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"Fumbling in the Dark"
An Exploration of the Lived Experience of Female, Adult Children of Divorce

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Abstract

Divorce is a major time of adjustment for children, bringing numerous short- and long-term impacts. Research here often focuses on the impact of divorce in explanation of intergenerationally transmitted unstable and unhealthy relationships. Little is known about the lived experience of adult children of divorce (ACD) who, despite experiencing parental disharmony and/or parental divorce, experience long-term romantic relationships. This study explored the lived experience of ten Aotearoa New Zealand women (18- to 45-year-olds) who experienced parental divorce prior to turning 18 and were in a relationship of over five-years. Narrative captured through two, one-hour virtual interviews was explored using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. This facilitated analysis of participants' insights into the multiple realities of parental relationships, divorce and subsequent influences on their own relationship journeys. Participants' journeys featured persistently "unhealthy relationships" built on a lack of understanding for how to do relationships and how to communicate effectively because of what they observed or did not observe within their parents' relationships, but also their parent-child relationships. Traumatic experiences of parental disharmony and/or divorce were exacerbated by an absence of emotional parental support and invalidation of needs within the context of changing events. This diminished participants' self-worth, informing the unhealthy behaviours that underpinned their journeys. Critical self-reflection and change assisted participants' transition from unhealthy relationships informed by confusion and isolation to healthy, safe, and joyful relationships. Findings reinforced the need to genuinely accommodate children's emotional needs and developmental stages beyond the mechanics of physical needs and custody arrangements. With a view to facilitate ACD relationship journeys uninhibited by parents' relationships, considerations for the wellbeing of young people who experience parental disharmony/divorce are made, including; role

modelling effective communication, anticipating children's emotions without presumption, parents as emotional resources, and external resources.

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Lastly, to the women who participated in my study, thank you for trusting me with your stories. It takes courage to share such raw experiences with a stranger, and I have been inspired by all that you are, not least the journey that taking part in this research, and recalling the past, has taken you on. The phenomenon of parental disharmony brings darkness to childhood that no one deserves; I am grateful you found light, joy and, ultimately, home. Ka mau te wehi.

Table of Contents

Abstract .... **iii**

Acknowledgments .... **v**

Table of Contents .... **vi**

List of Tables .... **ix**

Section 1: Introduction **10**

Section 2: Literature Review **14**

2.1 Theoretical Perspectives 14

2.1.1 Bowenian Intergenerational-Transmission Process Theory (BITPT) 15

2.1.2 Social Learning Theory (SLT) 16

2.1.3 Attachment Theory 16

2.1.4 Stage of Development Theory (SDT) 18

2.2 Research Approaches and Popular Explanations for the Impact of Parental Divorce on Children's Relationship Skills 19

2.2.1 The Impact of age During Divorce, and Gender 19

2.2.2 The Impact of Parents as Role Models 22

2.2.3 The Impact of Parent-Child Relationships on ACDs' Relationships 24

2.3 Research into the Experience of Being an ACD 31

2.4 An Alternative Approach to Researching the Impact of Divorce 38

Section 3: Methodology **43**

3.1 Study Design 43

3.2 Methodological and Analytical Principles 44

3.2.1 Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Ontology and Epistemology 44

3.2.2 Other Qualitative Methods Considered 47

3.2.3 Role of the Researcher and Reflexivity 47

3.2.3.1 Reflective Statement on the Researcher's Position. 48

3.2.3.2 The Reflexive Process 49

3.3 Participants 51

3.4 Participant Recruitment 53

3.5 Ethics and Ethical Principles in Practice 55

3.5.1 Mitigating Risk and Empowering Participants 55

3.5.2 Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Treaty of Waitangi) 57

3.6 Data Collection and Procedure 58

3.6.1 Interview Guide 59

3.6.2 Interview Procedure 62

3.7 Analytical Approach 64
3.8 Validity and Quality 68
Section 4: Results 72
4.1 Theme 1: Embarking on Relationships from a Position of not Knowing how to do Healthy Relationships 73
4.1.1 An Unhealthy Start 73
4.1.2 Positioning my Childhood Experience Within my Relationship Journey and the Impact it had on how I Engaged in my Relationships 80
4.1.2.1 I Didn't Know how to Communicate........ 82
4.1.2.2 My Parents Disappointed me. 87
4.2. Theme 2: Finding Myself 92
4.2.1 Understanding who I was and why 92
4.2.2 Realising What I Took into Relationships 98
4.3 Theme 3: Doing Relationships Differently 104
4.3.1 Breaking the Chains 105
4.3.2 Choosing to be Different 108
4.3.3 Doing the Work 112
4.3.3.1 Stop Rushing into Relationships. 115
4.3.3.2 Behaving Differently within Relationships. 116
Section 5: Discussion 120
5.1 Summary of Findings 120
5.2 Findings in Relation to Existing Literature and Theoretical Models 122
5.2.1 Communication Difficulties 122
5.2.2 Positioning Absence of Emotional Support Within CODs' Environments and ACDs' Journeys 126
5.2.3 Realisation and Transformation away from the Unhealthy Relationship Trajectory 135
5.3 Considerations for the Wellbeing of Young People Experiencing Unhealthy Parent Relationships/Divorce 140
5.3.1 Role modelling Effective Communication 141
5.3.2 Anticipating Children's Emotions 141
5.3.3 Parents as Emotional Resources and Avoiding Assumptions 142
5.3.4 External Resources 144
5.4 Limitations and Future Research 146
5.5 Conclusion 149
References 151

Appendix A: Information Sheet **164**
Appendix B: Consent Form **170**
Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Guide **172**
Appendix D: Support Services Information Sheet for Participants **179**
Appendix E: Authority for the Release of Transcripts **180**
Appendix F: Participant Recruitment Advertisement **181**
Appendix G: Protocols for Interviewing Participants who Identify as Māori **183**
Appendix H: Timeline Example 1 .... **188**
Appendix I: Timeline Example 2 .... **189**
Appendix J: Timeline Example 3 .... **191**
Appendix K: Exploratory Notes (Excerpt) **192**
Appendix L: Photo of Manually Sorting Experiental Statements **194**
Appendix M: Personal Experiential Themes (Excerpt) **195**
Appendix N: Group Experiential Themes (Excerpt) **196**
Appendix O: Reflexive Journal (Excerpt) **198**
Appendix P: Researcher's Background and Qualifications **199**

List of Tables

Table 1: Participant Information 54
Table 2: Summary of Themes 72

Section 1: Introduction

A process for terminating a marriage, divorce is a major time of adjustment for everyone involved. Particularly children as they navigate numerous changes in family and household structure (Cartwright, 2006; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Some divorce-related changes may have short-term impacts, such as psychological, behavioural or academic performance difficulties (Carr, 2016; Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2005; Fergusson & Horwood, 2001). Yet, children of divorce (COD) can also experience impacts that are not always immediately apparent. Subsequently, with increasing divorce rates throughout the Western world, the impact of divorce on children has become a long-standing concern for researchers (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001).

Seeking to understand and explain the negative, long-term outcomes of parental divorce, a significant amount of literature is dedicated to understanding the intergenerational transmission of divorce (ITD) (Wallerstein, 1987). Particularly, causational factors within the context of being an adult child of divorce (ACD) where the ITD theory is used to explain ACDs' increased vulnerability to divorce (Roper et al., 2020). Women are often identified as the main cause of ITD, with female ACD found at greater risk (59 percent) than male ACD for experiencing interpersonal difficulties and, marital breakdown (Amato & Booth, 1991; Charvat et al., 2023). The narrow research perspective, however, lacks insight into alternative experiences by ACD. Furthermore, while there is evidence of several positive impacts of divorce (Jackson & Fife, 2017; Lee, 1995; Morrison et al., 2017; Reed et al., 2016), little is known about adults who experience stable, long-term, romantic relationships despite being an ACD. Not all ACD experience divorce.

I have been intrigued by the grim reading divorce-related research offers. As a married ACD, I appreciate the impact divorce can have. Particularly, on an individual's approach to marriage and interpersonal relationships. There is an opportunity to explore the

long-term influences/experiences. Particularly of women and how the experience of parental relationships, and subsequent divorce, may influence their own approach to relationships.

In Aotearoa New Zealand (Aotearoa), despite a steady decrease in divorce rates during the early 2000's, year-on-year rates are increasing. In 2021, 6,372 couples were granted a divorce, 7,593 in 2022 and, 7,995 in 2023 (Statistics New Zealand, 2024). Similarly, the number of Aotearoa children under 17 years with divorced parents has increased year-on-year. Affecting 4,842 children in 2021, 5,853 in 2022 and, 5,901 in 2023 (Statistics New Zealand, 2024). These figures exclude separations by de facto couples. They also do not acknowledge couples that have separated yet remain married and therefore, how many children are impacted here. Furthermore, despite the suggested number of Aotearoa children impacted by divorce, there is a lack of Aotearoa based research. Most, such as Cartwright's (2006) are nearly twenty years old.

To understand the long-term divorce experience for Aotearoa children, there is a need to look at the complex interaction of divorce-related experiences Aotearoa ACD cognitively appraise when navigating their own relationships. Knowledge of the circumstances and experiences that contribute to an ACD's experience of the divorce phenomena and their own romantic relationships would contribute towards effective and meaningful therapeutic support for parents navigating relationship difficulties and/or separation/divorce. Hence, with a view to complement existing research that informs treatment and support for children and families navigating the phenomena of divorce, or separation, the objective of this study was to gather insights into the positive approaches parents can be supported in using when transitioning through separation. Insights into the factors that could facilitate a healthy adjustment for children, specifically in their approach as adults to their own relationships.

Since current, mainly quantitative, divorce-related research has been criticised for citing women as a risk factor for divorce (Elizabeth, 2003) and, not exploring experiences of

individuals (Lee, 1995), this study used the qualitative methodology, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), to explore women's experiences of their parents' relationship and divorce, and their own relationships. This approach chosen in acknowledgement of the study's focus on exploring women's lived and subjective perception of their experiences. In doing so, the study contributes to psychological literature by shedding light on the specific experiences and behaviours of women who have experienced their parents' divorce yet gone on to have their own long-term relationship.

Note: **Language use and definitions of terms**

This thesis uses terms such as "female", "women", "relationship", "marriage" and, "divorce", which are rooted in Western social understandings (Fine, 2017). While it is recognised that the term female is not neutral and that not all "families" involve parents who have legally married, these terms are used for pragmatic reasons. The thesis adopting the language used by researchers in this area to assist in creating findings that speak to this discipline. Definitions of the terms used follows:

- The term female is used to describe individuals who identify as a woman and publicly express themselves as of the female gender.
- The terms divorce and separation are used interchangeably to refer to the permanent separation/breakdown of parents' relationships. That is, where parents are no longer married, or a reconciliation of the long-term relationship is no longer possible, the family became two separate family units.
- References herein to interpersonal relationship/s or relationship/s implies romantic and intimate relationships between two individuals. A stable, long-term relationship being a committed, romantic relationship of over five years.

Lastly, in acknowledgement of the writing style for reporting qualitative research, the approach here will be personal. I will own my position in the first person, and be reflexive throughout (Crowley, 2019).

Section 2: Literature Review

Findings on the impact of childhood parental divorce are mixed. One focus remains on the initial problematic behaviours and poor emotional adjustment observed in children's responses to parents' relationship difficulties and divorce (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2005; Kelly, 2000). While others, such as Roper et al. (2020), Amato and Patterson (2017), Amato (1996) and, Pope and Mueller (1976), have focused on the long-term impacts; specifically the intergenerational transmission of divorce (ITD) or relationship instability. This being the earlier generations' influence on the marital or relationship stability of the next generation. Conclusions here frequently suggest COD are at a greater risk, than non-COD to interpersonal difficulties and divorce in adulthood.

