

Chapter Three

DIVORCE - The Current Perspective

Introduction

Marriage and family are among the oldest human social institutions. Although an institution by definition is assumed to persist over time, the bonds holding it together are not always as secure. The breakdown of the nuclear family is an increasing occurrence often resulting in parental divorce. Over the past decades, divorce has become an institution in itself. Through reforms in family law it has become more accessible and acceptable to society. Furthermore, the institution of divorce is no longer only found within western society. Many religious cultures have created laws to make provision for divorce where divorce was once forbidden. For example, in 1956, India incorporated divorce into their legal system, despite its prohibition under traditional Hindu religious laws ("World Book Encyclopaedia", 1996).

In the past four decades divorce seems to have become prevalent worldwide. In England and Wales, over a twenty year period between 1963 and 1983, the divorce rate increased by 600%, with one in three marriages ending in divorce (Parkinson, cited in Folb, 1992). This trend does not appear to have diminished either. The 1996 divorce statistics revealed 53% of British marriages would end in divorce (www.divorcemag.com/statistics/statsWorld.shtml). This was followed by an equally alarming rate in the United States with 49% in 1996, which rose to 50% in 2002 (www.divorcemag.com/statistics/statsUS.html). Within the South African context, data released by Statistics South Africa illustrate a steady increase in the divorce rate from 1997 to 1999. However, this has begun to decrease, with the last reported rates being 582 divorces per 100 000 married couples in 2001 (Lehohla, 2001).

The rising divorce rate has been viewed with alarm for many years, as there has long been a perception that the collapse of the nuclear family has an adverse affect on children and adolescents. Amato and Keith (1991) published a comparative meta-analysis of children from intact and non-intact families. Their analysis was based on studies completed over three decades from 1950 to 1980, which revealed that children from non-intact families scored significantly lower than children from intact families on a variety of indicators of well-being. However, their analysis also showed that the gap between the children of intact and non-intact families was steadily decreasing (Amato & Keith, 1991). Thus, one could conclude that the adverse effects experienced by children from divorced parents were declining. The improvement was short-lived though, as Amato (2001) and Reifman et al. (2001) uncovered a decade later in follow-up studies of research conducted from 1990 to 1999. These analyses revealed that the gap between children from intact and non-intact families regarding the adverse effects of their parents' divorce had again increased. For many adolescents, divorce marks the beginning of a series of transitions in their lives, with the possibility of their parents remarrying and the increased likelihood that this second marriage will also end in divorce. Thus, for some adolescents, the experience of the dissolution of the family is the first life-stressor they will encounter.

In this chapter, an analysis of the divorce process will be provided, highlighting the transitions in the family, followed by a discussion of the various emotions adolescents experience during and post-divorce. Thereafter, divorce as a risk for adolescents will be explored, and the factors that protect or endanger adolescents' adjustment. Finally, the coping strategies that are employed by adolescents that promote resilience will be discussed.

At this point, it is considered important to provide some clarity on the use of the concepts 'children' and 'adolescents' in the following section. Throughout the literature, previous researchers have made reference to an inclusive construct 'children' to represent both children and adolescents. It appears this is due to the fact that young children and adolescents are indeed the 'children' of the parents

who have divorced. Therefore, the concept 'children' will be used in a similar manner, unless otherwise specified.

The Divorce Process

Traditionally, parental divorce was viewed as a short-term crisis of acute dimensions that affects children only after its occurrence. This perception has since shifted to an understanding that it is a continuous, multistage process that changes family relationships and may begin long before families dissolve and extend many years after divorce (Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale & McRae, 1998; Morrison & Cherlin, 1995; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Wallerstein & Blakeslee (1989) identified three overlapping stages in the emotional process of divorce, which will now be considered.

The first stage of divorce is the **acute phase** – the period surrounding the marital separation and its aftermath (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). It is hypothesised that this process begins with a pre-disruption stage (Cherlin et al., 1991). Although families at this stage are theoretically intact, their basic family processes and functioning differ from those families that remain intact. Typically, pre-disrupted families in the acute stage are characterised by escalating discontent and conflict in interpersonal relationships among family members, and physical and emotional abuse of the spouse, children, or both (White, 1990). In addition, there exists a diminished capacity to parent (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), which is characterised by a decreased awareness of children's needs, a reduced sensitivity to their feelings, less consistent discipline, and a general confusion in the household routines. Emotionally, this period is the unhappiest and most arduous for children as it results in their parents' decision to divorce and the departure of one parent from the home.

As the acute stage subsides, normally within one year after its induction, the **transitional stage** begins. The instability of the family continues in a new mode as parents may become involved in new relationships, new careers, and at times

relocations. Children are confronted with unfamiliar roles and relationships within the new family structure, as they accept new responsibilities, attempt to solve problems, and experiment with a new lifestyle in new settings. The life of these children may become unsettled as the family's boundaries become more permeable to absorb new people, new routines and at times new environments. Within this stage, it is sometimes unclear who is in the family and who is out of the family.

