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The experience of family structure and family change on emerging adults: A focus on single parent households.

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Declaration

I declare that this dissertation, 'The experiences of family structure and family change on emerging adults: A focus on single-parent households,' is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the purpose of the degree of Master of Arts in Community-based Counselling Psychology, at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.

Signed on the 08 day of August 2023



Noelle Naidoo

Abstract

This qualitative research study explores the complex dynamics between family structure, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and their impact on emerging adults in South Africa. Through semi-structured interviews, the study investigated the experiences and perspectives of eight emerging adults aged 18-25 as they retrospectively journeyed through changes within their family structure and the adverse childhood experiences encountered along the way. The study is grounded within the theoretical framework of the family stress model (FSM); however, Arnett's (2000) theory of emerging adulthood is also significant to the study's conceptualisation. The study's findings highlighted several themes, namely, 1) the initial family structure and ACEs experienced; 2) the journey through family structure change; 3) the immediate impact following a change in family structure; and 4) the long-term impact following a change in family structure. The study draws attention to the nuances and complexities of nuclear, single-mother, cohabiting, extended, and stepfamilies while challenging the notion of "normal" and traditional nuclear families. Additionally, the study reveals the significance of changes in family structure and dynamics, such as divorce, separation, and emergence of new partners and stepfamilies, in influencing psychological, relational, educational, emotional, and behavioural outcomes in emerging adults. These outcomes ranged from immediate to long-term impacts, embracing adversities such as child abuse and neglect, witnessing intimate partner violence, financial difficulties, premature maturation, and trust issues. However, the study also revealed positive immediate and long-term effects highlighted throughout the findings, such as improved relationships, stability and security, empowerment, self-development, and optimistic self-reflections. The research study provides deeper insights into family structure changes and their consequences for emerging adults in South Africa while laying the foundation for future research.

Keywords: *adverse childhood experiences, emerging adulthood, family stress model, family structure change, immediate impact, long-term impact, positive outcomes, South Africa, thematic analysis*.

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List of Abbreviations

ACE – Adverse Childhood Experience

Covid-19 – Coronavirus Disease 2019

FSM – Family Stress Model

IPV – Intimate Partner Violence

SA – South Africa

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Introduction

Does a change in family structure encourage adverse childhood experiences? The interest in family structure and its influence on children has grown significantly, especially as divorce rates and the occurrence of single-parent households have increased. Various studies have explored changes in family structure, mainly around separation and divorce, and how these influence the well-being of children and adolescents in the short- and long-term (Amoateng & Richter, 2007). While divorce rates are still low compared to Western countries, divorce and separation rates have increased in Sub-Saharan African countries (Clark & Brauner-Otto, 2015). According to their study, this may be attributed to various reasons, such as women's education and economic independence and the changing social landscape. Changes in family structure are frequently followed by other changes in the family, whether it is due to separation, divorce, or loss of a parental figure. It is essential to explore children's experiences of these changes, as it has been shown that specific family structures may place children at greater risk for experiencing adversity than other family structures (Berger, 2004; Hetherington, 2005; Lucas et al., 2013). These changes may, for instance, result in a lack of additional family support, financial disadvantage, changes in living circumstances, parental stress, and the risk of abuse and neglect. However, it is essential to note that not all changes in family structure result in adverse childhood experiences, as many accounts report positive outcomes. In some instances, changes in family structure may benefit children and families, as they can also create more optimal and stable living environments (Cartwright, 2006; Mohi, 2014). Recognising this complexity, the current study explores this area of research further.

This introduction chapter discusses the focus of the study and clarifies the definitions of key concepts used in the study. Firstly, the chapter briefly introduces the concept of adverse childhood experiences. This is followed by an explanation of family and family structure, which includes what family means, the different family cycles, different family structures, and how the structures of families have changed over time. Hence, the chapter explores the impact and consequences of changes in family structure, where the critical concept of adverse childhood experiences plays a role. The population of focus for the study is emerging adults, and this chapter discusses what emerging adults are, how they are distinguished from young adults, and why this population was chosen for the study. The chapter then outlines the study's main aims and objectives before presenting the rationale for the research. This section of the chapter provides an in-depth exploration of why this topic was chosen and the importance of the study, especially within a South African context. Lastly, the chapter concludes with a section discussing the report's structure.

Focus of the Study

The experiences of children in early life contribute significantly to their development. Children are greatly influenced by the people, experiences, and events surrounding them (Coley et al., 2015). These also contribute to their identity and personality development (Bonner et al., 2020). This explains why many scholars are interested in the globally distributed concern of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which are harmful experiences that affect children directly or indirectly as they develop (Hughes et al., 2017). Ten ACEs are commonly recognised within the existing literature

base, namely child neglect (physical or emotional), child abuse (physical, emotional, or sexual), witnessing intimate partner violence, living with a relative with a mental illness, has been incarcerated, or abuses harmful substances, and parents not being present (Dong et al., 2004; Dube et al., 2003; Petruccelli et al., 2019). This study focuses on four adverse childhood experiences: child neglect, child abuse, witnessing intimate partner violence, and the absence of parental figures, as these were the shared prominent adversities. Exposure to these experiences early on in life may harm children's cognitive, emotional, physical, and social development in the short and long term (Hughes et al., 2017). Therefore, it is essential to investigate these ACEs and their consequences. However, unlike in many other studies, it is also necessary to assess the causes of these adversities, and the source is often located in children's immediate family environments (Berger, 2004; Hill et al., 2001; Manning & Lamb, 2003). Therefore, the study explores emerging adults' experiences and understanding of family structure, the experiences they had of family structure change during childhood, and the impact these had on their lives. The study explores the positive and negative experiences of family structure change among emerging adults; however, the focus is on how family structure and family change are related to adverse outcomes.

Background to the Study

The attention of researchers has been drawn to the concept of family as an integrated and functional unit of society for a significant period. The research has focused on the unit and its influential role in individuals' behaviour, development, and well-being (Berger, 2004). The term 'household' has also been introduced as a replacement for

family; however, these may exclude family members who do not live in the same home or include individuals who may not necessarily be a part of the family (Sharma, 2013). It is essential to define what family is and how families are interpreted, especially for research exploring the influential basis of these structures. Families generally go through various stages, such as families without children, families with children, families with emerging adults, middle-aged parents and children who can now move out of the home, and parents' retirement (Amoateng et al., 2004). Each stage has different needs, and various opportunities and burdens may arise. The family is essentially a multidimensional system that is influenced by and influences many distinct factors. It is important to note that this also applies to the behaviours of each family member affecting other family members. The family context could impact individuals' health, including influences from within the home, the neighbourhood, society, community, and culture (Sharma, 2013). Due to these external influences, the family members will share the risks and protective factors that impact their health (Neppl et al., 2016). Families adapt to these economic, social, political, and material changes in the external environment, which often depends on social, religious, and cultural values (Amoateng et al., 2004). Family structures may also change through the family life cycle process, affecting children through these processes. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that different family structures might encourage or exacerbate certain behaviours from either parents, relatives or children that could give rise to different adverse childhood experiences (Amoateng et al., 2004). Due to the history of South Africa, in terms of labour migration, colonisation, urbanisation, and poverty, these challenges allowed for the evolution of many different family structures, pre- and post-apartheid (Ramotuana & Amone-P'Olak, 2020). The prevalence of

adversities, such as neglect, abuse, witnessing intimate partner violence, and absentee parents, will depend on these different family structures, namely nuclear, single parent, separated/divorced, and extended family structures, as each type has its characteristics that could determine the experiences children have.

As mentioned, family involves both positive and negative factors that influence development. For example, the financial resources are often shared among all the family members in the unit, which may be harmful, as there is the burden of health care costs, or positive, as families are often protected by the availability of money and access to healthcare (Sharma, 2013). This is also linked to family structure, explored further in the study to understand the challenges different family structures face. Often, changes in family structure can lead to changes in family dynamics, which can encourage adverse childhood experiences. In some cases, these changes could benefit children or the family dynamic. Family structures are constantly changing, and that fluctuation, found in most cases, disrupts the lives of the children involved through developmental and health limitations because they are at a vulnerable stage in their growth process (Coley et al., 2015). These changes in family structure could potentially lead to experiences of neglect and abuse, and various studies explore how this impacts children developmentally. For example, Bonner et al. (2020) investigated the experiences of children from violent, chaotic, and neglectful homes and found that they could potentially experience poor academic development, psychological and emotional limitations, delinquent behaviour, and attentional issues. Another example is a study conducted by Coley et al. (2015), which found that children from low-income families, who often live in poorer communities that expose them to financial constraints, violence and crime, also experience adverse

developments (Coley et al., 2015). These adversities that children experience can have short- and long-term consequences that could potentially impact their quality of life, so it is crucial to study these experiences. Linking this back to family structure, one can relate this to single-parent family structures. Single-parent family structures in South Africa primarily comprise single-mother families, as many children are raised exclusively by their mothers (Koketso et al., 2019; Raniga et al., 2019). Research on single-mother family structures, in particular, is linked to financial constraints or neglectful behaviour and speaks about the negative developmental consequences, which are discussed extensively in the literature review.

Before defining the study's aims, it is crucial to describe what the term ‘emerging adults’ means and how it is distinguished from ‘young adults’. The definition of a young adult has been extensively written about and contested for the longest time (Erikson, 1968; Higley, 2019). For example, Erik Erikson described young adulthood as the stage after adolescence (between the ages of 18 and 40 years old) that involves the individual starting to develop relationships and maintaining a balance between intimacy and independence (Erikson, 1968). Erikson explains that this stage involves the interplay between the individual and their social environment, navigating the complexities of sustaining a sense of identity and independence while forming intimate and meaningful relationships. Another theorist, Jeffery Arnett, describes the term ‘emerging adulthood’, which is between the ages of 18 to 25, the stage between adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2000; 2007; 2014). This stage involves semi-autonomy, changing worldviews, identity exploration, and individual variability (Higley, 2019). Emerging adulthood is the developmental period from 18 to 25 years old, which is the transition from adolescence

to adulthood (Arnett, 2000). This developmental stage is described as a period where emerging adults develop their personalities and belief systems while trying to attain autonomy and independence (Higley, 2019; Maree & Twigge, 2016). Meaning-making is an important process in this stage and involves individuals being able to reflect on the bigger implications of certain events in their lives and apply what they learn to their current decisions and behaviours (Arnett, 2014). This study focuses on Arnett's stage of 'emerging adulthood'. Meaning-making forms an integral part of this research, as the study explores emerging adults' experiences of family changes and how they make sense of their impact on their lives. This is an essential emphasis for this stage of development, as young people in this stage can provide insight into and make meaning of their experiences of family change.

Aims and Objectives

This study aims to explore and understand how emerging adults experience and understand family structure and family change, with a detailed focus on the impact of adverse childhood experiences on emerging adults in South Africa. Specifically, the study aims to explore emerging adults' experiences of ACEs, such as neglect, abuse, witnessing intimate partner violence, and absentee parents in single-parent families who have experienced a change in family structure, which could include divorced family structures. The study aims to explore how emerging adults understand being in these types of families and their experiences of ACEs. It further seeks to explore their accounts of the impact of ACEs on their lives as emerging adults. Specifically, the objectives of the study are to:

(1) Explore emerging adults' understandings of the change in their family structures;

(2) Explore emerging adults' understandings of the ACEs they experienced following a change in these family structures; and

(3) Explore the emerging adults' accounts of how family changes and the associated ACEs have impacted their lives.

Rationale

ACEs may result in a wide range of negative developmental outcomes in children and emerging adults. While it is essential to understand these outcomes, it is also important to investigate the factors that may contribute to ACEs and the subsequent consequences. Risky sexual behaviour, substance abuse, negative mental health issues, intimate partner violence, and chronic illnesses are all negative outcomes which could be explained if these adversities are investigated widely (Bonner et al., 2020). For the focus of this research, it is crucial to investigate these adversities, specifically within the household and its family structure, which is the most influential setting throughout a child's development. However, with the wide range of studies on ACEs, few studies have investigated the prevalence and consequences of ACEs in different family structures (single mothers and divorced/separated families). This creates a massive gap in the literature, especially in African countries. In South Africa, apartheid, labour migration, urbanisation, and poverty have significantly influenced the changing family structures (Amoateng et al., 2004; Amoateng & Richter, 2007). Consequently, these changes result in many adverse childhood experiences, which need attention. Single-mother family

structures are focused on throughout the study, as previous studies have shown how children from these families experience many negative consequences. Therefore, it is important to investigate why this is occurring in these family structures. The study will focus on accounts from emerging adults in South Africa, which is quite helpful as South Africa has limited research on the impact of ACEs on emerging adults and a large emerging adult population. Emerging adults are well-positioned to provide in-depth retrospective accounts of their experiences of family change in childhood. This stage centres on psychological, emotional, physical, and cognitive growth, contributing to identity development and meaning-making (Arnett, 2014). This is important as individuals can make meaning of their childhood experiences. It is crucial to understand emerging adult experiences because this can significantly influence their development throughout their lives concerning their health, academic progress and social relationships, and a greater understanding of these areas can inform intervention strategies (Cartwright, 2006; Ramotuana & Amone-P'Olak, 2020). Exploring the presence of ACEs in the home within different family types could inform research studies and interventions in the future to explain how sensitive and supportive policies, programmes and caregiving practices can safeguard children from inevitable adversities that could negatively impact them later (Berger, 2004; Bonner et al., 2020). Future interventions may use this to work from the initial onset of the adversities rather than focusing on the later consequences, such as substance abuse and risky sexual behaviour that can occur in emerging adulthood. This will also bring in positive accounts of changes in family structure, which may also be helpful for future research and interventions. It is essential to be aware that positive experiences also exist in these cases, which the study also explores.

Structure of the Report

The report's first chapter is the introduction, which briefly introduces the topic, explains the study's fundamental concepts, outlines the study's main aims and objectives, and provides an in-depth discussion of the rationale. The chapter following the introduction is the literature review. In the literature review, the report will provide an extensive review of the existing literature around the current study. The literature review will discuss the papers, research, and studies already conducted while attempting to address the gaps within the existing literature. Before moving on to chapter three, the report will discuss the study's theoretical framework. Chapter three is the methods section of the report. The methods chapter discusses different areas of the research process, such as the key research questions of the study, the research design, the participants and sampling strategy, the data collection process, the process of analysis, and the ethical considerations of the study. This chapter also includes a section on reflexivity, which shows the researcher's understanding of their influences on the research process and results. The following chapter is the findings of the study and the discussion. This chapter will outline the research results and provide an in-depth discussion of the findings while attempting to answer the study's research questions. The last chapter is the conclusion, which will summarise the topic and results of the study. This is a valuable overview of the research report outlining the main chapters to be expected and what is included in these chapters.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the topic was briefly introduced to better understand what the study is about. The key concepts and ideas were defined concerning the current study to provide theoretical consistency and validity throughout the report. This helps avoid confusion and misunderstanding of the research questions, literature, or findings. This chapter also outlines the main aims and objectives of the current study, followed by a discussion of why this is an important area for research. This chapter concludes by outlining what the structure of the research report looks like. The following chapter is the literature review, an extensive review of the existing literature around the current study.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

The following chapter discusses the existing literature on the research topic. The literature focuses on different areas of importance for the current study and the relevant studies conducted to support the critical arguments presented. There are a few essential themes worthy of discussion for the study, such as the definition of emerging adults and emerging adulthood, the definition of family and discussion of family systems and transitions, the discussion of different family structures and how these changes occur, and the relationship between changes in family structure and adverse childhood experiences. The literature review starts by discussing the literature on emerging adulthood. This is an important concept to define for the paper because it is the population focus of the study, mainly due to the multiple definitions and understandings of young adults, adolescence, and emerging adults. The chapter then moves on to a discussion of family, family systems, and family structures. This is significantly relevant to the study, especially within the South African context, and it is important to have a well-rounded understanding of how family transitions take place and the different family structures that result. Following, and what makes up most of the chapter is literature and studies that highlight the relationship between changes in family structure and adverse childhood experiences, whether positive or negative. Although there is limited research on direct causality of this relationship, which is what the current study aims to achieve, many studies show how the different family structures encourage various adversities for children and how this impacts them in adulthood.

The Concept of Emerging Adulthood

Before exploring the literature on family structure and change, the chapter explores the concept of emerging adults. Emerging adulthood is a term originally coined by Jeffrey Arnett to describe the period of life between adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Although there may not be a specific or precise age range for this developmental period, emerging adulthood is generally considered to be within the ages of 18 to 29 years old (Arnett, 2014). After his long-term work and interviews with 18 to 29 year olds, Arnett concluded that these individuals were neither adolescents nor young adults, hence he highlighted the need for a new framework to understand the experiences, challenges, and opportunities faced by the individuals within this developmental period. Arnett (2007) defines adolescence as the period of life that precedes emerging adulthood (approximately 10 to 18 years of age), and young adulthood is defined as the period following emerging adulthood (approximately late twenties and over). In this way, one may gather that emerging adulthood is distinguished from other similar terms, such as adolescence and young adulthood. Apart from age, Arnett (2000) described five distinctive developmental features in his theory of emerging adulthood that set it apart from other stages: the search for identity; developmental instability; the focus on the self; the in-between period; and the focus on possibilities and optimism. Following will be a discussion of each feature and their significance in shaping the experience of emerging adults.

The first feature of emerging adulthood is the *search for one's identity*, which involves self-discovery and exploration in different domains, which may be ideologically, professionally, and relationally, as well as experimenting with different roles and identities (Theron et al., 2021). This developmental period allows individuals to actively discover

different experiences that may help to establish a more stable sense of self, related to education, relationships, values, and careers (Arnett, 2007). For example, individuals may explore different majors, fields of study, or academic interest; they may travel or explore different cultural identities; or they may experiment with different relationship styles, preferences, and values. Exploring emerging adulthood in relation to family structure and change is quite important, as this could either have positive or negative implications for individuals. At this stage, an emerging adult's identity is quite vulnerable and could potentially be influenced by the changes in the family or any experiences within the family setting (Goldberg, 2013). For example, being part of an open and supportive family environment that encourages personal growth may provide a safe space for emerging adults to explore different pieces of their identity and establish a more stable sense of self. Conversely, growing up in an unsupportive family that pressures individuals to conform to specific beliefs or roles may restrict emerging adults' ability to explore and make their own choices. These experiences may inform the roles or identities they decide to adopt, and how they understand their lives and themselves as individuals.

The second feature of emerging adulthood is about the *instability* experienced during this developmental period, which is mainly in relation to fluctuations in interpersonal relationships and one's career path or employment (Theron et al., 2021). According to Arnett (2007), there are many changes that are taking place within this period, such as changes in living arrangements, education and employment, and relationships. For example, emerging adults may move to seek independence from their parents or relocates due to job or educational opportunities; they may switch degree or jobs to explore different career paths; and there is the exiting or entering of friendships

and romantic partners that may also cause relationship instability. Once more, family is quite important here, especially in terms of instability, which can cause significant distress for an individual or benefit their journey somehow (Goldberg, 2013). Positively, family structure and change can create room for growth and adaptability, as seen with experiences of divorce or remarriage exposing emerging adults to diverse family dynamics, which may enhance their ability to navigate transitions in the lives. For example, in some cases, the departure of fathers can be regarded as a positive outcome due to the elimination of potential abusive situations or parental stress experienced by mothers. In other cases, the absence of a father figure can lead to financial hardships, particularly when the father had played a significant role in contributing to the household income. Conversely, family instability or disruptions may hinder emerging adults' sense of stability, which may make it challenging for them to develop a stable foundation in the different areas of their lives. The high degree of instability indicates that there is a continued exploration for social and personal direction and stability; hence, exploration and instability go hand in hand (Arnett, 2014).

Arnett (2014) noted that "There is no time of life that is more self-focused than emerging adulthood." (p. 27). Hence, emerging adulthood's next feature is the *focus on the self*, which involves prioritising one's personal desires and needs, rather than committing to any career or a life partner (Theron et al., 2021). The period of adolescence does involve its own ideas of self-focus, however, there are usually parents and teachers that they still must answer to. In other words, there are household and school standards and rules that they need to follow. By the age of 30, for most people, there are new commitments and obligations that need to be considered. There is often a new household

(that has new rules and standards), a partner (to negotiate and compromise duties and obligations with), possibly a child (who requires time, care, and attention), and a job (that requires commitment and standards of progress), which means that this period also does not allow much room for self-focus (Arnett, 2014). It is mainly during emerging adulthood that there is more room to focus on the self. Emerging adulthood is a developmental period where individuals can pursue personal development and growth, have the autonomy and freedom to prioritise their own values and aspirations, and explore self-discovery and independence (Arnett, 2007). For example, individuals may pursue different hobbies, passions and interests, invest in self-improvement activities, and explore, question, and refine their perspectives on social and cultural values and beliefs. Family structure and dynamics can either play a positive or negative role on self-focus as well. Positively, a supportive and autonomy encouraging family may empower individuals to pursue their own aspirations and needs, which fosters a healthy sense of self-focus. Conversely, intrusive and overly dependent family dynamics may encourage individuals to feel obligated to the needs of the family and this hinders their personal growth, which occurs often in single-parent households. This period is not meant be selfish, rather the goal is to gain a better understanding of who they are, what they want in life, build a foundation for the adult life, and learning to be a self-sufficient individual before committing themselves to areas of work and love (Arnett, 2014).

