

Risk factors and policy recommendations for parental divorce amongst adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa

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Abstract: During the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals and their families faced various risk factors, which in some cases resulted in divorce. Adolescents in such families had to grapple with COVID-19 across the world, the risk factors faced by adolescents have largely been under-risk factors associated with COVID-19 and divorce. Despite the rise of divorce during studied, especially among adolescents in South Africa. This study aimed to explore the risk factors experienced by adolescents from divorced households during the COVID-19 pandemic and make recommendations for policy and development. This study employed a phenomenological research design in alignment with qualitative research. Purposive sampling was used to recruit five female adolescents in Johannesburg. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Data was analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six steps of data analysis. The findings revealed that conflict at home, mental illness, physical and social isolation, a lack of paternal support, and diminished educational performance emerged as risk factors faced by the participants. These findings underscore the need for psychological interventions to help address the risk factors faced by adolescents whose parents divorced during the pandemic and those who face similar circumstances during future crises.

Keywords: COVID-19; divorce; adolescents; parents; risk factors

1. Introduction

In life, individuals worldwide go through various adversities and are exposed to risk factors. These factors are negative life events or circumstances which adversely affect individuals' functioning and well-being (Pai and Vella, 2019). Studies (Chung and Emery, 2010; Sattler, 2014) have reported that individuals are faced with risk factors that make them susceptible to negative effects such as maladaptation and problematic behaviour. Sattler (2014) states that personal, family, occupational and environmental stressors are primary examples of risk factors faced by individuals across the globe. Adolescents are not exempt from experiencing risk factors, and several studies (Racine et al., 2020; Wade et al., 2020) have noted that they encounter numerous risk factors (such as abuse, low self-esteem, peer relations and poor school grades) which negatively influence their overall functioning and development. In this study, divorce and COVID-19 were considered significant risk factors that adolescents face as they do not predict positive outcomes (APA, 2023; Magson et al., 2021; Mushtaque et al., 2021). This study, therefore, investigated the risk factors experienced by adolescents in divorced households during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was critical to undertake this study to offer adolescents interventions that can assist them to buffer the risk factors associated with divorce during the COVID-19 pandemic.

SARS-CoV-2 (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2) is a virus that originated in the city of Wuhan, China, in December 2019 (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023). On 11 February 2020, the WHO announced COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease 2019) as its novel name (Huang et al., 2020; WHO, 2023). Most people who were infected with the virus experienced mild to moderate respiratory illness and recovered without special treatment. Others required serious medical intervention (WHO, 2023). The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention declared the virus a pandemic as it promptly spread to the rest of the world and its impact was vast (Morens et al., 2009; Simonetti et al., 2020). According to the WHO (2023), as of August 2023, global statistics indicate that there have been 760 million cases of COVID-19 and 6.9 million deaths. The initial case in South Africa was identified in March 2020. To date, in South Africa, the National Coronavirus Command Council stated that there have been 4 million positive cases of COVID-19 and 102,595 deaths as of February 2023 when the recording of statistics stopped (COVID-19 South African Online Portal, 2023). To contain the spread of COVID-19, a variety of strict preventative strategies were implemented worldwide and in South Africa (WHO, 2023). Those regulations enforced stay-at-home restrictions, work restrictions, compulsory wearing of face masks, travel restrictions and closures of all non-essential services, including schools and universities (Padmanabhanunni and Pretorius, 2021).

COVID-19 had repercussions for many individuals and changed family life including employment status, financial security, mental health, child education, family well-being, and family resilience (Prime et al., 2020; Zakeri et al., 2021). A study on family well-being indicated that income loss, economic difficulties, job loss, death of a loved one, worsening mental health and illness, and divorce were reported by some families during COVID-19 (Gayatri and Puspitasari, 2022; Prime et al., 2020; Rais, 2021). Tsamakidis et al. (2021) and the WHO (2023) conveyed that some of the adolescents in South Africa also experienced the divorce of their parents.

As commonly known, divorce has existed for centuries before the COVID-19 pandemic. Bruwer et al. (2014) elucidate that divorce is considered one of the most prevalent childhood and adolescent adversities in South Africa. Legally, divorce can be defined as the dissolution of a marital contractual partnership (Family and Divorce Law, 2023). Simply put, it is the decision to terminate a marriage. This dissolution is permitted on the following grounds: an irretrievable breakdown of the marriage, mental illness, unconsciousness, separation for a year, evidence of adultery or other criminal activity and being the last resort (Albrecht and Kunz, 2010; Family and Divorce Law, 2023). The United Nations (2022) speaks of the 'diversity of divorce', as the definitions and laws pertaining to divorce vary from one context to another. In South Africa, it is important to note that the African community often does not tolerate divorce. Divorced individuals are often rejected and isolated in their communities and churches, suggesting a primarily negative view of divorce (Magampa, 2016). Family is very important in African communities and therefore marriage is seen as a vitally important concept. Although divorce is not a common practice in African societies, it is becoming more and more common. Divorce has thus been on the rise in South Africa; however, they do not have the highest statistic in the world (Baloyi and Olehile, 2021).

