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ENHANCING THE WELLBEING OF DIVORCED PERSONS THROUGH SOCIAL WORK SERVICES: SERVICE-USERS' EXPERIENCES AND SUGGESTIONS

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*Divorce is one of the most stressful life events a person can face and it often has adverse consequences. Social work services are of critical importance in enhancing the wellbeing of divorced persons and improving their relationships with their significant others. A qualitative research study was conducted to develop an in-depth understanding of the nature of social work services to divorced persons and the divorced persons' suggestions regarding social work services. This paper reports the findings, conclusions and recommendations based on interviews conducted with divorced South African men and women from different ethnic groups with the purpose of enhancing the wellbeing of divorced persons through social work services.*

Keywords: divorce, divorced persons, enhancing wellbeing, post-divorce adjustment, social worker, social work services

## ENHANCING THE WELLBEING OF DIVORCED PERSONS THROUGH SOCIAL WORK SERVICES: SERVICE-USERS' EXPERIENCES AND SUGGESTIONS

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### INTRODUCTION

The dissolution of a marriage at any point in the life course of a person can have negative outcomes for a divorced person (Bowen & Jensen, 2017). In most instances divorced persons are likely to experience grief similar to those who have lost a loved one through death (Frisby, Booth-Butterfield, Dillow, Martin & Weber, 2012:718; Stoner, 2009:15). Many divorced persons face substantial emotional challenges, including grieving the end of the marriage, revising one's self-identity, reforming social networks, managing feelings of loneliness and making major changes in parenting practices (Sbarra, Law & Portley, 2011:455). In most instances divorced persons experience depression, loneliness, anger and other negative emotions that characterise the divorce transition, including unhappiness, greater physical and psychological distress, more substance abuse problems and lower life satisfaction (Bowen & Jensen, 2017:1364; Perrig-Chiello, Hutchinson & Morselli, 2015:387).

The aftermath of divorce can be dire and there are reports of higher mortality rates, injuries, suicides, mental disorders, strokes, chronic diseases and disabilities among divorced persons (Nielsen, Davidsen, Hviid & Wohlfahrt, 2014:705). Divorced persons experience increased social isolation, economic problems and a concomitant lower standard of living, difficulties in raising children, the risk of health problems and psychological distress (Yarnoz, Plazaola & Etxeberria, 2008:291). When divorced persons experience distress in one area of their lives, that distress may affect other areas and their overall wellness (Galvin, 2006:420). Divorce can become unbearable for many divorced persons and post-divorce adjustment is necessary for their wellbeing.

The impact of divorce can often be severe and can last for a significant period, if no solutions are found to deal with post-divorce challenges (Bogolub, 1995:20, 179; Symoens, Bastaits, Mortelmans & Bracke, 2013:178). In other words, divorced persons remain negatively affected by divorce for a long time, unless they receive some form of psycho-social assistance. Because of negative experiences during the post-divorce phase, divorced persons mostly approach therapists or counsellors, including social workers, seeking services that would enable them to cope with the aftermath of divorce (Bogolub, 1995:191; Sommers-Flanagan & Barr, 2005:482). In this regard, it transpires that social workers are helpful in assisting divorced persons who present psychological concerns and, thus, divorced persons are more likely to reach out to them for assistance (Jackson, 2015).

Social work services have three dimensions, namely the therapeutic, aimed at promoting change and/or providing support; problem solving in human relationships, which promotes interpersonal and social harmony and/or serves social control functions; and promoting social development and/or social change (Anastas, 2014:571). These dimensions can also be viewed not only in relation to the primary methods of social work intervention, namely casework, group work and community work, but also in relation to the secondary methods, namely research and administration, as they are central to social work services (Zastrow, 2015). However, it is worth noting that therapeutic services are the main social work services

provided to divorced persons (Schultz, 2015). Therapeutic intervention means that a social worker is able to intervene on a one-on-one basis with divorced persons (through the casework method), or as a group (through the group work method) and provide therapy or counselling. Moreover, a social worker is required to draw on a range of theories and techniques to promote the physical, emotional and social wellbeing of divorced persons when providing social work services (Segal, Gerdes & Steiner, 2013:149). This means that social workers should be well equipped to work with divorced persons in order to bring about changes in their lives (Sommers-Flanagan & Barr, 2005). Furthermore, social workers should be able to provide appropriate and needs-based social work services to divorced persons in order to promote positive change in the lives of these divorced persons.

The researchers discovered that social work services to divorced persons remain a neglected research topic despite the negative outcome of divorce on divorced persons (Bowen & Jensen, 2017; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015). Although several studies have been conducted on the topic of divorce, there is no evidence of previous studies with a specific focus on social work services to already divorced persons. Instead, the articles that were found during the literature search focused on other areas of divorce, including how divorce affects women and children (Fagan, 2012; Hadad, 2015; Jacobs & Sillars, 2012; Jurma, 2015; Seabrook, 2015).

Therefore the research problem for this study can be delineated as follows: *Although there are studies conducted on various aspects of divorce, there is still a knowledge gap in the existing literature about the nature of social work services to divorced persons and divorced persons' suggestions regarding social work services.* It is therefore essential to describe the divorced persons' experiences of and suggestions for social work services with the focus on enhancing the wellbeing of divorced persons through social work services.

