use initiative to explore more about themselves and their early childhood environment. However, conflict during this third stage can result in the child experiencing the psychosocial crisis of guilt rather than developing a sense of purpose. As the child gets to imagine more possibilities about themselves through play, a greater desire to interact with others develops (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.286). The child progresses into middle childhood and becomes less self-centered. Their interest in the external world increases until the beginning of puberty (Corey, 2001, p.79).

2.6.2.4 Industry versus Inferiority.

This fourth stage is marked by the child's need to develop competencies. Erikson believes that the young school child is now ready to negotiate the

tasks of industry versus inferiority. This is achieved during middle childhood and involves setting and achieving goals that are “*personally meaningful*” (Corey, 2001, p.79). Future stages are negatively affected if this is not accomplished, which results in feelings of inadequacy and inferiority.

2.6.2.5 Identity versus Role Confusion.

This stage usually begins during adolescence, as the young person aims to achieve the basic strength of identity formation. Their significant relationships are with peer groups, “*out-groups*” (Erikson, 1982) in Cavanaugh (1997, p.286) and models of leadership. During this stage they aim to resolve the issues of identity versus role confusion.

The young adolescent is confronted with a multitude of possibilities in his or her search for the true self. The desire to experiment with too many possible future selves is exacerbated by the need to consider future career opportunities (Weiten, 2001, p.470). This often reflects personal goals and is a powerful motivator in the search for whom the young adolescent can become, rather than helping them discover who they are (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.286). Towards the end of this stage the adolescent starts his or her journey into adulthood.

It is this stage of development that is most relevant, as this study is interested in how these young people experience their parents divorce. The process of identity formation often continues beyond the age of 18, once the restrictions of post-adolescence and school regulations are removed (Shaffer, 2002, p.441). Within the South African legal context, one is considered to be a young adult at 18, rather than a post-adolescent. Being able to get a driver's license, to buy liquor and to vote engenders a far greater sense of independence. The young adult also continues to develop physiologically, cognitively and emotionally. Although this study

pays particular attention to personality development it is essential that the young adult be considered holistically (Weiten, 2001, p.470).

2.6.2.6 Intimacy versus Isolation.

Young adulthood is a stage in life when the individual is required to overcome the major psychosocial developmental task that achieves intimacy rather than isolation. This is achieved through forming strong friendships and companionship with another person. Choosing a partner whose qualities best represent one's personal criteria from past experiences, assists the individual most in achieving intimacy (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.286).

Erikson believes that only after establishing confidence in our own identity, can intimacy (or developing a shared identity) be achieved with another (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.372; Shaffer, 2001, p.43). Successful resolution of tasks to this stage implies that the young person has acquired the basic strengths of hope, will, purpose, competence and fidelity. This cycle is repeated again as the young adult struggles to develop an intimate relationship, while still maintaining their own identity (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.287). Intimacy cannot be achieved until one's identity is established. A more mature sense of identity enables the young adult to *"take control of their life in developing a personal ideology"* (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.299). Appropriate recognition of accomplishing specific developmental tasks enables the individual to continuously strive for trust, achievement and wholeness (Logan, 1986 in Cavanaugh, 1997, p.287). Logan also proposes that these stages of developmental progress repeat in a cyclical manner throughout our lives. The individual progresses from trust to identity and from a sense of identity, to integrity.

The young adult becomes free of their parents' influence and more interested in others. The basic ego strength acquired through successful

resolution of this stage of psychosocial development is love within an intimate relationship (Covey, 2001, p.79; Shaffer, 2001, p.43).

Loevinger (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.290) extended Erikson's groundwork in asserting that the ego is responsible for organizing and integrating one's morals, values, thought processes and goals. The complex development of the ego is influenced by the "*dynamic interaction*" of environmental and personal factors (Donald et al., 1997, p.60).


This requires that the ego of the young adult accommodate fundamental changes to their beliefs, concerns and expectations. Divorce and separation are forms of situational conflict that have the propensity to exaggerate any psychosocial developmental conflict that the young person is already experiencing (Orton, 1997, p.104). Wallerstein & Blakeslee (2003, p.114) found that although young men endorsed the ideas of love and marriage they were afraid to make commitments themselves for fear of repeating their parents' mistakes. Life events influence personality development e.g. self-perception of confidence at the time of the incident. This can cause the young adult to question previously organised, coherent and integrated patterns of self-perception (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.290).

Jones & Jablonski (1998, 8(2), pp.69-93) found that when the family system is compromised by divorce, individuals with lower levels of ego strength have the potential to develop a codependent relationship with the residential parent. The role of the young adult progresses from being a "*sounding board*" to becoming "*a caretaker*". These young adults find themselves in the precarious position of deriving self-worth from one or both parents by fulfilling the role of "*caretaker*" or "*container*" (listening to criticism about the other parent). This often negatively impacts on age appropriate intimate relationships. In a study done by Johnson and McNeil (1998; 20(2) pp.237-248) young adults who experienced recent

parental divorce presented with acute issues such as feelings of loss, anger and intense loyalty conflicts. Each developmental stage brings a different set of challenges for the new family system (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.36).

The above section has delved into the complex development of the ego and how it is influenced by the dynamic interaction of the environment as well as personal factors (Donald et al., 1997, p.60). The purpose of this study is to gain greater insight into the perceptions of young people who experienced a developmental crisis and a family life crisis concurrently. Having explained the stage related personality developmental crises, this study will now explore the stages of divorce. Each stage will first be discussed from the parents' perspective and then a more detailed discussion will relate to how the young adult experiences each of these stages.

2.7 THE STAGES OF DIVORCE.



"Not all marriages are good, nor are all divorces bad"

(Hendrix, 1997, p.286).

The previous section described the various stages of personality development in order to develop a frame of reference to facilitate the understanding of the influence divorce may have on successful resolution of the developmental crises faced by the young adult. Being cognisant that each person and family experiences divorce in a uniquely different way, this section aims to bring to consciousness the reality that various stages of divorce create temporary dissonance in the lives of all concerned.

More recent research indicates that few children are irreparably damaged by divorce and that it cannot be blamed for all the problems young people

face today (Charles & Bryner, 2001, p.202). The divorce experience is as varied and unique as is each family situation. Young adult children require an honest explanation as some children are not fully aware of the unhappiness and degree of conflict that exists in their parents' marriage (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 2003, p.117). Regardless of the age of the child, divorce tends to be an extremely stressful and disruptive event (Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.16).

Divorce comprises a series of transitions or stages for both adults and children (Schwartz & Kaslow, 1997, p.79; Shaffer, 2002, p.556). The intensity and duration of each stage depends on how each family system experiences divorce (Berk, 2003, p.578). Although children experience these stages quite differently from their parents, their ability to adjust is inextricably linked to several factors. These relate to consistent, effective parenting; the degree of conflict in the family; financial standing at the time of the divorce and the manner in which parents manage each stage (Berk, 2003, p.580; Gladding, 2002, p.274; Shaffer, 2002, p.556).

The three stages of divorce run consecutively and range from the initial pre-divorce deliberation stage, to the stage of litigation and the separation of family members. The post-divorce, re-equilibration stage occurs two to three years after plans to divorce were initiated. Many of the emotional and behavioural disruptions that were a part of the initial and litigation stages becomes significantly less over the next few years. Ex-partners begin to reach closure and slowly start to explore a *"life after divorce"* (Shaffer, 2002, p.558).

"The Dialectical Model of the stages in divorce" (Bohannon, 1970; Kaslow, 1979) describes the process of divorce. It incorporates a number of different theories regarding human behaviour, growth and development, which are applicable to the various stages of divorce (Spalding, 1999, p.29). A broad overview of this model will be used in order to describe the

possible experiences of the young adult participants in this study. The term parents and partners will be used interchangeably.

2.7.1 Pre-divorce: The deliberation and despair stage of divorce

2.7.1.1 Parents' reactions to the deliberation and despair stage of the pre-divorce crisis.

Each family experiences the stages of the pre-divorce crisis in a different way. The manner in which the parent experiences and adjusts to each successive stage of divorce is central to the young adult's experience of this family life crisis (Berk, 2003, p.578; Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.4; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.35). For this reason, each stage will be introduced by the parents' experience, followed by that of the young adult.

During the initial stages some couples attend marital counselling or divorce mediation. Others simply allow the level of conflict or withdrawal to increase (Ellis, 2000, p.71; Shaffer, 2002, p.556; Thompson & Amato, 1999, pp.10, 53). There are also those partners who so dread the idea of divorce that denial becomes the best way to cope with a family life crisis of this proportion. If the rift is not healed during the early stages of pre-divorce crisis, one of the partners usually becomes more "*divorce-focused*" than the other. It is common for one or both parties to withdraw (physically, sexually) and emotionally from the relationship during this period (Swartz & Kaslow, 1997, p.79).

The stages of "*physical and/or emotional divorce*" (Kaslow, 1979) usually occur within this pre-divorce stage and are difficult to separate as one often perpetuates the other. These behaviours may occur long before legal divorce proceedings are instituted or may not happen until some time after the divorce has been finalised. Physical separation is also common at this stage. When couples fail to separate physically, sexually and emotionally, closure is incomplete. This causes a sense of "*dissonance*"

(Donald et al., 1997, p.35) within the family system, which leads to confused relationships and disorganised parenting. These couples battle to find a new identity and to start new relationships. This is often the case when the decision to divorce is not mutual (Swartz & Kaslow, 1997, p.79).

Once partners realise that their marriage is in a more advanced stage of pre-divorce crisis, feelings range from anguish to panic and from shock to ambivalence. Disillusionment, dissatisfaction and alienation are also common. Fear of “*emotional*” and/or “*economic survival*” (Swartz & Kaslow, 1997, pp.70, 80) may force one of the couple to do all in their power to stay in the dysfunctional relationship.

The perceived role of the parent in the divorce process also influences the young adults’ experience of parental divorce. They realise that the initiator experiences divorce in a very different way to that of the spurned partner. Feelings of inadequacy, rejection, emptiness and poor self-esteem are all emotions commonly experienced by the rejected parent. Also relevant to how families experience the pre-divorce, deliberation stage, is the period of pre-divorce separation, changes in the financial situation and degree of divorce counselling the couple receives before the litigation stage of divorce. Each related factor has the possibility of influencing the young adults’ perception of their parents’ divorce (Gladding, et al., 2002, p.274; Twaite et al., 1998, p.21).

Typical behaviours towards the end of this phase are often those of bargaining, screaming, threatening and mourning. In extreme cases one of the partners may even attempt suicide. Depression, anger, hopelessness, self-pity and feeling detached often accompany the aforementioned behaviours (Berk, 2003, p.579). This initial stage may be repeated several times before parents finally divorce and can be far more destructive to the emotional well-being of a child than the actual divorce

(Gladding, 2002, p.274; Swartz & Kaslow, 1997, p.80; Shaffer, 2002, p.556; Twaite et al., 1998, p.21).

2.7.1.2 The young adult child's experience of pre-divorce, deliberation and the despair stage of parental divorce.

Research indicates that age, gender, temperament, developmental level and strength of support network play a crucial role in the ability of the young adult to adjust to their parents' divorce. Although they are more able to comprehend the reasons for their parents' divorce than are younger children, they are no less distressed. Developmentally, they are more aware of negative behavioural patterns and personality traits that may be responsible for their parents' incompatibility (Berk, 2003, p.579; Ellis, 2000, pp.25, 54; Gladding, 2002, p.275; Mize & Ellis, 2003, p.6; Twaite et al., 1998, pp.142-143; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, pp.31, 104).

2.7.1.2.1 *Behaviour.*

Zaslow (Ellis, 2000, p.25) found that young adult children of divorce show higher than normal levels of internalising problems such as anxiety and withdrawal. Research also indicates that boys are generally less able to adjust after their parents divorce, than are girls (Mize & Ellis, 2003, p.6). They found that most young adult males react to stress with more externalising symptoms, while young adult females respond with more internalising behaviours such as depression. The combination of a lowered self-esteem and depression negatively influences the general ability to achieve and to cope with academic responsibilities (Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.7).



However, not all children whose parents divorce react this way. Divorce can be the trigger to more mature behaviour and mastery of more complex skills. This is particularly evident in the behaviour of the oldest child, who often becomes more helpful, responsible and considerate during this period of family crisis (Berk, 2003, p.579; Ellis, 2000, p.18; Twaite et al., 1998, p.14).

2.7.1.2.2 *Intellectual perception.*

Cognitive maturity enables a higher level of information processing and enables the young adult to construct new forms of social knowledge within the context of their socio-economic, ideological and cultural background (Engelbrecht, Green, Naiker and Engelbrecht, 1999, pp.6, 7; Vorster, 2003, p.80). The young adult is able to apply knowledge that he has acquired through social interactions and his or her own personal relationships. Positive role models, supportive family members and social ties that advocate coping attempts, enable the young adult to objectively cope with this type of family stress (Mize & Ellis, 2003, p.7).

Thoughts become more abstract and reflective. Elaboration is added to encoding strategies, which improve the young adults' long-term memory. He or she is more able to contemplate contradictions as well as pros and cons (Weiten, 2001, p.470). This perspective suggests that improved intellectual abilities enable the young adult to create their realities through meanings that they construct about that which they observe and experience. Gateley and Schwebel (1992) identified four positive personality characteristics that enable young adults to "*adaptively cope*" with the stress of parental divorce combined with the physical and mental transformation of this developmental stage. They are maturity, self-esteem, empathy and androgyny.

Constructivism recognises that the way in which a person interprets a particular experience is central to how they construct both their inner and outer reality (Donald, et al., 2002, p.99; Vorster, 2003, p.80; Milner & O'Byrne, 2002, p.19)

2.7.1.2.3 *Personality.*

Individual personality traits such as self-confidence, resilience and degree of optimism regarding future plans also influence the way in which individual family members experience the stages of divorce and adjust to a new way of life (Berk, 2003, p.580; Thompson & Amato, 1999, pp.18-21). Although young adults are usually far more aware of family dynamics than are younger children, they still find it hard to accept that the family, as they know it, is about to disintegrate (Charles & Bryner, 2001, p.202). Unfortunately, it is often accepted that young adult children fully comprehend what is happening when their parents divorce. It is taken for granted that they are able to cope and many young adults receive very little support during this difficult period (Twaite et al., 1998, p.143).

2.7.1.2.4 *Emotional reactions.*

In a somewhat frightening world the breakup of the family leaves children of all ages, feeling intensely alone. The young adult feels vulnerable and needs an honest explanation from both parents. They know that their parents are no longer responsible for creating stability in their lives but often still feel responsible for the breakup (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, pp.35, 342).

Distress is often followed by anger, directed at one or both parents and their perceived negligence in repairing the relationship. Many are angry because they believe their parents' divorce will "*destroy their own dream of a healthy future*" (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.380; Ellis, 2000, pp.26-29;

Kaslow, 1997, p.71; Sommers-Flanagan et al., 2000, p.7). Young adults, who have no support system and are overwhelmingly stressed by their parents' divorce, are at risk of physical illness, depression and a lowered self-esteem, to mention just a few. Those who live alone are more predisposed to suicide ideation than those who have supportive relationships (Mize & Ellis, 2003, p.6).

The ability to form a lovingly intimate relationship is the primary developmental task for young adults. The inability to do so creates a sense of loneliness and isolation (Shaffer, 2002, p.42). Research indicates that adolescents and young adults of divorced families are prone to being more promiscuous and often marry young. It also indicates that the marriages of children of divorced parents are more at risk of divorce than are children from intact families. Intergenerational transfers are also more likely. In other words the children of the new generation are more at risk of experiencing similar negative consequences of divorce, as did their parents (Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.41).

2.7.1.2.5 *Reactions of young adults who live away from home.*

Those who have left home to study or to find employment experience considerable distress. Apprehension relates to family conflicts, concern for the well-being of both parents and a lack of family support to help them adjust (Twaite et al., 1998, p.142). Some young adults experience feelings of guilt, believing that they were "*the glue that held the marriage together*", and that leaving caused it to fall apart (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.114). These young adults are caught between two worlds. They are not sure whether to rush back home or to stay away. Many lose an academic year while trying to rescue one or both parents. Few manage to restore the marriage and most find the task emotionally draining. Sadly some drop out of their studies altogether (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.115).

Before the legal process of divorce begins there is often a dramatic increase in family conflict (Ellis, 2000, p.54). Young adult children, who still live at home, are often drawn into the confrontation. Most families experience the period leading to the actual legal divorce, as a time of extreme crisis that causes much distress and anxiety for all members of the family (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.379; Ellis, 2000, pp.71,72). During this time older children become intensely aware that their family has changed forever (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.20).

2.7.2. The actual divorce process: The litigation stage.

2.7.2.1 Parents' reactions to the litigation stage of divorce.

During this "*litigation stage*" the actual divorce process is initiated when one or both parents file for divorce. The reality of divorce necessitates that parents tell children, relatives and friends, if they have not already done so. The adversarial process of litigation can be intensely acrimonious and often exacerbates feelings of animosity, confusion, rage and distrust (Berk, 2003, p.581; Cavanaugh, 1998, p.379; Ellis, 2000, p.71). Grieving the loss of the relationship may be accompanied by feelings of loneliness, guilt, sadness and despair. Juxtaposed to these emotions, some parents experience a sense of relief, empowerment and liberation (Berk, 2003, p.579; Schwartz & Kaslow, 1997, p.80; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.15).