Globally, divorce has increased dramatically over the past decades (Ortiz-Ospina and Roser, 2020) and continues to be prevalent (UN, 2022). Data collected in 2021 from 58 countries shows that the average divorce rate worldwide is 1.8% of every 1000 people (Divorce Rates in the World [Updated 2024], 2024). Recently, in South Africa, there has been a delay in the National Census programme, thus delaying statistics reports on divorce. Nevertheless, the accessible statistics published show that divorce declined in South Africa in 2020, with 1,6097 cases being granted as opposed to 23,710 in 2019 (Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], 2020). More recent statistics, however, illustrate that the number of divorces increased in 2020. In 2021, 18,203 completed divorce forms were processed, indicating a 13.1% rise. In both 2020 and 2021, South Africa was under COVID-19 lockdowns; this impacted services for divorce proceedings and could reflect the sharp decline in recorded data over this time (Business Tech, 2023).

Divorce in the literature is linked to both positive and negative outcomes. To illustrate, some studies (Albrecht and Kunz, 2010; Coiro and Emery, 1995) believe that divorce is painful with far-reaching consequences, whereas Amato et al. (2011) speak of some divorce cases in modern times as ‘good’ divorces. In such cases, Mohi (2015) describes divorce as having the potential to yield more positive outcomes. Nonetheless, for children, their parents’ divorce is often accompanied by adversity. Divorce can have a significant impact on an adolescent’s mental health (American Psychological Association [APA], 2023; Schaan and Vögele, 2016) and can result in feelings of loneliness, depression, isolation, impaired self-esteem, insecure attachments and potential suicide. Garriga and Pennoni (2022) state that divorce also affects a family’s social, socioeconomic, emotional, cognitive and psychological functioning. In addition, the far-reaching ramifications for the emotional, social, behavioural and academic development of adolescents have been well documented (Garriga and Pennoni, 2022; Schaan et al., 2019; Zhang, 2020). Poor academic achievement, increased school dropout, teenage pregnancy, financial strain, frequent residential moves, changes in social environments, substance abuse, criminality, ineffective parenting and parental conflict were also reported in various studies (Anderson, 2014; Mothibi, 2014; Pitso et al., 2014). The intergenerational transmission of divorce has a plethora of international research dedicated to it for children and adolescents. South African studies are limited; however, increased suicide risk, academic problems and sexual abuse are among some of the risk factors found among children in South Africa (Bruwer et al., 2014; Meinck et al., 2015).

Existing research indicates that COVID-19 and divorce separately posed significant risk factors for individuals. For example, Tso et al. (2022) specified that the COVID-19 restrictions led to widespread social isolation, leaving its mark on mental health worldwide. Business Tech (2023) affirms that several studies (Prime et al., 2020; Spaul and van der Berg, 2020) revealed the viruses’ impact on mental wellness. COVID-19 was associated with mental illnesses such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression and stress (Lenzo et al., 2020; Luceño-Moreno et al., 2020; Zakeri et al., 2021). Tso et al. (2022) point out that children and adolescents with special educational needs, those with chronic disease and from divorced households and low-income families were at greater risk during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic turned into a global family affair (Rais, 2021).

Studies by Phillips et al. (2020) and Prime et al. (2020) mention that families lost connections and felt isolated, experienced caregiving burdens and suffered considerable financial problems. The impact of the pandemic on the economic and social well-being of children and adolescents cannot be ignored (Gittings et al., 2021; Green and Hendricks, 2020). The forced confinement meant adolescents were confronted with a family member's addiction, aggression and violence and those of divorced co-parenting families were suddenly deprived of alternating parental care (Phillips et al., 2020). These restrictions according to Magson et al. (2021) were difficult for isolated adolescents who heavily relied on connections with others for emotional support. In South Africa, children and adolescents in residential care facilities expressed their sadness regarding their lack of family contact (Levine and Haffejee, 2020). This led to further adversities, especially in a context such as South Africa where close family ties are greatly valued. Studies also found that school closures compromised both the educational and mental health needs of adolescents (Golberstein et al., 2020; Prime et al., 2020; Spaul and van der Berg, 2020).

2. This study

Based on the above information, both COVID-19 and divorce separately posed threats to adolescent well-being. Thus, it is plausible to deduce that experiencing both adversities concurrently may have amplified the negative consequences felt by many young people, potentially leading to negative outcomes. The authors of this study could not find studies on the combination of these two adversities, especially in the South African context. What is known is that the economic difficulties associated with the pandemic certainly led to family tensions (Ahmed et al., 2020; Buheji et al., 2020; Lui, 2020). International studies focused on an increase in violence in homes (Diaz-Faes and Pereda, 2020; Lee et al., 2021; Parrot et al., 2022) and instances of violence were also found in South African homes (Ayinmoro and Uzobo, 2021; Nduna and Tshona, 2021). The risk factors relating to divorce during COVID-19, therefore, need further exploration. While the pandemic has dissipated, it has not disappeared, and its ramifications are still being felt. Thus, the need still exists to add to the body of knowledge to enrich our understanding of its all-encompassing long-term effects. There needs to be a focus on identifying and understanding some of the risk factors to avoid potentially long-lasting negative effects and put measures in place to support them. On top of this, the voices of adolescents often go unheard as they are classified as a vulnerable group (Tso et al., 2022). Therefore, from a South African perspective, this current study explored adolescent experiences of parental divorce during the COVID-19 pandemic by delving into the narratives of their lived experiences and recommendations for policy and development thereof.