The third stage of the process of divorce may bring renewed **stability**. The divorced family is re-structured and relationships begin to settle down. The arrangements regarding the children become established and the children usually begin to feel more secure. However, transitions may be re-introduced with the remarriage of one or both parents. The remarried relationship is unlike the first marriage in that it carries with it the memories of the initial failure and the fear that this failure may be repeated. The challenge for parents is in the integrating of the children into a marriage that is itself not established. For children, the presence of a new parental figure may represent a threat, which could result in concern regarding their place in the family. This fear can be amplified when friction in the new marriage evokes old memories.

In the immediate aftermath of a parental divorce, most adolescents experience emotional distress as they attempt to cope with the changing relationships in the family and the alterations in their life situation in addition to the natural changes occurring in the process of adolescence. The feelings that are experienced are unique for each adolescent; however, research has revealed some clarity on the predominant emotions experienced throughout the divorce process. These will now be discussed in the following section.

The Emotional Experience of Divorce

As children, adolescents predominantly experienced primary emotions such as love, joy, sadness, anger, and fear (Lee, 2001). However, with cognitive

maturating adolescents are able to attend to two perceptual dimensions at once (Lee, 2001). Thus, they are capable of experiencing advanced emotions simultaneously such as ambivalence and loyalty conflict (Lee, 2001). In addition, they suffer through emotions such as guilt and shame owing to their ability for self-reflexive thinking (Harter & Whitesell, 1989). Their enhanced ability to understand what is taking place within the family may lead to the assumption that adolescents do not necessarily experience divorce as traumatically as younger children do (Heaven, 2001; Schwartz, 1992). However, the available research on the emotional experiences of adolescents reveals that they too experience strong initial reactions. In addition, the transitional stresses of divorce may be amplified by the turmoil that is experienced with the 'normal' physical and social changes of adolescence. Thus it is possible that adolescents' developmental advancement can either assist or hinder them (Frydenberg, 1997; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

- Denial and Relief

Although most adolescents may be aware of the discord and unhappiness in their parents' marriage, few expect their parents to divorce. In response to the news of their parents' decision to divorce, some adolescents may withdraw and isolate themselves from others in an attempt to deny the reality of their parents' separation. For others, although it occurs less frequently, a strong sense of relief may be felt for the divorce especially in cases where the marital relationship is characterised by violence and elevated conflict. Although these adolescents might not want their parents to divorce, they are able to recognise the superior alternative to the tension and stress that previously characterised the family (Burns & Dunlop, 1999; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Schwartz, 1992; Wadsby & Svedin, 1994).

- Insecurity and fear

The divorce process results in the loss of the family structure for adolescents, and when that structure collapses, their world is temporarily without supports. Although the family structure may have been unstable before the divorce, it still provided some form of support and protection. Thus, adolescents can be left

feeling alone, isolated, and frightened about the present and their future (Jennings & Howe, 2001; Lee, 2001; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Thiessen, 1993). These feelings of insecurity may be further heightened by intrusive fears of abandonment and rejection by the parent who leaves (Oppawsky, 2000; Thiessen, 1993; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

- Loss

As the reality of their parents' divorce is solidified, many adolescents begin to recognise the implications of the divorce, and may feel the loss of their parents' love and affection acutely. They experience a heightened sense of their own vulnerability, as their relationship with one parent is in danger of being destroyed. Adolescents experience a profound sense of loss on varying levels and not only is their childhood family lost to them, at this time in their development they are also in mourning for their childhood innocence (Drapeau, Samson, & Saint-Jacques, 1999; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001).

- Worry

The overwhelming loss felt by adolescents with the departure of the non-custodial parent is amplified by the implications his or her departure will bring. Adolescents become concerned with themselves, their siblings, as well as their parents. Adolescents may worry about who will take care of the non-custodial parent in his or her new home if the person is alone. Concerns for the custodial parent may include health and welfare as the custodial parent often exhibits both emotional and financial strain at the departure of his or her spouse. Since adolescents are confronted with their dependency on one rather than both parents together, it is vital the custodial parent remains psychologically healthy and emotionally supportive. In addition to their worry over their parents' well-being, the divorce brings about social changes too. As parents may acquire new lovers and relationships, adolescents are confronted with their parents' sexuality. This may be particularly difficult as adolescents are only beginning to discover their own sexuality and feel a heightened apprehension regarding their own sexual awakening (Lebowitz, 1985; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

- Guilt

Although most adolescents have attained formal operational thought and should therefore be able to take an objective stance from perceived parental rejection, their advanced cognitive abilities can contribute to a belief that they should have been able to intervene in some manner regarding the divorce. Therefore, this could create the perception that they are responsible for their parents' divorce, which results in a pervasive sense of guilt. For other adolescents, the responsibility and blame for the collapse of the family may be directed at the parent who leaves (Jennings & Howe, 2001; Spigelman, Spigelman & Engleson, 1994; Taylor, 2001; Thiessen, 1993). Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) challenged the belief that adolescents accept responsibility and experience guilt regarding the dissolution of the family. They found these feelings to be more likely among younger children. However, they found those adolescents who did experience guilt were "more often troubled in other ways and had symptoms which also reflected difficulties in other parts of their adjustment" (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, p. 50).

