

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO DIVORCE AMONG YOUNG COUPLES IN LEBOWAKGOMO

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### **ABSTRACT**

The overall aim of this study was to explore factors that contribute towards divorce among young couples in Lebowakgomo. In conducting the study the researchers used the qualitative method and a case study design. Snowball sampling was used in this study. Eleven participants were thus identified and recruited. The sample size was based on the principle of saturation. The researchers used semi-structured interviews to collect data. Interpretative phenomenological data analysis was employed. The study found that sudden character change, lack of and poor communication, financial problems, abuse and infidelity were associated with divorce among young couples.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Divorce cases have increased dramatically among young people in South Africa, where they are amongst the highest in the world (Statistics South Africa 2017; Oosthuizen, 2014; Bezuidenhout, 2017). Couples who marry between the ages of 18 and 35 are most likely to divorce. Among 25- to 29-year-olds, the rate of divorce is more than twice as high as among people in older age groups (Bezuidenhout, 2017; Oosthuizen, 2014; Statistics South Africa, 2017). It is common knowledge that marriage is not only expected to offer security to meet physical needs, but also to provide emotional and sexual fulfilment. Moreover, marriage offers real financial benefits for many (Clark-Sterwart & Brentano, 2006); Dew in Xiao, 2008). Scholars have also explained the income advantage of marriage (Greenwood, Guner & Knowles, 2003; Winslow-Bowe, 2006) However, divorce rates continue to rise despite the many benefits of being married (Scarpitti & Anderson, 2011). Boisvert and Poulin (2017) state that family life cycle is used by many researchers to understand and explain challenges faced by young adults.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Divorce is considered a “life-altering decision” that encompasses many ways of addressing the challenges that lead to divorce prior to the final legal decision (Tanaka, 2010:1). Most authors (Fagan & Churchill, 2012; Treas, Scott & Richards, 2013) regard divorce as a permanent separation of a married couple. The sociological view of divorce is based on the notion that marriage is a social institution (Wilcox and Dew, 2009). In this view certain cultural beliefs and norms (a long-term commitment, care of children and a man being the breadwinner of the family) are what constitute a marriage. When these beliefs and norms are violated, either a wife or husband is more likely to leave (Sayer, England, Allison, & Kangas, 2011) due to lack of social support, or because the spouse feel dissatisfied because of the norms have been violated.

Marriage is considered a “lifelong contract in African societies” (Arugu, 2014:382). Traditionally, divorce was not considered as an option; family members would address any dispute by judging the case on its merit and weighing all the consequences of the outcome. Divorce, which was essentially considered a “sin against God, nature, and society” (Arugu, 2014:382), could only be allowed in traditional African society if adultery had been committed, and despite all efforts to encourage the married couple to stay together. Bezuidenhout (2017) argues that it is therefore an advantage for couples to come from similar cultural backgrounds, as this helps them in adjusting to and developing the family culture for themselves

Multiple, interlocking factors have contributed to the rapid rise of divorce in South Africa (Ernest, 2003; Makwanise & Masuku, 2016). Some of these factors as revealed by South African researchers include sexual incompatibility (Ganerre, 2016; Tembe, 2010; Preller, 2014 ); lack of intimacy (Ganerre, 2016); lack of communication and 2014); social networking (Preller, 2014); marital infidelity (Tembe,

2010, Heaton, 2014; Preller, 2014); financial stress (Scarpitti & Anderson, 2011; Preller, 2014) and other socio-cultural factors (Ganerre, 2016). The number of divorce cases that are finalised in South Africa fluctuates from year to year, but the trend shows an increase (Preller, 2014).

Sexual incompatibility is one of the contributing factors in divorce. Men and women naturally tend to differ in every sphere of life (emotionally, mentally and sexually). Certain things require adjustment as the marriage progresses, i.e. children are born, health challenges arise and careers change. In most cases the transition affects a couple's sexual relationship (Preller, 2014). Consequently, if either party is not physically satisfied, he or she may look for a companion to satisfy his or her sexual needs. Consequently, sexual dissatisfaction may lead to divorce. King (2009) indicates that one reason given by young couples for their divorce is loss of sexual attraction and subsequent weakening of their intimate relationship. Lack of communication is another underlying cause of many divorces among young couples; failure to communicate makes it difficult for couples to resolve the financial, sexual and emotional issues affecting their marriage (Benokraitis, 2007).

Infidelity – also referred to as ‘adultery’ and commonly known as ‘cheating’ on one’s partner – is near the top of the list of reasons for divorce among young couples in South Africa (Preller, 2014). It does not matter whether it is a wife or husband who is unfaithful, the repercussions can be devastating for the entire family. Various factors may lead to adultery such as lack of intimacy and communication as well as sexual dissatisfaction in marriage. Some cultural beliefs may also promote infidelity; for instance, after giving birth (during the postpartum period of sexual abstinence), a woman is expected to abstain from sexual intercourse for a specific period to recuperate (Awusabo-Asarea & Anarfi, 1997). The disadvantage of this practice is that some men may become tempted and indulge in promiscuity, which is detrimental to the couple's relationship and marriage (Shirindi & Makofane, 2015).