The fourth feature of emerging adulthood is the focus on the *in-between* period, neither adolescence nor adulthood, where there is some independence, but the family is still an important support structure as well (Theron et al., 2021). This is the period in between the restrictions of adolescence and the responsibilities of adulthood, according

to Arnett (2000). There is a sense of “in-between” because emerging adults believe they have not yet met the criteria required for adulthood: accepting responsibility for themselves; making their own decisions; and being financially independent (Arnett, 2014). This is also quite important, because if an individual does not receive support from their families or is neglected, it could encourage various risky behaviours during this period, especially in relation to experimentation and exploring independence. Again, this could relate to positive or negative outcomes for the individual. For example, coming from a supportive family may encourage emerging adults to take on new challenges and foster making important decisions, whereas family conflict and disruptions may create emotional burdens that may interfere with autonomy and healthy decision making.

Lastly, emerging adulthood is a time of possibility and optimism, and the emerging adults’ expectations of the future are quite positive (Theron et al., 2021). They often have several possible life paths in mind, which allows them to engage in diverse experiences and navigate through the uncertainties and challenges of this period. For example, some emerging adults may engage in volunteer work or take a gap year, they will be open to new career or educational opportunities, and some engage in adventurous or entrepreneurial paths. This is quite significant because big changes that take place or adversities experienced could potentially impact their aspirations and perceived life trajectory, as described by Arnett (2014), all emerging adults take their family influences with them into the future. These experiences could change the way these individuals view their lives and the world around them. For example, with single-parent households that may lack resources and opportunities, the emerging adults may often restrict their sense of possibilities and undermine their belief in their own potential. Therefore, it is important

to explore these emerging adults in relation to their family context to better understand these experiences and impacts.

Family Structures and Transitions

The shift and increased interest in viewing families as dynamic systems instead of static bodies, is a result of the increase and complexity of family structures, especially in more disadvantaged populations (Osborne et al., 2012). As mentioned, the nature of families is essentially multidimensional in that it is affected by and can affect the different economic, social, political, and material systems that make up a society, as experienced in South Africa through colonisation, urbanisation, labour migration, disease, and poverty (Amoateng & Richter, 2007; Dlamini, 2015). There are many different family structures that exist today, including nuclear families (family that consists of a married couple and their children living together in one household), single-parent families (one parent assumes the primary responsibility of raising the children either through separation, divorce, single parent by choice, or the death of the partner), extended family (additional relatives are involved in raising the children either in the same household or in close proximity) or cohabiting families (an unmarried couple living together with or without children. Hence, family structures are constantly changing, and it is important to investigate these different structures, as they can significantly influence the type of environment that children develop in. For example, a change in family structure can result in changes in the quality and amount of parental supervision children receive, it can disrupt family routines which is quite stressful for children, and often it can decrease financial resources which affect children as well (Hill et al., 2001). As mentioned

previously, these changes can significantly impact how emerging adults develop their identities, view the world, and plan their futures. However, the child's developmental stage needs to be considered as well, because different stages require different needs. For example, early childhood requires a good learning environment, nurturing, caring, and nutrition, whereas later childhood requires more emotional support and parental supervision (Hill et al., 2001). Therefore, it is also important to consider when important changes took place in a child's life and whether they received the needs associated with their developmental stage. This is key when trying to understand experiences that were adverse versus not adverse, and whether these were the result of changes in family structure.

Family Structures in the South African Context

In South Africa, the processes of labour migration, colonisation and urbanisation negatively affected families and households, especially during the apartheid era, as many people were not formally educated, fathers had to leave their families behind to go work in the city, mothers were left alone to care and provide for the children, and these ultimately resulted in children experiencing many different adversities (Amoateng & Heaton, 2007). The study explores how these family structures are experienced now, especially from the viewpoints of emerging adults in this era. Previous studies have investigated four main family structures, namely single-mother, nuclear, separated/divorced, and extended families (Hill et al., 2001). This chapter provides a discussion around all family structures; however, the focus is on single-mother families. Hence, something essential to keep in mind as mentioned by Hall and Mokomane (2018):

"While "household" and "family" may coincide, for example in the context of nuclear families, this cannot be taken as the norm." (p. 33)

Modernisation theory was very popular during the 1950s and 1960s in explaining the transformation of families and households, which stated that before industrialisation, families were large and over time grew smaller as economies developed (Wu & Xu, 2020). Families, especially in South Africa, one of the most urbanised countries, are susceptible to social change, which explains the increase in different family configurations (Amoateng et al., 2004). Studies using population census data of 1996 and 2001 found that South African households are typically family orientated and are comprised of mainly nuclear (49.81%) and extended (44.84%) family structures (Amoateng et al., 2004). A study conducted in an African township near Johannesburg on changing family structures during urbanisation, found that the most common family structure was the nuclear family (48%), which corresponds to other studies (Ziehl, 2001). Another study found that the most common family structure in Duncan Village was extended families (58%), however, when the researcher observed the sample again 12 years later there was a significant drop in extended families (Ziehl, 2001). This shows how family structures are constantly changing and how there are various family structures in South Africa. However, family scholarship has challenged the simplistic notions of family and household change put forth by modernisation theory. Empirical evidence demonstrates that household living arrangements are more complex than previously believed, revealing that the sizes of households do not always decline linearly with economic development (Russel, 1994). In

certain contexts, economic constraints lead relatives to co-reside, forming more complex and extended family households, which has been observed as an adaptive strategy when families are faced by poverty. This was also highlighted by Hall and Mokomane (2018) in their study on the shape of children's families and households in South Africa. The study draws attention to the prevalence of non-nuclear family structures, such as single parent, extended, and grandparent headed households, and how social and economic factors have shaped these. However, scholars argue that while African cultures may embrace extended family systems, the urban-industrial milieu often necessitates nuclear family units (Russel, 2003). The debate centers around the convergence thesis, which suggests that as African family patterns undergo modernisation or socioeconomic development, traditional family systems or practices will shift to align with Westernised or nuclear family structures (Russel, 2003). However, the debate acknowledges that cultural, historical, and socioeconomic factors can influence the extent to which convergence occurs, and it recognises the importance of considering the complexities and variations for understanding the intricacies of families and households in post-apartheid South Africa (Amoateng & Richter, 2007; Hall & Mokomane, 2018).

The process of urbanisation and the associated migration from rural to urban areas brought about significant changes in family structure within South Africa and Johannesburg (Amoateng et al., 2007; Richter et al., 2007; Seekings, 2003). Individuals, and sometimes their families, were prompted or forced to relocate from rural areas to urban regions due to the appeal of improved employment opportunities and higher standards of living (Amoateng & Richter, 2007; Sooryamoorthy & Makhoba, 2016). Consequently, migration often led to the disruption and division of families, as individuals

(specifically men in the family as they were the head of the household and the breadwinner) would not return home or establish new families in the urban area. As a result, new family structures would be formed. This was highlighted in a study conducted by Hall and Posel (2019) on household migration strategies in post-apartheid South Africa, which aimed to explore and understand the impacts the migration process had on family structures. The study utilised a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative data with qualitative interviews, to better understand the lived experiences and decision-making processes associated with migration. According to the study's findings, multiple factors influenced the decision to migrate, such as economic opportunities, the need for social networks and support, and educational opportunities (Hall & Posel, 2019). These findings correspond to McAuliffe and Khadria's (2020) overview of the World Migration Report. However, economic considerations encouraged individuals and families to relocate from rural to urban areas. The study found that there were diverse effects to family structure due to the migration process. Most families and households experienced separation and fragmentation during the process, while some households adopted interventions to preserve family cohesion, such as short-term reunions or regular visitations (Hall & Posel, 2019; McAuliffe & Khadria, 2020). Furthermore, the results highlighted gender dynamics at play during the process of migration, as male heads of the household were more likely to migrate for job opportunities, which encouraged changes in roles and responsibilities within the family (Amoateng et al., 2004; Hall & Posel, 2019). Overall, the study, alongside other similar studies and literature, draws attention to the complex dynamics and subjective experiences related to migration and

its effects on family structure in post-apartheid South Africa. Once more, it is important to note that this is one way apartheid has played a role in shaping family structures.

The implementation of apartheid policies also had other significant impacts on family structures in South Africa. Apart from the mass movement of people, many alterations to social structures during this time affected families and households. The historical influence of apartheid is highlighted by Sooryamoorthy and Makhoba (2016) as they provide insights in family dynamics in South Africa. Family and household formation patterns were impacted by legislative restrictions to domains such as agriculture, education, employment, housing, and healthcare. For example, the restriction of African ownership of land limited opportunities for African farming, the racialised education system provided unequal educational resources, and the quantity and quality of housing was also unequally distributed (Amoateng & Richter, 2007). The implementation of these policies and processes imposed restrictions on the geographic mobility of Africans, thereby engendering limitations in social mobility within domains such as education and employment. These constraints subsequently exerted a profound impact on various aspects of family life. The imposed removals that primarily targeted urban areas, resulting in the separation of family members and the displacement of entire communities, significantly disrupted the traditional dynamics of families (Sooryamoorthy & Makhoba, 2016). Reflecting back to the previous section, the migrant labour system of apartheid also had a profoundly negative impact on family structures. Under this system, men were often forced to leave their families in rural areas to seek work in the urban areas, which often lead to the emergence of single-parent households, specifically single-mother households (Amoateng & Richter, 2007; Hall & Posel, 2019). These different policies

strained family cohesion and created significant challenges for maintaining stable family units.

Poverty and socioeconomic inequalities significantly and multifacetedly impact family structure in South Africa (Richter et al., 2009). High levels of poverty and economic hardships, such as limited access to basic necessities and parental unemployment, may place additional strain and challenges on family relationships, as it heightens stress, frustration, and instability within families (Sooryamoorthy & Makhoba, 2016). This was highlighted by Seekings (2003) in a study on social stratification and inequality in South Africa. The aim of the research was to gain insight into the nature and extent of poverty and socioeconomic inequality, as well as understand how these shape family structures. The study draws attention to how these factors often worsen existing vulnerabilities and encourages additional difficulties for the family system (Richter et al., 2009; Seekings, 2003). The scarcity of resources and financial constraints often encourage tensions and conflicts among family members, and there are increased instances of domestic violence, substance use, child neglect and abuse, and other negative coping mechanisms as the struggle to meet basic needs continues. This corresponds to findings by Casale and Desmond (2007) in their study on economic well-being of families and households in South Africa during 1995-2003. They highlighted that female-headed households are affected the most as they often lack adequate housing, stable employment, and reliable source of income. Furthermore, personal and educational development is limited and encourages a cycle of disadvantage across generations, which further strains the family dynamics (Seekings, 2003; Casale & Desmond, 2007). This research emphasises the

need for the implementation of policies and interventions to address these social and economic disparities.

The effects of the political and economic transformations in South Africa, characterised by racial capitalism and neoliberal reforms, have had significant implications for family structures in the country (Amoateng & Richter, 2007). The racial inequalities and socioeconomic disparities resulting from apartheid and its aftermath have contributed to the fragmentation and strain on family relationships. Similar findings were highlighted by McDaniel (1994) when exploring racial difference in living arrangements in African American families. High unemployment rates, job insecurity, and income disparities have placed immense pressure on families, affecting their stability and well-being. The rise in poverty and inequality has led to the emergence of alternative family arrangements, such as female-headed households and extended family networks, as individuals navigate economic hardships together. Moreover, the challenges associated with limited access to quality education and employment opportunities have impacted intergenerational mobility and perpetuated a cycle of disadvantage within families (Amoateng & Richter, 2007; Casale & Desmond, 2007). The social costs of neoliberal policies, including the inadequate response to unemployment and growing inequality, have further strained family relationships and exacerbated household challenges. Therefore, the political and economic transformations in South Africa have shaped family structures, creating complex dynamics influenced by racial inequalities, poverty, unemployment, and limited socioeconomic opportunities.

The increased instability and complexity of family dynamics and structures are strongly associated with adverse childhood experiences. Before going deeper into this

relationship, it is important to consider how these changes influence parental well-being, which determines childhood experiences (Osborne et al., 2012). There are many reasons why understanding parents' well-being is important. Firstly, adult well-being is important to society, and this may influence their lives economically, socially, and psychologically, especially once partnerships and families begin to form (Osborne et al., 2012). These family transitions impact on adults' productivity, health, ability to engage in society, and quality of life. Secondly, parents are responsible for ensuring their children's healthy development, and any family instability or changes may disrupt access to resources and result in psychological distress that impacts children's well-being (Loman, 2006; Osborne et al., 2012). These changes often disrupt the quantity and quality of care children receive from their parents, as stressful circumstances result in parents being more withdrawn, hostile, neglectful, and abusive (Masarik & Conger, 2017). These often result in changes within the family, which also become stressful due to sudden changes in roles and routines (Osborne et al., 2012). These structures may become chaotic, and children who are used to regularity and structure may find these transitions challenging.

The Impact of Families on Childhood Adversities

Various studies have explored family and family structure changes and how they can influence child adversities. Loman (2006) explored changes in family structure and child neglect and draws attention to this point. The study included two reports, separated by one year to account for any changes, which explored family characteristics and types of child abuse and neglect for reports one and two that involved noting any changes. The study highlighted that changes in family structure may often result in changes in

employment and financial status. This was also highlighted by Amoateng and Ritcher (2007). For example, the families with no male present had the highest unemployment at both times in the study, and this affected overall family income (Loman, 2006). The importance of fathers' financial support is highlighted by Madhava et al. (2014) in their community-based study of financial support for children in low-income communities in South Africa. Also, in studies looking at two-parent families, findings show that loss of employment and reduced income may lead to divorce or separation, which speaks to how financial stress and conflict may encourage changes in family structure (Loman, 2006). The study found that a change of males entering previously mother-only families resulted in increases in parent-child conflict, sexual abuse, and physical abuse, while neglect decreased in different areas (Loman, 2006). It is found that abuse increases because of the stress of having a new male in the household, and neglect decreases because there is some relief of the financial burden as there are two caregivers present (Loman, 2006). Another change worth noting is the children's age, as many families had teenage children in the second part of the study. Three crucial changes took place during these transitions: the number of parent-child conflicts increased, the number of physical abuse reports decreased, and the number of neglect reports decreased (Loman, 2006). This also speaks to the importance of the different developmental stages that children are in, as it appears that different stages involve different types of abuse and neglect.

Many scholars have widely studied the negative effects on children after experiencing a change in family structure. Many studies have found that children from divorced/separated, single-parent, and extended families experience more academic, psychological, and behavioural problems than children from nuclear families (Ram & Hou,

2003). The negative developments can be attributed to experiences before the change in family structure but are mainly associated with post-transformation issues, such as economic challenges and unsupportive parenting (Schor, 1995). Providing children with support, education, interaction, sensitivity, and understanding is essential for their health and development. However, when parents are under pressure and experience stress, they become depressed, hostile, and abusive toward children, which results in short and long-term negative consequences (Ridings et al., 2017). This corresponds with research done by Fonseca et al. (2020) that explored connections between parenting stress and parenting styles, with a focus on psychological flexibility. Ram and Hou (2003) found that children in single-parent families are disadvantaged in emotional and cognitive-behavioural domains compared to those in nuclear families. They found that the primary sources of childhood adversities were disruptions in parenting style (unsupportive parenting) and the mental well-being of parents (depression) (Ram & Hou, 2003). Although they found that supportive parenting was the most influential in buffering against adversities after a change in family structure, economic challenges also contributed to the adversities, especially for single-mother families (Corcnan et al., 2005; Fonseca et al., 2020). This study provided useful information for the current research, however, it focused mainly on younger children, while the current study intends to broaden the scope by exploring emerging adults and long-term consequences.

Taking a closer look at single-mother families, these can be formed due to various reasons, such as divorce, death of a parent, unplanned pregnancy, absentee father, or the mother's choice to be a single parent (Jacobs & Andrews, 2021). With the various structures of family, including single-father families, women are still viewed as the

children's primary caregiver, which challenges them with the roles of being both the primary breadwinner and sole caregiver (Berger et al., 2008). Consequently, these may impact the mothers' social and economic resources and psychological well-being, which may impact parenting. Many studies have shown that these families are a significant area of concern, mainly due to the mothers having to care for the children financially and emotionally when the father is absent, which many find challenging and highly stressful (Koketso et al., 2019). The longitudinal study on single-mother families by Loman (2006), found that adverse mental health, low levels of education, low income, and limited social support strongly influenced child neglect and abuse in single-mother families. The study reported that the mothers experienced psychosomatic symptoms and many abused substances such as alcohol, which also encouraged an increase in child abuse and neglect, and this corresponds with the research conducted by Riding et al. (2017) in their exploration of the risk and protective factors associated with child maltreatment. The literature shows that a lack of social support and resources, paired with negative mental and emotional states, can disrupt parenting skills and behaviours as the stress and pressure become overwhelming, exposing children to various kinds of adverse childhood experiences (Koketso et al., 2019; Masarik & Conger, 2017; Raniga et al., 2019). For example, regarding a case about a single mother of three daughters, the mother was going through a financial challenge and allowed a recently involved romantic partner into their lives, and this exposed her daughters to sexual abuse, which the man was reportedly repeating with other single-mother families (Loman, 2006). This highlights what a major concern financial challenges are for a family, especially vulnerable single-mother families. This is also the case for other family structures, as financial difficulty is a major source of

stress for parents, and this often disrupts marital relationships to the point of divorce as marital conflict increases between partners. The same is true for children from divorced families who experience child abuse and neglect as parents become less supportive and attentive. This shows how different family structures can result in different adversities for children, and why it is important to investigate this further, which is what the current study aims to highlight.

Various studies have also shown that there are positive associations with single-mother families, particularly when the rigid and authoritative father figure is absent and the household forms a more lenient and equal structure. This draws attention to the resilience and resourcefulness of single mothers, which is often driven by the motivation to provide a better future for their children and enhance their well-being (Raniga et al., 2019). Some mothers have reported positive relationships with their children because of having this type of structure, where effective communication, allowing them to make their own decisions and choices, and attentive listening to their children result in high self-esteem and responsible and independent behaviour (Brody & Flor, 1998). Research indicates that the closer adolescents are to their mothers and the more disapproving the mother is concerning early sexual engagement, the less likely the children are to engage in these activities or even fall pregnant (Dlamini, 2015). It is also important to note that not all single mothers have severe financial difficulty and challenges providing for their families. As highlighted by Raniga et al. (2019), some single mothers can provide for and support their families financially, especially when they are well-educated and employed, without the male figure's help, which gives them a sense of pride and self-sufficiency, as reported by some mothers. The study found that, due to the determination and

resourcefulness of single mothers, they often implemented creative strategies to ensure that basic needs were met, such as seeking social support and prioritising expenses. Children growing up with single mothers with financial autonomy and employment are less likely to engage in risky sexual behaviour, benefit from the mother's increased social support and networks, and display higher aspirations, goals, and achievements (Dlamini, 2015). In some cases, single mothers are not financially stable, and they often have extended families to support them. This could be regarding financial support or social control for adolescents' behaviour. Most of the time, single mothers are stigmatised due to patriarchal norms; however, it is important to note that they possess agency and the ability to navigate these difficult situations that they experience, which is strongly supported by feminist theory (Jacobs & Andrews, 2021). These also bring up reports directly from adolescents on how they preferred their father not to be around. This is particularly prevalent in households that have experienced domestic violence. In these cases, adolescents reported that they were better off without their fathers and viewed the separation or divorce as beneficial, as they were not exposed to violence or abuse (Makusha et al., 2013). This is why exploring these types of accounts is important because further research can expose different perspectives and yield a greater understanding of different situations and experiences, which is what the current study would like to gain and share. These positive and negative experiences are also like those experienced in divorced family structures.

