

**Breaking the Cycle: An explorative Study of the Experiences and  
Views of individuals affected by Parental Marital Breakdown, of  
their own Romantic Relationships**

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this study was to carry out an exploration of the experiences and views of adults from families of origin separated by parental marital breakdown, and to examine what effects, if any, such experiences have on the individual's own adult relationships. A sample group of five individuals were interviewed using semi-structured qualitative interviewing procedures, in order to collect in-depth data regarding their experiences. Pessimism and caution around the concept of marriage, was found, along with a sense of determination with regards to the success of their own marriages. Concerns were reported around the concepts of trust, conflict, security and intimacy. Psychotherapy was found to be of benefit in regards to identifying patterns and working through concerns regarding their own relationship. The findings are discussed with reference to the existing literature on the subject and in terms of the implications for psychotherapy.

## **CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION**

### **Rationale**

The Republic of Ireland is a nation which is relatively new in terms of its acceptance of separation as a legitimate option for married people who are in unsatisfactory and unhappy relationships. Divorce has only been permitted under Irish law since 1997. Prior to that legislation being enacted, as a predominantly Roman Catholic country, even the breakdown of highly discordant marriages were met with disapproval from the greater society, as well as not being legally recognised. The landscape has changed in past years with regard to public opinion and acceptance about divorce, and although Central Statistics Office (CSO, 2008) statistics show that Ireland's divorce rate is low in comparison to other developed countries, the number of applications has grown each year since divorce became a legal option for Irish citizens. As we experience this increase in marriage breakdown and divorce, in a society where divorce has only been legally permitted for the past twelve years, we are seeing the first generations of these families' children growing up and becoming involved in romantic relationships and marriages of their own. It is a relatively new phenomenon to us as a society and we may be only now seeing the possible long term effects of parental marital breakdown on the grown up offspring. This is the first reason for the study.

The second reason was to explore the experiences of individuals who had actually experienced their parents' relationship breaking down, to listen to their experiences within their own adult romantic relationships and to examine if those experiences were perceived to have been impacted by their family of origin which was separated by marital breakdown.

The third reason is the absence of a great deal of Irish based research on these possible long term sequelae. There has been much research carried out in the USA on the effects of parental divorce and separation on families. While much of the research focuses on the immediate effects for children following the separation, there are also long term longitudinal studies such as that carried out by Wallerstein, Lewis & Blakeslee (2000) who followed such children throughout their lives and investigated the effects of their experiences on their own relationships and marriages. However, there appears to be a lack of Irish based research on these later effects perhaps due to the relative youth of the acceptability of marital separation in Irish society.

The final rationale for this project was a desire to establish if the so-called cycle of divorce (Wolfinger, 2005) appeared to be true for the participants, or indeed if the cycle can be prevented or minimised in some way. The cycle of divorce (Wolfinger, 2005) suggests that statistically, marriages in which one partner has divorced parents are twice as likely to end in divorce as those in which both partners come from homes in which there are stable marriages.

## **Focus of the Study**

The study focuses on the adult romantic relationship experiences of five individuals who experienced parental marital breakdown in their families of origin. Through the medium of semi-structured qualitative interviews, it examines their experience within a number of themes which were guided by the existing literature on the subject. These themes included the participants' perceptions of their parents' relationship, their experiences and fears in relationships, their concerns and experiences around trust, intimacy, security and conflict, perceived relationship roles, views on marriage and an exploration of their views of the impact they believed witnessing their parents relationship breakdown had on their own relationship experiences and views.

## **Benefits**

This research provides a deeper insight into the experience of parental marital separation, and the long-reaching effects that this can have on individuals within their own later relationships, across the themes already outlined. It draws conclusions, based on these experiences of this sample group that these effects, as described across the existing literature and research, do occur. It highlights the need for a greater awareness in society of the issues that these children may experience throughout their lives, as divorce and marital separation continues to increase and become part of the fabric of life in Ireland. It emphasises the benefits of psychotherapeutic interventions for such individuals, particularly as they reach early adulthood and begin to delve into the world of romantic relationships, and how these interventions may help the person

to develop an awareness about their past which can enable them to make more informed, healthy and satisfying relationship choices in the future.

## **CHAPTER TWO - LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

This study sets out to explore the experiences and views of adults from families affected by marital breakdown, in their own romantic relationships. The following section is a synopsis of a wide selection of relevant literature which is related to this research inquiry.

### **The Influence of Parental Separation**

The experience of parental separation has the potential to influence the perceptions and beliefs that adult offspring hold about their own adult romantic relationships (Mahl, 2001), and can have an effect on their behaviours around and beliefs within such partnerships, such as difficulties with intimacy, trust, communication and conflict. Children learn about relationships from the modelling provided by their parents, and when there is parental separation, children learn that relationships are not permanent, and are characterised by conflict, lack of trust and intimacy (Weigel, 2007). Familial roles change following divorce, in often maladaptive ways in both the new family setup, and in future adult relationships (Piorkowski, 2008). The concept of intergenerational transmission of divorce suggests that children from separated homes are more at risk of divorce themselves in later life.

Wallerstein, Lewis and Blakeslee (2000) conducted a longitudinal study of the children of divorced offspring spanning twenty five years, which interviewed a group of children, their siblings and parents following their parents' parent's divorce, then at five, ten and twenty five years interval afterwards. Their findings led them to pronounce parental divorce to be a "life transforming experience" (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004 p367) as opposed to an acute stress which can be recovered from, and spoke of the so called 'sleeper effects' that arise when adult children from separated homes pursue romance and marriage, in the form of difficulties with intimacy, commitment and security. It is considered that such children's internal template of what a stable relationship might be like is often damaged, and these individuals can have difficulty conceptualising what they are seeking in a relationship, so often find themselves involved with unsuitable or troubled partners. This is in contrast to their findings on children from relatively stable, even moderately unhappy homes, the experience of which appeared to instil an understanding of what is needed to conduct a satisfying relationship, and an ability to draw on memories of their parents overcoming difficulties in their partnership (Wallerstein, Lewis & Blakeslee 2000). The findings described how many young children find the aftermath of separation bewildering, and experienced subsequent uncertainties about the reliability of relationships, even close ones, which emerged as a reoccurring theme for them in adulthood. The adults interviewed twenty five years later reported relationship difficulties and problems with trust, security and intimacy. Anxiety about relationships is common, and many describe a fear of disaster striking at any time. This happens particularly when life is going well and they are feeling happy, a fear arises that this happiness is transient, and can disappear at any time. Some describe

going to sleep happy and fearing that the source of their happiness will be gone by morning (Piorkowski, 2008, Wallerstein, Lewis & Blakeslee 2000).

## **Conflict and Communication**

Conflict resolution can pose difficulties for adult children from separated homes in their adult relationships. The experience of parental separation may expose children to maladaptive models of communication and conflict resolution skills; subsequently there is a lack of good role models for such behaviour (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002).