- Anger

The presence of anger in adolescents is noted as being the strongest and the most consistent emotion felt throughout the divorce process over time (Burns & Dunlop, 1999). The reasons for their anger may be irrational and varied. Some adolescents may react in anger as a defence against the overwhelming guilt they feel. For others, it may be a reflection of their self-absorption and egocentricity at the injustice of their social encounters being obstructed by visitations to the non-custodial parent. Adolescents may further express anger at one parent, either the non-custodial parent for leaving, or the custodial parent for driving the non-custodial parent away. This may lead to feelings of contempt for the parent's behaviour and a lack of concern for him or her. It is suggested that the anger that is expressed is motivated by a sense of powerlessness and helplessness. Adolescents seem to have little power over what happens to them and even less influence over their own situation (Burns & Dunlop, 1999; Drapeau et al., 1999; Devaris, 1995; Lee, 2001; Oppawsky, 2000; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Thiessen, 1993).

- Loyalty Conflicts

Anger can be exacerbated by adolescents' feelings of being trapped between both parents during parental arguments or when one or both parents attempt to manipulate them. At the formal operational stage of cognitive development, adolescents are probably capable of recognising both their parents' views. In addition, they are likely to be perceived by their parents as being more mature. Therefore, adolescents may be especially vulnerable to loyalty conflicts as they are expected to take sides and provide emotional support. Although they may be encouraged not to take sides, some adolescents may still feel the pressure to make a choice. This appears to be motivated by adolescents' need to secure protection for themselves and their relationships. However, at the same time they may feel despair and helplessness at betraying the other parent (Devaris, 1995; Lee, 2001; Oppawsky, 2000; Thiessen, 1993; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

The initial period following the separation of their parents is stressful for most adolescents. They seem to have little preparation for the challenges divorce brings and the absence of the departed parent. For most adolescents though, the intensity of the distress, anxiety, and shock that is experienced appears to diminish in intensity after three years as they begin to adjust emotionally to their new environment (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). For others, the adjustment difficulties may be enduring as they continue to experience negative emotions such as anger at one parent for up to 10 years after the initial divorce (Burns et al., 1999). The persistent presence of negative emotions long after stabilisation of the family highlights the difficulty adolescents can experience in adjusting to this process. This will now be explored in the following section.

A First Look –

Divorce as a Risk for Adolescents

There is considerable agreement in the research literature that divorce and life in a single-parent family are accompanied by an increase in stressful events and

transitions that place children at risk for developing problems in adjustment (for reviews see Amato, 1993; Amato & Keith, 1991; Demo & Acock, 1988). However, when this is coupled with the developmental demands of adolescence for self-regulated and autonomous behaviour, academic and vocational attainment, and the formation of intimate relationships, their development may precipitate or exacerbate problems of adjustment.

Compared to their peers in intact families, adolescents in divorced families have lower **academic performance** and achievement test scores (Aro & Palosaari, 1992; Boyce-Rodgers & Rose, 2001; Mulholland et al., 1991; Rodgers, 1996). This is mainly attributed to a decrease in concentration and motivation to attend to their studies due to conflict in the pre-disrupted family and the changing family after divorce. However, decreased involvement, as well as lack of support and monitoring by parents, are also identified as contributing factors (Sun, 2001; Sun & Li, 2002). In research conducted by Neighbours and Forehand (1992), the decline in adolescent girls' academic performance was found to have begun long before the divorce. This gender difference could be accredited to the pubertal changes girls experience before boys. In addition, it could be ascribed to the decline of motivation and competitiveness needed for vocational success that occur in girls at this stage in their development. However, this idea seems to perpetuate the notion of generalisations and also seems to contribute to gender bias. For some adolescents, the disturbance in their academic performance seems to extend beyond the transitional phase of divorce. Studies reveal that this group are more at risk than adolescents from intact families of experiencing unemployment, lower education, and an earlier transition to parenthood and working life (Aro & Palosaari, 1992; de Goede et al., 2000; Spruijt & de Goede, 1997). However, it is speculated that these risks can also be credited to a decline in economic resources that can exist in single-parent families.

The greatest effects of divorce on adolescent adjustment are obtained for externalising behaviours such as **delinquency, behavioural problems** (Cookston, 1999; Fergusson, Horwood & Lynskey, 1994; Videon, 2002), and

substance abuse (Cookston, 1999; Needle, Su & Doherty, 1990; Wallerstein & Lewis, 1998). The elevated rates of behavioural problems and substance abuse in adolescents from non-intact families have been attributed to a decrease in parental supervision due to single-parent families. A further contribution to delinquent behaviour is made by the disruption of the intimate and supportive parent-adolescent relationship due to that parent leaving (Videon, 2002). The acting-out and externalising behaviours may be the result of adolescents' ability to conceal their feelings, which would intensify their emotional suffering.

Research has further identified elevated risks for adolescents to engage in early-onset **sexual activity** (Jeynes, 2001; Rodgers, 1996; Wallerstein & Lewis, 1998). A study conducted by Jeynes (2001) led to the findings that adolescents from divorced families had more permissive attitudes and behaviours toward premarital sex than their peers from intact families. This difference could be the outcome of adolescents' curiosity regarding their own sexuality in the face of their parents acquiring new lovers. Furthermore, it may also be as a result of the influence of diminished parental influence, especially the absence of a father, on the moral development of adolescents.