The following section presents an overview of research that examines the impacts of parental divorce on children. Beginning with a discussion of the theoretical perspectives behind the intergenerationally transmitted factors examined by such research, the review will discuss the popular themes considered when explaining the influence of divorce.

2.1 Theoretical Perspectives

Ahead of exploring common themes identified within divorce-related research, it is important to understand two noteworthy, interacting psychological theories behind the perceptions and explanations for the effects of divorce on children. These being; the *Bowenian Intergenerational-Transmission Process Theory* and the *Social Learning Theory*. Together, these theories form the framework behind the exploration of ITD. In turn, they acknowledge several psychological development theories including Bowlby's (1969/1982) Attachment Theory and, Erikson's (1950) Stage of Development Theory. For context, this subsection will briefly discuss these theories.

2.1.1 Bowenian Intergenerational-Transmission Process Theory (BITPT)

The process by which interpersonal patterns and perspectives are succeeded between generations is traditionally stressed by Bowenian family therapists. To explain a family's dynamics and the beliefs, structure and behaviours within, BITPT describes intergenerational patterns of behavioural and emotional reactivity. For example, looking to previous generations to identify the origination of a person's behaviour or family communication difficulties (Bowen, 1978). In practice, a Bowenian family therapist works with families to identify and challenge unfavourable patterns of behaviour or dynamics. This approach is seen as particularly valuable where a family is wanting to disrupt long-standing influences of the broader family structure and/or previous generations on psychological health, conflict or communication (Gladding, 2014).

With regards to divorce, the ITD theory draws on BITPT to posit that children of dysfunctional marriages are at a higher risk of experiencing similar relationship difficulties later in life due to the transgenerational patterns of behaviour passed down through their parents (Pope & Mueller, 1976). Subsequently, in comparison to adults whose parents remained married (non-ACD), ACD are believed more likely to get divorced themselves. For example using the BITPT to explain ITD-findings, Jackson and Fife (2017) suggested parents who communicate with their ex-spouse via their children facilitate a negative perception by the child of their parent-child relationship. This is seen to convey dysfunctional communication patterns and relationships to the child, increasing the risk of the child's maladjustment to divorce and, subsequent interpersonal difficulties in adulthood. In explaining ITD, BITPT's account of family dynamics is complemented, and informed, by the Social Learning Theory.

2.1.2 Social Learning Theory (SLT)

Bandura's SLT (1986) holds that children's learning occurs as a result of observing, imitating and modelling others. Bandura proposed that factors including attention, emotion, and attitude influence what the child learns, but that new behaviours and knowledge can be learned vicariously through anyone. For example, parents, teachers, or peers. Testing his theory, Bandura famously demonstrated children modelling observed violent behaviour with the Bobo Doll experiment. This involved a person acting aggressively towards a doll in front of a child. The child demonstrating the theory in action by repeating the aggression they observed (Bandura et al., 1961).

In support of BITPT, SLT explains the assumption of intergenerational divorce, proposing that children learn ineffective interpersonal relationship patterns through observations within their family context. Behaviour is modelled by parents, shaping the child's own approach to relationships and, in turn increasing that child's risk of experiencing their own divorce.

As explored by Cohen and Finzi-Dottan (2005), Lee (1995) and VanLear (1992), with regards to the impact of divorce, application of SLT includes the internalisation and replication of negative and/or positive parental behaviours, subsequently facilitating either the child's respective maladjustment or healthy adjustment to divorce. Similarly, a child's attitude towards relationships and marriage may be informed by observations of their parents' marriage. For example, their perception of how reparable a difficult marriage is or, divorce as a solution to marital difficulties, influenced by observation of their parents' approach to relationship difficulties (Cui & Fincham, 2010).

2.1.3 Attachment Theory

Bowlby's (1969/1982) Attachment Theory, refers to the biological wiring of infants to form attachments to their primary caregivers; their emotional and social development shaped

by these relationships. From this perspective, the individual's self-esteem is associated with the level of security they experienced in response to the quality of these attachments. The theory holds that children develop different attachment styles presenting as secure, insecure-avoidant, insecure-ambivalent and, disorganised-avoidant (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Each style informing individuals' responses to situations and the quality of relationships they experience.

Attachment Theory is therefore often considered when exploring how individuals form and maintain romantic relationships, specifically the attachment patterns they developed in response to the relationship they experienced with their caregivers (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). It is proposed that children internalise the patterns of interaction they have with their caregivers. These patterns create templates for forming and maintaining relationships with others. While templates are persistent, their development is over a period of time. Adult responses presenting as secure or, insecure (anxious-preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant or, fearful-avoidant). The more secure a person's attachment, the higher quality their romantic relationships (Roper et al., 2020). Subsequently, a declining parent-child relationship, or a parent's inconsistent, unreliable and/or insensitive response to the child's needs during/post-divorce, is theorised to result in a distorted attachment template. The individual's ability to form and sustain subsequent relationships with others inhibited.

In line with this project's interests, studies have found ACD often display insecure attachment styles. The more stressful experiences of their parents' relationship and subsequent divorce, and/or the greater the perception of parental neglect during the divorce, the more insecure their attachment and lower their self-esteem. Negative behavioural patterns include adverse schemas about relationships, difficulty with intimacy and/or conflict, fears of abandonment and; avoidance of serious relationships with individuals ending relationships before they become too serious (Evans & Bloom, 1997).

2.1.4 Stage of Development Theory (SDT)

Erikson's SDT (1950) maps personal development throughout a human's lifetime. Development is explained within the context of broader social experiences, occurring in response to the interaction of these experiences and relationships.

Each of the theory's fixed sequence of seven stages, covering birth to death, aligns with important achievements/experiences that Erikson believed an individual needed to navigate or balance during a respective period within their lifetime. With each developmental step building on the skills learned during the previous stage, successful management of each stages' associated conflicts is seen as vital for healthy psychological development. The successful or failed completion of each stage impacts an individual's level of psychological growth, therefore conflict or difficulties during a specific stage can inhibit development of the essential skills required to achieve a strong sense of self, personality and mastery. For example, the ability to develop and maintain lasting relationships (Erikson, 1968).

Experience of parental divorce is seen to interfere with the balancing of the conflicting psychological developmental stages associated with the respective biological age but, of particular consequence between three- and 40 years of age (Erikson, 1968). For example, abrupt changes/loss experienced because of parental divorce during adolescence (Stage 5: 12 to 18 years) is thought to interact negatively with the adolescent's navigation of the identity (sense of self) versus role confusion ("who am I?") conflict stage in psychological development. Erikson understood a strong sense of self acquired during this stage was important for the individuals' development and experience of relationships. The theory holds that during this period adolescents are looking for relationships outside the family unit, becoming more attached to friends and less dependent on family. Divorce-related disruption in the security of home and family, and inhibition of parents' abilities to meet their adolescent's needs, is seen to remove the vital safe space an adolescent requires to

grow and develop. Subsequently, unsuccessful balancing of identity with role confusion, because of the disrupted environment experienced during this period, is associated with the experience of emotional isolation, loneliness and an inability to form long, meaningful relationships with others (Erikson, 1968).

2.2 Research Approaches and Popular Explanations for the Impact of Parental Divorce on Children's Relationship Skills

Focusing on the negative outcomes on ACDs' relationships, research has identified numerous mediating variables influencing the development of interpersonal skills or psychological tendencies and the factors that may account for relationship outcomes including gender, age at time of divorce, exposure to parental conflict and; the influence of parents as role models. The consequence of custodial agreements and disrupted parent-child relationships, particularly the father-child relationship with most COD residing with their mothers post-divorce, has also been thoroughly explored.

Reflecting on children's struggles with the stress of experiencing parents' relationship difficulties and outcomes of divorce, many view this period of children's lives as severely traumatic (Cartright, 2006). A literature review of research exploring the effects of divorce on children's mental health and development and, the subsequent variables contributing towards outcomes, including the intergenerational transmission of relationship styles and divorce, follows.

2.2.1 The Impact of age During Divorce, and Gender

With mental health and interpersonal skills affecting many aspects of life, including intimate relationships, there is often an association between mental health challenges or poor interpersonal skills developed in response to parental relationship difficulties, and an individual's increased risk for unstable relationships (Carr, 2016). Reportedly the most intense period for adjustment difficulties (O'Halloran & Carr, 2000), the grieving process for

the loss of the family unit and disrupted routines and relationships experienced by children during the first two years post-separation, can significantly affect children's psychological and emotional wellbeing and behaviour at this time (Williams-Owens, 2017). In comparison to children from parents who remained married (non-COD), COD reported higher incidences of self-esteem difficulties, depression, and anxiety (O'Halloran & Carr, 2000). Furthermore, researchers have identified several differential gender effects including externalising behaviours and interpersonal-conflicts by boys and more internalised distress in girls (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2000).

Drawing on SLT, research has found various correlations between a child's age during parental separation and long-term impacts. While Reed et al. (2016) found individuals who experienced parental divorce in early adulthood (18-29 years) were able to differentiate between their parents' relationship difficulties and their own, applying insights to their own relationships; Christensen and Brooks (2001) surmised, the younger a child is during parental divorce, the more they as ACD will experience relationship difficulties. This finding attributed to the child's age inhibiting their ability to process the divorce at the time (Christensen & Brooks, 2001).

Incorporating gender with age as a factor, male COD who experienced parental divorce between three and 18 years of age are deemed more at risk of the immediate experience of behavioural difficulties (Carr, 2016) which can alleviate over time (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2005). Yet, females experiencing parental divorce at a similar age are more likely to encounter interpersonal difficulties later in life, often affecting their relationship stability (Conway et al., 2003). With females traditionally internalising emotional distress and males externalising it (Gutman & McMaster, 2020), explanations of long-term effects of divorce on COD suggest, although effects may dissipate for males, the internalisation of

distress by female COD contributes towards their development of poor interpersonal skills thereby, increasing their risk of relationship difficulties in adulthood (Amato, 1996).

Supporting this gender difference in the impact of divorce, yet challenging the focus on age as a factor for negative effects on children's post-separation adjustment, Dunlop and Burns (1995) combined quantitative and qualitative research suggested social environmental factors influenced the experience of COD/ACD. Their longitudinal study found male COD were more vulnerable to anxiety and depression in childhood-early adolescence than female COD, who were more vulnerable to experience difficulties during later adolescence. Specifically, Dunlop and Burns concluded that the psychological developmental level and experience that accompanies being an adolescent, held the greater influence on an adolescent's behaviour than the simultaneous occurrence of parental divorce. Similarly, Conway et al. (2003) found no significant relationship between age during parental divorce and ACDs' ratings of intimate-relationship ideals, such as honesty, commitment, care and trust, other than ratings of passion ideals, such as exciting, challenging, humorous and fun.

Alternatively, exposure to parental-conflict and subsequent application of dysfunctional coping strategies in adjusting to parental separation has been found a key external risk factor for behavioural problems post-separation and subsequent relationship difficulties later in life (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2000). An ACD's difficulties with relationships are commonly seen as a result of the negative interpersonal and psychological cognitive appraisals the child engages with following observations of parental conflict (Story et al., 2004). Consequently, drawing on SLT and empirical evidence of factors impeding emotional and social development, research has focused more closely on the impact parents as role models have on children's future relationships.

2.2.2 The Impact of Parents as Role Models

Amato's meta-analytical research involving numerous longitudinal quantitative studies, suggested exposure to poor models of parental interpersonal behaviours impeded a child's ability to acquire positive dyadic relationship skills (1996). Amato concluded these children were highly likely to develop traits, such as difficulties with trust, because of the negative cognitive appraisal they engaged with while adjusting to the divorce. These traits subsequently interfering with the maintenance of relationships in adulthood.

