

## **Chapter One**

### **INTRODUCTION**

**A true family grows and moves through life together, inseparable in the heart...the word 'family' implies warmth...While we have differences, we remain 'family' by virtue of our heart connection. Family provides necessary security and support, and acts as a buffer against external problems. A family made up of secure people generates a magnetic power that can get things done. They are the hope for real security in a stressful situation.**

**Doc Childre and Howard Martin**

#### **A Personal Statement**

In the context of the above quote, the researcher acknowledges that this study has evolved from her interest in family systems. The researcher believes the family to be a significant context that generates a sense of belonging and provides a soft place to fall for those within. Throughout her life, the researcher has felt the safety of a warm and loving family. Nonetheless, being a member of a whole family has not protected her from experiencing the difficulties of family conflict. Even though the researcher has not experienced the divorce of her parents, she believes that the dynamics of her own family have allowed her to appreciate what it means for a child to feel polarised between the ones you love and to feel the powerlessness that is created within, to help or change the state of conflict. Thus, the researcher believes that her interest in the process of divorce is a personal one as it is a reminder of the dynamics and the processes that she has experienced in her own family. The researcher feels that her closeness to the topic has also heightened her sensitivity to the experiences of the adolescents who have been given a voice within this study. It is hoped that their connection with her,

which enabled them to break the silence that comes with being a child of divorce, was a healing experience for them.

### **General Introduction**

The prevalence of divorce within society has generated three decades of research. This body of knowledge is invaluable, as it has succeeded in dissecting the process of divorce as well as its impact on the children of divorce. The knowledge gained has managed to highlight the factors that place children at risk or protect them from long-term negative effects so that they may continue developing into the adjusted adults they were meant to be had they not experienced the collapse of their families. However, the vast body of knowledge has yet to represent the voices of these adolescents. Instead, their voices have mostly been reduced to statistical representations and essentially silenced by the 'objective' 'expert' voice which can predict the tendencies of these adolescents but which has failed to capture their experiences. In addition, these predictions by the 'experts' prohibit the possibility of alternatives. This study aims to complement this knowledge. By utilising a collaborative stance, the participants will be granted a space to share their experiences of their parents' divorce, without focussing on a particular area of interest. In doing this, the participants as 'experts' of their experiences have the freedom to share what they found to be relevant from their frame of reference, which is unique to their context. In essence, this study aims to obtain rich information about the experience of divorce from the lens of the adolescents involved, which may provide an alternative view of divorce and/or expand on the existing knowledge.

### **Explaining the Title**

The title of this study, *Courage Under Fire: Stories of Adolescents Who Survive the Destruction of Divorce*, will now be explained. The World Book Dictionary (1995, p. 617) defines 'divorce' as: "the legal end of a marriage". However, for the lives of those who experience it, it is so much more. The researcher chose the

analogy of war, since divorce can often mimic a war between two parties, where the innocents are often caught in the crossfire. In this study the innocent ones are the adolescents who have experienced their parents' divorce. According to White and Epston (cited in Becvar & Becvar, 2003), telling stories helps people make sense of their experiences. Therefore, this study is aimed at giving a space to two adolescents to voice their experiences and share their meanings regarding their parents' divorce. The focus of the study has been extended to highlight the manner in which they have navigated through the minefields that have been their lives following the divorce, to emerge as triumphant survivors of a war that has not been their own.

### **The Aim of the Study**

As will become clear in Chapter 3 of this study where a literature survey is provided, the impact of divorce on children has been researched extensively in the past three decades. Previous studies have focussed on the factors that place these children at increased risk for or protect them from maladjustment. Studies have even been conducted on the various coping styles that children employ in managing the changes they encounter as a result of their parents' divorce. However, for the most part, the literature presents a negative perception of these children, with predictors that suggest that they will not develop into well-adjusted adults. Surprisingly though, an awareness is being created that these children go onto leading well-adjusted lives as adults. The existing literature represents the dominant beliefs of the larger societal context, which often pathologises children of divorce. However, social constructionists recognise the presence of different perspectives, which challenge the dominant voices that suppress alternate perspectives (Doan, 1997). Therefore, by providing a safe space for adolescents to tell their stories openly, an alternative view of their experiences may be provided, which may not be in agreement with the dominant voices. In addition, the dominant voices in the literature focus on 'children', with little discernment for their different developmental age groups and the effect that this factor has on their experiences as well as their development. Thus, to include adolescents under

the universal group 'children' minimises the complexities that are created by this changing phase in their lives. Furthermore, it contributes to the silencing of their unique voices by including them amongst the voices of those younger than them.

