“What’s a divorcement?”: The voice of the child in parental divorce

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Abstract

The Objective of the paper is the way in which children experience the divorce of their parents plays a defining role in their adjustment and well-being. Research regarding parental divorce has traditionally preferred the adult perspective. This article aims to highlight and honour the voice of the child in parental divorce by highlighting children’s conceptualisations of parental divorce.

The Method of the paper is an unstructured interviewing technique was used to document the divorce narratives of five children between the ages of 9 and 10 years. Children’s stories were recorded and analysed using narrative analysis. Some major findings include seven themes emerged, the first of which was titled “What is a divorcement?”. This theme constitutes the focus of this article. An additional six themes were identified around the types of stories children told of the divorce process. These themes were titled: Stories of Loss, stories of gain, stories of change, stories of stability, healing stories, and complicating stories.

In conclusion, this article provides insights for practitioners working with children regarding children’s conceptualisations and misconceptualisations of parental divorce.

Keywords:
Children, divorce, divorce experience, perceptions, voice of the child
Introduction

In recent years society has gradually begun to listen to the voices of children in the divorce process (Van Nijnatten & Jongen, 2011). However, despite national and international legislation advocating the involvement of children in matters pertaining to them (Department of Social Development, 2005; Van Nijnatten & Jongen, 2011), researchers generally agree that parental divorce remains a context in which children are for the most part, silenced (Hogan & O’Reilly, 2007; Maes, De Mol & Buysse, 2011; Marquardt, 2005). There is limited research on the impact of being silenced. Researchers have come to acknowledge the benefits of child mediated reports of their own parental divorce experiences (Hogan, Halpenny & Greene (2003), which has resulted in a growing body of research focussed on the child’s experiences of parental divorce (Butler, Scanlan, Robinson, Douglas, & Murch, 2002; Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001; Hogan et al., 2003; Smith & Gallop, 2001; Wade & Smart, 2002). Researchers hoping to understand the impact of parental divorce are likely to gain valuable insights from tapping into the child’s own perspective (Portes, Lehman & Brown, 1999). While parents can be interviewed regarding their children’s experiences, the impact of developmental level on how experiences are interpreted, means that children are likely to make more reliable witnesses to their own experiences. Hogan and O’Reilly (2007) advocate for children to be included in social research that pertains to their lives. The premise of this article is based on the understanding that children’s perceptions of parental divorce have been found to inform the way they react and adjust after the divorce event (Bojuwoye & Akpan, 2009). Children’s own perceptions are considered valuable particularly when the effects of parental divorce on children is the focus of the research (Portes, Lehman & Brown, 1999). Jeynes (2006) advocates interviewing children and gaining their perspectives on parental divorce when possible.

Some children see divorce as a personal tragedy while others see it as an escape from parental stress and conflict (Wade & Travis, 1993). Benedek and Brown (1995) found that children commonly experience fear, sadness, anger, guilt, loneliness, rejection, regression, academic problems, physical conditions, as well as sleeping and eating problems in response to parental divorce. Children report a sense of helplessness due to the lack of control and limited input they have regarding divorce related decisions (Biank & Ford Sori, 2002).

Maes et al. (2011) conducted a focus group study with a sample of 22 (12 male and 10 female) Belgium children between the ages of 11 and 14 years, with the aim of exploring children’s narratives of parental divorce. Children in their study expressed the need to construct meaning around their parents’ divorce decision. In addition, they considered it important that their feelings were considered in the divorce process. Children express a need for an explanation for the divorce, and a wish to be considered in post-divorce living arrangements. Research on the divorce transition experiences of 107 children from New Zealand, between the ages of 7 and 18 years, revealed that children wished to be heard during the divorce process and did not want to be forced into post-divorce arrangements where they were uncomfortable (Smith & Gallop, 2001; Smith, Taylor, & Tapp, 2003). The most significant theme emerging from this research was the importance of keeping children informed, respecting their views, listening to them, and considering them in decision-making. Appropriate involvement in divorce related decisions that affected them facilitated the positive adjustment of children. Furthermore, the researchers urged practitioners working with children to allow their voices to be heard (Smith & Gallop, 2001; Smith, et al., 2003).
Children’s perceptions of parental divorce

