ADOLESCENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON CHILD-PARENT RELATIONSHIPS FOLLOWING PARENTAL DIVORCE: SUGGESTIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

A family is regarded as the main social institution that structures the lives, activities and relations of women, men and children (Thornton, Axinn & Xie, 2007:3). It is the basic unit of society that plays a vital role in the lives of all people, especially with regard to the survival, protection and development of children who are below the age of 18 years (Patel, 2005:167). It is against this backdrop that divorce, which is the legal dissolution of a marriage (Barker, 1995:106), is often a painful and a stressful process for parents and children (Afifi, Huber & Ohs, 2006:2; Yu, Pettit, Lansford, Dodge & Bates, 2010:283), especially adolescents. Family disruption is difficult for adolescents to adapt to, as they are going through a developmental stage characterised by changes in their physical growth, sexual development, cognitive abilities and identity development (Barton, Watkins & Jarjoura, 1997:488; Videon, 2002:489). Hines (1997:375) aptly states that parental divorce "promotes growth for some adolescents and developmental vulnerabilities to others".

Divorce is associated with loss and it is likely to have a negative effect on people's lives economically, socially and psychologically. It deprives individuals of their dreams and ignites a grieving process that manifests itself as self-judgement, fear, guilt and anger (Mentzer, 2009:53). It also leads to the dislocation of the spousal, parental and siblings' family subsystems. Currently the rapid rise in the divorce rate in South Africa poses a major challenge to social workers, who are concerned with the wellbeing of children and the social functioning of all humanity. For instance, in 2009 there were 30 763 divorces recorded and the numbers have been fluctuating between 28 924 and 34 145 per annum over the past decade (Statistics South Africa, 2009). The aftermath of divorce may be devastating for adolescents, who do not know why their parents dissolved the marriage, particularly if no conflicts were observed. For instance, face-to-face interviews conducted with primary school learners in suburban Durban revealed that some of the participants had experienced shock and disbelief as a consequence of parental divorce (Bojuwoye & Akpan, 2009:77). Another disheartening factor is that research has shown that such adolescents may become anxious and fearful of establishing committed romantic relationships later in life, or be at risk of thinking that their marriages will end in divorce (Amato & DeBoer, 2001:1044; Cartwright, 2006:138; Dennison & Koerner, 2008:93; Kunz, 2001:173).

It has been observed that during the process of divorce parents may inadvertently withhold information or trivialise the importance of engaging children in discussions about the imminent structural changes in the family. For example, in some instances, this may emanate from a misconception among rural African parents that children should be protected and therefore not be informed about the pending divorce. Perhaps the parents were mindful of the warning that when parents share information with adolescents, the latter may "feel caught in the middle" (Afifi, 2003:730; Afifi *et al*., 2006:6).

In 2008 the researcher responsible for fieldwork and other social workers employed by the Limpopo Provincial Department of Social Development based in Modimolle in the Waterberg

District was inundated with reports on adolescents aged between 13 and 18 years who were involved in crimes such as theft, shoplifting, assault and substance abuse, or who were suicidal as a result of dysfunctional family patterns. Apparently the adolescents' engagement in unlawful activities was a cry for help. The Waterberg District is characterised by a lack of amenities for youngsters. During the interaction with the young offenders, the social workers discovered that most parents of the adolescents were either separated or divorced. In another instance, a 16-year-old girl was referred by a local high school guidance teacher to the Modimolle Victim Support Centre in the Limpopo Province for counselling, as she had attempted suicide after being visited by her biological father, who was separated from her mother following allegations of sexual abuse of this child.

This study was consequently conducted in 2009 in the Waterberg District, a predominantly rural area. This research was also inspired first by Gibson-Cline's (1996:6) assertion that what youngsters perceive as their most serious problems are not necessarily what professionals believe them to be. Second, the research was also prompted by Videon's (2002:501) contention, which is generally shared by many, that adolescents who get involved in delinquent behaviour may be sending signals that they are having difficulties at home.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND GOALS

In qualitative studies researchers are advised to use questions rather than hypotheses to guide the study at the outset (Boieje, 2010:20; Creswell, 2003:105). A research question is a statement to which a researcher seeks an answer (Johnson & Christensen, 2010:72). The research questions for this study were:

- What are the perceptions of adolescents about their relationships with their parents and siblings following parental divorce?

