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## PARENTS AND ADOLESCENTS IN THE POST-DIVORCE PERIOD: THE EFFECTS ON ADOLESCENT PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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### ABSTRACT

Although the effects of divorce on younger children have been researched, the same cannot be said for adolescents and their future development. This study focused on participants' experiences of divorce and the effects on adolescent children during the post-divorce phase. Because this topic is relatively unexplored, a qualitative exploratory design was selected as few studies have investigated the post-divorce phase. Purposive and snowball sampling secured 12 adult and adolescent participants until data saturation was reached. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted, and two main themes emerged from the thematic data analysis. The two main themes were the psychosocial effects of divorce on adolescents, and role confusion. Institutional permission was obtained before commencement of the study as well as the requisite informed consent from the participants.

**Keywords:** adolescent, adolescence, divorce, parents, post-divorce, psychosocial development.

### INTRODUCTION

When Statistics South Africa (2018) released their Marriages and Divorces 2016 statistics, they showed a slight increase in civil marriages of 0.6%, although divorces also increased by 0,3%. The Western Cape province (where this study was conducted) recorded the highest number of divorces in South Africa, with a total of 6 224 (24,6%). Concerningly, most divorces (26,9%) occurred in marriages that had lasted 5 to 9 years. In 2016, 13 922 (55,0%) divorce cases

involved families with children aged less than 18 years. The White Paper on Families in South Africa (RSA, 2021) also referenced the large number of divorces in SA that affected children, this was also supported by Louw's (2015) study. The 2018 statistics on children in South Africa indicated that 43% (8.5 million) of all children live with their mothers as opposed to 3% living only with their fathers (Hall, 2019).

Further afield, Clark and Otto (2015) provided divorce statistics for 33 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. They estimated that more than 20% of first-time marriages culminated in divorce within 20 years. These authors further contended that divorce was the primary cause of single parenthood (notably single mothers) in comparison to widowhood or desertion. Therefore, given that divorce is common in sub-Saharan Africa, they concluded that divorce compounded family instability.

Internationally, comparative divorce rates reflect the following table statistically:

**Table 1: Comparative divorce rates**

Country	1 out of every -	Probability of divorce occurring
Russia	154	0.65
United States of America	189	0.59
Denmark	230	0.42
UK & Australia	287	0.35
South Africa	1 092	0.09

(Johannes, 2020)

According to the snapshot above, South Africa is languishing at the bottom, with regards to divorce rates, and Russia and the USA are at the top. Divorce is a universal issue and the concerns are common throughout. Although counsellors might differ on the nature and severity of the impact of divorce on children's wellbeing, they all concur that there are significant effects (Louw & Louw, 2007). In an older study by Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989, as cited by Whiteman, 2001), adults participants accounted for how devastating the effects of divorce had been on their lives from childhood to adulthood. Children respond differently to divorce, and their age has a huge impact, but the general conclusion is that divorce has adverse consequences when children are involved (Amato, 2000; Potter, 2010). In an extensive follow-up study by Amato (2010) the key findings were that children from divorced families were worse off than their peers from intact families. In their systematic review Sands, Thompson and Gaysina (2017) revealed that childhood parental divorce escalated adult depression; whilst Jackson, Rogers and Sartor (2016) identified the negative impact of parental divorce or separation in the early onset of alcohol abuse in adolescence. These authors thus confirmed that the effects of divorce should be investigated in order to increase our understanding of the negative impact of divorce on children (Jackson *et al.*, 2016).

## EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON ADOLESCENTS

### **Divorce: The severing of a formal relationship**

Divorce means a marriage has been legally dissolved. Marriages break up for various reasons. Pickhardt (2013) describes divorce as the ending of a marriage as a result of estrangement, abandonment or violence. Emery (2006) identified three types of divorce depicting the levels of cooperation after divorce. These three types are: (i) the cooperative divorce, where parents agree on divorcing and work together as parents to ensure the child is not involved in the ensuing conflict; (ii) the distant divorce, where parents are hostile towards each other because of either partner's adultery, or other situations that cause pain and bitterness; however, the parents cooperate in all aspects of their parenting for the sake of their children; and (iii) the angry divorce, where infidelity or violence has occurred, but one parent might not want a divorce and they are unable to come to any agreements. The latter could be the most harmful form of divorce to all parties, especially to children and could result in the loss of the parent-child relationship (Emery, 2006).

### **The unintended consequences of divorce**

The single event of divorce affects many people: the parents, the children, the extended family, friends and others connected to the individuals. The losses commonly affect financial security, future dreams, trust, stable relationships as well as the relationships between parents and children before, during and after the divorce (Czapiewski, 2014).

Czapiewski (2014) confirmed that the behaviour of adolescents can be affected as a consequence of divorce, as their growth and maturation are dependent on feelings of security and stable circumstances. Adolescence is the stage during which teenagers find their own identity, and hence the instability wrought by divorce could make them anxious about their own relationships and future connections with others. Divorce often leads to depression, anger and emotional withdrawal from others (Hartman, Magalhaes & Mandich, 2011). Fagan and Churchill (2012) clarified that the effects of divorce on children differ from minimal to severe, as the level of acrimony in the divorce process differ. Furthermore, although the effects of divorce cannot be wholly predicted, there is consensus that it has an adverse effect on children and society because of its prevalence and severity, and therefore should be taken seriously by bodies of government (Hartman *et al.*, 2011). The complacency about divorce and its effects are related to the perception that it is commonplace, based on the high numbers of divorces that take place.

Because divorce represents the ending a marriage, it can take a long time to recover emotionally, particularly for children (Emery, 2006). Pickhardt (2013) explained that divorce can mean many things to children, for example, that parents no longer love each other, parents will not be living together any longer, there will be no more family time, and life will no longer be the same. Divorce is painful for children, especially because of the loss of understanding, of valued connections, power and acceptance (Pickhardt, 2013). Considering the different types of divorces identified by Emery (2006), it is evident that some parents do take their children into account when filing for divorce, but other parents do not see or understand the implications for their children.

The Family and Marriage Society of South Africa (FAMSA, 2009) reported that the way children respond emotionally and psychologically to divorce depends on their age and the levels of confusion and trauma they experience. According to Potter (2010), divorce changes children's lives irrevocably, and this can be attributed to the shocking end to their family life which had up to that point formed the foundation of their existence.

### **The effects on adolescents**

Sawyer, Azzopardi, Wickremarathne and Patton (2018) define adolescence as a phase of substantial growth between childhood and adulthood. This growth involves biological, physical and significant social role development. Granville Stanley Hall (1846-1924), regarded as the father of adolescence science, conceptualised adolescence as "a process of physical and psychosocial 'rebirth'" (Curtis, 2015: 1). A key characteristic of adolescence is the increasing independence of children and their gradual emotional distancing from the family unit. They become more disconnected from the family and more attached to friends (peer group) (Cherry, 2015; Pickhardt, 2013). Their move towards increasing independence means they start to look beyond their family unit to the future in terms of an independent lifestyle.

The psychosocial developmental needs of adolescents are encapsulated in Erikson's Lifespan Developmental Theory. Erik Erikson (1902-1994), a German American developmental psychologist, was the first to identify eight psychosocial stages of development (Erikson, 1968; Sokol, 2009). Erikson referred to adolescence as the period between ages 12-18 years (Sokol, 2009). However, Sawyer *et al.* (2018) argued that the earlier onset of puberty had hastened the start of adolescence in most populations, which together with other social transitions (for example, completing education, and deferring marriage and parenthood), extended adolescence and delayed adulthood until the mid-20s.