Infertility may cause anxiety, distress and frustration in marriage and subsequently lead to divorce. Having children is the most common reason why people get married (Benokraitis, 2007). Arugu (2014:375) says, “In African culture, any marriage that is not blessed with children is not considered to have achieved its aim”. Childlessness is not acceptable in many societies that place a high value on children. It is assumed that when a couple cannot bear children, there will be nobody to remember them. Their genealogical line will disappear. Moreover, in some cultures a woman who gives birth to girls only (Mohanty & Biswal, 2007; Thabede, 2017) may be divorced, because the girl child cannot continue with the surname of the father.

Abuse is one of the major contributors to the dissolution of marriage (Preller, 2014). It occurs in all age groups, ethnic groups and class groups, and comes in a variety of forms, from physical abuse (domestic violence) to verbal, emotional, psychological and even financial abuse. The most painful issue is that children learn what they see. By merely being a witness to abuse between their parents, they might at a later stage become victims in abusive relationships themselves.

Today, family interaction is affected by social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp. People are free to post or share any sensitive comments without thinking about the influence the shared information may have in a relationship or marriage. Many hours are spent on social media, leading to a disconnect between the couples that often cannot be repaired, and consequently divorce follows (Preller, 2014).

Divorce rates amongst the black population are increasing more rapidly than among any of the other groups in the country (Oosthuizen, 2014). Economic factors such as poor or negative growth and inflationary tendencies put a strain on young couples who want more with meagre resources. Money means different things to different people, so financial issues are often a reason for marital conflict and tend to lead to divorce among young couples (King, 2009). Family competition and couples who live beyond their means may often lead to financial stress and subsequently divorce. For instance, a partner may wish to drive a car that the couple cannot afford, because friends or neighbours are driving such a car.

Families are more likely now to accept it when a daughter gets divorced, as it has become very apparent that women are more than capable of having a successful and happy life after marriage. Modern women know their rights and are much more likely to exercise them (Emery, 2013). Research suggests that African men are likely to divorce a woman if they feel disrespected and when the woman earns more than they do (Scarpitti and Anderson, 2011; Preller, 2014; Oosthuizen, 2014). Households where both spouses are employed are becoming more common among the modern-day families, which often have both spouses working, regardless of whether they have children or not. Traditionally, women remained at home while the husband brought in the money (Kanji & Schober, 2013). Traditional cultural norms and expectations regard women as care givers in the family, while men are responsible for taking care of the family. Women are regarded as in all respects inferior to the husbands. They are expected to look after the children and perform other household duties. Parsons (1949) argued that women's employment, especially in high-level jobs, was destructive to marriage by creating competition rather than enhancing solidarity between the husband and wife. The marriage-as-gendered-institution view is that spouses are more likely to separate when the man is not employed or when the woman is employed. Observations suggest that some men have an inferiority complex (Murphy, 2010) about earning lower salaries than their wives.

In some marriages, mother and daughter-in-law relationships may be a challenge. Another observation by researchers is that some husbands may leave their wives because they do not get along with their mothers-in-law. The relationship problem becomes rife especially when the daughter-in-law (*ngwetsi*) stays with the in-laws. This observation is consistent with the findings of a number of researchers (Merrill, 2007; Fingerman, Gilligan, VanderDrift & Pitzer, 2012).

Given the causes of divorce, the family life cycle process may be disrupted. The complexity of the consequences of divorce include reorganising the new family after divorce rather than dismantling it. For instance, it becomes necessary to establish new values, roles, rules and routines of life as the family is now consists of one parent. Consequently, the changes are a source of great stress, for children and parents, making it difficult to accept and adjust to the process of change.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The institution of marriage continues to decline as a result of many social, economic and cultural factors (Kyalo, 2012; Wilcox, Wolfinger & Stokes, 2016). This has produced a myriad of social problems such as single parenthood, divorce, separations, to name just a few (Treas, et al., 2013). These cases are rapidly on the increase. Few marriages among couples between the ages of 18 and 35 in South Africa last beyond 5 years, because divorce has become such an accepted alternative to working out marital problems (Kgoleng, 2013). Getting married "too young" was reported as a major contributing factor to divorce by 45.1% of individuals and by at least one partner from 61.1% of couples (Scott, Rhoades, Stanley, Allen & Markman, 2013) The causes of divorce are often complex, as several factors can lead a person or couple to become dissatisfied with the marriage (Thornton & Freedman 2009; Bezuidenhout 2017).

Divorce among young couples is relatively common in contemporary developing countries and causes significant distress, hence the study of the dissolution of marriage among young adults is of interest to policy-makers and society more broadly. Many studies (Ernest, 2003; Tembe, 2010; Scott, et al., 2013; Preller, 2014; Makwanise & Masuku 2016; Ganerre, 2016) have sought to identify socio-demographic and interpersonal factors associated with marriage breakdown, but few studies have looked at the causes of divorce specifically among young adults, and those that have, tend to be conducted in unrepresentative samples and/or have focused on marriages ending in divorce.

