Chapter Six

MY STORY OF
'Mr X'

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name Given:</th>
<th>Mr X</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age at the time of interviews:</td>
<td>18 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at the time of parents’ divorce:</td>
<td>2 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at the time of mother and stepfather's divorce:</td>
<td>16 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently living with:</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of interviews:</td>
<td>Two</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Introduction

This story is based on the transcribed interviews between the researcher and Mr X. The transcribed interviews can be found in Appendix D. The story has been reconstructed in terms of themes that were identified by the researcher and reflect the researcher’s way of ‘seeing’. The lens of the researcher thus colours her understanding of the participant's experience. Others may view the participant’s story through a different lens, thus different themes may emerge as their understanding of the participant’s experience develops. It is suggested that the interpretation of the participant’s story is one of many possible interpretations and can therefore not be viewed as the ultimate truth.

The chapter begins with a description of the setting in which the interviews were conducted, followed by an explanation of how the participant came to be named
Mr X. The researcher has also included a Genogram and a brief description of the structural changes that Mr X's family has undergone. Thereafter, Mr X's experience of both divorces will be discussed. This should set the context for the focus of his story. The dominant themes that emerged for the researcher, which she felt characterised Mr X's experience of both divorces, will then be discussed. The thematic punctuations will illustrate the following: the nature of Mr X's relationships with significant others following both divorces, and a description of the manner in which Mr X coped through the years following the divorce. Finally, the researcher will comment on the effects of the research on Mr X as well as on her.

**Research Setting**

Due to the physical distance that the participant lived from the researcher, she was unable to meet with the participant in person before the interviews. Instead, the researcher spoke telephonically with the participant on two occasions about the study as well as to arrange the interviews. When the researcher arrived for the first interview, the participant met her at the door, where she immediately became aware of the participant's shy demeanour. The researcher knew then that it would be necessary to spend time becoming acquainted with the participant to establish rapport before starting with the interviews. However, it seemed that the researcher could not allay his anxiety, which became evident. It appeared that the anxiety that the participant displayed was not as a result of the interview but was due to his concern that his mother may be experiencing reservations about his participation in the study and that he did not feel comfortable starting the interviews until he was certain his participation was not a problem for his mother. The researcher was puzzled by the participant's reservations as the participant's mother had given her consent for the participant to participate. It may have been that the participant was experiencing his own reservations about participating in the study, although he may not have felt comfortable admitting this to the researcher. Therefore, the researcher suggested that the participant speak with
his mother regarding her reservations and if he was still willing to, reschedule the interview. Fortunately, the interview was rescheduled for the following week.

Upon arriving for the interview, the researcher became aware that the participant's demeanour was more relaxed than at their previous meeting although he still appeared to exhibit some trepidation. The researcher conducted two interviews with the participant in his home, which he shares with his mother, his older brother, and his half brother, each lasting approximately one and a half hours. Although the researcher's home language is English, she felt it necessary to allow the participant to decide what language the interviews would be conducted in. The researcher felt it was important for the participant to feel comfortable in verbalising his story so as to gain the richest description possible. Thus, the participant chose to continue in his home language of Afrikaans. The interviews were conducted in the formal lounge of the participant's home, since the participant felt we would be least interrupted there as we could close the doors. The researcher found the room to be filled with family photographs, which assisted in defusing the setting somewhat. However, the researcher felt that the layout of the furniture and the formality of the room made it difficult to engage in a casual manner with the participant. Thus, the interview seemed to mimic a question and answer format despite the researcher's use of an unstructured interview.

Throughout the interviews, the researcher experienced the participant as an emotionally guarded young man, who was shy in nature. She experienced great difficulty in establishing rapport with the participant and found that he kept close to the topic that was being discussed without much elaboration or deviation, thus revealing only what he deemed necessary. However, the participant seemed to relax towards the end of the interview process, thus requiring less probing. It is possible that the participant was experiencing a sense of relief, since he knew that the interviews were close to an end.
Being Given a Name

To maintain the anonymity of the participant in the study, the participant needed a pseudonym. However, it must be noted, that the researcher felt it was important for the participant to be able to choose a suitable name for himself, since it was his story that was being given a voice.

Despite the researcher's encouragement, the participant seemed disinterested in the naming process and felt that “solank dit nie [sy] eie naam is nie” any name would be suitable. The participant appeared to demonstrate little emotional attachment to his story and the memories that were being explored. Instead, he seemed to want to distance himself, perhaps in an attempt to disown the memories and rid himself of the past. Therefore, it became the researcher’s prerogative to find a suitable name for the participant. However, the researcher also found herself struggling to name him as she felt that she did not have a comprehensive understanding of him yet. Thus, she named him, Mr X, as a temporary pseudonym, until she could find an appropriate one.

As the researcher continued with the interpretive process, she came to realise the suitability of the temporary name that she had chosen. Mr X presented himself as a contained yet subdued young man throughout the interviews. However, in reading the transcripts, Mr X's desire to remain elusive emerged. The researcher began to gain an image of a secret service agent who was trying to hide his painful past, only revealing fragments of himself and his story to those with whom he interacted. However, this contributed to the researcher's difficulty in gaining a sense of what Mr X was thinking and feeling. She felt that Mr X had opened a door for her so that she could peak inside his life and his story, but she was not invited to join him on an expedition into his past. Mr X's guarded behaviour throughout the interview process corresponds with the ‘uncomfortability’ that he displayed in participating in this research study. Although Mr X seemed to relax towards the end of the second interview, the impression that has been left with the researcher is that Mr X does not look back very often and he found it very difficult to reveal his story to the researcher.
To fully understand Mr X’s experience of divorce and the significant impact divorce has had on him and his life thereafter, the researcher feels it is pertinent to clarify the changing structure of his family, which the researcher has compiled from the interviews with Mr X.