A consequence of litigation or mediation is that "*the stage of economic divorce*" becomes intertwined with the physical and emotional stages of separation and adjustment (Schwartz & Kaslow, 1997, p.80; Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.162). The financial settlement often requires that assets acquired during the marriage be divided. Economic pressures created by this process place additional stressors on family members (Berk, 2003, p.578; Gladding, 2003, p.275). This aspect of the litigation process often

creates additional feelings of anger and bitterness between family members, which can include verbal and physical abuse (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.379; Shaffer, 2002, p.556). This is the stage when families separate physically and decisions are made regarding custody, maintenance and visitation schedules (Schwartz & Kaslow, 1997, p.80).

Parents and children of all ages find this period particularly difficult as it may involve relocating to a different home, school or community (Berk, 2003, p.578; Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.16; Wallerstein & Blaheslee, 2003, p.198). Old friends are left behind and new relationships need to be established. The stay-at-home parent is often the most disadvantaged partner, as they have to cope with mounting economic stressors at the same time as they cope with the emotional stress of divorce (Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.110). Many of these parents lack the necessary skills to be gainfully employed. Their age also negatively influences possible future career opportunities (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.379; Shaffer, 2002, p.557).

The demands of a new work environment often contribute to these parents being physically and emotionally unavailable at a crucial developmental stage in the life of the young adult. Parents are unable to meet the needs of the young adult child who has to make major life decisions whilst the family is in crisis (Berk, 2003, p.584; Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.119; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.10).

Mourning the loss of one's family as a unit and giving up on hopes and fantasies regarding the family future, require much grief work. Parents and children often experience the dissolution of the marriage and the corresponding sense of loss, as similar to grieving the death of a loved one (Kübler-Ross, in Charles & Bryner, 2001, p.202; Shaffer, 2002, p.557). All of these stressors reduce the degree of support given to the

young adult. Sadly, as the level of stress increases, so does the young adults' potential vulnerability to self-harm (Mize & Ellis, 2003, pp.7, 8).

Divorce counselling, religious or ceremonial rituals that signify the end of the marriage, may help the family to find a more gentle sense of closure. Feelings of hurt, guilt and anger need to be resolved before parents can begin a new life (Gladding, 2002, p.268; Spalding, 1999, p.33; Schwartz & Kaslow, 1997, p.75).

2.7.2.2 Young adults' experience of the litigation stage of parental divorce.

This is a period of "*crisis and reorganization*" (Shaffer, 2002, p.557). Charles and Bryner (2001, p.205), make it clear that children of divorce as a group are no different from other children. They respond according to their age and maturity at the time of the divorce. Kitson & Morgan (1998, pp.913-920) and Preston (2000, p.11) reviewed the multiple consequences of divorce. Many of these relate to aspects of psychosocial adjustment i.e. relationships, economic and social changes.

2.7.2.2.1 *Experiencing conflict.*

Unfortunately the legal process often encourages the couple to fight over financial, property and custodial matters (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.379). Older children can end with divided loyalties when one parent blames and denigrates the other. Clear boundaries need to be kept between marital conflict and being a parent (Milner & O'Byrne, 2002, p.110).

2.7.2.2.2 *Experiencing loss.*

Young adults may be growing up, but many still hold onto comforting symbols of the past. They mourn the loss of their home and resent the idea of leaving friends and moving on from childhood memories. Loss of

contact with the non-custodial parent and grandparents and friends can leave them feeling cut off, rejected and alone (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.141).

The experience of parental divorce brings much confusion to the world of the young adult. Their emotions range from relief to impatience, from embarrassment to distress over future relationships. Part of them grieves the loss of the closeness they once experienced as a family whilst another part wishes to explore the world beyond the bounds of their home (Sommers-Flanagan, 2000, p.144). A driver's license often enables the young adult to explore their independence and provide a means to escape family disruption.

2.7.2.2.3 *Anxiety regarding future relationships.*

The overly responsible young adult becomes more vigilant of their parents' reactions and hides their own distress in order not to become an added burden. The young adult needs to be reassured that he or she can invest their energy in establishing their own future and that they can live a productive life independent of their parents. As they move into society and create new relationships with new opportunities, they have to feel free to make decisions without the responsibility of emotionally or physically supporting a parent (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.117).

This is a crucial time when the young adult resolves the psychosocial task of developing intimacy (Berk, 2003, p.18). Extreme conflict or rejection during the divorce process will leave the young person shocked and disillusioned about his or her own relationship. Some cling to partners during this family crisis and others end the relationship. Their greatest concern is that if *"family relationships don't hold, then love itself is unreliable"* (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.114).

2.7.2.2.4 *Other emotional experiences.*

Children of this age may resent parental concern and see it as intrusive. Wallerstein & Blakeslee (2003, p.113) warn that even if young adults are in the throes of leaving home, or agree that their parents' divorce "is for the best", their reaction is just as powerful as younger aged children.

Research indicates that divorce can raise a young person's risk to a number of negative developmental outcomes (Hetherington, et al., 1998, in Weiten, 2001, p.481). Many young adults experience a range of symptoms. Most common are anxiety, depression, insomnia, eating disorders and an inability to cope with academic workload (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.36).

However, Richardson and McCabe (2001, p.485) and Weiten (2001, p.421) contradict this finding. They report that the majority of young adult children of recent parental divorce coped well and showed no significant levels of depression, stress, negative opposite-sex relations or poor self-concept.

They also found that the levels of anxiety were higher in young adults from recently divorced or separated families and although some experienced relief, most experienced a sense of loss and considerable grief (Milner & O'Byrne, 2002, p.110). High levels of anxiety could be ascribed to stressors that require the young adult to have to become more responsible. For example he or she may have to care for younger siblings, work part-time, have extra household duties as well as provide emotional and possibly financial support to the family in addition to coping with their own educational demands.

2.7.2.2.5 *Experiences related to future career planning.*

Decision-making regarding future career plans is often overshadowed by the trauma of divorce. The young adult faces a formidable task of having to deal with a critical developmental crisis parallel to a major family life crisis. These young people feel that they cannot rely on the family support system for career advice or for emotional support. They believe that their parents expect them to cope and adjust without their help as having completed senior secondary education implies greater maturity and independence (Twaite, 1998, p.142).

Kitson & Morgan (1998, p.913-920) and Preston (2000, p.11) found that young adult children of divorce are less likely to attend or complete college and are more likely to be unemployed. Many students battle academically and sadly some need to repeat that particular academic year. Others never complete tertiary education and resent the fact that their parents' divorce was responsible for lost opportunities. They will expect not only an honest explanation for the divorce but also detailed plans involving their future and reassurance about financial arrangements. The young adult knows that without an education he or she is at an economic disadvantage. Family mediation is very successful if this is too difficult a task to negotiate (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.115).

2.7.2.2.6 *Experiencing financial stressors after parental divorce.*

In most households the economic status becomes greatly reduced and some families have to find new accommodation (Shaffer, 2002, p.556). Financial resources are crucial in understanding each person's divorce experience as financial security after divorce is often linked to age, gender and the ability of the parent to be employed.

Cooney et al. (1995, p.160) found that financial consequences of marital disruption can have serious negative consequences in every sphere of the

young adult's future. It may disrupt education, basic living standards and morale. Parental intimacy often appears to be positively associated with the young adult's perception that a given parent would be responsible for their financial support.

When men remarry children feel that they may be disadvantaged by losing their financial or "*symbolic legacy*". Children of all ages feel deserted, angry and intensely jealous. Although young adults are not entitled to see their parents' will, they do have a right to details regarding changes that divorce may make to their inheritance (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.119).

2.7.3 Post divorce: The re-equilibration stage.

Once the divorce has been finalised parents slowly adjust to "*the co-parenting stage of divorce*" and to the stressors that can be a part of maintenance and custody arrangements. The degree of conflict between parents is central to the ability of children to adjust to the new family system (Ellis, 2000, pp.339, 340). Loyalty to a particular parent is often challenged during the early stages of re-equilibration and threatens the stability of both parental dyad relationships (Twaite et al., 1998, p.143; Shaffer, 2002, p.560). Co-operative parenting teaches conflict resolution skills that aim to reduce post-divorce antagonism and stress (Ellis, 2000, p.340).

2.7.3.1 Parents' reactions to the post-divorce stage of "re-equilibration".

Regardless of background details, parents of any age experience divorce as an extremely stressful life event. Both parents initially experience severe negative physical and psychological effects, which indirectly affect the young adults' ability to adjust (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.379; Schäffer,

2003, p.38). The custodial parent often faces the added responsibilities as a single parent tied into the previous family system (Berk, 2003, p.578; Cavanaugh, 1998, p.379; Minuchin, 1996, p.101). The law states that these parents are responsible for their young adult children until they are self-supporting, regardless of majority age (Schäffer, 2003, p.70).

A large percentage of parents of young adult children are middle-aged and experience significant social, emotional and economic disadvantages in attempting to start a new life. Schwartz & Kaslow (1997, p.80) explain that this stage involves community, social and extended family aspects of divorce. When divorce occurs in later life, one of the couple is usually extremely distressed. Family, friends and the community play a crucial role in supporting the new single parent. The older the parents, the more traumatic the divorce experience becomes (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.379). Divorce is particularly difficult for middle-aged women who invest their identity in the role of wife and mother.

However, there are also those parents who see later life divorce as an advantage. Once the children have grown up, the “dutiful” parent is more able to leave an unsuccessful marriage, with less guilt and regret, in search of his or her own happiness (Cavanaugh, 1997, pp.379, 380; Shaffer, 2002, p.557). Young adult children tend to blame the parent they perceive to be the least affected, for the disruption and do everything in their power to support the one that they believe has been “*wronged or abandoned*” (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, pp.115-116).

Gradually over time, single parents begin to reach out to new friends and become less dependent on their young adult children for emotional support (Schwartz & Kaslow, 1997, p.81). Many become involved in new activities and new relationships and their lives become more stable. Parents are able to develop a more consistent daily routine and style of parenting. Chaos and anger give way to optimism, resignation,

excitement and curiosity. Regret and sadness may still be present but they are far less invasive (Shaffer, 2002, p.557).

“Requisite behaviours and tasks” common to this stage involve a *“resynthesising of identity”* and completing *“the stage of psychic divorce”* (Spalding, 1999, p.34; Swartz & Kaslow, 1997, p.81). Parents become more comfortable with their new lifestyle and are ready to seek new love and to commit to a new sense of permanency. They are also more able to help their children accept the finality of the divorce and to support their continuing relationship with both parents (Gladding, 2002, p.268).

Emotionally this is a stage acceptance for most parents. Feelings are those of self-confidence, self-worth, independence and autonomy. Parents become more energetic and are once again able to experience feelings of wholeness and exhilaration. A prerequisite attitude for stability of the family in the post-divorce phase of the family life cycle requires a willingness of parents to maintain financial, custodial and visitation agreements (Berk, 2003, p.581). Encouraging healthy parenting relationships with the children and facilitating contact with extended family is also essential (Gladding, 2002, p.268).

2.7.3.2 The young adult child’s experience of the post-divorce stage of “re-equilibration”.

The manner in which parents divorce, and the degree of conflict experienced in the home before the divorce, play an important role in the ability of the child to adjust to family life.

2.7.3.2.1 *Experiencing conflict.*

Although most children remember divorce as a very stressful experience for many years after, Hetherington et al., (1998) in Shaffer (2002, p.559) found the following: children brought up in conflict-ridden homes where

parents stay married were at a far greater disadvantage than those from divorced homes. In most cases, behavioural and adjustment problems stemmed from high levels of pre-divorce conflict. Significant research shows that children who live in stable, single-parent homes adjust well and move with relative ease into future developmental phases.

2.7.3.2.2 *Emotional and behavioural experiences.*

Young adult children, whose parents divorce, feel as much anger, pain, emotional vulnerability and stress, as do younger children. They worry about their parents' future and battle with conflicting loyalties. High levels of conflict before, during and after the divorce may cause relationships with parents to be irretrievably damaged (Amato & Booth, 1997, p.219; Cavanaugh, 1997, p.380)

Emotional and behavioural disturbances experienced at the time of the legal divorce stage, begin to dissipate over the next two to three years (Shaffer, 2002, p.558). As with Kübler-Ross's stages of grief, the pain and stress related to divorce eventually softens. Most evidence suggests that the majority of children (regardless of age) appear to survive divorce without having long-lasting detrimental effects. Over time, they once again begin to display healthy patterns of psychological adjustment (Charles & Bryner, 2001, p.205).

Long-term negative effects of divorce are further reduced if the young adult experiences unconditional positive regard and a high level consistency from both parents (Berk, 2002, p.581). A caring, supportive network of teachers, friends, siblings and extended family members also facilitate the healing process. Divorced mothers are more likely to have positive relationships with these young adult children, than are fathers (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.380).

Once children are able to distance themselves from the trauma related to the above-mentioned stages, many begin to see divorce in a different light. This final stage of acceptance is more common in older children and young adults and often only occurs once children realise that their parents are happier living apart (Charles & Bryner, 2001, p.202).

2.7.4 A new dynamic to interpersonal relationships.

As the family structure changes, so do the roles and responsibilities of each family member (Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.120). Routines have to be re-organised and new patterns of family interactions need to be negotiated. In some instances children have to adjust to the introduction of new relationships e.g. to a parent's new partner and possibly also to the children of the new partner (Shaffer, 2002, p.556).

2.7.4.1 The Mother/Young Adult relationship.

Bronfenbrenner (1986) explored the interaction of the various subsystems within the family microsystem. Patterns of relationships continue to develop throughout the family life cycle "*in a continuous process of dynamic tension and adjustment*" (Donald, et al., 2002, p.47). Cooney & Kurtz (1996, pp.495-513) and Arditti (1999, pp.109-117) examine qualitative aspects of mother-child relationships related to recent parental divorce. As boundary issues and roles change between the mother and their young adult children, daughters particularly come to view their mother more as a friend, than as the caregiver. In situations where mothers relied on their young adult children for emotional support and advice, this contributed to a sense of equality and closeness in the relationship. This friendship status is contrary to the pathology described in most clinical literature (Cooney & Kurtz, 1996, p.512).

2.7.4.2 The Father/Young Adult relationship.

The literature also supports the finding that young adults reported lower levels of intimacy with their fathers than with their mothers (Amato & Booth, 1996; Osborne and Fincham, 1996, and Richards, 1996).

Research done by Cooney & Kurtz (1996, p.498), concurs with the findings in earlier studies which indicate that limited marital interaction is often linked to reduced father-child interaction. It is believed that the mother is most often the person who encourages this interaction. Traditionally she is the person who keeps the father informed regarding developments in their children's lives.

In situations where the young adult is cut off financially, it is viewed as a personal matter rather than a financial one (Charles & Bryner, 2001, p.206). This aspect pertains far more to fathers, than to mothers. Father-son relationships appear to be the most negatively affected by parental divorce. Young adults of divorce find lack of commitment to be the greatest stressor in their father-child relationship (Cooney & Kurtz, 1996, p.504). Most research found father-child relationships to be at far greater risk post divorce, than mother-child relationships. Research by Pharos (1996) showed that fathers play a significant role in the development of a child. Father absence and divorce appear to be associated with social problems and research shows that it is essential for the non-residential parent to continue to have an active involvement in the life of their young adult child (Breggin, 2000, p.234; Weiten, 2002, p.482).

2.7.4.3 The non-residential parent.

At this stage of his or her life, the young adult often feels less need to visit the non-resident parent. Their needs and interests are far more egocentric and no different to young adults from intact families. After

study activities, friends and work are more important than spending time with their parents. They know in which parent's home they would prefer to live and parent flexibility is the key to a successful parent-young adult relationship (Charles & Bryner, 2001, p.206).

Financial matters play a vitally important role in making or breaking the father-young adult relationship (Charles & Bryner, 2001, p.206). Although the S.A. Child Care Act stipulates that maintenance should be paid until the child is independent, three quarters of teenagers are cut off financially when they reach 18 years (Statistics S.A, 2005).

2.7.4.4 The Parent/Young Adult child relationship in general.

Palosaari and Laippala (1996, pp.20-26) found that the closeness of young adults to a specific parent at the time of the divorce was a mediating factor in self-esteem and depression.

Cooney et al. (1995, p.158) found that good relationships between parents and their young adult children are related to higher levels of post divorce intimacy within the family system. It becomes imperative that the divorced couple develop an amicable co-parenting relationship in order to share both the needs and events, which launch their young adult children into their own independent lives e.g. education, graduation, a career, marriage and childbirth. Continued marital disruptions and negative financial consequences of divorce are the greatest causes of troubled relationships between divorcing parents and their young adult children. In most cases, the dissonance created lasts as long as there are stressors and conflict. It is the role of the parent to facilitate renewed equilibrium.

2.7.4.5 Sibling relationships.

Bush & Ehrenberg (2003, pp.1-31) interviewed one sibling of a large dyad sample of first year students whose parents had waited to divorce.

Although a limitation of this study is that all participants were articulate and undergraduate students, valuable information was still gathered. They found that this was a time when the young person is leaving home, forming new groups of friends and concentrating on future career development. It is also a time for re-organising sibling relationships. It finds that negative sibling interactions tended to increase immediately after family transitions. Most important though, was the finding that sibling relationships offer a buffer against the negative effects of divorce on young adult children at a time when there are many changes in the home. This is also a period characterised by a decrease in parenting quality. These sibling relationships provide stability, security and life skills for coping with the stress of family transition (Caya & Liem, 1998).