Looking more at divorced families, these family structures are associated with many negative consequences, which present in psychological, social, educational, and behavioural outcomes (Leturcq & Panico, 2019). Literature on the causal impact of

separation on children is quite limited, and research on the impact on child outcomes focuses on the resources available to the family after the separation. One of the most explored resources is money, as many studies have shown that divorce often results in the deterioration of financial well-being, especially for single mothers, as described above (McLanahan et al., 2013). Many of these studies show a short-term view of how financial resources diminish after separation; however, it is also essential to consider the long-term impact. Another resource, which has been addressed before, is the quality and quantity of parental care children receive after a separation. The quality of parenting decreases before and after the separation due to increased conflict and stress, and the quantity of parenting decreases as there is usually one less parent in the household (McIntosh, 2014). This relates to the FSM, which forms the theoretical grounding of the study. The model explains that family stressors may result in increased parental mental health distress and parental conflict, which consequently impacts the children's well-being (Masarik & Conger, 2017). Timing is also an impact aspect to consider in these cases, which can be the children's age and timing from separation. In terms of children's age at separation, more negative impacts are experienced if the family changes occur in early childhood than later in life (Leturcq & Panico, 2019). For the latter timing, any financial difficulties appear more distressing in the first and second year after the separation and often recover after the third year due to re-partnering or better employment (Leturcq & Panico, 2019). Research by Jansen et al. (2009) found that re-partnering is a more likely outcome in the cases of single-mother families. Again, this could lead to positive or negative outcomes, depending on the new partners' employment status. If the new partner is unemployed, this may encourage additional financial strain on the family and,

consequently, additional stress that may impact the children. This was highlighted in a study by Ham (2004) that explored the impact of divorce and remarriage on the academic performance of high schoolers. The study confirmed that parental divorce or separation can adversely affect academic achievement, especially within the final year of high school, and remarriage may encourage improved academic outcomes in certain instances. However, future studies should focus more on this, as the short-term time frame of the current studies do not provide strong evidence for these links. In some cases, these may also result in extended family situations, as parents may opt to live with other family members to reduce the financial burden. These are also important to consider in South Africa, as extended family systems are prevalent. Mtshali (2015) highlighted the importance of extended families in South Africa by zoning in on how grandparents are supportive, guiding, and caregiving figures in the family system. Although this study focuses explicitly on black families, this is a common support system among families in South Africa. This study attempts to draw further attention to the nature and support of extended families in the country.

One study conducted in Botswana revealed that children in these families experienced positive and negative outcomes. Maundeni (2000) reported that the absence of the father figure was a crucial topic in the research, where many children reported that it had quite a negative impact on them, usually if there was a close father-child relationship. Many children reported feelings of anger, loss, sadness, and rejection because they lost a necessary support, structured, stable, and security figure, which has short- and long-term consequences for them. Similar perspectives were found by Makusha et al. (2013) in their research into positive and negative experiences with fathers

during childhood. The study found that intimate partner violence was a common issue that many children witnessed in their homes, so the divorce was a positive experience in that it protected the mother from further abuse; however, for some, it was negative because it often resulted in significant changes in their lives such as financial struggles and moving to different communities they were not used to. Witnessing intimate partner violence is a common adversity that many children experience. This was highlighted by Chander et al. (2017) in their study on the relationship between IPV and child behavioural problems, as well as other literature discussed previously in the study. These are often extended because mothers do not report the abuse, as they fear being unable to care for their children emotionally and financially and fearing stigmatisation based on social norms about women (Maundeni, 2000). Children in these cases are often left with many negative consequences, such as low self-esteem and vulnerability to abusive and neglectful parenting behaviour (Hetherington & Stanly-Hagan, 1999). In South Africa, IPV is also a significant issue, and it is essential to explore how this affects and is influenced by family structure, as well as the associated adverse childhood experiences. Roman and Frantz (2013) reported a high prevalence of intimate partner violence in the family context of African countries, and these have detrimental effects on children and adolescents. The study revealed adverse consequences such as low self-esteem, emotional distress, poor mental health, behavioural issues, and impaired social functioning. This shows the different dynamics at play within families and how a divorce or separation can either positively or, mainly, negatively impact children's lives. This is useful because it shows how adversities can arise for children in these families and why this research is so important.

Research also looks at the links between cohabiting family structures and child outcomes. Cohabiting family structures involve two people living together, often in a romantic relationship but not married (Goodman & Greaves, 2010). Children in these families often live with one biological parent, most commonly the mother and a partner who is not biologically related. One study found that nearly all the children in cohabiting families over the age of 12 years are living with only one biological parent (Manning & Lamb, 2003). This also speaks to how children in these family structures experience a different family life and developmental outcomes because of the context in which they are raised, which could be influenced by instability, parenting and economic situations (Manning & Lamb, 2003). Although children from cohabiting family structures have more advantages than single-parent families, studies have shown that children from these families have fewer social and economic resources than those in married/nuclear families (Schmeer, 2011). There is also the idea of these families not being socially accepted, South Africa not being the exception, which may also result in a lack of social support and heightened stress for the children and parents (Schmeer, 2011). In this case, it is essential to explore the potential stressors children are exposed to and the health outcomes that result. Studies have found that children in these families experience more harmful behavioural and developmental outcomes compared to those from married families, which is accounted for by parents experiencing more stress, less healthy home environments, limited financial support from other family, maternal depression, or increased parental conflict (Schmeer, 2011). Surprisingly, there is limited research on the potential benefits for children and families in cohabiting situations; however, some research explains that if the cohabiting parents marry, then that could have potential

benefits for the children (Schmeer, 2011). Future research should explore these dimensions further.

This chapter extensively reviews the literature relevant to the current study. The chapter discusses various key concepts, themes, and relationships of the research and provides different studies, globally and locally, to support the arguments presented. The chapter starts by explaining emerging adulthood and its relevance to the study, as this is the target population. This population was chosen because, throughout the literature, the focus is on the impacts on children, and only a few studies explore impacts in later adulthood or long-term consequences of changes in family structure. The current study recognised this as a limit or gap in the research that needs attention, especially since emerging adulthood is a time of big decisions that affect future individuals and society. The chapter then explains family systems and transitions, grounding the arguments presented in the study. The literature describes how changes in the family take place and how they may result in either positive or negative outcomes for the family setting, such as a decrease in intimate partner violence or increased financial struggles. This provides grounding for the rest of the chapter, which discusses how these changes may result in adverse childhood experiences. Not many studies shed light on the relationship between the two, which the current study aims to expand on with the accounts from the emerging adults' experiences. This way, the study also gains insight into long-term impacts, as many studies focused on more short-term or immediate outcomes. This is also a significant gap to address as it can inform future research on childhood adversity within the family setting. The literature focuses significantly on the impacts of parenting styles on children. However, not many studies highlight the transitions that encourage these

factors or the intersectionality of various factors and their combined influence. In this way, the literature provides background for what is already known about the topic and what gaps need to be filled. The following sections discuss the theoretical grounding of the current study.

Chapter 3. Theoretical Framework

Introduction

The framework used to guide the research is the FSM. The model was developed by Reuben Hill in 1949 when he investigated family separation and reunion during wartime and has since been used by many scholars to investigate the relationship between social and economic hardship and increased stress (Wu & Xu, 2020). The model emphasises the influence of family stressors, which are conditions or events that can disrupt the balance of the family system, and these can be internal (marital conflict, financial problems, or divorce) or external (unemployment or poverty). The framework suggests that families' social and economic difficulties result in increased stress and pressure on parents, which disrupts parent-child interactions and may result in adverse developmental outcomes for children (Neppl et al., 2016). Firstly, the model explains that economic challenges result in economic pressures and parents' psychological distress. Economic hardships include financial struggles, such as high debts and low income, while economic pressures include the inability to pay bills or meet basic living needs, which is why parents experience depressive, anxious, and hostile feelings (Neppl et al., 2016). These feelings result in marital and interparental conflict, as there is a decrease in support and communication between parents, negatively affecting parent-child interactions (Masarik & Conger, 2017). These impact parents themselves in different ways, such as parents being insensitive and unsupportive and neglecting and abusing (verbal or physical) children.

This can be seen in a more recent example during the Covid-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, UNESCO reported that about 1.4 billion children were out of school without access to other activities or interactions (Cluver et al., 2020). This created quite a challenge for parents working from home, resulting in heightened stress and pressure, ultimately increasing children's vulnerability to abuse and neglect, as reported by the rise in child abuse cases (Cluver et al., 2020). Similar results were found by Low and Mounts (2022) in their study on economic stress, parenting, and adolescents' adjustment. The study revealed that economic pressure encouraged by the pandemic contributed to harmful changes in parenting behaviours and interactions, which fostered poorer adolescent adjustment outcomes (Low & Mounts, 2022). Concerning changes in family structure, changes in the family system may increase family stressors, such as increased financial strain, changes in living arrangements, and changes in family resources. On the other hand, family stressors may result in changes in family structure, which may also negatively impact family dynamics and children's well-being. Concerning the study by Cluver et al. (2020), the FSM does have a weakness as it focuses mainly on nuclear families. In contrast, the study focuses on investigating emerging adults' experiences in single-mother and divorced/separated families. However, the model does provide a helpful explanation of the working mechanisms of a family and how the structure changes; it also outlines the causes of ACEs. Thus, this study may potentially encourage a widening of the model's scope in future research.

A study by Mackler et al. (2015) explored the relationship between parenting stress, parental reactions, and externalising behaviour in children. The study aimed to

investigate this relationship over six years with children ages 4 to 10, applying the FSM. The study utilised a longitudinal design and collected data using self-report questionnaires completed by mothers from a diverse sample of 399 families that assessed parental stress, observed parental reactions to child behaviour, and used teacher ratings to assess externalising behaviours. The findings revealed that higher levels of parenting stress were directly proportionate to the frequency of adverse parental reactions; in other words, the more parental stress involved, the increased likelihood of adverse reactions towards children (Huth-Bocks & Hughes, 2008; Mackler et al., 2015). The results highlighted that these adverse reactions from parents resulted in increased externalising behaviours expressed by children, such as higher levels of impulsivity, aggression, and hyperactivity. Furthermore, the relationship between parenting stress and externalising behaviours was cumulative (Mackler et al., 2015). The FSM was a helpful framework used to interpret the findings of the study, which indicated that parenting stress (financial, interpersonal, or life transitions, for example) is represented as a stressor within the family system that often leads to adverse parental reactions (neglect, harsh discipline, or reduced emotional support for example), and consequently impacting children in negative ways (Wu & Xu, 2020). This study provided a useful lens as it contributed to understanding the relationship between parenting and family stress and the negative impacts on children, highlighting the importance of the FSM.

A study by Huth-Bocks and Hughes (2008) observed similar findings but did not explicitly use the FSM. The study explored families experiencing intimate partner violence and aimed to investigate the relationship between parenting stress, parenting behaviour, and children's adjustment. They used a cross-sectional research design and included a

sample of children aged 4 to 8 from 103 low-income African-American families. Notably, the findings revealed that increased parenting stress resulted in increased internalising and externalising problem behaviours in children (Huth-Bocks & Hughes, 2008; Mackler et al., 2015). This indicates that the parenting stress caused by intimate partner violence contributes to maladaptive behaviour outcomes in children. According to a study by Øverlien (2010), witnessing intimate partner violence resulted in a range of adverse outcomes for children, such as emotional and behavioural problems, impaired social functioning, cognitive difficulties, and increased risk of revictimisation. Additionally, the study revealed that increased parental stress resulted in a higher prevalence of harsh and disruptive parenting behaviours, highlighted by the previous study discussed. These findings suggest that harmful parenting behaviours or reactions mediate between parental stress and children's adverse adjustment outcomes (Huth-Bocks & Hughes, 2008; Masarik & Conger, 2017). Although the study did not directly use the FSM, the findings highlight and confirm the mechanisms of the model. Intimate partner violence is considered a significant family stressor, especially when zoning in on the context of South Africa, which can lead to increased parental stress and parenting behaviours and consequently impact children. A study by Chander et al. (2017) in South Africa revealed an increased likelihood of negative adjustments in children exposed to intimate partner violence, such as depression, anxiety, conduct problems, and aggression. Incorporating the FSM may have provided a valuable framework for understanding these patterns and mechanisms within these families and families experiencing other stressors.

Conclusion

The FSM provides a valuable and effective framework for understanding the complex dynamics within the family system, essentially related to parenting stress, interactions or behaviours, and their impact on children. Various studies highlight the relevance of this framework to family research and adverse childhood experiences (Cluver et al., 2020; Huth-Bocks & Hughes, 2008; Mackler et al., 2015). The model draws attention to how specific stressors within the family system encourage parental stress, which influences parenting behaviours and, subsequently, children's adjustment outcomes (Neppl et al., 2016). However, there are limitations and gaps in research to be aware of concerning this model. For example, broader social and cultural contexts that shape parental stress are not fully captured the way individual and family-level stressors are, which is essential to highlight within the context of South Africa. This is one of the gaps this study attempts to fill. Additionally, it would be helpful to engage in more longitudinal research studies that explore the long-term impacts of parenting stress and its interaction with other factors over time, which this study is attempting by focusing on emerging adults and gaining insight into the continued effects throughout life. Moreover, the framework may be improved by acknowledging and integrating a perspective focused on strengths, resilience, and protective factors within families confronted by these stressors. Overall, the FSM offers a valuable lens into the complex dynamics of the family system, and further research may strengthen its applicability in diverse contexts.

Chapter 4. Method

Introduction

In this chapter, the outline of the study's methodology is provided. This chapter addresses the research questions that guided the study. Following the research questions are the methods used throughout the study to gain participants, collect data, and analyse that data. To begin, the research design or paradigm is discussed to highlight the framework of the study and its qualitative nature. Secondly, the target population for the study is outlined, as well as the methods used to gain the participants for the study. Then, the data collection procedure is outlined, including the methods used to reach the participants and how the data was collected from them. Furthermore, the instruments and measures used are outlined. Following, the ethical considerations for the study are outlined clearly. Then, the methods used for data analysis are discussed, including what data is analysed and the tools used. Lastly, a section on reflexivity is included to show the importance of being aware of the researcher's subjective involvement in the study and other factors that may be influential.

Research Questions

The study aimed to explore how emerging adults understand emerging adults' understandings of how a change in family structure has impacted their lives and their experiences of ACEs. It further sought to explore their accounts of the impact of ACEs on their lives as emerging adults. The research questions for the study were threefold:

(1) How do the emerging adults perceive and understand the change in their family structure and its impact on them?
(2) How do emerging adults understand being in these family structures and their experiences of ACEs?
(3) How do they make sense of the impacts of the ACEs on their lives?

These questions were the best approach to gaining insightful and meaningful information for the study.

Research Design

The study used an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative research design. The interpretivist paradigm allows researchers to capture the experiences and perceptions of participants, and this data can be used to interpret how individuals understand their world (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). The interpretivist paradigm proposes that reality is socially constructed and there are multiple perspectives of reality, as different groups and people have different views about the world, and this approach often encourages a more in-depth and insightful understanding of a specific context or situation (Willis, 2007). This design includes exploring and accepting multiple perspectives, valuing subjectivity, encouraging holistic and participatory research, and going beyond the deductive and inductive approaches (Willis, 2007). Interpretivists use qualitative research to better understand the relationship between individuals and their context and how individuals ascribe meaning to particular experiences (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Therefore, this research design was chosen because it helped make sense of individuals' lived experiences, which was

suitable to this study of perceptions and experiences of university students, as well as being cost and time-effective (Morrow, 2005). However, some limitations need to be considered as well, such as the bias on behalf of the researcher, which is addressed in the section on reflexivity (Levin, 2006)

Participants

A purposive and convenience sampling strategy was used, both non-probability sampling approaches (Taherdoost, 2016). Purposive sampling is a method where participants are deliberately selected, as this provides essential information that cannot be obtained from other samples (Taherdoost, 2016). Convenience sampling is a method where participants are selected because they are easily and readily available, and it is a favoured method for sampling among the student population (Taherdoost, 2016). Purposeful sampling was chosen because the study was looking for rich information on the experiences of students in specific family structures, and this allowed for an exploratory design, and it was not time-consuming (Berndt, 2020). A convenience sampling technique was chosen because it is helpful for exploratory and descriptive purposes, cost and time-effective, and simple to implement within the university setting (Berndt, 2020). It was time-effective in this study in the sense that the participants were easily accessible. The study looked specifically for students from single-parent family structures, including those who were married and then divorced, those who never married but were in relationships and had children, those whose structure changed from extended to single-parent families, and those who came from families where the parents were widowed. Therefore, the study recruited 8 participants under the respective family structure to ensure sufficient information was

gathered for data saturation. These strategies were used to collect data from students, males and females between the ages of 18 and 25, attending the University of Witwatersrand, who were enrolled in different departments and for various courses. The study also used social media to find emerging adults to participate since there was limited success with the students at the university. Hence, participants who met the criteria but were not Wits University students also participated. This also increased the generalisability of the study. This sample was appropriate for the research project as the focus was on the adverse childhood experiences of university students, and it was not restrictive to a specific department. The following section explains how the study found participants and how data was collected.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Name*	Age	Gender	Family Structure
Francine	20	Female	Single-parent
Katlego	20	Female	Single-parent
Bianca	24	Female	Divorced
Jane	22	Female	Single-parent
Lesedi	18	Female	Single-parent
Ofentse	19	Non-binary	Divorced
Gabe	21	Female	Single-parent
Simphiwe	20	Male	Single-parent

Method of Data Collection

The interview guide used in the study asked questions based on the experiences that emerging adults had in their respective families, which could potentially inform on adverse childhood experiences (exposure to domestic abuse, child neglect and abuse, parent's substance use, for example). An interview guide is provided in Appendix A. The interviewer used probing and follow-up questions if more information was needed. The responses were recorded and transcribed for later analysis. This questionnaire guide was developed after research on various ACE questionnaires, which are mainly quantitative (McLennan et al., 2020). These multiple items were then rephrased to accompany the qualitative design of this study and to ensure that rich information was collected from the interviews.

Data Collection Procedures

An announcement was sent out by the lecturers via the university online platform (Ulwazi) to the students, explaining what the research was about, the participants who were needed, the rights and responsibilities of the potential participants, as well as contact information for anyone interested in participating in the study. For the students who were interested in participating, they sent an email to the attached contact details and an online interview was set up with the researcher. For social media, a post was sent out, along with the above information and contact details, for anyone interested in participating in the study and meeting the required criteria. The data for the analysis was collected through semi-structured interviews. Interviews were helpful for this study because they allowed for probing and asking follow-up questions throughout the process and provided

in-depth information about the participant's experience. The interviews took place online in the second semester to avoid busy students' schedules and exam time stress. The interview asked questions based on the experiences that emerging adults had in their respective families that could have potentially informed on adverse childhood experiences (exposure to domestic abuse, child neglect and abuse, parent's substance use, for example). The interviews were audio recorded, with permission from the participants, for later transcription and analysis. The participants were debriefed on the ethical issues, such as confidentiality and data security.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical permission was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC – Non-medical) at the University of Witwatersrand (see Appendix D). Before any data was collected, the announcement sent out to students contained a participant information letter that explained what the research was about, who the researcher was, as well as the rights and responsibilities of the participants. They were then able to contact the researcher, on the provided contact details, to arrange the interview. See Appendix B for the participant information letter and consent form. In the participant information letter, the participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point (Arifin, 2018). The participants were informed that they would not receive any direct benefits from participation and would not lose any benefits or rights they would usually have if they decided not to participate. However, they would contribute to understanding how specific experiences impact emerging adults' lives. They were asked permission to audio record the interview. They were informed that it was

strictly for transcription, later analysis, and using quotations to back up findings (which will not reveal their identities) (Arifin, 2018). The participants were also assured that their identities would be protected in the research report, the confidentiality of data, and data security mechanisms (the data will be kept safely on the researcher's laptop and password protected) before they begin the interview (Connelly, 2014). Pseudonyms were used to identify the participants, as seen in Table 1. The study was categorised as low risk, where the only potential risk was potential discomfort or sensitivity to specific questions in the interview, which the interviewer was cognisant of throughout the interview. Once the interview was complete, there was a debriefing by the interviewer at the end on where the participants could seek help if any psychological distress arose throughout the process. Since speaking about ACEs in childhood may be a sensitive topic for some participants, a 'distress protocol' was enacted for students who experience any distress. In this instance, the interview would be terminated, and the students would be referred to the relevant student counselling and support services. This also applied to the researcher if distress was caused (Connelly, 2014). Ethics was considered at every stage of the research process, from approval and access to participants, informed consent and voluntary participation, confidentiality, and private interviews to the data analysis and dissemination of the findings.