Conflict can also bring anxiety, as any difference in opinion or arguments can be perceived as the beginning of the end of the relationship, and even disagreeing with someone they love can spark intense fear of abandonment, rejection and betrayal (Wallerstein, Lewis & Blakeslee, 2000, Piorkowski, 2008). This is particularly true for those from families in which the parental relationship was characterised by low conflict, as this often leaves the offspring unsure of the actual cause of their parents' separation, so in their own partnerships they are unsure as to what to confront and what to avoid, when conflict arises. They may not have had adequate modelling of conflict resolution in their parents' relationship, so fear that conflict leads to loss (Wallerstein, Lewis & Blakeslee, 2000). The fear of rejection and anxiety is particularly activated when their partner behaves in an emotionally distant manner. Fear of betrayal is particularly common where the parents had low conflict marriage, as when it is unclear as to the cause of separation, the child is bewildered as to what exactly caused it to occur, (Wallerstein & Lewis 2004, Piorkowski, 2008) and fear of abandonment is a common theme. Communication difficulties are common and a sample of married people whose parents had been divorced detailed interpersonal

issues in their own relationships, such as being overly critical, easily becoming angry and not speaking, as opposed to children from intact homes, which is possibly the result of the repetition in their own relationships of maladaptive communication patterns that were observed in the family of origin (Segrin, Taylor, 2006).

## **Trust and Intimacy**

The early parental relationship is usually the basis for the child's growing sense of trust, as the child internalises their experiences with their caregivers, and develops internal working models that form a template for how they relate to others throughout life (Bowlby, 1973). Children with stable secure relationships with parents expect to develop good relationships with others and experience trust towards others (King, 2002). However, children who experience parental separation and are exposed to poor models of interpersonal behaviour may have difficulty trusting others in adulthood, as they may have learned from experience that trusting leads to betrayal. Seeing their parents' relationship break down may increase their levels of concern about the stability and dependability of their own relationships (King, 2002), however Franklin, Janoff-Bullman & Roberts (1990) found that this pessimism about trusting others was limited only to intimate partners, rather than other people in general. In addition to witnessing the breakup, the parent-child relationship often suffers, and King (2002) suggests that where there is a decline in the father-child relationship, there is a more significant impact on trust, however, any long term effects on trust can be counteracted if both parents maintain a good relationship with the child. The offspring of divorced parents saw firsthand the breakdown of trust between their

parents, and this may add to their difficulties with trust in intimate relationships (Franklin, Janoff- Bullman & Roberts 1990).

Difficulties around intimacy are also common for adult children of divorce, and often the fear of rejection and hurt prompts a hesitance to relate on a deep emotional level (Mahl, 2001). Many describe fearing that there is something missing from their sense of self, and due to that fear, intimacy, with its necessary self disclosure, carries a great risk due to the possibility of exposure, and the humiliation that may follow should their vulnerabilities be used against them. They fear entering wholly into a relationship which might be snatched away from them by rejection (Piorkowski 2008). Intimacy issues present in differing ways for men and women. As women are more likely to lose contact with their father following a divorce, this may have a knock on effect causing insecure attachments in their adult relationships, and this insecurity may cause them to seek out intimacy in relationships while simultaneously fearing abandonment. In the context of adult relationships, women are likely to respond to the insecurity by demanding more from their partner, while men respond with distancing behaviours (Mullett, Stolberg 2002). Younger adults commonly present patterns of rushing headlong into relationships and of being constantly in some kind of relationship, possibly explained by Mullet and Stolberg (2002) as resulting from an expression of insecurity by rushing into physical expressions of intimacy.

## **Roles**

There is often a connection between the parents' relationship patterns and the subsequent romantic relationship patterns of their adult offspring. A possible theory why parental separation has the potential to influence their perceptions and beliefs about romantic relationships may be that marital discord can primarily affect children due to the inevitable disruption of the parent-child attachment bond, which is the basis for the child's internalised schema of intimate relationships (Hazan & Shaver 1987). Our primary attachment relationships provide a model for beliefs and views about trust in future romantic partners, and parental separation can lead to the disruption of these attachment relationships, especially where there is a lack of support (Mahl 2001), and to an increased risk of insecure adult attachment representations, which has been shown to be associated with impairment in adult romantic relationships, less adequate secure base behaviour, negative feelings towards relationships and increased aggression in conflict (Crowell, Treboux & Brockmeyer 2009). It is suggested that when a close relationship is maintained with at least one parent following the separation, that this permits a more comfortable relationship with trust and intimacy, and the creation or maintenance of an internal working model that allows trust and intimacy within their own adult romantic relationships. Following from this, the post separation parent-child relationship can have a meaningful influence on the adult child's relationships (Mahl, 2001).

In the direct aftermath of the separation, children may take on a caretaking or dependent child dynamic within the parent-child relationship, and in their adult relationships these roles are often echoed, seeking out partners who they feel require

nurturing, which in turn allows them to feel confident and adept, however they often mistake tender concern for love. The dependent child role can endow the individual with secondary gains such as attention and care, however this limits personal growth (Piorkowski, 2008). This connection may be in part explained by the repetition compulsion, a psychological phenomenon proposed by Freud in which a person creates for themselves in the present, replays of relationships and circumstances that were troublesome or painful in the past. However, even if there is a happy ending in the present, it does not resolve the original trauma as this happy ending is different to the original situation (Kahn 1997).

Mahl (2001) classified participants, in his study of the influence of parental divorce on offspring romantic beliefs, into three categories; modellers, strugglers and reconcilers. The perception that the divorce brought purely negative results to the family would be more likely to place the individual in either the modeller or struggler category, while those who view that there were some positive changes following the separation would be more likely to be placed in the reconciler category. These individuals may be more likely to evaluate that their parents' relationship was not a good example of a successful partnership, and try to create a different experience in their own personal relationships. Offspring who are categorised as modellers show direct patterning in their adult romantic relationships of what they observed in their parents' relationships, leading to great difficulties. Such individuals recall relationships that failed due to similar problems to the ones observed in their parents' relationships, however they do not cognitively see a connection, and do not believe that it may be related to their earlier experiences. Offspring who are categorised as strugglers show great difficulties in relationships, however unlike modellers, for

many they are able to relate this back to their parents' relationships. There is a difference between what they state is their belief about relationships and what they actually do. Offspring categorised as reconcilers are seen to attempt to use their parents experience as an opportunity for learning, and look for warning signs from their perceptions of how their relationships are. They have identified what is successful and try to apply it, and are consistent between their beliefs and behaviours. They are trying to create in their own relationships what was missing in their parents' relationship (Mahl, 2001).