The adolescent stage is viewed as the most vulnerable stage of development, where identity is the primary focus (Sokol, 2009). The greatest task of adolescents is the formation of identity amidst their changing social roles, which Erikson referred to as identity versus role confusion (Erikson, 1968). Witt (2013) explains Erikson's personality and role experimentation as a psychological moratorium, which he describes as a phase during which an adolescent experiments with different roles to establish where they belong. Combrinck (2014) points out that role confusion assails adolescents, who start questioning themselves, their personality and how others perceive them, always questioning the nature of their existence, and becoming lost in all these insecurities and uncertainties. Most adolescents experience confusion as a result of the physical, cognitive and social roles changes they undergo. Erikson further argued that if parents allowed this period of experimentation to proceed naturally, it would help adolescents find their place. During this phase adolescents also test and question their own beliefs and search for self-acceptance.

In the light of the effects of divorce and Erikson's process of identity formation during adolescence, it is clear that not all the needs of the adolescent going through a parental divorce will be met, as the interruption in their family unit also disrupts the safe space for their growth and development to take place. Children's ages determine the level of impact on them in a divorce, so the emotions most often cited are anger, fear, loneliness, anxiety, depression, and guilt (Louw & Louw, 2007).

Additionally, Louw and Louw (2007) highlight the fact that adolescents might feel they are being forced into becoming adults as they acquire new responsibilities, such as caring for siblings, taking on additional chores and even caring for their custodial parent. Concerningly, these authors also revealed the possibility that these adolescents could come into conflict with the law or be exposed to drug and alcohol abuse as a way of acting out.

## **RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY**

Previous studies reveal that though divorce does affect adolescents, it might be the consequences of the divorce and not the divorce itself (Kenyon, Rankin, Koerner & Dennison, 2007; Nelson, 2009; Woosley, Dennis, Robertson & Goldstein, 2008). Studies also found that divorce influences the wellbeing, behaviour and actions of both adults and children, although not necessarily over the long term or extensively in all cases, and therefore there might be many variations (Amato, 2010; Garriga & Härkönen, 2009; Härkönen, 2014). Other studies argue that there might be negative impacts before the actual divorce, and therefore it is difficult to precisely determine the effects on adolescents during the post-divorce phase (Galdeano & Vuri, 2007; Härkönen, 2013; Kim, 2011). In South Africa, van Jaarsveld (2007) concluded in her study that parents play a pivotal role in lessening the effects of divorce if they take into account the children's needs before their own. The cited studies all concluded that divorce has an adverse effect on adolescents and their development, but that the effects might be variable and unclear.

The issue for adolescents, as described by Erickson (1968), is either being able to claim their identity or be confused, depending on the nature of their family life vis-à-vis their experience of the divorce or the post-divorce period. This concern highlights the need to focus on the adolescent and the effects occurring during the post-divorce phase.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research approach and design**

A qualitative approach was used as the focus is on social concerns, where the aim is to respond to the questions about people's behaviour, opinions and attitudes, culture and social events, as well as their effects (Creswell, 2013). The qualitative approach is therefore an appropriate means to obtain in-depth information about the experiences of adolescents and parents regarding the post-divorce phase as it allows the researchers to acquire knowledge and a fuller understanding of the issue. An exploratory design does not only focus on new topics, but looks at existing phenomena (Babbie, 2013; Strydom, 2013). This design afforded parents and adolescents the opportunity to explore their experiences of divorce and its effects during a crucial phase of a child's development.

### **Research population and sampling**

The population of interest from which the research sample was drawn was parents who had divorced and whose children were adolescents, and adolescents whose parents were divorced. Purposive sampling is described as selecting a sample based on the researchers' judgement of what is most appropriate for the study (Strydom & Delpont, 2011). This was relevant as the researchers were then able to select a sample that fitted the study. The researchers also used snowballing sampling as the recruitment became more difficult. This sample method assisted

the researchers to include six adults and six adolescent participants, because data saturation was reached.