Mr X’s parents were divorced when he was approximately 3 years old. He is the second child and he has a brother who is four years older than him. Mr X’s mother remarried when Mr X was approximately 9 years old, and soon thereafter his half brother was born. Mr X’s mother and stepfather were separated in 2003 and divorced in 2004. Since the divorce, Mr X has had little contact with his stepfather. Mr X’s father remarried soon after his parents were divorced, in approximately 1992 and no children were born from this marriage. In 2004, Mr X’s father divorced his stepmother.
From the above description, it can be seen that Mr X’s family structure has been shaped by three divorces, two of them being in the past 18 months. It was the initial intention of the researcher to focus on Mr X’s experience of his mother and stepfather’s divorce, since this was more recent than the divorce of his parents and the researcher was aware that his stepfather had played a significant role in his life. However, during the interview, Mr X began to incorporate valuable descriptions that were linked to his parents’ divorce. Mr X’s experience of the recent divorce of his mother from his stepfather seems to be interlinked with the difficulties Mr X has encountered from the divorce of his parents, which will become apparent within this chapter. Therefore, the researcher felt that it was necessary to maintain the integrity of the study by shifting her focus to include Mr X’s experience from both his parents’ divorce as well as his mother’s recent divorce from his stepfather.

**Divorce: When Mr X was Young vs When Mr X was Older**

Mr X is very familiar with the experience of divorce. Whereas many children will never have to endure the break up of their family, Mr X has been confronted with it twice, at two very different times in his life. The first occurred when he was a young boy, when his parents divorced, and now recently as an adolescent when his mother divorced his stepfather.

Mr X does not remember much from the time when his parents divorced. It seems that his young age protected him because “[djie eerste keer weet [jy] nie eers wat dit was nie”. As he matured, he was able to gain an understanding of what it meant for his parents to be divorced, although by that time “[hy] het toe lankal daarvan vergeet”. However, Mr X also verbalised that the emotional experience continues to persist. He said:

[D]ie oomblik toe my ma en my regte pa geskei het, daardie pyn...[d]it is iets wat altyd by jou bly. Jy het altyd daardie gevoel. Dit gaan nooit weg nie.
Mr X shows some confusion over his experience of his parents’ divorce. It seems that Mr X feels that he understands the reasons why his parents divorced and Mr X has managed the changes that came as a result of it. However, the emotional experience of his family not being complete is a dull ache that he continues to experience daily.

Mr X has been less fortunate with his recent experience of the divorce of his mother and stepfather as the memories have left a lasting impression on him. The day that his family split yet again, Mr X seemed to be confused regarding his feelings towards his stepfather, “want ek het dit nie van hom verwag nie”. However, as the shock seemed to subside, the reality of his stepfather’s actions began to reveal itself. Mr X “het nagte gehuil”, and “[hy] kon nie meer konsentreer nie want die pyn was daar gewees”.

According to Mr X, his emotional experience of divorce as an adolescent “was die ergste”, probably as he was more aware of his emotions at that age, thus he could identify the source of his unhappiness. Furthermore, he seemed to understand what the divorce meant for him as well as his family. It is also possible that Mr X’s recent experience with divorce has reawakened feelings he has regarding his parents’ divorce, thus reminding him about the pain that he still feels when he lost his father.

**Life after the Divorce**

The researcher identified the following themes as an understanding of Mr X’s experiences, following the first and second divorce, was gained. It is the understanding of the researcher that these themes describe the influence both divorces have had on his life up to now as well as the role the divorces have played in his development as a person. Mr X’s experiences following both divorces were characterised by the following themes:
Loss

Mr X's relationships with his father and stepfather have featured prominently throughout his story. However, within these relationships, Mr X has experienced immense loss as a result of the choices that have been made by his father and stepfather.

The first loss Mr X experienced was in relation to his father. Following the divorce of his parents, it appears that the visitation agreement for Mr X and his father entailed “naweke [en] vakansies en elke tweede Desember”. Thus, it seems that Mr X and his father were able to keep on developing their father-son bond. Following his father's remarriage, Mr X continued to spend time with his father. The relationship between Mr X and his stepmother was disagreeable and Mr X believes that his stepmother was jealous of the attention that Mr X and his brother paid to their father instead of her. However, even this poor relationship between Mr X and his stepmother, did not appear to influence their father-son bond. As Mr X grew older though and matured into his teenage years, it seems that his father's commitment began to waver as his effort at keeping contact with Mr X diminished dramatically. Mr X recalls:

[Ons het] soos twee keer 'n jaar by hom gaan kuier. Hy't ons een keer in 'n paar maande gebel.

The distance between Mr X and his father increased over time. He said:

Daar was 'n jaar gewees wat ons hom glad nie eers gesien het nie. Ek kan nie onthou waneer, dit was 'n hele jaar. Ek dink hy het ons drie keer in 'n jaar gebel.
It seems that Mr X’s father became less committed to their father-son relationship and even seemed to abandon it for some time, which left a noticeable void in Mr X’s life. The absence of his father was especially felt when he needed his father to assist him with the “manlike” things that his mother could not. However, Mr X could do nothing to prevent the loss of this relationship. It seems that Mr X’s father “[het] net nie daardie tyd belanggestel nie” in his role as a father, thus leaving Mr X to manage the feelings of rejection and abandonment from a father who was no longer there for him.

*The second loss* Mr X experienced was in relation to his stepfather. Following his mother’s remarriage, Mr X displayed some caution in accepting his stepfather, since “[hy] het hom nie geken nie”. Furthermore, he

> kon nie eintlik verstaan hoe kon my ma nou weer met ‘n ander man trou nie. Ons het mos ons eie pa. Ons soek nie nog ‘n pa nie.

