



A retrospective study of the long-term effects of divorce on the wellbeing of young adults

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to qualitatively explore the long-term effects of experiencing divorce in childhood upon wellbeing in early adulthood. Previous research supports a link between parental divorce and wellbeing with explanations to why experiences differ focusing on the presence and severity of protective and risk factors (Amato and Sobolewski, 2001). The majority of previous research focuses on quantitative methods to produce correlations; therefore this current study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the reasons why individuals' experiences differ to provide a deeper understanding of the effects of parental divorce. Eight participants aged 18-25 took part in a semi-structured interview. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) following guidelines from Smith et al (2009) was used to generate themes from interview transcripts. The four key themes were: 'wellbeing', 'self-blame', 'family bonds' and 'relief'. The qualitative data method provided an alternate and more personal insight in to the experiences of individuals emanating from divorce. Concluding findings support a link between parental divorce, wellbeing, and education suggesting that experiences differ due to age and surrounding circumstances. Furthermore, findings could be valuable to future researchers in informing support techniques for parents, carers and teachers for children undergoing parental divorce.

KEY WORDS:	PARENTAL DIVORCE	WELLBEING	INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES	INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS	CRITICAL REALISM
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## **Introduction**

### **Demographics of divorce**

Although marriage rates have fallen, legal divorce rates have continued to increase since 1990 (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2007). One explanation for the decrease in marriage could be the higher percentage of couples choosing to co-habit rather than follow legal marriage proceedings (Mooney et al, 2009). Previous studies of family breakdown where partners are simply co-habiting have not shown drastic implications for other family members, whereas when separation has taken place following legal divorce procedures, consequences are more apparent and severe (Mooney et al, 2009). Therefore the present study aimed to look only at marital breakdown where a legal divorce separation had taken place, taking the definition of divorce as 'the legal termination of a marriage and obligations created by marriage' (Law, 2015: 202).

Statistics for the year of 2012 reveal that 42% of marriages end in divorce, with 48% involving at least one child under the age of 16 (Office for National Statistics, 2014). This leaves an estimated 1 in 3 children living with divorced parents in the UK. Findings show that divorce may affect the wellbeing of children in various ways but in some cases may not have any noticeable impact at all (Gropper, 2015). Therefore the following review of existing research focuses on the long-term effects that divorce has on the wellbeing of children involved, and the possible explanations for why individual experiences differ.

### **Wellbeing**

The vast majority of existing research supports a link between parental divorce in childhood and psychological wellbeing in early adulthood (Amato and Sobolewski, 2001). Individuals emanating from divorce report greater emotions of unhappiness and anxiety whilst also reporting a lack of life control (Biblarz and Gottainer, 2000). Amato (2000) explains that difficulties with psychological wellbeing arise due to increased stressors instigated by parental divorce such as moving house, changing schools, changes in financial status, and new parental partners. In addition to this, the age of the child at divorce predicts the way in which wellbeing may be affected; when divorce occurs in the early years, children are likely to suffer low self-esteem, guilt and self-blame (Wallerstein & Kelly, 2008). This is due to the egocentric nature of younger children, which presents the inability to differentiate ones own behaviour from another's, leading children to believe that their behaviour has directly influenced external events, such as parental divorce (Tizard and Hughes, 2002). On the other hand, older children are more likely to suffer depression, sleep disorders, and anxiety (Kelly and Emery, 2004). This is due to increased worry and feeling obligated to adopt adult responsibilities such as caring for younger siblings or providing support for parents following divorce proceedings (Marquardt, 2005).