To a lesser extent divorce is also associated with an increase in risk for internalising behaviours such as **anxiety** (Burns & Dunlop, 2002; Fergusson et al., 1994; Richardson & McCabe, 2001), **depressive symptoms** (Aseltine, 1996; Palosaari & Aro, 1994; 1995; Rodgers, 1996), and an increase in **suicidality** (de-Jong, 1992; Kurtz & Derevensky, 1993). This research indicates that the family and interpersonal relationships are at the core of internalising behaviours. During adolescence, the support and nurturing of the family are significant in their management of the normative stressors of this developmental stage. However, prolonged and progressive family disruption, elevated conflict, and ineffective intimacy development in parent-adolescent relationships may augment existing feelings of isolation, loss, and hostility, thereby diminishing adolescents' coping resources. The additional responsibilities placed on adolescents in single-parent

households were found to contribute to increased levels of anxiety (Richardson & McCabe, 2001).

The disruptions to parent-adolescent relationships as well as the conflict in the parental relationship as perceived by adolescents, lead to additional, although less severe, internalising behaviour such as low **self-esteem** (Berg, 2003; Rodgers, 1996; Sirvanli-Ozen, 2004) and a poor **self-image** (Burns & Dunlop, 2002; Billingham & Abrahams, 1998; Studer, 1993). Furthermore, adolescents' inability to develop healthy intimate relationships due to a lack of trust and a fear of rejection appears to be as a result of low self-esteem and distorted attachment styles generated by ineffective parent-adolescent relationships (Johnston & Thomas, 1996; Sirvanli-Ozen, 2004).

Although there is agreement in the research literature that adolescents of divorced families are at greater risk for maladjustment, the proportion of maladjusted adolescents compared to their peers from intact families has not been firmly established (Amato & Keith, 1991). Furthermore, despite the presence of gender differences found in the maladjustment of some adolescents, in general, few gender differences have been found in adolescents' responses to their parents' divorce (Hetherington, 1991; Sun, 2001). This discrepancy in the literature highlights the presence of a complex interaction between the adjustment of adolescents and other contributing factors, such as the quality of relationships with parents, which confound efforts to clarify findings regarding divorce and adjustment. The factors that may assist or hinder the adjustment of adolescents will now be examined.

New Directions –

Factors Contributing to the Adjustment to Divorce

Earlier research on divorce was largely established on a deficient model of divorce, which was guided by two assumptions. Firstly, that adolescents cannot be successfully socialised in single-parent families, and secondly, that divorce has

severe adverse effects on adolescents. However, findings based on these assumptions revealed a diverse pattern in adolescents' adjustment to divorce, since not all adolescents experienced long-term negative effects (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985). In an effort to explain the variability in findings, more studies focussed on searching for those factors that placed adolescents at risk or enabled adolescents to adjust effectively to the demands of parental divorce.

Risk factors are those characteristics of the individual or environment that are associated with an increased probability of maladaptive outcomes (Haggerty et al., 1994). Traditionally, risk factors were conceived as static markers that served as predictors of negative outcomes. However, they did not sufficiently explain how or why problems develop. Rutter (1987) argued that risks should not be perceived as predictors but rather as processes that link risk conditions with a specific dysfunctional outcome. Thus, a variable in adolescents, such as being taller than his or her peers, may function as a risk, perhaps by creating feelings of self-consciousness, and as a protective factor, for example by him or her not easily being physically bullied. Protective factors, or buffers, are hypothesised to be those factors that interact with sources of risk such that they reduce the probability of negative outcomes under conditions of high risk (Rutter, 1987). These factors that serve to undermine or support adolescents as they cope with the changes and challenges in their new family situations will now be explored.

Family Factors

The quality of inter-parental relationships, parent-adolescent relationships, and specific family processes can have a profound influence on the adjustment of adolescents in divorced families.

Inter-Parental Conflict

Conflict between parents proves to be one of the most crucial moderators of adolescents' adjustment to separation and parental divorce. Inter-parental conflict can exist before, during, and after the dissolution of the marriage. However, at all

three times, studies reveal that frequent inter-parental conflict has negative effects on adolescent development resulting in emotional disturbances (Ayoub et al., 1999, Lee, 2001; Schick, 2002), decreased self-esteem (Burns & Dunlop, 2002; Schick, 2002; Sirvanli-Ozen, 2004), and behavioural problems (Lee, 2001; McIntosh, 2003; Simons et al., 1999; Sirvanli-Ozen, 2004).

High conflict is likely to be destructive post-divorce when parents use adolescents to express their anger regarding the other spouse through verbal and aggressive outbursts (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991). Although adolescents have the capacity to empathise with adults, when their parents express their rage towards their former spouse by asking adolescents to carry hostile messages, by denigrating the other parent in front of the adolescent, or by prohibiting mention of the other parent in their presence, it can create intolerable stress and loyalty conflicts (Lee, 2001). Not surprisingly, such adolescents were more depressed and anxious when compared to adolescents with high-conflict parents who excluded them from their angry exchanges (Buchanan et al., 1991).

A study by Armistead et al. (1995) found evidence of potential long-term effects of parental conflict on adolescent development. Results suggest that living in a distressed family leads to diminished self-esteem, thereby influencing the quality of peer relationships, which can forecast poorer adult interpersonal competence. Findings by Booth and Amato (2001) differ from Armistead et al.'s (1995) findings. They report finding no associations between post-divorce conflict and later adult adjustment. The marital disruption following high conflict in the marriage may actually improve the emotional well-being of adolescents relative to a high conflict family status (Jekielek, 1998), provided the level of conflict that is experienced is less than that experienced in the pre-disruption family. Kelly (1998) concurs and proposes that the deleterious effects of divorce are often overstated and insufficient focus is placed on the risks of troubled marriages on the adjustment of adolescents.