However, Mr X’s love and respect for his stepfather grew over time and his stepfather became an established father figure in his life. Since his own father was not able to be present in his life on a day-to-day basis, it appears that Mr X “het hom aanvaar as ‘n pa vir [hom] te speel”. Their bond seemed to continue to strengthen as they did things together, and it became more evident to Mr X how important it was for him to have someone fulfilling his need for a father. During this time, Mr X maintained that his stepfather helped him alleviate the pain that gnawed at him regarding the divorce of his parents. It is also possible that his stepfather eased the loss that Mr X experienced due to the abandonment of his father.

When Mr X’s stepfather had an affair with another woman that ended his marriage to Mr X’s mother, Mr X felt that his stepfather’s behaviour was a betrayal of his relationship with Mr X too. As a result of his stepfather’s choice, the trust that had existed between Mr X and his stepfather “[was] heeltemaal verbreek” and Mr X knew from that moment “daar gaan nie iets tussen my en hom wees nie”. Thus, Mr X experienced the loss of yet another father in his life.
The third loss that Mr X has experienced was again with his father. Earlier this year, when Mr X was faced with asking his father for money, Mr X's father reacted with anger and “toe skryf hy my net af”. That is, Mr X's father told Mr X that he may not contact him again and may not visit him either. Thus, he wanted nothing more to do with his son. Mr X was devastated at being rejected again by his father. Mr X felt hurt and angry with his father since “[hy] het niks aan die eenkant verkeerd gedoen om dit te verdien nie”.

At present, Mr X seems to have reconciled with his father to some degree and “[hulle] praat dinge uit”, although there appears to be a very real threat of losing his father again. His father’s apparent ease at severing his ties with Mr X seems to confirm how little he values his relationship with Mr X as well as how tenuous their connection really is. However, it seems that Mr X is clinging to his relationship with his father, perhaps since his relationship with his stepfather has also just ended. Thus Mr X may feel he has no other resource to rely on to fulfil that fatherly role. Therefore, he needs to believe that they are beginning “n nuwe lewe” together as father and son.

Connection and Disconnection

Mr X's relationships with his parental figures, that is, with his father, his mother, and his stepfather appear to either be connected or disconnected. The following theme is a description of these relationships and how Mr X has defined them.

In relation to his father, he does not seem to have a stable relationship but one that shifts between connection and disconnection. However, it seems that Mr X perceives the connection in an idealistic way, to be stronger than what it is in reality. Mr X was very young when his parents were divorced. However, the connection between him and his father seems to have been established despite his father's absence from his day-to-day life. His father's remarriage seemed to introduce a new challenge to their relationship though. Mr X's relationship with his stepmother was strained due to her apparent dislike of Mr X and his brother. He
said:

[S]y het glad nie van ons gehou nie. Sy het ons heeltemal vermy as ons daar gekom kuier het. [S]y praat nie met ons nie. Sy vra nie hoe gaan dit nie. Sy ignoreer ons. Sy wou niks met my en my broer te doen hê nie.

The behaviour that Mr X’s stepmother displayed towards Mr X generated some tension within his father’s home, which resulted in “n bakleiery” between “haar en my pa en ons”. Mr X believes that his stepmother was jealous of the attention that he and his brother were paying toward their father on their visits. It is possible that Mr X’s stepmother may have felt excluded during Mr X’s and his brother’s visits and may have wished to be acknowledged as a part of their father’s life, which included his children. Although his stepmother’s behaviour made it more difficult for Mr X during his visits at his father’s home, Mr X does not allude to the influence that this may have had on his relationship with his father. Instead, he describes the time that he spent around his father “asof jy in die hemel is”. It seems that Mr X idealised the time he spent with his father and his stepmother did not really feature much in his thoughts other than as a nuisance.

Mr X’s connection with his father did begin to deteriorate though, “[h]ier naby die einde van laerskool begin van hoërskool”. Mr X’s father began to limit the contact he had with Mr X and the visits with his father became more infrequent. Thus, eroding the bond between Mr X and his father. Mr X justifies the growing disconnection in their relationship by explaining that it was because of his father’s “werk en hy bly ver van [my] af”. However, it is also possible that the tense atmosphere generated by the presence of his sons resulted in Mr X’s father choosing to maintain his marriage rather than his father-son relationship. He therefore chose to distance himself from Mr X.

Mr X seemed to be confused and distressed by his father’s lack of interest in maintaining their relationship. He said:

Soos ek onthou dit was seer gewees. Jy wil jou pa meer sien maar jy kan ook nie en as jy hom nodig het is hy nooit daar nie of hy kan nie daar wees nie.
However, Mr X's father did not seem to show much concern about his decision to relinquish his role and his responsibilities as a father. It is possible that Mr X's father may have felt threatened by the relationship that Mr X had developed with his stepfather. Mr X recalls his father probing him during a holiday that he spent with his father, asking questions such as:

Soos, hoe is hy, wat se soort pa is hy... wat het ons alles saam gedoen of speel ons ooit iets saam. Sulke goeters. Is ek liever vir hom as wat ek vir my eie pa is?

Perhaps his father felt that Mr X's stepfather was replacing his role as a father to Mr X. Thus, it was no longer necessary for him to ensure that Mr X's needs were being fulfilled and he could relinquish some of his duties and responsibilities as a father. However, his questions also seem to reveal that he may have felt threatened by the obvious bond that had developed between Mr X and his stepfather. Thus, he appears to have been testing Mr X's commitment to him as a father. Whatever his father's reasons, Mr X's father seems to have placed Mr X in an impossible position and left him with the feeling that his father “nie belang gestel het in my nie?”, which appears to have perpetuated the emotional disconnection in their relationship.

