

**DIVORCE AS BIFURCATION: REDEFINING A NUCLEAR  
SYSTEM**

**By**

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I declare that,

**Divorce as Bifurcation: Redefining a nuclear system**

is my own work and that all sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to explore the nature of dynamic relationships within families, and indicating how the decision to divorce may result from a family's difficulty in adjusting to new changes and stressors. Thus, divorce results in the redefinition of a nuclear system.

This study made use of social constructionism as its epistemological framework. By means of in-depth one-on-one interviews, the researcher was able to hear the narratives of all six participants. Hermeneutics was used to analyze the data.

The participants' stories were reencountered through the researcher's own frame of reference in which common themes of the divorce process were co-constructed. These themes were later elaborated on and a comparative analysis was undertaken to link them to the available literature.

The information gained from the study could contribute to existing research on the impact of divorce, family reorganization following a divorce, and offer a new perspective in understanding family systems.

### ***Key Terms:***

Divorce; Family system, Family reorganization, Relationships, Couples; Consequences and adjustment; Resilience; Chaos theory; Change; Bifurcation; Methodology; Post Modernism; Social Constructionism; Qualitative research; Hermeneutics; Ethics.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of contents.....	v
List of Figures.....	xiv
<b>Chapter One: Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
General Introduction.....	1
Brief Overview of the Literature.....	1
Motivation for study.....	4
Design of Inquiry.....	5
Format of the study.....	6
Organization of the dissertation.....	6
<b>Chapter Two: Divorce in context.....</b>	<b>9</b>
Divorce: Process and Models.....	9
An overview of divorce.....	9
Historical and social perspective on marriage and divorce.....	11
<b>DEFINING DIVORCE.....</b>	<b>14</b>
Divorce as a process.....	14
Divorce as a life crisis.....	15
<b>A TRADITIONAL PERSPECTIVE.....</b>	<b>16</b>
Defining adjustment to divorce.....	16
Stage models of divorce adjustment.....	16
<i>Bohannon's Six-Stage Model.....</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Wiseman's Grief Stage Model.....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Dynamics of Family Adaptations.....</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Dyadic Divorce Adjustment Model.....</i>	<i>21</i>
Viewing the Divorce Process through a Post-modern Lens.....	23
Conclusion.....	25

<b>Chapter Three: Aftermath of Divorce: Consequences and Adjustment.....</b>	<b>28</b>
Economic divorce: consequences and adjustment.....	29
Psychological divorce: consequences and adjustment.....	30
Social divorce: consequences and adjustment.....	31
Conceptualising divorce adjustment.....	32
<i>ABC-X Model of Family Crisis.....</i>	<i>33</i>
<b>A CURRENT PERSPECTIVE.....</b>	<b>35</b>
Resilience.....	35
<i>Resilience Theory and Resilience in Change.....</i>	<i>36</i>
<i>The Resiliency Model.....</i>	<i>39</i>
A brief overview of chaos theory and the theory of dissipative structures in the adjustment of divorce.....	41
Conclusion.....	42
<b>Chapter Four: Divorce as Bifurcation: A New Paradigm.....</b>	<b>44</b>
A paradigm shift.....	44
<b>CHAOS: A HOLISTIC SCIENCE.....</b>	<b>46</b>
Chaos: A river fed from many streams.....	46
General systems theory.....	47
Closed and open systems.....	48
The family as a system: structure and organization.....	49
<i>Nuclear family.....</i>	<i>50</i>
<i>Single-parent family.....</i>	<i>51</i>
<i>Extended family.....</i>	<i>51</i>
<i>Blended family.....</i>	<i>51</i>
<i>Adoptive parent family.....</i>	<i>52</i>
<i>Gay and lesbian parent family.....</i>	<i>52</i>
<i>Families with no children.....</i>	<i>52</i>
Chaos viewed as change.....	53
Order to chaos: The bifurcation of system states.....	55
Systems as self-organizing.....	58

Feedback loops.....	60
<i>First- and second- order change</i> .....	61
Similarities: Chaos theory and systems theory.....	63
An integrated perspective.....	63
Conclusion.....	65
<b>Chapter Five: Epistemology and Methodological Framework.....</b>	<b>67</b>
Introduction.....	67
Ontology and Epistemology.....	67
From Modernism to Postmodernism.....	68
Social Constructionism.....	70
Qualitative Research Paradigm.....	73
Research Design.....	75
<i>Characteristics of a Qualitative Research Design</i> .....	75
Process-oriented approach.....	76
Reliability and Validity.....	76
Ethical Considerations.....	80
<i>Informed consent</i> .....	80
<i>Confidentiality</i> .....	80
<i>Competence</i> .....	80
The Role of the Researcher and the Participants.....	81
<i>A Brief Personal Statement</i> .....	83
Sampling and Selection.....	84
Data Collection.....	85
<i>Interview</i> .....	85
<i>Procedure</i> .....	86
Data Analysis.....	86
Conclusion.....	91
<b>Chapter Six: Results: Rahima.....</b>	<b>92</b>
Introduction.....	92



<b>RAHIMA’S STORY.....</b>	<b>92</b>
Brief Background .....	92
Interview Setting and Impressions.....	93
<b>THEMES EMERGING FROM RAHIMA’S INTERVIEW.....</b>	<b>95</b>
<b>Pre-Divorce: A Roller Coaster Ride.....</b>	<b>95</b>
<i>A Relationship with a Silent Manipulator.....</i>	<i>95</i>
<i>Fear of loss vs. the need to Understand.....</i>	<i>97</i>
<i>The Relationship as an Illusion.....</i>	<i>99</i>
<b>During Divorce: Facing Reality.....</b>	<b>100</b>
<i>Depersonalization.....</i>	<i>100</i>
<i>A Mother’s Cry.....</i>	<i>101</i>
<b>After Divorce: A New Beginning.....</b>	<b>102</b>
<i>Re-defining a New Identity and Role- exiting.....</i>	<i>102</i>
<i>Relationship with Former Spouse.....</i>	<i>104</i>
<i>Establishing New Social Networks and Economic Stability.....</i>	<i>104</i>
<i>“Resilience of the human spirit” .....</i>	<i>105</i>
<i>Family Reorganization.....</i>	<i>106</i>
<b>CREATIVE SYNTHESIS.....</b>	<b>108</b>
I Cried, I Suffered, and Now I’m Living.....	108
Reflecting on my Participation: The Interviewer as Belonging.....	112
Summary: The Family System.....	113
Conclusion.....	114
<b>Chapter Seven: Results: Seedat.....</b>	<b>115</b>
Introduction.....	115
<b>SEEDAT’S STORY.....</b>	<b>115</b>
Brief Background .....	115
Interview Setting and Impressions.....	116
<b>THEMES EMERGING FROM SEEDAT’S INTERVIEW.....</b>	<b>118</b>
<b>Pre-Divorce: The Unspoken Remembrance.....</b>	<b>118</b>
<i>Affair as a Catalyst.....</i>	<i>118</i>

<i>Separateness</i> .....	119
<i>Explication and Avoidance</i> .....	120
<b>During Divorce: A Guilty Conscience</b> .....	<b>120</b>
<i>A Father's Guilt</i> .....	121
<i>The Ambivalent Initiator</i> .....	122
<b>After Divorce: The Freedom to Live</b> .....	<b>123</b>
<i>Re-defining a New Identity and Role-exiting</i> .....	123
<i>Relationship with Former Spouse</i> .....	124
<i>Establishing New Social Networks and Economic Stability</i> .....	124
<i>Family Reorganization</i> .....	126
<i>Freedom from Obligation</i> .....	127
<i>Traditional vs. Modern</i> .....	128
<i>Relationship with Current Family</i> .....	129
<b>CREATIVE SYNTHESIS</b> .....	<b>130</b>
The Freedom to Be.....	130
Reflecting on my Participation: The Interviewer as a Mistress.....	133
Summary: The Family System.....	134
Conclusion.....	135
<b>Chapter Eight: Results: Andrew</b> .....	<b>137</b>
Introduction.....	137
<b>ANDREW'S STORY</b> .....	<b>137</b>
Brief Background .....	137
Interview Setting and Impressions.....	138
<b>THEMES EMERGING FROM ANDREW'S INTERVIEW</b> .....	<b>140</b>
<b>Pre-Divorce: The Unimaginable</b> .....	<b>140</b>
<i>The Unknown and Unfaithful Relationship</i> .....	140
<i>Separateness</i> .....	141
<i>A Holistic Loss</i> .....	143
<b>During Divorce: A Conflict Process</b> .....	<b>144</b>
<i>A Father's Cry</i> .....	145

<i>The Ambivalent Acceptance</i> .....	146
<b>After Divorce: A New Beginning</b> .....	<b>147</b>
<i>Re-defining a New Identity and Role-exiting</i> .....	147
<i>Relationship with Former Spouse</i> .....	148
<i>Establishing New Social Networks and Economic Stability</i> .....	149
“ <i>Reborn</i> ”.....	150
<i>Previous Family Reorganization</i> .....	150
<i>Relationship with Current Family</i> .....	151
<b>CREATIVE SYNTHESIS</b> .....	<b>153</b>
My “ <i>Long Walk to Freedom</i> ”.....	153
Reflecting on my Participation: The Interviewer as Listener.....	155
Summary: The Family System.....	156
Conclusion.....	158
<b>Chapter Nine: Results: Tracy</b> .....	<b>159</b>
Introduction.....	159
<b>TRACY’S STORY</b> .....	<b>159</b>
Brief Background .....	159
Interview Setting and Impressions.....	160
<b>THEMES EMERGING FROM TRACY’S INTERVIEW</b> .....	<b>162</b>
<b>Pre-Divorce: The Detached Marriage</b> .....	<b>162</b>
<i>Complimentary to the Point of Non-existence</i> .....	162
<i>Connection vs. Disconnection</i> .....	163
<b>During Divorce: The Mind-game Process</b> .....	<b>164</b>
<i>The Ambivalent\Manipulator Initiator</i> .....	165
<i>A Mother’s Guilt</i> .....	166
<b>After Divorce: A Journey of Self discovery</b> .....	<b>167</b>
<i>Re-defining a New Identity and Role-exiting</i> .....	167
<i>Relationship with Former Spouse</i> .....	168
<i>Establishing New Social Networks and Economic Stability</i> .....	169
<i>The Power to Learn</i> .....	171

<i>Family Reorganization</i> .....	172
<b>CREATIVE SYNTHESIS</b> .....	<b>173</b>
The Intense but Profound Journey.....	173
Reflecting on my Participation: The Flexible Role of the Interviewer.....	176
Summary: The Family System.....	177
Conclusion.....	179
<b>Chapter Ten: Results: Sarah</b> .....	<b>180</b>
Introduction.....	180
<b>SARAH'S STORY</b> .....	<b>180</b>
Brief Background .....	180
Interview Setting and Impressions.....	181
<b>THEMES EMERGING FROM SARAH'S INTERVIEW</b> .....	<b>183</b>
<b>Pre-Divorce: The Unimaginable</b> .....	<b>183</b>
<i>The Passive relationship</i> .....	183
<i>Lack of Commitment: the Failed Fairytale</i> .....	184
<b>During Divorce: An Ambivalent Decision</b> .....	<b>185</b>
<i>Dual Initiator</i> .....	185
<i>Connection vs. Disconnection</i> .....	186
<i>A Mother's Guilt</i> .....	188
<b>After Divorce: A New Beginning</b> .....	<b>189</b>
<i>Re-defining a New Identity and Role-exiting</i> .....	189
<i>Relationship with Former Spouse</i> .....	190
<i>Establishing New Social Networks and Economic Stability</i> .....	191
<i>Isolation as Resilience</i> .....	192
<i>Family Reorganization</i> .....	193
<b>CREATIVE SYNTHESIS</b> .....	<b>194</b>
The Ongoing Lessons of Survival.....	194
Reflecting on my Participation: The Interviewer as Belonging.....	197
Summary: The Family System.....	198
Conclusion.....	200

<b>Chapter Eleven: Results: John.....</b>	<b>201</b>
Introduction.....	201
<b>JOHN’S STORY.....</b>	<b>201</b>
Brief Background .....	201
Interview Setting and Impressions.....	202
<b>THEMES EMERGING FROM JOHN’S INTERVIEW.....</b>	<b>204</b>
<b>Pre-Divorce: Living on Edges.....</b>	<b>204</b>
<i>Differentiated Relationship: Love vs. Convenience.....</i>	<i>204</i>
<i>Isolation and Lack of Support.....</i>	<i>205</i>
<i>Connection vs. Disconnection.....</i>	<i>207</i>
<b>During Divorce: The Sudden Decision.....</b>	<b>209</b>
<i>The Initiator vs. the Decision maker .....</i>	<i>209</i>
<i>Ambivalence vs. Independence.....</i>	<i>211</i>
<b>After Divorce: The Will to Survive.....</b>	<b>212</b>
<i>Re-defining a New Identity and Role-exiting.....</i>	<i>212</i>
<i>Relationship with Former Spouse.....</i>	<i>213</i>
<i>Establishing New Social Networks and Economic Stability.....</i>	<i>214</i>
<i>Resilience as Self awareness.....</i>	<i>215</i>
<i>Family Reorganization.....</i>	<i>216</i>
<b>CREATIVE SYNTHESIS.....</b>	<b>217</b>
In Suffering I have Triumphant.....	217
Reflecting on my Participation: The Interviewer as Belonging.....	220
Summary: The Family System.....	221
Conclusion.....	223
<b>Chapter Twelve: Comparative Analysis.....</b>	<b>224</b>
Introduction.....	224
<i>Connection vs. Disconnection.....</i>	<i>227</i>
<i>Loss.....</i>	<i>230</i>
<i>Role of Initiator and Non-Initiator.....</i>	<i>233</i>
<i>Parents Role in Relation to their Children.....</i>	<i>237</i>

<i>Redefining a New Identity and Role-exiting</i> .....	241
<i>Relationship with Former Spouse</i> .....	244
<i>Establishing New Social Networks and Economic Stability</i> .....	246
<i>Towards Resiliency</i> .....	249
<i>Family Reorganization</i> .....	252
How does change come about?.....	254
<i>Change Revisited</i> .....	255
Conclusion.....	259
<b>Chapter Thirteen: Conclusion</b> .....	<b>261</b>
Brief Overview of the Study.....	261
Evaluation of the Study.....	262
Limitations of Study.....	267
Recommendations for Clinical Practice and Future Research.....	269
<i>Clinical Practice</i> .....	269
<i>Future Research</i> .....	269
Conclusion.....	270
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>272</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b> .....	<b>294</b>
<b>Appendix 1: Consent Form</b> .....	<b>294</b>
<b>Appendix 2: Consent Form to be Audiotaped</b> .....	<b>295</b>

## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>Figure</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>3.1</b> Flach's (1988; 1997) model of disruption and reintegration.....	38
<b>3.2</b> The resiliency model: Richardson, Neiger, Jensen and Kumpfer (1990).....	41
<b>4.1</b> Successive Bifurcation with Increasing Distance from Equilibrium by Prigogine (1996).....	57
<b>6.1</b> Rahima's family genogram illustrating family relationships.....	94
<b>6.2</b> The ecomap depicts Rahima and Seedat's relationship with extra familial systems after the divorce.....	114
<b>7.1</b> Seedat's family genogram illustrating family relationships.....	117
<b>7.2</b> The ecomap depicts Seedat and Rahima's relationship with extra familial systems after divorce.....	135
<b>8.1</b> Andrew's Family genogram illustrating family relationships.....	139
<b>8.2</b> The ecomap depicts Andrew's and Tracey's relationship with extra familial systems after the divorce.....	157
<b>9.1</b> Tracey's Family genogram illustrating family relationships.....	161
<b>9.2</b> The ecomap depicts Tracey's and Andrew's relationship with extra familial systems after the divorce.....	178
<b>10.1</b> Sarah's Family genogram illustrating family relationships.....	182

<b>10.2</b>	The ecomap depicts Sarah's and John's relationship with extra familial systems after the divorce.....	199
<b>11.1</b>	John's Family genogram illustrating family relationships.....	203
<b>11.2</b>	The ecomap depicts John's and Sarah's relationship with extra familial systems after the divorce.....	222
<b>13.1</b>	Change within a family system as a result of divorce. (Adapted from Prigogine, I., 1996).....	263



## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **General Introduction**

*“It is the stories that persons have about their lives that determine both the ascriptions of meaning to experience and the selection of those aspects of experience that are to be given expression. It follows therefore that these stories are constitutive or shaping of person’s lives. The lives and relationships of persons evolve as they live through or perform these stories”*

**White, as cited in Weingarten, 1998, p. 10**

The above quote encompasses the body of this dissertation, that is, the shared stories of all the participants regarding the impact of divorce on their families. By sharing their stories, the reader deciphers the meanings that these stories hold as well as the co-creation of new realities by virtue of sharing the narratives.

#### **Brief Overview of the Literature**

Divorce is one of the most stressful life changes that a person can experience, and is considered to be so, since it demands personal reorganization and adjustment to new roles and life styles (Bursik, 1991). Perhaps the most difficult process of the divorce is the reorganization of the family into single-parent or step-family households, or even into other types of households. As such, divorce is regarded as a process rather than a discrete life event, and stages have been identified within that process (Riessman & Gerstel, 1985). Although these stages have been identified, they do not represent a universal practice since individuals (or couples) seem to go back and forth between stages.

Within the context of divorce, there exist societal and cultural expectations such as that “marriage is forever” or that the roles of women and men are characterized by the

responsibility they have towards their husbands, wives and their families. As an adult, individuals are expected to have a partner, or to be married, since this is the norm in Western and Eastern societies. Therefore, marriage can be regarded as an important part of a person's social identity and is seen as a sign of maturity, normality, and success. As a result, divorce may be viewed as a failure, which threatens the individual's choices, sense of being and judgment. It can be personally shameful and mortifying. Seemingly this can be related to a loss of social and personal identity as well as of one's self-image (Kitson, 1992; Spanier & Thompson, 1984).

Although divorce is a phenomenon that we experience in the present day, the impact and the stigma attached thereto, makes it difficult for individuals to adjust to these changes in a successful way. This is often a result of the ambivalent experiences of divorce such as public disapproval, a sense of failure and the loss of a spouse, family, friends, and economic status. In addition to practical stressors, psychological issues exist, that must also be addressed such as the feelings and emotions expressed by the divorcees. These feelings range from anger, bitterness, betrayal, loneliness to ambivalence towards being apart from their spouses; yet relieved to be separated (Riessman, 1990; Kitson, 1992).

In contrast to the negative aspects of the divorce process, crisis theorists such as Wiseman (1975) assert that the divorce process may be seen as one of both grief and growth. Divorce therefore becomes a context for optimal growth, personal discovery, and opportunities to pursue areas in the lives of the divorcees, which they could not otherwise have done if they had chosen to remain married. One then asks the question, what differentiates families who are able to cope positively, from those families who return to pre-divorce functioning, and those who experience ongoing distress and therefore poor adjustment to divorce. Research has identified certain factors, although not limited to these, which contribute to positive adjustment to divorce. These factors include: gender (Thabes, 1997); social support (Garvin, Kalter, & Hansell, 1993; Weiss, 1975); coping style (Chiriboga, 1989); degree of attachment (Weiss; 1975; Reibstein, 1998); socio-demographic variables, such as economic status, number and age of children, education, therapy, and length of separation (Rahav & Baum, 2002); employment (Bisagni &

Eckenrode, 1995; Rahav & Baum, 2002); and resiliency (Flach, 1988; Richardson, Neiger, Jensen, & Kumpfer, 1990). Wiseman (1975) captures, succinctly, how divorce is a “normal process with specific tasks to be mastered, recognized stresses to be dealt with, and satisfactions and goals to be sought after. Like any other of life’s crises, it is to be avoided when possible, when it occurs it can be dealt with as a means of achieving growth towards a more satisfying way of life” (p. 212).

Furthermore, an added explanation is encountered within the paradigm of chaos theory and dissipative structures, where divorce can be seen as a crisis or bifurcation in the life cycle of a family which results in the reorganization of the original family system. We thus formulate the question: “what occurs within a family system so that divorce as bifurcation becomes the solution to the problem?” Within any family, there are stressors or variables that fluctuate within the family system. These variables, such as infidelity, lack of communication, lack of intimacy, and so on may cause the tension to rise. If the family is unsuccessful in resolving the problem, the tension may intensify beyond a critical point. At this point, known as bifurcation, divorce becomes the only solution. It is through these fluctuations that the decision to divorce is expressed and also, the need for family reorganization to take place. Although a simple and somewhat scientific explanation has been provided here, it does not do justice to the complex nature of family systems. It is only by learning more about how divorcing individuals create meaning in the midst of the disruption caused by marital dissolution, that we can come closer to understanding their experiences, the events that unfolded, and the changes that resulted in redefining their family differently from that of a nuclear family system.

Divorce is therefore an experience that involves dramatic change. The institution of marriage is a highly scripted relationship with culturally defined expectations for husbands and wives. Marriage is therefore regarded as a pervasive, “meaning-making” structure, where spouses interpret their daily experiences in reference to their marital/familial roles. Divorce disrupts this structure and an ex-spouse is faced with the problem of changing her/his perspective on everyday life from that of a married person to that of a divorced person. Even when divorce is desired, this experience can be

disconcerting. The disruptive nature of divorce, and the pervasive nature of marriage as a provider of meaning, make the prospect of understanding how the divorced come to make sense of the divorce experience rich with possibilities. Consequently this led to the motivation for my study.

### **Motivation for study**

Studies of divorce appear in psychology, sociology, human development and social work. Each of these disciplines has contributed to our understanding of the causes and consequences of, and adjustment to, divorce. These concerns are usually addressed by seeking to identify the source of the problem in relationships or the circumstances surrounding a divorce in order to provide a solution to the negative effects of divorce. While the literature on divorce is extensive and provides valuable information regarding the multiple facets of this experience, it is primarily deductive in nature. This is a fundamentally limiting aspect of research in this area. This traditional approach overlooks that process by which people create meaning from their experience with divorce and the adjustment period, on a personal, familial and societal level, following divorce. However to understand fully the phenomenology of divorce, and to devise an interpretive analysis which explores the process of sense-making after divorce, research is necessary alongside the traditional outcome-oriented research.

Therefore, the aims of this research are:

- To provide a new perspective for understanding how families function when confronted with a stressful transition such as divorce.
- To explore the impact that divorce has on the ability of families to function by viewing the consequences of divorce and the process involved in reorganizing a family system, as shared by the participants.
- To communicate the idea that although the phenomenology of divorce is universal, the meanings, and experiences shared by those who have experienced

or are currently going through a divorce, are unique to each person and cannot be generalized to a wider population.

### **Design of Inquiry**

Social constructionism provides a framework for this kind of inquiry, since it acknowledges the unique experiences of the individual. This body of work includes examinations of strategies for storytelling, of how power and institutions are sustained by means of narrative, and of how culture or self may be embodied in stories. Thus, the employment of social constructionism in order to explore the process of adjustment to divorce is the overall objective of the current research.

The advantage of social constructionism is that it allows the focus to fall on the manner in which humans create meaning in their everyday lives. Individuals are actively engaged in interpretive and definitional processes in order to understand their experiences and choose how to behave in response to those experiences. Since, divorce often involves substantial change, it represents a life experience through which a person must work in order to understand it and which requires the individual to construct meanings in order to explain the divorce and redefine one's self and family following a divorce. Divorce can be viewed as a major life event that becomes the focus of much interpretive activity.

Furthermore, by utilizing a qualitative methodological approach, the world of lived experience is brought closer to the surface. This approach provides a structure within which the participants can freely relate their experiences in their own terms, and from their perspective. Furthermore, the qualitative approach allows participants to relate their processes, and together with the researcher, re-construct their realities. This further allows the space in which to explore the socially constructed meanings applied to the newly encountered experiences of becoming an ex-spouse or a single parent, and, also, the redefinition of a family system as a single-parent household or step-family household.

Specific information with regards to sampling, data collection and data analysis, will be provided in Chapter 5.

### **Format of the study**

This study will encompass a literature survey as well as a practical component.

The literature survey provides a platform from which to understand the experience of, and interactions between divorced couples. By explaining existing knowledge on divorce, the nature of the family system, and the process of change in a family, one is therefore able to view how changes and social discourses impact on a family's ability to function and reorganize after a divorce. Therefore, available research is regarded as an alternative voice with which emerging themes can be compared, and supports the notion that multiple realities exist.

The practical component of the present research is aimed at providing a trusting and safe context in which the six participants are able to voice their experiences regarding the impact of divorce on a personal, familial, and social level. The narratives of the six participants will be compared and deconstructed in relation to one another.

The integration of a literature survey with the practical component of a study, is supported by Lavee and Dollahite (1991) who argue that theory should serve as input into research, while the output of research projects should serve as feedback to theory. In this manner, theory and research coevolve.

### **Organization of the dissertation**

**Chapter 1** is an introductory chapter. It encompasses the present researcher's motivation to carry out the current research, and it includes all the important concepts that form the body of this study, which will be discussed at length in the remaining chapters of the dissertation.

The balance of the work is organized into thirteen chapters outlined as follows:

**Chapter 2** covers the traditional perspective of the process of divorce through various stages by incorporating various stage models of divorce. Furthermore, for any phenomenon to be understood in its totality, it needs to be viewed in context, and as such divorce finds expression in both an historical and social perspective.

In **Chapter 3**, the challenges that divorce entails, are discussed. This chapter contains reflections of the consequences of divorce in its aftermath and, also, the factors that influence a positive or negative adjustment to divorce. It includes a discussion of the process that a family and individual members experience during their adaptation, by viewing the ABC-X model of a family crisis. Lastly, reference to the role of resilience as a contributing variable in recovering from a stressful transition such as divorce is discussed.

**Chapter 4** comprises the main body of the literature review of the study. Any evolving literature needs to take into account previous literature that would form the foundation for any new theory to emerge, therefore an overall introduction to the General Systems theory is required before offering a new theory with regards to understanding family systems and particularly, the resultant changes within a family system marked by the decision to divorce. Concepts relating to chaos theory and Prigogine's theory of dissipative structures are introduced in this chapter.

**Chapter 5** deals with the theoretical framework of social constructionism, as well as the methodological approach of qualitative research with respect to the present research. Furthermore, it includes a description of the participants, sampling, information collection techniques, hermeneutics as the methods of analysis, and ethical considerations pertinent to the study.

**Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11** comprise the analyzed data related to each participant. Each chapter is dedicated to the experience of a single participant. A brief introduction to

the background of each participant is provided, followed by the analyzed data which includes the themes identified and discussed by the present researcher. This is followed by a creative synthesis which integrates themes into a story told by the researcher. The present author ends each chapter with a reflection on her participation in the process as well as her perception of the family system.

**Chapter 12** comprises the comparative analysis between the three divorced couples, across the males and females, and the literature pertaining to the various emerging themes. This allows the reader to infer personal distinctions and meaning.

**Chapter 13** concludes the study with a discussion of the main findings. Limitations of the study will be evaluated and recommendations for clinical practice and future research will be made. The present researcher concludes her dissertation with a message to her participants and readers by quoting from *The Prophet*.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Divorce in context**

#### **Divorce: Process and Models**

The basic assumptions about divorce underlying this research project are summarised in this chapter so as to obtain a conceptual understanding of the issue. This is an integral part of any research process, especially if one takes the position that information generated in the process of research is only meaningful in an ecology of concepts (Delia, 1977). That is, when all descriptions of reality are recognised as inherently theory-laden, the explicit use of theory at all stages in the research process is important (Lavee & Dollahite, 1991).

In this chapter, divorce is discussed in its historical and social context; a social phenomenon that has become a worldwide issue. Thereafter the various theories concerning the divorce process are presented, followed by a discussion of the dominant discourses attached to divorce through language and meaning and the necessity of challenging these discourses and viewing them in a positive light.

#### **An overview of divorce**

Marriage and family are among the oldest human social institutions. Most people do not enter into a marriage with the intention of getting divorced. Yet where divorce was once forbidden, it is becoming a common phenomenon in both Western and Eastern societies. The legal shift to a no-fault divorce procedure is generally perceived as a response to growing cultural demands and tolerance of marital dissolution. In the past four decades divorce has become prevalent worldwide. Divorce has now established itself in society as an institution, which is indicated by the increasing number of divorces. In Wales and England between 1963 and 1983, the divorce rate rose to 60%, with one in three marriages ending in divorce (Parkinson, cited in Folb, 1992). Similar results were

established for the United States in which divorce rates rose increasingly to 50% in 2002 ([www.divorcemag.com/statistics/statsUS.html](http://www.divorcemag.com/statistics/statsUS.html)). Within the South African context, the divorce rate in 2002 was 526 per 100 000 married couples (Statistics South Africa, 2005).

On account of the different functions of, and demands made on, the marital relationship by partners these days, the traditional form of marriage has been forced to make way for a modern form of marriage. The modern marriage (also known as companion marriage) differs from the traditional marriage (also known as the conventional marriage) in the sense that it no longer comprises “a set of norms and social obligations” that exist within the traditional marriage (Popenoe, 1993, p. 533). Traditionally marriage was seen as a means to an end, for example, providing a stable environment for raising children. Today, marriage is being viewed as a goal in itself, namely for companionship, love, and fulfilling the emotional needs of the marriage partners. The question “what changes have occurred in society to have facilitated a sudden drastic change in the marriage institution?” raises concerns for those planning to marry, married, getting divorced, divorced or remarrying.

Although the family life cycle continues to be a valuable construct, the developmental analysis of the family in the past has been amplified by the use of the life course approach, an approach which has provided an understanding of the link between family time, individual time, and historical time. It has received much acknowledgement in explaining the “synchronization of individual life transitions and collective family changes, the interaction of both individual and collective family transitions with historical conditions, and the impact of earlier life transitions on later ones” (Harevan, 1978, p. 46). Therefore the concept of “timing” takes into account the historical context defining the social circumstances and cultural conditions that affect the scheduling of life events, on both an individual and a familial level.

## **Historical and social perspective on marriage and divorce**

Divorce occurs in a social and historical context that comprises an amalgam of views about the sanctity and inviolability of the marriage contract.

Prior to the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the history of marital separation and divorce is sketchy; it is probable, however, that marital separation and divorce are as old as the institution of marriage itself and represent two of several mechanisms that evolved over the centuries to relieve the strains of marriage (Goode, 1963).

In the eighteenth century, as individuals began asserting greater control over their lives, there was a substantial increase in the number of divorces. For the first time since the days of divorce laws in Ancient Rome, ordinary citizens began to consider it legitimate to leave marriages in which they were unhappy (Scanzoni, 1979). In the nineteenth century, while there was still much guilt and shame associated with divorce, it was increasingly permitted, and even encouraged. Divorce came to be viewed as compatible with the development of the emerging conjugal family of industrial America (Price & McKenry, 1988). The conjugal family refers to the relationship between husband and wife. The conjugal family, with weakened kin ties and control over young people, was viewed as more suitable to an industrialized economy (Goode, 1963). Individual rights and aspirations began to challenge traditional families. Women's independence was emerging as a result of feminist ideals and employment outside the home, which significantly contributed to the continued rise in the divorce rate through the nineteenth century.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Western and Eastern societies viewed marriage as an institution of property, whereby young women were expected to remain at home in order to learn how to become a housewife and await marriage under the supervision of her father. The feminine role was an expressive one, whereas the masculine role was instrumental. Women were expected to fulfil "internal" functions, for example, to strengthen the ties between members of the family. The man, on the other hand, performed the "external" functions of a family, such as providing monetary

support. Thus, marriage remained an institution which was established according to social and economic rationales. However, a new concept of marriage and gender roles developed as a result of the change in society following the industrial revolution. There was a shift from rural to urban living and a concomitant alteration in the emphasis on what was socially valued; that is, skill rather than strength was increasingly admired. Prochaska and Prochaska (1978) claim that the male had been dominant in this traditional “agrarian society” and this phenomenon has continued, although the rural agricultural society has given way to the equality of the industrial society. The spouses were caught between the two societies. They were being socialised by their families to fit the traditional roles of husband and wife, while improvements in communication and the increase in mobility placed an irreversible strain on traditional marriage.

The divorce rate has risen in most nations over the course of the twentieth century as a result of industrialization and urbanization. According to Popenoe (1993), the causes of the rising divorce rate in modern societies are, of course, multiple. They include growing affluence that weakens the family’s traditional economic bond, higher psychological expectations for marriage today, secularization, the stress of changing gender roles, and an expensive lifestyle. It appears that divorce feeds upon itself. When more divorces occur, the more normal it becomes, with fewer negative sanctions to oppose it and more potential partners available.

As a result of the “divorce revolution,” a phrase used by Weitzman to characterize the remarkable shift in marriage and divorce practices that occurred in the last third of the twentieth century (Furstenberg, 1994), there was a sharp increase in the incidence of divorce from the mid-1960s to the late 1970’s. During a span of a decade and a half, divorce rates for married women more than doubled, causing the risk of divorce to become much higher for all marriage cohorts, especially after the mid-1960’s. For approximately 100 years women have been fighting for equality, especially in the 1960’s, with the advent of second-wave and radical feminism. This movement encouraged women to understand aspects of their own personal lives as deeply politicized, and reflective of a sexist structure of power. If first-wave feminism focused upon absolute

rights such as suffrage, second-wave feminism and radical feminism was largely concerned with other issues of equality, such as the end to discrimination and oppression. During this period the erosion of traditional marriage increased in the 1960's when the struggle for the liberation of women and all oppressed people was renewed. The cry for freedom for women, blacks, homosexuality for consenting adults, and so on, resulted in the loosening of the shackles which had confined many people in traditional marriages.

The focus of marriage has therefore shifted. Mace and Mace (1976) believe that marriage has altered from its traditional form, which was considered "authoritarian, highly institutionalized, rigid, formal, ritualistic and patriarchal" (p. 4), to modern marriage, which advocates self-actualization as its goal. A marriage is increasingly assessed in terms of the ability of the partner or relationship to foster the individual's or couple's growth. This concept originated in the philosophy of the 1970's in which individuals were concerned about their own fulfilment. Traditionally, marriage has been understood as a social obligation - an institution designed mainly for economic security and procreation. Today, marriage is understood mainly as a path toward self-fulfilment. This commitment to the self which was once considered selfishness is now renamed and lauded as self-actualization (Popenoe, 1993). One's own self-development is seen to require a significant other, and marital partners are picked primarily to be personal companions. In other words, marriage is becoming deinstitutionalized. No longer comprising a set of norms and social obligations that are widely enforced, marriage today is a voluntary relationship that individuals choose to engage in or not.

Divorce must really be seen as one symptom of a complex family system found throughout Western societies. Divorce is a response to a failing marriage, not a failing institution. The family system can remain strong even while divorce rates remain high. This perspective represents an attempt to approach this study by examining divorce not so much as a social problem but as a critical, often chaotic, and usually stressful transition in the life course of a substantial number of individuals worldwide.

## **Defining Divorce**

- **Divorce as a process**

Divorce is not just an event that occurs at a particular point in time; it is a drawn-out process that begins prior to marital separation and extends well after the legal decree is finalized (Coleman & Ganong, 1995). Since divorce is viewed as a process, it is difficult to pinpoint the actual start and end of this life event.

Divorce is a complex personal phenomenon as well as a multidimensional social one. There are few commonly occurring events, other than divorce, that influence so many areas of a person's life, such as the legal, social, psychological, economic, and (for those with children) parental. As a result of the complexity and diversity of experiences of individuals, Hagestad and Smyer (as cited in McDaniel & Coleman, 2003), maintain that it is necessary to view divorce as a "multifaceted process of multiple social and psychological ceasing" (p. 187).

Many researchers agree that divorce is best conceptualized as a process rather than a discrete life event, and have identified stages within that process (Riessman & Gerstel, 1985). It appears that not all the phases of the divorce process are equally stressful. Differing responses at different stages may be explained by the passage of time (Melichar & Chiriboga, 1988) in adjusting to the divorce process. Divorce is identified as a process during which the members within the family system undergo a painful process of transformation and which involves each family member in some kind of process of bereavement (though this may not occur at the same time). Working through the process in their own time allows for successful adjustment and regaining of personal identity.

- **Divorce as a life crisis**

Divorce is one of the most stressful life changes that a person can experience. It is ordinarily viewed as a painful, stressful, and crisis-producing event in one's life (Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Hunt & Hunt, 1977; Weiss, 1975).

According to Wiseman (1975), divorce is often viewed as a psycho-social transition that causes evident changes in the divorcees' life-space, changes that foster a reassessment of values, choices, relationships, and roles. By reassessing these realms, changes in self-identity occur.

Divorce can be seen as a disruptive force in the lives of divorcees. It marks the painful process of change that demands the reorganization of the family and, among other things, causes a multitude of losses, including loss of friends, spouse, children, often economic loss, and the loss of a family system as an identifiable unit that is missed (Bloom & Clement, 1984; Furstenberg, 1990; Pledge, 1992). Following this concept of divorce as loss, Parkes (1975) and Wiseman (1975) equate the adjustment to divorce with the mourning or dying process. Faust (1987) views divorce as a major stress-inducing life crisis which infiltrates into the many different spheres in a person's life. It involves a crisis in identity, in self-image and self-worth, in financial and life-style matters, often in child-rearing, and in one's life-goal.

Moos (1986) views a crisis as a situation that is unique; therefore normal responses are insufficient or inappropriate in dealing with any crisis. The crisis brought on by divorce is unique, in that the usual protection and resources offered by the nuclear family become severely weakened because the family has a weaker structure. Moos (1986) sees the required adjustments brought on by divorce as a series of tasks that need to be addressed.

## **A Traditional Perspective**

### **Defining adjustment to divorce**

Adjustment to divorce is a developmental process usually taking from two to five years (Weiss, 1975), and it involves many areas of life, including one's daily habits, personal identity, economic status, sexual and social relationships, relationships with children and extended kin, residence, and role redefinition (Bloom & Clement, 1984; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Raschke, 1977; Reissman, 1990). Kitson (1992, pp. 20-21) defines adjustment as "being relatively free of symptoms of psychological disturbances, having a sense of self-esteem, and being able to put the end of marriage in enough perspective that one's identity is no longer tied to being married or to the former spouse". Furthermore, Goode (1956) defines the post-divorce adjustment process as "a disruption of role sets and patterns, and of existing social relations, which is incorporated into the individual's life pattern, such that the roles accepted and assigned do not take the prior divorce into account as the primary point of reference" (p. 19). In other words, the individual is no longer viewed as the "ex-wife" or "divorcee" but rather as, for instance, a "co-worker" or "date". Adjustment to the end of marriage is characterized by a stable and resilient pattern of life, separate from the previous marriage and partner and based on anticipation rather than memory (Goode, 1956; Spanier & Casto, 1979; Weiss, 1975). According to Kitson (1992), divorce today still carries the "baggage" of earlier views of divorce as moral, social, and psychological deviance, which can increase distress for those choosing to end their marriage, consequently making the adjustment process more difficult and painful.

### **Stage models of divorce adjustment**

The interweaving of several theoretical sources forms the basis for a multidisciplinary approach to the process of divorce.

Hetherington (1979) and Kaslow (1981) believe that divorce involves a series of stages:



A) Pre-divorce - A time of deliberating the couple's illusion and lack of fulfilled expectations.

B) During divorce - The time of legal involvement when the level of animosity escalates and grief and mourning continue. Hetherington (1979) explains that children and other family members must experiment with coping mechanisms in order to adapt to the transitions from family life, before divorce, to the disequilibrium and disorganization associated with separation and divorce.

C) After divorce - A time of exploration, re-equilibration and destabilization, and redefinition of a family system.

- **Bohannon's Six-Stage Model**

Bohannon (1970) defined six stages associated with divorce. These stages cannot be differentiated precisely, as in all developmental models. A number of stages can be undergone at the same moment, and the order and content of the stages can change depending on the person. Bohannon's (1970) model connects the intrapersonal functioning of a spouse to external factors related to the divorce process.

The first stage is referred to as emotional divorce, because it is regarded as the most distressing aspect of the divorce process. Being together may continue physically, yet respect for and confidence in each other decline and these feelings are not compelled by love. During this phase the couple will rather ignore than confront their deteriorating relationship; as a result their conflicts discard the possibility of not finding a sound solution. Typical feelings experienced during this time include despair, anguish, disillusionment, disbelief, shock, loss, and low self-esteem.

The second stage is referred to as the legal divorce, which includes the bureaucratic procedures necessary for a legitimate ending of marriage. In this stage, many events such as seeking legal advice, bargaining, and redistribution of possessions, are regarded as a painful experience. Individuals experience diverse feelings such as depression, hopelessness, and detachment in a very short space of time. The individual feels

perplexed, having no self-control, and feeling that only events are leading her or him towards the dissolution of marriage, such as continuous meetings with lawyers. The total longevity of the process lengthens the process of regaining individualism.

The economic divorce is perceived as the third stage. Though the family is an economic unit, economic separation cannot be as easy as dissolution of a company. In this period, if a spouse is not working he/she has to make many efforts to lead his/her independent life. Mostly, the dividing of property is mingled with other emotional matters such as the former spouses not wanting to see the possessions shared by them again, or claiming no right to the property. In some cases, arguments about dividing the property can be used as a counter-attack. In this period the most prominent feeling is the feeling of being cheated. In other words, this stage concerns financial arrangements, custody arrangements, filing for legal divorce, and, if it did not happen previously, separating physically.

The fourth stage is referred to as co-parental or physical divorce, which centres on the single-parent homes, custody and visitation. The individuals who overcome this stage are able to differentiate between the problems of the couple, and the problems of the child. They can define a sound relationship concerning the development and progress of their common child(ren). They can facilitate the relationship with the other spouse. In such a positive case, they give the message to the child that although they are physically separate, the child will continue to be cared for by both parents, even though only one of the parents will be granted custody. According to Bohannon (1970), the most enduring pain of divorce is likely to come from the co-parental divorce.

The fifth stage is the community divorce. Divorce is not only a complex personal life event but also a social event. Bohannon (1970) defines the community divorce as involving the changes in friends and community that occur as a result of marital dissolution. Social attitudes towards the person divorcing or being divorced alter suddenly. He or she is isolated from the groups he or she once belonged to, or disliked in the group. In this period the individual feels lonely, and complains about the disloyalty of friends. In addition to losing friends, however, individuals often develop new friendships

and social networks and establish a satisfying form of living for the family. A new social balance is established.

The sixth and final stage is the psychic divorce. This is the most difficult divorce period, yet it is also the most suitable restoration period. It involves establishing an autonomous identity that is independent of the ex-spouse or the spousal role. A divorced person needs to redefine him- or herself in society at the personal, vocational, sexual and social levels. This period poses the greatest challenge for personal growth and development. Typical feelings experienced include acceptance, self-confidence, self-worth, wholeness, independence and autonomy.

- **Wiseman's Grief Stage Model**

Wiseman (1975) views the divorce process as one of both grief and growth. He adapted a similar approach to that of Kubler-Ross's theory of death and dying, applying this to the emotional adjustment in the divorce process. His approach relates to the process of rejection of a lost object and an acceptance of new patterns of living which is unique to divorce. It is vital to understand that individual adults need to work through the process of mourning the loss of the marital relationship, in their own time and way so as to regain personal autonomy (Parkes, 1975).

The process may be viewed as five overlapping stages, namely:

- a) Denial - The individual denies the hardship in the marriage in order to keep the relationship going. At this point, it is common to avoid making decisions or taking actions.
- b) The second stage is loss and depression. At this point the person has come into conscious awareness that something is wrong with the marital relationship. Feelings that are experienced are grief, depression, isolation, and an inability to communicate.
- c) Anger and ambivalence constitute the third stage in that the spouses channel their energy into emotion rather than into problem-solving. Couples continuously argue about minor and major financial and living arrangements. Feelings of anger alternate with ambivalence about ending the marriage.

d) The fourth stage is referred to as reorientation of life-style and identity. It involves individuals focusing on present and future planning and functioning. It includes their re-establishing an identity in all areas of their lives: personal, social, and occupational.

e) The final stage, acceptance and a new level of functioning, involves the individuals leading lives of their own. Decisions are much easier to make because people have found new purpose and meaning as they have begun to accept the termination of marriage.

- **Dynamics of Family Adaptations**

Ahrons (1980) established a model that attempted to integrate the total family's functioning in the divorce adjustment process. Within a systemic context, she identifies five transitional processes with the aim of exploring the move from a) individual cognition, through b) family metacognition, c) systemic separation, d) systemic reorganization, to e) family redefinition. Erikson (1968) defines a "*transitional point*" as "a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential within the life cycle" (p. 96).

As interpersonal and personal dissatisfaction evolves, it appears that one of the spouses realises that the problem is occurring within the marriage itself (Transition 1). As a result, the individual will attempt various coping strategies such as avoidance and / or denial which allow the individual to believe and pretend that all is well with her or his life. However, if these strategies fail, the idea of a dissolving marriage becomes recognised by the entire family system, and change in the family system begins. The situation is likely to be spoken about, and the problem is brought into the family's awareness (Transition 2).

Attempts at finding solutions and the consequences of these solutions or lack of actions are discussed. Eventually physical separation takes place (Transition 3). As a result of the separation, the family system is divided into two subsystems, the maternal and paternal household. Although one spouse is no longer physically present, the family must still take the spouse and his or her family into account. By doing so, the reorganisation of the

family into a binuclear family begins (Transition 4). According to Ahrons (1979, p. 500), a binuclear family “indicates a family system with two nuclear households, whether or not the households have equal importance in the child’s life experience”. Finally, family redefinition occurs, where individuals take on new roles, and “present themselves as family in their social structure in a new way” (Ahrons, 1987, p. 43). He views each transition as embracing a complex interaction of overlapping experiences.

- **Dyadic Divorce Adjustment Model**

Hackney and Bernard (1990) combined various stage models of divorce adjustment as a part of their own Dyadic Adjustment Model. These stage models include some of the previously discussed models: a) Situational states (Bohannon, 1970), b) Grief model (Wiseman, 1975), c) Developmental stages in emotional identification and adaptation (Levy & Joffe, 1978), d) Legal and personal or emotional developmental stages (Kressel, 1980) and e) Dynamics of family adaptation (Ahrons, 1980).

Hackney and Bernard (1990) acknowledge that stage models allow us to follow the person’s “process” through indecision to reintegration. However, Hackney and Bernard (1990) criticise this type of stage model on several grounds. Stage models fail to describe the experience of divorcing individuals who continuously move back and forth between stages, or regress to earlier stages. According to Hackney and Bernard (1990, p. 139) a model for divorce adjustment “must allow for variability within a particular time span as well as flexibility in the larger ‘passage’ from marriage to divorce to responsible autonomy”. As a result Hackney and Bernard (1990) proposed a dyadic adjustment model, which incorporates the members of the couple navigating the process of divorce, although separately and at different rates, and often in a different order of events or experiences. Their model is based on the following phases: “Awareness of issues”, “Reacting to issues”, “Compensatory activities”, “Alienation”, “Physical separation”, “Legal divorce”, “Psychic divorce”, and “Responsible autonomy”. Although Hackney and Bernard (1990) view these stages as linear, they incorporate into these stages “levels of experiences”, which “communicate the different competing realities that the clients

may experience at any point in the dyadic adjustment process” (p. 139). They regard the “levels of experiences” as unpredictable and thus dynamic in nature.

Level One, Indecision, involves the many decisions that occur during the divorce process. Although the greatest indecision will occur in the early process of divorce, it can recur at any time, particularly as a result of events being triggered, such as an anniversary.

Level Two, Emotionalism, represents much of the drama associated with divorce. The individual tends to focus on the past, experiencing feelings of anger, guilt, and regret, and the future which is viewed with fear.

Level Three, Reality, focuses more on the present, and to some extent on the future rather than the past. It involves an ability to “accommodate and plan for realistic consequences of divorce (Hackney & Bernard, 1990, p. 139). For example, a woman who has never worked and decides to take on a job, is considering her present reality and is taking the necessary steps to formulate a new way of living.

Level Four, Renewal, results in the need to let go and find a different path separate from one’s spouse. It involves the feeling of being able to withstand adversity as well as to create the opportunity for new beginnings and become autonomous.

Although this model integrates similar features to those in the above-mentioned models, the Hackney and Bernard (1990) model concentrates more specifically on the divorce experience. Although divorce is a phenomenon that we experience in society every day, the impact and the stigma that are attached to it make it difficult for individuals to adjust to these changes in a successful way. This is often a result of the ambivalent experience of divorce such as loss of a spouse, of a family and friends, of status, public disapproval, and a sense of failure.

In contrast to the negative aspects of the divorce process, crisis theorists such as Wiseman (1975) assert that the divorce process may thus be seen as one of both grief and growth. Divorce becomes a context for optimal growth, personal discovery, and opportunities to pursue areas in the divorcees’ lives that they would not otherwise have attempted if they had chosen to remain married.

## **Viewing the Divorce Process through a Post-modern Lens**

Social constructionism provides a framework for understanding that reaction to a divorce may be impacted on by language, in terms of the explanations an individual offers, by social interchanges with others, and by the cultural meanings of marriage and divorce that have influenced a person's thinking and perceptions. It views relationships between people according to stereotypes of social institutions of idealized relating, which actual participants either conform to or differ from. It means giving up fixed ideas in preference for a less orderly life accompanied by doubt and self-searching (Owen, 1992). This viewpoint considers the development of cultural narratives that are formed by, and in turn influence people, and against which people measure themselves. It is these cultural conventions that form the context for the development of problems (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996). People's personal stories are frequently subjugated and denied in favour of the dominant belief system which tends to pathologise those who do not meet its expectations. As a consequence, people begin to think about themselves and their relationships in ways that are consistent with problem-saturated stories.

Clausen (1997) theorized that people formulate their lives into a coherent and meaningful story. White and Epston (1990) believe that each person tells many stories about his/her life and that these stories are created and influenced by how individuals interpret past, present, and future. These stories become our template for how we perceive relational information, and all further experiences will be interpreted according to this blueprint. A person's life-story therefore reflects a sense of who he or she is. Clausen (1997) points out that it is the subjective importance of experiences that is significant for individuals, as opposed to the actual life event, for example divorce.

According to Anderson and Goolishian (1988, p. 372) "human systems are language-generating and simultaneously meaning systems; and meanings and understanding are socially and intersubjectively constructed". In other words the core belief is that reality is a social construction. "We live and take action in a world that we define through our descriptive language in social intercourse with others" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988, p.

377). The ways in which our meanings are constructed are invisible to us in the sense that through socialization the socially constructed meanings are internalized and understood through meaningful symbols.

The socio-cultural environment equips individuals with methods and ways of making judgements about aspects of the divorced person, ranging from how they felt about their divorce to religious values pertaining to divorce. These ways of making sense of the experiences are embedded in a meaning system which is accepted as reality by the social environment and in the scripts (ways of behaving) that form a part of the individual meaning system. The meanings of marital disruptions and divorce are derived from the meaning and functions of marriage, and the family. Families define who we are, who we belong to, and where we belong in the larger social framework. The family is our fundamental social unit. It lends meaning to society and individuals, and society reciprocates: marriage is socially sanctioned and publicly recognized. Disruption of the family system constitutes a crisis that causes a rupture in the integrity of a meaning system, and a sense of belonging (Hancock, 1980).

A social constructionist perspective views dominant discourses as problematic since they are encouraged by means of meaning systems that are constructed within the larger socio-cultural context. For example, in the context of divorce, individuals are faced with a “new” identity, that of being a divorcee. This new identity and the stigma attached to it create a sense of personal failure and lead to continuous scrutiny and discrimination by society. In other words the meaning systems influence people to see only certain ways of being as a possibility. However, Berger and Luckman (1966) believe in multiple selves, meanings, and context. These realities which are created influence the divorcee’s patterns of interactions through conversations regarding her/his divorce experience, and actions. In the same way as each person plays a different role in a family, the personal significance of a changed pattern of meaning will vary with each family member.

Feminist theorists believe that the reason for traditional gender socialization is to cause members of society to continue viewing women within the dominant socio-cultural



discourses, which according to Boney (2002, p. 77) prevent women from “acknowledging their ability to develop a shadow script that extends beyond traditional norms of being and behaving on the basis of gender”. Many divorced mothers view the context of their family structure as deviant, in the sense that it no longer conforms to the norm of what constitutes the ideal traditional nuclear family structure, that is, a two-parent household.

According to Anderson and Goolishian (1988), meaning systems need to be expanded, so as to examine and challenge existing meaning systems, and to allow the space for alternative understandings. This process is referred to as *deconstruction*. In such a process, the opportunity for communication regarding the “problem”, that is divorce, is maximized; new descriptions arise, new meanings are generated, and, therefore “new social organization will occur around different narratives” (p. 384). By altering the meaning and understanding of divorce, individuals and families can create a sense of competency, freedom, and autonomy. In other words divorce can be regarded as being “like any other of life’s crisis, it is to be avoided when possible, when it occurs it can be dealt with as a means of achieving growth towards a more satisfying way of life” (Wiseman, 1975, p. 212).

The literature review carried out by the researcher reveals a number of both differing and similar opinions and theories regarding positive adjustment to the divorce process. Although divorce still carries some degree of stigma in our society, the divorce experience can serve as a catalyst for altering the dominant discourse of divorce from “pathological” towards personal growth, and from traditional nuclear families towards various forms of families, such as single-parent households.

## **Conclusion**

According to life-span theory, developmental and societal changes are a result of “transactional adaptation” or “person-environment interaction”. As a result divorce can be seen as a constant process of the individual’s interaction with changing contexts,

including various historical transformations of society. The individual constantly seeks changes, and is changed by context (Lachman, 2001). Life-span development can be a continuous or discontinuous process. Continuity is provided by friendships, family and often the work context, but as we progress through life we are confronted by internal and external developmental contexts that cause discontinuity (Lachman, 2001). Divorce can therefore be characterized as both continuous and discontinuous, depending on the particular life events faced by individuals.

What we find is a strong argument that family life is changing, not deteriorating, as a result of divorce. If the institution of the family is to alter in the future, the change is not likely to be seen in its structural arrangements or its functional tasks. Change is most likely to be found in the dynamics of family interactions. Family relationships will need to alter over time. This will require family members to restructure, and readjust towards each other, so as to allow individual members' needs to be met, and communicated. Family members will also be required to change their habits to perform more adequately the familial function, emotional support, that has become dormant in recent decades (Spanier & Thompson, 1984).

The following chapter surveys the literature relevant to the understanding of the divorce process, as well as its impact on family members' functioning, and structure. The theory of resilience is incorporated into the understanding of why certain families possess the ability to overcome adversity during the divorce process, and others not.

It is within this sociocultural context that individuals make their own personal decisions regarding the fates of their marriages. While the decision to divorce is conditioned by the cultural atmosphere, most divorcees report very personal reasons for the dissolution of marriage, ranging from sexual problems to conflict over financial issues, and "falling out of love" (Gigy & Kelly, 1992). However, there has also been considerable empirical research which identifies predisposing factors that increase the likelihood of divorce. Research shows that parental divorce, cohabitation, and a relatively younger age at marriage (Amato & Keith, 1991; Demaris & MacDonald, 1993), but not limited to these,

are key premarital variables which predict the likelihood of divorce. While numerous factors in a marriage are associated with divorce, perceived marital quality is noted as the most important. This empirical finding is consistent with the general cultural value of individual happiness (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler & Tipton, 1985).

Research on divorce has yielded a vast amount of information on the consequences of, and adjustment to, divorce. This literature views divorce as a stressful life event with potentially devastating economic, socio-emotional, health, and psychological consequences. While the changes that accompany divorce can be quite negative, there can also be positive effects such as allowing the former spouse the freedom to explore individual interest, or an opportunity to leave a loveless marriage or abusive relationship.