2.7.5 The stage of remarriage and the blended family.

Hetherington, et al., (1998) found that 75% of single parent families remarry or cohabit within three to five years of divorce. This means that the children experience another major change to their family system. Some acquire a step-parent, step-siblings and a whole new pattern of rules, roles and relationships. Fortunately, the young adult is at the stage of his or her life that they can choose whether or not to develop these new relationships. They experience this stage as far less stressful than the actual divorce. This can most likely be explained by the fact that the young adult is far more involved in making plans for the new social context in which they find themselves. Friends play a crucial role during this developmental stage and period of family life crisis (Berk, 2003, p.608; Shaffer, 2002, p.559).

2.8 CONCLUSION.

“It is not that parents divorce, but rather how they divorce, that is crucial to the adjustment of children of any age”

(Ellis, 2001, p.51)

Wallerstein and Blakeslee (2003, p.127), state that there is no perfect answer to the question, “when is the best time to divorce?” Young adults experience great difficulty in coming to terms with the fact that they may be the reason their parents have remained unhappily married for so many years.

The degree of conflict and the impact it has in the home appears to be a far more important consideration for the appropriate time to divorce, than does the age of the child (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 2003, p.117). Where there are chronic threats of physical violence and repeated high conflict, they believe *“the sooner the better”*. Parents often believe that *“they should stay together for the children”* and that the best time to divorce is when their children are past adolescence and are more independent (Sommers-Flanagan, 2000, p.25). Although the period of young adulthood may be one of the less traumatic, the experience may still hamper critical developmental phases in the life of the young adult. Research indicates that young adult males are more vulnerable to the effect of discord and interpersonal problems within the family than are young adult females. While actual parental divorce had an effect on self-esteem and the vulnerability to depression in girls, this is not the case in boys (Palosaari, Aro & Laippala, 1996, p.7).

At this age, it is normally the central agenda of the young adult to *“explore sex and love”* with a view to more lasting relationships (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.113). The divorce process becomes highly subjective when considering the social, emotional and moral developmental stage of the young adult concerned (Orton, 1997, p.55,60; Louw, 1995, p.528-535).

In a clinical review, Charles and Bryner (2001, pp.201-209), subscribe to the notion that divorce affects children according to their coping mechanisms regardless of the age. Physiologically this becomes a period of extreme stress if family interaction is fought with conflict before, during and after the divorce. Charles & Bryner (2001, p.207), found that about one half of the behavioural, school achievement and academic problems, were obvious approximately four years before parents separated.

The impact of parental divorce on education, with the view to a future career is also important. The new role the young adult will be expected to play requires that one also consider the trauma of divorce, relative to the young adult's cognitive ability, maturity, personality and coping skills (Fursterberg & Kiernan, 2001, pp.446-457; Gladding, 2002, p.209).

Divorce cannot be regarded as "*a singular life event*", but rather as "*a series of stressful experiences*" to which the whole family is exposed. Morrison (1995 in Gladding, 2002, p.267) explains that the first three years after divorce are the most difficult. Divorce adds a whole new dimension to the family life cycle and has many new developmental tasks unique to the situation (Shaffer, 2002, p.556).

A common factor binding the life cycle of an individual to the family life cycle is their mutual focus on growth and development. The organisation of the new family structure needs to adapt in order to support the developmental tasks for each stage of the family cycle (Gladding, 2002, p.18; Voster, 2003, p.95; Hanna & Brown, 2004, p.78).

In this chapter, relevant literature was reviewed. A social constructive perspective was used to explore the process of how the three participants made meaning of the change in family relationships. Systems Theory described the functioning of the family and explored how divorce affects each member regardless of where the individual finds himself in the family

life cycle. The literature then reviewed the stages of divorce, the stressors of the family life cycle and the consequences of divorce pertinent to the young adult. The critical stages of personality development (Erikson, 1982) and a conclusion bring this chapter to a close. Chapter 3 describes the qualitative research paradigm used and introduces the research design. The researcher then explains the criteria considered when selecting appropriate participants. A short background history describing each participant follows. The method of data collection and data analysis is elucidated. The chapter concludes with the role of the researcher, ethical considerations and trustworthiness.



CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

“The advantage of Qualitative Research is that the researcher is slowly sensitised to see the slumbering variables, those properties of the phenomenon that are not observable to the naked eye and for which you need the sensitised human research instrument, with well adjusted lenses so that the whole picture becomes important”
(Henning et al., 2004, p.8).

3.1 INTRODUCTION.

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the literature in terms of the research methodology and to discuss the research process that was implemented when researching the question, ***“What are the experiences of young people whose parents waited until they had completed senior secondary education, before divorcing?”*** I will first define Qualitative Research and then discuss case study design. A review of data collection, data analysis and selection of participants will follow. The chapter concludes with ethical considerations, descriptions of trustworthiness and triangulation, and a brief overview of my role as researcher.

3.2 A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PARADIGM.

A qualitative paradigm follows an interpretive approach. This approach makes sense of phenomena and events, which are influenced by and interact with a particular social context, through the process of interpretation. The interpretive researcher examines and analyses

conversations and knowledge systems, in order to understand everyday social life and looks for “frames” that shape the meaning people attach to it (Henning et al., 2004, p.20; Woods, 2004, p.2). Merriam (1998, p.12) writes that qualitative researchers design their study with real individuals in mind. This requires that the research methods be sensitive to the experiences of each participant (Woods, 2004, p.3). The aim is to understand the meaning of the participants’ lives in their own words. Qualitative research is interested in how meanings are negotiated and understood, how roles are developed and how perceptions change over time (Henning et al., 2004, p.8; Woods, 2004, p.4). This methodology pertains to studying the phenomena and the individuals within those circumstances and relationships holistically (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p.185). It aims to examine the qualities, characteristics, properties or features of phenomena in order to gain a greater depth of understanding and explanation (Henning et al., 2004, p.5).

In its broadest sense qualitative research refers to research which brings to light a description of the understanding participants give to meaning, experience and perceptions (de Vos, Strydom, Fouché and Delpont, 2003, p.79) i.e. how they construct their reality (Henning et al., 2004, p.44). Marais and Mouton (1990) in de Vos et al. (2003, p.80) describe qualitative research as different from quantitative research in that the approach is more flexible and philosophical in the mode of operation it adopts. In a qualitative study such as this, concepts may be interpreted in a number of ways as observations are subjective and personally experienced. This requires that a variety of data sources and analysis methods be used in order to overcome fallible measurements and to provide valid and trustworthy results (see sub-section 3.5). Contextual features are also taken into account and research occurs in a non-structured manner thus allowing ample opportunity to record unexpected events that occur (Mouton, 2001, p.175).

The information is subjected to the “*freedom and natural development of action and representation*” (Henning et al., 2004, p.3). As qualitative research is conducted when the researcher engages in a “*learning culture*”, the variables are usually not controlled. New insight is gained when the researcher makes use of participant observation, structured interviews and literature studies (Holliday, 2002, p.10). The product of each individual experience demarcates the boundaries and characteristics of the individual’s perceptual world. This new body of knowledge is inextricably linked to the social context in which it has been accumulated, mediated and integrated (Donald et al., 2002, p.73). In this manner, individual knowledge is developed through each lived experience (Donald et al., 2002, p.101).

In this particular research study the three participants described the phenomena of their experiences of parental divorce, which occurred soon after they had completed senior secondary education. These descriptions were then interpreted to give an in-depth meaning and deeper understanding of their experience. The literature study and skills of observation were used to compliment and provide depth of knowledge to the interview process i.e. triangulation. These three tenets support the notion of “*precision*” which provides valid, trustworthy data (Henning et al., 2004, p.148; Huberman & Miles, 2002, p.344). They also facilitated the process of “*slowly adjusting the researcher’s lenses*”, so that she became more “*sensitised to the importance of the whole picture*” (Henning et al., 2004, p.8).

3.3 THE RESEARCH DESIGN.

A research design is defined as “*a set of guidelines and instructions to be followed in addressing a research problem*” (Mouton, 1996, p.107; Mouton, 2001, p.55). It is a particular procedure to be followed in order to

conduct the research process. In order to answer the research question, ***“What are the experiences of young people whose parents waited until they had completed senior secondary education, before divorcing?”*** a qualitative case study research design was used.

“A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (Yin in Merriam, 1998, p.27) once the researcher has a degree of knowledge of the relevant literature (Babbie, 2001, in Henning et al., 2004, p.40). Its purpose is to gain an in-depth understanding of a situation and to explore this from the perspective of those involved in the experience. Merriam (1999) in Henning et al. (2004, p.41) describes qualitative research as being more concerned with *“process than with outcome”*. The aim of this process is to discover features that require *“the more sensitised human research instrument”* (Henning et al., 2004, p.8).

This form of research design occurs within a particular context or bounded system (Creswell, 1998, p.61; Henning et al., 2004, p.41). It can be distinguished from other forms of qualitative research by the intense description of the interaction between the context and the unit of analysis (Henning et al., 2004, p.40; Huberman & Miles, 2002, p.211).

The case studies of three young participants were analysed in order to gain a deeper understanding of their experience of recent parental divorce. In all three cases, the parents waited until their children had completed senior secondary education before divorcing. The product of this research requires a variety of detailed data collection methods that are rich in description. This will help the researcher to elicit the participants' *“voice”* and to become sensitised to *“slumbering variables”* (Henning 1995) when formulating each theme (Henning et al., 2004, p.8; Huberman & Miles, 2002, p.211).

In order to capture a richness of depth and design validity, these methods will include interviews, observations, documents and a detailed literature review (de Vos et al., 2003, p.275). The three young adult participants have created their realities through the meanings that they have constructed about that which they observed and experienced. Constructivism recognises that the way in which they interpret each experience is central to how they construct both our inner and outer reality (Donald, et al., 2002, p.99; Vorster, 2003, p.80; Milner & O'Byrne, 2002, p.19). This qualitative research design meets the preconditions stipulated by Henning (2004, p.71-73) and Merriam (1998, p.31) for a sound case study design in that it pinpoints a particular situation. In other words, how young people experience their parents' divorce, which occurred soon after they had completed senior secondary education. The selection of appropriate participants should shed optimal light on the issue and provide rich descriptions. The design is also heuristic in that it brings understanding and new meaning to what is already known (Henning et al., 2004, p.71; Huberman & Miles, 2002, p.212).

3.4 THE SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS.

An insightful selection of participants is vital for both practical reasons and for delineating the enquiry (Henning et al., 2004, p.71). Merriam (1998, p.61) and Denzin and Lincoln (1998, p.204) state that the criteria chosen must reflect the purpose of the study and guide the process to be followed. This should enable the researcher to gain a rich, detailed understanding of the participants' experience. The sample of "*desirable participants*" should be made up of those individuals who are able to shed the most light on the issue to be researched. These criteria are grounded in the researcher's theoretical knowledge and practical understanding of the topic (Henning et al., 2004, p.71).

To facilitate an in-depth understanding of the research topic, 3 participants were intentionally selected.

The following criteria were used in this selection:

- The focus group comprised 3 young male adults whose parents divorced soon after they had completed senior secondary education.
- They were all between the ages of 18 and 18 years 6 months when the divorce occurred.
- English is their first language.
- They were all dependent on parental support at the time of the divorce.
- They were all from a typically middle class socio-economic group.

The researcher was an intern student at the Family Life Centre in Parkwood, Johannesburg at the time of the study. Several services relating to divorce are offered to families at the centre, e.g. divorce mediation, divorce counselling and divorce support groups. The researcher considered that the young adult children of these divorcing parents would be able to provide the most appropriate data. The director of Family Life gave written informed consent for the study to be conducted at the centre, as she hoped that the findings might assist future clients (See Appendix H). Henning et al. (2004, p.71) point out that although these findings cannot be generalised to a population, they may be transferable to other settings i.e. to other young adults whose parents' divorce at this particular time.

Initial contact was made telephonically with each young person, to enquire if they thought they would be interested in participating in this research

study. Permission was not required from the respondents' parents as they were all 18 years old at the time of their parents' divorce. According to the Code of Conduct (Health Professions Act, No 56 of 1974) pertaining to "*informed consent to professional procedures*", a psychologist is required to gain written informed consent when research is conducted. The participant must have "*capacity to consent*" i.e. be over the age of 18 in order to provide their own written informed consent to partake in the study or a "*legally authorised person*" must give appropriate permission (see sub-section 3.8 and Appendix B). Contacting and interviewing each young adult followed.

Before the interview started, a letter outlining the aim of the research and the process to be followed was given to each participant (refer to Appendix A). In this letter the participant was assured of sensitivity and the highest regard for privacy and confidentiality (Henning et al., 2004, p.73). In order to comply with the ethical standards of research, a consent form was given to and signed by each participant (refer to Appendix B).

3.4.1 The background of participants selected.

Participant 1

Participant 1 turned 18 in the November before his parents divorced. He has a sister who is two years younger. The participant was 10 years old when his parents separated for the first time. He remembered it as a very difficult period particularly with regards to finance. The family was reunited six months later. Open conflict continued between the parents. Immediately after the participant's final Grade 12 exam, divorce papers were served on his father. The mother and children moved out of the family home. The participant believed that the separation and divorce process were "*far less traumatic this time*" as his "*mother had a good*

career” and that “she had put a great deal of thought and planning into her decision to start a new life”.

Four months after the divorce the participant was offered the opportunity to move to Cape Town with his mother and sister. He chose to travel overseas instead, as he had battled to find employment with only a senior secondary education certificate. Although he had originally planned to go to college straight after Grade 12, this never happened. Participant 1 believes that *“so much energy went into my parent's final separation”* that *“planning for tertiary education lost its place on the list of priorities.”* A year later he returned to South Africa and then chose to live with his father, as *“that is where my social network is and my friends all still live there”*. His personal experience was that friends often played a more important role in his life at 18, than did his parents.

Participant 1 believed that when divorce occurs during this phase of the family life cycle, it could be so emotionally overwhelming that parents may neglect this stage of crucial career planning. *“It is during this time of transition from secondary to tertiary education that young people need so much time and parental assistance in planning future career and study possibilities”.*

Participant 2

Participant 2 is the younger of two children. He was in first year at Rhodes University and his sister was in London completing a law degree *“when things started to really go wrong.”* Both he and his older sister returned home for the Easter holidays and *“we became a part of my parents’ divorce”.*

Conflict always occurred behind closed doors in their home so it was a *“huge shock”* when their father left home one night to *“visit a friend”*. He phoned the children a day later from Europe, asked that they collect his car from the airport and told them that he would not be coming back. Their mother was left without any financial support as their dad *“had emptied all the bank accounts and financially flattened the business. It was a vicious time”*.

Although participant 2's father offered to continue financing his studies, he declined, as he believed that he had no option but to leave university and return home. The children's mother was *“devastated and unable to cope emotionally or with the new debt and demands of the family business”*. The participant's older sister had to return to London to complete her final year of law studies. *“She had no choice...nor did I...”* It would appear that participant 2 filled the adult male role in the home for the next year.

The divorce occurred during the crucial transition between secondary and tertiary education. Participant 2 never returned to university and is *“still battling to find direction towards future career prospects.”* Although this period was extremely stressful, the experience enabled him to discover a personal identity that may not otherwise have been possible. After 18 months of incredible tenacity, the company is financially secure and participant 2 has moved out of home. He is currently in a very happy relationship and is testing different avenues of career development. Family members have all become emotionally more independent and able to move on with their lives.

Participant 3

Participant 3 is the second of three children and has an older brother and younger sister. He was in Grade 12 when open conflict between his

parents changed to *“divorce talk”*. He was not particularly academic so had planned to go overseas for a *“gap year”* before returning to South Africa *“and maybe then go to college or maybe find a career”*. No consideration had been given to future study or career plans *“as it was not a priority right then.”*

The actual divorce occurred while the participant was overseas. He was not keen to return home immediately, as it had taken him several weeks to find employment in London. He believes that his father had waited for him to complete Grade 12 before divorcing his mother, as *“she didn't expect it to turn out that way and was devastated when it finally occurred.”* The participant returned home earlier than expected because his *“mother was having such a hard time”*. He is currently doing a trade and lives with his dad. He chose to return to the same home that he grew up in *“cause my dad is so much more relaxed and it's near all my friends. My dad could also afford for me and my girlfriend to live there and my mom couldn't”*. Finance was still a major problem for his mother, so she was unable to support future study or career prospects.

Participant 3 believes that *“my brother and sister coped better with my parents' divorce, because my sister had the structure of the schooling system and my brother was already well into tertiary education”*. He, on the other hand, was caught *“on the cusp of completing one stage and not yet having begun the next. Like you know...being caught in-between”*. When he came back from overseas *“for a long time I felt like I was going nowhere, but I'm going to go to college in January (2006). Now I feel like I have another chance...”*

3.5 THE METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION.

The most predominant mode of data collection used by qualitative researchers is interviewing (Seidman, 1998, p.1; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p.36). This method yields the most fruitful results in research where one is interested in how people make meaning of their experiences through language (de Vos et al., 2003, p.440; Merriam, 1998, p.69; Seidman, 1998, p.1). In this research the method of data collection used was primarily by means of a detailed literature study and open-ended unstructured interviews. The researcher also used observation, biographical information and artifacts to facilitate the process of triangulation (Huberman & Miles, 2002, p.14).

3.5.1 Interviews.

Kvale (in Sewell, 2001, p.1) defines qualitative interviews as *“attempts to understand the world from the participant’s point of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples’ experiences [and] to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations”*. While Dexter (as quoted in Merriam, 1998, p.71) proposes that they are defined as *“conversations with a purpose”*. Constructivism supports this notion in that each participant has been *“an active agent in the process of experiencing”* (Donald et al., 2002, p.100; Mahoney, 2003, p.6). Open-ended interviews attempt to gain insight into the complex behaviour of people and their subjective reality, without placing any limits on the field of study. They are conducted in an environment that induces trust and confidence, (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p.56). The researcher *“becomes the instrument of observation”* as she views the way in which the participant makes meaning of his or her experiences (Henning et al., 2004, p.81).