### **Intergenerational Transmission of Divorce**

Much research has been conducted on the subject of the intergenerational transmission of divorce. Amato's 1996 study suggested that adult children from divorced families are more likely to report instability, lack of trust and conflict in their own relationships, and that the impact of the experience of their parents' divorce may present in their interpersonal behaviour with their partner. These impaired behaviours and traits may be as a result of exposure to poor modelling of successful dyadic behaviour in their family of origin. As children are socialised they learn through the observation of adult models, usually parents, how to conduct relationships, learning positive social skills such as conflict resolution, compromising, and offering and receiving support. However, if the parents' relationship is not healthy, there are fewer opportunities for the child to learn skills necessary for a successful relationship, and consequently they may have learned behaviours and traits such as poor communication skills and develop issues with trust (Amato, 1996). As children from separated families learn from their parents that

marriage doesn't last forever, this can undermine their future commitment to marriage and lasting relationships, as they have witnessed firsthand the dissolution of their parents' relationship, at times one in which there has been no marital discord prior to the separation, which can help a child make sense of why it has happened. The adult may later see separation and divorce as a legitimate option for themselves, rather than working at and resolving difficulties (Amato & De Boer, 2001, Weigel, 2007 Wolfinger 2005). This notion was not supported by Cartwright's study of the experiences of children of divorced families, in which the participants were clear that divorce was not something they wished to experience themselves, nor for their children to experience it (Cartwright 2006), nor was it supported by Wallerstein, Lewis & Blakeslee (2000) who commented that the experience of parental divorce often makes offspring more committed to their own marriages and more determined to succeed. It is proposed that adult offspring are more likely to divorce when their separated parents had a low conflict marriage, as the children see that marital dissolution is justified even if the marriage is not particularly troubled (Amato & De Boer 2001), and some perceive avoiding marriage to be a way to avoid divorce (Amato, 19996, Cartwright, 2006, Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). The cycle of divorce is statistically strong where one partner is from a divorced home, and are almost twice as likely to end the marriage than two spouses from intact families, and when both spouses are from separated families, dissolution of their marriage is more than three times as likely than if both spouses came from intact families (Wolfinger, 2005). Crowell, Treboux and Brockmeyer did not find a link between parental and offspring divorce, but did find a link between parental divorce and offspring insecurity, and between offspring insecurity and offspring divorce, which supports the concept that long term these individuals are at greater risk of divorce. Women appear to be more

affected by this insecurity in relationships than men (Crowell, Treboux & Brockmeyer, 2009, Mahl, 2001), including reduced optimism and fear regarding less successful future marriages, a sense of vulnerability and fear of being hurt (Franklin & Janoff-Bulman 1990)

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this literature review was to identify the research findings related to the impact, if any, of parental marital breakdown on the relationships of their adult offspring. Arising from this various key themes emerged. According to the research, the experience of parental marital breakdown has an influence on the views and behaviours of offspring on their own relationships and marriages. Themes regarding trust, intimacy, security and conflict are also commonplace in the research. These findings will influence the scope of the author's own research, which will set out to examine if these themes are common to the experiences of the research sample, or indeed if their experiences differ.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

The objective of this study is to explore the experiences and views of adults, from families affected by marital breakdown, in their own romantic relationships. This section details the research methodology applied in this project.

#### **Research Strategy**

This study takes an explorative approach which attempts to collect descriptive data about individuals' experiences, which can be classified as qualitative research.

Qualitative data is said to focus on the "description of the qualities (or characteristics) of data" (Howitt, Cramer, 2008 p285). To facilitate the collection of this in-depth data, one-to-one interviewing formed the basis of this research.

## **Research Design**

The research took the form of semi-structured, informal interviews. Most questions were open ended in order to encourage depth and quality of data, however several questions relating to demographic information were closed, such as those relating to age, age at the time of parental separation and current relationship status. A set of guide interview questions were drawn up and tested in a pilot interview. A list of these questions can be found in Appendix 1.

## **Pilot Study**

A pilot study was carried out using a set of questions drawn up with reference to relevant literature on this subject. One participant was interviewed who had experienced parental marital breakdown however was outside of the scope of the selected demographic. The pilot study was intended to examine the potential effect of intended questions on participants, to ensure all themes were covered and to gain experience in carrying out interviews, including testing of equipment such as the voice recorder. Following the pilot study, a number of questions were added which the researcher felt were missing from the interview, and a number of questions were reworded (Appendix 1).

## **Research Sample**

The sample size for the study was five individuals who have experienced the breakdown of their parent's marriage. It was decided to limit the study to individuals who had experienced this phenomenon between the ages of 8 and 21. The rationale

for this decision was to find participants who had experienced their parents separation in childhood or early adulthood, having had ample opportunity to experience and form views of their parents relationship prior to that event. All participants were over the age of 18 at the time of interview, in line with ethical best practice and the desire of the researcher to speak to individuals who have had experience of moving from their family of origin into their own adult relationships.

### **Sample Selection**

Participants were selected through convenience sampling. Convenience sampling builds a sample from participants readily available to the researcher (Howitt, Cramer, 2008). An advertisement was sent to a group of college students calling for volunteers, either from students themselves or individuals known to them, and an advertisement was placed in the staff room in a counselling agency. Four participants responded to the advertisements and one participant was acquired through snowball sampling, that is, through word of mouth from one of the participants.

### **Confidentiality**

Utmost due diligence with regards to the confidentiality of all participants was guaranteed prior to commencement of the interviews. Interviews were conducted in a variety of locations where privacy could be guaranteed. During the transcription process, interviews were coded by number and all names or otherwise identifying data was obscured. Pseudonyms were used in the presentation of the results in this study.

## **Research Process**

Individuals wishing to take part contacted the researcher by email. The researcher responded detailing the nature of the study, and to offer the participants an opportunity to ask any questions they may have about the research in order to make an informed decision about taking part. When participants were satisfied, a mutually convenient date and time was agreed. All interviews took place in a private location, three in formally booked meeting rooms, and two in locations specified by the participant, such as the person's workplace or home.

At the time of the interview, the nature of the study was again explained to the participants, and it was stated that the questions may elicit responses of an emotional nature. It was made clear to participants that participation was completely voluntary and that they were free to stop the interview or withdraw participation at any time. A consent form detailing the voluntary and confidential nature of the study was signed by all participants (Appendix 2).

## **Ethical Considerations**

Due to the potentially distressing nature of the interview, participants were advised that they were free to stop the interview at any time, or withdraw participation.

Individuals under the age of 18 years old were not considered for this interview in line with ethical best practice. The confidentiality of the participant's responses was considered of paramount importance, and great care was taken to ensure a private

location for all interviews. In the transcription, the interviews were coded by number and identifying features were obscured. In the results section, pseudonyms were used to protect the participant's identity and to maintain confidentiality. A leaflet containing the contact details of low cost counselling services and support helplines was distributed to all participants following each interview (Appendix 3).

### **Data Recording and Transcription**

The interviews were recorded using a hand-held digital voice recorder, the voice sensitivity of which was tested at the pilot study. The recordings were then transcribed by the researcher, and once transcribed, listened to again to verify the typed account. Any identifying information was amended in the transcription to protect the identity of the individuals. Howitt and Cramer (2008) state that qualitative researchers should consider the transcription process as part of the greater analysis of the data, and that this process leads to greater familiarity with the material for the researcher. The transcripts were read several times in their entirety following the transcription process, and after all interviews were complete, data analysis commenced.

## **Data Analysis**

The analysis carried out on the raw interview data can be best described as a thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest a six step approach to thematic analysis, a familiarisation with the data, initial coding, searching for themes based on the initial coding, a review of the themes, theme definition and labelling and finally the reporting of the data. The data was initially coded as follows: (a) participants' views of their parents relationship (b) Trust Issues (c) Intimacy Issues (d) Security (e) Conflict Issues (f) Views about marriage (g) Fears in relationships (h) Experiences and patterns in own relationships (i) Roles (j) Any perceived influence of family of origin.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### Participants' details

Five women were interviewed for this study, ranging in age from 32 to 38 years old. Four of the participants were between 16 and 21 when the separation of their parents took place, while one participant was aged 8. Three participants are currently married, one is legally separated and in a long term relationship, and one is unmarried and in a long term relationship. All names have been changed in order to protect the identity of the participants.

**Table 1: *Interview Participants***

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Age at time of separation</b>	<b>Current Relationship Status</b>
Louise	33	21	Married
Pauline	38	17	Legally Separated - In long term relationship
Aisling	36	20	Married
Karen	32	8	Married
Grainne	34	16	Long Term Relationship

The findings will now be presented under the following themes: (a) views of parents relationship (b) Experiences or patterns in own relationships (c) fears around relationships (d) trust (e) roles (f) intimacy (g) security (h) conflict (i) views on marriage (j) perceived impact of parental relationship on own relationship choices (k) value of psychotherapy.

### **(a) View of Parents' Relationship**

The participants were asked how they viewed their parents' relationship before the separation. All of the participants had a negative view of their parents' marriage.

Three participants discussed distant relationships which in their view did not seem particularly happy or content:

Louise spoke of an awareness of her parents' marriage being unhappy, a union in which "*there wouldn't have been a lot of affection*".

Similarly, Grainne spoke of a relationship which she viewed as being "*unequal*", one in which there "*wasn't much affection between them... there wasn't much fighting but there wasn't any communication*".

Likewise, Karen spoke of her parents' relationship as being "*very distant and non-existent really... I didn't see a huge amount of love there*".

Two participants spoke of relationships marked by conflict and hostility:

Pauline spoke of a relationship that was conflictual, that "*was at times quite volatile... throughout the marriage (my father) had affairs... (my mother) put up with an awful lot*".

Likewise, Aisling spoke of disharmony in her parent's relationship and described her experiences as follows: "*It was terrible... They fought for about ten years so me and my sister were always waiting for them to split up... it was bad*".

### **(b) Experiences or patterns in own adult relationships**

All of the participants noted patterns in their own adult relationships, some in their current relationships or marriages and others in earlier relationships.

Karen described a pattern in her relationships of "*always looking for something but didn't have a clue what I was looking for... I felt not fully there if I didn't have a boyfriend*".

Likewise, in Grainne's earlier relationships she describes being “*obsessed with them leaving me... wanting to cling to them even if the relationship was going very badly*”, which Grainne referred to as a pattern of “*struggle*”.

Louise described a pattern in her earlier relationships of keeping men at arm's length because she “*cannot let them in*”. In her marriage, she noticed herself “*slipping into the parents' pattern*” then becoming determined to change things to keep her relationship intact.

Similarly, Aisling spoke of feeling “*shocked*” that her husband remained in the house following an argument, as her dad always would have left following an argument between her parents.

### **(c) Fears around Relationships**

The fear that relationships will come to an end or that the other person will leave was a common thread throughout most of the participant's discourse.

Louise articulated that she has “*never held the view that any relationship will last forever*”. She verbalised that in her own marriage, “*when it feels someone is pulling away, I want to work to keep them closer... I'm afraid that if I become relaxed about it, we'll drift apart*”.

Pauline stated that her main fear was *“that they'll leave, or have an affair...That was my biggest fear and I'd do anything to cling to a relationship even if it was bad”*.

Similarly, Grainne described her fears of being rejected, and the *“fear that it's just going to end and I'm not going to be able to do anything about it... I feel I can't fail at the relationship”*.

Likewise, Aisling's fear stems from seeing *“how bad marriages can get”* and worries that *“that if I react in a row that he'd leave”*. Aisling fears exposing her child to marital breakdown and *“the consequences of my parents' relationship on me growing up”*.

On the other hand, Karen stated that *“accepting unacceptable behaviour, staying because I have no choice”* is the *“worst case scenario”* for her.

#### **(d) Trust in Relationships**

All participants spoke of considering trust to be extremely important to them, and all described difficulties they had encountered in trusting others, for some in their friendships as well as their romantic relationships.

Louise stated that after her parents broke up she went through a phase of not being able to trust others with personal confidences, which “*reinforces the whole thing of don't let people too close, look how my parents have ended up*”. She describes trust as having “*been the hardest thing to overcome*”.

Likewise, Aisling found it difficult to trust others with confidences, particularly around what was happening at home, and that she “*learned not to tell people things*”. She emphasises that in her marriage, trust means “*a massive amount*” to her.

Similarly, Grainne also described it being “*very difficult to trust*” and something she's “*spent a long time trying to build with her partner*”. Grainne described trust in her earlier relationships as being “*always caught up with fidelity... not surprising really, my father had loads of affairs*”.

Pauline finds it “*extremely hard to trust... even though I'm not given any reason not to trust*” and describes “*watching out all the time for signs of infidelity*”.

In a similar fashion, Karen spoke of being mistrustful of men. She described her experiences in her earlier relationships as follows: “*when he wasn't there, I couldn't trust him, I couldn't really breathe when he wasn't there*”. Karen considers herself “*quite suspicious, not as insecure but still a little bit, I always expect the worst*”.

### (e) Roles

Four of the participants described the roles they took on in their earlier and current relationships, one participant did not identify any roles. The role of carer was a common theme, as was the concept of adjusting roles to whatever role the participant would see as benefitting the relationship.

In her relationships, Pauline describes taking on the role of “*the mother*”, “*the counsellor*”, “*the nurturer*”, and “*the provider*”. She spoke of adjusting to whatever role was required of her, taking on “*whatever role I have to play, I play*”.

Similarly, Aisling considers the role she takes to be “*maternal*” and she “*likes looking after her husband... sometimes I put his needs before mine*”. Aisling describes role confusion as a teenager, in that she “*tried to take over my mother's role*” during the breakdown of her parents’ marriage. She finds it “*very difficult to ask for help*” and describes herself as “*ridiculously way too independent*” which she attributes to having to look after herself a lot during her adolescence.

Likewise, Grainne describes taking on a caring role in her relationships, which she also draws parallels to her experiences in her family of origin, and describes how she “*took on some of my dad's role after he left*”. Grainne spoke of how she would “*take on whatever role the person wanted me to take on... in a lot of cases I would lose myself in the process*”.