## CHAPTER 3

*“Challenge is a fact of life. Making adjustments in each life stage, coping with unexpected setbacks, or handling the daily stressors of life can turn a crisis into an opportunity for growth”*

**Ben Silliman, University of Wyoming Cooperative Extensions,  
([www.uwcnm.org/information/family-overview.htm](http://www.uwcnm.org/information/family-overview.htm))**

### **Aftermath of Divorce: Consequences and Adjustment**

Life after divorce can certainly be characterized as a time of change. It often involves alterations in one’s residence, economic situation, role, social network, and so on. These changes can typically be viewed as negative by those experiencing the divorce, family, friends, or the community.

In terms of the consequences of divorce most of the research has focused on demonstrating the harmful effects following divorce (Briscoe & Smith, 1974; Chiriboga, 1982). This may lead to the view that divorce and its consequences have been regarded as “pathological”, and as a result engender the possibility of neglecting the strengths, resources, and growth of the family experiencing divorce. However, in contrast to the negative aspects of the divorce process, crisis theorists such as Wiseman (1975) have asserted that the divorce process may be seen as one of both grief and growth, which may lead to improved psychological functioning (Anderson, Stewart & Dimidjian, 1994; Wallerstein, 1986; Weiss, 1975; Wiseman, 1975). This viewpoint is further supported by Veevers (1991), who suggested that the divorce experience can provide an opportunity for constructive growth.

According to Kitson (1992), divorce today still carries the “baggage” of earlier views regarding divorce as moral, social, and psychological deviance (defined as abnormal, infrequent or unacceptable behaviour), which can increase distress for those choosing to end their marriage. The stigma attached to the new identity of “being divorced” may also

contribute to the difficulty in adjusting to the divorce transition. However there are many factors which influence post-divorce adjustment including, but not limited to, age (Chiriboga, 1982); gender (Diedrick, 1991; Thabes, 1997; Wallerstein, 1986); social support (Garvin et al., 1993; Wright & Maxwell, 1991); role-exiting (Duran-Aydintug, 1995; Ebough, 1988); coping style (Chiriboga, 1989); degree of attachment (Reibstein, 1998; Weiss, 1975); initiator status (Amato & Previti, 2003; Buehler, 1987; Vannoy, 1995); length of separation (Chiriboga & Cutler, 1977); employment (Bisagni & Eckenrode, 1995); independence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (Carver, 1998; Colletta, 1979).

The following section reviews the literature on the negative consequences of divorce, highlighting the possible benefits of divorce, and considers the factors associated with adjustment to divorce.

### **Economic divorce: consequences and adjustment**

Empirical examinations of the economic impact of divorce on men, women, and their children are numerous (Albrecht, 1980; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Weitzman, 1985).

Work that considers gender as a predictor of successful divorce adjustment has produced contradictory results (Price & Mckenry, 1988). Similarly, Weitzman's (1985) findings that women's economic situation worsens by 73% following divorce while men's improves by 42% have been deeply thrown into doubt (Peterson, 1989). Other researchers (Albrecht, 1980; Weitzman, 1985) show that women are more likely to experience financial difficulty after divorce than men. Socioeconomic status is negatively related to adjustment. The economic problems that often accompany divorce create more stress and prolong the adjustment period. This is because economic circumstances affect so many other arenas of family life, for example, paying rent, putting food on the table, and childcare costs. This is important to note, given that it may explain part of the reason that women are sometimes found to experience a more difficult time adjusting to divorce than men. However, this may be contrary to the notion that, recently, the labour market

has been more openly available to women. Women appear to be in stronger, higher positions of power and are earning increased salaries, making their financial situation less difficult.

Divorce after a longer marriage is found to be significantly more stressful and creates a more difficult adjustment (Bursik, 1991; Rahav & Baum, 2002; Wallerstein, 1986). However, few studies show no relationship between length of marriage and adjustment (Brown, Felton, Whiteman, Manela, 1980). Loss of a long-term relationship may create more stress because a greater part of one's self-identity is likely to be built on that relationship identity. Further, the social networks that a couple shares may be better established in the case of a longer marriage and when it is disrupted, the available social support is often divided.

### **Psychological divorce: consequences and adjustment**

Psychological consequences following divorce have been extensively noted in the literature (Chiriboga & Dean, 1978; Pledge, 1992). The view of divorce as a source of emotional strain, trauma or distress which is commonly experienced during and after marital dissolution has been common. From the earliest work on divorce, this understanding of divorce as a negative emotional experience has dominated (Goode, 1956; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989; Weiss, 1975). Weiss (1975) focused on the emotional distress that accompanies divorce and formulated a version of attachment theory to explain it. Continuing feelings of attachment and longing for the spouse are identified as emotional stress for the divorced person (Kitson, 1992), regardless of who initiated the divorce (Berman, 1985). The prevailing belief has been that a conflictual post-divorce relationship has been found to hinder adjustment, while severing the spousal relationship and dissolution of attachments facilitates adjustment (Krantzler 1973; Madden-Derdich & Arditti, 1999; Weiss, 1975; Zeiss, Zeiss & Johnson, 1980). More recently, however, research shows that a cooperative relationship between ex-spouses is most beneficial to psychological and emotional adjustment, especially in cases where children are involved (Reibstein, 1998; Spanier & Thompson, 1984). The emotional and

practical support, or the perception that it is available, may help reduce the stresses of the initial separation period and contribute to enhanced post-divorce adjustment (Pett, 1982; Raschke, 1977; Stokes, 1983). Divorce can bring about positive change. It allows opportunity for personal growth, aiming at a new sense of competence and autonomy, and the opportunity to end a destructive relationship.

### **Social divorce: consequences and adjustment**

Besides the economic decline and psychological consequences of divorce, significant social changes have been documented as a result of divorce. These alterations are linked to social roles, responsibilities and relationships (Arendell, 2000; Kitson & Morgan, 1990; McDaniel & Coleman, 2003). The changes in such roles and responsibilities that result from divorce may also contribute to adjustment difficulties such as longer work hours. The increased time constraints and role overload that accompany these added responsibilities represent some of the social consequences that result from divorce, including single parenthood, dating, and changes in employment (Arendell, 2000; McDaniel & Coleman, 2003). Nearly every aspect of one's daily, social routine is affected in the event of divorce.

Kitson (1982) reported that changes in social activities after the end of the marriage are related to significantly higher distress, but that friends, professional help, children (Machida & Holloway, 1991), and work (Reissman, 1990; Stone, 2002) buffer some of this distress. According to Kitson and Raschke (1981) social support has been defined as "formal and informal contacts with individuals and groups that provide emotional or material resources that may aid a person in adjusting to a crisis such as separation or divorce" (p. 25). Most studies that have examined the relationship between social participation and adjustment (for example, lower distress, better coping, and personal growth) have demonstrated a positive relationship. Higher social participation is significantly related to better adjustment (Spanier & Thompson, 1984; Thuen & Eikeland, 1998; White & Bloom, 1981). In sum, research places a strong emphasis on the

role of social support as a mediating influence on the adjustment process following a divorce.

### **Conceptualizing divorce adjustment**

Since the 1990's there has been a research shift from the dominant pathogenic paradigm to a salutogenic paradigm, which focuses on adaptation patterns in adversity, changes in adaptation with the passing of time, and the interaction between individual, family and environmental factors that promote or restrain adaptation (Smith, 1976). Emphasis falls on positive characteristics and strengths that contribute towards the growth and development of a system, rather than on weaknesses, shortcomings, and dysfunctions. According to Whiteside (1998), researchers originally focused on the dysfunctioning of divorced families, and only in the last decade have they started concentrating on the positive functions of support, respect, and cooperation. By viewing and describing families as resilient, the potential, and ability of such families to recover by themselves is emphasized.

“Adjustment” in this literature refers not only to what characteristics and resources family members bring to situations, but also to what families do in response to a stressful event. An important distinction is made between a family's vulnerability to stress, which is defined as its ability to withstand the initial impact of the stressor, and a family's regenerative power, that is, its ability to recover once there has been some internal distress, and disruption (McCubbin, 1979). Resilience is not merely a collection of characteristics or qualities. It refers to the reintegration of families with improved functioning following a stressful life event or challenge. In addition to resilience as a cluster of elements and an outcome, resilience is also an interactional process. It is thus imperative to focus research on the mediating variables essential to understanding how the stressful life event of marital disruption sometimes does, and sometimes does not, precipitate distress.

The following literature explores, from a traditional perspective, the divorce process, family crisis, and coping, leading to a newer understanding and conceptualizing of the



family's resiliency to overcome adversity, and ultimately to redefining the process as adaptive. Family resilience can be examined from the perspective of family stress and coping theory (Boss, 2001; Burr & Klein, 1994; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). The following theories have been advanced to describe the process that a family and individual members experience in the process of adaptation.

- **ABC-X Model of Family Crisis**

The ABC-X model of stress has been considered as the dominant family stress and coping theory for almost half a century (Clark, 1999). In 1949, Hill developed the ABC-X model to explain why families confronted with the same stressors vary in their ability to adapt (Hawley, 2000). The ABC-X model proposes that a stressor (A) interacts with the family resources in order to deal with crisis (B) and with the definition the family makes of the event (C) to produce the crisis (X). Another proposal in the ABC-X model has been to put forward what has been defined as the taxonomy of family stressors. Some of these stressors are relevant to the divorce process: The impact (on all or some family members); the onset (sudden or gradual); and the predictability (expected or not) (Clark, 1999).

Limitations have been identified in the ABC-X model. The model was perceived as positivistic in nature because it was based on the assumption that variables that operate in family stress operate in a relatively mechanistic, linear, and cause-and-effect manner, in other words A-B-C-X. However, as a result of its limitations, the ABC-X model was reformulated, so as to make it systemic and consistent with non-positivistic ways of thinking (Clark, 1999).

According to the newer version of the ABC-X model, it is postulated that when a family is not experiencing stress, their behaviour is fairly predicable and repetitive, and they interact with little difficulty (Burr & Klein, 1994). However, developmental changes and unexpected changes such as divorce continually create a degree of change in family systems. As a result of the continual balancing and rebalancing of the needs which the family members have for togetherness and separateness, the system is always responding

to generational, emotional, affective, economical, social, and ecological factors both inside and outside the family. During times of stress, however, it is theorized that the family undergoes developmental transitions and stages (Burr & Klein, 1994).

According to the new ABC-X model, the first stage of the model is referred to as the *pre-trauma phase*, where the family is functioning in a normal state, before experiencing a particular stressful situation. The second stage, the *acute coping phase*, is defined as the phase in which a stressful event precipitates a transition into the second phase. This phase is regarded as a period of disorganization. When the disorganization reaches the lowest levels, the family is said to move into the third developmental stage, or the *recovery stage*. In this stage families use numerous coping strategies to handle the stressful situation. This involves the time taken for a family to reach stability in relation to the adjustment of the change they are experiencing (Burr & Klein, 1994). If the family's coping strategies do not readily adjust to the stressful event, the family continues in a disrupted condition, and the process of recovery takes place over a long period of time. The final stage occurs when deliberate coping ends and the families have passed through the recovery process. This is a period exhibiting a new normal level of functioning for the system (Burr & Klein, 1994).

The ABC-X model suggests that although the stages defined appear to be linear, the process of the crisis that a family experiences is very circular in nature. The inputs and outputs in the family system, and the ways in which these interact with the environment are informed by, and in turn inform each other (Burr & Klein, 1994). The family appears to be in a constant struggle between change and stability. This is the dilemma faced by families in the final stage of the crisis model, which is described as an attempt to find stability (Burr & Klein, 1994).

A further extension of the ABC-X model is the resiliency model of family stress, which focuses more on individuals' and family members' abilities to successfully adapt despite adversity. Resiliency has been used to differentiate those individuals or families that are able to overcome adversity and adapt to changes from those who have not succeeded in

doing so. As a result resiliency is the characteristic trait that allows change to occur. It is therefore important to focus on the ideas and models of resiliency in depth.

## **A Current Perspective**

### **Resilience**

The literature discussing resilience is vast. This is all the more apparent when one considers the variety of synonyms present within disciplines such as psychology and education (Richardson, 2002). The field of positive psychology provides insight into an array of human qualities found to be associated with resilient individuals. As Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) remarked, “psychologists have scant knowledge of what makes life worth living. Yet they have come to understand quite a bit about how people survive and endure under conditions of adversity” (p. 5). Much of the literature dealing with the study of resilience introduces the reader to a population of individuals (very often students) for whom, more than others, resilience signifies a demarcation of their ability to succeed beyond great social, familial, or personal changes (Bosworth & Earthan, 2002; Carver, 1998; Flach, 1988; Richardson, 2002; Richardson et al., 1990; Rutter, 1999). Although the concept of resilience emerged primarily from studies of children who functioned competently in the face of adversity; the theory of resilience has also shifted to incorporate families and adults (Flach, 1997; Richardson et al., 1990). The perspective that families, like individuals, can be considered resilient when they deal with the challenges in their lives has received increased attention in the last decade. The concept of resilience adds a greater emphasis on family strengths and resources (Karpel, (1986) and Stinnett & Defrain, (1985), as cited in Patterson, 2002) rather than on family deficits and pathology. In terms of psychology, emphasis is now placed on positive mental health and good functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Resilience can be seen as the ability of families, in spite of severe stress and crisis, to stay intact and return to the pre-morbid level of functioning, or even to a higher level of functioning than before the crisis (Greeff & Van Der Merwe, 2004). Hawley and De

Haan (1996) are of the opinion that resilience can be described according to three main themes: Firstly, resilience occurs during a difficult time and is reflected in the manner in which individuals (or families) react to these events. Secondly, resilience refers to characteristics of individuals who “bounce back” after adversity and attain or even surpass the previous level of functioning. Thirdly, resilience is described in terms of a health-oriented paradigm, rather than on the basis of the pathogenic paradigm. Consistent with this view, McCubbin and McCubbin (1988) define family resilience as consisting of those “characteristics, dimensions, and properties of families which help families to be resistant to disruption in the face of change and adaptive in the face of crisis situations” (p. 247). However, family resilience can also be conceptualized as a pathway that a family follows over time in response to a significant stressor or series of stressors. It is important to trace the path a family follows prior to and in response to a stressor, as well as an anticipated route of reorganization (Hawley, 2000). Other researchers have also defined the concept of resilience, but the underlying core idea of these definitions appears to be the ability of individuals to “bounce back” from adverse circumstances, and adjust to a new way of being and living. In other words the experience of adversity (serious stress or trauma, physical or psychological) can sometimes yield benefits to the person who experiences it (Carver, 1998).

The way in which a family defines a crisis has a tremendous impact on how it copes. A key process Walsh (as cited in Patterson, 2002) views as vital for family resilience is that of belief systems. She cites that making meaning of adversity, adopting a positive outlook, and valuing transcendence and spirituality are vital principles in resilient families. Similarly, Boss (2001) indicates that perceptions of stressors and events often have greater effects on a family’s ability to manage than the richness of available resources or the magnitude of the stressor itself (Hawley, 2000).

- **Resilience Theory and Resilience in Change**

Much credit for the development of resilience theory is given to Flach (1988). The various models described in the literature focus on the interaction between stressors/life

challenges and protective processes/factors (Flach, 1997; Richardson et al., 1990). These models describe a process of disruption leading first to disorganization, and then to disintegration. Flach's (1988) model of *Law of Distribution and Reintegration* provides a suitable departure point from which one may discuss his contextual framework for capturing resilience as a process, later improved upon by Richardson et al. (1990) and Richardson (2002).

### *The Law of Distribution and Reintegration*

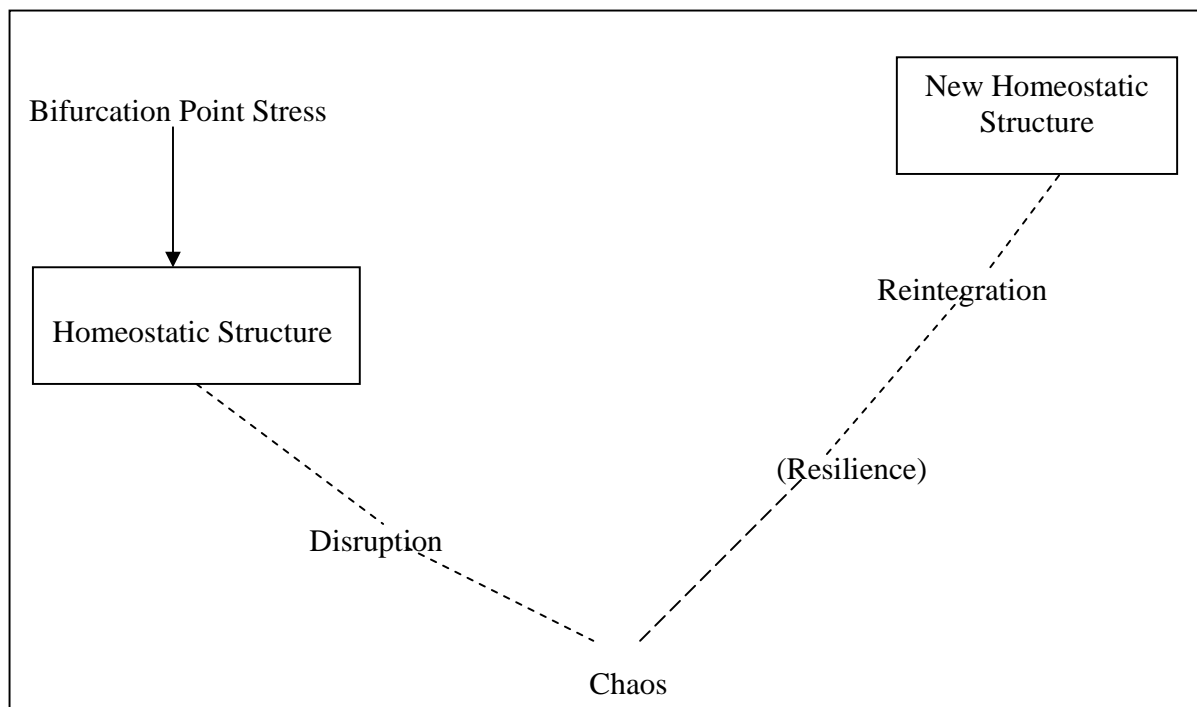
Flach's (1988, 1997) model of disruption and reintegration describes in systemic terms the process of disrupting as returning to the status quo (homeostasis). Flach (1988, p. 14) comments that:

*I came to realize that significantly stressful events, by their very nature, must shake us up and often disrupt the structures of the world around us as well. Moreover, such turbulence has to be accompanied by distress, which can range from mild happiness, anxiety, or impatience all the way to a state of profound anguish in which we might seriously question who and what we are and the nature of the personal worlds we inhabit.*

The stressful events to which Flach (1988) refers in the above passage include times in an individual's life where personal "equilibrium" (p. 13) is distressed. Ultimately the event is not as important as the effect of its occurrence on the structures which the individual had used to frame his or her life. Flach's (1988) broader point was that any stressful event "Shake[s] up and often disrupt[s] the structures of the world around" (p. 14), and in doing so we are presented with a period of chaos followed by a rebuilding to accommodate our new environment.

In developing his theory and model of resilience (Figure 3.1), Flach (1988) began by providing a definition of terms. One's initial life structure, Flach (1988) called homeostasis. The stressful events that disrupt homeostasis Flach (1988) termed

bifurcation points: a term derived from modern physics which “represents moments of extreme change” (p. 14). When homeostasis is lost the result is a disruption of structures and a possible disintegration into chaos. This chaos is totally unpredictable. At the point of chaos, “we may remain forever more or less destabilized. We may even form a new homeostasis structured around disability, anguish and inadequate coping behaviours. Or, under optimal circumstances, the stage may be set for integration into a new more effective level of personal coherence” (p. 14). Flach (1988) resumed deconstructing his model and noted that reintegration represents a “healthy response to stress” (p. 17). It is important to note that Flach (1988) describes bifurcations as comprising not only the big, traumatic events that we encounter in our lives, but also the small, everyday occurrences that cause our state of homeostasis to become disrupted.



**Figure 3.1.** Flach’s (1988, 1997) model of disruption and reintegration

Source: Flach, F. (1997). *Resilience: The power to bounce back when the going gets tough!* New York: Hatheerleigh Press. (p. 13).

From the preceding literature review it is clear that families work through and resist change and stressful life events in order to remain stable and to survive. Divorce is

considered a crisis that sets extreme demands and requires dramatic adaptation. The existing pattern of family functioning is altered during divorce. Changes go hand in hand with the re-evaluation of the family members' relating to others, as well as their relationships in terms of the external world. The process of change is aimed at the reestablishment of harmony and the progression of the family. This could result in the family staying the same or in reestablishing the family form through divorce; in other words, in single-parent households, stepfamilies or even gay families.

- **The Resiliency Model**

Richardson et al. (1990) built on the model presented by Flach (1988) for the purpose of providing “a framework for prevention[,] and creat[ing] the structure for piecemeal studies and articles that currently exist in the preventing literature” (Richardson et al., 1990, p. 33). According to Richardson et al. (1990), resilience is a process of coping with disruptive, stressful, or challenging life events in a way that provides the individual with additional protective and coping skills. In other words it appears that resilience can be seen as a collection of skills that can be developed, whether it can be taught or, at the very least, managed through furnishing opportunities for environmental control or ecology.

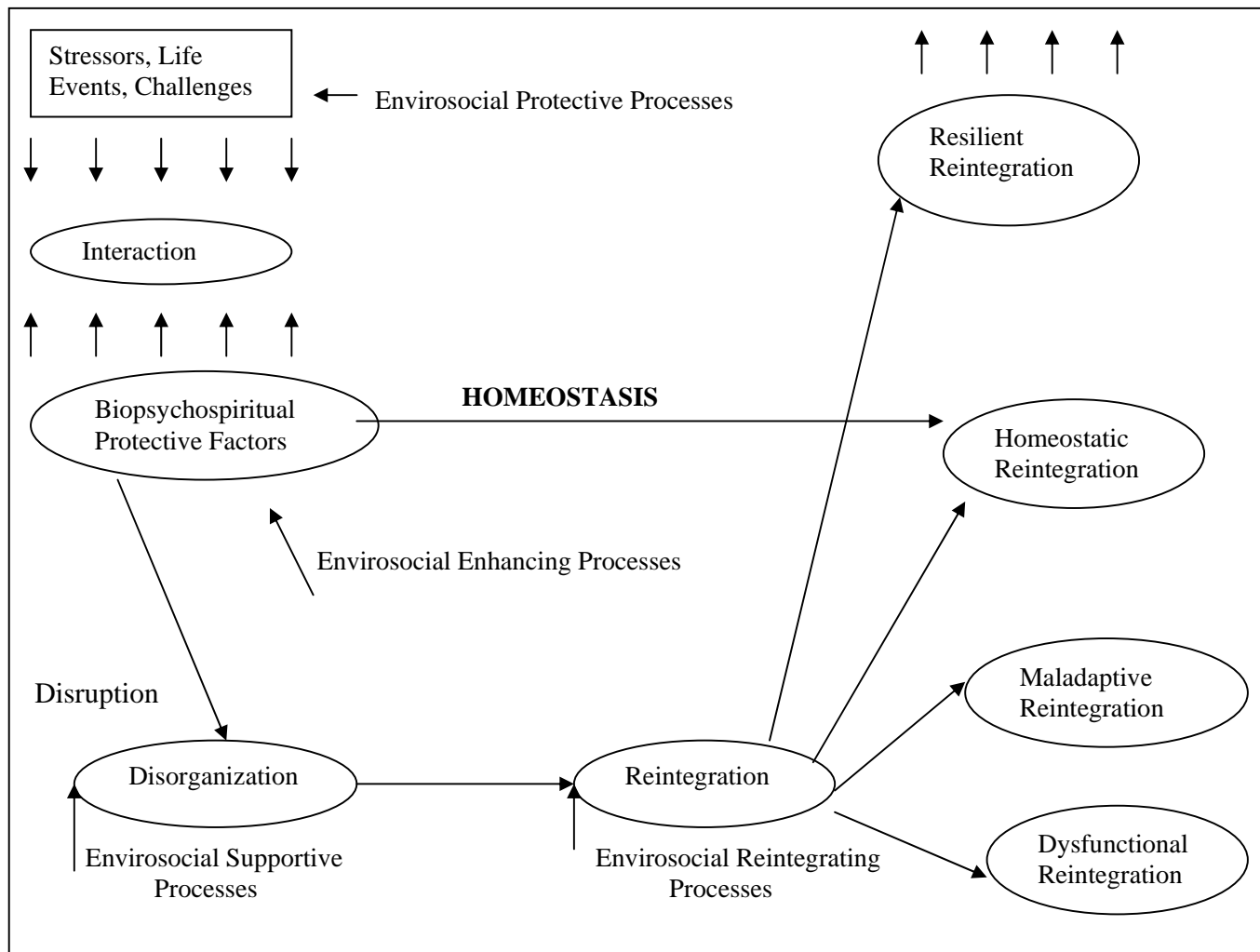
Richardson et al.'s (1990) model suggests a specific point in an individual's life. The length of this point varies from individual to individual. For some it may only occupy a moment or two, for others it may encompass years. The model's foundation relies on the assertion by Rutter (1999) and Flach (1988), that “in order to become more resilient, an individual must pass through challenges, stressors and risks, become disorganized, reorganize his or her life, learn from the experiences, and surface stronger with more coping skills and protective factors” (Flach, 1988, p. 35). Richardson (1990) refers to this as “biopsychospiritual protective factors” (p. 35). Homeostasis may be disrupted by life experiences, needs, stressors, adversity, and opportunities. Threats are counteracted or diminished by protective factors. A protective factor may consist of an internal or external support system which shields an individual from disruptions that are caused by

stressors, adversities or changes in one's life. Disruption is dependent upon the strength of the protective factors and skills. In most cases, disruption implies a period of chaos. Rutter (1999) regarded drastic life changes as turning points. At these points individuals are provided with radically new views of their world, both negative and positive.

Reintegration is a period of reorganizing one's world view to account for both the stressor and the change that caused the disruption, and the end result of the chaos that ensues. During this time an individual attempts to reconstruct a biopsychospiritual homeostasis which is consistent with a new reality. In this regard, people try to recover by putting pieces back together or by problem solving and rebuilding (Richardson et al., 1990). Richardson et al. (1990) have identified and outlined four possible reintegration outcomes: resilient reintegration (results in a more effective level of functioning than before the stressful event); homeostatic reintegration (results in returning to the same level of functioning as before the stressful event); maladaptive reintegration (returning to a lower level of functioning, with fewer protective factors than before); dysfunctional reintegration (utilizing dysfunctional coping mechanisms such as substances).

Overall, the models of Flach (1988, 1997) and Richardson et al. (1990) indicate that when we are in a state of homeostasis growth will not occur. Disruption is therefore necessary for reintegration and resilient growth to occur.





**Figure 3.2** The resiliency model: Richardson, Neiger, Jensen and Kumpfer (1990)

Source: Richardson, G.E., Neiger, B.L., Jensen, S., & Kumpfer, K.L. (1990). *The resiliency model*. *Health Education*, 21 (6), p. 38.

- **A brief overview of chaos theory and the theory of dissipative structures in the adjustment of divorce**

In Chapter 4 chaos theory, dissipative structures and change will be dealt with in depth, but a very brief overview of these theories and its application to the understanding of the family in crisis and the need to readjust is necessary here. Two main branches comprise chaos theory. One branch emphasizes the hidden order that exists within so-called “chaotic” systems. The other examines the spontaneous self-organization of systems out

of apparent disorder. The phenomenon of chaos occurs when something changes. This occurs in human behaviour as a result of human beings being intrinsically open in exchanging information, and therefore constituting a nonlinear system. At a critical point, which Prigogine and Stengers (1984) refers to as “dissipative structure” (p. 12), fluctuations will not tend to bring the system back to a former state but will rather amplify the crisis and drive the system to another state (Elkaim, 1981). The essential feature of Prigogine’s notion of order through fluctuation according to Dell and Goolishian (1981) is that “at any point in time, a system functions in a particular way with fluctuations around that point” (p. 179). At times, a single fluctuation or a combination of them may become so powerful, as a result of positive feedback, that it changes the preexisting organization. This can be referred to as a “bifurcation point”. At this point the system will either disintegrate into “chaos” or evolve into a more differentiated, higher level of “order” or organization. According to Prigogine and Stengers (1984), order and organization can arise spontaneously through the process of “self-organization”. In addition, concepts from chaos theory are further utilized in Flach’s (1988) theory of resilience. He postulates that “bifurcation points” represent times of extreme change in our lives. At the point of chaos we may be extremely vulnerable and form a new homeostasis, or we may reintegrate to a more effective level of functioning than previously.

## **Conclusion**

The aftermath of divorce can be viewed as a time of change. The journey through the divorce process will have challenged individuals’ personal strengths and coping mechanisms. It is during a traumatic and painful experience such as divorce that an individual’s ability to overcome adversity and bounce back to a new way of living is necessary. By doing so families are able to cope with the tasks and demands that are associated with restructuring their lives following the divorce.

The following chapter surveys the literature relevant to the understanding of the nature of families, of how they function as a unit, and of their ability to reorganize by referring to

Prigogine's theory of dissipative structures and chaos theory. Divorce can therefore be understood as a point of bifurcation resulting in the redefinition of a traditional nuclear family towards a neo-traditional family form. The process of change, dissipative structures, and chaos will be presented so as to formulate the foundation of the theoretical framework for this dissertation.

## CHAPTER 4

### Divorce as Bifurcation: A New Paradigm

*One day Alice came to a fork in the road and saw a Cheshire cat in a tree  
“Which road do I take?” she asked.  
His response was a question: “where do you want to go?”  
“I don’t know,” Alice answered.  
“Then, “said the cat, “it doesn’t matter”*

Lewis Carroll, in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*  
(<http://www.sabian.org/alice.htm>)

#### **A paradigm shift**

According to Lucas (1985, p. 165) “any given paradigm or framework for thought may be supplanted at a historical moment when anomalous findings no longer can be accommodated in or reconciled to the scientific model currently prevailing”. In other words, if there exists a newer, more comprehensive model that offers a more powerful explanation and a consensus eventually forms, a paradigm shift is inevitable. A “paradigmatic shift seems adequate to characterize the fundamental transformation in philosophic outlook that now seems imminent in contemporary Western culture” (Lucas, 1985, p. 165).

Today the Newtonian-Cartesian mechanical paradigm for understanding and studying human behaviour and reality has been, relatively speaking, abandoned. The consequent alienation of humanity from the natural world was a result of Descartes’ mind-body distinction. This split enabled scientists to treat matter as inert and completely distinct from themselves and ultimately led to the belief that the world could be described objectively. This world view was thus mechanistic and materialistic, but also analytical and reductionistic. It viewed complex wholes in terms of their constituent parts. However, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the major challenge to this mechanical view emerged through science itself as a result of Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity. This was the stepping stone towards a shift in “New Physics”. This shift allowed scientists to become

participant observers or “actor[s] whose operations ultimately give meaning and definition to the properties of phenomena under scrutiny” (Lucas, 1985, p. 165). Although this was an uncomfortable novelty in modern science, it was not uncommon in the western philosophical way of thinking.

Physicist James Jeans (as cited in Lucas, 1985, p. 166) concluded that “mind no longer appears as an accidental intruder into the realm of matter; we are beginning to suspect that we ought to hail it as the creator and governor of the realm of matter”. Equally adopted by modern physics was the principle of non-locality in quantum physics. This suggested that any occurrence at a given spatiotemporal point can be shown to be intimately and immediately linked with any other space-time location (Bohm & Hiley, 1974); which further suggests that the universe is not a mechanical multiplicity of things. It is a single, dynamic unity (Capra, 1983).

These challenges to traditional, empirical paradigms gave rise to chaos theory, which is “a human-sized science, a paradigm that deals with the behaviour of complex, interactive systems without relying on the reductionistic principles previously employed by empiricism” (Chamberlain, as cited in Chamberlain & Butz, 1998, p. 5). Prigogine’s and Stengers’ (1984) theory of dissipative structures, which incorporates concepts from chaos theory, as well as the study of non-linear systems offer an alternative model for observation and understanding of human interactions and behaviour.

Chaos theory has recently emerged as a central area of scientific interest that is being used in lifespan development (e.g. Thelen, 1989), psychology (e.g. Barton, 1994), and family therapy and research (e.g. Chubb, 1990; Gottman, 1991) in addition to merely mathematics, physics, and biology. Chaos is “an ancient philosophical concept, which in the past 200 years has been overlooked by scientists as they seek a logical positivistic answer to a world that is largely nonlinear” (Butz, 1995, p. 85). Prigogine’s and Stengers’ (1984) theory of dissipative structures and chaos theory is a relatively new theory of complex dynamic systems, which aims to understand and explore the processes of regularity and unpredictability in systems. Systems theory has been influenced by the

nonlinear principles of organization and change that have emerged from chaos theory and from the theory of dissipative structures. As a result a shift has occurred towards a multidisciplinary approach, involving the applications and principles of chaos theory, dissipative structures theory and self-organization, into a wider range of systems ranging within a variety of fields such as biology, physics and now even more so in the field of psychology. For this reason, the concepts derived from chaos theory and from the theory of dissipative structures will be utilised in describing the family as a living system and the process, and organization that exists within family dynamics. These theories offer a scientific model of change and explain the critical role of stress in change. It is a new paradigm which supplies a framework within which to better explain life and human behaviour, and understand the process of change. Furthermore, since the present study involves changes within families, and because structure and organization are dynamic concepts that are continually evolving rather than being static, a discussion of the concept “change” will also be undertaken.

### **Chaos: A Holistic Science**

*“Order and disorder are a matter of organization”*

**Tzu, 1980, p. 72**

### **Chaos: A river fed from many streams**

Chaos theory has emerged from various disciplines such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, engineering, medicine, and biology (Chamberlain, as cited in Chamberlain & Butz, 1998). Therefore a clear definition of it has not yet been formulated. However, integrating all the current definitions will result in a more complete picture of the understanding of chaos within the discipline of psychology.

According to the fields of mathematics and physics, chaos is defined as the “qualitative study of unstable aperiodic behaviour in deterministic nonlinear dynamical systems” (Kellert, 1993, p. 2). Gleick (1987, p. 5) refers to chaos as a “science of process rather

than state, of becoming rather than being”. Freeman (1991, p. 78) on the other hand views chaos as “complex behaviour that seems random but actually has some hidden order”. Furthermore, a definition from the field of psychology states:

[Chaos is] the unpredictable evolution of the behaviour of many nonlinear dynamic systems. Because of their sensitive dependence on initial conditions, the error in predicting the future states of such systems grows exponentially with time, so that the future states of such systems become essentially unknowable in a relatively brief period of time. Although chaos means unpredictability, it should not be understood to mean that the system was not or is not determined (Masterpasqua & Perna, 1997, p. 304).

The need to promote a unified theory across the field of science (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984) resulted in the shift encompassing different areas of study such as biology, engineering, and now psychology. This shift in paradigms can be explained by following the development of general systems theory.

### **General systems theory**

The systems approach was first proposed under the name of general systems theory (GST) by the biologist Ludwig Von Bertalanffy. His theory suggested focusing on the process of systems rather than on the specific content being studied. According to Von Bertalanffy (1968), a system is defined as a group of elements that are interrelated by a dynamic interchange of energy, information, or materials into a product or outcome for use within the system, or outside of the system (the environment) or both. Indeed, if a system is to survive, it must retain some of the outcome or product in order to maintain itself.

According to general systems theory, the study of systems requires an understanding of the dynamics of the whole rather than the reductionistic analysis of its parts. As a result

the functioning of a family system is best understood by examining the pattern or process of exchange between family members rather than by focusing on the behaviour of individual family members. Von Bertalanffy made a clear distinction between systems that are open and those that are closed to the environment. According to Masterpasqua & Perna (1997, p. 201), “living systems are open in the sense that they are in continual interaction with the environment. Life can only be maintained through the process of taking in energy; breaking it down for use in internal, vital processes; and expelling waste back into the environment”. A system is therefore defined in terms of physical, temporal, or dynamic boundaries. In this sense a boundary is a process involved in a continual exchange of energy with its environment. It is difficult to define the type of boundary in an open system because it is not static; it is therefore defined by the degree of openness between itself and its context. The ability to maintain and regulate its boundary is a function of the system’s autonomy (Masterpasqua & Perna, 1997).

### **Closed and open systems**

Closed systems were essentially focused on by Newtonian physics, in that system boundaries are impermeable to their environment (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984), that is, they are not open to their environments. Open systems, on the other hand, interact with their contextual environment; in other words, the internal aspect of the system can affect its external environment, and vice versa. Their boundaries are flexible and regulated by the quantity and quality of communication and emotional attachments between family members. They are therefore capable of adapting to changing contextual circumstances (Masterpasqua & Perna, 1997). The ability to import and export energy requires some form of organization. A structure of autonomy is implicit within this organization. As Caple (1985) stated, “autonomy is the function of the organization of activity within a system and is the basis for the organization of self” (p. 174). Thus, the patterns of behaviour within the system serve to organize and define the system as well as to maintain the distinction of the system from the context within which it is embedded.



### **The family as a system: structure and organization**

A family is considered to be a system since it fits the definition that a system is composed of regularly interacting or interdependent groups of activities or parts of activities in which the emergent relationship(s) form the whole. The behaviour of every individual within the family is perceived as related to and dependent upon the behaviour of all others in the family. All behaviour is considered as communication and consequently influences and is influenced by others. This argument is further supported by Anderson and Goolishian (1988) who maintain that by means of language the family generates meanings, regularities, and patterns. They emphasise the interpretive processes that form part of all human systems. Family systems are seen as both interactive and interpretive processes. The following hypothetical example illustrates the usefulness of the interactive-interpretive approach:

If her husband spends a lot of time working, his wife may begin to feel isolated and lonely; as a result, she starts spending more time doing extra activities outside the home, such as going to the gym or socialising with friends. This can lead to her husband working even longer hours. She might then become even lonelier and engages in more time outside the home, and so the situation escalates. He may blame his wife because she is spending less time with him, while she may argue that she is doing so because he is so involved in his work. Here, each has punctuated the interactive process in a different way, and interpreted the other's behaviour based on that punctuation. This shows how interpretive and interactive processes continuously influence each other over time. However, Dell (1982) emphasises that "these patterns are features that we, as researchers, distinguish, punctuate, and describe. They exist in our description, but do not exist for the family system, which functions as a whole" (p. 407).

Family systems can also be described in terms of organization and structure. Maturana and Varela (1988) use the term "organization" to indicate the relationships between components that make that system a system of a particular class. In other words, it refers to the relations between the different family members that give the family its identity. If these relations were to change, the identity of the family as a unity would change

(Keeney, 1979). Bogdan (1984) combines the interactive and interpretive processes, and views family organization as “the outcome of an evolutionary process by which some ideas are encouraged or confined and others suffer a kind of death or extinction” (p. 387). Structure, on the other hand, refers to the family members and all the relations between them. The structure can alter without a loss of organization, and in fact structure usually changes in order to maintain the overall organization of the system. In relation to a family: The structure of a family might include a mother, a father, children, and the particular unique relationships between these components that make it that particular family; that is, a nuclear family. These components can of course alter without the family ceasing to be a member of the class of families. The organization of a family will include a generational hierarchy. Since structure and organization are dynamic concepts that are continually evolving rather than being static, change plays a role in the process of organization.

Divorce can be viewed as a process of change that compels a family to reorganize and redefine its structure. Traditionally, the “perfect” family was rooted in the western religious belief that the only family form that can enable society to survive is the nuclear family. In the past few decades, however, the world has seen major changes within the family system. The effect of divorce has typically brought about a sudden reconfiguration of the family, and therefore a need to redefine the concept “family” and observe the changes occurring within it. Family units take a variety of forms. The family form or structure does not indicate how healthy the family is or how it functions. The family form is merely the physical makeup of the family members in relationship to each other, without respect to roles and functions. The varieties of forms a family may take include the following:

- **Nuclear family**

The nuclear, or conjugal, family is the basic unit of family organization in virtually every society. A nuclear family consists of a mother, father, and their biological or adopted descendants, often called the traditional family. There are three types of married nuclear families, depending on the employment status of the woman and man.

- a) The man works elsewhere than at the home while the woman's work is domestic.
- b) The woman works elsewhere than at the home while the man's work is domestic.
- c) Both the wife and husband work elsewhere than at the home and are both income providers.

- **Single-parent family**

One of the greatest alterations in family structure over the last twenty years has been the increase in the number of single-parent families. In this type of family there is only one parent in the household raising children. A number of varieties of one-parent families exist: those resulting from divorce, from parents who never married, as well as from bereaved parents. Currently it seems that these families are predominantly headed by women (Spanier & Thompson, 1984; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

- **Extended family**

An extended family comprises two or more adults from different generations of a family who share a household. It consists of more than parents and children; it may include parents, children, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, or foster-children. The extended family may live together for many reasons such as assistance in raising children, support, or financial problems. Sometimes children are raised by their grandparents when their biological parents have died or can no longer take care of them. Many grandparents take some primary responsibility for child care, particularly when both parents are working.

- **Blended family**

The blended family is one in which either parent brings with them children from a previous marriage. "For some children, this expanded family network is a positive turn of events that brings with it greater adult attention. But for most, it presents difficult adjustments" (Berk, 2000, p. 581). The manner in which children adapt to step-parents

and siblings depends on the overall quality of family functioning (Berk, 2000; Papalia & Olds, 1995).

- **Adoptive parent family**

There are a number of different reasons why adoptive parent families come into being. Other than partners being infertile, there are situations where parents do not wish to risk passing on a genetic disorder, or where they are older or single but want a family. Adoptive families cannot be categorised because they are diverse, and each family may face a multitude of common challenges. “Adoption is a satisfying family alternative for most parents and children who experience it. The outcomes are usually good because of careful planning and guidance provided to adoptive families” (Berk, 2000, p. 576).

- **Gay and lesbian parent family**

A larger percentage of the homosexual population is rearing children than previously. Families headed by a homosexual parent or gay or lesbian couple are very similar to those of heterosexuals. According to Berk (2000, p. 576), “gay and lesbian parents are committed to and effective at the parental role. Overall, children of homosexuals can be distinguished from other children only by issues related to living in a non-supportive society. The great concern of gay and lesbian parents is that their children will be stigmatised by their parents’ sexual orientation” (p. 577).

- **Families with no children**

Marriages in which a couple voluntarily chooses not to have children are uncommon but increasing in number. Such a family simply comprises a group of individuals from all kinds of backgrounds and all walks of life who, for whatever reason, have never borne children. Many have concluded that not to have children is their choice, yet others are still in the decision-making process. Others however are unable to bear children because

of a variety of social and/or biological forces that interfere and result in unplanned childlessness.

The types of families that evolve are all the result of change. As Smith (1976) suggests, “change always involves some reference to events, some turning-points or occurrences which mark a point of transition” (p. 11). Understanding how a family system evolves requires a holistic understanding of the dynamic patterns that exist within open systems.

### **Chaos viewed as change**

The phenomenon of chaos occurs when something alters; as a result living systems are viewed as changing over a period. One view that is crucial when applying chaos theory to human behaviour states:

...human beings are intrinsically open, and therefore a nonlinear system. Explicitly stated, the ontological assumptions underpinning all theoretical formulations asserted here are that: human beings interact with the environment, develop, choose how to develop within environmental constraints (Blackerby, 1983, p. 68).

Change in any open system is inevitable, and it is this very change which gives rise to the possibility of chaos. All living systems evolve and develop in one direction, along the arrow of time, as noted by Prigogine and Stengers (1984). As a result, any change that occurs is irreversible, that is, a system will not be the same as it was before. This is due to the fact that change is constant and transformative. These irreversible changes are referred to as dissipative structures (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984), which emphasise the close relationship between structure, flow and change. According to Masterpasqua and Perna (1997), a dissipative structure has the potential of breaking up into a chaotic disorder, which allows the system to reorganize at a new level. Instability in the face of a stressor allows for a potential reorganization in response to that stressor. For example:

When a couple is continuously faced with stressors such as financial difficulty, lack of communication, or infidelity, it is necessary for this family to re-evaluate its situation. In this sense, divorce becomes the point of redefining the family structure and ultimately the reorganization of a new family structure, defined either as a single-parent, stepfamily, or an extended family.

Fluctuations or perturbations cause a family to reorganize, when they are no longer able to adapt. This requires that a system transforms into a higher or lower order of organization. These fluctuations are spontaneous deviations away from equilibrium or from a steady state. Dell and Goolishian (1981) argue that:

The essential feature of [Prigogine's] notion of order through fluctuation is that at any point in time, a system functions in a particular way with fluctuations around that point. This particular way of functioning has a range of stability within which fluctuations are [minimised] and the system remains more or less unchanged. Should a fluctuation become amplified, however, it may exceed the existing range of stability and lead the entire system into a new dynamic regime of functioning (p. 179).

According to Prigogine (in Elkaim, 1981), when systems reach the critical level and reorganize, there is a sudden shift to a new structure: This is known as evolutionary feedback. Applied to divorce as bifurcation, this may mean that one should look for the fluctuations that become amplified and should expect a sudden change (although not always), rather than a gradual one when a critical level is reached. For example: A husband physically and emotionally abuses and is unfaithful towards his wife. At first she may feel that she has no way out of the marriage since she is not working. She may feel that she is not financially capable of "surviving" on her own. If and when both of their behaviours continue to escalate, the wife, after many attempts at resolution, may decide to start studying or looking for a job. In time, she may decide to divorce her husband because she is now financially independent to look after herself and her children. At a later stage, she may even decide to remarry; a reorganized family system is established.

## **Order to chaos: The bifurcation of system states**

Traditionally, social systems such as families were said to exist in a state of equilibrium. Some theorists use the word “equilibrium” in the sense of a balance of forces or a steady state, and consider that any form of transformation would lead to a new state of equilibrium (Lewin, (1947) and Parsons & Bales, 1955, as cited in Koopmans, 1998). Nevertheless, the concept of homeostasis is limited to accurately describing family experiences (Chubb, 1990), and as such has been challenged by recent nonlinear models. This conceptual shift has been used by scientists and clinicians in understanding family systems.

A system can be described as exhibiting varying states of equilibrium, near-equilibrium, or far-from-equilibrium. According to the work of Prigogine and Stengers (1984), systems that are at equilibrium are closed, meaning that the energy contained within the system is distributed in a random, disorganized state. Open systems never reach this state because they are continuously interacting and exchanging energy with the environment. At near-equilibrium the system is moving towards a state of equilibrium. In a state which is far-from-equilibrium, there is a transformation from disorder into order. Although an open system maintains itself in a state far-from-equilibrium, it is nevertheless stable, in that its overall structure is maintained by an ongoing flow and exchange of components. Since families have been described as open systems, Masterpasqua and Perna (1997, p. 203) state that “life can exist only in a state of nonequilibrium. It is not adaptive for life to be oriented toward the goal of equilibrium because, for an open system, equilibrium is death”. In other words, the boundary between family and context would be absent if families had to exist only in a state of equilibrium. Thus a family is not seen as a closed system operating near equilibrium; rather, families are open systems continuously interacting with their environments. Individual members are continuously involved within the community and society, such as when attending school, work, or church, as well as being active in other groups and organizations within society. Thus a family system is related to functional, adaptive change within a social and cultural context that is continuously altering.

Families may have more than one steady state which is dependent on both internal (such as degree of family interactions) and external factors (such as work and relationships with external family and friends). Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch (1974) have referred to sequences of behaviours, no two of which are necessarily the same, which make up a family's steady state. This notion is similar to Stewart's (1989) suggestion that the typical system displays a variety of states along a continuous spectrum from ordered to chaotic.

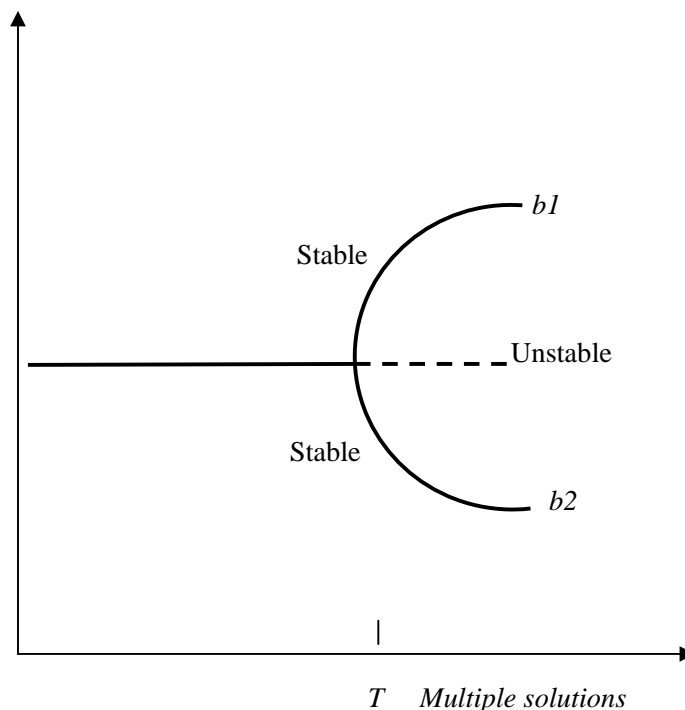
When a system is moved farther and farther away from its steady state by both internal (individual and family) and external (environmental) changes, it may reach a threshold beyond which it cannot recover. At this point, bifurcation occurs in which "two or more steady states, different from the first, become available to the system" (Ward, 1995, p. 631). Bifurcation, according to Koopmans (1998, p. 147), is defined as:

A branching of attractors, or preferred states, in periods of high fluctuations. If, due to variations in background parameters, such as biological or developmental variables, the strength of existing attractors weakens, any perturbing input to the family system may increase fluctuation. As a threshold level is reached in the background parameters, a bifurcation of attractors occurs in response to such fluctuations. Through bifurcation, new feedback relations, and new metacommunication options emerge.

When a system reaches a "stable" state, it will always be confronted with continuous stresses such as financial difficulty, remarriage or the birth of a child. As a result of environmental conditions, the system may choose one branch over the other. That is, the members of the system will select, from various options (branches), what they regard as the best option at that given time for that particular system. For example, the members of a divorced couple will be faced with decisions regarding where to live; should they move or should they stay; should the children live with their father or their mother or should the parent remarry or remain a single parent? The family will be faced with endless choices



regardless of the choice made. Although change may appear smooth, the system may shift suddenly to the other branches, producing discontinuous change, if there is a huge amount of disturbance. Eventually, if disturbance continues, chaotic behaviour will ensue (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984). (See Figure 4.1.) The fluctuations that result in the selection of bifurcation points, and a new high level of organization, in essence, create order out of chaos. Therefore, non-equilibrium is in fact the source of order; fluctuations perturb the system towards bifurcation points (Caple, 1985). Fluctuations become the source of innovation and diversification.



**Figure 4.1.** Pitchfork Bifurcation (Prigogine, I., 1996, p. 69)

Source: Prigogine, I. (1996.) *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos, and the New Laws of Nature*. New York: The Free Press (p. 69). (See below.)

For example, in the context of divorce, there is an initial rise in tension that calls for the members of the family to use the problem-solving strategies that they usually employ during times of stress. If these strategies do not succeed within the accustomed time

frame and if the stressor continues, the family becomes perturbed and ineffectual. As the tension increases, the family begins to mobilize resources both inside and outside the family and makes use of new problem-solving techniques. If these are successful, the family settles into a new steady state that may be significantly different from the previous one. Finally if the problem continues and cannot be solved or avoided by means of redefinition, tension intensifies beyond a farther threshold to a breaking-point that is followed by major disorganization of the family's functioning. The actual choice made at each crisis point will be affected by internal and environmental factors such as: The nature of the stress, the resources available both within the family and its environment, and the meaning that family members place on the event. During the passage of time, stressors may pile up, available resources change, and the situation be redefined, forcing the family to seek a further adaptation (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). Therefore a system should operate at a far-from-equilibrium state to allow for bifurcation and self-organization.

### **Systems as self-organizing**

Self-organization results when systems move farther away from equilibrium. By doing so, new structures and new types of organization in the system emerge spontaneously. Prigogine and Stengers (1984) described these new ordered structures as "dissipative structures" (p. 12). Self-organization is a part of the pattern that emerges when "a small fluctuation [is] amplified into a new form" (Robertson & Combs, 1995, p. 25).

Prigogine (as cited in Sardar & Abrams, 1998) defined self-organization as the phenomenon by which a system self-organizes its internal structure independent of external causes. These systems include other properties of chaos, namely, non-linearity (change describes the dynamic course of a system across time), feedback (in order to relate all parts within a system), and sensitive dependence (small changes may produce widely variant results).

According to Sardar and Abrams, (1998, p. 77), self-organizing systems possess three main features:

1. They are open and part of their environment, and yet they can attain a structure and maintain it in far-from-equilibrium conditions. This undermines the traditional view that systems should be examined in isolation from their environment.
2. The flow of energy in these systems allows them to spontaneously self-organize, that is to create and maintain a structure in far-from-equilibrium conditions. Self-organized systems are said to be “creative” and as a result are believed to create novel structures and new modes of behaviour.
3. Self-organized systems are said to be complex, since their parts are vast and as a result, there is no way in which a causal relationship between them can be established. They are interconnected by a network of feedback loops.

The work of Maturana and Varela (1988), regarding self-organization, further supports this notion by means of the concept of “autopoiesis”, which describes the ability of living organisms (such as people) or natural systems to connect with diverse environments in a manner that makes them continually self-generating. These researchers state that “the most striking feature of an autopoietic system is that it pulls itself up by its own bootstraps and becomes distinct from its environment through its own dynamics” (p. 47). This allows the system to move from chaos or disorder to a new order.

According to Chamberlain (Chamberlain & Butz, 1998), one of the most important aspects of self-organization is that:

... It emerges when systems are in chaos. During periods of stability, systems tend to maintain whatever pattern is in place and functional. The process of change is inextricably linked to disruption, disorder, confusion, and irregularity: chaos. Only when there is sufficient unrest in a system is it likely to be amenable to transformation (p. 11).

In terms of the theory of dissipative structures and self-organization, information is not a one-way process but a circular process involving continuous feedback that recreates the system.

### **Feedback loops**

Feedback is a characteristic of any system in which the output, or result, affects the input of the system, thus altering its position. Feedback loops are used to relate all parts within a system. Feedback systems in open and closed systems are different. In a closed system, feedback is used to maintain stability or equilibrium. When disruptions or destabilization occur within such a system, the feedback system responds to the imbalance by taking the necessary steps to regain equilibrium. The opposite occurs within open systems. Feedback is used for the maintenance of order, but “it also accounts for the learning and evolution of complexity within the system” (Francis, as cited in Chamberlain & Butz, 1998, p. 150).

Two varieties of feedback may be distinguished, namely: positive and negative feedback. Negative feedback counters any deviation from the system’s parameters (deviation-countering feedback). This type of feedback opposes the direction of the initial change. The intention is to decrease the original behaviour. It dampens and regulates activity to keep it within certain parameters. Positive feedback loops (deviation-amplifying), on the other hand, may have the potential to recalibrate or reset the parameters of the system, and allow for more varied interactions. Here, the consequences of the system’s output are fed back into that system, which causes the output to increase. Positive feedback amplifies the direction of the initial change that produced the feedback. The result of the information that is fed back to the system is to reinforce the original behaviour. By doing so the system enters into a higher level of adapting and organizing before it settles back into a temporary homeostatic state. A continuous tension always exists between the tendency of a system to remain the same and its tendency to change; this results in a dynamic equilibrium between these two forces or tendencies. For example: A housewife decides that she wants to start studying part-time and working, because she feels

inadequate and considers that she is overlooked by her family. However, the husband fears that, if his wife pursues her goals, she may become independent and may decide to divorce him. The husband decides to multiply her chores at home and to make her run extra errands for him, therefore maintaining the way the family functions (negative feedback). In time, the wife becomes more frustrated and decides on her own accord that she will start working. When the family realizes that she is capable of maintaining both the household and her job, both the husband and the children begin to change in order to accommodate their mother or wife. This will maintain the overall stability of the system, and thus offering positive feedback. Once this new pattern is incorporated into the system, that is, that no further change is required, it becomes negative feedback.

