

## **Chapter Seven**

### **COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, the common themes that emerged from the stories of the two participants will be discussed. Although each participant's experiences were unique to his or her context, some common themes run through their experiences. A comparative analysis between these themes and the literature in Chapters 2,3, and 4 will also be undertaken. Similarities and differences between the themes and previous research will be discussed. The aim is not to substantiate the findings in this research but to include the many different voices on the topic.

The themes that seemed to re-occur for the researcher in both stories were the following:

- Boundaries
- Loss
  - The Loss of Family and Relationships
  - The Loss of 'Authentic' Behaviour
- Silence
- Power vs Powerlessness
- Disconnection
- Towards Resilience

#### **The Theme of Boundaries**

Throughout the years following the divorce, Barbie experienced a consistent shift in the boundaries within her relationships with her parents. In relation to her father, Barbie initially experienced relaxed and permeable boundaries. However, the boundaries seemed to shift without notice, thus becoming rigid and restrictive

following her father's remarriage to her stepmother. In relation to her mother, the opposite seemed to occur, where Barbie's mother moved from instituting firm boundaries to ones that were more flexible in nature, which were negotiated with Barbie. Therefore, it seemed that Barbie's father initially relied upon a permissive parenting style and then shifted to an authoritarian style, whereas Barbie's mother moved from parenting in an authoritarian style, which later also mirrored her new husband's domineering and controlling stance, to an authoritative style. Steinberg (2001) emphasises that the authoritative parenting style provides a balance for adolescents because it offers three significant components, namely, warmth, firmness, and involvement. This is evident in Barbie, in that, she seemed to respond positively when her mother was able to be *both* assertive about the rules *and* willing to explain and negotiate.

Barbie gravitated towards the parent who allowed her the most freedom, and felt restricted and controlled by the authoritarian style of parenting. According to Adams et al. (1994) and Baumrind (1991), the authoritarian style of parenting stifles the adolescents' attempts to exercise their newfound cognitive abilities in an attempt to control and dominate them. Barbie seemed to find this aspect of control especially difficult in relation to her father, mother, and stepfather. In relation to her father, Barbie experienced the shift in his parenting styles, from permissive to authoritarian, especially difficult because there was no clarity surrounding the reasons for the shift. Furthermore, Barbie felt that in her relationship with her father, there was no room for compromise, and that his mistrust in her was dismissive of her ability to also contribute to the choices that influenced her. Barbie experienced a similar discomfort in relation to her mother, although, since Barbie's mother seemed to have always been a firm disciplinarian, Barbie's discomfort seemed to result more from her stepfather's use of domineering and controlling behaviour. Contributing to Barbie's discomfort was the lack of clarity surrounding her stepfather's role. That is, the influence he had on her mother and whether or not Barbie should adhere to his rules, was not clearly defined. Therefore, in relation to her parents, the absence of communication regarding the shifts and changes to her life was having an impact

on Barbie and seemed to further highlight the lack of accommodation for her advancing reasoning abilities. It has been found that adolescents raised in these environments may display hostility and resentment towards their parents (Olapegba & Emelogu, 2004), which may clarify Barbie's movement away from the parent who was utilising this style of parenting, namely, her stepfather and mother initially, and then her father after he shifted his style of parenting.

Wolfradt et al. (2003) found that adolescents who are raised in an authoritarian manner exhibit increased anxiety and a decreased ability to cope. The consistent shifts between rigidity and flexibility left Barbie feeling confused and insecure about what was expected of her as well as her place within these relationships. In an effort to cope with the restriction and control of her parents and stepfather, Barbie turned to mechanisms that were self-destructive and harmful in nature. That is, the self-mutilation, the eating disorder, as well as the suicide attempts, which may reflect the level of anxiety that Barbie was feeling.

Without the safety of defined and consistent boundaries, Barbie needed to discover her own limits. Vander Zanden (1993) maintains that during this stage in adolescents' development, their cognitive abilities facilitate the development of moral reasoning, thus allowing them to become less reliant on their parents for guidance. However, the nature of the authoritarian parenting style used by Barbie's mother, father, and stepfather would have inhibited this. Nonetheless, in spite of this inhibition, it seemed that Barbie developed her own value system, as she defined her own boundaries, which were comfortable for her and yet exhibited a developed sense of maturity and responsibility. Bednar and Fisher (2003) and Pratt et al. (2003) have identified that the authoritative parenting style fosters the development of moral reasoning. That is, this style emphasises reasoning and respect for others' opinions, which is necessary to develop one's own moral reasoning. Therefore, one may hypothesise that the shift in Barbie's mother's parenting style also facilitated Barbie's development of moral reasoning and allowed her to set boundaries that were both comfortable for herself and reflected the moral guidelines of her mother.

The shifting boundaries that Barbie experienced in her relationships with her parents seemed to have formed a template for her in other relationships, especially with her friends. That is, Barbie shifted between firm and established boundaries and a complete lack of boundaries. According to Camarena et al. (1990), adolescent girls emphasise aspects such as mutual trust and self-disclosure in their friendships. Thus, they are open to disclosing their feelings, especially with reference to the anxieties and concerns they experience regarding their physical changes as well as the changes to their parental and heterosexual relationships (Camarena et al., 1990; Miller, 1990). However, this is not the case for Barbie because she established firm boundaries with nearly all her friends regarding self-disclosure. Nonetheless, when it came to others needing to confide in Barbie or having their needs met, Barbie seemed to lack boundaries almost entirely as she found it difficult to say 'no' to their demands, which might indicate that she did not experience mutual trust within her relationships.