Since Mr X's brother left school, and was able to use his own car to transport himself and Mr X to their father's home, his father showed an interest in re-connecting with Mr X. However, there was no olive branch extended for the rejection Mr X had endured. Instead, Mr X and his father's relationship disintegrated further, thus maintaining the status quo of disconnection. It seems that their process of re-connecting was interrupted, since Mr X's focus was still on his schoolwork and “dan kuier [jy] net nie lekker nie”. It is possible that Mr X's father was interested in re-connecting with his son but did not wish to become involved again in his responsibilities as a parent. That is, Mr X's father appears to be disinterested in involving himself in Mr X's day-to-day concerns and worries regarding school. Therefore, the connection that Mr X managed to regain with his father appears to be a conditional one, which places the authenticity of their connection into question.
Mr X's father's commitment to renew their connection was brought into question recently when Mr X's father rejected him again. It appears that when Mr X questioned his father's failure to provide the finances he had promised, Mr X's father decided to sever ties with his son again. His reaction seemed to confirm that his connection with Mr X was tenuous and superficial in nature, although he appeared to be unaware of how important their relationship was to his son. It is possible that Mr X is somewhat aware of the fragility of his relationship with his father and his lack of commitment as “[hy] het geweet [sy pa] gaan dit nie vir [hom] gee nie”, since his father had done the same with his brother. His father’s reaction seems to have brought him into conflict though. On the one hand, he felt angry towards his father because he believes that his father “moet vir [hom] sorg. Hy moet iets ekstra bydra”. However, on the other hand, Mr X needs to maintain the relationship with his father, especially since his father has shown him how easily he can walk away. It seems that Mr X’s need for a father overrides the reality of who his father is. Therefore, him and his father “werk nou daar aan” and “praat dinge uit”.

Mr X believes that he has re-connected with his father and their relationship has been reborn. He said:

*My regte pa se storie kan ek sê daar is nie meer baie om te sê nie want ons het vrede gemaak met alles. Dit voel ons begin nou weer ‘n nuwe lewe met hom. So daardie storie, wat daarso gebeur het, is weg. Ek dink nie meer daar aan nie. Ek worry nie meer nie. Dit is iets van die verlede. Ek wil nie meer daaroor worry nie."

However, Mr X’s belief in his father appears to be somewhat idealistic, and their connection continues to be within disconnection. Perhaps their bond has been re-established to some degree. However, Mr X’s father seems to react very negatively to any pressure placed on him to fulfil his responsibilities as a father. In essence, their connection is a conditional one, which seems to be dependent on the whims of his father, and Mr X needs to comply if he is to maintain the bond.

*In relation to his stepfather, Mr X established a firm connection with him in the years that he was a part of Mr X's family. They “het baie dinge saam gedoen”*
and Mr X felt that his stepfather was “beskermend” over his new family. Mr X even acknowledges that “dinge het beter gegaan tussen my en hom as my en my eie pa”. It seems that Mr X experiences extremes and it is possible that the disconnection he experienced in his relationship with his father nurtured the connection Mr X felt with his stepfather. However, his stepfather’s behaviour began to change when his marriage to Mr X’s mother became problematic. He said:

_Daardie dae is hy soos die duiwel, dan hy baklei net. As ons nie iets wil doen nie dan druk hy op ons om iets te doen. Hy dwing ons._

Despite his stepfather’s behaviour, Mr X continued to acknowledge his stepfather and the connection between them remained firm, that is, until his stepfather betrayed their family by having an affair with another woman. Mr X was confused about his feelings toward his stepfather when his affair was revealed. He was uncertain

[m]_oet ek kwaad wees vir hom of moet ek bly wees vir sy part wat hy gedoen het. Ek ... ek weet nie?

It seems that Mr X felt torn. That is, his stepfather had let him down through his actions, although he still loved and appreciated the fatherly role that his stepfather had fulfilled for him. However, his stepfather’s actions had ruined the connection that existed between them, since Mr X felt that he “vertrou hom nou so ver as wat hy hom sien”. When his stepfather left their home, Mr X chose to disconnect from him stepfather, even though he continued to visit their home, to spend time with Mr X’s halfbrother. During these visits, Mr X ensured that he did not interact with his stepfather, since seeing his stepfather reminded him of the betrayal he had experienced and perhaps the relationship he felt he could no longer have with his stepfather. The strong feelings that Mr X experienced toward his stepfather, even though they were negative in nature, seems to reflect that he is still emotionally connected to their relationship. It seems that Mr X’s attempts to physically disconnect himself from his relationship with his stepfather, could not erase the emotional connection he continued to feel.
Mr X had the opportunity to reclaim the bond he had with his stepfather when his stepfather asked his mother if he could come back. However, Mr X did not want to risk making himself vulnerable again to experiencing the same betrayal that he had just endured. As far as he is concerned, “[h]y het sy goed gevat en geloop. So bly dit. Hy kom nie terug nie”. Mr X’s anger at his stepfather’s actions appears to still be present, as is his love for his stepfather. For Mr X, “[d]ie liefde wat [hy] vir hom gehad het is nog daar”. However, he believes that they need to remain disconnected, since geographically they live too far apart. Perhaps Mr X is actually “bang daar begin weer van vooraf ‘n nuwe band”, only to be hurt and to lose the connection for a second time. Thus, Mr X appears to maintain the disconnection within their relationship as a means of protecting himself from feelings of vulnerability despite the emotional connection he continues to feel.