### **Data-collection methods and analysis**

The researchers conducted individual interviews with adolescents and parents. Vosloo (2014) explains that individual interviews allow open-ended questioning with the use of probing for in-depth details to emerge. Self-designed semi-structured interview schedules guided the interview process with each participant, so that the interview contained elements of order as well as spontaneity. There were two schedules: one for adolescent participants and one for parents. The researchers used the eight steps pioneered by Renata Tesch (Schurink, Fouche & de Vos, 2011) with thematic analysis to reduce the data into main themes and subthemes. The researchers obtained ethics approval from the University of the Western Cape for the study before embarking on data collection and ensured informed consent, confidentiality and privacy of information.

### **Trustworthiness of study**

Vosloo (2014) defined the trustworthiness of research as engendering confidence and ensuring validity in the qualitative findings. The researchers applied the following four criteria: credibility using member checking; an audit trail to determine dependability of the findings; transferability was ensured by comparing the findings with literature and through thick descriptions; and to assess confirmability, the researchers used self-reflexivity to check for any personal beliefs and experiences relating to the topic that could be viewed as prejudicial.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Findings are distinguished into two main themes and five subthemes that reflected the perceptions and experiences of adolescents and parents during the post-divorce phase, especially the effects on the adolescent's psychosocial development. In the narratives the adult participants are denoted as AP, and child (adolescent) participants are CP, with a number attached to each.

### **Theme 1: Effects on adolescents and their development**

There are two subthemes related to this theme that support the claim of emotional and psychological effects of divorce in the post-divorce period.

#### ***Subtheme 1.1: Emotional effects***

Hume (2013) describes emotions as the internal feelings and sentiments that one has towards a person or an object. Cherry (2019) asserts that an emotion can be experienced as, among other things, a discomforting sensation that has an impact on how you think and act. Thus, it is experienced internally and manifested externally.

*But in the sense of taking care. I would not say that this house was not built on love. Its certain emotional phases we have gone through, and they have not been there for us. But they have seen it. Like you as a parent and you see what your kids go through and have gone through. But they have not really been there for those stages. (CP3A)*

*Academically this year is my best year ever. I'm excelling this year like I never did before. I have surprised myself and others. I would say I'm not just proud of myself. I am proud of other people who have helped me get here. Physically I have achieved what I always wanted to. Going through emotional and physical pain. But you learn things every day. (CP3B)*

*I cried; it was emotional for me because if my friends talk about their parents, but my mom and dad are divorced, it is not feeling the same as described or as their parents. Because it was emotional and it was my mom's fault, and I take it seriously because it has different feelings for me. (CP1)*

From these accounts, CP3B is experiencing the emotional upheaval and instability that divorce brings and stresses the poor support from the parents during and after the divorce. Although CP3A is excelling academically, he does admit to the emotional pain brought on by the divorce, but he clearly shows resilience and approaches his parental divorce in a mature manner, viewing it as a learning process. CP1 is very emotional and feels the full impact of the divorce, especially when comparing her unstable family circumstances to those of her friends. She is also frank about her mother being responsible for the divorce and her intense feelings of anger towards her mother.

This period heralds more anxiety and anger for adolescents, and the inability to express themselves, resulting in externalising behaviour (psychological effects), such as low self-esteem and an increase in suicidal thoughts and behaviour (see also subtheme 1.2 below) (Hartman *et al.*, 2011). According to Mohi (2014), qualitative studies show that children in divorce endure painful emotional effects (i.e. anger, suspicion, jealousy), which also then lower their levels of self-worth, trust and peer communication. Njeru (2017) contends that other related problems could arise which may have an impact on the adolescent, especially their emotional wellbeing, such as the effects of having a new step-parent, feelings of being unwanted by the parent who filed for divorce, and custody battles. These are counted amongst the most traumatic aspects for the adolescent. Furthermore, Njeru (2017) explains how adolescents are in an emotional turmoil whilst the divorce is in progress, and when they are older, they reflect on this time in their lives with anger as their parents had disrupted their home life and worldview of how things should have been. Parents might not be able to identify these emotions and could be unaware of how the divorce is emotionally affecting the adolescent, who might need counselling services (Mundalomo, 2016). According to Czapiewski (2014), children experience loss when they undergo a parental divorce, and it may be traumatic if it is not addressed.

