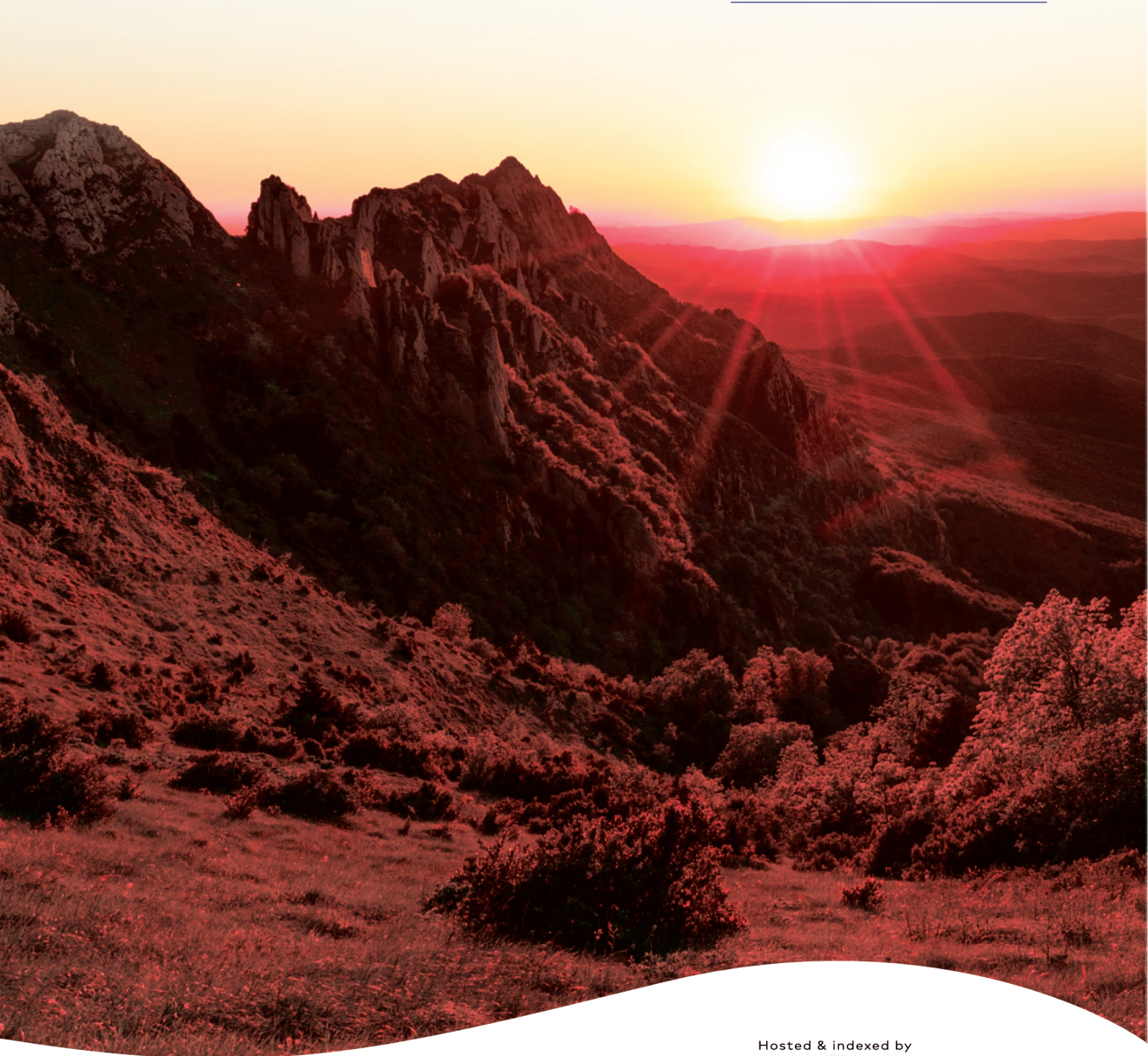


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Lived experiences of high school and university adolescents affected by parental divorce