3. Methods

3.1. Research design

This study adopted a qualitative research approach as it allows researchers to explore participants' subjective experiences (Leavy, 2017). Specifically, a phenomenological research design with an interpretivist undertone was used in this

study to understand in detail and learn from the experiences of the participants (Alharthi and Rehman, 2016; Neubauer et al., 2019). This design, therefore, aided the researchers of this study to investigate the risk factors faced by adolescents from divorced households during the COVID-19 pandemic from their subjective experiences. Their narratives were thus studied to understand what adolescents experienced in their daily lives (Neubauer et al., 2019).

3.2. Research setting and participants

This study was conducted in Johannesburg, South Africa. This setting was chosen because divorce and COVID-19 were considered two significant risk factors faced by adolescents in Johannesburg. Purposive sampling was used to intentionally select the sample most suitable to take part in the research process (de la Rey and Townsend, 2016). Five adolescents from both government and private secondary schools who experienced parental divorce during COVID-19 between 2019 and 2021 participated in this study. Participants' ages ranged from 15 to 17 years and all the participants in this study were female. Two of the participants were African, two were White and one was Indian. More specifically, participant A was a White 16-year-old, participant B was a White 17-year-old, participant C was an Indian 15-year-old, participant D was an African 16-year-old and participant E was an African 15-year-old. All the participants in this study were fluent in the English language.

3.3. Procedure

Adolescents were sampled from both private and public secondary schools. Initial contact was made with the headmasters of the schools to introduce the study. A flyer was created to explain the focus of the study, sampling criteria and what participation entailed. The flyer was shared with a variety of schools who then shared it during their assemblies and placed it in their newsletters. For adolescents who were eligible and willing to participate in the study, consent was granted by their school headmasters first. Thereafter, the parents of the adolescents were contacted, and consent was granted on the adolescents' behalf. Finally, assent from each of the adolescent participants was also acquired.

The data collection process only began after all consent had been granted in a written format. All participants were informed that data would be collected through 30 min one-on-one interviews and a 60 min focus group. They were made aware of the fact that these would be audiotaped, transcribed and analyzed. To ensure that privacy and confidentiality were upheld, the interviews were conducted in school classrooms that were quiet and devoid of distractions and away from the hearing of others so that they could express themselves freely. The option of online interviews was made available for those participants who lived further away. Three face-to-face and two online interviews were conducted. The focus group remained online to allow for anonymity as the participants were able to keep their cameras off during the session. The audio files were then transcribed verbatim into an electronic document, including symbols that denoted non-verbal communication. The transcription feature on Microsoft Teams was used for online individual interviews and the online focus

group session. The transcription document was also double-checked (de la Rey and Townsend, 2016).

3.4. Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was granted by the Ethics Committee at the University of Johannesburg in 2023 (Sem 2-2022-070). The researchers also applied for approval to conduct research in Gauteng Department of Education schools. The research process was clearly explained, and written consent was ascertained from school headmasters, parents and participants involved. Participation in this study was voluntary, fair and free of any form of coercion—they were made aware of their right to withdraw at any stage (Marczyk et al., 2005). The researchers emphasized the anonymity of the participants' identities by making use of private classrooms, password-protected files and pseudonyms in the transcriptions and report write-up (Marczyk et al., 2005). The sensitivity of the topic of divorce and thus the vulnerability of the participants was acknowledged, and the necessary interventions were put in place. A registered educational psychologist was at hand during and after data collection for any participants who might experience psychological distress because of this study. In addition, the contact details of the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) were made available to the participants and the school psychological services were tapped into for those who might need it. Nonetheless, no psychological distress during and after data collection was reported or observed.

4. Data analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method for thematic analysis was used to analyze the data in this study. This approach was chosen due to its flexibility in analyzing multiple perspectives. The aim was to summarize and describe the common meaning of the data (Clarke et al., 2015). The first step included becoming familiar with the data. The researchers immersed themselves in the data by listening to the audio recordings and reading the transcripts several times. Then, initial codes were generated for meaningful parts of the transcripts. These codes were colour-coded while searching for themes, whereafter the themes were reviewed, defined and named and the final report was produced. Themes were identified by merging initial codes based on their similarities and differences. Main themes and subthemes were also identified, and the researchers began to think about appropriate theme names. These themes were reviewed several times in the write-up and were guided by the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The themes were cross-checked for accuracy with the use of the program Atlas.ti, a computer qualitative research tool that can be used for coding and analyzing transcripts (New York University, 2023). The final stage involved producing a report. A detailed description of the data, supported by quotations from the participants' responses, has been presented in this article to illustrate the participants' experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Clarke et al., 2015; Delahunt and Maguire, 2017)

5. Trustworthiness

This study ensured the four pillars of trustworthiness were implemented throughout the research process (Guba and Lincoln, 1985; Leavy, 2017). To ensure the credibility of the study, the researchers made use of quality voice recorders and a suitable and confidential place for the interviews. Appropriate methods to collect qualitative data were used and there was triangulation of information with the use of both interviews and a focus group. This means data was collected from multiple sources to address the same question (Leavy, 2017). Furthermore, member checks and participant validation were also used as the researchers went back to their participants to check in with them after the data was collected to ensure that they understood the narratives told (Applied Doctoral Center, 2023). Since this was a qualitative research study, transferability could not be maintained. However, the use of interviews and focus groups yielded vivid and rich data and thick descriptions for this specific group of adolescents. This study upheld confirmability by unpacking potential personal biases along the way (Applied Doctoral Center, 2023). To do this, the researchers kept a research journal where they documented their feelings throughout the process. In addition, the data was checked and rechecked throughout data collection and analysis. Data was taken back to the participants for checking and a clear step-by-step coding schema was used by the researcher thus ensuring an audit trail (Applied Doctoral Center, 2023). Finally, the Atlas.ti computer application for coding was used to cross-check themes and codes (Leavy, 2017). At last, dependability was ensured through rigorous data collection techniques and analysis that was well documented by the researchers.