Data Analysis

With the data collected from the participants, the project intended to explore the experiences of ACEs among the different family structures the students belong to, specifically the single-mother family structures. The data was transcribed to use thematic

analysis. The data was thematically analysed to explore participants' experiences of ACEs within the family structure and the impacts of ACEs. Thematic analysis is an accessible and flexible approach where themes or patterns are identified from data collected from participants, which was helpful for the study because it was looking for a relationship between family types and ACEs (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The research focused on identifying themes in the data set that could answer the research questions and aims of the study. The study took an inductive approach to thematic analysis, which helped gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of emerging adults. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis through a six-step process, and the application is outlined below.

The six-step process involves familiarising yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming the themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For step 1, once the data is collected, it will be transcribed, and the researcher will read the transcripts and make note of essential ideas and recurring themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012). For example, making a note of similar experiences participants had or essential information related to a research question. For the second stage of analysis, codes will be created for the ideas picked up during the initial familiarisation stage and organised into categories with the different objectives of the study in mind (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The next step involves developing themes by examining how different codes relate to each other and fit into one theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, with the current study, themes could potentially be violence, abuse, or neglect. Once the potential themes have been identified, the researcher will review them and refine them to be relevant and applicable to the study's aims and objectives

(Braun & Clarke, 2012). Once the themes are defined, the findings will be interpreted and written up to answer the study's research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These steps allow for thorough thematic analysis as long as the analysis is done following the theoretical position of the study.

Ensuring rigour in a qualitative study is necessary, which is different from the process in quantitative research. The most appropriate criterion for evaluating qualitative studies is trustworthiness, which is assessed by four requirements, namely transferability, credibility, confirmability, and dependability (Maher et al., 2018). *Transferability* refers to the findings having the ability to be transferred to other settings or contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Maher et al., 2018). *Credibility* refers to evaluating whether the study measures what it aimed to measure and whether the findings accurately reflect the participants' social realities (Maher et al., 2018). This was done through prolonged engagement with the participants, building trust and following up on misunderstandings (Creswell & Poth, 2016). *Dependability* involves describing the research process in great detail in order for work to be replicated by other researchers (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Maher et al., 2018). This also allows for excellent transferability. *Confirmability* involves recognising the researcher bias that may be present in the study, which is similar to objectivity in quantitative research (Maher et al., 2018). The current study adhered to the above framework to produce a rigorous research process; as the study can be applied to various contexts, it measured what it intended and received accurate and in-depth insights from participants. Other researchers can repeat it, and research bias was considered throughout the process.

Reflexivity

It is vital to be cognisant of the fact that the fair collection and interpretation of data can be influenced by many factors, including aspects of interaction with participants in the study, presuppositions developed while reading literature, and a researcher's emotional involvement with the subject of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The nature of the data and the analytic process used in qualitative research, such as this study, is grounded in subjectivity and can often be influenced by researcher bias. To address assumptions and biases due to personal life experiences of interactions with participants, researchers usually take a reflexive approach to deal with these aspects. Self-reflexivity involves individuals being observant of themselves through self-monitoring and self-knowledge, being self-aware and having agency of that self-awareness (Pagis, 2009). There are many ways in which researchers can practice self-reflexivity. One way to practice self-reflexivity is to consult with peer researchers, who can reflect on the researchers' reactions to the research process or propose alternative interpretations of the data (Morrow, 2005). This is beneficial as it allows for multiple perspectives and interpretations of the data, illuminating new information and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Another valuable approach is for the researcher to keep a self-reflexive journal from the onset till the end of the study, where they record all their reactions, emotions, experiences, or awareness of any biases or assumptions that come to light during the study (Morrow, 2005). This is beneficial as it allows the researcher to examine and appropriately address these. Researchers should focus on developing self-knowledge, better understand how the self is involved in creating knowledge, practice self-monitoring of personal experiences, beliefs, and biases, and maintain a balance between the universal and the

personal (Berger, 2015). The researcher's characteristics, such as age, gender, sexual orientation, personal experiences, language, beliefs, biases, ideological and political viewpoints, and so forth, can impact the study (Berger, 2015). For example, female students may be more comfortable discussing specific experiences with another female. Throughout the study, I actively engaged in reflexivity as a crucial step of the research process. This was accomplished in various ways, such as continuous introspection, self-awareness, and reflection on my role as the researcher and how my own beliefs, perspectives, experiences, and biases have influenced the design of the study, the implementation, and the interpretation of the findings and discussion. The self-awareness of my role did not come from a position of power but from a place of openness and curiosity, allowing me to absorb the diverse perspectives shared by the participants. Additionally, although not practised from the onset of the study, I kept a reflective journal to keep track of my evolving thoughts, insights, and emotions, which allowed me to identify moments of subjectivity during interviews with participants or interpretation of the findings. Although complete eradication of researcher subjectivity cannot be accomplished (Creswell, 2009), I attempted to enhance the study's rigour and transparency and maintain the outcomes' trustworthiness and credibility by engaging in these steps. These are some of the aspects that the study addressed throughout the process to ensure the success of the study.

Apart from the study's general limitations, I faced some challenges as a researcher. Initially, I found it difficult to follow the participant's story as I was focused on answering the interview questions I had prepared. However, I quickly learnt that allowing the interviewee to share their experiences and probing and directing occasionally gave

more in-depth data to the research. Hearing some of the participants' experiences was also challenging, as they were accounts I had experienced personally as well. For example, similarly to several participants, being the eldest daughter in my family resulted in increased responsibility and early parentification. Additionally, after my parents' separation, there was a period where my mother relied heavily on me for emotional support, which was shared by several participants within the study. However, ethical boundaries were adhered to, as I had to be aware of not being overwhelmed by the story and maintaining objectivity. Some interviewees were more challenging than others, as they would stray away from the topic or try to educate me on a particular topic. I found it difficult to pause them or direct their attention back to the interview. From my academic position, being a psychology student may have influenced the study in several ways, such as entering the study with prior knowledge of psychological concepts and a solid theoretical foundation, shaping the interview questions and the interpretation of the study's findings (Creswell, 2009). Based on my own upbringing, there are experiences that I have reflected on and made sense of in relation to how these have psychologically impacted myself and my siblings. For example, after my parents' divorce, I took on the role of being an additional parent in the household, which resulted in the assumption that several participants would share the same experience. These are some of the ideas and assumptions I needed to be aware of during the interview process, to remain objective and avoid generalisability. Additionally, adopting the position of a person of colour may have influenced the study in several ways. My background may have influenced the assumptions or meaning-making about participants' experiences, requiring a strong awareness. Participants from similar ethnic or racial backgrounds may have perceived

me as more relatable, influencing their openness, which may work contrastingly with participants from different backgrounds. This was observed more clearly from a position of gender, as a female researcher the female participants generally found it easier to open up and share their experiences, while the male participants required additional probing in-between questions. It is possible that these may not influence the research process; however, it is vital to be aware of these aspects. Overall, gender, language, age, beliefs, and ideologies did not appear to infringe on the process significantly.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the outline of the study's methodology has been provided. This chapter has addressed the research questions that guide the study before moving on to the methods used throughout the study to gain participants, collect data, and analyse that data. Firstly, the research design or paradigm has been discussed to highlight the interpretivist framework of the study and its qualitative nature. Secondly, the participant characteristics were described, as well as the methods used to gain the participants for the study. Following was the data collection procedure, which outlines the methods used to reach the participants and how the data was collected from them. Furthermore, the instruments and measures used were outlined. Following, the ethical considerations for the study were outlined clearly. Then, the methods used for data analysis were discussed, including what data is analysed and the tools used. Lastly, a section on reflexivity was included, which highlighted the importance of being aware of the researcher's emotional involvement in the study and other factors that may be influential.

Chapter 5. Findings and Discussion

Introduction

This chapter integrates the findings and the discussion of the study. The results were gathered and interpreted using a thematic analysis approach, which allowed for systematically identifying recurring patterns and themes while exploring emerging adults' experiences. The rigorous and iterative process ensured the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, as there was constant engagement in comparison and interpretation. Situated within an interpretivist paradigm, the study acknowledged the importance of individual interpretations and subjective experiences when exploring the impacts of family structure change, allowing for a deeper understanding of the emerging adults' experiences, perceptions, and long-term impact. The discussion of each theme in this chapter integrates relevant literature. Additionally, it draws from the study's theoretical framework while allowing room for the researcher's critical voice. This permits a comprehensive analysis of the findings, highlighting similarities and differences with previous research, identifying potential avenues for future studies, and embracing a transparent and reflexive discussion. Hence, the chapter provides insight into the multifaceted and complex nature of changes in family structure and their perceived impact on emerging adults.

Overview of the Themes

Four main themes were identified, and these are illustrated and discussed in this chapter to highlight the different aspects of changes in family structure and the respective

consequences: 1) The pre-change family context; 2) The journey of family structure change; 3) The immediate impact of family structure change; and 4) Long-term reflections on family structure change and ACEs. The main themes include sub-themes representing the different elements of the data, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the findings and answers to previously highlighted research questions. An overview of the main themes and subthemes is presented in the table below.

Table 2. Themes and Subthemes of the Study

Themes	**Subthemes**
1) The pre-change family context	1.1) Family dynamics and structure before the transformation 1.2) Adverse childhood experiences prior to family structure change
2) The journey of family structure change	- No subthemes
3) The immediate impact of family structure change	3.1) Family structure change as a catalyst for ACEs 3.2) Positive outcomes amidst family structure change
4) Long-term reflection on family structure change and ACEs	4.1) Long-term impact of ACEs and family structure change 4.2) Positive perceptions and reflections of emerging adults on the change and ACEs

The Pre-change Family Context

Before any significant changes occur, the family dynamics and structure are essential to understand before engaging with the consequences of changes and adversities. This

provides more valuable insights into the experiences and perceptions of emerging adults after changes have occurred. Predominantly, the participants began their lives in a nuclear family structure, often described as “normal” or “traditional” families throughout the interviews. This highlighted significant social and cultural perceptions and beliefs around family, which are also highlighted in other literature (Allen & Henderson, 2022; Budlender, 2010). Hence, the emerging adults established their initial understandings of familial roles and relationships within this family context.

It is important to note that the pre-change family dynamics and experiences were not uniform across all the participants. Some emerging adults reported positive experiences within their nuclear family structures, while others expressed already encountering adverse childhood experiences. These experiences often varied in nature and intensity, ranging from absent parents and parental conflict to abuse and neglect. These diverse experiences shaped the emerging adults’ expectations and perceptions as they journeyed through the process of family structure change.

Within this overarching theme were two sub-themes, which describe the family dynamics and structure before any changes and the emerging adults’ experiences within their initial family structure. This is discussed further in the following sections to gain deeper insight into the initial experiences of the participants.

Family dynamics and structure before the transformation

The emerging adults’ understandings and experiences of their family dynamics and structures before any significant changes were diverse and varied. While there were

similarities, such as the initial presence of nuclear family structures, there were also other experiences of extended families or unofficial single-mother households where the mothers were parenting. At the same time, father figures worked away from home.

Several participants originally came from nuclear family structures:

> So first to nine was pretty much early childhood, um, was normal in terms of my parents being married and living in the same house (Francine).

Similarly, this was shared by other participants:

> I used to have a mom and a dad with siblings; there were seven of us until 2011 (Jane).

However, Katlego shared a different perspective on a nuclear family structure:

> The only like biological family I ever had were my mom and my dad. And my parents were, they were together for 30-something years, uh, and they were never married. Like not once. They were just together. (Katlego).

The response from Katlego illustrates the cohabitation family structures. Interestingly, Simphiwe reported experiences living with extended family members before any significant changes occurred:

> It was my mother, father, sister, and me. That was mostly it from what I can remember. And then, at some point, we started living with my grandfather from my father's side. Then, we were living with my grandmother, I think, still, from my father's side, a bit hazy, but that was the general structure. (Simphiwe).

There was also this occurrence of unofficial single-mother households, where there was a nuclear family, but the father figure worked away from home. This is illustrated by Ofentse:

> Okay, so basically, my dad has always been somebody who works away from home, in other like African countries. So, obviously, it kind of felt like my mom was a single parent years before she actually became one. (Ofentse).

Similar reports were found in other the interviews:

> My daddy used to work very far from home, but he would be there on weekends and made sure that he was there on weekends. (Jane).

Apart from the general descriptions of the pre-change family structure, the participants also expressed certain social and cultural norms that embody family dynamics and structure (Allen & Henderson, 2022; Khan, 2012), often referencing “normal” or “traditional” families:

> You know, I think there's definitely a very big portrayal in society and in social media and media in general, where there's the nuclear family, a mother or father and a bunch of kids in a white picket fence and living their lives. (Bianca).

Similar ideas were also expressed by Lesedi; however, they also emphasised the importance of recognising diverse family structures:

> I guess it is different from the normal family where children have both parents, but it is not different from other families that are single-mom families or single-dad families.

The above excerpts from the interviews highlight the importance of recognising the diverse family structures that exist in South Africa. The historical changes under apartheid, which continue to this day, have shaped the family dynamics and structures within the country (Khan, 2012). These various processes and events include colonisation, urbanisation, labour migration, and socioeconomic difficulties, resulting in family structures such as nuclear families, single-parent families, extended families, and cohabiting families (Amoateng & Heaton, 2007).

The presence of nuclear families, where both parents were married and lived in the same household, was a typical family structure among the participants, at least as the initial family structure. This was evident among most participants and often expressed as the “normal” family structure, which indicates the perceived commonness of this family structure. Rabe and Naidoo (2015) found that the nuclear family structure was common in South Africa. According to Ziehl (2002), many Black South African families do live in nuclear family structures (Ziehl, 2002).

The existence of cohabiting families, where unmarried parents live in the same household, was revealed in the findings. This is also quite a common family structure (Budlender, 2010; Singh, 2008) and often continued for several years, as expressed by Katlego. This highlights an alternative family structure that differs from the “normal” nuclear family structure. The development of cohabiting families is increasingly becoming a common family structure, and its existence in South Africa highlights the diversity of families in the country (Amoateng & Heaton, 2007; Rabe & Naidoo, 2015).

The extended family structure was an interesting finding as an initial family structure, as according to the literature, extended families are often formed after a significant change in family dynamics. For example, a single mother typically turns to her extended family after a divorce for emotional and financial support (Brody & Flor, 1988; Koketso et al., 2019). Khan (2012) highlighted that culture also played a role here, as the Indian families in South Africa increasingly supported the extended family structures due to social and economic challenges. The extended family structure encouraged extra sources of income and support within the family network. A study of families in Kwa-Zulu Natal, Durban, found that extended families were viewed as either a matter of

convenience or inconvenience by all those who were a part of that structure (Singh, 2008). These experiences during childhood shaped and determined the values and choices internalised and made after marriage, especially in terms of living arrangements (Singh, 2008).

Furthermore, some participants expressed being part of unofficial single-mother family structures, where the father figure was often absent due to occupational commitments. Single-mother families are an essential aspect of this study; hence, it was interesting to discover how these were initial family structures for some participants. This finding highlighted the historical legacy of fathers leaving their families for job opportunities in South Africa (Sooryamoorthy & Makhoba, 2016).

The “normal” or traditional family concept was also revealed as a significant finding in the interviews. This draws attention to portraying the nuclear family as the participants' typical or ideal family structure. This aligns with existing literature on family dynamics and diversity in South Africa (Russell, 2003; Sooryamoorthy & Makhoba, 2016; Ziehl, 2001), and it is vital to challenge this notion as the traditional nuclear family is just one among many diverse family structures in the country (Makiwane et al., 2017; Rabe & Naidoo, 2015). Jensen and Sanner (2021) shed light on the richness and complexity of modern families by exploring diverse family structures while challenging the notion of “normal” or traditional nuclear families. They highlight the importance of acknowledging and understanding different family structures within society (Jensen & Sanner, 2021), which goes beyond the norm of nuclear families (Budlender, 2010). Their work aligns with the emphasis on family diversity and inclusivity seen by Allen and Henderson (2022), who explored family theorising from a social justice perspective, challenging the notion of the

“normal” nuclear family. Russell et al. (2022) similarly acknowledge structurally diverse families' unique needs and experiences, embracing an inclusive perspective and highlighting its importance. This study highlights that societal norms are evolving, and family research must adopt a more inclusive perspective (Makiwane et al., 2017; Russell et al., 2022).

This discussion on the family structures before any significant changes highlights that the nuclear family structure was initially present; however, there was diversity in family dynamics, even in the initial phases of family development. The existence of nuclear, cohabiting, extended, and unofficial single-mother families displays the various structures of the participants. Acknowledging the family structures the participants initially came from to understand their experiences fully is essential. The unfolding of these structures and the subsequent experiences are discussed below.

Adverse childhood experiences prior to family structure change

The findings on adverse childhood experiences prior to changes in family structure revealed a range of different and intriguing experiences encountered by the participants. They expressed positive and negative experiences in their early childhood, highlighting the complex dynamics and impacts involved during this influential developmental stage. The findings also highlighted that childhood adversity was experienced even before significant structural changes occurred, resulting from many different factors. Excerpts from the interviews provided evidence of these adversities.

Some participants expressed that their childhood was distressing, with diverse accounts of childhood adversity, including family instability, abuse, parental conflict, financial instability, and negative perceptions of the father figure:

> Um, and my dad was about five years younger than my mum, and they were very unhappy in their marriage, and my father was physically abusive towards my mum. Um, and he was chronically lazy. He couldn't hold a job or support the family in any way, and most of my experience when he was at the house was loan sharks coming to repossess stuff and him hitting my mum, and it was a really unhealthy relationship. (Bianca).

Similar experiences were reported by Katlego:

> My mom tried to compensate for all of like the bad things that happened … uh, my parents didn't have the most stable relationship; my dad was was um ok so my dad had a gambling problem um he was an alcoholic he ok uh he was also sort of like a drug addict kind of thing. Um, so and because of all of that, my mom didn't want me to be affected by that, I guess, so I was pretty spoiled because of all of that. (Katlego).

Physical abuse emerged as an adverse childhood experience reported by the participants. Simphiwe highlighted the frequency of this abuse and the secrecy that accompanied it within the household:

> But my father would come home, get an extension cable. And we used to get beaten with extensive cables. So, he'll beat me up, beat my sister, beat my mom and they'll, they'll be like marks and stuff. And then the next day, when we had to go to school to cover up the marks and all that. That was the abuse that happened quite frequently, very frequently, actually. (Simphiwe).

While Bianca highlighted frequent physical abuse, she also expressed discomfort and anxiety often present due to the family dynamics within the dysfunctional nuclear family structure. This account revealed that there were harmful experiences of family life within the "normal" family structure:

> Um, when they were together it was a lot of fighting, a lot of abuse, a lot of discomfort, a lot of anxiety all the time. (Bianca).

Similarly, Katlego expressed that not only was there abuse, but there was also neglect, which consequently resulted in risky behaviour:

> Um yeah ok so basically, when I was a kid like, my parents did not pay that much attention to me; they, like, they gave me a lot of like free will, like I had a lot of free will and so on so um meaning that and like my mom had like sort of like club-ish like kind of place so that also influenced a lot of my behaviour when I was a kid. (Katlego).

Katlego expressed multiple experiences of neglect:

> My dad used to like since he was like a gambling addict and so on, he used to like to take me to his like the casino he used to go to and like there were moments where he lost me, and security had to find him and so on. (Katlego).

Similarly, experiences of neglect were shared by other participants as well:

> And my dad was living at the house. And I had, like, drawn him a picture of something. And he and my mom had a massive fight. And my mom was crying, and I took her a teddy bear and some tissues, and she was sobbing. And my dad went to storm out of the house, and I gave him the picture that I had drawn, and he threw it on the floor and left. (Bianca).

Some participants also reported neglectful parenting when it came to their mental health:

> I was going through my depression, like severe depression I wanted to kill myself - my dad literally- I was like looking for something, and he was like what are you doing so I was like no I wanna die and he's like, here you go, and he gave me a knife. He was like here you go, and threw it down; like what, what parent says that to their child? (Lesedi).

Interestingly, the initial idolisation of parental figures was revealed in the interviews. This explicitly related to father figures, who were initially perceived as sources of love and support during childhood, while mother figures were viewed as hostile and disciplinary.

Participants expressed feelings of guilt and confusion as they uncovered hidden family dynamics, highlighting the complex emotions associated with these parent-child relationships:

> Since I was a child I idol I practically idolised my father like he was my role model I loved him with, like, I was a daddy's girl, basically. When I was a kid, I thought that my dad loved me; he was always there for me whenever, like, um, whenever I had a tennis match or something, he was always there for me. My mom, on the other hand, was always at work. (Katlego).

Other participants expressed similar accounts:

> Well, I was essentially more closer to my father, my mother and I; for some reason, we had quite a few issues with me growing up. And so, when my dad would come down, I would feel comforted by having him around, because my mom and I did not have that relationship at the time. (Ofentse).