Mr X experienced less difficulty regarding the boundaries in his relationships with his parents. It seemed that his mother managed to remain a consistent and stable figure in his life. Steinberg (2001) believes the authoritative parenting style provides a balance for adolescents because it offers warmth and acceptance; assertiveness about rules and values, and demonstrates a willingness to listen, explain and negotiate. Although it is difficult to identify if his mother utilised this particular parenting style since Mr X did not speak much of her in his story, one may hypothesise that she may have used it to a degree. In relation to his father though, Mr X's experience was different. Instead, his father, who seemed to display a rejecting-neglecting parenting style, seemed to be the model of inconsistent behaviour and was absent for an extended period of Mr X's life. Traditionally in Western society, fathers have more authority and command than mothers in the family. Therefore, they are more likely to help their sons develop more adaptive and mature ways of thinking and behaving thereby limiting the possibility of them acting out exaggerated notions of their masculinity, such as extreme aggression (Snarey, 1993). Mr X's father was absent, in many ways, from his life, thus it seemed that Mr X did not receive this kind of guidance from his

father. However, Mr X still displayed a mature level of self-control and did not seem to act out any aggressive behaviour, thus challenging the contention of Snarey (1993). However, one may hypothesise that due to his stepfather being a part of his life from a young age, their relationship compensated for his father's absence and inconsistent behaviour, which then confirms what Snarey (1993) maintains. Therefore, unlike Barbie, Mr X appeared to avert the effect that his father's emotionally uninvolved parenting style would have had on him. That is, adolescents of these parents (rejecting-neglecting) are identified as having school and drug problems, and difficulties with self-regulation and adjustment (Weis & Schwartz, cited in Jaffe, 1998), qualities that Mr X has not displayed.

The boundaries that Mr X established with others were more rigid in nature, almost impermeable. However, according to Camarena et al. (1990) and Hartup and Overhauser (1991), boys place less emphasis on self-disclosure and being emotionally understood, and are more concerned with finding someone who shares similar interests and activities. Thus, Mr X's inability to openly disclose with others seemed to be age appropriate for this stage of his development.

The boundaries that Barbie and Mr X have established within their relationships appear to be significantly different to each other. On the one hand, Barbie's seemed to reflect open, permeable and sometimes undefined boundaries, especially when it involved the needs of others. However, on the other hand, she established firm and controlled boundaries regarding her own needs. Mr X's boundaries seemed to be closed and restrictive most of the time. Thus, both could benefit from finding a comfortable balance, which would be optimal in their future developmental phases.

### **The Theme of Loss**

Both Barbie and Mr X have experienced significant and multiple losses on varying levels as a result of their parents' divorce.

### The Loss of Family and Relationships

The initial loss, for both Barbie and Mr X, has been that of the family as a united and whole unit. As a result of this loss, both Barbie and Mr X suffered the loss of their relationships with the parental figure who left the home, which was their fathers. According to Flouri and Buchanan (2003) and Videon (2005), it is important for adolescents to have a loving and involved relationship with their father. The literature states that there could be a number of implications for Barbie and Mr X due to this disturbance in the father-adolescent bond.

Barbie's relationship with her father was initially maintained after the divorce. However, over time, the nature of their relationship shifted and Barbie lost the connection she felt she had with her father. As a result, Barbie experienced disappointment and developed a lack of trust in her father. Secunda (1992) suggests that during adolescence, it is expected that the time spent between fathers and daughters usually diminishes and the emotional bond weakens. Thus, the deterioration in their relationship may have been the 'normal' course for the parent-adolescent relationship to take. However, Secunda (1992) also asserts that this is the time that daughters rely on their fathers to assist them in separating from their mothers and establishing an identity of their own, as the bond with their fathers encourages their self-reliance and individuation from their mothers without losing the support of their family. Therefore, Barbie's ability to separate from her mother should have been inhibited. However, this seemed not to be true for her. Instead, Barbie seemed to become self-reliant as a result of her spending most of her time on her own and independently caring for herself following the divorce. This same implication is exhibited in Mr X's story. According to Biller (1993), the absence of a father in the life of adolescent boys interferes with their ability to individuate from the mother but it also has further implications from a traditional societal perspective. That is, society implies that sons should take responsibility for their mothers, when the father is absent (Biller, 1993). Therefore, when Mr X made the decision not to allow his stepfather to return following his affair with another woman, he appeared to take responsibility for his mother by protecting her. Thus, reflecting his willingness to ensure that his

mother was taken care of, although it may have interfered with his ability to separate from her.

Aseltine (1996) found that the loss of the support and nurturance of the family through divorce is linked with the development of adolescent depression, in that it generates additional stressors to the normative ones that adolescents face during this phase of development. In addition, Kurtz and Derevensky (1993) assert that prolonged and progressive family disruption and ineffective intimacy development in parent-adolescent relationships is associated with suicidal behaviour because it may augment existing feelings of isolation, loss, and hostility, thereby diminishing adolescents' coping resources. Barbie was diagnosed with depression and attempted suicide on numerous occasions, which can be linked to the loss of the close bond Barbie perceived to have had with her father. Furthermore, Barbie's experience of her parents' remarriages seemed to reflect a continued disruption for Barbie, since they contributed to the deterioration of her relationships with her parents, especially her father. In addition, her stepfather's excessively dominating and controlling nature seemed to be a further disruption that significantly impacted on Barbie's life and her sense of family with her mother. That is, his behaviour inhibited her freedom within her home and influenced the sense of security she felt within her home. Although Mr X's parents also remarried, he did not exhibit any internalising behaviours, thus challenging the findings of Kurtz and Derevensky (1993). However, this could be attributed to his age at which the remarriages took place, and more specifically due to the close bond that he developed with his stepfather, which seemed to compensate for the loss of his father.