Research has highlighted children’s need to construct meaning and to develop a coherent story about their parents’ divorce (Dowling & Gorell-Barnes, 1999; Maes et al., 2011). Hogan et al. (2003) found that children were sophisticated in their ability to conceptualise parental divorce. Research findings suggest that the child’s perception of divorce varies and is often unique to the individual child, while some children see divorce as a significant loss, others perceive it as an escape from stress and conflict (Wade & Travis, 1993). With the aim of attending to the child’s perspective of parental divorce, Dowling and Gorell-Barnes (1999) interviewed children and their parents. Children described parental divorce in both positive and negative terms, on the one hand the dissipation of conflict created a sense of relief, and on the other hand there was a sense of significant loss, particularly with regard to their non-custodial parent. Benedek and Brown (1995) found that children commonly experience fear, sadness, anger, guilt, loneliness, rejection, regression, academic problems, physical conditions, as well as sleeping and eating problems in response to parental divorce. Children perceive divorce as a domain in which they have no influence or control, because most divorce-related decisions are made without any consultation with the children affected (Biank & Ford Sori, 2002).

In their interviews with 238 children of divorce from England, Dunn, Davies, O’Connor and Sturgess (2001) found that parents’ failure to explain divorce related decisions to children often resulted in confusion. Children often experience confusion regarding the divorce of their parents, and younger children tend to ascribe blame to themselves (Neugebauer, 1989). The majority of children in Neugebauer’s, (1989) study were not forewarned prior to their parents’ separation, and were not provided with an explanation for the divorce. Maes et al. (2011) explored the parental divorce narratives of 22 Belgian children finding that children wished to be considered in post-divorce living arrangements. Participants in their study expressed for some form of explanation, and for the acknowledgement of their feelings in the divorce process. Similarly, in their interviews with children from New Zealand, Smith et al (2003) found that children wished to be heard and considered when it came to post-divorce living arrangements.

Children are not primarily concerned about what divorce is and how it impacts on the well-being of their parents as much as they are concerned about how divorce related decisions will impact on them. Children tend to focus on their own safety and security, and the extent to which their parents will still be able to meet their needs (Biank & Ford Sori, 2002; Bojuwoye & Akpan, 2009). This is particularly true for younger children who are less concerned with what the term divorce means, and more concerned with what divorce means for them personally (Biank & Ford Sori, 2002). A major concern for most children is the impact of the divorce on their contact with a non-custodial parent (Butler, et al., 2000; Hogan et al., 2003).

Smart’s (2006) study on British children of divorce noted that children are not necessarily distressed by divorce as much as they are distressed by the way in which their parents go about divorcing.

Parental divorce has received limited research focus in South Africa and Africa, partly due to the misguided notion that divorce is less prevalent in developing countries (Maudeni, 2002). Maudeni (2000; 2002) considered the divorce perceptions of mothers and children from Botswana, and found that many children did not feel that they had received adequate information about the divorce of their parents. Bojuwoye and Akpan (2009) reported on the parental divorce experiences of ten South African children between the ages of 13 and 15 years, and found that age and gender had a notable influence on the way children perceived divorce. Findings revealed a gender difference in divorce perceptions with boys tending to be more dissatisfied with the loss of a non-residential father. Age was influential in determining the extent to which children were able to recall and
understand the divorce, with younger children being notably less able to recall the divorce process of their parents. Roux (2007) interviewed 41 South African children from divorced families, and similar to international research found that children needed to develop a personal understanding of their parents’ divorce and needed the opportunity to have their opinions regarding the divorce process acknowledged.