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study utilising Husserlian phenomenology explored the lived experiences of high school and university adolescents affected by parental divorce in a low-income suburb of Harare, Zimbabwe. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with 16 adolescents aged 15–21 years whose parents had divorced within the past two years. Additionally, three experts were interviewed to provide professional insights into the perceived impact of parental divorce on adolescents. The study was guided by the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping and employed content analysis to examine the data. Key themes that emerged included emotional distress and adjustment difficulties, low self-esteem, identity struggles, social withdrawal, poor academic performance, suicidal ideation, and disruption of social relationships. The study also identified various coping mechanisms used by adolescents, such as emotional support-seeking, avoidant strategies, and cognitive restructuring, in managing their emotions and rebuilding relationships with parents and peers. A framework was developed to offer a nuanced understanding of the complex and multifaceted experiences of adolescents affected by parental divorce. The framework underscores the importance of tailored interventions and support systems to promote emotional wellbeing and successful adjustment during this transitional period.

Key Words: Lived experiences, Adolescents, parental divorce

Introduction

Divorce is a significant life event with far-reaching consequences for individuals and families, particularly adolescents. Parental divorce often leads to a range of psychosocial challenges for affected adolescents, including anxiety, depression, poor academic performance, disrupted social relationships, and compromised overall development. Globally, marriage as an institution has increasingly been affected by irreconcilable differences, contributing to rising divorce rates (Reiter et al., 2013). Both the divorcing couple and their children are invariably impacted by the emotional and practical changes associated with marital dissolution.

Newman and Newman (2015) note that marriage is typically entered into with the expectation of lifelong companionship and shared goals, including raising children and growing old together. However, in the Zimbabwean context, economic instability has placed additional strain on marriages. Many couples have migrated in search of better economic prospects, and prolonged family separation has often culminated in divorce. This, in turn, has negatively affected the mental health and social wellbeing of their children.

Research by Kim et al. (2022) found that children of recently separated parents exhibited declines in psychosocial wellbeing, scoring below average on various mental health indicators. Their study also reported increases in both internalising and externalising behavioural problems, as well as impaired social skills. Similarly, Newman and Newman (2015) found that children of divorced parents commonly experienced nervousness, hopelessness, social withdrawal, and suicidal ideation.

Parental divorce can have profound and enduring impacts on adolescents' developmental trajectories, particularly those attending secondary school or university. Despite its growing prevalence, there is limited research on the specific experiences and psychosocial challenges faced by adolescents in low-income urban areas of Zimbabwe. Evidence suggests that these adolescents often struggle with emotional regulation, academic achievement, and maintaining peer and family relationships, yet the intricacies of their lived experiences remain underexplored. The influence of parental divorce on adolescents' sense of identity and coping strategies is not well understood, and existing support systems frequently overlook the unique needs of this demographic.

This study, therefore, explores the lived experiences, psychosocial challenges, and resilience strategies of adolescents navigating parental divorce in a low-

income suburb of Harare, Zimbabwe. By examining these experiences, the study seeks to contribute to the development of a contextually grounded conceptual framework and to inform targeted interventions that promote psychological wellbeing and adaptive functioning among this vulnerable population.

Literature review

Psychosocial challenges experienced by adolescents following parental divorce

Globally, divorce rates continue to rise (Rich et al., 2023), and Zimbabwe is not immune to this trend. The dissolution of a family unit constitutes a major life stressor for children, often bringing with it a complex interplay of emotional, behavioural, social, cognitive, and academic challenges (Garriga & Pennoni, 2022). While much support is typically directed towards the divorcing couple, children, particularly adolescents, receive comparatively less attention, despite being significantly affected. Often excluded from discussions surrounding the divorce, adolescents experience emotional upheaval and developmental disruption (Dewa, 2016).

