

**Research Report**

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**THE LEGACY OF PARENTAL DIVORCE AS AN ADVERSE CHILDHOOD  
EXPERIENCE ON EMERGING ADULTS**

by

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## Abstract

The impact of parental divorce on children is well documented, yet there is a significant gap in literature regarding its long-term effects on emerging adults. This qualitative study addresses this gap by exploring how emerging adults narrate and make meaning of their experiences of parental divorce during childhood. The study aims to understand how emerging adults interpret their childhood experiences of parental divorce and how it has affected their emotional, psychological, and social development in emerging adulthood. The study uses Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood and Erikson's theory of psychosocial development as theoretical frameworks. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews with 11 emerging adults, aged 18 to 24 years, who experienced parental divorce during childhood. Reflexive thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data. Three overarching themes emerged from the study: (1) navigating interpersonal relationships, (2) developmental transitions and parental divorce impact; as well as (3) family dynamics and support shifts. Findings reveal that parental divorce, during childhood, has emotional implications, leading to maladaptive coping strategies, difficulties within the home environment, and challenges in forming secure attachments in emerging adulthood. Despite these hardships, participants demonstrated resilience and adaptability, often reinterpreting their experiences in a positive light as they navigated self-identity and emerging adulthood. The effects of parental divorce on emerging adults were deeply embedded in their individual experiences including how they related to their parents during their childhood. This study provides valuable subjective insights into the long-term impacts of parental divorce on emerging adults by presenting data derived from participants' experiences and includes recommendations for future research and practical applications.

**Keywords:** Parental Divorce, Adverse Childhood Experiences, Emerging Adulthood, Reflexive Thematic Analysis

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can be described as negative events that occur during childhood (Rymanowicz, 2020). They include traumatic events in one's childhood, and these may prevail into one's adulthood (Morin, 2023). ACEs can be conceptualised into two main categories, namely: child maltreatment ACEs and household dysfunction ACEs (Taillieu et al., 2020). Child maltreatment ACEs include parental: physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, as well as parental emotional and physical neglect (Taillieu, 2020). Child maltreatment also includes exposing children to intimate partner violence between parents (Taillieu, 2020). Household dysfunction ACEs include substance use, mental illness, witnessing domestic violence, parental separation, parental divorce, and parental incarceration (Bryant et al., 2020).

The loss of a parent through divorce is perceived as household dysfunction ACEs. However, other ACEs such as emotional and physical neglect, domestic violence, parental mental illness, and parental substance use, often occurs both before and after the separation or divorce (Muir Wood, 2023). Studies have highlighted that children who experience their parents' divorce are at a higher risk of encountering adjustment difficulties, including from academic challenges, disruptive behaviours, and feelings of depression (D'Onofrio & Emery, 2019). Moreover, they are more prone to engaging in risky sexual behaviours during adolescence and early adulthood (D'Onofrio & Emery, 2019).

A study on parental alienation revealed a significant connection between parental alienation and low self-esteem (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012). Parental divorce is considered an ACE, that places children in the position of having to navigate this challenging situation by themselves, often without a full understanding of its complexities and dynamics. Although some children of divorced parents may fare well in terms of general functioning compared to their counterparts who are from intact families, they often encounter delayed or 'sleeper effects'

later in their development (Sarigiani & Spierling, 2011). The sleeper effect of divorce refers to individuals who initially cope and recover effectively after their parents' divorce. However, later in young adulthood, they begin to experience adjustment difficulties surfacing from earlier experiences of parental divorce (Sarigiani & Spierling, 2011). The sleeper effect highlights the long-term effects of parental divorce on emerging adults. Research suggests that the consequences of parental divorce may not be immediately apparent but can surface as the child matures into adolescence or adulthood (Margareta & Željka, 2015). Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) suggest that when the sleeper effect, emerges during the critical developmental phase of emerging adulthood— (characterised by the formation of intimate relationships and self-identity exploration)—it is often driven by a latent fear of betrayal. This fear becomes more pronounced as emerging adults enter romantic relationships. Many individuals only recognise the impact of their parents' divorce when faced with the challenges of forming intimate relationships, fearing they may replicate their parents' behaviours, experience abandonment, or marry someone who resembles one of their parents (Brassfield, 2002).

Emerging adulthood refers to a period between adolescence and young adulthood, where individuals transition from being dependent on their parents and guardians to achieving a relative sense of autonomy (Sussman & Arnett, 2014). Additionally, the emerging adulthood phase is characterised by experiencing shifts in social roles, pursuing higher education and training, transitioning from school to work, as well as forming long-lasting relationships (Sussman & Arnett, 2014). Studies have demonstrated negative associations between parental divorce during childhood and its impact on adults' mental health (Thomas & Hognas, 2015). Moreover, studies have established associations; parental divorce with depression and anxiety (Auersperg et al., 2019), as well as low parental regard and reduced relationship satisfaction among young adults (Roper et al., 2020).

### **1.1. Focus of the Study**

Emerging adulthood is a period where individuals face critical developmental milestones, including strengthening their personal identity and personality, transitioning into the workspace, and establishing intimate relationships (Arnett, 2000; Benjet, 2017). Additionally, emerging adulthood is a period of individualisation, whereby individuals separate from their families and rely on friendships or romantic relationships. However, childhood experiences can influence the development of mental health issues or lead to engaging in risky behaviours such as alcohol and substance use problems (Sayyah et al., 2022). ACEs have a long-lasting effect on emerging adults. This study provides insight from the perspective of emerging adults regarding their experiences of parental divorce during childhood and how these experiences shaped their young adult lives. Findings contribute towards the goal of understanding the effects of parental divorce on emerging adults, highlighting whether these effects are positive or negative.

### **1.2. Research Rationale**

A study conducted by Yarnoz-Yaben and Garmendia (2015) reported that emerging adults who are from divorced families often demonstrate an increased level of negative affect. They found that emerging adults from divorced families experienced higher levels of negative affect and low life satisfaction when compared to individuals from non-divorced families (Yarnoz-Yaben & Garmendia, 2015). However, the difference in life satisfaction was minimal compared to significant differences observed in negative affect.

In addition, the study found that negative affect was also dependent on the age at which the divorce occurred and parental expectations regarding relaying messages (Yarnoz-Yaben & Garmendia, 2015). This suggests that the age at which divorce occurs in childhood will determine the impact on them during emerging adulthood. The study was consistent with

findings from other studies indicating that family stressors, such as familial conflict, parental separation, parental divorce, parental conflict, or experiencing a significant life event have a negative impact on emerging adults' well-being and life satisfaction (Amato, 2012; Schaan et al., 2019; Yarnoz-Yaben & Garmendia, 2015).

Emerging adulthood is a developmental phase where individuals experiment and explore their identity while prioritising their own needs and desires (Sussman & Arnett, 2014). During this phase, emerging adults tend to feel optimistic regarding their life goals and the potential opportunities ahead (Sussman & Arnett, 2014).

The experience of divorce can lead to significant changes in relationships among family members, as well as impact the establishment of romantic relationships in emerging adults. Furthermore, parental divorce is associated with negative perceptions and attitudes in young adults (Shulman et al., 2009). Despite the prevalence of divorce, the nuanced ways in which it impacts emerging adults remain underexplored. There is a need for further research to explore emerging adults' perceptions of their parental divorce, because scholars acknowledge them as valuable informants regarding divorcing parents (Parkinson & Cashmore, 2021).

The current study explores how parental divorce during childhood impacts the psychological and relational outcomes of emerging adults. Understanding the psychosocial adaptations made by emerging adults can enhance the comprehension of their personality, relational dynamics, and their support needs.

### **1.3. Research Aims**

Parental divorce is recognised as an ACE that yields varied impacts and necessitates diverse adjustment processes (D'Onofrio & Emery, 2019). The study aims to explore the emotional, psychological, and social consequences of parental divorce during childhood on emerging

adults. Additionally, it seeks to understand how emerging adults make meaning of parental divorce in the context of their psycho-social development.

#### **1.4. Research Questions**

Parental divorce during childhood is perceived as an ACE. However, most children experience a temporary disruption, followed by an adjustment. Emerging adults remain in parental care for an extended period before achieving their financial independence. Therefore, they have the potential to contribute to the knowledge base of the psychosocial impact of divorce. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do emerging adults narrate their experiences of parental divorce which occurred during their childhood?
2. How do emerging adults make meaning of the impact of parental divorce on their psycho-social development?

#### **1.5. Structure of the Report**

This dissertation is structured into four subsequent chapters, encompassing the literature review, methods, findings, discussion, and conclusions. The literature review synthesises relevant academic sources concerning the impact of parental divorce on emerging adults, highlighting the detrimental and beneficial effects. It also introduces the theoretical frameworks of the study which are Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood and Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. The methods chapter details the research design and procedures, including sampling, recruitment, and the instrument/interview schedule that was used for data collection. The method of data analysis, that is, reflexive thematic analysis, is described alongside discussions of ethical considerations, quality assurance, and reflexivity.

The findings chapter thematically presents the findings, derived from the data. Findings are discussed using direct quotes from participants. Subsequently, the discussion chapter contextualises the findings within the existing literature, exploring corroborative and contradictory evidence. The conclusion summarises the key outcomes, evaluates the study's strengths and limitations and makes recommendations for future research and practical interventions.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Divorce can reduce a child's future competence in various life situations, including intimacy, family relationships, education, and emotional well-being (Anderson, 2014). The ACEs of divorce has the potential to alter the psychological, social, economic, and physical conditions of a child (Tzouvara et al., 2023). Families and children respond differently to ACEs, such as parental separation or divorce. However, only a few manage to navigate this transition without consequences. The transition often involves significant household rearrangements as parents remarry or enter new relationships. Consequently, children must adapt to and develop relationships with stepparents and stepsiblings (Children's Institute, 2022).

Parental divorce can be viewed as a significant stressor in an individual's life. Studies have demonstrated that parental divorce can have a devastating impact on family structure and various areas of development (Anderson, 2014). In addition, divorce can instil feelings of uncertainty, fear, anger, and disappointment (Pedro-Carroll, 2020). Thus, presenting a range of emotions and experiences within a family. Moreover, parental divorce that occurred during childhood can have a negative impact on emerging adults. Negative effects on emerging adults include low self-esteem, fear of intimacy, expectations of divorce and marriage, and low satisfaction in romantic relationships (Kirk, 2002).

In South Africa, the divorce rate has significantly escalated, emerging as a prominent issue within communities. Research indicates a rapid increase in divorce rates in recent years, with Statistics South Africa (2022) reporting an increase in completed and processed divorce from 18 208 in 2021 to 20 196 in 2022. This trend highlights the necessity of exploring the long-term impact of parental divorce on emerging adults, who are navigating the complexities of their developmental stage amidst frequent familial disruptions.

### 2.1. Self-identity and Relationships

### **2.1.1. Impact of Parental Divorce on Self-identity**

The breakdown of a family unit due to parental divorce can hinder the formation of self-identity in emerging adults. Morton (2023) proposed that emerging adults often feel compelled to reassess their self-concept and inherited values, striving to integrate their experiences into a cohesive self-image amid the instability of a fractured family model. This may result in a prolonged identity quest where emerging adults explore various identities, career paths, and personal explorations. Arnett (2007) proposes that concentration on self, typical of emerging adulthood, could be significantly interrupted as the emotional strain of coping with parental divorce often shifts their attention away from self-discovery and personal advancement towards managing family challenges.

Erikson's theory of psychosocial development provides a vital framework for understanding the effects of parental divorce on emerging adults, particularly concerning the challenges it poses to identity formation and the establishment of fidelity (Maree, 2021). As individuals navigate the complexities of role confusion and identity development, the instability brought about by parental divorce can result in significant challenges in personal, professional, and social domains. Particularly during the developmental phase of emerging adulthood, individuals are especially susceptible to emotional disruptions as they shape their identities and explore life's possibilities (Wood et al., 2018).

Tanner and Arnett (2016) found that the disruptions caused by divorce worsen existing uncertainties and anxieties, plunging emerging adults into emotional turmoil. They often grapple with feelings of betrayal, loss, and confusion as their primary emotional support is disrupted. Exploring the emotional and psychological impact of parental divorce during childhood on emerging adults is crucial in understanding the specific challenges they face and how these early experiences influence their ability to navigate various life situations.

### **2.1.2. Navigating Interpersonal Relationships**

Romantic relationships experienced in young adulthood hold significance for several reasons, including that their formation and maintenance are a developmental task during the transition to adulthood (Xia et al., 2018). The development and dissolution of romantic relationships have crucial implications for behavioural adjustment and well-being. Additionally, the patterns of romantic relationships serve as predictors of later relationships and marriage in adulthood (Cui et al., 2010). McAdam (2023) demonstrates how experiences of parental divorce influence romantic relationships during college years.

The transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood often aligns with the transition to college (Bishop, 2019). This period is marked by several challenges, such as adapting to the academic and social expectations of college life, while also navigating changes in personal relationships, responsibilities, and expectations. Although not all emerging adults attend college, the college environment provides an opportunity for significant identity exploration and the development of intimate relationships, both of which are key developmental tasks during this stage of life (Bishop, 2019). As such, it represents an important area of study within emerging adulthood. McAdam's (2023) study was instrumental in understanding the intersection between a pivotal life transition, entering college, and the long-lasting effects of parental divorce. Therefore, the college environment, with its unique social dynamics and developmental challenges, provides a critical context for exploring how young adults from divorced families navigate relationships.

The collegiate setting is a place for significant personal growth, exploration, and identity formation. Additionally, for most emerging adults, it is a phase characterised by the pursuit and cultivation of romantic relationships. McAdam's (2023) study suggests that for individuals who have experienced parental divorce, their approach to romantic relationships

can be significantly influenced by their earlier family experiences. Young adults may carry with them the lessons learned, both consciously and subconsciously, from observing their parents' marital dynamics as they enter the college environment (McAdam, 2023). As a result, emerging adults may encounter substantial challenges in forming both intimate and platonic relationships.

As reported in studies by Lee (2019) and Willoughby et al. (2020), experiencing parental divorce can result in the development of certain marital paradigms and impact the quality of parent-child relationships. Both factors are crucial in shaping young adults' approaches to their own relationships. These influences can manifest in various forms, including apprehension towards commitment, challenges in trust formation, or inclinations towards conflict-avoidance. The college environment plays a significant role in shaping the expression of these influences, providing a platform where emerging adults encounter social circles and relationship paradigms. This exposure can either challenge or reinforce their existing perceptions of relationships. Cognitive representations include memories from past experiences, as well as observed relational dynamics from parental divorce, which can influence young adults' attitudes, beliefs, and expectations about themselves (Cui et al., 2010). These representations ultimately impact their perceptions and behaviour in their own relationships.

Studies conducted on the effect of parental divorce on young adults' romantic relationship dissolution, found that their perception of divorce varied, based on interparental conflict and the marital quality prior to the divorce (Cui et al., 2010). Marriage can be perceived as an example of intimate relationships. Consequently, divorce can be seen as a form of failure, which can deeply impact emerging adults. Studies have found that divorce is associated with a higher incidence of conflict in young women's relationships (Westervelt & Vandenberg, 1997).

Therefore, if the example of a relationship is one characterised by conflict, it is possible that young adults use this as a model for their own intimate interpersonal relationships (Cui et al., 2010; Westervelt & Vandenberg, 1997). The studies highlight the influence of parental divorce on the romantic relationship patterns of emerging adults, a critical aspect of their psychological and relational development. Moreover, exploring how perceptions of divorce are shaped by interparental conflict and marital quality offers valuable insight into the mechanisms by which parental divorce during childhood shape emerging adults' relational behaviours.

A study conducted by Willoughby et al. (2020) explore how the experience of parental divorce during childhood significantly shapes the perspectives and expectations of young adults regarding marriage. This study was crucial in understanding the intergenerational transmission of marital paradigms, demonstrating how the effects of parental relationship failures can influence the romantic ideologies of the next generation. The study highlighted the nuances of how young adults, having witnessed the dissolution of their parents' marriage, often develop beliefs and attitudes towards their own potential marital relationships, characterised by apprehension.

Furthermore, a study conducted on young adults from divorced families indicates problems in relationships, such as early marriages that ended in divorce (Shulman et al., 2009). Early marriage is a recognised risk factor for divorce, since young couples may be less prepared for the challenges of marital life, including financial stability, effective communication, and mutual understanding. Also, they may have less to no conflict resolution skills, as well as low capacity to manage the stresses of shared domestic life (Amato, 2010). Early marriage may sometimes result from a desire for stability or an attempt to escape a turbulent home life, potentially placing undue pressure on the marital relationship. Consequently, embarking on marriage without emotional maturity or life experience can undermine the longevity of the

union, perpetuating the cycle of divorce witnessed in the parental generation (Roper et al., 2020).

Research conducted on the differential effects of parental divorce and marital conflict on young adults' romantic relationships indicate that parents who exhibit problematic behaviours, such as poor communication and excessive criticism, are likely to increase the risk of their adult children displaying similar issues in their own romantic relationships (Cui & Fincham, 2010). This suggests that children learn through observing behaviours from their primary caregivers. Therefore, they are likely to display such behaviours as they grow into adulthood. Cui and Fincham's (2010) study concluded that a negative attitude towards marriage was associated with weaker commitment to romantic relationships, leading to lower relationship quality.

Gabardi and Rosen (1992) examined the effects of parental marital status, sex, attitudes toward marriage, and number of years since divorce occurred. Gabardi and Rosen (1992) found that pre-divorce and post-divorce conflict is associated with negative attitude toward marriage and a higher number of sexual partners. Furthermore, Zhang (2022) found that young adults who experienced parental divorce in childhood showed lower satisfaction in their marriages and marital sex, higher likelihood of contemplating divorce, and more symptoms of sexual dysfunction compared to those from intact families. Research found that if children witness a dysfunctional marriage and experience parental separation or divorce, they are more likely to develop negative attitude and perception regarding marriage (Cui & Fincham, 2010). Therefore, this results in young adults perceiving divorce as means of ending a problematic marriage. Also, they may be more inclined to terminate their own relationship when faced with challenges.

Amato and DeBoer (2001) argue that parental divorce and strained marital relations are likely to instil in children's interpersonal behaviours that threaten intimate relationships and increase marital instability in adulthood. Research has also revealed that adult children who experienced familial disruption often display fear of commitment and a sense of unpreparedness for marriage, even when in a loving relationship (Jackson & Fife, 2018).

Lee (2019) explores the intricate dynamics of how parental divorce affects the relationships between parents and their children during the critical period of adolescence. Furthermore, Lee (2019) investigates how these altered relationships influence the romantic engagements of the children as they mature into young adults. The study is particularly significant as it highlights the pivotal role that the quality of the parent-child relationship plays in the development of young adults' attitudes and behaviours towards their own romantic relationships.

Research (Cui & Fincham, 2010; McAdam, 2023; Willoughby et al., 2020) from various studies emphasise the lasting impact of parental divorce on emerging adults' attitudes toward marriage, relationship behaviours, and romantic stability, highlighting the pivotal role of early familial dynamics in shaping future relational outcomes.

### ***2.1.3. Influential Factors in the Aftermath of Parental Divorce***

The impact of parental divorce varies depending on several factors including the level of interparental conflict, the quality of parent-child relationships, the timing of the divorce, and socioeconomic conditions. Understanding these factors is essential to comprehending how divorce shapes emotional, relational, and psychological outcomes in emerging adulthood, and the extent to which individuals are affected by early family disruption.

Willoughby et al. (2020) found that the experience of parental divorce is not merely a transient event in a child's life, it imprints a lasting influence on their perceptions of marital

stability and satisfaction. Furthermore, Willoughby et al. (2020) highlight the diversity of responses among young adults to their parents' divorce. Some may develop a cynical view of marriage, while others might adopt a more cautious yet hopeful approach, emphasising open communication and conflict resolution as pillars for a successful relationship. This variation indicates that the impact of parental divorce on marital paradigms is not consistent but is influenced by numerous factors, including individual personality traits, the nature of the parents' divorce (whether amicable or contentious), and the quality of post-divorce parenting.

En-Ling (2014) investigated whether the timing of parental divorce influenced the formation of intimate relationships in young adulthood. En-Ling (2014) concluded that experiencing parental divorce at or before the age of 12 years could lead emerging adults to develop negative expectations about marriage.

Furthermore, Lee (2019) highlights the moderating role of gender in these dynamics, suggesting that the social learning outcomes from parental divorce may diverge significantly based on gender-specific experiences. Lee (2019) emphasises that these experiences are not consistent, they are significantly influenced by the adolescent's gender. The study highlights that both males and females may interpret and react to parental divorce differently, leading to distinct patterns in how they navigate their romantic relationships in young adulthood. For instance, males might react to a post-divorce environment with withdrawal or aggression, potentially stemming from the absence of a male role model or a perceived need to assume a protective role within the family. This might result in reluctance in forming deep emotional connections or difficulties in expressing vulnerability in their intimate relationships.

Conversely, females may respond to parental divorce with increased emotional sensitivity or anxiety about relationship stability (Lee, 2019). If the post-divorce environment is characterised by maternal distress or instability, young women may internalise these

experiences, leading to fears of abandonment or increased focus on relationship security in their own romantic engagements (Lee, 2019). These gender-specific responses are critical in understanding the divergent paths young adults may follow in forming and maintaining romantic relationships (Demir-Dagdaz, 2021).

Although studies indicate that children who experienced parental divorce are found to be resilient when they approach young adulthood (Karela & Petrogiannis, 2020). These children experience more subclinical emotional distress compared to those from married families (Shanholtz et al., 2018). Findings suggest that increased exposure to parental conflict predicts higher levels of emotional distress in children (Shanholtz et al., 2018). Additionally, stressful early life experiences are associated with excessive alcohol consumption during adulthood (Merrick et al., 2017).

Emerging adults who experienced childhood adversities may struggle with regulating their emotions, thereby resorting to alcohol and drug use as their coping mechanism (Merrick et al., 2017). Young adults from divorced families reported being worried, underachieving, angry, self-deprecating, difficulties in forming intimate relationships and more likely to divorce than people who grew up in intact families (Grady, 2012). In contrast, protective factors, like the presence of effective coping strategies and supportive relationships with non-parental figures, are found to mitigate the risks, suggesting diverse outcomes depending on individual circumstances (Radetzki, et al., 2022).

Peer influences and social contexts are equally significant in understanding the trajectory of externalising behaviours in emerging adults who have experienced parental divorce. Sillekens and Notten (2018) acknowledge that the social environments children encounter after divorce, including their peer groups and community settings, can either offer support and positive role models or expose them to additional risk factors during young

adulthood. Peer relationships can be a source of stability and normalcy, or they can reinforce negative behaviours and attitudes.

Furthermore, studies indicate that young adults are more likely to thrive when they have at least one well-rounded strong relationship in their lives (Roehlkepartain et al., 2022), as this can serve as an important source of strength. A study examining the relationship between social support and confidence levels in young adults who experienced parental divorce reveals that the quality of social support significantly enhances confidence levels in career expectations and romantic relationships (Jackson & Fife, 2018). Therefore, providing robust support systems and resources can assist emerging adults to overcome the challenges posed by parental divorce, enabling them to effectively navigate and establish a stable and fulfilling adulthood.

## **2.2. Effects of Parental Divorce on the Developmental Phase of Emerging**

### **Adulthood**

In understanding the impact of parental divorce, it is essential to consider how it affects individuals during the developmental phase of emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood is a period characterised by identity exploration, forming intimate relationships and establishing independence (Arnett et al., 2014). The experiences of parental divorce during childhood may manifest differently depending on how these developmental tasks are navigated. This section will explore how parental divorce influences the developmental stage of emerging adulthood.

Emerging adults often experience difficulties in reframing their roles and expectations following their parents' divorce. According to Oliveira et al. (2020), the realignment of family roles often leads to young adults assuming responsibilities previously designated for parents, influencing their personal development as they balance the demands of personal growth with family needs. Leustek and Theiss (2017) observed that this tension might lead to exhaustion and resentment, altering their emotional landscape and connection with their parents.

Furthermore, Aquilino (2006) indicates that role uncertainty may lead to severe stress and impede the growth trajectory of emerging adults. The emotional toll of assuming these positions might be substantial. Consequently, Valdez et al. (2013) reported that young adults may feel overwhelmed by the expectations placed upon them, resulting in stress, anxiety, and burnout. These findings illustrate how the developmental challenges of emerging adulthood such as role realignment and balancing new responsibilities, intensify the emotional and psychological impact of parental divorce, leading to significant stress and altered relational dynamics.

Most individuals are prematurely pushed into adult roles, such as caregiving for younger siblings or overseeing household affairs, while they still require financial and emotional support from their parents (Dariotis et al., 2023). This blurring of roles during childhood causes identity uncertainty and mental suffering as they try to identify their position within their families, as well as in the world during adulthood. According to Aquilino (2006) and Wood et al. (2018), support groups and peer-involved activities provide essential relief for young adults, enabling them to focus on their personal lives and better manage the complexities of post-divorce family dynamics.