Methodology

This article aims to highlight and honour the voice of the child in parental divorce particularly with regard to the way in which young children conceptualise parental divorce. It draws on the findings of a larger study in which the parental divorce narratives of 9 to 10 year old children were explored using a narrative framework. Narrative Inquiry allowed for the in-depth exploration of children’s experiences and the co-construction of meaning around the notion of parental divorce (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Kramp, 2004). The narrative paradigm is a respectful, non-judgemental approach that positions people as experts with regard to their own lives (Morgan, 2000). This approach holds that reality can never be objectively known and thus experiences are subjectively interpreted (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Polkinghorne (1988) suggests that the difference between the narrative paradigm and modernist research paradigms is that modern paradigms seek to find a universal truth while the narrative paradigm tries to find connections between events. Narrative research is based on the premise that stories are one of, if not the only means, by which human experience is accounted for (Clandinin, 2007). Narrative inquiry is concerned with the experiences of people as conveyed by the stories they tell. The starting point of a narrative inquiry is experience. The lived experiences of people are connected to theory that informs methodology as well as the experiences that prompted the inquiry (Clandinin, 2007). Clandinin (2007) aptly describes narrative inquiry: “In essence, narrative inquiry involves the reconstruction of a person’s experience in relationship both to the other and to a social milieu” (p. 5). A key aspect of narrative inquiry is that of storytelling, it is through the process of storytelling that experiences are given meaning (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Five children (two boys and three girls) were interviewed using an unstructured interviewing technique. The length and content of interviews were participant led. All children in a designated primary school between the ages of 9 and 10 years and whose parents had been divorced for more than 6 months were eligible for participation. Written informed consent was sought from both parents and assent was sought from the child participants prior to commencement and throughout the duration of the study. The current research was conducted in accordance with: the ethical guidelines for psychologists as prescribed by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA, 2008); the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013); the Belmont Report (1979); and the Batho Pele principles (South Africa, 1997). The Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013) outlines ethical principles for conducting medical research with human participants. It centres on the premise that individuals should be respected and should have the right to self-determination and the right to make informed decisions with regard to their participation in research. The participants should be considered more important than the research and research ethics should be upheld above the law. In cases where participants are minors, the declaration states that consent can be given on their behalf, but that wherever possible consent should be sought from the minor participants as well (World Medical Association, 2013). Informed consent is elaborated on later in this section. The Belmont Report (1979) which describes ethical principles for the protection of human subjects in research is built on three main principles namely, respect, beneficence, and justice. The Batho
Pele,(people first) principles are eight principles set out by the South African government in the quest for acceptable service levels (South Africa, 1997). These principles include, quality service standards, equal access, courtesy, the provision of information, openness and transparency, value for money and the remedying of failures or mistakes (South Africa, 1997). Permission to conduct the research was obtained in compliance with the code of ethics for research of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University from the university’s Faculty Health Sciences’ Post Graduate Studies Committee and the Research Ethics Committee – Human. Since narrative inquiry does not call for representative samples (Langdridge & Hagger-Johnson, 2009), five participants were considered sufficient with regards to providing a thick description of their parental divorce experiences. Participants were drawn from a primary school where one of the researchers was employed as a counselling psychologist. They were interviewed individually, at their school, in a private and safe space, and were given the opportunity to select their own pseudonym.

A single open-ended question was used to initiate the interview:

“I would like to hear about what it was like for you when your parents got divorced. You can tell your story in any way you feel comfortable. You can draw, write or paint. You can use playdough, toys or the sandtray or you can just use your voice. Perhaps you can begin by telling me a bit about before the divorce”

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview data was thematically analysed in order to extract themes both within and across interviews. With the goal of honouring the voice of the child, the narrative analysis was data driven and as far as possible themes and subthemes were named by the actual words of participants. The demographics of the sample appear below.
Table 1. The demographics of the sample appear

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant name (pseudonym)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age at time of interview</th>
<th>Time passed since parental divorce</th>
<th>Primary Residence</th>
<th>Marital status of mother</th>
<th>Marital status of father</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10 years 1 month</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Living with a partner</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10 years 0 month</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Share</td>
<td>Living with a partner</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10 years 0 month</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9 years 1 month</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Living with a partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9 years 10 month</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Living with a partner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“What's a Divorcement?”

