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Psychosocial effects of divorce on young women who grew up in divorced families at Rustenburg, Moruleng Village

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Abstract. Parental divorce account for a host of emotional, behavioural, and social maladjustment in children and the phenomenon have been found to be a major risk factor for both internalizing and externalizing problems in children and young adults. Yet, limited research attention has focused on the effect of parental divorce and the psychosocial needs of children. These connections have implication for behaviour in adulthood. The present study therefore explored the psychosocial effects of divorce on young women who grew up in divorced families at Rustenburg, Moruleng Village. The study employed qualitative approach and exploratory research redesign. Sample of 5 young women from Rustenburg in Moruleng Village were sampled using snowball sampling technique and data was analysed thematically through the aid of Atlas Ti qualitative software. In this study, findings show that young women from divorced families expressed negative feelings and emotions and distorted emotions after episode of parental divorce. They further indicated that these young women in later adulthood develop and form hate characters as a result of the abusive and shock experiences during the processes of parental divorce. Based on these findings, it is recommended that government should prioritize children rights, particularly children from divorced families in South Africa and provide free counselling services for them as this will assist in decreasing negative feelings and emotions, promote positive behaviour and ensure stable adulthood behaviour.

Keywords. Psychosocial, Parents, Divorce, Effects, Young Women

Introduction and Background information

Divorce otherwise known as marital dissolution refers to a choice of two people not to live together as husband and wife anymore (Molepo, Sodi, Maunganidze, & Mudhovozi 2010). While divorce is a fact of life, some countries divorce rates are higher than others, for example, United States report an unusually high rate of divorce throughout its history (Harrington & Buckingham 2018) while Kenya had a divorce rate of 270 in 2013 (Muranga 2000). Due to its frequent occurrence, divorce has generated concerns for many professionals and the society at large, because, divorce increases the risk of emotional, behavioural, and social maladjustment in children and the phenomenon have be found to be a major risk factor for both internalizing and externalizing problems in children and young adults (Amato & Sobolewski 2001; Sentse, Ormel, Veenstra, Verhulst, & Oldehinkel 2011; Averdijk, Malti, Eisner, & Ribeaud 2012; Lamela, Figueiredo, Bastos, & Feinberg 2016).

Among children and young adults, parental divorce has been linked with increased physical health problems (Amato & Sobolewski 2001; Ångarne-Lindberg & Wadsby 2012; Mohlatlole, Sithole & Shirindi, 2018). There is dearth in literature associating divorce with psychosocial effects relating to children more so linking divorce to women who are products of divorce homes. However, past studies (Oldehinkel, Ormel, Veenstra, De Winter, & Verhulst 2008; Potter 2010; van Oort, Huizink, Verhulst, van Beijsterveldt, & Boomsma, 2012) suggest that children from divorced homes report more psychological maladjustment than children of married parents. In support, Barrett and Turner (2005); Amato and Sobolewski (2001); Sun and Li (2002) discovered that children with divorced generally exhibit poorer mental health and life chances compared to children growing up with both their parents. On the same wavelength, Labuschagne (2005) children do not report any mental challenge if they are staying with their biological parents, even when such parents are in constant argument.

Pryor and Rodgers (2001) indicated that children from divorce families express feelings of abandonment, concern about future and increase self-blame. It has been noted that these children blame themselves for being the cause of the divorce. Some of these emotions have been linked to expressions of low psychological mental health; this can also lead to depression later in life and affect child school attainment negatively (Potter 2010). Equally, such children at latter adult life are at risk of committing suicide. Evidently, Afifi, Boman, Fleisher, and Sareen (2009) divorce has been found divorce to be linked with elevated suicidality risk in later years for these children, particularly, attempted suicide and suicidal ideation. While, Amato and Sobolewski (2010) and Bernardi and Radl (2014) discovered that young adults from divorce childhood families are more likely to leave the parental home and start an early family, such individuals are also at higher risk of getting divorce themselves. To that end, this study sought to explore the psychosocial effects of divorce on young women who grew up in divorced families at Rustenburg, Moruleng Village.