Divorce as a societal phenomenon has gained much attention from researchers in the social sciences, particularly social work, psychology and sociology. Studies conducted on this phenomenon encompass the causes and effects of divorce on both parents and children, as well as the recommended therapy by clinicians. For the purposes of this study the researchers devote attention to factors contributing to

divorce among young couples. Up-to-date knowledge of the reported reasons for divorce among young adults may also be important for relationship counsellors, and for men and women attempting to evaluate their own experience. Furthermore, this knowledge may be useful for guiding preventive interventions by informing relationship and marriage advice.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

According to McGoldrick, Carter and Garcia-Preto (2011), the emotional and intellectual stages that one passes through from childhood to old age as a member of a family are called the family life cycle. The family life cycle perspective describes a series of stages through which each couple investable passes. This offers an “organising theme for viewing the family as a system moving through time” (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013).

Each stage consists of specific developmental tasks expected to be accomplished. The family life cycle stages of development include independence, coupling, parenting, launching, retirement and late life.

In this paper the researchers focus on the three most relevant stages, namely the independence, coupling and parenting as identified by McGoldrick et al. (2011).

**The independence stage** is the one when an individual enters young adulthood where one begins to detach oneself emotionally from one’s family. It is during this stage that one strives to support oneself fully emotionally, physically, socially, and financially. One begins to develop unique qualities and characteristics (commitment, commonality, compatibility, trust and attachments) that define one’s individual identity (McGoldrick et al., 2011).

Intimacy is a vital skill to develop during this stage. Intimacy is the ability to develop and maintain close relationships that can endure hard times and other challenges. The couple’s ability to develop an intimate relationship depends on how successful they were at developing their individual identity earlier in their lives.

**The coupling stage** takes place when one joins another family through marriage or a committed union in which the couple form a new family system. One’s family system includes one’s personal ideas, expectations and values. These are shaped by the relationships and experiences within one’s original family. When an individual marries or forms a union, that person combines their family system with that of their spouses or partners (McGoldrick et al., 2011). The ultimate goal at this stage is to achieve independence, which occurs when one is able to fully enter into a relationship with another person. This also requires the sharing of goals and sometimes the ability to place the needs of the other above one’s own.

**Parenting** is one of the most challenging phases of the family life cycle. The decision to have children is one that affects a couples’ individual development. Divorce rates peak during the parenting stage. Children are so time-consuming that skills not learned in previous stages will be difficult to pick up at this stage. For instance, the ability to communicate well, maintaining a healthy relationship and solve problems may be tested. In case the couples failed to learn compromise and commitment in the previous stage, they may not have the skills to transition well into this stage. Various challenges of this stage include setting positive boundaries with the family of origin, unrealistic expectations regarding child-rearing, gender disparities in the home and at work regarding caregiving, and securing good, affordable, safe childcare (Healthwise, 2017).

Challenges may be encountered (such as divorce or loss of a loved one) during the transitional periods between these stages, which subsequently lead to individuals building or gaining new skills. Dealing with unexpected crises, stressful circumstances or passing expected milestones may temporarily threaten an individual or couples’ usual developmental progress. Ultimately a realignment in the family’s organisation and the family cycle development may be affected.

**TABLE 1**  
**FAMILY LIFE CYCLE AND DIVORCE**

Phase	Emotional process of transition: Prerequisite attitude	Developmental issues
<b>DIVORCE</b>		
1. The decision to divorce	Acceptance of inability to resolve marital tensions	Acceptance of the failure of one's marriage
2. Breaking up	Supporting viable arrangements	a. Working cooperatively on problems of custody, visitation and finances
		b. Dealing with extended family about the divorce
3. Separation	a. Willingness to cooperate co-parental and joint financial support to maintain the children b. Work on resolution of attachment to spouse	a. Mourning loss of family
		b. Restructuring marital and parent-child relationships and finances; adaptation to living apart
		c. Realignment of relationships with extended family; staying connected with spouse's extended family
4. The divorce	More work to address the emotions: overcoming hurt, anger, guilt, etc.	a. Mourning loss of family: giving up fantasies of reunion
		b. Retrieval of hopes, dreams, expectations from the marriage
		c. staying connected with extended families
<b>POST-DIVORCE FAMILY</b>		
Single-parent (custodial household or primary residence)	Willingness to maintain financial responsibilities, continue parental contact with ex-spouse, and support contact of children with ex-spouse and his or her family	a. Making flexible visitation arrangements with ex-spouse and their family
		b. Rebuilding one's own financial resources
		c. Rebuilding one's own social network
Single-parent (noncustodial)	Willingness to maintain parental contact with ex-spouse and support custodial parent's relationship with children	a. Finding ways to continue effective parenting relationship with children
		b. Maintaining financial responsibilities to ex-spouse and children.
		c. Rebuilding one's own social network

Source: Adapted from Carter & McGoldrick (1989)

Table 1 outlines the stages outlined by Carter and McGoldrick (1989) commonly observed prior to and after a divorce. Couples who divorce eventually remarry and start another family unit. A remarriage often gives rise to the so-called blended family, which is particularly complex, since the two adults entering this new marriage may bring along biological children and sometimes stepchildren from one or more previous marriages, and subsequently they may bear additional children. There may also be multiple sets of grandparents, stepparents and other family members.

Children may be affected in various ways. For instance, their academic achievements and relationships may be affected. Furthermore, they may have difficulties in internalising problems (such as anxiety, stress, depression and emotional maladjustment), and with externalising behaviours (such as aggression, rule-breaking, delinquency, disruptive conduct).