The aim/goal of this research study was to develop an in-depth understanding of the nature of social work services rendered to divorced persons and to elicit divorced persons' suggestions with regard to social work services.

In order to achieve the aim/goal of this study, the following research objectives were posited:

- To explore and describe the experiences of divorced persons after divorce;
- To explore and describe the nature of social work services to divorced persons;
- To explore and describe the suggestions expressed by divorced persons with regard to social work services.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical framework used for this study was based on the strengths and ecosystems perspectives. The strengths perspective emphasises the understanding of divorced persons' needs, interests and strengths, rather than diagnosing and labelling them (Yip, 2005). The purpose of the strengths perspective is to help individuals (in this case, divorced persons) in the context of an enriching collaborative partnership to identify, secure and sustain the range of internal and external resources that are required to live in the community normally and independently (Salleebey, 2009:48). In the strengths perspective, divorced persons are positioned as the experts on their own experiences (Gray, 2010). In other words, the strengths perspective holds the view that divorced persons have the strength to overcome the adverse situations they may encounter in their lives. Therefore, a social worker using the strengths perspective focuses on the strength of the client system, although weaknesses may be identified.

The ecosystems perspective helps in understanding the contexts in which divorced persons function and incorporates the interactions between divorced persons and their significant others, as well as the social structures of society (Woodside, Caldwell & Spurr, 2006). This points to the fact that a social worker working from the ecosystems perspective views divorced persons as a subsystem within a hierarchy of larger systems, such as the family and the community. In other words, divorced persons are inseparable from their environment, as they function in ongoing transactions with one another (Neal & Neal, 2013).

With the ecosystems perspective, divorced persons and their environment are perceived to experience transactional problems and needs generated by some changes that may have occurred (Zastrow, 2015). This is based on the principle that a change in one part of the system creates a change in another part of the system (Miley, O'Meila & DuBois, 2009:38). In this regard, the maladaptive interpersonal challenges of divorced persons in relation to different systems become the focal area in the ecosystem perspective (Neal & Neal, 2013).

The strengths and ecosystems perspectives will be used to present the findings and conclusions resulting from the nature of social work services to divorced persons and their experiences of and suggestions for social work services.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The researchers adopted the qualitative social work research approach proposed by Carey (2012:17–28) for this study. Although qualitative social work research draws significantly from qualitative social science research, it specifically seeks to explore and address concerns or topics that bridge aspects of knowledge, meaning, tangible experience, emotions and reflexive understanding in the applied social work practice (Carey, 2012:8). The researchers' interest in adopting the qualitative social work research approach was prompted by its benefits, as identified by Carey (2012:9), who pointed out that qualitative social work research

- offers a more detailed understanding of social problems or issues, the person-centred needs of service users or the impact(s) of social work interventions;
- increases our capacity to use our imagination by stimulating thought and new ideas;
- helps social workers to better understand the context and circumstances in which they practise;
- offers an opportunity to gain new insight into themes, such as those relating to policy, legislation and political, economic or cultural dynamics, for example, issues related to the class, gender, power relations or educational needs of service users, which impinge upon aspects of practice;
- broadens social workers' understanding of the complexity of the service user, carer or wider family's related needs; and
- helps social workers to provide better advice, guidance and awareness of other forms of support to people in need following the knowledge and skills gained by the social workers.

Explorative, descriptive and contextual research designs were employed for this investigation. The purpose of using the exploratory research design was to investigate the nature of social work services to divorced persons and their suggestions for social work services, as little was known in this area (Marshall & Rossman, 2016:78). The descriptive research design was used to give an account of the participants' experiences of and suggestions for social work services to divorced persons (Marshall & Rossman, 2016), whereas the contextual research design helped in focusing on a particular context (Fawcett & Pockett, 2015). In order to acquire a sample of participants, the researchers explicitly selected participants who were likely to generate appropriate and useful data (Green & Thorogood, 2009:118); the purposive sampling was used in recruiting the participants (in this case, divorced persons) as they understood the topic better (Thorne, 2016). Another method for reaching difficult-to-access or hidden populations (Tracy, 2013:136) that was used for this investigation is snowball sampling. Through the snowball sampling method, additional sample elements were selected as successive informants or participants identified them (Chambliss & Schutt, 2013:97). The researchers recruited the participants through various network methods, for example, referrals from colleagues, friends and social work practitioners.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews consisting of open-ended questions with the aid of an interview guide were used for data-collection purposes. Participants were interviewed in the language of their choice and translation services were sought where participants decided to communicate in a language other than English. It is important to note that the pilot study was used to test the research design before

the implementation of full-scale data collection (Williams, 2015:73). Through the pilot study the researchers were able to determine whether the research instrument and questions would elicit or yield the data (Maxwell, 2013). In the analysis of data collected, the researchers followed the eight steps of Tesch's approach to data analysis, as outlined by Creswell (2014:248).

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings, the researchers used Guba's model comprised of four characteristics, namely truth-value, applicability, consistency and neutrality (Krefting, 1991:215–222). The Research and Ethics Committee of Unisa's Department of Social Work granted ethical clearance for this project and the researchers adhered to the ethical obligations of obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, appropriate data management, debriefing and beneficence.

## DEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Table 1 below presents the demographic data of the ten participants recruited (recorded by means of pseudonyms) for inclusion in this study. The participants are men and women who had been legally divorced from their partners and reside in the Gauteng province, South Africa.

**TABLE 1**  
**DEMOGRAPHIC PARTICULARS OF THE PARTICIPANTS (DIVORCED PERSONS)**

Participant (pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Race	Ethnicity	Occupation	Number of years since the finalisation of divorce	Level of education	Marital status
Adelaide	49	Female	Asian	Indian	Nurse	10	Diploma	Divorced
Belinda	39	Female	White	Afrikaner	Volunteer	3	Bachelor's degree	Divorced
Cebisa	37	Male	Black	Zulu	Warder	5	University student	Divorced
Derik	44	Male	White	Afrikaner	Police officer	15	Grade 12	Married
Engenase	55	Male	Black	Tswana	Unemployed	7	Grade 12	Divorced
Fikile	45	Female	Black	Venda	Admin clerk	3	Diploma	Divorced
Goitsemang	48	Male	Black	Tswana	Liaison officer	9	University student	Divorced
Helen	45	Female	Mixed	Coloured	Admin clerk	9	Grade 12	Married
Innocent	32	Male	Black	Tsonga	Defence force	3	Grade 12	Married
Jaqueline	34	Female	Black	Sotho	Counsellor	2	Grade 12	Divorced

As reflected in Table 1 above, the demographic particulars of the participants are categorised in terms of age, gender, race, ethnicity, occupation, number of years since the finalisation of divorce, level of education and marital status. The participants were from diverse races and ethnic groups. Six of the ten participants who participated in this study were blacks from different ethnic groups. For example, two participants were Setswana speaking, one was Tshivenda speaking, one was Xitsonga speaking, one was Sesotho speaking and one was isiZulu speaking. There were two white, Afrikaans-speaking participants, as well as an English-speaking Indian and one Afrikaans-speaking coloured participant. The participants were between the ages of 32 and 55; five of these participants were female and five were male. Seven of the participants (which constitute the majority) had not married again after divorce and three had remarried.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

From the processes of data analysis, the researchers and the independent coder identified a number of themes, which are presented in the next part of this article. An exposition of the themes, sub-themes, and categories that emerged from the information provided by the divorced persons is presented in Table 2.

**TABLE 2**  
**AN OVERVIEW OF THE THEMES, SUB-THEMES AND CATEGORIES (DIVORCED PERSONS)**

<b>Theme 1: Divorced persons' accounts of their reasons for divorce</b>	
SUB-THEMES	CATEGORIES
1. Reasons for divorce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Extramarital affair/s</li> <li>▪ Abuse</li> <li>▪ Substance abuse</li> <li>▪ Unemployment</li> <li>▪ Cultural differences</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 2: Divorced persons' descriptions of the challenges they experienced after divorce</b>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Stigma</li> <li>2. Wellbeing of their children</li> <li>3. Financial difficulties</li> <li>4. Lack of support from the church</li> </ol>	
<b>Theme 3: Divorced persons' accounts of the losses they experienced due to divorce</b>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Financial losses</li> <li>2. Loss of companionship</li> <li>3. Loss of self-esteem</li> <li>4. Loss of trust in the opposite sex</li> <li>5. Loss of security</li> </ol>	
<b>Theme 4: Divorced persons' accounts of the emotions they experienced after divorce</b>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Anger</li> <li>2. Regret</li> <li>3. Suicidal thoughts</li> <li>4. Feelings of loneliness and rejection</li> <li>5. Positive emotions</li> </ol>	
<b>Theme 5: Divorced persons' descriptions of the support they sought or received during and after divorce</b>	
1. Informal support systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friends</li> <li>• Family and colleagues</li> </ul>
2. Formal support systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychologist</li> <li>• Spiritual support</li> <li>• Employer's wellness programme</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 6: Divorced persons' accounts of the social work services</b>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sought social work services</li> <li>2. Social work services not known about or not readily available</li> </ol>	

### **Theme 1: Participants' accounts of their reasons for divorce**

In recounting their pre-divorce lives, divorced persons described the circumstances or reasons that led to them deciding to get divorced. These included extramarital affairs, abuse by the partner, substance abuse, unemployment and cultural differences.

**Extramarital affairs** were the most-cited reason. Williamson, Nguyen, Bradbury and Karney (2016:1121), Allen and Atkins (2012:1478) and Amato and Prevetti (2003:607) refer to extramarital affairs/infidelity as the main reason for divorce among married couples. The researchers found that most of the participants showed some distress to demonstrate how badly they were affected by infidelity. Cullington (2008:32) postulates that having an extramarital affair is an expression of resentment, hopelessness and/or a wish to hurt a partner or provoke a response from them. Whatever the reasons may be, it is evident that extramarital affairs/infidelity bring about changes in the marriage and lead to the

irretrievable breakdown of a marital relationship. Enganase, Cebisa and Derik provided this as the sole reason for their divorce:

*I caught her red-handed with another man having sex in our house. We fought about it, because I just could not tolerate it but later on we reconciled. (Enganase)*

*It builds up until I discovered by myself that indeed she was cheating on me. (Cebisa)*

*At one stage I got a phone call from someone alerting me that she has got an affair. I said to the person, if you have the courage to tell me that my wife has an affair with the doctor, then come to me, come around the table and make these allegations then we sort it out and he said to me no ways, I am just telling you as a concerned person ... It was anonymous, but later on after divorce I found out that it was people who work with her who caught her red-handed in a cubicle or something. (Derik)*

**Abuse by the partner** was the second most cited reason for divorce. Abuse during marriage, which comprises physical, emotional, economic and sexual abuse, was a cause for divorce (Midgley, 2016:105; Stylianou, Postmus & McMahan, 2013:3187; Watson & Ancis, 2013:171–174) The researchers found that divorced persons mentioned various forms of abuse by their partners that led to divorce.