In the same fashion, in Karen's earlier relationships she describes how she took on the role of “*caretaker*”, or a “*motherly*” role, however in her marriage she feels that she is “*more open to being cared for and it's nice.. so yeah, now it's different*”.

#### **(f) Intimacy Issues**

A common theme with all of the participants comprised difficulties and concerns around intimacy.

Pauline commented on emotional intimacy, describing it as “*very difficult*”. She spoke of how this has “*upset*” relationships, as she can “*become ambivalent... inclined to just not speak about what's happening*” fearing that it will be “*thrown back into my face... not accepted*”.

Likewise for Grainne, in relationships she found it difficult to open up for fear that her confidences “*would be in some way used against me*”, and how it “*felt too dangerous*”. Grainne describes having “*little or no intimacy*” in her relationships however as time has passed she has made “*big efforts to take that risk*”.

Similarly, Aisling describes having “*a problem with intimacy*” which she attributes to a lack of intimacy in her family home, where it was like “*four strangers living in a house*”. She describes how these issues have improved but “*it was very difficult for me to get there*”.

Louise describes experiencing a lack of intimacy in her family, and she describes a desire for her own children “*to grow up having it (intimacy) as a natural state for them*”.

For Karen, emotional intimacy “*means more*” to her than physical intimacy, and she describes liking the fact her husband can be open with her emotionally, although she “*needs to be reassured regularly*” around this.

### **(g) Security**

Issues around relationship security were a common theme for all participants.

Participants spoke of not experiencing security; however it is valued as a concept. For many there is scepticism about security and a desire to provide security for oneself outside of the relationship.

Pauline spoke of security as being “*the knowledge that the person is there... they're not going to cheat*”, and considered that generally in her major relationships she has “*never felt really fully secure*”.

Similarly, Karen described wanting emotional security from her husband, however she also spoke of the importance of feeling she “*can do this on my own if I have to... I'm married, and I'm married for life, but I'm realistic about it*”.

Likewise, Louise considers herself always to have been “*a very independent person*”, holding the belief that her relationships “*won't last forever, not that I don't want it to*” and she states “*that I have to be able to do this on my own and be prepared*”.

On the other hand, Aisling declared that security in her marriage “*means the world*” to her. Security to Aisling means not feeling that “*everything is fragile... or going to fall apart immediately*”. Aisling values security because she “*knows how bad marriage can get*” and because she feels she never had it.

In contrast, Grainne describes feeling emotionally insecure, fearing “*that it will all be taken away from me*”, which she attributes to seeing this for herself in her parents relationship. Grainne states that she “*knows things aren't guaranteed any more*” when it comes to relationships.

#### **(h) Conflict**

All participants spoke of the need for healthy conflict in their relationships, however various attitudes and fears emerged among the participants regarding conflict, in some cases these were attributed to conflictual experiences in the family of origin.

Louise considered that “*there's always going to be some element of compromise*” in a relationship, however learning to manage conflict in her relationships has taken some

time for her, and described how she never saw her parents “*having an argument that resolved anything... just tension*”.

Similarly, Karen believes that “*there's definitely a healthy conflict*” although when the conflict is emotional, she states that she would “*shy away*” from it. Karen considered about emotional conflict that she would feel “*fearful, I'd be quite insecure if my husband wasn't talking to me, there'd be an anxiety in me to fix it*”.

Likewise, Pauline expressed a belief that “*it's healthy to have a row once in a while*”, however she stated that she doesn't like conflict, and will “*hold in stuff*” rather than “*being at the receiving end of a loud voice*”. Pauline attributed this to growing up in a very conflictual family home, which was “*at times very hurtful*”.

In a similar fashion, conflict for Grainne evokes the “*fear that everything's going to come to an end and the person will leave me*”, and she copes with this by tending to “*run away from it*”. Grainne indicated that she had “*never really saw her parents fighting*” which left her unsure as to how they resolved any difficulties.

Aisling considers that she can handle conflict well, however she describes feeling “*very shaky*” afterwards, which reminds her of “*feeling insecure, growing up in an insecure house*”.

**(i) Views on Marriage**

Louise stated that she had never aspired to marriage, viewing that *“things weren't forever”* however she married *“with the intention that this is for life, I never wanted to go through what my parents went through, and what we went through with them breaking up”*. She feels these views encourage her not to take her marriage *“for granted”*.

Pauline feels currently *“ambivalent”* to marriage. She is legally separated and describes feeling before her marriage that *“it's for life”*, however now although she *“would still like to think that it would be a lifelong commitment”*, she is unsure that *“in the age that we live in, that this can happen”*.

Aisling considers marriage to be *“a great thing”* and *“takes it really seriously”*. She stated that she *“takes marriage much more seriously than my husband... I know how bad marriage can get, he doesn't”*.

Karen states with regards to her belief of the longevity of marriage: *“I don't know. I want to believe it”* and about her marriage she states: *“if I remain happy, I'll stay here... I don't want to become too attached; I just don't want to, it's too scary”*.

Grainne spoke of it taking *“a long long time”* to *“get to the point where I can think marriage is a good thing”*, due to the fact that she has *“seen what happened in a*

*marriage, it's no guarantee that it's going to last forever*". Grainne states that if she got married she would *"want to work really hard at it"* due to *"knowing how unsuccessful it can get and how bad things can be"*.

#### **(j) Impact of family of origin on relationship choices**

Louise considered that her experiences in her family of origin have made her *"more appreciative"* of her marriage, and that these experiences stop her from *"taking that for granted"*, and have left her vigilant about slipping into her parents' pattern in her own marriage.

Likewise, Pauline considers the impact of her family of origin on her choices, and describes how she seems to choose men who are *"emotionally unavailable"*, and that *"sometimes it's like I'm playing out my mam's relationships"*.

Similarly, Karen describes making *"unconscious"* choices prior to gaining awareness, without which she considers *"you end up in the same shit your parents were in... it's a vicious cycle"*. Karen believes that her parents have *"shaped who I am"* and in terms of her father, she describes *"a level of anger and irritation which can be displaced on to my husband about men"*.

In the same vein, Grainne describes her earlier relationships as “*just trying to control people and stop them from leaving*”. She considers that “*maybe some of the fears I have in relationships are linked to what went on in my family*”.

Aisling also considers that it's “*hard to learn to let go of how you've been taught to cope with things*”. Aisling considers growing up in a very insecure household “*propelled me forward to try to find the things I didn't have*”.

#### **(k) Value of Psychotherapy**

All participants have participated in psychotherapy training programmes, and therefore have attended their own personal therapy. Three participants made specific reference to the benefit of either therapy or the personal development element of the course to their examination of their patterns and issues in relationships, and in gaining a better understanding and awareness.

Pauline spoke of the value of “*playing out what I've explored in therapy*” in her new relationships, and how she is now “*analysing my own relationships*”. Pauline spoke of an awareness that she is “*playing out my mam's relationship*” and how she is currently “*figuring that out*” in therapy.

Similarly, Grainne spoke of her previous patterns in relationships, and she considers that therapy has led her to change this pattern, saying *“I’d be still in these bad relationships if I hadn’t gone to counselling”*.