Although limiting, negative feedback is essential to keep society stable, and it can also be viewed as confining if “we come to believe that that’s all there is to our lives” (Briggs & Peat, 1999, p. 20). Therefore, in a chaotic system everything is connected, through both negative and positive feedback. When negative and positive feedback loops are coupled together, they can create a new dynamic balance at a point of bifurcation where chaotic activity suddenly branches off into order (Briggs & Peat, 1999).

Feedback occurs because continuous changes are occurring within and outside of the system. Whether change in a system leads to a higher level of functioning, or establishing equilibrium by remaining the same, feedback takes place. Feedback is therefore related to both first- and second-order change. Negative feedback is usually incorporated into first-order change, and positive feedback into second-order change. These concepts are discussed next.

- **First- and second-order change**

Within a system, change can be assigned to two categories: First- and second-order change (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984; Watzlawick, et al., 1974).

First-order change occurs within a given system, which itself remains unchanged. This is based on the notion that the more things (seem to) change, the more they stay the same. All living systems require energy to continue the self-organizing process. Masterpasqua and Perna (1997) further acknowledge that “fluctuations are inevitable because the flow of energy through a system is variable. Many fluctuations are simply absorbed and adjusted to without major structural alteration in the organization of the system” (p. 206). This gradual shifting or adjusting is referred to as first-order change. However, the process of change is not always smooth. At times when the system is not able to adjust to the fluctuations or perturbations, a kind of turbulence or crisis ensues. For example: In the pre-divorce phase, the more the wife badgers her husband by asserting that he is often away from home because of his work, the harder he works to stay away from home to avoid the conflict.

Second-order change occurs when the system is shifted into a new pattern of interacting. The system may then be transformed into a higher or lower level of organization. This occurs when adaptation is no longer possible, and the system changes by a “chaotic dissipation of the maladaptive structure” (Masterpasqua & Perna, 1997, p. 215). As the system is maintained by moving away from chaos, the system is propelled into a limited cycle of repetitive behaviour near equilibrium. Meanwhile the contextual environment continues to evolve. In the long run, the move toward equilibrium propels the system into more of a crisis. The system is thus propelled farther from equilibrium and is more vulnerable to perturbation and second-order change. If any single component of the system attempts to maintain the status quo or seeks to resist, a crisis is inevitable. Change is no longer smooth and becomes discontinuous. This change represents a point of bifurcation (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984). For example: The more the husband stays away, the more frustrated the wife becomes. The tension starts to escalate to the point where either one spouse, or both, decides on a resolution for their marriage. However, if the tension continues to escalate, the couple may decide that the only option to gain order in their lives would be to divorce.

### **Similarities: chaos theory and systems theory**

Similarities between the chaos and the family system theories exist (Montgomery & Fewer, 1988):

- Both are non-linear systems. Their behaviour cannot always be predicted by knowledge of their earlier patterns of interaction.
- Both continuous and discontinuous structural change may occur within the family structure (i.e. change in relationships or family members).
- Organizational change is always discontinuous because the old system ceases to exist and one or more new systems are created.
- Both have boundaries that can be viewed on a continuum from open to closed.
- Both function in terms of the law of composition: The whole is more than the sum of its parts. Every family system, even though it is made up of individual elements, results in an organic whole.

Although chaos theory and the theory of dissipative structures offers us a new lens or platform in order to view and understand how the dynamic relationships evolve within the family system, that is, it provides us with a generalized understanding of families, it fails to acknowledge the unique experience, meaning and social discourses that are encountered within families and society at large that may make the adjustment to divorce possible or not.

### **An integrated perspective**

According to Fleischman (1999, p. 129):

We live in a stew of interactions. The impact of our lives occurs within the dense matrix of other lives, a historical moment with unique and oscillating concurrent companions with their own actions, interactions, and vectors. But chaos theory reminds us that complexity is a far cry from anarchy. We may ricochet, but we can also steer. We may collide,

but we may also resume our direction as often as we are bumped off of course. While we can't predict the outcome of one afternoon's choices and actions, we can become increasingly foresighted about the outcomes of continuous, recurrent, enduring efforts of direction, despite the interference of lateral collision or torque.

This is consistent with the constructivist view, that human beings are actively engaging in the process of perception, learning, and knowing through language. Human beings are, thus, viewed as social beings who continuously interact with their environments. Human beings do not learn about the world around them but rather reorganise themselves relative to it. In that way information is an "internal construction based on the interaction of other and self. In other words meaning, knowledge, and learning are the result of interdependent systems shaping one another's organizational activity" (Masterpaqua & Perna, 1997, p. 211).

Operating within a social constructionist systemic framework, McNab and Kavner (2001) perceive family relationships as being contextualized within a socio-political, cultural context while simultaneously focusing on individual and relational experiences of connection. One needs to take into account that when two individuals marry, they each bring into the marriage their own set of values and beliefs that were taught to them by their families and those with whom they interacted. Therefore marriage should be seen as a context in which those different meanings are shared and a unified understanding is achieved. It is therefore questionable whether these different values and beliefs could be a reason for divorce since the stories shared by the divorced are so different. Even though social constructionists hold the view that multiple realities exist, a frequent theme that emerges in the literature of divorce is lack of communication, which may also incorporate a lack of shared meaning.

According to Pincus (2001), realities are defined as shared, family-relevant cognitive structures or schemas. Within family systems, realities are created by family members' experiences with the rules, roles, and relationships in their families. The efforts of White



and Epston (1990) focus on altering family member's scripts (story-like schemes) about their experience of the family and family members. This permits for an in-depth analysis about family dynamics, and allows others to identify with those shared narratives.

Complexity is evident within a husband-wife relationship or any other relationship, since it is influenced by a multitude of factors, elements, and contexts. The following chapters explore the complexity of language and meaning within a family context since each spouse interprets their experience from their point of view. By doing so, the unspoken word and the underlying meaning that did not find expression in the marriage can be heard, reflected on and new "insight could melt the rocks of destiny. And when the moment of insight passed, the cave once again feels solid, but of new, personally sculpted dimensions" (Fleischman, 1999, p. 130).

## **Conclusion**

A strong sense of hope and purpose is evident in this paradigm. As Chamberlain (Chamberlain & Butz, 1998, p. 11) states: "It is during periods of chaos, when the old 'structure' or approach to solving problems and coping with life no longer works, that people are able to make significant leaps out of previous patterns into new behaviours".

This new paradigm supplies a framework within which to better explain life and human behaviour and understand the process of change. It also provides an understanding of families which are far-from-equilibrium, and of why the next bifurcation or change cannot be determined in advance. Once the concepts of dissipative structures, chaos, nonequilibrium, and sensitive dependence are grasped, and once the perception of this continuity is understood, people will be able to move towards a self-organizing existence and influence the continuing evolution of humanity (Caple, 1985). Once the paradigm is truly understood and accepted, it no longer seems so difficult, precisely because it is accepted (Peck, 1978).

Its aim is not to alienate human beings from the world but rather to establish a new relationship among them and nature. The idea of this paradigm is not to take away anything discovered before, but rather to build on the ideas and findings that evolve within individuals and society, hence the term evolution (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984).

We are all able to identify with the dilemma faced by Alice in Wonderland: The search for the right path. We are confronted every day with choices regarding daily activities. However, decisions that demand a reorganization of personal identity for the individual, as well as a new way of adapting to a life crisis such as divorce, require questions to be pondered on and choices to be made. It is at times impossible to determine whether choices are “right” or “wrong” (if such an ideology exists), but the notion is to incorporate the consequences of those choices into future decisions. Periods of “smoothness” will occur in our lives as a result of our choices; however, we are continuously faced with stressors that disrupt the “smoothness”. Thus, as chaos theory and Prigogine’s and Stengers’ (1984) theory of dissipative structures proposes, changes resulting from choices are discontinuous. Regardless of the path we choose to embark on, chaos is inevitable. However, chaos brings innovation and diversion, which ultimately results in order.

Applying the theory of dissipative structures and chaos theory to family systems implies that the present study should focus less on discrete elements such as factors causing divorce. Chaos theory and the theory of dissipative structures therefore allows for a more holistic understanding of the experience as shared by both partners involved in the divorce process, that is, pre-, during, and after divorce.

## CHAPTER 5

### Epistemology and Methodological Framework

*“We do not see or feel an experience - we understand it. This means that in the process of introspection we engage our experience into a context made up of other signs we understand. A sign can be illuminated with the help of another sign”*

Volosinov, 1973, p. 36

#### Introduction

In this chapter, the epistemological framework for this study will be presented and the methodology will be outlined. Firstly, the researcher will briefly introduce postmodernism as an ontology, followed by social constructionism as an epistemology. Thereafter, a discussion of how social constructionism informs the present study will be addressed. Thereafter, the focus will shift to an explanation of the chosen research design, namely, qualitative research and how it relates to the proposed study. The characteristics of qualitative research as such will be discussed. These will include reliability and validity, the roles of the participants and the researcher, sampling and selection, data collection, and the data analysis which employs a thematic analysis of the content.

#### Ontology and Epistemology

Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999) argue that:

Ontology specifies the nature of reality that is to be studied, and what can be known about it. Epistemology specifies the nature of the relationship between the researcher (knower) and what can be known. Methodology specifies how the researcher may go about practically studying whatever he or she believes can be known (p. 6).

Methodology is formed by questions of epistemology and ontology, which implies that, as researchers, we hold many beliefs and values that underlie the research that we undertake. Indeed, these underlying assumptions have an impact on the world around us as well as our choice of research topic and the assessment techniques to be employed. In other words, “as inquirers and researchers, we create the worlds... [that we claim to find]... through the questions we ask coupled with what we and others regard as reasonable responses to our questions” (Steier, 1991b, p. 1).

As a result of the above, it is important to view the role of the researcher as an important variable in any study. Not to do so would result in an objective scientific method of doing research, but as noted in Chapter 4, science itself questions the role of the researcher as being an objective outsider.

### **From Modernism to Postmodernism**

The modern era assumed the existence of universal truths and language as being faithful and unbiased. This philosophy was based on the idea that the world could be understood, controlled, and predicted (Becvar & Becvar, 2003) and that a ‘knowable’ world is determined by universal laws. From this perspective, there could only be one ‘truth’ or account on which to rely, and to which some people had access. In order for any research to be accepted, it had to be scientifically proven by utilizing empirical methods involving quantification, statistical inference, and controlled experimentation in order to test hypotheses from which objective and measurable results were generated (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). Postmodernism rejected this notion by stating that perceptions or constructions (“storied realities”) can never be known completely, absolutely, or objectively, and that there are so many ways in which to view the same phenomenon. Each one of us is a co-creator of our reality and, as a result, our “realities” are inevitably subjective and occur within various contexts. Knowledge, or what we believe, is, instead, seen as “an expression of the language, values and beliefs of the particular communities and contexts in which we exist” (Lynch 1997, p. 353).

Neuman (2000, p. 84), identifies the following characteristics of postmodern social research:

- Rejection of all ideologies and organized belief systems, including all social theory.
- Strong reliance on intuition, imagination, personal experience, and emotion.
- Sense of pessimism, belief that the world will never improve.
- Extreme subjectivity in which there is no distinction between the mental and external world.
- Ardent relativism in which there are infinite interpretations, none superior to another.
- Espousal of diversity, chaos, and complexity that is constantly changing.
- Rejection of studying the past or different places since only the here and now is relevant.
- Belief that causality cannot be studied because life is too complex and rapidly changing.
- Assertion that research can never truly represent what occurs in the social world.

In line with the above, the shift from modernism to postmodernism resulted in the death of 'I' as a knower towards a relational self. It is a movement from the inside of the psyche to the text of the world. The human being is said to be rooted within a specific historical and cultural context in which a linguistic and social construction of reality is achieved by means of the interactions with others. Thus, while modernist thinkers are concerned about facts, postmodernists are concerned with meaning acquired from experiences and that knowledge is built on shared experiences. Thus, knowledge and experience are unified, since one cannot exist without the other, and therefore, form the basis of a social constructionist enquiry (Owen, 1992).

## **Social Constructionism**

Constructionism can be seen as a source of the postmodern movement, since it was founded on the belief that “we socially construct reality by our use of shared and agreed meanings communicated via language; that is, that our beliefs about the worlds are social inventions” (Berger & Luckman, as cited in Speed, 1991, p. 400). Our worlds are governed by institutions within which we are socialized and taught to live life accordingly. We come to view, represent, interpret, and understand the world around us in terms of the concepts we bring to bear on it, which means, that the only access we have to the world is indirect; that is, only through the medium of our concepts of what the essential differences or relationships are. We acquire our views of the world, our conceptual filters, in many different ways of which the primary one is discourse. We are told, in many different ways, what the important differences are and the standard socialization procedures of family, school, workplace, army, as well as the media influence us. These institutions comprise our society and culture, and therefore, form the basis of our experiences. Social constructionists hold that knowledge evolves in the space between people, in the realm of the common world. Only through the ongoing conversations with others does an individual develop a sense of identity, or, an inner voice (Hoffman, 1992). The knowledge of people and their conceptions (and beliefs) of what reality is, becomes embedded in the institutional fabric of society. Social reality, therefore, is said to be socially constructed. A social construct is an idea that may appear to be natural and obvious to those who accept it, but in reality, is an invention or artifact of a particular culture or society. This implies that social constructs are in some sense human choices rather than laws resulting from divine will or nature. The idea is that 'reality' is constructed, and that we are all actors on a stage.

The aim of social constructionism is to uncover the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the creation of their perceived reality. It involves looking at the ways social phenomena are created, institutionalized, and developed into tradition by humans. Socially constructed reality is seen as an ongoing, dynamic process; reality is re-produced by people acting on their interpretations and their knowledge thereof. Berger and

Luckmann (1966) argue that all knowledge, including the most basic, taken-for-granted commonsense knowledge of everyday reality, is derived from, and maintained by, social interactions. When people interact, they do so with the understanding that their respective perceptions of reality are related, and mediated by means of language (Hoffman, 1993). Therefore, in addition to creating one's own meaning, meaning is also co-constructed together with another person. As stated by Schwandt (2000, p. 197) “[we] do not construct our interpretation in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understanding, practices, language, and so forth”.

According to Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999, p. 149), “[l]anguage helps to construct reality”, by means of our conversations with others. By doing so, a word is agreed upon and established, thereby attaching meaning to our experiences (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988). Meanings are the description of what the world represents, and according to Anderson and Goolishian (1988, p. 372),

[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.

This suggests that language is a shared activity which is inherent in the negotiation of understanding, and that the meanings of words and actions are contextually bound (Shotter, as cited in Bem & Looren de Jong, 1997).

A social constructionist perspective is interested in the grand narratives, which are formed by, and in turn, influence people, and against which people measure themselves. White and Epston (as cited in Speed, 1991, p. 400) state “that the particular meanings we impose on behaviour are dictated and organized by whatever ‘dominating analogies or interpretive frameworks’ are currently available”. Social constructionists challenge this notion, and believe that it forms the context in which problems develop. These occur because of the existence, within all cultures, of dominant discourses that specify the

preferred manner of behaviour and belief within the culture. These dominant discourses may subjugate individuals into believing that their experiences and relationships are consistent with problem-saturated stories. Social constructionism, therefore, focuses on knowledge as power, believing that “cultural specifications” exert a real influence on people’s lives (Dickerson & Zimmermann, 1996, p. 80), and takes a stand on the subjugating effect of discourses.

The idea of social constructionism is to ‘deconstruct’ these dominant discourses so that new realities can be ‘reconstructed’, or rather, co-created or co-constructed, so that new meaning and understanding can emerge (Coale, 1994).

This process may be the case with divorce, where it is regarded as a social construct, with (particularly negative) connotations and meanings attached to it. However, to attach these connotations to all the individuals who have experienced divorce would not do justice to them. It is, therefore, necessary that the meaning of divorce and the experiences of those involved, be placed within a specific context, including the relationships between all the family members. Meaning is unique to each individual, and together with the researcher, their construction of their reality is co-created. A further grand narrative that is deconstructed in this research, is that of the nuclear family. For various reasons the structure of the family is changing, with families being described as single-parent families, blended families or extended families. Despite the changes to the structure of the family, that is the nuclear family, there still exists the taboo and stigma attached to the ‘broken’ family. By challenging these dominant discourses, new meanings are able to surface.

Social constructionism fits perfectly with the present study since it prefers stories to be based on personal experience rather than on the expert knowledge (Doan, 1997). The following section will sketch the methodology used.



## **Qualitative Research Paradigm**

According to Durrheim (1999, p. 38), paradigms are “systems of interrelated ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions”. It is essential that the nature of the research design incorporates the nature of the research questions and the manner in which they are to be studied. Two basic research paradigms can be utilized, namely, quantitative research and qualitative research.

Quantitative research is depicted as “enumerative”, “verificative”, “deductive”, and “objective” (Goetz & LeCompte, as cited in Moon, Dillon & Prenkle, 1990, p. 358). It employs the Newtonian Cartesian principles of universal laws of cause and effect. It also enforces the notion that all things, including social phenomena, are reduced to their smallest parts, and are measurable, controlled and predictable. Furthermore, the quantitative researcher is disconnected from her research, that is, the variables being studied and her participants, thus allowing the results of the study to be objective and value-free (Durrheim, 1999; Neuman, 2000). This research paradigm complies with the modernist perspective.

Qualitative research, on the other hand, provides a rich source of information, and fits in with the postmodernism way of thinking. This perspective argues against the reductionist approach towards human experience and thus is more concerned in capturing aspects of the social world for which it is difficult to develop precise quantified measures expressed as numbers (Neuman, 2000). Human experiences are therefore captured from the participant’s worldviews, and meaning is arrived at in terms of the researcher’s interpretations. Therefore, the role of the researcher is to play an active role, and become involved in the telling of the story, and thereby, the participant’s world. Researchers tend to develop a close relationship with the participants, who may become co-researchers, and together, they arrive at mutually agreed-upon meanings. This implies that the same experience can hold different meanings in different contexts, which is consistent with the notion of multiple realities. Researchers prefer to focus on the qualities, processes and meanings of individual differences and contexts, rather than on measurement and causal

relationships. As such, the researchers acknowledge their impact as researchers in the research process (Rennie, 1999; Sciarra, 1999). Thus, qualitative method of trying to understand the experiences of the participants, although not perfect, is the method that may least distort the experiences of the participants.

Since the aim of this research project is to capture the profound experiences of the participants, quantitative research will not be considered, and a more in-depth, holistic, qualitative approach will be utilized for reasons Babbie and Mouton (2002) employ to define the main features of the qualitative approach:

- Research is conducted in the natural setting of the participants. That is, that the subjects are viewed holistically within their context.
- Research is based on the process rather than the outcome. In this way the focus is on the “why” rather than on the “what”. This will allow for underlying meanings to emerge.
- The aim of research is to gain an in-depth, rich description of the life of the participants, where actions and events are included.
- The main concern of research is to view social action within a specific context and to try not to generalize according to some theoretical population.
- The research is inductive, resulting in new hypotheses and theories.
- The researcher is the main tool in the research process.

It is hoped that the chosen epistemology of social construction, together with a qualitative research paradigm, adds to the value attached to the meanings created by the participants within a social context. Participants are therefore, able to re-live their experiences in a safe and secure environment which will allow them the opportunity to recreate the meanings associated with those particular experiences. As Braud and Anderson (1998, p. 26) explain, this methodology allows one to honour human experience and therefore,

“to incorporate, advocate, and verify the full and expansive measure of any human experience studied, however it presents itself to awareness”.

## **Research Design**

### **Characteristics of a Qualitative Research Design**

Moon et al., (1990) outline the specific characteristics of qualitative research designs as follows:

1. They are informed by theory. A specific epistemology allows the researcher to look at the world through a new lens. Hermeneutics is undergirded by an epistemology which is consistent with the methodology.
2. The purpose of the research should be clear. Questions should be open-ended and “what” rather than “why” questions should be used. The focus does not fall on linear causality but, rather, on context, actions and events, all of which are viewed holistically.
3. The role of the researcher is active and participatory.
4. Sampling and selection: Small samples are selected allowing for intense, rich and detailed information from the participants.
5. Data collection: Data is collected in various ways using both interactive and non-interactive methods. Data can be collected by means of interviews, document analysis, video tapes, and so on.
6. Data analysis: Data can be analyzed in various ways so that patterns can be discerned. Data can also be analyzed by employing hermeneutics, case studies, heuristics and many more.
7. Results: Results are usually in the form of assertions, discovered theory, or taxonomies (categorical systems).
8. Reporting: The goal is to recreate the reality studied and to share it with participants.
9. Reliability and validity: This ensures the credibility of the research being studied.

These characteristics will be further expanded, in order to explain more fully, the in-depth process of qualitative research in the quest to hear the real story of each participant in the present study.

### **Process-oriented Approach**

A brief introduction to the process-oriented approach is essential, since it encompasses the experience of the participant throughout the entire divorce process, and, also, the patterns that existed within the family system. As such, Cummings and Davies (2002, p. 32) confirm that “[t]he aim of process-oriented research is to describe the specific responses and patterns embedded within specific contexts, histories, and developmental periods that account for effects over time”.

In this study, the relationship between husband-and-wife is explored within a specific context of time, that is, the pre-divorce phase, as well as those during, and after it. By so doing, both the researcher and the participants are able to view how their relationship patterns changed over time and how such patterns within the family system resulted in their decision to divorce. Thus, it is hoped that while the participants share their experiences, it is possible to attribute meaning to, alter or shape their experiences (Denzin, 2002).

### **Reliability and Validity**

Reliability and validity are concerned with the manner in which one connects constructs with measurable outcomes. However, in social constructionist theory, the concepts of reliability and validity are virtually impossible to achieve accurately and without error, since constructs in the social sciences are “ambiguous, diffuse, and not directly observable” (Neuman, 2000, p. 164). If this is the case, reliability and validity should be discarded, since they are incompatible with the social constructionist perspective, in the sense that reality is embedded in contexts, and continuously changes and therefore, cannot be repeated (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999). However, it is an ethical obligation

of the qualitative researcher to assess research, since it is a representation of the lived experiences of people.

Reliability and validity in qualitative research are conceptualized differently from that of quantitative research designs. In quantitative research, reliability refers to the reliability of the measuring instrument, and validity, its measurement of what is intended to be measured. However, in qualitative research, reliability may be replaced with dependability which “refers to trustworthiness of observations or data”; whereas validity may be replaced with credibility which “refers to the trustworthiness of interpretations or conclusions” (Stiles, 1993, p. 601). Furthermore, Stiles (1993) mentions the following guidelines for obtaining dependability and credibility so that the research produced is of a high standard and is meaningful.

The following guidelines are regarded as fundamental in achieving dependability in the present study (Stiles, 1993, pp. 602-607):

- “Disclosure of orientation” refers to the researcher’s theoretical epistemology, preconceptions, values, and orientation, which may have an impact on the research and findings.
- “Explication of social and cultural context” refers to the context in which the investigation takes place, by making implicit the social and cultural context of the researcher and that of the participants, explicit. Furthermore, it requires that the reasons for conducting the research be clarified, since this influences the way in which the participants and their stories are viewed. Regarding the present study, the reasons for conducting the research are for academic purposes, and to contribute to the literature on the present topic of study.
- “Description of internal processes of investigation” refers to the internal processes of the investigators, or the impact the research had on the investigator while conducting the investigation and developing the interpretation. This has been achieved in the present study by incorporating the researcher’s reflections on each participant’s story and its impact on the researcher.

- “Engagement with the material” refers to the researcher being immersed in the material collected. The present researcher reviewed the available literature on divorce as well as the data gathered from the participants with regards to their experiences of divorce. Thus, the present researcher was able to gain a deeper understanding of the topic of research. Furthermore, in order to reach such an in-depth understanding, rapport and a trusting relationship needed to be established with the participants by seeking an understanding of their worlds through their lenses.
- “Iteration: Cycling between interpretation and observation” refers to a continuous process of being a part of and apart from the process of interpretation. This allows the researcher to replay to the participants the reflections and understanding of the researcher. This allows the participants the opportunity to correct or negotiate the meaning of the observations.
- “Grounding of interpretations” refers to the connection between the context and the content of the interview, with the interpretations of the researcher. In the present study it refers to linking identified themes with the excerpts of the original interview text.
- “Ask ‘what’ not ‘why’” questions, grounds the experiences of the participants within the context that these occurred. In the present research, the shift from ‘why’ to ‘what’, was required in order to capture the participant’s own story rather than to elicit material that had been learned or taught. This manner of asking questions generates richer descriptions of the meanings created by the participants.

The following guidelines are used to achieve credibility in the present study (Stiles, 1993, pp. 608-613):

- “Triangulation” refers to obtaining various sources of information, methods, prior theories or interpretations in one’s research in order to achieve convergence, and ensure some level of fairness. In the present research, this was achieved by accessing and gaining a comprehensive description of the existing literature, the

interview, the themes that emerged, and engaging in a dialogue with the supervisor of the dissertation.

- “Coherence” refers to the quality of the interpretation concerning the experiences of the participants. It also encompasses the relationships between the elements used in the study such as the theoretical framework, the literature surveyed, the interview, and emerging themes based on the interpretations of the original transcript.
- “Uncovering: Self-evidence” refers to making sense of our experience, and to whether our concerns within the research context have been answered. Furthermore, it is hoped that the present researcher has enriched the reader’s understanding of the experiences of the participants and allowed change and growth to occur as a result.
- “Testimonial validity” refers to the validity that is obtained from the participants themselves. This allows the participant to become a co-researcher in the process and therefore, being given the opportunity to confirm the researcher’s interpretations. Furthermore, the researcher is made aware that interpretations are only one way of viewing the events that have unfolded.
- “Catalytic validity” refers to the degree to which the research process makes sense to the participants and produces change or growth. The aim of this research is to empower participants by giving them the opportunity to view their experiences from a new perspective and to shed new light as a result.
- “Reflexive validity” refers to the manner in which the thinking of the researcher is changed by the data.

The research ethic is closely linked with the dependability, credibility and confirmability of the research study. Like most qualitative research, biases do exist, and ethics therefore need to be considered in order to protect the participants as well as the integrity of the researcher. As Neuman (2000, p. 90) argues “ethics define what is or what is not legitimate to do, or what ‘moral’ research procedure involves”. In order to combat ethical issues, certain guidelines need to be followed so as to protect the participants as well as the researcher.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical concerns in qualitative research revolve around the following topics (Neuman, 2000; Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999):

- **Informed consent**

This involves obtaining verbal and written consent from the participants in order to participate voluntarily in the research study. The participants of the current study were, telephonically, also made aware of the study, in which they had consented to participate, by providing them with a detailed description of what the research entailed as well as of what would be expected of them. The researcher's explanation of the proposed study was full, non-technical, and clear, so that the participants could make an informed choice with regards to their participation. Furthermore, because the interviews of the participants were audiotaped, permission to do so was also required.

- **Confidentiality**

The researcher should discuss the issue of confidentiality with the participants. This includes informing the participants regarding who will have access to the information supplied by them, and how it will be used, recorded and presented. Furthermore, participants who chose not to make their identity known to the public will be protected by the use of pseudonyms.

- **Competence**

Due to the nature and sensitivity of the issues discussed, the welfare of the participants, and their rights, need to be protected. A competent researcher will ensure that no physical, emotional or social harm is incurred by the participants. The researcher will therefore need to continually respect the autonomy of the participants. Thus, the participants are informed that they may withdraw from the research study at any time and need not feel compelled to answer questions with which they feel uncomfortable and uneasy. The researcher only conducts and collects information that is within the realm of the research study and the researcher's expertise. Furthermore, the researcher will need to



define her role to the participants in order to ensure that the research relationship is adhered to.

### **The Role of the Researcher and the Participants**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue against the traditional investigator-object dualism assumed by positivistic research whereby, “the inquirer and the object are independent; the knower and the known constitute a discrete dualism” (p. 94). Instead, the authors propose a naturalistic perspective, thus, “the inquirer and the ‘object’ of inquiry interact to influence one another; knower and known are inseparable” (p. 94).

The researcher is seen as the major data collection instrument in the research process (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999). Angrosino and Mays de Perez (2000) contend that a distance between researchers and their subjects can no longer be assumed or taken for granted. “Indeed the very term, subject, with its implicit colonialist connotations, is no longer appropriate. Rather, there is said to be a dialogue between researcher and those cultures/societies which are to be described” (p. 675). Participants will have an influence on the conclusions that can be drawn, and in this process, they become co-researchers or collaborators. Such an approach is in line with the constructionist perspective, where the researcher as observer is also included in the description of the system. This ‘mutual shaping’, involving both the researcher and the participants, is influenced by the values of both the researcher and participants. According to Ely (1991), biases are impossible to escape: they are a part of who we are; therefore, the aim is not to discard those biases but rather to understand and be aware of these when they surface in order to prevent distortion of the research data. Inevitably, researchers are not culture-free, or value-free, and biases will emerge.

The researcher should believe that the participants are the experts regarding their own experiences and therefore know a great deal about the research topic. This is referred to as tacit knowledge (Sciarra, 1999). As such, the interview held between the present researcher and the participants is an interactive, rather than a controlling process. The

researcher should allow the participants to reveal their stories, but at the same time, to be aware of the nature of the process that occurs at any point during the research. Therefore, the researcher maintains a learning attitude where the participants are the teachers.

Part of the role of the researcher is to clearly state the purpose of the research before commencing with the interview. In the present study, the researcher informed the participants that the researcher was interested in the divorce experiences of the participants from their vantage point. She disclosed to them that her interest stemmed from the continuously increasing rate of divorce and what occurred within families that would later result in divorce. She also disclosed to the participants that her knowledge concerning divorce had been obtained chiefly from the literature she had read, and that it was her belief that most conclusions she had drawn were predominantly related to the negative consequences that divorce has on families. Therefore, the researcher believed that a knowledge gap existed which needed to be filled by the divorced participants' own accounts of the processes of their divorce. They were also told that their stories might assist other divorced families who could be struggling to adjust to the formation of a new identity and a new family structure. In addition, the participants were also informed that their stories could add to the body of knowledge on divorce, in order to facilitate a deeper knowledge and understanding of the dynamic processes within, and underlying, the relationships within families. Furthermore, the researcher informed the participants of the researcher's ethical practice. She assured the participants of their anonymity, if they so wished, and that all information shared would remain confidential. Since the researcher was aware of the sensitive nature of the topic, the participants were told that they had the right to withdraw at any stage of the study if they felt uneasy or uncomfortable about continuing their participation in the study.

As Rubin and Rubin (1995) indicate, the researcher's role and how it is perceived by the participants, affects the quality of communication and relationship between the researcher and the participant. Hence, the researcher needs to be flexible enough to accommodate each participant and to define a mutually acceptable research role. Thus, by means of the

researcher's involvement with the people they study, lives become intertwined, with all the accompanying hazards, challenges, and opportunities that such closeness brings.

### *A Brief Personal Statement*

At this point, the researcher wishes to make a personal statement about her background in order to shed light on how her interest in divorce came about. It is hoped that the researcher's biases and subjectivities will be made explicit.

The researcher is an adult female of Caucasian origin. She is not married and has no children. Although she has never experienced a divorce within her family, she has witnessed her own family's struggle to remain together, the conflict that spread throughout the household, and the trauma of having been exposed to the events that resided within her family, and ultimately, could have resulted in divorce. For the researcher, divorce was regarded as deviant and outside the social norm, and could not have been an option or acceptable. However, the researcher's view on divorce as being deviant and negative shifted when she crossed paths with an individual who had experienced a divorce. She shared a story of pain, disappointment and betrayal, yet, from those feelings stemmed a need to survive, courage to find a new identity, and a desire to live a new life with her children.

As a result of this encounter, the researcher's interest in the dynamic relationships within her own family, and those of families who have divorced, expanded. For the researcher, divorce is not necessarily an end, but rather, the beginning of a new life with new meaning. She hopes that this study will not only provide further insight with respect to divorce in general, but also, assist her in her own understanding and interpretations of her own relationships within her family and with her partner.

## **Sampling and Selection**

Sampling involves the process of “selecting people, settings, events, behaviours and/or social processes to observe” in the research study (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999, p. 44). In qualitative research, only a few cases are selected, which allows for rich and detailed information to be acquired and analyzed in depth. Furthermore, the idea is not to generalize results but rather to allow participants to share their experiences.

In this study, sampling purposive-unique-case and convenience selection was employed. Participants were selected according to the following criteria:

- Both ex-wife and ex-husband had to participate in the research. Interviews were to be held separately due to the sensitive nature of the research topic.
- The participants must have been divorced for a period of at least one year, in order to allow for adjustment.
- The participants must have been willing to share their personal experience relating to divorce.

The researcher advertised her research, together with the required criteria, for participants on the internet, and by means of text messages to acquaintances and friends. Various people responded to the e-mail regarding individuals whom they knew. However, because both ex-husband and ex-wife had to be part of the research, most of the respondent individuals did not participate. The sample eventually comprised three couples, based on convenience and availability. The first and third couples are known to the researcher, while the second couple was put into contact by the researcher’s friend.

All participants agreed to share their experiences telephonically and an appointment was set up for the interviews. Before commencing with the interview, the participants were briefed again regarding the purpose of the research, and also the associated ethical considerations. The participants were requested to grant permission for the interviews to be audio-taped and were afforded the option of anonymity. They were then requested to sign consent forms to allow the sessions to be tape-recorded and for the information to be

used solely for the purposes of the current research (See Appendices A1 & A2 for copies of the consent forms).

## **Data Collection**

- **Interview**

In qualitative research, the data is collected in visual and/or verbal form. The researcher gathered data by observing each participant during the interview.

Personal data, such as name, age, culture, religion, birth place, education, occupation, names and ages of children, length of dating, marriage and divorce, and current status, was obtained from a “personal data form” which the participants completed at the beginning of the first interview. Due to the sensitive situation regarding the third couple, minimal background information was collected so as to protect the identity of all the family members as well as that of the participant. The structure and the relationships between family members were best obtained during the interview process due to the nature of the topic of the study, involving families.

The interview, recorded onto audiocassettes, was the method employed in order to obtain information. Although the nature of the interview was semi-structured, it was more consistent with a conversation in which a dialectical search for meaning is found and constructed between the researcher and the participant.

The interview was based on a minimal number of open-ended questions that would enable the participants to reveal their stories throughout the pre-divorce stage, as well as the stages during and after the divorce. Questions therefore, focused on “what” rather than “why”. According to Stiles (1993, p. 607), “ ‘what’ questions elicit material of which clients have direct knowledge”. These questions were intended to capture perceptions, feelings and opinions (Breakwell, Hammond, & Fife-Shaw, 1997) of their

experiences, which allowed for a holistic picture of the worldviews of the participants to emerge.

Each interview commenced with the invitation: “what were you experiencing on a personal level prior to the decision to divorce?” However, the researcher had to be flexible in order to accommodate each participant. Questions were asked during the telling of the participants’ stories. The research questions were constructed (Breakwell et al., 1997) according to the literature surveyed as well as the curiosity of the researcher. However, careful attention was paid to the process of the present research to ensure that the issues dealt with were sensibly related (Breakwell et al., 1997) to the original research questions.

- **Procedure**

Each interview was scheduled to take place at the participant’s own convenience. The interviews were conducted by the researcher and lasted approximately one to two hours. Interviews were audio-taped with the consent of the interviewee. The audio-tapes were fully transcribed after the interviews. The original transcripts of the interviews are safely stored with the researcher and are available on request. In the event of any material being ambiguous or unclear, the participants will be invited to participate in a second interview or contacted telephonically. In the analysis of the data, the author of the present document, quoted from each of the interviews with the participants. Specific information on the setting of the interview for each of the participants will be provided in the chapter pertaining to the results.

### **Data Analysis**

According to Rapmund (1996, p. 118), analysis of information “is the process whereby order, structure, and meaning is imposed on the mass of information that is collected in a qualitative research study”. Within this vast amount of information, the spoken word of

the participants is linked with their thoughts, understanding, beliefs and meanings. Vygotsky (1934, p. 285) links these concepts with consciousness by expressing that:

If language is as ancient as consciousness itself, if language is consciousness that exists in practice for other people and therefore for myself, then it is not only the development of thought but the development of consciousness as a whole that is connected with the development of the word.

Vygotsky's (1934) understanding of the concept 'language' is crucial in order to underpin and justify the use of the interview as an instrument of data collection, and also, of the analysis of the transcribed auto-recordings of the interviews since humans experience the world through language which provides both understanding and knowledge.

The choice of data analysis is the interpretive approach which is described by Neuman (2000, p. 71) as "the systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social world". In other words, individuals are social beings that should be understood within the context in which they exist.

Hermeneutics is congruent with an interpretative approach which refers to a process of scriptural interpretation. The term hermeneutics was derived from the Greek verb "hermeneuein", meaning to interpret, and the noun "hermeneia", meaning interpretation. In Greek myth, Hermes was the mediator responsible for explaining the messages of God, hence the word hermeneus, an interpreter. Hermeneutics, as a discipline, was utilised to interpret religious texts. Early monks analyzed works by employing a method termed reconstruction to find the original intended meaning. However, hermeneutics has evolved from an analysis of biblical texts to a method of understanding human nature.

This method of textual analysis emphasises that the interpretations and understanding of the experiences of the participants need to be viewed within the socio-historical-cultural context (Reason & Rowan, 1981). The researcher, being part of her own community and culture, will emerge within the text of the participant's story with her own beliefs and values. This is not necessarily a setback, since the researcher is able to expand her own beliefs and reach a new understanding with regards to the phenomenon being studied.

A meta-principle, known as the hermeneutic circle, guides the hermeneutic approach where the process of understanding moves from parts of a whole to a global understanding of the whole and back to the individual parts in an iterative manner (Klein & Meyers, 1999). This meta-principle allows the development of a complex whole of shared meaning between the researcher and the participants. The hermeneutic process describes the process of understanding a text hermeneutically. Therefore, the aim of hermeneutics is "to discover meaning and to achieve understanding" (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991, p. 266) or to make sense of "that which is not yet understood" (Addison, 1992, p. 110).

The hermeneutic circle involves the process whereby all the information collected during the interviews with the participants, is brought together. Data can be in the form of the transcribed interviews, the researcher's impressions and any personal documents that are supplied by the participants in order to gain a deeper understanding of the experience of the participants during the divorce process. At this point, the researcher needs to put on hold any judgments and preconceived ideas that she may have in order to allow the themes to emerge naturally. As Shantall (1996, p. 243) expresses this:

The process involved is what has been referred to as the hermeneutic circle: instead of a single cycle of data collection, there need to be multiple cycles, where the theory, concepts, and categories are progressively extended and refined, differentiated and integrated, reaching towards theoretical saturation. This is a rigour of clarity, accuracy, and precision.



Hermeneutics, as a methodological perspective, is considered to reside within an interpretive/constructivist paradigm of inquiry. Therefore, this approach coheres with the proposed study, since the aim of the study is to discover meaning and to achieve understanding concerning the divorce process.

In summary, hermeneutics is based on the following assumptions (Addison, 1992):

- People give meaning to what happens in their lives, which is vital if others are to understand their behaviour.
- There are various ways in which meaning may be expressed, not only verbally.
- The meaning-giving process is informed by the “immediate context, social structures, personal histories, shared practices, and language” (Addison, 1992, p.112).
- The meaning of human action is not a fixed entity. Human action is constantly being negotiated, changing, or evolving over time, in varying contexts and for different individuals.
- The process of interpretation enables the person to make sense of his/her world. However, these ideas are informed by the interpreter’s values and therefore the notion of “truth” does not correspond to an objective reality.

Although this method does not have a set of prescribed techniques, the following approach has been adapted from Addison (1992), Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999), Wilson and Hutchinson (1991), and Braun and Clarke (2006), and involves the following practices that will be utilized in the proposed study:

**Step 1: Familiarization and Immersion:** The researcher becomes immersed in the world that is created by the text of the participants in order to make sense of the world. The researcher interviewed the participants and had the interviews transcribed. The researcher then immersed herself in the transcribed texts, repeatedly reading the texts in search for meanings and patterns. She worked through the story of each participant, one at a time, in order to prevent one influencing the other.

**Step 2: Thematising:** Once the researcher had familiarized herself with the texts of her participants' world views, she engaged in the process of searching for themes. "Themes should ideally arise naturally from the data, but at the same time they should also have a bearing on your research question" (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999, p. 141). Initially, the researcher allowed for unlimited themes to emerge, so as to allow for clarity and openness.

**Step 3: Coding:** Once the themes were identified, the researcher then coded relevant sections of the interview together, with the intention of later grouping them together under the same theme. Thereafter, themes were analyzed in relation to those of the other participants. According to Boyatzis (as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88), codes refer to "the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon".

**Step 4: Elaboration:** Once the themes had been identified, the researcher explored, more closely, the themes that were generated, so as to gain a fresh view and deeper meaning of the stories of the participants. The researcher constantly moved "back and forth between individual elements of the text and the whole text in many circles" (Tesch, 1990, p. 68). Thereafter, the researcher reconstructed the stories of the participants by linking the dominant themes with the excerpts of their stories. During this process, the researcher needed to maintain a constant questioning attitude, looking for misunderstandings, deeper and alternative meanings.

**Step 5: Interpretation and Checking:** Thematic analysis was employed to interpret and identify common themes from the texts of participants. The researcher must check that sufficient evidence of the themes within the data demonstrates the prevalent theme throughout the story of the participants. In the chapters yet to follow, this study will be evaluated, future recommendations proposed, and the researcher's personal involvement in the phenomenon will be declared.

In essence, working through the above steps allows the researcher to immerse herself in the world of meaning; that of a word and a text, in order to make sense of the experience of the participants.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter was introduced by discussing the growth of postmodernism, followed by the epistemological framework of social constructionism. Thereafter, qualitative research, as often informed by the ideas of postmodernism, was introduced. The data collected was then analyzed using the hermeneutic technique. These concepts appear to correspond with one another and are conducive to the present study since the same ideas of creating meaning, language, context, and personal experiences, are incorporated.

The information obtained in this study assists in the understanding of the inner subjective world of the participants by travelling back in time. Together, both the researcher and the participants relive their experiences of pain, suffering, strength, courage and triumph. This immersion allows the researcher to understand the experiences of the participants within their socio-historical context in which dominant societal discourses influence their decisions and ability to adjust, or not, to the divorce process. The postmodern movement allowed for the creation of unique experiences and multiple realities rather than an “absolute truth”. This reminds us that no two people experience the same event in the same way. However, it is by means of a dialectical relationship that others are able to relate, share and create new meaning. Therefore, the aim of this research is not to compare, but to add to what we already know concerning divorce and to find alternative ways of viewing families, and their relationships.

The following chapters, 6 to 11 will illuminate the themes that emerged during the interviews with the participants. Their voices will be heard and acknowledged and as we embark on the journey we need to remember “to respect the integrity of the system and judge it as neither good nor bad” (Rapmund, 1996, p. 124).

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **Results: Rahima**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter is based on the transcribed interview with Rahima. A brief background will be sketched, followed by a description of the setting of the introduction to the interview and the researcher's impressions and observations. Rahima's relationships with her immediate and extended family, as well as with her social networks, will also be depicted graphically using genograms and ecomaps. She will re-live her journey by voicing the changes and transitions that she perceived to occur within herself and her family during the divorce process. Subsequently, the themes that emerged will be discussed. Thereafter, a comparison of themes across the three divorced couples, and also, across the males and females, will be presented.

Each narrative has been reconstructed in terms of the themes identified by the researcher. The researcher's own lens has coloured the manner in which she has interpreted the stories of the participants and their relationships. It is thus important to note that others may view and understand the experience[s] of the participants through their own, possibly different, lenses as other themes may well emerge. It is suggested that the interpretation of each participant's story is one of many possible interpretations and is by no means regarded as the absolute truth. Although the participant was willing to use her real name, the researcher has decided to provide her with a pseudonym so as to protect those who wish to remain anonymous such as her ex- husband.

#### **Rahima's Story**

##### **Brief Background**

Rahima is a 45 year old Muslim mother of two boys aged sixteen and ten. She was born and raised in South Africa, and is the youngest of five children. At the time of the

interview, she had been divorced for four years after thirteen years of marriage. It was an arranged marriage and they dated for only three months during the time that they were engaged. Since it was an arranged marriage, there was no courtship. She currently lives alone with her two children. Her mother resides in an adjoining house, with a door that links the two households. Rahima works six days a week and occasional Sundays as a beauty advisor. Her relationship with Seedat, although civilized, is viewed as one of conflict and tension. With regard to the children, Seedat seems to be detached, thus creating a strained relationship.

### **Interview Setting and Impressions**

The interview took place at Rahima's home. She greeted me warmly in her traditional Muslim attire. She was friendly and hospitable, offering me coffee and something to eat. The environment was comfortable and quiet since the children had gone to their father. Respectfully, she took the phone off the hook and asked the gardener to come another day in order to prevent any disruptions and noise. The environment was therefore conducive to an interview. The interview started at the table in the dining room while we drank our coffee. We later moved into the lounge as a result of the noise that started outside the window. Rahima and I appeared to be more comfortable in the lounge as evidenced by our body postures: we put our feet up on the couch and our bodies faced each other. Rahima continued with the interview as if there had been no interruption. She was very excited about the research project and her participation. She openly volunteered in-depth information, not withholding the sharing of her emotions during the interview. A day after the interview, Rahima made contact with me and expressed the fact that since she had been so emotional on the day of the interview, she had forgotten to tell me how she currently feels about her life by quoting from a book she had read. She had also written a few pages about her experience of the divorce and said that she would like to share her thoughts with me. Rahima's themes are a result of the interview, as well as her personal writings reflecting her struggles, pain, and recovery during the divorce.

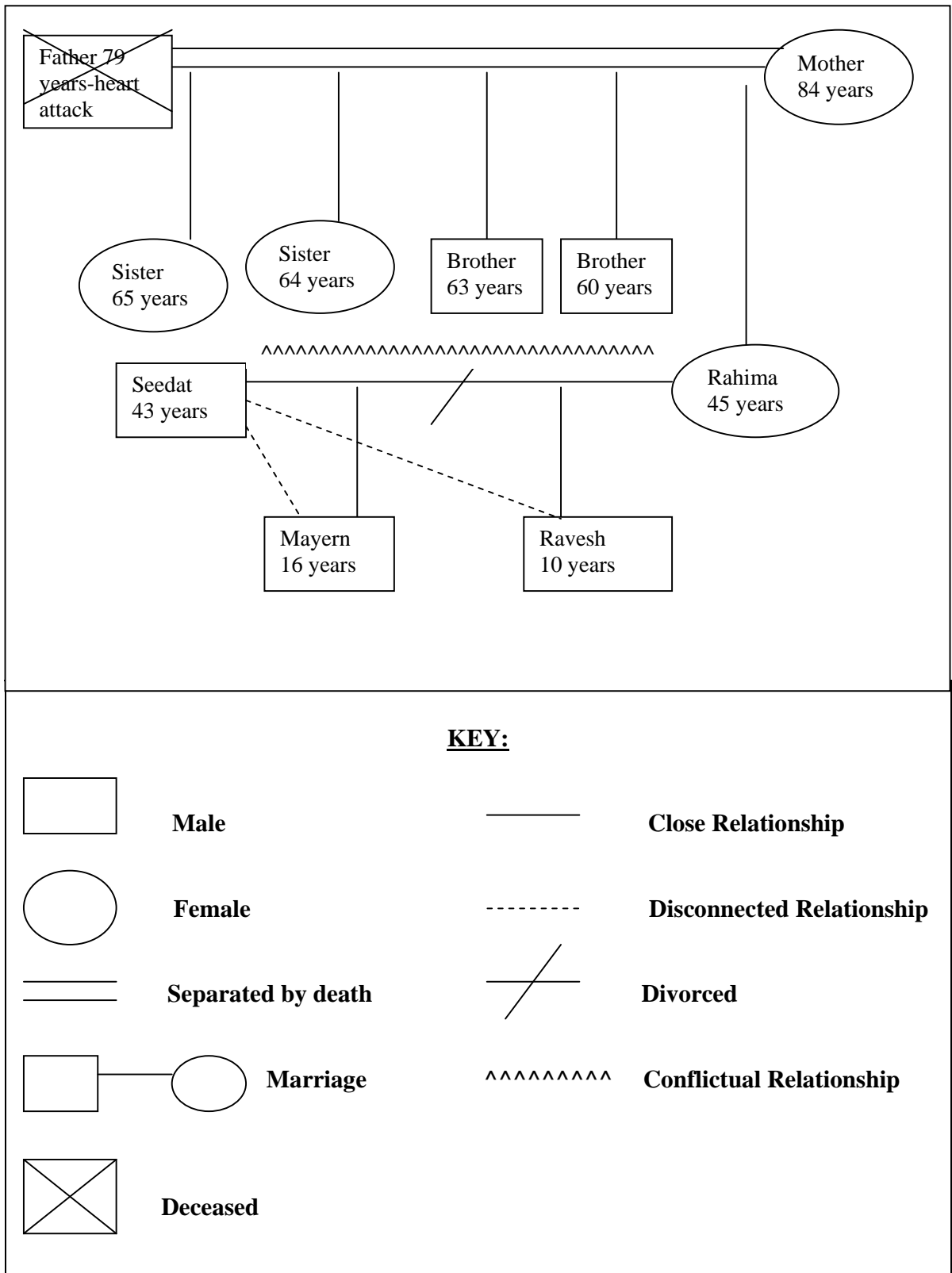


Figure 6.1. Rahima's genogram illustrating family interactions

## **Themes Emerging from Rahima's Interview**

The following themes throughout the pre-divorce phase, as well as those during, and after the divorce were identified in Rahima's interview:

### **Pre-Divorce: A Roller Coaster Ride**

At this stage of the divorce, it seems that Rahima was caught in the midst of overwhelming emotions, and as a result, it appears as if it was the most difficult and painful stage of her divorce. What seemed to be an eternity of uncertainty and confusion, lasted for "nine months". The following themes that emerged during this stage of the divorce were to reveal themselves while she experienced and lived through her "worst nightmare".

### **A Relationship with a Silent Manipulator**

This theme refers to two means of communication, that is, avoidance and manipulation. The term, avoidance, refers to Seedat's style of interaction in which he avoids conflict, dislikes disagreements, and keeps peace according to his own desires and wishes, which resulted in diminished communication. Manipulation, on the other hand, refers to communication without explicitly stating what needs to be said, but with the intention of achieving the desired outcome. It therefore, refers to Seedat's unscrupulous control over Rahima by employing her good nature, particularly that of taking pity on him, and thereby creating self-doubt within herself.

Rahima described her relationship with her husband to be like that of any other marriage with its problems and solutions. She described herself, similarly to her husband, both as people-pleasers who sacrificed their personal needs and interests for the happiness and success of their marriage, and also, those with whom they came into contact. In their relationship, she regarded herself as the communicator because Seedat was more private and withdrawn:

*“He doesn’t clearly openly communicate; he isn’t a man of many words. I think he was more withdrawn I would say. It is not like he would normally be verbal, he can communicate when he wants to but he isn’t generally one that communicates. He has to be in a specific mood to really talk about something. He isn’t just someone who would talk about something.”*

Seedat’s passiveness and lack of communication, together with Rahima’s constant attempts to engage with her husband, resulted in a tug-of-war between them. This behaviour eventually led to Rahima displaying a similar behaviour as that of her husband, that is, avoidance but with the assumption that this was in her husband’s best interest. Her struggle to communicate was reflected in her statement:

*“He is the type of person that the more you talk the more he pulls back.”*

It appears that the passivity of both Rahima and Seedat contributed to the pattern displayed in their relationship, in that the more the husband withdrew and became silent, the more Rahima withdrew away from him, in the belief that he needed space. Seedat would communicate with Rahima in the style of a helpless victim, portraying the image of a failed husband and father. This is reflected by Rahima when she recalls the shortly period prior to the separation.

*“He always made it sound that I was so much better without him. He kept on saying how I could go on with my life, how I was a stronger person that the kids would be better off with me. He was such a waste that we didn’t deserve to have someone like him in our lives, we deserve so much better.”*

Rahima, on the other had responded as a devoted, understanding and nurturing wife, the type of wife that she was expected to be. She recalls telling Seedat, that she understood



*“that this is what you need that maybe I should give you the space and you should explore those feelings and what you’ve actually been through now and maybe have a chance to actually be who you want to be and see if that will bring you happiness.”*

It appears that the lack of communication was further aggravated by Seedat’s extended working hours and his need to be financially well-off. This created a physical and emotional disconnection from the family. Rahima seems ambivalent about the fact that her husband resented being the sole breadwinner:

*“He was just working, and for nothing, because he didn’t really see it.”*

Her ambivalence regarding her attempt to understand her husband’s dissatisfaction was integrated with a sense of sadness and disappointment because, for Rahima, “family” gives meaning and purpose to life:

*“under normal circumstances we all work because we want to support our families, and Seedat wasn’t feeling that anymore, so something must have been very wrong for him.”*

### **Fear of Loss vs the need to Understand**

Loss is a theme that occurs at every level of human life, both physically and personally. At times, the fear of losing is misunderstood as a need to understand, because this emotion could mean the possibility of not losing those close to us.

For Rahima, a sense of loss emerged not only by losing her marriage, but also an identity with which she strongly identified. Rahima adopted the role of mother and wife intensely. For her it was important to adopt the correct attitude associated with being a mother and wife. Her identity had become enmeshed in a unified whole with that of her husband.

*“He (husband) was the centre of my world and my children’s ... after him. To me he was the only person in the world that existed.”*

Her loss was further perceived as the loss of the traditional family unit, even greater than that of Seedat. She recalls:

*“I wanted the relationship to work. I could have accepted that he made a mistake or whatever the case may be, but I was prepared to forgive him. It would have meant that we would have stayed as a family; we would still have been a family.”*

Rahima’s underlying beliefs about life and family, most of which are traditional and fundamental, were the motivation for her attempts to resolve the conflicts of her marriage. Her belief that ‘marriage is forever’ is depicted by Rahima thus:

*“I think that my commitment was always that I would make any marriage work no matter what the circumstances were. I would literally have put up with about anything to make the relationship work, because I felt that I had it in me, or I had it in me to make any relationship work and that is why I did think of...you know.”*

Furthermore, the fear of losing everything that she had built during her thirteen years of marriage, was substituted by an underlying need to attempt to ‘understand’ what her husband was experiencing. By so doing, she would be placing faith in the idea that her marriage would return to the way it had been previously. However, this led to Rahima questioning herself as a woman and consequently contributed to her low self-esteem and lack of confidence, thus sacrificing her own integrity as a woman and wife.

*“He could see this woman, date her and he could have that same kind of relationship with me, so we would also be dating. Every time I saw him, he would see me at my best, because I would also be dressed up, and he would only see me dressed up, we would go out, and have a good time , and then part at the end of the evening. He would be able to date her and me, to give the relationship a chance to start again and in that way he could decide who he actually wanted to be with.”*

## **The Relationship as an Illusion**

This theme highlights the process of how placing faith and trust in a relationship, at times, may lead to the avoidance of any negativity in the relationship. Thus, it is through the belief in hope that denial arises.