#### The Loss of 'Authentic' Behaviour

In relation to her parents, the manner in which Barbie interacted with them and the behaviour that she displayed seemed to be edited versions of what she felt and thought in 'reality'. This is similar to what Brown (1998, p. 160) describes as self-presentational behaviour, which focuses on the "social side of the self" and is

defined as “any behaviour intended to create, modify, or maintain an impression of ourselves in the minds of others”. Brown (1998) emphasises that self-presentation is a significant aspect of our lives because it assists us in leading others to believe that we are worthy of being loved and trusted by others. In relation to her mother, this behaviour seemed to develop following her mother’s negative reaction when Barbie disclosed her feelings regarding her mother’s new relationship with her future stepfather to the psychologist. Thus, based on Brown’s (1998) assertion above, Barbie may have questioned her worthiness of being loved by her mother. Her mother’s remarriage intensified her feelings of being ignored and neglected, and in the years that followed Barbie appeared to be consistently manoeuvring for her mother’s love and approval, aspects of their relationship that seemed to continue to be absent for Barbie. Brown (1998) suggests that individuals need to be sufficiently motivated before they can create a self-presentation. One such motivation is being ignored or shunned by others, which then increases the individuals’ awareness of themselves (Buss, cited in Brown, 1998). Thus, the neglect that Barbie experienced due to her mother’s remarriage and the obstacle that it posed to Barbie being accepted and loved by her mother may have been sufficient motivation for her to engage in self-presentational behaviour. This was especially evident when Barbie returned from the hospital, following her last suicide attempt, and Barbie was more concerned with how she had disappointed her mother yet again instead of the lack of acknowledgement that her mother had given to the despair she had felt at this time. Thus, Barbie seemed to be further shunned by her mother, which Buss (cited in Brown, 1998) suggests heightens the need to engage in self-presenting behaviour. As a result, Barbie seemed to believe that she needed to secure her connection with her mother by being a ‘better’ daughter, the daughter her mother expected her to be. Thus, Barbie began to present herself in a manner that her mother found to be most accepting, which seemed to secure the love and acceptance that she had been manoeuvring for. Barbie’s presentational behaviour seemed to be largely dependent on her ability to silence her thoughts and feelings regarding her needs as well as the impact her stepfather’s demanding behaviour was having on her. This seems to concur with what Goffman (cited in Brown,



1998) identifies as being one of the reasons for engaging in self-presentational behaviour, namely to facilitate social interaction. That is, individuals will withhold expressing what they think or feel as a means of avoiding conflict and reducing tension (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, cited in Brown, 1998). Thus, one can hypothesise that the acceptance that Barbie gained from engaging in self-presentational behaviour was conditional, in that she needed to edit her emotional self from her relationship with her mother to receive that acceptance and to maintain the relationship.

Similarly, in relation to her father, Barbie seemed to engage in self-presentational behaviour, although the onset seemed to have been immediately following the divorce of her parents. The nature of Barbie's relationship with her father seemed to be defined as a friendship. Thus, Barbie seemed to play the role of her father's friend despite what appeared to be her need to be a daughter. As previously mentioned, Buss (cited in Brown, 1998) maintains that individuals need to be motivated to engage in self-presentational behaviour. Oppawsky (2000) and Thiessen (1993) have found that as a result of their parents' divorce, adolescents experience feelings of insecurity, which are heightened by the fear that they will be abandoned and rejected by the parent who leaves. Thus, the absence of her father may have been sufficient motivation for Barbie to present herself in the manner that was most pleasing for her father due to a fear of losing the love and acceptance she had always felt in their relationship. This became more of a challenge though following her father's remarriage, since he seemed to no longer want Barbie to play the role of a friend but a daughter. Barbie experienced the shift as confusing, although she nonetheless seemed to try to alter her role to maintain the acceptance and love she received in their relationship. Her only resource seemed to be in her silence. That is, Barbie avoided sharing what she really thought and felt to maintain the harmony in her relationship with her father. This concurs with what Goffman and DePaulo et al. (cited in Brown, 1998) identify as a common reason for engaging in self-presentation, that is to facilitate social interaction and to avoid conflict. She seemed unable to keep up with the presentation though, which resulted in her pulling away from her father.

Brown (1998) contends that in general, people are attracted to the roles that will let them express their self-perceived qualities. However, there are times when peoples' views of themselves are in conflict with the roles they adopt, which can create psychological inconsistency between actions and beliefs. Thus, as a means of alleviating this incongruence, it is suggested that people will internalise characteristics that are relevant to the role they play (Brown, 1998). However, the characteristic is not forced onto individuals, instead, the individuals internalise characteristics that they interpret as being necessary to create congruence (McCall & Simmons; Sarbin & Allen; Stryker & Statham, cited in Brown, 1998). Barbie seemed to develop this incongruence with regard to her relationship with her mother. That is, Barbie's need to silence her thoughts and feelings to maintain the relationship was inconsistent with what she needed. However, she eventually came to believe that it was she who no longer felt comfortable in confiding in and gaining support from her mother. Thus, she had internalised a characteristic of the role she played in this relationship. One may also hypothesise that Barbie experienced a similar inconsistency in the role that she played with her father, although, instead of internalising certain characteristics of the role, she chose to withdraw from the relationship.