The pursuit of financial independence is a defining feature of emerging adulthood, yet parental divorce may make this process challenging. According to Pineda Jr. (2020), when parents separate, the family's financial stability typically deteriorates, significantly impacting young adults. Therefore, young adults may assume increased financial responsibilities, including contributing to household expenses, supporting younger siblings, or assisting a single parent who might be unemployed (Pineda, Jr, 2020). This financial obligation might postpone or derail their long-term financial security plans, such as furthering their education or savings.

Dew et al. (2012) reported that persistent financial stress could result in anxiety and depression, thereby adversely affecting academic and occupational performance. Consequently, Dodds et al. (2014) proposed that emerging adults from households affected by divorce might prioritise job security over personal interests or passion. This act is motivated by fear of financial instability witnessed during their parents' separation.

According to Murray and Arnett (2019), financial instability is a direct result of parental divorce that might affect educational endeavours. Lack of financial assistance may cause emerging adults to postpone their educational trajectory and focus on working full-time. However, this restricts their exposure to various learning opportunities crucial for this developmental phase. Spalding (1999) suggested that premature entry into the workforce may confine young adults to lower credential occupations, offering limited benefits and minimal compensation. While these positions may satisfy immediate financial needs, they lack substantial advancements for career growth, potentially leading to job dissatisfaction and lack of professional fulfilment (Spalding, 1999).

There are significant consequences of parental divorce for emerging adults, which include feelings, attitudes, and perceptions they are left with as they embark on adulthood and start their own families (Fabricius & Hall, 2000). A study examining the effects of parental divorce and distress found that individuals who experienced their parents' divorce reported more internalising problems, such as symptoms of depression and anxiety. They also exhibited externalising problems, such as school-related issues, in comparison to those whose parents stayed together (Storksen et al., 2006). Parental divorce has been associated with low self-esteem, psychological distress, poor academic achievement, delinquency, substance abuse, recidivism, sexual precocity, depression, and suicidal behaviour (Dreman, 1999).

A study examining the impact of family unpredictability and perceptions of divorce found that college students with negative perceptions of divorce reported having more external locus of control (Ross & Miller, 2009). In addition, individuals with an external locus of control may feel helpless and powerless. They do not believe that their efforts can change their situation. Khumalo and Plattner (2019) argued that individuals with an external locus of control may experience anxiety, as they believe they lack control over their lives and are less likely to try to learn or work toward change. Research found that parental divorce impacted college students' trust and assertiveness. It made them less trusting, more independent, and less likely to rely on others (Carrigan, 2015).

Fry and Addington (1985) found evidence that separation-individuation processes during adolescence and young adulthood are accelerated due to parental divorce. This is particularly evident among college men who experienced greater emotional separation from their parents and left home earlier (Lopez, 1991). A study examining how young adults perceive parental divorce indicated their perceptions as being multifaceted and consisting of feelings and recollections (Shulman et al., 2009). The findings suggested that despite the challenges presented by parental divorce, it also provides unique chances for personal growth and development. This is consistent with literature that describes children as resilient and having the ability to overcome adverse experiences (Sameroff, 2013). Chase-Lansdale et al. (1995) suggest that the aspiration to overcome challenges stemming from familial disruptions may foster independence, self-reliance, and a stronger sense of self.

### **2.3. Family Dynamics**

The diminution of family support following parental divorce may have significant emotional and psychological effects on emerging adults, thereby influencing family dynamics. Laumann-Billings and Emery (2000) reported that when the conventional family structure disintegrates,

young adults typically experience a sense of loss and instability. The family unit, traditionally a source of emotional support and comfort, often becomes a source of stress and uncertainty. This fundamental shift might induce feelings of isolation and insecurity, heightening the challenges of emerging adulthood (Schaan et al., 2019). Chase-Lansdale and Hetherington (1990) highlight that infrequent parental support may exacerbate feelings of anxiety and abandonment. Hence, it adversely impacts confidence and self-esteem in emerging adults. This issue may be intensified if the parent is simultaneously dealing with the emotional and logistical challenges of divorce, potentially constraining their ability to provide support.

Chase-Lansdale et al. (1995) proposed that estrangement from one or both parents can weaken familial bonds, which are essential for support during emerging adulthood. Family dynamics become strained, impacting their interactions outside the family. Murray and Arnett (2019) emphasise how emerging adults may retreat from social networks or over-engage as an escape, both of which can be detrimental to their social development. In addition, Fabricius and Hall (2000) found that the living arrangements established at the beginning of the divorce often remain the same eight years later, indicating that children typically do not have a say in these decisions. Lopez (1991) found that parental divorce impacted college student's emotional attachment to their noncustodial parent, who is often the father. Moreover, Austin et al. (2013), asserted that parental support, particularly the involvement of both parents, is crucial for children during this period, assisting them in adjusting and navigating through the divorce process.

Divorced parents often use alienation strategies, such as degrading one another or turning children against the other parent. This can be described as parental alienation syndrome which arises in custody battles, whereby one parent influences the child to act against the other parent (Haimi & Lerner, 2016). A study assessing parental alienation strategies on young adults

whose parents divorced during their childhood, found that such experiences were associated with lower self-esteem, insecure attachment in relationships, reduced self-sufficiency and high levels of depression (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012). This suggests that parents often significantly contribute to the negative impacts experienced by emerging adults.

Although divorce marks the end of a marital union, it can represent a positive transition under certain conditions. For instance, when children are exposed to prolonged conflict and stress between parents, divorce can be perceived as a logical option (Anderson, 2014). In numerous cases, parents frequently contemplate divorce but reassess their decision to preserve familial unity and fulfil financial responsibilities (Bell et al., 2022). However, this often results in families living in extremely stressful environments, with children experiencing significant distress.

Pickhardt (2015) argues that during adolescence, when detachment is naturally progressing, divorce can accelerate the process of letting go in pursuit of growing up and being more independent. Pickhardt (2015) believed that although parental divorce may cause children to feel hurt, challenged, and more detached from their parents, they also have the capacity to adjust, recover, and move forward in their adult lives. Conversely, continued parental conflict, lack of emotional support, and inconsistent parenting can leave children vulnerable to adopting maladaptive coping strategies that persist into adulthood (McAdam, 2023).

Research consistently associates parental divorce with an increased likelihood of divorce in the subsequent generation's marriages (Amato, 2010). Referred to as the intergenerational transmission of divorce, this pattern suggests that children of divorced parents tend to experience divorce in their own marriages (Roper et al., 2020). Several behavioural and environmental mechanisms are proposed to explain why children of divorced parents might be more inclined to experience divorce themselves. One explanation centres on social learning

theory, which suggests that children observe and internalise relationship behaviours from their parents (Bandura, 1971). If children often witness conflict, poor communication, and dissolution within their parental relationship, they may inadvertently adopt these patterns, affecting their own capacity to maintain stable relationships (Auersperg et al., 2019). Additionally, divorce often introduces stressors, including economic strain, custodial disputes, and altered family dynamics, which shapes a child's outlook on relationships and their worthiness of trust and intimacy (Demir-Dagdaz, 2021). Therefore, these internalised feelings could contribute to a propensity toward relationship instability in adulthood.

### ***2.3.1 Societal Acceptance of Divorce***

Family dynamics are often influenced by the societal context in which divorce occurs. Societal acceptance of divorce can shape how family members perceive and navigate their roles and relationships, affecting the overall adjustment and interactions within the family (Ackermann, 2004). Societal acceptance of divorce significantly influences emerging adults' attitudes toward marriage and its dissolution (Fučík, 2020). As societal norms evolve, perceptions of divorce change, subsequently influencing the decisions and beliefs of future generations. When children witness their parents' divorce, it inherently alters their understanding of marriage and its permanence. As Miller (2021) reported, divorce may become normalised as a viable solution to marital discord. This normalisation process can lessen the stigma traditionally associated with divorce, making it a more accessible option for resolving relationship challenges.

The societal acceptance of divorce, as discussed by Sumari et al. (2020), presents both empowerment and challenges. Increasing acceptance of divorce can liberate individuals from unhealthy or unsatisfactory marriages, providing an escape from situations that previous generations might have felt compelled to endure. This shift can be particularly significant in cultures where marital permanence has been significantly emphasised. It offers new narratives

and possibilities for personal happiness and fulfilment. However, this evolving societal perspective can also diminish the emphasis on perseverance and effort traditionally associated with maintaining a marriage.

Children raised in environments where divorce is normalised as a common response to marital conflict may develop attitudes that perceive marriage as less of a lifelong commitment. This perception can influence their approach to conflicts and challenges within their own marriages (Roper et al., 2020). The societal acceptability of divorce also interacts with other cultural, economic, and legal factors. Moreso, economic independence, gender roles, and legal provisions related to divorce can all influence how society views marital dissolution, and how individuals consider it in their own lives. For instance, in societies where economic independence is more attainable, the feasibility of pursuing a divorce might be higher, further contributing to its normalisation and acceptability (Radetzki et al., 2022).

Divorce can be experienced as an adjustment that promotes resilience rather than a crisis, provided that adequate assistance and support are available during this transition (Pedro-Carroll, 2020). This can include cooperative parenting, healthy relationships between parents and children, supportive relationships with extended family, household structure and stability, understanding children's emotions and managing conflict as well as strong emotions (Pedro-Carroll, 2020).

#### **2.4. Theoretical Framework**

Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood and Erikson's psychosocial development theory, provide an insightful framework for analysing the effects of parental divorce on emerging adults. According to Arnett et al. (2014), the emerging adult developmental stage includes individuals aged 18–29. While it may share similarities with preceding or subsequent stages, it is distinct due to its unique features. Emerging adults, as described by Arnett et al. (2014), have achieved

physical and sexual maturity and display diverse educational as well as occupational paths. Childhood adversities can significantly impact this crucial developmental stage and influence how an individual transitions into adulthood. This study will utilise these theoretical frameworks to understanding the developmental stage of emerging adulthood and provide insights into how individuals navigate life decisions and cope with the effects of parental divorce. By integrating the theories, the study will provide a comprehensive understanding of how parental divorce influences identity and relationship formation as well as emotional and social well-being during emerging adulthood and identify potential support strategies.

#### ***2.4.1. Arnett's Theory of Emerging Adulthood and Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development in Emerging Adults***

Arnett's (2014) theory of emerging adulthood describes five features of emerging adults (i) the age of identity exploration which involves deciding who they are and what they want, (ii) the age of instability, which is the phase of constant change, either with studies, occupations or friends, (iii) the age of self-focus, which is experiencing freedom and making choices for themselves, (iv) the age of feeling in-between, which is having a sense of responsibility but still not feeling as an adult and lastly (v) the age of possibilities which is being optimistic. At the age of possibilities, emerging adults may envision having a lifelong marriage and believe they will not repeat their parents' choices (Arnett, 2014). They may opt for a different path and refuse to let their past experiences influence them.

Emerging adulthood is marked by exploration and independence. Emerging adults navigate work and education, with some pursuing full-time employment, others are in tertiary education, and many balancing both (Arnett et al., 2014). Compared to adults in their 30s, emerging adults generally lack stable structures in their professional and personal lives, highlighting the transitional nature of this stage (Arnett et al., 2014). Arnett et al. (2014)

describes emerging adulthood as a phase of instability, characterised by explorative changes in educational and career paths, as well as numerous romantic relationships before establishing long-term commitments.

Similarly, Erikson's theory of psychosocial development posits that identity formation is a fundamental task during late adolescence and early adulthood, occurring in the fifth stage of development (Maree, 2021). This stage is crucial for achieving independence and developing self-actualisation (Maree, 2021). The theory further outlines the sixth stage as a phase where emerging adults focus on establishing and maintaining intimate relationships, which are integral to identity formation, as well as decisions regarding education and career choices (Maree, 2021).

In the context of parental divorce, the frameworks provided by Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood and Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, become particularly pertinent. Both theories highlight the potential impact of parental divorce on emerging adults, encompassing psychological, emotional, social, educational, and long-term developmental issues. Parental divorce disrupts this critical developmental phase, primarily by destabilising the secure family environment, which serves as the basis for personal and social identities (Wood et al., 2018).

#### ***2.4.2. Implications of Parental Divorce on the Emerging Adulthood Period***

Emerging adults who are exposed to parental divorce during childhood may question the stability and reliability of relationships, fundamentally changing how they develop their own identity. This ambivalence may lead to prolonged periods of role exploration, potentially delaying the achievement of a mature and stable personal identity (Dodds et al., 2014). Dodds et al. (2014) observed that the emotional turbulence and psychological strain caused by parental

divorce during childhood might result in substantial introspection and self-questioning among emerging adults.