6. Results

In this study, five main themes were identified, namely conflict at home, mental illness, isolation, absent fathers and a diminished sense of educational performance. These themes and their subthemes are unpacked in the ensuing sections.

6.1. Conflict at home

The participants in this study were confronted by conflict in their homes. It appears that divorce during the pandemic brought with it a rise in conflict. The adolescents reported that the conflict was centred on the following subthemes: Parental dishonesty, parental fights and increased exposure to domestic violence in their homes.

6.2. Parental dishonesty

Participants reported that their parents were dishonest and engaged in relations with other partners. It seems that the pandemic's restrictions made it harder to conceal their secrets. Therefore, the adolescents were not only navigating the risk of divorce and COVID-19 but lived with parental dishonesty. Participants shared their experiences of dishonesty on the part of their mothers and fathers.

I saw her speaking to another man in a very inappropriate manner as she is a married woman with children ... My mom then started 'sneaking' out of the house

saying she would go shopping ... it wasn't very long until I found out that my mom was cheating on my dad (participant A).

My father was unfaithful, and my mother found out. They attempted to move forward and fix their marriage, but my mother found it difficult ... My father felt that his past transgressions were always being held against him. My father had another affair during COVID-19, and my mother decided that she couldn't move past it (participant B).

In addition, another participant expressed the pain she felt when she realised that her father was cheating on her mother. What compounded the effect of dishonesty was the fact that it was shared on social media for the rest of her friends and family to see.

What made the year so painful was the fact that my dad was cheating on my mom during that year... He was dating someone else while still being married to our mother... They posted it on Facebook and social media for everyone to see (participant C).

As illustrated by these quotations, participants considered parental dishonesty a risk factor. They grappled with the dishonesty of their parents regarding secret relationships that surfaced during the time of COVID-19.

6.3. Parental fights

Arguments in the home were discussed by participants as a risk factor. During COVID-19, families were forced to live in close confinement, thus fights became inevitable. In addition, they were seen as an additional cause of divorce. A participant touched on the fact that conflict in their home arose at the start of the pandemic, and she shed light on how stuck she felt.

In 2020 COVID-19 happened, and my parents started fighting more than usual as they were stuck in the same house every minute of the day. It was horrible to have to wake up in a house where everyone is fighting and emotional ... they were continuously fighting and arguing over stupid things (participant A).

Another respondent narrated her experience of a household characterised by conflict. She even argued that divorce was more favourable than all the conflict that was around.

I felt like the experiences linked to the divorce were easier than dealing with the constant conflict within the home ... You don't need to walk on eggshells in your home anymore (participant B).

This experience was lamented by another participant, whose family was also constantly arguing.

The picture I drew was my two parents fighting; they tend to fight a lot because of something my dad did, and they kept fighting almost every night and day, even when they used to talk on the phone... They always used to yell, either they were playing chess at night, or they would end up fighting (participant C).

Furthermore, a participant reflected on her dark emotional journey in a household flooded with so much conflict that the authorities had to be involved. While people were awaiting the government to announce the opening of the sale of alcohol, this family was dreading it as it led to further conflict and violence.

My mom could not run to the neighbours when my dad shouted; even the neighbours could not come in to help. I had to hide my siblings every day. It was a disaster... It was during lockdown and Mama would call the police, but like always they never responded or responded late. So, my mom felt like divorce was the solution ... the government only cared about opening taverns. My dad would just buy booze once they opened taverns. Wasting money. Money, he demanded from my mom. After drinking he'd shout (participant E).

Likewise, evidence from the participants indicated that the characteristic conflict surrounding divorce during COVID-19 tended to not only affect the immediate family but often caused divisions for the extended family too. This is because they were forced to take sides. A participant reflected on the fact that instead of getting support, she was blamed.

I think what made it worse ... my mom's family also blamed me for the divorce ... because I had told my dad about her cheating, and they practically hated me for doing so because, in their eyes, I ruined the marriage by telling my dad (participant A).

Families often preferred to avoid the topic of divorce entirely, and as a result, there was a lack of support and no clear understanding of the matter.

My family tended to take sides. This made things a lot more difficult. They would also avoid the topic of my parents' marriage and divorce. (Participant B)

We didn't have much support from my family, they couldn't exactly help us they didn't know too much about what was going on with us (participant C).

Lastly, it was difficult for participants to realise they did not have the support of their families but rather their strong dislike. A participant shed light on those who lacked supportive natures.

Some of them weren't very fond of me but I had to push that aside because I knew that at the end of the day, I do have people supporting me (participant E).

The above quotations by participants divulged that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic translated to an increase in arguments in the participants' homes and families.

6.4. Increased exposure to domestic violence

Due to the above-mentioned conflict, domestic violence was rife in participants' households. For example, a participant spoke about being subjected to both verbal and physical violence from her parents throughout the divorce. She experienced emotional threats from her mother and physical assault from her father.