- What types of social work services are required by adolescents who have experienced parental divorce?

The study was intended to achieve the following primary goals:

- To gain an in-depth understanding of the adolescents' perceptions of their relationships with their parents and siblings following parental divorce;

- To determine the type of social work services required by adolescents who have experienced parental divorce.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As a theoretical framework, structural family therapy (SFT), originally described by Minuchin (1974) in his book entitled *Families and family therapy,* was selected to guide the study, since it regards a family as functional or dysfunctional on the basis of its ability to adjust to different stressors (extra-familial, idiosyncratic and developmental), depending upon the clarity and appropriateness of its subsystem boundaries (Fredericks, 2011:1; Green, 2003:113). The goals of SFT are twofold: (1) to reduce symptoms of dysfunction; and (2) to bring about structural change within the system by modifying the family transaction rules and developing more appropriate boundaries (Corey, 2005:429). Green (2003:113) states that the primary goal of SFT is to bring about organisational changes in a disorganised family; it focuses on the idea that the whole family is organised in a functional way. For instance, the family transactional patterns regulate the behaviour of its members. These patterns of interaction consist of rules, boundaries, alliances and coalitions among family members, including subsets of family

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members. The boundaries assist to maintain separateness and underscore belongingness to the family system (Green, 2003:117). Furthermore, Peris and Emery (2005:172) maintain that boundaries also "delineate each member's unique psychological domain, as well as his or her role within a broader family."

There might be three subsystems in the family, namely spousal, parental and sibling (Minuchin, 1974:56-59). Briefly, the spousal subsystem's tasks are complementary and mutually accommodative; the parental subsystem has executive powers and parents are expected to comprehend children's developmental needs and to explain the rules they impose, while in the sibling subsystem, children may support, isolate, scapegoat and learn from each other.

Three boundaries that might exist between the family subsystems are: the disengaged (rigid), clear (normal) or enmeshed (diffuse) boundaries (Minuchin, 1974:54). Disengaged boundaries create solid barriers through which parents and children cease to be affectionate and to have contact with each other (Green, 2003:117). Thus communication across subsystems becomes difficult and protective functions of the family are thwarted (Minuchin, 1974:54). Clear boundaries permit subsystem members to carry out their functions without any obstruction. Such boundaries promote autonomy among members. Enmeshed and disengaged boundaries are opposites. Minuchin (1974:55) illustrates enmeshed boundaries as evident when "the behaviour of one member immediately affects others, and stress in an individual member reverberates strongly across the boundaries and is swiftly echoed in other subsystems." However, the lack of a clear generational hierarchy in enmeshed boundaries might lead to exchange of roles and to confusion in the adolescent's personal identity (Green, 2003:117).

Peris and Emery (2005:171) define boundaries "as the implicit or explicit rules of relationships in general … central in establishing the structure of family relationships in particular." In addition, SFT addresses problems within a family by charting the relationships among family members, or between subsets of a family (Fredericks, 2011:1).

Divorce brings structural changes to the family and therefore SFT was employed in the current study to identify the types of boundaries that existed among various subsystems following parental divorce. However, Frank (2007:107) raised a pertinent question which requires further investigation, namely whether it is the family structure by itself or the degree of conflict prior to the divorce that affects adult relationships with family members.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative approach and explorative descriptive research design employed in the investigation enabled the researchers to gain a broad understanding (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000:41) of the perspectives of adolescents regarding their relationships with their parents and siblings following the divorce of their parents. It was the first time that such a study was conducted in the Waterberg District. A non-probability purposive sampling technique facilitated the selection of adolescents who met the following criteria in that they: had had a good relationship with both parents prior to the divorce; were between 13 and 18 years old; were from various socio-economic and ethnic groups; were willing to take part in the research; and were granted permission by their custodial parents to participate in the study.

Since this study was qualitative in nature, the sample size was not determined at the outset, but the principle of "data saturation" was applied to determine the sample size in the end. Data saturation is achieved when it becomes apparent to the researcher that a full understanding has been reached (Donalek & Soldwisch, 2004:356). Once the information from participants begins

to repeat itself, the researcher can be confident that the qualitative data have become saturated. In the current study the researcher responsible for the fieldwork conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews, aided by an interview guide, with adolescents who had experienced parental divorce. The data collection process was discontinued after an interview was conducted with the twentieth participant, since no new insights were being gained from the interviews. During the preparation phase the participants agreed to take the responsibility for identifying suitable locations and times for the interviews. They granted the researcher permission to tape-record the interviews after they were assured of confidentiality and anonymity (Bailey, 2007:24) by the researcher when reporting on the findings. Open-ended questions posed to the participants focused on their interpersonal relationships with their parents and siblings after parental divorce.

To manage the qualitative data, the NVivo programme was used for storing, linking ideas and documents, and for coding documents at nodes to show where the concept appeared in the text documents that could be searched and analysed (Walsh, 2003:252). Data verification was conducted through Guba's model (in Krefting, 1991:214-222) of trustworthiness of qualitative research. Credibility of the study was enhanced through the application of triangulation of data sources by gathering qualitative data from adolescents from different socio-economic backgrounds. However, the limitation of the study is that the participants were not reflective of all the cultural groups living in the Waterberg District. For instance, adolescents from the Venda and XiTsonga cultural groups did not take part in the investigation.

THE BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Of the 20 adolescents who constituted the sample, 12 were female and eight male. Their ages ranged between 13 and 18 years. The mean age was 16 years. Nineteen participants were African and one was white. Thirteen participants spoke Sepedi, six spoke Tswana and one spoke Afrikaans. Eleven custodial parents of the participants were unemployed at the time of divorce; five were in part-time employment; while four were in full-time employment. Eighteen participants were in the custody of their mothers and two were in the custody of their fathers (female and male adolescents aged 13 and 15 years respectively).

FINDINGS

The findings will be linked to Minuchin's (1974:53-55) descriptions of boundaries (the implicit or explicit rules of relationships) that emerged between subsystems after parental divorce. Storylines of the participants are utilised to offer their experiences below.

THEME 1: SEVERED OR DISENGAGED RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ADOLESCENTS AND THEIR CUSTODIAL PARENTS FOLLOWING PARENTAL DIVORCE

During the transition period following divorce, custodial parents often feel overwhelmed and might become harsh towards their children and end up straining the parent-child relationship. The manifestation of stress in parents might present itself in what Afifi *et al*. (2006:4) regard as "a diminished capacity to parent their children after a divorce."

Slightly more than half of the participants' utterances about the nature of their relationships with their custodial parents following parental divorce seemed to be associated with "severed" links and fitted in with Minuchin's (1974:55) description of disengaged boundaries between the parental and siblings subsystems, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

> *"My relationship with my mother turned sour following her divorce with my father."*

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> *"I guess I did not understand what happened because nothing was explained to us."*

> *"My mother always shouts at us and she is always in a bad mood and angry. She does not believe in engaging children in parental stuff."*

Evidently no explanation or inadequate explanation was provided by parents to the children about the divorce, which made it harder for some participants to have an open and beneficial relationship with their custodial parents, usually their mothers. It appears that some of the custodial parents were emotionally affected by the divorce and thus failed to maintain good interpersonal relationships with their children. This confirms Sheehan, Darlington, Noller and Feeney's (2004:70) assertion that during the time of stress parents are unable to meet their children's needs for empathy, support and encouragement. It has also been noted that some parents may not talk with their children very often, if at all, about the divorce – for instance, how and why it is making them stressed (Afifi *et al*., 2006:22).

Another issue causing disengagement between the parent and children subsystems was the reluctance of some participants to accept the decisions made by their custodial parents to end the marriage, since the divorce had dire consequences for their socio-economic status and lifestyles. Some of the participants had to vacate their family homes as illustrated in this quotation:

> *"I find it very difficult to relate with my mother since I cannot find a place in my heart to forgive her for letting us move out of our house."*

The finding confirms views of other researchers on the consequences of divorce for adults and children which include, among others, disruption in parent-child relationships, loss of emotional support, economic hardship, decline in networks and other negative life events such as change of residences and schools – for instance, women especially move from a family home into less expensive accommodation (Amato, 2000:1272; Gindes, 1998:120; Hetherington, 1993:41-42). The latter may be detrimental to the adjustment of some adolescents to parental divorce, as they may rely on avoidance as a coping mechanism compared to those who adjust quickly because they manage to establish new relations and gather social support (Amato, 2000:1281). The adolescents' successful reconstruction of their social network following parental divorce is critical in helping them to cope with the structural changes in the family.

Henning (2005:56) noted that previous studies found that custodial parents very often experience considerable stress right after the divorce and may be incapable of providing warmth for their children; their relationships are consequently affected as a result of the instability. For instance, in the current study some participants described their unstable relationships with their custodial parents as follows:

> *"My mother is sometimes moody and she calls us names and at times she is happy with us. The problem is that she does not explain to us what is bothering her."*

> *"I have a good relationship with my mother except when she is upset with my father then she becomes mean to us."*

Verbal abuse directed at adolescents by their custodial mothers promotes disengaged boundaries between the parent and children subsystems. The mothers' outbursts may be attributed to their inability to control their emotions when overwhelmed by the adjustment they had to make following the divorce.

Sub-theme: Normal relationships between adolescents and their custodial parents

Normal boundaries prevailed between some of the custodial mothers and their adolescent children following parental divorce. Conversely, Arditti (1999:109) is concerned that "many scholars fail to address the transformational qualities divorce might bring to mother-child relationships." Few participants, who were able to bond with their custodial mothers in the absence of their fathers, stated that they have a good relationship with their mothers, as evinced in the following quotations:

> *"I have a good relationship with my mother and she seems to be relieved from lots of stress since the divorce."*

> *"My mother is always happy with us since the divorce."*

> *"My mother is kind and caring towards us these days."*

From the participants' stories, the authors concluded that positive adjustment on the part of the custodial parent helps to maintain good interpersonal relationships among family members. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the participants and their custodial parents were relieved after the divorce, hence their relationships were enriched. The findings are also consistent with what a few participants in Cartwright's (2006:138) study indicated that "it was better for them that their parents' marriages ended" and that they saw no negative effects of their parents' decision to separate as they highlighted the positive benefits.

Sub-theme: Enmeshed relationships between adolescents and their custodial parents

Custodial parents who provided an environment that fostered adolescents' openness to talk about their stress following parental divorce enhanced their coping (Afifi *et al.*, 2006:20-21) and autonomy (Minuchin, 1974:55). The participants' responses below imply parental divorce was a relief to some. In some cases, custodial parents confided in participants as illustrated below:

> *"My relationship with my mother is very good as my father does not bother her anymore. I am like a friend to her. She talks to me about what bothers her."*

> *"I relate very well with my mother and she confides in me even though I sometimes feel overwhelmed by the information, especially if it has to do with my father."*

Similar findings were reported by Arditti (1999:113), who interviewed 58 young adult children who indicated having close mother-child relationships and, in addition, the daughters described their mothers as their "best friends". Furthermore, another study by Frank (2007:117) found that the mother-child relationship in divorced families was rated more positively. However, it should be noted that when custodial parents confide in their adolescent children, they may inadvertently share information that is not age-appropriate for adolescents and thus burden the children with the responsibility of being a mediator, counsellor, or friend (Afifi, McManus, Hutchinson & Baker, 2007:80; Amato & Afifi, 2006:22; Arditti, 1999:113). This occurrence is viewed by some family therapists as a violation of boundaries (Arditti, 1999:109). Peris and Emery (2005:171) regard it as "a breakdown in boundaries and a reversal of traditional parent-child roles." On the other hand, divorce can strengthen custodial parent-child relationships, especially the custodial mother-daughter relationship (Arditti, 1999:116). Furthermore Arditti (1999:116) reported that the participants in her study valued the fact that their mothers leaned on them for emotional support, contributing to "a sense of equality, being needed, closeness, shared disclosure, and friend status."

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However, in the current study the findings suggest that the custodial mother-adolescent child relationships were enmeshed and that the adolescents were likely to internalise their mothers' stress. In addition, the mothers' unintended elevation of their adolescent children to confidants may create confusion for the adolescents as they are still developing cognitively, psychologically and physically.

A lack of social support for parents, the severity of divorce stressors and a lack of control over them are regarded by Afifi *et al.* (2007:79) as factors that "create a context in which parents are more likely to disclose inappropriate information to their adolescents about divorce." Conversely, interviews with adolescents revealed their appreciation of their parents' openness about the divorce and their feelings about it, but they were uncomfortable when one parent degraded the other parent's character and wished that their parents would be careful of such disclosures (Afifi & McManus, 2010:97). Reliance of parents on their children for emotional sustenance that is usually derived from the spousal relationship (Arditti, 1999:109) may make it difficult for such parents to provide parental guidance and support to their adolescent children. After divorce, the non-existence of the spousal subsystem may undoubtedly pose a challenge to many custodial parents, if their support system (e.g. family and friends) is lacking.

Sub-theme: Strained relationships between adolescents and their non-custodial parents

The descriptions of the non-custodial father-child relationships provided by the participants are indicative of the disengaged boundaries between the parent-child subsystems. Some of the non-custodial parents shunned their children, including abdicating their responsibilities, in an attempt to punish their ex-partners. Such conflict between divorced parents makes it difficult for adolescents to relate freely with both parents. Amato (2000:1280) observed that marital break-ups that are full of inter-parental conflict are not only a direct stressor for adolescents, but also interfere with the adolescents' attachment to the non-custodial parents.

Most of the participants gave the impression that they were scared to relate with their non-custodial parents, because there was tension between them and their non-custodial parents. Their experiences are reflected in these excerpts:

> *"My parents fight a lot about us and I am unable to relate freely with my father."*

> *"My father is too serious, we are scared of him. He is not friendly to us. I am actually scared of him."*

> *"It appears my father has lost interest in all of us since he parted ways with my mother."*

> *"My father always alleged that my mother did not want him to discipline me and so he still hates me."*

> *"I hate my father a lot for abandoning us and now we are suffering because of him."*

> *"My father rarely visits us and whenever we arrange to visit him, he makes excuses. He thinks we are siding with our mother."*

> *"I am okay without him; I feel I am not ready to see him as he hurt us."*

> *"I still visit my mother although she suspects that I am digging information to pass it on to my father."*

The findings suggest that adolescents developed anger towards their non-custodial parents, because they blamed them for the stress and the hurt they endured after the divorce, or because

their non-custodial parents did not want to relate to them any longer. Feelings such as anxiety, hurt and hatred were expressed by the participants, while others perceived their fathers as uninterested in their welfare, unfriendly, less caring, unloving, pain inflictors and suspicious that the children were siding with their mothers. Thus the process of divorce lead to many changes in children's lives, such as changes in contact with each parent and changes in parental emotions and behaviour (Leon, 2003:258). The findings support those of Frank (2007:119), who found that the father-child relationship suffers when the father is no longer residing with the family, whereas the mother-child relationship is not affected to the same degree by living arrangements.

Sub-theme: Healthy relationships of the adolescents with their non-custodial parents

Such relationships fit very well with Minuchin's (1974:53-60) description of normal boundaries between subsystems. Research shows that the father-child relationship suffers when the father no longer lives in the same residence with the family (Frank, 2007:107,119). It was heartening to note that a few participants in the current study maintained contact with their non-custodial parents, who also continued to offer their children emotional and financial support and, thus, had a good parent-child relationship. The continued contact and involvement of non-custodial parents in the lives of their children strengthened their relationships. The participants indicated that:

> "I am still close to my father as we were before he moved out; I often visit him and he sometimes come to our house."

> "I visit my mother anytime I want and we communicate a lot over the phone too."

> "My father is very nice to us and I am fond of him. I visit him often and he assists me financially and emotionally."

The custodial parents who supported the relationship between the non-custodial parents and the adolescents illustrated their understanding that for the adolescents to flourish, they required a qualitative on-going relationship with both parents. Such an arrangement affords the non-custodial parents an opportunity to execute their parental responsibilities without impediments. Peris and Emery (2005:171) are of the view that parents who are no longer marital partners must maintain an alliance that encourages effective parenting. The findings also support the idea that all family members benefit when there is continued shared parenting (Peck & Manocherian, 1989:344). A father-adolescent child relationship is critical after divorce, since it helps the parent to be more effective in monitoring, communicating with and teaching children (Scott, Booth, King & Johnson, 2007:1194).

THEME 2: THE RELATIONSHIP AMONG ADOLESCENTS AND THEIR SIBLINGS

From the participants' statements the researchers concluded that the adolescents' relationships with their siblings after the divorce of their parents were characterised by animosity or happiness, depending on the circumstances. Thus boundaries among siblings were either disengaged or enmeshed, depending on what was happening in their lives at a particular time.

The findings also support the conclusion by Sheehan *et al.* (2004:73) that adolescents from divorced families were more likely to have sibling relationships characterised by simultaneously high levels of hostility and warmth.

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Sub-theme: Animosity among adolescents and their siblings

More than half of the participants stated that their relationship with their siblings was strained because of blaming, jealousy and mistrust as illustrated in the following excerpts:

"It appears as though we are divided between our parents. My elder siblings are not on good terms with our father and therefore expect me to dislike him too."

"The relationship between my siblings and me is unstable. Sometimes it is good and at times bad since my mother told them that I am no good."

"My little sister dislikes me. She says that I am troublesome and add more stress to our mother."

"My brother is disrespectful. I cannot stand his behaviour."

"My sister and I quarrel a lot more especially because she passes false information about me and my mother to our father."

The responses suggest that conflict emanating from blaming, animosity and parental loyalty among siblings may be associated with parental divorce. Similarly, it has been observed that adolescents from single-parent families are likely to experience more negative sibling relationships than those in two-parent families (Drapeau, Samson & Saint-Jacques, 1999:35; Hetherington, 1993:41). According to Frank (2007:107), the three empirical studies (Milevsky, 2004; Panish & Stricker, 2001; Riggio, 2001) conducted on adult sibling relationships thus far found that "young adults from divorced families have a lower quality of sibling relations", even though Riggio (2001) found this to be true "only if divorce had occurred beyond the age of eight." Therefore, additional research is necessary to contribute towards knowledge in this regard.

Sub-theme: Normal relationships between adolescents and their siblings

Kunz's (2000:19) meta-analysis concluded that children from divorced homes have more positive relations with their siblings than children from intact homes. In this study some of the participants had no option but to mature earlier and to assume responsibilities such as providing support to their younger siblings and custodial parents. Almost half of the participants mentioned that they became close as siblings, especially because they had to protect their younger siblings who did not understand what was going on. Thus the boundaries among the siblings were either clear (normal) or enmeshed (diffused). Their closeness was described as follows:

"We have become very close to each other since our parents divorced."

"My siblings and I are fond of each other and we share most of our belongings to minimise costs for our mother."

"I am very helpful to my mother as I take care of my siblings while she is at work and I also help with household chores."

"I relate well with my siblings especially because I take care of them while my mother is at work."

The participants' relationships with their siblings grew stronger because of their parents' divorce. They provided support for each other, learned how to share in order to cut down on expenses and showed sympathy towards their custodial parents. Participants in Milevsky's (2004:119) study also reported on the siblings' overall closeness, communication and support.

Some participants in the current study felt sympathy for their custodial parents and therefore assisted them by looking after their younger siblings. Such gestures strengthened the relationship among siblings. The findings confirm Rose's (1998:91) contention that the sudden loss of a father figure led some older children to mature early. Such children are often assigned greater responsibilities, such as caring for younger children and doing household chores. Similarly, in the Virginia longitudinal study on the effects of divorce and remarriage on children's adjustment, Hetherington (1989:5) found that "both sons and daughters in divorced families were allowed more responsibility, independence, and power in decision making than were children in non-divorced families." Two participants in the current study did not have siblings and this may have posed a challenge to their adaptation to the new situation.

THEME 3: SOCIAL WORK SERVICES REQUIRED BY ADOLESCENTS FROM DIVORCED FAMILIES

None of the participants had received any professional assistance, including social work services, prior to or after parental divorce. They did know about the existence of social workers, but were unclear about their roles and functions. Despite that, nearly half of the participants indicated that social workers should provide counselling to adolescents from divorced families, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

> *"They should assist adolescents to adjust to their situation following parental divorce."*

> *"They should provide counselling to adolescents, because they need someone to talk to and also listen to their frustrations."*

> *"They should be provided with counselling, since they experience a difficult situation of being torn between two people, both of whom they love."*

> *"I think they should interview them so that they understand what is going on their minds and therefore advise them accordingly."*

> *"I think they should interview them in order to reach out to their inner feelings, since I believe that they might be keeping the pain inside which may explode in future."*

> *"Social workers must intervene or mediate between the two parents so that their differences do not affect the welfare of their children."*

A few participants expressed a wish to have social workers based at schools to be accessible to children who may require assistance. Clearly, children whose parents are going through a divorce or have divorced require psycho-social support from relatives and/or professionals to assist them through a transitional period and imminent changes in the family structure.

DISCUSSION

From the current study five findings emerged as essential. Overall, the research results highlight the benefits of maternal proximity and involvement for the adolescents' wellbeing. However, the family structure – namely, the transactional patterns, boundaries and subsystems – was adversely affected by the absence of the non-resident parent.

For instance, the first finding shows that divorce had a negative effect on the father-child relationship, but a positive effect on the mother-child relationship. This is attributed to the fact that after divorce the conflict between parents was no longer present and custodial parents,

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mostly mothers, were able to give their children their full attention and care, thus resulting in the development of enmeshed boundaries between the parental and siblings subsystems.

The second finding indicates that most of the boundaries between the parent and the children subsystem, and among the children themselves, were either disengaged or enmeshed, depending on circumstances prevalent in their lives. It is worth noting that transition after parental divorce may be difficult for some adolescents.

The third finding shows that normal boundaries prevailed in very few instances, meaning that cohesion and belongingness among family members were lacking to the detriment of the development of adolescents.

The fourth finding suggests that many participants were displeased with parental divorce and hence some displayed anger and disappointment, though a few participants welcomed parental divorce as they and their custodial mothers were then at peace. Nevertheless, the authors assume that adolescents who may feel isolated and lonely following parental divorce are likely to lose direction and engage in unacceptable conduct as a way to gain parental attention. Such adolescents require assistance through proper intervention strategies that would provide them with guidance and support to enable them to develop into well-rounded, confident, self-reliant and responsible adults. The absence of such services could lead adolescents to grow into bitter and angry adults, who may later displace their anger onto others such as partners and children.

The fifth finding indicates that there is a need for school social workers, who would be easily accessible to adolescents who are unable to cope, because their parents are going through divorce, or who have experienced parental divorce, including those who are facing myriad psycho-social problems that may hamper their school performance.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PRACTICE

The authors' contention here is that an appropriate social work intervention to assist adolescents and their families after parental divorce would be by means of the approach known as structural family therapy (SFT). This approach is applied to assist in the restructuring of such families, following the suggestions outlined by Minuchin (1974:138-157). It is not possible for the authors to provide a comprehensive framework for the application of SFT here. However, a few issues are raised regarding SFT with a view to encouraging social workers to familiarise themselves with this intervention and motivate them to implement it when helping families during the restructuring process. This would provide social workers, adolescents and their parents with an opportunity to embark on a journey to recreate the whole family structure, namely transactional patterns, boundaries and subsystems.

According to Green (2003:114), structuralists purport that well-functioning families should be hierarchically organised, with parents serving as the executives in charge. Additionally, the spouses should act as a team with complementary functions. The rules (spoken or unspoken) of the family and the behavioural patterns of its members become the family structure (Green, 2003:114). Deviations from the rules destabilises the family. Nevertheless, healthy families are able to adapt to transitional circumstances that may occur, while other families who lack flexibility in dealing with change may, for instance, have some of their members present with behavioural problems.

The application of SFT requires social workers who are well trained, receive quality supervision and are competent in assessing and assisting individuals in a family context (Corey, 2005:491). The passion of the social worker when engaging with the family is critical. It is

assumed that some of the social workers may regard the implementation of SFT as a daunting and complex task. SFT also requires a dedicated and committed professional who will allocate sufficient time to engage the family as a whole to be able to, for example, participate in the process of joining the family (Minuchin, 1974:89-109). However, Corey (2005:491) cautions that one of the challenges of SFT is being able to involve all the members of the family in therapy, as "some members may be resistant to changing the structure of the system."

During the sessions with the family, the social worker should prepare for "a structural diagnosis" (Minuchin, 1974:89), which is the first phase of therapy. The process of joining the family enables the practitioner to, among other things:

- Hear what family members have to say;

- Observe the way family members relate to the practitioner and to each other;

- Determine the spokesperson of the family and the position the person holds in the family;

- Observe and determine transactional patterns (that regulate family members' behaviour) and boundaries, which will enable the practitioner to derive a family map that will ultimately assist in the development of the therapeutic goals (Green, 2003:119; Minuchin, 1974:89).

Minuchin (1974:91) is of the view that "Change is seen as occurring through the process of the therapist's affiliation with the family and his restructuring of the family, so as to transform dysfunctional transactional patterns." The process of this second phase is presented in Chapter 8 of Minuchin's key study, *Families and Family Therapy* (1974), in which seven categories of restructuring operations are discussed:

- Actualising family transactional patterns;

- Marking boundaries;

- Escalating stress;

- Assigning tasks;

- Utilising symptoms;

- Manipulating mood;

- Supporting, educating and guiding (Minuchin, 1974:138-157).

A clear illustration of what transpires when the family is in transition after parental divorce and the role of the therapist is provided (Minuchin, 1974:100). SFT is based on the promotion of children's and human rights. In this regard, Minuchin (1974:59) contends that "A therapist should know the developmental needs of children and be able to support the child's right to autonomy without minimizing the parents' rights."

For researchers and practitioners to educate parents about how to talk to their children about their divorce and provide the type of information appropriate to share with their children in this regard, Afifi *et al.* (2007:79) suggest that identification of what parents revealed and conditions that influenced disclosure should be investigated first. The results will enable researchers and practitioners to develop appropriate interventions for divorced parents.

For social workers to have a successful intervention with adolescents after parental divorce, parents, and especially the custodial parent, should be encouraged to offer emotional support to

their children. Therefore, when applying SFT, some areas that social workers should consider include:

- Assisting parents and their children in renegotiating family relationships, since boundaries are often lost among stressors accompanying the divorce process (Peris & Emery, 2005:172);

- Helping parents and their adolescent children to improve their communication skills to empower them to talk about divorce-related stressors, their impact on their coping abilities and their wellbeing (Afifi *et al.*, 2006:21-24);

- Assisting parents to share information with their adolescent children about what is going to happen during the process of divorce to alleviate their fears and to minimise the emotional impact of parental divorce on them. Afifi and McManus (2010:85) are of the view that adolescents need to be provided with some information about divorce to reduce their uncertainty. Encourage adolescents to talk about their experiences and assist them to adjust to the new family structure;

- Addressing issues of forgiveness between parents and their children in order to facilitate the restoration of relationships and normal boundaries, considering Freedman and Knupp's (2003:137) statement that "investigations of forgiveness by psychologists have shown that it can be interpersonally healing for individuals who have experienced a deep, personal and unfair hurt." Furthermore, it is necessary to allay the misunderstanding that forgiving is psychologically unhealthy or unwise (Freedman & Knupp, 2003:137);

- Helping single parents with adjustment problems following divorce, including parenting, communication and problem-solving skills that would enable them to know how to handle adolescents' concerns, adapt to the new family structure, establish family contracts and offer children the necessary support in various spheres of life. Encourage single parents to establish support groups, since most families no longer live close to their extended families, who would have offered the needed support in this regard.

Social workers should strive to collaborate with other professionals (in multidisciplinary teams) when assisting adolescents who have experienced parental divorce, since some of them may be emotionally and psychologically affected and may require psychological or psychiatric evaluation and professional services.

Even though this paper supports the use of SFT in addressing the challenges faced by adolescents who have experienced parental divorce, the realities in practice need to be taken into account. For instance, the possible resistance of some family members to participating in the structural changes of the family and the fact that social workers in under-resourced rural areas are beset by challenges such as shortage of staff, high case loads, unfavourable working conditions and infrastructure (Kruger and Centre for Scientific and Industrial Research, 2008:31-49). Hence, further research is required to establish how social workers implement SFT.

FUTURE RESEARCH

In order to address the major limitation of the study, which is that the investigation was limited only to the Waterberg District in the Limpopo Province, future research should focus on:

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- In-depth study to gain more insight into the phenomenon of parent-child relationships, especially how the parents and adolescent children communicate and cope with stress following parental divorce;

- The effects of parental divorce on sibling relationships, for example, the positive aspects of role shifts among the custodial parent and children;

- The identification of cultural factors that may inhibit or enhance open communication between parents and their children about the impending divorce;

- Identifying existing support systems and their roles in assisting divorced parents to cope and adapt to the new family structure;

- An empirical exploration of the implementation of SFT by social workers to determine how they adapt SFT to various types of families that require social work services;

- Making suggestions for suitable social work interventions that would incorporate cultural competence when assisting children and their parents after divorce.

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