Hawkins et al. (2024) proposed that the instability resulting from parental divorce during childhood could impede the ability of emerging adults' capacity to trust, making the development and maintenance of relationships more challenging. Additionally, according to Dunkel and Sefcek (2009) experiencing parental divorce can lead to a generalised distrust of relationships, as well as scepticism regarding personal and professional commitments. The fear of repeating their parents' mistakes or experiencing betrayal might cause emerging adults to be sceptical and hesitate to commit, thereby impeding the formation of a stable as well as secure personal identity that includes interpersonal connections (Arnett, 2007; Sorosky, 1977; Valdez et al., 2013).

Parental divorce during childhood can significantly influence the transition into emerging adulthood, necessitating multifaceted intervention strategies. Arnett (2007) emphasises that diverse strategies are required to mitigate these impacts. To explore the long-term impact of parental divorce during childhood on emerging adults, this study will integrate Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood and Erikson's theory of psychosocial development.

## **2.5. Conclusion**

This chapter has comprehensively explored the multifaceted impacts of parental divorce during childhood on emerging adults, incorporating insights from Arnett's theory of emerging adults, Erikson's stages of psychosocial development and various empirical studies. The literature review revealed that parental divorce is associated with a range of emotional, psychological, and social challenges in emerging adulthood. These included alterations in familial relationship dynamics, mental health issues, attitudes toward relationships, coping mechanisms and educational and financial outcomes. The theoretical implications of these findings suggest that

parental divorce disrupts normative developmental processes, emphasising the necessity of implementing support mechanisms during the critical phase of identity formation.

Evolving societal norms around divorce and increased acceptance might influence the intergenerational transmission of attitudes toward divorce. They may lead to specific impacts on young adults' romantic relationships, and the potential for externalising problem behaviours into adulthood. While parental divorce presents significant challenges to emerging adults, a thorough comprehension of these impacts, along with strong support systems, can assist in effectively navigating these challenges. The insights from the literature review suggest scenarios where parental divorce, as a response to familial upheaval, could potentially mitigate further negative impacts.

Overall, the empirical literature underscores the importance of continued research and the creation of interventions aimed at supporting emerging adults in fulfilling their potential despite the adversities they encounter during their formative years.

## Chapter 3: Methods

This chapter outlines the methodological framework employed to explore how emerging adults derive meaning of parental divorce during childhood. The study adopted a qualitative research design to deeply explore personal narratives, experiences, and meaning construction of emerging adults who experienced parental divorce. This aim of the study was accomplished by addressing two research questions: first, how do emerging adults narrate their experiences of parental divorce which occurred during their childhood? Second, how do emerging adults make meaning of the impact of parental divorce on their psycho-social development?

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews. Data was collected from a purposively selected sample of individuals who experienced parental divorce during childhood. The methods employed facilitated an in-depth analysis of their subjective experiences and the long-term consequences of familial disruptions on their adult relationships and self-perception.

### 3.1. Research Design

Interpretive approach was used for this study. An interpretive approach focuses on people's subjective experiences as the core of what is real for them (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). This approach was deemed the most suitable due to its emphasis of directly engaging with emerging adults and attentively listening to their narratives regarding parental divorce. In addition, this approach facilitated a nuanced understanding and interpretation of participants' experiences and perspectives, providing a comprehensive exploration of the complexities inherent in the phenomenon of parental divorce as perceived by individuals who are directly affected.

Interpretive research focuses on the initial encounter and seeks to comprehensively describe and express this encounter and the experiences. Interpretive research consists of two

key principles: understanding in context and the researcher serving as the primary instrument (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Employing an interpretative approach implied that the researcher was the primary instrument responsible for collecting and analysing data. The key principle of understanding in context is to be empathetic and understand individual's feelings and experiences in their context (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Throughout the study, the researcher consistently approached participants with empathy, recognising and valuing each participant's unique experiences and the resulting formation of their individual perspectives. Interpretive research, which supports this approach, is based on the notion that social reality is complex, shaped by various human experiences and social contexts, rather than being singular or objective in nature (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

A qualitative approach was employed for this study. Qualitative approach was appropriate for the study because the aim was to describe and interpret emerging adults' feelings and experiences (Tere Blanche et al., 2006). Qualitative research is distinguished by its open-ended and inductive approach, emphasising thorough exploration and understanding of individual's feelings and experiences, as well as the subjective significance attributed to them. This was crucial to the study because it aimed to understand the lived experiences of emerging adults regarding parental divorce and how they have influenced their understanding and perspective of divorce and marriage. Therefore, this was the most appropriate method to assist in answering the research question.

Using qualitative research, the study recognises situations based on participants' perspectives and explores various issues they experienced. The data collection process provided them with a platform to openly express themselves and share their stories. For this study, a qualitative approach was deemed most suitable. This required participants to reflect on their experiences while they articulate their thoughts, emotions, and encounters regarding the

subject matter, openly and comfortably. The selected research design facilitated empathetic engagement with participants, fostering a genuine understanding of each individual's perspective.

### **3.2. Sampling and Recruitment**

Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique. It is sampling done according to various characteristics and criteria, such as experience or age and corresponds with the purpose and objective of the study (Wagner et al., 2012). Purposive sampling assisted in identifying and selecting emerging adults, particularly who were knowledgeable and had experience of parental divorce during childhood.

The sample comprised of 11 emerging adults, including males and females aged 18-24 years. The inclusion criteria for sampling were: participants' parents must have divorced during their childhood between the ages of 1 and 12 years. In addition, participants had to be financially dependent on at least one parent, as well as living at their parental home or university housing. Inclusion of participants residing in university housing and those living at their parental home allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the impact of parental divorce in emerging adults, ensuring that the study accounted for varying living conditions.

Social media platforms, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram were used to advertise the study and for the recruitment of participants. These platforms are frequently used by emerging adults which rendered the most suitable and effective means to obtain a diverse sample. Subsequently, Microsoft Teams and telephonic calls were used to conduct the interviews.

The table below provides a brief description of the participants:

*Table 1: Sample Description and Additional Information (at time of the interview)*

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Current Age	Age at the time of divorce	Occupation
John	Male	24	10	Student and employed
Cassandra	Female	22	5/6	Unemployed
Lerato	Female	20	1	Student
Katy	Female	18	6	Student
Jared	Male	19	5	Student
Thandi	Female	19	8	Student
Maria	Female	18	9	Student
Miranda	Female	19	10	Student
Danny	Female	21	12	Student
Hazel	Female	24	11	Student
Katleen	Female	19	8/9	Student

### **3.2.1. Instrument/Interview Guide**

A semi-structured interview guide was developed for data collection (please see Appendix C). Semi-structured interviews enable efficient use of time and offer a systematic approach to exploring participants and their experiences comprehensively (Jamshed, 2014). Moreover, semi-structured interviews are considered flexible because they allow for the inclusion of follow-up inquiries, probes, and new questions that arise based on the responses provided by the interviewee (Ruslin et al., 2022). These interviews maintained flexibility that enabled for in-depth exploration of the topic while ensuring the conversation kept flowing (Jamshed,

2014). This adaptability facilitated a deeper exploration and enhanced the richness of the data collected.

The interview guide encompassed various aspects of the participants' lives, including questions about their experiences of parental divorce and its consequences, friendships, romantic relationships, and relationship with parents. This approach provided an overview of the participants' lives, their experiences of divorce, and how they interpreted its significance within the context of their lives.

### **3.3. Data Analysis**

Reflexive thematic analysis was employed for data analysis. It focused on the researcher's reflective and thoughtful interaction with the data and analytical process (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In addition, reflexive thematic analysis is a method of deriving patterns within the data. Reflexive thematic analysis deeply explores the dataset, interpreting its content and crafting narratives that reveal the patterns of meaning that it has (Joy et al., 2023).

The advantages of reflexive thematic analysis method are that it provides a flexible approach for exploring and enhancing understanding of patterned meaning within the data (Joy et al., 2023). It also provides a rich and detailed discussion of the data (Nowell et al., 2017). Additionally, it allows summarising the key points and aspects of a large data set. In the current study, reflexive thematic analysis provided a method for exploring and reorganising data, developing insightful understanding and crafting a narrative that captures the meaning and significance of the findings (Joy et al., 2023). However, the disadvantage is that its flexibility can lead to inconsistencies and a lack of coherence when identifying themes.

Reflexive thematic analysis is mostly employed in qualitative research for its ability to generate comprehensive and detailed data descriptions (Braun & Clarke, 2019). It entails the

organisation and description of themes identified within the data. A theme, in this context, can be described as creative and interpretive narratives derived from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). These are narratives that will be pertinent to the research question.

Six phases of reflexive thematic analysis were used in the current study. These are: (1) familiarising oneself with the dataset, (2) coding, (3) generating initial themes, (4) developing and reviewing themes, (5) refining, defining and naming themes, as well as (6) writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

In phase 1 of reflexive thematic data analysis, the researcher familiarised themselves with the collected data by listening to the recorded interviews and transcribing them verbatim. Subsequently, the researcher engaged in iterative reading and re-reading of the transcribed data to become acquainted with its various aspects and fully immerse themselves in its content. This process facilitated the identification of patterns and meaning within the data. It also involved note making, capturing the researcher's thoughts and questions.

The process of coding included identification of key aspects, as well as back and forth recoding as codes evolved (Joy et al., 2023). Examples of codes generated during this phase encompassed descriptions of; conflict, infidelity, avoidance, rejection, financial insecurity, undisclosed information, custody arrangements, and resentment. After completing the coding process, the next step was to generate themes from the coded data. This phase included analysing the list of codes generated, with a focus on identifying patterns, similarities, and connections between different codes.

Various techniques were employed to facilitate the organisation and synthesis of codes into coherent themes. These methods involved using mind maps to visually illustrate relationships between codes and creating theme piles. In theme piles, each code, along with a brief description, was written on pieces of paper and grouped together based on similarities.

The themes were carefully arranged to ensure they effectively addressed the research questions. Some of the key themes identified during this phase encompassed the desire for a lasting marriage, lack of parental communication, divorce as a stressor, suppression of emotions, and the maintenance of positive emotional bonds with siblings.

The process of developing and reviewing the themes involved a meticulous examination of each theme to ascertain its relevance, comprehensiveness, and coherence. This phase involved scrutinising the content within each theme to ensure it was supported by sufficient data and determining whether certain themes could be integrated to form a cohesive narrative (Joy et al., 2023). The next step was refining, defining, and naming them, which involved assessing the validity of each theme and ensuring that they accurately reflected the meaning of the entire data set.

The refining phase identified the essence of what each theme entailed, as well as the aspect of data that it captured (Joy et al., 2023). The final phase was writing up, which involved the final analysis and writing this dissertation (Joy et al., 2023). The process involved presenting the data and examining its correlation or contradiction with existing literature. It provides the reader with a narrative derived from the data, where each theme is discussed concisely and informatively, encapsulating the genuine significance as well as essence of the information.

### **3.4. Ethical Considerations**

The study followed all ethical conventions prescribed by the University of Witwatersrand's Human Research Ethics Committee (non-medical). Ethics refers to a set of principles and rules of conduct that must be followed when conducting research (McLeod, 2023). Therefore, researchers have a moral responsibility to protect participants from physical and emotional harm. The ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the University of Witwatersrand

School of Human Research Ethics Committee (non-medical) under protocol number MACC/22/09 (please see Appendix D).

### ***3.4.1. Informed Consent and Non-Deception***

With regards to informed consent, the study's participants were given a participant information sheet (please see Appendix A) along with the consent form (please see Appendix B). They were required to complete and return the consent form, thereby providing the researcher with voluntary informed consent to conduct the interviews for the study. The information sheet covered several aspects of autonomy, such as voluntary participation, the right to record and use quotes from the participants in the researcher's master's dissertation. Additionally, participants were asked permission to be audio recorded. Throughout the process, participants were treated with utmost respect, and they were not subjected to any form of deception.

### ***3.4.2. Confidentiality, Anonymity and Safety***

Confidentiality refers to protecting the contents of data obtained from participants and restricting access to it (Bos, 2020). Data sharing was limited to the researcher and supervisor. The data obtained from participants was stored safely and securely in a password protected file on the researcher's computer. Anonymity refers to protecting participants' identities and collecting data without revealing identifying information (Bos, 2020). However, anonymity could not be guaranteed in this study because recruitment posters were shared on various social media platforms. If participants responded to these posts, other users might be able to see their responses. The data gathered through interviews was obtained via phone calls and virtual meetings. Nevertheless, the researcher could not see the participants' faces. Therefore, anonymity in the report is guaranteed as participant's identities are protected, and no identifiers are used, making it impossible to link any participant to their individual responses. Furthermore, pseudonyms are also used to refer to the participants.