Adolescence is a particularly vulnerable developmental stage, characterised by identity formation and heightened emotional sensitivity. Neurological studies indicate that brain restructuring during adolescence increases neuroplasticity, making young people more susceptible to environmental stressors (Casey et al., 2008; Drevets et al., 2008). In this context, parental divorce can have lasting effects on neural circuitry and behaviour. Tullius et al. (2022) found that divorce during adolescence is particularly damaging to mental health, as it introduces disruptions such as changes in financial circumstances, parental absence, guilt, anger, and relocation, all of which can significantly impact emotional regulation and behaviour.

Kim et al. (2022) observed that parental separation undermines an adolescent's sense of security and stability, potentially leading to long-term consequences in academic achievement, career choices, and future relationships. Haralambos et al. (2004) describe secondary victims of divorce as experiencing shock, abandonment, reduced self-esteem, and anger. Adolescents may express these feelings through withdrawal, rage, or blame directed at either parent (Chisango et al., 2024). Such emotional responses may escalate into self-isolation, hopelessness, depression, or suicidal ideation, significantly impairing psychosocial functioning. Sawyer (2012) asserts that these disruptions affect not

only emotional health but also cognitive and behavioural development, laying the foundation for future outcomes.

Behaviourally, adolescents may display what is often perceived as mischief, both at home and in school, yet these are frequently expressions of distress. UNICEF (2023) highlights a correlation between parental absence and increased engagement in risky sexual behaviour, which may result in teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. D'Onofrio and Emery (2019) report that adolescents from divorced families are 1.5 to 2 times more likely to engage in high-risk behaviour and to experience intergenerational instability. In addition, adolescents from separated families often face stigma and discrimination, potentially leading to low self-esteem, social withdrawal, and antisocial behaviour (Dewa, 2016). Cortes-Briseño and Valencia-Ortiz (2022) argue that failure to address such issues in a timely manner may overwhelm the adolescent's limited coping capacity. Divorce also impacts physical wellbeing, with adolescents frequently reporting symptoms such as insomnia, appetite fluctuations, and headaches (Rich et al., 2023). Disruptions to sleep and nutrition can impair concentration, increase irritability, and reduce participation in daily activities.

The trauma associated with divorce further affects academic performance. Horton et al. (2019) note that feelings of abandonment reduce learners' motivation and cognitive engagement. Adolescents may struggle with memory retention, focus, and participation in learning tasks. Dohoon and McLanahan (2015) found that children of divorced parents are at heightened risk of academic failure, truancy, substance use, and school dropout.

Gender differences also emerge in the psychological effects of divorce. Girls are more likely to internalise distress, manifesting as depression or anxiety, while boys more frequently exhibit externalising behaviours such as aggression and rebellion (Amato & James, 2010; Tullius et al., 2022). These gender-specific responses must be considered in the design of targeted psychosocial support programmes. Single parenting, following divorce, has also been shown to hinder adolescents' social development, as both parents typically play distinct yet complementary roles in nurturing personal identity (Chapani, 2021). The absence of one parental figure may lead to a reluctance to form long-term attachments, fear of abandonment, or general distrust in relationships.

Despite these challenges, some adolescents demonstrate notable resilience. While they may not show overt psychological issues, many still experience inner emotional struggles, such as concerns over future milestones where both parents might not be present (Cao et al., 2022). In some cases, adolescents found solace in the belief that their parents were better off apart, especially if the marriage had been marked by visible conflict. Active involvement of both parents' post-divorce has been shown to reduce feelings of abandonment and promote healthier adjustment.

Coping mechanisms adopted by adolescents after parental divorce

Adolescents employ a variety of coping mechanisms, both adaptive and maladaptive, in response to parental divorce. Chisango et al. (2024) report that some adolescents channelled their emotional distress into constructive outlets such as poetry, sport, and visual art. In certain cases, these creative outlets evolved into potential income-generating activities. However, access to such coping strategies is often limited in under-resourced communities. Supportive social interactions, including conversations with teachers, peers, or school counsellors, have also proven helpful. Adolescents who engage in such positive coping behaviours are better equipped to manage stress and maintain stable academic and social functioning.