Having been separated for nine months prior to the final decision to divorce, Rahima described much of this period as a time of denial. It appears that, for Rahima, believing that her marriage could return to the way it used to be, created a sense of detachment from the reality that she ultimately knew was inevitable. Her faith and trust in her husband further contributed to her denial. She recalls how she was completely dedicated to making her marriage work by believing in him:

*“He promised that it wasn’t serious and it will all be over. I didn’t think it was that serious; I suppose you don’t think. I was totally devoted to him, leading up to that time even though he was constantly communicating with someone. I didn’t think it could actually be with another woman because ...I mean... I just didn’t think. I thought we had a very sound relationship.”*

Rahima’s husband not only betrayed her dreams of what marriage ought to be, but personally humiliated her by having an affair. She attempted to reconstruct the meaning of what had occurred by reframing her husband’s betrayal in a positive light. Her constructing an account, or interpretation, of what had occurred, and why, was an important step in the process of understanding. Rahima’s need to justify her husband’s motives and unhappiness helped her to cope with the haunting fear of losing her marriage. She refers to her husband’s betrayal as:

*“Maybe this was like a salvation, because here someone was pleasing him totally again- This person. Whereas in our relationship, suddenly it all became about supporting the family and supporting the kids.”*

Furthermore, this created a belief that, in some way, she was to blame for her husband's disconnection from the family. Rahima was hoping that by being the supportive, understanding wife, she would undoubtedly reunite her family. Her desperation and longing for the traditional family was depicted by her words:

*"It was Eed; he was going to pick up the kids to go for the Morning Prayer. I asked him to have breakfast with us, and he had breakfast with us. We were like a family in the morning having breakfast, and after that he went."*

### **During the Divorce: Facing Reality**

This period for Rahima was characterized as a time of grounding herself in the present, and facing the inevitable: The truth that her husband, after nine months, finally initiated the divorce. It was a time that required Rahima to reflect not only upon herself and what she was going through, but also on her responsibility as a mother. The following themes tell a story of her personal struggles as a single parent and the conflictual relationship with her ex-husband.

### **Depersonalization**

Rahima felt a great sense of depersonalization at the beginning of the divorce. By this, I refer to her sense of being completely removed from her body, soul, and thoughts: an empty shell. Her world existed without hope, desire, and faith. What she once believed to have given her life purpose and meaning, no longer existed.

Rahima experienced shock and numbness during the period of the upheaval of her divorce. It appears that Rahima was disconnected from both herself and her 'normal' world in which she felt confused and despairing. These feelings may relate to Rahima's inability, at times, to determine other ways of thinking about the situation, or, to choose other ways of dealing with her feelings of hopelessness and disconnection. Rahima describes the physical pain and her out-of-this-world experience as:

*“I lay grief-stricken, unable to move, numb with pain. I had never before realized that grief could be so great that it could wreak such physical havoc on our body. My body was totally numb. I did not feel anything because it felt as though there was only emptiness inside and out. I had no desire to wake up, drink or eat, or even see the sun. I just lay there, my mind was blank, and the curtains remained closed. There was no today or tomorrow just an eternal present. I guess I was in a traumatic shock that I didn’t have to concern myself about coping or even going on, life had already ended. I felt totally disconnected with everything and everyone.”*

Rahima is saddened when she speaks of her husband abandoning her and her two children. His sudden abandonment left Rahima immobilized in terms of taking the first steps to bringing her life back on track. Her husband’s abandonment of the family created a sense of loneliness that expresses the belief, *“I am alone”*, and as a result, she felt apart from others at a time when she most needed to be in contact with them.

### **A Mother’s Cry**

Rahima’s concern for her children is an enduring theme in her story. One of the greatest difficulties she was forced to face was the feeling of being completely helpless and powerless to defend and comfort her children in their pain. Rahima experienced a grief that far surpassed despair since she felt that not only had her children just lost a father, but also, even their mother was not emotionally available. Her inability to save her marriage and also alleviate her children’s pain has left Rahima with an enormous sense of blame and guilt. The intensity of the pain is illustrated by Rahima in the following way:

*“I cannot bear to see the sadness in my children’s eyes nor can I fulfill the longing in their hearts. I beg God, I cannot understand. I cry their tears for them, I share their pain, I would do anything to fulfill the longing in their hearts, but that is not for me to decide.”*

Rahima’s attitude towards how society treats and views children of divorced parents is bitter-sweet. For Rahima, society further elicits her feelings of guilt, shame, and personal

failure as a mother, wife, and as a person. She feels that society underestimates the trauma that children of divorced parents experience and, as a result, Rahima feels that it becomes solely the responsibility of the mother to make the transition for her children. Rahima compares the death of a parent to that of losing a parent through divorce as follows:

*“People say death is more traumatic than divorce, I didn’t feel like that. I notice that when there is a death in our culture they have a lot of sympathy for... which I really don’t want, for myself but I think my kids deserve it (crying). I can be a little bitter now, when I see how people fuss over kids who have lost their parents, through death because suddenly they see them needing attention, or they just feel that they have lost a father. In a divorce a child does loose a parent, and with my children it was a long time. It is not like they get empathy from other people. They are the kids of the divorced as opposed to being an orphan and if your dad isn’t playing his part then you are an orphan.”*

### **After Divorce: A New Beginning**

This stage demonstrates Rahima’s unremarkable survival during and beyond her divorce. For Rahima, a ‘new’ self is described and understood as possessing the strength to overcome adversities in life, to reflect on the process of one’s suffering and to discover a ‘new’ way to deal with, and be content with, life and the choices one makes.

### **Re-defining a New Identity and Role-exiting**

Although Rahima was left with no option but to redefine her role, at times she found it difficult to do so. Part of this struggle in her new role of being a single woman and parent would appear to be the centrality of the roles of wife and mother in her worldview, as a result of her upbringing in a close, loving, and ‘traditional’ family. Even so, Rahima’s role as a mother is strongly internalized, and being a mother means to protect and provide for one’s children. This realization gave Rahima the courage to seek work in order to support her family, since Seedat was uninvolved and uninterested in their welfare:

*“Wasn’t giving us any maintenance money. We were living here and he was living somewhere else, doing what he wanted to do, and not even bothering to see if we were okay financially.”*

Rahima’s difficulty in exiting her role was related to the fact that she was not the initiator of the divorce. For nine months, Rahima found herself in a tug of war while waiting for her husband to decide whether he wanted to return home or not. It was only when her husband traditionally divorced her, and she received the call from the lawyer, that her role-exiting could begin. Prior to this, she had still regarded herself as his wife, hoping that they would be reconciled.

For Rahima, redefining who she is echoes her need to reconnect with herself since she had experienced a deep sense of disconnection. By disconnection, she means having experienced the loss of who she used to be and of the things in which she had once found pleasure. Her remark relates to her choice to discover her new identity separate from her spousal role:

*“I had to search deep into my soul and reconnect with myself.”*

Rahima is aware that although her strength and courage opened the path for her to rediscover herself, she still recognises the responsibilities of being a single parent and, thus, she limits her own needs to those of her children.

*“I cannot forget the days in which my responsibilities came first. I can’t just literally take off, nor do anything that I want because I have to consider them because it was a pledge to them when I decided to have a child.”*

### **Relationship with Former Spouse**

Rahima's relationship with Seedat appears to entirely revolve around his relationship with the children. Although Rahima continues to facilitate the relationship between the children and their father, there appears to be tension surrounding his lack of contact and his responsibility as a father. For Rahima, it seems that the reason for the minimal contact between herself and Seedat is owing to his current wife (with whom he had the affair). Rahima still experiences anger and resentment towards Seedat's current wife because she was perceived to be the reason for the dissolution of her marriage. She reports that:

*"I also find that his wife is extremely insecure, so if she senses that we are communicating on some level, even if it is as simple as a text message, she immediately gets involved."*

### **Establishing New Social Networks and Economic Stability**

Rahima is aware that the social networks that existed when Seedat was still her husband, no longer exist. She refers specifically to her disconnection from the second family, namely, Seedat's family. Rahima felt that his mother's insensitivity and blame resulted in her not wanting to continue ties with her former mother-in-law.

*"I think that she needed to blame me for what happened, and that is just the way she is. Now I don't need that relationship with her."*

Coming from a Muslim background, divorce may be seen as unacceptable and a disgrace to the external family, yet, for Rahima, the experience was different. From the early stages of her divorce, Rahima's own social support network has always been strong, primarily due to her close ties with her large family of origin, and her friends. These relationships have been instrumental in not only alleviating her loneliness, but also providing her with courage and strength by the shared understanding of those who have



experienced divorce, and of those who assisted her in constructing a new meaning in her life.

*“I’m very blessed in that I have so many friends. I have a wonderful and very supportive family, probably more the extended family.”*

Her work also provides Rahima with an increase in self-confidence and area in which she can discover meaning, independence, and competence. She gains continuous appraisal and affirmation from her company and is being regarded as one of the most valuable consultants in the cosmetic chain. In terms of her economic stability, Rahima believes that she is coping. If she had been older when the divorce occurred, she is unsure whether she would have had the opportunities and resources available to her in order to survive the divorce. Rather than experience financial difficulty, she has proven to herself that she has made it on her own and is able to fully support her children. She portrays herself as:

*“I feel very secure because I feel that I started to build a nest for myself already, and in that way I think I am very fortunate.”*

### **“Resilience of the human spirit”**

It is in times of adversity that people inevitably become more in touch with the spiritual dimensions of life. Rahima’s faith in God grew to such deep levels that her hope and the need for healing prevailed over her despair. She reflects on her gaining an overwhelming sense of peace with what had happened to her:

*“I trust in the resilience of the Human Spirit. It was placing my faith in a Higher Power and trusting totally that God would give me the strength to cope.”*

Her innate ability to self-empower herself meant taking charge of her life. Through her self-awareness and self-acceptance she was able to gain a better understanding of what

had occurred, and of the way she felt and behaved. It was important to have made an agreement to appreciate, validate, accept, and support who she was at that moment. It seems that it was the beginning of a new life with possibilities that had not previously existed, because she had been so caught up in the struggle against the reality of her abandonment. She reflects on where she sees herself:

*“I have arrived because I am happy to be where I am, my life is full of joy and I have rediscovered myself. Thus I have found pleasure in things that bring me fulfilment.”*

Emotionally, Rahima has set herself free from the painful memories of her divorce. Rahima’s need to forgive her husband was about letting go of the pain and accepting what had happened, because it would not change. Forgiveness meant dismissing her pain and gaining a sense of control. Taking control of her life meant to start living again, and accepting responsibility for her actions and choices.

*“I think that I totally forgave Seedat, I don’t know if I needed to forgive him, but I needed to forgive him to move on with my life.”*

Furthermore, Rahima ends this chapter of her life by stating: *“I claim back the power you have to control my life, even though overwhelming pity stains my resilient heart, today I say goodbye.”*

### **Family Reorganization**

As noted earlier, a major loss for Rahima was that of the traditional family unit. However, for Rahima, the process of reorganizing her family around a single parent household was not very stressful and she believes that she has been successful as a single parent. This was the case because she felt that normality for the children was essential, in that her children needed stability and familiarity, particularly in the wake of the divorce.

*“I think that to a large extent, their lives have stayed the same because, they still have the same comfort that they used to. They have not had to change schools. They have had enough time to adjust to me being a working mum but also the fact that I still pick them up from school at lunch time and all that has not changed for them, so pretty much their lives have stayed very secure and stable.”*

Important in the reorganization of the family, is her ex-husband’s role. She has worked consciously at maintaining a relationship between the father and the children, despite the emotions that it evokes in her regarding his limited contact with them and the children’s reluctance to be with their father.

*“I still somehow feel that he needs to know that his dad is still a part of his (Mayern) life, but that’s something Seedat needs to sort out with him. In all honesty we all know that it is not existent.”*

Ravesh (the younger son) is regarded as the ‘perfect’ child and the parent’s pride and joy, while Mayern (the older son) is viewed as the problem-child. Mayern is seen as the mediator and the main person responsible for the reorganization of the family. It appears that the only time that contact is made with the father is when Mayern acts up. For the family, his behaviour is functional, since he succeeds in maintaining contact with all the family members. By doing so, Mayern alienates himself from his father, and is seen by him as being “difficult”, while at the same time he plays out his assigned role as the mediator. Rahima explains an incident in which Ravesh and Mayern were involved in a fight. She reports on Mayern’s behaviour:

*“Mayern just acted more aggressively and that made him wrong. He was very reluctant for me to phone his dad and in a way I wanted to.”*

Seedat’s disinterest in being a father is characterized by his minimal involvement with and concern for the children. Biologically he is the father, but in the true meaning of what constitutes a father, Seedat has lost all the privileges and rights of a father. This has led to

an irreconcilable relationship between Seedat and his children; a relationship that has become described as distant, strenuous, and uninvolved.

*“Seedat has unfortunately, very little control, and I actually feel sorry for him because I think that he doesn’t feel like he’s got the right to reprimand the children or discipline them in any way. He is more like the outsider looking in. You (Seedat) will never have the same relationship with your kids. As much as I want him to and as much as I feel he has the right to I think the kids have let him know, or him, out of his own guilty conscience, that he just doesn’t have that authority over them.”*

### **CREATIVE SYNTHESIS**

Rahima’s story was written according to the unfolding themes, employing her own words.

#### **I Cried, I Suffered, and Now I’m Living**

Rahima recalls a time of uncertainty regarding her husband’s sudden withdrawal and lack of communication: *“There were actually no problems and then, just after that, we went on a weekend. He seemed very withdrawn after that. Things seemed to have deteriorated for a couple of months, but it wasn’t like it hadn’t happened previously in the marriage. I was just kind of waiting for him to come out of this”*. Soon after, Rahima was confronted with the unimaginable possibility that her husband *“admitted that he was having an affair. I was totally devastated. I didn’t think it could actually be with another woman because...I mean... I just didn’t think.”*

Rahima believed in her husband and their marriage. She believed that he would stop seeing that woman and attempted to resolve their marriage issues. However, subconsciously, Rahima doubted her husband’s commitment to her because she *“smelled a rat. He was doing something that he wasn’t supposed to be doing because he wouldn’t take me along. I knew he was going to see her and obviously that caused some friction between us”*. Rahima recalls the day that she gave him the choice to leave or stay. It was

during the time of the death of a family member when she had to prepare the family meal. She asked him *“why he wasn’t switching the car off and he said he was just running the engine. As I came into the house for something he just....GONE. He came back a few hours later and said that he just needed to go for a drive”*. Rahima’s distrust and Seedat’s secretive behaviour was *“obviously to me he had gone to see this woman because in that time there was a call where he was communicating to someone and being very evasive about it”*. The time had arrived for Rahima to make a decision regarding her husband’s infidelity, *“I said to him well you either tell me where you have been this afternoon or you leave (pause). He tried to work his way around that and I said the choice was obvious. I wanted to know where he was, where he disappeared to for two hours. Well that was his choice whether he was going to stay or he was just going to go. He chose to go.”*

Rahima talks of the time immediately preceding the separation as one in which Seedat displayed extreme confusion. *“He said to me that his whole life he has always done everything to please everyone, and this is one time he really want to do something for himself”*. She reflects on how she tried to *“understand that maybe for once he wanted to find out who he was and get in touch with his feelings and I said okay, I understand that this is what you need that maybe I should give you the space and you should explore those feelings and what you’ve actually been through now and maybe have a chance to actually be who you want to be and see if it will bring you happiness.”*

The continuous betrayal during this period created a lack of meaning in the situation. Rahima began to doubt her role in the relationship because *“I blamed myself for what happened and I kept thinking what I could do differently if I was given another chance”*. However, the “chances” seemed endless during the ensuing months, and her denial persisted for nine months during which she *“kept hoping that because we weren’t divorced yet, that it would not happen”*. Her denial contributed to her greatest fear: that of losing her family. As a result she felt that *“I was prepared to forgive him. It would have meant that we would have stayed as a family; we would still have been a family.”*

Rahima remembers the day that Seedat came to the house in a very angry state. He proceeded to divorce her, *“In our religion if you say I divorce you three times that the divorce is over but it is not suppose to be done the way he did it, but that meant the marriage is annulled. I was too shocked and I couldn’t accept that. I refused to accept that it had happened”*. She was devastated by an intense and overwhelming sense of grief, and loss. She remembers feeling removed from herself when she *“felt as though there was only emptiness inside and out. I remember that I couldn’t get up the next morning and that I was physically ill from shock about the whole thing.”*

The intensity of Rahima’s grieving became beyond that of her own loneliness where she would *“lie alone in bed, wondering if he thought of us”*. Out of her despair and desperation, as a mother, she wanted to alleviate her children’s loneliness and sense of abandonment. She expresses her view of how she saw her children dealing with the divorce. *“Mayern was very angry because Mayern felt that I shouldn’t have taken him (his father) back in the first place. Mayern had totally lost respect for him by this stage and he really, really didn’t want his dad to come back home”*, for Ravesh, *“I think that he personally felt that he was responsible, that he could do something just to keep us together”*. At this point, Rahima realized that having been left with *“a divorce settlement in which I ended up with a car and only a small allowance which barely covered my children’s school fees. I was totally responsible for taking care of every aspect of life.”*

Rahima’s incredible strength was embedded in the power of her God where she regards her spirituality as her higher level of consciousness. Rahima cited from a poem ‘footprints’: *“When you were in pain I lifted and carried you”*. Rahima trusted in the *“resilience of the human spirit”*, which she believes forces one to *“arise beyond the present”*. Through the suffering and the discovery of her *“new”* self she realized that *“I am an incredibly strong person with a capacity to love, share and touch life on an emotionally deeper level. I am not afraid and cherish no bitter hatred”*. It was through the power of *“forgiveness”* that she was able to move on.

Rahima's turning point in her life occurred when she realized that *"I was in the position by choice. I believe that we always have a choice and because of that we can not wallow in our self pity. I could have chosen to live with betrayal but that was not an option for me, so to some degree I chose to break away and that I have control over my own destiny."*

Rahima experienced support from her family almost immediately, as opposed to the lack of support from Seedat's family. Rahima experienced a rift occurring between her and Seedat's family, particularly from his mother. Rahima felt that *"I shouldn't put up with this other woman, she was hoping that I would just allow him to carry on seeing this woman, and have him live with us. I wasn't prepared to do this and my family certainly felt that I should not have to do that. They (Rahima's family) were very instrumental in helping me through the whole thing"*. Financially, Rahima feels that *"I am now financially very independent. I will not be dependent on my children or anybody else."*

Rahima's concern for her children, financially and emotionally, has been an enduring theme. One of the greatest difficulties she has had to face is the development of a co-parenting relationship with her ex-husband: *"He didn't even call me to say how he sorted it out (with Mayern), so I don't think that he really plays a role in their lives"*. She describes her relationship with her ex-husband as being *"like an older brother or someone that you asking for advice because you having problems with the kids, it is more like that"*. There are still feelings of ambivalence surrounding the facilitation of the relationship between the children and their father, because *"that's something Seedat needs to sort out with him (Mayern)"*. Rahima realizes that there will always be a bond that will keep them inseparable because *"our children are the tapestries of that love and in them our lives will always be intertwined."*

Despite the trials and tribulations of single-parenting combined with a career and hobbies, she *"cannot imagine that we could have been together now because life is so different"*. She feels that *"I have found pleasure in things that bring me fulfilment. I am in control of my life"*. She ends off by citing from the book *Dreamer* where she sees herself today as a single woman:

*“I felt a strange sense of peace, a new depth of appreciation for my life in the present moment. I was truly okay with being alone. I felt a kind of trust that if a man I could share my life with crossed my path; I would recognize and move towards him. And I was okay if it happened tomorrow or in ten years. I was even okay if it never happened.”*

### **Reflecting on my Participation: The Interviewer as Belonging**

Rahima used to be my supervisor when I worked at a clothing store, and is currently a good friend. I was extremely appreciative when she was willing to participate in my research project. We have, on numerous occasions, conversed about the difficulties she often experienced with Seedat when they were married and the strength she demonstrated when coping with the divorce. Thus, I held preconceived ideas concerning the relationship between Rahima and her ex- husband.

Rahima shared her story openly and willingly and I felt myself being captivated by a story that was being shared and experienced together with her for the first time. I became engulfed by her depth and philosophical reflections while I immersed myself completely in her world where my role was purely related to listening, reflecting, and asking for clarification when trying to understand specific meanings. It felt as if I had gained a new perspective on Rahima’s story. I was no longer the friend offering guidance and questions, but rather the unbiased listener providing her with the context in which she could share her story openly.

While writing down the themes, I felt anxious and nervous, and feared that the friendship status might interfere with the interpretations of the results, a concern that I had shared with Rahima and, therefore, openly discussed. Thus, the themes that emerged reflect the overwhelming emotions and feelings that Rahima encountered and expressed during her divorce.



### **Summary: The Family System**

Based on Rahima's description of how the divorce progressed, the family was viewed through my lens, as functioning in the following way (Figure 6.2):

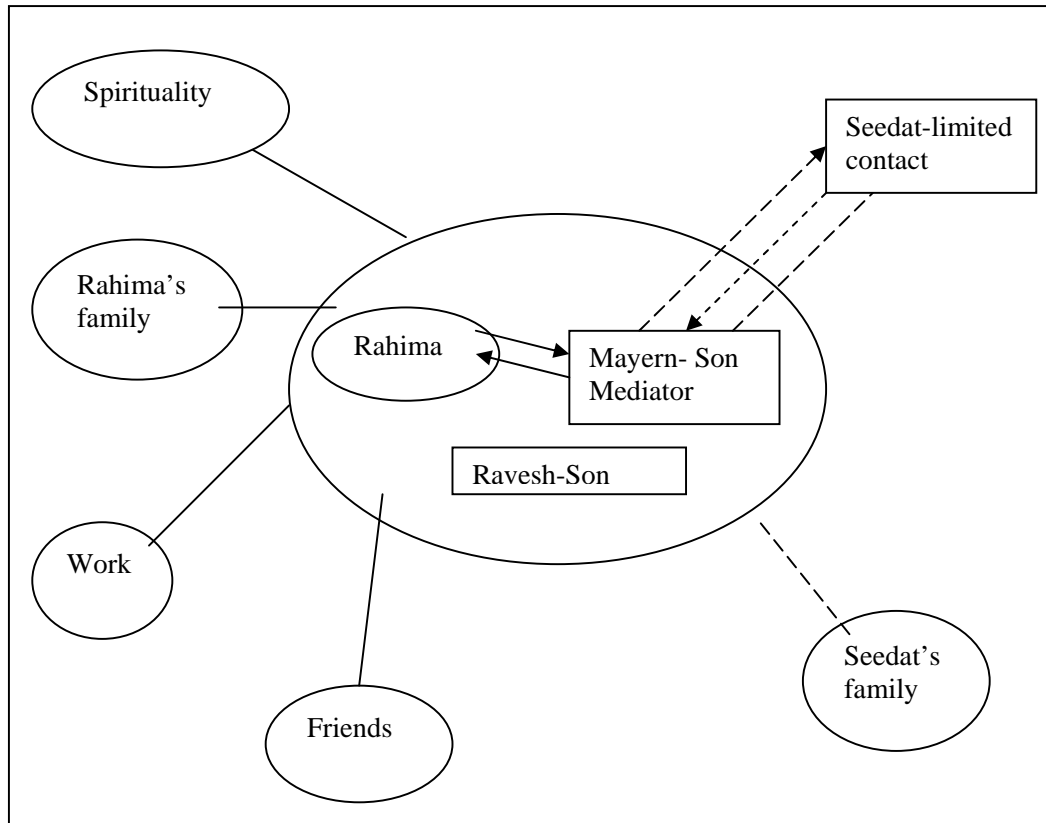
At the beginning of the relationship, both Rahima and her husband were engaged in a tug-of-war where Rahima felt that the more she tried to persuade her husband to communicate, the more he withdrew. This resulted in Rahima's withdrawal from the relationship, believing that he needed the space, whereas, instead, it provided the space for her ex-husband to become involved with someone else.

During the time of the separation, Rahima continually attempted to reorganize her family as it had been. This led to the back-and-forth struggle between Rahima and her ex-husband. The ongoing betrayal and the indecisiveness caused the conflict in the family to escalate to the point of being out of control, and the only way to reorganize and maintain some stability in the family seemed to be by means of divorce.

At present, the family has reorganized itself into a single-mother household comprising Rahima, Mayern, Ravesh, and Seedat (as partly involved). Mayern is seen as the 'scapegoat' in the family. His behaviour and attitude open the channel of communication between his parents. For the family, Mayern's 'deviant' behaviour performs a function in the family, because without him, the family, as they see it, would cease to exist. This, in turn, would require the family to reorganize itself again in order to adapt to the new changes of not having the father present.

External support from family, friends, and work has contributed to the adaptation to the newly organized family system. Rahima's family assists her by transporting the children when Rahima is bound by commitments at work. Furthermore, Rahima is exposed to a broader social environment as a result of her work where she attends workshops and conferences and therefore constantly interrelates with people, often making new friends.

Rahima has moved her family to a higher level of functioning than previously as a result of her personal change, and this has led to change in the family as a whole.



**Figure 6.2.** The ecomap depicts the relationship of Rahima and Seedat with extra-familial systems after the divorce

## Conclusion

Rahima’s story integrates the voices of so many who have already experienced, and are currently in the process of, a divorce. For Rahima, the most important lesson that she learned was knowing that she was able to overcome her “*worst nightmare*” by believing in her own strength and courage to overcome adversity. Rahima strongly identifies with the roles of being both a mother and a career-woman. However, Rahima believes that above anything, her children’s happiness is, and will always be, her first priority. As for her ex-husband, there will always exist a love for him, a bond that will connect them forever. Rahima’s journey has not ended, but has demonstrated that one always continues to grow and heal.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **Results: Seedat**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter is based on the transcribed interview with Seedat. A brief background will be sketched, followed by a description of the setting of the introduction to the interview and the researcher's impressions and observations. Seedat's relationships with his immediate and extended family, as well as those within his social networks, will also be depicted graphically by means of genograms and ecomaps. He will re-live his journey by voicing the changes and transitions he perceives to have occurred within himself and his family during the divorce process. Subsequently, the themes that emerged will be discussed. Thereafter, a comparison of themes across the three divorced couples, and across the males and females, will be presented.

Each narrative has been reconstructed in terms of themes identified by the researcher. The researcher's own lens has coloured the manner in which she has interpreted the stories of the participants and their relationships. It is thus important to note that others may view and understand the experience[s] of the participants through their own, and possibly different, lenses as other themes may well emerge. It is suggested that the interpretation of each participant's story, is one of many possible interpretations and by no means regarded as the absolute truth. For the purposes of confidentiality, the name of the participant as well as the names of the family members have been substituted with pseudonyms.

#### **Seedat's Story**

##### **Brief Background**

Seedat is a 43 year old Indian father of two boys aged sixteen and ten. He was born and raised in South Africa. He is the younger of two children. He completed his matric and

began studying at university but did not complete his course. At the time of the interview, he had been divorced for four years, after twelve years of marriage, and one year of courtship. Soon after the divorce, Seedat remarried and currently lives with his Afrikaans wife and her two children in the West Rand. Seedat is self-employed, and is the owner of a fastfood outlet. He maintains contact with the children only on weekends.

### **Interview Setting and Impressions**

The interview took place at Seedat's workplace. I arrived earlier and ordered an orange juice while waiting for Seedat to arrive. He arrived a few minutes late and was apologetic for the delay. I was concerned about the noise made by the construction work taking place nearby: the music from the gym was blaring and people were continuously walking past us. Since this environment was not conducive to the interview, I requested that Seedat find us an office where we could have privacy and no distractions. He returned, having found a nearby office which was, in fact, a conference room, which was empty and cold with only chairs and tables standing around. I thought that it would be difficult to form a warm and relaxing atmosphere in such an environment. However, the small talk prior to the interview, with regard to the gym, the weather, and the fast foods shop he ran allowed both of us to relax.

The interview began with an explanation of the purpose and aim of the research project. Although he was willing to participate in the research study, he was reluctant to venture into any in-depth descriptions and explanations of the events that unfolded during the divorce. Even so, the minimal information was beneficial and valuable in establishing the patterns of communication and behaviour in his various relationships.

Throughout the interview, Seedat appeared nonchalant. He sat back in his chair with his arms folded and legs crossed. His body language further suggested his hesitancy in openly sharing all information. Towards the end of the interview, his wife phoned him three times, thus disrupting the interview. When I contacted Seedat, I had asked if he would prefer that I speak to his wife regarding his participation in the research. Seedat

reassured me that he would speak to her, and that there would be no reason why he could not participate. It appears that she was unaware that Seedat was to meet with me, thus causing an argument over the phone. He explained to her that I was there to obtain information about Mayern (his older son).

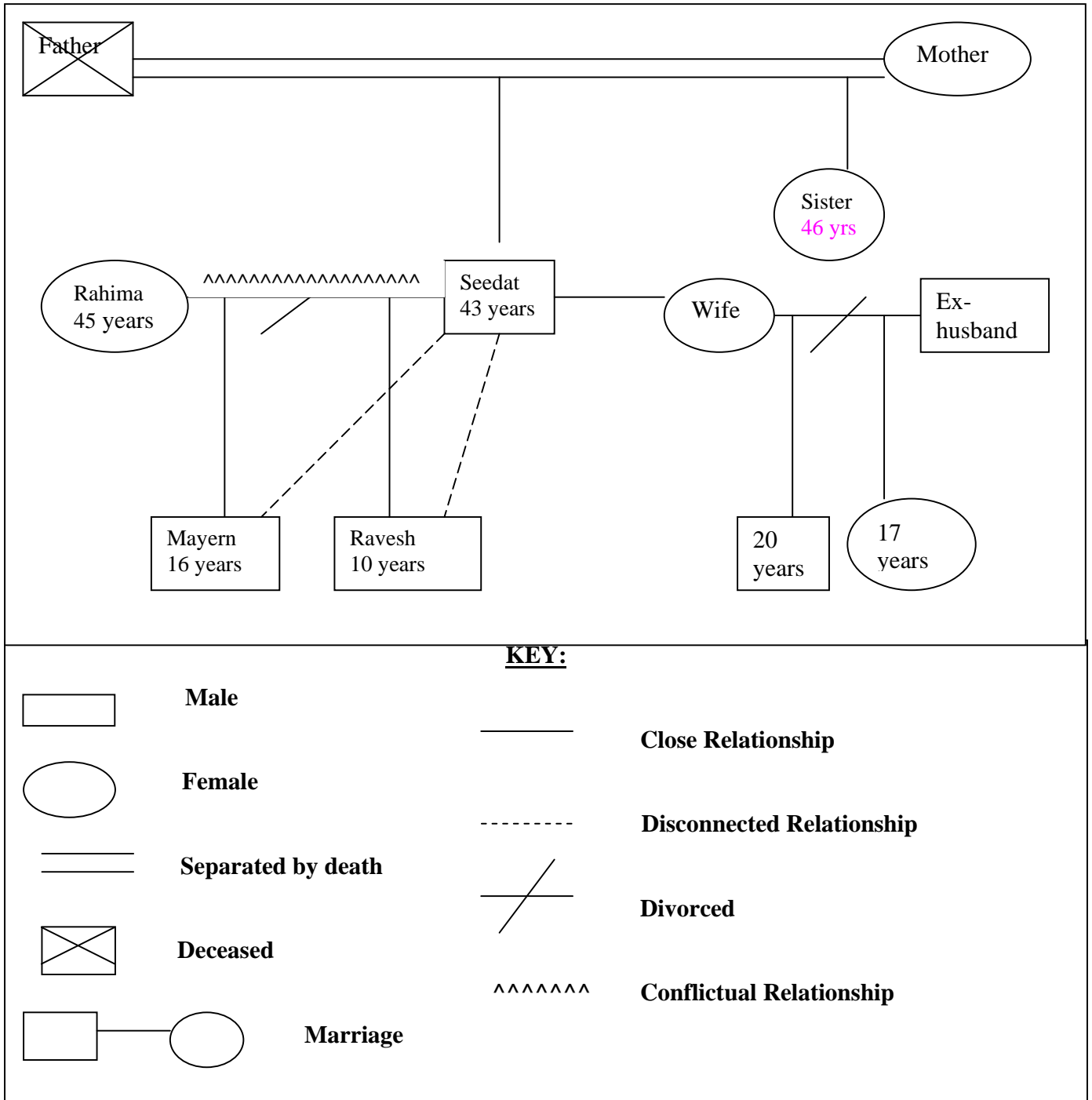


Figure 7.1. Seedat's genogram illustrating family interactions

## **Themes Emerging from Seedat's Interview**

The following themes in the pre-divorce phase, and those in the phases during, and after it, were identified from Seedat's interview:

### **Pre-Divorce: The Unspoken Remembrance**

It appears that Seedat experienced this stage as being somewhat difficult and a time when he felt estranged. This was indicated by his difficulty in openly sharing and recalling how the events unfolded and occurred. His account of this period reflects a desperate need to change or escape from the marriage. As such, the affair was seen to have assisted him to take the necessary steps to accept that the marriage was, indeed, over.

### **The Affair as a Catalyst**

Betrayal is a prominent theme in Seedat's reason for divorce. However, the term itself is understood and reflected differently by those who are the betrayers and those who are betrayed. Therefore different meanings and significances are attached to the concept of betrayal. For Seedat, betrayal (the affair) was the catalyst for the separation.

Seedat's continued affair and Rahima's discovery thereof brought things to a head. His interpretative schema surrounding the affair is strongly reflected in his belief that the marriage was over, in an emotional sense, by the time the affair occurred. The affair merely served to resolve the situation that had already persisted for an extended period of time. Seedat regarded his disclosure of the affair to Rahima as the beginning of his liberation towards freedom and the dissolution of the shackles that had confined him to an unhappy marriage. He describes the relationship with Rahima at the time as:

*"We were just not getting along with each other and I suppose there was a lot of unhappiness."*

## Separateness

Seedat's narrative pivots on separateness. This theme is threaded through all of the 'stages' of the divorce process. A powerful image of emptiness, having nothing, and going nowhere, is strongly identified.

Seedat experiences a total disconnection from his wife and children. His world revolved around work, within which he had no place for a family. His work alienated him from his family and created self-centered solitude where he found a personal comfort by withdrawing inwards. For Seedat, life had become monotonous with no excitement nor any real purpose for living. Seedat viewed his marriage as a 'one-man marriage', where he was responsible for taking care of the family, as well as himself. The lack of physical proximity to his wife and children was also amplified by his extensive working hours, resulting in a lack of communication, and a deep sense of loneliness. Seedat renders a description of what happens when he arrives home from work.

*"You go home and the kids are asleep or something and you don't speak to each other so often so I suppose you eating on your own, you make supper on your own so, it's a bit of both. With my previous wife (Rahima) I don't think could handle this, the hours were longer, when you close the shop and finish at twelve, then you get home and everyone is sleeping. Basically you get up and go to work. You don't see each other. We didn't talk much."*

Similarly, Seedat's persistent pattern of interaction appears to recur, even with his current relationship in which his work, and thus isolation, appears to be the reason for much of the conflict and tension.

*"My present wife, also, she works, she leaves early, she comes back. The time is very limited so usually it's a problem."*

## **Explication and Avoidance**

This theme refers to two means of communication, that is, explication and avoidance. Explication here refers to Seedat's attempt to explain the events and tell of his strong feelings and emotions involved in his marriage, while avoidance on the other hand refers to retreating from sharing information that may appear threatening, uneasy or uncomfortable. This theme was prominent throughout Seedat's narrative.

Seedat rushes through his account of the emotions experienced, stopping his sentences half way, and not dwelling on the topic. The use of metaphoric language such as "*sing and dance*" may suggest a fear of losing control, or perhaps, a reminiscence about the past, or even an attempt to reconstruct and name a past feeling or state. Although it appears that Seedat experiences either an overwhelming anger, or the sorrow of loss, the prevalent image is one of running from his feelings. It may be that Seedat has moved on and therefore that dwelling in the past is unnecessary, or that he has not yet come to terms with the divorce. Seedat's laughing throughout the interview was suggestive of the discomfort he felt and the strength it took for him to maintain control. The following extract demonstrates the explication and avoidance of a question put to him asking him to explain what led to their decision to separate.

*"It's quite clichéd, but one thing just leads to another. (Laughed). It was about it and then JA that's all I can say about that. I just decided it and I moved out for a little while, and from there it was a stupid move, I think that it's the worse thing that you can do."*

## **During Divorce: A Guilty Conscience**

This stage for Seedat is regarded as a period of ambivalence and denial as a means to cope with the reality that his marriage no longer exists. The themes highlighted below reveal Seedat's personal struggle as the initiator and the leaver.



## A Father's Guilt

It appears that Seedat's guilt about having abandoned his children is linked to feelings of denial. Seedat's denial may be misunderstood as being a part of a naïve, unloving, and uncaring father. However, his pain is overshadowed by the need to protect himself. He therefore chooses not to acknowledge his children's pain, and, hence, cannot comfort them. To comfort them would mean accepting that he is partly to blame for his children's unhappiness and distress. This is reflected as follows:

*“Well, the kids I think, what's the word I'm looking for..., they stronger than we think, I think so anyway. Now Mayern still gives Rahima a bit of problem and stuff, but that would have been anyway even if I was there; he is at that stage in his life, where he just wants to be alone. I don't think that it's because of the divorce.”*

His limited involvement and lack of communication with the children has further caused a rift between them. He is uncertain and oblivious to the impact the divorce has had on his children and the irreconcilable differences that have resulted because of his disconnection.

*“(Long pause), Well Mayern I think is a little resentful and Ravesh I don't know but I don't think so much, he doesn't show much but I think he has gone on with it, he's okay. Mayern I think a little more.”*

At some point in the interview Seedat's “*not so worried*” attitude towards his children is replaced by empathy, a longing to understand, and sadness, towards his children when he attempts to identify with Mayern's feelings:

*“Sometimes he says ‘when you put too much pressure you don't live under the same roof as I am, you don't know what I'm going through’, well I suppose the only way you know is if you walking in the other person's shoes to know what they really going through.”*

### **The Ambivalent Initiator**

This theme relates to which partner in the marriage initiated the decision to separate and divorce. It is a reflection of the impact that the role of the initiator has on Seedat and the emotions and feelings that are attached to such a role.

Seedat has found the transition to being single easier and less threatening than his ex-wife since he was the one who initiated the divorce, and therefore, had a sense of control over the divorce process. He reflects on his transition as:

*“No it wasn’t that difficult. I mean I didn’t do a whole song-and-dance about the whole thing I mean I just used it and went forward with it and carried on, and didn’t let it impact too much on my life.”*

However, being the initiator comes with a price. Although Seedat was the partner who ultimately sued for divorce, he found it difficult to identify himself as the initiator, since this would suggest that he would have to ‘own up’ to his part in the dissolution of their marriage. This feeling of ambivalence (“*both*” and “*I*”) is coupled with the feeling of guilt, and a desperate attempt to move on. This is reflected by Seedat as follows:

*“Well it was decided by **both**. It was a joint decision. It just got to a stage that we both just decided. I had moved on with my life, I was living with someone else. It got to a stage where **I** had to make the decision one way or the other.”*

Seedat’s feeling of guilt weighs heavily on his conscience, making it difficult for him to accept and move on with his life. Ironically, since Seedat was the one who initiated the divorce because of his affair, he remains suspicious of and questions his children’s and wife’s motives. This in itself limits the freedom that he seeks. His freedom is replaced with feelings of frustration and anger; as he expresses them:

*“You must be more CAREFUL, you grow watchful with what you say, with what you do, and you don’t know how it’s going to be used against you. More watchful, hey, more aware, before you do anything you think of the repercussions. You never know.”*

### **After Divorce: The Freedom to Live**

Although Seedat is still faced with certain challenges regarding the divorce, this stage for him is described as a time of recovery and freedom to pursue new interests and desires. It reflects the start of a new life with his current family and an even stronger need to focus on himself.

### **Redefining a New Identity and Role-exiting**

I had the strong feeling, when interviewing Seedat that he perhaps has never invested deeply in an identity as a married person, so the task of establishing a new identity was not relevant. He described himself as someone who should not be in a relationship, and although he is married, he still regards himself as single. He has always experienced a sense of being alone, and that work was part of human nature, regardless of whether you are married. Seedat has strongly identified himself as a single person, even though he is married:

*“It’s like a life of a single person.”*

However, his identity as a Muslim male has been challenged to the core. Having been a traditional practising Muslim who possessed a strong faith, Seedat feels a sense of loss as regards his roots and upbringing. He finds it difficult to integrate his identity as a Muslim man with an interracial marriage. Coupled with the issue of loss, are feelings of disconnection from self, poignancy, and remorse. Seedat paints a picture of the faith of such a man:

*“Now I’m in my current situation, I mean we don’t even have a mosque in our area, close by or anything that a normal place because you normally meet people that way so every time you go, five times a day everyday, once a day you go to the mosque. It’s non-existent in my life at the moment.”*

### **Relationship with Former Spouse**

Although limited, Seedat realizes that the only connection he has with his ex-wife, exists as a result of their children. There is very little reference to a relationship between Seedat and his ex-wife apart from the children. Even so, it appears that Rahima is the person involved in establishing a connection between Seedat and his children. He views his relationship with Rahima as:

*“Nothing, there is no relationship with Rahima; we just talk on the phone basically about Mayern or the children if she wants me to come pick them up.”*

He makes a conscious effort to maintain a degree of civility with Rahima for the sake of his children. Seedat’s relationship from Rahima is not free from tension and conflict as indicated by his ‘suspicions’:

*“I don’t know if Rahima is like that or she puts them up to it or what, like sometimes when they came you always have to tell them hei, greet now or do this, simple things like this, you know what I mean. Then you wonder if Rahima is putting them up to this or is it something to do with our community stuff”.*

### **Establishing New Social Networks and Economic Stability**

Seedat experienced a sense of ‘aloneness’ while going through the divorce process. He detaches himself from his emotions and an image of a strong, controlled ‘macho’ man is created. There was a lack of social support networks in both his and his ex-wife’s family, friends and community.

The lack of support from his family resulted in a 'deviant' image being portrayed to the Muslim community. From his mother's perspective, the divorce and the remarriage to an Afrikaans lady was viewed and regarded as humiliating, embarrassing and, to an extent, a disgrace to the family and the said community.

*"Initially my mother was a little worried the usual. She was worried about the community, being like it is, and she is worried about what people are going to say and stuff like that (laughs)."*

This may have led to Seedat feeling misunderstood and judged, which resulted in the belief that he could go through the divorce alone without support from his external family.

*"I didn't need anybody, or extra help, I just carried on. I did fine on my own."*

Seedat is aware of the disconnection from the people with whom he was once involved in his previous marriage. The physical distance further contributes to the disconnection from everyone. Seedat is finding it somewhat difficult to adjust and belong, personally and physically, to his family, as reflected by his loss:

*"I don't see anybody from there, I'm completely disconnected, I mean we in completely different worlds (increase volume tone). The people I used to see are completely out. Now I'm in my current situation, I mean we don't even have a mosque in our area, close by or anything."*

However, Seedat's transition through the divorce process was easier, since he was involved with his current wife with whom he conducted the affair. Seedat did not seem to experience the true depth of the pain of being physically alone; as a result, there is a feeling of ambivalence towards being married and a preference for the life of a single person.

*“I don’t know maybe I’m not the kind of person to be in a relationship.”*

Seedat shows an inner confidence, strength, and motivation to get through the divorce, and make a new life. Lingering on the past only brings back a time of discomfort, hurt, and unnecessary memories. He has taken the opportunity to reflect on the positive outcome of his marriage, and to integrate that knowledge into his current relationship. His motto is:

*“You try not to let it impact too much on your life, you do what you have to, you move on, you get up and move slowly, no point living in the past.”*

Economically, Seedat is aware of his financial freedom, as opposed to the financial constraints imposed on him when he was married. This freedom allows him the opportunity to be financially more independent since his responsibility lies solely in providing maintenance towards his own children.

### **Family Reorganization**

As noted earlier, Seedat no longer plays a major role in how his previous family should function. He is, therefore, not directly involved in the process of reorganizing his family. This limits his access to his children since he views his responsibilities merely as a father’s obligation, rather than a need to establish a closer relationship with his children.

For Seedat, the family organization has remained the same, in that he believes that the children need stability and security, and that this is achieved by the role of his ex-wife. Furthermore, this elicits the feeling of loneliness and detachment, since he still views himself as being separate from the family, and in particular, may feel that he has no place, or right, regarding the upbringing of his children.

*“I prefer them to have stability, that they not moving around all the time, so they know that they don’t need to move. It’s easier for them, so they know where they stay and what they do. They got their stuff. It’s fine like that.”*

Seedat mentions his older son, Mayern as being “*difficult*” and the reason why he and Rahima communicate. Mayern is seen as the restorer in the family, since his behaviour allows the family to relate. Although Mayern’s relationship with his father is described as “*strenuous*”, it is ironic that this particular relationship is what allows the father access to the family.

*“I think that Mayern is at a difficult stage in his life, and he also has a lot of pressures on him, but its okay. It’s not where I want it to be, it’s umm.... (Stopped his sentence), ‘strenuous’ (interviewer completes the sentence), yes it is.”*

### **Freedom from Obligation**

For Seedat, freedom means having fewer responsibilities, and not being responsible for anyone except for what “I” want to do. It further represents more discretionary income and freedom from responsibility for others.

Seedat’s divorce has resulted in massive changes in his daily routine. He no longer has the care of children for whom to provide a continuing structure and meaning. Seedat’s freedom has caused contact with his children to be irregular and sometimes unrewarding.

*“You don’t have those responsibilities. You can do with your time what you want, it’s only on weekends that you now spend time with them because you have to and umm want to.”*

His freedom from responsibility encompasses an emotional detachment from his previous family, and thus he alienates himself from being part of the family. Furthermore, his

liberation from an “*unhappy marriage*” is linked to an element identified in Seedat as being self-centered and selfish.

*“I’m now more independent, because the children are with Rahima, and my day-to-day life is only about me....I mean, its like paying off your responsibility, like you paying off your maintenance, you don’t have to worry about those things anymore, which Rahima has to like picking up the children, worry about taking them to and from... I don’t have to.”*

### **Traditional vs. Modern**

This theme relates to the contrast between and diversity among gender and culture. For Seedat, it reflects the need to integrate two worlds: The Muslim belief and values, which he so desperately wants to challenge, but also wants to integrate them with the values and moralities of the Afrikaans culture.

Seedat reflects on gender roles since these pertain to being a good spouse in the Indian community. Husbands are expected to provide economically for the family; wives are expected to support husbands by tending the home and raising the children. Seedat found it necessary to explain these gender differences because it is deviant in his culture for a man not to respect his role. However, Seedat has felt a liberation from the role of being the breadwinner in his current marriage in that

*“[w]here she understands that pressure I mean, so the burden is spread, it’s easier, its like two heads are better than one, kind of thing.”*

However, Seedat is faced with the dilemma of practising his religion and abiding by its values. Seedat has repeatedly commented on how he is not the appropriate person to be involved in a marriage, however, his cultural values speak louder than his feelings and his decision to remarry was based accordingly.



*“Well, in our culture you can’t live with someone, you have to be married to them, so I married.”*

### **Relationship with Current Family**

Seedat views the roles in his current relationship as equal, a shared communal environment in which both partners communicate openly regarding daily decisions. Although they are married and marriage is regarded as a unity, Seedat believes that in his relationship, both are independent. This allows Seedat the opportunity to pursue his own interests while in the safety of a family network. He reflects on his marriage as:

*“Two people are doing their own thing, and understand what the other person is going through. The relationship is more open.”*

However, a contradiction within Seedat occurs when he points out the similarities between his current wife and his ex-wife. His lack of communication appears to contribute to the conflict occurring in his current relationship. He describes his wife as:

*“She likes to know everything, what you doing, when you doing it, how you doing it, and that’s not me. And the same with Rahima, I think it was the same thing. I just carry on with my life, and I mean if it is not going to affect you I’m not going to tell you about it.”*

It appears that his relationship with his stepchildren is satisfactory, and he does not play a role in caring for them. The responsibility of his step-children is solely his wife’s, and his role is merely to assist her. This further suggests the best of both worlds for Seedat: the family without the responsibility.

*“My wife’s children live with her; it’s her problem not mine and they also older, so I mean it makes my life easier because I don’t have to worry about them.”*

## CREATIVE SYNTHESIS

Seedat's story was written according to the unfolding themes, employing his own words.

### The Freedom to Be

*“There wasn't much going on really”*, indicates the realization and the manner in which his marriage ended. Seedat believes that the affair was the main reason for the divorce, after all, they *“were growing apart”*, and work-related stress undermined the marriage. Life, for Seedat, appeared to be meaningless and without direction; it was *“basically you get up and go to work”*. He simplifies his experience and his relationship with his ex-wife by seeing it as *“quite clichéd, but one thing just leads to another (laughs). It was about it and then ‘Ja’ that’s all I can say about that.”*

Indeed, for Seedat this chapter in his life was a difficult process, and even though *“it’s a long time to remember, and you don’t want to”*, the recollection of events and the emotions that were invested, is distressing. As such, Seedat finds it easier to reflect on society's general response rather than to experience it as his own, since he doesn't *“know what all the fuss is (laughs), why do people make so much of it (laughs).”*

Seedat's unhappiness in his marriage resembled unhappiness within himself; he thought that *“maybe I needed some time alone, and see how it goes”*. However, Seedat viewed the separation as *“the worst thing”* and felt that as a result of this separation *“it went down from there.”*

Seedat has difficulty admitting that he was the initiator of the divorce. This creates a deep sense of guilt and ambivalence regarding who was the decision maker. He therefore regards it as *“a joint decision”*, but later affirms that *“it got to a stage where I had to make the decision one way or the other”*. He chooses to discard the pain that his children are experiencing, since being the bearer of pain only further elicits the feeling of self-blame: *“They stronger than we think, I think so anyway”*. He describes his relationship with Rahima during the divorce as *“amicable, it wasn't the best, but it worked. There was*

*no conflict”, but feelings of distrust and suspicion only made him more “watchful with what you say, with what you do, and you don’t know how it’s going to be used against you. You are more watchful and aware before doing anything. You think of the repercussions. You never know.”*

The decision to divorce left Seedat with a sense of relief in that *“it wasn’t that difficult. I mean, I didn’t do a whole song-and-dance about the whole thing...didn’t let it impact too much on my life”*. Undeniably, he reflects on his concern regarding the *“children, thinking about her and what they’re doing. The area she was in with the kids...umm there incidences around them. That type of thing. That’s why I was concerned about them.”*

As a father, he is aware of his disconnection from his children. Seedat’s getting to know them is based on the observation of them because *“we don’t really get a true picture but what you see you try and piece together”*. He is not in harmony with the impact that the divorce has on Ravesh as he reflects that *“I don’t know but I don’t think so much”*, Mayern, on the other hand, is experienced as being *“a little resentful”*. *This perception is based on how “he acts and behaves”*. Although his relationship with Mayern is *“strenuous”*, limited contact is made, since *“I hate the telephone so I don’t phone very often.”*

A loss of social support from his and Rahima family, and friends was evident. He reports that his mother was *“worried about the community, what people are going to say and stuff like that (laughs)”*. Seedat indicates a need for his mother, in particular, to accept his current wife. However, he realizes that from *“the few side comments she always makes”* that there are obstacles that have to be worked through especially since he and his current wife are from *“different races”*. Regarding Rahima’s family, *“there is no contact. Now and then I meet some of her cousins that we were friends with. We just have a chat ‘hi’, ‘how are you’, but there’s no time. I won’t go out of my way”*, and, as for friends, *“friends are different. I’m in the west and she is in the east so I don’t meet anybody. I don’t see anybody from there. I am completely disconnected”*. Seedat ascribes his alienation from friends to *“work”*, and feels that it takes effort to *“make time for these*

things”. Added to his alienation is a loss of cultural identity, to which Seedat is finding it very difficult to adjust: *‘In my current situation, I mean, we don’t even have a mosque in our area, close by or anything. It’s non-existent in my life at the moment’*. Being married to someone from a different culture has raised issues regarding his own culture: *“You wonder what all the fuss is about our upbringing being better than theirs. There are things we can take from them. They got a bit of a different way of communicating, which seems to be different from ours.”*

Seedat reflects on his current life as *“a life of a single person”*. Thus, the emotional and financial freedom that comes with being single, allowed him to be free of the responsibility that comes with being a father. He regards his role as *“paying off your responsibility, like you paying off your maintenance, you don’t have to worry about those things anymore which Rahima has to like picking up the children, worrying about taking them to and from.”*

The transition for Seedat regarding his divorce was easier, because *“I was living with someone else’*. In his new relationship *“she does her own thing now and it’s like we living a life together but independently: both of us. The relationship is more open”*. This allows Seedat the freedom to do his *“own thing”*. Seedat avoids any conflict and confrontation, which contradicts his phrase mentioning an *“open relationship”* because he feels that *“if it’s not going to affect you, I’m not going to tell you about it.”*

Seedat feels that the divorce has given him the power to reflect on his personal changes and that he can therefore incorporate the lessons which he has learned into his present relationships. He therefore reflects on his lessons: *“The only thing that changes is that you become a lot wiser, you look out for faults, look out for those signals. Like in your day to day life you watch out, you more cautious, you see if you neglecting your wife or neglecting your family, you try and talk to them more, you try resolving things before it gets to those stages. Knowing this you make more sacrifices, you spend more time, you also getting older, you don’t want to get into a third marriage.”*

### **Reflecting on my Participation: The Interviewer as a Mistress**

I had never met Seedat before the day of the interview. I was concerned and somewhat anxious that I was going into the interview with biased and preconceived ideas.

My experience illustrated a sense of disconnection from Seedat's story. I was aware of my presence in the relationship, and at times, I found myself becoming frustrated and irritable because I had difficulty following and immersing myself in his story. It was very difficult to relate to Seedat because he was mostly evasive and defensive. I therefore resorted to making the interview session more comfortable for both of us by mostly playing the role of the observer and watching for cues that suggested he no longer wanted to continue explaining an issue. Coupled with observation, was the ability to listen and ask for clarification in order to understand specific meanings relating to his personal feelings regarding his divorce and his family.

Toward the end of the interview, his conversation with his wife resulted in a discomfort between Seedat and me. It appeared that Seedat had not told his wife that he was meeting with me but had told her that I was there to get information regarding Mayern, and not about his divorce from Rahima. Feelings of betrayal and hurt surfaced in me since I was being viewed as the cause of the conflict between the two of them. I felt that I had become Seedat's new 'mistress'.

Writing out the themes was a challenging process for me since I was constantly attempting to tone down the seriousness of his discrepancies while at the same time not wanting to omit any important issues raised. Even though I tried to be as diplomatic and unbiased as possible, I believe that the true essence of the unfolding themes reflects his journey through the divorce process. Seedat's story is thus characterized by ambivalence, cautiousness, and desperation and attempts to connect with his children and to begin a new life.

### **Summary: The Family System**

Based on Seedat's description of how the divorce progressed, the family was viewed through my lens as functioning in the following way (Figure 7.2):

The relationship between Seedat and Rahima was characterized by the lack of communication and physical proximity. Seedat was seen as the silent partner while Rahima was seen as the dominant, communicative partner in the marriage. In order to escape the tension and the conflict in the relationship, Seedat resorted to having an affair as a means to escape the family tension.