Inadequate Parent-Adolescent Communication

A shortage of information and a lack of communication between parents and adolescents preceding the event were found to impact on their ability to cope and accept the divorce (Wadsby & Svedin, 1994). Although adolescents seem to have little emotional preparation for their parents' divorce, the extent and depth to which the divorce was discussed with them contributed to their understanding and acceptance of the event. Adolescents who are left without prior knowledge regarding the reasons and the consequences of the divorce are left to struggle alone with the meaning of this event, which can contribute to their isolation and the unfounded perception that they are in some way responsible (Dunn et al., 2001).

The tendency of some parents to exclude adolescents in the decisions regarding custody and living arrangements impact on their ability to adjust socially subsequent to the divorce (Moxnes, 2003). When parents decide to change residence without negotiating with adolescents, this often results in the loss or reduced contact with previous friendships. These adolescents experience further difficulty in establishing friendships within their new environment, and describe feeling excluded, teased, and socially isolated from the peer group (Drapeau et al., 1999; Moxnes, 2003). This may impede their development in this stage, since participation and acceptance in the peer group plays a pivotal role in their emotional, moral, and social development.

Access to the Non-custodial Parent

The continued involvement and contact of non-custodial parents with adolescents appear to contribute to their ability to adjust. Not only does the marital dissolution bring the possibility of losing friendships through a change of residence but they are also confronted with the inevitability of the departure of the non-custodial parent. The reduced proximity and involvement with the absent parent often result in the erosion of intimacy in the parent-adolescent relationship (Kelly & Lamb, 2000; Moxnes, 2003; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). This has been shown to result in the increased risk of externalising behaviours such as delinquency and

substance abuse in adolescents (Cookston, 1999; Simons et al., 1999), especially in those whose parent-adolescent relationships were characterised by a strong emotional and supportive bond (Videon, 2002).

The Influence of the Custodial Parent

The adjustment of the custodial parent to the divorce plays an increasingly significant role in determining the eventual outcome of adolescents. Whereas during the marriage, one parent can create a buffer and balance for the other parents' behaviour, after the divorce adolescents are more at risk. The psychological adjustment and the quality of parenting of the custodial parent (Silitsky, 1996) have been found to directly correlate with the emotional adjustment (Spruijt & Iedema, 1998; Vandervalk et al., 2004) and the externalising behaviours in adolescents (Simons et al., 1999). The adverse effects created by high conflict are exacerbated by significant problems in parenting by the custodial parent, especially mothers. These mothers are reported to be less warm, more rejecting, and use harsher discipline (Krishnakamur & Buehler, 2000).

Divorce is often coupled with the frequent deterioration in parenting of both custodial and non-custodial parents in the several years after separation. Parents may become preoccupied with their own emotional responses to the divorce, whilst adolescents are utilised as the sole emotional support for their distraught needy parents (Drapeau et al., 1999; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Within the nuclear family, social support is identified as salient in reinforcing positive coping strategies in adolescents (Kot & Shoemaker, 1999). In addition, intimate parent-adolescent relationships characterised by warmth, emotional support, consistency, and authoritative disciplining were identified as successful buffers against the negative effects of the marital transition (Amato, 2000; Berg, 2003; Hines, 1997; Krishnakamur & Buehler, 2000; Richardson & McCabe, 2001).

Disclosure between Parents and Adolescents

The disclosure of inappropriate information by the custodial parent regarding financial concerns, personal complaints with reference to the other parent, and the

denigration of the other parent to the adolescent are associated with increased psychological distress in adolescents (Koerner, Jacobs & Raymond, 2000). Parents violate familial boundaries when they confide in adolescents as if they were peers. The parents may be motivated by their need for emotional support or as an attempt to sabotage the non-custodial parent-adolescent relationship. However, despite the motivation, it results in loyalty conflicts and augments the adolescents' struggle to maintain close parent-adolescent relationships with the non-custodial parent.

Sibling Relationships

Research shows that the presence of a sibling relationship can serve as both a risk and a protective factor in adolescents with regards to the risks of divorce (Anderson, Lindner & Bennion, 1992). There is evidence that in addition to the changes to the parent-adolescent relationship, adolescents from non-intact families experience more negative sibling relationships than those in intact families (Hetherington, 1992; 1993; Drapeau et al., 1999). A study conducted by Sheehan et al. (2004) revealed the likelihood that adolescents from non-intact families have affect-intense sibling relationships characterised by high levels of both hostility and warmth. The increase in conflict in sibling relationships has been attributed to the separation and divorce of their parents, the degree of conflict present between parents (Sheehan, 2004), and the separation of siblings due to custody arrangements (Drapeau et al., 1999). It is suggested that negative sibling relationships are associated with an increased risk of externalising behaviours (Hetherington, 1992; 1993). However, positive sibling relationships can mitigate the risks of externalising behaviours in adolescents, since positive relationships with siblings in divorced families can lead to increased social competence (Kempton et al., 1991).

