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The experiences of Xhosa adolescent males regarding the marital separation of their parents

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INTRODUCTION & CONTEXTUALISATION

Marital breakdown

An increasing phenomenon worldwide (Cohen, 2002)

South African statistics on divorce:

(Statistics South Africa, Marriages and divorces, 2015:6, 8)

- **fluctuating figures between 2003 and 2010, with an increase in divorce from 2011 to 2015**
- **25 260 divorces recorded in 2015**
- **56% (14 045) of these involved children younger than 18 years of age**

Divorce & marital separation

Divorce: the legal dissolution of a marriage
(Benokraitis, 2011)

Not all parents separate through legal divorce

Marital separation: (Benokraitis, 2011)

- **Usually intended as a temporary separation in which partners decide whether to maintain a stressful marriage or not**
- **Often turns into a permanent separation of the parents**

The effects of divorce and marital separation on the family unit are very similar:

(Anderson & Sabetelli, 2011; Holborn & Eddy, 2011; Lamb, 2010; Feder & Leibovitz, 2010)

- **The family unit breaks up**
- **Where children are involved, it usually becomes a family headed by the mother**
- **The father usually leaves the family home**

To understand the effects of marital breakdown, one needs to understand the family as a system

(Bannister, 2007)

The family as a system

- **The family is regarded as the basic unit of society, and primary context in which children develop**
- **Responsible for survival, protection, development of family members**
- **Many family types exist; however the nuclear family (mother, father, children) still most common family type in South Africa** (Department of Social Development, 2013)
- **A stable family environment is important for children's development**
- **Parents have specific but complementary roles in terms of care of children**
- **However, marital breakdown leads to the loss of one of the parents in the home**

South Africa: a decree of divorce is not granted unless the court is satisfied that sufficient provision is made for the welfare of minor or dependent children (Mediation of Certain Divorce Matters, Act 70 of 1979, S 6)

The Children's Act 38 of 2005 makes provision for divorce mediation and parenting plans to determine parental responsibilities and rights in respect of children (Children's Act 38 of 2005, S 33, S 34)

- **These include: living arrangements, contact, maintenance, schooling, and religious upbringing of the children**

In contrast to divorce, marital separation does not involve a legal process

Parents generally make informal arrangements for the care of and contact with their children

However:

- Separation could be indefinite**
- Similar to divorce, marital separation could have substantial and long-lasting effects on the children**

(Anderson & Sabatelli, 2011; Benokraitis, 2011; Berk, 2013; Kunz, 2011; Lamb, 2010)

Rationale for the study

Social work services to, amongst others, Xhosa adolescent males whose parents have separated informally

General pattern observed:

- Father usually leaves the home; children remain in care of the mother**
- Separation often indefinite**
- No formal arrangements in respect of parenting responsibilities between the mother and the father**

Adolescence

Developmentally, a time of significant change in all developmental domains

Key aspects of adolescent development include:

- **The formation of a personal identity**
- **The achievement of autonomy, independence**
- **Belonging to and acceptance by the peer group**
- **Adapting to pubertal changes and accepting their physical appearance**
- **Idealistic thoughts, more intense emotions, self-consciousness**

Parents: providing guidance and direction

(Berk, 2013; Louw & Louw, 2014, Santrock, 2009)

The Xhosa adolescent male

In the Xhosa community, the father plays an important role in lives of adolescent males

Literature indicates:

- fathers are carriers of the family lineage**
- adolescent male's identity closely linked with father's clan and ethnic heritage**
- the male initiation ceremony still highly practiced in Xhosa communities**
- fathers play a significant role, whereas mothers are usually excluded from these practices**

(Momoti, 2002; Mtuze, 2004; Mwamwenda, 2004; Saracho & Spodek, 2008; Venter, 2011)

What would the effects of marital separation be on Xhosa adolescent males where the father is not part of the household?

Research question:

What are the experiences of Xhosa adolescent males regarding the marital separation of their parents?



RESEARCH METHODS

Research approach: qualitative
Type of research: applied research
Research purpose: exploratory and descriptive
Research design: phenomenology
Sampling: purposive sampling

Study sample: 12 participants

- **Xhosa adolescent males between 14 and 18 years**
- **Parents were separated for at least 1 year at time of the study**
- **Participants lived with their mothers; the fathers left the family home**
- **Participants were not on the caseload of the researcher**

Data collection: semi-structured interviews

interview schedule

Data analysis: thematic analysis

Data quality: measures implemented to ensure trustworthiness

Pilot study

Ethical considerations:

- Avoidance of harm, voluntary participation, informed consent and assent, confidentiality, no deception of respondents

Ethical clearance



RESEARCH RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Themes and sub-themes

Theme 1: marital separation was not openly dealt with

Theme 2: the influence of marital separation on the participants' relationships with the family and extended family

Theme 3: the influence of marital separation on the participants' material, educational and socio-emotional needs

Theme 4: coping strategies used by the participants

Theme 5: participants' advice to parents who separate

Theme 1: Marital separation not openly dealt with

Sub-theme 1.1: Participants not informed about marital separation

Most parents did not inform their children that they have separated (11 participants)

They became aware of it by observing changes within the household

- *“My mother said: ‘Let us go and stay with my brother.’ ... **I saw** that we were staying ... and my mom was not visiting my dad.”*
- *“Nobody told me what was happening ... **I observed and concluded** that they have separated.”*

Sub-theme 1.2: Participants found out in indirect ways

Some participants had a suspicion that their parents have separated. These were later confirmed in different ways, e.g.

- informed by family members

- *“My **sister told me** that I do not have a father anymore.”*
- *“I heard it from a close **relative**.”*

- overhearing conversations of others

- *“Nobody told me ... I **heard my mother talking** with our neighbour, saying that she has separated from my dad.”*
- *“I asked her [mother] as to where my father was, as I **hear in the township** [that they were separated]. My mother then told me.”*

Participants wished that parents would personally inform them

- *“I wish when parents separate they **could get back to the child**, at least one of them, and **tell you** ...”*

Sub-theme 1.3: Topic not addressed over the longer term

For most participants, the marital separation was not openly discussed, even over the longer term

- *“There has **never** been a time we **discussed** this.”*
- *“**Until today ... nothing** has been **said**.”*

Some participants avoided discussion of the topic

They either chose to do so or perceived it as a norm

- *“... Xhosa speaking people ... one will be encouraged to be **strong** as you are a **male person**.”*

Participants wished to talk about the topic, to help them adjust and deal with the separation of their parents

They pointed to the negative consequences of not discussing parental separation

- *“I would entertain this **pain** for long **as I was not able to share** it with anyone at home.”*
- *“I **do not know the reasons** why my parents separated ... so I get **anxious**.”*
- *“Maybe it can make me **understand more** and [I can] **feel right** ...”*

Theme 2: Effects on relationships with the family and extended family

Sub-theme 2.1: Relationship with mother and siblings

Most participants maintained a positive relationship with their mother, while sibling relationships were not affected

- *“My mother is very supportive to me. As a single parent she is always trying her level best to do the best for us.”*

One participant’s relationship with his mother was negatively affected, involving an issue related to the father

- *“My mother sometimes does not allow me to see my dad. I do not know why.”*

Sub-theme 2.2: Relationship with the father

Participants (6) who maintained contact with their father, experienced it as positive

- *“I visit him during the holidays. I **feel that he cares** and he loves me.”*

Two participants did not wish to see their fathers as they feared negative consequences

- *“I do not need anything that will **hurt me** (referring to contact with his father).”*

Other participants wished to maintain contact with their fathers, but could not due to different reasons

- *“Even though my mother is doing everything for me, there are things she cannot do, especially ... giving **guidance and advice** as my **father would do.**”*
- *“I wish he would contact me or visit me, but nothing happens as **he is quiet.** ... It was boiling inside me and hurting so much.”*
- *“My **mother does not allow** me to see my dad.”*

Sub-theme 2.3: relationship with the extended family

Most participants maintained positive relationships with members of the paternal and maternal extended family

Participants especially appreciated positive relationships with the paternal family

- *“It is nice with the (paternal) family because **my father belongs to them.**”*

Those who did not maintain contact with the paternal extended family, wished to build a relationship with them

- *“I never have a chance to know his family. ... that hurts me as my friends will talk about how they visit both (maternal and paternal) sides of their family in rural areas. I have **no rural areas to visit** my paternal family. That **leaves a space in my heart.**”*

Theme 3: Effects of parental separation on the participants

Sub-theme 3.1: Material needs

Parental separation made it more difficult for the participants to have their material needs met

Some parents seemed to shift the responsibility to the other parent

In some instances, other members of the family would help

- *“I need clothes like other teenagers. However, she (mother) could **not afford** that.”*
- *“It affected me big time because when I wanted something from my other, she would say ‘**Go to your father** and ask for it.’ When I go to my father, he would say ‘Go to your mother and ask for it.’”*
- *“**Only my grandmother** bought me clothes, although she was struggling to do so ... and feeding me.”*

Sub-theme 3.2: Emotional effects of parental separation

Participants experienced emotional distress because of the separation of their parents

These effects tended to last over the longer term

Some would hide their emotions from others

- *“I was tearful much of the time. I could **not control** my emotions.”*
- *“I was deeply hurt ... I used to **keep quiet** and at home they would not know what the problem was. Emotionally, it **did not leave me, not (even) today.**”*

Sub-theme 3.3: Effects on school performance

Most participants mentioned that the marital separation of their parents had a negative impact on their school performance

Three participants even dropped out of school

However, one participant became motivated to do well at school to escape from his home circumstances

- *“My **concentration** was wandering. I was busy **thinking about this situation** [parental separation] while the teacher was talking.”*
- *“I was **always thinking about this problem**, even at school.”*
- *“This issue between my parents **pushed me to achieve** ... I passed very well at school.”*

Sub-theme 3.4: Effects on self-perception and self-esteem

Participants' self-perception and self-esteem were negatively affected by their parents' marital separation

They felt different from their peers who could dress well and who had intact families

- *“You look at other children, how they wear uniforms (to school) and then you look at yourself ... I saw that I am a loser because I was **comparing myself** with this and that person.”*
- *“I see myself as **different** ... If my dad was here, maybe he would buy me shoes so that I am like other children.”*
- *“I **felt different** from other children. I was **embarrassed**.”*
- *“My **confidence dropped** as I saw that I was left with one parent.”*

Sub-theme 3.5: Involvement with the peer group

Parental separation negatively affected the participants' involvement with the peer group

The issue of an absent father and incomplete family appeared to be a central theme

As a result, some preferred to socially isolate themselves

- *“When we are just talking in general (I feel fine), but the minute they **talk about fathers**, I keep quiet, answer here and there but do not want to show that I am hiding something inside.”*
- *“I felt left behind in the conversations as their conversations were based on **both parents living happily**.”*
- *“I felt fragile inside ... my friends ... maybe they would laugh at me. That is why I decided to **withdraw** from them.”*

Sub-theme 3.6: Participation in cultural practices

The parents' marital separation affected the participants' participation in cultural practices

Most participants (10) were concerned about the initiation ceremony as an important part of Xhosa culture

- **Involvement of the father**

Participants emphasised the importance of involvement of the father or the father's family

- *"It is two **different** things to be circumcised in your maternal family and ... in the paternal family. I will feel proud (to undergo the ritual in the paternal family). I know I am following after the **footsteps of my father**. I know hardships may happen, but I will be able to overcome those circumstances."*
- *"It would not feel good to see everything pertaining to **my manhood** done on my mother's side."*
- *"I am another person [doing the ritual with the father]. **I belong** to my father's side."*

- **Involvement of mother's family**

Where the father is absent, participants would involve a male member of mother's family ("social father")

Need a male family member to act on their behalf

- *"Even if I could wish to do it on my father's side, the people who know me are from my mother's side ... so I am **not known** there."*
- *"By right, I am supposed to do it in my father's side. I knew nobody there, so I felt I will arrive there with no dignity and **nobody would stand in for me** ... my maternal family [are from] the same clan. I know for a fact ... if I am asked about my manhood, I can explain and be accepted."*
- *"I would have preferred my paternal family, of course, as I belong there traditionally. But doing it under my **maternal uncle is fine.**"*

CONCLUSIONS

- Marital separation can have substantial effects on children
- In most families, the father leaves the home; children remain in the care of the mother, often with a diminished involvement of the father
- With marital separation, arrangements in terms of the children are often informal or even overlooked; children might not be informed about the situation
- These aspects make it difficult for children to cope with the separation of their parents
- In this study, the effects of parental separation on Xhosa adolescent males correlated with the effects of parental divorce and separation described in literature
- However, in Xhosa communities the father plays a significant role in the lives of adolescent males, which the mother cannot perform

- Absence of the father due to marital separation thus has specific effects on Xhosa adolescent males
 - They might be deprived of guidance by the father
 - They might be deprived of contact with the paternal extended family
 - They could experience problems with regards to the initiation ceremony
- A lack of clear arrangements related to these aspects could have a significant effect on the Xhosa adolescent male's sense of belonging to a family lineage and sense of manhood
- Male members of the maternal family could act as “social fathers”
- It is important to make clear arrangements for children affected by parental separation, with consideration of cultural factors

The image features a solid blue background on the left and a white background on the right, separated by a vertical line. A red square is positioned in the top right corner. The word "RECOMMENDATIONS" is written in white, bold, uppercase letters across the blue background.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- As insufficient arrangements for children in families affected by marital separation could have substantial and long-term negative effects on the children, social workers need to educate parents and other role players on the importance of clear arrangements to serve the best interests of the children
- Children should be informed about parental separation to allow them to adjust and to cope with the situation
- As parental separation tends to be a hidden phenomenon, social workers should reach out to children affected by parental separation through implementing awareness programmes and therapeutic services in schools and faith based organisations

- Social workers should be culturally sensitive in terms of cultural norms and practices that could be affected by parental separation
- Large-scale research studies need to be conducted on the phenomenon of marital separation, exploring the effects thereof on children of different ages and from different socio-cultural groups
- The findings of such studies could be considered in policy guidelines for social workers who provide services to children affected by the marital separation of their parents

Thank you



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