Katlego also highlighted the presence of guilt that came up because of these dynamics:

> So then that really affected the relationship I had with my dad and then it also made me feel guilty because I felt like I wasn't giving my mom the enough credit because no one really ever gave her enough appreciation for all of the things that she ever did. For the fact that she dealt with my dad who also was abusive to her emotionally and physically. (Katlego).

Conversely, there were positive family experiences expressed by some participants as well. There were reports of warm and loving home environments, with family time and fond memories, which encouraged in a stronger sense of emotional security and togetherness:

> It was actually great. We were growing up um in a home where there is a mom and a dad you know when it's teatime everyone was there, and it was full of life it was warm. It was fun. You know I felt protected. Yeah. (Jane).

This was also expressed by Ofentse, as the initial experience of family dynamics:

> So, before my parents split up…, you know, everything was as normal... And it was generally a happy family situation; my parents would sometimes bicker, but it was really quite harmonious. (Ofentse).

Other participants reported similar accounts of family time, and the ideas of “normal” family structure continued throughout:

> So, what I remember from that like experience from birth to nine was a lot of family time. We spent a lot of time together travelling cause we all had a passion well my mom and my dad had a passion for travelling um which was obviously passed onto me, so I developed my passion for traveling. It was a pretty normal like it it felt normal- it felt ok. (Francine).

In contrast to the previous accounts, there were more positive perceptions of father figures. There were cases where father figures brought support and a sense of security:

> Okay, um, so financially, we were very secure. My father is a chartered accountant. So, he was bringing stability for us. (Ofentse).

Similar experiences were reported by other participants, such as Ofentse, who was part of a household, where her father worked away from home:

> Well, I didn’t feel I didn’t feel so much of a problem because I know who will be there and when he’s there he would give us time, he would give us money for food. We would be ok; we would be ok, and he would communicate with us on a daily basis. (Jane).

The findings presented above highlighted the diverse range of ACEs experienced by these emerging adults in childhood before any changes in family structure had occurred. These experiences involved abuse, family instability, financial instability, parental conflict, violence, and differing perspectives of fathers, which included both moments of idolisation and negative views.

Several participants reported experiencing family instability and parental conflict within their households prior to changes in family structure. These experiences created uncertainty and emotional turmoil for these participants as they grew up, which is revealed later in the study. This was an interesting finding, especially since several participants reported that their initial family structure was a nuclear family. Existing literature often describes the nuclear family as the most stable and secure (Sear, 2021; Singh, 2008); hence, these accounts contradict what is deemed “normal” and expected within society. This is important for family studies as it highlights how family disruptions may occur early in child development and how their impact can be tracked from the onset (Bonner et al., 2020; Frankenhuis & Amir, 2022). Here, limited conceptions of everyday family life as being nuclear may function to hinder necessary and healthy forms of family change. Fomby and Cherlin (2007) explored the impact of family instability on children, revealing that this may result in emotional distress, behavioural problems, and academic and relationship difficulties. They also highlight that family instability disrupts stable family environments, changes in household structure, and loss of parental support.

Some participants also reported abuse and neglect within the pre-change family context, although abuse was more prominent in the pre-change family environment. The experiences of physical and emotional abuse were personal, as well as witnessed intimate partner violence (IPV). IPV is a common occurrence in the initial family structures that children live in within the South African context, which results in a greater risk of emotional distress, physical harm, and psychological trauma (Joyner et al., 2015). Throughout the interviews, the participants expressed that they would often witness their mothers being abused by their fathers, which significantly contributed to negative

perspectives of their fathers (Øverlien, 2010). Importantly, this may reflect the high rates of intimate partner violence in South Africa (Chandler et al., 2017). Some participants expressed that they found out about incidents of abuse later in their lives, which encouraged a sense of guilt, especially if they did not have a good relationship with their mothers in their early years. Abuse harms child development, as it may lead to low self-esteem, trauma, and difficulties in forming and maintaining healthy relationships (Roman & Frantz, 2013). Hence, it is essential to acknowledge the occurrence of these experiences in early childhood and monitor their impact in later life.

Financial instability was another recurring theme within participants' initial family structures. Existing literature focuses significantly on the financial instability and challenges that occur after a change in family structure, such as those within single-parent families (Akanle et al., 2018; Barnett, 2008; Raniga et al., 2019), and less on these difficulties before these changes. Reflecting on the ideas of "normal" nuclear families, there is often the assumption that having both parents involved brings financial stability. However, this is not always the case, as evident from the participants' experiences. Another interesting finding was that the father figures were not always the household's breadwinners and sole financial providers, corresponding to existing literature (Akanle et al., 2018). This is another significant indication that family dynamics and gender roles have changed in recent years. This was highlighted in a thought-provoking article by Sear (2021), which challenges the notion of the male breadwinner and argues that it is not as universal as often presumed. In several African countries, women are increasingly becoming breadwinners due to multiple factors, such as male migration and economic disadvantages (Akanle et al., 2018; Kabeer, 2013). Parry and Segalo (2017) highlight that

South Africa is no exception, as women often take on this role while facing societal disapproval and resistance due to gender norms and expectations. This shift in gender dynamics poses difficulties not only for females but men as well, as they face feelings of inadequacy or emasculation, which results in complex adjustments and potential conflicts within the family structure (Mathur-Helm, 2006; Parry & Segalo, 2017; Poortman & Van Der Lippe, 2009). Hence, financial and economic hardship encourages stress and strain within the household, which can result in increased parental conflict and psychological distress (Huth-Bocks & Hughes, 2008). Subsequently, this enables childhood adversities (Mackler et al., 2015), such as child neglect, which the participants also reported. The FSM becomes helpful in understanding the family dynamics that unfold during these challenging periods. It can aid in understanding its overall impact on development, as children exposed to high economic stress, chaotic households, and disruptive parenting practices may present with behavioural and emotional difficulties, academic challenges, and physical health problems (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Mackler et al., 2015; Masarik & Conger, 2017). Sear (2021) provides a fresh perspective on family dynamics, recognising the diversity of family structures and the potential adverse consequences of perpetuating the myth of male breadwinner nuclear families, which the current study highlights while raising awareness of the potential impacts these have on child development.

With this in mind, the study also highlighted the initial perspectives that the participants had of their paternal and maternal figures. Interestingly, there were both positive and negative accounts of the parental figures reported by the participants. Some reported negative views about their fathers, expressing witnessing and experiencing physical and emotional abuse and the absence and laziness of their fathers, while others

mentioned idolising their fathers and receiving financial and emotional support from them compared to their mothers, who were always busy (Krampe, 2009; Palkovitz, 2019). This highlights an interesting contradiction of societal norms, where the mother is viewed as the parent who provides support and care, which underlies inequality in the distribution of labour in childcare (Poortman & Van Der Lippe, 2009). Many participants, especially the female participants, reported that they did not have the best relationship with their mothers and expressed much guilt around this, as previously discussed. This highlights the contrasting views of maternal figures, as disciplinarians and victims of abuse and exploitation, from the participants. The contrasting experiences shed light on the complex parent-child relationships, even before significant changes occurred.

The findings above shed light on the importance of recognising the multi-faceted nature of the initial family structures and ACEs and their potential consequences.

The following section discusses the process of family structure change to gain deeper insight into what these experiences were like for the participants.

The Journey of Family Structure Change.

This theme engages with the process of family structure change experienced by the participants. Here, the focus is on the significant transformations that occurred within the family, such as single parenthood, divorce, co-habitation and parenting, the role of extended families, the occurrences of re-partnering, and other significant changes that represent a shift from the initial family structure and its dynamics. This theme highlights

the changes in composition, relationships, and roles within the family (Manyema & Richter, 2019).

The emerging adults' subjective experiences of the process are explored to gain a deeper understanding of the adjustments they were confronted by and how they made sense of the changes. An element of comparison repeated throughout the interviews as individuals reflected on the differences and similarities between their experiences and those of others. This allowed for valuable insights into how the participants had journeyed through the changes while reflecting on and learning from the process and the world around them.

Single-mother households were a common significant change revealed throughout the interviews, as in other studies (Mbanefo, 2013). This is often followed from the separation of parents or divorce:

> My parents were separated and formally divorced in 2009. And then my mom stayed on well I lived with my mom then my mom, my sister and I lived with my mom then. (Francine).

Simphiwe expressed that there was quite an abrupt separation between the parents:

> And then my father basically became abusive. And then eventually, he kicked us out of his house. It was me, my mother and my sister who got kicked out. That was like in 2010. I was like nine years old, yea I was nine. That's 2010. Yeah. And then that's when it just became a single-parent household. (Simphiwe).

Other participants also highlighted that their parents initially separated before they divorced:

> So, in 2015, my parents got divorced, but they had already split up in 2011. (Ofentse).

While some parents went through a formal divorce without any initial separation period:

> Yes, they were married, and then they had a divorce. Um, they had a divorce. They didn't just separate; it was a formal divorce. (Lesedi).

The occurrence of the single-mother household revealed itself with all the study participants. After a divorce, the participants reported living with their mothers. Although there were some cases where the participants lived with their fathers for a short time but eventually came to live with their mothers:

> I was about- I didn't know that my mom suffered from depression, um and therefore, my dad used it against her in court to get custody of my sister, and of course, my mom had a mental breakdown. Uh, so yeah, and he used that against her, and my dad got custody of my sister and I. (Francine).

Francine highlighted that the divorce and custody process was not always seamless and harmless. She expressed that they initially lived with their mother after the divorce; however, after the custody battle, they lived with their father for a short time. A change in environment often occurs during this process. Other participants reported similar experiences of custody arrangements; however, most reported joint custody between parents:

> They got divorced when I was about six. Um, and for a while they had joint custody where I would see my dad on weekends. I stayed with my mum. (Bianca).

Another significant finding was the role of extended family, new partners, and stepfamilies. Several participants mentioned these changes in structure at least once during their childhood:

> My dad is also a professional hunter part time so like when he was away on safaris, and it was his weekend, or like his days, we would go to my aunt's house or his sister. She's also like my godmother, um and I think she tried to like kinda keep a routine family structure in place because ours was so broken, you could say. (Francine).

Francine highlighted the helpful role of extended family in cases where parents were divorced, separated, or absent. Other participants shared similar experiences:

> Um, and my grandmother moved in with us when I was about ten to help out with me and school trips. Up until that point, I still kind of had a relationship with my dad. It was rocky, but it was there. (Bianca).

Lesedi revealed that multiple changes in family structure could occur, in other words, moving from a nuclear to an extended family, then to a stepfamily:

> Um, I lived with my dad for like two years, two-three years, then lived with my mom and grandmother from three till eight, and then from eight until I was 14 and lived with my mom and stepdad, and then at 14 I lived with my mom and grandma again. (Lesedi).

Apart from the existence of extended families, the participants also expressed encounters with stepfamilies:

> Um they both got remarried I lived with my dad for a while so going from a not like just my sister, my mom and my dad to now a blended family with a stepmom, two younger stepsisters and my sister and my dad. Um, so going from like four to six is is quite a big jump. (Francine).

Similarly, Katlego expressed the emergence of stepfamilies, and she also slowly lost contact with her father, which is discussed later concerning the adversities that accompany family structure change:

> My dad lives in Ethiopia with his new wife, and I think they have a child- I'm not sure, um, but and her children. So, my step-siblings. I've never met them, and I never really wanted to meet them. (Katlego).

This corresponds to the experiences of Bianca:

> Then, when I was about eight, he got a girlfriend, and he was very abusive towards her. She had kids, and he kind of shifted his focus on those kids entirely. (Bianca).

The participants' responses revealed that there were often other losses that accompanied the loss of the nuclear family structure, such as loss of contact and communication with parents or financial stability. While these are discussed later on, it is essential to note that these typically occur after the change in family structure.

Contrastingly, some participants remained in a single-parent household:

> So now, so I grew up mostly with my mom. And with with seeing my dad occasionally, like, once every two months or so. (Gabe).

The journey of family structure change revealed in the interviews was a complex and intricate process that shaped the functioning of families and the lives of individuals. In South Africa, the structure of families has evolved over the years due to various social, cultural, and economic factors, as described by the participants. Sooryamoorthy and Makhoba (2016) and Makiwane et al. (2017) delve into this in their study on families in the context of the country's evolving social landscape. Ziehl (2001) also highlights this well in a data-driven study that provided information on evolving family dynamics, such as marriage patterns, household structures, and living arrangements. This discussion explores the experiences of emerging adults as they journeyed through the transformations in their family dynamics, focusing on evidence that came out of the interviews, such as divorce and custody battles, the emergence of extended families, the presence of new partners and stepfamilies, as well as loss of communication with parental figures. The purpose behind unravelling these experiences is to better understand how families changed and how emerging adults made sense of these changes.

From the excerpts above, it is revealed that divorce and custody battles were crucial events in moulding the emerging adult's family structure journey. Hence, the divorce or separation process significantly impacted their living arrangements and, often, the relationships they shared with their parental figures. The findings from the interviews aligned with existing literature on the disruptive nature of divorce, as the experiences shared by the participants highlighted the challenges, complexities, and instabilities established during and afterwards. Manyema and Richter (2019) touch on this in their study on the prevalence and factors related to ACEs; however, they do not give a detailed account of divorce as a potential risk factor for children. Additionally, they adopt a quantitative approach, making gaining deeper insights into the participants' experiences challenging. The emerging adults expressed that these changes influenced how they perceived and interacted with their parents and other family members, as roles and relationships changed and often resulted in limited or no communication with one parent. Interestingly, from the findings, father figures were often viewed negatively after the divorce, and contact slowly became scarce when the father entered into a new relationship and created a new family. The absence of father figures may be attributed to different types of absence, such as fathers not being present or involved, fathers not living in the same household, fathers who work far away and travel, fathers who are incarcerated, or fathers who have passed on (Padi et al., 2014).

The participants' experiences highlighted the presence of extended family structures after family change. Many participants expressed living arrangements with their grandparents or had their grandparents actively involved in their childhood years. This was quite an important finding as extended family structures, especially those involving

grandparent figures, are vital in South Africa (Amoateng & Richter, 2003; Sooryamoorthy & Makhoba, 2016). Here, the role of grandparents as parental figures is quite common, often attributed to cultural reasons (Nyasani et al., 2009; Mtshali, 2015). This highlights the significance of extended family support in changing family structures, especially when single-mother families are involved (Makiwane et al., 2017). This speaks to the importance of reinforcing family ties and intergenerational relationships. For the study, this also highlights how family support can make a significant difference to single-mother households. Additionally, the emergence of a parent's new partner and the inclusion of stepfamilies was another significant change revealed from the interviews. These events also brought their dynamics and complexities, with most participants reporting negative experiences during the changes. Several emerging adults expressed challenges adjusting to the new family dynamics, with some not wanting any relationship with stepfamily members and revealing strained relationships. This corresponds to research by Dunn (2002) on the adjustment of children in stepfamilies. The study illustrates the complexities of stepfamily dynamics and sheds light on the stressors that children experience, such as stepsiblings, new parental figures, and changes in family roles (Cartwright, 2005; Dunn, 2002; Pasqualini et al., 2018). The participants have similarly highlighted these complexities and challenges. In contrast, the presence of new partners also offered opportunities for emotional support and other positive experiences (Dunn, 2002). These experiences further draw attention to the evolving nature of family structures in South Africa and the diverse journeys through which families come together.

With the above in mind, several emerging adults expressed that there was limited or no communication with one parental figure after the change in family structure. For the

participants, it was often found that the father figure was the one who drifted away and restricted communication and interactions, typically after the emergence of a new partner, as expressed by Participants 2 and 3 above.

This was also highlighted by Cartwright and Seymour (2002), where the participants experienced a loss of parental attention, which was associated with the emergence of a new partner in the parents' lives. Later in the chapter, I explore how this shaped the participants' perception of family relationships and how it impacted them emotionally. The lack of communication was experienced not only after the separation but also during the process, as participants shared that they were often excluded from decisions associated with changes in the family. Dunn et al. (2001) shed light on this by focusing on children's voices in these processes and events. This study found that most children whose parents had separated were never informed about the separation before it occurred (Cartwright, 2006; Dunn, 2002; Dunn et al., 2001). Cartwright and Seymour (2002) revealed that participants recalled feeling hurt, betrayed, or confused when their parents did not communicate about family changes. This was another vital factor this study highlighted, as this could contribute to adverse experiences (Dunn, 2002). This signals the importance of transparent communication and openness with children within the family dynamics, especially since the parent's psychological distress during these changes may harm the child's well-being in multiple ways (Huth-Bocks & Hughes, 2008).

This theme provided significant information towards the objectives of the current study. The experiences shared by the participants draw attention to the diverse and complex experiences that may be associated with changes in family structure within South Africa. The existence of separated families, extended families, new partners, and

stepfamilies adds complexity to the concept of family structures, emphasising the importance of challenging the idea of “normal” or traditional nuclear families (Budlender, 2010; Russell et al., 2022). This part of the study highlights the importance of understanding the family structure journey before delving straight into adverse childhood experiences, as this provides valuable insights into the diverse processes the emerging adults go through and make sense of. Hence providing a more profound understanding behind the negative and positive impacts the emerging adults shared about their subjective experiences.

The Immediate Impact of Family Structure Change.

This theme explores the immediate impacts of family structure changes on emerging adults' lives. This includes exploring significant changes, such as altered family structure, divorce, relocation, re-partnering, relationship dynamics, and other key changes that influence their well-being and overall experiences. While most studies investigated the negative impact of changes in family structures, this study highlights the negative and positive outcomes that emerge, emphasising their complexity for the participants.

Within this theme, two subthemes emerged throughout the interpretation of the data, which explores the adverse childhood experiences linked to family structure change and the positive outcomes that had occurred. There were multiple potential risks and vulnerabilities that emerged throughout the interviews, such as abuse, neglect, intimate partner violence, and other disruptions due to conflict and changes in the family. However, there was room for potential positive changes and growth, such as the reoccurring

expression of improved mother-child relationships in the data. This theme aims to provide a balanced perspective on the multifaceted consequences immediately after changes in family structure, attempting to answer the question of emerging adults' understandings of the impact of family structure change and their experience of ACEs.

Family structure change as a catalyst for ACEs

There were multiple difficulties and adverse experiences that the participants shared, the majority of whom reported instances of neglect after family structure change:

> Um, I think I felt pretty neglected, and my mum at the same time was working really long hours, so I didn't really have a parent, um, for a lot of it. In a lot of ways, I kind of raised myself and tried to make sense of what was happening and why I was feeling the way I was feeling, and I couldn't always figure that out, so it definitely caused a lot of internal conflict. (Bianca).

Similarly, other participants reported the same occurrences, and these typically related to neglect by their mothers:

> Because she was not there, or she was not, trying to find out like as a as a girl child as you're growing as you're growing up what is it that you're going through this and all that. I I never got that opportunity. I never got to tell my mom about my first period because she was always busy or in her when she's saying, in her words she says that um the reason why I'm as hard-working as I am, is because I was teaching it was a way of teaching you. But then it went on to a point where I could see that now I can't really take it because we would be going days without eating or even having water. And for her, she would call it fasting. (Jane).

Lesedi also expressed instances of neglect after the divorce, but also concerning the decision behind the parental separation:

> After the divorce, I did feel a bit neglected. Because I felt like they made a decision based on themselves and neglected how we would feel and be affected by their decision. But I did feel neglected and isolated. (Lesedi).

Apart from the adverse experience of neglect after the change, some participants also shared instances of physical and emotional abuse:

> Eleven twelve years old. Um, I was taken to the family advocate um because, like there had been instances like throughout- during those those periods of time where like I would go like with to like my mom's house and she would, think it was also around twelve yeah 2010 I was around 12, and um she used to like try and beat us, and I used to make my sister get underneath the bunk bed, and I used to take the beatings. Um, so there was, like obviously physical abuse involved and then my dad was very um emotionally abusive. Um, so I had a kind of abuse on both sides, really. And then I was taken to a family advocate, and um, they told me at 12 years old, uh, you need to decide who you gonna live with. (Francine).

As in Berger (2004), these were shared experiences among children after a change in family structure, which also aligns with the FSM. Gabe highlights how her mother's psychological distress impacted her:

> But like, I think also, like, when she gets, like, when she got upset, she would become like, quite quite violent, and like, aggressive. So that was also a thing. So, it's like, you can't show too much emotion. Like you can't, like, on both ends, like you can't be too happy. Because then your happiness, we don't know. Or you can't be like too sad, because she's like, why are you sad and after having to having to deal with whatever, like emotional things, you're going through, with, like, upset her because then it adds something on her plate. (Gabe).

Similarly, shared by Simphiwe, whose mother continued the cycle of abuse they initially suffered from the father figure:

> Yeah. My mom was still, my mom became abusive at some point. Like, she kept up the habits of the practice of beating us with an extension cable. (Simphiwe).