Role Reallocation

Adolescents are often assigned greater responsibilities, such as caring for younger children and household tasks, when being raised in single-parent families. These adolescents become aware of financial pressures and act as sources of support for

both parents who confide in them after the divorce (Hetherington, 1999). Although some adolescents view these abilities with pride, they also experience regret at not being given more time to remain dependent on their parents (Moxnes, 2003). Furthermore, the reliance of parents on adolescents may interfere with their ability to individuate and separate from their parents (Atwater, 1996). At this time in their development, adolescents need to disengage from their parents and the family to successfully experiment with their identity. They require emotional distance to focus on themselves, for the purpose of individuation, and the peer group to assist in separation. However, when parents divorce, adolescents are forced to re-engage with their parents' needs and wishes, thus obstructing this differentiation process.

Environmental Factors

Risk factors outside of the family become increasingly important with age and often interact with individual and familial factors in adolescents' responses to the stresses associated with parental divorce.

Socio-economic Status

For most families, divorce presents some decline in financial resources. In families that are financially comfortable, a moderate post-divorce financial decline may foster increased maturity in adolescents as they are able to contribute to the solution by earning their own income and view the decline as a shared family problem (Moxnes, 2003). However, some families experience financial hardships, which may bring about extended challenges for the adolescent such as a considerable reduction in their standard of living and the need to relocate to a new residence and community (Booth & Amato, 2001; Drapeau et al., 1999).

The change to adolescents' socio-economic status is reportedly associated with feelings of shame and rejection, and may lead to social withdrawal (Moxnes, 2003). The decline in financial resources confronts adolescents with a practical problem. However, this can become internalised as a personal problem when

conflict between parents regarding money influences family relations, and adolescents perceive the non-custodial parent as rejecting them thereby negatively influencing their self-esteem (Moxnes, 2003). In addition, the decline in financial income often results in the increased risk of deviant behaviour due to diminished monitoring by single parents who are required to work longer hours, and limited vocational opportunities as a consequence of limited resources.

Extended and Extra-Familial Support

In the event that adolescents are faced with a decline in parental support, external sources of support such as grandparents, friends, or teachers can serve as a buffer from the detrimental effects of their parents' marital transitions (Hetherington, 1989; Kot & Shoemaker, 1999; Silitsky, 1996). The acceptance and involvement with a peer group are necessary for the formation of the self-concept (Dacey & Kenny, 1994) and the establishment of identity (Newman & Newman, 1988). Therefore, peer rejection may not only impede development but can exacerbate the consequences associated with divorce.

Research by Boyce-Rodgers and Rose (2002) indicates that peer support could further moderate the effects of low parental support on internalising symptoms such as anxiety, low self-esteem, and feelings of isolation. However, this also predisposes adolescents to the risks of peer influence (Hetherington, 1993). This is in part because of their need for independence and poorer adult supervision associated with single-parent families. If disengagement from families is associated with increased involvement in a delinquent peer group, adolescents are at greater risk of developing antisocial behaviour and academic problems. However, the disengagement process can also be a positive alternative if disengagement results in greater involvement with a caring functional adult (Hetherington, 1993).

There seems to be little doubt that parental separation and divorce presents adolescents with a variety of non-normative stressors and transitions. The changes to the family structure appear to place adolescents at risk for

maladjustment; however, many of these symptoms can also be accounted for in the years preceding the break-up (Sun, 2001). These pre-disrupted families have also been found to be characterised by distant parent-parent and parent-adolescent relationships, less parental commitment to adolescents' education, and fewer economic resources. With newer research further highlighting the complex interaction of family processes on the adjustment of adolescents, such as marital conflict (Peris & Emery, 2004), the view that divorce as such is the primary source of these symptoms of maladjustment should be reconsidered.

A New Perspective – Resilience and Coping

The earlier stress models related to marital transitions view parental divorce as an inherently negative event that predisposes adolescents to dysfunction unless moderated by variables that protect the adolescent from its detrimental effects. However, some researchers are taking on a new risk and resiliency perspective in studying marital transitions (Boyce-Rodgers & Rose, 2002; Davey, Eaker, & Walter, 2004). Resilience is defined by Garmezy as the "skills, abilities, knowledge, and insight that accumulate over time as people struggle to surmount adversity and meet challenges. It is an ongoing and developing fund of energy and skill that can be used in current struggles" (cited in Saleebey, 1996, p.298). More simply put, it involves successful adaptation despite adversity.

This resiliency perspective recognises that divorce is a process of family transitions that affect family relationships and adolescents' adjustment. The experiences ante-ceding divorce, life in a single-parent family, and possible further marital transitions following divorce, may further impact on adolescents' adjustment (Hetherington, 1999; Moxnes, 2003; Sun, 2001). As adolescents negotiate these transitions, risk and protective factors are not static since the family and life situations continue to change during and following the divorce. Therefore, despite the stress and challenges their parents' divorce brings to adolescents, it may also bring with it an opportunity to break free from the conflict within their families,

which may result in more meaningful relationships and the possibility for personal development and well-being (Hetherington, 2003). This perspective is not aimed at undermining the pain and adversity adolescents may experience. The purpose is to create a balance regarding the potential outcomes.