The current article describes one of seven themes from a larger study. The narrative analysis process considered themes within and across interviews. This particular theme emerged strongly within the interview of Participant 2, who began the interview with the following statement:

Participant 2: Mmmmm, well it was very puzzling because I didn’t know what was going on, I didn’t know what divorcement is. So I was just like, what’s going on? What’s a divorcement? What’s a divorce? What’s a divorce? Over and over and over again.

Participant 2’s opening response illustrates a key theme for him that also emerged as a theme amongst the other participants in this study. Participants 4 and 5 expressed a similar kind of wondering.

Participant 5: Me and my brother never knew what was happening ‘cause we were all young.

Research findings suggest that children tend to experience confusion regarding parental divorce (Dunn et al., 2001; Neugebauer, 1989) In a research review of parental divorce literature Kelly (2003) found that the majority of children received little notice and little explanation. This may explain some of the confusion expressed by the participants in the current study. In a review of studies on parental divorce Birnbaum and Saini (2013) found that the majority of children were surprised by news of their parents’ decision to divorce. Participant 4 made a statement that suggested that she had some insight into this notion and that perhaps a failure to fully understand divorce as a young child is better than understanding it at a later age.
Participant 4: Because it’s better when you small because you can hardly understand anything, and now when you big you can understand everything.

From the perspective of a child the notion of a divorce did indeed seem rather puzzling, particularly with regards to some of the language and terminology that is commonly used.

“I didn’t understand that word.”

Similar to Participant 2 and the interviewer who puzzled over the idea of a divorcement, the interviewer with Participants 4 and 5 also wondered what was happening. This reminded the researchers that children’s conceptualisations of this very adult process can differ vastly from their adult counterparts. Participant 4 provided striking insight into a child’s interpretation of divorce related concepts as she explained her understanding, and simultaneous misunderstanding, of her parents’ conversation about custody.

Researcher: What do you understand now that you didn’t understand then?
Participant 4: Um I can’t remember much actually, like my dad (long pause) was talking about something about (pause) custody. And I didn’t understand that word ever when I was small, so now I understand it...

Researcher: What is custody for you?
Participant 4: Jail.
Researcher: Ok.
Participant 4: It’s like jail.
Researcher: And who will go to jail?
Participant 4: Well my dad and my mother were fighting so my dad just said, ‘must we go to custody?’ My mom and my dad went to therapy but that wasn’t helping at all so my dad just said ‘ok we must have a divorce now, this isn’t working.’ So.. That’s when it ended.

Researcher: So did you think your parents were going to go to jail for getting divorced?
Participant 4: Yes.
Researcher: Sjoe, did you ever tell anyone you thought that?
Participant 4: No, it’s quite embarrassing. Similarly Participant 5 and Participant 2 conveyed their understanding of an affair.

Participant 5: My dad had an affair and that’s how they got divorced.
Researcher: What’s an affair?
Participant 5: (laughs) It’s when my dad goes with another girl.

Participant 2: ...So my mom was dating someone else so I know that’s evil and it’s against God’s law. So my mom was dating someone else when she was married...

Participant 2: Yes, although she was like tck and forth, because we were moving all the stuff from my old house to his house, her boyfriend’s house. Most of the stuff that is.

Kot and Shoemaker (1999) highlighted the value of considering children’s own perceptions since children’s experiences may differ to what their parents perceive based on their developmental level. In the case of Participant 4 it was not likely that her parents were aware of her perception that they were going to jail. Both Participants 4 and 5 were very young when their parents were divorced.