Amato also found a negative correlation in ACD between low levels of self-esteem and experiences of high levels of parental conflict, before and after parental separation (1986). In contrast, narrative inquiry found minimal exposure to parental conflict before and/or during the divorce, together with parents demonstrating positive adjustment to the separation, assisted children in experiencing a healthy adjustment (Brand et al., 2017; O'Halloran & Carr, 2000).

With many citing the high occurrence of conflict within a troubled marriage prior to divorce (Bryner, 2001; Fergusson & Horwood, 2001; Kelly, 2000; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001), it is important to acknowledge, while the significant changes that follow a divorce are disruptive, the observation of high levels of conflict and/or negative interparent relationships is more likely to have a significant influence on ACDs' relationship experiences than the divorce alone (Cui & Fincham, 2010). For example, Bryner (2001) and Kelly (2000) cite several findings where behavioural or learning issues were detectable prior to parental separation. Additionally, Conway et al. (2003) suggested family conflict was more influential on ACDs' engagement with intimacy than specifically, parental divorce. The child's cognitive appraisal of the conflict and association of interpersonal disagreements/conflict with poor relationship outcomes, influencing their approach to relationships (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001)

Additionally, Sinclair and Nelson (1998) suggested COD develop long-term dysfunctional relationship beliefs in response to observing parental conflict. For example, the belief that disagreements with romantic partners are destructive to a relationship were experienced more by adolescents who had been COD with high parental conflict, than non-COD. In explanation, Sinclair and Nelson (1998) proposed children modelled their parents' intimate, or lack of intimate, behaviours. This supported by levels of parental conflict negatively correlating with ACDs' levels of perceived trust in romantic partners (Conway et al., 2003).

SLT is also used to explain an intergenerational transmission of conflict behaviours within relationships (Cui & Fincham, 2010). Internal fears of rejection, or lack of trust in partners may also develop in response to the processing of parents' failed relationships fuelling and triggering ACDs' initiations of rejection (Christensen & Brooks, 2001; Conway et al., 2003). Further exploring the impact of parental conflict, Whitton et al. (2008) found family-of-origin communication patterns, particularly parental hostility when observed by individuals as adolescents, correlated with ACDs' conflict resolution styles within their marital relationships. The impact greater where either parent was also an ACD.

VanLear (1992) theorised that the level to which ACD withdraw from conflict in relationships is based on the difference between how their partner manages conflict and observations of their parents' conflict management styles. Male ACD whose mothers struggled with conflict resolution were found less likely to avoid conflict if their partner was able to regulate conflict positively. Women who were not ACD, were found to interject humour and care during tense interactions, thus helping to dissipate the likelihood of intense, unresolvable conflict. In contrast, female ACD who had observed poor conflict resolution by their mothers, were found to struggle with conflict resolution, avoiding conflict where possible. Similarly, Mullett and Stolberg (2002) proposed that where both partners are ACD

the chance of relationship difficulties and divorce is higher. This was attributed to the observation of negative communication patterns, particularly during parental conflict but in addition, the event of a disrupted father-daughter relationship where children reside with the mother after divorce. Here, Mullett and Stolberg (2002) found that in comparison to male ACD, female ACD reported experiencing lower levels of intimacy and greater difficulty in communicating constructively with partners, frequently avoiding conflict.

The concluding theory is that models of interpersonal relationships from prominent adults in children's lives facilitate opportunities to learn interpersonal styles. Thus explaining how observations of positive dyadic behaviour can influence ACDs' levels of affection and relationship satisfaction.

In summary, the long-term outcome on interpersonal skills of the behaviours role modelled by parents is clear. Many have explored this relationship further by exploring the role model aspect of interpersonal relationship behaviours that are transferred intergenerationally through the parent-child relationship. Research with this focus will be reviewed next.

2.2.3 The Impact of Parent-Child Relationships on ACDs' Relationships

This section explores the significant amount of literature that emphasises the long-term post-divorce outcomes of the parent-child relationship, both in how the relationship directly impacts the child's emotional development and the role modelling set by the parent-child relationship for how children relate to others. It is here we see the interaction between BITPT and SLT as researchers attempt to explain causational factors for long-term impacts of parental divorce.

Research presents two sides to the influence parent-child relationships have on children's experience of divorce and subsequent experience of adult relationships. These being (1) Changing family dynamics affect the level parents are available to support and be

involved with children's development of the necessary interpersonal skills to develop rewarding relationships (van Schaick & Stolberg, 2001) and; (2) Declining parent-child relationships after the separation announcement strongly influence children's adjustments to, and appraisals of the divorce, particularly where poor relationships are with the father. Paternal absence and/or negative involvement with children post-separation associated with ACDs' marital instability and incapacity for positive intimacy (Fergusson & Horwood, 2001; Wallerstein, 1987).

Custodial mothers who struggled to provide consistent and effective emotional support to their children post-separation, have been identified as contributing factors towards children's level of adjustment-related distress (Boney, 2002). Yet, Williams-Owens (2017) found a reduced involvement of fathers in their sons' lives after divorce corresponded with a more significant increase in delinquent and externalising behaviour difficulties. Williams-Owens proposed such behaviours reflected a poor adjustment to divorce. While boys are found more at risk of experiencing psychological distress immediately after the divorce (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001), paternal absence and particularly, poor father-daughter relationships, are noted later for female ACD (Carr, 2007); many female ACD consequently reporting a lack of trust in men (van Schaick & Stolberg, 2001). Research suggests female ACDs' capacity for successful relationships with men is inhibited by experiencing an inconsistent or insecure father-daughter relationship (Biller, 1993). The association between poor father-daughter relationships and ACDs' low self-esteem and maladaptive interpersonal patterns providing the framework for the most popular explanation behind female ACDs' higher risk for ITD than male ACD.

Diving deeper into lived experiences, Lee (1995) found visitation schedules with non-custodial fathers can be as traumatic for COD as the experience of parental absence is to children who lose contact with a parent after divorce. Lee's participants reported that having

a parent whose availability was scheduled rather than spontaneous was as unsettling as having an absent father. Particularly, when the scheduled availability was not in alignment with the children's needs and schedule. Conflict here found to negatively impact children's emotional development (Wadsby & Svedin, 1993).

Concluding their exploration on the impact of paternal involvement in the children's lives post-divorce on the ACD's relationships, van Schaick and Stolberg's (2001) analysis of survey responses by 408 participants found that while an involved father is important for children of either gender, it is the overall parental involvement and positive parent-child relationships that are more important than parents' marital status. That, while regular observations of healthy relationships influence the level of trust and commitment ACD experience in their own relationships, it is the opportunity for close and positive relationships with parents that is more predictive of ACDs' ability to enjoy stable relationships. This conclusion reflecting Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1969/1982) and the difficulties that can result from disrupted child-caregiver relationships. Similarly, Arditti's (1999a, 1999b) comparison studies and Mustonen et al's (2011) analysis of questionnaire responses found post-divorce, strong mother-child relationships involving close maternal proximity, involvement and, support aided in greater intimacy and companionship sought by ACD. Mustonen et al. (2011) insinuating a good mother-daughter relationship assists with positive psychosocial adaptation in adulthood. Here, psychosocial resources particularly, self-esteem and satisfaction with social support levels, were theorised to mediate the impact that mother-daughter relationships had on female ACDs' quality of relationships.

Further associating the impact of parent-child relationships with COD attachment styles, insecure-anxious attachment styles have been theorised to inhibit romantic relationships in adulthood (Kunz, 2001). For example, Crowell et al. (2009) found ACD participants reported behaviours that implied they experienced a higher level of insecure

attachment than non-ACD. Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1969/1982) would suggest the loss of a secure family network, and disturbed relationship/s with parents, disrupted the existence of a secure place for the child to experience the world around them. From a gender perspective, female ACD have been found to experience attachment and interpersonal deficits more strongly than male ACD (Charvat et al., 2023; Kunz, 2001). Deficits attributed to the female COD internalising discomfort with changes during and after the divorce consequently developing a range of negative core beliefs displayed during adulthood. Similarly, D'Onofrio et al. (2007) concluded that female COD's negative adjustment to parental divorce, and subsequent future relationship difficulties in adulthood, correlated with the negative family environment during the divorce; such as poor interparental relationships and parents' declining mental health. The latter inhibiting the parent's emotional availability for their children.

Building on this, Wallerstein (1987) found a correlation between children's contact with their non-custodial parent and children's subsequent level of self-esteem; attributing low self-esteem in children with little contact with their non-custodial parent to an experience of abandonment and rejection. Similarly, van Schaick and Stolberg (2001) found avoidant and anxious attachment styles were higher in ACD who had received low levels of paternal involvement during childhood and adolescence. Noting Lee's (1995) finding that parent-child contact should be at a convenient time for all parties, such findings support Gardner's (1976) argument that children who grow up without regular contact with both parents are at risk of experiencing high levels of insecurity which then influence children's abilities to develop satisfying relationships in adulthood.

While numerous studies capture the variability in children's responses to parental divorce and attempt to provide frameworks for understanding the negative impacts on children's life stories, there is a need to understand which factors positively mediate

outcomes. For example, exploring the mediating factors behind attachment styles, Amato and Booth (1991) did not find any interpersonal relationship style differences between adults from parents who were still together and adults who had experienced their parents' divorce, *if* the divorce was not perceived by the individual as distressing *and,* where the individual maintained strong parental relationships during and after the divorce. Similarly, a positive parent-child relationship with at least one parent, has seen some ACD experience less negative effects of the divorce than those with poor relationships with both parents (Mahl, 2001); self-esteem, confidence and, emotional and social development aligning with the level a father is positively involved (Biller, 1993).

Jackson and Fife (2017) found some participants from single-parent households experienced sufficient support systems to facilitate positive, post-divorce emotional adjustment, where they perceived the support system satisfactory to their needs. Yet, there is little research in the potential for positive changes in parent-child relationships occurring later, after the divorce (Boney, 2003). For example, the impact a decrease in hostile environments may have on children's subsequent experience of wellbeing, mental health, and adaptation to parental divorce. Interestingly, Lee (1995) found ACD experienced positive growth in interpersonal skills and approaches to relationships once they had moved away from their family-of-origin and were able to select their own influences, or experience opportunities to observe other role models and build different relationships with others.

Interestingly, few studies using quantitative methods explore the influence of other role models in children's lives post-divorce or, the possibility for stepparents and other prominent adults in children's lives to exhibit positive relationship styles (Arditti, 1999b). Lived experience and narrative inquiry has provided insights with extended social support facilitating the divorced parents' experience of positive post-divorce adjustment. Children here have been found to benefit indirectly as a result; the extra support network facilitating

the opportunity for children to observe alternative and positive role models (Boney, 2002; Jackson & Fife, 2017; Lee, 1995). Increased social skills and social competence a known benefit to children who have regular interaction with extended family post-divorce (Gately & Schwebel, 1991). Illuminating detail here, while Lee's (1995) lived experience interviews found evidence for the role model hypothesis, the ACD participant's reporting both indirect and direct learning and, observations of relationship behaviours from their parents; the participants also talked about others having a positive influence after parental divorce on their perception of relationships, such as grandparents who remained married. Subsequently, Lee (1995) concluded it can be the intensity of the impact changes post-divorce have on the individual, such as parent's remarrying, relationships with stepparents, or growing up in a single-parent family, that are more influential on outcomes for ACD than the specific event of parental divorce.