Hetherington and Kelly (cited in Hetherington, 2003) have begun to address this imbalance in the literature regarding the outcomes for the adolescents of divorce. Although their research confirmed the presence of maladjustment in adolescents with divorced parents, it also highlighted the competency of these adolescents (Hetherington, 2003). They were able to categorise the adolescents in their study into three competent clusters, namely, opportunistic-competent, caring-competent, and competent at a cost. Overall, these adolescents all shared positive attributes such as autonomy, responsibility, an unusual ability to perceive and respond to the needs and feelings of others, an enhanced self-esteem, self-control, and the ability to successfully adapt to later life stresses. However, distinguishing attributes were also identified. Firstly, opportunistic-competent adolescents were characterised as manipulative and utilised these skills to establish relationships with powerful individuals. As adults, they were professionally successful and were generally oriented towards careers of power and prestige such as law or politics. Secondly, the caring-competent adolescents were genuine nurturers by nature and as adults they chose to enter the helping professions. Lastly, the highest achievers were found to be those in the competent at a cost group. However, beneath their success was a sense of failure stemming from not being able to assist their parents through the emotional and financial stress their parents were facing due to the divorce.

The findings of Hetherington and Kelly's (cited in Hetherington, 2003) study supports the notion that the successful engagement with adversity strengthens some individuals rather than sensitises them (Rutter, 1985). Other researchers in the field of marital transitions support this perspective, in that they state that the vast majority of adolescents whose parents divorce are not distinguishable from their peers and develop into competent well-adjusted adults (Amato, 2001; Chase-

Lansdale, Cherlin, Kiernan, 1995; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985; Simons et al., 1996). It is proposed that an individual can develop protective mechanisms by successfully engaging and negotiating adversity (Leonard & Burns, 1999; Rutter, 1985). A protective mechanism that is suggested by Nowack (1989) is coping style.

Before commencing on a discussion regarding coping style, it is important to highlight the coping process. Smith and Carlson (1997) have outlined the steps in the coping process, which are:

- Firstly, the individual assesses the meaning of the situation as well as its impact on the individual.
- Thereafter, the individual will choose the appropriate coping strategy to manage the stressful event, taking into consideration the type of stressor and the probability that the coping strategy will be effective.
- The third step, the coping strategy is utilised.
- Finally, the success of the coping strategy is appraised in accordance with its efficacy in reducing the stressor and managing the individual's response to the event.

Coping Style

Coping style has a reputation in mitigating the relationship between life stress and psychological functioning (Lazarus, 1999). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) indicate that coping styles can affect how a stressful event is perceived and how it is managed. They describe coping as "all efforts to manage taxing demands, without regard to their efficacy or inherent value" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p.134). Therefore, coping is not necessarily equated with a good outcome; it is merely the manner in which we manage ourselves in the face of adversity.

There appears to be little consensus in the literature about the categories of coping style as the constructs are often used inter-changeably. Lazarus and

Folkman (1984) proposed two main categories of strategies that are employed to deal with a particular stressful situation. They are problem-focussed strategies and emotion-focussed strategies. Problem-focussed strategies, as the name implies, are active attempts by the individual to find a solution to the situation by changing aspects of the situation or the environment. This may be accomplished by problem-solving strategies, direct action, or seeking out information (Nowack, 1989; Seiffge-Krenke, 1995). This construct is often used interchangeably with approach-oriented strategies. On the other hand, emotion-focussed strategies aim to deal with the psychological discomfort of emotions associated with a difficult situation. Strategies employed include distraction, avoidance, rumination, and the search for emotional support (Billings & Moos, 1981; Proulx et al., 1995; Seiffge-Krenke, 1995). Emotion-focussed strategies are used synonymously with avoidance-oriented strategies.

Studies have been conducted to determine which coping strategies children and adolescents commonly use. Results of a study conducted by Drapeau et al. (1999) on children and younger adolescents suggest they attempt to solve the problems they encounter directly, that is, through the use of problem-focussed strategies. Thereafter, they employ emotion-focussed strategies such as avoidance and emotional expression in an attempt to cope. However, these findings further revealed that the utilisation of direct interventions is limited to those contexts where parents are not directly involved in the problem. Instead, for problems that directly involve parents, the children and younger adolescents employ indirect-problem solving strategies, for example, they communicate their feelings of discomfort or disapproval of a parent's dating behaviour through acting-out behaviour in the hopes that their message will be understood and the problem solved (Drapeau et al., 1999). Drapeau et al. (1999) suggest that this indirect strategy is utilised because the children do not feel they are free to communicate their feelings or perhaps feel powerless over the outcome of the situation.

Lee's (2001) study challenges these findings in that it was found that a higher percentage of children and younger adolescents utilised emotion-focussed

strategies, that is, distracting activities, and not problem-focussed strategies. Thereafter, inhibition of action, that is, behaviours that prevent or avoid the stressful situation, were utilised. Furthermore, Lee (2001) revealed that the least employed strategies were information-seeking and support-seeking respectively. There is a noticeable contradiction in the findings regarding which coping strategies are predominantly employed by children and younger adolescents. This could be attributed to the methodological limitations of the study. However, these contradictions may also be a reflection of the distinctiveness of the individual child and the value of the child's context that is not taken into account when attempting to categorise and generalise certain coping strategies of the individual child.