Hetherington (1989) found that younger children are less able to make realistic assessments of their parents’ reasons for divorcing.
Biank and Ford Sori (2002) point out that younger children fail to comprehend the meaning of the term divorce. Based on focus group interviews with children between the ages of 11 and 14 years from Belgium, Maes et al. (2011) suggest that children are able to think about and make sense of the divorce process. However, children hold less power in the parent-child relationship, as a result children have less resources and rely on their parents to some degree to create meaning (Maes et al., 2011). Bojuwoye and Akpan (2009) found that the way in which children perceive divorce informs their reaction to the divorce event. It therefore appears essential that the parental divorce perceptions of children are explored and clarified by the adults in their lives. The section to follow explores some of the metaphors that were used by the participants in order to describe parental divorce.

“Divorce is a horrid black cloud.”

The identification of metaphors proved to be a powerful means of tapping into the participant’s experiences and perceptions of divorce. Metaphors constitute part of individuals’ daily thought processes and can be used as broad concepts that allow the possibility for a better understanding of what is being conveyed (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphors can be used to create understanding of experiences, provide varying perspectives and facilitate new or different interpretations of the world (Burns, 2001; Ortony, 1998).

The researchers’ primary aim of attending to the voice of the child was facilitated by the participants’ use of metaphors, which not only provided a thicker description of divorce, but also presented us with alternative ways of understanding what these children had experienced. Participant 2, whose language was particularly characterised by his use of metaphors described divorce as a horrid black cloud and dark shadow.

Research agrees with Participant 2’s perception and has shown that most children experience difficulty navigating the uncharted territory of parental divorce (Butler et al., 2002). In the extract below we see Participant 2’s ability to extend this metaphor as he uses it to illustrate the difference he experienced between life before and life after the divorce of his parents.

Participant 2: Yes and there was more happiness, it’s like there’s a dark shadow clouding me. I dunno why.

Researcher: Divorce is like a dark shadow?

Participant 2: Yes, it follows everyone in the family around. Except for my dad, he did change a lot.

As seen in the above extract Participant 2 was also able to convey his perception that his father had a different experience of the divorce. The dark shadow or black cloud metaphor provided a means by which Participant 2 could explain his experience of divorce in a way that the researchers could, never fully, but perhaps better understand. As researchers aiming to honour the voice of the child in parental divorce we experienced moments of inadequacy for example one of the researchers’ own parents were never divorced.

The use of metaphors like these challenged our perceived inadequacy by giving us glimpses into the participants’ worlds of experience, which provided us with alternative ways of knowing about divorce. While we could not know what it is like to experience the divorce of one’s parents we could certainly relate to Participant 2’s dark shadow that followed him around, and his horrid black cloud full of sadness as we too had experienced our own dark shadows and black clouds in other distressing interpersonal experiences.
Benedek and Brown (1995) noted that amongst others, sadness was a common emotion experienced by children of divorce. Biank and Ford Sori (2002) found that the children in their study reported a sense of helplessness with regard to their parents’ divorce. Participant 2 also used this metaphor to effectively describe his process of accepting or dealing with the divorce of his parents.

Researcher: Um, does that horrid black cloud ever get any better?
Participant 2: Yes it started to clear up about a month ago.
Researcher: It started to clear up.
Participant 2: It’s grey now.
Researcher: What got it to start clearing up?
Participant 2: I don’t know, at Christmas maybe, I got a bit happier then. Well, I know that I started to turn into a blackish-grey when I knew that I had passed into Grade 4. That made me happy. And then in Grade 3. No in Grade 4, kind of Christmas time. Well on Christmas day it started to like really fade. Lots of the blackness went away and since it was my birthday then it turned grey. Pure grey, no like blacky parts and stuff like that.

... Researcher: It sounds like you have a happy life?
Participant 2: I do.
Researcher: You do.
Participant 2: Yes.
Researcher: So divorce is like a dark cloud...
Participant 2: But once you find your way to take care of it, you, you fine.

In addition to the cloud metaphor Participant 2 also made several references to body parts to tell his story of divorce.
Participant 2: Uuum well I can tell you more. Before my divorcement a tiny bit of me, well every time my sadness comes it likes just scooping me. So it’s like it, my finger got cut off mostly.

Participant 2: ...and well, it just feels like some part of me has been ripped off.