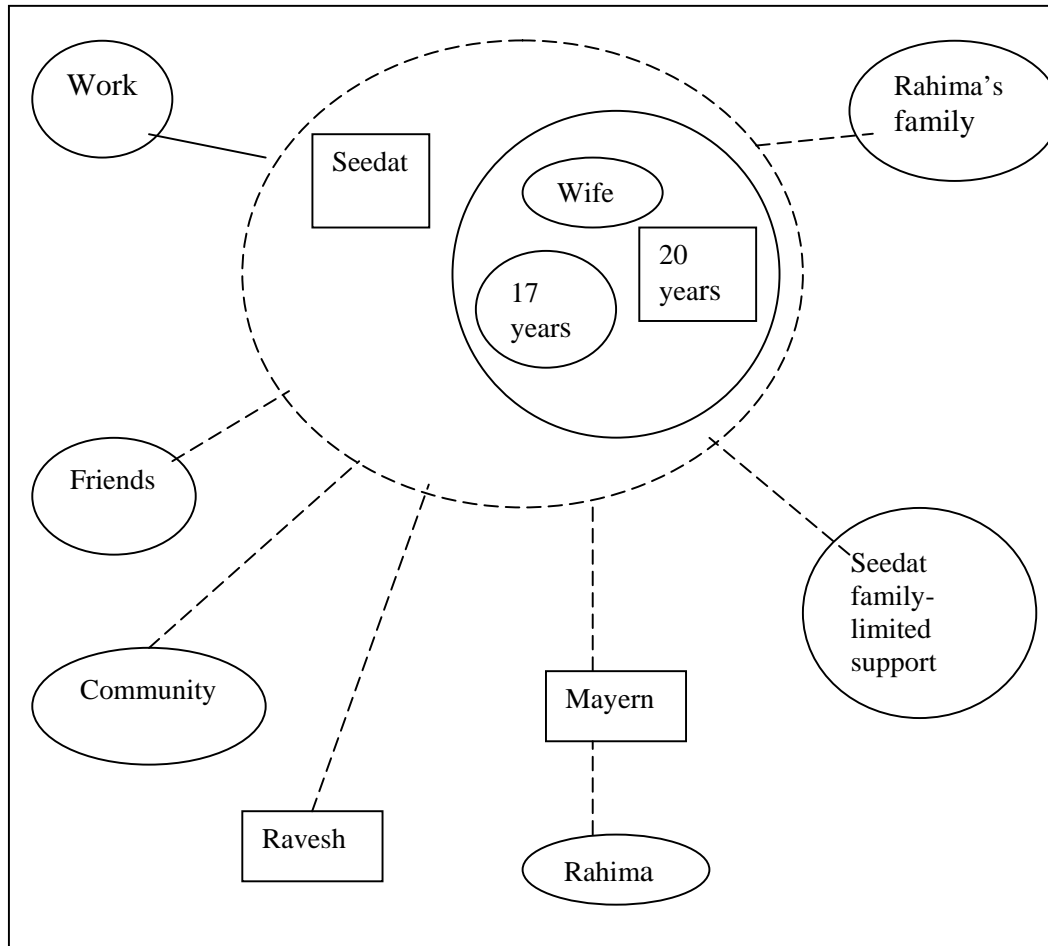
Although an attempt was made to reorganize the family according to a previous level of functioning, the family experienced difficulty adjusting to the ongoing infidelity, to the point that the only possible solution was by means of divorce.

Seedat's disconnection from his previous family has resulted in Mayern "*acting out*" in an aggressive and attention-seeking manner. Mayern's behaviour serves a function in that it ensures the continuous involvement of the father in the family, since the only contact the father has with the family is as a result of the children. Thus, the only form of relationship that exists between Seedat and Rahima revolves entirely around the children, and in particular, Mayern.

Seedat continues to display similar patterns of interaction in his current step-family. As such, he has returned to a previous level of functioning, since recurring patterns from his previous family such as non-communication, personal freedom, work, isolation, and deceitfulness persist in his current step-family. Furthermore, these very issues are creating an increase in tension and conflict similar to that of his first marriage.

External support from family and friends has been limited, thus making the process of adaptation and his relationship with his current wife more difficult. His role as a step-father is to support and assist his wife, and is thus limited only to that. Furthermore, his

work relations have remained the same in terms of his type of work and the number of hours involved. For Seedat, it is an area over which he finds he has control.



*Figure 7.2. The ecomap depicts the relationship of Seedat and Rahima with extra-familial systems after the divorce*

## Conclusion

Seedat's narrative echoes the voices of so many men who find it difficult to express their emotions and feelings, since to do so was once regarded as unacceptable and weak in a male-dominated society. However, lurking behind the strong façade are Seedat's feelings of concern, guilt, and loneliness. Although the divorce was a long and rather traumatic process, the freedom from a marriage in which he felt so unhappy, has given him a new

breath of life. His journey has continued in a new family where he finds himself adjusting to a new way of being and relating, completely different from his previous life. He believes that he has the wisdom and knowledge to incorporate the lessons he has learned through his divorce experience, into his new marriage and new relationships.



## **CHAPTER 8**

### **Results: Andrew**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter is based on the transcribed interview with Andrew. A brief background will be sketched, followed by a description of the setting of the introduction to the interview and the researcher's impressions and observations. Andrew's relationships with immediate and extended family, as well as those with his social networks, will also be depicted graphically using genograms and ecomaps. He will re-live his journey by voicing the changes and transitions he perceives to have occurred within himself and his family during the divorce process. Subsequently, the themes that emerged will be discussed. Thereafter, a comparison of themes across the three divorced couples, as well as across the males and females, will be presented.

Each narrative has been reconstructed in terms of the themes identified by the researcher. The researcher's own lens has coloured the manner in which she has interpreted the stories of the participants and their relationships. It is thus important to note that others may view and understand the experience[s] of the participants through their own, possibly different, lenses as other themes may well emerge. It is suggested that the interpretation of each participant's story is one of many possible interpretations and by no means regarded as the absolute truth. For the purposes of confidentiality, the name of the participant as well as the names of the family members have been replaced with pseudonyms.

#### **Andrew's Story**

#### **Brief Background**

Andrew is a 59-year-old English speaking father of three sons and one daughter. His two elder sons, aged 33 and 31, are from his first marriage and his younger son, aged

fourteen, and daughter, aged seventeen from his present, second marriage. He was born and raised in South Africa. He is the eldest of two siblings. He completed his matric and has also attained an IMM Diploma in Marketing. At the time of the interview, he had been divorced for eight years, after seven years of marriage. Andrew has been married to his second wife for 20 years. His current family lives in the East Rand. Andrew is self-employed and works as a consultant to various companies.

### **Interview Setting and Impressions**

The interview took place at Andrew's home in the East Rand. I had met Andrew, the husband of a colleague of mine, only once before. He is a tall and small-built individual. Andrew looked younger than his age, yet his eyes portrayed wisdom far beyond his age. He greeted me with respect and courtesy and offered me a drink, which I graciously accepted. Andrew seemed quite anxious and uncomfortable at first, perhaps because I was a friend of his current wife and he was unsure about how confidential the process would be. He was concerned about divulging certain information to me, especially that which he had not shared with Desiree.

The interview was to take place in the formal lounge. This room was positioned at the end of the house away from the rest of the rooms. The lounge was small, yet comfortable, and was conducive to an interview since it was quiet and there would be no likelihood of any interruptions.

Before the interview began, some time was spent discussing the issue of confidentiality. Furthermore, the aim and purpose of the research was once again explained. Andrew commented that he was not a very emotional person, but that he would try to recall how he had felt. I reassured Andrew that the information he shared with me would be valuable and that there were no expectations regarding how, or to what depth, he would need to share his emotions. His comment suggested that he wanted to be helpful and was prepared to share his experience of the divorce.

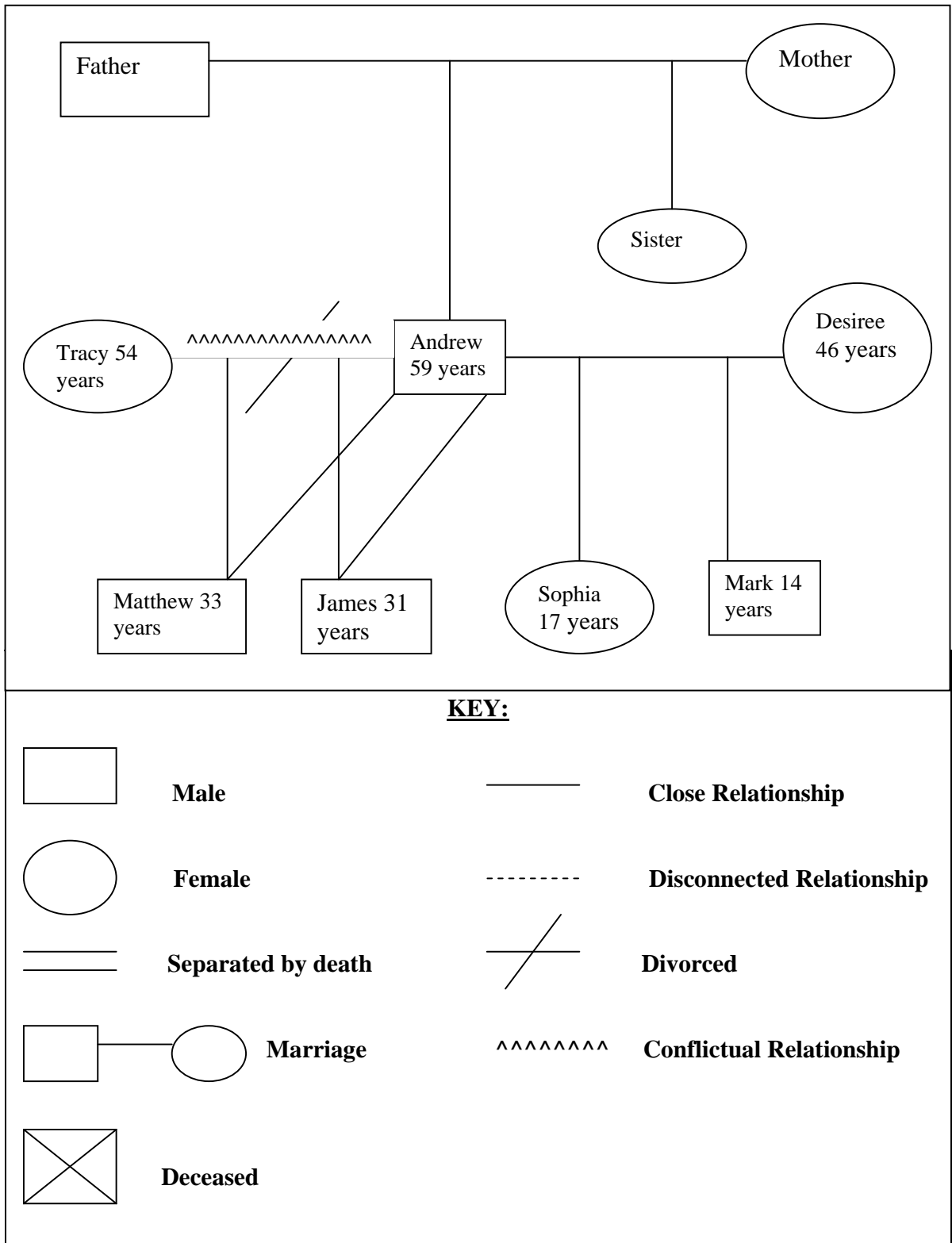


Figure 8.1. Andrew's family genogram illustrating family interactions

### **Themes Emerging from Andrew's Interview**

The following themes throughout the pre-divorce phase, as well those during, and after it, were identified in Andrew's interview:

#### **Pre-Divorce: The Unimaginable**

For Andrew, this stage was characterized as a period of total confusion amidst a whirlpool of mixed emotions. It represented a time of profound betrayal, abuse, and pain. The following themes are drawn from Andrew's experience as he reflected on the truth concerning his marriage.

#### **The Unknown and Unfaithful Relationship**

This theme refers to the manner in which Andrew and his wife related and communicated prior to their divorce. The relationship is thus characterized by manipulation and betrayal on the part of his wife and Andrew's naïve and total unawareness of his family's behaviour, from his point of view.

Andrew viewed his relationship as a "*happy marriage*". His confidence in his wife, due to his trusting nature, prevented him from accepting the unimaginable, that is, that Tracy would be unfaithful. However, this implicit rule in their marriage allowed the family to continue functioning as they always had. In other words, Andrew worked long, extensive hours trying to manage work, study, and a family, while Tracy's work provided the context for numerous affairs. Thus, he reflects on his behaviour during this time:

*"Prior to the discovery of my wife's behaviour, I was totally trusting and naïve and quite unaware of what was going on. ... My wife was always busy with work, or so we were led to believe."*

When Andrew became aware of Tracy's behaviour and the diminishing amount of time that she spent at home, his fear that she might be betraying him and their family, forced

him to question her behaviour and the signs that he may have previously missed. It appears that his less-than-confrontational attitude created a greater distance between Tracy, himself and their children. The family was no longer able to function as it once had done because his suspicions and sudden confrontational nature prevented his wife's behaviour from occurring openly. He recalls his suspicion and distrust regarding her behaviour:

*“We started to have arguments about the amount of time she spent away from home and her attitude towards the children and me. I think at this time I began to get suspicious and began to question her attitude towards the children and myself as well as her general behaviour at functions with our friends and neighbours.”*

Their physical proximity in the relationship at this time was on the verge of becoming non-existent, and a lack of communication proceeded to expand the gap that already existed, to the point that each lived an independent life in the same household.

*“The problems manifested and we hardly spoke to each other.”*

### **Separateness**

This theme is strongly illustrated in Andrew's narrative. It incorporates two issues: the first one features disconnection as being harmless, since Andrew believed that his family would eventually reap the rewards of his hard work while the second issue refers to the separateness and isolation that society forcefully placed upon him, and which ultimately led to Andrew continuing to be a loner. Andrew, therefore, resorted to his isolation in order to cope with losing his children.

Andrew experienced a disconnection from Tracy and the children as a result of his excessive working-hours. At this point in Andrew's life, his family life rested on the notion that his success would make his family happier and complete. However, the pursuit of his personal accomplishments that resulted in his disconnection from his

family, provided the opportunity for Tracy to conduct an affair. Andrew renders a description of his daily routine during this period:

*“I was away from home four nights out of seven. When I was not away on business I was at college in the evenings studying marketing. During this time my wife was having affairs with two guys at work as well as two of our neighbours in the new neighbourhood.”*

His disconnection from his marriage and Tracy’s new freedom in effectively living the life of a single person left Andrew with the full responsibility to take care of, protect and nurture his young children. Andrew found himself in a state of complete confusion with an inability to make sense of the sudden changes that were occurring in his family. He expresses his feelings during this time:

*“I was feeling betrayed and very disappointed. I felt I had not given any reason to behave in this manner.”*

Even during the time prior to the divorce, Andrew found it difficult to belong anywhere. Unspoken blame from friends and community forced Andrew into exile within his own physical and psychological confines. These external pressures created, within Andrew, a sense of blame and of personal failure as a husband and a man; a failure that reflected his lack of control over his wife’s promiscuous behaviour. Andrew felt that society viewed him in terms of his wife’s behaviour, thus judging him unfairly. He reflects on the social isolation he experienced, particularly from his friends:

*“All the friends we had must have felt I was a threat to their marriages as I was now single and probably hunting for a new mate.”*

Having been cast out from his circle of friends, Andrew withdrew from them and from society completely. He chose to spend all his time working. The pain and hurt of his wife’s betrayal and the loss of his children was unbearable and work became the context

in which he could escape. For Andrew, it felt as if he had to prove himself to be competent and triumphant. Work, therefore, became a means of coping, and although ironically, he achieved success as a career-person.

*“Being alone spurred me to achieving at work to prove to myself that a failed marriage did not make me a failure in anything else.”*

In his account, Andrew reflects that his marriage had failed, at least in part, because he had not made it his primary focus. In this regard he considers that his marriage would have been more central to his life if things had changed. However, even

*“after the break-up (separation), her behaviour became even more promiscuous. She then had licence to see and do as she pleased.”*

### **A Holistic Loss**

This theme encapsulates, for Andrew, a sense of loss and grief on various levels. It represents not only loss alone, but also the loss of a world that had been so familiar, safe and perfect.

The loss of an entire way of life, one that was built on the belief that nothing matters more than family, threatens the identity of each person involved. A family is a representation of who we are and what we will become. For Andrew, his identity was built upon the identity of his family. Andrew’s loss of the traditional family unit was devastating and has had the lasting effect of his being filled with pain and sadness. His loss is incomprehensible since he could not understand the reasons why his wife resorted to destroying their family. He reminisces about the beginning of his marriage:

*“I had, what I thought, a happy marriage. We seemed to be very happy in the beginning and for the first three years.”*

Andrew's loss of the traditional family unit resulted in him acquiring the roles of caregiver, nurturer and breadwinner. Andrew identified very strongly with the role of a husband, and in particular, of a father. For Andrew, to have been stripped of such a privilege was "traumatic" for him. However, Tracy's emotional and physical neglect of him and his children, only ensured Andrew's determination to establish a home of love and security for his children. This deepened the close bond between father and children. He expresses the reasons for this cohesiveness with his children:

*"My sons and I spent more and more time together as my wife was always busy with work or so we were led to believe."*

Linked to the theme of "separateness" is the broader theme of loss, that of Andrew's social identity. He was once a member of a social group, a community in which he had used to participate, now he was just Andrew, a loner. His wife not only destroyed his dreams, but her behaviour had humiliated him and destroyed his pride. Having lost his integrity and pride, Andrew found it difficult to reintegrate himself into the community; the very community that had assisted his wife in destroying his image. The feeling of abandonment and his loss of family and self was absorbed into his work as a means to find comfort and peace, and perhaps even seen as necessary to overcome this traumatic experience. Andrew recalls how the community approached him regarding his wife's behaviour:

*"The other wives in the neighbourhood came to me to try and stop their husbands from going to spend time with her, as she rented a house two streets away from where I still lived."*

### **During the Divorce: A Conflict Process**

This stage for Andrew is regarded as a period of ambivalence and relief from the painful shackles that bound him to the torturous experience which stripped him of his children



and of his identity. The themes highlighted below reflect Andrew's difficult journey and personal struggles as a divorcee and a father.

### **A Father's Cry**

During the divorce, the most painful experience for Andrew was being aware that he was helpless and powerless to protect his children, since they were taken away from him when his wife moved out. As a father, Andrew felt an enormous sense of guilt and failure. He expresses his pain and concern for his children:

*"My only worry was that my boys were stuck in a very negative environment and I was concerned for their future."*

Indeed, the knowledge of how Tracy neglected the children evoked feelings of anger and bitterness towards his wife and feelings of abandonment, despair, and hurt regarding his children and himself. Andrew describes his wife's attitude towards the family as:

*"A total lack of conscience or remorse at the hurt and suffering she had caused my boys and me."*

Andrew felt a deeper need to connect and establish a closer bond with his children, especially since the time spent with them was limited to weekends. This need was expressed in his desire to fight for his children and to reassure them of his love and continuous involvement in their lives. Andrew felt the loss of his children even more intensely when Tracy attempted to keep his children away from him by using them as scapegoats. He recalls one episode of an escalating conflictual relationship between him and his wife, and the role his children played in it.

*"She tried all means possible to keep me from seeing my sons and also sued me on a regular basis for more and more maintenance until I was barely able to support myself. She went out of her way to hurt me because after the divorce she wanted to get back*

*together for the sake of the boys. I point blank refused and said I did not want to return to a situation that I knew would not work. She got very angry that I had turned her down and said that I would regret it. She would often call me prior to my weekends with my boys and say that they did not want to come to me. She then told them that I did not want to see them. My oldest son then said to me ‘Daddy, Why don’t you want me?’ This had a devastating effect on my emotions and I went out of my way to show them both how much they meant to me.”*

### **The Ambivalent Acceptance**

Although Andrew’s wife was the initiator of the divorce, Andrew did not experience a sense of betrayal, hurt, or pain as a result of the divorce. Instead, the divorce symbolized a new beginning, a second chance at life and happiness. It represented an opportunity to rectify and build on that which he had lost. During the period of separation, Andrew was made aware of Tracy’s behaviour during their marriage. He “*felt betrayed and abused*”, yet his discovery gave him the freedom to feel relief rather than guilt. Andrew expresses his ambivalence as follows:

*“At the same time I felt relief in the knowledge that I was now free of her to continue my life without wondering where she was and what she was doing. I felt reborn.”*

Andrew’s personal relief was short-lived as a result of Andrew experiencing tremendous guilt as a father. He felt that his freedom would be at the cost of his children. Freedom, for Andrew, meant that he was powerless to protect them from harm. He reflects on the day Tracy called to notify him that the divorce had been finalized:

*“I made an arrangement with a friend of mine and we met for a drink to celebrate. My only worry was that my boys were still stuck in a very negative environment and I was concerned for their future.”*

Andrew acknowledges that the divorce process was very traumatic. It was a time that he felt detached from himself and his emotions. Andrew's decision not to allow himself to acknowledge his feelings, provided him with the means to cope with the loss of his family and his marriage. He therefore redirected his energy into his work, since work gave him little time to reflect or experience the pain of his loss. He reflects on this process:

*“During the divorce process I felt almost no emotion. I busied myself at work to recreate the company I had joined. My efforts were rewarded....”*

### **After Divorce: A New Beginning**

This stage is described as a period of incredible strength and courage. It represents the choices and actions that one makes and the acknowledgement of the consequences thereof. The period following the divorce created, in Andrew, an inner strength that allowed him to continue to believe in a family and a happy marriage. Andrew's dream has become a reality with regards to his new family. However, even within his new family there are challenges and obstacles that he must face.

### **Re-defining a New Identity and Role-exiting**

Andrew found it difficult to redefine his role simply because his identity was strongly reflected as that of a family man. The most difficult role, with which he was faced at this stage, was that of not being the primary caregiver of his children. The only role that Andrew was left with was the 'idea' of being a father, because his wife wanted to strip him of even that title. Even so, Andrew's role as a father is strongly internalized, and, to him, being a father means that he should provide financial and emotional support for his family. His relationship with his children is reflected by Andrew as:

*“The relationship we have with each other (sons) is one of love and respect that has transcended the divorce and the negative input my ex-wife tried to instil into my sons.”*

Although Andrew was not the person who filed for the dissolution of his marriage, exiting the role of a husband was easier than exiting his role as a father. Perhaps this could have been due to the divorce proceedings having taken only four months. Furthermore, during the divorce, the relationship with his wife was characterized by conflict, hurt and pain, and the relief of leaving such a torturous relationship made the transition easier. He recalls the need to move forward with his life:

*“She wanted to get back together for the sake of the boys. I point blank refused and said I did not want to return to a situation that I knew would not work.”*

Andrew had always been the breadwinner in the family, providing for, and supporting the family, financially. In this regard his identity has remained unchanged.

### **Relationship with Former Spouse**

When the children were younger, Andrew’s relationship with his ex-wife revolved entirely around their relationship with the children, and he acknowledges that this limited his attachment to his ex-spouse. However as the children grew up, his involvement with his ex-wife became non-existent since he communicated directly with his children. Although implicit, tension and conflict still prevails in their relationship, and he tries to maintain a degree of civility with Tracy for the children’s sake. Andrew expresses his disconnection from his wife and her family:

*“My relationship with my previous family is limited to my sons. The rest, I never see or hear from, nor do I need to. My extended family (previous), I have no contact with at all. They have shown me their true colours and I do not need to be a part of that history.”*

Although he spoke much of their relationship while married, his narrative with regards to the post-separation period almost completely excludes his ex-wife and focuses, to a large extent, on himself. This, and the relief from the divorce that he expresses, suggests that he is completely detached from his previous marital relationship with Tracy.

## **Establishing New Social Networks and Economic Stability**

Andrew profoundly experiences the loss of external networks. Friends, whom he believed would support him, abandoned him, leaving him with a deeper sense of guilt and loneliness. Furthermore, his ex-wife's family abandoned him by placing the blame on him. Their criticism formed a rift between himself, his family and those who blamed him for the dissolution of his marriage. He recalls his ex-family's attitude towards him and his family:

*“My extended family, in-laws, blamed me for the divorce and was very antagonistic towards me and my parents and sister. We saw very little of each other, except when I went to see my sons. I merely put them out of my life and continued to live as if they had never been part of my family.”*

However, Andrew felt the support of his parental family almost immediately. His family provided him with encouragement, strength, and the motivation to move forward in his life although they seem to have taken it very hard. Andrew was sensitive to the loss that his parents had experienced, especially since they were instrumental in the daily care of the children. His work required extensive travelling, and created the context in which to establish new circles of friendships. Even though his work provided the means by which to escape the pain, it became the area in which he found himself flourishing professionally, and in turn, an aura of confidence and self-esteem emerged. His competency at work has maintained his economic stability. He recalls these times as:

*“After the divorce, I worked hard, long hours and went out with the new people I had now met and a couple of young ladies that were friends and business associates. I attended a lot of business functions and travelled around the country and abroad setting up new distribution channels for the company.”*

Soon after the divorce, Andrew met his current wife, Desiree, who aided him in the process of the post-divorce adjustment. While Andrew once felt that he would never be

able to overcome the pain, his new marriage, and subsequent family, afforded him the opportunity to create new and stronger bonds while gradually relinquishing the bonds that continued to haunt him.

### **“Reborn”**

The theme of resilience is pivotal to Andrew’s story. It is remarkable that within the depth of such pain he was able to find a burning light. It is the faith that he carried within himself that gives Andrew the strength to survive the unimaginable experience with which he was faced. He was left with nothing, in the true sense of the word. He walked away empty yet he regained his pride and his love for his children, and his work, which were the elements of his survival. It seems that “having nothing” gave Andrew the courage to overcome adversity. Andrew’s ability to empower himself reflects his ability to have resumed control over his own life. Andrew reflects on his belief in humankind, and although he has made peace with his painful experience, he has a bitter-sweet view of human beings:

*“My trust of human nature and the innate good, I believe is present in all human beings. To this day I believe that I believe that most people are basically good and do not mean to hurt their fellow man, but there are people who are ruthless and greedy for love and affection any go for the maximum they can get, regardless of the cost to others.”*

### **Previous Family Reorganization**

Andrew found it difficult to play an active role in his children’s lives, particularly since his wife attempted to keep him away from his children so that he had only limited access to them. However, when it was his turn to be with his children he was met with his ex-wife’s resistance. Her behaviour only further encouraged Andrew’s persistence and determination to establish a relationship with his children.

*“She tried all means possible to keep me from seeing my sons and also sued me on a regular basis for more and more maintenance until I was barely able to support myself.”*

To this day Andrew tries to maintain peace within his previous family. His despair has remained within him and although he does not regard Tracy in a good light he however feels it necessary to protect his children from the trauma that may ensue should they become aware of the events that occurred between their parents.

*“I have never tried to relate the reasons for the divorce to them. They know nothing of their mother’s behaviour.”*

### **Relationship with Current Family**

Andrew has been married for twenty years and fathered two children with his current wife. For Andrew, this was the white-picket-fence portrait that he always imagined he would have. His current family mirrored his own family when he was growing up. However, Andrew is aware that, as in any marriage, there are problems. As opposed to his first marriage, Andrew has made his new family the centre and primary priority of his life, and this is reflected by his twenty-year marriage. It appears that in his marriage, Andrew is the submissive partner while Desiree is the dominant voice in the family. He describes himself as:

*“I have always been very much of a loner and even nowadays I am still a quiet and private person. I prefer the company of my wife and children rather than a very big family gathering.”*

Andrew experiences a disconnection from Desiree’s extended family. He regards himself as an outsider, perhaps because he was previously married and the stigma of being a divorcee was seen as “deviant”. During the reign of the “patriarchal leader” (Desiree’s father), Andrew felt a part of the family, but since the death of his father-in-law, a sense of disconnection and lack of belonging, has made it difficult for him to relate to, and

establish, strong and trusting relationships with, the present extended family. Andrew's disconnection is reflected as:

*"Now that he (father-in-law) has gone, I again feel like the step-child of the family. I do not believe my wife and extended members family fully realize the way people outside the family circle feel. When they are told this they simply say it is nonsense and in your imagination."*

Indeed, Andrew experiences an inner turmoil of connection and disconnection, that is, regarding his need to be a part of the extended family and to be accepted unconditionally, rather than to be accepted under the pretence of being that which the family wants him to be.

*"I feel you have to be totally submissive and accept that they are always right. I also feel that they find it very hard to apologize. This is very hard for me to accept."*

Since Andrew identifies very strongly with the role of a family man, it is very important for him to establish his own identity away from his present family. For Andrew, this represents the need for individuation. He, therefore, forms other relationships apart from those who are connected to the family. He reflects on the importance of this:

*"I have friends outside the family circle. They remain my friends or acquaintances only and not family friends or acquaintances, it is difficult to become friendlier as the rest of my family (present family) remains aloof."*



## CREATIVE SYNTHESIS

Andrew's story was written according to the unfolding themes, employing his own words.

### My "Long Walk to Freedom"

It was a fairytale marriage. Family, friends, work, all came in a perfect bundle, or so Andrew thought: *"We seemed to be very happy in the beginning and for the first three years. Our friends were initially all my friends from school in the old neighbourhood. They used to visit a lot and we were always at each other's houses for home movies and braais etcetera"*. Andrew started to grow suspicious when *"she started to become distant and worked late almost every night"*. On confronting her about her behaviour and attitude in general, she responded that *"she was taking the children and the furniture and leaving me"*. When Andrew returned home from work the next day *"she was gone"*. Andrew was very traumatized by what was happening to his family because his *"background and upbringing had not prepared me for the situation I now found myself in."*

It was difficult for Andrew to come to terms with what had occurred. This lack of meaning caused feelings of guilt and self-blame, while Andrew *"now questioned [his] my own behaviour as well as the fact that my job and studies kept me away from home so much"*. However, in time, Andrew realized that this *"was not the main reason"*, because it appears that her behaviour continued and she *"became more promiscuous."*

Once Andrew became aware of the numerous affairs that his ex-wife was conducting, Andrew felt a sense of *"relief in the knowledge that I was free"*. However, Andrew feared what was to become of his children *"in a very negative environment"*. Andrew put all his energy into his work because *"this helped me over the trauma I felt at losing my boys"*. Loss was an enduring and endless process especially because friends *"felt I was a threat to their marriage"* and the female neighbours *"came to me to try and stop their husbands from going to spend time with her."*

After Tracy “sued me for divorce”, Andrew felt that “a great burden had lifted from my shoulders and I felt liberated”. He was completely disconnected from the entire divorce process. He recalls his absence as: “when the final decree was made in court, I was not even present. She called me that afternoon to tell me that we were now officially divorced”. His liberation from the marriage affected people close to him. His parents “took it very badly” because “they were worried about what would become of my sons living with her.”

However, Andrew’s hardships with Tracy only continued to escalate. Andrew believes that she “became jealous of my success and tried various means to make my life as difficult as possible”, especially with regards to his children. He recalls the question that was posed to him by his oldest son: “Daddy, why don’t you want me”. Andrew knew that he had to fight for his children regardless of the nature of the relationship with his ex-wife.

“I started a new job and really worked as hard as I can”, indicates Andrew’s coping mechanism throughout his divorce. Andrew felt that he had lost everything, including his identity surrounding his family. However, his identity as a businessman continued to provide him with a raised status and success. Andrew’s efforts were “rewarded as the company grew in leaps..., I was happy, successful and making new friends and meeting people all over the world.”

This time, for Andrew, was a painful journey, and as such, he feels the need to detach himself completely from the memories of his first marriage. He, therefore, has no relationship “with my previous family...I never see or hear from, nor do I need to”. His only contact with the family “is limited to my children.”

Andrew remarried and prefers “the company of my wife and children”. Although Andrew felt a part of Desiree’s family at first, he finds it difficult to belong within the family because “the only one that made me feel totally welcome was my late father-in-law”. He refers to himself as “the step-child of the family”; doing as others want rather than what

he feels should be the right thing to do. His pretence has created in Andrew a person with whom he finds it difficult to identify. He is aware the he has *“become more private in my display of emotion and affection as it not common in my new extended family as it was in my own family while I was growing up”*. As such, Andrew has established networks outside the family: *“I have friends outside the family circle. They remain my friends or acquaintances only and not family friends or acquaintances’*. For Andrew it is important to establish himself as an individual, apart from the family.

Andrew’s journey has bestowed on him a *“respect of my attitude to life. We must plan as best we can and then live with the consequences of our decisions, for better or worse”*. Andrew’s greatest belief is to *“Practice Universal Unconditional Love and expect nothing in return”*. Andrew’s hardships and pain in life did not destroy his belief in true love, family, and happiness. His final comment conveys this message:

*“I pray that someday all other people will see that love is the only thing that is able to bind people, families and communities together. Family pride, status and possessions are not the basis of a happy co-existence and can in fact be a hindrance in the pursuit of true happiness.”*

### **Reflecting on my Participation: The Interviewer as Listener**

As mentioned earlier, I had only met Andrew once before. My knowledge of him was based on Desiree’s (his current wife’s) description of him. Meeting Andrew for the second time seemed uncomfortable, perhaps because of the relationship between Desiree and myself.

When Andrew shared his story, I felt myself being drawn towards his world. At times, I felt that my curiosity was merely in order to gain a complete picture, regardless of how irrelevant the information may have seemed to the research. However, Andrew was open

and honest, recalling events as if he had only recently experienced them. His words and their profundity regarding pain and suffering surpassed my expectations. I was in awe.

My role in the process was merely that of a listener, clarifying and reflecting when necessary. Although the interaction, in terms of communication, was limited between Andrew and me, the instant connection is evidenced by Andrew's narrative which was shared in the form of a story, and I envisioned a Red Indian telling his daughter his life's legacy. Perhaps, this may have been the reason for the limited number of questions which I posed, yet, his story is meaningful and the information, relevant.

### **Summary: The Family System**

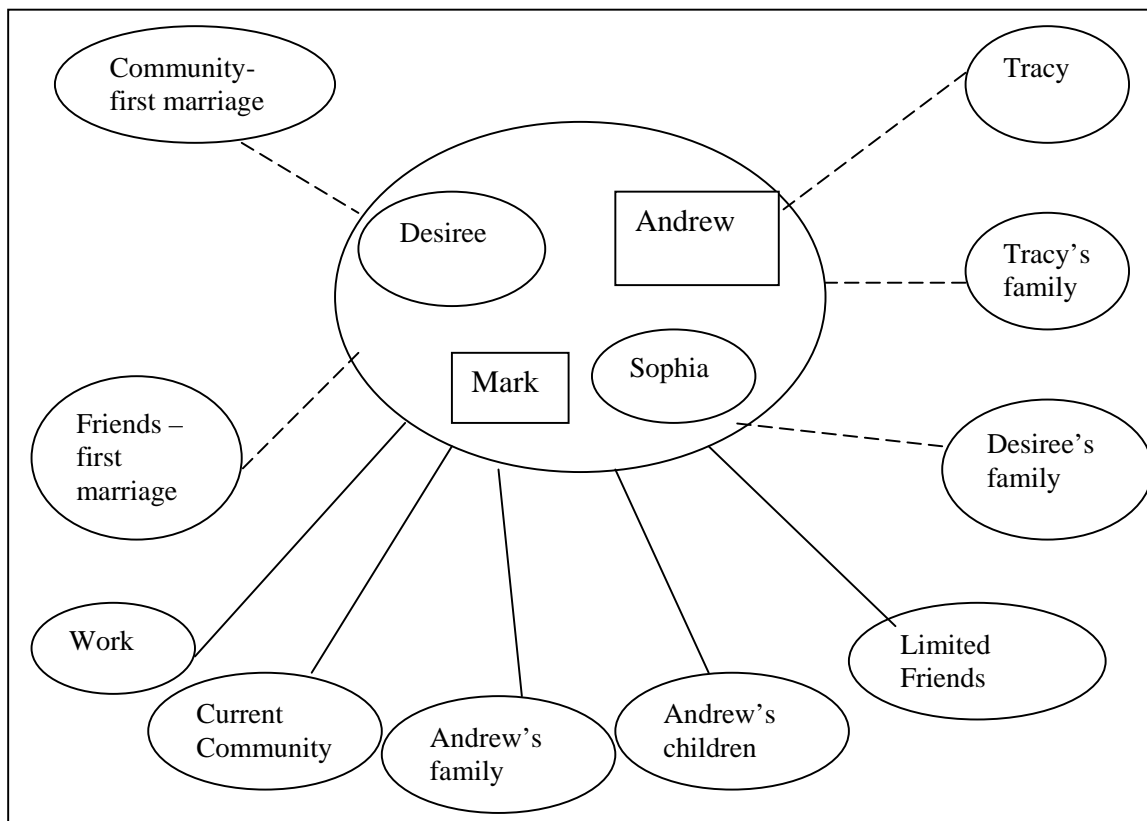
Based on Andrew's description of how the divorce progressed, the family was viewed, through my lens, as functioning in the following way (Figure 8.2):

Andrew's relationship with Tracy was characterized by manipulation, deceitfulness, and dishonesty. In this family, Andrew seemed to be the quiet, subdued partner while his wife was the extroverted domineering partner. This style of interaction played a role in affecting the manner in which they related to each other and those with whom they were in contact. As such, the less Andrew knew, or chose to know, the more his wife continued with the affairs. However, when Andrew confronted his ex-wife and adopted the dominant stance, she withdrew further from the family and her promiscuous behaviour increased. Her escalating behaviour reached a point where divorce was considered the only solution. Her sudden withdrawal created a stronger bond between Andrew and his children.

However, even after the divorce, the conflictual relationship between Andrew and Tracy continued and the children were engaged as a means to take revenge on Andrew for not accepting her back. The children's role as mediators established a relationship between

Andrew and Tracy. Furthermore, external pressures from neighbours and friends contributed to Andrew's isolation.

Andrew still remains a quiet individual in his current marriage, and continues to be the submissive partner, while Desiree is the dominant voice in the marriage. He appears to be close to his immediate family; however, a gulf seems to exist between him and Desiree's extended family. Andrew's attempt to communicate with the family is met with disregard and an apparent view of its unimportance, leaving Andrew feeling unaccepted. This causes Andrew to further withdraw and isolate himself. His children, from the first marriage, continue to play an active role in Andrew's new family. Andrew's family has always been supportive and continues to do so, together with the new friends and social networks that he has established.



**Figure 8.2.** The ecomap depicts the relationships of Andrew and Tracy with extra-familial systems after the divorce

## **Conclusion**

Andrew's story reflects themes of pain, abuse, continuous betrayal, and a profound sense of loss. Yet at the same time, his narrative sings the triumph of life, and the belief that the power to overcome adversity is reflected within each person. It is a story of tremendous courage against society and those whom we believe to be true and real in our lives, as well as choices and survival. Andrew's ability to self-validate his experience and the meaning that his divorce represented, has provided him with the platform from which to form a new family and to keep alive his belief that family gives meaning to our lives, regardless of the pain with which we are faced, at times.

## **CHAPTER 9**

### **Results: Tracy**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter is based on the transcribed interview with Tracy. A brief background will be sketched, followed by a description of the setting of the introduction to the interview as well as the researcher's impressions and observations. Tracy's relationships with her immediate and extended family as well as those with her social networks will also be depicted graphically by means of genograms and ecomaps. She will re-live her journey by voicing the changes and transitions she perceives to have occurred within herself and her family during the divorce process. Subsequently, the themes that emerge will be discussed. Thereafter, a comparison of themes across the three divorced couples, and across the males and females, will be presented.

Each narrative has been reconstructed in terms of the themes identified by the researcher. The researcher's own lens has coloured the manner in which she has interpreted the stories of the participants and their relationships. It is thus important to note that others may view and understand the experience[s] of the participants through their own, possibly different, lenses as other themes may well emerge. It is suggested that the interpretation of each participant's story is one of many possible interpretations and by no means regarded as the absolute truth. For the purposes of confidentiality, the name of the participant, as well as the names of the family members have been substituted with pseudonyms.

#### **Tracy's Story**

##### **Brief Background**

Tracy is a 54 year old Afrikaans mother of two sons aged 33 and 31. Tracy is the second-youngest of four siblings. She completed her matric and has received a secretarial

diploma. She was married to Andrew for seven years and had been divorced from Andrew for eleven years before getting engaged to someone who broke off their engagement due to a motor vehicle accident in which she had been involved. At the time of the interview, she had been divorced from Andrew for fourteen years. Currently, Tracy lives alone with her current boyfriend. She works as a part-time secretary for a recruitment company.

### **Interview Setting and Impressions**

The interview took place in Tracy's home. Jonathan (her current boyfriend), greeted me at the gate. He was very polite and led me to Tracy who was seated in the T.V. lounge, reading a book while drinking a cup of tea. Tracy appeared to take care of her appearance since she was well-groomed. She has a slight figure and looked relaxed in her tracksuit. Tracy apologized for not greeting me at the gate because she experienced difficulty walking. She took the opportunity to show me her walking stick by laughingly waving it in the air. She summoned me to sit next to her on the couch and asked Jonathan to make us a cup of coffee.

Tracy's home exuded calm and tranquillity. The lounge where the interview was to take place was small and cluttered, yet there was a feeling of comfort and warmth. Tracy commented that she liked that room because it was quiet. She could just relax with a book and fall asleep. The room was conducive to the interview.

Prior to the interview, I provided Tracy with the aim and purpose of the research, and explained the ethical considerations and the format of my study. She commented that some information regarding the divorce might be sketchy and the exact dates may be slightly different. During the interview, Tracy spoke slowly as if reminiscing about her past. This was also indicative of her posture while she spent the interview looking straight ahead or laying her head back with her eyes closed.



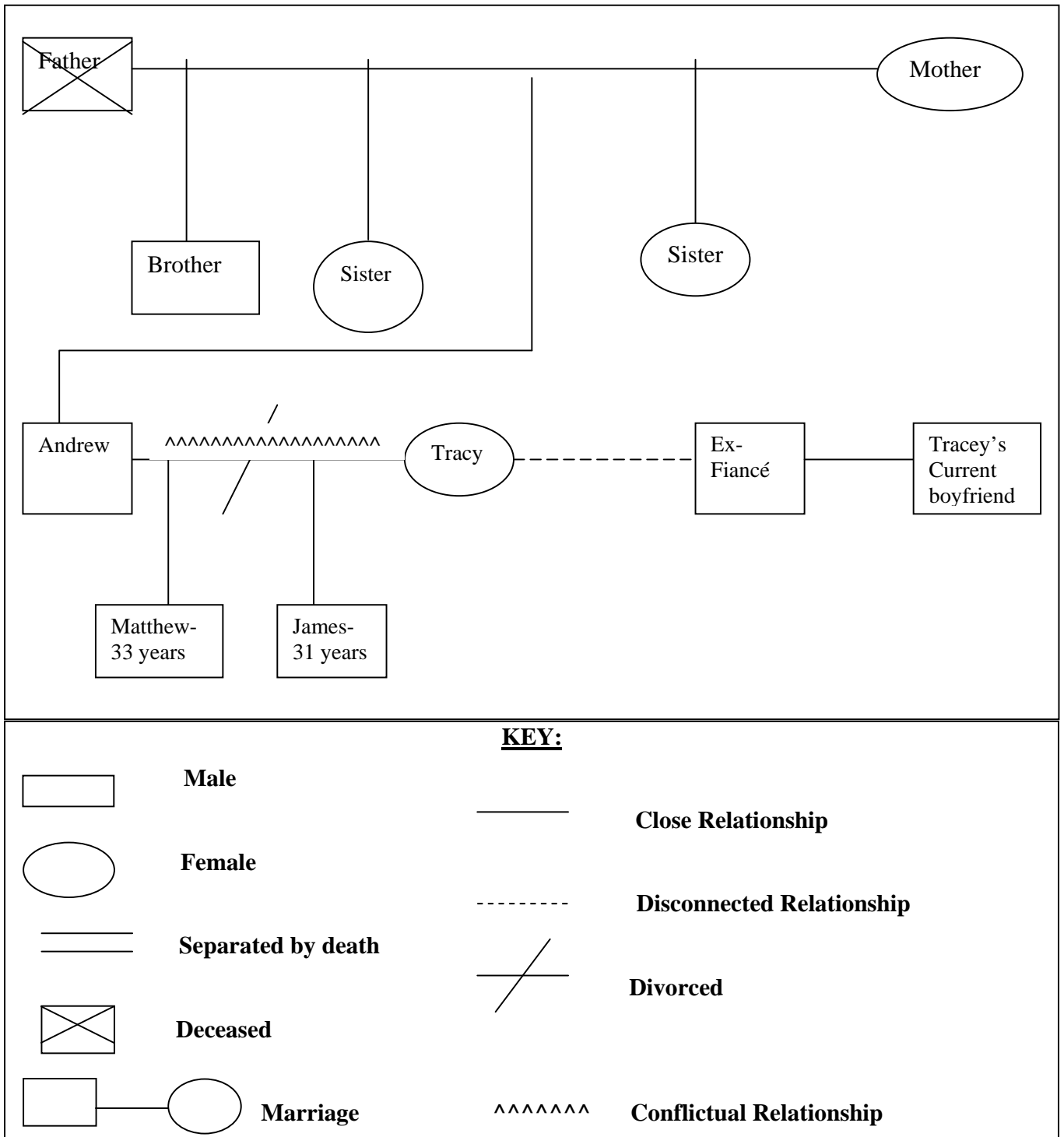


Figure 9.1. Tracy's family genogram illustrating family interactions

### **Themes Emerging from Tracy's Interview**

The following themes throughout the pre-divorce phase, as well as those during and after it, were identified in Tracy's interview:

#### **Pre-Divorce: The Detached Marriage**

This period for Tracy was, in many ways, described as a time of complete confusion regarding her personal needs, apart from her marriage. It reflects Tracy's overwhelming feelings and the events that occurred in her life prior to her decision to divorce. The following themes reflect Tracy's personal dilemma and how she viewed her relationship with Andrew.

#### **Complimentary to the Point of Non-existence**

This theme refers to two patterns that have become independent of one another. This pattern refers to the role that each partner played in the relationship in terms of their interaction with each other. Their relationship could be described as being dominant-submissive, with Tracy being the dominant partner and her husband the submissive one.

Tracy describes Andrew as being passive, in the sense that he avoids conflict, dislikes arguments and tries to maintain the peace at home and in social gatherings. Although Andrew enjoys social activities, he seems to prefer his own company and that of his family. Tracy, on the other hand, is viewed as domineering and demanding. Her outgoing personality and the enjoyment of being with people gives her a sense of being alive. Although very different, their personalities reflected a balanced "ying-yang". This description is reflected by Tracy as follows:

*"People always say opposites attract, and it's true, well, in my case anyway. Andrew was always the quiet one, even at parties or functions he didn't really get carried away. Even when we had children he was always the talker, never shouted or disciplined the children*

*harshly. I was, and of course, still am, an extrovert. I enjoy people, confusion and having a blast. We complimented each other, or so I thought.”*

Tracy viewed their relationship to have been equal, in the sense that all responsibilities were shared. They had found a common ground, not only where there were opportunities to become involved in activities as a family, but also to pursue their own interests independently of one another. However, with Andrew’s extensive working hours, the members of the family seemed to relate to one another more as individuals rather than as a family. Furthermore, this resulted in less communication between Tracy and her husband, and led to a less than satisfactory relationship. Tracy thus turned to another relationship where she felt acknowledged and needed, since her needs were not being met in her marriage. She recalls how she was feeling at the time prior to having the affair:

*“Things started to fall apart. I was very lonely, I needed intimacy I needed...umm something, anything to be alive. So I had an affair with someone from work.”*

### **Connection vs. Disconnection**

This theme depicts the process involved in Tracy’s relationship with Andrew. It describes how the events in their marriage unfolded due to the connection – disconnection process. In this context, connection refers to the need for closeness, characterized by physical intimacy and emotional closeness, while disconnection refers to the desire to be cut-off or disengaged from another. Disconnection, therefore, can be a result of an inner personal dilemma, or due to circumstances in a relationship such as an over-involvement in work which may provide the space for disconnection.

For Tracy, her marriage had once reflected closeness and intimacy on various levels. However, Tracy experienced a deep loneliness and a gulf that occurred between her and Andrew as a result of his extensive hours of work. It seemed that Tracy felt alienated and deprived of her own needs being met since Andrew’s days away from home forced her into a monotonous routine of work and the role of being a mother. It was her belief that

Andrew disconnected himself from his family in order to pursue his own dreams while she had to remain the dutiful loving wife. She depicts how Andrew's work had kept him from his family:

*"I felt that he only really cared about himself and his own success. I mean, can you imagine being with someone who was at work 24 hours, I mean literally, he worked everyday and then he was away from home for about five days in a week. Not to mention that when he was at home he would go to night classes to study something. Do you call that a relationship? It wasn't for me. He kept going on about how he is doing this for us, so that we would have a better life. Some better life we had."*

Andrew's disconnection created a cascade of deteriorating connections, whereby physical separation due to Andrew's work resulted in a decrease of communication, which fed into emotional separateness that ultimately led to two individuals living separate lives. Thus, Tracy's affair reflected a need to feel acknowledged and appreciated. Furthermore, Tracy found herself in a space that was unfamiliar and unknown to her regarding her sense of self. Perhaps her disconnection from her husband elicited this personal struggle of not knowing her direction in life and her identity.

*"I guess when you caught up in so many things at once you get lost. You loose track of what is ultimately important at that point in time. For me, I felt that I was being pulled in so many directions, I didn't know if I was coming or going. I didn't even understand me anymore and I couldn't find...umm, it was difficult. I felt that I was suffocating."*

### **During Divorce: The Mind-game Process**

This period was regarded as a time of overwhelming negative emotions regarding her spouse. It reflects the conflictual relationship and the involvement of their children in the struggle between Tracy and her husband. The following themes shed light on the process that unfolded during the divorce.

### **The Ambivalent/Manipulator Initiator**

This theme gives expression to the idea that, at times, ambivalence and manipulation possibly go hand in hand. At times, the feeling of ambivalence is suggestive of an underlying need or desire. In other words, ambivalence is not necessarily a result of emotional loss in a marriage, contemplating whether divorce was the correct action to take, but rather, the realization that their economic status would be affected.

Tracy based her decision to separate and divorce, on Andrew's approach to her concerning her affair. Tracy's decision to divorce occurred at a time when she was in an irrational state of resentment and anger that contributed to her impulsive behaviour when she decided to leave home. However, for Tracy, their marriage existed on paper only, and therefore, the decision to divorce was liberating and exciting, permitting her to pursue her own interests.

*"I was relieved that the divorce was over. I had found my new freedom."*

However, Tracy's freedom was restricted by her financial constraints. Although she expresses the fact that her children were her main reason to reconcile with Andrew, she negates the fact that her economical status was the primary purpose of reconciliation. For Tracy, her ex-husband's increase in wealth evoked feelings of jealousy towards Andrew's increased socio-economic status. This formed the grounds for a conflictual relationship between Tracy and Andrew regarding legal aspects relating to maintenance and visitation rights with regarding the children. Tracy depicts how Andrew was financially, much better off than she was:

*"Anyway, because of my children, and financially, things were difficult. I wanted to reconcile and start our relationship again. Financially, Andrew was doing much better. He was just paying maintenance and that wasn't enough. What about everything else, I also had to do things for me. Money wasn't enough."*

## A Mother's Guilt

Tracy articulates that going through a divorce is a “*selfish process*”. Undeniably one becomes caught up in all the confusion, pain and legal aspects of the divorce and the thought that others may be experiencing similar pain, is disregarded. She recalls how self-centered one becomes during the divorce process:

*“When you’re going through all your stuff and the divorce, you don’t really think about the children or what’s best for them, it’s about you and what you’re going through.”*

Tracy found it difficult to identify with the pain of her children. She found it arduous to comfort and support them during the time after they lost their father. As a mother, Tracy felt helpless and guilty since she was unable to meet the needs of her children.

*“For any mother it is hell trying to comfort your children and meeting their needs while you’re going through your own hassles, and pain. It’s not easy. You feel divided.”*

Eventually, Tracy’s pain was replaced by anger and the need for revenge. She employed her most powerful weapon to take revenge on her husband: her children. Her awareness of her actions resulted in a deeper sense of guilt and blame. However, for Tracy, the pain she caused her children contributed to her sense of failure as a mother, and an inner hatred towards herself. She reflects on her role in the process of taking revenge:

*“Wow! What kind of mother was I to do that to my children. I won’t lie; I played a huge role in the pain I caused my children. They didn’t deserve that I mean...my God they were still babies wanting their father. This was about me, only me (nodding).”*

### **After Divorce: A Journey of Self-discovery**

This stage reflects Tracy's need to connect with herself on a deeper level in order to gain meaning and understanding from the divorce process. It represents her strength and courage to overcome adversity while living with the fact that she was partly responsible for the dissolution of her marriage.

#### **Redefining a New Identity and Role-exiting**

It appears that the transition to being a single parent was not that difficult for Tracy, since, during her marriage, she had practically raised her children alone while her husband was away for extended periods of time.

*"I was left at home looking after two kids and going to work. It was like going to work, coming back home, looking after the kids, back to work again. That was my life."*

However, at the time, Tracy was bearing the brunt of child-rearing and experiencing the typical role-overload confronted by single parents who also have to maintain a career. Yet she maintains that she has been successful in the up-bringing of her children. Her growth in confidence as a single parent and as a career woman could have enabled her to gradually develop a new identity in these roles. For Tracy, being a single parent was also a constraining factor as regards dating and meeting other people:

*"When you're a single parent it's hard to get someone to commit to you because you have children, so...umm for me I had a few relationships but that didn't last."*

As the initiator of the divorce, Tracy did not experience any difficulty exiting her role as a wife, since she had more control over and awareness of the process. Since the length of separation was relatively short, her adjustment to their divorce seemed easier. Her need to reconcile with Andrew resulted from financial issues rather than the need to re-attach to her former spouse. She describes her role as initiator:

*“Much easier. I mean you don’t really sit around wondering ‘why’, because you already had the time to think of it, that’s why you land up making the decision...yeah its easier, you basically hold the cards in your hands.”*

Furthermore, self-esteem is an important aspect of identity. She received affirmation, to a large degree, in her work environment and therefore, she feels confident and worthy. Within her work context, Tracy experiences support from friends and colleagues and works in an area where she can interact socially.

### **Relationship with Former Spouse**

Tracy is aware that the primary link she had with her ex-husband was due to the children when they were younger. However, she acknowledges that this limited her detachment from her ex-spouse since the children inevitably bound them together.

*“When the children were younger we would have to be in contact about maintenance issues, or when it was Andrew’s chance to see the children for the weekend, birthdays, whenever it was necessary to get hold of him.”*

Complete detachment from her ex-spouse resulted in the children maturing. The children therefore made their own decisions regarding the time spent with their father. Although Tracy has been divorced from her ex-husband for fourteen years, it would appear that the relationship between her and Andrew is still not free from tension and animosity, in spite of their relationship being “*non-existent*”. This is evident in Tracy’s description of their relationship:

*“Umm... as you know we have been divorced for so long, but umm we have absolutely no contact at all. You can say that it is non-existent. You must understand that our break up*



*was very bad, and there was a lot of hurtful things that was said and done to each other, so forgiving is very difficult.”*

### **Establishing New Social Networks and Economic Stability**

After the divorce Tracy experienced a disconnection from her external family networks, particularly those of her in-laws. It appears that her difficulty related to the fact that, regardless of her affair and her attempts at keeping Andrew away from the children, her in-laws were still respectful and polite.

*“Not sure what’s worse, just hating you and get it over with or hate you but being nice. It makes you feel kinda guilty or something. Anyhow we didn’t see much of each other except when Andrew came with his parents to pick up the children.”*

Tracy received relief and support from her family almost immediately. However, her difficulty in getting over her experience in her own family as a child creates a sense of suspicion regarding their emotional support. She finds herself wondering whether their concern is genuine and directed at her well-being, or whether it stems from their concern regarding the image of the family in society. She shares her uncertainty regarding her parent’s actions:

*“My parents were supportive, although they took it hard. Most parents wonder what is going to happen to their children, I mean they want you to get married and settle down. Sometimes I wonder if it isn’t the humiliation that I’ve caused purely because I was the woman and I had the affair, not the other way around.”*

Tracy’s parents have provided her with practical assistance by taking care of the children. This has allowed Tracy time to balance the various roles that she fills while at the same time giving her the opportunity to meet other people and explore her new interests. After the divorce, friends that were regarded as those of both her and Andrew abandoned them. Yet, Tracy continued to maintain strong and secure friendships with her high-school

friends who supported her through the divorce. Furthermore, Tracy maintains that being involved with someone during the adjustment period made the transition less painful and redirected her energy to the current relationship.