The addition of new partners and stepfamilies was often a negative experience for the majority of the emerging adults. This involved uncomfortable living arrangements, loss of attention and communication, as well as financial difficulties after fathers started to restrict maintenance:

> It wasn't always that pleasant to live with my stepdad. I never liked staying with him, but, yeah, I just got to a point where I was like, I just need to accept that this is what we're going to stay. And then accepting it was hard, and then just after accepting it, we moved out. (Lesedi).

Other participants also reported similar experiences when their mothers entered new relationships, often expressing uncomfortable, chaotic, and abusive environments:

> And then my mother got into a relationship with an abusive alcoholic, more so psychologically abusive than physical. So that impacted the home environment… And he basically moved in; we expanded as he never went home… And so basically, when he would drink, he would get himself completely drunk, and then he would become very violent with my mom. (Ofentse).

Several of the participants shared limited or loss of contact and communication with their fathers after the emergence of a new partner or a new family to take care of:

> I was very close with him, but his priorities shifted to finding a new partner. Um, when that happened, I kind of fell by the waste side, and it was upsetting for me… Um, and I think a very pivotal moment in my life was my father deciding he didn't want to see me anymore… Um, and that on its own was tough, but my dad is a diagnosed narcissist, and in this process, I was in grade six, and he would phone me whilst I was at school and just remind me that he didn't want me. (Bianca).

Katlego shared similar experiences, significantly how the focus shifted to the new partner's children:

> Like, um, so when my dad was out of the house, he like uh, he started like um, he introduced me to one of like her children over the phone, and um he was like every time like he called or something he was always going out with her to like lunches and so on and things like that. And there was this one time like, um, I really needed a pair of shoes or something- it was for an event- it was for my birthday, it was for my birthday, and I really

> need- I wanted these like pair of shoes, and my like we got to the place and so on and my dad could barely like pay any attention to me for like ten like for like five minutes. (Katlego).

Interestingly, aligning with previous research, there were also reports of the mothers taking on the role of gatekeepers and restricting the contact the fathers could have with children (Cartwright, 2006):

> And I think after that because when my mom was given, like, full custody, my dad still wanted to be a part of our lives. But my mom was too, like very hesitant, like not hesitant. Very, what's the word? Not a fan of that idea. So, like, she would try to, like, prevent his involvement in our lives, like, the greater part of my childhood. (Gabe).

Furthermore, some participants shared that their fathers restricted maintenance money after the emergence of a new partner:

> And when that happened, he also refused to pay maintenance; he refused to pay anything towards me. So, our financial situation got more difficult. (Bianca).

This was similarly reported by Ofentse:

> And at that same time, he was still with this girlfriend of his. And we think that she was an influence in him beginning to cut down our maintenance money; we noticed that when we moved here, he suddenly got a lot stricter on the maintenance, which, you know, had started already in 2015. We experienced circumstances of having to move around. I've moved around maybe eight houses in the past six years. So, it was quite intense. And you know, like me trying to contact him. And he stopped replying to my messages. (Ofentse).

Several participants expressed financial difficulties in being part of a single-mother household:

> Okay, um, during, I guess, high school, there were things that, um, I needed, like things we needed, and my mum worked hard but still could not do them. But because my dad wasn’t really in the picture, or he could have helped, but in a way, either he didn’t want to help, or there was something that prevented him from helping or something like that. (Lesedi).

This was a commonly reported occurrence from many of the emerging adults:

> Financially? A bit? Yes. Um, because we sort of started seeing, like, a whole family in one room type of situation. Because, you know, my mom was trying to study and work at the same time, so she was still struggling on that aspect. So, like those financial challenges. (Simphiwe).

Another common experience was the element of maturing at a very young age and not getting to experience their childhood to the fullest:

> Yeah, yeah, absolutely. The pressure definitely intensified. It felt like I went from being a relatively normal kid to being someone who had to be an adult in an 11- or 12-year-olds body. (Bianca).

Gabe shared similar experiences, and she also expressed that gender roles were involved as well as fearing what the outcome would be if tasks are not competed:

> So, like, okay, okay, like, just seeing like how being forced to, like mature at a younger age, compared to like having more of a, for lack of a better term, more of a childhood, you know, because then you don't have to worry about stuff like, okay, who's gonna cook today? Oh, who's gonna clean? Or, like, what kind of mood is mom in? And like, what, what actions do we have to walk around? (Gabe).

The immediate negative impacts were the emotional and behavioural consequences resulting from the change in family structure. There were more emotional than behavioural repercussions:

> I internalised a lot of what I was feeling. So, I started self-harming when I was probably about 11. And then my kind of control issues shifted to food. So, I developed bulimia when I was about 13. And that lasted until I was about 17 or 18 and would kind of bounce and recur. And it was always kind of expected of me to be the model child and to do everything perfectly because there was this immense pressure of like you have a single mom, everything you want, everything you need, you have to work for yourself. So, I had to keep my academics. So, there was always a lot of pressure. And I didn't always know how to cope with it. So, I would, I guess, because I felt alone, I would punish myself for things. I became a lot more anxious, especially after my dad fully left my life. But I think it was just because of how he left, like how aggressively it was. And it felt very much like I had done

> something to make him not love me anymore. And that definitely ramped up the anxiety. (Bianca).

Other participants also expressed self-harming, academic difficulties and feelings of abandonment and rejection:

> And basically, my dad abandoning us and the repercussions, you know, the financial repercussions the, the loss of contact between him and I affected me very deeply; I became deeply depressed. To the point where I did commit self-harm to myself. And I was in a really dark place academically; I just didn't care. I would go to school basically and put in little effort. I didn't really care about my studies, and then throughout the years. So, 2016-2017 was basically, like, my worst year. It was when I was in grade nine, and I was still feeling rejected by my father. (Ofentse).

In contrast, Simphiwe did not share the emotional impact of the experience but expressed behavioural repercussions:

> But yeah, you know, the shoplifting started after we left. It started when I was still in my dad's house. The first time I got caught stealing was still my dad's house. I remember I still got beaten when I got home. And then, now, I got arrested for that one there. Now, another time. I got caught shoplifting at Checkers. (Simphiwe).

The excerpts above indicated that the negative impacts occurred after the change in family structure, either in relation to single-mother families or the emergence of new partners or stepfamilies. Parental separation and the subsequent changes in family structure and dynamics commonly exposed children to neglect as parents often experienced a shift in focus. This is mainly due to stress, financial challenges, and psychological distress, as explained in the FSM (Masarik & Conger, 2017). However, the participants revealed a shift with the emergence of the parent's new partners, stepfamilies, and a new family. This often resulted in children feeling neglected, abandoned, and rejected by this parent, who was usually a father figure. Child neglect

was a common adverse childhood experience reported in these situations, corresponding to previous literature (Kalmijn, 2015; Peters & Ehrenberg, 2008). Many studies highlight those children from divorced and single-parent households, especially single-mother families, have a higher likelihood of experiencing neglect (Berger, 2004). Neglect may be experienced in diverse ways, such as limited or lack of supervision, not providing basic needs, such as food and a safe environment, and harmful parenting practices (Low & Mount, 2022; Mackler et al., 2015). Several participants reported physical and emotional neglect from their parents. This study sheds light on how family structures have changed and how limited access to resources and support may contribute to child neglect.

Apart from child neglect, there were reports of child abuse and witnessing intimate partner violence from the participants. The stress and psychological distress that parents experience after changes in family dynamics increase children's vulnerability to negative experiences, and emotional and physical abuse is no exception (Ram & Hou, 2003; Ridings et al., 2017). After the separation, several participants reported emotional and physical abuse from their parents, mostly their mothers. Studies have highlighted the vulnerabilities of children from single-mother households (Ram & Hou, 2003), which correspond with these findings. Several participants expressed being physically beaten by their mothers, humiliated and insulted, blamed for all the challenges the family was experiencing, and manipulated. Additionally, intimate partner violence was another form of abuse that the participants shared, which shifted from being practised by the father to the new partner the mother was involved with (Huth-Bocks & Hughes, 2008). The abuse witnessed ranged from physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, and many reported that their mothers had endured it for a significant amount of time. In South Africa, many studies

have found that the prevalence of IPV is high, and family structure changes can alleviate or aggravate these difficulties.

The involvement of new partners and stepfamilies often leads to other adverse childhood experiences, such as the absence of parental figures (Peters & Ehrenberg, 2008). Several participants reported limited or loss of contact with their fathers after their parents divorced. This was attributed to the presence of a new partner or stepfamily as priorities shifted. Much research reveals that divorce is challenging for children, and the involvement of stepparents' is often increasingly tricky, significantly when it alters the parent-child relationship (Cartwright, 2005; Kalmijn, 2015). This is important as existing research focuses on the stepparent-child relationship, and less attention is drawn to the impact on the biological parent-child relationship. Interestingly, the findings revealed that the father-daughter relationship was most affected during these occurrences, possibly because these relationships are typically stronger than father-son or mother-daughter relationships (Byrd-Craven et al., 2012). Hence, several participants reported feelings of abandonment and rejection. The influence of stepfamilies was an interesting finding in the study, which is worthy of further exploration. Future studies may explore these families' role and impact on children, as they present unique cultural and social factors, which may expand knowledge in the South African context.

Financial challenges were also commonly reported by the participants after the change in family structure. This was commonly reported from those who were part of a single-mother household, which resulted in multiple adverse childhood experiences. Existing literature often explores the financial difficulties experienced by single mothers, especially those who were financially dependent on their partners before the separation

and those who struggled to find and keep employment (Koketso et al., 2019). There were also reports of financial difficulties, even when the father was paying maintenance to the mother, as this was often not enough money, or the father started restricting money after the involvement of a new partner and new family (Peters & Ehrenberg, 2008). Several participants reported that eventually, the father cut them out completely, relationally and financially, resulting in more severe financial challenges. This is an important finding, especially in South Africa, as economic inequalities and limited access to resources intensify these financial difficulties for single mothers (Bojuwoye & Sylvester, 2014). In South Africa, mothers often reach out to extended family networks for economic and social support (Makiwane et al., 2017; Sooryamoorthy & Makhoba, 2016), which corresponded to experiences shared by the participants. This is important to consider for policies and interventions to aid single-mother households.

Family structure changes often accelerate children's emotional maturation due to diverse stressors and increased responsibility (Bojuwoye & Sylvester, 2014). Several participants shared that they felt the pressure to mature faster and not get to experience their childhood as children. The emerging adults reported that their responsibilities increased, such as taking care of household responsibilities, themselves and their siblings, and the pressure to start thinking and behaving like adults instead of embracing the innocence and ignorance of childhood. Many studies have found that this premature transition into adulthood is quite prevalent in single-parent households, especially when it involves the role of a caregiver to siblings and parents, which may hinder social and emotional development. Hetherington (2005) speaks about how this manifests differently, taking on additional responsibilities or independently managing their daily routines and

personal needs. Additionally, this may have positive or negative implications. This was an interesting finding, as research revealed that child-headed households were quite prevalent in the South African context, and there is insufficient research to help us understand the dynamics at play in these families.

The interviews all revealed emotional and behavioural consequences for the emerging adults. There were immediate consequences, as well as long-term consequences. The participants expressed multiple emotional consequences that followed their change in family structure, such as anxiety, depression, abandonment, rejection, and several other mental health difficulties, as found elsewhere (D'Rozario & Pilkington, 2022; Lucas et al., 2013). Several studies have revealed that children from divorced or dysfunctional families experience a greater vulnerability to mental health issues and conduct problems, which may also persist into later adulthood and impact other areas of their lives (Lucas et al., 2013; Pasqualini et al., 2018). Some participants revealed behavioural effects, such as self-harming and self-sabotaging behaviours, and conduct problems, such as anger outbursts and shoplifting. Extensive research highlights these outcomes globally (Morrison et al., 2017), and this study aims to shed light on these issues within the South African context, with experiences shared directly by the participants.

In light of the research questions of the study and the FSM, the findings highlight the immediate negative impacts of changes in family structure on children in the South African context. The FSM assists in understanding how specific stressors (separation of parents) interact with family resources (emotional support and financial stability) and family interpretation to influence certain consequences for children (Mackler et al., 2015).

The immediate negative impact discussed in the study aligns with the concepts of this model. The emerging adults, as children, perceptions and understandings of the change in family structure, how they made sense of the reasons behind it, and their relationships with parental figures shaped their emotional and behavioural responses and adaptations. In South Africa, these consequences highlight the necessity for support systems and interventions to aid families experiencing these changes. Hence, the study shows the importance of recognising the broader social and cultural context when understanding family systems.

Positive outcomes amidst family structure change

This section discusses the immediate positive impacts experienced by participants. Although they may not be as common or vast, these immediate positive impacts occur. It is essential to draw attention to them to understand family systems and dynamics better. It begins by exploring the emerging adult's perception of the change in family structure:

> In a weird way like, she is like sort of happier because she isn't living with like an abusive person and so on, and she's not like she has more for the first time in like 30-something years she has independence. And that has sort of like changed like our entire hou- like household, I guess, which is just me and my mom but uh for like the first time like sin- after we moved here was like the first time like we started sort of talking about like more. (Katlego).

Other participants shared this:

> Um, when they split, they were both happier independently. Um, so initially, it was fine, and when they first split, I still had a good relationship with my dad. (Bianca).

Alongside the participants expressing that the separation was for the best, they also shared that it resulted in improved relationships and reconnecting with extended family support networks:

> Um, I'd say that my mum focused on us more. Like she put us first in everything, and we got closer to our uncles and most relatives, I guess, but mostly my uncles. (Lesedi).

Other participants also shared improved relationships with their mothers, especially the female participants, creating a stronger mother-daughter relationship:

> So even, like let's say she's on the phone texting to someone, if I wanna go talk to her, she immediately like puts her attention like right at me and so on and even if I tell her to like no go back to texting and so on like she says like no you like I'm literally the only person that you have so like. (Katlego).

Interestingly, there was a greater sense of support from the maternal figure compared to other participants who experienced neglect and having to bottle up how they were feeling:

> I remember often going to her through my depression um phase uh cycle be like, Mom, I wanna die, I don't wanna do this anymore and just by that trust of me being able to open up to her…and then like just like little things like that really made a big difference just by showing that a parent is there to listen to their child plays a huge role. (Francine).

From these excerpts, there appears to have been a shift from viewing the maternal figure as neglectful and psychologically distressed to someone supportive in different ways, emotionally and financially. This contradicts the experiences of emerging adults who shared instances of financial hardship and continued dependence on their fathers:

> And at the same time, my mom and my grandma were very self-sufficient women. So, they taught me everything I needed to know. They taught me how to change a tire and how to do plumbing and basic electrician stuff. And, you know, as much as I felt like I didn't have a dad in my life. (Bianca).

Other participants shared this experience:

> I know after the divorce, everything stopped. Also, we we all depended on my mom. And I can say that when it comes to financial support, my mom was there; she would make sure that I I don't need a uniform, she would make sure that I'm I'm ok at school. (Jane).

There was also a shift in perspective when exploring experiences some participants encountered with new partners and stepfamilies:

> So, during this time round, yeah grade 8, grade 9- so 13, 14, 15, um, my mom met my stepdad and then my stepdad apparently had a meeting with my mom, my stepmom and my dad. I remember they frequently used to have meetings cause we'd always used to be in the house. Like it would be like once we'd change over, we'd like- if like if we're like, before the weekend sort of thing… Um, so my stepdad managed to convince my mom to take me in, and I moved in with my stepdad and my mom, and my sister was still living with my dad. And then, I started to go to like psychologists and psychiatrists frequently and actually educated about bipolar. (Francine).

Francine highlights how the stepfather took initiative when it came to her mental health, as well as bringing the family together constructively and effectively.

Additionally, there were also positive accounts when exploring the emotional and behavioural impact on emerging adults:

> I can never say it it affected my academics because where I would really find comfort. I went to schools where I knew that where I'd go after school id be able to see friends because I know that when I come back from school that's it. I'll go out again tomorrow so going to school was really comfort to me. So, academics was really where I would find comfort and that's where I also decided that I'm gonna work hard so that I go to varsity because I feel like that would really make me proud of myself. (Jane).

This contradicts accounts of participants who shared struggling with academics after the change in family structure, especially since many shared that their fathers took on the responsibility of keeping track of their academics. Other participants found comfort in school and academic work:

> Um, I kind of feel like my academics were affected in a good way. I feel like that's when I started seeing that I just need to push myself to pass and pass really well so that in future

> I don’t have to depend on someone. That I can be self-sufficient which is not so good thing, but it pushed me to excel in my academics. (Lesedi).

Gabe shared that being at school, compared to being at home, was more beneficial to her mental health and it was a setting that helped her unlearn harmful behaviours she was exposed to growing up:

> So, like, I think like, there was a lot more less emotional strain on me, because that's when I learned like, oh, this is what compartment compartmentalising is, this is what suppressing is this is like, it's it's like healthy to like feel your emotions is healthy to like, you know, express yourself. So, I think like being at high school, like it gave me space to do that in a way that it I like I wasn't being like shunned for doing so. (Gabe).

From the above, the emerging adults highlighted that there were positive immediate after a change in family structure. Several participants shared that the parental separation sometimes resulted in the emotional well-being and happiness for both parents, especially the mother figure if intimate partner violence was involved during the marriage. This positive outcome may be attributed to being relieved from the tension and conflict the parents experienced during the marriage (Mohi, 2014). When parental figures experience a sense of happiness and peace after their divorce or separation, it often creates a more positive and stable environment for the children involved, which aligns with the FSM (Masarik & Conger, 2017; Neppl et al., 2016). Hence, the participants highlighted how impactful family stress and parental psychological distress can be for children’s well-being. The presence of a more stable environment allowed for a more supportive and nurturing setting, which several participants described. While existing literature tends to focus more on the negative impact of changes in family structure (Cartwright, 2006; Mohi, 2014), children also gain positive occurrences from this.

Hence, the parental separation also allowed for stronger relationships and closer family bonds. This may be explained by more one-on-one time with the parental figures, which was the maternal figure mainly in these cases, as well as increased opportunities for interactions with extended family members, as they were the new support systems for the families (Cartwright, 2006). This improved bonding within the family and the new supportive environments may provide a strong foundation for the emotional development of the children. Additionally, the more stable environments and enhanced relationships highlighted a change in perceptions of the mother figure throughout the interviews. Several participants reported establishing a more nurturing relationship with their mothers, which may be attributed to the newfound independence and peace the mother experienced as a parent. Hence encouraging more positive and supportive parenting practices, as described by the FSM (Low & Mount, 2022; Neppl et al., 2016). Furthermore, some participants shared more positive experiences with their parents' new partners after the change in family structure. According to existing literature, having a stepparent often provides additional financial and emotional support and a sense of stability and belonging within the family (Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010). Hence, these positive accounts may be linked to supportive stepparents, who contributed to family functioning and improved adjustment outcomes instead of continuing the cycle of dysfunction and disruption. The findings have shown that relationships improve after family structure changes, and the study draws attention to these occurrences alongside the adversities emerging adults share.

Apart from the improvements in relationships, some participants also reported improvements in their financial situation or more stable finances. This was an interesting

finding, as existing literature often emphasises how single mothers struggle financially after changes in family structure (Raniga et al., 2019; Wilson, 2014). The emerging adults expressed struggles, like in most families. Still, for the most part, they were economically secure and well provided for by their mothers, even when their fathers were not paying maintenance. This may benefit children in different areas, such as their education (Wilson, 2014). The emerging adults' successful progression to studying in the higher education sector is significant despite the family changes and challenges. This was one of the ideas that the study wanted to draw attention to when it comes to single-parent households, especially single-mother households.

Lastly, concerning the immediate positive impacts, some participants shared more positive emotional and behavioural outcomes after the change in family structure. This may be attributed to multiple factors, for example, removing chaotic and harmful influences, such as abuse, which allowed for improved self-expression and personal growth in different areas of the emerging adults' lives (Cartwright, 2006; Mohi, 2014). Additionally, the participants shared healthier coping strategies, emotional resilience, and help-seeking behaviours, which allowed them to manage and overcome challenges instead of turning to harmful and risky behaviours. The study highlights these occurrences of resilience among the families and the emerging adults, which will be discussed further in considering the long-term impact.

The immediate positive effects have shed light on several contrasting ideas related to changes in family structure, such as enhanced family relationships, improved emotional well-being, positive perceptions of parents, stable family environments and finances, and healthier emotional and behavioural outcomes. These provide valuable insights into the

complex nature of changes in family structure in South Africa, filling the gap in the literature on non-traditional families and positive occurrences after disruptions.