Armistead et al. (1990) conducted a study exclusively on adolescents between the ages of 12 and 16 years of age. Their findings revealed that adolescents view themselves as playing an active role in their adaptation to their parents' divorce by seeking out information or advice, and through the acceptance of social support. Thus, they utilised both problem-focussed and emotion-focussed strategies. However, their strategies seem to be focussed on active-cognitive methods as opposed to utilising behavioural strategies (Armistead et al., 1990). This could be attributed to their understanding that they can do little to change their parents' divorce through behavioural means.

In separate studies led by Dumont (1999) and Sandler, Tein, and West (1994), it was found that avoidance strategies were the least used strategy by adolescents. Their findings further revealed that those adolescents who did employ avoidance strategies were inefficient in protecting themselves and were at an increased risk for developing internalising and externalising symptoms (Dumont, 1999; Sandler et al., 1994). On the other hand avoidance strategies may be effective. Frankl (cited in Meyer et al., 1989, p. 433) believed that psychological health could be enhanced by an individual's choice in how he or she will deal with the circumstances they find themselves in, which he termed "self-determining action", and by moving beyond the self, which he defined as "self-transcendence". Therefore, in choosing to employ avoidance strategies, adolescents may be able to

create distance between themselves and their circumstances, which may enhance their psychological health as they are focussing on something beyond the self, thereby enabling them to maintain the relationships they have with those involved in the situation.

There is an indication of a relationship that exists between self-esteem and problem-focussed strategies. It is hypothesised that adolescents with high self-esteem are better able to cope with adversity. This is due to their perceptions that they contain the capacity to react effectively to the environment and therefore have more confidence in themselves to challenge the problem and locate a solution (Dumont, 1999). For that reason, the factors that protect adolescents' self-esteem from the adverse effects of divorce, such as diminished inter-parental conflict and effective parent-adolescent relationships, play a more significant role in adolescents' ability to cope than previously understood.

Parental divorce compels adolescents to engage in personal adjustment to non-normative stressors long before they are emotionally and cognitively mature. However, the exploration into how these adolescents from non-intact families cope is unclear and an understanding of the efficacy of the strategies employed is limited. Furthermore, despite research in this field taking a new resiliency perspective, the predominant focus of this research continues to be on the processes whereby adolescents adapt successfully rather than on their skills and abilities to meet new challenges thereby enhancing their development (Boyce-Rodgers & Rose, 2002). The dominant voices in the literature recognise that the vast majority of adolescents whose parents have divorced develop into competent and well-adjusted adults (Amato, 2001; Chase-Lansdale et al., 1995; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985; Simons et al., 1996). However, with the exception of the study by Hetherington and Kelly (cited in Hetherington, 2003), resilience as defined by Garmezy (cited in Saleebey, 1996, p.298), that is, the "skills, abilities, knowledge, and insight that accumulate over time", is yet to be explored.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that the emotional experience of divorce is painful and at times traumatic. For some adolescents divorce is the resolution to an unstable environment. However, the complications associated with divorce can provoke feelings that may not have the opportunity to dissolve as parents continue their marital struggles beyond the divorce. Although adolescents from divorced families, in comparison to their peers in intact families, are at increased risk for developing social, emotional, behavioural, and academic problems, most seem to be able to adjust to the hardships of divorce. The diversity of responses to divorce is related to the interaction of risk and protective factors associated with characteristics of the family, environment, and active abilities of adolescents to cope. Parents play a key role in moderating these effects by maintaining authoritative parenting, appropriate boundaries, and minimising conflict. The presence of inter-parental conflict undermines the quality of parenting and can lead to diminished contact with non-custodial parents. Parent-adolescent relationships that continue to be characterised by support and care, especially with the absent parent, diminish the loss that is felt and further prevent adolescents from seeking the support of deviant peer groups. In addition, access to positive extra-familial relationships, such as siblings, and external relationships, such as teachers and peers, assist in buffering adolescents from the stresses encountered through the transition.

Although spanning almost three decades, research in this area appears to still be in its infancy. For the most part, studies do not predict favourable post-divorce outcomes. They reflect parental divorce as an inherently negative event that predisposes children to dysfunction and developmental delay unless moderated by variables that protect them. However, the message that is communicated to society is not necessarily accurate, since most children do adjust well. Research that continues to pathologise the experiences of children may be assisting in reinforcing this distorted image. Within the social work practice, a new strengths-based approach is being developed with regards to case management (Saleebey, 1996). The strengths perspective proposes viewing individuals in "light of their capacities, competencies, and possibilities" despite their circumstances (Saleebey,

1996, p. 297). Therefore, individuals are perceived as unique, with various traits and resources that are their strengths. Through their personal accounts, comprehensive knowledge and an appreciation of the experience of these individuals can be attained (Saleeby, 1996). If more research is to focus on the resilience of these survivors of divorce, a balance may be introduced to the view held by society and perhaps assist in children's adjustment.

The vast majority of the literature available is predominantly based on empirical methods and measurements functioning within a modernistic perspective. Thus few studies have attempted to explore in depth the opinions and perceptions of the survivors of divorce. Established within a social constructionist perspective, this research study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of adolescents who have endured despite the challenges of societal expectations placed upon them to develop into maladjusted and emotionally burdened individuals. A discussion of social constructionism will now be provided.