



Exploring experiences of parental divorce in childhood using semi-structured interviews and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

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April 2019

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ABSTRACT

This aim of this study was to explore experiences of parental divorce in childhood. The value of lived experience in the subject of parental divorce is underrepresented in the literature, so the research was centred around individual experiences. Three participants contributed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and then analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (henceforth IPA). Three themes emerged: inner conflict and confusion, change over time and acceptance. The theme of acceptance was split into two sub themes: acceptance for the sake of peace and 'that's just the way things are'. Participants described both positive and negative experiences of parental divorce, indicating the subjective, unique and deeply personalised nature of parental divorce. The study has implications on how we treat children during parental divorce and for future research.

KEY WORDS:	DIVORCE	FAMILIES	IPA	PHENOMENOLOGY	CHILDREN
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Introduction

Divorce: The Big Picture

As of 2017, 42% of marriages end in divorce (Office for National Statistics, 2018). Divorce rates have been rising since 1960, and peaked in 1993 (Office for National Statistics, 2018). The rising divorce rate can partially be attributed to the Divorce Reform Act 1969, which came into effect in 1971 and made it easier for couples to get divorced (Office for National Statistics, 2018). In the 1960s 90% of children spent their childhood and adolescence in a home with two, biological, married parents (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1999), a very different world to the one we live in now. The risk factors for divorce are numerous, among them are: marrying young, having grown up in a house without two married parents and bringing children from a previous relationship into the family house (especially if a man in a heterosexual marriage is to do this) (Amato, 2010). The idea that growing up in a divorced or separated household leads to a higher likelihood of divorce in later life is common in the literature (Amato, 2010; Wallerstein and Lewis, 2004), and there is data to suggest that the impact of divorce on children is profound, long lasting and long reaching (Amato and Cheadle, 2005). Divorce can impact not only the first generation, but can negatively affect the second and third generation as well; even if they weren't even born at the time of the divorce (Amato and Cheadle, 2005). The third generation experienced more marital discord and weaker ties with both mother and father (Amato and Cheadle, 2005). Research by Amato and DeBoer (2001) also implies that divorce can have implications across two generations - with the second generation more likely to experience divorce if the first generation had divorced. Despite this, there is much to suggest that divorce doesn't negatively impact children more than any other big life event (McIntosh, 2003; Brand et al, 2017; Morrison et al, 2017). Early studies have been critiqued as they made assumptions about what kind of family structure is necessary for healthy child development and socialisation, and the impact of a fatherless upbringing (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1999). They often assumed that parental divorce is a deeply traumatic event for a child that has severe and enduring effects on their wellbeing (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Parental divorce is a deeply personal and individual experience, and it's hard to generalise the effects of it to everyone because of this. It's also possible that our society's attitudes towards divorce have changed. Children of divorced parents will likely face less judgement than before, being surrounded by a greater number of people who will relate to their circumstances, due to the rise of rates of divorce since the 1960s (Office for National Statistics, 2018). It is crucial to examine how recent the research is in order to assess its applicability to the current day; growing up as a child when 90% of your peers had married parents is a very different experience to that of growing up in a time where 42% of marriages end in divorce, and this must be acknowledged.

The Negative Effects of Divorce on Children

Research shows parental divorce can negatively impact children in a number of ways. Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) conducted a 25 year longitudinal study examining the experiences of children whose parents had divorced. They found that their participants had a perception that personal relationships were unreliable, and this was persistent across the study's lifespan. They also tended to have children

later on in life and were likely to have a negative attitude towards marriage. Divorce can also impact children's educational attainment (Amato, 2010), their self esteem (Barumandzadeh et al, 2016), their psychological well being (Boring et al, 2015) and eventually negatively affects their own future relationships and marriages (Cartwright, 2006; Amato, 2010). This can be seen in children of divorced parents, who are more likely to report problems in their marriages and more likely to become divorced themselves (Amato, 2010). Development of identity, relationships between fathers and children and views about forming families of their own are all factors affected by parental divorce (Pantelis et al, 2015). Feeling 'caught' between two parents and not knowing which side to pick is a stress that can be felt by children of divorce, particularly if the divorce is ending a high conflict relationship (Amato and Afifi, 2006). Damage to the child's relationship with both parents is another short term consequence of divorce (Fortin et al, 2012). The negative effects of divorce on children, both short term pains and long term struggles, are numerous, prolific, and emotionally harmful.