The effects on the family life cycle are seen when difficulties arise for couples with young children and adolescents. For instance, lack of proper parenting, bringing romantic partners in and out of children's lives, lack of role models or emotional support for adolescents; unclear norms; renegotiation of rules and boundaries; disorganisation and reorganization of the family system or switching of

denominations. Factors affecting children must also be taken into account during the divorce process; for instance, not putting the children in the middle of a dispute, not forcing them to choose sides, allowed them to give input on visitation schedule after divorce etc.). Resiliency is evident when a strong parent-child relationship is maintained throughout the divorce process (particularly father-child relationship) and beyond.

Social workers can play the role of counsellor to assist families of divorced couples with the stresses of moving from one stage of family life to another or when other disruptions (emotional separation) occur in the family life cycle

## **METHODS**

The overall methodology of the study was qualitative semi-structured interviewing. Data were audio recorded after obtaining consent from the participants. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and an interpretative phenomenological analysis was conducted. A qualitative semi-structured interview is neither a fully open-ended nor a strictly structured questionnaire; this allows the researcher to uncover the lived world as experienced by the participants. Since divorce is a quite sensitive and private topic, the researchers were concerned to find a way to access the lived experiences of the participants as much as possible. A qualitative research interview has the unique potential for obtaining access to and describing the lived everyday world of respondents. A qualitative semi-structured method was therefore useful for this study as a tool to access the everyday experiences of the participants and to bring out the experiences as seen from their own perspective.

## **SAMPLING**

The researchers used snowball sampling. They knew a young adult divorcee, who had been married for a period of not more than ten years; the researchers then asked this individual to refer them to others who met the same criteria. Eleven (11) participants were thus identified and recruited. The sample size was based on the principle of saturation, which suggests that data collection stops when there are no longer any new emerging themes.

## **DATA-COLLECTION METHOD**

The researchers used semi-structured interviews to collect data. This led to the elicitation of information about the participants' thoughts, feelings and perceptions, as the study used open-ended questions from the interviews.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The researchers used interpretative phenomenological data analysis (IPA) which involves four steps:

- Step 1: the researchers read through and make initial comments on the data;
- Step 2: the researchers re-read and coded the data into sub-themes;
- Step 3: the researchers re-organised the sub-themes to determine higher themes;
- Step 4: the researchers re-grouped the themes and sub-themes under superordinate themes.

## **FINDINGS**

The following master themes emerged as factors contributing to divorce: (1) character; (2) poor communication; (3) abuse; (4) financial problems; and (5) infidelity.

Data presented in Table 2 show that the participants' ages ranged from 27 to 35 years. Amato, Johnson, Booth and Rogers (2014) claim that, for many young couples, their youth itself is the principal stumbling block to a successful marriage, and that many of those who divorce in this age group say they had intensely romanticised ideas about marriage. Kreppner and Lerner (2013) also observe that family therapists hesitate to use the word 'immature', but many suggest that people in this age group do not have well-developed identities and often lack skills that could help them resolve problems. Chan and Halpin (2015) argue that in general young couples are not emotionally ready to understand themselves and they are often unable to talk

about conflicts constructively without either withdrawing or lashing out. Strong and Cohen (2013) indicate that the possible consequences of this lack of maturity include a greater likelihood of change, whether in terms of self-identity or socio-economic status and prospects.

## DESCRIPTION OF SAMPLE

**TABLE 2**  
**DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF THE PARTICIPANTS**

Partici-pant	Age	Gender	Religious affiliation	Educational status	Duration of marriage	Number of children
1	27	Female	Christianity and Ancestor worship	Undergraduate degree	6 years	1
2	30	Male	Christianity	Matric	6 years	2
3	35	Male	Christianity	Matric	5 years	2
4	33	Male	Christianity	Matric	2 years	2
5	35	Female	Christianity	Undergraduate degree	4 years	4
6	28	Female	Christianity and Ancestor worship	Undergraduate degree	5 years	2
7	26	Female	Christianity	Matric	6 years	1
8	29	Male	Christianity	Undergraduate degree	5 years	2
9	32	Female	Christianity	Matric	1 year	3
10	35	Female	Christianity	Matric	5 years	2
11	33	Male	Christianity	Undergraduate degree	6 years	2

The demographic data provided in Table 2 show that 7 of the 11 participants had 2 children each, while 2 participants had 1 child only, and another participant had 4 children, while 1 participant had 3 children. Strong and Cohen (2013) found that the number of children has a significant impact on divorce risk and suggest that the greater the number of children, the more stable the marriage. However, the protective effects of the number of children have diminishing marginal effects; the lower the child's age, the lower the divorce risk is, and couples with boys have lower divorce risk (Kotlikoff, 2016). These findings are not consistent with the results of previous studies in Western societies, which demonstrate that, as a link between the couple, children are extremely important for maintaining a stable marital relationship and resolving family conflicts (Strong & Cohen, 2013; Steinmetz & Sussman, 2013; Kotlikoff, 2016). Kreppner and Lerner (2013) found that the number of children and divorce risk have a u-shaped nonlinear relationship and that either too many or too few children are not favourable to the stability of the marriage.