She creates an interactive process that enables the participant to bring this process to consciousness (Henning et al., 2004, p.52; Huberman & Miles, 2002, p.54). In so doing, the interviewer becomes “*deeply and unavoidably implicated*” in exploring their description and in the reflection of their personal experience (de Vos, 2002, p.292). Huberman and Miles (2002, p.54) warn that inferences drawn from the brief interview period, to perceptions, actions and other aspects of the participant’s life, pose problems for internal generalisability. It is crucial to the validity of the study that the interviewer be sensitised to the possibility of making false inferences to similar observations, behaviours or actions, in the life of the participant, outside the interview situation.

The approach used in this study was based on an initial open-ended question, which directed the process. The question posed to all three participants was:

“Tell me about your experience of your parents’ divorce, which occurred soon after you had completed senior secondary education?”

The interview was adapted to each participant as the process unfolded. This approach encourages the participant to be viewed as the expert on the topic and as such he is able to influence the interview schedule. He is then able to explore his story to the fullest by adding additional information during the interview. The interview schedule is designed as an aid to the researcher, rather than as a tool to dictate structure or to restrict the participant’s words or chosen direction (Smith et al., 1995 in de Vos et al., 2002, p.298, 302). As described in Henning et al. (2004, p.72) this method is particularly suitable where one is interested in a particular issue that is complex, controversial or personal.

Each interview was conducted with a young person whose parents had divorced soon after he had completed senior secondary education. The interview took place at the Family Life Centre in Parkwood, Johannesburg. The researcher spent an initial 15-20 minutes discussing ethical considerations, assisting the participant in completing biographical information and perusing artifacts (photographs). A further 30-35 minutes was spent on the interview process. Each interview was taped onto audiocassette and transcribed verbatim (refer to Appendix D). Interviews were the primary source of data collection. Observations formed a secondary and important tool in giving a *“holistic description and analysing characteristic”* to the case study (Merriam, 1998, p.134; Henning et al., 2004, p.82)). Biographical information and artifacts further substantiated the data collected.

The researcher wrote a reflection immediately following each interview in order to capture descriptive notes pertaining to both verbal and non-verbal observations. Parenthetical thoughts of the researcher were added to the data collected. This enabled the researcher to develop tentative themes and to consider new options and ideas for the next interview (Henning et al., 2004, p.73). (refer to Appendix D).

3.5.2 Observation.

Observations, as a form of data collection, require that the researcher consider far more than the mere contents of the interview. Interpreting the data requires that she also be aware of factors such as, *“how”* the interviewees communicate the information, their culture, role in society and age-related stressors to mention but a few (Henning et al., 2004, p.52). It also enables the researcher to gain insight into structural developments e.g. facial gestures, body language and changes in the tone of voice and tempo of speech patterns (Henning et al., 2004, p.73;

Merriam, 1998, p.104-106). “*Meta-notes*” are often taken by the researcher or by an assistant during the interview in order to facilitate the process. The researcher needs also to be aware of naturally occurring events such as the setting, language used and symbolic representations. Topics, which are avoided are as important as those confronted (refer to Appendices C and E). Once the researcher has observed and recorded these events, she further “*observes*” through the data and documents collected (Henning et al., 2004, p.82; Merriam, 1998, p.101).

3.5.3 Biographical details and artifacts.

The researcher requested that each of the participants bring a small selection of photographs or a photo album to the interview. As the researcher had not previously met the participants, she hoped that these artifacts would capture a variety of accounts of their “*lived experiences*”. The richness of family interaction would possibly enable her to explore the participants’ construction of their experiences. It would also help her to gain a deeper insight into family dynamics (Henning et al., 2004, p.9). She explained that this would assist her in seeing a connection between individual family members and the research question (Henning et al., 2004, p.99). Biographical information was also collected from each participant to further support the concept of triangulation (refer to Appendix C).

3.5.4 Triangulation.

Triangulation uses multiple avenues to confirm agreements between researchers and theories regarding new findings. Mathison (as quoted in Merriam, 1998, p.204) explains that one needs to develop a holistic understanding of the particular phenomenon being studied in order to cultivate possible explanations. This understanding can be generated

from an appropriate selection of significant data relevant to the salient features of the case. The researcher used the above-mentioned methods of inquiry to confirm the evaluative statement and working hypothesis (Basse, 2003, p.76; Huberman & Miles, 2002, p.14; Merriam, 1998, p.204) i.e. that all children battle with parental divorce, regardless of age. De Vos et al., (2002, p.341), Henning et al., (2004, p.52) and Merriam (1998, p.151) concur that the process of data collection is inseparable from that of data analysis.

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS.

Analysis is inductive and the communication of meaning is the focus (Merriam, 1998, p.160). It is a process of bringing order; structure and meaning to all the data collected and enables the researcher to facilitate *“an understanding of the meaning of the experience or phenomenon being studied”* (de Vos et al., 2003, p.339; Woods, 2003, p.31). Henning et al. (2004, p.103) propose that *“analytical craftsmanship”* shows the researcher's ability to *“capture the understanding of the data in writing”* and to produce conclusions and generalisations that are congruent. In most cases, qualitative research data is initially analysed through the process of content analysis (Henning et al., 2004, p.102).

3.6.1 Methods of data analysis.

In this study the data was first subjected to content analysis. A more detailed interpretive text was then built on the strength of a constant comparative method of data analysis.

3.6.1.1 Content Analysis.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim; and additional notes and observations were added to the transcripts from the observations and biographical details (refer to Appendix E). The researcher read through the data several times in order to gain a holistic view of the participants' experiences. Possible themes and "*units of meaning*" were then coded. A basic form of comparison developed as the researcher organised and refined similar data into possible categories (Henning et al., 2004, p.104; Maykut & Morehouse, 1995, p.127). A more detailed explanation follows in 4.2.1.

3.6.1.2 Constant Comparative Data Analysis.

Constant comparative data analysis reduced the data and made specific themes more easily retrievable (Henning et al., 2004, p.106; Maykut & Morehouse, 1995, p.126; Merriam, 1998, p.164, 167). These themes were then displayed on "*data matrices*" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.249) in order to interpret constructs related to the analysis (Merriam, 1998, p.164). The matrices enabled the researcher to further analyse across the three cases that had been displayed. Raw data quotes from each respondent were then used to strengthen the validity of the category and allow for conclusions and recommendations to be deduced (refer to Appendix F).

Miles and Huberman (1994, p.172) in Merriam (1998, p.195) maintain that the comparison of multiple cases not only increases validity but also enables the researcher to understand the phenomenon as "*qualified by local conditions*" (refer to appendix G). This inductive approach categorises information by comparing all units of meaning that have been

gathered (Henning et al., 2004, p.105; Huberman & Miles, 2002, p.19; Merriam, 1998, p.159).

The researcher aims to use the above-mentioned methods of data analysis in order to gain a deeper insight into the experiences of the three participants. In each case, their parents waited until they had completed senior secondary education before divorcing.

3.7 THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER.

Henning et al., (2004, p.7-9) propose that "*as the main instrument of research*" it is the role of the researcher to present a "*thick description*" of the participant's "*lived experience*". In her attempt to elicit the respondent's "*voice*", the researcher needs to have some understanding of social issues relative to the "*lifeworld*" of each research participant. All aspects pertaining to possible bias must be considered. This will enable the researcher to become more sensitised to "*slumbering variables*" (Henning et al., 2004, p.8). The findings must be an "*articulated interpretation*" of the research data and be a true representation of a participant's "*lived experience*". The findings must be supported by the researcher's understanding and logic as well as by sufficient theoretical and empirical evidence (Henning et al., 2004, p.9, 107). It is the role of the researcher to uphold all ethical considerations throughout the research process (Henning et al., 2004, p.73).

3.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.

As Stake (1994), in Merriam (1998, p.214) points out, "*qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the participant's world. Their manners should be good and the code of ethics strict*". The responsibility of maintaining an ethical code of conduct requires that the

researcher have a sound respect for democracy, respect for truth and a respect for people (Bassegy, 2003, p.74). In accordance with these ideals each participant was fully informed regarding all ethical aspects relative to the research for which their interview would be used (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p.73). Written informed consent was given by each of the three young adults before the process of data collection began (See Appendix B).

My role as a researcher was explained and I advised the respondents of their right to terminate their involvement at any time during the research process, if they chose to do so. Each respondent signed a pre-drafted letter detailing informed consent to participate. Guaranteed anonymity was assured. Confidentiality would be protected, as would the respondents' privacy and sensitivity. Data collected would not be used for any other purpose than that stated by the researcher. The information gathered would be treated with the utmost discretion after recording (Henning et al., 2004, p.73). Feedback would be given to each respondent at the Family Life Centre in Parkwood, Johannesburg.

Written consent was received, from the Family Life Centre, for the inquiry to be conducted. Each of the above-mentioned factors supports the ethic of respect for truth, persons and for democracy, in case study research (Bassegy, 2003, p.74, 77). The concept of "*trustworthiness*" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) in Bassegy (2003, p.75) and Henning et al. (2004, p.147) also embraces the tenants of "*credibility, dependability and confirmability*" (de Vos et al., 2003, p.168).

3.9 TRUSTWORTHINESS.

A pre-requisite for all research is that it produces trustworthy information within the parameters of an ethical code of conduct. Kvale (2002), in

Henning et al. (2004, p.148, 149) proposes that this form of validation comes from precision (which is essential for good craftsmanship) and from dialoguing knowledge with participants and other researchers. It also comes from the pragmatic consequences of knowledge claims. These three tenants support the concept of trustworthiness (Bassey, 2003, p.7).

Where practitioners intervene in people's lives, it is expected that the *"conduct of the investigation"* and the results of the specific study engender confidence in researchers and other interested parties (Bassey, 2003, p.76; Merriam, 1998, p.199; Woods, 2003, p.4). As the researcher is accountable for the trustworthiness of the results produced, the researcher's biases need to be clarified and resolved from the outset of the research study (Merriam, 1998, p.211). This is based on the assumption that reality is grounded in the researcher's assessment of how people construct their reality within a specific contextual framework (Merriam, 1998, p.201).

Woods (2004, p.4) concurs with Henning et al., (2004, p.147) and Bassey (2003, p.76) in alluding to the *"truth value"* of research findings as knowledge statements, which *"correspond with reality... show internal logic and consistency... and have pragmatic utility"*. Case studies usually *"describe people acting in events"* (Merriam, 1998, p.19). They are used to construct knowledge, based on *"a rationalised version"* of social reality (Henning et al., 2004, p.148-149; Merriam, 1998, p.199; Woods, 2003, p.4). In order to facilitate this process the primary instruments used in qualitative research are participant or non-participant observation, unstructured or semi-structured interviews and the study of documents. This enables unobtrusive and sustained methods of qualitative research interaction that provides a holistic interpretation of complex human behaviour (Merriam, 1998, p.203; Woods, 2003, p.4).

Effective qualitative research is conducted rigorously, is insightful, identifies critical elements and removes plausible interpretations, so as to render valid conclusions (Merriam, 1998, p.19). To maintain trustworthiness in qualitative research requires that one constantly assess the parameters and the component parts of the study. This pertains to the construction of interviews and to the appropriate analysis of the contents of the documents. It also refers to whether the conclusions of the case study are sufficiently supported by the data to persuade “*discourse communities*” (Henning et al., 2004, p.149) of their trustworthiness (Merriam, 1998, p.199-200). The internal coherence of qualitative research comes from “*precision, honest communication, a cohesive theoretical structure and substantial theoretical knowledge*” (Henning, 2004, p.147-148).

In order to facilitate this process there needs to be a “*prolonged engagement*” with data sources and “*persistent observation of emerging issues*” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985 in Bassey, 2003, p.75). Spending time on a case enables the researcher to become involved in all aspects of their discussion and to become sensitive to features that may be either of conjectural importance or totally irrelevant. It also helps to build a relationship of trust with the participants who will provide the data (Maykut & Morehouse, 1995, 145).

Participatory or collaborative modes of research involve the participants from the time the study is conceptualised, to the final stage of writing the conclusion. This involves returning to the respondent with provisional interpretations of the raw data and again later to explore the credibility of the results. In this way the participant has the opportunity to check the accuracy of recorded observations and on their perception of what was recorded in the interview. It is also important to involve a “*critical friend*” who will be prepared to challenge the research processes and findings in

order to strengthen the “*truth value*” of the research project (Bassey, 2003, p.76; Maykut & Morehouse, 1995, p.153).

Trustworthiness supports the notion that the researcher needs to provide a systematically recorded audit trail of each case study. This is done to facilitate stage-by-stage checking by an auditor who hopes to certify that the conclusions drawn are justified (Maykut & Morehouse, 1995, p.146).

3.10 CONCLUSION.

A coherent group of complimentary methods that reflect the research question and suit the research process have enabled the researcher to explore possible “*slumbering variables*”. The three young people, whose parents waited until they had completed senior secondary education before divorcing, shared their experiences with the researcher on a number of levels. Triangulation provided a strong substantiation of the constructs and possible hypotheses. With “*well adjusted lenses*”, the researcher became a more finely tuned instrument as she explored “*the whole picture*” (Henning et al., 2004, p.8).

In Chapter 3, a description of the nature and characteristics of a qualitative research paradigm were explained. The main tenets of the research design of this study were described and the criteria for selection of participants were elucidated. The method of data collection and analysis was discussed, while bearing the nature of the research question in mind. The role of the researcher was also explored. The chapter concluded with a discussion of ethical considerations and trustworthiness.

Chapter 4 will concentrate on the presentation, analysis and discussion of the data and findings of this study.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS

*“Every problem, brings the possibility
of a widening of consciousness”*

(Jung, 2001, p.98)

4.1 INTRODUCTION.

The aim of this chapter is to describe the procedure of the investigation with reference to the methods of data collection used and to the analysis of the data. It focuses on the design and development of the researcher's inquiry. A salient feature will be an explanation of the analysis of the data in relation to the context in which the inquiry was researched. This will be followed by a discussion of the interpretation of the findings. An overview of data collection and analysis follows paying particular attention to content analysis, constant comparative analysis and the drawing of conclusions.

4.2 AN OVERVIEW OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS.

The initial stage of most qualitative case study data analysis is qualitative content analysis (Merriam, 1998, p.160). This interactive process occurs simultaneously with data collection and data management (refer to Appendices A-G).

4.2.1 Content Analysis.

As described in section 3.5, the first stage of data analysis began at the research site during data collection. The data was collected and

transcribed. Systematic “*open coding*” enabled the researcher to gain a global impression of the data, whilst becoming more acutely aware of single utterances and phrases. These “*units of meaning*” were highlighted, identified and coded to facilitate categorising (Henning et al., 2004, p.104; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p.127). (See Appendix E and F).

The processes of organising, reducing and describing the data, enabled the researcher to refine categories into an easily retrievable “*case study data base*” (Yin, in Merriam, 1998, p.194; Woods, 2003, p.37). The ‘category’ is a concept derived from the data (see 3.6). It reflects the purpose of the research study and answers the research question (Merriam, 1998, p.183). This enabled the researcher to identify variations, peculiarities and connections between the categories before constructing themes (Henning et al., 2004, p.127; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p.127, 128). Each theme related to the research question, “***What are the experiences of young people, whose parents waited until they had completed senior secondary education, before divorcing?***” The process of “*thematic organisation*” (Henning et al., 2004, p.107) facilitated a clearer understanding of each phenomenon, as it allowed for the grouping and conceptualising of data with similar characteristics (Huberman & Miles, 2002, p.342).

Each theme opened the possibility for further discussion and argument, which generated findings relative to the research question (Henning et al., 2004, p.107). Henning et al. (2004, p.103) and Cresswell (1998) in de Vos et al. (2002, p.340) assert that a spiral image best represents the process of data analysis and interpretation. This encouraged the researcher to interpret and present data “*in analytical circles rather than using a fixed linear approach*”, in order to arrive at a true narrative account of the experience.

Henning et al., (2004, p.102) explain that qualitative content analysis may produce a “*thin description*” of “*superficial and naively realistic findings*” if the data is not thoroughly interrogated. For this reason the researcher explored the validity of the findings which resulted from qualitative content analysis, by further subjecting the data to the rigors of a constant comparative method of data analysis (Cresswell, 1998, p.344; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p.783; Huberman & Miles, 2002, p.18; Merriam, 1998, p.159; Silverman, 1998, p.38). This method of data analysis will now be discussed.

4.2.2 Constant Comparative Data Analysis.

Denzin and Lincoln (1998, p.783) and Merriam (1998, p.195) maintain that the aim of comparing multiple case studies is to increase validity. A constant comparative method of data analysis increases the possibility that this criterion will be met. There are two stages in the analysis of multiple case studies. Initially, each case pertaining to this study was subjected to a comprehensive “*within-case*” analysis (Huberman & Miles, 2002, p.17). This enabled the researcher to explore the relevance of contextual variables in the data gathered from each case. Before conclusions could be drawn and verified, each case study was subjected to “*cross-study analysis*” in order to compare relevant themes and to expose possible “*slumbering variables*” (Henning et al., 2004, p.8; Huberman & Miles, 2002, p.18, 19).