Barbie's need to engage in self-presentation extended beyond her relationships with her parents to include her relationships with most of her friends. Within Barbie's friendships, Barbie became a 'people pleaser', where she went beyond what was expected or asked of her to satisfy the needs of her friends. Brown (1998) maintains that individuals self-present to convince others that they are worthy of receiving their friendship. This is done by trying to get others to like you, which is commonly achieved by doing favours for them or demonstrating positive personal characteristics (Jones, cited in Brown, 1998). Thus, Barbie's 'people pleasing' behaviour seemed to be aimed at cementing her friendships, which ensured her acceptance by them. That is, if Barbie could present a self that was likeable and could convince her friends that this was a quality that she possessed then they would have been more unwilling to reject her.

Mr X also seemed to engage in self-presentational behaviour, although it appeared to be predominantly in relation to his father. Mr X's father seemed to reveal that his responsibilities as a father to Mr X were a burden to him. This was evident early on in their relationship when Mr X's father made little contact with Mr X and eventually stopped seeing him for an extended period of time. Mr X felt unimportant and shunned by his father, thus intensifying his need for his father's love and acceptance. Therefore, when Mr X's father re-established contact, Mr X seemed to begin presenting himself in a manner that pleased his father. Buss (cited in Brown, 1998) identifies being ignored or shunned by others as a significant influence on the need to engage in self-presentation. The self-presentation that Mr X displayed seemed to be of an undemanding and pleasing son, which he seemed to believe would ensure that his father would not ignore him again. The importance of maintaining this role with his father was evident when Mr X's father severed his ties again with Mr X after he questioned his father regarding money his father had promised him. That is, it seemed that Mr X had briefly stepped out of his role as the undemanding son, which had clear consequences for Mr X. In spite of Mr X feeling that his father should uphold his fatherly responsibilities, he was incapable of insisting this from his father. Instead, Mr X seemed to become more accommodating in his attitude that it was his father's obligation to uphold his fatherly responsibilities. According to Brown (1998, p. 185), it has been shown that individuals "change their attitudes when they behave in ways that contradict their values and their beliefs". Festinger (cited in Brown, 1998) contends that this change happens to reduce the distress that is experienced between one's beliefs and their actions. Thus, Mr X seemed to change his attitude regarding his father's lack of responsibility to him because this contradicted his own inability to demand this of his father.

It is believed that in general, self-presentational behaviour occurs unconsciously. However, it has been identified that certain situations increase people's awareness of themselves, thus requiring them to take control of how they are presenting themselves (Leary; Schenkler & Weigold, cited in Brown, 1998). It is these instances where Barbie and Mr X have felt the risk of losing or have lost the

acceptance and love in their respective parental relationships that has motivated them to take control of the impressions they create. However, Barbie and Mr X's awareness to create desired impressions in these relationships, which are considered to be close relationships, challenges what is considered the 'norm' of self-presentational behaviour. That is, it is argued that people are more aware of the impressions they create mostly with those they are not close to (Brown, 1998). Schenkler (cited in Brown, 1998) maintains that the reason for this is that when we present an impression to people that have knowledge of our past and are close to us, the risk of creating a false impression is higher. Thus, the people generally behave authentically with people they are close too. It is possible to hypothesise that this risk is less for Barbie because she has internalised part of her role into her self. Furthermore, as Mr X's contact with his father is less due to their separate living arrangements, he is able to maintain the impression he has created of himself more easily.

### **The Theme of Silence**

Silence has been inextricably linked with the losses that Barbie and Mr X have endured, and their inability to behave authentically in their relationships with their parents.

During adolescence the parent-adolescent relationship is in flux. Baumrind (1991) believes that during this stage conflict is a necessary part of adolescents' development towards self-reliance, which is achieved by adolescents expressing and defending their opinions as well as differentiating their views from their parents. However, Barbie did not experience the luxury of being able to express her views. Instead, following her parents' divorce, it seemed necessary for Barbie to silence her voice as a means of preserving her relationships with her parents, since Barbie experienced them to be under threat in the times when she dared to speak out, as she did when she disclosed her feelings to the psychologist. Thus, possibly influencing her ability to become self-reliant. This did not seem to be the case though for Barbie, since she was expected, in many respects, to care for and

raise herself following the divorce. Mr X experienced a similar need to silence himself to preserve his relationships, although, unlike with Barbie, it did not seem to result from a time when he had tried to speak out. Instead, he seemed to have come to his own realisation that there would be consequences if he spoke out about his opinions and emotions. Thus, Mr X avoided engaging in any form of conflict, especially with his parents, which may have impacted on his ability to become self-reliant. Furthermore, this links with Goffman (cited in Brown, 1998) who suggests that people avoid saying what they think and feel to facilitate social interaction, which is motivated by the need to avoid conflict (DePaulo et al., cited in Brown, 1998).

Adolescents are especially vulnerable to loyalty conflicts, especially due to their ability to understand their parents' position regarding the divorce. 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 (Oppawsky, 2000; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). However, at the same time they may feel despair and helplessness at betraying the other parent. Mr X appeared to have only experienced a conflict in his loyalties at one time when his father questioned Mr X about his relationship with his stepfather, although he seemed to have felt that his silence was the only solution that could protect himself and preserve the relationship with his father *and* stepfather. Barbie also relied upon her ability to remain silent, as a means of managing being placed in a loyalty conflict, although she seemed to experience more harmful effects. Following her father's remarriage to her stepmother, Barbie became a frequent witness to the unfair criticism of her mother by her father and stepmother. The powerlessness and guilt that Barbie experienced as a result of her silence resulted in her being physically ill when she returned home after visiting him. This concurs with Koerner et al. (2000) and Lee (2001) who have found that these adolescents experience increased psychological distress. In addition, according to Buchanan et al. (1991), these adolescents are also more depressed, a condition that Barbie was diagnosed with.