The Other Side of the Coin

Despite the suggestions that parental divorce is wholly negative, there is also a wealth of studies that would suggest that parental divorce is not as damaging as it can be perceived to be. For example, research conducted by Hashemi and Homayuni (2017) found that children of emotionally divorced parents (parents who have not officially divorced but no longer feel attraction or trust for their partner, and therefore withhold emotionally) demonstrate higher levels of emotional and behavioural issues than those whose parents have legally divorced. The idea that parental divorce is preferable to having parents stay in an unhappy or acrimonious marriage is also supported by Amato (2010), who, despite painting a grim picture of the outcomes for children of divorced parents, found that children can show little change in emotional wellbeing, or even show small improvements if the divorce ends a high conflict marriage. Amato and Afifi (2006) found that, while children with parents in high conflict divorces felt caught between the two, this was no more so than children whose parents were in high conflict marriages. Morrison et al (2017) found that while parental divorce may cause distress during childhood, adults with divorced parents tend to accept that the divorce was the best course of action. Whilst divorce is often construed as a deeply damaging experience for children, these findings suggest that it may actually be a better alternative to staying in an unhealthy marriage. Factors such as open communication (Morrison et al, 2017), positive or neutral disclosures about the parents' relationship (Afifi and McManus, 2010), and giving children choice and influence over their own living arrangements (Berman, 2018) can all help children to adjust to life after parental divorce. That being said, there is also a way in which each of these tactics can be harmful rather than helpful. Closed communication can be damaging for children (Morrison et al, 2017), negative disclosures by one parent about the other can be detrimental (Afifi and McManus, 2010) and, in cases of high conflict divorce, making children choose who they want to live with can make them feel caught (Amato and Afifi, 2006). All of this indicates that there are many contextual variables and individual differences that mediate personal experience and reaction to parental divorce, and that divorce can be the better alternative to staying together unhappily.

A Balanced View and the Present Study

It is clear that experiences of parental divorce are widely varied (Berman, 2018). Children whose parents divorce encounter an assortment of emotions, but parental divorce does not always lead to wholly negative outcomes. Research by Sadowski and McIntosh (2016) found that children of divorced parents experience both security and contentment and a lack of security and contentment simultaneously. Campo et al (2012) also found children experience positives and negatives with regards to parental divorce - positives including close relationships and cooperative parents, and negatives such as distance and parental conflict. Parental divorce is a process consisting of many layers that affect children differently over time (McIntosh, 2003) and varies in enduring effects from case to case (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1999); to view it one-dimensionally as 'harmful' or 'helpful' is reductionist and minimises the complicated and subjective nature of divorce. Another common theme within the literature is the need to listen to the voice of the child (Sadowski and McIntosh, 2016). The experiences, feelings and thoughts of children have been largely ignored (Johnsen et al, 2018; Brand et al, 2017; Fortin et al, 2012; Coyne et al, 2016), despite the child being just as greatly affected by divorce as the parents who are divorcing. This study attempts to address the gap in the research by asking people with divorced parents to talk openly and freely about their own experience of parental divorce during childhood. Current research needs to address divorce from an angle that values children's thoughts, feelings and experiences and acknowledge that children often struggle to understand parental divorce. This approach is vital for creating a better understanding of the experiences of children. Therefore, the aim of this study is to create an understanding of how people who have experienced parental divorce make sense of their situation.

Methodology

Participants

Three participants contributed to allow for rich and detailed analysis. One participant was recruited via the participation pool of MMU psychology students. The other two participants were approached by a gatekeeper and asked if they would like to take part in the study. The participants had to be over eighteen years of age. They had to have parents who had divorced when the participants were between the ages of one to sixteen years old, and had to be comfortable talking about their parent's divorce. Each participant chose a pseudonym to be referred to in order to protect their identity. "Pat Healy" is a male whose parents divorced when he was three or four. "Jamie Emerald" is a male whose parents divorced when he was thirteen or fourteen. "Kayleigh" is a female whose parents divorced when she was around two years old.