Table 2 also reveals that 6 out of 11 participants had matric as their highest educational qualification, while the other 5 had undergraduate degrees as their highest qualification. According to Amato, et al., (2014), the impact of education on marital stability is not that straightforward. Kreppner and Lerner (2013) further show that education is part of the general process of socialisation and may represent an individual's preferences for ways of living. Strong and Cohen (2013) argue that good education improves opportunities on the labour market, which in turn makes an individual more independent from the partner. Boisvert and Poulin (2017) believe that appropriateness of educational level and homogeneity can be a positive and influential factor in a couple's mutual understanding, because it provides sufficient motivation and an appropriate cultural atmosphere for verbal and spiritual communication between couples, which creates grounds for deeper cultural and intellectual convergence. Knapp, Sandberg, Novak and Larson (2015) found that there is a significant positive statistical relationship between educational level and marital satisfaction. However, this does not mean that the absence of this will result in incompatibility and lack of



understanding between couples, because such factors are interpreted based on the intellectual and epistemic background of the couple. Arnett (2014) sees the educational level of the young adults as an important factor in selecting their appropriate partners.

Although data in Table 2 reveal that there were 9 participants who mentioned Christianity as their religious orientation, there were also 2 participants who reported Christianity as well as ancestor worship as their religious persuasion. Martin and Bumpass (2011) think that valuing religion and regularly practising it is associated with greater marital stability, higher levels of marital satisfaction, and an increased likelihood that an individual would be inclined to marry. Wenner and Randall (2016) observe that during the 1980s and 1990s, when religious practice decreased overall, the association between regular religious attendance and marital stability became even more apparent compared to those who had ceased religious practice and who divorced 2.5 times more frequently than those who continued to attend religious services.

Religious beliefs play a significant role in strengthening the marriage and its stability. A review including 94 meta-analyses referred to an 'average to strong' relationship between religion and commitment and marital satisfaction, while the results of studies carried out on Muslim, Christian and Jewish American populations indicated that religion affected marriage stability through anti-divorce beliefs and the sharing of religious beliefs in the community (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). A study of appropriate criteria in spouse selection by Kyalo (2012) discovered that adherence to religious beliefs and principles was among the top priorities. The results of the study indicated that there was a significant positive relationship between religious adherence and marital satisfaction after marriage. The study carried out by Knapp et al. (2015) concluded that religiosity had the highest relationship with the level of agreement between the couples, while religious tendencies and emotions had the highest relationship with total marital satisfaction. Shulman and Connolly (2013) maintain that religious beliefs generally have a positive relationship with satisfaction with life and help with improving, strengthening and consolidating the relationship between couples and the stability of marriage, while an increase in ethical commitment reduces the probability of resorting to divorce.

Table 2 also shows that 6 of the participants indicated that their marriages lasted for six years, whereas two other participants mentioned that their marriages lasted for five years. The marriages of the remaining 5 participants lasted between 1 and 4 years. Martin and Bumpass (2011) note that young couples rush into marriage without knowing the stresses of living with a partner for the rest of their lives; then after a period of complete happiness which usually lasts from 1-5 years, there is constant fighting, ultimately leading to divorce.

## **FINDINGS ACCORDING TO THEMES**

The following master themes emerged as factors contributing to divorce among young couples in Lebowakgomo: (1) character; (2) poor communication; (3) abuse; (4) financial problems; and (5) infidelity.

### **A CHANGE IN CHARACTER**

The narratives below were given by the participants who had to deal with a spouse whose character changed:

*“When we started, she had a good character and that demonstrated the reason why I married her. I married her because I liked her character and that made me love her, but along the way her character changed and I do not know what caused that sudden change”.*

*“She had a good character and respected my family, including me. She had a good heart and was very humble. She seemed to be satisfied with everything. She started changing after I had lost my job, and she started cheating on me, and when I tried to talk to her she did not change her new ways at all”.*

*“When I fell in love with him he was all gentle and seemed to be a modern man who was romantic, but after we got married, his character changed. During our marriage he did not*

*behave according to what I expect of a man to behave, and I think the fact that he is a traditionalist played a big role in his behaviour, because he believed that he is the head of the family and everything he says or does goes without being challenged. My opinion as his wife did not count at all; my opinions were just being ignored”.*

The participants' ex-spouses had unresolved identity issues in a form of unstable characters. Popenoe and Whitehead (2010) hold the view that character changes occur when a person experiences a dramatic change in actions, opinions or feelings. This is best explained by Erikson's stage of development which he called 'identity vs role confusion'. Erikson (1950) believes that during this stage young adults search for a sense of self and personal identity through an intense exploration of personal values, beliefs and goals. Erikson (1950) further argues that during this stage the young adults re-examine their identity and try to find out exactly who they are. Erikson (1950) views intimacy or closeness and mutual sharing as the basic strength of the intimacy versus isolation stage, and isolation as its core pathology. Wenner and Randall (2016) believe that intimacy between couples was only possible when each had separately developed a strong sense of identity. They argue that it is unfortunate that many couples these days marry at a very young age and this development had by no means always been completed. Newman and Newman (2014) argue that the dilemma is that it is difficult for two people to grow and mature together unless they have first matured separately. Kroger (2014) observes a trend which is not surprising: divorce is a common outcome for couples who marry while still quite young and immature. Marcia and Josselson (2013) state that young adults often still have not advanced in maturity, and although some have achieved a level of maturity in their twenties, many others do not arrive at this level until well into their thirties, and still others are not able to attain full maturity ever.