My mom and I still had our fights as I knew she was cheating on my dad. I couldn't keep it in anymore and my mom threatened me in ways no mother should ever that if I were to speak about what she was doing she would ruin my life because she was the one who put me in this world, and she can easily make it very hard for me ... I had enough of this continuous manipulation... My dad physically assaulted me ... I had no other choice but to make contact with my mom. My dad said he wanted me out of the house and never wanted to see me again... They sent my dad to jail, and I had to go testify (participant A).

Participants dwelled on the sad memories of witnessing the physical and verbal abuse of their mothers by their fathers. This is something they found quite traumatic at the time, and it has etched itself into their memories.

I remember my dad physically hurting my mom ... I knew it was for the best; my dad used to abuse my mom before ... When I first saw my dad hurt my mom (and) it made me sit in a corner and cry (participant C).

My dad lost his job abruptly and started abusing my mom verbally ... I witnessed all this. He used to swear and scream at my mom for no reason. Calling her names. Cursing her. The lockdown was unnecessary honestly. It worsened the situation for us. Had my mom not divorced, my father could have physically abused us, and he was going to be locked in jail. My mom could not run to the neighbours when my dad shouted. Even the neighbours could not come in to help. I had to hide my siblings every day. It was a disaster. We were too young to experience this. (participant E).

The narratives by participants revealed the impact of being exposed to domestic violence in their households during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, it is clear from the above that during the pandemic, these adolescents had to navigate conflict-laden environments where they were exposed to parental dishonesty, fights and domestic violence.

6.5. Mental illness

The mental health of the adolescents was evidently under strain. In this study, results revealed that the mental illness of adolescents was a risk factor. Elements of anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts and feelings as well as changes in eating patterns appeared to be the most prevalent. Their experience of divorce during COVID-19 either meant the beginning of mental health challenges or that existing mental health challenges were exacerbated.

To illustrate, a participant admitted that due to the divorce during COVID-19, she now suffers from anxiety, and it worsened to the extent that she had to be admitted to a psychiatric hospital:

I suffer from anxiety; my mental health is not 'healthy' at all. Some days I don't have any motivation to wake up or care about anything ... I was.

The effects appeared to be long-lasting as she confirmed, "I still suffer from anxiety and I'm currently on medication (participant A, female).

In some cases, participants were not always able to label their feelings, but they were aware that they were sad, that their mental health was being negatively affected and that they needed mental health support.

Mental illness (pause)I felt very sad but managed to overcome it. Mom took me to a counsellor (participant C).

In addition, a participant spoke about going through a phase where she had poor eating habits due to poor self-esteem and body image.

When I started becoming aware of myself and how I look or how I perceive myself I started relating all that emotionally with food; so that's when I started to gain weight drastically because I was eating all the time. And then shortly after like a few months, after I realised that I was gaining weight, and it made me feel a lot more

insecure than I was already, so I started starving myself. And that's when I started losing weight drastically, yeah (participant E).

Lastly, participants admitted that with everything going on around them, they faced depression which resulted in suicidal thoughts.

I did struggle with a bit of depression and some negative thoughts after the lockdown and the divorce. I have to admit that some of the thoughts were about suicide (participant D).

I cried a lot. Mentally I wasn't ok. I was suicidal (participant E).

The quotes from participants suggested that the mental health of adolescents was negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants felt trapped owing to the confinement imposed by the pandemic. Therefore, they could not find a release for some of their difficult feelings.

6.6. Isolation

The study's results showed that the participants felt isolated during their parents' divorce and COVID-19. It was a lonely time for them, and they had to navigate 'isolation' emotions. Specifically, they spoke to the subthemes of physical and social isolation that resulted in a sense of entrapment and the loss of friends. These subthemes are discussed further below.

6.7. Physical isolation

COVID-19 restrictions meant that many families were faced with the rules to physically isolate from others around them. The pandemic caused a period of lockdown, where families were expected to isolate indoors together for an extended period. This meant that families were in each other's company more than they had ever been before. The participants admitted that it did not allow them an easy escape from the experiences during their parent's divorce. A participant even likened the experience to being 'imprisoned':

It made it difficult to wake up each day in the same house with the same situation each day I would have given anything to escape that place even if it meant I had to die ... I had to stress every single night of my life that my parents aren't going to kill each other or aren't going to hurt my brothers and me, or that something bad would happen as we had nowhere to go. We were imprisoned (participant A).

Another participant indicated that the confinement made it difficult to escape the raw feelings they felt about the divorce which affected all those involved. She explained that there was no break for anyone.

It made it difficult to escape the difficult feelings I was experiencing. I was unable to give myself a break from the raw feelings within the house. My parents did not take the separation and divorce well and removing myself from the negativity felt impossible (participant B).

Moreover, a participant lamented the realisation that she was spending too much time by herself and began to feel lonely.

At first, I was quiet, I would, I wouldn't say happy, but I was like content considering (the fact that) before COVID-19, I didn't have a ton of friends to be talking to all the time or seeing all the time I was mostly inside. So, at first, I was OK with it,

but then when I started to realise that I'm I was spending a lot more time by myself (participant D).

Physical isolation characterised by lockdown confinement worsened the situation making violence and abuse more prevalent in families.

My mom could not run to the neighbours when my dad shouted. Even the neighbours could not come in to help... The lockdown was unnecessary honestly. It worsened the situation for us. Had my mom not divorced my father, he could have physically abused us, and he was going to be locked in jail (participant E).