High levels of social support from parents and family members, particularly where these individuals proactively, and consistently, maintain positive and supportive relationships with children during and after the divorce, has been found to have a significantly positive correlation with ACDs' expectations for romantic relationships (Jackson & Fife, 2017). Healthy relationships between children and their parents, extended family and, broader social networks ameliorating the extent that divorce negatively impacts their lives. Confidence in relationships correlated with quality, rather than quantity, of social support. Subsequently, the perceived quality to ACD of the social support experienced after the divorce was found to greatly influence their confidence in relationships.

Drawing on BITPT, when considering family health dimensions of conflict, cohesion and emotional expressiveness, findings indicate that "family health" holds a greater influence on the outcome of being an ACD, than other factors such as family structure, frequency of contact with both parents, and age at time of divorce (Johnson et al., 2001; Morrison et al.,

2017). While Johnson et al. (2001) acknowledged these latter factors can influence outcomes, the quality of family health was found a stronger mediator in the level of intimacy and quality of relationship, young ACD experience. They concluded that healthy families used effective coping mechanisms to manage challenges, which subsequently facilitate positive adjustments for all family members when faced with divorce, thus moderating the effect of divorce on children. COD mimicking their family's coping styles, cohesion and emotional expressiveness to adjust to the divorce and, in the future, draw on these skills to manage their own relationship difficulties; the intergenerational transmission of healthy communication styles assisting ACD in developing positive interpersonal processes (Morrison et al., 2017).

Identifying various mediating variables impacting children's adjustment after divorce, Sinclair and Nelson (1998) drew on SLT and Attachment Theory for their findings. They added that parental modelling of positive relationship behaviours, and parents' emotional availability, plays a key role on CODs' ability to develop positive interpersonal relationship skills and core beliefs. Dunlop and Burns' (1995) longitudinal study similarly found the level of care and emotional engagement children received from parents during and after divorce was a greater predictor of ACDs' relationship stability. Parents being emotionally unavailable during divorce negatively impacting children's feelings of security and, in adulthood, their ability to experience high levels of intimacy. Lee (1995) found nurturing parent-child relationships also helped protect children from the negative impacts of post-divorce changes, while Brand et al's (2017) narrative analysis found COD experienced a sense of security where parents were available to consistently provide reassurance during the divorce. Affirming children's importance and value, while making efforts to maintain routine and stability through amicable interparent relations and consistent parenting styles across both households, subsequently mediated children's positive adjustment to the divorce (Carr, 2016).

In support of the parent emotional availability link, Wadsby and Svedin (1993) acknowledged the importance of having both parents present when discussing divorce prior to announcing separation and during the separation process. Maintaining consistent, informative communication throughout separation, and after the divorce, was seen as a key mediating factor to CODs' positive adjustment and positive mental health. The greater understanding children have of why the divorce is happening, the greater chance children have of coping with the outcome (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Furthermore, children of amicable parents, who genuinely made time to connect and relate to their children during and after separation, were found to have adapted best to parental divorce (D'Onofrio et al., 2007).

To summarise, with parent-child relationships being a key factor for an individual's development (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969/1982), these findings highlight the complex interaction of parents as role models and parent-child relationships on the relationship outcomes for an ACD. Subsequently, while there is no denying that relationship behaviours can be linked between generations, it may not be the separation of family, or association of being a COD, that has the long-term impact on ACDs' relationships, but the variables around the event of divorce. These factors strongly influenced by interparent behaviour and parental interactions with children. Combining these findings, this literature review will now discuss research that explores the overall relationship experiences of ACD and the overall impact that being an ACD has on ACDs' experiences.

2.3 Research into the Experience of Being an ACD

Much literature here relies on the theory that experiences in family-of-origin shape children's interpersonal resources, and subsequently, their approach to relationships in adulthood. Analysing survey responses, Roper et al. (2020), identified numerous connections between a person's interpersonal skills and their approach to relationships, and their relationship with their divorced parents. Findings included ACD reporting lower regard for

their parents, lower contentment with their own relationships and, higher relationship distress than that experienced by non-ACD. Emulating findings that disrupted parent-child relationships can explain ACDs' interpersonal difficulties, particularly where as children they observed high levels of interparent conflict (Cui & Fincham, 2010), while Roper at al. (2020) did not find ACD demonstrated different levels of satisfaction with intimacy and attachment in their own adult relationships than non-ACDs, lower couple satisfaction was reported by ACD than by non-ACD. The conclusion being that damaged parent-child relationships impact ACDs' approaches to relationships, with a higher level of distress experienced by ACD in relationships than non-ACD. This was seen as a predictor of the ITD; ACD repeating learnt relationship patterns from parents' marriages in their own marriage. Both in how they were treated by their parents and how they observed their parents treat each other. The transmission of relationship skills therefore, seen as the greatest explanation for the ITD and intergenerational relationship instability. Those who had experienced the least harmony and stability within a parental union and family-of-origin being the most significant risk factor for union instability in the subsequent generation (Amato & Patterson, 2017).

The experience of divorce can also impact ACDs' relationship ideals and perceptions of marriage (Amato & Booth, 1991; Cui & Fincham, 2010; Keith & Finlay, 1988; Yu & Adler-Baeder, 2007). While taking a retrospective analysis from ACD and the mechanisms behind the effects of divorce, Morrison et al's (2017) phenomenological study found impacts differed in line with how parents communicated with each other, about each other and, to the children during and after the divorce. ACDs' perceptions of divorce and viewpoints of marriage, or monogamy, was better where parents had supported their children in understanding the changes that were happening during separation and divorce. Parents who facilitated opportunities for children to talk about the divorce were seen to provide the support required for children to proactively and positively navigate and appraise the

phenomenon of divorce. In contrast, children who had not felt supported through open communication but also exposed to parental conflict reported experiencing negative perceptions of marriage and monogamy and, commitment fears in relationships.

Many researchers' examination of the long-term impact of divorce on ACDs' romantic relationships and interpersonal skills, cite difficulties with trust and commitment (Roper et al., 2020) and, key interpersonal processes, such as communication patterns and conflict resolution (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002). Citing a gender split where the female in the relationship is often the one to manage emotions between the couple, female ACD are particularly seen to experience difficulties with some suggesting the divorce prevented their learning of the communication skills needed to resolve conflict (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002).

Following factor analysis of self-inventory instrument answers, Johnson et al. (2001) found that in comparison to non-ACD, ACD experienced a loss of independence while in relationships. The participants rating highly with regards to emotional withdrawal from partners. Perhaps to protect themselves from the loss they had observed in their parents' marriage or, a result of poor socially learnt interpersonal skills impacting their confidence in their ability to experience satisfactory relationships (Cui & Fincham, 2010). Johnson et al. (2001) attributed this behaviour to their young participants ($M = 21.26$, SCD = *5.91)* being less self-aware and less tolerant of anxiety within relationships, than non-ACD. They also surmised these ACD were more likely to be emotionally reactive with a greater likelihood to be emotionally cut-off from others and to have a greater tendency for impulsive decisions within relationships. This in contrast to the study's non-ACD participants, who were reportedly more likely to make decisions based on objective, and measured, assessments of numerous factors. Acknowledging Erikson's development theory (1950) whereby, during early adulthood (19-29 years of age), individuals negotiate experiences of intimacy against isolation, Erikson would suggest these difficulties arise as a result of unsuccessfully resolving

the conflict between intimacy and isolation when the young adult was establishing intimacy and relationships with others. While Johnson et al's (2001) research focused specifically on young adults, and is thereby not generalisable to all adults, it captures a distinct difference between ACD and non-ACD's approaches to relationships.

Story et al.'s (2004) research captured a similar perception of young adults, their male and female participants averaging at 25.4 and 24.0 years respectively. When compared with non-ACD, Story et al.'s female ACD participants experienced greater levels of psychological and physical aggression early on in their marriage. Providing reports of marital satisfaction and marital status every six months for four years, these women were found at greater risk of experiencing divorce within four years of marriage than women who were not ACD. In comparison, male ACD who specifically recalled high levels of negativity within their parents' marriage, experienced greater levels of anger and contempt within their own marriage than males who were not ACD.

Relatedly, Amato (1996) theorised divorce was seen by children of divorced couples as an acceptable solution to relationship difficulties. SLT explaining how COD learn the limitations of marriage and/or, that divorce can be used to overcome marriage difficulties. The individual learning an approach, or perception, of "marriage" limitations. Similarly, Cartwright's (2006) participants viewed divorce as an acceptable outcome for resolving difficult relationships and, reflecting on their experiences, voiced concern for their own children should their relationship fail. Self-observations included difficulties with interpersonal behaviours, such as anger or communication problems, and broken parental relationships. Others have also found ACD seek divorce when unable to work through problems with their partners (Conway et al., 2003). Despite this, problems in relationships due to learnt behaviour or poor role modelling of conflict management problems within a

relationship, were identified by Amato (1996) and, Cui and Fincham (2010), as the greater risk for divorce than a person's attitude towards marriage.

Interestingly, Sinclair and Nelson (1998) found that ACD who experienced poor emotional support from either parent during the divorce and subsequent insecurity, still engaged in physical intimacy in adult relationships however, it was a result of a desire to feel intimacy and have physical needs met, rather than a desire to establish long-term emotional commitment. The quality of their romantic relationships was poor. This has been asserted by others such as Amato (1996) who suggested ACD have an increased need for emotional connection with others and, whilst ACD may seek committed relationships, the relationship itself is often unhealthy, women's in particular. This finding contrasting with Johnson et al.'s (2001) conclusion that ACD can emotionally withdraw from partners. It also contrasts with Conway et al's (2003) findings. Here participants considered physical intimacy and passion important in a relationship; emotional connection was not considered. Conway et al's majority female participant sample (~70 percent) rated affection and acceptance higher in importance for an ideal and successful relationship, than non-ACD did (2003). While this study did not measure the participant's relationship health, the affection and acceptance intimacy ideal could be interpreted as more than just "emotional connection". Other participants' ideals included commitment, stability, and support. Of note however, is the assumption by Conway et al. (2003) that participants were consistent in their interpretation or measures of these ideals. It raises the question about how participants define terms when responding to questionnaires and how this is interpreted by researchers. It also demonstrates the effect the phenomenon of divorce has on ACD, and the potential influence experiences have on the meanings they associate with relationships and their subsequent approach to relationships.

Conway et al. (2003) theorised unhealthy perceptions of “intimacy”, for example perceiving sexual and passionate intimacy as “love” and subsequently security, explains ACDs’ struggle in achieving long-term and/or “happy” relationships; the ACD desiring a physical connection regardless of the level in emotional connection, since physical intimacy makes them feel loved and secure. This would explain Conway et al’s (2003) participants’ prioritisation of affection and perceived acceptance within a “healthy” relationship. Christensen and Brooks (2001) proposed ACD held misperceptions of the factors required for a “perfect” relationship; the length of time since parental divorce correlating with the number of unrealistic beliefs. Establishing what elements a participant deems important for a relationship, while also establishing participants’ personal understandings or perceived meanings behind these ideal elements, may provide more qualitative and informative detail. For example, exploring if a fear of rejection and subsequent need for commitment, fuels desire for physical intimacy and therefore, facilitates poor foundations for a successful relationship.

In summary, with interpersonal skills seen as a mediating factor between parental divorce and ACDs’ relationship outcomes (Amato, 1996), literature suggests several variables interact to influence ACDs’ experiences of their own relationships. The problematic consequences are unique to the individual hence, the ACD and researcher perception and interpretation of these variables is difficult to define. While there is no disagreement that numerous factors influence long-term outcomes for ACD, the mixed findings suggest a negative outcome of divorce is not inevitable. It is unclear how alternative experiences occur, such as positive and enjoyable relationships.