The *aim* of this study therefore is twofold. Firstly, *to tell the story of adolescents who have experienced their parents' divorce*, and secondly *to show how they have survived despite the challenges they have faced*. This will include the significance of the developmental stage of adolescence, since it adds to the complex nature of their experiences.

The researcher aims to provide these adolescents with an opportunity to be heard, perhaps for the first time. The researcher also recognises that her participation in the interview and the analysis of their stories will colour the final outcome of their story. Therefore, in essence, this study will be co-constructed from the realities of the researcher and the participants.

It is hoped that this study will make a valuable contribution to the current understanding of adolescents' experiences of their parents' divorce. More specifically though, it is hoped that their unique perspective may assist us, both parents and professionals alike, in becoming aware of the complex nature of divorce and to listen more attentively to the voices of adolescents, since they "always have something to say...every teenager has a story" (Interview with Barbie – see Appendix B).

### **The Design of the Study**

The vast majority of the literature available on adolescents' experiences of their parents' divorce is predominantly based on empirical methods and measurements, within a modernistic perspective. These studies have exposed the impact that divorce has on adolescents and brought into awareness the many risks that come from the collapse of the family structure. These studies have also begun to highlight that despite the presence of the many challenges that adolescents of

divorce face, they continue on to develop into adjusted adults. The literature attributes this mostly to specific protective factors that reduce the risks that they are exposed to. Nonetheless, even in the absence of these protective factors adolescents seem to survive. In addition, due to the empirical methods used in previous research, the complex nature of adolescents' experiences and the meaning making around their experiences therefore seemed to be an unexplored area in the literature, and thus became the justification for the aim of this study.

In order to fit the aims of this research, a qualitative research method was selected. This allows the participants to share their stories, thus allowing the researcher and others to know what they reveal of themselves personally and experience what they share of their experiences in their daily struggles. The emphasis will therefore be on the participants' experiences, particularly their relationships with their parents following their parents' divorce, which is grounded in their unique context.

Due to the nature of the conversational inquiry, the researcher is involved in an inseparable relationship with the participants. As a result, the researcher may bring parts of her reality to the conversation. Furthermore, the lens through which the researcher views the participants' stories is coloured by her reality. However, the researcher acknowledges the importance of allowing each participant to be the expert on his or her own story. Thus, the participants' stories will essentially be a co-construction of the researcher's reality and the participants' distinct reality. In addition, the relationship between the researcher and the participants allows for the possibility of growth in both the researcher and the participants, since the generation of new meanings is possible through the interactions and relationships we hold with other people (Gergen, 1997). It is hoped that the generation and discussion of themes unique to each participant's story, as well as the common themes among the participants, will enrich and broaden the current understanding of adolescents' experiences of their parents' divorce, and provide new meanings for the participants regarding their experiences.

### Sampling and Selection

In this study, purposive sampling and convenience selection will be used. Participants, who can provide rich descriptions of their experience of their parents' divorce, will be selected. The sample will include two adolescents, aged between 11 and 22 years, whose parents have been divorced for a period of at least one year.

### Data Collection

The researcher will obtain personal information from the participants prior to the interview. The in-depth interview will be the method of inquiry. The nature of the interview will be unstructured and conversational to allow the participants to tell their story openly and with little interruption by the researcher.

### Data Analysis

The data will be analysed using a 'Thematic content analysis'. This method of analysis is guided by hermeneutics, an interpretive approach. There are no established steps for this method of analysis, thus the researcher will utilise steps delineated by Rapmund (1996) and Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999) as a guideline.