Problem Statement

Several authors across countries have established that children with divorced parents fare less well than children in intact families, both in the short and long run and on a number of dimensions, such as social, behavioural, emotional, and psychological well-being, physical health, and educational attainment, is an indication for a concern that needs addressing (Oldehinkel, Ormel, Veenstra, De Winter, & Verhulst 2008; Potter 2010; van Oort, Huizink, Verhulst, van Beijsterveldt, & Boomsma 2012). The issue of parental divorce continues to be on the increase globally and particularly in South Africa as one out of every two marriages ends in divorce (Collins 2003; Mohlatlole *et al.*, 2018; Statistics SA, 2018). More so, young adults from dissolved childhood families are more likely to leave their parental home and start a family early in life, and they stand a higher risk to divorce themselves (Anderson 2014).

Studies that have been conducted on the effects of divorce have been using Eurocentric lens and alienating African's lens and context. For instance, In Denmark, Astrup, Pedersen, Mok, Carr and Webb (2017) examined self-harm risk between adolescence and midlife in people who experienced separation from one or both parents during childhood. In United States of America, Fuller-Thomson and Dalton (2015) investigated gender-specific association between childhood parental divorce and later incidence of physical health. Likewise, among Australian samples Stallman and Ohan (2016) examined differential predictors of child psychosocial adjustment following divorce. Generalizing results from such Eurocentric settings to African samples may be bias due to cultural differences that exist across countries. To close this gap, the present study collected samples within South Africa so as to generalize results for African population.

Therefore, psychosocial effects of divorce on children: experiences of young women who grow up in divorced families have not been adequately studied. The present study seeks to critically consider parental divorce in South Africa, this is with a view that findings of the study will be important in providing insights relevant to educate people on the consequences of divorce on the development of children. The current study will aim at sensitizing society in efforts aimed at strategies to prevent divorce and promote healthy family living.

Research Methods

Research Approach and Design: Qualitative research design was used in the study. In-depth individual interviews were conducted with adult women from divorced families so as to understand their lived experience as they grew up in divorced families. The study drew on Bowlby's (1988) Attachment theory and Boss's (2002) family stress to inform key aspects of the study within a constructionist paradigm. An interpretative paradigm employing constructive qualitative methods was regarded appropriate because of the nature of the study under investigation which demands contextualisation of the meaning. Thus, the qualitative design used in this study was primarily exploratory consistent with its purpose to support an understanding, interpretation of meaning and intentions underlying human interaction. Snowball sampling technique was employed, and semi-structured, one-to-one interviews were utilised for data collection. Thematic content analysis was followed using Atlas Ti.

Data Collection Methods and Procedures: Data was collected using a semi-structured interview schedule. This was due to the fact that it affords the researchers the opportunity to gather detail data from participants. The face-to-face interview method also enabled the researchers to take advantage of social cues such as voice, intonation and body language of the participants to give value to verbal responses provided. This technique also allowed the researchers a unique opportunity to probe further on the thoughts and feelings regarding the issue of divorce and its impact.

Sampling Population and Sampling Frame: The population sample comprised of 5 young women who grew up in divorced families at Moruleng Village. Young women who grew up in 'intact' families were excluded from the study. Researchers used non-probability purposive sampling using a snowball sampling technique was used to recruit information-rich participants. The young women were selected as the sample group to explore how divorce affected their psychosocial, emotional, intellectual and spiritual well-being. The sample size was determined by the principle of saturation. This study utilized open ended questions, comprehensive enough to cover all areas that would help in achieving the objectives of the study.

Ethical Considerations: In order to ensure trustworthiness and credibility of data, permission to tape-record the interviews was sought from the participants. Only participants who gave permission to be interviewed were included in the sample. Participants were further assured of confidentiality and informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any time if they felt uncomfortable with the process or if they felt that they would not be able to continue with the research for whatever the reason. Although the assessment of potential risks done indicated a very low risk, precautionary measures were taken by guaranteeing the availability of the referring social workers for emotional support to participants as and when need arose.