Long-term impact of Family Structure Change and ACEs.

This last theme explores the long-term consequences of changes in family structure and adverse childhood experiences on emerging adults. In other words, focusing on how these experiences continue to shape their perceptions and lives well into adulthood may manifest in positive and negative outcomes. In this section of the chapter, there are significant links to Arnett's (2000) defining characteristics of emerging adults. Various aspects emerged during the analysis of the data, such as psychological, relational, emotional, and academic consequences, highlighting the complex nature of the lasting effects that emerging adults experience. The findings predominantly revealed harmful repercussions; however, several participants reported positive outcomes and personal growth despite these challenges.

Hence, two subthemes encompass this final theme, which speaks to the negative long-term impact that the emerging adults experienced and may still experience and the positive aspects that developed in the long term. This theme highlights the importance of exploring a long-term perspective to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how these experiences shape the lives of emerging adults. The enduring nature of the impact, as well as the potential for resilience and personal growth, are highlighted.

Long-term impact of ACEs and family structure change

After exploring the immediate impact of the change in family structure, this subtheme explores how these affected emerging adults in the long run. One of the long-term consequences for participants was its impact on their mental health:

> So, I have definitely struggled and still currently struggle with anxiety. And I wasn't really diagnosed as a kid. It came a lot later with anxiety and depression. And my mom was always very much of the opinion of mind over matters. So, you know, whatever you're feeling you can overcome it. So, I think I internalised a lot of that. And I do think, to a degree, having such a lack of control over my home life and feeling like I had zero say in what was happening to me. If I don't have everything under control constantly, my life will fall apart, and people will get hurt as a result. So, I think when those family structures changed, it very much ramped up the anxiety and, as a result, ramped up the depression because I still felt like things were very much out of my control all the time. (Bianca).

Ofentse also struggled with anxiety; however, there were other effects she experienced:

> It made me a very anxious individual, like emotionally psychologically; it really messed with my head. Academically, it messed with my academics. Not that much, but a little bit socially. Well, I would kind of like talk about it. I had a boyfriend; well, I still have him. And, you know, I would like go to his house, sometimes as an escape from what was happening at home. (Ofentse).

Other participants also shared difficulties related to their mental health and commonly shared that they would bottle everything up and avoid talking about what was wrong:

> I feel like my mental health was affected in a bad way, and at that time, I didn't know that my mental health was being affected in a bad way. My mum did try to help. She regularly asked if we were doing okay, if we needed help with anything if we needed to vent or something like that, and at that time, it was when I learnt to bottle up everything, and I never spoke about it… I have never wanted people to feel pity for me, so I always displayed and expressed a very happy child, and that was not good because I suppressed everything, and yeah, I never spoke about anything. (Lesedi).

Hence, the participants experienced difficulties asking for help when they needed it:

> Um, I guess I gained knowledge, I guess. Now I know not to rely on anyone, I guess. But also, a disadvantage, I feel like being self-sufficient is more of a bad thing than a good

> thing because you are always trying to do things by yourself; each time it makes you inefficient, it wears you out. Whereby you could have asked someone who has more knowledge maybe in that particular thing, to help you, but because I have learnt not to rely on anyone else, it is hard for me to ask for help. (Lesedi).

The idea of not being reliant on other people presented itself often throughout the interviews, especially concerning difficulties with trusting other people:

> That really changed my perspective on a lot of things, especially relationships. And trusting people. Um, so after that, I had a very hard time trusting people. Until this very day, I have a very hard time like trusting people, making friends, and trusting the whole the entire like construct of relationships and things like that. And that's still something that is still affecting me until this very day. I have like like because of like my daddy issues I guess you can say, I have trust issues and things like that. And it's not even just my dad and my mom and so on; it's my entire family. (Katlego).

Similar issues around trust were reported by other participants, which relates back to the lack of stability they experienced throughout their childhood, as well as having to mature at such a young age:

> I feel like it also made me, it takes a lot for me to trust someone because I know my mum trusted him and he trusted her, but the trust in each other that they had couldn't help them to stay together, so it's very hard for me to trust people. (Lesedi).

Ofentse linked this to her fear of abandonment, which was a common fear expressed by many participants, even when they established a sense of stability and found caring partners in their later years:

> So basically, how has it impacted me? I basically had trust issues. You know, after my father, after my mother's boyfriend, I have trust issues, and I was scared of abandonment. But because I had my boyfriend with me, who was very much like an anchor in my life, it really helps with the sense of abandonment. (Ofentse).

Bianca highlighted where these issues often stemmed from:

> I think when I had my dad in my life, my view as a father figure role, my view of a man in my life was someone who took from you and would punish you for not being exactly who

> they wanted you to be all the time. And I think, to a large degree, I kind of viewed partners in a way that they will leave at some point; it was kind of expected that someone is going to treat you badly, someone is going to disappoint you and let you down. And it is in my own relationships. (Bianca).

Furthermore, the emerging adults expressed significant changes in perspective on specific issues, whether it involved ideas about their future families, finances, or the need to have a father figure around:

> When I do get married, I I I don't want to have children. Like if it happens, it happens, but I'm not planning um a child in the future at all because if something had to happen to like my family structure, such as my husband like die um like divorces me or whatever and then that's very disruptive for a child. Um, the importance of family, I think is so it's also like you get your toxic families and your non-toxic families and again, it's like if my parents stayed together, it would have been so toxic. (Francine).

Similarly, Bianca stated:

> You know, I didn't see a healthy relationship there, which has kind of pushed me to question the notion of a nuclear family. And it's kind of taken me to realise that maybe it's something I don't want. You know, I, it's very much impacted my decision about whether or not I want to have kids one day. Because I don't really want to parent children if they're going to have a similar experience to what I did, it doesn't feel like it's worth it. (Bianca).

Some participants shared perspectives they now have about money due to their childhood difficulties:

> Because of the money issues with my dad, I do have issues with money. I can't spend money on myself. While it's very difficult for me, if I see something like a shirt that is like R100 at the shop, I will second guess it until I don't even want that shirt anymore. So, money is very difficult for me to spend and to have. (Ofentse).

Additionally, there was the struggle for identity, which forms part of the characteristics of emerging adults:

> Because of the circumstances I was pushed into, you know. You go to school, you aim for a career, you study for that career, you go to university, you get into that career, wasn't really that chance for me to figure out who I was. So now I'm kind of trying to figure out

> who I am. And that's difficult because I've always been kind of who I was expected to be or who I had to be. (Bianca).

The excerpts above illustrate several long-term negative effects of changes in family structure on emerging adults. One significant finding that came up was the presence of mental health difficulties. Several of the emerging adults shared struggling with anxiety and depression in the long term after dealing with the change in family structure and the following challenges. According to the FSM, disruptions in the family system may add to mental health challenges and emotional distress among children and emerging adults (Lucas et al., 2013). The participants expressed how the lack of control in their respective environments, the exposure to conflict and constant stress, and feelings of helplessness and powerlessness may have significantly influenced their mental health difficulties. Existing literature has revealed that children from divorced families experience an increased vulnerability to psychological distress, and symptoms of anxiety and depression are no exception (Pasqualini et al., 2018). However, the study also revealed that the precursors to these difficulties may already have been present in families before the change in family structure. These difficulties also extend to other areas of life, such as academic performance and intimate relationships, which is why it is essential to understand emerging adults' challenges.

A common theme among the participants was difficulties in seeking help from others. Growing up in an environment where they experienced instability in the family and often needed to take care of themselves may have encouraged them to learn self-sufficiency and establish a sense of independence as coping mechanisms (Sugimura et al., 2023). Several participants shared that it was often empowering for them; however, it

created challenges for them when they needed help from others. Existing literature highlights that children from divorced and single-parent families often develop a mindset of self-reliance, which stems from diverse beliefs they have developed (Cartwright, 2006). For example, many participants reported experiencing trust issues in their later years, which may be one of the contributing factors to self-reliance and independence. This may be attributed to the lack of consistency and stability during their childhood and a breakdown of trust in their parents, as this often signals abandonment, broken promises, questioning the reliability of others, and betrayal by essential figures in their lives (Baker, 2005). Difficulties with trust create several barriers to building and maintaining healthy relationships in later adult years, which was expressed by some of the participants (Morrison et al. 2017).

The experiences of changing family structure also shaped the emerging adults' perspectives on various aspects of life. These new perspectives they established often influenced their decision-making process and their attitudes towards important life events (Delicia & Hasanat, 2022). For example, some participants expressed not wanting to have children due to the fear of experiencing similar difficulties and negative consequences, which they had discussed with their current partners. This highlights the fear of a dysfunctional cycle, which gives insight into how emerging adults understand how their adverse childhood experiences have affected them long-term. The disruptive and toxic nature of their parents' relationship and the family dynamics had a significant influence on their perceptions of what marriage should be like and what a family should consist of, questioning the very nature of traditional family structures and the fundamental act of bringing children into those environments (Baker, 2005; Cartwright, 2006; Morrison et al.

2017). As represented, this corresponds to existing literature that has found that children who experienced changes in their family structure often develop different beliefs around marriage and family, which may result in commitment issues, trust issues, and self-sabotaging behaviours.

Looking back at Arnett's definition of emerging adults, the participants' experiences align with the concept, especially concerning exploration, identity formation, and instability (Arnett, 2000). The disruptions that emerging adults experienced growing up affected their identities and psychological growth, shaping their relationships, life decisions, and sense of self, which will continue to shape their lives into adulthood. Arnett (2014) argues that when there is a change in family structure, there is a re-evaluation of roles and relationships within the family system, which the participants highlighted. Additionally, these findings align with previous research highlighting the negative impact of changes in family structure.

Positive perceptions and reflections of emerging adults on the change and ACEs

Apart from the adverse long-term effects the emerging adults experienced, it was interesting to note some of their positive long-term outcomes and their final reflections on their experiences. To begin, which is also something that started immediately, was improved relationships and positive experiences with parents:

> Um, well, like I had mentioned before that, my mom's and I relationship is much better right now. Um, I can talk more about things that I that I didn't imagine that I'd be able to talk to my mom about. (Jane).

Similar experiences were reported by other participants in the long term as well:

> But yes, my mom and I are exceptionally close now. I have an incredibly strong relationship with my grandmother. She's my best friend. And I think when I was a teenager, I didn't really see that. I felt very sorry for myself that I was like, oh, everything is so hard all the time. (Bianca).

Ofentse shared a similar experience, and she also mentioned growing closer to her siblings as well, despite the difficulties they experienced:

> I mean, despite things being very difficult, we became closer to my mom. But we still had a bit of a strained relationship. That's from 2016-2017. It was rough, but it started improving. So, my family, we just started. I felt like these circumstances were really harsh on us, but it helps us become more united. I spent more time with my sister, my brother, and I got along better. My mom and I had our moments where we got along, actually, whereas before, it was like we couldn't really get along at all. (Ofentse).

About intimate relationships, some participants expressed finding partners that were very supportive and challenged their negative perspectives, which were established by their past family experiences:

> It kind of pushed me to find a partner or to be open to a partner who was completely different to that. So, I'm engaged to a partner of eight years. And he is the complete opposite of my dad. He's wonderful. He's caring. He never raised his voice. He is a lovely person. And it's been really nice to start forming that relationship; that makes sense for me. My partner is incredible. He's super loving, super caring. And he's my best friend. I adore him. And it's been really nice to see what a healthy relationship looks like. And not only to see it, but to experience it. It's taken a lot of learning and unlearning to be a good partner and to try and figure out what this dynamic looks like. (Bianca).

In contrast to some participants who viewed their self-sufficiency as a negative characteristic, mainly due to trust issues, other participants perceived this as a strength:

> Well, one thing is I learnt to take care of myself from very early on. And it gave me a sense of independence and thoughtful awareness. (Simphiwe).

Similarly, Ofentse shared:

> I've learned to become more independent; I've learned to not be looking for a father and settling for, you know, somebody that is subpar, and somebody that is maybe abusive, or

> doesn't give me attention or anything. I've learned more independence; I've learned to appreciate my mom more…And over time, I realised that, you know, I don't need a father; I have my mom, and my mom has been like my rock; I'm literally my mother's my best friend. She's been there for me always. (Ofentse).

Similarly, to Ofentse, other participants expressed that they were better off without their fathers:

> Recently, I realised that even though he wasn't there, I didn't want for anything. You know, I didn't feel like I was missing out on some kind of fatherly experience because my mom and my grandma really stepped into that role and took over. And just not having him in my life did bring me a lot of peace. That hurt initially. But when I was old enough to make the decision to actively not want him in my life anymore, I realised it was the best thing I could have done for myself. I found peace with him not being around. So, there was definitely a massive benefit there. (Bianca).

Other participants highlighted that it was an experience to learn from, that was beneficial in some way, and should not negatively define one's life:

> And I just feel like everything I'm doing right now I'm doing it for my little sister and my little brother to see that its ok to have a mother and not have a father. Even when he is alive but he's not around in your life it shouldn't define, you know, your basis, it's for you going to school you should you should strive to do good for yourself. You should learn for from your your your parents' relationships…for me, it was a sense of I should take everything that's happening, or that happened as a positive thing to change my life or to to have a direction for my life where I wanna go. (Jane).

This sense of empowerment was shared by many, if not all the participants, in their long-term reflections on their experiences:

> When I realised that I get to make decisions, I get to decide who I want in my life, even if that person is my blood; I get to make that decision to remove him from my life. And that was a very impactful decision. Yeah, it made me feel very empowered and very in control for the first time in that relationship where he wasn't the person calling the shots anymore. I was like; I'm done. We're finished. I deserve better than this. And that was really important for me. So, very recently, that's had a massive impact. Just on my confidence and my feeling like I have control over what happens to me. (Bianca).

Participants also expressed how they were able to take matters into their own hands and ensure that they were not passing down adverse childhood experiences:

> And, I guess right now, given my little nephew, little brother, son, whatever you want to call him, he doesn't have a father. So naturally, me being first of all the closest to his age and the most consistent male figure in his life, I've sort of had to, I won't say, take up the role of a father figure but take up the role of a role model. And one thing about it is that I have never really like, having someone around who's always watching you, and like watching every move, and you want to be at least trying to be aware of cautious, cautious, cautious, cautious of, like, anything I do around him because, you know, children pick up the most minute details. So, I'd say I'm trying to raise him with the good aspects of my childhood in, like, a healthy way because, like I said, I don't think my childhood was all bad. I'm trying to teach him the things I learned in trying to teach himself reliance to some extent. Without the abuse, and I know there's like a lot of that. (Simphiwe).

Similarly, Gabe shared:

> Because, like, why would you stay in a loveless marriage for the benefit of your kids? Like, I think like, it'll be much more healthy for your kids to be like, okay, cool. That's what it looks like when two people don't love each other. Generally, find, like, let me avoid that. I don't know what I'm going to find. But let me avoid that. And I think that me growing up, like in a setting where I could see like, okay, that's what lovelessness looks like. (Gabe).

From the excerpts above, several long-term positive outcomes were revealed from the study, including improved relationships in the long term, a better sense of self and sense of empowerment, as well as more profound reflections. At each stage, the emerging adult's ability to navigate challenges due to past experiences is emphasised.

One of the long-term findings was the improvement in relationships that the participants shared. Despite all their initial challenges with family relationships, some participants expressed that their relationships with their mothers and other family members improved and became more supportive. This may be attributed to the increased maturity, personal growth, and lack of disruptive events in the participants' lives. Many reported that they formed deeper bonds with their maternal figures, which benefited their

perspective of relationships and their mental health as they received more attention and support (Mohi, 2014). This is also reflected in their ability to create and maintain strong relationships with their partners, recognising the importance of communication and unlearning the harmful beliefs and behaviours they grew up with (Delicia & Hasanat, 2022). According to the FSM, specific stressors often result in the development of maladaptive or adaptive coping strategies, which, in this case, helped the participants in their current relationships. Although several participants reported disruptions to their relationships or ideas about relationships, significant improvements also need to be noted. In the end, the focus was on how emerging adults made sense of their experiences and how they shaped them currently in their lives.

Additionally, the participants reported self-growth and a sense of empowerment in their emerging adult years. Many shared that once they realised, they had control over their lives and gained a deeper understanding of their strengths and the support around them, they felt empowered and were motivated to improve their lives and not stay stuck in their experiences from the past. Establishing agency significantly improved their well-being, relationships, and perspectives (Eldar-Avidan et al., 2009). Evident from the emerging adults' accounts, changes in family structure may encourage the motivation to better their future lives and challenge the traditional family expectations and roles. Hence, the participants' ability to navigate and survive the difficulties they experienced may have contributed to their agency and autonomy during this critical life stage. The emerging adults' accounts aligned with Arnett's concept as they constantly redefine their beliefs, values, and aspirations to suit their ideal relationships and lives (Arnett, 2000). The emerging adults focused on personal goals and self-development after their adverse

experiences, another essential characteristic of this developmental stage, and how they perceive possibilities of growth, adaption, and new connections (Arnett, 2007).

The participants reported much deeper reflection, such as questioning the notions of “normal” or traditional families and the significance of having both parents present in your life. This significantly influenced their beliefs and decisions about having their children in the future and the types of partners they wanted. Many participants also reported that the absence of their fathers was more beneficial to their lives, and realising that had empowered them and allowed them to reframe the difficulties they experienced. Hence, these reflections highlighted these emerging adults' resilience and capacity for growth and development from experiencing changes in their family structures. This again draws attention to the identity exploration stage and how emerging adults challenge certain societal expectations (Arnett, 2014). Overall, the reflection provided more profound insight into the participants’ meaning-making of their lives and how they had learnt and grown from these experiences.

The findings from the long-term positive impacts provide valuable insights into how transformative changes in family structure can be for individuals. By shedding light on these experiences, the study significantly contributed to a more in-depth understanding of family structure change and resilience during this critical life development stage.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the multifaceted impacts of changes in family structure on emerging adults within South Africa. Through investigating the immediate and long-term

consequences, several important themes emerged to highlight the complexity of these experiences.

The immediate negative impacts drew attention to disruptive parental relationships, child abuse and neglect, financial instability, premature maturation, and emotional and behavioural consequences. Conversely, the immediate positive impacts highlight strengthened self-sufficiency and independence, academic motivation, and improved relationships with custodial parents and other family members. These findings, in relation to the FSM, aided in understanding the stressors and methods of coping experienced during changes in the family structure and the subsequent consequences experienced by emerging adults.

Additionally, the long-term negative impacts revealed trust issues, difficulties seeking help from others, mental health issues, and different perspectives on important aspects of life. In the FSM, these may draw attention to the emotional and psychological scars of the stressors during childhood. Conversely, the long-term positive impacts revealed a sense of empowerment by the emerging adults, improvement in relationships and perspective taking, and essential self-reflections highlighted by the participants. Aligning with Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000), the participants' adaptability and resilience draw attention to how their experiences have shaped their identities and decisions in life, as well as their focus on possibilities and optimism (Arnett, 2007).

Overall, the current study contributes critical perspectives to understanding changes in family structure and its impact on emerging adults, specifically within South Africa. The acknowledged impact of family structure change, immediate and long-term,

highlights the importance of developing and establishing interventions tailored to families experiencing these changes. The last chapter draws attention to the strengths and limitations of the study, the broader implications and contextual relevance, and potential future research directions.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Introduction

This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive summary of the current study, highlighting the intricate dynamics between changes in family structure and adverse childhood experiences while drawing from the shared experiences of emerging adults. The study is grounded within a qualitative framework, unravelling the complex narratives of emerging adults as they navigate through their changes in family structure and the subsequent childhood adversities. Using an interpretivist perspective allowed the study to unfold the

participants' experiences, highlighting different themes, understandings, and reflections. The study was guided by foundational questions to gain deeper insights into the experiences: How do emerging adults perceive and understand the change in their family structure and its impact on them? How do emerging adults understand being in these family structures and their experiences of ACEs? How do they make sense of the impacts of the ACEs on their lives? Ultimately, this involved exploring how these experiences shaped their sense of self, relationships, and world. This chapter delves into an overview of the findings and their significant relevance to the South African context, the strength and contributions of the study, directions for future research and expansion of knowledge. It concludes with final comments about the study.

Overview of the Findings

Through the use of thematic analysis, the previous chapter provided a presentation of the findings and a discussion of the participants' multifaceted experiences of changes in family structure and adverse childhood experiences. The separation of these experiences into themes, from the initial experiences to the current impacts, shed light on the complex nature of family structure and childhood adversity. There were similarities and differences highlighted in the accounts from the emerging adults, which draws further attention to the importance of exploring the positive and the negative implications of changes in family structure, especially when investigating single-parent households. The FSM was a practical theoretical framework for this study, as it allowed for an in-depth interpretation of the findings, which focused on how specific stressors affected the family structure and the well-being of children. This allowed the study to identify four different themes, which

relate to the initial family structure, how the family structure changes, the immediate impact of the changes, and the long-term impact of the change. Hence providing a comprehensive overview of the emerging adults' experiences. Uniquely, the context of South Africa also played a role in interpreting the findings and expanding knowledge on this topic. This section unfolds the study's significant findings, exploring the participants' experiences and considering the research objectives.