In relation to his mother, the connection that exists between them appears to be unclear. Mr X describes her as being his “rol model” because

*sy leer vir my baie goeters wat ek eendag sal nodig kry. Sy wys my hoe om met die goed te werk [en] [a]s ek werk kry, hoe om my geld te gebruik.*

This description appears to imply that their connection is very practical in nature. Mr X also acknowledges that he is uncomfortable in sharing his emotions with his mother, thus, he only keeps her updated on the events that occur in his life but not how he feels. However, at the same time, Mr X feels that he “*is die heel naaste aan [haar]*” in his family. The contradictory nature of Mr X’s feelings regarding his relationship with his mother seems to reveal that Mr X feels sufficiently connected with his mother, even though he seems to be emotionally disconnected from her. However, it seems that it is Mr X who maintains the emotional distance within their relationship and not necessarily his mother. Thus, the manner in which he has defined his relationship with her satisfies his needs. Their emotional disconnection may also be the reason why Mr X’s relationship with his mother does not feature very prominently throughout his story, in that he has not experienced any of the emotional shifts between connection and disconnection that he has with his father and stepfather. Instead, it appears that throughout the
changes generated by his mother’s divorces, Mr X has remained connected although emotionally disconnected, a definition that he seems to be content with.

It is also possible that the discomfort that Mr X experiences in sharing his emotional difficulties with his mother may be as a result of the perception he has of her as a person. He said:

*Sy is sag. Sy kry ook seer maar vinniger as wat my pa sal seer kry. Aan die een kant sy word gou kwaad...sy word net gou geiriteerd met ons, sy skreeu baie.*

It appears that Mr X’s mother is a sensitive person who may become easily overwhelmed by things of an emotional nature. Thus, it is possible that Mr X may feel that he cannot burden his mother with his emotional difficulties, since she will not be able to cope with them as well. Therefore, Mr X may not rely on his mother for emotional support, thus maintaining the emotional disconnection in their relationship, as a means of protecting himself, since her inability may leave him feeling more exposed and vulnerable.

The nature of Mr X’s relationships appears to be all or nothing, which prohibits him from experiencing his relationships holistically. That is, Mr X seems to be unable to merge both the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ that occurs in these relationships. In relation to his father, Mr X *either* idealises him or is devastated by him. A similar polarity seems to exist in relation to his stepfather, where Mr X appears to *either* be connected or disconnected. In doing this, it seems that Mr X is unable to utilise the challenges in his relationships to strengthen them. Instead, they seem to lack a sense of authenticity due to their fragmented nature.

**Loyalty**

As a result of both divorces that Mr X has experienced, the changes to his family structure has brought with it difficulties that have resulted in conflicts between the members of Mr X’s family. According to Mr X, the relationship between his brother and his stepfather was very turbulent and they “*het baie bakle!*, sometimes for
“weke” because they did not agree on most things. There was also continuous conflict between Mr X’s mother and stepfather, usually regarding his stepfather’s daughter. However, throughout the conflict that seemed to be quite pervasive within his home, Mr X seems to have made a conscious decision not to align himself with anyone in his family. He said:

_Ek het normaal aangegaan soos ek altyd aangegaan het. In die eerste plek met die bakleiery of dit nou my ma en hy is of my eie broer of wie ookal. Ek het my nie gesteur aan hulle bakleiery nie._

It appears that Mr X did not want to become involved in the conflict between the people whom he loved. Instead, he seemed to understand both sides of the argument and felt that it was futile for him to become involved in the conflict too. Thus, in not making alliances with anyone, Mr X seemed to show loyalty to everyone. However, it is also possible that Mr X’s behaviour was actually a reflection of his loyalty to himself. That is, by not choosing sides during conflicts with anyone that he loved, Mr X was able to ensure that he maintained the peace in his relationships with those family members. This capacity to remain neutral within his family relationships seems to reflect a level of maturity in acknowledging his boundaries and those of others by not getting involved in issues that do not necessarily concern him. However, it may also reflect the indirect manner in which Mr X maintains relationships, that is, by distancing himself and silencing any opinion he may have so as not to challenge his place within those relationships.

Although Mr X has acknowledged his obvious choice to remain neutral, it seems that if Mr X “kon gekies het, het [hy sy] eie ma se kant gekies of [sy] broer se kant gekies”. Thus, it appears that Mr X feels strongly about his blood relationships. Perhaps, throughout the conflicts that he witnessed within his home, Mr X aligned himself with his mother and brother but only in his mind or his heart. However, he could not verbalise his alliance, perhaps because this may have placed his own relationships in jeopardy.

It appears that his loyalty to his blood relationships is now creating some discomfort within him as he tries to maintain his neutral stance between two
family members who are both his blood relatives. Recently, the relationship between Mr X’s mother and father has begun to deteriorate, where as it always used to be that “[hulle het] soos twee groot mense met mekaar gepraat”. Mr X feels that

[h]ulle sê die commonste goed vir mekaar...[s]oos my pa sê hy gaan vir sy prokureur bel, ek weet nie oor wat nie, en my ma sê dis reg, doen dit … en suke klein goedjies.

Mr X is adamant that his parents will not draw him into their conflict. Instead, Mr X “loop weg en gaan staan in my kamer tot dit verby is”. However, the conflict between his parents does seem to be having an influence on Mr X. In retelling his story, Mr X expressed that the conflict between his parents “pla [hom] nie” but soon after that Mr X verbalised that “die lewe is baie unfair”. It is possible that Mr X is experiencing a conflict in his loyalty for the first time with the deterioration of his parents’ relationship and it is becoming problematic for him to remain as neutral, on an emotional level, as he has done in previous conflicts.

It is possible that Mr X’s need to remain loyal to his family originates from his own experience in feeling disappointed and betrayed in his relationships with his father and stepfather. That is, since Mr X knows what it is to feel betrayed and abandoned, he may be trying to avoid creating a similar feeling within those whom he is loyal to by remaining neutral.

Keeping the Peace vs Creating conflict

Mr X’s ability to remain neutral in the face of conflict between two members of his family seems to be a task that has been manageable for him since he can distance himself from the issue at hand as it does not involve him. However, Mr X’s need to maintain the peace appears to be more pervasive, in that he seems to experience discomfort with conflict in general and strives to maintain the peace within any relationship even if it means sacrificing his needs.

Mr X’s need to maintain the peace in his relationships appears to have been
present from an early age. When his father questioned him as a child about his relationship with his stepfather, Mr X “het hom nie geantwoord nie”. Instead, “[hy het] vir hom gesê kom ons los dit. Ons praat eerder oor iets anders”. It seems that Mr X knew that if he continued to allow his father to explore this area with him, it would probably have ended in conflict and Mr X may have felt responsible for angering his father, which may have threatened their relationship. However, it seems that Mr X could not avoid conflict within his relationships completely, especially with his father.

Recently, when Mr X had a fallout with his father regarding the money his father had promised him, Mr X’s father “was baie vies”. Although Mr X felt that it was his father’s “plig” to assist him financially, Mr X also felt responsible for making his father angry with him. Therefore, he told his mother that “ons moet dit maar los en daarvan vergeet”. It seems that Mr X’s discomfort in making his father angry overruled his need for his father to fulfil his needs. Thus, Mr X was willing to sacrifice his needs to regain the peace within their relationship.

Perhaps the consistent conflict that Mr X has witnessed as a result of his mother’s divorces has developed a need within Mr X to be the peacekeeper within his home, and as a consequence within all his relationships and interactions. Mr X may be afraid of displeasing someone he cares about which may result in him being rejected, as he has been before. However, Mr X displayed a keen sense of maintaining the peace even before his first significant experience of rejection by his father. Therefore, it is possible that Mr X may have felt rejected even before the fallout with his father, perhaps with the initial divorce and the absence of his father in his life. Thus, as a means of compensating, he may have felt that if he pleased those around him and did not demand more for himself, he would remain accepted by those whom he loved.
Power vs Powerlessness

Mr X appears to have experienced shifts between feeling powerful and powerless within the situations he has needed to confront as a result of his mother’s divorces. Furthermore, it seems that as a consequence of the these shifts, Mr X has developed the need to control whatever parts of his life he can, perhaps as a means of regaining the power he had unwillingly lost.

The most explicit display of Mr X’s need for control appears to be in the manner in which he controls his emotions. Each time Mr X has experienced any pain or challenge associated with the divorces, he seems to have found his own way to cope, which is

"om rustig te wees. Om op my eie aan te gaan, en my eie dinge te doen, en niks daaraan te dink nie...of probeer om nie daaraan te dink nie."

It seems that Mr X needs to withdraw from others until he feels he has contained the overwhelming feelings he may be experiencing. However, he does not rely on others for emotional support even after he has gained control over his emotions. It is possible that Mr X feels that in allowing others to share in his pain, he may be placing himself in a vulnerable position, which may leave him exposed and feeling out of control. Furthermore, in controlling his emotions through the use of distractions and by forgetting, Mr X can have power over how much of what he is feeling and what has been done to him, affects him.

In relation to his father, Mr X displays a protectiveness, which seems to have evolved into a deep concern for him. However, his concern may also be motivated by Mr X’s need to regain his power in the situations with his father where he has felt powerless. Earlier in their relationship when Mr X’s father made little effort to contact him, Mr X wondered “wat gaan van hom word as hy nooit dinge met ons regmaak”. This same concern for his father was again exhibited when his father severed his ties, where he worried
It seems that Mr X wanted to take responsibility for their father-son relationship even though it was his father who had rejected him. It is also possible that the powerlessness that Mr X has felt in his relationship with his father and perhaps continues to feel, directs him to take responsibility for their relationship. That is, if Mr X can do something to resolve matters with his father and essentially ‘fix’ their relationship, perhaps he can regain some control over the course of their relationship as well as the powerlessness he feels.

In relation to his stepfather, it seems that Mr X felt powerless when his stepfather's affair resulted in Mr X losing this relationship. Mr X “het dit nie van hom verwag nie” and as a result of his stepfather's actions, the trust that had existed between them was broken. However, when his stepfather wanted to return to their family, this appears to have given Mr X the opportunity to regain some of the power he had lost. He said:


Both his brother and his decision not to allow his stepfather back into their lives appears to have been motivated out of protection for themselves and their family. In doing this, Mr X seems to have regained his power, in that he chose not to place himself in a vulnerable position again where his stepfather could hurt him and betray his trust.

Mr X appears to be attempting to regain a feeling of power over his life. It is possible that so much of what has been the source of Mr X's pain, that is, the divorces, as well as the disappointment regarding his father and stepfather's behaviour; Mr X had no control over. That is, Mr X was powerless to prohibit or change what was being done to him. Therefore, as a means of regaining his power, he seems to be grabbing onto all the things he can have power over, to
ensure he is not placed within a situation that leaves him feeling vulnerable and powerless again.

**From Coping to the Absence of Meaning**

The following theme is a description of the specific pattern of coping that Mr X has developed and come to rely upon to manage the overwhelming emotions he experiences.

As a result of his parents’ divorce, Mr X has had to face many emotional challenges in the years that followed. However, the manner in which he has learnt to cope seems to be directly aimed at self-containment. When Mr X is faced with an emotional challenge, he seems to feel overwhelmed and needs to withdraw from his environment and others, to be “op [sy] eie”. Mr X mostly retreats “na [sy] kamer [toe]”, where he will “probeer om daarvan te vergeet”. Perhaps Mr X requires time to sort his emotions out within himself first. Thus, he retreats to the safety of his room “[o]m rustig te wees”, so that he may gain the distance he requires to “verwerk” the overwhelming emotions he experiences. Once in the solitude of his bedroom, it is not an effortless task though for him to forget how he is feeling. Thus Mr X relies upon distractions to keep his “gedagtes op ‘n ander plek”. Through the years it seems that Mr X has found various effective strategies, ranging from reading to doing his homework, that keep his concentration sufficiently focussed on something else other than what he is feeling. It appears that in distracting himself, Mr X is able to abate the intensity of the emotions he is experiencing. However, there also appear to be times when Mr X turns to the solace of “rustige” music, especially when he is feeling “kwaad”, as the music helps him “om af te koel”.

Mr X relies completely on himself to manage his experiences and his emotions. Although his family appears to offer a supportive environment for Mr X, he has not found it possible to utilise this as a support system. During the difficulties Mr X and his brother were experiencing with their father, Mr X’s brother attempted to
connect with him by asking “hoe voel ek of wat ek daaromtrent gaan doen”. However, for Mr X “[d]it was te seer gewees” and he chose to remain quiet. Mr X is unable to reveal his pain to his brother and seems to feel safer by remaining guarded. This pattern of containment applies within his relationship with his mother as well. He said:

Dit is net moeilik om met jou ma ... om met iemand in die familie daaronder te praat. Dit voel net nie vir my reg nie...as ek sou dalk sou gevra het, is ek bang daar gebeur iets...ek sê iets verkeerd of ek vra iets verkeerd.

It is possible that Mr X’s need to remain loyal to his family motivates his inability to confide in them regarding his problems, especially when they are related to the divorces or other family members. Perhaps Mr X feels that if he seeks understanding from his family, he will be speaking about that person in a negative light. Thus, he will no longer be showing loyalty to everyone, which may perturb the relationships he holds with these family members. Therefore, Mr X needs to cope on his own regarding his own difficulties, perhaps because this is the only way he can ensure that the relationships he holds with his family are maintained.

Mr X has found an external source of support in “[sy] een vriend by die skool”, from whom he seeks advice. Mr X feels this friend “weet baie van [hom] af”, although he still maintains the distance within this relationship by only sharing with him the “klein dingetjies wat [hom] pla”. He said:

Wat gebeur het... of hoe dit sou gebeur het...ek het probeer om daarvan te vergeet. En as ek gevoel dit is na die tyd en ek het reg gevoel dan sal ek ... loop ek na hom toe en ek vertel hom die storie en ek vra vir hom waar kan jy my help? Hoe kan ek dit doen?... Hoe kan ek dit sê?

The support Mr X gains from his friend appears to be on a practical level, where he gains advice on how to deal with practical problems that arise as a result of the divorce. Perhaps Mr X experiences discomfort in feeling so much emotion, thus he needs to gain some control over feeling overwhelmed before he can feel comfortable opening up to his friend. It is possible that in this way he can control his feeling of vulnerability, which comes with the overwhelming emotions he faces.
Reliving the Past through Unresolved Emotions

Mr X appears to cope in a restricted way by suppressing his emotions through forgetting and distracting himself from what he feels. However, it appears that in suppressing these emotions, Mr X is merely placing them in a box and locking them away. As an initial solution, this seems to be ideal, in that Mr X can quickly move on from feeling so overwhelmed by his emotions. However, there are certain times when Mr X feels that he “wil nie meer lewe nie...dinge raak nou te erg”. It is possible that Mr X continues to feel overwhelmed by the losses he has endured and the changes to his life that have come as a result of these losses. However, Mr X’s ability to suppress his emotions regarding the divorce appears to have prohibited him from resolving his emotions and finding closure on them. As a result, Mr X finds himself re-experiencing the pain from the past each time he reflects upon his past experiences. He said:

[A]s ek terug dink aan alles wat gebeur het. Ek wil weet hoekom het dit gebeur. Wie se skuld dit was. Om watter rede het dit gebeur.

Mr X seems to be aware of this occurrence, which is why “[hy] hou nie daarvan om van die verlede te praat nie”. Therefore, he avoids delving into his past as much as he can and avoids sharing his feelings with others. Mr X is aware of the reasons behind the first and second divorce, although it appears that these reasons have not completely satisfied Mr X. It is possible that Mr X is searching for the meaning of these experiences. However, since he does not allow himself to experience his pain, his emotions are not able to evolve beyond the initial intensity of his experiences into the meaning that he could discover. Furthermore, his inability to release the pain in sharing it with others may also be contributing to the lack of meaning he has found in his experiences as the emotions remain raw and intense.

Throughout the interview, Mr X’s ability to emotionally express himself appeared to be limited, which is especially exhibited in his vocabulary where he repeatedly used the word “seer” to describe his feelings. Perhaps in not allowing himself to explore his emotions, Mr X has not been able to accurately identify how he is
feeling. Thus, the experience of his emotions appears to have remained somewhat child-like and generalised.

Despite the lack of meaning that Mr X has discerned from his experiences, he does exhibit an innate sense to survive the many challenges that he has been forced to confront. Each challenge, disappointment, and loss that Mr X has faced has not been from choices he has made. Nevertheless, he appears to have found a way to emerge from these challenges with a focus on his future and hope still burning in his heart for a renewed start in his relationships.

**A Last Word...**

When Mr X reflects upon the years following the first and the second divorce, he feels that he has always received support and love. In addition, he believes that he has been taken care of and never wanted for anything. However, Mr X harbours a secret wish, "dat hulle weer bymekaar kan uitkom, van vooraf weer kan begin", and “as ek tyd kon terug draai het ek”. His desire to have his family reunited extends to both his parents and his mother and stepfather, perhaps bringing to light the significance of both these families to Mr X. However, his silent wish also seems to express the need of the young child within who has not been able to come to terms with the reality of living in a parted family. It is possible that this same wish, that Mr X has silently hoped for through all these years, has prevented Mr X from finding the meaning in his experiences and the ability to unearth any positive influence from the divorces on his life. Mr X clearly verbalised this in that the only lesson that he has learnt from his experience of the divorces is, “as jy trou, moenie skei nie, dit is nie lekker nie”.