These professionals were also sensitized on confidentiality. For ethical reasons, once transcription and transferability was assured, data was destroyed.

Data Capturing, Presentation, Analysis and Processing: All interview sessions were tape-recorded, Tape-recording was used to ensure trustworthiness and credibility of data. tape-record their interview sessions; and, this helped the researcher to play and replay the clips during the analysis for needed details. Data was analysed by means of Atlas ti and thematic content analysis. Atlas ti version 8 was used to analyse the interview data, and linkages and networks of the findings were generated. In addition, thematic content analysis was conducted on the raw data, and this analysis involved five steps, which include transcription, checking and editing, analysis and interpretation, and verification (Sarantakos, 1998). As a way of further ensuring trustworthiness, the researcher avoided subjectivity by remaining non-judgmental throughout the research process and displayed truthfulness and honesty in the presentation, analysis and processing data.

Findings related to Experiences of Young Women from Divorce Families

When analysing **experiences of young women from divorce families** on Atlas Ti, free quotations were generated on the transcription to visualize participants' expressions on experiences related to parental divorce. Three themes emerged from the data: formation of hate characters, abusive experience and shock experience as indicated in **Fig 3** below.

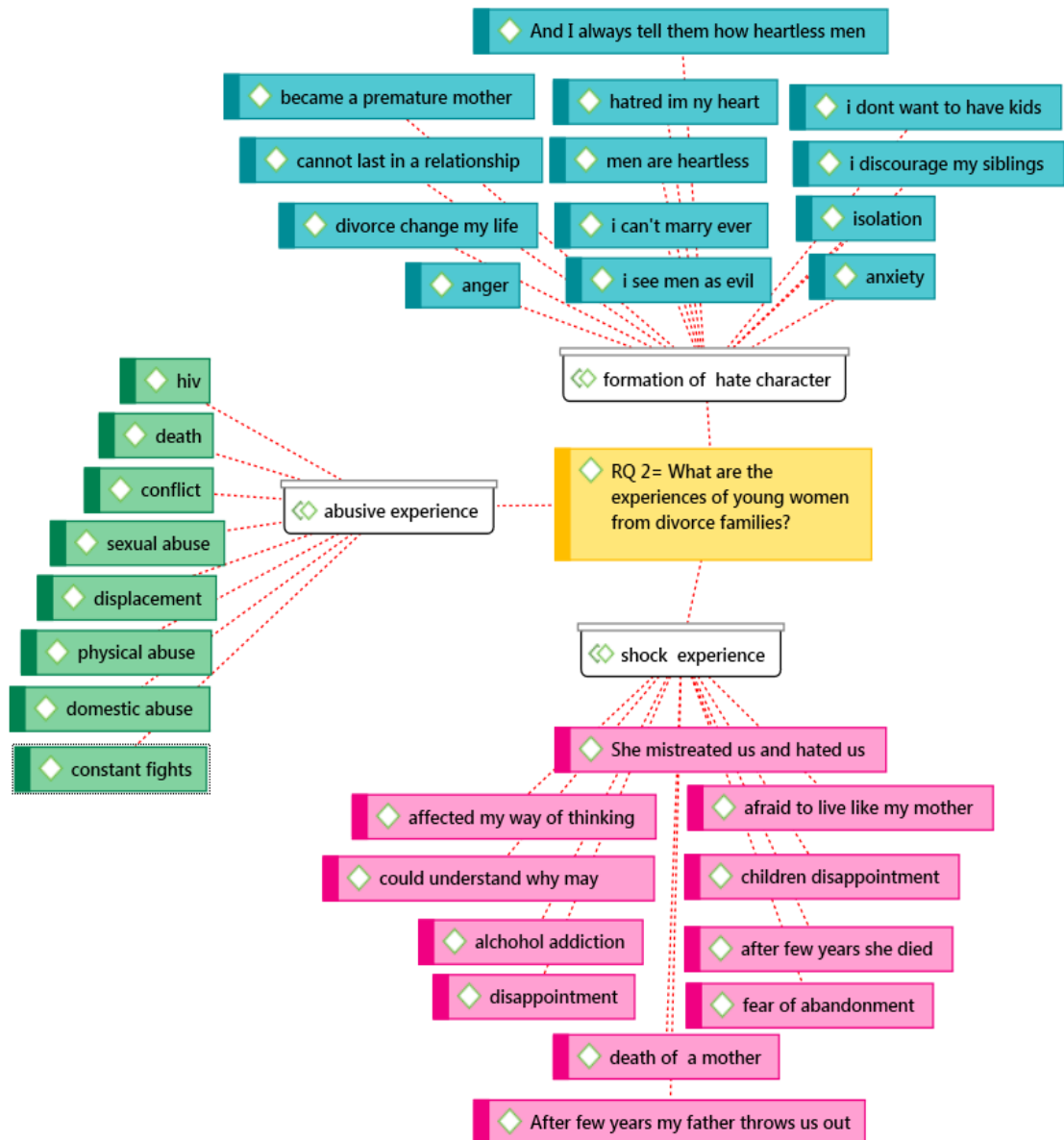


Fig 3: Three Themes relating to Participants' Experiences

Formation of Hate Characters

All the participants in this study attest to the fact that the period of parental divorce impacted on their character, one of the participants said she was in a relationship before the incidence of parental divorce, but was unable to cope afterwards. Likewise, another participant opined that her boyfriend complained bitterly that she expressed controlling attitude which is unhealthy for any relationship to flourish and be maintained. More so, few of the participants indicated that they became aggressive and bullied classmates in school because they hated their classmates for being in 'intact families'. The attachment theory of Bowlby (1988) corroborate the finding of this