### **3.4.3. *Right to Withdraw***

Participants received a verbal explanation, as well as written and verbal assurance that participation was voluntary. Therefore, they could withdraw at any stage without prejudice or giving a reason (Edwards, 2005). Participants were also informed that there were no direct benefits to participating in the study. However, the data will assist people to understand the long-term consequences of parental divorce on emerging adults and in planning adequate services to address their needs.

There were no anticipated risks to participating. Additionally, the topic being researched was of no harm to the well-being of participants. However, as a precaution, the contact details of two 24-hour mental health helplines (Wits Students Crisis Line and SADAG) were provided to participants in the information sheet.

### **3.5. *Establishing Quality***

Trustworthiness of the data refers to the extent to which the study conclusions are credible and sound. Studies need to be presented and described comprehensively to enable the readers to determine whether the information is appropriate. There are four criteria that can be used to ensure the trustworthiness of a study which are: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Wagner et al., 2012).

Credibility refers to activities that make the study more credible by ensuring that the findings correlate and are derived from the data (Trochim, 2006). For the current study, the actions of the researcher resulted in appropriate measures being taken to ensure internal validity of the study. These measures consisted of member checking to ensure that participants' responses were accurately captured and understood. It also comprised of peer debriefing, which provided the researcher with feedback and insights from colleagues to enhance the quality of

the study both before and after data collection. Peers were not directly involved in data collection or associated with the study, and peer debriefing sessions were conducted to identify potential biases, challenge the researcher's interpretations, and offer alternative perspectives.

Transferability refers to the extent to which the study's findings can be generalised or applied to other contexts (Trochim, 2006). For the current study, this was achieved using purposive sampling. By selecting participants who experienced the same event, parental divorce, the study captured their unique perspectives and diverse experiences, providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Throughout the study, the researcher actively engaged in reflexive practices, critically examining and reflecting on their role, assumptions and biases (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). The study produced rich and detailed descriptions of contexts to ensure transferability. It offers readers an accurate and precise account of the structures of meaning that emerge in that context, which can subsequently be applied to new contexts in other studies (Terre Blanche et al., 2006).

Dependability refers to the reliability measure that emphasises the need for the study to provide the necessary information to account for the ever-changing context in which the study is conducted (Trochim, 2006). Dependability is achieved when the findings of the study are presented in extensive and rich detail, describing the methods and process of collecting and analysing data (Trochim, 2006). Furthermore, continuously reviewing of themes ensured that they were dependable and accurate representations of participants' experiences rather than the researcher's own experiences.

Finally, confirmability refers to the extent to which the results and findings can be confirmed by the data (Trochim, 2006). This was achieved through triangulation, employing various methods with multiple steps. The researcher familiarised themselves with existing studies on the topic and relevant theories to ensure the research question remained pertinent.

Reflexivity was also implemented throughout the research process to ensure that the researcher's position and stance did not interfere or take away participants' experiences and narratives. Enhancing reflexivity in the research process facilitated a more profound and comprehensive understanding for the researcher, thus, strengthening the integrity of the study (Smith, 2006). With the above criteria for trustworthiness being carefully addressed throughout each research step, the researcher ensured commitment to the quality of research they presented.

### ***3.5.1. Reflexivity***

Reflexivity in research can be described as the process in which the researcher reflects on and examines their own thoughts and behaviours, recognising the potential influence on the research process. It is seen as a process that embraces the subjectivity of the study (Smith, 2006). The central topic of this study is how emerging adults derive meaning of their experiences of parental divorce during childhood. My own experiences of parental divorce motivated my decision to explore its impact as an adverse childhood experience on emerging adults. My parents divorced when I was already an emerging adult, which required me to adjust and adapt to the ensuing changes. As an emerging adult with the emotional and psychological capacity to understand the situation, I experienced emotional responses to these changes. This sparked my curiosity about the emotions and experiences that a child might face during parental divorce and whether these experiences would result in any long-term effects as they transition into emerging adulthood. Hence, as the researcher, I actively engaged in continuous introspection, carefully examining my personal cognitions, affective states, and conduct throughout the research process, including post-participant interview sessions and interactions, to minimise the impact of potential biases. I regularly journaled to unpack and reflect on my thoughts and behaviours. A reflexive researcher recognises that they are an integral part of the

research process. Therefore, their participation contributes to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the research process and its findings (Smith, 2006).

### **3.6. Conclusion**

The study employed semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis to rigorously examine the impacts of parental divorce on emerging adults. These methods were selected for their effectiveness in capturing detailed personal narratives and analysing the subjective experiences of familial disruption as recalled by emerging adults. Employing reflective thematic analysis ensured a thorough exploration of the data, enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings. Consequently, the research methods laid a solid foundation for understanding the complex dynamics that influence the developmental trajectories of emerging adults.

## Chapter 4: Findings

Central to the research was the exploration of how emerging adults construct their perceptions and experiences of parental divorce during their formative years. The analysis identified three core themes, namely: (1) Navigating interpersonal relationships, (2) developmental transitions and parental divorce impact, as well as (3) family dynamics and support shifts. These themes served as pivotal lens through which the nuanced implications of parental divorce on the experiences of emerging adults were comprehensively explored and elucidated.

### 4.1. Navigating Interpersonal Relationships

Navigating interpersonal relationships explores the impact of parental divorce during childhood on emerging adults' interpersonal dynamics and relationship behaviours. This theme highlights how participants' perceptions of marriage and divorce shape their approach to both intimate and social relationships. Additionally, it explores how exposure to familial conflict and instability during parental divorce influences relationship patterns and coping mechanisms.

Challenges with establishing secure and healthy attachments were reported among most emerging adults. Many participants alluded to difficulties with forming relationships across various domains such as family, friends, and intimate partners. Their parents' divorce was perceived as having contributed to the challenges of cultivating meaningful relationships. They attributed these difficulties to being exposed to unhealthy and unsuccessful relationships during their formative years. Even the cultivation of friendships was perceived as arduous, as narrated below:

*“I do struggle to create intimate or rather just connections with people over a longstanding friendship, mostly because there's always a bit of a barrier between me and others but I think is also a similar kind of challenge there because of one, the*

*traumas that I've experienced and two, the only real healthy example I have of a relationship was with my grandparents, the rest of the relationships that I know of, my parents, their friends, all ended in divorce. They all didn't have the best kind of divorce experiences and the reasons for the divorce were usually not good ones either... I do think that it's led me to kind of lacking genuine proper friendships with a lot of individuals and it has made having relationships a bit harder” (John).*

Furthermore, participants alluded to experiencing various challenges in romantic relationships. Some of them expressed apprehension in romantic relationships and described fears of abandonment and potential trauma. This is highlighted in the extract below:

*“I think it definitely has, because my dad leaving, just the whole idea of guys approaching me, I don't like it, it's scary. I feel like I can't see myself ever being intimate with a guy because I'm scared that they're going to leave. I feel like it definitely affected my relationships because now I feel like I hurt them before they hurt me” (Miranda).*

Those who witnessed their parents being hostile towards each other harboured apprehensions about interpersonal relationships. The fear of rejection led to challenges with commitment in different forms of relationships. Several participants reported experiencing feelings of insecurity which contributed to the development of insecure attachments, as exemplified below:

*“I feel like now I tend to...the moment the small conflict arises I'm on the brink of a breakdown, I start wondering if these people are going to leave me or they're not going to want to be my friend anymore, I start to unravel and just a mess. I think it's definitely affected the way I view my relationships” (Miranda).*

Some participants mentioned that they adopted self-protective behaviours and experienced difficulties trusting others within interpersonal relationships. Miranda adopted a self-protective strategy from emotional vulnerability by being overconfident. Her way of coping with romantic relationships was to be in control through inflicting emotional harm on others, before allowing herself to be susceptible to potential hurt, as shown below:

*“I feel like now that’s sort of manifested itself into all the relationships that I have with men, I’m always scared that they’re going to leave so I try and front this confidence and, how do I say this, like overconfident manner, I will try and assert my confidence over theirs to hurt them before they hurt me” (Miranda).*

In addition, one participant highlighted experiencing a sense of security which derived from engaging in romantic relationships with older partners. The reason behind pursuing relationships with older individuals seemed to stem from a desire to seek comfort and support from a ‘father figure’. Lerato explained:

*“He was older, and I think not having my father around made me feel that having an older guy around could make me feel comforted, you know, I felt like talking to an older guy would make me feel better about things, again” (Lerato).*

Participants highlighted that parental divorce and poor relationship modelling contributed to their challenges in developing secure and healthy interpersonal bonds. However, despite these challenges, participants emphasised the importance of open communication and providing unconditional support within their own relationships. These qualities were seen as crucial for fostering healthy interpersonal relationships and reflected a conscientious effort to avoid poor communication patterns that they observed in their parents:

*“When I do look at marriage, now, I just want a marriage that’s ...open communication, supportive, successful. In terms of being supportive, you’re trying to help your partner achieve their goals, the dreams they wish to achieve. That’s how I look at marriage these days” (Jared).*

#### **4.1.1 Subtheme 1: Perspectives of Marriage and Divorce**

Perspectives of marriage and divorce were closely linked to interpersonal relationships, as participants views on marital commitment, conflict resolution, and the possibility of separation significantly shaped how they engaged with and maintained romantic relationships, influencing their level of trust, emotional investment and long-term commitment. Participants’ perspectives of marriage and divorce were predominantly influenced by their own familial experiences of marriage and separation. Moreover, some participants expressed scepticism about the portrayal of the marital institution and suggested that it often fell short of its romanticised depiction. They viewed marriage as expendable and considered divorce a viable and beneficial option, as it offered a healthier alternative. John narrated:

*“I think that divorce is often a much better option than people think it is. Relationship dynamics change. Sometimes divorce is the healthiest decision that you can make for both you and your children, if you have them... So, I do think that if you're unable to sort your relationship issues healthily and it has gotten to that point and you're considering it, rather get divorced than stay in that and cause undue harm towards yourself and the children” (John).*

Certain participants believed that their parents’ divorce was the best thing to happen in their lives. Participants who viewed divorce as a viable solution in failing marriages reported experiencing increased stability following the dissolution of their parents’ marital relationship. They perceived divorce as a healthy decision for both parents, as well as children:

*“I think it brought a lot more stability to our life at that time because suddenly their arguments in the home weren’t there, and suddenly a lot of the issues that were in the house weren’t there anymore. It was more just adjusting to a new pattern of things. I do think that quite frankly, just because of how well it was handled...I would say my parent’s divorce was probably the best decision that they’d ever made in their life”* (John).

Numerous participants also believed that divorce was justifiable in situations of infidelity or when there was abuse within the marital relationship, as exemplified below:

*“In my parent’s case, my mom cheated, so I think in that case it’s okay (Divorce) or in a case where one is abusing the other. I think it’s okay, but if it’s just fighting or arguing or not agreeing on things especially if kids are involved, it’s important to maybe go for counselling, try and resolve things, because it affects kids differently. Maybe I was okay, but I know a lot of kids who didn’t cope well”* (Cassandra).

Alternatively, some participants viewed divorce as an undesirable resolution. Based on their post-divorce experiences, participants advocated for exhaustive exploration of all potential reconciliation strategies prior to considering divorce. Therefore, many participants suggested counselling as a significant intervention for salvaging difficult marriages. For example, Katy said:

*“I feel like for me, it’s not an option (Divorce). It may have seemed like the best thing for them at that time, but for me, I don’t think it’s a route I would want to take... it affected my view ... it’s something I don’t want to go through. So, if it takes for me to go through the marriage counsellor, the therapist, and anything, I’d do that, because at the end of the day it may seem as the best option for the partners but it affects everybody else, not just the children but also the community members and stuff like that. So, I feel*

*like it's a very unfair process to everyone, first to the partners, and to the children, to the community, to just everybody” (Katy).*

Other participants expressed a strong desire to avoid marriage altogether. Their parents' divorce led to concerns about marriage, which participants perceived as potentially fraught with adversity and suffering. Hence, participants believed that entering a marital union would require passive acceptance of challenging circumstances, something they actively sought to avoid.