Likewise, Karen spoke of how she *“put up with a lot”* in past relationships, however now says *“I value myself more than I had done, and that’s definitely through the therapy, definitely”*. Karen considers that she can make *“informed choices”* about her relationships now. She considers without therapy or personal work she would *“probably be in an abusive relationship now ...but I wouldn’t know how to change it”*.

## **Conclusion**

The participants all described witnessing what they perceived as less than satisfactory parental marriages. All spoke of trust, security and intimacy as being vital to them, however most described a struggle with these concepts, and they discussed their fears with regards to relationships, particularly in the context of their experiences in their families of origin. The participants described a sense of realism towards their own marriages, and a determination to make them work. The next section will analyse the findings with reference to the existing literature on the subject.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **Introduction**

This study set out to explore the romantic relationship experiences of a group of five individuals who had experienced the breakdown of their parents' marriage, to establish what views and opinions they now hold on the subject of relationships and what influence, if any, their experiences of their parents' relationship have had on their opinions, choices and behaviours within their own relationships. This section will seek to analyse the salient findings with reference to the existing relevant literature.

#### **Trust and Intimacy**

Mahl (2001) stated that trust and intimacy are "considered to be cornerstones of close romantic relationships" (Mahl, 2001 p111), and in this study, themes of struggle with intimacy and trust were common to all participants. According to Franklin, Janoff-Bullman and Roberts (1990), the offspring of divorced parents may have difficulties with trust in part due to witnessing firsthand the breakdown of trust between their parents, which increases their levels of concern about the dependability of their own relationships. Every participant described parental marriages that were far from ideal,

with three participants describing what they perceived as very 'distant' relationships with a lack of affection, and indeed three participants explicitly mentioned the infidelity of either or both of their parents. This experience may have contributed to the levels of concern they expressed about issues of trust, and indeed each participant drew parallels between their experiences in relationships and their earlier experience of their parents' relationship.

Each participant described trust as being very important to them; however all described a struggle to trust their romantic partners. The development of trust has taken a great deal of time for these women in their relationship history. Three participants specifically mentioned their difficulties with trust around infidelity, and their vigilance for its signs. They expressed a sense of finding it extremely difficult to trust even though, in the words of one participant, they are "not given any reason not to trust". It is perhaps unsurprising that the marriages of these particular participant's parents were characterised by infidelity, and as King's (2002) research stated, many adult children of divorce have difficulty trusting others in adulthood, as they have observed first hand that trusting others can lead to betrayal. Franklin, Janoff-Bullman & Roberts (1990) and Mahl (2001) considered that the foreboding felt with regards to trusting others was only related to intimate partners and not to others in general, however for most of the participants in this study this was not the case, and difficulties trusting others with personal self disclosure were expressed, particularly disclosures to friends and peers about what was happening at home.

The research states that difficulties around intimacy are also common for adult children of divorce, and the participants described a difficulty in opening up to romantic partners, and in some cases, to friends and peers, perhaps as a result of the lack of intimacy experienced in the family home. This was described by one participant as "dont let people too close, look at how my parents have ended up". Socialisation theory, which is cited in Amato and DeBoer's (2001) research as being fundamental to the intergenerational transmission of interpersonal ways of relating and behaviours, assumes that children learn behaviours and how relationships work through observing adult models, in particular, their parents. Every participant interviewed spoke of a lack of intimacy in the family home, in one case the participant felt like the family were a group of "strangers living in the same house", while all described relationships between their parents which they considered to be distant and lacking affection. Several participants recognised the effect that living in families that did not display a great deal of intimacy had on their own relationships, and the participants used words such as "too dangerous", "extremely difficult", "big risk" to describe their feelings around intimacy and the efforts they had made in their own relationships to develop emotional intimacy with their partners. One participant described herself to be "at a loss" for many years about intimacy, and another described a great desire to provide a different experience of intimacy for her own children.

Piorkowski (2008) stated that due to the fear of there being something missing from their sense of selves, intimacy, with its necessary self disclosure, can feel dangerous to the adult child of divorce, as it brings the possibility of exposure and the humiliation that might follow if their vulnerabilities are used against them. Four of

the participants spoke of a fear that they had, particularly in the past, of self disclosure being "thrown back in my face", "used against me", and indeed one spoke of feeling "like I'd lose a part of myself" every time she opened up to a partner, due to that fear of rejection. While the other participant did not specifically mention a difficulty around self disclosure, she commented that "it's fragile, my own source of feeling good about myself", which does support Piorkowski' (2008) observation.

It is worth noting that although difficulties around trust and intimacy were still being experienced by most participants, Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) suggest that in young adulthood for children of divorced families, a time when the focus is often on love, intimate relationships and marriage, these young people are "haunted by the ghosts of their parents' divorce and frightened that the same fate awaits them" (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004 p363), and the authors suggest that the struggle to overcome these fears can last well over a decade of their lives. In this study, for all participants, an average of 18.2 years has passed since their parents' separation, ranging from 12 to 24 years. Most of the participants who have described the struggle for trust and intimacy also noted that this has been something that has improved over time for them, which would support Wallerstein and Lewis's (2004) observation that these effects lessen over time, however it can take more than a decade.

According to Piorkowski (2008), one of the great fears of love is losing one's autonomy, and an interesting finding of the current research centred around a fierce sense of independence and needing to rely on oneself felt by most of the participants, which was attributed to their experiences in their families of origin. One participant

specifically pointed out financial security as being vital to her, as a personal guarantee that should anything happen she would be able to take care of herself and her child. Two participants described taking on parental roles either following the separation, or during the marital difficulties, roles which would have forced them to be very independent and responsible, in the words of one participant, "I wasn't looked after all the time so who else was going to look after me". Although they are in relationships that are going well, most of the participants spoke of needing to be able to rely on themselves rather than others, which is perhaps not surprising as they may have learned through their experiences that relationships are not to be counted on, that they may have to rely on themselves at any time.

### **Intergenerational Transmission of Divorce**

It is proposed that the family of origin provides the individual with their first understanding of what is normal in relationships. It is where they learn about personal relationships, which influences their general opinions about commitment, and give subtle messages about fidelity, the longevity of marriage and what can go wrong in a relationship (Weigel, 2007). The intergenerational transmission approach to understanding the impact of parental divorce on the offspring's views and behaviours regarding marriage has been suggested to explain the higher divorce rate for these offspring in their own marriages, as opposed to those who come from more stable family backgrounds. Amato and DeBoer (2001) proposed that by witnessing parental divorce, children learn that marriage does not last a lifetime, and that people do not have to stay in unsatisfactory relationships. All of the participants describe coming from families in which their parents had what they would consider unsatisfactory

relationships, and there is a sense that they have had to struggle to work out for themselves how to operate in their own relationships. Of the five participants, three are married, one is separated and one has never married, however the sample is too limited to draw any inferences with regards to the level of divorce amongst this population. Wolfinger (2005) refers to the cycle of divorce which suggests that when one partner is from a divorced home, the marriage is twice more likely to end than when both spouses come from intact families.