Communication between parents and adolescents preceding the divorce were found to impact on their ability to cope and accept the divorce (Wadsby & Svedin, 1994). More specifically, Dunn et al. (2001) suggest that insufficient information leaves adolescents to struggle alone with the consequences and meaning of the event, which contributes to their feelings of isolation. Barbie was especially unprepared when her parents divorced. However, the lack of communication between her parents and herself seemed to become a pervasive norm throughout the years that followed, as Barbie was left to find her own understanding regarding most of the changes that continued to disrupt her life. Mr X's first experience of divorce was at a very young age, although he was still left to find the answers to the questions he had regarding the reason for his parents divorce, himself. When his mother divorced his stepfather, Mr X clearly knew the reasons for this divorce, although the absence of communication about the divorce and its impact on him continued. As a result of Mr X's isolation, he was still plagued by questions, although they seemed to be existential in nature. For example, at times Mr X wondered why both divorces had to happen at all.

Dacey and Kenny (1994) maintain that during this phase of development, adolescents begin to push for fuller participation in their relationships with their parents, beginning with the decisions that concern them. However, this became more difficult for Barbie and Mr X, due to the lack of communication that existed in their relationships with their parents, and more especially since Barbie and Mr X needed to silence themselves to maintain the bond in the relationships. Therefore, it seemed that Barbie and Mr X were placed in a paradox, where silence was both a factor that protected them and their relationships, although at the same time, it resulted in consequences that were not optimal for their development. This concurs with Smith's (1999) belief that what may have been resilience in one context can become vulnerability in another. Barbie appeared to have been aware of the paradox she was in though, since she tried to communicate her needs through alternate ways, that is, her behaviour. Barbie felt overwhelmed by the silence and the impact it was having on her, thus through her rebellious and self-

destructive behaviour, Barbie seemed to try to communicate with her mother, although this indirect manner of communicating was not very successful.

### **The Theme of Power vs Powerlessness**

Oppawsky (2000) and Thiessen (1993) have independently found that the collapse of the family structure due to the process of divorce generates feelings of insecurity in adolescents because their world is temporarily without support. These feelings become heightened by the fear that they will be abandoned and rejected by the parent who leaves. Initially, this fear of abandonment was not a reality for either Barbie or Mr X, since both Barbie and Mr X's relationships with their fathers were maintained after their fathers left. However, this fear came to be realised later in their relationships. Following her father's remarriage, Barbie felt that her father had abandoned their relationship to focus on his new life with his wife and Barbie's halfsister. In addition, Barbie experienced the same feeling of abandonment in her relationship with her mother, following her mother's remarriage to her stepfather. For Mr X, his experience of abandonment seemed to be in his relationship with his father, when he diminished his contact with Mr X for an extended period of time, and with his stepfather, when he left Mr X and his family because of his affair with another woman. Drapeau et al. (1999) and Pryor and Rodgers (2001) have suggested that adolescents experience a heightened sense of their own vulnerability when the relationship with the parent is in danger of being destroyed, as they fear losing this parents' love and affection. For both Barbie and Mr X, this was no longer just a fear but a reality. Thus, their sense of vulnerability seemed to be heightened and appeared to create a feeling of powerlessness in them.

Ostgard-Ybrandt and Armelius (2004) have identified that a parent-child relationship that is not characterised by love, concern, interest, warmth, and support, and which does not remain consistent throughout adolescence, is associated with the development of low self-esteem and can generate mistrust in the environment and in others as a result of their needs not being met. In feeling

abandoned by their respective parental relationships, Barbie and Mr X's needs were no longer being met. As a result, Barbie and Mr X no longer seemed to trust that they would not be abandoned and rejected again in these relationships. Therefore, as a means of regaining a sense of power over these relationships, they silenced themselves, which ensured that the needs of their parents were satisfied and they, Barbie and Mr X, could maintain the acceptance and love of their parents, even if it was a conditional love.

Jones (cited in Brown, 1998) has identified this attempt by one person to gain power over another as strategic self-presentation. That is, "selective disclosures and omissions" are made with the aim of directing social interactions to fulfil the purposes of one of the individuals involved (Jones, cited in Brown, 1998). Therefore, by silencing themselves, Barbie and Mr X have engaged in strategic self-presentational behaviour because their omissions ensure that they have power over the maintenance of the relationships with their respective parents, thus ensuring they are not exposed to feeling vulnerable and powerless again.

According to Kernis et al. (1993), people with low self-esteem feel socially insecure. Johnston and Thomas (1996) concur, in that they have found that low self-esteem and distorted attachment styles generated by ineffective parent-adolescent relationships result in adolescents' inability to develop healthy relationships. This was especially evident in Barbie's relationships with most of her friends, which were characterised by distance and emotional control. Barbie was not able to establish an authentic connection with them because she did not trust that she would not be placed in a vulnerable position, which would leave her feeling powerless. Thus, to achieve this sense of control, Barbie would meet the needs of others although she ensured that her needs remained silent, which guaranteed that she was emotionally protected and in control regarding the emotional proximity of the relationships. This seemed to be the same employment of strategic self-presentational behaviour, mentioned above, that she engaged in with her parents to gain a sense of power over the relationships. That is, Barbie's silence and "selective disclosures" to her friends prohibited her from exposing



herself to feelings of vulnerability and the disappointment of not having her needs met (Jones, cited in Brown, 1998).