#### **4.1.2 Subtheme 2: From Family Conflict to Personal Struggles**

Family conflict affected interpersonal relationships by shaping participants behavioural patterns, emotional responses and conflict resolution skills. Parental divorce was frequently accompanied with conflict and violence that varied in intensity. Most participants reported witnessing conflict between their parents, characterised by a spectrum of passive aggression to overt violence. In addition, participants recounted several incidents of poor conflict management between their parents. This led to them experiencing fear and confusion. Some participants also recounted the emotional toll their siblings experienced due to these incidents:

*“... my father was beating her up and then she was bleeding, and I remember my younger sister crying and then I remember the neighbours came in to intervene, to ask, like stop the confrontation” (Jared).*

The disruption within the family unit, along with the emotional upheaval, contributed to participants feeling a sense of vulnerability and instability. Some participants coped with this emotional turmoil by engaging in risky behaviours, such as physical violence and other problematic conduct, which continued into emerging adulthood. Some participants experienced issues with their temperament, manifesting in form of anger and rebellious behaviour, the following quotations reported:

*“There was an instance where a relationship of mine had ended and the guy had tried to kind of have this emotional outburst at my work, I was working nightshifts at an emergency call centre at that time, and he showed up to my work and I was alone there, and he had this emotional outburst of the breakup and when I tried to kind of just push him out of the door, he did try to punch me and that ended up with me putting him in a choke hold” (John).*

*“I was quite rebellious in some ways. So, I wanted to do what I wanted to do which helped me escape if you know what I mean. I was a teenager and wanted to try things out” (Jared).*

The extended family also became involved in the marital conflict and sometimes contributed to the split by pressuring participants to sever ties with the non-custodial parent. Thandi expressed that her mother was a source of comfort and stability during the turbulent transition associated with the divorce. However, she could not experience a sense of safety and security due to being separated from her mother. Consequently, being deprived of the opportunity to see her mother for extended periods elicited feelings of anger and resentment towards the responsible family members. Since all participants were children at the time of their parents’ divorce, they experienced a sense of helplessness. Nevertheless, as the participants matured, they chose not to engage in violence as conflict resolution.

#### **4.2. Developmental Transitions and Parental Divorce Impact**

This theme elucidates the nuanced ways in which parental divorce influenced the developmental trajectories of emerging adults. It provides insights of how participants interpreted and integrated these experiences, significantly affecting their personal development and life perspectives.

The impact of parental divorce and its associated stressors, and changes to living arrangements were experienced as disruptive to the attainment of some developmental milestones. The stress of divorce surpassed the intensity of daily stressors and was particularly challenging for those involved. It triggered a series of changes, including shifts in living arrangements and educational environments, which elevated stress levels of participants. Some participants reported numerous upheavals, such as changing schools, relocating to another area, changes to living conditions. In addition, they had to meet their parents' new partners, which triggered considerable stress and confusion.

Some participants described these changes to their normal routines as disruptive, uncomfortable, and scary. Furthermore, participants reported experiencing exhaustion from constantly commuting. Contrarily, some of their parents demonstrated poor judgement in trying to avoid communication with each other. This act put their children in compromising positions, by expecting them to act as intermediaries, as Miranda said:

*“I think it does put a strain, it's exhausting, having to be that middle person, being in the middle where your mom will say: go tell your dad this, or your dad will say, go tell your mom this. It does put an emotional strain and makes you wonder, why me? Why did I have to be put in this situation with my parents who can't even talk to each other?”*  
(Miranda).

Parental divorce represented significant adjustments for participants. Also, the divorce not approached with due consideration for the participants, precipitated anxiety and stress among them. Therefore, it disrupted the stability of the family whilst engendering feelings of confusion, fear, and insecurity among the participants. In addition, majority of participants reported that their anxiety manifested as feelings of worry, uneasiness, and nervousness. One

participant recalled experiencing anxiety following her parents' divorce, primarily due to uncertainties about the future.

*“It was very scary because when my mom and I moved out, we didn't move out to our own home - we moved out with my stepdad. And at that time, I didn't even know who this man was, and at the same time I would ask myself if we don't go here, where else would we go? Because all I knew was that we just needed to go. We can't stay here anymore, that's all that my mom told me - we just need to go. So, it was very difficult, and I honestly had a lot of questions”* (Danny).

#### **4.2.1 Subtheme 1: Emotional Strain and Psychological Impact**

Several participants alluded to a tendency of hiding their emotional experiences. Hence, they experienced challenges in openly expressing themselves. They reported lack of confidants with whom they felt safe to share their feelings. Additionally, some participants admitted to suppressing their emotions due to shyness and apprehension of the way people would perceive them. They also expressed concerns of being misunderstood by their parents. It became apparent that for some participants, internalising emotions served as a coping mechanism aimed at avoiding conflicts or distressing their parents and their partners during the divorce. As reported by Jared:

*“...most of the time I didn't really have anyone to speak to because I was more closed with the way I was feeling. I didn't feel the need or the urge to tell anyone. I think most of it was because I was even shy...”* (Jared).

Participants struggled with navigating their experiences and emotions independently, without any guidance or support from parental figures. The perceived lack of initiative and support from their parents to enable an environment conducive to emotional expression, resulted in them feeling neglected. Therefore, it increased their sense of isolation and

vulnerability. Several participants also alluded to feelings of anger, stemming from their parents' failure to comprehend their sadness. For Thandi, she expressed that whenever she attempted to confide in her father, he was not willing to listen.

*“It was very hard, ... I felt very abandoned, like they didn't care. My mom and I were always close, even from my childhood. I feel like me and her just got along more than I did with my dad. My dad got along with my brother and my sister more, and then when the divorce happened, I felt isolated from them both. I didn't really get along with any of them, I detached myself from my mom and distanced myself from my dad.”* (Miranda).

#### **4.2.2 Subtheme 2: Blurred Roles and Responsibilities**

This subtheme highlights how the disruption caused by parental divorce led to ambiguous and shifting roles. Some participants reported that when one parent left the household, the eldest sibling assumed the role of a caregiver to younger siblings. For Thandi, she recalled her sister shouldering the responsibility of cooking, cleaning, and caring for her and other siblings after her mother left, she said:

*“...my sister had to take on and do everything. She had to take the role of cleaning and preparing us for school, and at that time I think she was 12 years old”* (Thandi).

Another participant found himself providing support to his mother during his parents' divorce. He explained:

*“I ended up being a bit of an emotional crutch, specifically for my mother, and with the divorce and things that had happened, I think there was a bit of a greater calling to being more responsible, to trying to kind of emotionally be there more than I should have been at that time, and that definitely did have, ... I think some effects on what I thought were the expectations of me at that time”* (John).

As participants matured and reflected on the roles they assumed as children after their parents' divorce, they were able to acknowledge the undue burden placed on them.

### **4.3. Family Dynamics and Support Shifts**

This theme explores how parental divorce alters family relationships, support systems, including changes in emotional, financial, and practical support, impacting the stability and well-being of family members, particularly emerging adults. The findings highlight crucial aspects of familial interaction and support systems that shaped the trajectories of these individuals. Following the divorce, a visible shift occurred in the relational dynamics within families. This shift was primarily due to the impact of divorce on fundamental elements in relationships, such as trust, love, and family affectional bonds. Some participants experienced deterioration in their relationships with their parents after remarriage, noting a shift in parental priorities towards their new partners and stepsiblings:

*“We had to fight for our father’s attention or our father’s money for even the basic things like toiletries. We just really had to fight with him when my stepmother easily got things and she even got unnecessary things for her children and for herself” (Thandi).*

Participants also highlighted a sense of financial insecurity within the household following the divorce. It was apparent that the financial burden seemed to have fallen on one parent, worsening the economic strain. Participants whose parents had remarried experienced significant challenges in obtaining financial support, particularly from their fathers. Many participants reported difficulties in accessing basic needs, such as healthcare and educational fees. Despite some participants experiencing sporadic child support payments from one of their parents, consistency in providing financial assistance was lacking. For example, John said:

*“So, my father had defaulted on the house payments even though we weren't living at that house anymore. So, that debt fell onto my mom - he was unable to fully cover our school fees so that debt went to my mom” (John).*

Poor communication between parents, as well as re-marriage/cohabitation with other partners, further worsened the economic challenges. Participants found it challenging to request financial assistance, especially in cases where parents had remarried, due to complexities of blended family dynamics. However, despite the financial constraints, some participants alluded to their parents making sincere efforts to provide for them given the situation. One participant recalled being removed from her father's medical aid following the divorce, without any explanation. Additionally, she highlighted the challenges she experienced when requesting financial assistance from her father:

*“So even healthcare, I remember he took us off the medical aid...But he was really stingy with money, it was so difficult to ask him for money, very difficult, and at times he would not think that because we are girls - we go through our periods so we need toiletry money every month. He would not think of giving us that money...So, some of the things my mom was doing for us” (Thandi).*

Some participants, such as Thandi, realised that the parent who provided a significant amount of tangible assistance for the family was her mother, not her father. Thandi became cognisant that her mother was responsible for the fulfilment of familial needs. Such shifts in perception became more apparent when participants relocated or when one parent moved away, resulting in a discontinuation of the commodities and support that had been previously provided by that parent.

*“The funny thing is that our father didn't really provide... because that's when we actually could see that all these uniforms that we had and food and all that, really used*

*to come from our mom's hustling, because when she moved out then my dad started buying... I can't say less food but we moved from eating... let me make you an example with lunchboxes, we moved from eating maybe pies or noodles or bread with peanut butter to eating brown bread with Rama, each and every day, for lunchboxes" (Thandi).*

Family dynamics and support shifts are intrinsically linked to the lack of communication from parents as disruptions in familial roles and support systems following parental divorce are often exacerbated by insufficient or unclear communication. The lack of parental communication was also identified as a significant issue, reflecting its critical role in fostering relationships. However, despite its significance, parents exhibited considerable shortcomings regarding this. Many participants reported that their parents failed to engage in meaningful communication with them regarding the divorce and the subsequent changes. Consequently, poor parental communication left participants grappling with confusion as familiar family roles and structure were disrupted. Furthermore, significant changes to living arrangements were experienced following their parents' divorce. However, there was no clarification or explanation regarding these changes.

*"They really didn't communicate it with us, because I vividly remember being all happy and pulled together and then at one moment it became real, one day we were all together and then the next my dad was moving out and he left" (Miranda).*

Participants, who were too young at the time to grasp the complexities of custodial agreements, experienced varied impacts during their transition into emerging adulthood. For some, growing up in a single-parent household was normalised. However, for those who experienced supervised visits or lived under joint custody arrangements, understanding the reasoning behind these arrangements was often a struggle. This led to persistent thoughts and questions about the absent parent.

*“I think I found out the time when I had to make a decision with regards to who I wanted to stay with between my mom or dad. So, I think the court had wanted me to make a decision based on that. I think that’s how I found out, even though it didn’t quite register at the time that a divorce was happening because nobody told me anything about it”* (Hazel).

As participants began to develop a sense of understanding and curiosity, some gained the courage to enquire about their parents’ divorce. However, some parents adopted a closed communication stance on the reasons for their divorce. Even as adults, many participants remained uncertain about the reasons for their parents’ divorce and formed their own conclusions based on the information they had gathered over time.

*“I am not a hundred percent...I don’t want to ask, it has nothing to do with me because they didn’t make it clear to us what happened, but as far as I know, I think maybe my dad cheated and this led to my mom not handling the pressure that was happening, so they had to separate”* (Maria).

Majority of the participants desired open communication about their parents’ marital situation, unfortunately they were left out of the process. Many felt that open communication would have allowed them to understand the marital disharmony and remove some of their own sense of isolation.

*“Honestly, one thing that I feel that my parents owed me at the time was an explanation. Like I needed to know, I needed someone to explain to me what’s going on”* (Danny).

Parental blame influenced participants’ perceptions of post-divorce parent-child relationships, leading them to attribute fault and responsibility for their familial breakdown to one parent. There was a tendency for participants to assign blame to the parent they lived with,

often due to a lack of understanding of the complexities of the divorce. This inclination also stemmed from questioning why they were separated from the other parent. Participants reported experiencing and managing complex emotions such as anger, resentment and uncertainty directed towards one parent.

*“I had a lot of anger towards my mother. I don’t know, it just tends to happen that you blame one of the parents, I guess, and then my mom was just the closest person. So, there was a lot of anger towards her because I didn’t understand what was going on. I didn’t understand the reasons behind it. I just saw, oh, this lady’s taking me away from my father, and taking the family apart” (Katleen).*

Additionally, it was found that some participants struggled with the thought of replicating their parent’s behaviours. This often led to significant emotional turmoil due to the implications of adopting such behaviours. Participants displayed a strong determination to avoid mirroring the hardships created by one parent and imposed on the other. Similarly, participants who witnessed violent conflicts between their parents, harboured feelings of blame and anger towards the ‘aggressor’. Therefore, the aggressor parent was held accountable for causing them distress, as they also contemplated the motivations behind the violent actions and reflected on the challenges they endured as a consequence.