study by suggesting that, all kinds of poor care are likely simultaneously to arouse anger toward one's attachment figure and to inhibit its expression. The result is often underlying resentment that contributes to dysfunctional relations, because everyone—even a person who has learned to be what is called "compulsively self-reliant"—needs love, care, and

support (Bowlby, 1988). Golombok and Tasker (2015) opine that the reality is when a person’s attachment needs go unmet, he or she is more vulnerable to anger and less capable of dealing with it which in turn leads to hatred. In fact, unmet attachment needs may be expressed in aberrant forms of care- eliciting behavior. Below are some of related expressions in this regard:

...Divorce changed my emotions in a bad way I have so much hatred in my heart even at school I use to bully other children who were coming from happy family, I wanted them to also feel terrible at school and suffer emotional.

...I started dating when my mother was still alive and since the death of my mother I have less interest in man I feel that man are dirty and heartless

...Guys that I used to date used to complain that am controlling and that I will never last on any relationship with the attitude that I have.



Fig 4: Formation of Hate Character as a Consequence of Parental Divorce

Attitudes and general behaviour formed as a result of the lived experiences of young women in divorced homes are reflected in **Fig 4** above. These include: isolation, anger, anxiety, seeing men as evil. All participants expressed that the formation of negative attitudes was not intentional as they only find themselves expressing such hate attitudes, particularly to the

opposite gender and lamented how these continue to affect them and prevent them from having long-lasting relationships with men. Participants' conflict with establishing relationships and the need to love someone are reflected in their expressions in Fig 5. Their emotions and feeling vacillate between hating men and marriage to wanting to have own children and give them the love they were denied through divorce. These feelings were mainly linked to those participants that said that their mothers left their fathers to cater for them. The exact words of participants as generated by Atlas Ti free quotations are captured in **Fig 5** below.