This process of analysis becomes “*strikingly iterative*” (Huberman & Miles, 2002, p.28). The researcher moves back and forth between cross-case comparisons, redefining the research question and back again to the original case study analysis. This requires a constant tension between convergent and divergent thought processes. Merriam (1998, p.195) asserts that a qualitative, inductive, multi case study aims to find

“*abstractions*” which can be generalised across cases. This interactive process often exposes new data, which then becomes the issue of new analysis (Merriam, 1998, p.151). It also enables the researcher to produce more trustworthy findings.

The data for this study was coordinated and then entered onto a data display matrix. This enabled the researcher to constantly compare data from one respondent to another. “*Matrices are the crossing of two or more main dimensions or variables to see how they interact*” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.43). They were used to gain a deeper insight into the research question. Once this process was completed, the researcher was in a position to draw relevant valid conclusions. This concept will be elucidated in the following paragraph.

4.2.3 Conclusion drawing.

Conclusion drawing and verification involves the organisation, comparison and interpretation of the data. The purpose is to provide a greater sense of meaning to the information gleaned from the research question. It is imperative that the researcher checks for inconsistencies and errors of measurement, when interpreting the data. These include inadequate planning and preparation, vague definitions, interpreter and responder bias (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.245).

Denzin and Lincoln (1998, p.313, 330) refer to “*the art of communication*” as being the process used by the researcher to translate the data into a format that can be communicated to others. A sound constructionist interpretation is based on purposive sampling, data analysis that is inductive and contextual interpretations. It produces understandings that are shaped by the narrative and personal experience of the respondents.

For this particular study, the researcher identified patterns, themes, contrasts and comparisons on the matrices before interpreting, drawing conclusions and making relevant recommendations (Miles & Huberman, in Merriam, 1998, p.195). Triangulation and a constant comparative method of data analysis were used to validate the trustworthiness of the interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p.331). The conclusions that were drawn followed logically from the evidence, so that the outcome of the analysis could be regarded as valid. (Refer to Appendices A-G).


In this section of the researcher described how the data was collected and analysed. The concept of content analysis, constant comparative analysis and conclusion drawing were further elucidated. The following section will explore the themes and sub-themes which emerged during the process of data analysis.

4.3 EMERGING THEMES.

The research study explored how three young adults experienced parental divorce, which occurred soon after they had completed senior secondary education. As the researcher analysed the data the following themes emerged.

The first theme explored the concept of conflict whilst the second related to the young adults' personal experience of recent parental divorce. The third theme introduced information relating to the young adults' ability, during or soon after their parents' divorce, to advance from senior secondary education to tertiary education or into the world of work. Finally, the manner in which each of the three young adults experienced a family life crisis concurrent to a critical developmental crisis is discussed.

The themes tabulated below, emerged during the process of content analysis and constant comparative analysis. These appear in order of predominance.

THEMES	SUB-THEME(S)	
4.3.1. The role conflict plays in relationships.	4.3.1.1. Conflict in parents' relationship.	<p>4.3.1.1.1. <i>Pre-divorce conflict in parents' relationship.</i></p> <p>4.3.1.1.2. <i>The role conflict plays during the litigation stage of divorce.</i></p> <p>4.3.1.1.3. <i>Coping with post-divorce conflict.</i></p> <p>4.3.1.1.4. <i>The "other face" of conflict.</i></p>
	4.3.1.2. Conflict in personal relationships. 	<p>4.3.1.2.1 <i>In participants' intimate relationships.</i></p> <p>4.3.1.2.2 <i>In participants' relationship with parents.</i></p> <p>4.3.1.2.3 <i>In participants' relationship with siblings.</i></p>
4.3.2 Young adults' experience of recent parental divorce.	4.3.2.1 Role reversal. 4.3.2.2 Parents/coping. 4.3.2.3 Young adults' perception of coping.	
4.3.3 "Caught on the cusp between two worlds" - School and a future career.	4.3.3.1 Financial resources.	<p>4.3.3.1.1 <i>Education and Father/son relationship.</i></p> <p>4.3.3.1.2 <i>Independence and responsibility.</i></p>
4.3.4 Developmental crisis versus crisis in family life cycle.	4.3.4.1 In search of self-Identity vs. Role confusion. 4.3.4.2 Intimacy vs. Isolation. 4.3.4.3 Role of friends.	4.3.4.1.1 <i>In search of self-identity formation.</i>

A comprehensive discussion of each of these themes follows and a literature review is integrated.

4.4 INTERPRETATIONS AND DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS.

“The interpretation of data is at the core of qualitative research”

(Flick, 1998. p.178)

Interpretation is the search for meaning and essence in the study of the phenomenon. It is the process of describing, explaining and making inferences about information that is revealed through the data (Henning et al., 2004, p.148). It is about understanding the perceptions that the respondents give to the reality around them. The discussion that follows will give a comprehensive exposition of the main findings of the research inquiry. The essence of trustworthiness (as discussed in sub-section 3.9) is maintained throughout the interpretation of these findings. The main themes and sub-themes are introduced using anecdotal references from each participant. This information is then examined and relevant literature is integrated to substantiate the research findings. Appendices C – G elucidate the constant comparative process employed in analysis of the data and exploration of the themes.

4.4.1 The role conflict plays in relationships.

Conflict played a pervasive and dominant role in the homes of the three young adults. Since ‘conflict’ is a broad term, the researcher refined this concept into the theme “the role conflict plays in relationships.” The data was so saturated with the contents of this central theme that it was necessary to separate the theme into two more manageable sub-themes. The first sub-theme pertains to the young adults’ experience of conflict

between their parents during the various stages of divorce. The second sub-theme relates to the young adults' perception of how their experience, at this crucial stage of their development, influenced their own personal relationships.

Schwartz and Kaslow (1997) describe divorce as a series of interrelated stages rather than a singular event. Each family experiences this crisis in the family life cycle in a uniquely different way and to varying extents and degrees. Similarly, each member of the family unit experiences the stages of divorce individually. Children's ability to adjust to the environment and their experiences is inextricably linked to several factors. These relate to consistent and effective parenting, the degree of conflict in the family and financial standing at the time of the divorce. The manner in which the parent experiences and adjusts to each successive stage of divorce is central to the young adults' experience of their family life crisis. (Berk, 2003, p.578; Gladding, 2002, p.274; Shaffer, 2002, p.556; Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.4; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.35)

4.4.1.1 The young adults' experience of conflict in parents' relationships.

It would appear that conflict played a dominant role in the homes of each of the three participants at various stages of their parents' divorce. They believe that conflict "*generated anxiety*", was "*incredibly draining*" and "*made you just want to stay out of the way*". It created a situation where family members "*would either defend themselves with more intense anger*" or "*simply avoid each other*". Although each participant was aware of their parents' conflicted relationship, none believed that their relationship would end in divorce.

Regardless of the age of the child, divorce tends to be an extremely stressful and disruptive event (Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.16). Constructivism recognises that the way in which a person interprets a particular experience is central to how they construct both their inner and outer reality (Donald, et al., 2002, p.99; Vorster, 2003, p.80; Milner & O'Byrne, 2002, p.19). Unfortunately, it is often accepted that young adult children fully comprehend what is happening when their parents divorce. It is taken for granted that they are able to cope and many young adults receive very little support during this difficult period (Twaite et al., 1998, p.143).

Although young adults are usually far more aware of family dynamics than are younger children, they still find it hard to accept that the family as they know it, is about to disintegrate (Charles & Bryner, 2001, p.202). In a somewhat frightening world, the breakup of the family leaves children of all ages, feeling intensely alone. The young adult feels vulnerable and needs an honest explanation from both parents. They know that their parents are no longer responsible for creating stability in their lives but may still feel responsible for the breakup (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.35, 342).

4.4.1.1.1 *Pre-divorce conflict in the parents' relationship.*

Each family experiences the stages of pre-divorce crisis in a uniquely different way (Schwartz & Kaslow, 1997, p.79). The three participants believe that they had come to regard conflict between their parents "as normal". Whether *conflict was "open"*, or occurred "*behind closed doors*", these young adults were fully aware of the hostility between their parents from a young age. "*When you are younger you are always at home, you always hear it... even if it's 12 o'clock at night*" but "*when you are older most of it is probably happening when you are out... that's what they tried*

to do... I think". Two of the participants had become aware of the conflict at about 10 years of age. One of the families separated during this time but had been unable to cope without the father's financial support and the mother felt compelled to return. The level of conflict escalated.

In all three cases it would appear that conflict caused anxiety and a sense of insecurity. *"When you're younger you don't really know what's going on ... it's when you are upset...where I think you don't understand...it's more frightening"*, said participant 3.

Only one of the boys appeared to be aware of the origin of conflict in their home. He believed that although his parents' relationship *"was incredibly strong, there were also a hell of a lot of differences. Ja, my dad was very Greek and my mom is Jewish. Ja (sighs)... very emotional..."* None of the three participants expected their parents to divorce as they all thought, *"the degree of conflict was normal for marriage"*.

During the initial stages of divorce some couples attend marital counselling or divorce mediation - others simply allow the level of conflict or withdrawal to increase (Ellis, 2000, p.71; Shaffer, 2002, p.556; Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.10, 53). There are also those partners who so dread the idea of divorce that denial becomes the best way to cope with a family life crisis of this proportion. If the rift is not healed during the *early stages of pre-divorce crisis*, one of the partners usually becomes more *"divorce-focused"* than the other (Swartz & Kaslow, 1997, p.79). These experiences were common in the homes of all three young adults who took part in the study

Before the legal process of divorce begins there is often a dramatic increase in family conflict (Ellis, 2000, p.54). Young adult children, who still live at home, are often drawn into the confrontation. Most families

experience the period leading to the actual legal divorce, as a time of extreme crisis that causes much distress and anxiety for all members of the family (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.379; Ellis, 2000, p.71,72). During this time older children become intensely aware that their family has changed forever (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.20).

This initial stage may be repeated several times before parents finally divorce and can be far more destructive to the emotional well-being of children, than the actual divorce (Gladding, 2002, p.274; Swartz & Kaslow, 1997, p.80; Shaffer, 2002, p.556; Twaite et al., 1998, p.21).

4.4.1.1.2 *The role conflict plays during the litigation stage of divorce.*

All three participants appear to feel that they *“were caught between”* and had to *“split loyalties”* between each parent due to their conflicted relationship. *“...Regardless of what he had done, the more bashing that was happening on her behalf, the more defensive I was getting for him,”* said participant 2.

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Participant 1 perceived it as *“an incredibly draining year. It was um...a...vicious time”*. Participant 2 thought, *“it was a lot more stress and a lot more emotion flying around but somehow, ja, somehow I suppose we all survived”*. Participant 3 was overseas at the time of the actual divorce and *“just knew it happened - but my sister had to deal with all the pain and anguish. My mom just couldn't get it together”*.

The reality of divorce necessitates that parents tell children, relatives and friends, if they have not already done so (Berk, 2003, p.581). None of the three young adults knew that that one of the parents planned to divorce. Grieving the loss of the relationship may be accompanied by feelings of loneliness, guilt, sadness and despair. Juxtaposed to these emotions, some young adults (and their parents) experience a sense of relief,

empowerment and liberation (Berk, 2003, p.579; Schwartz & Kaslow, 1997, p.80; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.15). This was the experience of participant 1 and his mother.

The adversarial process of litigation can be intensely acrimonious and often exacerbates feelings of animosity, confusion, rage and distrust. Unfortunately, the legal process often encourages the couple to fight over financial, property and custodial matters (Cavanaugh, 1998, p.379; Ellis, 2000, p.71). Older children can end up with divided loyalties when one parent blames and denigrates the other. Clear boundaries need to be kept between marital conflict and being a parent (Milner & O'Byrne, 2002, p.110).

Parents and children of all ages find this period particularly difficult as it may involve relocating to a different home, school and/or community. Old friends are left behind and new relationships need to be established (Berk, 2003, p.578; Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.16; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.198). Although the three participants initially moved out of their family homes, two returned a year later to live with their fathers.

4.4.1.1.3 *Coping with post-divorce conflict.*

Each participant believes that family members coped with the stress of divorce in different ways. Participant 1 spent as much time as possible with his friends before going overseas "*earlier than planned*" to get away from the upheaval". His mother and sister moved to Cape Town to start a new life. He believes that nothing changed in his father's life, "*he was and always will be a difficult man*". Participant 1 copes with conflict in exactly the same manner as his father did, "*I leave; I do everything possible to avoid it*".

Participant 2 left university and returned home in order to help his mother “emotionally and financially, to run the family business”. He felt “incredibly alone. My sister went back to London to complete her degree. So there was just me to pick up the pieces”. A year later “when it was all coming together again” he “fell apart. Just too much responsibility! I went wild, drinking and drugging, till my body gave the warning signs and I had to stop”.

Participant 3 only heard about the divorce once he was overseas. “The actual idea didn't worry me too much. I figure rather happy apart than unhappy together, but my mom just couldn't cope”. His greatest concern was for his mother, “that was why I had to come home. She never expected the conflict to reach, um...reach I suppose...um, divorce proportion”. His younger sister “was so angry with them [the parents] and umm... just everybody really. You never knew what she was thinking”.

Each participant believes that his father avoided conflict instead of mediating the problem. Participant 1's father would “fight during the week when he had to be at work, then disappear to the Bushveld on his own to avoid facing it over weekends”. Participant 2's father left the country. Participant 3's father “had the house, the money and the ‘friend’ [he gesticulates the “-“ around the word ‘friend’ as he says it], so he wasn't overly phased - he left the worrying part to my mom”.

Individual personality traits such as self-confidence, resilience and the degree of optimism regarding future plans influence the way in which individual family members experience the stages of divorce and adjust to a new way of life (Berk, 2003, p.580; Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.18-21).

Milner and O'Byrne (2002, p.110) found that the levels of anxiety were higher in young adults from recently divorced or separated families and although some experienced relief, most experienced a sense of loss and

considerable grief. High levels of anxiety could be ascribed to stressors that require the young adult to have to become more responsible. For example he or she may have to care for younger siblings, work part-time, have extra household duties as well as provide emotional and possibly financial support to the family in addition to coping with their own educational demands.

The overly responsible young adult becomes more vigilant of their parents' reactions and hides their own distress in order not to become an added burden. The young adult needs to be reassured that he or she can invest their energy in struggling to establish their own future and that they can live a productive life independent of their parents lives. As they move into society and create new relationships with new opportunities, they have to feel free to make decisions without the responsibility of emotionally or physically supporting a parent (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.117).

Jones & Jablonski's (1998; p.93) research relates fairly succinctly to the relationship two of the participants had with their mothers. They found that when the family system is compromised by divorce, individuals with lower levels of ego strength have the potential to develop a co-dependent relationship with the residential parent. The role of the young adult progresses from being "*a sounding board*" to becoming "*a caretaker*". These young adults found themselves in the precarious position of deriving self-worth from one or both parents by fulfilling the role of "*caretaker*" or "*container*" which means they would have to listen to criticism about the other parent.

This progression to caretaker or container often negatively impacts on age appropriate intimate relationships. In a study done by Johnson and McNeil (1998; 20(2) p.237-248) young adults who experienced recent parental divorce presented with acute issues such as feelings of loss, anger and intense loyalty conflicts.

4.4.1.1.4 The “other face” of conflict.

The three participants felt that conflict negated the values they had been brought up with as it “took on the role of betrayal” and “dishonesty” towards the final stages. Participant 1’s mother planned that they would move out of the family home on the day the divorce papers were served on his father. He said, “*this time she [his mother] had planned it, she knew what she was doing. She had a good job and enough money - not like last time*”.

Participant 2 still feels angry with his dad because “*it wasn't expected, like they apparently had decided to separate but...there were agreements being drawn up and it was all meant to be done very amicably, and so their emotions became completely null and void. So I suppose her plans and expectations were completely thrown out of the window basically. He took all the money and left the country. She was devastated*”.

Participant 3 believes that his dad “*wanted a way out*” because he thought “*it had been bad for some time*”. He believed that his mom “*had spent the best part of her life bringing us up and didn't really look out for herself. She didn't want the divorce...she had invested so much. She still loves my dad*”. None of the participants thought that parental influence or bias altered their interpretation of post-divorce conflict. However, all three participants agreed that conflict generated by parental divorce spilled over into their own relationships.

The perceived role of the parent in the divorce process influences the young adults’ experience of parental divorce. They realise that the initiator experiences divorce in a very different way to that of the spurned partner. Feelings of inadequacy, rejection, emptiness and poor self-esteem are all emotions commonly experienced by the rejected parent, which weigh

heavily on the young adult. Fear of *“emotional”* and *“economic survival”* also have the possibility of influencing the young adults’ perception of their parents’ divorce (Gladding, et al., 2002, p.274; Swartz & Kaslow, 1997, p.70, 80; Twaite et al., 1998, p.21).

Loyalty to a particular parent is often challenged during the early stages of *“re-equilibration”* and threatens the stability of both parental dyad relationships (Twaite et al., 1998, p.143; Shaffer, 2002, p.560).

4.4.1.2 Conflict in personal relationships.

Avoidance of conflict in personal relationships was a common sub-theme. Two of the young adults were shocked when they realised that they may model behaviour similar to that of their fathers. Participant 1 said, *“actually I never thought of it that way, but yes... I avoid conflict at any price. I just leave. I go off diving, or riding, anything to get away from it...”*

4.4.1.2.1 Conflict in the participants’ intimate relationships.

Participant 1 chose to have a group of male friends, rather than to have an intimate loving relationship. He felt it was *“far safer, less demanding, what you see is what you get”* as *“women are so complicated”*. Two of the three participants learnt through trial and error, to mediate conflict. *“I didn't have exactly the ideal role model so I bashed my head many times, but I think I'm getting there”*, said participant 3.

Participant 2 and 3 said they *“would only stay if the relationship was happy”*. Participant 2 found that he had become far more trusting since the divorce and *“really believes in the possibility of long-term loving relationships. I think that's where I am at now”*, he said (referring to his current relationship).

Participant 3, on the other hand, felt that his parents' divorce had left him "fairly disillusioned. I think marriage generates conflict. Rather just live together". However, on a more reflective note he offered, "I don't know if it is just the way we were brought up, but I really have learnt that screaming and shouting doesn't help. I just switch off when that happens. I don't do it so much any more either. I'm far more in control now. You don't have to scream and shout to get your way."

All three respondents believed that their parents' divorce was "the best thing in the long run". Nearly two years later they have all found that "it is actually a lot better in many respects". Participant 1 felt that "it really meant we moved houses and I guess the first big change was that the conflict was gone" while participant 3 said "the conflict was taken out of our lives it was so much easier for everybody".

The ability to form a lovingly intimate relationship is the primary developmental task for young adults (Berk, 2003, p.18). The inability to do so creates a sense of loneliness and isolation (Shaffer, 2002, p.42). Extreme conflict or rejection during the divorce process will leave the young person shocked and disillusioned about his or her own relationship. Some cling to partners during this family crisis and others end the relationship. Their greatest concern is that if "family relationships don't hold, then love itself is unreliable" (Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.41; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.114).

Distress is often followed by anger, directed at one or both parents and their perceived negligence in repairing the relationship. Many are angry because they believe their parents' divorce will "destroy their own dream of a healthy future" (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.380; Ellis, 2000, p.26-29; Kaslow, 1997, p.71; Sommers-Flanagan et al., 2000, p.7).

4.4.1.2.2 *Conflict in the participants' relationship with their parents.*

The three participants felt that they had always had a good relationship with their mothers. Each young adult had filled the main supporting role in his mother's life during the *"hardest times of the divorce"*. They all believed that women who divorce later in life *"really get a lousy deal"*. *"Unless they have money or a good job"*, added participant 1 (who had previously learned from similar experience).

None of the three participants believe that they had a good relationship with their fathers when they were younger. They all felt that their fathers were physically and emotionally unavailable. Participant 1 believed that his father had *"always been difficult, always will be, married to my mom or not"* and that *"up to Grade 12 he was never around"*. Participant 2 and his dad *"fought like cat and dog. We never had the best relationship to begin with anyway. You see, okay I'm gay and he's Greek! So although I know he would never approve, I wasn't that invested anymore to take what he said to heart"*.

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All three participants currently experience a far more positive relationship with their fathers but believed that this is more related to age than to divorce. Participant 1's father *"doesn't really have anyone else in his life, so we do a lot more together now. He's more interested in the things I do and loves my bike racing. Occasionally he'll even join my friends and me, for a drink at the local pub, while we wait to watch the rugby to end"*.

Cognitive maturity enables a higher level of information processing and enables the young adult to construct new forms of social knowledge within the context of their socio-economic, ideological and cultural background (Engelbrecht, Green, Naiker and Engelbrecht, 1999, p.6, 7; Vorster, 2003, p.80). The young adult is able to apply knowledge that he has acquired

through social interactions and his own personal relationships. Positive role models, supportive family members and social ties that advocate coping attempts, enable the young adult to objectively cope with this type of family stress (Mize & Ellis, 2003, p.7).

Thoughts become more abstract and reflective. Elaboration is added to encoding strategies, which improves the young adults' long-term memory. He or she is more able to contemplate contradictions as well as pros and cons (Weiten, 2001, p.470). This perspective suggests that improved intellectual abilities enable the young adult to create their realities through meanings that they construct about that which they observe and experience. Gateley and Schwebel (1992) identified four positive personality characteristics that enable young adults to "*adaptively cope*" with the stress of parental divorce combined with the physical and mental transformation of this developmental stage. They are maturity, self-esteem, empathy and androgyny.

Regardless of background details, parents of any age experience divorce as an extremely stressful life event. Both parents initially experience severe negative physical and psychological effects, which indirectly affect the young adults' ability to adjust (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.379; Schäffer, 2003, p.38).

Father-son relationships appear to be the most negatively affected by parental divorce. The literature supports the finding that young adults reported lower levels of intimacy with their fathers than with their mothers (Amato & Booth, 1996; Osborne and Fincham, 1996, and Richards, 1996).

Young adults of divorce find lack of commitment to be the greatest stressor in their father-child relationship (Cooney & Kurtz, 1996, p.504). Most research found father-child relationships to be at far greater risk post divorce, than mother-child relationships. Research by Pharos (1996)

showed that fathers play a significant role in the development of a child. Father absence and divorce appear to be associated with social problems and research shows that it is essential for the non-residential parent to continue to have an active involvement in the life of their young adult child (Breggin, 2000, p.234; Weiten, 2002, p.482).

Palosaari and Laippala (1996, p.20-26) found that the closeness of young adults to a specific parent at the time of the divorce was a mediating factor in self-esteem and depression. While Cooney et al. (1995, p.158) maintain that good relationships between parents and their young adult children are related to higher levels of post divorce intimacy within the family system. It becomes imperative that the divorced couple develop an amicable co-parenting relationship in order to share both the needs and events, which launch their young adult children into their own independent lives e.g. education, graduation, a career, marriage and childbirth.

4.4.1.2.3 *Conflict in the participants' relationship with their siblings.*

The participants felt that their friends had been their most important source of support at the time of their parents' divorce. Although they had always had good relationships with siblings, they all felt that they had grown a lot closer after the divorce experience. Participant 1 felt responsible for his younger sister at the time of the divorce but that had changed considerably since his mother had moved to Cape Town. Both participant 1 and 3 had a new found "respect" for the younger sibling, who had taken on the role of supporting their mother. Participant 2 had always been very close to his older sister. He believes that she really admired the way he coped with their family crisis. *"She now comes to me for advice, strange how this sort of thing, changes life's patterns,"* he said.

Bush & Ehrenberg (2003, p.1-31) found that this is a time when the young person is leaving home, forming new groups of friends and concentrating

on future career development. It is also a time for reorganising sibling relationships. It finds that negative sibling interactions tended to increase immediately after family transitions. Most important though, was the finding that sibling relationships offer a buffer against the negative effects of divorce on young adult children at a time when there are many changes in the home. This is also a period characterised by a decrease in parenting quality. These sibling relationships provide stability, security and life skills for coping with the stress of family transition.

4.4.2 The young adults' experience of recent parental divorce.

Although each of the three young adults experienced their parents' divorce in different contexts and circumstances, there were several common factors. The first sub-theme in this section explores the concept of role reversal in the parent/young adult relationship. Second, the young adult's perception of how their parents coped during the divorce experience is examined. A third sub-theme relates to the perception held by each young adult of the coping skills he relied upon during his parents' divorce.

4.4.2.1 Role reversal in the parent/young adult relationship.

The participants experienced a change in the relationship with their parents. This became increasingly more evident in the period leading up to the divorce and for approximately a year thereafter. Participant 1 felt *"more like the parent supporting your injured child"*. The three young males enjoyed the fact that their opinions were valued as they *"became a sounding board"* for their mothers. They believed that they had always experienced a good relationship with their mothers and that the divorce made them even closer.

Participant 1 explained that his mom *“would say am I doing this wrong, have I done this right and what about my moving to Cape Town. It was more like a partner when she needed advice and someone to talk to”*. The second participant experienced a sense of pride and achievement as he had *“made incredibly rational decisions that I possibly wouldn’t have made otherwise”*. Participant 3 experienced this period as the most difficult as he was away from home and felt he needed to return because his *“younger sister was not coping with the divorce situation”*. He was too far away and *“was concerned for my mom mostly, she was more upset than anyone. She battled and battled... with life... with just living”*.

As the family structure changes, so do the roles and responsibilities of each family member (Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.120). Routines have to be reorganised and new patterns of family interactions need to be negotiated. (Shaffer, 2002, p.556).

Cooney & Kurtz (1996, p.495-513) and Arditti (1999, p.109-117) examine qualitative aspects of mother-child relationships related to recent parental divorce. As boundary issues and roles change between the mother and their young adult children, daughters particularly come to view their mother more as a friend, than as the caregiver. In situations where mothers relied on their young adult children for emotional support and advice, this contributed to a sense of equality and closeness in the relationship. This friendship status is contrary to the pathology described in most clinical literature (Cooney & Kurtz, 1996, p.512).

4.4.2.2 The young adults’ perception of how their parents coped with divorce.

In two of the three cases the father was perceived as having coped better with the divorce. Most literature supports the notion that middle-aged women are the group most severely disadvantaged by divorce. A

secondary factor relevant to these two cases is that the father initiated divorce proceedings. Participant 2 had become incredibly anxious about his mother. *“Ja, it was far more strain on her. I was helping her out emotionally more than anything else”.*

Participant 3 perceived his dad as having *“had it easier... way out easier. He stayed in the house. He didn't have to move and go through all the stress”.* This young adult sounded almost resentful that his *“dad's life hasn't changed much. He's had the house, the money and somebody to look after him since the divorce anyway”.* He believed that his dad had *“moved on. He decided why spend another 25 years trying to sort it out”.*

Despite the fact that all of the participants were of the impression that their mothers had been *“incredibly courageous”* only two perceived them to be *“a lot stronger than she was when they were together”.* Participant 1 was particularly impressed by the fact that his mother *“had learned so much from the first separation. This time she planned it. She had a job, enough money and somewhere nice for us to live and only when she was ready, she served divorce papers on him”.* Participant 2 said in admiration *“I think that they have both grown a hell of a lot being apart from each other. No there were a lot of lessons to be learned in that.”*

A large percentage of parents of young adult children are middle aged and experience significant social, emotional and economic disadvantages in attempting to start a new life (Schwartz & Kaslow (1997, p.80). When divorce occurs in later life, one of the couple is usually extremely distressed. Family, friends and the community play a crucial role in supporting the new single parent. The older the parents, the more traumatic the divorce experience becomes (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.379). Divorce is particularly difficult for middle-aged women who invest their identity in the role of wife and mother. Young adult children tend to blame

the parent they perceive to be the least affected, for the disruption and do everything in their power to support the one that they believe has been “*wronged or abandoned*” (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.115-116).

Participant 3’s mother had never developed a career and at 46 years of age, she found the prospect quite daunting. According to Thompson and Amato (1999, p.110) the stay-at-home parent is often the most disadvantaged partner. They have to cope with mounting economic stressors at the same time as they cope with the emotional stress of divorce. Many of these parents lack the necessary skills to be gainfully employed. Their age also negatively influences possible future career opportunities (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.379; Shaffer, 2002, p.557).

However, there are also those parents who see later life divorce as an advantage. Once the children have grown up, the “dutiful” parent is more able to leave an unsuccessful marriage, with less guilt and regret, in search of his or her own happiness (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.379, 380; Shaffer, 2002, p.557). The three young adults each had a parent who felt this way.



4.4.2.3 Perceived coping strategies of the young adults.

Participant 1 and 3 were of the opinion that being old enough to leave home whenever they pleased was their greatest coping strategy. They all invested in a driver’s license before they completed senior secondary education. This gave them the independence and freedom to spend as much time as possible with their friends and “*to escape divorce related stress*”. Cycling for a local club enabled participant 1 “*to distress*” but he preferred to go overseas “*earlier than planned*” once his mother had decided to move to Cape Town.

Participant 2 *“did react quite badly as soon as that period was over. Like as soon as my mom was back on track really, and getting her stuff together. Then after that I fell apart, and I started doing a lot of drugs. It lasted a good couple of months”*. They *“kind of affected my personality, so I had to quit”*. It would appear that this period of stress laid the foundation for much introspection. He *“started to get panic attacks and found it very hard to go into public spaces”*. He became *“incredibly isolated and aggressive. Which was not characteristic of me at all. But I was carrying a lot of crap that I was just sitting with basically and needed to get rid of”*.

Participant 3 used the excitement of making new friends, as well as touring and working in London to *“divert divorce related thoughts”*. After seven months he succumbed to feelings of concern for his mother and prematurely ended his “gap year” experience. By this stage he had decided that his future career would be in hairdressing as he *“had never been particularly academic and could start an apprenticeship right away”*.

Individual personality traits such as self-confidence, resilience and degree of optimism regarding future plans also influence the way in which individual family members experience the stages of divorce and adjust to a new way of life (Berk, 2003, p.580; Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.18-21).

Research indicates that age, gender, temperament, developmental level and strength of support network, play a crucial role in the ability of young adults to adjust to their parents’ divorce. Although they are more able to comprehend the reasons for their parents’ divorce than are younger children, they are no less distressed. Developmentally, they are more aware of negative behavioural patterns and personality traits that may be responsible for their parents’ incompatibility (Berk, 2003, p.579; Ellis,

2000, p.25, 54; Gladding, 2002, p.275; Mize & Ellis, 2003, p.6; Twaite et al., 1998, p.142-143; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.31, 104).

Those who have left home to study or to find employment experience considerable distress. Apprehension relates to family conflicts, concern for the well-being of both parents and a lack of family support to help them adjust (Twaite et al., 1998, p.142). Some young adults experience feelings of guilt, believing that they were "*the glue that held the marriage together*", and that leaving, caused it to fall apart (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.114). These young adults are caught between two worlds. They are not sure whether to rush back home or to stay away. Many lose an academic year while trying to rescue one or both parents. Few manage to restore the marriage and most find the task emotionally draining. Sadly some drop out of their studies altogether (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.115).

Zaslow (Ellis, 2000, p.25) found that young adult children of divorce show higher than normal levels of internalising problems such as anxiety and withdrawal. Research also indicates that boys are generally less able to adjust after their parents divorce, than are girls. Most young adult males react to stress with more externalising symptoms, while young adult females, respond with more internalising behaviours such as depression. The combination of a lowered self-esteem and depression negatively influences the general ability to achieve and to cope with academic responsibilities (Mize & Ellis, 2003, p.6; Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.7).

Young adults, who have no support system and are overwhelmingly stressed by their parents' divorce, are at risk of physical illness, depression and a lowered self-esteem, to mention just a few. Those who live alone are more predisposed to suicide ideation than those who have supportive relationships (Mize & Ellis, 2003, p.6).

However, not all children whose parents divorce react this way. Divorce can be the trigger to more mature behaviour and mastery of more complex skills. This is particularly evident in the behaviour of older children, who often become more helpful, responsible and considerate during this period of family crisis (Berk, 2003, p.579; Ellis, 2000, p.18; Twaite et al., 1998, p.14).

4.4.3 “Caught between two worlds” - school and a future career.

Conflict not only relates to interpersonal relationships, it also affects intrapersonal aspects of development and planning for a life after school. This theme explores how parental divorce at this stage of the family life cycle can negate the importance of planning future career or educational possibilities for the young adult. It considers the financial effect of divorce and its significance to the young adult in this regard. It also investigates the participants' perceptions of how divorce in their homes affected their sense of independence and responsibility.

The three participants felt that the level of conflict generated during the pre-divorce and litigation stages caused the general family cohesiveness to disintegrate *“to an almost non-reparable state”*. This period was so saturated with conflict and making post-divorce plans that their parents neglected to plan for the young adults' future study and career options. Their developmental life crisis was overshadowed by their family life crisis. Several aspects critical to supporting the young adult through this developmental stage were negated.

Each young adult had to deal with the conflict inherent to making plans *“for a life after school”* on their own. Each young participant made reference to the experience of divorce being easier for his sibling(s) who were either at school, working or well into tertiary education. *“It gave them*

a structure". They already had direction, a path to follow. They knew where they were going; they just had to carry on living like before".

Participant 1 completed senior secondary education with a university exemption certificate. He hoped to study *"something in the engineering line"* following the *"gap year"*, which he personally financed. He has taught scuba diving since returning from overseas a year ago. This was the only time during the interview that participant 1 showed any feelings of frustration and resentment with regards his experience of parental divorce. He assumed that it *"was probably because the conflict at home was building that very little thought was put into what I was going to do the next year"*. *All my friends had plans and I was going nowhere. "I guess I haven't got on the next road yet"...With no real education at 20, I have no idea where I am heading, not a clue. I can't keep waiting for answers, they [the parents] have moved on. I think I will have to go and teach diving in Mexico. I believe it's a good way to get a visa into the States"*.

Participant 2 felt obliged to give up on his first-year of studying drama at Rhodes University, to help his mom save the family business. He has subsequently attempted to study part-time, but has had little success. After a year he found the family business *"a little too responsible for me, I hated it...not at all creative, so I tried advertising 'cause it was the next best choice but I'm going to go back to freelance design and start manufacturing kinds of clothing and furniture aaargh... what to do, what to do?"* Once again this was the only time during the interview process that the young participant appeared to be angry about a specific parent's role in the divorce. He had learnt to accept the betrayal of his mother, but felt that the consequences of divorce influenced so many factors in his life, that he had no control over his future. *"In my culture [Greek] the father is supposed to stick around and help his son become something he will be*

proud of. I haven't seen mine in over a year, let alone support me in these major decisions”.