Although all participants have indeed learnt that marriage does not last a lifetime, they have entered into, or intend to enter their own marriages with the intention that it is for life. However there is a realism for the participants around marriage, and a sense that it is something that needs to be worked on, and “taken seriously”, as one participant said, “because I know how bad it (marriage) can get”. As Franklin, Janoff-Bullman and Roberts (1990) stated, considering what these individuals experience, it is reasonable to have greater caution and pessimism when it comes to one's own marriage, and the participants stories of their decisions to marry, and their realism surrounding the longevity of marriage would be demonstrative of this caution.

Amato & De Boer (2001), Weigel (2007), and Wolfinger (2005) consider that the experience of parental divorce may lead to the adult later seeing divorce as a legitimate option rather than working at and resolving difficulties. However the findings of the current study were more in line with Cartwright (2006) and Wallerstein, Lewis & Blakeslee (2000) who made it clear that the wish to never

experience divorce themselves, nor for their children to experience what they themselves had gone through, can make offspring more committed to their own marriages and more determined to succeed. Three participants expressed a desire to prevent the same fate from happening to their own marriages and in particular wanted to protect their children from that. All the married participants, plus the one unmarried participant expressed that they work extremely hard at their relationships. The participant who is legally separated stated that she was "ambivalent" to marriage now and did not think she would marry again, however she states that she entered marriage with the view that it was a lifelong commitment. Without a comparison group, it is difficult to know if this earnest struggle to make relationships work out is as a result of the observation of parental divorce, or if this is a common trait.

Sprecher, Cate and Levin (1998) found women with divorced parents less idealistic in their relationship beliefs, and this was certainly true of the participants in this study. While all wanted to make their relationships work, there was a sense that their relationship was not taken for granted, and many spoke of their experiences in their family of origin as being the main reason for this. Participants spoke of wanting to enter marriage with the belief that marriage is forever, however they felt realistic about this, they had seen for themselves that not all marriages last. For most participants there was a sense of wanting to take the marriage seriously and work hard to make it successful, and one participant spoke of being "afraid that if I become relaxed about it (the relationship) that we'll drift apart". One participant, while happily married spoke of needing to feel prepared financially and emotionally in case her marriage did not work out, a sense that she could be on her own if she had to. According to research, this reduced optimism and fear regarding the breakdown of

one's marriage is more prevalent in women than in men (Franklin & Janoff-Bullman, 1990).

## **Conflict and Communication**

Parental separation can result in adult children experiencing difficulties with conflict resolution in their own relationships, as they are more likely to have exposure to maladaptive models of communication and conflict resolution skills, according to Mullet and Stolberg (2002). While all participants recognised the need for healthy conflict in relationships and being able to communicate and work through difficulties, there was a fear of conflict expressed through all of the interviews. Two of the participants came from homes in which there was a lot of conflict prior to separation, and the remaining three experienced distant relationships in which there was not a great deal of communication. The participants who experienced a great deal of conflict spoke of finding conflict in their relationships very difficult, in one case leaving them "shaky" afterwards, which the participant considered to be as a consequence of her history of conflict in the family home. Most of the participants who came from less conflictual homes but ones in which there was a lack of communication spoke of feeling insecure during disagreements with their partner, feeling anxiety to resolve the conflict, and a fear that the conflict will be impossible to resolve. This supports Wallerstein, Lewis & Blakeslee's (2000) and Piorkowski's (2008) research which found that conflict brings anxiety for adults from divorced homes due to the perception that arguments or differences can spark intense fear of abandonment, rejection and betrayal, particularly for individuals from low conflict homes, as this leaves the offspring unsure what to confront and what to avoid, and

may fear that conflict leads to loss (Wallerstein, Lewis & Blakeslee, 2000). This was true for the participants from lower conflict homes, and may be as a result of a lack of adequate conflict resolution in their parents' marriages.

### **Impact of experiences in the family on own relationships**

Wallerstein, Lewis & Blakeslee (2000) put forward that for children of separated families, their internal template of what a stable relationship should look like can be distorted by their experiences and this can lead to a difficulty in conceptualising a satisfying relationship, and their ability to seek out a satisfactory partnership. This was true for many of the participants who described difficult, in some cases abusive relationships as they entered early adulthood. In the words of one participant; "I was always looking for something but didn't have a clue what I was looking for... I didn't understand why I was being attracted to different types of people" and another who stated she went for "people who were damaged in some way and who I thought I could change... I would have been obsessed with them not leaving me". Both of these participants describe how the passage of time, and psychotherapy, have helped them to gain insight into their choices and have more healthy relationships, about which one participant poignantly comments; "if I hadn't done any work on it, I'd probably be in an abusive relationship now... but I wouldn't know how to change it". This finding supports the research of Wallerstein and Lewis (2004), in which it was found that parental separation "impacts detrimentally the capacity to love and be loved in a lasting committed relationship... Many eventually overcome their fears, but the struggle to do so is painful and can consume a decade or more of their lives". Most of the participants in the current study describe a journey in which they have had to

struggle to overcome their fears, and learn to recognise the patterns of their parents' relationship in their own, when they crop up. Amato (1996) suggested that the difficulties experienced in adult children of divorce's own relationships can be accounted for as a result of their likely exposure to dysfunctional models of dyadic behaviour, which may hinder them in their learning of the skills that facilitate successful interpersonal relating in intimate relationships. The participants spoke of a growing awareness of their parents' relationship, and the influence their experience has had on their own relationships, which in their view helps them to break out of the patterns of their parents' relationship. This supports Amato's (1996) view, however it is also more optimistic, as the participants have shown that awareness of these repetitions can lead to a better understanding of their behaviours and choices in romantic relationships, as well as a modification of these behaviours which has enabled many of the participants to engage in relationships that are more healthy and rewarding for them.

### **Value of Psychotherapy**

All of the participants have engaged in personal psychotherapy. Three participants explicitly mentioned the benefits of engaging in personal therapy, however the remaining participants alluded to the personal development aspect to psychotherapy training, which it can be assumed has bearing on the engagement of the participants in the courses' personal therapy requirement. It must be noted that there was no specific question asked regarding personal therapy or psychotherapy training however all participants either explicitly mentioned the topic, or alluded to it. Unfortunately there is a lack of research into the benefits of psychotherapy for this specific

population, although in Wallerstein & Lewis (2004) longitudinal study, one third of the participants entered therapy as a result of relationship issues and worries, and one half of those considered the therapy to be beneficial. In this case, all participants had been in therapy and three specifically described the benefits, including identifying dysfunctional patterns and choices, and a greater ability to "make informed choices". Two participants are adamant that they would probably still be in unsatisfactory and damaging relationships today were it not for the benefits gained from psychotherapy. Perhaps the experience of personal growth and psychotherapy for these women can be best illustrated by the following quotation:

"Recognition of the losses that have led to one's current place in the life story may open one up to a number of valuable and rich experiences... the very experiences that mark us may become a source of unexpected strength and play a role in the creation of a more differentiated and integrated self " (King & Hicks, as cited in Konstam, 2009 p38).