*I started like putting things into perspective and I started questioning and he started being abusive on me ... it was a lot of uphill, it was a lot of verbal abuse. (Adelaide)*

*He accused me of cheating with the guy who gave me the lift, forgetting that those people were taking care of my health. It was just so unbearable for me and everything was sinking in my head. I then realised that I have married a wrong person. Once you get abused emotionally, it hurts more, unlike physically, because you can get healed. (Fikile)*

*There was also an abuse in different forms, physical, financial, verbal, emotional, psychological, sexual, you name it, it was there. (Helen)*

**Substance abuse** is mentioned in the literature as one of the reasons for divorce (Holmila, Raitasalo & Kosola, 2013:361; Kalmijn, Vanassche & Matthijs, 2011:160; Marsal, Jackson & Harrison, 2007:321). Moreover, substance abuse leads to financial difficulties among married couples, as often money would be spent on alcohol and drugs, instead of on something to benefit the entire family. Jacqueline and Goitseman said that their marriages were negatively affected by alcohol and/or drug abuse, and eventually they crumbled:

*... alcohol was the other thing that contributed towards my divorce. (Goitseman)*

*When my son's teacher told me that she was very scared to let my son go, because it looked like [my] husband was high and it is not the first time that he would come that way, that let me to separate within the household, but I did not want to separate as parents. (Jacqueline)*

**Unemployment** was also cited as one of the reasons for divorce. There is a higher risk of divorce if the husband is unemployed or has lost his job, which causes financial hardship within the marriage (Poortman, 2005:169; Tumin & Qian, 2017:1390). The researchers concluded that a spouse's unemployment can trigger the beginning of the divorce process, due to both the psychological damage of losing a job and the economic strain of losing a share of the household income. Fikile shared how her husband's resignation contributed to divorce:

*Things went well until when he was no longer working ... he just decided to resign from his job, even today I do not know what his reasons were ... I cannot even explain to anybody why he resigned. Then I took the responsibility of being the mother and the father and life went on ... I took care of everything in the house. I was paying for the bond, house, water, electricity, food and school fees, I was doing everything, but I hold on. We continued together regardless of everything. I asked him to check for vacancy in the internet and he agreed, only to find that he was not applying at all. (Fikile)*

**Cultural differences** are one of the reasons for divorce cited by divorced persons. The majority of men and women prefer a marital partner from their own cultural and ethnic group with similar traits to their own (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2017:17; Tsay & Wu, 2006:166). Therefore, marrying someone from an outside group deserves more sociological attention, since it may lead to an unstable or even conflicting relationship (Tsay & Wu, 2006:166). This means that misunderstanding and lack of acceptance of a spouse's cultural practices may lead to a conflicted marriage relationship. This may also increase the likelihood of divorce, as in Goitseman's case.

*My marriage was a mess from the beginning and I think it was because of the cultural issues, as I told you earlier that I am a Tswana person and got married to a Zulu woman. I think it is our love that made our marriage stronger, but the foundation was not good at all, and already there was a child on the way ... they had to do things together as a family like the rituals and so on and the church that she went to ... (Goitseman)*

## **Theme 2: Divorced persons' descriptions of the challenges they experienced after divorce**

As pointed out in the literature, divorced persons are likely to encounter several challenges after the dissolution of marriage, including stress, a lower standard of living and difficulties in parenting (Ruppner, 2012:638; Saleh & Luppacini, 2017:184). This bears out the assertion of Perrig-Chiello et al. (2015:387) that there is a great body of empirical evidence that associates divorce with challenges that may have detrimental effects on the wellbeing of divorced persons. Therefore, the researchers found that participants experienced challenges related to **stigma, children, finance and lack of support**.

The literature (Saleh & Luppacini, 2017:188) confirms that divorced persons are often faced with **stigma**, rejection and exclusion. A stigma is defined as an attribute or characteristic that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context, which includes being the target of negative stereotypes, being rejected socially, being discriminated against and being economically disadvantaged (Madera, 2013:458; Toyoki & Brown, 2014:715–71). The researchers found that participants experienced stigmatisation after divorce, as is evident in the excerpts below.