A review of the methodology used in divorce-related literature demonstrates the limitations of using quantitative approaches, such as surveys. Use of statistical analysis and/or comparison studies where the research is mainly quantitative commonly provides

mixed results (Roper et al., 2020). The lack of opportunity for narrative, or deeper exploration behind participants' responses, presenting findings that rely on participants' and researchers' interpretations or definitions of terms (Arditti, 1999a). Subsequently, differences in definitions may explain the contrasting findings. As such, generalising findings from research where definitions of concepts are relied upon to determine findings is concerning (Johnson et al., 2001).

Acknowledging the different definitions of concepts such as conflict, positive communication, emotional connection, expressiveness and, intimate relationships as measured by different questionnaires often used in research, Johnson et al. (2001) encouraged future research explores ACDs' personal interpretations of the coping styles they used to appraise and adapt to parental divorce. Particularly, ACDs' perceived impact of family-of-origin experiences on their own relationships and parenting styles; which factors they apply in their own lives and which they alter. Taking a qualitative approach, exploring participants' lived experiences during this title study, and being mindful of assumptions and biases when analysing the stories captured, aligns with this recommendation.

Discussing mainly traditional approaches to divorce-related research, this section has detailed the common themes used to explain the impact of divorce on children and the explanations given for ITD. Exploring specific findings regarding the experience of relationships by ACD, this review has also articulated two noteworthy aspects. These being that current literature, particularly the literature based on quantitative data, suggests; (1) female ACD relationship experiences are more negatively affected by parental divorce than males' and, (2) that the prevalence of negative outcomes on these womens' relationships is impacted by a combination of several socio-cultural factors. Subsequently, literature illustrates a gap in explanations for women who experience long-term relationships despite being ACD, together with a lack of narrative acquired through research that permits the voice

of the ACD to be heard. The following section will discuss alternative and more inductive ways to explore ACDs' parental divorce experience.

2.4 An Alternative Approach to Researching the Impact of Divorce

In reflection of the unique intervening variables experienced by ACD, none of the findings are unanimous or provide a comprehensive set of risk factors. Furthermore, while several researchers have investigated the intergenerational transmission of relationship factors when exploring the phenomenon of divorce, few have purposively explored factors that can mitigate ITD (Lee, 1995; Morrison et al., 2017). Instead, many have focused on the factors that negatively affect development leading to the long-term challenges displayed by ACDs in their own relationships (Amato & Patterson, 2017; Keith & Finlay, 1988). A deficit emphasis commonly being that ACD are unable to enjoy relationships because of not observing healthy interparent relationships (Arditti, 1999a). Such research makes for grim reading. Particularly, research that suggests female ACD are at a greater risk than male ACD for experiencing interpersonal difficulties and, relationship instability/divorce (Charvat et al., 2023; Kunz, 2001) or; research that identifies women as the main cause of the ITD phenomena due to inheriting and/or developing a range of interpersonal faults (Pope & Mueller, 1976). Many have called for exploration of the positive outcomes of parental divorce with greater, more in-depth insights into female CODs' experiences of the divorce phenomenon and, experiences of relationships in adulthood (Lee, 1995; Morrison et al., 2017). Subsequently, seeking to justify this study and referring to alternative approaches to exploring the long-term impact of divorce, this section will argue the issues with prioritising quantitative over qualitative methodological approaches to divorce-related research.

Some literature has identified several positive outcomes of parental divorce including, personal growth (Brand et al., 2017), an increased level of independence and maturity (Sinclair & Nelson, 2008), self-esteem and empathy (Conway et al., 2003). Parental divorce

has also been cited as motivation for persevering with difficult times during a marriage. Some ACD perceiving parental divorce as a learning experience, guiding them in how to positively manage relationships and the foundational characteristics they associate with stable relationships (Lee, 1995; Mahl, 2001; Morrison et al., 2017; Wallerstein, 1987) such as, communication, expression of affection, and loyalty (Lee, 1995).

Not all ACD experience unstable relationships. Shifting away from exploring the reasons behind ACDs' marital issues or divorce, and more towards the complex interaction of experiences ACD must cognitively appraise, Jackson and Fife (2017), Morrison et al. (2017), Reed et al. (2016) and, Lee (1995) each used qualitative methodologies that permitted ACD to establish what they positively took out of their parents' relationship in their own words. Their focus on identifying positive lived experiences of relationships post-parental divorce creating opportunities for a more transformational approach to researching the experience of divorce.

Feminist researchers (Burgoyne, 2004; Elizabeth, 2003; Gergen & Gergen, 2003; Petrassi, 2012; Robinson, 2003) have also challenged using traditional psychological research approaches for exploring the impact of parental divorce. Arguing for a different way of knowing (Braidotti, 2008), feminists have criticised the structural perspective such research takes (Boney, 2008), challenging the focus on ACD's relationship outcomes. A focus which many argue oversimplifies the intervening variables involved (Lee, 1995), and reduces phenomena to data values (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). For example, Jackson and Fife (2017) acknowledged the limitation of their surveys which prevented insight into the amount of social support COD were provided with by different sources during and after parental divorce. Subsequently, the research instrument assumed an equal amount of satisfaction was experienced with each supportive relationship. Exploring specific relationships experienced

by children and seeking participants' reflections on the quality and importance of different supporters during this time, would have improved Jackson and Fyfe's findings.

Several of the aforementioned feminist researchers also propose purely quantitative research methodologies result in a dominant focus on the negative effects of divorce on women, rather than men *and* women. For example, research focusing on gender-based traits which identify women as more at risk than men for developing negative core beliefs and internalised discomfort in response to parental divorce (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Feminists argue such research methodology presents findings that suggest an increased risk of divorce by female ACD; that this facilitates conclusions of women being both the central risk factor for increased divorce rates and at greater risk of the ITD than men. This presenting a singular, socially constructed story that identifies female ACD, as the greater cause of intergenerational divorce occurrences than male ACD (Fine, 2017). For example, Mustonen et al's (2011) longitudinal study measured participants' perceptions of their parent-child relationships and quality of intimate relationships. While their findings strongly suggested daughters' adult relationships are more greatly affected by divorce than sons' relationships, their use of structured Likert-scaled questionnaires to establish these perceptions failed to grasp the participants' detailed life experiences and insights into the reasons behind their answers. Capturing rich descriptive accounts, qualitative research would be more illustrative towards a broader understanding (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). For example, and referring back to Bandura's SLT (1986), asking participants what they have taken from parental divorce and how it influences their approach to their own relationships permits insight into the behaviours and application of behaviours in alignment with, or perhaps deliberate juxtaposition to, that modelled by their parents during and after the divorce.

The argument is that qualitative research reveals greater, more insightful and potentially more positive understandings of the experience of female COD/ACD and their relationships, than research using quantitative methods (Boney, 2003; Fine, 2017). Approaches that create opportunities to hear deeper and less statistical or less data-focused insights into the outcome of divorce. Opportunities to explore what parental divorce means to COD/ACD and how they use this experience to contextualise their own relationships. As such, to interpret rather than discover, the truth and alternative realities that exist for COD/ACD than the ones previously explored by quantitative research.

An example of the greater insights that qualitative research reveals is Cartwright's (2006) research. Originally developed to explore the experience of children in stepfamilies, in capturing participants' narratives Cartwright's findings revealed numerous insights into participants' experiences of being a child during parental divorce. These insights would not have been revealed by quantitative research. Examining male and female standpoints on the impact parental divorce has on participants' lives, Cartwright's (2006), and Cartwright and McDowell's (2008) subsequent research, shared participants' accounts of parental divorce and the sense-making processes they engaged with. The research approach created an opportunity to improve understandings of experiences of divorce and identify mediating factors towards more positive interpersonal relationship experiences by ACD.

Exploring participants' own views of the effects parental divorce had on them, and that they carried through into adulthood, while Cartwright's research (2006) identified several everyday mental health functioning difficulties and impacts on relationships, it also presented findings that detailed the strengths and resources COD can develop in the aftermath of parental divorce. It shifted away from a focus on the negative effects of parental divorce.

Similarly, having interviewed ACD, Reed et al. (2016) theorised that age and developmental stage facilitated ACDs' ability to separate their intimate and interpersonal

capabilities from their parents' marriage difficulties. As emerging adults, this study's participants (aged 18-29 years) were exploring their identity and negotiating autonomy away from their parents (Bowen, 1978). As such, Reed et al. (2016) found these participants benefited from an increased level of awareness and insights into their parents' divorce. Sharing stories of using self-talk to self-differentiate from their family and their own interpersonal relationships, participants described both realising their parents' divorce was not their fault and, incidences of applying learnings to their own relationships. For example, deliberately talking through disagreements with partners rather than fighting as their parents had. While these participants acknowledged the influence of their experience as a COD on their emotional behaviour patterns with their own partners and/or ability to become romantically involved with others, the findings present a challenge to the application of BITPT in much divorce-related research.

In conclusion, this literature review illuminates the opportunity for exploring long-term relationship experiences of female ACD. Research that explores the interactional and contextual variables that facilitate positive post-divorce functioning from the voice of the ACD (Boney, 2002; Brand et al., 2017). In exploring the experience of women who, despite being ACD, live in a long-term relationship/marriage, my question was therefore what have female ACD taken from experiences of their parents' relationship and subsequent divorce into their own relationships? Here I acknowledge the potential for intergenerational influences and the theoretical models employed in current quantitative divorce research. I am also afforded a framework for exploring the individual experiences of my participants with a view to gaining deeper perspectives and insights into female ACDs' experiences of long-term relationships and the factors that may have contributed towards these experiences.

Section 3: Methodology

This qualitative study explored the lived experience of ten, Aotearoa female ACD with a view to capture insights into the factors that may have contributed towards their experiences. This section sets out the rationale for the study design before discussing the methodological principles underpinning this research, my approach to participant sampling and recruitment, data collection, analysis, and the maintenance of research quality. A reflexive statement is included.

3.1 Study Design

Challenging traditional, quantitative, psychological research on divorce and arguing for a different way of knowing (Braidotti, 2008), several psychologists argue the diversity in experience and long-term effects of being an ACD is difficult to capture in quantitative scales (Morrison, 2014; Smith, 2019). Quantitative approaches are also seen to oversimplify what are complex and nuanced challenges, subsequently limiting the insights that are captured (Allen, 1993). In contrast, qualitative research methods are argued to permit deeper, more accurate insights into ACDs' lived experience (Allen, 1993; Burgoyne, 2004; Elizabeth, 2003; Gergen & Gergen, 2003; Petrassi, 2012; Robinson, 2003). Subsequently, this study took a qualitative approach, using an interpretive phenomenological theoretical orientation, to explore the relationship journey of female ACD within Aotearoa.

Acknowledging aforementioned criticisms of quantitative-based research, it was anticipated that Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis (IPA) would facilitate a shift away from analysing ACD as data or explaining the impact of divorce on ACD using probabilistic conclusions. That IPA would instead create the opportunity to facilitate an understanding of participants' unique experiences as individual cases (Shaw, 2019). IPA has the capacity for an interrogative approach from which to contribute to existing psychological research (Smith, 2019). Subsequently, in inviting participants to share experiences of their parents' divorce,

including interpretations of any influences this experience had on their journey, it was anticipated this study's design would complement existing research; increasing knowledge through the capturing of participants' own words and in-depth perspectives. For the participants, it was hoped their explorations and reflections would facilitate acknowledgement of their journey, and any growth, in a positive light.

3.2 Methodological and Analytical Principles

The study's desired focus was to prioritise the individual participants' lived experiences and the meaning these experiences have for them, over all others. Therefore, underpinned by the principles of IPA, a hermeneutic phenomenological lens was applied with the tenets of idiography within IPA permitting exploration of each participant's story in its entirety, ahead of exploring subsequent participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Shaw, 2019). The following subsection will explain the ontological and epistemological foundations to Hermeneutic Phenomenology while also detailing the analytical approach afforded by IPA.