Data Collection

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, as recommended for IPA, because the interview schedule (appendix four) can be prepared ahead of time to ensure a general direction and outline of conversation, while still being flexible and allowing the participant to have influence and control over the interview (Smith et al, 2009). Semi-structured interviews give participants the space to fully express themselves outside of a list of questions on a sheet of paper, which is vital for IPA. Interviews were undertaken in a private room in a public university building. Before

the interview the interviewer described to the participant their own experience of parental divorce in order to promote disclosure and make the participants feel more at ease about talking about themselves. The participants were encouraged to reflect on the past ('Can you tell me how you remember feeling about your parent's divorce when it was happening?') and asked to consider how their feelings have changed over time ('Can you tell me how you feel now looking back on it?'). They were also asked to describe factors that may have helped or hurt them when processing their parent's divorce. Eight questions (appendix four) were prepared in advance of the interview, with additional prompts in order to open up the conversation further and encourage rich, detailed data. Anything else discussed during the interview was the product of the natural course of conversation between the researcher and participant.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed using IPA. IPA is a technique based on phenomenology, which is the study of events as they occur in experience (Chaplin, 1975, cited in Roux, 2007), and creates an understanding through perception and awareness of the world (Allen, 2012). Phenomenological research is descriptive, not experiential, and attempts to understand human experience from the perspective of the individual (Knaack, 1984). Merleau-Ponty (1945, cited in Roux, 2007) described phenomenological research as the study of the essence of consciousness. Phenomenology was first developed by Husserl in 1931 (Zahavi, 2003), to oppose what he saw as the misguided realism of behaviourist thinking of the time (Hammond et al, 1991). In order to avoid the misinterpretation of participants' experiences, we must discard our preconceived views (Roux, 2007). One of the ways in which IPA examines lived experience is through the lifeworld: the lenses of temporality (time), spatiality (space), embodiment (the body) and intersubjectivity (interactions with others). Smith et al (2009) created a guide to analysing in the style of IPA, which was followed in the analysis of this research. Firstly, the transcripts were read and reread to gain full understanding and immerse the researcher in the experiences of the participants. Initial notes were then made, which developed into the emergent themes of each interview. Once the smaller themes were connected, the process was repeated with the next set of data. IPA treats each set of data as an individual (Smith et al, 2009). Once each transcript was analysed the data sets were compared for patterns across the interviews. IPA was chosen as the method of analysis because of its grounding in phenomenology. It places importance on the unique experience of the participant and requires faithfulness to the participant's own experience (Walker, 2007). It is inductive, data driven and person-centred (Smith, 2004), which fits the aim of this research: to explore the participant's own unique experiences of parental divorce.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was gained before interviews commenced (appendix seven). Because the subject of parental divorce is potentially a sensitive subject for some people, the planned questions (appendix four) were chosen carefully and revised with a supervisor. The participant information sheet (appendix two) stated that participants must be comfortable talking about their parents' divorce. Participants who were not recruited through the participation pool were approached by a

gatekeeper in order to avoid any coercion. They provided a pseudonym to be referred to in order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were provided with a participant information sheet (appendix two) and a consent sheet (appendix three). A debrief sheet (appendix five) was given at the end. The participants were assured that they could stop the interview at any time and withdraw their data up to a certain date. In addition to following the British Psychological Society (2018) guidelines, further guidelines specific to phenomenological research were followed. This advice includes bracketing, where the researcher sets aside their own beliefs in order to describe the experiences of others as faithfully as possible (Walker, 2007). Extra precaution was taken alongside the BPS guidelines firstly because the subject of divorce can be distressing for some people, and secondly because adherence to ethical guidelines is especially important when researching the lived experience (Walker, 2007). The data is deeply personal to the participant and must be treated with respect.

Quality Criteria

Yardley (2000) measures the quality of qualitative research under four criteria: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence and impact and importance. The present study shows sensitivity to context by the adoption of IPA, which creates an individual and personalised analysis on how a person views their own lifeworld (Knaack, 1984). Commitment and rigour were shown in the in-depth interviews that were conducted with each participant. The small number of participants was chosen so that commitment could be shown to each participant. Transparency is displayed above in the detailed description of the stages of research. The adherence to the qualities of IPA demonstrates the coherence of the research. The impact and importance is clear - research into children's experiences of divorce is vital for informing policy making that has the wellbeing of children in mind (Fortin et al, 2012).