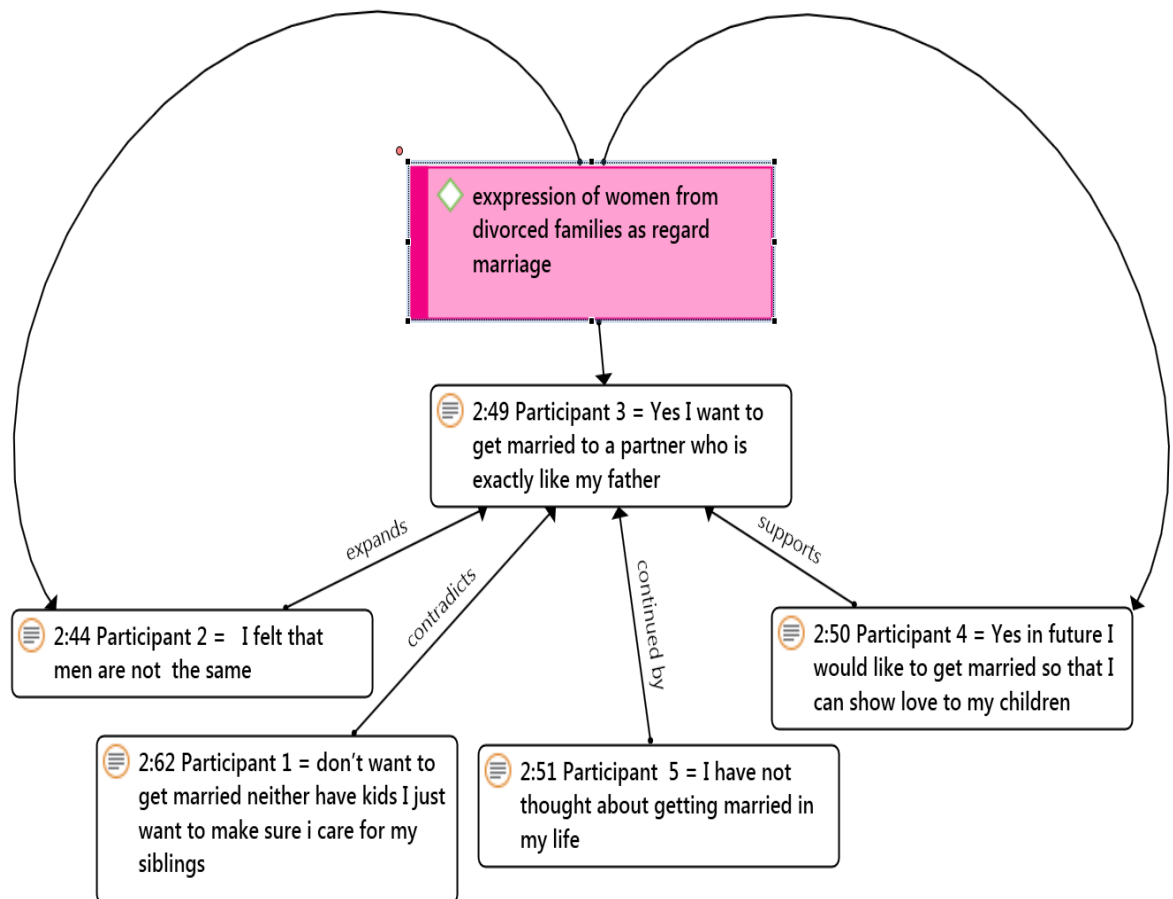


Fig 5: Verbatim Expressions of Participants Regarding Marriage

From the figure above, **Participant 1** out rightly objected towards getting married, not even agreeing to have children, as her exact words in **Fig 5** contradicts the words of **Participant 3**, who still hopes to get married, only if the man is exactly like her father. While **Participants 4** supports **Participants 3**, her wish to marry is only intended to express love to her unborn child since she was never experienced that love growing up.

Abusive Experience

Two participants bitterly echoed how they experience their fathers beating up their mothers because she had asked why he had come home late. Similarly, two of the participants confirmed sexual assault from their fathers. One was infected with HIV/AIDS and the other was impregnated by her father. **Fig 6** below highlights the abusive experiences as lived by women. Below are some of participant responses:

...My father and my mother were both drinking and smoking; after drinking they fight and abuse us. I was once admitted to hospital because the iron rod which my father tried hitting my mother wish missed her and ended on my head ... and, they asked me to lie about the incident.