Conversely, many adolescents turn to negative coping mechanisms. Boys, in particular, are more likely to exhibit outward behavioural issues such as aggression, truancy, or substance abuse (Rich et al., 2023), while girls tend to internalise their emotions, presenting with mood swings, tearfulness, and social withdrawal (Tullius et al., 2022). These maladaptive responses can lead to long-term psychosocial difficulties if left unaddressed. Rich et al. (2023) emphasise the importance of strengthening parent-child communication, particularly with fathers, to enhance emotional resilience. Safe community spaces such as schools, churches, and youth centres can serve as platforms for group-based interventions, after-school programmes, and community projects aimed at emotional healing. D'Onofrio and Emery (2019) found that expressive group techniques enhanced social skills and emotional intelligence, providing effective tools for broader interpersonal contexts.

In Epworth, Zimbabwe, parental divorce has notably affected academic engagement. Learners often report reduced concentration, emotional distress, and poor academic outcomes due to disruptions in their living arrangements,

financial instability, and school transitions. The compounded effect of emotional trauma and structural changes continues to impede educational progress for adolescents in these settings.

The overarching aim of this study, therefore, is to explore the lived experiences of adolescents affected by parental divorce in a low-income urban area in Zimbabwe, with a specific focus on their psychosocial challenges, coping mechanisms, and potential pathways for support. The objectives are Explore the psychosocial challenges experienced by adolescents following parental divorce; Examine the coping mechanisms adopted by adolescents as they navigate the emotional and social consequences of parental divorce as well as develop a conceptual framework to inform interventions aimed at enhancing the mental wellbeing of adolescents affected by parental divorce.

Theoretical framework

This study adopts the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (TMS&C) developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) as its guiding theoretical framework. The model is particularly suited to examining the lived experiences of adolescents in secondary and tertiary education residing in low-income urban areas affected by parental divorce.

The TMS&C is grounded in the understanding that stress is a product of the dynamic interaction between an individual and their environment. It views coping as a process through which individuals manage internal and external demands perceived as exceeding their resources. This framework is especially relevant for adolescents navigating the emotional and psychological upheaval following parental divorce. The model's emphasis on *primary and secondary appraisal*, how individuals evaluate a stressful event and assess their ability to manage it, aligns with the cognitive and emotional responses reported by adolescents experiencing parental separation. Moreover, the model incorporates *contextual factors, developmental stages, and cultural sensitivity*, which are crucial for understanding stress and coping within the Zimbabwean socio-cultural context.

By accounting for both *resilience* and *vulnerability*, the TMS&C enables a nuanced exploration of individual variation in coping strategies. It considers how adolescents' environments, school, university, family, and peer networks, either exacerbate or mitigate stress. This makes it a suitable lens through which to interpret adolescents' adaptation to parental divorce. Furthermore, the application of this model can inform the development of context-specific

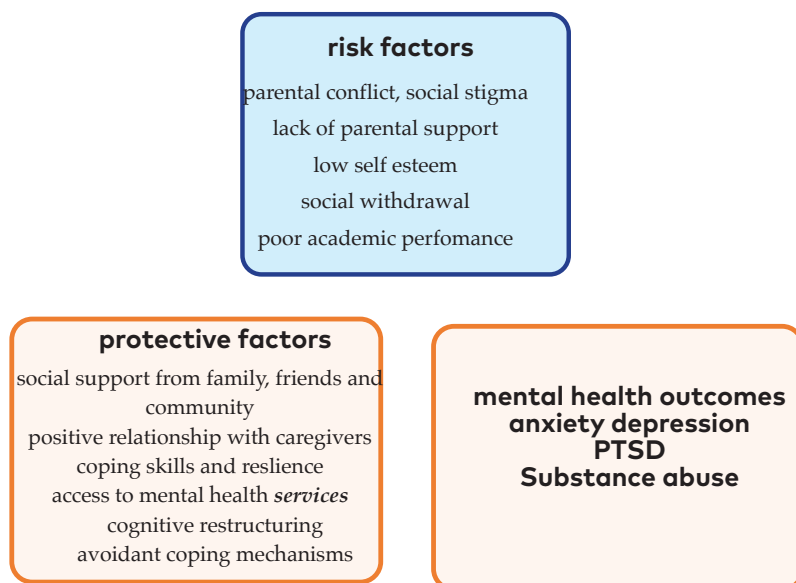
psychosocial interventions. In appreciating adolescents' coping processes, the study proposes targeted strategies to promote emotional resilience and psychological wellbeing among this vulnerable group.