... Participant 2: And the divorcement chopped off a arm.
Researcher: Your arm?
Participant 2: Yes my left arm cause um, it didn’t take away my good stuff on my right arm.
Researcher: It left some good stuff behind?
Participant 2: Yes.
Researcher: What good stuff is left?
Participant 2: Um....I dunno, my humour, well sort of my humour, kind of a bit of my happiness and... I dunno... and a teensie bit of my greed.
Researcher: Can the arm grow back?
Participant 2: Yes if um.. if I like did stuff that I like a lot.

Researcher: You’ve put it in a very interesting way. It helps me picture it.

Participant 2: Yes.
Researcher: I’m kind of hearing you say that some of the divorce stuff is fine and easy and on the outside like the clouds or the clothes.

Participant 2: Yes.
Researcher: And there’s some divorce stuff that sits deep in your heart.
Participant 2: Yes. Why don’t we get onto the next question. Question question question?

During this dialogue Participant 2 was attempting to explain that certain aspects of divorce were too deep to discuss. He masterfully presented a metaphor that demonstrated this after which he seemed to confirm this by asking that we get on to the next question when the interviewer continued to make reference to the deep parts.
Earlier in the interview Participant 2 also made reference to the life planet (extract below) to aptly describe this process. The interviewers’ perception of this metaphor was that Participant 2 was not only using it to tell his parental divorce story, but that it also served to caution us not to dig to deep.

Participant 2: Yes so it’s about, there’s a planet called the life planet and its basically all your experiences so the clouds are basically, your basic everyday stuff, now if you go onto the land and water then, then um, then you basically just saying your emotions and stuff. And if you start digging down, then that’s stuff you hide from people. And if you dig too down, that’s something that you don’t actually know.

Researcher: Mmmmm So the clouds and the...
Participant 2: land...
Researcher: ...land, and the water and digging down. Where is divorce in those places?
Participant 2: I don’t know.
Researcher: Or could it be a bit of...
Participant 2: Land, because that’s sharing my emotions.
Researcher: So talking about divorce involves sharing your emotions?
Participant 2: Yes.
Researcher: But not sharing emotions that are too deep down?
Participant 2: Yes.
Researcher: And when I ask you what it’s like to have three parents that’s too deep?
Participant 2: Yes because, it’s pretty emotional.

Participant 2’s life planet and body metaphors, in which he carefully describes and mediates between his inner and outer worlds, seems to resonate with Winnicott’s (2005) statement:

My claim is that if there is a need for this double statement [individuals with an inside and an outside], there is also need for a triple one: the third part of the life of a human being, a part that we cannot ignore, is an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute.

It is an area that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated (p.3).

At times it seemed as if Participant 2 and the interviewer were meeting in this intermediate area. In the above dialogue it seems that Participant 2 is actively engaged in this task of “keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated”. He even appears to express some knowledge of an inner more unconscious part of himself when he states that if you dig too down, that’s something that you don’t actually know.

During my interview with Participant 1 he exhaled deeply. My reflection on his big sigh influenced the development of an interesting metaphor.

Participant 1: (sighs)
Researcher: That was a big sigh?
Participant 1: Mmmm It’s just um from then.
Researcher: From then? It’s the sigh from then?
Participant 1: Ja from then.
Researcher: Tell me about what makes you sigh?
Participant 1: It’s just everything that like went, the dogs, the house, the um marri... uh my mom and my dad, all of that.
Researcher: It’s a big sigh.
Participant 1: Mmmmm.
Researcher: Mmmmm. There was a lot that went.
Participant 1: (nods)
(Pause)
Researcher: (nods) And it’s hard?
Participant 1: Mmmm very hard

Participant 1 also referred to divorce as the big thing and the big divorce. The big sigh metaphor assisted Participant 1 and the researcher to dialogue about his parental divorce story and uncover different layers of experience as seen in the extract below.
Researcher: And the divorce was, wasn’t nice for you, it was a sigh, but it sounds like, like it was the right thing?