...My father started to abuse my sister emotional and physical which included beating her up and sexually. He would come home drunk and demand sex from my sister When she refused, she would beat her up ... my mother would be too drunk herself to pay attention. Later in the year my sister got pregnant with my father and she was also diagnosed with HIV.

In this study, participants expressed being exposed to behaviours against rights of a child such as neglect and abuse. One participant indicated that both parents are alcoholics and whenever they get drunk they argue and fight and sometimes they as children also end up in the crossfire and subsequent verbal and physical abuse by the father. This affirms the findings of Mohlatole et al. (2018) and Mashego and Taruvinga (2014) discovered that there is a link between violence and abuse amongst children of divorced parents. In addition, Dennison and Koerner (2006) found that after having experience parental divorce, many young women fear that their future marriages will lack love, trust, or communication, and that they will be beset by infidelity, conflict, or abuse. On the same wavelength, Similarly, Dennison and Koerner (2008) noted that young women also worry that their marriages will fail or that their spouse will abandon them.

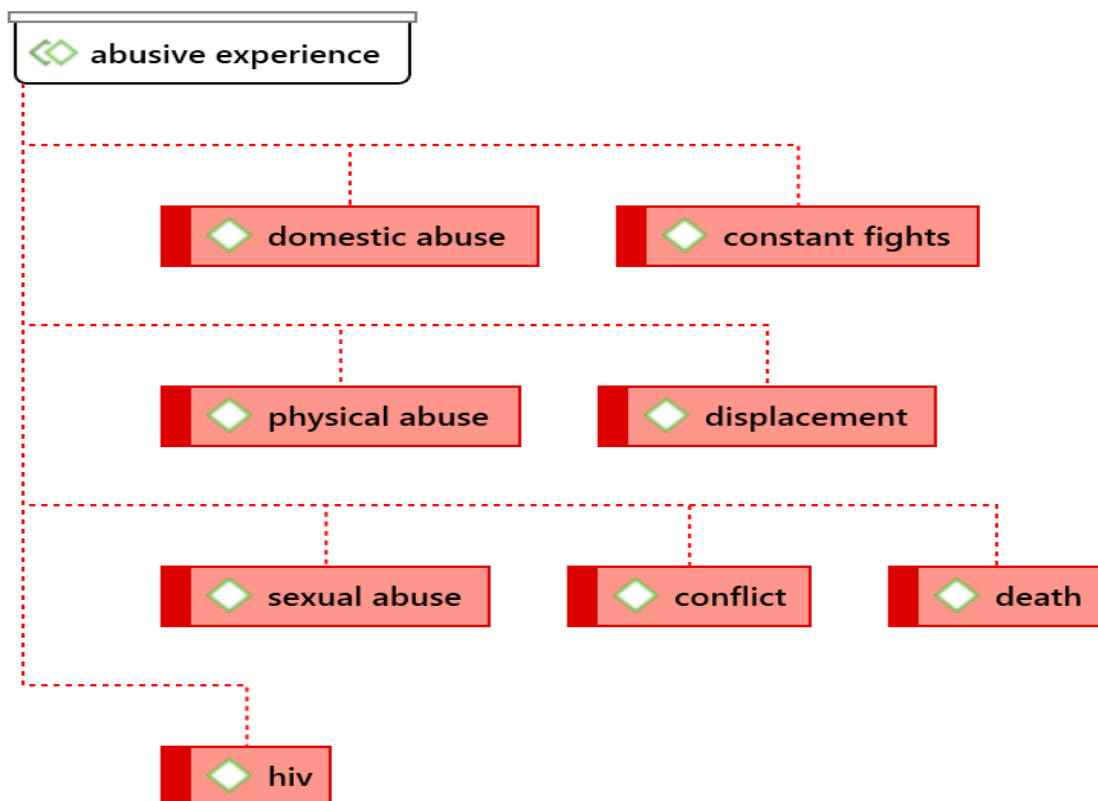


Fig 6: Abusive Experiences of Women

Shock Experience

With the exception of one of the participants that indicated that her parents divorced when she was much younger, all the participants were in their late adolescence, and said they were very shocked when they first heard that their parents were planning divorce. One of the participants attested that to date, she still does not know the reason/s why her parents opted for divorce. According to her, she and her siblings never witnessed any quarrels or fights between their parents. Participants' responses regarding this theme are captured as follows:

... Later that year my mum got sick and she was diagnosed with depression and after few years she died and none of my father's family attended the funeral.

...throughout my life with my father and mother, I never heard my father and mother arguing or fighting. They were my role models and I always wanted to be like them Even their divorce was peaceful But for us children, we were shocked and still.... Especially because we don't know the reason behind the divorce.