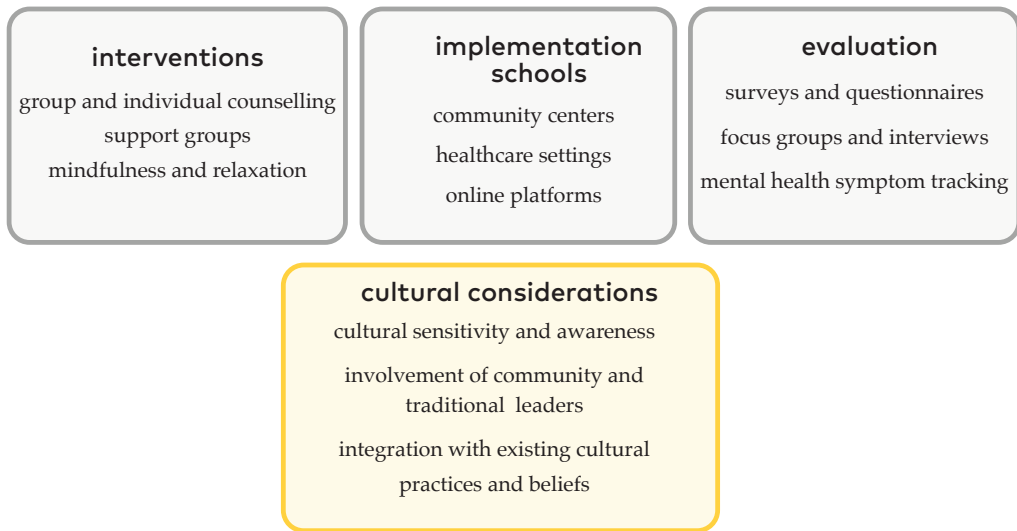
Conceptual framework for adolescents affected by parental divorce

Given the vagueness of parental divorce, a conceptual framework for adolescents affected by parental divorce was developed grounded in the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. It focused on the dynamic interplay between the adolescent's appraisal of the divorce as a stressor and their coping mechanisms. This framework projects risk factors, protective factors, mental health outcomes, cultural considerations and how adolescents cognitively appraise the divorce. By understanding these transactions, the framework could inform interventions aimed at enhancing adolescents coping skills and promote resilience in adversity

Polit and Beck (2020) assert a conceptual framework as a theoretical structure that outlines the relationships between concepts, variables, and ideas to guide research, practice or policy. Srivastava and Thompson (2020) argue that a conceptual framework provides a visual representation of the relationships between different components, helping to organise and clarify complex ideas.

Figure 1 below depicts a conceptual framework showing the relationships between components that clarify ideas on adolescents affected by parental divorce in Zimbabwe





Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design informed by Husserlian phenomenology, to explore the lived experiences of adolescents affected by parental divorce. Rooted in Husserl's concept of the lifeworld, the research sought to understand how these adolescents interpret and navigate the psychosocial impacts of parental separation.

The target population included male and female adolescents aged 15–21 years, residing in Epworth (Harare), and enrolled in secondary or tertiary education at the time of the study. Participants were selected through snowball and expert purposive sampling, beginning with two initial referrals and expanding through participant networks. Adolescents were eligible if they had experienced parental divorce and reported psychosocial challenges. Those living with both parents or outside educational institutions were excluded.