The first theme discussed the family structure and experiences before significant changes occurred. This highlights interesting and diverse findings across the participants' experiences. The existence of various family structures in the initial stages was surprising as extensive research often focuses on the traditional nuclear family structure as the norm or starting point (Allen & Henderson, 2022). The emerging adults shared being a part of nuclear families, cohabiting families, unofficial single-mother families, and extended family structures, each representing their distinct dynamics and implications for the members involved. The notion of the "normal" nuclear family was often challenged, and this was an important finding that contributes to knowledge related to the South African context, as the existence of these family structures in the country is quite prevalent yet not researched widely (Allen & Henderson, 2022; Budlender, 2010). This draws attention to the importance of shifting beyond societal assumptions and recognising that diverse family structures exist. These come with their dynamics that may impact the members of the unit. Acknowledging the complexities of these structures may allow for improved tailored interventions and support systems (Frankenhuis & Amir, 2022). Additionally, the theme revealed that there were both positive and negative experiences within the initial family structures. This is important, as research often focuses on adversities experienced

after a specific change in family structure, such as divorce. Several adverse childhood experiences were highlighted, such as neglect, abuse, witnessing intimate partner violence, and parental figures' absence. However, positive experiences were reported, such as family and financial stability and security and support. These findings were significant, combined with Arnett's (2000) theory of emerging adulthood, as it helped the study understand what perspective the emerging adults initially had before experiencing any changes in family structure, which allowed for a deeper insight into their meaning-making process (Arnett, 2014; Cartwright, 2006). The findings from this theme revealed that there are diverse family structures in South Africa, and the respective experiences highlight the positive and negative implications that occur, which is crucial for understanding the subsequent themes. Exploring the emerging adults' understandings of their initial family structure and their retrospective experiences may inform family studies and potential interventions. Additionally, exploring the positive accounts highlights the room for diversity and resilience within family dynamics. Hence, the pre-change family structures revealed a complex interplay between positive and negative experiences reported by emerging adults. This highlighted the need for early support and interventions, and the following discussions on immediate and long-term impacts will also contribute to this concern.

The journey of family structure change was another key theme discussed in the study, which allowed for a comprehensive understanding of family changes within the South African context. In their insightful analysis of expected human childhood, Frankenhuis and Amir (2022) emphasise that childhood is not a uniform and fixed process. They highlight how children grow and develop as they adapt to social and

ecological experiences; hence, debunking these universal patterns recognises the complex nature of family dynamics (Frankenhuis & Amir, 2022). The emerging adults expressed diverse changes in their family structure, such as parental separation, divorce, the inclusion of extended family members, and the emergence of new partners and stepfamilies. This highlights the diverse socio-cultural landscape of South Africa, as the study identified traditional and modern influences intersecting in these changes (Budlender, 2010; Makiwane et al., 2017; Rabe & Naidoo, 2015). Divorce and single-mother households were common experiences shared by the participants, which also reflected a diverse range of challenges. Some participants described the process as relieving and for the best; however, others expressed that it had led to uncertainty, emotional distress, and financial challenges. Additionally, similar paradoxical experiences were expressed by those in single-mother households, where some reported resilience and managing economic and emotional challenges. In contrast, others reported neglect, abuse, and financial difficulties. There were diverse experiences reported by the emerging adults, which are expanded upon in the following two themes. The role of extended families was also an important highlight, especially within the South African context, as it is quite a prevalent family structure (Khan, 2012; Mtshali, 2015). The participants reported that this structure offered a sense of support and stability, which draws attention to the importance of kinship within this context. Furthermore, there was the emergence and integration of new partners and stepfamilies. In some cases, this offered positive experiences. However, some tensions and challenges accompanied this change in family structure (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002; Pasqualini et al., 2018). Interestingly, most participants shared experiences of multiple changes in family

structure, hence the importance of exploring these changes and the challenges and advantages they bring. The findings highlighted the delicate journey of changes in family structure in South Africa, how important it is to consider socio-cultural influences that might be at play and resonating with existing literature on family structure change.

The third theme provided a comprehensive exploration of the immediate impacts that occurred due to the changes in family structure, which offered insight into the emerging adults' direct experiences, negative and positive. The negative consequences were prominent and varied. Many participants experienced emotional and physical abuse after changes, highlighting children's significant vulnerability and difficult situations. Others experienced neglect from their parental figures and feelings of rejection and abandonment when parents established relationships with other partners, a common occurrence among the participants (Hetherington, 2005; Padi et al., 2014). The involvement of stepfamilies led to a lack of communication, leaving the emerging adults feeling isolated and emotionally distressed. Additionally, there were financial challenges, especially within single-mother households, which led to further adverse childhood experiences (Koketso et al., 2019; Raniga et al., 2019). Interestingly, the presence of stepfamilies also encouraged financial difficulties for the participants, as fathers restricted maintenance. The changes also resulted in an accelerated parentification that the participants shared, highlighting the enhanced responsibility they were pressured into and certain emotional and behavioural consequences, which impacted their long-term psychosocial well-being. Conversely, other participants expressed positive experiences from the changes in family structure. Many participants shared their parents' enhanced well-being and happiness after the separation, improved relationships with their mothers,

stable financial situation, and the positive impact of new partners and stepfamilies. Interestingly, the participants highlighted the resilience of single-mother households, which is not explored extensively in existing literature (Cartwright, 2006; Mohi, 2014; Wilson, 2014). These findings strongly resonate with the FSM, drawing attention to how stressors may impact the psychological well-being of parents and children (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007). This is valuable information for the South African context, as understanding the multifaceted nature of family change and the social, economic, relational, and emotional factors involved contribute to our knowledge of emerging adults' experiences.

Lastly, the study explored the long-term consequences of emerging adults, which is not covered extensively in the existing literature in this area. The participants expressed enduring positive and negative long-term impacts, revealing the complex nature of changes in family structure. There was a common theme among the participants of experiencing difficulty in asking for help from others, which may stem from the learned self-reliance and independence, as well as the shared experience of trust issues due to disrupted family dynamics, broken promises, and fears of abandonment and rejection. Existing literature reveals that these are common consequences for individuals who experience changes in family structure, especially if the experience was disruptive and chaotic (D'Rozario & Pilkington, 2022; Morrison et al., 2017; Peters & Ehrenberg, 2008). Additionally, continuing mental health difficulties were prominent, especially with anxiety and depression, which often impacted other areas of the emerging adults' lives, such as academic performance, intimate relationships, and finances. In relationships, these manifested as specific ideas about partners and maladaptive perspectives on future

family planning, impacting decision-making and meaning-making. Conversely, multiple positive outcomes were shared, such as improved relationships, building and maintaining healthy relationships, self-improvement and empowerment, resilience, and transformative reflections (Cartwright, 2006; Delicia & Hasanat, 2022). Many participants expressed engaging in some reflection of their childhood adversities and what they learned from the entire experience, good and bad. These findings coincide with Arnett's (2000) theory of emerging adults as the participants engaged in self-discovery, self-focus, and optimism about the possibilities of the future (Arnett, 2007). These findings illuminate the interesting perspectives emerging adults offer on the experience of changes in family structure, as well as the importance of recognising these negative and positive outcomes. This draws attention to the intricate link between family structure and adverse childhood experiences from emerging adults within a culturally rich context.

These findings provide a comprehensive overview of family structure within the South African context. The study highlights the immediate and long-term positive and negative outcomes emerging from changes in family structure, leaving little room for unanswered questions. Applying the FSM (Masarik & Conger, 2017) and Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000) helped solidify the understanding of the participants' experiences, allowing for evidence-based insights and subjective interpretation. This allowed for an all-encompassing study, just like the context itself.

Strengths and Contributions to Knowledge

The current study includes multiple strengths and contributions, which significantly contribute to understanding changes in family structure, adverse childhood experiences, and the experiences of emerging adults within the context of South Africa. Filling the gaps, the study explored the experiences of individuals in their initial family structures. It challenged the notion of “normal” or traditional families by highlighting the presence and intricate dynamics of other family structures, such as cohabiting families, single-mother families, extended families, and stepfamilies in South Africa. This exploration has allowed the study to understand the evolving nature of family structures and their complex influences on childhood experiences.

The exploration of the immediate and long-term outcomes has highlighted the complex and multifaceted nature of changes in family structure, adverse childhood experiences, and emerging adults’ experiences. The complexity, founded in adversity and resilience, broadens the knowledge of the impacts of changes in family structure and emerging adults’ experiences. These hold significance in South Africa due to the social and cultural factors that may influence change in family structure and shape the immediate and long-term impacts.

The longitudinal journey the emerging adults took in the study revealed the process of transitions, from the initial family structure to separation, divorce, custody battles, single-mother households, and the involvement of new partners and stepfamilies. This thorough exploration contributes to existing knowledge by journeying through emerging adults' subjective and experiential accounts, providing a comprehensive understanding of their lived experiences and deeper insights into other mechanisms that influence their journeys.

Additionally, using Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood has thickened the understanding of the participants' experiences within these diverse accounts. The findings align with Arnett's emphasis on identity exploration, instability, focus on the self, the in-between periods, and optimism about future possibilities (Arnett, 2014). This highlights the theoretical and empirical relevance of the study, especially when exploring the experiences of emerging adults. The FSM was another theoretical strength of the study, as it provided a comprehensive framework for interpreting the experiences shared by emerging adults (Huth-Bocks & Hughes, 2008; Mackler et al., 2015). The model's adaptability to the context of South Africa highlighted the evolving nature of family structure change and ACEs within the country, further improving the applicability and relevance of the study's findings.

Lastly, the qualitative approach and interpretivist paradigm have proven effective for exposing and unravelling participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Mwita, 2022). Semi-structured interviews allowed for a deeper exploration of the emerging adults' experiences, encouraging a comprehensive analysis of the diverse dynamics involved in changes in family structure, ACEs, and emerging adulthood (Buriro et al., 2017; Mwita, 2022). The rigorousness of the methodologies allowed for a robust study. The in-depth process carried out by thematic analysis was another methodological strength of the study, allowing for a thorough examination of the data and interpretation of the findings (Braun & Clark, 2006; Braun & Clark, 2012). Hence, the current study contributes to the existing knowledge of family structure and adverse childhood experiences through empirical richness, theoretical alignment, and methodological rigour. This may be helpful for future researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

Limitations

Exploring the methodological limitations, the small sample size of 8 participants may limit the generalisability of the study's findings. The participants shared rich experiences, which allowed for a deeper understanding of these dynamics; however, the diverse accounts cannot be generalised for South Africa's emerging adult population. Although the sample was carefully selected, and their experiences aligned experientially and theoretically, the applicability to the broader South African context cannot be assumed. Additionally, the interpretivist approach adopted by the study may have allowed for researcher bias during the data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Mwita, 2022). Although rigorous efforts are employed to limit the extent of bias through transparency and reflexivity, the influence of the research cannot be taken entirely away (Creswell & Poth, 2016). For example, the researchers' purpose for the study, the development of the research questions, and the interview guide are said to be initial influences by the researcher.

Additionally, using semi-structured interviews may have prevented consistency throughout the interviews and left room for researcher bias (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017; Mwita, 2022). However, it did allow for flexibility and probing, which aided in building rapport and gaining detailed information from the participants necessary for the study. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reporting during the interviews may have involved recall bias and the participants' limitations to fully understand specific psychological and emotional experiences, especially considering the longevity involved (Buriro et al., 2017). This may also include limitations with utilising emerging adults as the sole sample for the

study, as the absence of perspectives from other members involved may inhibit a comprehensive understanding of the family structure change and adverse childhood experiences.

Furthermore, another limitation may be the geographical and cultural context of South Africa. While the context provided rich and diverse insights, there may be limits to the transferability to other international contexts, mainly due to the historical legacy of the country, the cultural dynamics, and the socio-economic challenges that shaped emerging adults' experiences throughout life. Although the theoretical framework highlighted the context's applicability, this is still important to consider.

Ultimately, the study recognises that there may be inherent limitations which may have an influence on the findings of the study. Acknowledging these potential flaws is vital to contextualising its applicability within the broader academic discourse. It aims to inform future research to deepen the understanding of changes in family structure, adverse childhood experiences, and emerging adult experiences.

Directions for Future Research

Numerous areas may prove helpful for future research. This is informed by the limitations and findings directly from the study. There are improvements to be made based on the analysis alone, as well as the research areas of the study.

Firstly, considering the complex nature of changes in family structure and adverse childhood experiences, a longitudinal study exploring emerging adults over a more extended period may provide further insights into how their perceptions and experiences

evolve. Future research may unravel and reveal additional adversities or areas of resilience, other significant points of change and their impacts, and new points for interventions. In this way, it may be helpful to widen the sample size and increase the study's applicability and generalizability. Increasing the sample size may improve the quality and reliability of future research studies. Interestingly, extending the focus to the experiences of previous generations and future generations within the same families may provide insights into the intergenerational spread of challenges and areas of resilience. This may provide crucial insights into the emerging adults' own family dynamics and parenting practices in the future, providing a more holistic picture and understanding of future implications for families.

Expanding on the diversity of the sample for future research may yield more comprehensive findings. Taking an approach of intersectionality by exploring diverse races, genders, and socio-economic statuses may reveal unique experiences and various ways in which individuals are impacted and the coping mechanisms employed. Including more varied socio-cultural contexts within South Africa may be helpful, providing a more comprehensive understanding of families and emerging adults within the context. For instance, comparing the experiences across rural and urban areas may reveal specific patterns and themes not highlighted in the current study. In this way, it will be helpful to explore the role of cultural norms and traditions on emerging adults' experiences of family structure change and ACEs in more detail. Specifically, exploring the role of cultural values, practices, and expectations in family structure, coping mechanisms, and resilience may provide valuable insights.

A longitudinal exploration of future trajectories may also provide valuable insights into the emerging adults' experiences, which may surround relational, familial, or educational and vocational courses. Exploring the emerging adults' perspectives on relationships and future families allowed for gathering interesting views and beliefs. Hence, future research may explore how these impact their experiences in the future and if their perspectives have shifted in any way. Additionally, exploring how their experiences have influenced their educational and career paths regarding occupations, academic performance, and personal and professional goals may provide interesting insights and points for future support systems.

Finally, future research that uses the current study may focus on developing evidence-based recommendations for policies, interventions and support programs targeting emerging adults navigating changes in family structure and ACEs. It may prove helpful to collaborate with policymakers and practitioners alike to address the challenges and promote resilience, to target the different areas of concern on an individual and societal level.

Final Comment

The current study explored the delicate experiences of emerging adults who have experienced changes in their family structure and adverse childhood experiences. The study gathered significant insights into the complex and multifaceted experiences of the participants' lives through a meticulous qualitative exploration, highlighting their stories, social and cultural constructs, and context-specific factors. With that in mind, it became

evident that their shared challenges and points of resilience reached far beyond their familial lives, extending well into broader societal patterns and systems. By profoundly exploring these experiences, the study revealed the diverse dynamics between nuclear, cohabiting, single-mother, extended, and stepfamily structures, highlighting separation, divorce, custody battles, single-parenthood, and the involvement of stepfamilies. Hence, the narratives of vulnerabilities and resiliency were revealed, echoing the immediate and long-term outcomes that often go unheard and unnoticed.

The guidance from the FSM allowed the study to understand the influences that shaped experiences and outcomes for emerging adults. This again highlights the significant and enduring impact of socio-economic factors, individual characteristics, and interpersonal relationships interwoven with family structure and childhood adversity. The findings aligned with Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood, echoing the potential universality of the experiences, with the acknowledgement of the cultural and contextual considerations of South Africa. Although the study's findings are significant, recognising the shortfalls and limitations has allowed for important points for future research. By exploring longitudinal studies, emphasising intersectionality, and exploring the role of culture, knowledge is continuously enriched within these areas of concern.

Reflecting on the intention and purpose behind the study, the importance of direct experiences and perspectives is highlighted, noting that this reaches far beyond individual lives. Although each participant shared their story, challenges, and strengths, a shared or collective alignment deepened the insight into the diverse paths experienced in life. The experiences shared by the participants humble the study, the findings unravelled, and the future research that may emerge. The emerging adults' experiences encourage the

further exploration and transformation of knowledge around family structures and ACEs for generations to come.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Understanding the pre-change family structure and dynamics:

1. Tell me a bit about your family situation growing up.
2. What was your experience like growing up in this family?

Understanding the journey of family structure change:

3. Were there any significant changes that you could tell me about?
4. What was it like for you after these changes took place?

Understanding the immediate impacts of the change in family structure:

5. How do you see your family as different from other families?
6. Tell me about any difficulties that you experienced.
7. What do you think you gained from those experiences?
8. Can you think of any incidents or memories that you could share (good or bad)?

Understanding the long-term impacts of family structure change:

9. How do you think these experiences have impacted your life now?
10. Tell me more about what your family situation is like now.

Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet

Dear Sir / Madam

My name is Noelle Naidoo. I am a master's student in Community and Counselling Psychology at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. My supervisor is Professor Tanya Graham. I am conducting a research study about adverse childhood experiences in different family types, specifically single-parent families. The title of my study is "The experience of family structure and family change on emerging adults: A focus on single parent households.". The purpose of the study is to understand how emerging adults make sense of their family structure and how their experiences impact their lives.

I would like to invite you to participate in a single interview, answering a few questions about your experiences in your family and how this has impacted your life if you fall under the above-mentioned family types. If you decide to participate in the study, your participation will last 45 minutes to an hour for the interview. The interview will take place either online or face-to-face, depending on your preference, and either during breaks or after school hours, depending on your available time.

With your permission, I would like to audio record the interview. This data will be stored safely and securely for the research and potential future secondary research studies. Only I, as the researcher and my supervisor, will have access to the data. The interview will be kept confidential. When the research study results are shared, your name or any identifying information about you will not be shared. With your permission, future studies may use the data collected from this research study, but your identity and other personal information will not be shared or used.

Participation in the study is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time and do not have to answer any questions if you do not want to. You will not receive any direct benefits from participation and will not lose any benefits or rights you would usually have if you decided not to join. Participation in the study will not cost you anything, and you will not be paid for participation in the research. If it is an online interview, we will select a space with Wi-Fi availability to avoid data costs.

The risks for this research study are no more than what happens in everyday life. If the interview becomes uncomfortable, you are welcome to withdraw from the study. If you need support or counselling services following the interview, these are free of charge at the university's Counselling and Career Department Unit. You can contact the department at 011 717 9140.

This research study will be written as a research report and available on the university library website. If you would like to receive a summary of this report, I will gladly send it to you.

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor at the details listed below. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) at (011) 717 1408 or hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely,

Noelle

Researcher: Noelle Naidoo, 1854018@students.wits.ac.za, (061) 441 8182.

Supervisor: Tanya Graham, Tanya.Graham@wits.ac.za, (011) 717-8330.

Appendix C: Consent Form

Title of project: The experience of family structure and family change on emerging adults: A focus on single parent households.

Name of researcher: Noelle Naidoo

I, ……., agree to participate in this research project.

I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below.)

The research study was explained to me. I understand what this study is about.	YES	NO
I understand that I can volunteer to take part in the study	YES	NO
I agree that the interview may be audio-recorded	YES	NO
I agree that the researcher may use direct quotations from my interview in their research report.	YES	NO
I agree that my identity will remain protected (my name will not be used by the researcher in their research report)	YES	NO
I agree that other researchers may use the information I provide in my interview (depending on their own ethics clearance being obtained), but my name and any personal information will not be used or passed on.	YES	NO

…… (name of participant)

…… (signature)

…… (date)

…… (name of researcher)

…… (signature)

…… (date)

Appendix D: Ethical Clearance

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ETHICS COMMITTEE
CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE:	**PROTOCOL NUMBER: MACC/22/07**
PROJECT TITLE:	The experience of family structure and family change on emerging adults: A focus on single parent households.
INVESTIGATOR	Naidoo Noelle (1854018)
SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR	SHCD/Psychology
DATE CONSIDERED	13 May 2022
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved unconditionally
RISK LEVEL	Low Risk
EXPIRY DATE	31 December 2024

ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE 23 May 2022 **CHAIRPERSON** ____ (Dr Vinitha Jithoo) ____

Cc: Prof. Tanya Graham (Supervisor)

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

Naidoo

Signature **Date** 11/08/2023

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES