

Chapter Eight

CONCLUSION

Introduction

In this chapter, an overview of the study will be given. The study will be evaluated in terms of its strengths and limitations, and recommendations for future research will be proposed.

Evaluating the Study

The aim of the research was to give 'voice' to two adolescents who had experienced and survived their parents' divorce. It was hoped that through them telling their stories, the complexity of the divorce process could be highlighted. This study was also geared at elucidating the immense courage that adolescents display in overcoming the challenges that can be associated with divorce, especially within the changing context of the developmental stage of adolescence. It is believed that this has been achieved since the research has provided rich and detailed information regarding their unique experiences and meanings. The research was not aimed at challenging the existing body of knowledge on divorce. Instead, it was hoped that the information gained from these adolescents' personal accounts could expand on what is already known and provide a greater understanding of the human experience.

Themes that were identified and discussed in each story provided the reader with a unique view of the experience of divorce, which seemed to be lacking in the literature. The recurring themes that emerged were elucidated and compared with the existing body of knowledge. Common themes to emerge were:

- Boundaries

This theme highlighted the importance of consistent and defined boundaries by parents as well as the manner in which parenting styles can facilitate adolescents' development and feelings of security. Furthermore, the manner in which the participants experienced the boundaries in their relationships with their parents seemed to form a template for how the participants created their own boundaries in other relationships.

- Loss

- The Loss of Family and Relationships

This theme described the immense loss that adolescents experience in terms of the supportive family, but more importantly it described the meaning of losing the relationship with the non-custodial parent.

- The Loss of 'Authentic' Behaviour

The threat of losing their relationships with their parents was heightened due to specific factors. Thus, the participants engaged in self-presentational behaviour as a means of preserving these relationships. However, this resulted in the loss of their ability to behave authentically, which could be seen in relationships with others as well.

- Silence

The voicelessness and the need to silence the self were highlighted, especially in terms of preserving or maintaining the relationships with their parents. In addition, the significance of communicating with adolescents in this stage of their development, especially within the context of divorce, was highlighted.

- Power vs Powerlessness

This theme elucidated the feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness that were experienced by the participants and their need to regain some sense of power in their relationships.

- Disconnection

This theme brought into awareness the importance of feeling emotionally connected in their relationships, especially with their parents. Furthermore,

the impact of the pervasive disconnection in these significant relationships on their ability to establish relationships with others was elucidated.

- Towards Resilience

The various coping styles that were employed by the participants in managing the challenges presented by their parents' divorces were explicated in this theme. Furthermore, the theme revealed the development of their specific resilience and the manner in which the participants have emerged as survivors in spite of the factors that placed them at risk.

Strengths of the Study

In this study it was acknowledged that each person has different experiences and the contexts in which they are embedded shift and change too, producing different definitions of the world. Thus, as opposed to only a singular view of the world, multiple realities are recognised (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). In this study, the participants' experiences and the contexts in which they were embedded were unique to each of them. However, there were also some similarities between the participants' experiences.

The social constructionist nature of this study allowed for the co-construction of another reality between the researcher and the participants, which was also context defined. Thus, the researcher was able to include her understanding and experiences. It is the researcher's opinion that this relationship contributed to the richness of the information that was attained.

The context within which the meaning of lived experience is created is integral in the understanding of reality (Burr, 1995). It is evident from the participants' stories that their experiences of their parents' divorce were embedded in distinct contexts and co-created by the relationships they hold with others. Thus, in this study the participants were seen in the contexts of their relationships with others. This further contributed to the understanding of the participants, since our

realities are constructed in relationships with 'others', which includes the understanding of ourselves (Gergen, 1985).

Previous literature has predominantly focussed on highlighting specific predictors about the effects of divorce on adolescents. However, this study highlighted the intricate dance that develops in the interactions between parents and adolescents. This has further assisted in bringing the levels of complexity that surround divorce and its effects on adolescents clearer into focus. In essence, this study has contributed to existing knowledge on divorce through the richness of the information gained.