Bernardi and Radl (2014) consider the effects that parental divorce has on educational wellbeing, finding that children with divorced parents are at a disadvantage throughout their academic career. Children of divorce experience this disadvantage into university years, averaging seven percentage points lower on their final degree mark than peers from two-parent families, showing a negative correlation between parental divorce and tertiary education attainment over 14 western countries (Bernardi and Radl, 2014). However, Bernardi and Radl (2014),

focus only on western society, where education is universally free. Divorce may affect attainment differently in non-western countries where the sole breadwinner is absent following divorce and consequently education becomes unaffordable. Explanations for presenting low academic achievement immediately after marital breakdown can be attributed to stress resulting from the divorce interfering with schoolwork. Explanations of long-term presentation of low academic achievement develop from the possibilities of divorce resulting in lower economic status and therefore impacting upon achievement (Amato, 2000). Furthermore, The Canadian Paediatric Society (2000) found that individuals with divorced parents in western society are more likely to partake in risky behaviours such as alcohol misuse and law-breaking, which has shown to have a direct impact on both psychological and educational welfare of individuals.

### **Explanations for individual differences in experiences**

Marital breakdown is not a one-factor event, but instead a process that involves protective and risk factors to the child or children involved. To comprehend the risk of a negative consequence upon a child's wellbeing, understanding of the mechanism of a marriage breakdown is necessary (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001). This may include marital conflict, economic inputs, and post-divorce arrangements, all of which can have positive and/or negative repercussions for the child depending upon the intensity and surrounding circumstances (Mooney et al, 2009).

Marital conflict is present in a large proportion of families prior, during, and post-divorce. Marital conflict can be defined as high levels of disagreement, stress, disrespect and anger between spouses, which is visible through verbal and/or physical disputes (Lian and Geok, 2008). When marital conflict is high within a divorce, children react either negatively or positively. When divorce occurs after a high conflict marriage, some children see the divorce as a stress-relief event, leading to post-divorce improvement rather than deterioration (Wheaton, 1990). Whilst Wheaton's (1990) theory of stress-relief is relatively out-dated, more recent researchers provide support for the theory, suggesting that escaping a dysfunctional family environment allows a child to flourish in personal growth, individualisation, and wellbeing (Burke et al, 2009; Yu et al, 2010; Megglolaro and Ongaro, 2014). In contrast to this, Grych (2005) suggests that when marital conflict has been high and ongoing for a long period of time, children develop interpersonal issues such as depression, anxiety, and disruptive behaviour as a means of coping with a high stress environment. However, the stress relief hypothesis suggests that once marital conflict is resolved through divorce, children should recover from these issues (Wheaton, 1990). Despite this, Cavanagh (2008) suggests that contributing factors such as unresolved conflict, losing contact with one parent, ineffective parenting or co-parenting and declines in household income could all increase the likelihood of interpersonal issues persisting after divorce. Amato (2010) explains that these post-divorce arrangements could be predictors of how wellbeing may be affected, suggesting that the severity and frequency of these factors will differ child-to-child, accounting for why individuals react differently to marital conflict and in turn why experiences of parental divorce differ.

Another contributing factor of wellbeing is a negative post-divorce adjustment which could arise if parental divorce is unexpected by the child (Gustavsen et al, 2015). Following an unexpected marital breakdown, children suffer feelings of instability and

insecurity, which in some cases can lead to substance abuse, crime, and low educational outcomes (Kuehnle and Drozd, 2012). Kuehnle and Drozd (2012) explain that unforeseen and misunderstood situations present stress and upset, which increases the likelihood of interpersonal issues developing. On the other hand, if marital conflict is present and the divorce is predictable, children are more likely to adjust in a positive way – in line with the stress relief hypothesis (Wheaton, 1990) - and are therefore at less risk of distress or mental health issues.

Post-divorce adjustment can be influenced by a variety of protective and risk factors (Gustavsen et al, 2015). One of these is having a large network of supporting family and friends, which can be perceived as a protective factor when undergoing stressful life events such as parental divorce, suggesting that the presence of this support system could decrease the risk of negative effects on wellbeing developing (Gurmen, 2015). Amato (2000) provides a contrasting theory to this, suggesting that having a large support system could present as a risk factor during stressful life events, as feelings of helplessness and increased distress can arise when reliance on others develops. Protective and risk factors are often perceived differently in each case due to surrounding circumstances, which could account for the difference in individual experiences.

Current explanations as to why individual experiences of parental divorce differ focus mainly on the severity and quantity of protective and risk factors in place (Amato, 2000). However, research has heavily relied on quantitative data and statistics to produce correlations between parental divorce and wellbeing. In order to fully understand the explanations as to why experiences differ, it would be beneficial to have a qualitative account of personal experiences (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

### **The present research**

The study intends to qualitatively explore the long-term effects of experiencing divorce in childhood upon wellbeing in early adulthood, focusing on both positive and negative aspects of this. The research questions, which were derived from the existing literature, are:

1. In what ways is wellbeing in early adulthood affected when a person experiences divorce in childhood?
2. What contributing factors influence the individual differences in wellbeing after experiencing divorce in childhood?

The research questions aimed to produce a personal understanding of parental divorce, producing discussion rather than focussing on statistics as the majority of prior research has. The present study differs from previous qualitative studies through using a retrospective design, requiring participants to reflect with hindsight how the divorce has affected them throughout the life span and to speculate reasons for this, producing detailed and personal discussion.

### **Methodology**

#### **Design**

A qualitative retrospective approach was adopted using one-to-one semi-structured interviews to collect conversational data and to gain an in-depth account of participants' experiences. This was followed by interpretative phenomenological

analysis (IPA) of the transcribed interviews. IPA was chosen due to its focus on the exploration of lived experiences (Yardley, 2000). This design allowed for the in-depth, detailed interpretation of attitudes, feeling and emotions from the participants perspective (Elliot and Timulak, 2005). A phenomenological epistemological approach was adopted throughout the study, which assumes that individuals have the consciousness to explore and express their experiences allowing the researcher to embrace an insider perspective (Willig, 2008). The research also adopted a critical realist ontology, which assumes no single reality, whereby individuals understand experiences differently as they are shaped by context and previous experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

## **Participants**

The participants consisted of eight students aged 18-25 recruited using volunteer sampling through Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) participation data pool. Volunteer sampling was chosen due to convenience but also for its implications of informed consent, recruiting participants that are happy and willing to take part. Through the participation pool, participants had access to an invitation letter (Appx 1), inviting them to take part in the research and ensuring that they met the criteria necessary to take part. Participants must have experienced divorce in childhood, and have clear recollection of this. Participants were therefore required to be between the ages of 5 and 15 at the time of the divorce, as this is deemed old enough to recall experiences, yet young enough to allow long-term effects to become apparent by the ages of 18-25 (Scottish Government, 2015). Students who were currently undergoing psychological support in relation to their parental divorce were disallowed to take part in the study. This was in order to abide by The British Psychological Society (BPS) ethical guidelines, which suggest that individuals undergoing psychological support could be perceived as vulnerable and at risk to increased psychological harm and distress (The British Psychology Society, 2010).

## **Procedure**

Individuals who met the criteria were given access to an information and briefing form (Appx 2), which explained the purpose of the research and what taking part in the study would entail. Individuals who were then happy to partake in the research were required to complete a consent form (Appx 3).

Prior to carrying out the interviews, the schedule was piloted. This was to ensure that questions were easily understood and to check if any questions needed removing, adjusting or adding in order to obtain the required information (Blessing and Chakrabarti, 2009). The pilot study found that the interview schedule only yielded approximately 30 minutes talk time rather than the proposed hour; however, the schedule was not adjusted in any way as this was deemed enough to collect the required information. For conversational data collection it is recommended that a minimum of 3-4 hours of interview data be processed in order to have enough data to create an efficient and valid analysis. Approximately 4 hours of data was collected, reaching this minimum threshold (Wood et al, 2012).

Participants were interviewed one-to-one for between 15 and 40 minutes. The interview schedule (Appx 4) consisted of 10 key questions with multiple prompts. A semi-structured approach using open-ended questions was chosen as this allowed participants to freely express their views without strict boundaries. The use of

prompts allowed opportunity to ask unplanned questions when further discussion was necessary and provided guidance to the participant to discuss relevant topics whilst still allowing them to express their interpretations in their own terms (Blessing and Chakrabarti, 2009). Following interview, participants were debriefed (Appx 5); this included advice on how to seek support if taking part in the research had caused distress in any way. The debriefing form also contained instructions on how to create an anonymous code in the event that they wished to withdraw their transcript at a later date.

The interview was audio recorded and transcribed using verbatim transcription (Appx 6). This involved noting word-for-word conversation and non-verbal communication such as laughs, pauses, and hand gestures. Verbatim transcription was chosen due to IPA being concerned with gaining an insider perspective of the lived experience, which can best be succeeded when observing both verbal and non-verbal communication (Halcomb and Davidson, 2006).

### **Analytical Strategy**

The chosen approach to data analysis was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA aims to give the researcher an insider view of how the participant makes sense of an event, requiring them to self-reflect on life experiences and the meanings that they associate with these (Griffiths, 2009). IPA combines hermeneutics, phenomenology and ideography to create an analysis that allows the researcher to have a unique connection with the participants world, permitting them to engage with the participants experiences as they do themselves (Van Manen, 2014).

Guidelines by Smith et al (2009) were used to inform a step-by-step approach to analysis. Step one began with multiple reading of the transcripts whilst re-listening to audio recordings. Any comments of potential significance were noted at this time, including content, language, and context (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012). Key words, potential theme titles, connections to knowledge, and preliminary interpretations were also noted at this stage. Initial notes were then transcribed in to emergent themes, focusing on any psychological significance in relation to the research aims. Emergent themes were grouped and colour coded, developing clear clusters of super-ordinate themes (Smith et al, 2009). A table of master theme titles was then drawn up; master themes capture what is being interpreted as the most important concerns of the participants. To produce connections, a cross-analysis of the transcripts was then conducted to construct a set of shared master themes, which best capture the research aims. These identified shared experiences, emotions and attitudes towards the phenomenon of parental divorce in childhood (Murray and Chamberlain, 1999).

IPA was deemed suitable as the research aimed to ask young adults to reflect retrospectively on how parental divorce has affected their wellbeing and the explanations why this may be; this is relative to the IPA function of assessing individuals perception of reality and their own lived experiences (Smith et al, 2009). IPA is advised to be used when research explores experiences and perspectives, when sampling strategy is small, and when data collection is qualitative - this is because IPA does not aim to go beyond the data collected, only aiming to make sense of what is true of the participants involved (Griffiths, 2009). As the present

research fit all of these criteria, IPA was deemed the most suitable and useful analysis for the current research.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The research was carried out in accordance to the BPS ethical guidelines, and in line with those of Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU). An Application for Ethics Approval Form (AEAF) has been completed and approved by the University (Appx 7) as evidence for this.

Participants were students of MMU, over the age of 18, and not currently receiving support in relation to their parents' divorce and so were not considered to be vulnerable. Participants were made aware of the motives of the research; this allowed them to have the ability to make fully informed consent and take part on a voluntary basis. Openness and honesty was consistent throughout the study in order to ensure that no deception took place (The British Psychology Society, 2010).

No personally identifiable information was required, instead participants created a personal code in place of their name to use to ensure anonymity. Transcripts were labelled using randomised lettering rather than using names or codes associated with the individuals. All transcripts and recordings were kept confidential between the participant, the researcher, and the supervising staff. After completion of the research, transcripts and recordings will be destroyed to honour complete confidentiality (The British Psychology Society, 2010).

Participants were not subject to any harm, either psychological or physical, and there was no perceivable risk that this could have happened. However, participants were debriefed at the end of the study, including contact information for support outlets if they felt they had been distressed in any way. Should participants have wished to withdraw at any point during or after the study, they had the right to withdraw data up until March 2016 before analysis had taken place. No participant chose to withdraw data.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

This study sought to gain insight into the long-term effects of experiencing parental divorce in childhood upon wellbeing in early adulthood and to identify and explore possible explanations to differences in experiences. Four master themes were constructed following IPA of interview transcripts. Theme (i) explores the effects of parental divorce on wellbeing, encompassing a range of wellbeing factors including but not limited to sadness, distress, and anxiety. Theme (ii) illustrates the feelings of self-blame that many individuals experience as a result of experiencing parental divorce, and consequently the impact that these feelings have on individuals in later life. Theme (iii) explores the effects of family ties and external support when undergoing parental divorce. Lastly, theme (iv) highlights the feelings of relief that many individuals feel in relation to a divorce when high marital conflict has been present. A number of other emerging themes were also discovered including academic success, and aggressive behaviour, however, the above master themes were chosen, as they were shared and expressed by the majority of individuals interviewed. Themes (i) and (ii) have been chosen as they outline the ways in which wellbeing in early adulthood is affected when a person experiences parental divorce



in childhood. Themes (iii) and (iv) have been chosen as they highlight possible contributing factors which influence individual differences in experiences.

### **Wellbeing**

Participants reported the impact of parental divorce on wellbeing in several ways, mainly expressing experiences of negative effects on wellbeing. The master theme of wellbeing produced the sub-themes of sadness, distress, and anxiety.

### **Sadness**

Sadness refers to the increased amount of negative emotion experienced by individuals during and after the divorce process. Participants conveyed that an increased amount of sadness arose due to increased worry:

“I was obviously really upset and maybe a little depressed if I’m honest. I was worried for my dad and for myself and my brothers” (Transcript G, lines 52-54).

G, who was 14 at the time of his parents divorce, infers that increased emotions of sadness relate back to his tendency to worry about his siblings and parents. Marquardt (2005) theorises that elder children with divorced parents are likely to express emotions of sadness due to feeling obligated to take responsibility of adult duties such as protecting siblings, which can lead to increased amounts of worry in the child. However, B, who was 6 years old when his parents divorced, presents an alternate reasoning to sadness, communicating a misunderstanding of the severity of divorce, feeling that the effects would dramatically change his life, which in turn caused upset and worry.

“I think I thought it was the end of the world at the time and I was sad and upset for a little bit. I remember being quite stressed, like worrying a lot about it more than I should have” (Transcript B, lines 39-41).

Dunn et al (2001) explain that children of divorce are likely to be melodramatic about the situation due to lack of effective communication from parents, leaving children to construct meaning from the situation alone which can cause emotional confusion and upset. Kelly and Lamb (2000:302) explain that these emotions are observed more so in children who were young at the time of the divorce as they ‘lack the cognitive and emotional maturity’ to fully understand the divorce process, which causes confusion and sadness. Therefore, although expressing emotions of sadness and worry after divorce is a shared experience for many individuals, the reasoning of emotions often depend upon other factors such as age at the time of divorce.

### **Distress**

Distress refers to initial feelings of disruption and consequently stress that participants experienced due to the breakup of the family, the motion of moving house, and adjusting to a new family situation. All participants reported distress of some kind; in particular H explains how stress arose through moving house and struggling financially:

“I do remember being really stressed in general about the situation, just about like moving house and stuff like that, and my mum didn’t

have much money, so that stresses anyone out, even if you're young, like all that disruption made a difference at school and stuff but it was only ever short-lived, like no long term things or anything" (Transcript H, lines 13-17).

Amato (2000) explains through the divorce-stress-adjustment theory that marital breakdown instigates a process of events that both parents and children find stressful. These stressors include moving house and a change in economic status as experienced by H. Amato (2000) suggests that stressful events as such increase the likelihood of negative emotional and educational welfare. H expresses that due to stress from moving house and lack of income, she suffered distress and disruption in education. Bernardi & Radl (2014) found that as a result of increased stressors, children of divorced parents often underachieve academically up to a tertiary level when compared to children of two-parent families. However, H explains in her experience how the distress experienced was short-term, with no long-term effects on her education or wellbeing. Amato (2000) explain that the consequences of marital breakdown may only be short term if there are a number of protective factors in place or if the child possesses resilient traits, which could be speculated in the case of H.

### **Anxiety**

A number of individuals expressed emotions of anxiety developing shortly after the divorce, explaining that insecurities stemming from the parental split led to increased anxiety and worry in day-to-day life. Participants T and C express similar experiences of anxiety and insecurity in everyday life that they attribute to the divorce:

"I overthought loads of normal stuff and got anxious about that too like stuff at school and my friends and stuff. So I think 'cause I was anxious because of the divorce I was anxious in day-to-day life too, like worrying about every little thing" (Transcript T, lines 49-51).

"I'm insecure in myself and insecure in like everything around me, like I'm always on edge that something could happen at any time without warning and stuff, so that's made me anxious" (Transcript C, lines 42-44).

Kelly and Emery (2004) argue that stressors deriving from divorce result in an increased risk of psychological difficulty throughout childhood, which continues in to adulthood in most cases. Both participants express an irrational fear of everyday events going wrong, communicating that anxiety arising from the divorce extended into the school environment and social groups. Foxman (2004) explains that this increased anxiety is a result of being forced to adjust to an unfamiliar and unknown situation, which is out of one's own control. Participants T and C both infer, in concordance to Foxman (2004), that they were fearful of future everyday events due to the fear of unpredictable outcomes such as that of their parents' divorce.

### **Self-blame**

Apparent in the participants' accounts was a repetitive mentioning of self-blame and feelings that the parental divorce had occurred due to factors triggered by

themselves. B repetitively mentioned experiencing feelings of self-blame, which he believes, led to a lack of self-esteem:

“I think maybe I could put my low self-esteem down to it because I blamed myself so much. Of course I know better now but I’ve never had self-esteem and I think that started at an early age so maybe you could put it back to the divorce” (Transcript B, lines 42-44).

Goodman and Pickens (2001) found that feelings experienced by participants were a shared experience across children with divorced parents - children self-reported higher levels of self blame and lower levels of self-esteem than children from non-divorced families. Wallerstein and Kelly (2008) explain that younger children are most likely to develop feelings of self-blame due to the egocentric nature of behaviour and perceptions at this age. B, who was 6 years old at the time of divorce, explains that these emotions developed at an early age, reflecting retrospectively on younger years, supporting that egocentrism could be the explanation to his emotions.

Older participants such as T, who was 12 at the time of divorce, express similar feelings of self-blame and insecurity, suggesting that egocentrism is not the sole explanation of these emotions:

“I think I kind of blamed myself a little bit so that made me insecure” (Transcript T, lines 48-49).

Matters (2007) accepts that children of a younger age are more prone to these emotions due to egocentrism, but explains that children with divorced parents at any age are more susceptible to attribute blame to themselves than children of two-parent families, for reasons not yet known. Goodman and Pickens (2001) suggest that these emotions are presented only short-term, and that children from divorced families will recover self-esteem with time and maturity. Whilst T does not specify whether insecurities and self-blame continued to adulthood, B explains how low self esteem is something he has suffered with long-term, contradicting that self-esteem is recovered with maturity.

B provides further information on feelings of self-blame, perceiving that they arose due to a lack of conflict and misunderstanding of the divorce:

“Uhm, there wasn’t any fighting or arguments or anything that I remember, so that’s why at the time I think I blamed myself a little bit ‘cause I couldn’t think of any other reasons which would lead them to want a divorce” (Transcript B, lines 16-18).

Amato (2000) explains that when marital dissolution is sudden without prior conflict or discussion, children tend to show a decline in wellbeing, which encases feelings of self-blame and low self-esteem, whereas if high-conflict marriage precedes divorce then little change in these emotions is observed. Insecurity is thought to arise due to fears of abandonment when divorce is unforeseen or misunderstood by the child (Kuehnle and Drozd, 2012). Therefore, it could be perceived that B developed feelings of self-blame due to the divorce being unforeseen and that self-esteem difficulties have persisted due to insecurities surrounding the event as suggested by Kuehnle and Drozd (2012).

## **Family bonds**

This master theme illustrates the impact of parental divorce and relationships within immediate and extended family on wellbeing. Participants reported that the presence of a strong familial bond was beneficial during the divorce process, allowing them to view aspects of the divorce in a positive manner. L explains how the divorce allowed her to build stronger relationships with siblings and parents due to the dissolution of conflict:

“I’m closer to my brother and sister because of it, and probably to both my parents too, like with all the arguing before and stuff, I never really was that close to either of them” (Transcript L, lines 103-105).

L’s experience supports that the dissolution of marriage is often associated with a strengthening of familial bonds when healthy post-adjustment situations are maintained (Gurmen, 2015). This involves successful co-parenting, effective emotional support, and the resolution of any prior conflict (Kelly, 2000). C explains that successful co-parenting allowed her to experience healthy relationships with both parents:

“Occasionally we’d hang out as a family and stuff which seems weird I guess but it was helpful I think, like we remained a strong family even though they were separated” (Transcript C, lines 29-31).

Ahrons (2007) suggests that the strength of family ties post-divorce has a significant impact on how children adjust, with the effects lasting upwards of 20 years. The healthier the relationship with parents and siblings, the less likely children are to suffer emotional and behaviour problems in relation to the divorce. Both L and C express that strong familial bonds provided a positive quality to the parental divorce, which could be interpreted as an explanation as to why neither suffered long lasting issues after the divorce.

Together with the immediate family unit, the extended family also provide an important support system. G explains how help from grandparents provided him with feelings of safety and happiness whilst undergoing a stressful divorce:

“We’re close with my family and my nan helped out and in the long run it was so much better, just safer you know, and happier, like it’s made our family so much closer now and we have a really strong link” (Transcript G, lines 31-33).

Gurmen (2015) suggests that strong extended family relationships are a protective factor when undergoing stressful events, such as divorce. G explains how having familial support increased feelings of happiness and security, providing support for Gurmen (2015). Strong familial bonds were a recurrent theme that individuals perceived as positive and beneficial to their wellbeing when undergoing parental divorce, refuting findings that support systems can add increase stress throughout divorce proceedings (Amato, 2000).

## **Relief**

This theme captures an important explanation as to why experiences of parental divorce differ; highlighting the key role that marital conflict plays in the family breakdown. Participants who experienced high marital conflict prior to parental divorce expressed feelings of relief when the divorce process arose, also reporting

emotions of happiness and security, opposed to distress or insecurity as experienced by some participants in previous themes. Individuals explain how divorce was a positive experience in their situations due to high marital conflict prior to divorce:

“I was genuinely quite happy when they divorced because they were just always arguing and it just seemed better this way” (Transcript L, lines 25-26).

L’s experience supports that when divorce occurs after a high-conflict marriage, individuals’ perceive divorce as relief from a stressful environment, leading to post-divorce improvement in happiness rather than deterioration as explained by the stress-relief hypothesis (Wheaton, 1990). Whilst L explains that relief resulted in happiness, H explains that the relief also resulted in increased feelings of security for her:

“It was so beneficial for me, like I was starting to get miserable with all the arguing, like any kid would, honestly I was pretty relieved when they finally got divorced, it was a long time coming and I was happy when it finally happened. And it was definitely more secure afterwards, like it just felt safer being with my mum and seeing my dad separately rather than seeing them together and just being miserable all the time” (Transcript H, lines 54-59).

Similarly to the stress-relief hypothesis, Burke et al (2009) suggest that relief provided from escaping a high conflict situation leaves children with heightened feelings of security and stability when compared to the home environment prior to divorce, which in turn has positive effects on well being, specifically happiness. H reflects retrospectively, reporting that happiness arose due to increased security due to no longer witnessing conflict between her parents, supporting this theory.

However, participants also expressed relief and happiness when no conflict was present but the marital and family situation was deemed as negative and disruptive nonetheless:

“I think it’s if anything been a positive thing for me and probably for my brothers too like it was negative for us being in that situation and getting out of it and away from him is a good thing in my eyes” (Transcript G, lines 36-38).

Sun (2001) argues that marital disruption of any kind including abuse, conflict, and hostility is a strong predictor of harmful effects on wellbeing in children involved. G discloses that living in a dysfunctional environment with his alcoholic father was having a negative effect on him, implying that it was harmful to his wellbeing. Stroschein (2005) suggests that putting an end to family dysfunction through divorce could be beneficial to children involved, which is observed in the case of G.

## **Final Discussion**

The research questions were effectively explored through the master themes provided through IPA of interview data. The research found that participants experienced both negative and positive consequences of divorce at varying degrees. However, the reasoning behind the effects on wellbeing differed depending on age

and context, supporting that the meaning that we attach to experiences changes over the lifespan (Wallerstein and Kelly, 2008). Interestingly, not all participants experienced negative consequences when marital conflict was present, refuting findings that high marital conflict always results in the development of interpersonal issues (Grych, 2005). The research supports that wellbeing after parental divorce can be predicted by pre-divorce factors such as marital conflict, and the amount of external support available (Sun, 2001). The present research concludes that although the effects on wellbeing can be predicted to some extent, context and external factors cause differences in the meaning that individuals attach to their experiences of parental divorce, which accounts for why experiences differ between individuals.

The research presents limitations due to its ideographic nature. As the research adopted critical realist ontology, the data collected and analysed is only true of the participants who expressed these experiences. All individuals understand and experience phenomenon differently as they are shaped by context and previous experience meaning that the findings cannot be generalised to others who experienced parental divorce in childhood (Braun and Clarke, 2013). A second limitation is that although a sufficient amount of interview data was collected, collecting more could have possibly developed the understanding of experiences further (Wood et al, 2012).

Previous research has assumed that experiences are predictable and that individuals experiencing parental divorce can all be supported in the same manner. Therefore, the contradicting findings of the research have wider practical implications for support systems surrounding the child during and post parental divorce. Research could potentially educate parents, carers, and teachers on how to decrease the likelihood of the negative effects on wellbeing through highlighting possible risk and protective factors and providing suitable support tailored for the child.

Suggestions for future research precede from the research findings that some children are at a disadvantage in the classroom following parental divorce. Whilst previous literature acknowledges this link, there is a neglect to provide suggestions as to how to attempt to change this (Bernardi and Radl, 2014). Future research should focus on the ways in which teachers and academic staff could provide support in order to counteract this disadvantage. Overall, the present research successfully develops the understanding of how and why individuals experience both positive and negative long-term effects on wellbeing due to parental divorce. Furthermore, future research could develop the findings in order to provide advice to family and professionals on how to decrease the likelihood of negative effects, particularly in educational settings.

### **Reflexive Analysis**

I chose to research this topic as I experienced parental divorce at the age of 15 thus developing an interest in to how parental divorce has affected others. Having experienced both positive and negative effects of divorce, I was disheartened to find the majority of previous research focused on the negative consequences, thus developing an interest in how experiences differ and explanations as to why. As an independent researcher, it is acknowledged that my personal experience may have

influenced the research. However, I believe my situation to have been beneficial to exploring the phenomenon, allowing subjectivity and an insider perspective throughout the study.

I was also anxious that my personal experience might influence my data collection in some way. However, I again found my position beneficial to the research process, which allowed me to engage with participants comfortably, quickly building rapport with participants. However, one issue that did arise with data collection was that on a few occasions, participants failed to fully expand on answers. Due to my novice researcher status, I was nervous to probe individuals for further understanding; consequently this had an effect on the quantity and quality of data collected. However, in time, my confidence in asking participants to expand on answers increased, and so, I believe that I have learnt valuable interviewing skills from this experience.

As a relatively novice researcher, I was hesitant about using qualitative data as I was unsure I held the skills necessary to successfully carry out and interpret data. One issue I faced was that I hugely underestimated how difficult and time-consuming data analysis would be and quickly began running behind my planned schedule, however, having allotted myself extra time in case any problems arose, I was soon back on track. I also struggled to find the right balance between using prior knowledge to interpret the data and not allowing my personal experiences to influence findings. However, with perseverance and repetitively going over my interpretations, I believe I have stayed impartial to the research.

Prior to conducting interviews, I was certain that the media portrayal of the negative effects of divorce on children were indicative of what I would find. My perceptions changed vastly after interviewing, finding that it is possible for divorce to be a positive experience dependent upon the contributing factors of marital breakdown. However, due to my novice researcher position and the phenomenological, critical realist approach to the research, findings are only true of participants involved as they are solely based on my own interpretations of participants' experiences.

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