### ***Subtheme 1.2: Psychological effects***

Huppert (2009) asserts that one's psychological wellbeing can be affected by one's family context, specifically one's parental care. Huppert (2009) defines psychological wellbeing as occurring when your situation is positive, and you are functioning competently, even in the face of adversity (in other words, life's ups and downs). However, if adversity (i.e. where you can fail, or become anguished or anxious) does occur, and it is not positively managed, then it can affect your sense of wellbeing and psychological functioning (Huppert, 2009; Winefield, Gill, Taylor & Pilkington, 2012).

*I think back and I almost tried to commit suicide. I can't take the fact that my father did that to my mother. My mother pushes me a lot. It's not nice to live without my father, sometimes I miss him. (CP1)*

*It's such a blur I can't remember, I feel neglected by my mother and father [struggles to control her tears]. My mom is not there for me. My sister lost her baby. It was my birthday, but I didn't feel special. Feeling off the whole month. (CP5)*

The psychological impact might not always be as visible as other effects (such as changes in housing and lifestyle), but CP1 admitted that the divorce and her father's behaviour towards her mother made her contemplate suicide (suicidal ideation). Both CP1 and CP5 indicated that they lost hope. CP1 is blaming her mother and is sad because of how her father treated her mother and she consequently felt she wanted to commit self-harm. CP5 felt neglected by both her parents, a sentiment heightened by the perceived favouritism towards her sister; she was showing signs of depression as she could not summon feelings of sympathy for her sister.

In a divorce the psychological effects can include feelings of sadness, hopelessness, being overwhelmed and unhappiness, which can be followed by depression (Newman & Newman, 2009), and suicidal ideation or even suicidal behaviour (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Strohschein (2005) states that when parents' divorce, their children may suffer from nervousness, hopelessness and social withdrawal. Studies reveal that if there is parental conflict and anger, this adds to children adjusting poorly to divorce, and importantly they could be at risk of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and behavioural problems (Maldonado, 2008). These risks can lead to psychological problems for the adolescent that might not be evident immediately, but only later in their lives. It is clear in the comments by CP5 that even after her parents had been divorced for 10 years, she continues to feel the psychological impact of the divorce. The study by Haimi and Learner (2016) in Denmark revealed a high risk of depression and attempts of suicide in post-divorce periods, where girls were at a higher risk. This finding is thus a red flag for the helping professions to pay attention in order to ensure appropriate assessment of adolescents after the divorce.

## **Theme 2: Role confusion**

Botha (2014) explains that in terms of Erikson's stage of identity versus confusion, adolescents attempt to figure out who they are. Divorce can affect this developmental stage as their sense of identity develops from the different roles they inhabit and the functions, responsibilities and tasks they engage in as they go about exploring friendships, initiating relationships, behaviours, and adopting roles to find themselves.

### ***Subtheme 2.1: Adolescent roles in the post-divorce phase***

The family continues to be the backbone of society, and the genesis of good and bad consequences is highly contingent on whether circumstances are positive or negative. In relationships between adolescents and parents, Botha (2014) states that the adolescent forms their identity because of good and stable adolescent-parent relationships; they are then able to have positive feelings and develop high self-value (self-esteem). Because of unhappy childhood experiences, adolescents may not achieve their sense of identity, and a state of confusion can result with serious repercussions for their sense of self (Mundalomo, 2016).