This seemed to be less prominent for Mr X, in that he did not appear to silence himself just to satisfy the needs of others. Similarly to Barbie, he also exhibited power over the emotional distance in his relationships with others, thus controlling the risk of him being placed in a vulnerable position, which would again leave him feeling powerless.

### **The Theme of Disconnection**

In many of Barbie's relationships, she seemed to feel emotionally disconnected, even when there was some evidence of a connection. This is especially evident in her relationships with her parents. In relation to her mother, Barbie did not experience much connection with her mother following the divorce, although her mother ensured that she was still taken care of on a practical level. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) identified that in the acute phase of the divorce, there exists a diminished capacity to parent, 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. Thus, the disconnection that Barbie experienced in her relationship with her mother could have been due to her mothers' difficulties in adjusting to the divorce.

However, in the years that followed, the disconnection seemed to continue and became a consistent presence in their relationship. This seemed to be predominantly on an emotional level, as her mother continued to see that Barbie was always cared for on a practical level and never wanted for anything, with regards to material objects. Silitsky (1996), Spruijt and Iedema (1998), and Vandervalk et al. (2004) all report the importance of the quality of parenting of the custodial parent on the emotional adjustment of adolescents following divorce. Furthermore, mothers who are less warm, more rejecting, and use harsher discipline further affect the emotional adjustment of adolescents negatively

(Krishnakamur & Buehler, 2000). These were all aspects that Barbie experienced in relation to her mother, especially following her mother's remarriage. In spite of this though, Barbie manoeuvred to establish an emotional connection with her mother. However, her mother seemed unable to bridge the distance. The ineffective intimacy development with her mother seemed to take its toll on Barbie, and also placed her at risk for depression (Aseltine, 1996) and suicidality (Kurtz & Derevensky, 1993), both of which became part of her experience. Barbie's relationship with her mother appeared to improve somewhat at a later stage, although the shift seemed to be established as a result of Barbie's willingness to accept the connection that her mother was able to give her, as opposed to Barbie receiving the stronger connection she desired.

In relation to her father, Barbie experienced a strong connection with him, even though it appeared to be based on the foundation of a friendship. Oppawsky (2000) identified that the insecurity and fear that adolescents experience at the time of their parents' divorce is further heightened by fears of abandonment and rejection by the parent who leaves. However, this did not seem to be true for Barbie because her bond with her father appeared to have remained strong. Furthermore, Barbie's concerns were aligned with her father, which Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) identify as a 'normal' concern for the non-custodial parent by the child since it is him or her that is leaving the security of the home and the family. Following her father's remarriage though, the nature of their relationship shifted as her father began to make choices that perturbed their relationship significantly. As a result, Barbie experienced a strong physical and emotional disconnection with him. Kelly and Lamb (2000) suggest that the intimacy in the parent-adolescent relationship is eroded due to the reduced proximity and involvement of the absent parent. For Barbie, although she continued to have physical access to her father, it seemed that the presence of her stepmother interfered with her emotional access to him. She felt that his focus was on his new wife and their life, and Barbie was less of a priority to him. Videon (2002) proposes that the disruption to the non-custodial parent-adolescent relationship has been shown to result in an increased risk for externalising behaviours such as delinquency and substance abuse,

especially in those relationships where the parent-adolescent bond was characterised by a strong emotional and supportive bond. Thus, the rebellious behaviour that Barbie exhibited, that is, her experimentation with marijuana and her need to change her appearance, could have been in reaction to the emotional suffering she was concealing regarding the disconnection she felt with her father.

Hetherington (1992; 1993) suggests that a negative sibling relationship increases the risk for externalising behaviours. Initially, Barbie experienced little connection with her sister, which was perpetuated by her sister's absence in the years immediately following their parents' divorce. When her sister returned to live with Barbie, their relationship improved on a surface level, although it remained competitive and emotionally disconnected. Thus, Barbie's relationship with her sister may have also augmented Barbie's risk for externalising behaviour.

Berg (2003) and Rodgers (1996) have identified that the disruptions to the parent-adolescent relationship have been linked to the development of low self-esteem in adolescents. In addition, Johnston and Thomas (1996) assert, as was mentioned previously, that the combination of low self-esteem and distorted attachment styles, as a result of ineffective parent-adolescent relationships, hinders adolescents' ability to develop healthy intimate relationships, as they no longer trust others, and fear rejection. Many of Barbie's relationships with her peers and boyfriends are also disconnected. However, unlike her relationships with her parents where the disconnection was initiated by her parents, Barbie has established, and continues to maintain, the disconnection in these relationships. Thus it seems that the disconnection Barbie experiences in her relationships with her parents has influenced her ability to connect in her other relationships.

Mr X's experience of connection and disconnection is less prominent than was evident in Barbie's relationships. Furthermore, in his relationships with his mother and brother, Mr X seemed to choose to remain disconnected. In relation to his mother, it seemed as though Mr X experienced some degree of connection with her. However, his inability to seek emotional support from her suggested that he

did not feel emotionally connected to her. The absence of internalising or externalising behaviours, which have been identified by Aseltine (1996), Kurtz and Derevensky (1993), and Simons et al. (1999) as a suitable reflection of the emotional adjustment of adolescents to divorce, suggest that this has not affected Mr X negatively.