*Is the stigma. I know more especially of the Indian community. It's like when you are divorced or single, you cannot even venture [out], and you cannot go to a party. You cannot go to a function, because you are the one who is single out there. You cannot go with the partner. If you go to the party or a function, it's very awkward. It gives you the sense of incompleteness. It's like maybe I should not be at that place. (Adelaide)*

*But also the [in]dignity and the stigma it is so painful. You were a married man before and all of a sudden you are a divorced person, it is hard. I have only started now to be all over the place, I was never like that before. (Cebisa)*

Apart from the stigma, the researchers found that one of the challenges experienced by divorced persons related to the **wellbeing of their children**. It is demonstrated in the literature that parents' concern for the wellbeing of children is based on the knowledge that children experiencing parental divorce are at risk of a variety of negative developmental outcomes (Al-Zamil, Hejjazi, Alshargawi, Al-Meshaal & Soliman, 2016:177; Kim, 2010:191, Lansford, 2009:141). This may be exacerbated by the parents' fear of the inability to take care of their children, also known as parental transition difficulties during the post-divorce stage (Al-Zamil et al., 2016:178). Similar sentiments were also found in the study being reported on here.

Belinda explained the challenges she faced with her children after divorce:

*It was hard, because they were boys. I just thought that the best thing to do would be to do things that a man would do then. So, I learned how to ride a bike, because he never used to come to the house after the divorce. He was free now to do whatever. I would go to the survival camps with them. Then I started doing a lot of stuff with them. I would be part of everything*



*that they would do. I would also invite their dad and he would not come. But then I knew that they still have me.*

Cebisa also shared his challenges:

*You know, when you have children, divorce affects children, and if you love your children you will see the disorientation part in their lives. My son never coped although I took him to [a] psychologist to get assistance. It did not help at all. He still hopes that his mother and I will get back together at some point.*

Fikile also explained the challenges she faced after divorce that concerned her son in particular:

*As time [passed], I realised that my second-born child is becoming more affected because he was full of anger, he did not want to listen when I talked to him. Eventually you get irritable and want to beat the child, forgetting that it is the way he feels. He did not want to understand that I am divorced with his father ... sometimes at school they would call me to let me know that my child is rude in class and he is always fighting with others.*

The researchers also found that participants **experienced financial difficulties after divorce**. The literature supports the view that divorced persons experience a substantial decline in income after divorce and often start out with fewer resources as they are compelled to share their debts and assets (Lavelle & Smock, 2012:414; Stoner, 2009:13; Zagorsky, 2005:408). The financial challenges could be worse for persons in lower income brackets (Bowen & Jensen, 2017:1371).

When asked about the challenges, Derik responded:

*It is the financial burden ... In the sense that I am paying maintenance that side and she also want to be taken care of this side. Now, I must build up something from nothing again. Remember, I had a house and I had everything, so now I have to build up my small little house again. I have to buy teaspoons, carpet, a glass, it sounds stupid. It becomes a step back, instead of moving forward.*

Helen also shared her financial challenges:

*He defaulted so many times with the maintenance orders. He just defaulted from the first day, because he said 'no court will decide what I have to do'. So, it was a constant battle.*

**Lack of support from the church** was also raised as one of the challenges participants experienced. Christians believe that marriages are made in heaven, therefore married persons and fellow parishioners may have divergent opinions if persons decide to divorce (Murray, 2002:191; Sarkar, 2015:93). Moreover, Christians believe that God desires permanence in marriage and that married Christians must do all they can to save their marriages (Balswick & Balswick, 2007:309). The conclusion the researchers came to was that participants experienced lack of support from the church as one of the challenges they faced.

Belinda received no support from her church group, but was judged instead:

*... there is a whole change of relationships and friends that occur when divorce happened ... It was difficult for me, because it was not even my decision, it was him who started everything ... I am still dealing with it now religious, asking God to say what was the plan in that, what was the whole thing in that marriage, relationship and the friendship that went wrong ... the whole (church) study group issue. And I did not go to that church any more. I stopped that, because I felt that I was being judged in that group and I said that never will I go to such a group.*

### **Theme 3: Divorced persons' accounts of the losses they experienced due to divorce**

The researchers found that participants experienced some losses due to divorce. These include financial losses, loss of companionship, loss of self-esteem, loss of trust in the opposite sex and loss of security. A marriage entails, among other things, sexual, economic and social rights and obligations for the married

partners and the dissolution of a marriage results in losses for both partners (Cullington, 2008:43–53; Madathil & Benschhoff, 2008:222).

**Financial losses** were reported as the main losses experienced by divorced persons. This is evident in Belinda's and Helen's comments:

*... he is still paying maintenance. The girls have everything they needed, but it is not like it was before. So, in the sense we really go a level down. I am renting a place now; I am driving a smaller car. Now we have to budget, but previous it was not the case since he was earning dollars, not that we were spending money wildly, but if you needed to take the girls out, it did not require a second thought, you just did it but now you have to plan for everything you need to do. (Belinda)*

*... it made a huge impact in our lives. Besides the downscale, in fact everything was a downscale for us you were forced to. (Helen)*

In contrast, Jacqueline stated that her financial position improved after divorce:

*It actually became better when he left, because it was now [one] less mouth to feed even if the helper has now come on. To be honest with you, I felt less burdened, because he had standards he wanted to maintain. He wanted to eat out, he would not opt for a cheaper stuff like I would see a pair of shoes on sale, you see, I would buy myself a pair of shoes for R50 and he would want three pairs of R150 each.*

Divorced persons also shared their experience of **loss of companionship** after divorce. The literature reveals that divorce involves the loss of relationships that were shared by the divorced person with their former spouse and their relatives such as in-laws and friends (Kalmijn & Van Groenou, 2005:457; Terhell, Van Groenou & Van Tilburg, 2004:720) and this may lead to some negative consequences, which include emotional, social and economic distress (Drew, Heesacker, Frost & Oelke, 2004:381–382). The researchers concluded that participants experienced loss of companionship due to divorce as stated by Jacqueline and Belinda below.