*He knew what to do, when to and how to implement it. He was good at doing that as being the man of the house. He could do those things. Those are the roles I have to fill in now. I am not used to it, I never watched him do these things. (CP3B)*

*He [referring to the adolescent child] just took on a bigger role where his brother was concerned. He took on a fatherly role actually. From a very young age he took on responsibilities. Having only two children, he was the one that had to stand in unfortunately. And I think it made him grow up very mature, he had a sense of responsibility. Not just his brother, but his family. But I am very proud of him. (AP2)*

From the narratives, it is apparent that the divorce made CP3B aware of the role (and function) that his father had played when he was living in the house and when they were an intact family, and the void he left when the family became separated. CP3B is reflecting on several significant elements: the roles that the father figure plays in families; the importance of father-son relationships; and the social learning that takes place as the conduit for the continuation of traditions and roles. In his account one can detect his confusion at being torn between being an adult and a child (adolescent). AP2 asserts that the adolescent child took on a protective, caring and nurturing role in the family, whereas the parent should take on this role (called parentification) (Dykes, 2014; Earley & Cushway, 2002). This parent stressed that her adolescent child took on adult roles because circumstances dictated this, but that he had matured and that made her proud of him.

Both narratives mention the role of the non-resident parent leaving a void and how they themselves felt the need to fill it. This could prevent the adolescent from reaching the next developmental stage, because of the confusion between roles, the need for readiness and preparation, and the relative immaturity to take on a role that is meant for adults.

### ***Subtheme 2.2: Self-identity***

Hasanah, Susanti and Panjaitan (2019) explain self-identity as being an individual reflection that is constant over multiple contexts or experiences such as pursuing a career, relationships, making decisions and choices, sexuality, interests, and motivation, amongst others. Erikson emphasised that parents play a crucial role in helping adolescents navigate through these contexts and to develop a positive self-identity (Hasanah *et al.*, 2019; Mabuza, Thwala & Okeke, 2014; Scott & Lilja, 2010).

*To please them I would have to be me and not change as I said I try to be the best me all the time. I would say that is my way of pleasing others. Even if others feel I'm not a good person I know I am a good person. You can say I steal or I drink or I walk with the wrong crowds but I know I don't do that things I am not that type of person. I know who I am. (CP3A)*

*I ask my mother the least, but is least given, the eldest cares for herself. I feel I want to stay away from them, my mother and father, I want to be on my own. (CP5)*

*I was fine with it [parentification] seeing it is my family. My mother would always say seeing that my father was not there. She would say a part of my childhood was stolen, because I had to run around. It never had an effect on me. (CP2)*

CP3A is very aware of who he is and what he wants to achieve and thus appears to possess a solid identity. By contrast, it is evident that CP5 is emotionally affected by the divorce as she wants to be on her own, be independent, as it feels as if her parents are not providing for her. In this instance, it might take the participant longer to reach the next developmental stage. CP2, by contrast, feels that he is not resentful for the added responsibilities, because everything he did was for his family, although his mother admitted that these responsibilities had impacted on his childhood. This participant can be experiencing parentification and over-identification with his mother (Makopane & Mogoane, 2012), and may be oblivious to the impact on his self-identity. Supratman (2020) also reported that the adolescent participants could not develop a steady self-identity because of the impact of the divorce and its aftermath.

### ***Subtheme 2.3: Attachments and relationships***

The theory of attachment, referring to the relationship and bonding between the parent and child, describes the emotional connections that model to the child what a relationship is and how to deal with different life experiences (Bowlby, 1969 cited in Nelson, 2009). Relationships are formed early and, if there is a divorce, it could cause relationship difficulties later (Carranza, Kilmann & Vendemia, 2009).

*Mostly when I date boys, they use me. But the first one I had, other girls interfered in the relationship because they got jealous and gossiped about me. I didn't listen but he listened to them, and he broke up with me. (CP4)*

*She [referring to her daughter] wants to be like her aunt, she is not going to get married. When I ask if this is because I am divorced, she says, yes perhaps mummy. But sometimes it is so; you not going to get married as you might also get divorced. (AP1)*

*No, I will definitely not jump into a relationship. It's hard with the one I have been in and seeing my parents. It's hard to understand the concept of love right now. I had my own ideas of what love is and as long as I have passed and this relationship to look back onto, it's hard to know what is suitable and what is right to do. (CP3B)*

The latter two narratives reflect a cautious approach to future relationships, with one participant (AP1) saying that her daughter is grappling with the notion of not marrying because of the circumstances around her divorce. CP4 has been in more than one relationship, and she is aware that this could possibly taint her reputation, as she has already had to contend with rumours about her. CP3B also had a relationship, but it ended, and he feels that the parents' marriage did not provide him with a positive example for his future relationships.

Ivanova, Mills and Veenstra (2011) confirm the effects of parental inattentiveness before, during and after divorce on the adolescent and their increasing sense of emotional isolation, resulting in precarious relationship behaviours and views. Lansford (2009) notes that several studies confirmed that divorce while children were still very young affected the children and youths more strongly when they became adults, and that the parents' divorce could increase the likelihood of the failure of their own marriage. Portnoy (2008) asserts that the adolescents (and adults) highlighted the effects of the parents' divorce on their own relationships (also see Nelson, 2009). The findings are therefore supported by the literature and attest to the important

role of parents' marriages in the ability and approach of children to initiate and forge their own intimate relationships.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study underscored that the family unit is important and what transpires in a family has far-reaching consequences for each member. The themes generated by the study addressed the psychosocial effects of divorce and showed that post-divorce experiences affect adolescents differently. It is more complicated to identify the psychological impacts and thus the consequences of the divorce are more apparent in the emotional effects on the adolescent. However, the psychological and emotional affects that emerged in the study showed that participants' psychosocial development is affected in the post-divorce phase. The findings of the study are aligned with those in the literature. The theme on role confusion showed the bewilderment of the adolescents in coming to terms with the different aspects of their roles, the development of their identities, and in forming romantic relationships. These findings strongly confirm the overall aim of the study regarding the psychosocial effects on adolescents in the post-divorce phase by encouraging participants to consider the effects of divorce on their future relationships. The discussion also supports the premise that divorce exerts a potent influence on the adolescent seeking to establish his or her identity, according to Erikson's theory of identity versus role confusion.

The following recommendations are suggested below for families who are contemplating divorce.

Parents who are contemplating divorce should attend counselling together as a couple in order to understand the impact of what happens legally, financially, and emotionally after the divorce. The children need stable parents who can convey the decision to the children to ensure children feel safe and secure. This means amending relevant divorce legislation to include this recommendation of counselling before the divorce for the family as a unit. This will ensure that the principle of considering the best interests of the child is upheld (RSA, 2006). Mediation is strongly recommended for couples who are in the divorce phase to avoid the possible conflict being transferred to their children. This will assist with the parenting plan and with custody battles after the divorce. Although mediation is part of the Divorce Act 70 of 1979 (RSA, 1979), it is unregulated and not enforced. Children should receive counselling before the divorce to sufficiently prepare them for the drastic changes that divorce brings. Additionally, mediation can prepare children for the absence of the non-resident parent and possible changes in emotional and psychological support from their parents.

The above recommendations have an impact on relevant helping professions such as social work. Although provision is made for parenting plans in the current Divorce Act (RSA, 1979) and the Children's Act (RSA, 2006), they are not always implemented and thus should be more strongly regulated. Divorce specialists such as social workers and family advocates should be employed and supported (with appropriate resources, for example) so that mediation and counselling can be implemented to assist in maintaining the best interests of the children and the family as a unit. Individual and group counselling are emphasised for families, parents and children; this can be undertaken by the state, NGOs, and private or faith-based organisations.

The overall recommendation is that there should be intervention in the form of counselling and mediation in the pre- and post-divorce phases. The adolescents and/or children will feel part of the process and feel secure in the knowledge that all parties strove to ensure their best interests and the family's emotional and psychological wellbeing will be more positive.

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