*“I had this small resentment against my dad because, why did you do such a thing? I didn’t really understand why he would make us suffer, because he did not only make my mom suffer but he also made us suffer and for no reason at all. So, yes, it was one hell of a journey” (Thandi).*

Several participants expressed frustration towards their parents for expecting them to maintain their usual demeanour post-divorce, without providing adequate support. Furthermore, some participants reported that the impact of their parents’ divorce became more

apparent as they grew older, particularly when they observed the absence of both parents at significant events. This led to feelings of disappointment towards their parents.

*“...once I began becoming a teenager, that’s when I had to realise that my family isn’t normal. I would look at my peers and see them as wow and both parents are there for them, but at mine it would be none of my parents because I’d invite one parent and the other would get mad that they’re not coming, and then they’d just both decide that they’re not going”* (Miranda).

For some participants, such as John, the absence of support intermittently manifested during adolescence and persisted into emerging adulthood. John indicated that his mother failed to support him regarding his sexual orientation and vocational pursuits. Participants' experiences demonstrated that a lack of support extended beyond physical aid to include tangible assets, emotional sustenance, and acceptance of one’s sexual orientation. However, even those who received tangible assistance still yearned for their parents' physical presence.

*“My mother has completely withdrawn herself from my studies when I chose to go into psychology with SACAP... With how things worked out, in matric, I was really struggling with my relationship with my mother because we had a lot of friction, it was soon after I’d come out and she was struggling with that”* (John).

Following the divorce, participants articulated that closer bonds were fostered with grandparents and siblings, rather than with their parents. Hazel, for instance, found solace in her grandfather, who alleviated some of the feelings of loss and longing for parental presence in her life. Furthermore, Hazel highlighted having a stronger emotional bond with her half-sisters as opposed to her biological father. Participants had divergent perspectives regarding sibling relationships and support. Some reported close sibling relationships, while others alluded to a more distant and strained connection within the sibling unit.

*“When my grandfather was still alive things were not bad... I didn't actually see my parents as parents. So, I was not really worried nor did I miss them that much”* (Hazel).

Furthermore, participants gained a deeper understanding of their experiences and demonstrated greater insight into changes in their family dynamics as they transitioned into emerging adulthood.

#### **4.4. Conclusion**

The findings offered a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted impact of parental divorce on emerging adults, exploring it through the lenses of self-identity and interpersonal relationships, developmental transitions, and family disorganisation and dynamics. Parental divorce contributed to the reshaping of emerging adults' self-identity, prompting significant reassessments of their personal and social lives. This re-evaluation influenced their interpersonal relationships, leading to altered interaction patterns and attachment. Developmental transitions, triggered by the restructuring of the family unit, critically influenced emerging adults. Furthermore, the need for individuals to navigate new roles and responsibilities underscore the complex impact of family dynamics on their developmental trajectories. The exploration of family disorganisation and dynamics highlighted how the breakdown of traditional family structures contributes to a sense of instability and reshapes familial bonds and support systems.

The findings underscored the pivotal role of familial interactions and support systems in shaping the developmental trajectories of individuals. They emphasise the necessity for targeted interventions aimed at mitigating adverse effects and reducing the impact experienced during emerging adulthood.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

This study explored the narratives of emerging adults on their childhood experiences of parental divorce. Emerging adults described parental divorce as a catalyst for significant confusion, fear, anxiety, and disruption. These emotional responses are typical for children facing significant changes within their family structures, which disrupt their sense of normalcy. Emerging adults reported various emotional reactions to the changes, suggesting that a lack of an emotional response would be unusual and concerning given their experiences. Existing literature suggests that divorce can adversely affect mental health, leading to social and behavioural issues (Haimi & Lerner, 2016).

The discussion will examine the study's findings in relation to the broader literature on the impact of parental divorce during childhood on emerging adults. Additionally, the discussion will be presented in relation to the study's research questions: how do emerging adults narrate their experiences of parental divorce which occurred during their childhood? and how do emerging adults make meaning of the impact of parental divorce on their psycho-social development?

### **5.1. How do emerging adults narrate their experiences of parental divorce which occurred during their childhood?**

The study explored how emerging adults recalled and recounted the emotional, relational, and practical challenges they experienced because of their parents' divorce. These personal narratives provided valuable insight into the immediate and long-term effects of parental divorce on family structure, interpersonal relationships, and the individual's sense of stability during childhood.

Emerging adults' experiences of loneliness during and after parental divorce underscore a crucial dimension of the emotional consequences associated with familial disruptions. The pervasive sense of isolation highlights a significant lack of emotional support which intensifies feelings of abandonment and hinders one's ability to navigate the upheaval effectively. du Plooy (2013) posits that parental divorce engenders a profound sense of loss and insecurity, disrupting the foundational sense of safety and stability. Additionally, research underscores that such disruptions often lead to strained relationships not only between parents and children but also with extended family and friends, thereby exacerbating feelings of loneliness (Anderson, 2014; Chavda & Nisarga, 2023; Dykes & Ward, 2022).

Storksen et al. (2006) contends that individuals who experienced parental divorce are more susceptible to various internalised challenges, including anxiety and depressive symptoms. They are also susceptible to externalised problems including in academics. Self-isolation and withdrawal emerged in this study as a common coping strategy for those who experienced disruption. A study that explored the impact of parental divorce on mental health identified isolation and insecurity as consequences of familial shifts resulting from parental divorce (Schaan et al., 2019). However, it can be argued that self-isolation allowed emerging adults of the present study to process their circumstances independently, without external influence of parental and familial figures. On the other hand, for some emerging adults, the inability to share their feelings with a trusted confidant worsened their emotional distress.

The lack of open communication and distrust exhibited by parents' regarding the marital dissolution was a major precipitating factor of emotional turmoil. Instead of promoting understanding and clarity, the details of the divorce process were often obscured, leaving individuals uninformed and perplexed. However, research has found that secrecy and a lack of communication might serve as a protective measure or reflect societal attitudes towards

divorce, which is often stigmatised (Miller, 2021; Roper et al., 2020). One can argue that emerging adults' desire for greater parental communication during and following the divorce may stem more from wishful thinking and possibly reflecting on how negative outcomes could have been avoided.

Several emerging adults for the current study did not want to explore with their parents the reasons behind the divorce, possibly due to norms that emphasise respect towards elders and their decisions or a fear of what they could uncover. Clear and effective parental communication during and after the divorce process, tailored to the child's developmental stage, could have facilitated a better understanding of the impending changes in the family structure and possibly eliminate any fears or uncertainty about the future. This approach might have reduced feelings of confusion associated with the divorce.

Emerging adults of the study reported difficulty with expressing and communicating their feelings therefore such communication from parents could have encouraged them to express their emotions and concerns. Furthermore, expressing their emotions and concerns could have assisted in providing them with essential support, including a sense of security, during the divorce transition. Effective and frequent parental communication, characterised by empathetic listening, fosters optimism, hope and loving relationships (Pedro-Carroll, 2020). Research indicates that talking about one's problems and sharing one's emotions with a person that can be trusted, helps reduce stress as well as physical and emotional distress (Beachboard, 2020; Ravenscraft, 2020).

Cao et al. (2020) describe the adaptation to divorce as a dynamic process that evolves over time and is significantly influenced by the intensity as well as nature of interparental conflict, the dynamics of loyalty and relationships. The complexity of familial dynamics following divorce sometimes results in financial redistribution which intensifies the feelings of

resentment and injustice. Furthermore, the restructuring of family dynamics significantly impacts communication between children and the non-residential parent. For the emerging adults in this study, altered living arrangements created challenges in maintaining regular contact with the parent who relocated. The dissolution of the marital union was associated with a decrease in communication efforts initiated by the non-custodial parent. These disruptions underscore broader challenges in sustaining parent-child relationships post-divorce (Lopez, 1991) and highlight the need for strategies to address and mitigate these issues.

Witnessing varying degrees of parental conflict, whether subtle verbal disputes or overt physical aggression, is a common consequence of parental divorce. This conflict is not gender-specific, with emerging adults in the study reporting aggression from both mothers and fathers. Exposure to parental conflict has significant emotional repercussions, including fear and distress. This suggests that in cases of persistent, detrimental conflict, divorce may be a necessary measure to safeguard children's well-being (Amato et al., 1995). Despite its immediate negative impact, emerging adults of the study perceived the divorce as a preferable alternative to ongoing familial dysfunction. Emerging adults' preference for parental divorce in the face of familial dysfunction demonstrates the significant impact that persistent conflict and unhealthy family dynamics can have on their emotional well-being. It highlights the notion that the long-term benefits of ending a dysfunctional family environment can sometimes outweighs the immediate adverse effects experienced during the divorce process.

Emerging adults' varying responses to stepsibling relationships demonstrate the complex dynamics of blended families following parental divorce. While some emerging adults acknowledged the bonds that they had formed with their stepsiblings, others reported having strengthened their connections with their biological siblings due to shared experiences of

parental divorce. This highlights the role of shared adversity in fostering sibling solidarity and the importance of supportive sibling relationships in mitigating the impact of family disruption.

McAdam (2023) argues that young adults often, consciously and subconsciously, internalise the lessons from witnessing their parents' marital dynamics during childhood. The variation in responses can be attributed to several factors, including the presence of protective elements such as strong support systems, including alternative familial support structures. These protective factors result in role models and a sense of stability, thereby mitigating potential negative consequences of parental divorce. It is evident from the study that the presence of supportive relationships plays a significant role in buffering adverse effects. Pedro-Carroll (2020) contends that divorce can bring about positive transformations in certain circumstances, challenging the common assumption of its inherently negative repercussions. Existing literature emphasises the potential for individuals to recover from adverse experiences and dysfunctional family dynamics (Radetzki, et al., 2022).

Role reversal is a common consequence of divorce which is often experienced by emerging adults. Many emerging adults of the study assumed pseudo parental roles for their siblings and provided support to the custodial parent following the divorce. Co-parenting duties and other decision-making roles resulted in accelerated maturation. This emphasises the phenomenon of role reversal following divorce, where children assume caregiving responsibilities that significantly impact their emotional well-being and developmental trajectory. This experience may lead them to questioning their roles as they transition into adulthood.

Moreover, existing literature delves into the concept of parentification, elucidating how children are frequently compelled to adopt parental and adult roles (Dariotis et al., 2023). Studies demonstrate that parentified children tend to experience internalising problems

such as anxiety and depression (Earley & Cushway, 2002 as cited in Engelhardt, 2012). Parentified children may also experience difficulties in their relationships, since they did not experience healthy boundaries and attachment during childhood (Dariotis et al., 2023). Parentification during childhood enhanced self-reliance, emotional intelligence, and self-identity in several emerging adults for the current study. Furthermore, parentification can be beneficial in various ways, such as providing children with the opportunity to socialize, be self-reliant, and learn coping skills which then influences healthy identity formation (Dariotis, 2023).

It is important to note that these narratives reflect both the reality of emerging adults' experiences and possibly some idealisation or wishful thinking over time. This suggests the complexity of emerging adults' reflections on past events.

## **5.2. How do emerging adults make meaning of the impact of parental divorce on their psycho-social development?**

The study shed light on how emerging adults understood and interpreted the impact of parental divorce. As emerging adults matured, they exhibited an increased ability to understand their emotional reactions and gain deeper insights into their experiences. Drawing on Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood, this developmental stage encompasses exploration, the formation of a definitive self-identity, and the pursuit of life direction, all occurring without parental authority (Sussman & Arnett, 2014). This autonomy enables emerging adults to independently reinterpret their past experiences and understand them within new cognitive and emotional frameworks.

In line with psychological development, emerging adults often encounter manifestations of anxiety, depression, confusion, and insecurity (Storksen et al., 2006). Chase-Lansdale and Hetherington (1990) highlight that a lack of parental support intensifies feelings of anxiety and abandonment. Thus, adversely impacting the confidence and self-esteem in

adults. The experiences of parental divorce during childhood, shaped emerging adults' personality development, as well as influenced certain traits such as emotional regulation, resilience, and coping mechanisms. While some emerging adults displayed adaptive coping strategies, others struggled with maladaptive patterns of behaviour. Maree (2021) suggests that unresolved issues during this developmental phase can result in identity confusion, insecurity, and a fragmented self-concept. These were all evident in some emerging adults' engagement in risky behaviours.

It is important to contextualise emerging adults' perceptions and experiences of parental divorce within the broader characteristics of emerging adulthood, which inherently involve adjusting, adapting, and identity formation (Sussman & Arnett, 2014). Noteworthy, not all emerging adults from dysfunctional families will automatically develop insecure attachments or struggle to form relationships. This is highlighted by literature on Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development which explores how individuals grow and how social interaction as well as different relationships contribute to development (Maree, 2021).