**Reflections of the Researcher**

From the initial meeting with Mr X and throughout the interview process, the researcher experienced immense difficulty in connecting with him. Mr X's trepidation felt like a dark shadow that followed them throughout the interview
process to the extent that the researcher often felt that she was intruding into the private world of Mr X – a world he did not want revealed. The researcher experienced him as extremely guarded in nature and felt that he consistently tried to block the researcher’s inquiry, which strongly highlighted his difficulty in openly exploring his past. In addition, this became a challenge for the researcher in that she needed to continuously probe Mr X to gain a deeper and richer understanding of his experiences, which has in many respects been unsuccessful. Instead, the researcher feels that she has been left with many unanswered questions regarding Mr X’s story, in that, she feels there is much more to his story and to Mr X than he was willing to reveal.

Mr X’s evasive and guarded nature further influenced the researcher, in that, the researcher experienced Mr X as being detached from the pain that he was verbalising. As a result, the researcher found it a challenge to connect with the painful experiences and memories that he shared. However, this also became an advantage for the researcher in that she did not feel as strong an alignment with Mr X as she did with Barbie. Thus, the interpretive process of Mr X’s story was less of an emotional challenge for the researcher. This is not to say that the researcher was not affected by Mr X’s story. In revising the interpretation, the researcher became aware of her tendency to use extreme adjectives. In reflecting upon this process, the researcher feels that she may have been more emotionally influenced by Mr X’s story than she initially thought. In addition, the researcher feels that her use of extreme adjectives is in some way similar to the extreme manner in which Mr X experiences his relationships, which may have had an influence on the researcher’s perceptions.

The researcher feels that Mr X showed great courage in simply participating in the study. At the beginning of the second interview, the researcher was taken aback by passive-aggressive behaviour that Mr X displayed towards the researcher regarding his participation in the study. He revealed to the researcher that he had expressed to his mother that he “wil dit nooit weer doen nie”. The researcher felt that Mr X was experiencing uneasiness in exploring his past and telling his story.
and may have wanted to end the process. However, when Mr X was confronted with the option of discontinuing his participation, he chose to continue. The researcher suspects that Mr X was possibly afraid of stopping his participation in the study because he did not want to disappoint or anger me, or perhaps his mother. Therefore, he chose to continue despite his obvious discomfort in exploring his past. Although, it is possible that this simple act to continue, was in fact a giant leap forward for Mr X, which the researcher admires.

In spite of the difficulties that the researcher encountered with Mr X’s story, in the end, the researcher feels that she was able to gain a better understanding of what motivates Mr X to remain elusive and guarded. Since the researcher has not even experienced one divorce in her lifetime, she is aware that she can never know the immensity of what it feels like to have your family broken twice in one lifetime. The researcher believes she can appreciate Mr X’s need to protect himself through the destruction and disappointment that he has endured. The researcher admires Mr X’s ability to preserve his relationships with the people he loves through his capacity to remain neutral during the times that he was obviously in the midst of a war zone. This especially reflects for the researcher that Mr X learnt the rules of the game at a young age, which assisted him in being able to out manoeuvre the pull of being polarised within his family. Finally, the researcher feels that Mr X shows strength of character because despite being rejected and disappointed by his father, Mr X has been able to forgive his father and move beyond his emotions and look forward to the possibility of a fresh start within their relationship.

Mr X’s Reflections
Following the first interview, Mr X continued to display some trepidation regarding his participation in the study. He seemed to be unsure about his feelings regarding the interview thus far and described that he “het nie sleg gevoel nie. Ek het nie goed gevoel nie. Ek was so inbetween”, although he expressed to his mother that he “wil dit nooit weer doen nie”. However, when Mr X had reached the end of both interviews he seemed to have changed his opinion about being able to share
his story. It appears that Mr X has found some comfort in exploring his past, since he believes

\[
\text{[d]it is beter om dit met iemand uit te praat as wat jy dit vir die res van jou lewe in jou hou.}
\]

Mr X admitted later that, following the first interview, he was feeling and sleeping better, since he had “die meeste van my hartseer uitgepraat”. Although, it appears that the relief that Mr X experienced in speaking out about his experience is not something that he will experience regularly since he feels that he “kan nie almal vertrou nie”. Thus, Mr X’s relief regarding his experience in this study has largely been dependent on the secrecy that he can maintain in remaining anonymous.

In light of Mr X’s sense of peace that he had found in participating in this study and sharing his story, it is significant that Mr X’s participation in this study ended with the conclusion of the second interview. Mr X did not express any interest in concluding the process, even though he was given the opportunity to provide feedback regarding the researcher’s interpretation of his story. Perhaps in participating in this study, Mr X had found some sense of peace in being able to speak about his experiences of divorce, thus he did not feel it relevant for him to continue beyond the interviews. However, when considering his disinterest in the interpretation of his story in light of his initial hesitation, as well as his trepidation following the first interview, it seems that Mr X needed this process to end so that he could bring his past to a close.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, the researcher has presented a description of Mr X’s experience of his parents’ divorce and the divorce of his mother and stepfather. These two events have been described in relation to the role they have played in Mr X’s life experiences following the divorce and the effect they have had on himself and his relationships. When viewing divorce within the context of Mr X’s story, the importance of a consistent relationship with both parental figures has been clearly depicted. Mr X’s story also highlights that the blending of families can have both a
positive and a negative influence on the children of divorce. In addition, Mr X’s story illustrates that it is the parental figures who hold the key to minimising the disadvantageous effects of divorce on the children of divorce.

The researcher feels that in relation to Mr X’s story, his mother and father, like many parents, did not think they needed to address or discuss issues, especially if they were not brought up by Mr X. It is possible that they felt that as a teenager, Mr X had moved on and no longer needed to address anything relating to the divorce. They seem to have been mistaken. Mr X has endured repeated losses as a result of both divorces and his story highlights the lingering pain that can continue within the children of divorce long after the marriage has come to an end. However, Mr X has also displayed an innate sense to survive despite the past that continues to haunt him.