*“I was involved with someone during this whole time so your mind is there and not trying to think back on the divorce. It’s easier having someone there.”*

Tracy felt that the status of being a divorcee did not make it difficult for her to adjust on a social level. Rather, it was due to the identity of being a “*man hunter*” that she experienced harsh criticism and judgments. Although Tracy felt that she had not failed in her marriage, society instills in one the belief that one’s ability to sustain a marriage is a reflection of competency and success which leaves very little room for change and success if you are divorced. She reflects how society’s isolation makes it difficult to belong:

*“Society can be very hurtful. It just seems that when you divorce people think that its failure, and it doesn’t stop there, oh no...it’s a complete reflection of you.”*

Tracy’s competency is established within her work context. She continuously receives affirmation from work colleagues. Thus, work has become an area in which she feels in control and independent.

*“I worked hard and did what I had to do, and I got recognition for that and not my actions in my personal life.”*

Financially, Tracy felt that, at the time, she did encounter financial difficulties, yet she was motivated to provide and support her children. With her dedication, salary and maintenance from Andrew, she was able to provide an enriched environment for her children. Currently, Tracy does not support her children since they are in their thirties and do not live with her. She lives alone with Jonathan (her current boyfriend) where responsibilities are shared.

## **The Power to Learn**

This theme reflects an epiphany for Tracy. It reveals a sudden moment of realization after living in an inner world of anger for many years. It demonstrates this anger turning to rage and ultimately, within this rage, the sheer force of determination. Tracy's inner strength was the driving force that enabled her to overcome her experience of divorce and the difficulties she encountered, even after her divorce.

It appears that, after her accident, Tracy engaged in a process of self-reflection and self-discovery. This gave her the means to self-empower herself by taking responsibility for her part in the process, thus opening herself to a world of new possibilities and effective changes in her life and in her new relationships. Although she embraces her experiences as life's lessons, she has done so by finding guidance in a higher power. The adjustment to her divorce inevitably steered her to find meaning and understanding within her relationships.

*“Regardless of how difficult you feel your relationship is, it is supposed to be based on communication and respect and when that is failing you need to act on it and not let it get to the point that it's too late. I have searched deep within myself perhaps a spiritual level if you like. All I know is that it's been a long process.”*

Emotionally, Tracy has adjusted to the divorce by means of the lapse of time. She reflects that it has been many years, and that time is 'a healer of old wounds'. Her difficulty in coping with the divorce was based on the feeling of loneliness. In that sense, loneliness caused her to engage in many relationships where physically, she was not alone, but emotionally, she felt empty and alone. The fear of being alone, was the driving force for Tracy to keep living. Tracy shares her representation of "time":

*“You're just trying to survive. You can't just stop completely and think about what's happening and then move on. No, you need to move on and think at the same time, otherwise your life moves on and you stay behind.”*

Tracy acknowledges that her competency at work and the social support she received from her family and friends provided her with the foundation on which to rebuild her self-esteem. However, she also gives herself credit for her own inner strength to cope with her divorce. She describes her personality as:

*“I think that the kind of person I am...I mean I think that my bubbly and outgoing personality helped me a lot. I didn’t just sit around. I went out with friends and met new people.”*

### **Family Reorganization**

The stress of reorganizing the family into a single parent family was a relatively easier process for Tracy than for Andrew since she was not completely oriented towards her home and family but had also invested in a career. She explains that, at times, it is difficult to balance the various roles:

*“You were once married, now you a single parent, trying to find a balance between work, being a mother, and trying to date. It’s not always easy, but with support you manage to get through. Yip, it’s tiring.”*

The role of Andrew in the reorganization of the family was essential. Tracy showed very little interest and involvement in establishing a relationship between Andrew and the children. Instead she engaged in completely disconnecting Andrew from the lives of the children. Her behaviour further aggravated the conflict that already existed between her and Andrew. Her behaviour was regarded as unnecessary since Andrew was involved in co-parenting his children.

*“All the fights and deceptions, man the confusion, for what? You’re already divorced what’s the point of carrying on. All I know is that they were young and needed their father. He was a good father.”*

Part of Tracy's difficulty in the reorganization of her family is her parents' concern about her as a single, divorced, mother. This concern is met with resistance and ambivalence by Tracy who feels that her parent's poor role-modelling, while she was growing up, is partly to blame for her failed marriage.

*"When you're single, they're afraid that you're going to get old alone, or that because you're divorced with children no one is going to want you, just stuff like that. I never had a great upbringing, my parents were always fighting, my dad had numerous affairs, and it was purely hell. Than you think to yourself how do they expect to give you advice when the only lesson you ever learnt from them was how to fail in your marriage."*

### **CREATIVE SYNTHESIS**

Tracy's story was written according to the unfolding themes, employing her own words.

#### **The Intense but Profound Journey**

Tracy's marriage started off like most blissful marriages: *"When I first got married it was great. We related beautifully"*. Marriage symbolized equality where *"we did things together, we spoke to each other all the time, basically we made time for each other"*. However, after a few years of being married things gradually started to change in their relationship. Tracy always accepted Andrew's introverted personality. However, *"when he became over-involved in his work the communication...umm, it really got less"*. Andrew's extensive working hours made her *"reflect on whether this was the kind of marriage I wanted. I questioned everything, my life, me...everything"*. With Andrew being away for most of the time she felt that *"he only cared for himself and his own success"*, and *"he forgot about his family"*. The disconnection created a gulf between them where Tracy felt *"very lonely"*. Within the depth of her loneliness she felt that *"I was dying. I needed intimacy"*. Feeling unappreciated and unacknowledged she *"had an affair with someone from work"*. At first, Tracy felt *"guilty"* and then *"shocked that you*

*did it. But after awhile it becomes a part of your life. You did it, now you lay in your bed". She recalls a moment when Andrew asked her: "You've become so...distant. Are you cheating on me? The next day "I took my children and left."*

The separation period "wasn't long", she felt that "it was good, because we had a really bad break up, because there were fights about custody and visitation and maintenance, all that legal jumbo". Having been the one to initiate the divorce made the process much easier: "you don't have to think about where it all came from, why that person did it, what happened...you know. In this position you have the say, I mean in some way you have control of when things happen". For Tracy, getting a divorce represented "my new freedom. I was free to explore my own things. What can I say, the world was to be my oyster."

Having to deal with the guilt of causing her children pain was a difficult process: "They were so young at the time. They asked me all the time where their father was and why he didn't want them". Tracy had to face the reality that "I would call and say that the children don't want to see him" and that her actions contributed to her children questioning their father's commitment to them. Tracy however expresses the irrationality behind the conflict between herself and Andrew: "...what's the point carrying on. I mean the divorce is painful as it is, does it get better with the fighting, and no it's only worse for the children."

Although Tracy doubted the intentions of her family, she appeared grateful that they "were very supportive through the divorce. My sister was still living at home with my parents so she helped out a lot". However, she felt that Andrew's parents, although respectful, "blamed me. I was the bad mother and wife. I broke up the family by having the affair". As for friends, "they were wonderful. I meant the friends that were just mine". Tracy relates the difficulty that friends have in choosing which partner to support: "After the divorce, friends that were both mine and Andrew's weren't friends anymore. They always feel that it's hard to choose who to support and you're no longer a couple and they're all couples so it's just all weird."

Tracy reflects that marriage is a societal expectation: *“Andrew and I were very young when we got married. We left school, got married and had children. It’s like it’s expected...umm it’s what you have to do”*. This expectation created limits in that *“you didn’t get the chance to find out what you wanted. Life gets to be designed for you”*. Furthermore, she views how unempathetic people are when it comes to affairs: *“I know people are shocked and think bad things, but people don’t know what’s going on behind closed doors and especially in you”*. Tracy shows an inner strength to overcome the scrutiny and criticism of society and her divorce: *“I didn’t just sit around; I went out with friends and met new people. I mean, you have to find some way to survive, you need to bounce back”*. Her need to *“connect to the higher power was a turning point in my life. It made me believe again, believe that anything is possible to overcome”*. She describes that the work environment *“is a good place to interact with people because you’re always attending functions.”*

After the divorce, Tracy experienced *“financial worries”*, however, *“I managed. You always more wary about how much you spend and on what, but overall, my children got what they wanted”*. Despite the hardships that she encountered, *“I did okay as a single mom, not always easy but I managed.”*

After eleven years of failed relationships, Tracy got engaged. However the engagement ended when she was *“involved in a major car accident and I hurt my back and head really bad. Let’s just say that I wasn’t good enough, or a complete woman. You know men when it comes to nurturing, they run. Anyway, I returned from overseas with my children”*. Currently, she is *“living with someone; it’s just me and him. There’s no child in the house anymore. It’s not always easy because I struggle to walk, but he is a good person and he treats me well.”*

Tracy expresses that finding meaning is a unique experience:

*“It’s not always easy trying to make sense of everything because so many times questions became unanswered and you have to accept that it was okay. I guess meaning comes in the way that makes sense to you, weather its real or just a means to cope with everything. It’s your understanding, your belief, your ultimate experience.”*

### **Reflecting on my Participation: The Flexible Role of the Interviewer.**

I had never met Tracy prior to the day of the interview. As such, I had mixed feelings regarding the process of the interview. On the one hand, not knowing Tracy or her background, placed me in an unbiased position where I could enter the interview without any preconceived ideas, yet, on the other hand, I thought that she might feel uncomfortable and guarded in sharing her experience with a complete stranger. Indeed, as a researcher, I was aware that this was my own process that I had to deal with.

Although Tracy openly shared her post-divorce experience, I experienced her to be somewhat guarded at times, particularly in relation to the phases prior to and during the divorce. It seemed that she attempted to make light of, or rather, limit the content of the events that were unfolded during the divorce process. This became a challenge for me since I continuously needed to probe to gain a more comprehensive, deeper and richer understanding of her experience. Yet, I felt that I was able to connect with Tracy and her pain because her spoken and unspoken words, expressions and reflective stance created an atmosphere of realism and suffering. When she reflected on her post-divorce adjustment, I merely listened and reflected on what was being said, in order not to misinterpret her experience. Thus, my role as researcher was flexible in the sense that I alternated between an active and passive role.

The interpretive process of Tracy’s story was less of an emotional challenge, perhaps, because our relationship was defined as researcher and participant. However, since this study is of a sensitive nature, I attempted to integrate important and relevant issues raised



while trying to be as diplomatic as possible. As such, I feel that I was able to highlight the underlying meaning of Tracy's story of her divorce experience.

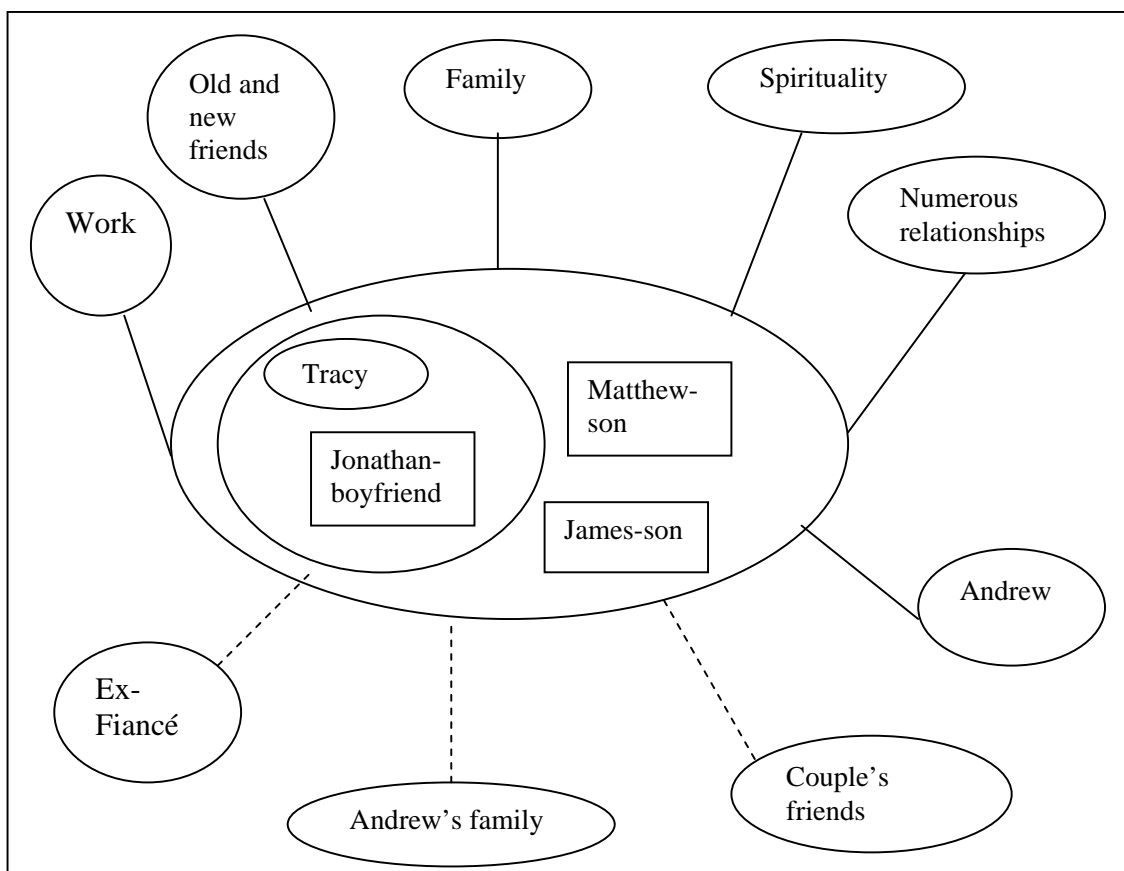
### **Summary: The Family System**

Based on Tracy's description of how the divorce progressed, the family was viewed through my lens to function as follows (Figure 9.2):

At the beginning of her marriage, Tracy's relationship was described as complementary, in the sense that Tracy was the dominant, and Andrew, the submissive spouse. Tracy views Andrew's role as being the main breadwinner, quiet and easygoing with regards to decisions. As regards Tracy, she was both the housewife, tending to the children, and husband, while at the same time, juggling her role of a career woman. Although this family system functioned appropriately, they were unable to adjust to the changes that took place within the family. When Andrew became over-involved in his work, the distance between husband and wife increased to the point that a lack of communication and intimacy resulted. As a result, the more Andrew withdrew, the more Tracy withdrew. This pattern of interaction between them deteriorated to such an extent that she conducted an affair, and ultimately, led to divorce.

During the separation period, and later the finality of the divorce, Tracy's relationship with Andrew was based on conflict, manipulation and deceitfulness since her attempt to re-establish the family was a result of financial difficulties, and not the re-establishment of a nuclear family system. During this period, she employed the children as a means to take revenge on Andrew by preventing contact between him and the children. The children functioned as mediators between Andrew and Tracy, and therefore, the only form of relationship between them revolved entirely around the children. Today, however, there is no relationship between Tracy and Andrew since the children are in their thirties and freely engage with both parents.

Although Tracy no longer has contact with Andrew's family or friends who were regarded as friends of both of them, Tracy has received support from her family, friends and colleagues at work who have all assisted in her adjustment to divorce. During the period following the divorce, Tracy was involved in numerous relationships, perhaps as a means to cope with her divorce. She is involved with her current boyfriend (Jonathan) who has been available for her since her motor vehicle accident. They have no children and live alone.



**Figure 9.2.** The ecomap depicts the relationships of Tracy and Andrew with extra familial systems after the divorce

## **Conclusion**

Tracy's narrative is a reflection of numerous silent and unheard voices for both men and women. Her story depicts the difficulty with which women, especially, are confronted when they conduct affairs. This behaviour is regarded as deviant since it does not conform to society's image of a woman. Her story also demonstrates her strength to overcome a painful experience as well as society's norms and expectations by living life according to her philosophy. It appears that Tracy's search for meaning has led her to become an innovator by taking charge of her own recovery and discovering other views by acting on her worldview.

## **CHAPTER 10**

### **Results: Sarah**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter is based on the transcribed interview with Sarah. A brief background will be sketched, followed by a description of the setting of the introduction to the interview and the researcher's impressions and observations. Sarah's relationships with her immediate and extended family as well as with her social networks will also be depicted graphically employing genograms and ecomaps. She will re-live her journey by voicing the changes and transitions she perceived to have occurred within herself and her family during the divorce process. Subsequently, the themes that emerged will be discussed. Thereafter, a comparison of the themes across the three divorced couples, as well as across the males and females, will be presented.

Each narrative has been reconstructed in terms of the themes identified by the researcher. The researcher's own lens has coloured the manner in which she has interpreted the stories of the participants and their relationships. It is thus important to note that others may view and understand the experience[s] of the participants through their own, possibly different, lenses as other themes may well emerge. It is suggested that the interpretation of each participant's story is only one of many possible interpretations and by no means regarded as the absolute truth. For the purposes of confidentiality, the name of the participant as well as the names of the family members have been substituted with pseudonyms.

#### **Sarah's Story**

##### **Brief Background**

Due to the fact that one of the contributing factors that led to the divorce concerns a sensitive legal matter, background information regarding the names, ages, nationality, and so on, of the participant and the family members will not be mentioned in order to

ensure complete anonymity, especially since the participant's case is still pending. Furthermore, the legal matter will be referred to as 'the problem' and no information regarding the facts and its implications will be discussed, since it has no relevance to the present study.

Sarah is the youngest of three children. Sarah was married to her first husband for six years and had been divorced for eleven years before meeting and marrying John. She has two children from her first marriage. At the time of the interview, she had been divorced for six years after two years of marriage, and three years of dating. She currently lives alone with her two children. Sarah works as an assistant attorney and has almost completed her LLB degree.

### **Interview Setting and Impressions**

Making an appointment with Sarah was very difficult. Numerous attempts were made to contact Sarah in order to decide on an appropriate and convenient time for the interview. Sarah indicated ongoing enthusiasm and an eagerness to participate; however, once having decided to meet with Sarah, she made various excuses not to meet. This was suggestive that Sarah did not want to participate in the research. During a phone call made to Sarah I explained that she was under no obligation to participate in the study and thus needed not do so if she so chose. Finally, the date for the interview was set to meet at her home in the evening. Once again the interview did not take place. I contacted Sarah the next day and she asked me to come over to her office for the interview. On arrival I observed that both Sarah and I were irritable and frustrated. This was a concern because Sarah was already reluctant to participate in the research and now the interviewer-participant relationship was characterized by tension, frustration, and annoyance. A further factor was the environment in which the interview was to take place. Since Sarah was an assistant attorney, her office was cold and somewhat dark. It appeared that it was going to be difficult to establish rapport.

Before the interview started, we spent one hour talking about various topics so as to create a more relaxed, social, and comfortable atmosphere. This allowed for good rapport to be established. At the end of the interview, some time was spent comforting and debriefing Sarah because she was very upset. It was made known to Sarah that I was merely debriefing her but that she should seek professional assistance to help her cope with her pain.

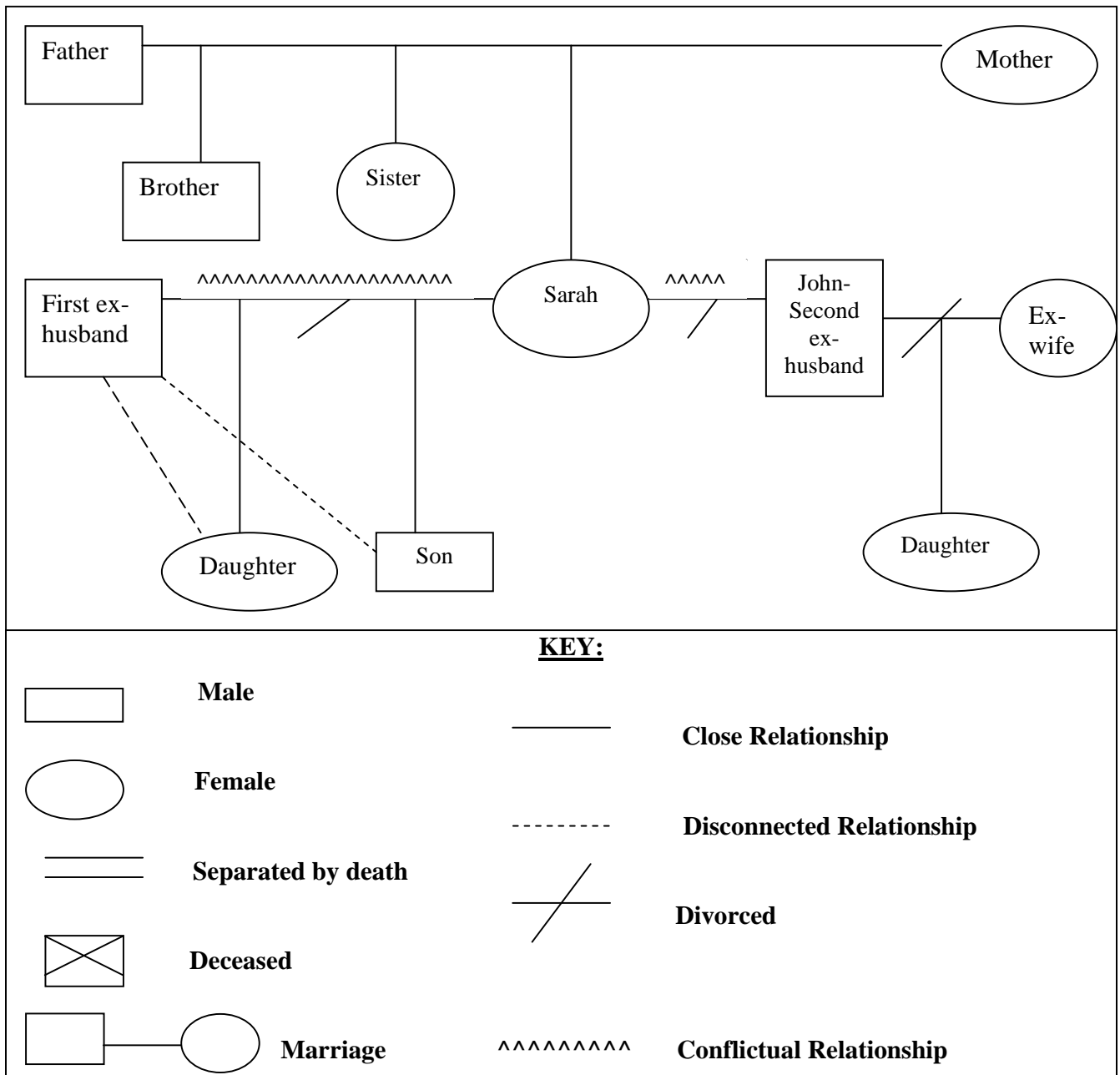


Figure 10.1. Sarah's family genogram illustrating family relationships

### **Themes Emerging from Sarah's Interview**

The following themes in the pre-divorce phase, as well as those during, and after it were identified from Sarah's interview (Sarah's divorce relates to her second marriage):

#### **Pre-Divorce: The Unimaginable**

This period for Sarah was characterized as a time of pain, sadness, betrayal and uncertainty. For Sarah this time was confronted amidst an overwhelming set of emotions and major life decisions. This period for Sarah was regarded as the most painful and difficult stage of the divorce process. The following themes illustrate the most difficult time in her life and the events that unravelled during this period.

#### **The Passive relationship**

This theme reflects Sarah's and her husbands' style of interaction. According to Sarah, both partners were passive in their relationship. Although passivity can be suggestive of an equal and parallel relationship, in this case it signals the need to avoid conflict and disagreement in order to maintain peace at the expense of one's interests and desires. However, this causes tension and frustration, resulting in a strained relationship since little mutual communication takes place. Sarah's limited description of her interaction with her husband is suggestive of an unreceptive and inactive relationship:

*"We were just both together, doing our own thing. We were both submissive in the relationship. I don't know, I guess it was an okay relationship."*

When the family was confronted with 'the problem', a similar pattern was displayed among all the family members. It appears that as a result of the internal and external pressures, it seemed safer to avoid each other while dealing with the impact that 'the problem' had on the family. This further contributed to the lack of communication not just between the husband-wife subsystem but also between theirs and that of the children. Sarah recalls how each family member dealt independently with 'the problem':

*“I suppose we all handled it differently, and we looked at things in life differently but I can’t really blame him or anyone in this instance. Everyone just took it the way they knew how to handle it.”*

### **Lack of Commitment: the Failed Fairytale**

Although Sarah had previously been married and divorced, her hope and belief that she would find happiness and love again prevailed. For Sarah, her second marriage represented a second chance. This chance reflected an opportunity to prove to herself and others that she was not a failure at being a mother and a wife. It gave her a sense of belonging and being needed. She reflects this opportunity as:

*“I thought I should give myself a chance, after being divorced for eleven years from my first marriage and I was entitled to be happy.”*

Although fairytales always end in ‘happy-ever-after’ scenarios, this was not the fairytale marriage that Sarah had envisioned for her second marriage. Rather, after shortly being married, Sarah was experiencing confusion and uncertainty regarding her husband’s sudden departure. Sarah had difficulty creating meaning regarding what had just happened and his lack of commitment. The suddenness is reflected in the point-form manner in which she describes how it happened:

*“I didn’t expect him to go all of a sudden even though there were problems in the marriage from...all of a sudden to say that he didn’t love me anymore and than walking out.”*

Her husband’s departure left Sarah feeling betrayed and alone. His betrayal was seen as a weakness and an easy way out. The period in which ‘the problem’ occurred was seen by Sarah as a time when she needed cohesiveness and support, rather than abandonment and fear that was elicited by John’s decision to leave. His behaviour further enhanced the



feeling that there was a lack of commitment to their relationship and the family. She was left with the guilt that she was to blame for most of what was happening surrounding their personal ‘problem’, and thus, the dissolution of their marriage. She expresses his betrayal as:

*“They (children) felt very betrayed that he left, especially at a stage in our lives when I most needed him.”*

### **During Divorce: An Ambivalent Decision**

This stage for Sarah was an enduring and stretched out period in that the separation lasted one year before the divorce proceedings. This was a time of ambivalence, and hope as well as of feeling remorse by reflecting on what could have been. The themes highlighted below signify the devastating effect that the divorce had on Sarah as a result of ‘the problem’.

#### **Dual Initiator**

Just after ‘the problem’ occurred, the suspicion, lack of communication, and distrust in one another escalated in the marriage, which resulted in an overload of pressure within the marriage and the difficulty in coping with ‘the problem’. Faced with the difficulty of John’s daughter accepting his marriage with Sarah, only further contributed to the family’s pressure. It was John’s decision to separate.

*“...we were trying for marriage counselling or anyone that could assist; umm I didn’t just expect him to just leave the house on the Sunday.”*

Since Sarah was the non-initiator of the separation, it created a self-doubt with regards to who she was as a woman, wife and mother. This resulted in her complete loss of identity. Sarah had difficulty recognizing who she had become as a result of the divorce. She started to define herself according to how she felt about herself. Her low self-confidence

and self-esteem emerged from her experience, forcing her to find refuge in her work. Sarah remembers feeling that the divorce,

*“... broke me in so many ways, umm it kept my self- confidence in my personal life back a lot, umm it has taken its toll, I must be honest...I feel not worthy, I feel I’m not good enough, I’m not special enough.”*

Finally, after one year of being separated, Sarah filed for divorce. For Sarah, this meant self-empowerment; in other words, she once again took control of her life. However, although Sarah felt a great sense of relief, there were feelings of confusion, hurt, and anger. Perhaps this ambivalence integrates feelings of guilt as a mother and, once again, attributes the feeling of personal failure as an individual as well as her role in marriage. She reports on the events and feelings that occurred when she made the decision to divorce:

*“I did after being for a year and a half separated. I phoned him once and said that I wanted to divorce. He said I worked for attorneys, I was the lawyer, I had the money and I should go ahead and get divorced. Yes, I was hurting that it had come to this, but relieved as well.”*

### **Connection vs. Disconnection**

Within this theme an attempt is made to illustrate Sarah’s need for connection and closeness during the most difficult time of her divorce, yet, at times, she is also met with the need to disconnect herself from her ex-spouse and the criticism and judgment from those in society. This continuous balancing between connection and disconnection may have resulted in ineffective ways of manoeuvring for closeness and individuation in various relationships.

Perhaps the separation period of one year and half gave Sarah the hope that she and John would reconnect since she still felt very strong emotional feelings towards him. This connection related to physical proximity, emotional support and intimacy, particularly because of 'the problem'. Furthermore, Sarah's need to reconnect with her spouse created a deep sadness that she still carries within herself since she is aware that she would still be married if it had not been for the unforeseen circumstance that occurred in their life. She reflects on what could have been:

*"...many a times that I thought that there could have been a possibility that if this problem hadn't occurred that I would have given him another chance, and I umm still felt for him."*

Yet Sarah acknowledged that once John left, he had completely disconnected himself from her and the family. She felt abandoned, alone, and lost. Sarah experienced anger towards John that replaced the feeling of emptiness, thus detaching herself emotionally from the divorce process. She explains how the events occurred during the divorce in a detached and uninvolved manner.

*"Umm, no I just told him that he must come sign it, he said he would come sign it, umm that I must deal with everything, and that's basically what happened. He got the summons he signed it, he didn't oppose it or defend it, or anything else, and the divorce just took its normal procedures."*

For Sarah, shifting between connection and disconnection was the predominant manner in which the family interacted with each other. Sarah recalls that there was a continuous struggle to connect with John's daughter since she felt that she had not accepted their marriage. Since most arguments related to John's daughter, Sarah attempted several times to form a relationship with her since Sarah regarded it as essential in their marriage.

*“She was a very persistent and domineering child who always got her way. She was very rude and a spoiled child. I tried various times to connect with her, I even wrote her letters, but it never happened.”*

Similarly, Sarah’s own daughter found it difficult to establish a connection with John. Their relationship was stable but featured as disconnected in the sense that they respected each other for Sarah’s sake. It appears that the family was so over-involved in establishing connected relationships amongst each other, that it only further created a need to disconnect, not only due to internal and external pressures but also for the sake of individuation.

### **A Mother’s Guilt**

For Sarah, her concern for her children was an enduring theme throughout her narrative. Perhaps, for Sarah, this divorce was regarded as the most difficult for her children to accept and cope with, especially since her children felt neglected and abandoned by John. Sarah identifies very strongly with her role as a mother, and, as a result, she feels that she has failed her children, thus creating feelings of guilt for bringing pain to her children once again. Sarah identifies the role of a mother as being a protector and a nurturer, yet she was unable to fulfil these functions. She felt helpless and powerless to comfort and console her children during the time that they needed her most. Her children’s pain is reflected in her own.

*“...it made me feel guilt, very guilty for putting them through the pain of my divorce, and I’m very heart sore.”*

Sarah’s guilt is further increased when she reflects how the roles have, in some way, reversed in her family. Her children assist Sarah in taking care of the bills, and all the extra chores in the home. They provide Sarah with continuous support and encouragement. Sarah expresses a deep sadness and hatred towards herself because she

feels that, although she provides them with emotional support, she is unable to give her children the material things that they deserve.

*“...roles have reversed. My daughter helps with the bills sometimes, and I can see that she doesn’t mind, but she should be enjoying her money, buying herself a new top or something. My son would call me from overseas asking if I needed money because he would send if I needed. They have had to grow up so much (crying).”*

### **After Divorce: A New Beginning**

This stage demonstrates Sarah’s remarkable ability to overcome adversity, as well as the courage and strength that she continues to exert. Although Sarah is still confronted with much pain and suffering regarding her divorce and ‘the problem’, she has demonstrated that her resilience and the support she received, has provided her with the platform from which to restart a new life.

### **Redefining a New Identity and Role-exiting**

Sarah’s self-identity changed drastically, to the point where she no longer knew who she had become. For Sarah, this was petrifying while she scrambled to make sense of herself and the events that were occurring around her. She had lost a self she had once felt was protected and safe, knowing the type of person she had always believed she had been. Sarah struggles to detach herself from the label that society has given her and thus makes it almost impossible to surpass the labelled identity. She describes how she feels when she is out in society:

*“When I go out that circle then I close myself up, and I feel very unprotected and very fearful, very scared of actually going out there, being who I used to be many years ago.”*

It appears, during the interview, that Sarah perhaps has never invested deeply in the 'marriage identity'. Sarah had wanted to establish the ideal family, that consists of husband, wife, and children. Therefore, the task of establishing a new identity as a single mother and career woman did not appear to be that relevant. Perhaps this could have been due to the fact that Sarah had previously been married, and had been divorced for eleven years during which time she established these identities.

*“Even during my first marriage I have always worked. I was divorced for 11 years and was a single parent raising my children. In my second marriage it was no different.”*

It was difficult for Sarah to exit the role as a wife, since she was the non-initiator of the separation. For a year and a half, she found herself hoping that she and her husband would reconcile. At this stage, she still regarded herself as his wife. However, Sarah felt the need to move on with her life and this meant taking control over the process. She then decided to file for divorce.

### **Relationship with Former Spouse**

Sarah has no relationship with her ex-husband, especially since they have no children to bind them together. However, the only form of communication, though limited, that exists between Sarah and John, is with regard to 'the problem'. It appears that the limited communication exists due to the force of circumstances, rather than by choice. She describes their relationship as:

*“Non-existent. There is very minimum contact, the only contact there is, is surrounding the circumstance that has erupted in our lives. That is the only time we have contact besides that, it is non-existent.”*

The relationship with John and Sarah's children is similar. It appears that the children blame John for what has happened in their lives and, as such, prefer to disconnect

themselves from him completely. Sarah expresses, in an angry tone, how her children relate to John:

*“JA, the relationship is non-existent. They are not interested, and my daughter especially, umm they aren’t interested.”*

### **Establishing New Social Networks and Economic Stability**

Sarah experienced a huge betrayal and disconnection from external networks, particularly from people whom she regarded as friends. Although her abandonment from society resulted mostly from ‘the problem’, Sarah felt the prejudice, scrutiny, and disapproval from those whom she knew and those with whom she was yet to make contact, to an even greater extent, after the divorce. As a result, Sarah found it very difficult to belong, and to adjust to the divorce, especially, at the time when she needed society most. She reflects on society with a deep sadness and anger:

*“...society looked at me in many ways differently, but due to the fact of the problem that impacted in our lives umm even more so when the divorce happened. Yes for me it was very difficult to belong. Society is a strange place to actually live in to be honest, they can both support you and really be of good use, or they can really break you and take you to your grave.”*

Part of Sarah’s difficulty in belonging is due to the “black and white” thinking of society. For Sarah, society views reality as being on opposite sides of a spectrum and therefore, deviating from the norm is regarded as deviant and unacceptable, even if it is a result of unforeseen circumstances. Sarah elaborates on this point:

*“Society has, I suppose...has a way of looking at things very differently, either you are on top and just immaculate and you don’t have anything wrong or if you do have something wrong people don’t want to face lightly to the fact that the next door neighbour is going to see and speak, society is weird. Society can either make you or destroy you.”*

However, Sarah received much support from her true friends and family from the outset of the divorce. Part of Sarah's ability to keep going was due to the unconditional love, care, understanding and support from those closest to her. Their motivation and encouragement, coupled with the love that she felt for her children, gave her a new reason for living. She recalls how easy it would have been for her to give up if it wasn't for her family:

*“Moral support, umm definitely moral support, being there for me, especially during the worst time in my life. I don't think that I could have coped, without them I don't think I would have been here. I would have given up especially, if I didn't have my children. I would have given up long ago.”*

Sarah's self confidence and esteem continues to be affirmed and validated within her work environment. Her employment is therefore central to her life pattern. It is an area in which she gains a sense of control and feels competent and helpful:

*“...when I'm not in my working environment, when I'm not working, when I'm not being of use, I feel worthless. I work hard and I do it well, and I'm not afraid to admit when I'm wrong.”*

### **Isolation as Resilience**

This theme refers to Sarah's inner strength in overcoming her pain and suffering. As a result of 'the problem', Sarah looked towards herself and that of the higher power in order to cope and overcome her painful experience.

Her achievements at work also contribute to meaning in her life, as does her desire to give of herself to others. In this way, Sarah gains a sense of worthiness and power. After her divorce, Sarah decided to make a career change in that she became an attorney's assistant and then decided to study to become a criminal lawyer. Even within the suffering of Sarah's divorce and the existing “*problem*”, she found meaning and a



passion in what she wanted to do. Sarah felt that she was in a position to help others that were seen to be in a similar situation. I was moved by Sarah's strength in choosing a career where she will always be confronted with and reminded of what had happened in her life. I was moved by the clarity of her vision, and also, by the motivation that had urged her to take such an action. She reflects on her changes as having,

*"Achieved a lot, I umm have taken up studying to be a criminal lawyer because I want to make a difference. I have grown up in a sense of being more patient with my children; I've got more time with them. I look at life differently, I don't take things for granted in life, and I look at aspects of life in a different angle, in different ways."*

Although Sarah has found a way to cope with events in her life, she has isolated and detached herself from the assistance of those around her. For Sarah, independence refers to doing things on your own because not being able to is a reflection of weakness and a lack of coping resources. Furthermore, Sarah's detachment from others resulted in the need to protect herself for fear of being hurt. Sarah reflects on how she needs to cope:

*"... through this divorce I've looked at it saying you know what, I've always been, in a sense independent and I've always looked after myself in that way, now it makes me look twice and you know what, be more independent, don't lean on anyone else beside yourself, don't believe in anyone else, don't trust anyone else but in yourself, and that's what I've done and umm, that's how I think I have coped and managed."*

### **Family Reorganization**

The stress of reorganizing the family into a single-parent family was a relatively easy task since Sarah and John had no children together while married, and perhaps, also, due to the fact that Sarah had previously gone through a divorce whereby a similar family reorganization took place. Sarah was, to all intents and purposes, a single parent even while she was married, since John had no responsibility or say over Sarah's children.

*“He is not the father of the kids...so he must just be in his own place and they will be in their own place.”*

Her career orientation during her marriage probably assisted in the reorganization of the family following the separation, since her focus shifted to her career rather than being completely orientated towards her home and family. In other words, although the roles of wife and mother were very important to Sarah, she has always maintained a career orientation.

Sarah’s primary difficulty in the reorganization of her family has been her parents’ concern for her as a single person and her immediate family, where “*role reversal*” has occurred. In Sarah’s household all family members assist in the chores and the payment of bills. At times, Sarah feels that her children are supporting her rather than the other way around.

### **CREATIVE SYNTHESIS**

Sarah’s story was written according to the unfolding themes, employing her own words.

#### **The Ongoing Lessons of Survival**

It was difficult for Sarah to reflect positively on any of the aspects of her marriage, even those before ‘the problem’ occurred. This could suggest that Sarah has difficulty in detaching herself from her ex-husband. Sarah was “*sad and hurting at the same time*”. She describes her marriage as having “*a lot of arguments, umm I think we were on edge constantly...*”, as well as a division of emotions that, at times, made their relationship very confusing: “*we hated and loved each other.*”

The shattering of expectations and dreams was a key experience for Sarah, especially since she felt she “*deserved a second chance*” at happiness. However, Sarah’s experience turned out to be different from what she had expected. She recalls the day that John just left the house. Perhaps the surprise of the sudden decision made it harder for her to come

to terms with what occurred. It was a normal Sunday. *“I was cooking Sunday lunch when I saw him walking out with a suitcase”*. The greatest source of stress during this period was the lack of understanding, meaning, or sense, in the situation. This was evident when Sarah was reminiscing about their marriage, *“I know that we were trying to sort it out...umm I wasn't just expecting him to leave the house on the Sunday”*. His departure left Sarah with a deep sense of *“betrayal”* and *“I felt I was being blamed”*. This action was confusing for Sarah especially since they needed to support one another during this difficult time.

Sarah questions the events and John's motives and behaviour to the point that she started to become suspicious: *“...someone tries to blame someone else when they feel guilty, when there's something they're hiding away”*. Solely based on the suspicions and distrust that now existed in their relationship, Sarah was aware that the relationship would not be mended, although she does acknowledge that if it had not been for “the problem” she *“would have given him a second chance”*. However, after one year and half of separation, and the *“many affairs or women in his life”*, Sarah *“picked up the phone and decided to divorce.”*

The biggest obstacle for Sarah was the guilt that she felt as a mother, and the pain that her second marriage had caused them: *“It took a lot of strain for my children, umm that was the main reason why my son went overseas after he completed matric, and umm my daughter has, umm, closed herself very much and umm so in a sense it hurt them a lot”*. As a result of the divorce, the children felt very betrayed by John's abandonment: *“He has never gained their respect and given that respect, so they totally lost respect...so they're just not interested”*. Furthermore, Sarah feels that she should be supporting her children and not the other way around.

The loss of support from both her spouse and most of her social network of friends has been a painful experience. Although the main reason for the loss of these networks was primarily due to ‘the problem’, Sarah felt even more abandoned and criticized after her divorce. Sarah's difficulty in reintegrating into society stems from her belief *“(I am the*

*kind of person), that once you betray me, you won't betray me again, so maybe I didn't go back". Sarah feels that people in society "don't want to see you happy, they don't like to see you grow or be positive so, umm, it's just weird, and you have to try and ignore and try not to take it to heart."*

Perhaps, allied to this sense of abandonment is Sarah's loss of self-esteem: *"I'm not trying to take self-pity, but what I'm trying to say is that a whole set of circumstances that has been done to me, has taken me to feeling umm an unworthy person".* However, Sarah validates herself according to her work and it is within this context that she finds appraisal and affirmation. *"I am secure when I am working or in my work environment."*

Sarah acknowledges that her greatest coping mechanism was found in *"(close) friends, my children, my family"*. Since the beginning they believed in and supported her and *"helped in the sense of moral support, umm, probably in the beginning financial support, but definitely moral support, being there for me, especially during the worst time in my life, being there for me when I wanted to see them and when I didn't want to see them. They've understood that and they've always been there."*

Although Sarah has experienced extreme pain and suffering, she feels that she has not taken what has happened to her *"for granted"*. She has had to *"look at life differently"* and realize that in suffering, there is meaning. Although this has been a long and difficult journey, she has not yet arrived at her destination. Sarah's vision is to look forward into the future whether alone or with someone. She looks forward to:

*"A peaceful life, a relaxed life. I just want to be with my children. That I will be able to cope with my work environment. I will be able to take care of my children, until one day they have their own lives, umm that's all I have and that's all I want, I just want peace and tranquillity in my life. At this stage I don't think of anything, I don't want other relationships. I don't know why, I've just blocked it out, hopefully to an extent it's just normal for me."*

### **Reflecting on my Participation: The Interviewer as Belonging**

I had met Sarah approximately six years ago through a mutual friend. During these years I formed a deep friendship and connection with Sarah. Although I was aware of the difficulty Sarah experienced in sharing her story, I was very appreciative and undoubtedly amazed at her courage to participate in my research. I had, in many ways, become Sarah's confidante and on numerous occasions, we conversed about the difficulties she often experienced with John and 'the problem' that had occurred in her life. Thus, I had preconceived ideas about the relationship between Sarah and her ex-husband.

It was obvious that Sarah was weary of how much to divulge in the interview, therefore, at times, her responses were brief and short. I was very aware of my presence and the context in which the interview took place. At first, my role became that of the active interviewer probing for answers while at the same time being extremely sensitive to certain issues. At times, I felt the need to reassure her and affirm her courage and strength; this allowed the interview to become a free-flowing conversation. My role, therefore, had become that of a listener, while also reflecting and asking for clarification when trying to make sense of certain meanings. Sarah's story has always had a major impact on me since it reflected the true meaning of pain and suffering. Indeed, this experience is one that I have never even come close to experiencing, yet I feel as if I have been immersed in her world where the pain in my own eyes reflected that of Sarah's.

Writing about the themes was probably the most difficult part of the data analysis. Ethical considerations regarding 'the problem' had to be strongly adhered to so as not to cause any harm to Sarah. I had to be sensitive to certain issues, yet, I believe that the truth and honesty of Sarah's experience through the divorce process is reflected honestly throughout the themes.

### **Summary: The Family System**

Based on Sarah's description of how the divorce progressed, the family was viewed through my lens, as functioning as follows (Figure 10.2):

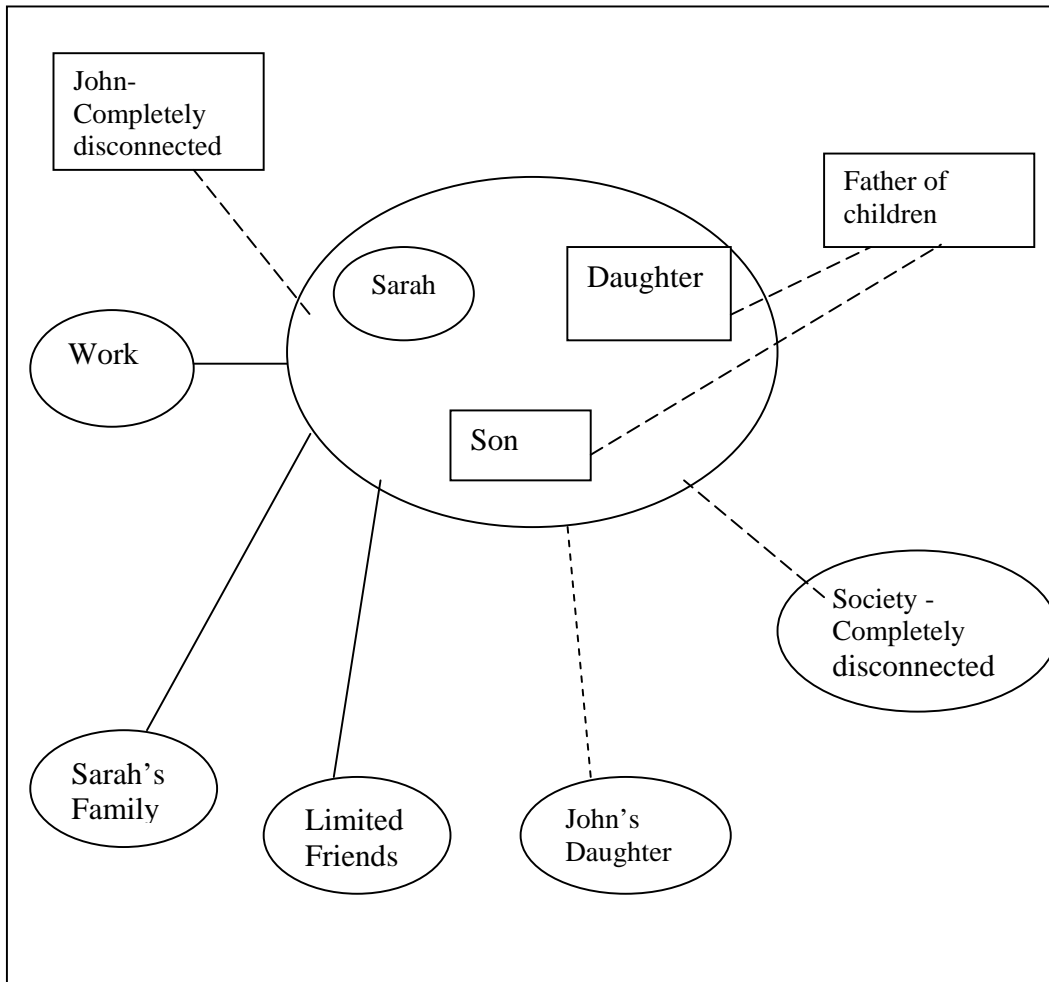
As noted earlier, Sarah had previously been married and divorced for eleven years before meeting John. During this time Sarah was living alone with her two children. Sarah described their relationship before 'the problem' occurred as functioning normally. That is, like all marriages they were confronted with obstacles, but managed to overcome them due to good communication and honesty.

Within the family system, tension existed between the daughters of Sarah and John. John's daughter behaved in a manner that explicitly suggested that she had not accepted his new family. Partly due to this fact, tension between Sarah and John continued to escalate. Furthermore, Sarah's own daughter didn't accept John into the family, yet her behaviour was implicit and tolerable towards John, merely because of her mother. Thus, the tension between Sarah and John continued to escalate even further.

Having been married for less than a year 'the problem' occurred in their family; with continuous suspicions, arguments, and finally lack of communication the family system started to disintegrate. It became apparent that internal and external pressures were too much for the family to understand and cope with. The lack of communication that resulted from the ongoing pressures forced each individual to cope with what had happened in their own way and in their own time. Eventually the stressors in the family were too heavy to carry and the ultimate solution was divorce.

Sarah's family has returned to the previous family form, that is, a single-parent household. However, certain roles have been reversed, or rather, roles had to adapt to the life circumstances of the family. That is, due to 'the problem', Sarah has experienced financial difficulties and all the family members contribute to the running of the household. Since Sarah and John have no children, their relationship has been completely

disconnected and thus, no bonds exist between them. Furthermore, the only support that Sarah's family receives is that of close friends, church, and family, since society has labelled her and making it difficult for Sarah to relate and belong to society.



**Figure 10.2.** The ecomap depicts the relationship of Sarah and John with extra- familial systems after the divorce

## **Conclusion**

Although most people who go through a divorce have not had to experience ‘the problem’ in their marriage, the pain of losing someone close to them, as well as an entire society, is shared with most others. Sarah’s story reflects a process that still incorporates tremendous pain, yet it echoes the courage and strength that is innate in all individuals during times of adversity. Sarah is aware that this is perhaps only the beginning, that there are painful memories to accept and, yet, there are beautiful memories to be made.



## **CHAPTER 11**

### **Results: John**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter is based on the transcribed interview with John. A brief background will be sketched, followed by a description of the setting of the introduction to the interview as well as the researcher's impressions and observations. John's relationships with his immediate and extended family as well as those with his social networks will also be depicted graphically using genograms and ecomaps. He will re-live his journey by voicing the changes and transitions he perceived to have occurred within himself and his family during the divorce process. Subsequently, the themes that emerged will be discussed. Thereafter, a comparison of themes across the three divorced couples, and those across the males and females, will be presented.

Each narrative has been reconstructed in terms of the themes identified by the researcher. The researcher's own lens has coloured the manner in which she has interpreted the stories of the participants and their relationships. It is thus important to note that others may view and understand the experience[s] of the participants through their own, possibly different, lenses as other themes may well emerge. It is suggested that the interpretation of the story of a participant is one of many possible interpretations and is by no means regarded as the absolute truth. For the purposes of confidentiality, the name of the participant as well as the names of the family members have been substituted with pseudonyms.

#### **John's Story**

#### **Brief Background**

One of the contributing factors that led to the divorce regards a sensitive legal matter, therefore the background information regarding the participant and the names, ages, nationality, and so on of the family members will not be mentioned in order to ensure complete anonymity, especially since the participant's case is still pending. Furthermore,

the legal matter will be referred to as ‘the problem’ and no information regarding the facts and its implications will be discussed since it has no relevance to the present study.

John is the youngest of four siblings. John had been married to his first wife for twenty two years and had been divorced for six years before he met, and, later, married Sarah. He has one daughter from his first marriage. At the time of the interview he had been divorced for six years after two years of marriage, and five years of dating. He currently lives alone and is involved in a new relationship. John runs his own import and export company.

### **Interview Setting and Impressions**

At first, the interview was set to take place at an enclosed coffee shop. However, because the interview was going to take place on a Saturday, it was recommended that a quieter and more private context would be more conducive to the interview. John was very accommodating by agreeing to come over to my home for the interview. He had contacted me the day before to confirm that we were still to meet on the Saturday morning.

John arrived on time for the interview. He greeted me warmly, politely, and was friendly. Before the interview started, I offered John a cup of coffee which he accepted. Since I had not seen or made contact with him for a number of years, some time was spent catching up on old times. Before the interview began, John expressed his concern about being audiotaped purely because of ‘the problem’. He felt uncomfortable that others would hear him, other than myself and my supervisor. It was therefore necessary to go through all the ethical guidelines relating to confidentiality and to emphasize that the information he divulged would not be used to harm him in any way. It was agreed that once the present study had been completed, the audiocassette would be destroyed. When the interview began, he appeared very calm and relaxed and asked if he might smoke during the session.

John appeared excited and eager to participate in the research and, as such, voluntarily shared in-depth information without much probing from me. At the end of the interview, John commented that he hoped that his story would assist others in similar situations. He excitedly asked if he could see the outcome of the research project.

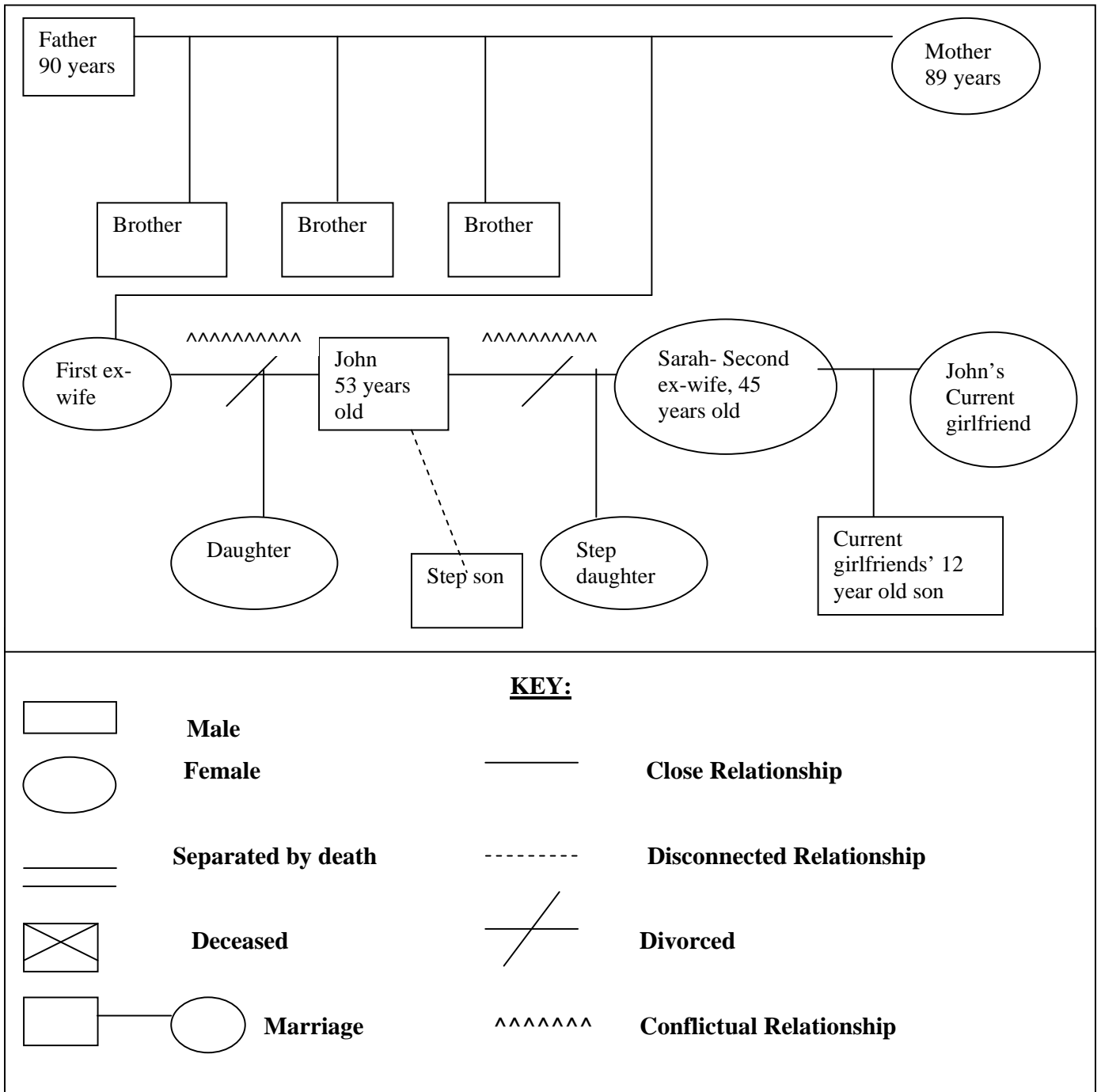


Figure 11.1. John's family genogram illustrating family relationships

## **Themes Emerging from John's Interview**

The following themes throughout the pre-divorce phase, and those during, and after it were identified from John's interview (John's divorce relates specifically to his second marriage):

### **Pre-Divorce: Living on Edges**

This period was experienced by John as living on the edge of various realms. For John, his position in the family reflected a dualistic, either-or notion. It therefore depicts his difficulty in belonging and finding a balance between two worldviews. This stage portrays the obstacles with which he was confronted even before 'the problem' occurred. As such, this stage represents the most difficult and painful phase of the divorce process. The themes below further shed light on his experience during the pre-divorce stage.