Data collection involved in-depth interviews (n=16), focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews with counsellors and community leaders. Interviews were conducted in Shona, using open-ended questions to elicit nuanced, culturally grounded narratives. FGDs were stratified by age, gender, and educational level, while key informants offered expert insights into adolescent coping behaviours and emotional wellbeing. Triangulation across methods enhanced the validity and depth of the data.

Data was analysed using content analysis, identifying recurring themes such as emotional distress, low self-esteem, academic difficulties, and suicidal ideation. Coding schemes, memoing, and thematic categorisation ensured analytic rigour and transparency. Trustworthiness was strengthened through prolonged engagement, member checking, peer debriefing, and maintenance of an audit trail.

The researchers practised reflexivity, acknowledging their biases and maintaining critical awareness of their positionality. Ethical protocols included informed consent and assent, strict confidentiality, secure data storage, and culturally sensitive engagement with vulnerable participants. Therapeutic interviewing techniques helped minimise emotional discomfort, and on-site referral to counselling services was available as needed. The use of Shona language, respect for cultural nuances, and attention to participant well-being further underscored the ethical and methodological robustness of the study.

Results and Discussions

Emotional distress and adjustment difficulties

This study explored the lived experiences of adolescents affected by parental divorce in a low-income urban area of Zimbabwe. Several interrelated psychosocial challenges and coping mechanisms emerged from both participants and key informants. The themes are presented below, supported by direct narratives and corroborated by literature.

Emotional Distress and Adjustment Difficulties

Emotional distress and adjustment challenges were prevalent among adolescents' post-divorce. Participant P3 reflected:

I had intense feelings of grief, loss, and sadness over the dissolution of my family.

Similarly, P2 shared:

The collapse had significant disruptions to my daily routines, schedules, and support systems. I really struggled to adapt to changes in living situations, school, and my social circles.

A key informant (KY17) elaborated that adolescence is already a period of hormonal change and identity formation, and parental divorce adds an additional emotional burden. These findings align with Agochiya (2010), who observed that adolescents often struggle to come to terms with family disruption. The instability associated with divorce creates heightened anxiety

and insecurity (Kim et al., 2022; Chisango et al., 2024), making emotional adjustment particularly difficult.

Low Self-Esteem

Several participants reported diminished self-worth following divorce. P4 explained:

I experienced a decline in self-worth and self-confidence. I would always feel unlovable, inadequate, and unworthy.

A counsellor (KY15) noted:

Adolescents are struggling with low self-esteem, exacerbated by inter-parental conflict and lack of support, which leaves them feeling caught in the crossfire.

This theme is consistent with findings from Kim et al. (2022) and Liu et al. (2019), who reported that parental divorce is often associated with lowered self-esteem and increased psychological distress. Clark et al. (2020) further linked low self-esteem to substance abuse and behavioural issues.

Challenges with Identity

Participants also described identity-related confusion and a sense of displacement. FGDP5 stated:

Following my parents' divorce, I felt lost and disconnected from my old family life. It was hard to reconcile the past with the new reality.

This was echoed by KY4, who highlighted adolescents' uncertainty about their identity and place in the world after divorce. Newman & Newman (2015) and Chapani (2021) found similar outcomes, noting that adolescents often struggle to establish a separate identity and report uncertainty about their views on romantic relationships.

Poor Academic Performance

Adolescents reported reduced academic engagement and achievement due to emotional distress. P2 admitted:

It is difficult for me to focus on my studies. Sometimes I skip lectures, and when I attend, I can't concentrate.

Garriga and Pennoni (2022) found that adolescents from divorced families often perform poorly in core subjects, while Kim et al. (2022) observed reduced aspirations and increased absenteeism. The emotional burden of divorce clearly impacts educational outcomes.

Suicidal Thoughts

The risk of suicidal ideation emerged strongly. FGDP3 disclosed:

I attempted to take my life on two occasions. Financial instability and university changes following my parents' divorce triggered this.