Participant 3 returned home early from his “gap year” overseas because his mom “just seemed to battle...with everything in life in general”. He returned home in the October of the year following Grade 12 and “did nothing for the next year”. *Staying with my mom was going nowhere... I don't know... I had no plans and neither did they? I don't know. I figured your folks helped you with that sort of thing, but my mom couldn't and my dad seemed too busy with his new life”.* A year later his father stepped in and “nipped it in the bud” [not working] so he decided to “take the easy way out...no, I'm only joking” and follow in his father's footsteps. “I'm not really academic and hopefully this will be more than just a job because when I'm qualified my dad has promised to buy me a salon so it will become a career”. This young participant lives and works with his father. He believes that the arrangement works well even though they have “a temperamental relationship”. *At least I get to have his support and... my freedom”.* Participant 3 and his girlfriend live together in the father's home. She is employed.

The young adolescent is confronted with a multitude of possibilities in his or her search for the true self. The desire to experiment with too many possible future selves is exacerbated by the need to consider future career opportunities (Weiten, 2001, p.470). This often reflects personal goals and is a powerful motivator in the search for whom the young adolescent can become, rather than helping them discover who they are (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.286).

Parents are unable to meet the needs of the young adult child who has to make major life decisions whilst the family is in crisis (Berk, 2003, p.584; Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.119; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.10). Kitson and Morgan (1998, p.913-920) and Preston (2000, p.11) found that

young adult children of divorce are less likely to attend or complete college and are more likely to be unemployed. Many students battle academically and sadly some need to repeat that particular academic year. Others never complete tertiary education and resent the fact that their parents' divorce was responsible for lost opportunities. They will expect not only an honest explanation for the divorce but also detailed plans involving their future and reassurance about financial arrangements. The young adult knows that without an education he or she is at an economic disadvantage. Family mediation is very successful if this is too difficult a task to negotiate (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.115).

The demands of a new work environment often contribute to these parents being physically and emotionally unavailable at a crucial developmental stage in the life of the young adult. Decision-making regarding future career plans is often overshadowed by the trauma of divorce. These young people feel that they cannot rely on the family support system for career advice or for emotional support. They believe that their parents expect them to cope and adjust without their help, as having completed senior secondary education implies greater maturity and independence (Twaite, 1998, p.142).

Thompson and Amato (1999, p.165) state that because so many marriages have failed, the number of young people who cohabit has increase. Living together provides the opportunity to experience intimacy and companionship without having to make a formal commitment Their research indicates that young adults who have seen their parents marriage fail are more likely to cohabit them are children whose parents are still married parent.

4.4.3.1 Financial resources.

4.4.3.1.1 *Education and the father/son relationship.*

The financial settlement often requires that assets acquired during the marriage be divided. Economic pressures created by this process place additional stressors on family members, which creates additional feelings of anger and bitterness between family members ((Berk, 2003, p.578; Cavanaugh, 1997, p.379; Gladding, 2003, p.275; Shaffer, 2002, p.556). Financial resources are crucial in understanding each person's divorce experience as financial security after divorce is often linked to age, gender and the ability of the parent to be employed (Shaffer, 2002, p.556). (See sub-section 4.4.4.1).

Cooney et al. (1995, p.160) found that financial consequences of marital disruption can have serious negative consequences in every sphere of the young adult's future. It may disrupt education, basic living standards and morale. Parental intimacy often appears to be positively associated with the young adult's perception that a given parent would be responsible for their financial support. In situations where the young adult is cut off financially, it is viewed as a personal matter rather than a financial one (Charles & Bryner, 2001, p.206).

4.4.3.1.2 *Independence and responsibility.*

The three participants believe that leaving home contributed far more to their becoming independent than did their parents' divorce. They also all felt that *"divorce forced you to grow up, to do things you never normally would have done...and um...to become more independent, I don't know, responsible". Then after that you could never go back to that freedom, like you're really not a child any more"*.

Two of the three participants spent the first year after senior secondary education overseas. Participant 1 worked for two years prior to this in

order to have *“sufficient savings to get there and maybe for a few days without work.”* Participant 2 studied away from home and his father covered all study costs *“but the rest was up to me”*. Participant 3 *“had to work to pay back the airfare”* and *“whatever it cost to live there”*. All three found that with *“being on your own, in your own space”* came *“lots of choices, but also consequences”*. They all *“went completely wild, for a while in the beginning”*. *“But then reality set in”* said participant three.

Maintenance and custody were not relevant to the participants as their parents all appeared to be very flexible with regards to living arrangements. An additional asset was that all three young adults earned a living within the first six months of leaving school. All three participants maintained that the best choice of all was *“that you get to choose where you live”*. Two of the three male participants chose to live with their fathers when they came back from overseas. The third stayed with his mom *“for nearly a year after the divorce and now I'm living with my partner”*. Participants 1 and 3 echoed participant 2's view that *“after the divorce, at 18 and a bit,”* he *“wasn't used to being responsible, it wasn't a burden though... I chose to do it”*.

Participant 1 believed that *“being out-of-school gave you so many choices, but only if you had money”* and *“you have no control of your life if you have no money...if you are dependent on somebody else”*. He has always had to work and said, *“when you leave school everybody thinks you've grown up. My dad wasn't going to pay for me, he had moved on. Independence comes with a price tag; I figure you've just got to work really hard to pay for it”*.

Participant 2 thought that the divorce experience had taught him a crucial lesson in being independent i.e. that with money comes responsibility. *“You can lose it all so easily. The business was too responsible for me, I*

hated it, but I had no choice. We would have lost everything. It takes years to build up a business... he left us with nothing. I was at quite a crucial age; I had just gone to Rhodes, which had been a dream, I wanted to be away on my own. I was going to do drama...completely self-indulgent, to have my own space...Ja, it was a big leap between school and choosing your life”.

Participant 3 battled to find employment when he *“first arrived in London, at the age of 18, with no qualification whatsoever”*. For a short while he felt that he might have to return home and lose the independence he so valued. *“When they talk about you getting your independence, it sounds so easy. Nobody tells you, that without a job you have no money and without money you have no chance of independence. I nearly died. It was awful; I thought I would have to come home, back to all the drama. That wasn't part of the plan”*.

Divorce can be the trigger to more mature behaviour and mastery of more complex skills. This is particularly evident in the behaviour of older children, who often become more helpful, responsible and considerate during this period of family crisis (Twaite et al., 1998, p.14).

Bryner (2001; p.210) asserts that divorce affects children according to their coping mechanisms in their particular stage of development. These usually involve *“transitions in important social relationships”* (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.285; Weiten, 2001, p.445). The manner in which the individual experiences these crises lays the foundation for future behaviour. The ego's prime motivation in the development of personality is to adapt to and to master an objective reality. Striving to resolve a particular developmental crisis invariably leads to personal social and emotional growth (Corey, 2001, p.73; James & Gilliland, 2001, p.104; Prochaska & Norcross, 1999, p.48).

4.4.4 The developmental stage versus a family life crisis.

Within the narrative of describing their experiences, each of the three young adults alluded to aspects pertaining to the current and previous developmental stages of their parents' divorce. This final theme will review the role that identity formation and independence played in the lives of these young adults in their experience of their parents' divorce. It will also allude to the influence parental divorce had on their intimate relationships and to the importance of friends. As with all of the previous themes, the findings that emerge will be interpreted and integrated with relevant literature to support the final results.

4.4.4.1 The search for self-identity versus role confusion.

Each of the three participants is still in the process of exploring their personal and sexual identity.

Participant 1 stated, *"I just work, and work, and work, I really battle to come out and after that there's sport"*. He still prefers to be part of his group of male friends and is relatively weary of love and intimacy. He said, *"no ways, nothing serious at the moment. I've had a few girlfriends, but they haven't lasted. I figure sport is easier...there are rules. Girls, I don't know... they are so complicated, I don't quite get them"*.

Participant 2 summed up his confusion regarding career identity and certainty regarding sexual identity when he said, *"at almost 20 and nearly two years out of school, I'm not sure what I do, but I know who I am! One of the advantages of their divorce was that there was none of the guilt that goes with 'coming out' with regimented parents. I don't think I could have if he were still here, you see my dad is Greek and I am gay"*.

Participant 3 said, *“When I came back from London I knew what I wanted and where I was going...but I wasn’t sure how to get there. I love women. I think they are beautiful. I knew when I came back, that all I wanted was to be creative, be part of that kind of world, and to have fun. Now I’ve decided to become a hairdresser. Once I’m qualified my dad will help me open up a place of my own. I’m really good at what I do...I love it!!”* (laughs)

During this stage the young adult child aims to resolve the issues of identity versus role confusion (Erikson, 1982, in Cavanaugh, 1997, p.286). The process of identity formation often continues beyond the age of 18, once the restrictions of post adolescence and school regulations are removed (Shaffer, 2002, p.441). Within the South African legal context, one is considered to be a young adult at 18, rather than a post adolescent. Being able to get a driver's license, to buy liquor and to vote engenders a far greater sense of independence. The young adult also continues to develop physiologically, cognitively and emotionally. Although this study pays particular attention to personality development it is essential that the young adult be considered holistically (Weiten, 2001, p.470).

4.4.4.1.1. *In search of self-identity formation.*

The process of identity formation begins in adolescence and continues into young adulthood. Each of the three young participants believed that leaving home would give them a chance to discover their true identity. Unfortunately, all three returned home earlier than planned for reasons linked to their parents’ divorce. In each case the young adult returned to support the parent who had not initiated the divorce and who was not coping with *“life after divorce”*.

Part of identity formation, common to the three participants, was the recognition of values that had been incorporated into their development. None of the three participants had considered that to be loyal, caring, responsible and unselfish might relate to values that had become a part of their identity. Each had temporarily sacrificed their independence and search for identity, in order to support the *“abandoned parent”*.

Although participant 1 believed that his father *“was always a difficult man, always will be...”* he found it difficult to accept that his father had been left alone, after his mum and sister moved to Cape Town. *“He deserved it”* but *“she planned it”* and *“he really had no one else, so I sort of became his only friend. He spends much more time with me now than he ever did when I was at school”*.

Participant 2 came home from University. *“I was at quite a crucial age; I had just gone to Rhodes, which had been a dream. I wanted to be away on my own... completely self-indulgent, in my own space”*. Then his dad *“took a plane to Greece, with no warning and no intention of ever returning”*. He believed he had no option but to *“come home and help my mom with the business, because she completely fell apart”*.

Participant 3 returned from London as they, the children *“were so worried about my mum, she just battled and battled...with everything...with life in general. My dad wanted a way out...my mom was devastated - she didn't want the divorce, she had invested too much. She spent the best part of her life bringing us up and didn't really look out for herself. She still loves my dad”*.

Loevinger (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.290) extended Erikson's groundwork in asserting that the ego is responsible for organising, integrating one's morals, values, thought processes and goals. The complex development

of the ego is influenced by the “*dynamic interaction*” of environmental and personal factors (Donald et al., 1997, p.60).

Erikson believes that only after establishing confidence in our own identity, can intimacy (or developing a shared identity) be achieved with another (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.372; Shaffer, 2001, p.43). Successful resolution of tasks to this stage implies that the young person has acquired the basic strengths of hope, will, purpose, competence and fidelity. This cycle is repeated again as the young adult struggles to develop an intimate relationship, while still maintaining their own identity (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.287). Intimacy cannot be achieved until one’s identity is established. A more mature sense of identity enables the young adult to “*take control of their life in developing a personal ideology*” (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.299).

4.4.4.2 Intimacy versus isolation.

Although all three participants experienced their parents’ divorce soon after they had turned 18, they each found that it contributed to their intimate relationships in a completely different way.

Participant 1 found that he had a special relationship with seven friends with whom he had played rugby at school. They “*all currently ride for the same cycling club and apart from work I don't really have time for much else*” (he is a full-time diving instructor). When discussing relationships he “*always feels so unsure, you have to risk too much*”. His two most common themes about meeting the right person one day are, “*marriage is so overrated*” and “*I hate conflict, I leave*”.

Participant 2 moved out of home once the “*business was secure*” and his mother was “*coping brilliantly*”. His optimistic nature enabled him to invest his energy in the uniqueness of his own relationship without comparing it

to his parents' divorce. He has been *"in a very happy, secure relationship for over a year"*. They share a home near to his mother and sister's home. He believes that the relationship has allowed him to become *"far more trusting of people, now than ever before"*. Because *"everyone has their horror stories along the way and you are either going to hang onto them, or try, I don't know, try and find something beautiful"*.

Participant 3 cohabits with his girlfriend at his father's home and is as skeptical as participant 1, regarding the permanency of marriage. He *"had never really been into sport, so had mainly female friends"*. His views were rather ambiguous. Initially he said, *"what's the point of getting married, if people just give up so easily, it's just about the ring then. You might as well just move in together. There's so much pressure to get married. I wouldn't do it. Young people get married because they are bored, they don't think it through. Rather pretend you're married, it's cheaper. Marriage doesn't give you security"*. Then on the other hand he appeared to believe in the importance of commitment. *"So many people are getting divorced today, so it is always around us. I'm sure, like back in the old days, it wasn't really like that, and you stuck to your word. I think you should try and work it out, you should make it work. If you don't have it together you may as well move on, but if you do, you need to keep trying; it's worth it in the long run"*.

Young adulthood is a stage in life when the individual is required to overcome the major psychosocial developmental task that achieves intimacy rather than isolation. This is achieved through forming strong friendships and companionship with another person. Choosing a partner whose qualities best represent one's personal criteria from past experiences, assists the individual most in achieving intimacy (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.286).

This requires that the ego of the young adult accommodates fundamental changes to their beliefs, concerns and expectations. Divorce and separation are forms of situational conflict that have the propensity to exaggerate any psychosocial developmental conflict that the young person is already experiencing (Orton, 1997, p.104). Wallerstein & Blakeslee (2003, p.114) found that although young men endorsed the ideas of love and marriage they were afraid to make commitments themselves for fear of repeating their parents' mistakes. Life events influence personality development e.g. self-perception of confidence at the time of the incident. This can cause the young adult to question previously organised, coherent, integrated pattern of self-perceptions (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.290).

4.4.4.3 The role of friends.

Each of the three participants valued the role friends played *"once you were older"*. In all three cases, they felt that their relationships with *"special friends"* were *"almost as important if not sometimes more so than their relationships with family"*. Two of the three participants believe that this *"was especially so before, during and after one's parents get divorced"*. Possibly because *"you get to choose your friends, family...I don't know... you just get landed with"*, said participant 1. The third participant believes that although his friends were very important, *"my sister, mom and I have always been very close... you know Greek families!"*

The three participants agreed with participant 1's view of friends, and their role at the end of Grade 12 (pre-divorce stage for all three). He said, *"I was at a very self-centered stage in my life. I was very focused on my friends, we just wanted to party and live one day at a time"*. When the conflict became even more severe (just before the litigation stage) friends

played a crucial role. Participant 3 summed it up most succinctly in stating, *“it was the best place to get away from all the rubbish, I didn't have to even think about it there”. I don't know... I could just be myself*”. Two of the three participants chose to live with their fathers when they came back from overseas as, *“it was where my friends lived. My whole social life was there”* said participant 1. The three believe that their friends played a crucial role in the post-divorce stage of re-equilibration, *“to realise that now my parents had gotten on with their lives, so I could also”*.

The experience of parental divorce brings much confusion to the world of the young adult. A caring, supportive network of teachers, friends, siblings and extended family members may facilitate the healing process (Cavanaugh, 1997, p.380). The young adults' emotions range from relief to impatience, from embarrassment to distress over future relationships. Part of them grieves the loss of the closeness they once experienced as a family whilst another part wishes to explore the world beyond the bounds of their home (Sommers-Flanagan, 2000, p.144).

The young adult may be growing up, but many still hold onto comforting symbols of the past. They mourn the loss of their home and resent the idea of leaving friends and moving on from childhood memories. Loss of contact with the non-custodial parent and/or grandparents and friends can leave them feeling cut off, rejected and alone (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.141).

Some young adults feel less the need to visit the non-resident parent at this stage of his or her life. Their needs and interests are far more egocentric and no different to young adults from intact families. After study activities, friends and work are more important than spending time with their parents. They know in which parent's home they would prefer to live and parent flexibility is the key to a successful parent-young adult relationship (Charles & Bryner, 2001, p.206).

Appropriate recognition of accomplishing specific developmental tasks enables the individual to continuously strive for trust, achievement and wholeness (Logan, 1986 in Cavanaugh, 1997, p.287). The young adult becomes free of their parents' influence and more interested in others. The basic ego strength acquired through successful resolution of this stage of psychosocial development is love within an intimate relationship (Covey, 2001, p.79 Shaffer, 2001, p.43).

4.5 CONCLUSION.

Social constructivism recognises that people create their realities through the meanings that they construct about that which they observe and experience. The way in which we interpret each experience is central to how we construct both our inner and outer reality (Donald, et al., 2002, p.99; Vorster, 2003, p.80; Milner & O'Byrne, 2002, p.19). The divorce experience is as varied and unique as is each family situation. Young adult children, whose parents divorce, feel as much anger, pain, emotional vulnerability and stress as do younger children. They worry about their parents' future and battle with conflicting loyalties (Amato & Booth, 1997, p.219; Cavanaugh, 1997, p.380; Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.16).

The experience of parental divorce brings much confusion to the world of the young adult. They require an honest explanation, as some children are not fully aware of the degree of conflict that exists in their parents' marriage (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 2003, p.117). Their emotions range from relief to impatience, from embarrassment to distress over future relationships. Part of them grieves the loss of the closeness they once experienced as a family whilst another part wishes to explore the world beyond the bounds of their home (Sommers-Flanagan, 2000, p.144).