The focus of social constructionist inquiry is especially concerned with the stories and voices that are traditionally silenced in favour of the grand narratives (Doan, 1997), since through the internalisation of the normative experience, a portion of the lived experience is denied and the meaning is lost. This study has given two adolescents a chance to speak out and share their experiences of their parents' divorce in their totality. Furthermore, their voices have revealed the layers of meaning that exist within. In essence, this study has acknowledged their experiences, when others so often silence adolescents.

In any research study, whether it is quantitative or qualitative research, the quality of the study needs to be addressed in terms of its reliability and validity. *Reliability* questions the data or observations and *validity* questions the conclusions that are based on the data (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999; Neuman, 1997). In essence, research findings are evaluated upon their ability to accurately reflect the phenomenon being studied and if this can be repeated, it can then be assumed to be the 'truth'. This perspective of reliability and validity is challenged by social constructionism, in that, social constructionists believe that accurate reflections of reality are impossible to attain since reality is constructed and perspectival (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999). Furthermore, the idea of something being 'true' because it is repeated is rejected in social constructionism since reality is embedded in contexts, which are continually changing, thereby producing

differences that cannot be repeated (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999). Thus, in qualitative research, it is more congruent to speak of *dependability* instead of *reliability*, which addresses the trustworthiness of the observations or data, and *credibility* as opposed to validity, which involves the trustworthiness of the interpretations (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999; Stiles, 1993).

Dependability was ensured in this study as the researcher disclosed her orientation to the reader and explained the social and cultural context of the investigation. The researcher provided reflections on her internal processes throughout the research process, which indicated that she engaged with the material. The themes that emerged for the researcher were linked with extracts from the participants' stories. Finally, the rich and detailed descriptions that were provided of the participants stories validate the use of 'what' not 'why' questions.

Credibility was achieved in the following ways:

- Triangulation was achieved by including a comprehensive description of the existing literature, the perspectives of each participant, and by engaging in a dialogue with the supervisor of the research.
- The internal coherence was shown to exist in the fit between the research purpose, context, and the method of investigation.
- The researcher acknowledged to the reader in her self-reflections that her own viewpoints might have influenced how she interpreted the participants' stories. Furthermore, this research has been successful in extending the reader's understanding of adolescents' experiences of their parents' divorce.
- Testimonial validity was achieved by incorporating the participants' reflections of the process and the researcher's interpretations of their experiences into their stories.
- Catalytic validity was achieved through the interaction between the researcher and the participants, as well as between the participants and the interpretation of their stories. Through the interpretation new meanings and understanding of their experiences were reached.

- Reflexive validity was achieved since the researcher's understanding of the complexities of adolescents' experiences of the parents' divorce was extended. The researcher has a new admiration for the challenges that the participants had to manage and feels that they reflect a strong will to survive.

Limitations of the Study

The researcher's personal interest in family systems and consequently divorce led her to select this topic. As a result, the researcher's frame of reference may have had an influence on her participation in the interview and it may have extended throughout the interpretive process. However, due to the nature of the qualitative research process, where the researcher is the data collection instrument, it is impossible for the researcher to be 'objective' and value-free, thus her biases form part of the co-constructed reality of the interview and extend throughout the research process. It is possible that other researchers would identify different themes in the participants' stories, working from their own frame of reference. Thus, this study cannot be considered *the truth* regarding adolescents' experiences of their parents' divorce. It is more accurate to say that this study is a co-construction of the researcher's frame of reference, the theoretical and academic sources that the researcher chose to consult, and the stories of the two participants, the 'experts' in this study.