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **Strengths and Limitations**

This study intended to explore the relationship experiences of individuals from families separated by marital breakdown. As part of this investigation, a wide range of literature was selected and studied in order to gain a thorough understanding of the existing research on the subject of the relationship experiences of adult children from families affected by marital dissolution. The choice of qualitative, semi structured interviewing as a research method was conducive to the collection of in-depth, rich and meaningful data, which gave the researcher a greater insight into these participants' experiences. As the qualitative interviews were conducted over a sample of five participants, who were selected by convenience sampling, the researcher cannot claim that the sample or the results are representative of the entire population. However, by limiting the study to a small sample, the researcher was able to acquire a deeper insight into the experiences of these individuals. The study may also be limited in that the sample selected were all female, so this study does not explore the experiences of men who have experienced their parents' divorce or separation. A limitation exists in the profile of the participants. All participants who were selected are participants of psychotherapy training courses, and this means all will have experienced personal psychotherapy as a matter of course, therefore the

study does not explore the experiences of those who have not had such psychological support, or indeed been exposed to psycho-educational material. The degree to which time has passed since their parents marital dissolution was varied among the participants and this may also be a limitation, as the passage of time itself may lessen or increase the effects. A longitudinal study may be more illustrative.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

There are several aspects which could be researched further into this topic. Firstly, a comparative study which investigates the experiences of both women and men in relation to this topic could possibly show differences in the way men and women take on the relationship related messages imparted by their experiences in their families. Secondly, a longitudinal study, similar to that carried out by Wallerstein, Lewis and Blakeslee (2000) however limited to romantic relationship views and experiences could be illustrative regarding the impact of parental divorce throughout the lifespan, and whether the passage of time itself can help impacted individuals to work out for themselves any struggle they may have with interpersonal relating, or if specific psychotherapeutic interventions should be recommended in early adolescence or adulthood for such individuals. Thirdly, a comparative analysis with a sample of individuals who originate from stable and intact families may be enlightening in terms of whether any relationship experiences and views are common to both populations. Perhaps the issues as presented in the findings of the current study may be common to both groups as they work through the psychosocial tasks of young adulthood, in what Erikson (1963) referred to as the basic conflict of intimacy versus isolation.

## **Research Conclusions**

A number of key findings have been highlighted by this research. The first key finding is that the experience of parental separation may lead offspring to be less idealistic about the concept of marriage. From their parents, they gain messages that marriage doesn't necessarily last a lifetime, and this can lead to a sense of pessimism or caution with regards to their own marriages, as they no longer have any guarantees of its longevity.

The second key finding however, is that while the experience of parental separation can lead to a less idealised view of marriage for those children, it also instils a sense of determination with regards to their own marriages. Marriage, although seen as something that is potentially fragile and breakable, is not taken for granted by these participants, and is considered to be worth a great deal of effort, both to keep the relationship alive and to prevent the same fate from happening to their own children. In this particular sample, participants spoke of an attempt to identify and break out of the patterns of behaviour in their families of origin that they saw themselves repeating in their later relationships.

The third key finding relates to trust, which all participants describe as vital to their relationships, yet many find difficult to attain. This difficulty with trust occurred not

only with intimate partners but for most participants, with their friends and peers also, particularly around telling friends about what was happening in the home when their parents were separating. Perhaps as separation and divorce become more accepted in Ireland, family conflict will be less taboo as a subject for discussion, and therefore these individuals may be more likely to reach out to utilise supports. Trust with regards to infidelity was found to be an issue for those who had knowledge of either parent's extramarital affairs.

The fourth finding relates to conflict, and it was found that although all participants saw the value of healthy conflict, most shied away from emotional conflict. This was particularly true for those from lower conflict homes, who perhaps did not have appropriate conflict resolution techniques modelled by their parents.

The fifth and final finding relates to psychotherapy and personal developmental work, of which all participants have availed. Most participants described the benefits of such endeavours on their insight into their behaviours and choices within relationships, and of how it has allowed them to make more healthy and informed choices with regards to their intimate relationships. This finding begs the question of whether more focussed and timely interventions for young adults from such families would help lessen the effects of the experience of parental separation on one's own romantic relationships, and break the cycle of intergenerational divorce that is statistically so prevalent for this population.

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## **Appendix 1      Interview Schedule**

The following is a list of questions that formed the basis of the interviews.

1. Current age of participant
2. Age of participant when separation took place
3. Present relationship status
4. How did you view your parent's relationship before the separation?
5. Do you notice any patterns or recurring themes in your adult relationships?  
What are your fears regarding relationships?
6. What roles do you see yourself taking on in your romantic relationships?
7. What does trust in relationships mean to you?
8. What does intimacy in relationships mean to you?
9. What does security in relationships mean to you?
10. What are your feelings around conflict in relationships?
11. What are your views or feelings about marriage?
12. Do you think your experiences in your family of origin influenced your  
relationship choices?
13. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

## **Appendix 2      Interview Consent Form**

The following is the consent form which was signed by all participants:

### **CONSENT FORM**

“An Exploratory Study of the Experiences in Romantic Relationships of Adults from Separated Families”

This Study intends to examine the experiences in relationships of adults who have come from separated families. This is part of my final year project (BA Counselling and Psychotherapy) and my research supervisor is Susan Eustace.

The process involves an interview which should take no more than 40-50 minutes, and will be recorded. The questions are about your experiences and views on adult romantic relationships, and how you see your parents’ relationship.

You will not be identified in the results or in any part of the finished project, and all answers given will be treated in the strictest confidence.

The recording will be destroyed following data collection.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you may stop the interview at any time, or withdraw your participation.

The purpose and process of this study has been explained to me, and I agree to participate. I understand that my participation is voluntary and I can stop the interview or withdraw my participation at any time.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 3      Leaflet detailing contacts for further support

**Thank You!**

**Your participation in the study has been greatly appreciated**

If you or anyone you know would like to talk to someone in confidence the following organisations provide confidential, free or low cost counselling services.

**AIM Family Services** – Low Cost Counselling for Couples, Individuals and Families

[www.aimfamilyservices.ie](http://www.aimfamilyservices.ie)

01-670-8363

**Teen Between** – Counselling and Support for teenagers whose parents are separating and young adults who experienced this during their teenage years

[www.teenbetween.ie](http://www.teenbetween.ie)

1800 303191

**MRCS – Marriage and Relationship Counselling Services**

[www.mrcs.ie](http://www.mrcs.ie)

1890 380 380

**Samaritans**

[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

1850 60 90 90

**AWARE**

[www.aware.ie](http://www.aware.ie)

lo-call 1890 30 33 02

**One in Four - offers support and advice to those affected by sexual abuse and/or sexual violence**

[www.oneinfour.org](http://www.oneinfour.org)

01 662 4070