In this study it was evident that young women experienced shock when their parents told them that they are divorcing. This affirms the findings of Mencarini, Meroni and Pronzato (2010) who assert that at the time the parental divorce takes place, children face a shock which may influence their development, and this will eventually affect their decision to leave home afterward. In support, Bernardi and Radl (2014) discovered that most children experience shock when their parents institute divorce and feel uncertain as they welcome a change in family environment. In this study, it emerged that participants expressed shock that their mothers were the ones who moved out of the house. For them, men are the ones that was supposed to move out. Another interesting finding regarding participants' shocking experiences was expressed by one of the participants who associated the death of her mother to the divorce outcome. The death of one of the mothers of the participants shocked her so much that, that the experience remains fresh in her mind and affects her day to day associations and relationships.

Practical Suggestions from Participants

Further findings from study participants were in areas of suggestions. Overall participants were of the view that government need to play an active role in protecting the children through provision of cancelling services. One of the participants lamented the state of society where divorce has become so common that children are the last thing government think about. The needs of children are only considered when there is a dispute on custody property or material support. Fighting in the presence of children is not considered abuse and the mental health of children hardly gets considered as a form of abuse. There was a strong feeling from all participants that the protection of children's mental health needs should be prioritised during parental divorce and beyond until the family reaches some form of stability. A common theme that emerged from participants' views was the need of therapy for children by government social workers and/or psychologist to help them deal with the effects of divorce. Participants felt that this will go a long way in preventing maladaptive behaviour; and that it should be mandatory for children to be in therapy during and post the divorce process. In Fig 7, participants' suggestions regarding help for children are highlighted.