Participant 1: Yes. It was a sigh at that moment but then uh, then it actually like it was better afterwards, it felt... I did feel like it was the right thing to do. A good decision.

Researcher: A good decision.

Participant 1: Mmm.

Researcher: In that moment of the sigh, did it feel like a good decision?

Participant 1: Mm um, in that moment, it didn’t feel then, in that moment of the sigh, because like, it’s just a big thing to take in.

Researcher: Yes.

Participant 1: Like you’re having fun the one day and then no more.

Participant 1 enhanced the big sigh metaphor with his words it’s just a big thing to take in. The imagery created by this explanation helped to clarify Participant 1’s experience of parental divorce. For Participant 1 divorce seemed to mean taking in a big thing, it involved more than taking in a breath, it required taking in a big sigh. He also seemed to allude to the sudden change that divorce brought to his life when he suggested that it was like you’re having fun the one day and then no more. Also using a metaphor for divorce, Participant 4 referred often to the idea that divorce was tearing her family apart.

Participant 4: What’s happening? Is my family tearing apart?

... Participant 4: But I still remember I was really sad because my family was tearing apart.

Researcher: That must have been a special time for your mom and dad to have their baby Participant 4?

Participant 4: Yes

Researcher: And then things between them just didn’t...

Participant 4: Yes.

Researcher: Didn’t work.

Participant 5 described divorce as uncomfortable and a lot of our dialogue centred around the comfortable and uncomfortable aspects of divorce, along with her attempts to balance these two dichotomies. Participant 3 made less use of metaphors and imagery but used stories to tell of her experiences. She referred to divorce as not nice and went on to explain why through the use of several stories and examples.

Similarly, to the findings of the current study, Hogan et al. (2003) found that Irish children between the ages of 8 and 17 years were able to describe and conceptualise their parental divorce experiences in a sophisticated manner. Through the use of metaphors and narrative imagery the researchers came to understand divorce as uncomfortable and not nice, as a horrid black cloud, a dark shadow and a big sigh, that has the potential to make you feel like you’ve lost a limb, or that your heart has been torn apart. Perhaps Participant 2 put it quite aptly when he said, divorce is a pain in the butt. Some of the participants also revealed their understanding of divorce as they told of their perceived reasons for their parents’ divorce.

“What’s a divorcement”: The voice of the child in parental divorce
Participant 1: Yes. It was a sigh at that moment but then uh, then it actually like it was better afterwards, it felt... I did feel like it was the right thing to do. A good decision.

Participant 1: Mmm.

Participant 1: Like you’re having fun the one day and then no more.

Participant 4: I thought what’s happening? Is my family tearing apart?

Researcher: That must have been a special time for your mom and dad to have their baby Participant 4?

Participant 4: Yes

Researcher: And then things between them just didn’t...

Participant 4: Yes.

Participant 4: Tore apart.

Participant 4: My heart’s not together yet.

Researcher: It isn’t?

Participant 4: No.

Researcher: Your heart tore apart as well?

Participant 4: It’s quite sad for me.

Participant 4 later conceptualised divorce as heart-breaking when she reflected on her parents’ ongoing dislike for one another.

Researcher: How do you feel about that?

Participant 4: Well it’s really heart-breaking because I mean, my family is not together anymore.

Participant 5 described divorce as uncomfortable and a lot of our dialogue centred around the comfortable and uncomfortable aspects of divorce, along with her attempts to balance these two dichotomies. Participant 3 made less use of metaphors and imagery but used stories to tell of her experiences. She referred to divorce as not nice and went on to explain why through the use of several stories and examples.

Similarly, to the findings of the current study, Hogan et al. (2003) found that Irish children between the ages of 8 and 17 years were able to describe and conceptualise their parental divorce experiences in a sophisticated manner. Through the use of metaphors and narrative imagery the researchers came to understand divorce as uncomfortable and not nice, as a horrid black cloud, a dark shadow and a big sigh, that has the potential to make you feel like you’ve lost a limb, or that your heart has been torn apart. Perhaps Participant 2 put it quite aptly when he said, divorce is a pain in the butt. Some of the participants also revealed their understanding of divorce as they told of their perceived reasons for their parents’ divorce.

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“I was wondering why did they get divorced?”

The participants included in their stories some of their perceptions regarding what caused their parents’ divorce. This was interesting to the interviewer because care was taken not to address any direct questions to them in this regard. In their research on 11 to 14-year-old children from Belgium, Maes et al. (2011) found that children spoke in significant detail about their ideas as to the reason for their parents’ divorce. Children in their study placed emphasis on their need for a coherent story as well as an understanding of what had led to the divorce. The importance of a coherent story was also highlighted by Dowling and Gorell-Barnes (1999) who found that children needed help in finding an explanation for the divorce of their parents. Stories of why helped to create more in-depth descriptions of parental divorce as experienced by the children in this study. Participant 1 explained that things weren’t working out after which he elaborated.

“Participant 1: Um, I haven’t heard the whole story about their divorce but I just heard... uh... my mom said that she didn’t like things that my dad wanted and my dad didn’t like things that she wanted.”

Participants 3 and 4 shared stories that involved a sense that their parents may have been disagreeing over taking care of their children.

“Participant 3: Um just um that every time when I was small and then my father my father used to go out, because they were still young when they had a baby...

Researcher: Ok.
Participant 3: And, then when my father was going out to get something and my mother had to go to night school and there was no one to look after us. And my mother’s mother was very sickly so then my mother had to go let her aunty look after us

Butler et al. (2002) interviewed 104 children between the ages of 7 and 15 years from South Wales and West England in order to explore their experiences of parental divorce. Children in that sample reported an increased capacity to establish equilibrium if they were given explanations for their parents’ divorce.
Implications for Practice

This article aimed to highlight the voice of the child in parental divorce placing particular emphasis on the way in which children conceptualised the notion of divorce. Attending to the voice of the child on parental divorce may inform practice and policy. Parental divorce remains a relatively unexplored area, with only limited research on the manner in which children experience the divorce process (Maes et al., 2011). The discourse of parental divorce has been dominated by the adult perspective and there is a lack of research that considers the perspectives of children themselves (Marquardt, 2005).

Marquardt (2005, p.4) states the following:

Children are voiceless: they don’t write books, they don’t vote, they don’t usually get interviewed on television. We learn about their experiences by sensitively observing their lives and later, when they are grown up, asking them what it was like.

Along with this study, research has found that the way in which children experience the divorce of their parents is likely to influence their adjustment (Maes et al., 2011). These findings highlight the need for ongoing dialogue with children regarding the challenges that affect their lives.

This study highlighted the importance of clarifying children’s perceptions and misconceptions regarding parental divorce. Parents can assist children in this area by providing them with clear, age-appropriate information regarding the divorce. Professionals can guide parents in this regard, while also assisting children with their understanding. The findings of this study suggest that those working with children of divorce could make use of the metaphors that children provide as a significant towards generating an appropriate explanation of divorce.

It would also be important for professionals to assess and clarify children’s misconceptions, as children may not verbalise a misconception, or even be aware that they have misunderstood something. Children could also benefit from the opportunity to ask questions of the significant adults in their lives. Related to the conceptualisation of divorce, children also expressed a need for an explanation of the divorce, and a need to draw their own conclusions when they are not given one. Parents and professionals can assist children by providing them with an age-appropriate explanation.

Professionals can provide assistance with this if needed. Professionals can assist parents and children in developing a clear conceptualisation of, and explanation for, the divorce of their parents. The voices of children need to be heard and understood in order to facilitate coping with parental divorce. As Winnicott (1984, p.20) aptly states: “The greatest reassurance we can give to children is the feeling that they are understood and accepted right down to the painful sad bit in the middle. If we do not deny this painful bit of themselves, they need not do so, and their natural resilience can then take them on into life again.”
References


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