Thus, the participants' physical isolation due to the confinement imposed by the pandemic made them feel trapped in their homes, with nowhere to go. This made it difficult for them to escape the experiences associated with the divorce of their parents.

6.8. Social isolation

COVID-19 and the experience of divorce also brought with it social isolation. The participants in this study explained that during this time, they socially withdrew from those around them and as a result, suffered the loss of close friends. A participant reflected on a numb feeling due to all the pain she was experiencing and that she preferred to be alone.

There were a lot of times where I would want to be left alone ... they didn't understand ... I also started withdrawing myself from my friends and we drifted and then just never really spoke again ... I just chose to ignore everything and live my life as if it never happened. Hence the reason I still feel that numb feeling and struggle to connect with people on an emotional level as I have suffocated my feelings to not feel as deeply as I once did. And I also don't care as much ... it's a vicious cycle of numbness (participant A).

A participant acknowledged that the confinement did not allow her to confide in friends as she usually would. All her friends and family were too isolated in their homes for their safety.

It did not allow for an easy escape to be with other people who could help me process my own feelings and emotions about the situation (participant B).

Even when participants preferred to be alone, it was disturbing for them to realise that they were alone, and they did not have that many friends they could count on.

I tend to enjoy ... being alone at points ... but it was like I was walking alone with no one which is pretty normal. That's how I grew up, but usually I had someone who I could count on, but this time it was me walking alone with no one who made me feel okay... I have never really connected with anyone. I am mostly alone. I kind of have friends but they are never around... It made me realise a lot of things... At the time I didn't have friends (participant D).

Finally, not only did embarrassment keep the participants secluded, but deep-seated anger added to it, leaving them alone once again to deal with all the emotions on their own.

I have no friends. I love my space. I prefer being alone ... I am angry and at times rude to people because I just want to be alone (participant E).

Social isolation also translated into a loss of friends who would usually serve as an anchor. A participant narrated her story of lost friends because of a feeling of being

misunderstood. She felt that she could not expect her friends to understand what she herself did not understand.

I also lost a lot of friends during this time ... because I had emotions that they couldn't understand, and neither could I... There were a lot of times where I would want to be left alone and they didn't understand. They couldn't help and it frustrated me and I think it frustrated them more. My friends don't always understand because their parents are still together. So, even though they would say they understand, they never truly do (participant A).

Participants also shared their embarrassment of talking about parental divorce with their friends. They wanted to avoid the questions they might ask altogether.

There were very few friends I would open up to. I felt almost embarrassed talking about the separation. I always thought it would lead to more questions that I didn't want to answer (participant B).

Another participant also spoke about the loss of friends and how she was unable to regain them later in life.

I never used to speak to my friends, I kind of lost touch with them in grade 4 during COVID-19. I never had friends during that stage. They used to tease me... I never had any friends to play with because of COVID-19. So, I had no friends while others did. When we went to school during the pandemic. I wore a mask. I never really connected with anyone, I am and was mostly alone (participant C).

Similarly, because of some consequences of the pandemic, participants were not able to have or maintain many of their friends. One participant said that because of all the changes brought about by the divorce and pandemic, the environment was not conducive to keeping any of her friends.

I didn't have a ton of friends to be talking to all the time or seeing all the time I was mostly inside (participant D).

I have no friends. I love my space. I prefer being alone. I hate this transition. I lost all my friends because I'm deemed poor now. Most of my friends still has (sic) their parents and they still have their jobs. They never were affected. Instead, their parents worked from home. I lost friends. I missed out on a lot of things. My teen years. I lost my friends (participant E).

Many of the participants during the pandemic endured social isolation. The above narrations by participants highlighted a sense of loneliness and the loss of many of their friends.

6.9. Absent fathers

Support from parents is pivotal when going through challenges, however, the participants indicated that they lacked paternal support. Many of the participants spoke of their father's absence. They did not only experience poor relationships with their fathers but a lack of emotional and financial support from them. For example, a participant mentioned that her father was not there for her and her brothers, and she described the relationship with him as a broken one.

My dad and I have never really had the best of relationship as he was an absent dad in the sense of, he never seemed to care much about us as it was always my mom being there for us and cheering us on at our sport events. For two years I lived with

my dad trying to fix the “broken” relationship that we had, and I tried my best to be there for him ... I don’t speak with my father at all (participant A).

Similarly, another participant had no relationship with her father as he did not offer emotional support to the family. She shared her disappointment that she no longer has a close relationship with her father.

It made it worse because we didn’t exactly talk to my dad ... I don’t really like to talk to him. I don’t really see him much. I would not exactly like a close relationship with him... With my dad, I don’t have a close relationship anymore, after he cheated on Mom and hurt her feelings, I never answered a single call, when he phoned. It helped me cope a bit more if I didn’t hear his voice, I needed space from him (participant C).

Finally, a participant was left heartbroken by her father’s disappearance as he vanished after COVID-19 and the divorce. Their good relationship was impacted.

Now I have no relationship with my dad. He left and never thought of us. Not even calls. No father, no support. It’s tough yes but these are the results of COVID-19. We are fatherless. He is somewhere out there, who knows, my dad never looked back since he left. No calls, no financial aid. He is bitter and angry. He was so sweet, but COVID-19 turned him into a monster. Now I have no relationship with my dad. He left and never thought of us. Not even calls (participant E).