Kempton et al. (1991) suggest that positive relationships with siblings can mitigate the risks of externalising behaviours in adolescents because these relationships can lead to increased social competence. Mr X seemed to maintain the emotional distance in his relationship with his brother, although Mr X's brother seemed to feel connected to Mr X as he attempted to relate with Mr X regarding the difficulties they both encountered regarding their father. Thus, their relationship did not seem to be a negative one. Therefore, one may hypothesise that Mr X's relationship with his brother may have helped him in adjusting to the effects of the divorce, although in an indirect manner.

Mr X's relationship with his father shifted from connection to disconnection. Kelly and Lamb (2000) maintain that the physical absence of the non-custodial parent erodes the intimacy in the parent-adolescent relationship. This is especially true of Mr X's relationship with his father because their disconnection developed as a result of Mr X's father's lack of effort to remain in touch with Mr X for some time. The erosion of their bond may have been perpetuated by the absence of a strong bond prior to the divorce because he was so young when his parents divorced. According to Videon (2002), the lack of intimacy in the non-custodial parent-adolescent relationship, especially one that is characterised by a lack of an emotional and supportive bond, increases the risk of externalising behaviours. Thus, the deterioration in Mr X's relationship with his father may have disconnected him. However, it also seemed to protect him at the same time from further detrimental effects and externalising behaviour.

Mr X's desire to have a strong emotional connection with his father has led him to believe that they are currently connected. However, their connection is tenuous

and dependent on the emotional whims of his father, thus Mr X continues to manoeuvre to feel connected with his father. Biller (1993) and Shulman and Seiffge-Krenke (1997) assert that during adolescence, boys require a competitive and argumentative relationship with their fathers, which helps them to gain sufficient emotional distance to establish an identity of their own. Therefore, Mr X's desire to be emotionally connected to his father may be hampering his ability to explore and define his identity.

According to Erikson's (1968) stages of development, Barbie and Mr X are currently in the stage of identity development. However, their tendency to maintain the emotional disconnection in their relationships may inhibit the next stage of their development. That is, in the following stage of early adulthood, they will be confronted with the task of 'intimacy versus isolation', although, if they are unable to connect with others emotionally, it seems that they might experience some difficulty in forming lasting relationships.

### **Towards Resilience...**

Lazarus (1999) suggests that an individual's coping style can diminish the effect that life stressors have on psychological functioning. The manner in which Barbie learnt to cope with the challenges of her parents' divorce was proactive in nature. At first Barbie relied upon mechanisms of coping that were self-destructive and harmful toward herself. Drapeau et al. (1999) identified, within the context of divorce, that younger adolescents attempt to solve the problems that directly involve parents, through the use of indirect-problem solving strategies, such as acting out behaviour, in the hopes that their message will be understood. Thus, Barbie's attempts to make her parents aware of her despair and unhappiness through her rebellious and self destructive behaviour seemed to be an indirect strategy. Drapeau et al. (1999) further suggest that indirect strategies are employed because children do not feel they are free to communicate their feelings or perhaps feel powerless over the outcome of the situation. Barbie felt especially powerless to alter the cause of her despair, since it was the disconnection in her

relationships with her parents, which was created by her parents' remarriages. Furthermore, Barbie was unable to communicate her feelings regarding this to her parents for fear of losing the bonds completely. Although Barbie initially used this indirect strategy, it still seemed to reflect her innate ability to be present in her struggles and engage actively with the challenges she faced.

This destructive behaviour alone did not seem to satisfy Barbie for long and she began to also rely upon other methods, such as music and writing, which appeared to direct her towards the discovery of meaning. Her need to engage did not shift though as she continued to confront the pain and disappointments in an attempt to unearth the meaning of her experiences. By turning to reflection, Barbie employed emotion-focussed (avoidance-oriented) strategies, which are often employed when the stressors are perceived to be uncontrollable (Compas, Malcarne & Fondacaro, 1988). Drapeau et al. (1999) have found that emotion-focussed strategies are the alternative coping style employed after direct action, unless, as mentioned above, the context of the problem is directly associated with the parents. Barbie felt that at times her ability to be present in her struggles became overwhelming for her. Thus, she turned to other external methods such as 'distracting' and 'forgetting' to alleviate this feeling. Billings and Moos (1981) contend that these strategies are also emotion-focussed strategies as they are aimed at helping the adolescent deal with the psychological discomfort of emotions associated with a difficult situation. Barbie's reliance on her ability to distract herself challenges what Dumont (1999) has found, that is, that it is the least used strategy by adolescents. However, Dumont (1999) also states that the use of avoidance strategies is directly related to adolescents developing internalising behaviours. Thus, according to these findings, Barbie's attempted suicides could have been influenced by her need to distract herself and forget the challenges she was facing.

Throughout Mr X's experiences of both divorces and the many challenges that have come as a result, he has chosen to cope by disengaging and detaching himself when feeling overwhelmed, and was not present in his struggles.

However, Mr X does not only disengage from his feelings, he withdraws from his environment too. That is, Mr X seemed to isolate himself and avoid connecting or speaking with others when feeling overwhelmed. This challenges the findings of Dumont (1999), who has found that the least used coping strategy is avoidance. Mr X has also relied upon emotion-focussed strategies, such as distractions, to help him forget the feelings and even the events that challenge him. Again, this differs from the findings of Drapeau et al. (1999), who suggest that emotion-focussed strategies are employed second to problem-focussed strategies, a strategy which Mr X does not rely on. Mr X's reliance on emotion-focussed and avoidance strategies further challenges Drapeau et al. (1999), in that the problems he encountered directly involved his father, although he did not employ indirect-problem solving strategies in the hope that his message would be understood, as Barbie did. Mr X's coping strategies are in agreement with what Lee (2001) has found. That is, younger adolescents first rely upon emotion-focussed strategies such as distracting activities.