## **POOR COMMUNICATION**

The participants responded differently with respect to poor communication, but most of them shared the same experience of bad communication in their marriages. The following excerpts illustrate views of the participants who experienced bad communication in their marriages.

*“Our communication was very poor during our marriage, as he was taking decisions alone without involving me; he treated me like a child who does not have a say. Yoh, our communication was very bad, and we were not agreeing on anything”.*

*At the beginning, our communication was good, but after she got a job, she started to throw hurting words on me. Just because I understand human rights, I could not beat her up, and I took a decision to divorce her, as I was starting to doubt my manhood as she degraded my dignity. I was unable to continue living with her anymore. The real reason we divorced is communication problems we had experienced once my ex-wife started working. The reason I am saying this is because after she started working, she began troubling me and our communication then started to deteriorate”.*

*“It was not a proper communication because he was not engaging me in anything, even if he had to buy a couch, he would not say anything to me. I would just see a delivering vehicle coming to deliver. I think he did this because I was a housewife during our marriage, so our communication was not good at all”.*

The findings presented here indicate that lack of, or poor, communication was a major problem in the participants' marriages.

Cox (2010) notes that the underlying cause of many divorces among young couples is a lack of, or poor, communication. Tembe (2010) suggests that failure to communicate makes it difficult to resolve financial and emotional issues, among others. Hohmann-Marriott (2012) holds that communication problems between a couple may possibly exist long before they even get married officially, and that expectations may not have been made clear, or certain issues that could affect the marriage may not have been discussed.

Madhyastha, Hamaker and Gottman (2011) explained that poor interpersonal communication and prolonged conflict are strong indications of potential divorce. In their study Knapp, et al. (2015) posit that

young people are placed at increased risk of divorce because of negative communication patterns acquired through family systems throughout the developmental process. According to the emerging adulthood theory of Arnett (2016), young adults should delay serious life decisions until they have fully realised their identity development. This extended stage of identity development and exploration becomes especially transformational for young adults, as they can unlearn maladaptive communication patterns through independence from their parents as well as learning effective communication through opportunities to improve their skills through romantic relationship experiences (Arnett, 2014). Madhyastha, et al., (2011) argue that maladaptive communication patterns corrode relationships and that effective communication is a skill learned through family upbringing, social experiences and previous romantic relationships.

## EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL ABUSE

The following are excerpts from the participants who experienced abuse in their marriages.

*“Yes, I was emotionally and verbally abused because my ex-husband was not faithful to me, as he was dating ladies staying in the same complex with us, and it was stressing me, as I could see him with those ladies doing all these things ... verbally he was abusing me in a way that he would say that I am not his type and that I am not working, and as such, I am useless. He was calling me names”.*

*“He abused me physically, and that is what gave me the courage to divorce him, as I feared that if things continue like this, I will end up being killed”.*

*“Yes, I experienced emotional abuse because towards the beginning of our problems, she was trying to make me feel bad and feel less about myself. She made me feel less of a man as I could not provide for her”.*

The data presented above suggest that the participants experienced abuse in their marriages at some point. Lamanna and Riedmann (2009) observe that there are many forms of abuse, not just intentional and habitual physical battery, all of which are possible causes of divorce among young couples. Lamanna and Riedmann (2009) hold that sexual, emotional and physical abuse can lead to divorce among young couples, and that a feeling of being unsafe in one’s relationship can make it difficult or impossible to continue with the marriage.

In this study women cite abuse as the reason for their divorce. This finding is surprising considering that the psychological literature contends that abused women tend to be caught in a cycle of violence and are unable to or unwilling to leave abusive spouses (Indongo & Pazvakawambwa, 2015). In contrast to conventional wisdom, Mashego and Taruvinga (2014) think that abused women are 1.7 to 5.7 times more likely to divorce, while for men, witnessing violence is a strong predictor of abusive behaviour, but that re-socializing men from violent homes lowers abuse rates by 26 to 48 percent.

Abuse is often associated with women as victims and men as perpetrators. Baholo, Christofides, Wright, Sikweyiya and Shai (2015) explain that South Africa has many such communities where domestic violence is culturally entrenched, and where men exert power and control over women; in fact, domestic violence is on the increase in South Africa. Mathews, Jewkes and Abrahams (2014) posit that a cultural twist to domestic violence is that in certain cultures beating a wife and violence to a wife is tolerated as a response to infidelity or other infractions of the family honour by her. Fischel-Wolovick (2018) argue that in some communities the terms ‘abuse’ or ‘domestic violence’ do not even exist; in other communities religious and social norms hold that domestic violence is a private matter between partners rather than a crime for which the perpetrators should be held legally responsible.

Adjei (2017) suggest that the ideas and attitudes in African cultural notions of male patriarchy abound within marital relationships, where the subordination of women is underscored by the tradition of bride price, which reinforces the notion that husband has purchased and now owns his wife, including her labour and sexuality.

## FINANCIAL PROBLEMS

The following narratives reveal the participants' experiences of financial problems in their marriages.

*"Yes, we had financial problems, and it was the result of lack of proper communication, as everyone did as they pleased. At the end of the month, when we got our salaries, we did not sit down and plan how best we can spend our money, and everyone was just spending as they wished".*

*"Yes, we experienced money problems because I did not have a stable job, and I was the only one working at that time, and when my wife started working, I thought it would be a relief for me because we would help each other, but that was not the case. When I told her that now that you are working you should assist me, she refused. The financial situation we were in was caused by debts I got into while she was still unemployed, but she was not ready to help me out".*

*"Yes, I was working at the garage as a petrol attendant, and I lost my job, and that meant that there would not be an income anymore in the house. Then that changed our lives and we started to rely mainly on my parents and her parents for survival, something which did not sit well with her and that is why she left".*

The data presented here are consistent with Hofheimer's (2010) contention that financial difficulties can add stress to any relationship, especially marriage. Brown and Manning (2010) posit that money or aspects related to it are a possible cause of disagreement between young couples. Choi and Marks (2008) observe that young couples fight over issues such as shared financial responsibility, unequal financial status, undisclosed financial state, overspending and lack of financial support. Evidence by Kuhn and McParland (2008) suggest that lack of communication over financial issues is the real problem and not money per se.

Research has shown that financial stress has a direct impact on financial wellbeing. When couples are unable to manage their finances because of inadequate resources or poor money-management decisions, they are constrained from achieving financial wellbeing and relationship satisfaction (Bezuidenhout, 2017; Britt & Huston, 2012; Halliday-Hardie & Lucas, 2010). Britt, Huston and Durband (2010) add that financial stress is more prominent when a couple's financial contributions are not equitable (i.e. one partner is contributing significantly more to the couple's finances than the other). Dew and Stewart (2012) argue that the presence of financial stress may also exist in a relationship because both partners are being affected by common financial stressors such as low income and high debt. Arnett (2014) suggests that conflict may exist among young adults when there is a lack of sound financial decisions being made or lack of communication over financial decisions. Kuhn and McParland (2008) hold that, although couples frequently argue about other topics such as house chaos that affects them, those involved in both research and practice have found that financial disagreements are much more symbolic and likely to predict negative conflict responses than any other type of disagreement.

Financial stress tends to lower overall relationship or marital quality. In their study Halliday-Hardie and Lucas (2010) found a direct negative effect of financial stress on relationship satisfaction. Britt and Huston (2012) state that couples who argue over money are couples who have not taken the time to focus on each other. This is typically during the early stages of their relationship – the appropriate time to build on their commitment as a couple. When less focus is placed on resolving financial conflicts, it is evident to see the significant impact of financial disagreements, influenced by both money and relationship factors, on committed and married couples (Britt, Huston & Durband, 2010).

When couples are facing financial stress, communication plays an important role in relationship quality as it is likely that there are additional contributors of financial conflict. Specifically, financial conflict may bring other relationship issues such as power, fairness, respect and

commitment to the forefront (Dew & Stewart, 2012). This is important to consider as many young adults today engage in committed, romantic relationships. The formation of such relationships also requires commitment and the increased likelihood that young adult couples may need to make financial decisions together (Bezuidenhout, 2017).

## INFIDELITY

In the following narratives all participants, including those of the men, admitted to having experienced a cheating wife/husband:

*“Yes, he had extramarital affairs and after that, our relationship was never normal again, and at that stage, I had had enough of him, and this just fuelled the situation even worse because of the type of people he was cheating on me with”.*

*“Yes, she had extramarital affairs, and I believe that if she did not have extramarital relationships, we would still be married. I was asking myself why she is cheating on me while she is busy telling me that sexually I satisfy her. I used to believe that the reason why women cheat on their husbands is because their husbands were not satisfying them sexually, but now I know that you can be cheated on even if you satisfy your woman sexually”.*

*“Yes, after I lost my job she started seeing other men, and that is one of the reasons that collapsed our marriage. When I first found out that she was cheating on me, I spoke to her, and she regretted and showed some remorse, and she suggested that she had to go home as she was not comfortable with me about what has happened”.*

According to Vincent (2009), betrayal, adultery and cheating in marriage have become some of the most common reasons for divorce among young couples, and that infidelity in marriage can ruin the best of relationships. In other words, whether it is a cheating wife or husband, the repercussions are devastating for all.

The literature suggests that if a woman has extramarital affairs, the culture does not support her but condemns her and gives her names such as adulterer and prostitute (Choi & Marks, 2008; Mathebula, 2017). Morgan and Rindfuss (2013) indicate that today women see divorce as a means of regaining their freedom. It has been noticed that extramarital affairs bring financial constraints upon the family. Onoya, Zuma, Zungu, Shisana and Mehlomakhulu (2014) state that sayings such as the Sotho “*monna ke tswene oja ka matsogo a mabedi*” (literally meaning “a man is a baboon, he eats with both hands” – in other words, a man may have more than one wife) not only reinforce the subjugation of women, but also make women vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. It is a universal phenomenon that people get involved in extramarital relations. In some societies this is regarded as a frivolous matter, but is controlled by strict social norms and taboos and in some societies. Claxton, Deluca and van Dulmen (2015) suggest that extramarital relations, either frivolous or extreme, have devastating effects on marital life, resulting in divorce. For example, Morgan and Rindfuss (2013) in their study compared 160 cultures and found that infidelity was the single most cited cause of divorce. Lyons, Manning, Longmore and Giordano (2014) have found that in Western countries it has been estimated that between 25 and 50% of divorcees cited spouse infidelity as the primary cause of the divorce. Infidelity is universal in all societies and in all times and among both sexes. But it is a strange fact that infidelity in females is not tolerated, but in males it is considered their right in many instances. Morgan and Rindfuss (2013) view males as more likely to be involved in extra-marital relations than females.

## DISCUSSION

A theory by McGoldrick et al. (2011) suggests that failure by couples to navigate transitions in marriages may lead to changes in the structure of the marital relationship. The change may have positive or negative effects that may eventually lead to divorce. In this study transitions manifest

themselves in different ways, such as poor communication, loss of a job, infidelity, sudden character change, financial problems and abuse.

Steinmetz and Sussman (2013) state that after getting married, couples are required to adjust, and one way of achieving this is to develop communication skills. McCubbin and Figley (2014) argue that communication is at the heart of a marriage. Olson and Lavee (2013) suggest that clear communication is important for stable marriages.

The researchers also found that failure to resolve the identity formation stage successfully can lead to divorce among young couples. McGoldrick et al. (2011) postulate that the family life cycle involves tasks and transitions, and one of the tasks to be accomplished during the family life cycle is to find a suitable partner to start a family. Walsh and McGoldrick (2013) argue that at this point the person undergoes a series of changes and this might also include their identity.

Noller and Callan (2015) state that learning to live together while providing for each other's basic personality needs is crucial developmental task. Datan and Ginsberg (2013) claim that the couple must mutually accommodate each other in many small ways. For example: they must develop routines for eating, sleeping, getting up in the morning, cleaning the house, sharing the bathroom, recreational pursuits, and going to places that they both enjoy. Moreover, how successful the evolving marital relationship will be depends on how well each of the partners has differentiated or separated from their respective families of origin (Galvin, Braithwaite & Bylund, 2015).

Each stage is precipitated by a life event or by a family stage marker. These markers demand change and new adaptations (Darling & Cassidy, 2014). The change may be due to alterations in family composition, or as a major shift in autonomy. During each stage of the life cycle young couples must fulfil certain family tasks. Should carrying out of any task be incomplete, impeded or disturbed, then family development would be delayed or suspended (Walsh & McGoldrick, 2013). The difficulties experienced by young couples will be carried on into subsequent stages of family development (Olson & Lavee, 2013).

Financial problems due to poor communication about finances, lack of income and loss of a job emerged as one of the main causes for divorce among young couples. The family life cycle theory states that during the independent stage individuals strive to support themselves fully – emotionally, physically and socially. Noller and Callan (2015) note that exploring interests and career goals is part of developing independence by young adults, and that to live successfully away from their family, young adults must develop financial and emotional independence. Le Breton-Miller and Miller (2015) say that young adults may find that some of the ideas or expectations that they held about finances in the past are not realistic at this stage. Therefore, as can be seen from this study, failure to adjust to these transitions results in the family life cycle being disrupted or impeded (Choi & Marks, 2008; Mathebula, 2017).

This study also noted a relationship between abuse and divorce among young couples. The participants identified physical and emotional abuse as the type of abuse that they have suffered. Widom and Wilson (2015) indicate that although wives are also likely to attack their husbands, widespread violence against women is related to the sexist structure of society and our socialisation. This study also identified a relationship between infidelity and divorce among young couples. Morgan and Rindfuss (2013) suggest that infidelity is common across cultures, and add that in hunting and gathering societies there was no evidence that young women were any less adulterous than young men.

This study revealed that all the participants had to deal with a cheating partner in their marriages. Kreppner and Lerner (2013) believe that infidelity is the most common problem in marriage, which is devastating to relationships and the most difficult problem to treat. Walsh and McGoldrick (2013) note that while most couples disapprove of infidelity, its causes are complex and varied. Affairs can occur in happy relationships as well as in troubled ones. While most affairs happen because of relational dissatisfaction, they also happen because of personal dissatisfaction and low self-esteem. In such cases the partner involved may be unaware of their contribution to what is lacking in the relationship (Schlacter, Razzouk & Mills, 2016). Schlacter, et al., (2016) argue that, in addition to low self-esteem,

reasons for infidelity include relationship deficits such as a lack of affection or a social context in which infidelity is condoned.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, sudden character change, poor communication, financial problems, abuse and infidelity are associated with divorce among young couples. The mastery of the prior stages of the family life cycle can reduce the chances of divorce among young couples. This can be achieved by ensuring that before the couples enter marriage, they receive pre-marital counselling. Additionally, after entering marriage they should attend marital enrichment programmes.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The implications of the above findings are that the family life cycle approach should be taken into consideration by therapists during marital counselling. The researchers are of the view that if young people understand their place in the life cycle correctly, they will be able to deal with the stage of the family life cycle they are in and consequently they will be able to anticipate problems associated with each stage.

The study calls on government to pass legislation, through parliamentary processes, that will ensure that pre-marital counselling is mandatory for couples entering marriage for the first time. This will help curb divorce among young couples.

Family counsellors such as social workers may also work with family members when they are in the process of deciding to divorce, during the actual time of a divorce, or after a divorce has taken place. Working on problems of custody, visitations and finances becomes important. Social workers may utilise their various skills and values to assist divorced couples when mourning the loss of the intact family and adapting to living apart. During the divorce process, the focus of counselling should be working on the emotional separation and overcoming hurt, anger and guilt.

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