This research could be criticised for not being able to generalise its outcomes to the larger population due to its small sample size. The nature of qualitative research though lends itself to smaller samples because this methodology is labour intensive. Thus, it is doubtful whether the same degree of richness and detail could have been elicited from a larger sample as the researcher may have been overwhelmed by the size of the sample. Furthermore, since the aim of this research was to generate detailed information about adolescents' experiences of their parents' divorce, which seemed to be lacking in previous studies, the focus needed to be on the meanings generated. However, the similarities that emerged

between the two stories could indicate the usefulness of a larger sample, thus further enriching the descriptions and the knowledge gained.

The personal nature of this study may raise important ethical issues (Moon et al., 1990). During the interview, the researcher was required to explore sensitive issues involving the participants and their families. To ensure the anonymity of the participants and their families, pseudonyms were used and only personal data that was relevant to the nature of the study was revealed. Furthermore, the researcher attempted to prepare the participants as much as possible regarding the nature of the inquiry. The researcher also made use of her clinical judgement during the interview process to ensure that the participants were comfortable with the degree of the exploration. In addition, the researcher was explicit throughout the interview process that the participants had full authority to disclose only the information they were comfortable with. The researcher's clinical experience enabled her to see that the participants felt strongly attached and protective of the relationships they held with their parents. Thus, throughout the interview, the researcher ensured that she respected these relationships; despite her personal feelings regarding the experiences they were sharing. The researcher ensured that she also displayed the same integrity throughout the interpretive process by highlighting the complex nature of these relationships in the retelling of their stories.

Recommendations for Clinical Practice and Future Research

In Clinical Practice

First and foremost, the researcher feels that knowledge of the unique challenges that adolescents face in this stage of their development is vital for both clinicians and parents, if they are to assist adolescents in managing their parents' divorce. Perhaps clinicians could educate parents on this phase in their children's development, which would empower the parents to cope more effectively with this changing time in their children's lives.

For the researcher, the disconnection that was a pervasive theme in the relationships between adolescents and their parents stood out as a significant area of concern for clinicians. Perhaps clinicians could address the importance of remaining connected, from both the adolescents' and the parents' frame of reference.

Lack of communication between parents and adolescents may also be a significant area of concern, which is inextricably linked with adolescents' development on different levels. Firstly, adolescents are increasingly aware of the events that are occurring and more so, they need to be interacted with on a level that acknowledges and stimulates their increased cognitive abilities. Thus, age appropriate communication between parents and their adolescent children needs to be encouraged. Secondly, the silence that adolescents incorporate as a mode of ensuring their security can adversely affect their development. Thus, communication regarding their experience of their parents' divorce is vital for their emotional well-being and should be encouraged with their parents, or someone else. Just because adolescents are not exhibiting maladjusted behaviour or are not verbalising their concerns, does not mean that they are content with their parents' divorce.

In Future Research

It would be interesting and valuable to explore a study similar to this one that included the perceptions of parents regarding their adolescent children's experiences of their divorce.

Linking with the above recommendation, a study that explores the experiences of siblings regarding the parents' divorce would be a useful area of inquiry to investigate. This might establish the similarities and differences in the siblings' experiences, which could then highlight, from a social constructionist perspective, how perceptions are constructed as well as substantiate the presence of multiple realities within a similar context.

Research could also be conducted on female and male adolescents to elicit the gender differences that might exist between their experiences of their parents' divorce.

It may be useful to investigate a study similar to this one in a cross-cultural context. Divorce has fewer boundaries than before between cultures, as cultures have begun adapting their religious laws to include divorce. Since South Africa is such a multi cultural nation, it would be invaluable to elicit an in-depth inquiry into the experiences of adolescents from various cultures, especially since aspects of the developmental phase of adolescence may also vary from culture to culture.

Conclusion

This study has provided valuable and in-depth information regarding adolescents' experiences of their parents' divorce. It has reinforced the importance of context and especially the significance of their relationships with their custodial and non-custodial parents. Specific themes regarding their experiences were articulated, and common themes were discussed. The qualitative research method proved to be invaluable in gaining the information in this study. Important areas for concern in clinical practice were highlighted, as well as directions for future research.