The following steps will be implemented:

- Firstly, written permission by the participants, and their parents, to participate in this study will be obtained. Copies of the consent forms will be included under Appendix A1 and Appendix A2, for the participants, and Appendix B for the parents. Thereafter, the participants will be interviewed. The interviews will be recorded onto audiocassettes.
- Then, the researcher will have the interviews transcribed. The transcribed interviews will be included under Appendix C and Appendix D.
- The researcher will identify themes in the transcribed interviews from the researcher's frame of reference.

- Finally, the themes present in both stories will be identified by the researcher and, where possible, linked with the literature.

### **The Format of the Study**

This study will comprise both a theoretical component and a practical component.

The theoretical component will comprise of two literature reviews, a discussion of the epistemological stance of this study, and the research methods to be used in this study.

The first literature survey in this study will involve a comprehensive discussion of the developmental stage of adolescence. The second literature survey will comprise previous research in connection with the process of divorce and the impact of divorce on children. According to Neuman (1997), a literature survey is essential in traditional research because it allows for the formulation of hypotheses. However, this is inconsistent with the epistemological stance of this study. Instead, in this study, the surveys will be included as a means of setting the context for this study and to provide the reader with a background to the topic under study. Therefore, the literature surveys are included as an alternative voice with which the emerging themes can be compared. However, the aim is not to confirm or refute the themes that emerge. Instead, the intention is to provide valid and different perspectives (Becvar & Becvar, 2003), which concur with the both/and perspective of the epistemological stance, which will also be discussed.

The practical component of this study aims at giving a voice to two adolescents regarding their experiences of their parents' divorce. Their voices will be added to the voice of the literature. Thus, providing co-constructed, although alternative meanings and realities.

## **The Presentation of the Study**

The study will comprise of the following chapters:

**Chapter 2** will provide a comprehensive summary of the developmental stage of adolescence. The chapter will commence with a discussion of the period of adolescence in terms of its definition, as well as to delineate the age of onset and conclusion. Thereafter, the developmental changes that continue from the previous developmental stage of childhood will be introduced and discussed, namely, physical development, cognitive development, moral development, and the self-concept and self-esteem. Then, the emotional development of adolescents and the personal relationships with both parents and peers will be explored. Lastly, the importance of mothers and fathers to the adolescents' development will be explicated.

**Chapter 3** will provide a brief literature review of the impact of divorce on adolescents. Firstly, the divorce process and the emotional experience of divorce will be discussed. Thereafter, divorce as a risk for adolescents will be explored followed by the factors that contribute to the adjustment to divorce. Lastly, the coping strategies that are employed by adolescents that promote resilience will be discussed.

**Chapter 4** is a combined presentation of the epistemological stance and the research approach of this study. The chapter will commence with a brief discussion on postmodernism, which highlights the necessary move away from modernism toward postmodernism. Thereafter, social constructionism, which is the theoretical approach of this study, will be presented, followed by the practical application of the theoretical approach to this study.

Then, the research design that was used as a framework for this study will be explored and its correlation with the theoretical stance, highlighted. This is followed by a discussion of the characteristics of the qualitative research approach



together with the methods of obtaining and analysing the information. The method of analysis that is used is the 'thematic content analysis'.

**Chapters 5 and 6** will present the reconstruction of each participant's experiences of their parents' divorce in terms of themes identified by the researcher. The themes have emerged following careful analysis of the transcribed interviews (Appendix B and Appendix C) between the researcher and each participant. Included in each chapter are the researcher's reflections on her process.

**Chapter 7** will comprise the comparative analysis between the recurring themes from the participants' stories and the links with the literature.

**Chapter 8** will be the concluding chapter for this study. The study will be evaluated and future recommendations will be made.

### **Conclusion**

Previous studies regarding divorce have focussed on the impact of the divorce on adolescents. However, few have attempted to capture the experiences of these adolescents, with reference to their ability to survive despite the challenges of their parents' divorce and their stage of development. This study is therefore aimed at giving two adolescents the space to voice their unique experiences. The theoretical perspective is social constructionism and a qualitative research methodology has been selected. This study is not meant to be generalised to the larger population, although it is hoped that it will provide a greater understanding of the challenges that these adolescents encounter and their ability to survive.