Once the divorce has been finalised parents slowly adjust to "*the co-parenting stage of divorce*" and to the stressors that can be a part of

maintenance and custody arrangements. Co-operative parenting teaches conflict resolution skills that aim to reduce post-divorce antagonism and stress (Ellis, 2000, p.340). The degree of conflict between parents is central to the ability of children to adjust to the new family system (Ellis, 2000, p.339, 340). Long-term negative effects of divorce are further reduced if the young adult experiences unconditional positive regard and a high level consistency from both parents (Berk, 2002, p.581). Regret and sadness may still be present but they are far less invasive (Shaffer, 2002, p.557).

A prerequisite attitude for stability of the family in the post-divorce phase of the family life cycle requires a willingness of parents to maintain financial, custodial and visitation agreements (Berk, 2003, p.581). Encouraging healthy parenting relationships with their young adult children and facilitating contact with extended family is also essential (Gladding, 2002, p.268).

Although most children remember divorce as a very stressful experience for many years after, Hetherington et al., (1998), Shaffer (2002, p.559) found that children brought up in conflict-ridden homes, where parents stay married, were at a far greater disadvantage than those from divorced homes. Significant research shows that children who live in stable, single-parent homes adjust well and move with relative ease into future developmental phases.

In this chapter the researcher discussed the methods of data analysis used in the study. She then introduced the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the process of data collection and analysis. These were discussed at length and were supported by raw quotes from the data and authenticated by literature where possible. In Chapter 5 the researcher will draw the study to conclusion. Recommendations resulting from the findings will be made and a brief discussion of both the purpose and the

limitations of this particular study will be stated. This will be followed by a validation regarding the uniqueness of the study and a brief conclusion.



CHAPTER 5

RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSIONS

“As a group, children of divorce are neither disturbed nor are they abnormal. They are simply passing through the trauma of family dissolution”

(Charles & Bryner, 2001, p.205).

5.1 INTRODUCTION.

This research inquiry has attempted to answer the research question posed in Chapter 1 i.e.:

“What are the experiences of young people whose parents waited until they had completed senior secondary education, before divorcing?”

From the findings that emerged in the research data, recommendations were drawn. The aim of this chapter is to offer these recommendations for educational psychologists and school or tertiary education counsellors. I hope that the information gained will also assist families who are faced with this predicament in couples' counselling, divorce counselling or in divorce mediation. The chapter also outlines the limitations that were confronted in this study.

5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations are usually referred to as favourable comments and suggestions that are designed for application in the circumstances under discussion. The following recommendations were formed and structured

from the results of the findings as discussed in Chapter 4. The recommendations are seen as twofold: one set relates and is applicable to the young adult whose parents divorce soon after he or she has completed senior secondary education and the families of these young adults. The other is for the educational psychologist or counsellor.

5.2.1 Parents of the young adult.

Each member of the family will create their realities through the meanings that they construct about those things that they observe and experience. Social constructivism recognises that the way we interpret each experience is central to how we construct both our inner and outer reality (Donald et al., 2002, p.99). For this reason, the young adult requires an honest explanation regarding their parents' divorce (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.141). Parents who face this major crisis in the family life cycle are confronted with a multitude of emotions. They not only have to deal with their own trauma, but also need to support and understand their young adult child simultaneously. The sense of loss in a divorce situation is similar to that associated with death. However, unlike death, there are certain choices that parents make which play a crucial role in their young adult child's ability to develop a healthy, loving personality (Wallerstein & Blakeslee in Orton, 1997, p.104).

*“It is not that parents divorce, but rather how they divorce
that is crucial to the adjustment of children of any age”
(Ellis, 2001, p.51).*

For this reason the following recommendations are proposed as guidelines to parents, counsellors, psychologists and attorneys who practice divorce mediation at the Family Life Centre.

- Conflict between parents is one of the most destructive aspects of divorce. It has the potential to impair the young adults' ability to adjust psychologically for many years after the event. It also predisposes these young people to severe depression and self-harm. The relationship between ex-partners has been found to have a significant influence on the young adults' ability to successfully negotiate their age-related developmental task of committing to a long-term intimate relationship. A new relationship between parents has to be negotiated in which the young adults' best interests are of prime concern. Many couples prefer to perceive their new relationship as purely a business transaction.
- The young adults of this study found that their homes *"became so saturated with the divorce related stress"* that they were never given the required support and direction that would have enabled them to get *"onto the next path"*. Their parents eventually moved on but they had *"gotten stuck on the cusp between the end of school, and starting out in real life"*.
- The young adult should be informed of the planned separation as soon as possible. It is important that both parents are involved and present when the young adult is informed about his or her parents' future plans. As with children of any age the discussion should be open and young adults should be informed that both parents will still be involved in their lives. Even though these young people are older, it is still important that they be told that they are not the cause of the separation or pending divorce.
- As with younger children the young adult needs to be reassured of his or her parents' love and continuous affection. They also need to understand that they do not have to choose sides and that they will neither be abandoned nor rejected in any way. Because of the

parents' personal and emotional involvement, therapists and divorce mediators can play an important role as a neutral party during this period.

- As stressful as divorce may be, parents need to move away from the pre-divorce, litigation stage of conflict as soon as possible. In this way the young adult will feel less responsible for an individual parent's happiness or for salvaging the remnants of the marriage (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p.141).
- Many young adults find that they are expected to cope simply because they are older. Parents often underplay the importance anxiety; anger, guilt and fear play in their lives during this period. They need to be reassured on an ongoing basis regarding what is expected. It is crucial that the young adult child knows that this period of disruption will improve. It is important as a parent to listen and respond appropriately to the young adult child's divorce related concerns.
- It is important that the young adult perceives divorce as a developmental process, which could last two to three years. During this period there are important developmental tasks that need to be completed by each member of the divorcing family to ensure successful adjustment. To resolve each of these, each family member needs to mourn what is lost. It is normal to experience emotional tension at transition points between the various phases of divorce (refer to sub-section 2.7).
- It is ideal for parents to attend support groups. There, they can explore ways in which they can help their young adult child who is in a critical developmental stage. Sharing experiences with others in similar situations enables the parent *"to become an active agent*

in the process of experiencing" (Mahoney, 2003, p.6) and to find solutions. In this way parents acknowledge the need for order as they slowly regain their ability to cope with change and return stability to the home (Donald et al., 2002, p.100). Workshops that enable parents to improve their communication skills, problem solving capacities and coping skills also often improve relationships between family members.

- Parents need to strengthen external support systems and social networks during this difficult time. This will enable them to assist and support themselves through the traumatic experience of the dissolution of their family as it had once been. They need to begin rebuilding their own financial resources.
- It is important, as a parent or counsellor, to be aware of and sensitive to a young adults' ability to cope with this crisis. Young adult females often withdraw, whilst young adult males may react with externalising behaviours. Young adult children who have low self-esteem and those who are away from home, during this traumatic critical family life crisis, require special attention. As unique as each divorce is, so too are the reactions of each family member.
- Professional, individual or family counselling should be sought. It is far more beneficial to the young adult if the parents share the plethora of emotions that accompany divorce with an appropriate professional, rather than with the young adult or with everybody in the community. This situation not only overburdens the young adult but can also force them into situations where loyalties have to be split. Parents and counselors must work on the resolution of attachment to the ex-partner as well as on overcoming hurt, anger and guilt. Relationships with extended family should be re-aligned.

It is important for a divorced parent to stay connected to the ex-partner's extended family in order to facilitate the young adult's relationship with grandparents and other important family members.

- Parents should develop a willingness to continue co-parenting in a co-operative relationship that shares financial support of the children. Divorced parents should be willing to maintain civil contact. The non-custodial parent should also respect the custodial parent's relationship with the children.
- The adult is also at a critical developmental stage in their life and a critical developmental issue is the acceptance of one's own part in the failure of the marriage.
- Divorce mediation encourages ex-partners to work co-operatively on problems related to custody visitation and finance. A parenting plan is as valuable for the young adult child as it is for younger children. The young adult child is more concerned with the financial implications of the divorce than with many other aspects. They know that there is the possibility that once they have completed senior secondary education, they may receive no further financial support. This has significant implications for the possibility of tertiary education and a future career. It may also force the young adult into the world of work, without the necessary skills. Facing the realms of the unemployed is also daunting for the young adult (refer to sub-section 1.6).
- Young adults prefer having the flexibility that supports the independence of their developmental stage. A relaxed visitation arrangement between the young adult and the non-residential parent facilitates relationship building.

- It is crucial that the non-residential parent maintains contact with the young adult child in order to minimise the repercussions of divorce (Carter & McGoldrick in Gladding, 2002, p.267).
- The young adult child should be encouraged to talk with a parent, other trusted adult, psychologist or friend about their feelings.
- The young adult must be provided with understanding, support and attention. Parents' grief should not cause them to overlook the young adult's grief. It is important to learn to recognise emotional and physical expressions of grief. These may include fatigue, shortness of breath, depression and irritability. The young adult should be allowed to cry and to express anger. Time for grief is necessary and will help the young adults adjust to new roles.
- Parents should understand that because the young adult is older, their previous role as parents often becomes one that is more of friendship. This requires a more flexible relationship between the parent and young adult child. An open and honest relationship between both parents and the young adult child must be encouraged (Thompson & Amato, 1999; Thompson & Rudolph, 2000; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003).

5.2.2 The Educational Psychologist

“Contrary to what those who’ve never been there believe, young adults whose parents are divorcing feel as much pain and grief as do younger children”

(Amato & Booth, 1997, p.219).

Merriam (1998, p.222) postulates that any usefulness or appropriateness of recommendations must be assessed in reference to the practitioner's specific context and circumstances. The following recommendations are suggested for the educational psychologist when working with these young adults and/or their families to offer assistance and support:

- Provide and strengthen support systems both external and internal. During the initial stages of this family trauma a multitude of emotions including confusion and helplessness may reign. The young adult, ex-partners or family may need guidance and direction. Often the rejected parent or young adult who feels abandoned needs someone to talk to. A professional, who will be informative, maintain confidentiality, be empathetic and act, as a “container” is invaluable to a family in crisis.
- Provide counselling especially for loss, trauma, sadness, guilt or anger. Therapy may be fairly short-term and relatively didactic where the young adult or family members need to develop communications and problem-solving skills, anger management or grief counselling. Long-term therapy for depression may be essential for the young adult who battles to come to terms with the enormity of the loss of one's family, as it once was.
- Provide stress management techniques for parents and children alike. Divorce is not a singular incident but rather a series of stressful events, which normally take the family two to three years before reaching the posts-divorce stage of “*re-equilibration*” (Schwartz & Kaslow, 1997, p.81).
- Encourage the family to attend divorce mediation or post-divorce counselling if financial, educational and future career planning for the young adult becomes too stressful for the family to negotiate.

- Facilitate a process where the young adult and his or her parents move towards a phase of acceptance and start to plan for the future.
- In cases that are extremely adversarial and protracted maintenance and custody battles have a profoundly negative influence on the young adult, the educational psychologist may prefer to refer the family member(s) to other psychologists. The psychologist needs to be aware of his or her limitations in considering the client's best interests (Thompson & Amato, 1999; Thompson & Rudolph, 2000; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003).

5.3 THE LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The limitations of this research study can be seen from several viewpoints. An important cluster of limitations involves the fact that all three young adult participants were male and came from a middle-class, to upper middle-class, economic background. A further limitation is that this research was conducted from a single cultural perspective that is, from a white culture. For this reason it cannot be generalised to the other multicultural facets in the South African context.

An additional limitation is that the researcher, who conducted the study, had no previous experience in research. Any errors made must be seen in the light of constructive opportunities for further growth and understanding of the research process. An area of limitation for the novice researcher was that the open-ended interview process generated an incredible volume of information. A semi-structured interview process may have limited the concentration of data collected.

A third limitation resulted in that only three young adults were interviewed. However, the researcher did achieve data saturation and therefore

conducted the interpretation of the result effectively as explained in Chapter 4.

Finally, literature pertaining directly to the young adult, whose parents divorce soon after they have completed senior secondary education, is very limited. There is a vast amount of research relating to younger children whose parents divorce and the influence it has on these same young people when they become young adults. There are however, very limited resources pertaining to young adults who experience this family life crisis. This is possibly due to the fact that parents and society believe the young adult is ready to begin a life of their own and is sufficiently mature and independent to cope with this family trauma (Twaite et al., 1998, p.14).

5.4 VALIDATION

In the study, the researcher explored the experiences of young adults whose parents waited until they had completed senior secondary education before divorcing. It would appear from both the data collection and analysis process as well as from the feedback section that emotional support and guidance are needed for young adults, parents and support professionals involved in this traumatic family life crisis. Parents believe that waiting to divorce is in the child's best interest and that divorce at this later stage will be easier for all concerned. Sadly, in reply to the question posed by Wallerstein and Blakeslee (2003, p.127) "*when is the best time to divorce?*" there is no perfect answer. Even at this stage of the child's life many difficulties are experienced.

Information generated from the feedback sessions with each of the three participants was most enlightening. All three young adults explained that they had found the experience of partaking in the research extremely beneficial for the following reasons:

- It was the first time that any of them had discussed any detail regarding their experience of parental divorce. Each young male found it strange that family members discussed the events in great detail with their respective sisters, but not with them. They were not sure if this was peculiar to their particular family or to a culture that believes that males would rather not discuss unpleasant emotional events. They all believed that their parents expected them *“just to deal with it”*.
- Participants 1 and 3 decided to attend Family Life Centre for further divorce-related counselling for support in the following areas. They resented the fact that they were the reason their parents *“had wasted so many years living unhappily together”*. They battle with conflict resolution, coping with anger and cycles of depression. They *“felt guilty”* about the parent who they perceived as being most hurt as they were *“caught between wanting to look after their parent and needing to move on with their lives”*. Their own personal relationships were either unhappy or unsuccessful. They were disillusioned about long-term commitment and marriage.
- Each of the three participants had requested to read the literature review prior to the feedback section and each remarked that it had given them *“incredible peace of mind. It was so great to realise that the reason I felt stuck and going nowhere in my career, wasn't because I was useless or stupid, it was just that too much happened at the same time”*, said participant 1.
- All three participants were referred to an educational psychologist who specialises in career development and planning and have involved the parents in facilitating new opportunities.

For the above-mentioned reasons the research can be seen as being beneficial to young people who face the developmental crisis of entering tertiary education or the world of work at the same time as their parents divorce. The researcher also believes that the study invites further research into the influence this experience may have on the population in general i.e. on young adult females and across multiple cultures. The development of support programmes based on information generated will be highly beneficial to young people *“caught on the cusp between late adolescence and young adulthood”*. The profound effect of divorce on the young adults’ ability to enter into and succeed at tertiary education needs to be brought to the attention of all parents who...*“wait to divorce after their children have completed senior secondary education”*.

5.5 CONCLUSION.

The family system is a dynamic entity in which the continuous development and changing interaction of each individual creates a process of continuous change within the family unit as a whole (Gladding, 2002, p.5; Weiten, 2001, p.462). In this study ‘Systems Theory’ illustrates an understanding of the interrelationship and interdependence of individuals within the family and their social context. These interactions within the family system are central to how the individual constructs both his inner and outer reality (Berk, 2003, p.559; Milner & O’Byrne, 2002, p.19; Prochaska & Norcross, 1999, p.359, 360; Voster, 2003, p.30, 80; Weiten, 2001, p.464).

The researcher explored how change at any one level (in this instance parental divorce) leads to change in the whole system (Donald, et al. 2002, p.47, 83).

Damaged parental relationships account for the fact that nearly 60% of marriages end in divorce. Almost half of these involve children who still

live at home (Hendrix, 1997, p.18) of which less than 10% involve young adult, minor children. Parents, teachers and friends often fail to understand the enormity of the emotional effects of divorce on the older child (Cooney & Kurtz, 1996, p.496).

Research shows that a few of the difficulties experienced by young people whose parents waited until they had completed senior secondary education to divorce are problematic parent-child relationships, an increase in the probability of divorce in married offspring and lowered socio-economic attainment. Each of these factors occurs independently of the degree of conflict between the divorcing parents (Thompson & Amato, 1999, p.42). Perhaps the single most debilitating disadvantage of divorce (which occurs during this developmental period) is the negative influence the experience has on the young adults' future educational and career potential. It would appear that divorce related stressors can be so overwhelming that parents either neglect to, or are unable to, invest the time, effort and money required into planning for their children's tertiary education requirements.

Juxtaposed to these negative connotations are positive aspects such as improved relationships with a particular parent and siblings when family conflict has been removed. This often initiates an improved self-confidence, assertiveness and independence, as the young person grows from this traumatic experience (Palmer, 2000, p.174).

In all family systems" *the whole is dependent on the interaction between all parts*" (Prochaska & Norcross, 1999, p.359)

and

"contrary to what those who've never been there believe, young adults whose parents are divorcing feel as much

pain and grief as do younger children”

(Amato & Booth, 1997, p.219).

This final chapter delineated the recommendations, which are intended to support and encourage the young adult who experiences parental divorce soon after they have completed senior secondary education. The recommendations are also intended for teachers, counsellors and educational psychologists. As support professionals, they are equipped with the necessary therapeutic skills and knowledge to address the emotional needs expressed by the young adult participants in the research study. The chapter concludes with an elucidation of the limitations and validation of the study.

*“The healing begins when feelings of entitlement no longer restrain
fairness and a new kind of trust can be constructed.
When goodwill triumphs over conflict then the family
is able to move forward”*

(Winslade & Monk, 2000 in Milner & O’Byrne, 2002, p.111).

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