The current study reveals various perspectives among emerging adults concerning their perceptions of relationships, marriage, and divorce. The study suggests that early exposure to marital discord may lead to either a heightened sense of caution or a fear of replicating parental behaviours, which can manifest as reluctance to enter committed relationships or a strong desire to avoid divorce at all costs. Additionally, the study reveals ambivalence towards marriage, with perceptions often shaped by concerns about relational instability. Conversely, some emerging adults in the study adopted a more optimistic view, seeing divorce as a means of creating a healthier family environment when conflict becomes unmanageable. The variation of responses from this study aligns with findings from Willoughby et al. (2020), who contend that emerging adults' perceptions of relationships, marriage and divorce are influenced by a

myriad of inconsistent factors. The factors include individual personality differences, the amicability or hostility of the parental separation, and the quality of parenting received post-divorce.

Emerging adults clearly attributed the loss of a sense of family to their parents' divorce. Sumari et al. (2020) argue that the termination of a marriage is not just seen as the end of a personal relationship but rather an interruption to the complex social framework that connects extended family and communities. Additionally, observing parental conflict instilled deep-seated fear and insecurity in emerging adults of the study, leading to resentment and blaming one parent for family disruption. Moreover, the study indicates that emerging adults may attribute their parents' divorce to one parent's unwillingness to compromise, resulting in anger being directed toward the custodial parent as the most accessible target. When violence is observed, blame is often assigned to the aggressive parent, reinforcing feelings of frustration. Similarly, existing literature suggests that witnessing a parent's emotional distress, such as during divorce, can instil a cautious or apprehensive attitude (Demir-Dagdaz, 2021). Several emerging adults indicated proclivity to side with the parent who remained in the household whilst others tended to blame the custodial parent. This variation of responses stemmed from an incomplete understanding of the reasons behind the other parent's departure.

Contrary to the common assumption of parental alienation (Bernet, 2015), this study demonstrates that emerging adults' perceptions of each parent were predominantly shaped by how they engaged with them, personal experiences, and observations of the relationship between their parents. Often, emerging adults struggled to acknowledge the unhealthy aspects of their parents' marriages. Therefore, as emerging adults they maintain idealised perceptions of what the family life could have been without the divorce. This may be attributed to that their

parents shielded them from the realities of the marital discord. Conversely, others highlighted that the dissolution of the marriage led to greater contentment and stability within the family.

Emerging adults described significant challenges in forming secure attachments across intimate, platonic, and familial relationships which they attributed to their parents' divorce. Experiencing parental divorce led many emerging adults of the study to develop a pervasive belief that relationships are temporary. As a result, they often adopted a defensive approach, characterised by a reluctance to fully engage in relationships. Dunkel and Sefcek (2009) highlight how parental divorce often precipitates a broad mistrust in personal and professional relationships. Sorosky (1977) note that mistrust can cause emerging adults to approach potential friendships and romantic relationships with scepticism and hesitation. Arnett (2007) further explored this theme, highlighting that in romantic contexts, the scepticism frequently transforms into fear of commitment and anticipation of potential relationship dissolution.

Fabricius and Hall (2000) suggest that young adults prefer equitable living arrangements that allow interactions with both parents, particularly emphasising the value of frequent contact with their fathers. Furthermore, collaborative and cooperative efforts by parents can help reduce the impacts of parental divorce on emerging adults (Pedro-Carroll, 2020). The current study highlights the importance of balanced post-divorce parenting arrangements in mitigating the negative impacts on psycho-social development. It underscores that emerging adult's psychosocial development is profoundly shaped by the relational and emotional dynamics they experienced during and after their parents' divorce. Furthermore, the study emphasises that emerging adults' experiences of parental divorce during childhood are unique and require a nuanced understanding of their individual circumstances (Lee, 2019).

### **5.3. Conclusion**

The study explores how emerging adults narrated their experiences of parental divorce during childhood, and how they acknowledged its impact. The study reveals a complex interplay of emotional, psychological and social impacts. Key findings indicate that parental divorce serves as a source of confusion, fear, and anxiety, disrupting the sense of normalcy for emerging adults. These emotional challenges are exacerbated by limited parental communication, which often leaves emerging adults feeling uninformed and abandoned.

Emerging adults in the current study reported long-term effects on their psychological and social development, including difficulties in forming secure attachments and a pervasive mistrust in relationships. The study also reveals the complexities of stepfamily dynamics, with most emerging adults feeling betrayed by their parents' remarriage. Financial redistribution to stepfamilies often intensifies these feelings of betrayal. However, positive outcomes are noted in some cases, where emerging adults form meaningful connections with stepsiblings or strengthen their relationships with biological siblings through shared adversities.

Furthermore, parentification emerged in the current study as a significant theme, accelerating individuals' maturation while simultaneously impacting emotional well-being. While these experiences foster traits like self-reliance and emotional intelligence, they also present challenges in adult relationships due to disrupted attachment and boundary issues.

The study further explored how emerging adults interpreted and derived meaning from their experiences. Psychologically, emerging adults often experienced feelings of anxiety and insecurity, affecting their confidence and self-esteem. However, a lack of parental support further intensifies those feelings. Moreover, individual differences play a crucial role in how emerging adults cope and adapt to challenges. Parental divorce impacts emerging adults' perceptions of relationships, marriage, and divorce. Furthermore, emerging adults maintain healthy relationships with at least one parent, emphasising the importance of familial bonds.

However, collaborative parental efforts can mitigate some of the impacts of divorce, emphasising the significance of supportive co-parenting.

#### **5.4. Strengths**

One of the primary strengths of the study is its qualitative methodological approach to data collection and analysis, which allowed for an in-depth exploration of emerging adults' experiences of parental divorce. This method provided a platform for participants to openly express their perspectives and delve into their experiences, leading to profound realisations for some. For several emerging adults, the study was the first opportunity to explore and discuss their parents' divorce, allowing them to unpack their experiences and gain new insights.

Another significant strength of this study is its focus on examining the long-term effects of parental divorce on individuals who experienced this adverse event during childhood and continued to be affected by it into emerging adulthood. As divorce rates keep increasing across various communities in South Africa, the priority is often given to the divorcing couple, neglecting the significant and long-term effects on the children involved. By highlighting these adverse experiences, this study fills a crucial gap in the literature and underscores the importance of addressing the challenges that children of divorced parents encounter as they transition into adulthood.

Finally, this study contributes to the existing literature in South Africa by offering valuable insights into how emerging adults perceive and derive meaning from their experiences of parental divorce. Given the limited studies in this area within the South African context, this research significantly enhances our understanding of the impact of parental divorce on individuals as they transition into emerging adulthood. It fills a notable gap in the literature and contributes to advancing scholarly knowledge in this field.

## **5.5. Limitations**

When considering the limitations of the study, it becomes apparent that there was a restricted exploration of the consequences of parental divorce on various aspects of emerging adulthood, including its effects on a biopsychosocial level. By broadening the exploration to include additional domains such as educational and career trajectories, the role of cultural and socioeconomic factors, and the influence on physical health and lifestyle choices, a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of divorce on emerging adults could have been obtained. This broader scope could have facilitated the acquisition of nuanced insights from alternative perspectives.

Another limitation is that emerging adults in the current study narrated their experiences of parental divorce based on their perceptions and recollections from childhood. Therefore, these narratives were shaped by a combination of actual experiences as well as their interpretation over time.

Finally, another limitation of this study is the disproportionate focus on the negative impacts of parental divorce, potentially overshadowing some of the positive outcomes. While significant attention is given to the challenges and adverse effects experienced by emerging adults, potential positive impacts such as increased resilience and independence are not equally explored. This imbalance may result in biases of experiences related to parental divorce.

## **5.6. Areas for future research**

Further research is required to explore the biopsychosocial well-being of emerging adults who navigated parental divorce during their formative years. Examining the effects of parental conflict, which was highlighted in this study, could provide deeper insights into its impact.

Similarly, comprehensive research is required to equally examining the positive and negative consequences of parental divorce on emerging adults.

### **5.7. Recommendations for Practical Implications**

The study suggests implementing educational workshops for emerging adults that focus on enhancing relationship building skills, emotional management, and coping techniques. These workshops should be tailored to address unique challenges encountered by children of divorced parents. Such interventions are crucial for fostering emotional resilience and improving interpersonal skills among emerging adults.

To mitigate the impact of parental divorce on educational and professional development of emerging adults, educational institutions and policymakers must acknowledge the specific challenges faced by this group. Implementing adaptive academic programmes, financial assistance and career counselling are crucial steps. Additionally, Schechter et al. (2018) suggest that relationship-focused therapy and social skills training are effective interventions for addressing issues arising from familial upheaval.

The study highlights the significant role of parental engagement in elucidating the reasons behind the divorce, as its absence significantly worsens the feelings of anxiety, worry, and stress. Engaging in discussions regarding the shifting dynamics within the family structure is imperative. It mitigates the negative emotional repercussions stemming from the lack of awareness on the changes occurring.

Children experiencing parental divorce may benefit from readily accessible family counselling and therapy sessions, as revealed in the study's findings. Having access to a professional to assist in navigating and interpreting one's emotions is necessary and advantageous in facilitating emotional well-being.

Involving respected and mature immediate family members, such as grandparents into the divorce proceedings could provide children with emotional support. By relying on the stability provided by these family members, children can establish an essential emotional safety net that nurtures sibling bonds and protects against feelings of isolation and self-exclusion. This highlights the importance of broader family dynamics in mitigating the long-term effects of divorce on emerging adults. Also, it emphasises the need for support networks during times of familial transition.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A- Participant Information Sheet



Dear Sir / Madam

My name is Jewel Christina Presence. I am a Masters student in Community-Based Counselling Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. My supervisor is Dr Vinitha Jithoo. I am conducting a research study about parental divorce which occurred in childhood. I am interested in the long-term consequences of parental divorce on young adults; especially how they make meaning about their own relationships, family structure, support systems and physical, psychological, and social consequences. The study title is “The Legacy of Parental Divorce as an Adverse Childhood Experience on Emerging Adults”.

I am inviting you to take part in an interview. If you decide to take part, your participation in this research study will be about 60 minutes. The interview will take place either face to face at a venue suitable to you, including at Wits university or an online platform that is appropriate for you and at a time that is convenient for you. With your permission, I would like to audio record the interview. The interview will be transcribed by the researcher. The data will be stored safely and secured in a password protected file on a computer. Only the researcher and supervisor will have access to the data. The interview will be confidential. Your identity will be protected in the research report, as no identifiers will be used, alternatively pseudonyms will be used to refer to the participants.



Participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at any stage without prejudice. There are no direct benefits to participating in the research study however the data will help us understand the long-term consequences of parental divorce on emerging adults and plan adequate services. There are no anticipated risks to participating, however, if you should experience emotional distress or feel the need for support you could contact SADAG on 0800 456 789/ 011 234 4837 alternatively you can contact the Wits Students Crisis Line on 0800 111 331. This research study will be written up as a research report. The report will be available through the Wits library portal.

If you have any questions about this research study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor on 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), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email [hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za](mailto:hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za).

Yours sincerely

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## Appendix B- Consent Form



**SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT  
PSYCHOLOGY**

### CONSENT FORM

Research Title: The Legacy of Parental Divorce as an Adverse Childhood Experience on Emerging Adults

Name of Researcher: Jewel Christina Presence

I, \_\_\_\_\_ agree to participate in this research project.

I agree to the following: (Please tick the relevant options below)

The research study was explained to me.

YES	NO
-----	----

I understand what this study is about.

YES	NO
-----	----

I understand that my participation is voluntary in the study

YES	NO
-----	----

I agree that the interview will be audio recorded

YES	NO
-----	----

I agree that direct quotations from my interview may be used by the researcher in their research report

YES	NO
-----	----

I agree that my participation will remain anonymous (my name will not be used by the researcher in their research report)

YES	NO
-----	----

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Participant's signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Researcher's signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

## Appendix C- Semi-structured Interview Guide



### Demographic Details:

1. What is your age?
2. How old were you when your parents divorced?
3. Tell me about your family?

### Divorce:

4. How did you experience your parents' divorce as a child?
5. How do you make sense of how you experienced your parents' divorce (either positive or negative) as an adult?

### Prompts-

- Changes to family structure
- Finances
- Conflict
- parenting skills
- relationship with extended family and community
- intimate relationships
- attitudes towards divorce

## Appendix D- Ethical Clearance Certificate



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

**CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE:**

**PROTOCOL NUMBER: MACC/22/09**

**PROJECT TITLE:**

The Legacy of Parental Divorce as an Adverse Childhood Experience on Emerging Adults.

**INVESTIGATOR**

Presence Jewel (2577018)

**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: Dr Vinitha Jithoo (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 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.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

Date 11 August 2022

**PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES**