Post divorce: Patterns and perceptions within sibling relationships and future intimate relationships

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ABSTRACT

The harmful effects of divorce, regarding children’s formations of relationships have always been a concern amongst psychologists. The consequences of both sibling and future relationships have been examined in this investigation. John Bowlby’s (1969) Attachment theory was focused on in this study; this proposed that once an attachment bond becomes broken, the development of future attachments in relationships may be problematic. Eight participants from the North West of England were administered an interview similar to Mary Main’s (1985) Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), in order to determine the effects of a broken parental attachment. Findings showed siblings became increasingly dependent on each other, buffering the negative effects of a divorce through forming closer sibling bonds. Children of divorce appeared to replace the absent parents role in the household by exhibiting ‘protective’ maternal behaviour toward siblings. Regarding children of divorces hypothetical future intimate relationships, individuals felt a strong need to avoid repeating their parent’s patterns of mistakes. This left individuals to be cautious and avoid proximity in their own relationships, a pessimistic attitude was developed as individuals were found to be reluctant to commit. Possible positive and negative effects on relationships following a parental divorce are discussed.
Introduction

Marriage can be defined as a long-term commitment whereby two individuals legally pledge themselves to one and other. Government figures from the Office for National Statistics (2010) have shown that there were 119,589 divorces in England and Wales during 2010, which is a five per cent increase from 2009. The ever-expanding prevalence of divorce in contemporary society has led to the question of how such a common occurrence is affecting the formation of sibling and intimate relationships.

Existing research into divorce typically focuses on parental separation and the effects on child development, therefore I chose to focus on a less researched topic. The research into divorce and sibling relationships is limited therefore; I will explore this further along with children of divorces intimate relationships. Personally having separated parents I have a strong curiosity as to how my parent’s divorce shapes the way I view and act in my own relationships. In my research I questioned the view that divorce is a ‘temporary crisis’ and aimed to understand the effects of a broken attachment by examining genuine human experiences and the after effects of divorce in terms of relationships.

Background

The significance of parent-child relationships was recognised by clinicians and scientists in the late 1800’s, since then a revolutionary approach into parent-child attachment was devised by John Bowlby (1969). This theory demonstrates a way of conceptualising the propensity of humans and their ability to form strong bonds with others. Bowlby (1944) argued that quality of early relationships remains important throughout life as early patterns of attachment were to be repeated, however feminists are critical of Bowlby’s portrayal of ‘mothering’ as essential to healthy child development (Contratto, 2002).

In 1970, Mary Ainsworth devised the ‘Strange Situation’, this famous body of research offered explanations on attachment types through observation of infants experiencing the separation and return of a primary caregiver. Through Bowlby and Ainsworth’s work, attachment theory emerged and four attachment types were found: Secure, insecure-avoidant, insecure disorganised and insecure-ambivalent. These classifications have been used extensively when researching children (Mennen et al., 2005). Attachment theory suggests that individuals learn a set of expectations or a ‘working model’, which is to be repeated throughout life.

Sears (1963) claims that the capacity for forming attachments is a product of maturation and Van Ijzendoorn et al (1988) argue that attachment theory is somewhat ethnocentric as the Strange Situation was examined through a meta-analysis, to find that there may be universal characteristics that underpin the infant’s attachment with the caregiver.

Ideally, a child would develop a secure attachment that would lead to an ease in establishing future relationships in adult lives, Bowlby’s research suggests that in early infant life, once an attachment becomes broken, there will be consequences in forming long-term relationships. However, research has also found that there are no
positive correlations between infant attachments and later attachments (Weinfield et al. 2000). Bowlby’s research is still widely used today thus, it can be seen that children from divorced families may have a predisposition into dysfunctional relationships; this can still be seen in current research.

Mikulincer (2007) studied the dynamics of relationships to find that romantic adult relationships are the results of childhood attachment development. Children of divorce usually lose a degree of contact with one of their parent figures, this detached bond may leave a child without an accurate template for a successful relationship (Eagan, 2004) thus, the feelings of abandonment and insecurity may be replicated in their own relationships. Also studies have shown that children with secure attachments to parents tend to have less conflicted relationships of their own (Lieberman et al., 1999).

McIntosh (2011) performed a longitudinal study exploring the influence of attachment security and relationship competence across the lifespan. He discovered that after a disrupted attachment relationship, children were more likely to have difficulties with secure attachments and progression of relationships throughout adult life. McIntosh’s extensive research demonstrated the significance of a marital breakdown and the potential negative effects on relationships.

Children of divorce often have to deal with many challenges, explicit or implicit loyalty demands and amendments of their beliefs about the permanence of relationships (Hess et al., 1979:82). Research on adolescents and attachments found that security of romantic attachments during young adulthood was affected by the amount of immoral mistrust that was exhibited in a parental divorce (Summers et al., 1998). Similarly, Crowell (2009) used interviews to understand adult attachment and the transmission of potential effects following a divorce. From this, it became apparent that later in life children of divorce were unwilling to commit and had a tendency to end their own marriage, supporting the notion that a parental separation may cause a disturbance towards children’s own relationships. There are cultural issues here as research is based mainly on Western societies, and it was found that individualist societies exhibit more favourable divorce attitudes than collectivist societies, (Toth et al., 2009).

Collingan et al (1994) found that children of divorce may be particularly vulnerable in developing a pessimistic explanatory style; this may then be reflected in their own personal views on relationships. Also, Brown (2000) stated that feelings of trauma and helplessness around a parental divorce are likely to leave children unconcerned and disapproving of their own adult relationships. This research does not recognise that divorce can be perceived as something positive dependent on the situation. Margolese et al (2005) studied college students and found that their attachment to romantic partners had been affected by depressive symptoms such as ‘fear of abandonment’, which have resulted from their parent’s separation.

Arguably, existing research ignores children’s own perceptions on the event of a divorce (Kurdek et al., 1980). Divorce is assumed as a deficit experience, research focuses on the negative perspective and the interpretation of the outcomes, such as educational success. Kurdek’s argument can still be seen as true today as many
studies on children of divorce are focused on children rather than with them, reporting statistics about them, disregarding children’s views. Adult-centric research is leading and the age of the researcher can be just as vital as gender or ethnicity (Mayall 1994).

In 1989, Blakeslee and Wallerstein conducted interviews with children whose parents had separated, this was done a decade after the divorce. Blakeslee and Wallerstein’s findings concluded that individuals showed a ‘strong desire to fix what their parents could not fix within their own adult lives’, individuals also stated they had a ‘strong needs for stable relationships’. This suggests their relationships become moulded as a result of their parent’s behaviours. I have also interviewed participants to see whether the effects of divorce are still similar today.

Other literature contradicts the idea that divorce is damaging. Ahrons (2011) studied the misconceptions surrounding divorce, finding that divorce is not necessarily always harmful to children. Ahrons looked at the negativity surrounding the event of a divorce; her research found that it could also enhance a person’s life when it is handled correctly. The result of a divorce may be encouraging and provide families with a new approach at looking at relationships. Sprague et al (1997) support Ahrons; they found that individuals with separated parents were more altruistic and trusting in their current intimate relationships. Marquardt, (2010) criticises Ahron’s study suggesting that it oversimplifies the trauma of divorce and that it is not appropriate to use one example as a neutral experience, as individual cases will determine different outcomes of divorce. Amato et al. (1994) looked at existing research on divorce to find that research tends to overgeneralise cases and lose sight of the fact that children can function exceptionally well after a parental separation.

Guidubaldi et al (1985) performed a two-year follow up study on a nationwide sample of children whose parents were divorced. He discovered a positive effect on the female children. Without two parents in a family, adolescent girls may acquire peer and confident relationships with their custodial parents, this maturity rises partly from the status and responsibilities in the house, however this research is dated. Over the years parental roles have changed in the household, therefore research such as this may not reflect contemporary views and feminist’s argue that the structure of a household should be based on egalitarian role sharing (Tannen et al., 2007).

Cohen et al (1985) created the ‘buffering hypothesis’ (high level of social support against negative effects of stress), this was also researched by Bush et al (2003) to find that siblings may seek out a closer bond together as a buffer when stressful occurrences are happening in the family such as a divorce. A similar line of reason came from Whiting (1944), who proposed that we become dependent on others in times of frustration, for example, infants feeding dependency is an acquired drive towards the primary care giver, demonstrating that at times of high anxiety, individuals seek proximity in others.

Research such as this implies that siblings may become closer and relationships can be positively affected after a divorce. This gives the idea that further investigation is needed to provide further evidence to decide whether divorce is beneficial or
damaging to offspring’s relationships. Amato (1991) found that children of highly conflicted families, whose parents are not divorced, fare worse over time than children with divorced parents. This suggests that distance from an attachment figure may be more beneficial than living in a troubled environment with two parents.

I have shown that existing research has produced conflicting findings, which demonstrates a diverse discernment on the subject of divorce and relationships, with a larger focus on the negative effects found. A qualitative method of interviewing was chosen and a thematic analysis was conducted in an attempt to gain an understanding into how a marital breakdown influences a child’s own perceptions on relationships.

Throughout my journey as a researcher, I looked beyond traditional stereotypes. Through the selection of key themes, I aimed to understand how a parental divorce influences the way in which individuals see their own intimate relationships and determine whether divorce can be somewhat damaging or beneficial to sibling relationships. My research may be helpful to student counsellors or practitioners who work alongside divorced families, in order to improve children’s coping efficacy and emotional adjustment by refining the quality of relationships (see appendix).

**Method**

**Design**

A qualitative approach has enabled me to provide complex textual descriptions of human experiences through the process of performing semi-structured interviews. These were then thematically analysed through Boyatzis (1998) system to extract in-depth accounts. Interview questions were informed by the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) devised by Mary Main et al. (1985). Unlike Ainsworth’s (1969) Strange Situation, this interview was used to measure individual’s general state of mind regarding their attachments. The AAI has been widely practiced in a range of clinical settings and aims to ‘surprise the unconscious’ (George et al., 1985). This interview method was selected to explore adult’s mental representations of attachment relationships, manifested through the language used on questions regarding perceptions and styles of relating to other childhood experiences and their current feelings.

This interactive method is favoured when focusing on areas that may be seen as particularly sensitive, as the area of divorce may arouse powerful emotions. Semi-structured interviews ‘probe deeper into the initial responses of the respondent, gaining a more detailed answer to the question’, (Wimmer et al., 1997:328). After completion, interviews were then transcribed, this process is an interpretative act and from this, meanings are created (Bird, 2005:227). Boyatzis’ (1998) system was used to thematically analyse the transcripts, this coding process identified relevant features for analysis. Tuckett (2005) states that coding is the organisation of data into specific groups, this procedure has allowed me to structure my analysis and provided me with a range of flexible vocabulary that I used towards generating my findings.
Participants

Eight semi-structured interviews were performed based in different areas around the North West of England. Each participant was white-British and reported that they were heterosexual. More information can be found about them in the participant’s profile (see appendix). The participants were given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Four of the individuals had experienced their parent’s separation and the other four were the initial four’s siblings, three males and five females. These were selected to avoid producing androcentric findings. The participant’s age ranged from 18-25, this was chosen to try to understand the views on relationships at a time when the individuals were maturing and starting to form their own relationships. The small sample provided an opportunity to gain rich qualitative findings, rather than using a quantitative technique and gaining figures, which merely represent a number. It is not important ‘to be right’ but to reflect on human meaning through language. (Gee, 2010).

Deciding on a sample

Oliver (2006), states that the researcher should decide on the individuals depending on specific criteria. I decided to approach my friends, as I was aware that a large number of their parents were divorced, the participants were selected through purposive sampling. Burman (1994) believes that the topic and task of research should be negotiated beforehand, thus the informant selection tool was appropriate as it ensured that the participants already had existing knowledge on the chosen subject, eliminating individuals that were unsuitable candidates. Purposive sampling was beneficial due to the time constraints, however before selecting the participants it was crucial that I was aware of the participants family background as inappropriate informants could have rendered the findings meaningless. (Godambe, 1982).

Materials

The AAI by Main (1985) was used as a guide for my interviews and informed me of useful ways of asking about relationships, an example of a question used is as follows, ‘When you were upset as a child, what would you do?’ A Dictaphone was used to record the interviews and a computer was used for transcription.

Data collection

Patton (1987) said that good questions in qualitative interviews should be neutral, sensitive and clear to the interviewee, thus an interview training section was attended to improve my dialogue. After this, a small-scale practice interview was performed, (see appendix IV) this taught me how to articulate my skills giving me an estimate into the time scale and an example of the interviewing procedure. Alvesson (2003:170) states that ‘Interviewees are frequently politically conscious actors’, suggesting that participants may have answered with socially desirable answers, this is a factor I had to take into consideration.

After the preparation of interviews, meeting times and places were arranged to fit in with their schedules rather than mine as Weeks et al. (1980) found there was an
increase in participant cooperation when a favourable strategy of timing was in place. (See appendix for interview schedule). Next, the meeting of participants took place individually in their chosen setting; the natural circumstances of the interview enabled the participants to express themselves fully, to uniquely define their world, (De Waele et al., 1979). I ensured the setting was a private, non-judgemental and comfortable environment as Ejide, (2002) believes that a positive environment provides clients with a broad range of experiences, which broadens the mental capacity. Because some participants chose their own home for the interview to take place, their memory on their childhood may have been easier to retrieve as they are in the same setting, as Godden et al.'s (1975:325) study on environment and memory demonstrated that context effected memory recall.

Before the interviews commenced, my briefing statements (see appendix2) were read out to make certain the participants were aware of the nature of the research. All ethical procedures abided by the British Psychological Society's (2009) guidelines, these were also approved by MMU's ethics committee. The next step was ensuring that participants agreed to take part by asking for a signature of their informed consent, (see appendix 3) I then proceeded with the interview questions. At this stage, it was my responsibility to ensure the participants were relaxed as this helped to ease their anticipation and a variety of naturally occurring responses began to emerge. Honeycutt (1995) describes interviews as 'informal, unorthodox, lay interventions', this interviewing method has given me an opportunity to unveil meaningful answers that quantitative approaches would not have been able to achieve. Nonetheless, Deem (2001:16) states that a small number of interviews may not be regarded as trustworthy or representative, where as a quantitative approach would generate a larger, perhaps more reliable scale of responses.

The interview process took approximately 45 minutes and the AAI gave a broad range of invitations for the participants to respond to. Snow et al. (2009) observed that open-ended questions were more efficient in providing detailed, flowing answers, compared to other closed question types. Ezzy (2010) argues that all interviews are emotional embodied performances and good interviewing is facilitated by a reflexive engagement with the emotional dimensions of the interview. Because of the nature of the interviews, it was essential that I offered comfort if necessary and gave the participants the option to stop the interview if required.

Within interviewing, empathy is an interpersonal phenomenon, which may influence the answers given by. My briefing statement mentioned that my parents have separated; this could have led the participants to feel more inclined to 'open-up'. Rasch et al. (2000) looked at the willingness of women to communicate regarding abortion; it was found that when the interview dialogue was more empathetic, women were more likely to engage. This advocates that the interviewer’s empathetic approach influences the flow of conversation and the quality of the data; however, there are large differences between ethnographic interviews and ordinary conversations (Spradley, 1979). After the interviews were complete, my debriefing forms were read out (see appendix4) and participants were given the right to withdraw their details if they felt necessary.
Data Analysis

The interviews produced naturally occurring language, and from the analysis, objects of ‘truth’ were found at particular moments (Foucault, 1972). The findings have created authentic pictures of individual perceptions into divorce, and theorised language to have different meanings of social production, going beyond the bounds of statistics. However, qualitative research is subjective, because of this it was important that I paid careful attention to the age group and subject being interviewed. It was vital I did not let myself, the researcher, threaten the quality of the collection by being pre-occupied or letting my personal mood influence the findings, as researcher frustration decreases the ability to thematically analyse findings, (Boyatzis, 1998).

Once the recordings of the interviews were made, these were transcribed verbatim, away from the initial recording allowing distance so other points can be brought to the surface for further analysis (Parker 2005). On completion of my transcripts, I underwent the process of coding and my personal skills were used to recognise significant moments in the interviews, Daly et al. (1997) state ‘themes emerge as being important to the description of the phenomenon’. I followed the stages of coding devised by Boyatzis (1998). (See figure1) This structure enabled me to organise and summarise the raw data, to identify and develop the codes. The codes created an opportunity to group together relevant themes relating to classified patterns that form a comprehensive picture of their collective experience, (Leninger: 1985:60).

Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of the stages undertaken to code data (Adapted from Boyatzis, 1998, and Crabtree and Miller, 1999)
After I completed the procedure of defining the themes, these were then corroborated to describe the process of confirming the findings. Crabtree et al (1999) state that the manufacturing of evidence can be a problem when interpreting data such as this. The researcher may ‘unconsciously see’ too much, this is unintentional however it may produce findings that researchers ‘want to see’, therefore it is necessary to avoid projection of my own emotions, at risk of creating unambiguous findings.

**Results and Discussion**

After analysing the transcripts following the model of Boyatzis et al (1998), the following five themes were interconnected and identified with regard to relationship status of children of divorce. (See Figure 2).

**Figure 2 – Themes discovered through the analysis.**

![Diagram of themes](image)

1. **Fearful- avoidant**

The first theme present in the transcripts was the fearful-avoidant attachment style, this theme developed; as several participants appeared to feel ‘uncomfortable’ at the thought of becoming emotionally close in relationships. Participants reported that their parents had been unfaithful; due to this, the participants were seen to be apprehensive with trust in their own relationships, displaying characteristics of an avoidant style in their relationships.
(Chel:137) ‘To go and have affair... you can’t have the best interests of your family at heart, he wasn’t an awful dad but because he worked away, I don’t think he’s ever had a closeness with us’.

Above it can be seen that Chel has experienced a loss and feelings of abandonment from her father’s affair. The fear of desertion has become the basis for her expectations in her internal working model and this basis has been used to interpret her own current relationship.

(Chel:266) ‘we have lived separately and I’m always worried that he’s gonna’ meet someone haha, and like run off and be all happy with some random whore.’

This statement shows an undeniable amount of mistrust and corroborates with Summers et al. (1998) discovery that marital affairs of parents can be harmful to children’s trust levels. Chel uses humour to mask her fear of abandonment as she has suspicions that there is a possibility of her boyfriend having an affair. This indicates that individual’s whose parents were unfaithful, may be susceptible to a lower level of trust in their own personal relationships, juxtaposing Sprague’s (1997) finding that children with separated parents appeared more trusting in relationships.

The next statement also demonstrates how individuals are likely to become wary in their own personal relationships due to events following a parental separation.

(Joe:117) ‘my mums ex-boyfriend hit her, ...he did seem like a nice guy ... that just shows that you shouldn’t let strangers into your life.’

This quote reinforces the participant’s insecurities. Joe creates the impression that he would be reluctant to let people into his life because of what he has seen his mother experience. This implies that a broken attachment in a child’s life can be damaging, causing children to feel uncomfortable and fear strangers coming into their lives. The following quote indicates how children of divorce’s processing becomes constricted as the parents separation has resulted in a rigid view of expectations.

(Tom:219) ‘I was happy before it got officially branded a relationship’.

This quote suggests Tom is afraid of committing as he views the label as something negative, as this was the case for his parents. Because of this, there is a chance that children of divorce, such as Tom, may be cautious when forming relationships with a high degree of proximity. If bonds were to form, because of this avoidant style, there may still by implications in the future. This supports Crowell’s (2009) finding that children of divorce had a ‘tendency to end their own marriage’, showing how avoidant attachment styles see ‘love’ as rare and temporary.

2. Dismissive style

Throughout the analysis, it was evident that several participants were particularly pessimistic with regards to forming relationships, strengthening Hess et al (1979) belief that children of divorce doubt the permanence of their own relationships, this was shown on various occasions.
(Jal:205) ‘I’ve seen like so many marriages fall apart and at the end of the day, a marriage is just (.), just like saying you love someone but on paper’.

It appears Jal feels indifferent to the idea of marriage, as his emotions have been dulled due to witnessing disturbances in previous marriage failures. He compares marriage to a paper statement, suggesting that marriage has little meaning to him. This supports Collingan et al (1994), as Jal clearly has a pessimistic attitude towards his own future relationships. After observing various separations, it can be seen that children are left with little faith and an unrealistic belief that marriages can be successful. This reinforces Amato et al’s (2001) finding that children of divorce learn through their parents that marriage is impermanent, in contrast to those from non-divorced families. Those with separated parents disagreed with the notion that marriage is ‘life-long’. Another dismissive attachment type was found as Joe stated:

(Joe: 135) ‘it’s kind of prepared me for the worst…Things don’t last forever and now I just accept that things will go wrong’.

The above quote suggests that his parent’s separation has left him with a feeling of cynicism. His negative view materialises an image of ‘learned helplessness’, signifying that he is dismissive in relationships and unaccepting of the idea that relationships can be successful. Brown (2000) discovered that children of divorce were likely to disapprove their own adult relationship’s, Joe is reluctant to involve any positivity into his own future as he feels that his parent’s separation has set an example, which has left him critical of his own relationships, the same can be understood in the statement below.

(Gem: 25)’all my dad’s fault and that the reason they were breaking up was because of him’

Bowlby’s (1994) research would describe Gem as having a dismissive-avoidant style of attachment, Gem projects direct blame on her father’s actions, blaming the male for the marital failure, suggesting her parent’s separation has influenced her pessimistic outlook on relationships.

(Gem:109) ‘It's rare that you can depend on a man to do anything.’

It is clear that Gem has been hurt previously by her father’s actions as she uses sarcasm to project her feelings of anger towards males. As confirmed by Margolese et al. (2005), depressive feelings influence adolescents’ negative thoughts towards relationships. Gem displays a ‘worry’ that has emerged from the subjection of her own parent’s marriage failure, as a result, a dismissive personality can be seen and Gem’s attitude towards her own relationships as somewhat distrustful.

3. Desire to fix parents broken template of marriage,

A common dynamic found amongst children of divorces hypothetical future relationships was the determination to maintain a successful relationship and an aspiration to repair what their parents have ‘broken’. This theme emerged as many participants spoke negatively of their parent’s failed marriage, thus the longing for a ‘perfect’ relationship became apparent. Gem voices this point most clearly.
(Gem:43) ‘I’m not my parents …I don’t plan on cheating on anyone any time soon.’

This statement creates the impression that Gem feels anger towards her parent’s actions, altering her own perspective on relationships; she refuses to admit she would ever behave the same way as her parents have. Blakeslee and Wallerstein (1989) stated that children of divorce have a ‘strong need for stable relationships’, this can be seen here as Gems non-affiliated tone signifies her opinion on those that ‘cheat’. Because of Gems own experience with her parent’s relationship, this has led her to be determined to accomplish a ‘happy’ relationship. The following quote also displays the desire to improve on the standards set by parents.

(Pat: 128) ‘I know that I would never ever let the father of my children be like that to my kids’.

In this context, Pat expresses a high degree of certainty that she would not follow her parent’s patterns; she states ‘never ever’ emphasising how strongly she feels about this. This agrees with Wallerstein et al’s (2004), suggestion that children of divorce have an increase in apprehension when it comes to repeating their parent’s mistakes in hypothetical future relationships. It is obvious that her parent’s actions have caused upset and impacted on her own perception of relationships thus the desire to ‘fix’ her parent’s broken relationship emerges. This could potentially lead to children of divorce being over-protective and dismissive towards any individual that could be a reminder of their parent’s actions.

(Chel:279) ‘I wouldn’t want them to be without a parent, I wouldn’t want conflict, I wouldn’t want to put them through what I’ve been through.’

This repetitive quote illustrates the eagerness to avoid shadowing the path of her parent’s example, she feels her parents have affected her life in a negative way, and feels it is necessary that this pattern should not be repeated in her own relationship. Chel proposes that she would not let her children suffer in the way that she did, this was also found in Ahrons (2011) work, he discovered a positive outcome of parental divorce was how ‘encouraging’ it was for children to view their relationships in dissimilar ways to their parents, striving for an idealised future relationship.

4. Replacement of absent parent

Eagan (2004) stated that children of divorce tend to lose contact with one parent figure, this was a prominent theme discovered in the transcripts, in most cases it was found that the offspring of divorce typically continue living with their mothers and their attachment bond with their fathers becomes temporarily damaged. A number of participants revealed that a sense of responsibility was gained from the divorce, and their fathers exit led to an increase in their maturation and acquiring father role.

(Jal:131) ‘When my dad left…I was the man of the house…everything my mum needed, I had to do’

It appears that Jal has taken on the instrumental role in the household developed by Talcott Parsons (1995). The family dynamic has transformed and with an absent father figure, new roles are assumed, altering the relationship with the mother.
Guidubaldi (1985) stated that a parental separation would alter the female’s relationship with the custodial parent however, it is clear here that the son’s relationship is also reformed. Other quotes below signify the change in children’s attitudes towards their mothers.

(Les:44-47) ‘we speak on the phone nearly every night…I feel a bit sorry for her…all her friends are busy and married, so like when she gets in from work, she just wants to tell someone how her days gone.’

This reinforces Guidubaldi’s (1985) research that adolescent girls of divorce acquire close peer relationships with their custodial parents. It is evident that Les is providing her mother with support and has taken on the role of the husband. Les feels sympathy for her mother, comparing her to her ‘busy’, ‘married’ friends, suggesting that she sees the married state as something preferable, perhaps indicating that she yearns for a healthy relationship herself. Kramer et al. (2005) affirmed that a strong mother-child relationship is a predictor of a sibling relationship, because of this closeness, sibling relationships have also been found to improve, see below.

(Chel:23) ‘I felt very protective of them…seeing my dad attacking my mum, I knew that I had to get them away from the situation’.

This again highlights the modification of child behaviour following divorce; Chel takes on the responsibilities of the parents, supporting Bowlby’s (1969) assumption that the mother-infant bond provides a sense of protection through reciprocal interactions. Chel seems to exhibit something comparable to the ‘maternal bond’ toward her siblings, defending their wellbeing, similar to what is expected from the primary caregivers. The increased involvement with siblings demonstrates how a separation may be beneficial to relationships within the family. Children of divorce are seen to mature in their close relationships and offer more affection and support. This leads me to my final theme.

5. Sibling as a ‘Buffer’.

When participants spoke about their sibling relationships, a distinct matter emerged. The findings supported Cohen’s (1985) Buffering hypothesis, as it was clear that siblings sought out social support in each other as a way to protect themselves in stressful events. Joe displayed signs of an ambivalent attachment style, see quote.

(Joe:55) ‘We don’t really speak that much.’ (Speaks of his mother)

The consequences of divorce left him to feel frustration towards his mother; however, because of this, his relationship with his sibling was enhanced. (Below speaks of his sister).

(Joe:188) ‘my mums pissed up she’ll side with me and then we’ll actually have something to talk about because it’s the only thing that we’ve got in common.’

This statement suggests that Joe’s frustration has been transformed into something positive, his anger at his mother created a gateway for conversation with his sibling, supporting Whiting’s (1944) construct of dependency. The following statement demonstrates an increase in emotional proximity between siblings after divorce.
(Tom:79-80) ‘We stayed close because we were in the same boat…we had something in common…we made sure everything was alright with each other.’

Through this metaphor, it was noticed that Tom also became protective and dependent on his sibling around the time of the divorce. Perhaps Tom’s empathetic sibling bond is somewhat of a buffer that has been used to mask the suffering he has felt from his parent’s divorce. Lepore et al. (1996) also believe that ‘the availability of persons to talk to has been found to reduce intrusive thoughts’, this can also be seen in the quote below.

(Chel:83) ‘Because of everything that had happened…we’ve really been quite protective of each other, we can talk to each other about problems…rather than going to my mum’.

It appears that the sibling bond has been affected in a positive light due to the separation of parents. Chel states that she would seek proximity from her sibling rather than disturbing her mother, as she felt she would receive more comfort from someone who has experienced the divorce, rather than someone who has been seen to cause it. This reinforces the notion that sibling relationships can mitigate through buffering, in order to reduce negative thoughts that arise from a stressful divorce (Bush et al., 2003), thus the consequences of a divorce have the unexpected effect of developing affectionate relationships with siblings.

(Chel:47) ‘we didn’t want to see him so…we all decided we were gonna’ tell him that we didn’t want to see him anymore.’ (Speaks of father)

This quote advocates that the siblings have a common goal, this creates an impression that Chel is seeking comfort in her siblings, who are actively joining together in order to protect each other from their father. This again suggests how sibling’s proximal relationship is increased as a result of stressful divorce circumstances, reflecting Amato’s (1991) finding that an amount of distance from parents may develop sibling relationships further than children living with married parents. This statement also illustrates a strong bond of attachment as Chel reports a strong feeling of safety and security with her siblings.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that divorce does not inevitably produce permanent scars in terms of relationships. You can see from the themes that there is a sufficient amount of evidence suggesting that parental separation has been a constructive element in the formation of sibling’s relationships, as several participants reported their bonds had been enhanced. In contrast it was found that parental divorce was somewhat damaging to future intimate relationships as individuals were reluctant and cautious in developing new attachments with others.

As divorce rates increase, wider social changes created a shift in the social acceptance of divorce (Guttmann et al., 2002). However, the impact on the child’s relationships remains the same regardless of society’s acceptance of divorce as the norm. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that the effects of divorce can be problematic for individuals and society.
Reflexivity

Coming from a family that has experienced divorce in a very negative light, personally it was surprising to discover the extent of salutary effects of divorce on relationships. Throughout the interview process, I became increasingly aware of human emotions and learnt to question how research usually neglects a person’s embeddedness in social interaction (Kvale, 1996:292). Because of this, I began to appreciate the significance of working with actual participants in research, although funding and time constraints proved restricting. The findings in this study support Bowlby’s (1969) theory of attachment as this predicted that broken attachment bonds from a divorce may impact future relationships supporting the value of the AAI. However, the AAI relies mainly on childhood memories, thus the classification may be associated with the individual’s memory recall, (Sagi et al., 1994) which may have been falsely fabricated, therefore producing an untrue representation of their attachment relationships.

As it was my friends who were approached for interviewing, a conscious effort was made to avoid discontinuing subjectivity. I am curious to see whether a more diverse sample would have created similar outcomes, as due to age and ethnicity my findings were limited. However, it was interesting to see the large variety of experiences in such a small sample. Holloway et al. (2003) believe that qualitative approaches are ‘diverse, complex and nuanced’, and the thematic analysis created an opportunity for me to include myself within the research. The body of literature was constructive, however proved difficult to scale down to the confines of five basic themes.

I feel that this flexible approach was more beneficial as I concentrated on a subject that individuals may feel is particularly sensitive, whereas a quantitative approach would only produce statistics, which cannot reflect genuine human experiences. Upon reflection, I feel my first attempt as a qualitative researcher has been a complex journey that has led me to enquire about other methodological techniques. I understand that in qualitative research it is likely that the process of the research will shape the phenomenon that is studied. A divorce is known to be a stressful procedure as it is the ending of a relationship; it was surprising to find that something that was so damaging to children’s lives has caused stronger sibling relationships to develop.

Family breakdown is generally a distressing period in an individual’s life my research was based on 18-25 year olds, the findings developed primarily reflected the view of young adults. At this age, it is probable that individuals are beginning to start moving away from their family, however in ordinary circumstances, their parents are expected to be standing behind them in unison, to protect them as they explore in their own relationships. As the subject of divorce is something I am particularly interested in, I may continue to my research through a different approach, perhaps concentrating on different social classes reactions to divorce, as this could be a fundamental difference that affects how children of divorce act in relationships.

References