Absent fathers who were the breadwinners of the family also meant great financial difficulties for some. A participant mentioned that COVID-19 made their experience worse because her father put them in a difficult financial situation.

The fights were mostly about my dad not paying for school fees or helping us. He started putting us in a difficult situation financially and emotionally. My mother didn’t have any money. She was very close to being broke. She had no money and not much help with raising my little sister and me (participant C).

These verbatim quotes showed that these participants felt a genuine lack of paternal support both emotionally and financially—a significant risk factor for them. It is also clear that the consequences of the divorce and the COVID-19 pandemic also resulted in severed ties between adolescents and their fathers.

6.10. Diminished educational performance

The final theme was diminished educational performance. Participants experienced challenges regarding their education during the divorce of their parents and COVID-19. A participant narrated the extreme pressure she felt and how her grades dropped.

The pressure was insane, and I felt like running away sometimes ... I was falling behind in schoolwork my grades were dropping and I had absolutely no motivation whatsoever (participant A).

Correspondingly, a participant mentioned that the stress she experienced was too much for her and affected her studies even though she was older and better able to manage stress.

It caused a lot of additional stress in my life. Having started my studies, I was already feeling a lot of external stress (participant B).

In addition, online learning, compounded with all the distractions at home, had a significant impact on participants' online learning. A participant mentioned that there were far too many distractions at home, and she thus struggled with online learning.

My sister was with me in the room, because she didn't want to do her lessons, so this kind of distracted me (Participant C).

Lastly, due to financial constraints, a participant was forced to move out of her current environment where she was academically adjusted and move to a government school—but not any government school, one which had scarce resources. This resulted in a severe negative impact on this adolescent's education possibilities. Sadly, she expressed how much she had begun to hate school.

I wish to go to a private school so I can receive better education again. I quickly had to downgrade and attend public schools. Worst-case scenario ever. Public schools are a mess. Teachers are so demotivated. They skip classes. They come to class and just shout. They are so rude and unprofessional. I think it's due to low wages. Or lack of resources. There are no extra mural activities at all. I hate my life. I hate school. I hate this transition. ... While they continued with school virtually, we had to downgrade and go to public schools where there are no resources. They kept postponing the reopening of schools as they were not ready. HIV and cancer are way better. Lives aren't destroyed. We go to a public school. No car. No outings. No extra murals. My life is dull (participant E).

Based on the above quotations, it is evident that adolescents' educational performance diminished, leaving them demotivated. They felt extreme educational pressure and online schooling was challenging due to distractions.

7. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the risk factors experienced by adolescents from divorced households during the COVID-19 pandemic to make practice recommendations. In this study, five main themes emerged from data analysis, and these were guided by the research questions. It is generally known that both divorce (Bezuidenhout et al., 2018; Marennyena, 2021) and the COVID-19 pandemic (Browning et al., 2022; Cao et al., 2020;) were adversities faced by many adolescents. This study revealed that adolescents experienced COVID-19 and divorce risk factors concurrently. Participants reported the prevalence of conflict at home. Conflict was reported to be caused by parents' dishonesty, cheating, fighting and domestic violence. These findings confirm the results of previous studies (Sinko et al., 2021; Woodruff, 2020) that noted a rise in conflict in homes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar findings on conflict were also reported in a South African study (October et al., 2021). Other studies in Filipina, United Kingdom and Nigeria shed light on cheating as a harsh reality during COVID-19 (Anizoba, 2023; Kua et al., 2021). In South Africa, however, research has been focused on academic dishonesty. Participants of this study also elucidated those parental arguments became more intense during the COVID-19 pandemic. These arguments were noted to have begun during the pandemic in some cases, while, in other cases, the pandemic exacerbated the arguments. This echoes findings by previous studies that highlight the new family tensions that arose during COVID-19 that put many family relations to the test (Lee et al., 2021; Mushtaque et

al., 2021). Furthermore, in South Africa, increased lockdown time was linked to increased conflict in families due to financial pressures (UNICEF, 2023). Participants' homes were also affected by a surge in domestic violence. This resonates with studies conducted on domestic violence in other parts of the world (Albaira et al., 2021; Campbell, 2020). These findings were synonymous in the South African context with 94,000 domestic violence cases being reported in the first few weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ahmed et al., 2020). Uzobo and Ayinmoru (2021) also state that Africa experienced similar surges in domestic violence according to a review of African countries.

Furthermore, the study found that mental illness was a significant risk factor for the adolescents in this study. While it is well known that divorce (APA, 2023; Family and Law, 2023) and COVID-19 (Racine et al., 2020; Tso et al., 2022) often led to mental illness (Wade et al., 2020), not much is known about the aftermath of these adversities concurrently. Thus, this specific finding of this study is unique. It is evident in this study that the mental health of adolescents was adversely impacted by divorce and COVID-19. The adolescents experienced intense sadness, depression, anxiety, poor eating habits and suicidal ideation. This finding is corroborated by other findings that link divorce with depression and anxiety in children and adolescents (APA, 2023; Bain et al., 2023). Furthermore, COVID-19 has been linked to stress, low mental health and internet addiction among females (Lebni et al., 2022; Yoosefi et al., 2021) as well as PTSD, depression, anxiety and suicide (Kim et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021).