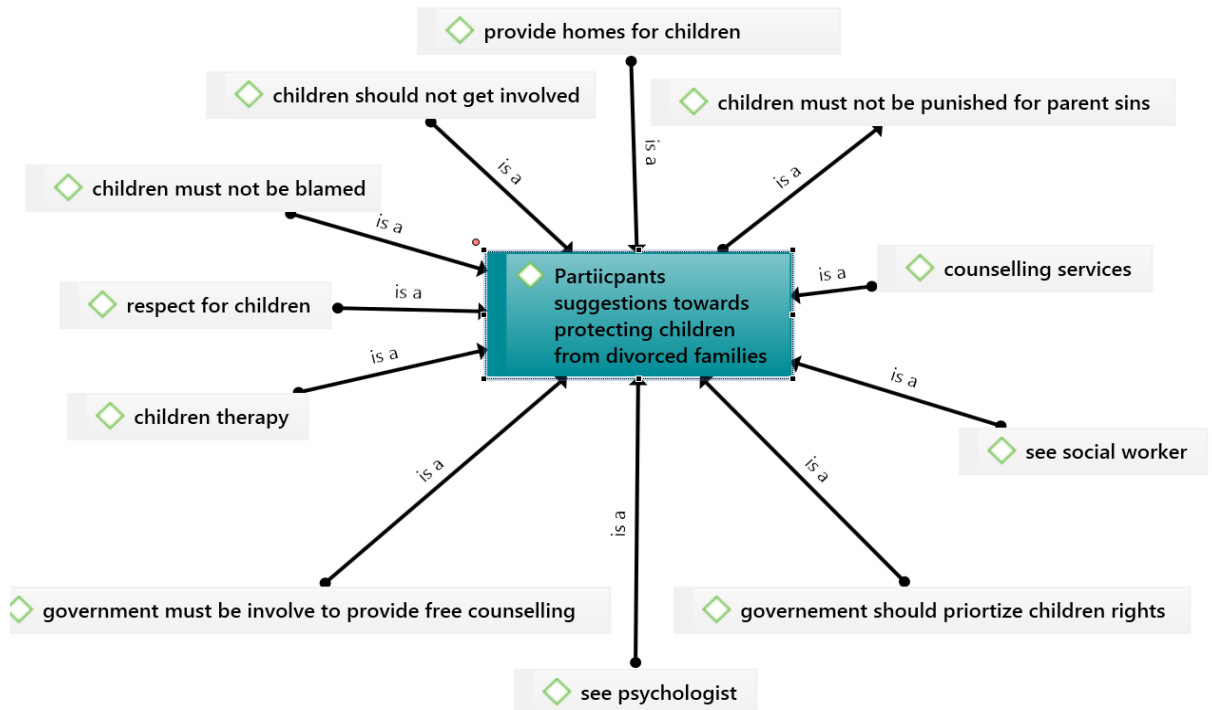


Fig 7: Participants’ Practical Suggestions

Of significance, the suggestions as in indicated in Fig 7 above, emphasised the need to respect children, and not to blame them as reasons for the divorce, as was the case in the experiences of some of the participants. While there was a feeling that Children’s Homes were not the solution, the women who were exposed to the trauma of divorce saw it as a best of the two situations. There was a feeling that this would protect children, at least, for a while until the distress of divorce is over and some ‘normality’ has been reached. One participant who experienced trauma when she and her siblings had to move from home to home at the time when the mother was thrown out of their house and took them along, felt that children should not be exposed to such suffering. The suggestion was that government should provide shelters for displaced women and children.

Discussion

Children learn from modelling and observation of those always around them. Based on the findings of the study, the experiences of children in the parental divorced families exposed them to diverse experiences, ranging from abuse experience, formation of hate character and shock experience. The women interviewed attributed their violent and aggressive as reflected in their behaviour with other children at school, to the lived experiences of unhappiness at home. This finding was consistent with the study conducted by van Dolen, Weinberg and Ma (2013) which associated aggression and parental divorce.

Similarly, study participants confirmed that they were exposed to different abuses such as domestic, physical and sexual abuses. This finding gives credence to Van Dolen et al. (2013) conclusions that experiencing parental divorce during childhood is linked to increased likelihood of being subject to child abuse and witnessing violence. Besides, when parents go through divorce, children become witness to conflict between the parents, and sometimes unconsciously get involved. Lucas, Nicholson, and Erbas (2013) found that that children who get caught up in their parents’ divorce are likely to suffer greater stresses than those who do not

become involved. Further, compared to children raised in 'intact' families, children growing in divorced families show poorer outcomes in multiple domains. A myriad of attitudinal issues reported by young people in this study can be ascribed to their lived experiences during their parental divorce processes. Key among these are: the decision to abstain from relationships, isolating themselves from the society and manifesting violence and bullying of others in schools and in other relationships.

Conclusion

The study was conducted to explore the psychosocial effects of divorce on young women who grew up in divorced families at Rustenburg, Moruleng Village in South Africa. The empirical evidence from study participants highlighted that parental divorce have an effect on children's later development. Specifically, it was showed in the study that young women from divorced families expressed negative feelings and emotions and distorted emotions after episode of parental divorce. Further findings indicated that experiences during parental divorce lead to formation of character as a result of the abusive and shock experiences during the process of parental divorce.

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