KY3 supported this, noting an increased rate of suicidal tendencies, 30–40% among adolescents from divorced families, compared to 15% in those from intact families. These findings are consistent with Horton et al. (2019), Wang et al. (2019), and Chen et al. (2020), all of whom identified a link between parental divorce and heightened risk of suicide, particularly in adolescents with pre-existing vulnerabilities.

Disruption of social relationships

Participants experienced significant challenges in maintaining social ties. P1 stated:

After the divorce, I lost connections with my friends and social groups.

KY3 confirmed that divorce disrupts adolescents' social support networks, potentially leading to isolation and difficulty forming new relationships. This aligns with D'Onofrio and Emery (2019), and Tullius et al. (2021), who reported lower social competence and peer ratings in adolescents from divorced families.

Social withdrawal

Social withdrawal was a recurring theme. During a focus group, participants noted:

I feel insecure and judged by my peers. I don't trust easily and struggle to open up.

KY4 emphasised that social disengagement is a common reaction, driven by emotional distress, shame, or the desire for privacy. This withdrawal limits social development and further compounds isolation.

Coping Mechanisms

Emotional Support Seeking

Many adolescents reported seeking emotional support as a coping mechanism. FGDP1 shared:

I seek emotional support from friends, my boyfriend, family members, and mental health professionals at my university.

KY5 affirmed:

Seeking emotional support is a common strategy among adolescents affected by divorce, and we provide such support when they visit our offices.

Liu et al. (2021) and Chen et al. (2022) found that emotional support-seeking significantly predicts resilience and leads to improved mental health outcomes for adolescents in post-divorce contexts.

Avoidant Coping Mechanisms

Adolescents also reported avoidant strategies. KY2 noted:

They try to repress their thoughts and feelings about the divorce by engaging in hobbies or social activities to avoid confronting the pain.

KY3 added that some adolescents turn to alcohol and drugs as a form of escapism. These behaviours, supported by Horton et al. (2019) and Kim et al. (2022), are often associated with poorer mental health and lower resilience.

Cognitive restructuring

Cognitive restructuring emerged as a constructive coping approach. KY2 explained:

Cognitive restructuring has proven to be a valuable coping mechanism. Adolescents reframe negative beliefs and focus on future goals.

KY5 further observed:

I have seen adolescents challenge their self-defeating thoughts and use personal growth as a motivating factor.

Cortes-Briseño and Valencia-Ortiz (2022) noted that cognitive restructuring improves emotional regulation and academic performance. Liu et al. (2021) and Wang et al. (2020) found that adolescents using CR exhibited higher levels of problem-focused coping and mental resilience.

Conclusions

This study provided a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted experiences of adolescents affected by parental divorce in Zimbabwe. The findings revealed that these adolescents encounter significant emotional, psychological, and social challenges during the transition period. To cope, they adopt various strategies including emotional support seeking, avoidant coping mechanisms, and cognitive restructuring. The study shed light on the critical roles of policymakers, psychologists, and educators in addressing

these challenges. Furthermore, the conceptual framework developed offers a foundational guide for future interventions, incorporating risk and protective factors, mental health outcomes, and family dynamics. It also emphasised the importance of culturally sensitive approaches in supporting adolescents through the divorce process.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several key recommendations emerge. First, there is a pressing need to establish school- and university-based programs aimed at mitigating divorce-related stress and fostering adaptive coping strategies. Expanding access to counselling services for families undergoing divorce is essential, as is the integration of divorce-related topics into school curricula. For practitioners, the study suggests the development of standardised tools to assess divorce-related stress and corresponding coping mechanisms. Psychologists are encouraged to design programs that strengthen parent-child relationships during periods of family transition. Educators should receive training to identify and support students affected by divorce, while schools could facilitate peer support groups and establish accessible counselling services. Strengthening parent-teacher communication channels is also recommended to ensure collaborative support for learners' emotional and psychological needs.

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