Moreover, physical and social isolation were reported by the adolescents as significant risk factors in this study. The adolescents felt physically isolated in their homes, making the challenges related to parental divorce difficult to escape. This finding is in line with other literature that states that divorced families during the pandemic felt stuck, exhausted and emotionally spent (Allen and Goldberg, 2021). The physical isolation that came with the closing of schools also did more harm than good according to a Canadian study (Vaillancourt et al., 2021). Adolescents in this study experienced social isolation due to a loss of friends. Similarly, it is known that divorce tends to isolate families (APA, 2023). COVID-19 also caused a significant loss of friends through its inherent social isolation (Diaz-Faes and Pereda, 2020) and this was especially the case for many adolescents and children (Magson et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2021).

Paternal support received by the adolescents in this study was intangible. Specifically, poor relationships with their fathers and a lack of emotional and financial paternal support were reported. This finding contradicted the literature that speaks about the importance of father-child relationships (Erola and Tanskanen, 2017; Thuen et al., 2021). COVID-19 resulted in financial challenges for the participants' families, which in turn meant that they did not get the much-needed financial support. This finding corresponds with studies that affirm that financial strain was noted as a characteristic of divorce (Cohen, 2002) and COVID-19 (Goldberg et al., 2021; Siddique et al., 2021), especially where fathers were absent (Golombok et al., 2016). Lastly, diminished educational performance was a risk factor that adolescents were exposed to in this study. It was found that the adolescents disclosed that their studies were impacted due to the stress of their parent's divorce and switching to online learning. In this study, the findings reiterate the findings of prior studies that portray

that parents' divorce difficulties (Brand et al., 2019; D'Onofrio and Emery, 2019) and COVID-19 (Spaull and van der Berg, 2020) had impacts on educational performance. A study by Spaull and van der Berg (2020) also notes that the COVID-19 pandemic school closures compromised the educational performance of learners. A decline in academic performance was also evident in South Africa, where the shift to remote learning was not financially or practically feasible for everyone (Soudien et al., 2021).

7.1. Limitations

This study was accompanied by some limitations that merit discussion. One limitation to be noted is having a small sample of five participants from Johannesburg schools, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other settings. The findings of this study reflect the situation in the context of the participants, and it cannot be assumed that other adolescents in South Africa or around the world will have similar experiences. Nonetheless, the study still provides valuable insights into the risk factors faced by adolescents experiencing parental divorce during COVID-19. A further limitation was cultural differences in the understanding of divorce; some individuals separated as opposed to getting divorced, and therefore, this could have resulted in some exclusion of adolescents whose parents were separated. The sample only consisted of females; thus, the male perspective was not accounted for in this study. This could be because it is considered more acceptable for females to talk about their problems than it is for males (Brenneis, 2018).

7.2. Conclusion and recommendations for policy and development

In this study, adolescents who experienced parental divorce during COVID-19 underwent various risk factors. These risk factors had a negative impact on their social, academic and psychosocial well-being. Moreover, negative home environments were significant precursors to mental disorders, social isolation, poor academic performance and overall health among adolescents in this study. This study offers insights into risk factors faced by adolescents who experienced parental divorce during COVID-19. As there is a dearth of knowledge on this topic and because the existing research on this novel area is already scarce, this study adds to this knowledge gap. We recommend that similar and further studies be undertaken in other contexts for a contextual and holistic understanding of the topic. To prevent distress among adolescents who experienced both parental divorce and COVID-19 adversities concurrently, it is imperative for mental healthcare professionals working with adolescents to provide measures to support them to minimize the exacerbation of these risks. Even though COVID-19 is no longer a factor, its repercussions are still being felt. This study's findings on the rise in conflict and domestic violence in the home have implications for society and it is therefore imperative for strategies to be implemented by different stakeholders in the community to create awareness and to prevent its rise. Educational institutions and educators need to put strategies in place to support learners in times of crisis as it has implications for their learning. This study has shed light on the detrimental effects of parental divorce on adolescents' functioning and the lasting impacts on their well-being and those parents must seek psychological interventions for themselves and their children. Interventions such as family or community

psychoeducation, advocacy and awareness of the risk factors faced by adolescents whose parental divorce are recommended to assist families in similar situations. Different stakeholders such as mental health practitioners will play a pivotal role in these community interventions.

Policies to foster adolescents' positive development and adjustment and prevent future negative consequences of parental divorce during trying times, such as pandemics, should be promoted. The findings of this study imply that policymakers need to be aware of risk factors faced by adolescents when parent divorce during pandemics. The findings of this study could be used as a foundation to guide policymakers in developing and implementing policies to support the development of adolescents to promote their well-being. Policies should be aimed at promoting the resilience and development of adolescents to combat the risks they face. Resilience training needs to be considered in schools and communities. Implementing programmes that teach adolescents to navigate their context in search of accessible resilience-enabling resources should be prioritised in our schools and communities. Such programmes should also focus on how adolescents may effectively use such resources to cope despite the aftermath of parental divorce and during pandemics. Collaboration of a multidisciplinary team comprising mental healthcare practitioners, attorneys, teachers, parents, and community activists is mandatory in safeguarding the well-being of adolescents against risk factors when parent divorce. Policies should be developed and implemented to guard the rights and protection of adolescents whose parents divorce. Part of the policies should focus on navigating risk factors faced by adolescents amid parental divorce and this could include psychosocial support for adolescents and their families and parental involvement in their children's lives. Lastly, continuous monitoring of the policies and support implemented is thus critical for positive outcomes to be obtained and to reduce risk factors faced by adolescents when parents divorce during pandemics.

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