*Firstly, I missed having him, I mean the person I knew, not this crazy him. So, I had a friend in him, I had somebody who could help me out with the kids and so on, and I had to face life all by myself and alone. The kids also missed their father, because they were close to their father, so that has been so difficult. Getting home and not having someone to talk to. (Jacqueline)*

*... it was about suddenly being a single mother and taking all the responsibilities that come with it. Although it (the marriage) was long distance, at least there was someone I could talk to just like a companion. Suddenly all of that is gone and everything is all on you now. (Belinda)*

In addition, the researchers found that participants experienced loss of **self-esteem** due to divorce. Evidence suggests that marriage provides a strong positive sense of identity and self-worth to married partners and therefore divorce is more likely to negatively affect their identity and self-worth (Clapp, 2000:40; Saleh & Luppardini, 2017:193; Soulsby & Bennett, 2017:360). Therefore, the conclusion the researchers reached was that divorce negatively affected the self-esteem of divorced persons as it evoked feelings of rejection, worthlessness and failure.

Engenase spoke of his loss of self-esteem:

*...you end up getting tempted to drink alcohol too much, being involved with so many girlfriends. It becomes a competition in the sense that you think if you can have a girlfriend maybe she would be jealous and come back.*

Divorce may damage a person's ability to trust and, as a result, diminish the intimacy and emotional bond with a new partner (Tark, Bedard, Kleck & Roe-Sepowitz, 2008:3). This means that divorced persons may suffer from a loss of trust, anxiety and increased worry about being hurt in future relationships and eventually lose interest in either dating or sexual intimacy Clapp, 2000:184; Frisby et al., 2012:719). This

was also the case in this study as the researchers found that participants experienced **loss of trust in the opposite sex**.

Innocent shared how he lost trust in women:

*I can say that I lost trust in women, because I no longer trust. I do not trust my wife now because of what happened with my ex-wife.*

Fikile also shared her experience:

*I also had thinking that all men are the same and did not believe that a man would be telling the truth if he says he loves me. In fact, I was no longer interested to be in a relationship anymore thinking that even the next person will treat me the same way I have been treated by my ex-husband.*

Engenase mentioned the following:

*You just feel like all women are the same to an extent that you can end up being a serial killer. You may want to inflict pain to the entire women in the world. When you see a young girl growing up, maybe 12 or 13 years old, the only thing that comes to your mind is that she is going to hurt somebody's feelings one day. She is going to raise somebody's hope and end up divorcing him. You end up miserable.*

The other loss shared by divorced persons is the **loss of security**. Married couples feel secure and happy in the marriage if they consider the marriage a lifelong partnership, comprising secure emotional support, lifelong commitment, enhanced life success and secure attachment (Hurt, 2012:859). As a matter of fact, married couples experience higher levels of psychological wellbeing than divorced individuals (Frech & Williams, 2007:149). The researchers found that participants experienced loss of security due to divorce. The comment below confirms this assertion.

*I think the first one would be the security that I have lost. The relationship that I had with my ex-wife was very strong and we never thought that we would get divorced. As a man I always thought so because my wife was always an understanding person. It's like she was well taught on how to respect her husband, because she was a respecting woman. (Goitseman)*

#### **Theme 4: Divorced persons' accounts of the emotions they experienced after divorce**

There is a great body of empirical evidence that associates divorce with symptoms of mixed emotions, for example, depression, grief and anger, and these emotions persist throughout the process and continue after divorce (Frisby et al., 2012:720; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015:387; Stack & Scourfield, 2015:701). Post-divorce experiences were evident in this study as researchers found that participants did not just experience one single emotion, but mixed emotions and their accounts of these emotions included **anger, regret, suicidal thoughts** and feelings of **loneliness** and **rejection**.

**Feelings of anger and aggression** were experienced by most of the participants in this study. Divorced persons continue to battle feelings of anger and aggression and, in most instances, these feelings are caused by the fact that divorced persons have never acknowledged their losses or dealt with their underlying feelings of rejection, hurt and failure, or their wounded self-esteem (Clapp, 2000:154; Leary, Twenge & Quinlivan, 2006:111; Nielsen et al., 2014:705).

Derik and Innocent shared how they experienced anger:

*Anger yes, I think one has to handle the situation differently. Anger towards myself and my ex-wife, anger towards the police ... (Derik)*

*I was forever angry. There were times where I thought of going to her place and burn[ing] the house and the car. I was full of anger ... (Innocent)*

Apart from **feelings of anger and aggression**, participants also indicated that they experienced **feelings of regret and guilt**. Regret and remorse were experienced in the context that life would have been better

if they had not sought divorce. In some instances, it was based on the thoughts that their lives would have been better if they had never met their ex-partners. These are mixed feelings and the literature attests to the fact that divorced persons experience feelings of regret, guilt and, at the same time, a feeling of shame, which is about feeling small, worthless and incompetent (Wietzker, Buysse, Loeys & Brondeel, 2011:324, 327). Adelaide and Cebisa expressed how they experienced regret after divorce:

*Yes, regrets did happen, but then those regrets were just normal human behaviour ... it is still there because you think, I could have this, I could have that. I think it's normal to have those flashbacks, because sometimes I would think that if I had stayed in that marriage, I would be the most spoiled female who had everything. (Adelaide)*

*She said don't worry about the divorce papers since we can easily cancel them if we agree to get back together and solve things. She tried to convince me. She invited neighbours, pastors and other people, you know my house was full of people, but I refused. That where my regrets would come that maybe I should have considered reconciling with her there. But when I thought of all these other experiences I do not blame myself for the decision I have taken. (Cebisa)*

In addition to anger and regret, the researchers found that most of the participants experienced **suicidal thoughts** after divorce. In some instances, the suicidal thoughts included wanting to kill their ex-partner and children. The literature attests to the fact that divorced persons have an elevated risk of suicide due to higher levels of depression, which may further lead to the killing of other family members, such as children and ex-partners (Cao, Zhong, Xiang, Ungvari, Lai, Chiu & Caines, 2015:297; May, Overholser, Ridley & Raymond, 2015:262; Nielsen et al., 2014:705; Stack & Scourfield, 2015:697). Engenase and Derik shared their experiences of wanting to kill themselves and/or their children:

*You see it is so stressful to such an extent that you may end up killing yourself or killing the children. I once drove with the kids in the car and I wanted to kill them in pretence that it was an accident ... (Engenase)*

Derik contemplated suicide:

*You sit in the room alone and do not feel like talking to people, you feel like committing suicide. I had a friend who supported me throughout and later on he committed suicide, because he got divorced.*

He explained further:

*... after my first divorce, I sat with this pistol in the chair and putting it in my mouth. I do believe in angels; I heard my youngest daughter calling me. I don't know how it happened, but I took the pistol [out] and put it back. (Derik)*

**Loneliness and rejection** are some of the feelings experienced by participants after divorce. The feelings of loneliness and rejection among divorced persons are also the result of the loss of a spouse and may be one of the most common precursors to aggression (Kalmijn & Van Groenou, 2005:457; Leary et al., 2006:111). Therefore, the researchers found that, among other emotions, participants also experienced loneliness and rejection after divorce. Derik and Belinda articulated their experiences of loneliness and rejection after divorce:

*You cannot describe the pain that comes with it, it is so intense. You are seated there alone and you cannot describe it. I think the loneliness is what made my second marriage, because you are just seated there alone. (Derik)*

*...rejection. And it was not only rejection from him, it was rejection also from friends, religious group, and you feel rejected more than one area. It is not good at all because you keep asking yourself questions like, was it my fault, what did I do wrong, and it took me a long time to come to terms with the fact that it was his decision. It took some time indeed. (Belinda)*

However, it is worth noting that irrespective of the adverse consequences of divorce, divorced persons also experience **positive emotions** after divorce. The literature affirms that although divorce is regarded by many as the most stressful life event, for some it may be an emotional and social liberation from a problematic marriage (Frisby et al., 2012:716; Terhell et al., 2004:721). In this study, Cebisa and Adelaide expressed positive emotions after divorce:

*...after divorce it was only a formality. I had already dealt with it. I think mine was not a bitter divorce since there were no fights or contest. I was not bitter, because I wanted her out of my life. (Cebisa)*

*I think the peace that you have is priceless, it's not worth anything in the world. (Adelaide)*

### **Theme 5: Divorced persons' descriptions of the support they sought or received during and after divorce**

The researchers found that participants sought and received support during and after divorce. Formal and informal support systems assisted in physiological and psychological functioning and in coping with divorce (Bowen & Jensen, 2017:1372; Gahler, 2006:374). The majority of divorced persons prefer to receive informal social support before seeking formal support and this involves support from partners, friends, colleagues and family members (Antonucci, Lansford & Ajrouch, 2007:539; Mosack & Wendorf, 2011:1554). Derik and Belinda spoke of the support they received from **their friends**:

*I had a friend who supported me throughout and later on he committed suicide, because he got divorced. We were there for each other, me and him. (Derik)*

*... there was this other lady, a friend of mine who went through divorce, and she was available and willing to support me through these. (Belinda)*

Conversely, Goitseman, Innocent and Engenase shared about the support they received from **their family and colleagues**:

*In my family, my sisters are so understanding and when my mother says something, it goes. (Goitseman)*

*I got support from my family, but also from my girlfriend ... she supported me throughout from 2012 until now. (Engenase)*

*Fortunately, there was a colleague of mine who supported me throughout and I would tell him that I feel like burning that house. He would say to me, don't do that, and if you feel lonely come and stay with me. He advised me that there is still life after divorce. (Innocent)*

The researchers conclude that in most instances the informal support received by participants was somehow provided simultaneously, although there were instances where they sought support but could not get it.

With regard to the formal support received by divorced persons, the researchers found that participants referred to the support sought and received from **psychologists, spiritual support** and the **employee wellness programme**.

Goitseman explained how he would get agitated with the psychologist:

*I have been going to the psychologist and I am on chronic medication for my medication for my bipolar. Sometimes it gets worse, I do adhere but sometimes [I] lapse. I think given the background and things that I am getting exposed to, when I get to the psychologists I would look for small things, like whether they are ethical or not, and I will get agitated. Last year I was admitted at Vista and my psychologist saw me as this dangerous person, because I tried to commit suicide twice.*

On the other hand, Adelaide explained that she received **spiritual support** from her priest:

*I am Catholic, I had a priest who gave me support. You know, he would talk to me and that was a way forward for me, because in our church you can only divorce for that reason, so I did it for that reason.*

Fikile explained about the employer's wellness training she attended:

*At some stage there was wellness training which includes divorce issues, how to use money, and so on organised by my employer. I attended those trainings and I was getting much better because I could not cope all by myself.*

The researchers concluded that although participants mentioned the formal support sought and received after divorce, they hardly mentioned social work services received.

### **Theme 6: Divorced persons' accounts of the social work services**

Although participants were asked whether they had sought services from social workers and, if so, what services had been provided, most of them did not know about any social work services available specifically for divorced persons. The researchers found that those who sought social work services mainly required counselling services as they were unable to cope with the aftermath of divorce. The literature confirms that divorced persons who present with psychological concerns reach out to a variety of sources, including social workers, for assistance, specifically counselling (Jackson, 2015:86; Qalinge, 2015:17; Graumann, 2009:2).

Engenase sought social work services after his divorce, but could not find any, although he explained about the social work services he and his wife received prior to divorce:

*I was looking for services from social workers, but I could not find them.*

Just like Engenase, Adelaide also sought social work services as she was unable to deal with the aftermath of divorce, but she was deterred because she felt that she would not receive their full attention:

*I think the only thing that deterred me from continuing going to a social worker, was that ... It's like they are always too busy for you. I am talking about the departmental social workers. They seem to know what they are doing but just the effort of, for instance, making an appointment with them. It's like they are always too busy, they always have lots and lots of files in their desks, incomplete files or incomplete cases if you can call them.*

Helen tried to find social work services for herself and her children, but struggled:

*We actually went to the social workers at CMR for assistance, but no one seemed interested to assist me. I also reported this to the social worker who was handling my case at the office of the family advocate and she included that in my case.*

Although some of the participants sought and/or received social work services as presented above, in this study most said that they did not seek social work services, as they were **not aware that social workers provide services to divorced persons**, or because **social work services were not readily available**. For example, when asked whether he knew of social work services for divorced persons, Engenase stated:

*Truly speaking, I know nothing about those services. I have never heard of such services.*

Belinda also shared her experience of social work services to divorced persons:

*I have not been to social workers, because the social workers that are mostly available in the area are social workers in private practice. The services that are mostly available in the area, especially from the social workers, are not therapy based. So the services are not available really.*

When asked whether she had heard of social work services for divorced persons, Fikile replied:

*I have never heard about it.*

Goitsemanang had a similar response:

*No, mostly I only hear about issues pertaining to children, issues pertaining to grants and supporting families that are destitute. Mostly those are the social work services I am aware of and I have never heard of social work services to divorced persons.*

The researchers concluded that the majority of participants were not aware of social work services for divorced persons. In fact, they thought that social work services were meant for the poor, children and managing social grants.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK SERVICES TO DIVORCED PERSONS**

The participants put forward suggestions about the nature of social work services for divorced persons based on their post-divorce experiences. Their suggestions include the following:

- Social work services to divorced persons should be a specialisation;
- Counselling services should be readily available to divorced persons;
- Mediation and parenting planning sessions with social workers should be available and accessible after divorce;
- Social work services aimed at empowering divorced persons should be provided on a long-term and continuous basis;
- Post-divorce support groups for divorced persons would be helpful and therefore should be established and conducted regularly;
- Regular campaigns should be conducted to make people aware of social work services to divorced persons as the majority of people are not aware of such services. Many people think that social work services are meant for the poor and children in need of support;
- Social work services to divorced persons should include financial emancipation to divorced persons because their financial situations are negatively affected by divorce;
- Social work services should be extended to children of divorced persons as they are equally affected by divorce;
- Poverty-alleviation programmes for divorced persons should be undertaken.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

On the basis of the findings and the conclusions reported in this article, recommendations for further research and social work practice are offered.

Given the adverse consequences of divorce for divorced persons (Gahler, 2006:372; Nielsen et al., 2014:705; Simonic, 2014:205–207; Nielsen et al., 2014:705) and the fact that previous studies conducted on the subject of divorce did not focus on the nature of social work services to divorced persons (Boon, 2005; Fagan, 2012; Hadad, 2015:494; Jacobs & Sillars, 2012; Jurma, 2015:69, 70; Lansford, 2009; Seabrook), the researchers recommend that this topic and aspects related to it be further investigated.

In view of the fact that this research study was conducted in the Gauteng province of South Africa, the researchers recommend that similar studies be conducted in other provinces in order to generate a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the nature of social work services for divorced persons and divorced persons' needs for social work services.

The researchers further recommend that comprehensive and clear practice guidelines for social work services to divorced persons be developed considering the views and suggestions raised by divorced persons.

It is further recommended that the Department of Social Development (DSD) should develop a comprehensive programme and social welfare policy aimed at enhancing social work services for

divorced persons. On that note, it is recommended that managers and social workers employed in different sectors be trained thoroughly on the implementation of such a programme.

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