### **Differentiated Relationship: Love vs. Convenience**

This theme relates to how John defines the coming together of his second marriage. It expresses the motives and ideas of each individual for entering a new marriage. Rather than viewing marriage as a unity, he regards it as being divided and unrelated in the sense that one partner entered the marriage with the notion of love and devotion and the other, pure convenience. It therefore represents two people with different worldviews, and within their worldviews exist different needs and different realities.

John expresses a very deep and passionate love for his second ex-wife. He was prepared to sacrifice his own personal belief and self-made promise to make Sarah realize her dream of a "*proper marriage*". He expresses his devotion to Sarah by referring to his feelings towards her:

*"Because I loved her I said okay lets get married, although I had made a promise to myself that I would never get married again."*

Although John was aware that Sarah did not love him, he had hopes and expectations that in due time the same love and passion he felt for her would be reciprocated. John's fear of losing Sarah was unimaginable, and as such, he was prepared to accept any form of a relationship with Sarah. John's excerpt expresses the type of relationship that he had with Sarah:

*"...she was never really in love with me, there was a connection, I don't know how you call it, but it was like a friendship or a connection there was something but there wasn't really love from her side."*

According to John, Sarah's reason for getting involved with him involved her desire to return to South Africa. Her marriage to John was seen as the escape route from a life that she no longer wanted to live. John dreamt of the perfect family, that is, the husband, the wife, and children, rather than the marriage itself, since he preferred not to remarry. However, two people living together with children was viewed as deviant and unconventional and thus marriage was seen as appropriate and the norm in society. John recalls the reason why Sarah wanted to get married.

*"She wanted to get married because she said that her first marriage wasn't a marriage, she would like to have a proper marriage like everybody else."*

### **Isolation and Lack of Support**

This theme relates to the pattern of being separate yet, at the same time being in the process of disconnection. It reflects how the behaviour and actions of the family members impact on an individual's choice to isolate themselves for fear of being further rejected and hurt.

John expresses that the main reason for their divorce was due to 'the problem' that occurred in their life. Family dynamics changed drastically as a result of their feeling

betrayed, misled, and suspicious and, finally, led to the point of communication being non-existent. For John, after the brief separation that took them away from each other due to ‘the problem’, he found it very difficult to adapt to the changes that occurred in the family. Not being able to return to the way that the family had functioned prior to ‘the problem’, he felt that the pressure from within and outside the family was too heavy to bear.

*“Something very personal happened in our lives, which you are aware of...umm and that made us to be separate for a while, and then when we came back things were never the same.”*

John felt that he was being blamed for what had occurred, which created feelings of disapproval, powerlessness, self-worthlessness, and isolation. However, for John, isolation was accompanied by a deep sense of loss. A loss that created a dark vortex of complete loneliness. He had lost his power and ability to control the occurrences in his family. He saw himself as “*an outcast*”, an intruder who had brought the family only pain and suffering. He felt that he no longer belonged because he felt attacked and judged by the alliance that had formed between Sarah and her children.

*“I noticed that the kids also had their suspicions about what happened, why it happened and all that. Then things got really bad and it came to a point that I knew that there was no place for me in the house. They (children) were not the same to me.”*

The feeling of loneliness was further enhanced by his abandonment and by people closest to the family because of ‘the problem’. He had no family in South Africa who could offer him support, advice, and encouragement during this difficult time. He was therefore left alone to fend for himself and overcome the adversity that he faced. He recalls the support that he needed but did not receive:

*“...all the friends left us as you can imagine, family I don’t have, she doesn’t have except for the sister, and really we didn’t have a backup, and the backup we needed to be able to overcome the situation that we were in.”*

### **Connection vs. Disconnection**

The theme of connection and disconnection is pivotal in John’s narrative. This theme intertwines and threads its way throughout his divorce process. It reflects John’s need for closeness and belonging as well as the disconnection he experienced in his relationships, often not by choice, but due to the circumstances which led to the view that disconnection was the only solution. The following theme is a description of these relationships and their larger ecology and how John has defined them.

Concerning his second ex-wife, John always felt a deep connection to Sarah, even before they became involved with each other. It appears that this connection was at a higher and deeper level since John searched for Sarah overseas after his divorce. He recalls his feelings when he first laid eyes on Sarah:

*“...umm in the very beginning there was a click type of thing, but I was married.”*

In his new family, John found himself balancing between needing to connect with Sarah’s children, his daughter and his relationship with his new wife. From the outset, John found it difficult to fill the role of a stepfather. He felt unwelcome and not worthy of such a role, yet he continued his pursuit of developing a close relationship with the children, perhaps more intensely because of his wife. As such, he connected with her son but settled for a respectable relationship with her daughter. He describes his relationship with the children:

*“I did relate very well to them but more to the boy than the girl. She has got her own personality and character and for certain reasons we never clicked, me and her never clicked. We tolerated each other, she tolerates me because the mother made the choice to*

*be with me and she didn't have a say in it at that time, and I had accepted and respected her because of the mother, but there wasn't really a good relationship...a bond. With the boy...yes, we did bond very nicely not because he was a boy, maybe because we can say he was a boy..., umm we connected nicely."*

Furthermore, John found himself divided between the need to connect with Sarah's children and his love for, and commitment to, his own daughter. This was emotionally and physically draining for John, who found himself in the middle of various conflict relationships. For John, it was important to continue to connect with his daughter and to assist her to reintegrate into his new family. Although his daughter chose to disconnect herself from the new family, John had to facilitate his relationship with her outside of the new family. The following excerpt depicts the tug-of-war as an attempt to keep all the relationships connected:

*"My daughter and Sarah never clicked...never from day one. She never fitted in. In fact for those years to see my daughter I had to go outside and see her. It was very difficult, but I'm glad that I kept very close to my daughter..."*

However, when 'the problem' occurred, John experienced a complete disconnection from Sarah and her children, especially since he felt betrayed. Although John gives no indication regarding the reasons for the betrayal, he felt that he was being blamed and banned from the family. The mistrust that John felt from his family and society contributed to John's detachment from himself and others, perhaps as a means of coping. For John, this led to a lack of communication and disconnection. He strongly reflects on how he and Sarah began to relate:

*"We were busy living separate lives, not in the sense as a married couple but separate lives in the way of different goals, different targets, what we needed, and especially with what had happened."*



Towards the end of his narrative, John reflected on how his obsession with work disconnected him from his family. His over-involvement in his work made it difficult for him to separate his work from his family, thus causing a further rift between them.

*“I got so involved in my work at the time I was working for a company and umm I’ve always been a workaholic and that is so bad for a relationship.”*

### **During Divorce: The Sudden Decision**

This stage was described as a period of prolonged separation and indecisiveness. It represents the difficulty of letting go and the hope that reconciliation would occur. It reflects John’s feelings of ambivalence with regard to being the initiator of the separation. The following themes will deepen the researcher’s understanding relating to John’s experience as the initiator versus the non-initiator.

#### **The Initiator vs. the Decision maker**

This theme refers to the two stages regarding the decision to divorce, that is, which partner initiated the separation and the divorce. It reflects the impact and the emotions that are involved in the role of the leaver and the role of the one remaining.

Although John initiated the separation, he had difficulty accepting his decision to leave the family, even though, at the time, he had not considered the impact of his actions. John therefore rationalizes his decision so as to avoid an acknowledgment of his vulnerability. This resulted in his unwillingness to recognize weakness or negativity within himself and his marriage and thus an avoidance of conflict and disagreement. In this way he could detach himself from feeling guilty about abandoning his family. He therefore rationalizes his behaviour of being the initiator as:

*“...umm I made that decision. Also you make decisions on impulse, umm you make decisions that you regret later, and it like an impulse. I could have sat down and spoken*

*to her but at the time the communication was already broken, we didn't really have communication."*

Integrated into John's objective, rational justification of his decision was his self-awareness that led to feelings of regret, ambivalence, and to a large extent, self-disappointment at the realization that he had abandoned his family during their most difficult time.

During the year of separation, John described his relationship with Sarah as being "*amicable*". Although they were not living together, physically, their relationship continued to flourish and provided a supportive foundation for both of them. However, once again, John felt betrayed when he was suddenly "*served with the divorce papers*". It was difficult to make sense of Sarah's sudden decision to divorce him. Perhaps, to a large extent he felt misled, deceived, and manipulated into hoping and believing in an illusional relationship. He paints a picture of Sarah's hidden agenda:

*"...I went to Canada and when I came back from Canada she wanted me to stay in the house for a night, I didn't want to stay but she said no you sleep here, and then the next day I left. We had a friendly relationship during the separation and we were talking and then one day I was served with he divorce papers."*

It seems that it was harder for John to accept the divorce since he was not the initiator. John felt disconnected from Sarah, especially since she did not involve him nor did she communicate her decision to divorce. Subsequently, it was necessary for John to disconnect himself completely from Sarah and her family, perhaps because to let go of his ex-spouse would make his adjustment easier. He expresses his anger and disconnection in describing the sudden manner in which the divorce process occurred:

*"...I was basically just served with the papers. I felt it was a bit strange because we had quite an amicable relationship and suddenly this thing changed and papers were served, I signed the papers, I accepted."*

### **Ambivalence vs. Independence**

This theme is further linked to the role of the initiator. On the one hand it represents an overwhelming set of emotions and actions relating to the decision to separate and on the other, a need for individuality, framed as freedom and an opportunity to begin a new life away from the memories that held him captive.

As noted earlier, John was the initiator of the separation; yet, it appears that John's decision was made at a time when he was irrational and deeply hurt. He had lost control of his emotions and inevitably acted impulsively. Due to the stress that he experienced, his unexpected decision reflected a desperate attempt to escape a world that was filled with pain and suffering. However, within his loneliness, the realization of his actions created feelings of blame and an attitude of self-reproach emerged. He reflects on his attempt to return home soon after having left:

*“On the next day I went back to her work and asked if I could apologize. I apologized and said if she could take me back. She said no, she said once you go you're gone, and I respect that.”*

Sarah's refusal to accept the return of John, formed the stepping-stones to his new freedom; to move forward into a new world where he would be in complete control of his life. John needed to re-establish a new life with new dreams and expectations away from the painful memories that haunted him. For John, being independent meant taking back the power to live and prove that he was capable of overcoming the criticism and scrutiny of society and Sarah's family. He reflects on his need to disconnect from everything around him:

*“I realized that what we had at that moment was due to the circumstances that happened to us, and I decided that I wanted nothing to do with it, when I realized why we had all those things. I said for me I prefer to start from fresh because I don't want anything to do with that, and umm I made that decision.”*

### **After Divorce: The Will to Survive**

This stage depicts John's remarkable inner strength to overcome the various obstacles and painful experiences that he and his family had to endure during the divorce and the occurrence of 'the problem'. His strength is indicated by his incredible determination to face a new life without any feelings of remorse, hatred, and betrayal.

### **Redefining a New Identity and Role-exiting**

Throughout the interview, it appears that John never really aligned himself with the identity of being married, perhaps because, from the beginning, he did not want to remarry. However, John was ambivalent about exiting the role of being married since he was the initiator of the separation but not the divorce. Subsequently, it was only when the divorce papers were served on him that he was able to exit the role, after one year of hoping for reconciliation. John's attachment to Sarah further made the exiting of the role more difficult:

*"Yes, during the separation we were talking to each other, I helped her a lot, umm we spoke and we saw each other...and then, one day, I was served with the divorce papers."*

However, redefining himself as a single man was not that difficult, since he had already lived as such for six years after his previous marriage. He continued to establish a very close relationship with his daughter, even though she did not live with him after his first marriage nor his second. Thus, his role and relationship with his daughter remained unchanged.

The biggest challenge for John was to reflect on his personal identity, which had been shaken to the core. As a result of the divorce and 'the problem', John was forced to reflect on the events that had occurred in his life and how these circumstances had come to define him. Spending time alone after the divorce gave him the opportunity to rebuild a

new sense of self in terms of being a father, a businessman, and a member of society. As a result, John's new self-esteem and confidence has allowed him to overcome adversity.

*"I took time for myself to try to go through the emotions and try to understand if things could have been different although I knew at the time I couldn't change anything, it's done it's done, you have got to move forward. And we must not hold on to the past. If you have a bad situation in life and at least you learn from the mistakes that you did, and you can become a better person then you have already learned something."*

### **Relationship with Former Spouse**

John's relationship with his former spouse moved through three stages during the divorce process. At the beginning of the separation there were feelings of remorse and ambivalence: *"I apologized and asked if she could take me back"*. This was followed by a year of separation during which a friendship developed. It seems that the friendship that proceeded was due to 'the problem', since most people had abandoned them. They had a supportive relationship based on a shared experience of 'the problem'. Thus their relationship was defined as caring and compassionate: *"We had a friendly relationship ... talking to each other, I helped her a lot"*. Shortly afterwards, the divorce papers were served on John. He felt confused and betrayed: *"We had an amicable relationship and suddenly this thing happened."* Although it was painful, it ultimately provided John with closure with regards to his divorce. As a result of the suspicions and mistrust that were embedded in their relationship, the only form of contact with Sarah pertains primarily to 'the problem'.

*"We don't see each other for months, unless there is a phone call to tell me about a certain date or whatever."*

## **Establishing New Social Networks and Economic Stability**

John felt isolated from certain people whom he had considered to be friends. This alienation was a result of 'the problem' rather than his status of being a divorcee. John was aware of the loss of external networks, yet those closest to him provided John with the support and motivation to work through his divorce.

*“Some friends came back, apologized for the judgments they made. The really good ones never left us. My friends were friends that never left me, always believed in me and supported me no matter what.”*

John's only family support was his daughter, since his family resides overseas. Even so, John's family supported him from afar. There has been very limited contact with Sarah's family, although he does maintain a good relationship with Sarah's brother-in-law. It appears that he assisted John during this most difficult time of his life; his actions seemed pure and genuine.

*“With my brother-in-law I have kept a good relationship, a very good friend. I will never forget what he did for me.”*

Shortly after the divorce period, John became involved in a new relationship. It seems that his new relationship assisted him in his adjustment to the divorce and has become a new support system. He values the knowledge and the lessons that he has learnt and thus reflects on how he has integrated these into his new relationship.

*“I've taken all that knowledge into this relationship. It's still a new relationship but it's been going on for three and a half years and above anything else we are very good friends. We are friends, we trust each other, communication and we have our space.”*

One of the things that has changed drastically in John's life, although not by choice, is his disengagement from the church. After his divorce he felt excluded from the church group

since he felt that they had taken Sarah's side. This led to a sense of loneliness and blame, and as a result, he started to explore other avenues of spirituality. He reflects on this disengagement and the need to connect with the spiritual aspect of his being:

*"...we had a circle of friends of the church that basically helped us to get through the difficult times; they stayed on her (Sarah's) side after the divorce except with one lady. ... I also dedicated a lot of time to my spiritual side which was very important, very important."*

John portrayed that, economically, he has experienced financial difficulty, particularly as a result of 'the problem'. However, when he regained his self-confidence, work became his new pattern of life where he could affirm himself and felt competent since he continued to work in the same line of work as he always has.

*"I can make it on my own, and I have to prove to myself that I can do it. From there I got up and started my own business."*

### **Resilience as Self-awareness**

This theme refers to the innate ability to look beyond the superficial exterior of what we are and what we do. Thus, it allows us to attain a deeper level of understanding and meaning attached to our actions and our being. Self-awareness promotes personal growth at various levels, such as in the spiritual realm and interactional relationships.

The period following the divorce was, for John, a time of introspection. Being overwhelmed by all the sudden events that occurred in his life, John resorted to an isolated monotonous lifestyle. His world included himself, his daughter, and his limited group of friends in which he found solitude and peace. John describes, in point form, what a normal day would be like for him:

*“I took that year to live on my own. My life was like an enclosure, it was me living in the cottage, going to work, going to have supper at a lady in Primrose where I used to have my supper, and then go to my cottage. I lived like that for a year because I had to deal with my emotions and I learned a lot about relationships.”*

The time spent self-reflecting created a feeling of disconnection from everything with which he had been in contact. However, at this most important time, the disconnection and isolation he experienced was reframed as necessary; thus warranting a need to reflect and reach a higher level of understanding and acceptance. By so doing, John was able to reconnect with himself by regaining self-respect and self-confidence. Since John had no family support other than that of his daughter, he drew his strength from his spiritual life. He invested his time in the meditation that he had learnt when he taught Taekwando. He realized that he had disregarded his spiritual belief and therefore, had lost his way due to his materialistic perceptions and greed. Meaning has developed, for John, particularly in the spiritual arena. From his meditation, he learnt to *“forgive and forget”*, to regain the control that had been overshadowed and controlled by the anger he had felt. I was moved by how sincere and ‘wholesome’ he spoke about the power of his martial arts and how he has integrated the philosophy of Taekwando into his life:

*“That’s why we say that you embrace your opponents; we love him first before we bring him into our control. I coped with my divorce with meditation and self-control techniques.”*

### **Family Reorganization**

Having no children of their own in their marriage made family reorganization a relatively easy task for John. During their brief marriage, John played no part in the upbringing and support of Sarah’s children: he was purely the person with whom *“the mother made the choice to be ....”*



Prior to his second marriage, John enjoyed a very strong bond with his daughter although she lived with his first ex-wife. During his first divorce, he had always made an attempt to maintain a safe and secure relationship with his daughter and he continued to maintain the bond during the second marriage. However, as a result of ‘the problem’ and the divorce, this period resulted in the reorganization of his relationship with his daughter, in which *“the roles reversed”*. Since his daughter was the only family he had in South Africa, she had become the ‘parentified child’ providing him with emotional support and advice. He refers to her role in the relationship as follows:

*“The only support I had was from my daughter, in terms of advice and because she did psychology, she was in the position to give me a lot of advice. She was basically my pillar of strength during that time.”*

### **CREATIVE SYNTHESIS**

John’s story was written according to the unfolding themes, employing his own words.

#### **In Suffering I have Triumphed**

John reminisces on how he was first introduced to Sarah at a party held at Sarah’s house. His wife at the time, and Sarah, were co-workers. He recalls experiencing a *“click type of thing”*; however, since he was *“still married”* he never acted on it and it was *“something you keep inside”*. Finally, after six years of being divorced from his first wife John started to search for Sarah. He flew overseas and they *“more or less decided there and than that we would get together”*. However, both John and Sarah had different reasons for getting involved with one another. Sarah wanted to *“come back to South Africa, she always had that thing to come back...badly”*. As for John, he *“was in love with her at the time”*. They decided to get married on these terms. However, they were confronted with the difficulty of being accepted by the children: *“Me and the girl never clicked. We tolerated each other. With the boy we did bond nicely.”* John’s daughter *“didn’t want another woman, she didn’t understand, but she and Sarah never clicked”*. Indeed, John

experienced a tension between his new family and his daughter. Nevertheless, John thought, *“we both coped very nicely with the kids.”*

Not long after being married, *“something very personal happened in our lives”*. It was a very difficult time for both of them, and instead of believing and supporting each other, *“there were suspicions; there were a lot of things. The pressure was too much for us to handle”*. John acknowledges that they didn’t have the *“backup”* support to get through ‘the problem’ and as a result *“we were falling apart”*. As the pressure escalated, John felt like *“an outcast”* and that he was betrayed. He had suddenly decided to leave because *“a few things came to my knowledge. I came to know things that I didn’t know through other sources”*. John’s decision to leave was compounded with feelings of ambivalence as he returned the next day and *“I apologized and said if she could take me back.”*

John accepted the decision that Sarah did not want him to return. However, during their separation period, a friendship formed: *“We had a friendly relationship during the separation...talking to each other, I helped her a lot”*. John was confused and angry when Sarah had the divorce papers served on him without first discussing this with him. This betrayal resulted in a complete disconnection from Sarah and her family: *“The relationship went sour for awhile, so we hadn’t been talking and this has been up to now, we don’t see each other for months.”*

After his divorce, John felt the need to isolate himself so that he could spend time reflecting on his life and the lessons he had learnt: *“I always believed that at least you can always learn from your mistakes what you have done wrong in the past. I have my mistakes, everyone has their mistakes but I learned. I took the time to look into what happened and where can I go from here”*. John was aware of his external networks being limited. He had no family in South Africa to support him except his daughter; he had no contact with Sarah’s family except for his brother in law. Other than his daughter and his *“limited circle of friends”*, John turned to the spiritual aspect of his being. Meaning has developed for John, particularly, within his spiritual arena: *“I became a better person in many aspects, in forgiving and forgetting. My spiritual side is very important and we*

*didn't have time for the spiritual side, because we were so much money orientated, so much materialistic orientated". His strength and his ability to cope with the divorce were drawn from the inner resources that were available to him: "I did taekwondo for twelve years. It involves a lot of meditation. In taekwondo you cannot attack anybody, because your techniques of taekwondo are only defense techniques; you have to be attacked to use your techniques. I coped with my divorce with meditation and self-control techniques."*

It is incredible that through his suffering, John has found meaning. He acknowledges that *"I've failed and I know where I've failed"*. This awareness has allowed him to reflect on the moments that led to his present situation and the things that are most important in his life: *"The biggest lesson, well I learned a few lessons, first I've admitted some of my mistakes, you take things for granted when you married, and you tend to forget about the other person. It's not intentional but it happens during a marriage. I failed because I didn't communicate right. Then the material things, I was never a materialistic person, but with Sarah I became materialistic. Sarah is a very very materialistic person. And money in a relationship is bad, very bad"*. With his new self-confidence, *"I got up and started my own business."*

Currently, John is involved in a new relationship and *"it's working beautifully. My daughter is very happy with my relationship, which makes me very happy. She (girlfriend) has a twelve year old son and I was already playing the role of the father because the father was a bad character"*. John views this relationship differently: *"I've learnt to accept when I am wrong, and I've learned with the other person's mistake. I tried to convey this message to my new relationship."*

John ends his narrative by expressing, from his viewpoint, how relationships should occur and the elements that need to be included in any relationship in order to ensure success:

*“Remember, I had another divorce of twenty two years, you have to be friends before anything else, if you are not friends with that person, you can be in love , you can have communication but if you not really a friend above anything else, it doesn’t work. I’ve put it in order of friendship first, trust, and communication in the same level. Remember we do things to our partners that we don’t do to a friend. Why do you we do that? Because we are not friends with that person because we take things for granted, she is there she is my wife I must demand this, I must demand that, we expect things, we take it for granted but not with a friend. That’s what I have learnt.”*

### **Reflecting on my Participation: The Interviewer as Belonging**

John was introduced to me by Sarah while they were still married. We had never established a relationship, but we were polite and greeted each other in passing. I was nervous about asking John to participate in the research, particularly since he was aware that I had a good relationship with Sarah. Furthermore, I was aware of ‘the problem’ and understood that it had possibly been the main cause of the divorce. Having taken these factors into account, I was extremely delighted when John, without hesitation, agreed to participate.

The interview seemed like a social conversation. After greeting John, he proceeded to tell me his story without my having to ask any questions. He displayed enthusiasm and was eager to divulge in-depth information regarding his experience. I was caught up in his story, listening to him, for the first time, as he spoke about his struggles, his solitude, his spiritual reconnection, and his desire to overcome adversity. My role was passive in that I was, for the most part, the listener, reflecting and asking John to elaborate and to clarify certain issues in order to gain a comprehensive picture.

The most challenging part of the process was to write about the themes, because of the sensitive nature of the individual’s experience with ‘the problem’. However, John

provided valuable and indispensable information that, I believe, has been honestly captured in the themes that emerged in his narrative.

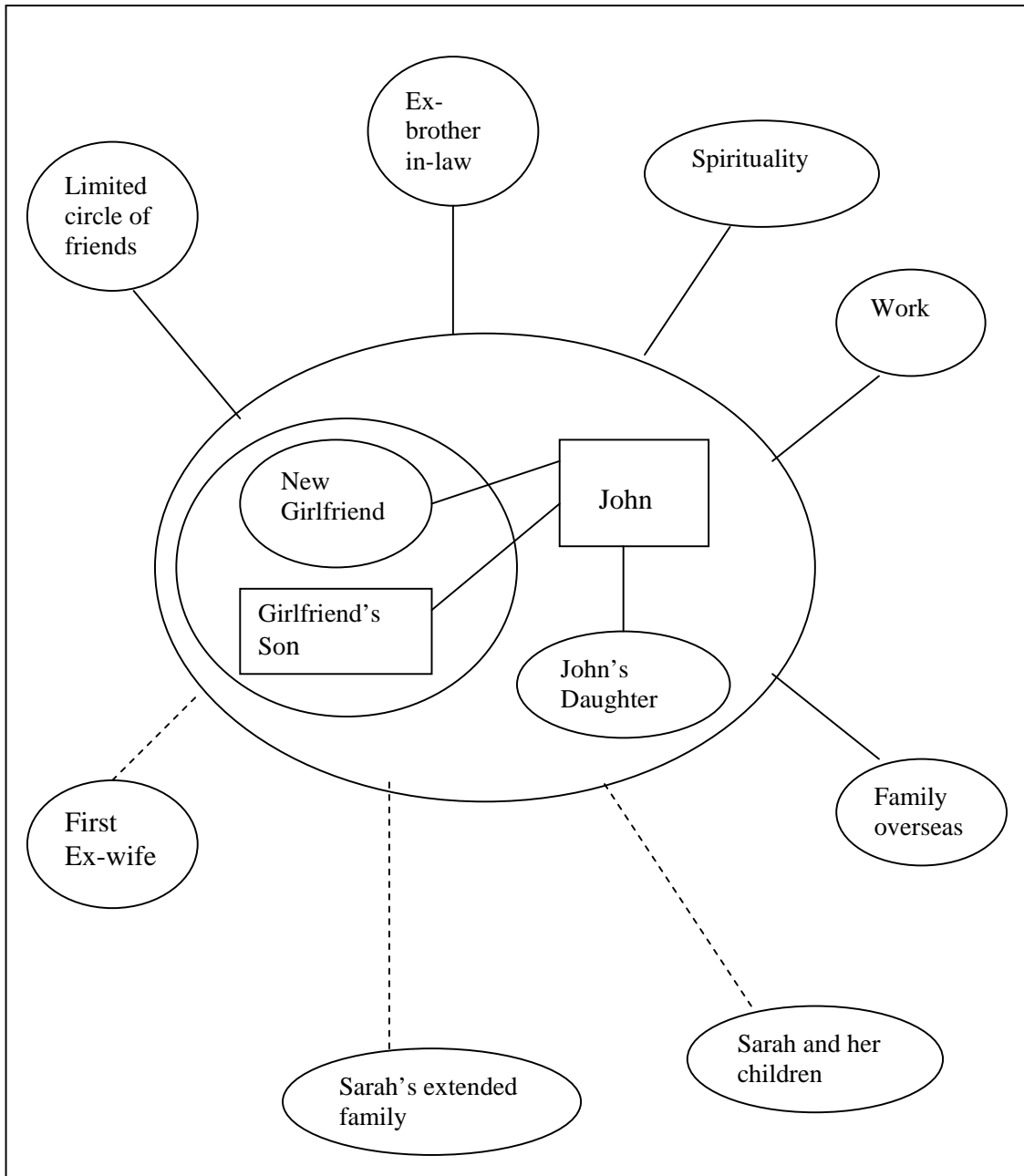
### **Summary: The Family System**

Based on John's description of how the divorce progressed, the family was viewed, through my lens, as functioning as follows (Figure 11.2):

John provides a brief description of how his first marriage functioned. His marriage was described as purely conventional in the sense that it represented the traditional family, comprising husband, wife, and child. As the years progressed the family isolated themselves from society and friends. Thus, the family became enmeshed, and too involved, with each other. However, when his wife left the family circle, her independence resulted in infidelity. The three attempts at reconciliation were a result of their daughter who was seen as the mediator in the family. However, due to the escalating mistrust and lack of communication in the family, divorce became the only solution to regain stability in the family.

After six years of divorce John remarried. From the beginning, both partners entered the marriage for different reasons. From the outset, John found it difficult to be accepted into the family. Similarly, John's daughter couldn't accept Sarah as her step-mother. This continuous tug-of-war between the subsystems of the parent and child, contributed to major tensions within the family. When the family was confronted with 'the problem', each family member attempted to change each other rather than adapt to the situation and circumstances of the family. Due to the suspicions, mistrust, blame, and lack of communication, the family spiraled out of control. Since the family experienced internal and external pressures with limited resources available to them, the family members functioned independently during a time when the family should have supported one another.

As a result of the divorce, John's external social networks changed drastically. Being isolated from the church group, and disconnected from Sarah's immediate family, John formed new relationships from which he gained support and motivation. He is currently involved with a single mother, and plays the role of the father of her twelve-year-old son.



**Figure 11.2.** The ecomap depicts the relationship of John and Sarah with extra-familial systems after the divorce

## **Conclusion**

John's story encapsulates the dynamic occurrences within a family system. His story and personal experience provide a voice to those who have been divorced, not once, but twice. As such, the pain and suffering that John experienced was unique and different for both of his divorces. For John, trying to make sense of his divorce and understand the role that he played in the dissolution of his marriages gave him a sense of empowerment. He was able to overcome the painful experience of his divorce, yet the lessons that he learnt are valuable in his current relationship.

## **CHAPTER 12**

### **Comparative Analysis**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter will offer a comparative analysis between the common themes that have emerged from the stories of the three divorced couples and, also, the literature presented in Chapters 2, 3, and 4. Although each participant's account of his/her experience is unique to his or her context, certain common themes flowed through each of the stories of the participants. The themes identified similarities and differences across the three divorced couples, and, also, across the males and females. The aim is not to substantiate the findings in the research, but to include the many different voices with regards to the topic of divorce. As such, reality is intersubjectively or socially constructed by shared meaning, in which the 'problem-saturated story' is deconstructed and a new story is co-authored with new meaning and understanding (Becvar & Becvar, 2003).

Although most of the themes identified are grouped under the discrete divorce phases for the purpose of the present research, it is important to note that most of them are intertwined throughout the entire divorce process. Thus, it is difficult to appoint a theme to a specific divorce phase, particularly with regards to the phases prior to, and during, the divorce.

The themes were divided according to the manner in which the divorce process progressed for each couple. It appears that in terms of the phases prior to and during the divorce, the focus fell primarily on the experience of each individual on a personal level, rather than the impact that the divorce had on the entire system. Nevertheless, a change in one part of the system will inevitably bring about change in an entire system (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). It appears that this realization occurs during the adaptation phase of the divorce where the focus shifts from 'I' to 'we', thus allowing for the reorganization of the family system.



The themes identified in the interaction pattern between each of the three couples in the present study include:

- Pre-divorce
  - ❖ Connection vs. Disconnection
  - ❖ Loss
  
- During divorce
  - ❖ Role of Initiator and Non-Initiator
  - ❖ Parents Role in relation to their children
  
- After divorce
  - ❖ Redefining a New identity and Role-exiting
  - ❖ Relationship with Former Spouse
  - ❖ Establishing New Social Networks and Economic Stability
  - ❖ Towards Resiliency
  - ❖ Family Reorganization

Below is a diagrammatic representation of the themes that emerged during the analysis of the transcripts of the interviews. The summary table is intended to illustrate similarities and differences between the experiences of each of the interviewees. Certain themes seem also to find expression under different meta-themes and phases, such as the theme of connection vs. disconnection where Sarah experienced this during the divorce phase while John, on the other hand, experienced it during the pre-divorce phase. This further suggests that themes are intertwined throughout the divorce process and further supports the notion that to appoint a theme to a specific phase is almost impossible. Furthermore, while certain themes grouped together were differently described, such as separateness and loss, the researcher believes that there is an association between them.

<b>COUPLE 1</b>		<b>COUPLE 2</b>		<b>COUPLE 3</b>	
Rahima	Seedat	Andrew	Tracey	Sarah	John
<b><u>PRE-DIVORCE</u></b>					
Relationship with silent manipulator	Affair as a Catalyst	The Unknown and Unfaithful relationship	Complementary to the point of Non-existence	The Passive relationship	Differentiated Relationship: Love vs. Convenience
Fear of loss vs. the need to Understand	Separateness	Separateness	Connection vs. Disconnection	Lack of Commitment: the Failed Fairytale	Isolation and Lack of Support
The Relationship as an Illusion	Explication and Avoidance	A Holistic Loss			Connection vs. Disconnection
<b><u>DURING DIVORCE</u></b>					
Depersonalisation	The Ambivalent Initiator	The Ambivalent Initiator	Ambivalent/ Manipulator initiator	Dual Initiator	The Initiator vs. the Decision maker
A Mother's Cry	A Father's Guilt	A Father's Cry	A Mother's Guilt	A Mother's Guilt	Ambivalence vs. Independence
				Connection vs. Disconnection	
<b><u>AFTER DIVORCE</u></b>					
Redefining a New Identity and Role-exiting (both hard)	Redefining a New Identity (harder) and Role-exiting (easier)	Redefining a New Identity (harder) and Role-exiting (easier)	Redefining a New Identity and Role-exiting (both easy)	Redefining a New Identity (easy) and Role-exiting (harder)	Redefining a New Identity and Role-exiting (both easy)
Relationship with Former Spouse (contact limited to children)	Relationship with Former Spouse (contact limited to children)	Relationship with Former Spouse (no contact)	Relationship with Former Spouse (no contact)	Relationship with Former Spouse (limited contact due to 'the problem')	Relationship with Former Spouse (contact limited due to 'the problem')

Continuation...  <b>AFTER DIVORCE</b>  Establishing New Social Networks (good support) and Economic Stability (financially better off)	Establishing New Social Networks (poor support) and Economic Stability (financially better off)	Establishing New Social Networks (relative support) and Economic Stability (financially better off)	Establishing New Social Networks (good support) and Economic Stability (financially worse off)	Establishing New Social Networks (relative support) and Economic Stability (financially worse off)	Establishing New Social Networks (relative support) and Economic Stability (financially better off)
Resilience of the human spirit		Reborn	The Power to Learn	Resilience as Isolation	Resilience as Self-awareness
Family Reorganization (single with both children)	Family Reorganization (remarried with two step-children)	Family Reorganization (remarried with two children)	Family Reorganization (single with no children, has a boyfriend)	Family Reorganization (single with both children)	Family Reorganization (single with no children, has a girlfriend)
	Freedom from Obligation				
	Traditional vs. Modern				
	Relationship with Current Family	Relationship with Current Family			

### Connection vs. Disconnection

This theme appears to reflect, for the participants, a point of departure concerning their personal struggles as well as their unmet needs in their marriage prior to their decision to divorce. As in any relationship, there is a need to connect, a closeness that all human beings seek in relation to another. This closeness, or bond, that one person feels for

another, provides a net of safety and security (Kitson, 1982; Madden-Derdich & Arditti, 1999). Bowlby (as cited in Kitson, 1982) refers to this closeness as “attachment” and defines it as “the propensity of human beings to make strong affectional bonds to particular others” (p. 292). **Rahima** reflects that at a particular stage in their marriage **Seedat** became withdrawn and distant. For fear of the unknown, her attachment towards her husband increased. She expressed the need to support and communicate with him, yet her attempts only resulted in **Seedat** further disconnecting himself from the family. Literature on attachment theory (Kitson, 1982; Madden-Derdich & Arditti, 1999) reports that attachment may occur when it is evoked during a threat. This seems consistent with **Rahima’s** attempt to connect with her husband. **Tracy**, on the other hand, felt a need for a stronger closeness with **Andrew**, especially since **Andrew’s** nights away from home created a sense of loneliness. She yearned for physical and emotional proximity, and **Andrew** was not fulfilling those needs. It appears that when one partner rejects the affection expressed by the other spouse, the closeness that is desired by the spouse is replaced by disconnection.

**Seedat**, **Andrew** and **John** acknowledge that work-related stress undermined their marriages. Work was regarded as a factor in the dissolution of their marriages since they did not regard their families as their primary objective. The self-indulgence of acquiring material possessions, in the case of **Andrew** and **John**, or the need to prove oneself in terms of the yardstick of other successful men, as **Seedat** attempted to do, inevitably resulted in their over-commitment to work, to the exclusion of the family (Riessman, 1990). This is in keeping with the views of Kaslow and Robinson (1996), who indicate that married individuals tend to experience lower marital happiness if they report that money is the issue that often initiates arguments within their marriages. Thus, money, rather than bringing the family material happiness, results in disconnected relationships among family and friends.

Frustration with regards to role expectations was strongly experienced by **Seedat** and **Tracy**. It thus reflects the spouse’s frustration regarding the inability of the partner to share household tasks and financial burdens as expected (Pearlin & Turner, 1987). For

instance, both men and women who report that they share more household and work labour than they are willing to accept (unfairness), experience lower marital happiness than those who perceive the division of household and work labour to be fair (Frisco & Williams, 2003). A similar scenario was expressed strongly by **Seedat** who reflects that when he was married to **Rahima**, all the responsibility fell on him to provide for the family and he was therefore, unable to devote any time to himself. This resulted in hostility towards his family and only further disconnected himself from his family. Similarly, **Tracy** felt that her unique characteristics were not favoured or recognised by **Andrew**. She was left to tend to the household while she also had to work outside of the home.

**Sarah** felt that **John's** lack of commitment to her and their family made it difficult for the family to connect as a whole during the most stressful time in their lives. Correspondingly, a low level of commitment in a spouse somewhat implies his or her lack of motivation to make an effort to improve the marital relationship, which can lead to conflict and disengagement in the relationship (Kaslow & Robinson, 1996). **Rahima** believed that **Seedat** had lost the commitment required of a father and husband. His disconnection from the family resulted in his unwillingness to view the relationship as being long term.

From the beginning of the second marriage, both **Sarah** and **John** needed to establish their new roles as step-parents to both their biological children. **Sarah** found it difficult to connect and establish a relationship with **John's** daughter, more than **John** did with **Sarah's** own children. This is in keeping with Ambert (1986) and Ihinger-Tallman (1988) who report that a wife's adjustment to her step-children may be even more troublesome than a husband's adjustment to her children. **Sarah** recalls that when **John's** daughter visited, she would do everything to make her feel a part of the family. Although **Sarah** attempted, on numerous occasions, to reach out and connect with **John's** daughter, a relationship was never formed. **John** reflects that his daughter's reluctance to have a step-mother contributed to her feelings of betrayal towards her biological mother. This is supported by Ambert (1986) who considers that children exhibit greater attachment to

their mothers than their fathers; thus, this attachment may make it more difficult for step-children to accept and relate to step-mothers than to step-fathers. Ihinger-Tallman (1988) proposes that step-parent–step-children relationships are easier to form when they reside together at home. However, this was not reflected in **John’s** account of failed attempts to connect with **Sarah’s** daughter, in particular. This left **John** feeling inadequate due to an inability to overcome his sense of detachment and failure to develop close proximity and emotional contact with his step-children. These feelings are strengthened when the step-father’s children live elsewhere (Ambert, 1986).

### Loss

All three couples experienced significant and cumulative losses on varying levels as a result of their decisions to divorce. Whereas **Rahima** and **Andrew** explicitly share their losses, the unspoken losses of **Seedat**, **Tracy**, **Sarah** and **Andrew** are implied in their narratives. Therefore, the profundity of the loss is reflected in the dissolution of their marriage relationships.

The grief over the loss of a marriage has a profound impact on people’s lives, sending shock waves through their relationships with children, friends, parents, peers, and even colleagues. When the loss of a marriage occurs due to separation/divorce, the impact, and therefore adjustment, is determined by the functional significance of the former spouse within the system of relationships. In other words, perhaps the most significant of **losses** is that *of the parent-child relationship and the family* as a unified and whole unit (Furstenberg, 1990). In the present study, the loss of relationship was experienced by the paternal figures who left the home.

The quantity of contact between the non-residential fathers and their children is not the determining factor; but rather, it is the quality of the father-child relationship that matters (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). The relationship between **Seedat** and his children was strained during and after the divorce. **Rahima** relates that **Seedat’s** lack of involvement with his children, caused the adjustment to be a difficult process for their children.

**Seedat** implicitly relates that his relationship with his children is not satisfactory and is the area in which he experiences the greatest loss. Furthermore, **Seedat's** lack of involvement also meant, for **Rahima**, an absence of support or assistance in parenting. **Andrew**, on the other hand, experienced a strong bond with his children during, and especially, after the divorce. His need to protect them stemmed from the realization that his children blamed themselves for the divorce. Since **John** and **Sarah** did not have any children together, and did not identify strongly with the role of step-parents, there was no need to establish or maintain relations with **Sarah's** children or John's daughter. John had always enjoyed a strong and close relationship with his own daughter.

For the couple going through the divorce, the *loss of attachment to the spouse* involves the loss of the primary source of social support, one's spouse. Accompanied by the loss of a spouse, is the loss of someone who helps to organize time and work, and of someone who assists with parenting (Madden-Derdich & Arditto, 1999). Thus, the loss of the family system as an established and recognizable unit is no longer recognized, because the custodial parent now has to fit into the role of a single person or parent, attempting to balance and adapt to a new way of life. This is consistent with **Rahima's** experience where she reflects that she would have been prepared to do anything to make her marriage work, especially since surviving on her own, as a single person, was more frightening than losing the traditional family. Similarly, **Andrew's** experience of losing his family was devastating to the point where he avoided his pain by committing himself to working even longer hours. For **Sarah**, the loss of the traditional family was very difficult, particularly since she was family-orientated. With regards to **Seedat, Tracy and John**, the dissolution of a family system was not detrimental to them, perhaps because they did not profoundly identify with their roles of being a husband or wife.

Similarly, loss within the immediate family also extends to a subsequent *loss of the extended family*, especially that of the ex-spouse, and, also, a *loss of external social networks*, such as friends and community (Kitson & Morgan, 1990). Research indicates that men experience the loss of social support more profoundly than women (Madden-Derdich & Arditto, 1999; Spanier & Thompson, 1984; Wright & Maxwell, 1991); perhaps because women are more likely to keep the channels of communication open among

family and friends, particularly with their own families. This was consistent with the experience of **Rahima** and **Seedat** who spent more time with **Rahima's** side of the family than **Seedat's**. Although she has lost all connection with **Seedat's** family, no love has been lost, as opposed to **Seedat**, who not only lost the friendships that he had formed with **Rahima's** family, but also his spirituality, since it has been a long time after his divorce that he has not practised his faith. Both **Andrew** and **Tracy** lost mutual friends as well as all ties and connections with the families of the ex-spouse. On the other hand, **Sarah** had no contact with **John's** family while they were married since **John's** family resided overseas. Therefore she experienced no extended familial loss. **John's** contact is limited to **Sarah's** brother-in-law. **John** also experienced a loss of the church community since he felt alienated from them when they took **Sarah's** side after the divorce.

According to Pledge (1992), a marriage partner is regarded as being part of a family system where there are significant interpersonal attachments that collectively provide a person with a sense of self. Within every system, each family member performs one function or a set of these critical to the identity of the person and other family members in whose network of relationships they are involved. Consequently, when a marital loss occurs, there is a loss of one or more functions since the spouse is removed from the *role identity* with which he/she was associated (Bloom & Clement, 1984; Pledge, 1992). This is pivotal for **Rahima** and **Andrew** who identified very strongly with their roles of being both mother/father and wife/husband; therefore, the transition to singlehood was not an easy process. **Sarah** and **John's** loss of identity was primarily focused on their roles of being wife/husband. Exiting these roles appeared to be somewhat uneasy, perhaps because they both experienced feelings of failure, especially since, for both of them, it was their second marriage. Unlike **Rahima** and **Andrew**, the investment of **Tracy** and **Seedat** in their roles as mother/father and wife/husband was not central in establishing their identity. However, **Tracy's** loss of her husband meant losing her economic status since **Andrew** was the primary breadwinner, thus forcing her to redefine her role as being the breadwinner, whereas **Seedat** reinforces the idea that he is not the type of person who should be married.



### **Role of the Initiator and Non-Initiator**

Vaughan (1986) describes 'the initiator' as the person who first moves away emotionally from his or her partner, and thus from the marital relationship. This person may, or may not be, the first person who physically leaves the relationship. It is therefore difficult to decide who the initiator or non-initiator was in the divorce process, since one partner could have suggested the separation but not the divorce. This relates to **Sarah** and **John's** case where **John** was the initiator of the separation and **Sarah** that of the divorce. However, former spouses tend to agree with one another regarding who initiated the divorce (Buehler, 1987). This however was not the case for **Seedat** who experienced difficulty admitting his role in initiating the divorce and as such, refers to a joint decision regarding the decision to divorce.

Given that marital discord and divorce are gendered experiences, it is not surprising that researchers have documented differences between the accounts of divorce as related by both men and women (Riessman, 1990; Vannoy, 1995). Women, whether they originally wished for divorce or not, are more likely than men to initiate divorce (Goode, 1956; Kitson, 1992; Zeiss et al., 1980). Perhaps this occurs since women tend to examine their relationships more closely, and therefore, become aware of relationship problems sooner, and also, are more likely to converse about relationship problems with their partners (Thompson & Walker, as cited in Amato & Previti, 2003). Men, on the other hand, are more likely to withdraw from communication with regards to relationship problems (Gottman, 1994). Contrary to expectations, however, men were no more likely than women to refer to external causes, and men were more likely than women to report problems with communication. **Seedat**, **Andrew**, and **John** all referred to work as a major cause of the divorce since their work required long extensive hours away from their families, which later contributed to lack of communication and intimacy. **Rahima** and **Tracy** further suggested that their husbands' extensive hours of work contributed to the failure of their marriage. **Sarah**, on the other hand, makes no reference to work, but relates growing apart as a result to 'the problem'. The latter findings appear to clash with the assumption that women are more relationship orientated than men (Diedrick, 1991)

and that wives are more sensitive than husbands to marital problems involving emotions and communication. Although it is possible that men are becoming more sensitive to relationship dynamics in marriage, it is suspected that some men used general references to poor communication and other relationship problems in order to avoid admitting that their own misbehaviour had undermined the marriage (Vannoy, 2000). This seemed to be the case with **Seedat**, who describes the relationship as “falling apart” long before he conducted an affair, thus not taking responsibility for his part in the failed marriage. However, this did not apply to **Andrew** and **John** who admitted that their behaviour contributed extensively to the dissolution of their marriage.

Findings show that infidelity among married couples is the strongest predictor of later divorce (Amato & Previti, 2003). Infidelity appears to play a central role in the understanding of many people regarding the manner in which their marriages unravel, and individuals who cite infidelity as a cause of divorce demonstrate poorer adjustment than those who cite other causes. However, this did not seem to be the case with **Rahima** and **Andrew**, since both, having experienced unfaithfulness by their respective spouses, gained the power to overcome adversity. In addition they seemed to be better off emotionally and financially than **Seedat** and **Tracy** who both thought they had control over the divorce process. Along with infidelity, complaints about the general quality of the marital relationship and their incompatibility, growing apart, personality clashes, and lack of communication; figure prominently in the accounts of the divorces of all three of the couples.

Initiation of divorce is associated with better adjustment to divorce since it involves possessing control over the process and this effect appears to continue, to moderate improvement in the quality of life experienced long after divorce (Kurdeck & Blisk, 1983; Wallerstein, 1986). If women are regarded as the initiators of divorce, they therefore may fare better after divorce (Diedrick, 1991). However, this appears to be contrary to the experiences of the three couples who participated in the present study with respect to who was the initiator or non-initiator. In the case of the first couple, **Rahima** was the non-initiator of both the separation and divorce. However, it appears that

**Rahima** has adapted more effectively, is flourishing in her work, and is financially better off. With regards to **Seedat**, although he was the initiator of the divorce his transition was described with an implicit guilt and his sudden remarriage bears similar problems to that of his previous marriage, such as his extensive hours of work and lack of commitment. Concerning the second couple, **Andrew** was the non-initiator of both the separation and the divorce. Although, at first, he had difficulty adjusting to the divorce, he maintained a successful work identity and is currently married. **Tracy**, as the initiator, struggled financially and experienced numerous unsuccessful relationships. Regarding the third couple, **John** initiated the separation while **Sarah** initiated the divorce. Although it was difficult for him at first, in the long run, **John** seems to have coped far better than **Sarah** who believes that she would not have initiated the divorce had he not initiated the separation. Thus, it appears that non-initiators, regardless, of gender, seem to adapt better in the long run as opposed to initiators. This may relate to identity strength, regardless of who was the initiator or non-initiator (Vannoy, 2000). This view contrasts with the findings that suggest that initiators of the divorce tend to adjust better in the long run (Spanier & Thompson, 1984).

Furthermore, Pettit and Bloom (as cited in Buehler, 1987) contend that the status of being the initiator is an important variable because it reflects a sense of personal control during a period of change. **Rahima**, **Andrew**, and **John**, felt that they possessed no control over the divorce process since they had not been allowed to be involved in this major life decision and were given little warning that their spouses wanted to terminate the marriage. As a result, they experienced further rejection (Kitson, 1982), while **Seedat** and **Tracy** experienced more intense guilt (Weiss, 1975). **Sarah** and **John** experienced these emotions alternately between the two of them during the separation and divorce phases since they were both involved in the decision to separate and divorce. Spanier and Thompson (1984) reported that the men who were non-initiators reported more anger than the men who were initiators. While this was the case for **John**, **Andrew** experienced a sense of relief and freedom.

Thus the three couples can be seen as fitting into Vannoy's (1995) divorce role paradigm of initiator and non-initiator which therefore provides grounds for a comparison among the three divorced couples. Hence the divorce of **Rahima** and **Seedat** is seen to be the 'set-up' type, that of **Andrew** and **Tracy**, the 'abandoned' type and that of **Sarah** and **John**, the 'escape' divorce. This classification cannot be accurately conceptualized as a dichotomy. It merely refers to the respective position of each partner on each continuum as they relate to one another in this particular relationship, and not as they relate to others, nor is it a description of their general over-arching pattern of behaviour.

The set-up type of divorce involves the self-attending spouse (**Seedat** as initiator), who becomes discontented and begins the emotional transition from the relationship first, and yet avoids taking responsibility for terminating the marriage. **Seedat** confirmed that the marriage was over a long time prior to his affair and this was only a result of their having grown apart. Feelings of guilt contributed to **Seedat's** lack of ability to accept responsibility for initiating the divorce, perhaps, in order to avoid publicly appearing to be the "bad guy", or, to avoid admitting that he caused the pain that **Rahima** and his children experienced. **Seedat** (the one who set her up) went to great lengths to convince **Rahima** (the one set-up) to define their relationship as irredeemable and to initiate the idea that **Seedat** take the time he needed to sort out his personal issues. The one who set up the divorce (**Seedat**) behaved in ways that caused **Rahima** to arrive at this conclusion. He played the self-pity card in that he has never been able to find his own interests because everything that he does, is for everyone else except himself. **Rahima** thus wished to save her marriage and was driven to take responsibility for **Seedat** leaving the family by recommending that he leave and search for that which he felt he needed to gain.

The abandonment type of divorce is probably the most common. It occurs when the abandoner (**Tracy**) initiates the termination of the relationship both emotionally and physically. **Tracy** emotionally detached herself from **Andrew** when her affair became a part of her life and she became more distant towards Andrew and the children. **Tracy** was aware of her own needs, and could no longer offer caregiving to the abandoned

(**Andrew**). **Andrew** was the partner who was more attached to and more nurturing towards **Tracy**, and his children, and desired that the relationship should work if they were both committed to ‘fixing’ the marriage.

The escape type of divorce involves the escaped partner (**John**) wishing the relationship to continue. Although he may have become withdrawn and simply unwilling to meet **Sarah’s** needs, he remained attached and desired the relationship. **Sarah** (the escapee) seemed to have been the first to feel the emotional separation from **John** and was also the one who took responsibility for the physical separation. Even though **John** chose to leave the home, he returned the next day yet **Sarah** suggested that they remain separated. This usually occurs only after much effort to improve the relationship. For safety, emotional survival, or self-respect, **Sarah** eventually placed caring for herself above caring for **John** and after one year of being separated she ended the relationship. She escaped.

#### **Parents Role in Relation to their Children**

This theme relates to the emotions of the parents concerning the impact of the divorce on their children and their difficulty in consoling their children during the divorce. Furthermore, it reflects the role of the children in the marital conflict of their parents as well as the patterns of interactions between the children and their parents.

One of the most significant changes associated with divorce is the departure of a parent, typically the father, from the home. In the overwhelming majority of cases, the custody of children is awarded to the mother (Buehler, 1987). This was the case with regards to **Rahima, Tracy** and **Sarah**, although **Sarah’s** children were from her first marriage.

Riessman (1990) differentiates between the feelings experienced by women and men towards their children. Women’s empathy for their children and spouses leads to guilt, self-blame, and sadness, while men were more likely to be depressed if they were afforded less than their desired contact with their children. Interestingly, there appears to be a connection between an emotional manifestation and the role of the initiator and non-

initiator. Although all three couples experienced guilt, it was based on different circumstances. **Rahima** and **Andrew** experienced sadness and guilt at not being able to comfort and protect their children. However, their differences resulted from the presence of their children. **Rahima** has custody of her children and the acknowledgment of the pain of her children surpasses her feelings of despair. She, at times, found it difficult to provide the care that her children needed. **Andrew**, on the other hand had only visitation rights to his children. His powerlessness was a result of not being physically present to protect his children. For **Sarah**, her guilt encompassed the reversal of roles between parent and child where her children have provided her with emotional and financial support (Johnson, 1988). Furthermore, her guilt is worsened by subjecting her children to a second divorce. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) identified that the parent-child relationship may be eroded during the period of the actual divorce when parents often exhibit a diminished capacity to parent. This may be the case when parents are emotionally stressed and tend to be less consistent in the use of discipline, less affectionate, and may display rejection of their children (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1985). **Sarah** reflects on how she was impatient with her children during this stressful time. The guilt experienced by **Seedat** and **Tracy** found expression in their actions as initiators of the divorce and therefore their responsibility for breaking up their family unit. **Tracy's** guilt is further amplified by using her children as co-combatants in her revenge and disputes against **Andrew**. On the other hand, **John** appeared indifferent since he had always maintained a strong bond with his biological daughter even though she was not living in the same household as his step-family.

The guilt experienced by **Rahima**, **Tracy** and **Sarah** stems from the belief that they were not being “good enough” mothers. They are aware that divorce has hurt their children, and they bear both the burden for this and the desire to remedy it. **Rahima** expresses sadness with regards to a society that has failed to respond to women and, also, to attend to the children (Boney, 2002; Riessman, 1990), thus placing full responsibility on mothers to help their children to adjust. A divorced mother's guilt may be reinforced by social, economic, religious, and legal institutions that marginalize parenting outside of the

dominant ideology of biological heterosexual marriage and full time commitment to mothering that excludes paid employment (Arendell, 2000).