Lee (2001) also identified that adolescents have a tendency to utilise inhibition of action, as an alternative strategy, which are behaviours that prevent or avoid the stressful situation. It seemed that when Barbie and Mr X chose to use silence as a means of preserving their relationships with their parents, they were able to avoid being placed in further stressful situations that would result in them feeling vulnerable and powerless. Furthermore, Lee (2001) has also found that the least employed strategies by adolescents in coping have been the seeking of information and support, which is supported by the stories of Barbie and Mr X. However, this challenges the findings of Armistead et al. (1990), who 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.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define coping as "all efforts to manage taxing demands, without regard to their efficacy". Much of the literature focuses on the order or type of strategy that is used by adolescents. However, what Barbie and

Mr X's stories reveal is that what is of importance is just finding a way to cope. Smith and Carlson (1997) have identified that the final step in the coping process is an evaluation of the coping strategy employed, with regards to its efficacy in helping the individual cope with the stressor at hand. This can only be done by the individual since the stressor is initially perceived, and its meaning assessed, by the individual. Thus, one cannot evaluate the efficacy of Barbie and Mr X's coping strategies; this is something only they can do since it is they who have experienced the threat created by the stressor.

Compas et al. (1988) have identified an individuals' ability to cope as a protective factor that increases resilience. Thus, coping and resilience are not mutually exclusive but rather interactive concepts, since if a person is coping, they can be considered resilient. This is confirmed by the definition of resilience by Smith and Carlson (1997), who describe it as "the presence of protective factors or processes that moderate the relationships between stress and risk, on the one hand, and coping and competence, on the other". Based on this definition, it seemed that Barbie has indeed become more resilient in nature. Despite the presence of some of her behaviours, the manner in which Barbie has learnt to cope seemed to have helped her gain some objectivity and understanding beyond the initial intensity of her emotions, towards the discovery of meaning. Anderson and Goolishian (1988, p. 372) state that

[w]e cannot arrive at or have meaning or understanding until we take communicative action, that is, engage in some meaning-generating discourse or dialogue, within a system for which the communication has reference.

Barbie was unable to engage in a dialogue in the conventional sense, since silence was the norm within her family and there was a noticeable absence of communication in her family. However, through music and her writing, Barbie created her own dialogue, which enabled her to arrive at the meaning of her



experiences. Furthermore, in being able to dialogue with herself, Barbie was able to gain a deeper understanding, and a more 'realistic' perception of her relationships. That is, Barbie seemed to have understood that people are fallible and that they have both 'good' and 'bad' characteristics. However, what makes relationships 'real' is when one can merge both the 'good' and the 'bad' experiences in those relationships and find the strengths from the negative experiences to improve the relationships. Thus, Barbie displayed that she is trying to experience her relationships holistically. Furthermore, her ability to engage her struggles appears to have helped her build resilience against similar emotional experiences and challenges that she has already confronted.

Mr X also seemed to show resilience, as he has coped throughout the many challenges that his parents' divorce and his mother's recent divorce have presented. Mr X's style of coping seemed to help him contain the immensity of the emotions he experienced. Unlike Barbie, his inability to reflect upon his experiences appeared to prevent him from discovering the meaning of them. Furthermore, Mr X seemed to still be overwhelmed by challenges that are similar in nature to ones he faced earlier. However, in spite of this, Mr X has successfully been shown to be resilient in that he has managed to cope with the stressors successfully, which is in accordance with the definition proposed by Smith and Carlson (1997).

Thus, both Barbie and Mr X have challenged the 'expert' voices that assess adolescents' adjustment according to the many risk factors that are present throughout the divorce process and the level of maladjusted behaviour displayed. In addition, the resilience that they have developed as a result of the individual and similar challenges they have faced seems to be unique and specific to each of them. This is supported by Smith (1999) who suggests that resilience and vulnerability are aspects of the individual that are linked and influenced by the contexts they are in. Thus, Barbie and Mr X's specific resilience seems to be related to the contexts of their experiences that are unique and constantly shifting.

Saleebey (1996) suggests utilising a strengths-based approach when looking at risk and resilience. This view proposes that individuals are unique, with various traits and resources that are their strengths, and should be viewed in “light of their capacities, competencies, and possibilities” despite their circumstances (Saleebey, 1996, p. 297). Hetherington and Kelly (cited in Hetherington, 2003) seem to support this view in that they have highlighted the possibilities that exist for adolescents of divorce. Their findings reveal that overall, these adolescents all showed aspects of competency. That is, autonomy, responsibility, an unusual ability to perceive and respond to the needs and feelings of others. Both Barbie and Mr X seemed to have displayed these qualities at some point in their stories. Thus, challenging the dominant voices that would predict that they could not develop into well-adjusted adults.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, the researcher presented the themes that she identified in the participants’ stories. The researcher would like to re-assert that these themes have emerged and been discussed according to how the researcher punctuated and understood the participants’ stories. Links have been made with the literature, which highlighted both the similarities to and differences from the experiences of Barbie and Mr X. However, the researcher feels that it is important that the themes be considered in the unique context of each participant’s story because it is more significant that their stories are heard in their totality, and not whether they confirm or refute what has already been found in the literature regarding the experience of divorce for adolescents.