Analysis and Discussion

Three themes were found that applied to all participants. These were: inner conflict and confusion, growth over time and acceptance. The theme of acceptance was split into two sub-themes: acceptance for the sake of peace and 'that's the way things are'.

Inner Conflict and Confusion

The participants often found that they experienced confusion when they were younger and first grappling with their parents' divorce. The literature rarely discusses the confusion that children of divorce feel, but does reference events that likely cause confusion, such as feeling caught (Amato and Afifi, 2006), living in two separate homes feeling like living in two separate worlds (Johnsen et al, 2018) and negative disclosures made by one parent about the other (Afifi and McManus, 2010). However, the participants in this research described situations different to these:

"I used to come home from school and go to my mum's and cry for my dad for like an hour, if I had to, my dad would come and get me and take me to his and I'd cry for my mum when I was there because in my four year old head all I wanted for them to be together but I couldn't understand or

communicate that so I was very, just, confused and sad” - Kayleigh, lines 76-80.

In this emotive passage Kayleigh expresses her confusion when she was young through the embodied experience of crying. She constructs her “four year old head” as going through such inexpressible sadness that all she could do was cry. She uses crying as an attempt to express her desires for her parents to be together. Kayleigh makes it clear here that an inability to communicate with her parents due to her young age and her inability to understand why they were no longer together resulted in a considerable amount of sadness and stress as a young child. She also clearly describes being conflicted, as she would cry to see one parent, but then when they picked her up she would cry for the other. Any space in which Kayleigh embodied was marred by the sadness that came with missing one parent or the other. At that time, any space that didn’t involve the world she wanted (her parents being together) was a sad and confusing one.

Kayleigh also describes the inner conflict that she felt after the divorce of her mother and stepfather many years afterwards:

“Again quite confusing because there was such a conflict of emotions... I... So my Aunties sort of joked to me and people coming up to me going ‘I bet you’re made up’ and I was like, okay, I am for myself, but I was watching my mum and my brother and my sister devastated...” - Kayleigh, lines 177-179.

Here Kayleigh describes having to reconcile feeling happy that her stepdad was gone from the family home against feeling sad for her close family who were “devastated”. This is an example of cognitive dissonance; the mental tension that occurs when someone holds two contradictory beliefs or feelings (Festinger, 1957). Cognitive dissonance has not been approached in the literature in terms of parental divorce, but research shows that cognitive dissonance in general can cause discomfort and emotional tension (Festinger, 1962). This is the second divorce that Kayleigh encountered. As of yet there is little research into children who deal with more than one divorce in their lives. In Kayleigh’s experience, it is very different and yet very similar to the divorce of her biological parents. There is still a sense of loss and deep sadness within the household, but unlike before Kayleigh now feels obligated to hide her feelings for the sake of her family. She had to mediate between feeling happy for herself and feeling empathy for her “devastated” mother and siblings, which created more confusion and conflict as a result of the cognitive dissonance produced by two conflicting feelings. Through the lens of temporality we can see the time and growth that Kayleigh has gone through between the two divorces - in the time that has passed she’s become considerate and aware of her family’s feelings in the way her younger self couldn’t be.

Jamie also experienced a lot of confusion when his parents divorced:

“very confused because like prior, about two weeks before finding out they were getting divorced we had a big long conversation about love and

family and that they were like a rock and that sort of thing and then two weeks later, bam!" - Jamie, lines 32-34.

Jamie's confusion over his parent's divorce showcases how he was completely unaware of the impending divorce. Using the lens of intersubjectivity, it's clear that the contradictory messages his parents communicated to Jamie resulted in a very shocking and confusing situation - the use of the word "bam!" is evidence of how out of the blue it felt to him. When he is then told they are divorcing, this creates an inner conflict between what he had been told and the reality of his parent's relationship. This confusion leads to him feeling a dissolution of trust in the perceived strength of not just his parent's relationships, but all relationships:

"I recognise that it's caused me a lot of distrust over the years" - Jamie, line 43.

Through the lens of temporality we can see that Jamie's parent's divorce has resulted in a long lasting ("over the years"), detrimental effect on his ability to trust others. Through the lens of intersubjectivity we can see that Jamie's ability to relate to others and form close, trusting relationships has been damaged due to the confusion and inner conflict he felt when his parents first divorced. Jamie's experiences support the findings by Wallerstein and Lewis (2004), who found that children whose parents have divorced have a persistent perception that relationships cannot be relied upon and cannot be trusted. Cartwright (2006) also found that the majority of the participants experienced problems in intimate relationships. His experiences also support the literature that suggest that divorce has a long lasting effect on children (Boring et al, 2015; Cartwright, 2006).

Pat, similar to Kayleigh, describes experiencing inner conflict around wanting to see his Dad.

"sometimes I might feel guilty about it or I'd miss seeing my Dad or miss seeing my mum or whatever" - Pat, lines 118-119.

The conflict between wanting to see his Dad but not wanting to hurt his Mum's feelings causes Pat to feel guilty. This is similar to what Amato and Afifi (2006) describe in their research about children feeling caught, however, in this case Pat's parents have a relatively healthy relationship with each other:

"They just tried their best to make it easy for me and Oscar" - Pat, lines 113-114

"we can go round anytime we want, there's nothing stopping us, my Mum's not going to be bothered" - Pat, lines 71-72

Whereas Amato and Afifi (2006) only describe high conflict marriages ending in divorce leading to children feeling caught, Pat feels caught even though by his own admission, his parents have a healthy co parenting relationship centred around him and his brother. This suggests that, despite his parents "trying their best to make

things easy", children of divorce can still feel caught between parents, leading to feelings of guilt.

Each participant feels a deep sense of confusion and conflict. In the case of Kayleigh and Pat, this sense of confusion is something that lessens with time and age, consistent with research that suggests the negative effects of divorce fade over time (Morrison et al, 2017; Fortin et al, 2012; Eldar-Avidan et al, 2009). In contrast, Jamie still experiences the lack of trust in others that was a result of the confusion he experienced in childhood. This highlights the variance of experience between people who experience parental divorce.

Growth Over Time

The participants experienced a sense of growth over time, contradicting the research that suggests that parental divorce is a phenomena that has permanent effects on children (Cartwright, 2006; Young and Ehrenberg, 2007; Boring et al, 2015), and supporting research that suggests the passage of time can affect children's feelings about divorce (Morrison et al, 2017; Fortin et al, 2012; Eldar-Avidan et al, 2009). Pat sees his experience as something that has shaped the person he has become:

"I'd be a completely different person, so I'm glad that is has affected me - the divorce - in a way because it made me who I am" - Pat, lines 199-201

Here Pat expresses gratitude as to how his experiences have changed him over time. For him, the idea that his life could have been better if his parents hadn't divorced isn't something that enters his mind, and he's satisfied with his sense of self and the person he's become. This is in contradiction to the research that suggests that children of divorce have poorer psychological adjustment than others (Amato, 2010; Amato and Cheadle, 2005).

Kayleigh describes a sense of growth, having experienced pain in the past but growing through it and moving on from it.

"I feel sorry for young Kayleigh because... I wish I could go and hug her and like, be there for her but I kind of see her as a different person like I've grown now that was the past and I can probably leave it in the past" - Kayleigh, lines 124-126.

Kayleigh separates her old self and her young self in order to conceptualise how she has grown from the pain she felt when she was younger. Her desire to comfort her younger self indicates the physical comfort that she may have felt was missing. The embodied experience of giving her younger self a hug is also wrapped up in the temporal experience of reflecting on past pain and the intersubjectivity that occurs when you view your past self as a different person. Ultimately the separation of past and present Kayleigh represents the change of her feelings over time, however, the use of the word "probably" hints that she might still be in the process of moving on from the pain, that it's an ongoing process. This is consistent with literature that suggests that instead of being one big life event, parental divorce is more accurately described as a series of transitions (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

Jamie refers to the change he's experienced over time in the context of his desire, or lack of, for a father figure:

"I suppose now I'm older I can see maybe what I've missed out on not having one" - Jamie, lines 49-50

"I've known people with good fathers now so I do know it's not all like my own father" - Jamie, line 54

Here, the change that Jamie experiences over time is both a positive and negative one. He can "see... what [he's] missed out on" with regards to having a father figure, whereas before he never thought it was important. Even then, his use of the words "I suppose" and "maybe" highlights how this is still a work in progress. He's in the stage of transitioning from one opinion to another - a state of flux where he doesn't yet feel secure in the thought that he has or hasn't missed out on having a father figure. In this instance the passage of time has brought to light more things that Jamie feels he's missed out on rather than allowing him to grow from things that previously brought him pain as Kayleigh and Pat describe. Jamie's experience of a lack of a father figure is reflected in the literature; Pantelis et al (2015) found that divorce impacts father-child relationships and Fortin et al (2012) found that parental divorce can damage children's intersubjective relations with parents, although they suggest this is usually a short term damage which is repaired over time, whereas in the case of Jamie, this is a long term effect. As time has passed, Jamie describes knowing people with good fathers, and knowing that they're not all like his own. His longing for a father figure has been directly impacted by knowing people with good fathers, an example of how intersubjectivity has shaped his lifeworld. This contributes to a change in how he views himself:

"I know I'm probably a bad person as well who will do the same thing as my father... No I don't know about now but I thought I could probably do similar things" - Jamie, lines 182-183.

The tense that he uses is important. He starts talking about being a "bad person" who "will" do the same thing as his father, and then in the next sentence says he "thought" he could do those things. The switching from present to past tense within the same sentence demonstrates that he's still transitioning from one thought pattern to another - he's not yet let go of the idea that he's a bad person but is beginning to come to terms that he doesn't have to view himself in that way. The absolute phrases "bad person" and "will do the same thing" leave no room for debate and indicate that, due to the nature of his parent's divorce, he "thought" he had no choice but to follow in his father's footsteps. Jamie struggles with the idea that he "could probably do similar things" (that led to his parent's divorce), implying that he fears divorce in his future. While the literature suggests children with divorced parents are more likely to divorce themselves (Amato and Cheadle, 2005; Cartwright, 2006), Jamie seems to both accept and want to reject this rhetoric. The use of both present and past tense implies a degree of cognitive dissonance, where he simultaneously believes he is a "bad person" but also rejects this thinking as something he's grown from with time.

The change and growth that Kayleigh and Jamie describe is something fluid and constant. They're still going through the process of growing and changing and healing from their past pain. The changes Pat has gone through over time appear to be much more fixed. Pat appears to be secure and confident in the person he's become as a result of his parent's divorce, whereas Kayleigh and Jamie are still in a state of change. This supports the literature that suggests parental divorce is a series of transitions over time (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1999), and defies the research that suggests that the outcomes for children with divorced parents are only negative (Wallerstein and Lewis, 2004; Amato, 2010; Boring et al; 2015). Pat's experience in particular supports the idea that children are robust and divorce does not always result in long lasting damage for children (McIntosh, 2003).

Acceptance

While all participants described some form of acceptance of their situations, Kayleigh and Jamie express acceptance for the sake of peace, either inner peace or peace within the family, whereas Pat seems to accept his experience as 'the way that things are'. Therefore the theme of acceptance was split into two sub themes.

Acceptance For the Sake of Peace

Both Jamie and Kayleigh had conflict with the father figures in their life, but chose not to express their feelings for the sake of the peace of the family and for their own wellbeing:

"it was either get on with him or not enjoy my home life" - Jamie, line 160.
 "I can't imagine he's now going to go 'sorry about that by the way', so I'm just like you know what, it's fine, you just carry on. I'm alright honestly I'm used to it" - Kayleigh, lines 112-113.

Through the lens of intersubjectivity we can see how complicated personal relationships with fathers or father-like figures can get when divorce occurs. Jamie makes the choice to get on with his mother's partner so that his home life will be affected as little as possible. Kayleigh chooses to accept her father's irregular contact and the "rocky" (Kayleigh, line 22) relationship she has with him. She feels that a conversation with him about his inconsistent relationship with her would be pointless, as in the years of this behaviour he's never acknowledged it or apologised. This forces Kayleigh to be the bigger person and accept the relationship as it is. This type of acceptance suggests a longing for things to be different, but an acknowledgement that this could never be. Kayleigh says she is "used to it" when talking about her father's absence and lack of apology, which implies that she feels that she shouldn't have had to get used to it. Jamie chooses to get on with his mother's partner for the sake of peace, but the underlying subtext is that he would have preferred for him not to be there at all. In choosing to get on with his mother's partner he chooses the lesser of two evils, whereas Kayleigh feels she doesn't have a choice but to accept her Father's inconsistency because a conversation about it would be fruitless. This is consistent with the suggestion that father-child relationships can be threatened by parental divorce (Pantelis et al, 2015). Overall,

there is little research into the sacrifices that children make in order to make peace, either for others or themselves.

'It's Just the Way Things Are'

Pat's form of acceptance was different to Kayleigh's and Jamie's because he appears to accept his circumstances without wishing they could be different.

"he wasn't there a lot, not because he didn't want to be it's just because of the way it was" - Pat, lines 60-61

Although he admits that his Dad "wasn't there a lot", Pat doesn't appear to have any resentment for "the way it was". He presents an image of not being bothered by his parent's divorce:

"I guess I never felt like a lot of my friends have families and parents who is still together and that never bothered me in the slightest like I never felt jealous or like I was missing out or anything" - Pat, lines 128-130.

"I never questioned it and I still don't question it" - Pat, lines 130-131.

For Pat one of the key reasons why he never felt "bothered... in the slightest" is because he didn't feel like a lot of his friends had family who were still together. Pat demonstrates important intersubjectivity is when constructing our own lifeworld and relating our experiences. While he did experience negative things as a result of his parent's divorce ("I might feel guilty about it" - Pat, line 118), ultimately he "never questioned it" because he felt no need. Pat completely accepts the circumstances of his parent's divorce and therefore the circumstances of his life. He's grateful for how the divorce has affected him:

"I've been exposed to stuff that's shaped who I am now" - Pat, line 169.

Pat has truly accepted his circumstances and the person he's become as a result of them.

The most important thing that this theme demonstrates to us is that the experiences of parental divorce are extremely subjective and personal to each individual, and attempting to form universal truths leads to a reductionist agenda in which intimate, nuanced and unique lived experiences are oversimplified and stripped of value.

Concluding Thoughts

There are many individual, personal and contextual variables that impacted the participants' experiences of divorce, as evidenced by the very different feelings and beliefs held by the participants as a result of their parent's divorce. It's crucial for research to treat children of divorce as individuals. No two experiences are the same and we need to move away from truisms about children's experience of parental divorce, an approach that is agreed upon by McIntosh (2003). It's impossible to construct truth about the impact of divorce. Everyone is different, their experiences are unique and individual. We need to talk to people and treat them as experts of their own world if we want to create understanding around this topic. When we

silence the voices of children we limit their contributions and therefore limit our ability to understand their lives (Brand et al, 2017).

A limitation of this study is that it was conducted years after the divorces had taken place. It is not centred on children as the literature suggests research must do (Brand et al, 2017; Chen and George, 2005). The passage of time and hindsight will have tempered the perceived experiences of the participants. The only way to find out how children feel is to talk to children because people can change their perspective on events after time has passed. However, this was also a strength of the study, as it meant that the participants were able to describe and name feelings and experiences that may have been out of their grasp and understanding when they were children. Good research into parental divorce must therefore address the experiences of children at the time of divorce and also after time has passed.

When conducting future research it is important not to view divorce as only having bad or good consequences. It is complex and multilayered, and to avoid oversimplification and generalisation it must be treated as such. A suggestion for further research is to look into the coping mechanisms that children of divorce create in order to make sense of and move on from their experiences. It would also be interesting to examine what kind of self sacrifices (if any) children make for the sake of the family during parental divorce and what impact this may have on them growing up, as this is a topic that came up in the study but has not as yet been commented on by other research. Another suggestion would be to explore the role of cognitive dissonance in parental divorce - another subject that came up in this study, and has not yet been commented on in any other parental divorce research. Whatever future research is conducted, people's individual and unique experiences need to be at the heart of it.

Reflexivity

Bracketing is an important part of conducting IPA and involves suspending one's own beliefs in order to view the data as the participant sees it, without bringing in one's own opinions (Walker, 2007). Bracketing is a difficult thing to do, especially when I have my own experience of parental divorce which could have biased both my research and my analysis. I had a very positive experience of parental divorce, where both my parents have worked together to create the best coparenting relationship they could. I don't identify with the research that suggests that parental divorce has a deeply negative and long lasting effect on children because I have not experienced this myself. This could have impacted the way in which I interrogated the existing research, it also could have impacted the way in which I processed the data from my participants. While I recognise the importance of approaching your data in an unbiased way and with an open mind, I also recognise that it's impossible to fully disconnect for your own experiences, and I acknowledge that this may have impacted the analysis of my data and research.

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