Since women are usually awarded custody of their children, the relationships that are most affected are those of the father and his child(ren). Thus, a father's absence challenges the integrity of parent-child relationships and one would expect a decline in the closeness of the relationship (Furstenberg, 1990). A decline in father-adolescent closeness is to be expected since fathers, typically, play a lesser role in the day-to-day care of, and communication with, their children. Fathers are often viewed as agents of change because, compared to their closeness during the pre-divorce phase, their post-divorce involvement tends to be low. Children are regarded as equal to, or more important than, the father as an agent of change with respect to father-child closeness because they tend to have power in encouraging and discouraging contact with their father.

**Seedat's** relationship with his children, is described as tense and uninvolved. His lack of involvement and disinterest in establishing stronger bonds with his children contribute to their strained relationship. **Seedat's** relationship with Ravesh (the younger son) is less conflictual than that of Mayern (his older son). Perhaps this was influenced by their ages during the time of the divorce (Furstenberg, 1990). However, it appears that the poor relationship with his children is independent of the divorce, thus supporting the notion that father-adolescent closeness following divorce is likely to be a continuation of the pre-divorce relationships (Arditti & Prouty, 1999). Although **Rahima** encourages her children to visit their father, she feels that she needs to respect her children's decision regarding the amount of time they wish to spend with their father. It appears that **Seedat** is aware of his children's lack of responsiveness to him, which inhibits his initiative to engage with his children in the future. This further contributes to his children wanting to spend less time with his father since they interpret his lack of involvement as abandonment and being disinterested; thus the circle continues (Booth & Amato, 1991).

During the pre-separation period, **Andrew** enjoyed a strong and close relationship with his children and, as such, his relationship with his children was not severely impacted on. Although **Tracy** made visitations with his children difficult, he fought to increase the quantity and quality of his interaction with his children thereby preserving the emotional bonds of kinship (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Riessman, 1990). This is in contrast to the fact that the quantity and quality of contact between children and non-custodial parents, usually the father, tends to decrease with time (Furstenberg & Nord, (1985) and Seltzer, (1991) as cited in Amato & Booth, 1996). To the present day, **Andrew** still maintains a close relationship with his children and has continued to protect them from knowing the events of the divorce by not telling them of these.

After **John's** first divorce, his daughter lived with her mother. The divorce created a special context between **John** and his daughter, which resulted in a positive outcome (Riessman, 1990). After remarrying, **John** maintained a close relationship with his daughter, which differs from the view that remarriage seems to lessen parent-child closeness (Arditti & Prouty, 1999). **John** indicated his divided loyalties between maintaining a relationship with his daughter and creating new relationships with his new step-family. Although the main reason for the dissolution of **John's** marriage was 'the problem' rather than the tension regarding the step-children, tension did exist. This supports the view of White and Booth (1985) that remarriages that include step-children are more likely to dissolve than remarriages without them and it seems that children from previous relationships constitute a source of tension, strain, and discord in a new marriage. Ihinger-Tallman (1988) reported that the wife's adjustment to her step-children may be even more troublesome than the husband's adjustment to her children. This seems to have been the case with **Sarah** and her children. Although her children did not like **John**, they accepted and tolerated him purely for the sake of their mother. By contrast, **John's** daughter made no effort to accept **Sarah**. Furthermore, older step-children in the household inhibit the adjustment of the step-parent to a greater extent than younger children, perhaps because they have greater experience with pre-existing family patterns and are less willing to accept the step-parent (Ihinger-Tallman, 1988). This was the case,



in the present study, with regards to all the children who were already teenagers at the time of the divorce or remarriage of their parents.

### **Redefining a New Identity and Role-exiting**

The building of an identity becomes essential for spouses in order to redefine their identities away from the marriage identity to that of a single working parent. Thus, creating a new identity apart from the relationship is a necessary step in the process of detaching oneself from the partner. A common pattern identified in these couples, is one of an increasing independence allowing them to nurture their own values and interests that would facilitate a new life without one's spouse. However, for a new identity to form, the existence of previous roles that bound spouses together is necessary. According to Ebough (1988), role-exiting involves disengaging from a role that was central to one's identity and establishing a new role that takes into account one's ex-role. It, therefore, involves disengagement (not accepting any rights and obligations from the role of husband and wife), and disidentification (no longer thinking of one's self as being in the former role) (Ebough, 1988). This allows for the process of a new identity to be formed and internalised in one's self-concept.

Linked to the process of creating a new identity, certain factors that influence the process of role-exiting and the change in self-identity, have been identified. These factors include: initiator status as well as the degree of awareness, voluntariness, and control of the role-exiting (Duran-Aydintug; 1995). Thus, control can usually be influenced by length of separation (Gigy & Kelly, 1992); sex-role orientation (De Garmo & Kitson, 1996; Pledge, 1992); socio-demographic variables such as economic status, number and age of children, education, therapy, time (Rahav & Baum, 2002); employment (Bisagni & Eckenrode, 1995; Rahav & Baum, 2002); and resiliency (Flach, 1988; Richardson et al., 1990).

Women whose orientation is toward the home and family, that is, traditional in nature, are said to experience more difficulty in adjusting to separation and divorce than those

women whose marital sex-role orientation is self-directed and thus non-traditional (Bloom & Clement, 1984). Among the women in the present study, **Rahima** seemed to be the woman who had most difficulty in redefining her role as a single-parent. This could have been a result of her identifying, very strongly, with the role of being a mother and wife, particularly since she was a stay-at-home mother. Furthermore, **Rahima** was the non-initiator of the divorce and had no control over the process, particularly since her husband, for nine months, was unable to decide whether he wanted to return home or not. Perhaps **Rahima's** attempt to reconcile her marriage was due to the fact that she had two young children, and at the time, she was unemployed. Thus, her role-exiting only occurred once **Seedat** finally filed for divorce. It would seem that these factors, rather than hampering her adjustment to divorce, gave her the strength and motivation to overcome her situation by becoming successful in her job and raising her two children alone. This contrasts with findings that regard these factors as inhibiting adjustment and causing emotional and psychological distress (Bloom & Clement, 1984; Goode, 1956). **Tracy**, on the other hand, did not experience difficulty in role-exiting, perhaps because she was the initiator of the divorce and hence had control over the process. Furthermore, the separation period was relatively short, allowing easier detachment from the role of being a wife. During her marriage, **Tracy** already had a job, thus it was not necessary for her to establish new roles as single parent and careerwoman. However, **Tracy** experienced financial difficulties, particularly since she had two young children to care for, consequently making her adjustment to divorce more difficult (Bursik, 1991; Ihinger-Tallman, 1988). **Tracy's** case is illustrative of findings relating to women's adjustment to divorce (Amato & Previti, 2003). **Sarah** is both consistent and inconsistent with the research findings in regard to the abovementioned factors, in the sense that **Sarah** was not the initiator of the separation but was, in fact, the initiator of the divorce. Her role-exiting occurred once she regained control of the process after one year of being separated. Although **Sarah** had previously been divorced, was raising two children on her own and was successful in her work, she still had difficulty exiting her role of being a wife. **Sarah**, in the sense of being a professional, appears to be the most successful of all three women, yet, she seems to be the one who is finding it most difficult to adjust. This

could have been due to the circumstances surrounding the decision to divorce rather than the divorce itself (Pledge, 1992).

Regarding men, however, studies have found no significant relationships between sex-role orientation and adjustment to divorce, although some evidence exists that adjustment is more favourable in those men who are willing to share decision making and power in the family (Bloom & Clement, 1984). Other studies have found that similar variables relate to both men and women in their adjustment to divorce. These include: being prepared for the decision to divorce, high marital conflict, a decreased degree of attachment to the ex-spouse, receiving social support, possessing adequate finances, and engaging in social and dating activities (Kurdeck & Blisk, 1983; Raschke, 1977; Spanier & Casto, 1979; Weiss, 1975). Men usually do not find it difficult to establish a new identity, particularly since the focus of men falls mainly on their role of being established in a career. This is consistent with **Seedat** whose role was mainly reflected in his status as being the breadwinner and was never really involved in the day-to-day care of his children. Bailey (2007) reflects that lack of contact with the children is likely to be a factor in whether or not non-residential parents identify with the role of being a parent. However there is also the exception to the rule: **Andrew**, who during the period of his wife's numerous affairs had become the primary caregiver of his children. Thus, he was involved in the role of being both parent and worker, while detaching himself from the role of being the father, rather than that of a husband, was difficult for him. **John**, on the other hand, underwent more difficulty exiting the role of being a husband rather than that of a step-father, since he was still hoping, during a period of one year, to be reconciled with his ex-spouse (Diedrick, 1991). Exiting the parental role was not part of **John's** process since this was his second marriage and his biological daughter did not live with him.

Positive consequences of divorce for women are the result of a change in self-identity and/or new opportunities for growth and development (Bevino & Sharkin, 2003) which heightens a sense of competence and self-worth (Bisagni & Eckenrode, 1995), while men, more often than women, seek another romantic relationship following divorce as a

means to create a new identity or to continue the same identity. This is consistent with **Seedat** (remarried), **Andrew** (remarried), and **John** (currently involved), as opposed to **Rahima** and **Sarah** who are not currently involved, though **Tracy** is currently involved.

Occupational progress following divorce further contributes to a woman's self-confidence and sense of competence (Rahav & Baum, 2002) as opposed to men, since the work identity of men remains the same. **Rahima** was the only participant who established a work identity after her divorce since she had been a house-wife previously. **Sarah** developed her work interests by studying law, while **Tracy**, not by choice, had to dedicate more time to her work. Work has been linked to an increase in self-esteem, particularly for women, since self-esteem for women may be related to greater involvement in instrumental activities (Diedrick, 1991). **Seedat**, **Andrew** and **John** focused more on their work as a result of not having their children residing with them (Bailey, 2007). Hence, research indicates that, since men have always identified themselves as being in a work role, their need to gain self-esteem after divorce is lower than that of women. It appears that self-esteem among men increases as a result of the pursuit of their own interests, as is evident in the case of **John** and his interest in taekwondo. Furthermore, work for all participants is not only a source of independent income, but also a source of experiences, interactions and social roles, as well as an area in which one may be tested and be proven (Rahav & Baum, 2002).

### **Relationship with Former Spouse**

Post-divorce adjustment involves the ability to develop an identity that is separate from the former spouse and marriage (Madden-Derdich & Arditti, 1999). However, this task is not always a simple process, especially for couples who continue to share parenting responsibilities (Reibstein, 1998). Both **Seedat** and **Rahima** comment that the only relationship they have is fully centred on their children. Although the same may have been said for **Andrew** and **Tracy** when the children were younger, there is no relationship between them at present, since their children are much older and more independent. For **Sarah** and **John**, no ties exist between them, since they have no

children of their own. As such, this ongoing emotional detachment between the former spouses has been regarded as a primary source of increased emotional distress during the post-divorce period (Kitson, 1992). According to Diedrick (1991) and Zeiss et al., (1980), men, compared with women, feel a greater degree of attachment and desire to reconcile after divorce. This seems to be contradicted by **Seedat, Andrew** and **John** who did not seek any reconciliation after the divorce. This could also be due to the fact that attachment to the former spouse could decline with the passage of time (Kitson & Morgan, 1990). **Tracy** reports her desire to reconcile with Andrew after the divorce. Madden-Derdich and Arditto (1999) found that creating a new intimate relationship is an effective way for fathers to dissolve their ties with their former spouse by shifting feelings of attachment to the new relationship. This allows them to move on and begin the healing process. **Seedat** remarried immediately after his divorce had been finalized; **Andrew** remarried a couple of years later; and **John** became involved in a new relationship soon after his divorce.

Furthermore, there tends to be a lesser attachment for those who initiated the divorce (Berman, 1985), perhaps because the detachment process had begun earlier in the relationship. This was not the case for **Tracy**, who, as initiator, nevertheless felt a need to reconcile. This however was consistent with Brown et al. (1980) who propose that attachment to the spouse is stronger for those who initiate the divorce. Attachment has been found to be associated with depression, anger, loneliness, and a loss of self-efficacy. Furthermore, attachment may manifest in varying patterns of attachment behaviours such as preoccupation and hostility towards the former spouse (Madden-Derdich & Arditto, 1999). All the participants of the present study, except for **John**, expressed a passive hostility and anger towards their ex-spouses. Furthermore, for the sake of the children, **Seedat, Rahima, Andrew** and **Tracy** maintained a level of civility towards their ex-spouses (Reibstein, 1998).

### **Establishing New Social Networks and Economic Stability**

Social networks are disrupted by divorce, as indicated by a loss or change of friends, social disruption, and loss of contact with affinal kin (Arendell, 2000; Kitson & Morgan, 1990). Yet, the very loss of these networks results in the reorganization of new and existing relationships, since social support and economic stability has been regarded as a contributory factor of post-divorce adjustment (Thuen & Eikeland, 1998) for both men and women. However, gender differences regarding social support and economic status seem to exist between women and men (Albrecht, 1980; Riessman, 1990).

Women, compared to men, appear to receive more social support after marital separation (Diedrick, 1991; Spanier & Thompson, 1984; Wright & Maxwell, 1991), which may be a result of men disclosing less personal information to family and friends, so that they are less likely to have a same-sex intimate confidante (Thuen & Eikeland, 1998), while women find satisfaction in their friendships and seek social support when they need help (Diedrick, 1991). **Rahima** and **Sarah** found their primary support system in their families. **Rahima** expresses how her family supported her through the whole divorce process, even to the extent of trying to reconcile her with **Seedat**. **Sarah**, on the other hand, depended on her family for support since she had lost most of her friends. This is in keeping with Kitson (1992) who found that individuals receive more help from their own families compared to friends and colleagues. In contrast, **Tracy** experienced ambivalence regarding the support her parents gave her, yet she acknowledges that they assisted her with housework and childcare (Machida & Holloway, 1991). Furthermore, in keeping with the findings of Wright and Maxwell (1991), **Sarah** expressed the view that support from her adult children was greater than that from any other source. However, according to Wright and Maxwell (1991), men ranked their friends and their parents ahead of children with respect to support, which was not the case for **John**, who depended mostly on his daughter, rather than his friends and family who reside overseas. Since **Andrew** lost most of his friends (Kitson & Morgan, 1990), his family provided him with much support; however, he chose to isolate himself by throwing himself into his work. This is in keeping with Riessman (1990) and Stone (2002) who aver that men, particularly

fathers, seem to receive greater support and encouragement from the workplace. However, in contrast to research that suggests social support as a variable for positive adjustment, Thuen and Eikeland (1998) found that support from, and interaction with, extended kin were unrelated, or even negatively related, to adjustment to marital separation. This is reflected in **Seedat's** experience where he experienced limited support from his immediate family, particularly since he was Muslim and his new wife was Afrikaans.

It is common for friendships to be lost during divorce because they are often related to being a part of a married couple (McDaniel & Coleman, 2003). This was the case with **Andrew** and **Tracy** who reported feeling that, as single persons, they were a threat to married couples, either because they represented a failure in marriage, or because they might be considered a sexual threat (Spanier & Casto, 1979). As for **Rahima** and **Seedat**, social engagements were limited to family, particularly **Rahima's** family, and as such, **Seedat** experienced a loss of the friendship he had formed within **Rahima's** extended family. Riessman (1990) reports that a woman's continuing bonds and obligations to kin are often seen as a problem. Both **John** and **Sarah** lost friends mainly as a result of 'the problem', rather than the divorce. However, **John** reflects that, after the divorce, friends who were gained while they were a couple, were loyal to **Sarah** only.

Developing an intimate relationship with a new partner has been shown to ease the transition into singlehood and dating can boost the divorcee's sense of worth (Garvin et al., 1993). This is reflected in the experiences of **Seedat, Andrew, John** and **Tracy** with regards to establishing new relationships after the divorce. For **Rahima** and **Sarah**, depending on themselves, rather than on a man, creates feelings of independence, responsibility, competence, challenge, control, and self-esteem (Rahav & Baum, 2002).

Work is an area in which both men and women are able to receive social support (Bisagni & Eckenrode, 1995; Riessman, 1990; Stone 2002). This appears to be consistent with regards to all the participants, whose work requires continuous interaction with colleagues and clients. **Seedat** is the exception. Although his line of work requires

relationships with people, it is perhaps by choice that **Seedat** only attends work in order to ascertain whether any stock is required or any problems have arisen. Furthermore, men gain much of their personal status and self-concept from their careers. Those who were not awarded the custody of their children dedicate more time to their work and, as such, flourish in their careers. A new commitment to work, coupled with previous histories of employment, sets the stage for career advancement, improved financial status, and consequently, heightens self-esteem (Riessman, 1990). Of all the men, this was particularly true for **Andrew**, since, after his divorce, he dedicated all his time to his work as a means to cope with having lost his children. This resulted in his increased financial and career status. The same may be said of **Rahima, Tracy** and **Sarah**, which supports the findings by Anderson, Stewart and Dimidjian (1994) that employment is an area in which mastery, independence and competence develop, contributing to enhanced self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Research indicates that the greatest gender difference in the experience of divorce is related to economic stability. Women are said to experience a decrease in income while men tend to experience upward economic mobility (Albrecht, 1980; Weitzman, 1985), possibly because children tend to reside with their mothers and thus the latter devote more substantial time than the fathers, to caring for children. This is consistent with **Seedat** whose increase in financial status resulted in his freedom from the parental obligation that is involved in the day-to-day care of the children. As **Rahima** reflects, the child support maintenance from **Seedat** does not even cover the school fees of even one of the children. Although **John** acknowledges that he still has accounts to settle, his financial situation is improving. **John** does not pay any child support since his daughter is older and works. However, unlike **Seedat** and **John**, **Andrew's** experience was different. Although his financial situation improved substantially after the divorce, his wife continuously fought for more maintenance, thus leaving **Andrew** with barely enough money to survive. As for the women, research regarding the economic consequences of divorce was consistent with regards to **Tracy** and **Sarah**. For **Sarah**, the predominant concern centres on her inability to financially support her young adult children. However, her economic decline is a result of legal aspects rather than the



divorce itself. She feels obligated to financially support her adult children and is discouraged by her not being able to provide for them as in the past. **Tracy**, on the other hand, experienced financial difficulty because she was responsible for taking care of two young children (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

The employment history of these women will influence their ability to move smoothly through the economic divorce (Bohannon, 1970). Their transition was not only influenced by how many hours they worked, but also, their investment in their work as a career (McDaniel & Coleman, 2003). Both **Tracy** and **Sarah** worked throughout the larger part of their marriages. **Sarah** invested in her career and although she no longer works in the same occupation, she has established herself successfully as an assistant lawyer. However, **Sarah** is still faced with financial difficulty as a result of the debt that she incurred during the legal procedures related to 'the problem'. **Tracy**, on the other hand, did not invest much in her career since her husband's career was the predominant one. Thus, she experienced a decrease in her economic status, and therefore, she was compelled to invest in her work. In contrast to the other women, **Rahima** did not work outside the home during her marriage. Of all the women, **Rahima's** economic status has grown the most substantially, in the sense that if she chooses to retire, she would be able to not only survive, but enjoy life. **Rahima's** economic status is better than during her marriage to **Seedat**. **Rahima's** experience is therefore inconsistent with research which suggests that women with young children, and who have not worked during their marriage, would experience a deterioration in their economic circumstances (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Weitzman, 1985).

### **Towards Resiliency**

Resilience has been examined and divided into internal (such as personality traits, attitude, sense of mastery) and external factors (such as family support and community).

The loss of an individual, whether by death or divorce, in some way forces us to contemplate what life would be like in that person's absence, to question our own

conduct, relationships, and even the meaning of life itself. Thus, how we cope with the challenges reflects, to some extent, our more general capacity for health and well-being. Humans are more resilient in the face of loss. According to Frankl (1985), the search for meaning is a primary human motivation, often prompted by suffering, and forms the foundation of positive psychological adjustment. People may try to find meaning in their divorce experience as a means to cope and grow from this experience. Meaning is thus linked to purpose in life. For **Rahima, Tracy and Sarah**, raising their children appears to be part of their purpose in life. For **Andrew and John**, their purpose is to protect and provide for their children. **Seedat**, on the other hand, appears to be still searching for his purpose. Furthermore, Greene, Galambos and Lee (2003) report that spirituality or religious belief is of practical importance to people during adversity. This is reflected by **Rahima, Sarah, John, and Tracy**, who believe that their hope and faith in a higher power assisted them to cope with the divorce. Yet, **John** finds and practices his spirituality in other areas such as meditation and taekwondo. **Sarah's** purpose in life is to assist individuals in a similar situation to herself, by working and studying to be a criminal lawyer. However, **Seedat** has lost much of his faith and belief, particularly since he has married an Afrikaans woman.

**John and Rahima** both expressed the need to forgive their spouses, although forgiving did not reflect forgetting. By doing so, they were able to let go of negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in response to wrongdoing (Rye, Folck, Heim, Olszewski & Traina, 2004).

Thompson (1985) proposes that seeing one's own actions as being responsible for an undesirable event is adaptive because it heightens feelings of control. This occurred during a time of self-awareness and self-reflection for **Rahima, Andrew, Tracy, Sarah** and **John**, whereby, in time, they were able to reflect on their participation in the dissolution of their marriage. Thus, psychological thriving appears to represent a kind of growth: growth in knowledge, skill, and confidence; greater elaboration and differentiation of one's ability to deal with the world at large (Carver, 1998).

Self-efficacy appears to be the underlying characteristic of psychological thriving. Self-efficacy refers to the ability to confront and overcome challenges with which one is confronted by developing skills or utilizing the skills that an individual already possesses (Carver, 1998). As such, self-efficacy can be strengthened by developing competency in a particular area and, thus, it becomes further enhanced every time one is confronted with a new challenge. When people master a new skill, they are more able, appropriate and flexible to confront and deal with the unpredictable world. For all the participants, work was an area in which they could prove their competency and become successful. By so doing, the newly acquired skills provided the basis on which to increase their confidence, which seeps into other areas in their lives. **Rahima's** confidence grew in proportion to her increase in financial status, new relations with other people, and developing relationships with her children. The sense of empowerment felt by **Andrew** and **Tracy**, resulted in an active social life with friends and colleagues and provided **Andrew** with the courage to enter a second marriage which has lasted twenty years. **Sarah's** confidence is reflected in her work, where she feels worthy. For **Sarah** isolating herself from everyone helped her cope with the divorce and has provided her with a sense of self-mastery. Apart from work, **John** has also decided to return to teaching taekwondo, to which he had previously devoted twelve years. This action is in keeping with Carver (1998), who proposes that those high in mastery tend to master the situation effectively, appraise their experience as beneficial, and increase their sense of mastery with which they approach subsequent situations. Those who begin with a lower sense of mastery, cope by avoidance and escapism. They fare more poorly, appraise their experience as detrimental, and suffer further depletion in the sense of mastery. This seems to be consistent with the case of **Seedat**, who has difficulty in accepting his part in the dissolution of his marriage by blaming external variables.

Resilience is also reflected in the existence of social support resources. Thus, the existence or perception of support and acceptance from significant others as an external resource, can be seen as providing a person with a solid base of security (Harzan & Sharver, as cited in Carver 1998). All the participants, except **Seedat**, received adequate

social support from family and friends, and this demonstrates that social support assists in positive adjustment to divorce.

### **Family Reorganization**

Reorganising the family from a nuclear family system to a binuclear system is not always a simple task. The binuclear system contains two households organised around the divorced parents (Ahrns, 1979). In moving towards binuclearity, family members must establish new patterns of relating: a task termed systemic reorganization (Rodgers & Conrad, 1986). Single-parent and step-family households are on the increase.

Families continuously change and adapt to their environment, thus, hierarchies, alignments, decision making, and general life patterns in a family must change in general. Therefore, divorce does not represent the dissolution of the original family, but rather, the family is reorganised to function on a higher level (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984). Families, particularly with children, are organised around custodial and non-custodial parents. However, since, mostly, women have custody of the children, the family is usually organised around the mother and her children (Kitson & Holmes, 1992; Spanier & Thompson, 1984; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). **Rahima, Tracy and Sarah** were all awarded custody of their children, while **Sarah's** children are from her first marriage.

After a divorce, family members must establish new patterns of interacting with one another. The subsystem for which the re-establishment of a relationship probably requires the greatest effort, is the non-custodial parent-child subsystem. In this case, the non-custodial parents are the fathers. In the absence of physical proximity, and the presence of legal restrictions with regards to contact, as well as those imposed by the ex-wives, the non-custodial parent must consciously plan interactions with their children (Rodgers & Conrad, 1986). As a result of the conflict between **Tracy and Andrew**, **Tracy** would limit **Andrew's** access to the children with the intention of punishing him (Rodgers & Conrad, 1986) for not taking her back. This behaviour only reinforced **Andrew's** commitment, as a father, to establishing a relationship with his children. Unlike **Andrew**,

**Seedat** makes no conscious effort to arrange meetings with his children, and appears to be satisfied with the limited time he spends with his children. Thus, **Rahima** acts as the gatekeeper (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) between **Seedat** and the children.

However, the task of redefining patterns of interactions with the custodial parent-child subsystem also needs to take place. According to Hetherington and al. (1985), once new patterns are in place, the custodial parent-child subsystem looks different than it did previously. Children are likely to play a larger role in family life, share greater intimacy with the parent and have a more equal relationship to the parent. This was consistent with the experience of **Sarah** and **John**, with regards to their biological children in which role reversal occurred between parent and child. However, it should be considered that the children of both **Sarah** and **John** were from both their first marriages. Furthermore, **Sarah's** children and **John's** daughter were older and this could allow parents to depend on their children for emotional support. Furthermore, in **Sarah's** case, her children shared adult responsibilities, such as assisting in paying the bills. The children of **Rahima** and **Tracy** were much younger when the divorce occurred. **Tracy** employed her children as tools for revenge against **Andrew** (Rodgers & Conrad, 1986), while **Rahima's** children, in particular Mayern, were seen as mediators between **Rahima** and **Seedat** allowing for continuous attachment between the parent subsystems (Reibstein, 1998).

**Seedat's** strained relationship with his children could also be a reflection of their response to his sudden introduction of a step-parent into the family. This is consistent with Rodgers and Conrad (1986) who propose that the early introduction of a step-parent figure could serve to retard the development of the relationship between non-custodial parent and child. Furthermore, **Rahima** feels that **Seedat's** new partner may pressurize him to limit his contact with her, which as Weiss (1975) reflects, is sometimes the case in remarriages.

A further issue following divorce is the effect that marital disruption exerts on the relationships with the extended family (Johnson, 1988). Following a divorce, contact with relatives by marriage is generally reduced, while interaction with blood relatives may be

heightened (Furstenberg, 1990). This is consistent with all three couples and also with Johnson (1988) who notes that mothers make an effort to maintain relations with paternal grandparents. **Sarah** briefly suggests the importance of maintaining ties between children and both their maternal and paternal grandparents. Thus, **Sarah** still maintains a relationship with her first ex-husband's mother as a result of the children. Currently, Sarah has no contact with **John's** family. However, the above proposition is inconsistent with the case of **Rahima** and **Tracy**. Although **Rahima** encourages her children to continue relationships with **Seedat's** family, she, on the other hand feels it unnecessary to have any connection with them. **Tracy** did not encourage nor insist that a relationship continue between the children and **Andrew's** parents. **Andrew** reflects that the impact of the divorce, to a certain extent, was harder for his parents because they were involved in the daily care of the children. This is supported by Johnson (1988) who proposes that "while divorce can end the connection between in-laws, the formerly married and their relatives still share biological relationships to the children of the dissolved marriage and in that capacity they share similar interests in the welfare of these children" (p. 2).

### **How Does Change Come About?**

The primary question one must ask relates to the development of our understanding of change. Has this research presented a new collection of experiences outside of those currently held? To answer this question requires more than a binary response. To be sure, the current study presents a new collection of individual and unique voices that explore the response of couples to change in the context of their divorces. In so doing, it yields an addition to the collected knowledge concerning change, and specifically, non-instigative change within divorce.

Although the above themes reflect the experiences of divorce of the individuals and the consequent changes that took place within their families, combining the narrative of each of the couples will provide the reader with a comprehensive understanding of how change occurs within a family system. Furthermore, as reflected by Ayers (1997), similar

systems in similar circumstances will exhibit very different types of behaviour. This will be evident in the changes that each family endured.

### **Change Revisited**

The relationship between **Rahima** and **Seedat** was defined as being complementary, with **Rahima** being the dominant, communicative spouse while **Seedat** was the submissive, silent spouse. Since **Seedat** withdrew and became less involved in family activities and discussions, **Rahima** felt it necessary to draw closer to her husband by re-opening the channels of communication. This is supported by Lewis (1986) who argues that a family initially responds to stress by trying to maintain its organisational structure. However, **Seedat** responded to **Rahima's** actions by withdrawing even further and spending less time with the family. As such, **Rahima's** interpretation of **Seedat's** behaviour as needing space, caused **Rahima** to observe her husband from a distance. Due to internal pressures from the family, **Seedat** resorted to having an affair as a means to escape the tension.

Similarly, the relationship between **Andrew** and **Tracy** was described as complementary, where Andrew was the introverted, pleasure seeking, quiet spouse and **Tracy**, the extroverted, loud and communicative spouse. The family functioned appropriately with both **Tracy** and **Andrew** working and equally sharing the childcare. However, as new changes took place in the family, such as **Andrew's** over-involvement in his work and lack of intimacy, the distance between **Tracy** and **Andrew** increased to the point that **Tracy** conducted an affair. It appears that **Tracy** felt that the family could continue functioning the way it had, with **Andrew** involved in his work supporting the family, while **Tracy** enjoyed the benefits of being financially cared for by her husband, and emotionally, by her lover.

**Sarah** and **John** viewed their relationship as being parallel, that is, that they were both passive in their interaction with each other. The relationship was regarded as respectful and accommodating. Both **Sarah** and **John** entered into the new marriage with children from a previous marriage. Although arguments involving the children did occur,

particularly with **John's** daughter, the family was able to maintain a level of civility. As a family, they were unaware of the difficult transition their children would undergo when they remarried, consequently resulting in strained relationship between step-parents and step-children. However, their family was confronted with an external stressor that wreaked havoc in their family. After being reunited as a family, they were unable to adapt to the changes that resulted from 'the problem'. Thus, the damage that 'the problem' caused only resulted in a ripple effect of added stressors. This reflects the scenario of the Butterfly effect in which "a butterfly flapping its wings over the Amazon might produce a storm in Chicago" (Ward, 1995, p. 631). Internal stressors (suspicions, avoidance, and lack of communication) and those which were external (legal fees, societies and exclusion by friends), only contributed to the escalation of tension and conflict within the family. Unable to contain the tension, the marriage of **Sarah** and **John** resulted in divorce. The observation that choices and decisions were made at each crisis point, is supported by Ward (1995), who contends that choices are affected by internal and environmental factors, by the nature of the stress, resources available both within the family and its environment, and the meaning that family members attach to the event.

Once the existence of the affair was revealed, **Rahima** and **Seedat** attempted to reorganize the family according to how it used to be, that is, to maintain the nuclear family, where **Seedat** would return home, go to work and support his family, while **Rahima** remained at home in order to tend to the children. According to Prigogine and Stengers (1984), this is an impossible process, since change is irreversible, and therefore a system will never be the same as it had been, previously. Indeed, this shed light on the nature of their interactions, where **Seedat's** ongoing affair, lack of decisiveness about returning home, a deficiency in communication, lack of physical proximity and extensive working hours, only contributed to increasing the stress and tension within the family. These stressors contributed to the family moving away from their steady state since they were no longer able to adapt to the ongoing stressors. This relates to Prigogine's (as cited in Elkaim, 1981) notion that fluctuations regarding certain points or issues increase until they reach some critical level when a sudden change occurs. For **Rahima** and **Seedat**, the critical point occurred when they were unable to resolve the tension. At this point of



“bifurcation”, divorce is considered and the reorganization of a new family structure occurs.

McCubbin and Patterson (1983) postulate that with the passage of time, stressors are more likely to accumulate, available resources alter, and the situation is redefined, forcing the family to seek a further adaptation. This is true for **Andrew**, whose suspicions did not cause **Tracy’s** behaviour to cease; rather, the more suspicious Andrew became, the more **Tracy** spent time away from the family. Eventually, **Tracy’s** on-going promiscuous behaviour, lack of involvement with the family, and lack of communication, resulted in the family being unable to cope with the sudden changes. With regards to **Andrew** and **Tracy**, no attempts were made to reconcile. Once **Tracy** was confronted regarding her conducting an affair, she left the house the following day and filed for divorce.

**Rahima** has reorganised her family into a single-parent household, while **Seedat** has remarried into a step-family. The effect of the divorce not only affected the parental subsystem, but also affected the subsystem of the children. This process is in keeping with the idea that any change in one part of the system results in change in the entire system (Becvar & Becvar, 2003; Prigogine & Stengers, 1984). After the divorce, Mayern’s role in the family became that of the symptom-bearer; the child scapegoat, who sacrifices himself by misbehaving in order to ensure his father’s involvement in the family. Part of **Rahima’s** ongoing stress relates to her children since she feels that **Seedat’s** lack of involvement has caused them pain and suffering. **Rahima**, therefore, plays an active role in establishing a relationship between **Seedat** and the children. **Rahima** is faced with these decisions and concerns on a daily basis. This finds expression in Prigogine and Stenger (1984), who explain that, since family members are continuously interacting with each other, they never reach a state of equilibrium. Therefore, a family, as an open system, functions at a far-from-equilibrium state, and yet remains stable. Every family is embedded in a spectrum of chaos since it is continuously faced with problems, decisions and choices. Families are able to adapt to the chaos, but, when they are unable to redefine or adapt to the familial and societal changes, disorder

occurs. This can be said for **Seedat** who appears to be experiencing difficulty adjusting to the new changes in his step-family, since the very same stressors that occurred in his previous family are evident in his current marriage. Although the tension has not yet reached a critical level (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984), it is, however, escalating.

After the “bifurcation” that resulted in divorce, **Andrew** and **Tracy** were confronted with ongoing stress, even though the family was reorganised into a single-parent household, with **Andrew** playing an active role in supporting and establishing a strong bond with his children. After the divorce, **Tracy** attempted reconciliation between them. This is supported by Ahrons (1980), who claims that the family may try to preserve old rules and rituals, but old patterns fail to provide comfort or unity, as reflected by **Andrew** who was unwilling to return to the way their relationship used to be. This resulted in an escalation of conflict between **Andrew** and **Tracy** to the point that she employed the children as pawns by excluding him from the children’s lives. Yet, her behaviour only reinforced his willingness to establish a relationship with his family. Thus, importance is accorded to the fact that all family members are affected by the changes and behaviours of other family members. After a few years of living a single life, **Andrew** remarried and has formed a new family with Desiree, which has, to date, lasted for twenty years. Even within his new family, there are obstacles to overcome and decisions to be made. With regards to his extended family, where he once felt included, since the death of his father-in-law, he feels separated from them. This enhances the idea that change is constant and transformative, although not always regarded positively (Masterpasqua & Perna, 1997).

After the divorce, **Sarah** assumed the role of a single mother, yet within the confinements of her family, there appeared to be an ongoing role reversal between her and her children, where her children provide her with ongoing financial and emotional support. Although **John’s** daughter did not live with him during, or after the divorce, he experienced a similar shift in their relationship. As Koopmans (1998) notes, after the bifurcation (divorce) takes place, an alternative course of interactive behaviour between the members of a family occurs, especially if the family system is in perturbation. This seems to be the

case with John's and Sarah's families as they were confronted with the effects of the divorce and the ongoing battle with 'the problem'.

Furthermore, the ability of a family to reorganise itself, is also determined, according to Maturana and Varela (1988), by the unique structure of each of the systems involved. From an ecosystemic perspective, the various system levels, from individual to extended family, friends, and the broader social environment are involved in the process of assisting the family in its reorganisation into a new family structure. Although the level of quality and quantity of support received from external networks varied for each participant, **Seedat** appears to be the one who has received the least support, and is consequently the one who finds it the most difficult to adjust.

## **Conclusion**

It is quite evident from the above analysis that the process of divorce, and particularly the relationship among couples, family, friends and society at large, is a complex one influenced by internal psychological and external situational factors. Each participant reflects how the process of reorganising a family encompasses a variety of factors ranging from loss, to personal growth, to the establishment of a new family system. Hence the theory of dissipative structures sheds light on the continuous change that families endure, particularly since families are always changing and adapting to internal and external changes. As such, families never reach a complete state of equilibrium. However, this does not suggest that families are in constant turmoil, but rather, that humans are regarded as ever-evolving during the passage of time. As Prigogine and Stengers (1984) note, even in disorder, there is order, which is reflected by the families who have experienced divorce.

In this chapter, the current researcher presented the themes that characterize the participants' experience of the divorce and the dynamic relationships of the three couples. It must be noted that these themes are a result of an in-depth analysis by means of which the researcher interpreted and understood the stories of the participants. Thereafter, links

were made with the literature that exhibits both similarities to, and differences from, the experiences of the three couples. However, the researcher believes that the story of each participant will shed more light if it is viewed in its totality rather than in terms of whether it confirms or refutes what has already been established in the literature on divorce.

In the next and final chapter, a summary of the findings of the above chapter and the thesis as a whole, will reflect the meaningfulness of the research process.

## CHAPTER 13

### Conclusion

*‘Where shall I begin, please your Majesty?’ he asked.*

*‘Begin at the beginning,’ the King said, gravely,*

*‘and go on till you come to the end: then stop’*

**Lewis Carroll, in *Alice Adventures in Wonderland***  
(<http://www.sabian.org/alice.htm>)

This dissertation has evaluated family change and experiences within the context of divorce. It has dealt with themes and co-constructions that emerged in the conversations between three couples and myself as part of the interviewing context. Through the processes of language, personal identities and exchange of dialogue, new meaning was co-created with the participants, and perhaps even more so for the researcher who has never been married and never experienced a divorce within her family. In this concluding chapter, the present study will be evaluated in terms of its strengths and limitations, and recommendations for future research will be proposed.

#### **Brief Overview of the Study**

In Chapter 1 the notion of divorce and family reorganization was introduced and the motivation for the study discussed. Chapter 2 provided a description of divorce in context and of traditional perspectives in explaining the divorce process. Chapter 3 furnished the reader with a sense of the impact of divorce on the individual, family, and society, and showed how resilience contributes to family reorganization. Chapter 4 sheds light on establishing a new paradigm in understanding the change that families endure as a result of divorce by utilizing chaos theory as well as Prigogine’s and Stengers’ (1984) theory of dissipative structures. Chapter 5 contained a description of the research process and research method that were to form the basis of this study. In Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11 the elicited co-constructions of meanings regarding the participants’ experience of the

divorce were presented, based on my personal assumptions and frame of reference, including the conversations between the six participants and myself in verbatim form. Chapter 12 provides the reader with a comparative analysis between the literature surveyed and the themes that emerged from the participants narratives.

### **Evaluation of the study**

The main objective of the study was to provide the reader with a newer and elaborative perspective in understanding how a family functions as a result of life changing events such as divorce. Most of the literature on divorce is characterized by a step by step approach through the divorce phases while existing literature on family systems suggests that families return to a homeostatic level of functioning. This research project acknowledges the fundamental contributions of such theories and models to our existing knowledge of divorce and family systems by giving them the space to air their discussion. However, chaos theory as well as Prigogine's and Stengers' (1984) theory on dissipative structures is not viewed as a separate theory in its own right but is regarded as a stepping stone laid in terms of the already available literature. Thus, just as human beings are ever evolving with the passage of time so is the literature constantly being expanded so as to capture the ongoing changes of individuals, families and society.

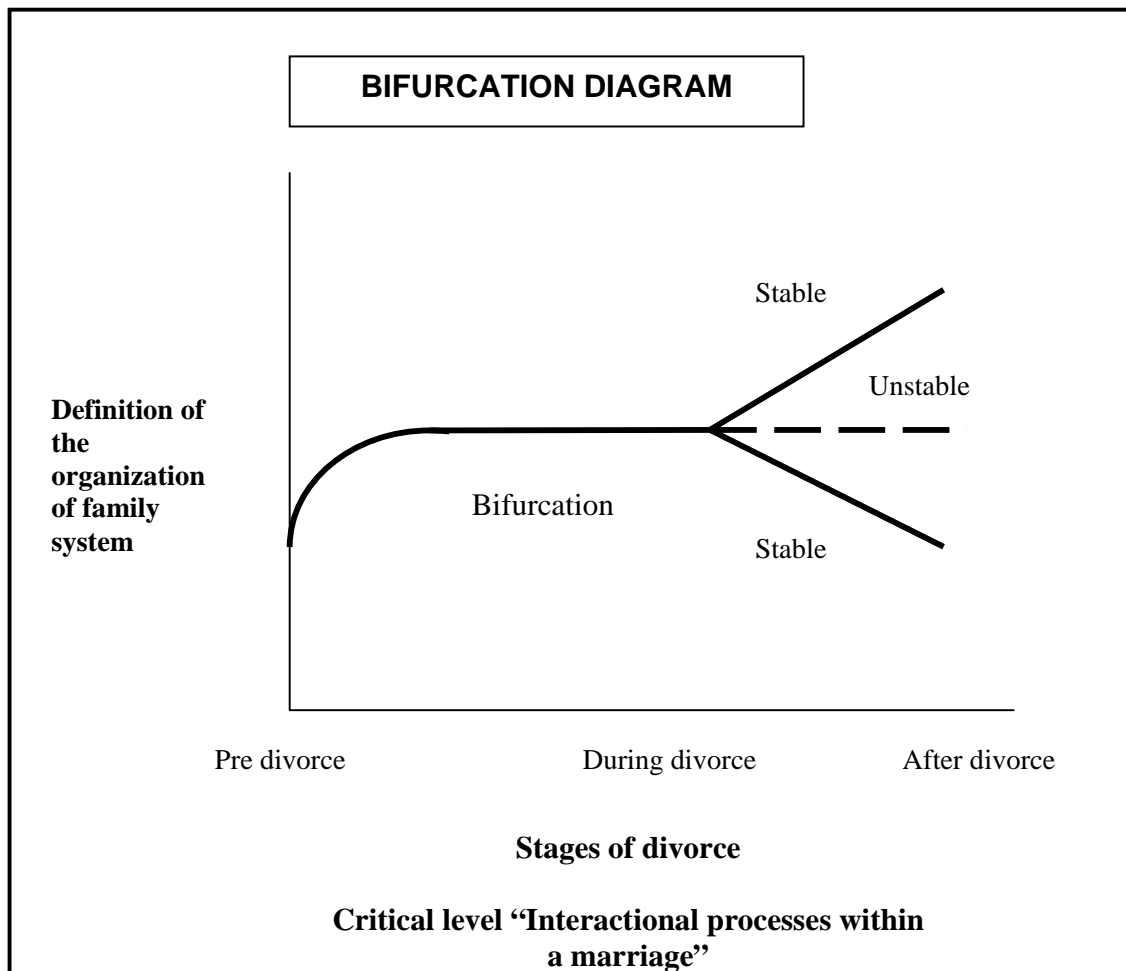
In summary, the following assertions have been identified regarding family change as illustrated by Figure 4.1 in Chapter 4:

- Families are viewed as open systems since they are in constant interaction with their contextual environment.
- Families as living systems are viewed as changing over time; change is regarded as irreversible and constant. Therefore families are always functioning at a state far from equilibrium, and hence never reach a stable state.
- On-going stressors or variables are always fluctuating within a range of stability in families.
- When positive feedback (or deviation-amplifying events) increases to a critical level, fluctuations in a system will amplify. If families are able to adapt to the new

changes in the family they can function appropriately; however, if they view change as threatening and attempt to preserve the family organization by means of homeostasis, the family in time will be pushed to a critical level.

- At a critical level, bifurcation, defined as divorce, results as a solution to the family's predicament. This causes a redefinition of the family organization.

The application of the general diagram of Figure 4.1 in Chapter 4 to the specific study is depicted below. The diagram reflects the above assertions and provides a description of change through the different stages of divorce, and the reorganization of a family system as a result of the interactional processes within a marriage that may ultimately lead to divorce.



*Figure 13.1. Change within a family system as a result of divorce (Adapted from Prigogine, I., 1996, p. 69)*

The second objective of this project was to elicit the different and unique meanings of the divorce experience through a process of dialogue and conversation. The aim was to gain as much information regarding the participants' experience of divorce through differing personal epistemologies, wider social discourses, and frames of reference. Thus the study highlights the complexity of the divorce experience but also emphasizes the immense courage and resiliency that individuals possess in overcoming the challenges that are associated with divorce.

The following themes that emerged from each participant display the process involved in changes that occur at personal, familial, and societal level. Common themes were:

❖ **PRE DIVORCE**

- **Connection vs. disconnection** - This theme elucidated the feelings of closeness and disengagement between family members. Those who have a need to connect are confronted with resistance while those who became disconnected owing to external pressures only became further disconnected from family.
  
- **Loss** - This theme describes the immense loss that families experience on various levels. It reflects the loss of the traditional family unit, of one's spouse, of extended family and of external social networks. Perhaps the most profound and detrimental of losses is losing the relationship with the non-custodial parent and spouse.

❖ **DURING DIVORCE**

- **Role of Initiator and Non-initiator** - This theme illustrates the role of the person who makes the decision to leave and the role of the person who is left behind. The manner in which the divorce impacts on initiator and non-initiator is dependent on these roles. However, the way in which each participant chooses to define and identify with these roles further contributes to positive or negative adjustment to divorce.



➤ ***Parents Role in Relation to Their Children*** – This theme reflects parents' immobilization in consoling, protecting, and comforting their children during the divorce. In addition it reflects children's role as mediators and scapegoats in their parents' marital conflicts. Furthermore, it reveals the process involved in the non-custodial parent-child relationship, where generally more effort is required to maintain a relationship with their children.

❖ **AFTER DIVORCE**

➤ ***Redefining a New Identity and Role-exiting*** – This theme illustrates the process of redefining one's identity away from the marriage identity to those of a single working parent. Adding multiple identities to one's persona is suggestive of competency and self-worth and constitutes an area where new opportunities for growth occur.

➤ ***Relationship with Former Spouse*** – This theme represents the attachment that spouses still experience towards each other, particularly since children are involved. Children are regarded as binding parents together since decisions and concerns regarding the children are communicated to the other parent.

➤ ***Establishing New Social Networks and Economic Stability*** - This theme demonstrates how social support from family and friends necessitates a positive adjustment to divorce. Since friends and extended family are lost, new relationships are established through interactions at work, community centres, and old friends. Furthermore as a result of divorce, the economic status of both men and women is affected. How it is negatively or positively affected is compounded with an individual's self-motivation and encouragement.

➤ ***Towards Resiliency*** – This theme reflects the various coping styles applied by the participants in overcoming the challenges presented by the divorce. Furthermore the theme reveals the development of their specific coping styles and resilience, and the need to discover identity in a higher power.

- ***Family Reorganization*** – This theme involves the process of reorganizing the family into a single parent household or step family household. By redefining the family organization, one must redefine the patterns of interactions with custodial/non-custodial parent-child subsystems and ex-spouse subsystem. By doing so clear boundaries and roles are established.

The third objective of the study was to establish how through the process of language, co-constructions of the divorce experience would emerge amongst all participants. This is reflected by Anderson and Goolishian (1988) who place importance on human systems as capable of generating meanings through dialogue. As such, a qualitative and social constructionist approach was selected for this study. The aim was not to quantify or explain the participants' experience of divorce using measurable data but rather to give voice to the participants who had experienced and survived the divorce.

Social constructionism as rooted in this study acknowledges that each person has a different experience in a similar situation that is embedded within individuals' social contexts. Although there were similarities across the three couples and across the females and males, differences were also evident which support the notion that multiple realities exist (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). Thus this study cannot represent or be generalized to all other couples experiencing or who have experienced a divorce. To do so would suggest a single absolute truth, which consequently eradicates the possibility of reinterpretation and new discoveries of meaning (Owen, 1992).

Social constructionism looks at the way people narrate their experiences in language. Individuals experience their world on the basis of their narratives or stories, and these stories are constructed through our interactional experiences with others. According to Anderson and Goolishian (as cited in Hart, 1995, p. 184), "we live with each other in a world of conversational narrative, and we understand ourselves and each other through changing stories and self descriptions". Thus the researcher joined with the participants in this study and in this way became a part of their social interactive system. The researcher acknowledges that her participants are the experts in their lives and that she is merely a

learner, taking a journey alongside each participant. It was only through this process that my own assumptions, previously held ideas, and meanings surrounding divorce were challenged and modified. Through the interviewing contexts, new meanings and beliefs emerged where I became aware of the impossibility of predicting outcomes and of inferring objective truths regarding the divorce process.

This study further incorporated the process-oriented element in observing and describing the changes that took place over time in the participants' relationship. This was accomplished by asking questions relating to family process and structure and how the events unfolded through the three stages of the divorce. Thus each participant reflected from their own perspective what they considered to be the changes in their families.

The vast amount of information on divorce is predominantly focused on specific factors that relate to positive or negative adjustment to divorce. However this study, although it makes reference to these factors, integrates these factors into the interactions between couples, children, extended families and society. By having done so, the researcher is able to view the complexity that surrounds divorce and its effects on all networks, ranging from immediate family to social networks.

Social constructionism also takes into account the grand narratives and as such views these grand narratives as problematic since they are encouraged through meaning systems that are constructed within the larger socio-cultural context, such as "marriage is forever" or divorce viewed as "personal failure". These grand narratives aid in the difficulty of adjusting to divorce. However by providing a space for these participants to voice their experience, divorce can serve as a catalyst for interpretation and personal growth.

### **Limitations of study**

The choice of research design is derived from qualitative and social constructionist principles. Since the researcher is part of the interactive system, the researcher is informed by her own personal subjectivities, experiences, values, and biases, which in

turn influence her perceptions of each participant's experience. Thus researchers cannot be completely objective and fair since they are not culture and value free. Their biases and personal subjectivity form part of the co-constructed reality of the research process.

A second limitation is found in the number of couples that were interviewed. Due to the extensive time and labour intensive nature of the study only six participants were interviewed. This small sample only represents a small proportion of divorced couples and therefore cannot be generalized to a larger population of divorced couples. This does not confirm that the study is not valid but rather that the information gathered is applicable to only the three couples in this study. Although the researcher is aware that interviewing more couples might have elicited more meanings and assumptions about the research topic, the aim was to gain a richer description of couples' divorce experiences and as such only three couples were included in the study.

An additional limitation of this study involves the nature of the transcripts. Although the researcher believes that she has captured all the relevant information by writing down in detail her observations and her participation in the sessions, important information could have been omitted. This information relates to what the reader does not see or hear, such as intonation, voice pitch, non-verbal gestures and facial expressions. Furthermore in terms of ethical considerations, the participants were explicitly made aware that they need disclose only the information they were comfortable sharing. Although certain participants were indeed selective in what they chose to disclose, the researcher respected their decision; despite her personal feelings regarding the experiences they were sharing. However, the researcher feels that rich descriptions have been extracted from the case studies and as such each reader will be able to make his or her own inferences as adequately as possible.

A further limitation may be the use of participants with whom the researcher has a relationship. Two of the participants were well known to the researcher, while the other two had been introduced to the researcher in the past by friends and acquaintances. The other two participants were unknown to the researcher. Those known to the researcher

could have influenced the researcher-participant relationship, the interview process and the data analysis. As such the researcher attempted to be as 'fair' as possible to all participants involved in the research.

## **Recommendations for Clinical Practice and Future Research**

### **Clinical Practice**

Most of the information regarding family therapy takes into account first order cybernetics and second order cybernetics which acknowledges the need to bring a family back to a level of homeostasis when confronted with a crisis. However, as this study clearly illustrates, a family never reaches a state of equilibrium since it would cease to exist; families are seen functioning at a level far from equilibrium as demonstrated by Prigogine's theory of dissipative structures. Therefore his work can be viewed as an alternative to or expansion of the already available literature in understanding family systems. Furthermore clinicians working with families should assist families in adapting to new changes and reaching a higher level of functioning rather than assisting families in reaching a previous level of functioning or homeostasis.

Furthermore, as seen in this study, children are often excluded from the divorce process, and are only acknowledged during the custody battle and regarded as pawns between spouses. This only exacerbates the difficulty that children experience in adapting to their parents' divorce. Therefore communication with their children is vital for their emotional well-being. Perhaps clinicians should address the importance of involving children in the divorce process so they can heal appropriately rather than be neglected and used as a tool for revenge.

### **Future Research**

It would be interesting and valuable to undertake a study similar to this one that included the perceptions of children regarding the impact of divorce on their family. By doing so

one would acquire a holistic understanding from all family members involved with respect to the impact of the divorce on their families and the changes that resulted from it.

Furthermore, linked to the above recommendation one could carry out a study that explores the experiences of ex-spouses compared to those who are remarried and divorced for a second time. This will narrate a comprehensive systemic story which allows for similarities and differences between different partners and families to emerge.

## **Conclusion**

This study presents valuable in-depth information regarding divorce, and particularly the impact that divorce has on the family as a whole. It therefore reveals the complicated and ambivalent nature of a marriage relationship and the dynamics involved concerning all family members. However it must be noted that the meanings and distinctions that have been discussed do not represent an objective or universal truth, although similarities may be shared. Presenting the topic as one way of understanding divorce and the process of family reorganization allows the reader to infer his or her personal meanings regarding the effects of divorce on a family. Furthermore, divorce as bifurcation was depicted graphically using Prigogine's diagram of bifurcation. Common themes were articulated and gave expression to participants' experiences of their divorces; this was made possible by employing the qualitative research method, despite certain limitations. Some important areas for clinical and future research were also suggested.

Overall, the aim of this dissertation was to aid individuals in understanding the nature, meaning and process of divorce, assisting families' ability to function and adapt to new changes or crises more effectively and leading to the redefinition of a nuclear system as a result of divorce. I would like to end off this dissertation by reflecting on the message spoken by The Prophet Kiblan Gibran. It was because of the stories shared by my participants that I was able to understand the significance of such a message. As such I would like to share the message with all the participants as well as with those who have and those who are yet to become involved in a shared experience. May this message

remind you of the freedom you have in the unity of marriage, family relationships or any other significant relationship.

*Then Almitra spoke again and said,  
And what of marriage, master?  
And he answered saying:  
You were born together, and together you shall be for evermore.  
You shall be together  
when the white wings of death scatter your days.  
Aye, you shall be together  
even in the silent memory of God.  
But let there be spaces in your togetherness.  
And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.  
Love one another, but make not a bond of love:  
Let it rather be a moving sea  
between the shores of your souls.  
Fill each other's cup  
but drink not from one cup.  
Give one another of your bread  
but eat not from the same loaf.  
Sing and dance together and be joyous,  
but let each of you be alone,  
Even as the strings of a lute are alone  
though they quiver with the same music.  
Give your hearts,  
but not into each other's keeping.  
For only the hand of life contain your hearts.  
And stand together yet not too near together:  
For pillars of the temple stand apart,*

*And the oak tree and the cypress grow not  
in each other's shadow.*

**The Prophet- K.Gibran**

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**Appendix A1**  
**Consent form**

I ..... have been completely informed regarding the nature of the study, as well as my participation in it. I hereby consent to participate in a one-on-one interview that is to be conducted by Talita Da Costa, a Clinical Master's Student, under the supervision of Professor Fredrick Snyders, at the University of South Africa. I understand that by taking part in this study, I incur no risk of harm to myself and that I have a right to withdraw at any given time during the study, without any negative consequences.

Signed.....

Date.....

**Appendix A2**  
**Consent form to be audiotaped**

I.....have been completely informed that participation in this research involves being audio taped. I am also aware that the researcher Talita Da Costa as a Clinical Master's Student at the University of South Africa will ensure that my anonymity is kept, by restricting review of these tapes to herself and her trainer, Professor Fredrick Snyders. I understand that these audio taped materials will be destroyed immediately once the dissertation has been accepted, to ensure my confidentiality and to further guarantee that my responses and identity will not be identifiable, by virtue of replacing my name with a pseudonym, if chosen to do so.

Signed.....

Date.....