3.2.1 Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Ontology and Epistemology

As a research method, IPA is underpinned by the epistemology of critical realism. A philosophy of ontology that implies reality is multi-layered, existing independent of human perception and without dependence on observation (Smith et al., 2009). Positioned between positivist (objective) and constructivist (subjective) perspectives, critical realism shapes how we understand knowledge by explaining our interpretation of the world around us based on observable and unobservable consequences of the phenomenon of an event. The principles of IPA are informed by the analytical tenets of Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Idiography.

As first argued by Husserl, phenomenological inquiry requires "stepping outside of our everyday experiences," to intentionally understand what something means to someone, while adopting a reflexive stance to "disengage from the activity and attend to the taken-for-

granted experience of it" (Smith et al., 2009, p.8). Hermeneutic Phenomenology takes exploration of lived experience a step further. Inspired by Heidegger's hermeneutic approach to phenomenology, Hermeneutic Phenomenology focuses on accessing "lived time and engagement with the world" through interpretation (Smith et al., 2009, p. 19). It is a combination of Phenomenology's philosophical approach to exploring an individual's subjective experience and, Hermeneutic's reflective interpretation of understanding these experiences and the meanings behind their descriptions. This is of relevance here as it is through participants' interpretations that I explore the long-term influences of parental divorce on participants' relationship journeys.

From a metatheoretical perspective, the epidemiology for hermeneutic phenomenology holds that knowledge is the immediate consciousness of practical activity and context acquired at the time of an event; knowledge of experiences cannot be returned to without being influenced by a person's subsequent interpretation based on knowledge acquired since the event (Smith et al., 2009). Subsequently, and relevant for this research where participants are reflecting on experiences several years past, this approach holds that reflections on lived experiences are made sense of from a person's current knowledge standpoint; "the complex understanding … [evoking] a lived process, an unfurling of perspectives and meanings … unique to the person's embodied and situated relationship in the world" (Smith et al., p.21). The individual research participant using broadened horizons of acquired experience and biases to interpret the meanings they associate with the event in question (Martin & Sugarman, 2001; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Taking an empathetic and non-judgemental position the IPA researcher is therefore interpretative of the participant's perspective, while simultaneously grounding their interpretations within the participant's narrative (Smith et al., 2009). Applying a double hermeneutic process, knowledge is subsequently co-constructed between the participant and

the researcher. The researcher applying the Hermeneutic Circle concept by moving back and forth between different interpretations of the data as they explore the relationship between part of the participant's story and the whole. Notably, researchers must hold themselves accountable for any conscious or unconscious influences on their knowledge-making when exploring and interpreting participant's experiences and meaning-making of such. Both as an individual narrative and as part of a broader interpretation. Reflective processes capture the researcher's concerns and thoughts throughout the process, while use of participant verbatim narrative, and the number of extracts used in the write-up, provide evidence of findings grounded in the participant's own words. This sequentially, facilitates credibility to the project (Shaw, 2019).

The third influential component of IPA, Idiography, commits the researcher to situate participants within their unique context. The researcher is required to explore each case and the situated perspectives illustrated in turn, before proceeding to more general claims (personal experiental statements [PETs]) and the subsequent, broader claims regarding the overall cohort's experiences (group experiental statements [GETs]). IPA does not strive to identify generalisable findings across participants' experiences. In contrast, following a thorough examination and capturing of PETs, then GETs, IPA looks to illuminate where perspectives/experiences are the same or different across the cohort. Combined with the phenomenological and hermeneutic philosophical understanding of how meanings of reality are made, IPA's use of idiographic theoretical underpinnings also therefore permit an opportunity to stay close to the data. Researchers work with small, homogenous samples, capturing first-hand accounts of participants' experiences. The IPA methodology in turn facilitating analytic and critical interpretations about an individual and groups' sense-making to acquire deeper knowledge regarding the phenomenon in question (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Shaw, 2019).

3.2.2 Other Qualitative Methods Considered

Thematic Analysis (TA) was initially considered for this study given its flexibility and focus on extracting themes across broad populations, such as ACD. IPA and TA are similar in that they are methods for "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). Both approaches involve coding to structure analysis and emphasise the value of reflexivity, however TA takes a broad view of a topic. It does not focus on participants' individual lived experiences; the central focus of this study. In contrast, IPA facilitates interpretation and rich, detailed understandings of participants' lived and complex experiences of the phenomenon of interest (Sullivan & Forrester, 2019).

The following subsection will discuss reflexivity as a component of IPA. Acknowledging my position to this research topic, the section will also discuss my role as researcher, detailing my engagement with reflexivity.

3.2.3 Role of the Researcher and Reflexivity

IPA acknowledges the worldview assumptions and biases of the researcher and the interpretative process required to achieve an understanding of the participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2009). An acknowledgment of the co-construction that can occur when a researcher interacts with a participant's narrative and the need for researchers to attend to potential bias when interpreting what is being said, or not said (Hydén, 2014). Actively considering the position the researcher holds with regards to the research process and findings is, therefore, a priority.

Relatedly, feminist scholars recommend several factors be considered when exploring lived experiences, particularly where the objective is to provide a diverse collection of perspectives and knowledge, such as the desire here (Harding, 1992). Works such as those by Fine (2017); Gilligan et al. (1996); Haraway (1988); Harding (1992); Hydén (2014) and Oakley (2016) provide guidance in moving away from the empirical scientific approach used

to produce facts and single realities about women, towards a critical focus on how a project, such as this, is designed and implemented. For example, fitting with IPA's theoretical standpoint and approach, Harding (1992) urges qualitative researchers avoid collecting data from a distance and instead explore the connection between their personal experience and the research methodology. This includes acknowledging the motivating factors behind the research question and approach, and any influence on the interpretation of themes and results. Subsequently, while I did not interpret the data through a feminist perspective, how I heard and attended to my participants was guided by the aforementioned feminist's ethical recommendations. Reflexive journalling assisted me in continuously reflecting on the influence my position could have on participants' experiences of the process, and the final outcomes of the project. As detailed within the relevant subsections below, considerations included: actively working to minimise power imbalance between myself and the participants; participant agency in the direction interviews took; ensuring participants had opportunities to review how their narrative was used in the research and; actively minimising potential harm by paying attention to the language used and ensuring participant's emotional safety was considered and supported throughout.

The reflexive process was important to me and one I prioritised ahead of decisions on participant criteria, recruitment and data collection. Given the potential influence on the data collected by me as the researcher, I acknowledged the motivation, experience, training and potential assumptions I brought to this project (Frost & Kinmond, 2012). Consequently, a reflective statement and details of the reflexive considerations made follows.

3.2.3.1 Reflective Statement on the Researcher's Position. The motivation for this study evolved during a literature review of divorce-related research when completing the Advanced Psychology of Women post-graduate (175.720) paper with Massey University. As I did then, I come to this research, as an ACD who experienced parental divorce as a toddler

and then another divorce between their mother and stepfather at 14 years old. A white, middle-class woman, for most of my childhood I was raised in a house of mental and sexual abuse at the hands of my stepfather. I did not see my own father, nor my paternal family from the age of nine until I was 15 years old.

I have been married for 18 years. My relationship with my husband accumulating 23 years. Having lived experience of being a married ACD, I feel a connection to the phenomena of divorce, particularly the impact of divorce on children and the long-term impact this experience can have on ACD and their approach to relationships. During the Advanced Psychology of Women paper, I realised that despite demonstrating the diversity of experience held by ACD, divorce-related research regularly taints ACD as damaged and at risk of divorce. That conclusions often focus on the consequence of being a female ACD and/or, the correlations between gender and intergenerationally transmitted relationship behaviours and outcomes.

During subsequent reflection on my relationship status and experience of parental divorce, I felt a relational connection with the women mentioned, particularly within the ITD-focused research, and the different stories that could be shared. This inspired me to explore the experience of parental divorce by women who are in a long-term relationship despite being an ACD. In turn, driving my passion to honestly capture my participants' experiences; to facilitate an opening to hear stories that may speak of ACD relationships differently. I wanted to hear women reflect on their experience of parents' relationships while considering their own relationship experiences.

3.2.3.2 The Reflexive Process. My insider position acknowledges that I hold bias with regards to the experience of ACD in long-term relationships. My desire to explore why women like me exist in contrast to the outcome illustrated by the deficit findings which consistently suggest the inevitability of an ITD; I am certainly not neutral. However, I

identified an opportunity for providing insights into the other side of the phenomenon of divorce. The potential positive elements of divorce and/or the learnings that female ACD use to experience a different relationship from their parents. These insights hopefully guiding those navigating relationship difficulties/divorce, to mitigate the chance of one couple's relationship having negative, long-term impacts on their children's future.

As such, I owned the responsibility to be conscious of my approach. To use ethical and reflexive practices to ensure my position did not influence how readers heard the stories I had the honour of capturing and sharing. Subsequently, and acknowledging the value researcher reflexivity holds in IPA, throughout this research I remained cognitive of any enhancement or obstruction my personal experience could have towards my understanding and sensitivity to the diverse experiences of my participants. For example, leaning on my training and work experience to monitor how I engaged with, and supported, participants in sharing their stories without influence on their narrative. Refer to Appendix P for detail of my experience and training.

While IPA encourages researchers bracket, or set aside, pre-understandings of a topic to avoid influencing thoughts and engagement during the research process, this is not an easy task. To manage any bias, self-reflective journals and consistent reviews of my perspectives throughout assisted me in acknowledging any assumptions, challenging myself to approach each participant's experience from a stance of openness to learning from them and appreciating them as the experts in their stories (Braidotti, 2008). In line with Smith et al's (2009) approach, this included debriefings with my supervisor Dr Shepherd, where we explored any influence personal experience/bias may have on engagement and analysis. My reflexive journal also acknowledged fusion or changes in understandings that occurred from shared experiences with participants. Conscious of my own safety, any discomfort or

emotional activation in response to participants' stories was also discussed. See Appendix O for a Reflexive Journal Excerpt.

With discussion acknowledging the aforementioned guiding principles and reflexive-informed decisions, I will now detail my approach to participant sampling and recruitment, data collection, analysis, and the maintenance of research validity and quality.

3.3 Participants

IPA prioritises deep over broad understandings of a phenomenon. Therefore, the quality of data and approach to sampling in IPA influences the depth and accuracy of the analysis and the level to which the findings accurately represent the lived experience of interest. Sample size and homogeneity, and clear inclusion/exclusion selection criteria assists with acquiring high-quality data (Shaw, 2019). Subsequently, my intention was to recruit six to ten participants with the sample being as homogenous as possible to meet recommended guidelines for IPA (Smith, 2019). With IPA's approach to research analysis committed to idiographic features and lived experience, this sample size was understood large enough for an in-depth exploration of the lived experience of female ACD. Further, my interest related particularly to how female ACD, who have grown up in Aotearoa, make sense of their experience and relationships. Subsequently, to acquire meaningful and comparative first-hand accounts of how ACD believe parental divorce influenced their own relationships, gender, age, and age when parents divorced/separated was controlled to minimise the likelihood of the sample being too diverse (Lee, 1995).

Numerous factors were considered when selecting the criteria for participants' age. When transitioning through adulthood, while individuals explore intimacy from early adolescence, it is believed that relationships do not stabilise until individuals are in early adulthood or, over the age of 23 years (Erikson, 1950). This is also when couples consider cohabitation. Many individuals over 23-years-old experiencing at least one stable intimate

relationship by this stage (Mullett & Stolberg, 1998). Reed et al.'s (2016) discussion of developmental stages and subsequent findings suggest participants beyond this emerging adult developmental stage have greater, and more accurate, insights into the impact parental divorce has on their own relationships, than younger participants. Subsequently, and acknowledging that the negative effects of divorce on ACDs' relationships, particularly women's, often appear in late adolescence or young adulthood (van Schaick & Stolberg, 2001), participant age criteria was set at 23 to 45 years. The cut-off of 45 years set to maintain a homogenous sample (Smith, 2019).

The focus was on relationships, rather than specific marital status; there was no criteria for sexual orientation or relationship styles such as married or not married. Most divorce research compares COD with non-COD, or divides children into distinct groups; such as those of married or divorced parents. Arditti (1999a) argued this approach defines not being married, or not remaining married, as a failure. Notably, where studies are focused on relationships rather than specifically marital status, Lee (1995) advises against controlling for marital status; relationship styles seen as irrelevant and associated too closely with societal definitions and socially constructed meanings (Gilligan et al., 1996). Subsequently, IPA's acknowledgement of the subjectivity of interpretation via its hermeneutic theoretical influence facilitated an opportunity to explore relationships beyond the parameters of "ideal relationships" that the status of "married" permits. Hence, while it was agreed that ACD do not need to be in a relationship to have insight into potential connections between parental divorce and their own relationships, possible conflicting factors were removed by inviting participants whose parents had either been married, or in a long-term relationship and; who themselves were either married or in a long-term relationship. A long-term relationship being a minimum of five-years in length (Story et al., 2004).

In summary, the following selection criteria was applied:

- 23 to 45 years of age.
- Identify as women.
- Raised in- and still residing in, Aotearoa.
- Have lived experience of being a COD where parents' divorce/separation happened before they were 18 years of age.
- Either married or in a long-term relationship (over five years in length).
- Of any ethnicity. However, interviews were conducted in English.

See Section 3.6 and 3.8 for further detail regarding steps taken to facilitate high-quality data.

3.4 Participant Recruitment

Recruitment was via purposive sampling including word-of-mouth, snowballing and, advertisements through Massey University's post-graduate community groups and personal community membership. Advertisements included detail about the study, inclusion criteria and contact details (See Appendix F). In acknowledgement of the time and effort required to participate, advertisements confirmed a koha would be offered to participants. In total $400 in koha vouchers was funded through the School of Psychology's Post-Graduate Research Fund at Massey University.

While IPA's advocation of using small samples prevents the generalisability to a broader population in the way nomothetic research does, sourcing a diversity of education level in participants can address any bias. This improves elements of generalisability to a population beyond that of a specific level of education while also facilitating high-quality data as discussed above (Shaw, 2019). Subsequently, snowballing, where applicants were asked if they knew anyone who fit the criteria and may wish to take part, ensured recruitment was via a variety of channels beyond Massey University's student cohort. Two participants were recruited via snowballing.

Responding to recruitment advertisements for more information or reaching out via recruited participants, was the first point of contact potential participants had with me. Subsequent emails helped develop our relationship and build familiarity prior to the interviews. Rapport being vital for participants to feel comfortable in sharing their lived experience (Hydén, 2014).

Lastly, data saturation was used to determine the final number of participants. Saturation was assumed once it was agreed additional information would not provide further insight to the data already collected (Marshall et al., 2013). In consultation with my supervisor, saturation was achieved after ten sets of interviews. No further participants were considered with the final sample number being ten.

Table 1

Participant Information

Participant	Age	Ethnicity	Age when parent's divorce/separation announced	Length of current relationship
Anna	43	NZ European	15	8
Annika	43	NZ European	6	21
Amelia	34	NZ European	6	8
Catherine	45	NZ European	16	24
Katrina	25	NZ European	7	5
Rebecca	33	NZ European	7	15
Sabrina	31	NZ European	5	6
Samantha	36	NZ European	11	15
Tamara	26	NZ European/Māori	16	5
Wendy	32	Māori/Pasifika	16	17

3.5 Ethics and Ethical Principles in Practice

This project was completed in compliance with the Massey University Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations Involving Human Participants (Massey University, 2017). Given the trauma that individuals can experience during parental divorce, and the potential for participant involvement to cause them discomfort, embarrassment, or psychological harm, a peer review deemed this research to be of high risk. Subsequently, a high-risk notification application was submitted to the Massey University Human Ethics Committee. Approval was received with minimal changes. The following subsections detail the ethical principles considered in practice.

3.5.1 Mitigating Risk and Empowering Participants

Ahead of completing this project, several potential issues were explored, and respective strategies implemented to minimise risks. For example, to manage and avoid any undue influence on a participant to take part, no one was directly approached or asked to participate by me or my supervisor. Furthermore, where a referee was involved through snowballing (twice) the referrer passed on my details for the potential participant to act on if they wished. All potential participants who made contact were provided detail about the project both verbally and via a detailed information sheet. The information sheet detailed the research objective and procedure, participant eligibility criteria, rights, risks, benefits and; data management (see Appendix A).

The information sheet supported participants in making an autonomous and informed decision to participate. Recipients were invited to contact me should they require further clarification on the interview content and process. Documents also assured participants of the option to request certain questions or topics be removed from their interview, together with the right to withdraw any answer up to two weeks after the second interview. Mitigating any ethical issues associated with privacy and confidentiality, participants were also assured any

photos shared by them during the interviews would not be retained (one participant shared photos). Instead, the participant's description and narrative would be (and was), captured in the audio recording. The Information Sheet also detailed the procedures that would be taken to maintain participant anonymity across all retained materials, with participants informed they would be given pseudonyms with all identifiers removed from transcripts and write-ups.

Acknowledging the aforementioned risk that participation could cause stress, the Information Sheet included an interview schedule of topics and interested participants were encouraged to ask questions before giving consent. Sharing topics conveys transparency of the research process and the asks of the participants (Roberts, 2020). Participants were reminded of their right to opt-out and decline, clarify, or withdraw interview questions, without challenge.

Out of courtesy to future applicants and to avoid over recruiting, advertising was paused after each application while details were matched against selection criteria. Three applicants did not meet criteria. Participants who met criteria were accepted onto the project in the order they applied. Once informed consent was obtained (see Appendix B), pre-interview meetings were held to discuss the interview schedule of topics and questions. There were no requests for amendments to the questions.

Consent was sought throughout with participants regularly reminded they were in control of what they shared and what would be captured. This empowerment was paramount during the interviews where participants were reminded they could skip questions or request the interview be paused/stopped, should they become uncomfortable or distressed. At times several participants questioned if their stories met my research objective. Conscious of the power imbalance that can occur by nature of the interviewer-interviewee relationship and subsequent distress this can cause participants, I was always clear with participants that this was about their story and that there were no right or wrong answers (Hydén, 2014; Yardley,

2000). Participants were also regularly reminded of their options for withdrawing comments, affirming their agency for what was captured.

During interviews and all non-verbal communication, I was mindful of my body language, tone and use of non-judgemental language. Similarly, I monitored participants for any signs of discomfort, using empathetic listening to support them and facilitate a safe space for their sharing with me. A follow-up phone call after each interview was always offered regardless of how the participant appeared during the interviews with details of organisations for support and/or counselling provided (see Appendix D). This acknowledged these women as invaluable and central to my research, prioritising their health and comfort (Hydén, 2014).

Furthermore, while being an insider-researcher afforded me relationality and a platform from which to develop trust with the participants, there was a risk it would influence my understanding of participants' journeys and their interactions with me. Information sheets made my position known. During initial conversations, participants were also invited to make any enquiries they wished about me and my experience. Mitigation of risk to accurate knowledge-making/understanding was managed during reflexivity (refer Section 3.2.3).

At the close of analysis, transcriptions including notes of participant's emotional states during interviews, were shared with the participants to give them an opportunity to check the accuracy of what the research captured. This again respected the participants as experts in defining their experiences while permitting opportunities for further clarification, seeking final consent from the participants in how their experiences would be shared (Braidotti, 2019).

3.5.2 Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Treaty of Waitangi)

Although this research did not focus on Māori as a group, every effort was made to recognise and uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi principles (protection, participant, and partnership) including giving Māori the opportunity to participate should they wish. A *Protocol for*

interviewing participants who identify as Māori document (see Appendix G) was prepared in advance to reassure any applicants wishing to participate as Māori of my dedication to ensuring the project was fully inclusive of all ethnicities and the respective need for cultural awareness.

Prior, I also completed a course in Te Reo Māori and the Kaupapa Māori component of Massey University's Psychological Research: Principles of Design (175.738) paper. Learnings refreshed my understanding of cultural values specific to Māori, including the importance of spirituality, whakapapa, connection with land, and related cultural protocols, including hui formalities.

Documentation affirmed whānau as members of the project, encouraging participants to share the information sheet and discussion topics with their broader community for input and consent. As per Te Ara Tika guidelines (Hudson et al., 2010), documentation assured participants that tikanga principles including Whakapapa, Tika, Mana and Manaakitanga would be observed. It also detailed how participant's time and sharing of knowledge would be acknowledged through gifts of koha.

One participant identified as Māori, and another identified as Māori-Pasifika. Both declined the offer to involve whānau in the process or include any specific cultural protocols during interviews.

3.6 Data Collection and Procedure

The main aim of this study was to understand the prolonged effects of divorce on female ACDs' (between 18 and 45 years of age) relationship experiences. Particularly, the aspects participants took away from their experience of parental divorce and any mediating factors for their lived experience of relationships. Therefore, this study strove to acquire insights into the influence of parental divorce on ACDs' relationship experiences by exploring:

1. Female ACDs' relationship experiences including relationship journeys and perceptions of "relationships" and "successful relationships";
2. Female ACDs' experiences of family life and parents' relationships as children prior to, and after, parental divorce and;
3. Female ACDs' perception of being a COD and thoughts towards supporting children experiencing parental divorce.

Detail of how I developed the interview guide to facilitate exploration of these topics, the interview process, and the sequence of analysis follows.

3.6.1 Interview Guide

Considering the findings shared in Section 2, I felt it important to explore this study's topic using open-ended questions. This approach permitted the participants a freedom to share their story from what resonated most for them during their reflection (Roberts, 2020). Subsequently, to support this study's interests, an Interview Guide was developed as a flexible data collection tool (see Appendix C).

Aligning with the structure recommended by Roberts (2020) for novice researchers, the guide included an outline of orienting questions to build rapport and help the participant feel comfortable sharing their lived experience. This was followed by a series of main questions with potential follow-up questions and prompts. While predetermined lists of questions are not advised when applying IPA, this structure aided in facilitating deep exploration of topics while keeping the conversation flowing. The guide facilitated responses to participants' answers as knowledge of their experience grew.

Developed as a list of possible topics to explore, the guide also included variations of similar questions to facilitate different opportunities to explore the same element of an experience, appealing to the individual participant's different thought processes. Working with the participant to explore possible alternative angles to their experience and the meaning

they took from it, facilitated a complete response from each participant (Arditti, 1999a). In its entirety, the interview guide provided me with the tools to be receptive to my participants, avoiding any reinforcement or encouragement that could have influenced what was shared or focused on. Instead, the outline facilitated an interview that provided the space for participants to freely recall, reflect on, and share their experiences (Roberts, 2020).

Listing potential follow-up questions within the interview guide also helped return participants to their original experience when they struggled for answers and build on the stories gathered by follow-up questions related to the specific experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For example, participants were asked to describe and reflect on their parents' relationships. Here, a potential follow-up question asked the participant to describe their experience, reflecting on the emotions and feelings they recalled from the time. These follow-ups potentially triggering further recollections by the participant of their relationship experiences and any meanings attributed to their experience of parental divorce. Guided by Fine (2017), who advocates taking a listener rather than interviewer approach to facilitate richer understandings of lived experiences, this approach created opportunities for participants to reflect on the sense-making and adaptive cognitive appraisals they engaged with.

Interviews were split across two sessions. This enabled me to convey my interest and sincerity while building up to exploration of more sensitive aspects of the participant's experience. Jumping too fast into tough questions before the participant felt comfortable would have been intimidating (Roberts, 2020). Interview one focused on strengthening our rapport, reflecting on the periphery of the participant's experience, relationships and family life during childhood. Once participants confirmed they were comfortable, the interview moved to exploring relationship timelines and working through key turning points participants felt relevant. Following a recap on any reflections completed since the first

interview, and any follow up questions I had after transcribing the initial interview, the second interview centred around what Robert's (2020) describes as the "grand tour question" (p.3194). This being "What do you feel you have taken away from your experience of your parents' relationship and divorce?" At the close of each interview, the guide featured less sensitive questions to facilitate a recovery period and wind down the conversation (Roberts, 2020).

While the guide was not rigid in structure, it provided an outline that facilitated the capturing of participants' core experiences, breaking up topics into their central elements while providing suggestions for ways to pursue topics raised by participants. This ensured prioritisation of the participants' perceptions while simultaneously guiding me as an active co-participant (Roberts, 2020; Smith et al., 2009); embracing the opportunity to hear hidden learnings I may not have expected from different angles (Mikaere, 2013).

Examination of my interview guide and approach included a peer review by a post-graduate psychology student, who fitted the participant selection criteria. Assessing the effectiveness of my interview questions with the student's feedback helped maintain research integrity (Frost & Kinmond, 2012). For example, on reflection of this review I realised the interview guide lacked guidance for how I could seek clarification on participants' answers. Roberts (2020) suggests clarification-seeking follow-up questions assist researchers in acquiring accurate interpretations of their participants' interpretations; a key factor in IPA. Research into qualitative interviewing techniques, together with support from my supervisor, assisted with further development of potential follow-up questions. Looking to facilitate thorough clarification, a subsequent review of the transcript also saw me reorder some of the questions, particularly those encouraging the participant to explore any perceived connections between their experiences during childhood and adulthood.

3.6.2 Interview Procedure

Participants were invited to attend two semi-structured interviews of up to one hour each in length, with scheduled breaks. From an ethical and emotional safety perspective, this approach acknowledged the burden interviews can have on participants; an hour seen as an appropriate amount of time before participants are unnecessarily exhausted and negatively impacted by participation (Shaw, 2019). It also mitigates negatively impacting the quality of data (Gilligan et al., 1996). As discussed, open-ended questions with follow-up descriptive prompts promoted two-way fluid discussion (Gibson, 2019), facilitating deep exploration of each topic, and the capturing of participants' thorough narrative (King & Bailey-Rodriguez, 2019). Acknowledging the idiographic commitment of IPA, semi-structured interviews permit a conversational style of questioning that aid building the necessary level of rapport for giving courage to participants to share their experiences. It also minimises development of a hierarchical relationship that can inhibit a participant's comfort in sharing openly (Oakley, 2016) and gives them agency over the direction interviews take and the topics explored (Gilligan et al., 1996; Morrison, 2014). Here I leaned on the feminist ethics of care advocated by Hydén (2014) and Oakley (2016) which included taking an empathetic approach that communicated respect for the gift participants provided in sharing their story.

Participants were invited to attend interviews in person, at a location convenient to them, or via video conference. As with building rapport, offering participant's this choice helped build a relationship of trust, further addressing any power imbalance of the interviewer-interviewee relationship (Hydén, 2014; Yardley, 2000). It also ensured participants discussed their experiences from an environment they were most comfortable with, minimising potential feelings of intrusion (Reed et al., 2016). All participants opted to attend interviews via video conference. Two participants were interrupted by family during interviews, however both seemed to return to their flow of thought unhindered. Furthermore,

while two participants identified as Māori and/or Māori-Pasifika, neither required whānau involvement or respective cultural protocols during our interactions. During the interviews narrative touched on these participants' lost connection with their cultural heritage and whakapapa. To ensure both felt supported through the sessions, I regularly reminded them they could bring a support person with them to the sessions or invite their partner's whānau to join. Both preferred to attend sessions alone.

Notably, when I contacted the women for a debrief and emotional check-in after their interviews, most responded with appreciation for an opportunity to share their experiences in a safe space and acknowledged the benefit they had experienced in taking part. Commentary that reassured me the relational focus of my approach and consideration of ethics of care, had prioritised participants' needs:

> *You're welcome! Thanks for holding the safe space for me.* (Practice run participant).
>
> *Thank you for allowing me to take part in your project, I have not given much thought to my parents' divorce, or what I have taken or learned from their relationship. Talking with you and reflecting on my experience with my parents' relationship has given me some insight and a real sense of peace, so thank you very much for talking with me.* (Amelia).
>
> *I realised how much more intuitive and how much better I know myself than I thought I did. I never take the time to think or talk about those kinds of things. It feels really good to be able to talk about that kind of stuff in a bit more depth.* (Tamara).

Prior to the first interview, participants were asked to share a timeline of their relationship history for discussion during the interviews (See Appendices H-J). Given many participants commented they had not given their experiences much thought, this provided participants the opportunity to proactively reflect on their parents' divorce and their own relationships ahead of our interviews. Exploring participants' full relationship histories,

including premarital/pre-long-term relationships, in this way facilitates in-depth and rich insights into participants' journeys (Arditti, 1999a), assisting participants in accessing thoughts and emotions (Sullivan & Forrester, 2019).

Once all interviews had been conducted, participants were invited to a debrief to review their experience of the research process and ensure adequate support was offered to respond to any discomfort the experience triggered. This also acknowledged the time and energy participants gave to my research (Roberts, 2020). For those participants who became emotional during their interviews, or displayed forms of discomfort, each were already in contact with forms of counselling/therapy and confirmed they were comfortable using these services later should they experience any ongoing distress in response to our conversations. Subsequent conversations suggested no further support was required.

All interviews were conducted by me as the researcher and recorded using the video conference tool, Zoom. Each interview was then transcribed by me at home immediately after the interview to ensure privacy and confidentiality. At this point, I also captured interview context and any other immediate thoughts within my handwritten notes. Initial transcription was completed using Zoom's AI Companion feature with the downloaded transcript file then converted to a Microsoft Word document. Given the potential for AI to mishear words or phraseology, I then listened to the audio recordings of the interview and, working within the Microsoft Word document, ensured the transcript was accurate. I also removed any tangent conversations unrelated to the research, such as off-beat conversations about family I may have interjected to assure the participant of my engagement with their story. These edits were reserved at the base of the transcripts for transparency.

3.7 Analytical Approach

Analysis followed guidance by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), Shaw (2019), Smith et al. (2009) and, Sullivan and Forrester (2019). This included

maintaining detailed and accurate records of each research process stage, familiarisation with the data collected, identifying themes within participants' transcripts, organising themes into clusters, refining and editing themes across the set of data and; developing a structured reflection of participant narrative to account for the overall central themes. Aligning with these requirements, my approach to transcript analysis follows.

During interviews, distinctive narrative and/or emotional responses by the participants, together with my personal reflexive comments, were noted to later aid the capturing of interpretations and identification of themes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). As recommended by Shaw's IPA analysis procedure (2019), immediately after each interview I wrote a summary of the participant's narrative to capture initial thoughts on what was important to the individual, the topics they introduced or focused on and, the people they referred to. Shaw (2019) theorised doing so captures elements the participant considers most important when making sense of their experiences. Unexpected themes or interview happenings were also captured together with detail of potential biases or influences that may have occurred and potentially impacted the interview outcome. Reflection ensured I remained cognisant of my role in the process (Roberts, 2020).

In line with the IPA idiographic and iterative analytic approach, once transcribed, each transcript was repeatedly examined in turn to gradually identify and group dominant themes within each participant's narrative before engaging with the subsequent participant. For each case, I read, watched and listened to the interview recordings and transcripts repeatedly, fully immersing myself in the story being shared. Notes on key words/phases, tone and, emotions were made for future reference before experiential statements and, then Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) were developed. See Appendix K for exploratory notes excerpt.

To identify experiential statements, I broke the transcript into small segments to ensure I stayed close and fully immersed within each aspect of the narrative.

Phenomenological coding and then interpretive coding were applied to identify initial experiential statements and then group these into overarching PETs (see Appendix M). This involved summarising participants' descriptions of their experiences before interpreting what these descriptions might mean; taking time to consider the sense-making involved. The latter interpretive analytical approach explored how participants' descriptions assisted in empathically understanding their experiences from their perspective, while considering their self-reflections to explore how they made sense of experiences. This immersion a vital element to the IPA process (Smith et al., 2009). Personally, paper-based printouts are easier to digest and manually sort, therefore I used this approach to engage with each interview and identification of PETs (see Appendix L). Excel spreadsheets provided a digital backup. Once I had identified PETs for the first participant, I then engaged with the next participant's transcript.

Analysis looked to provide a detailed account of specific themes within the data rather than a rich thematic description of the entire data set. Consequently, I reviewed narrative for themes related to the participants' experience of relationships in adulthood and coded without considering previously discussed research. It was hoped this would result in several novel themes regarding how participants navigated relationships and the interpersonal skills they attributed to their parents' divorce/relationship difficulties (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Throughout each transcript, several PETs echoed that of other participants, however several also took a divergent aspect that related specifically to the individual participant. Reflexive journaling explored thoughts to acknowledge the idiographic processes I engaged with here.

Once all interviews were transcribed and coded, comparisons were made between findings to identify converging and diverging patterns, creating a list of Group Experiential Themes (GETs) that captured collective experiences (see Appendix N). Detailed notes of GETs permitted representation of the presence or absence of PETs identified in each case,

facilitating a data set illustrative of the variations between participants' experiences. A paper-based review approach was then used for sorting each GET into themes and subordinate themes to arrive at the final result (Smith et al, 2009).

Reaching a consensus of GETs required several edits to decide which themes and participant quotes were most relevant for the research; identifying which theme and quote most logically represented participants' experiences. Switching between excel spreadsheets and printouts was the easiest approach to ensuring I did not miss any aspect of the data. Subsequently, arranging the findings and participants' narrative to form a story within an appropriate structure involved a cyclical process of interpretation; a key IPA component (Smith et al., 2009).

While focus was to gain a sense of the importance of each theme by recognising the number of quotes from each participant that informed the themes, I was passionate about ensuring themes adequately illustrated each participant's experience. I also took regular breaks to reflect on the overall story and theme, ensuring quotes were selected that best illustrated and illuminated participants' experiences/sense-making. Although not every quote could be used, I am confident this reflective approach ensured each participant's story was equally represented; no participant quote was prioritised over another under the guise of equal representation.

The final stage, writing up a narrative of findings, subsequently involved several re-reads, drafts and edits to ensure interpretation of participant experiences and use of personalised quotes, made sense to the reader while also meeting the research objective. In the Results (Section 4), this included underlining words in some participant quotes to emphasise stronger intonation by the participant. Furthermore, square brackets were used to indicate where text had been inserted either to provide clarity or, to assist with readability of the quote. With participant permission, square brackets around descriptive words, such as

[*CRYING*] were used to illustrate where topics had triggered an emotional response. This conveyed the full story to the reader while being mindful of any influence the formatting would have on how the reader heard participants' stories (Fine, 2017; Harding, 1992).

3.8 Validity and Quality

To maintain methodological integrity and ensure valuable, qualitative research of good quality, Yardley (2000), proposes four dimensions be considered: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence and; impact and importance. Conforming with these principles, as discussed in Section 3.2.3, I remained reflexive throughout the study. Consciously ensuring I put aside assumptions of divorce and prioritising the taking of a position of not knowing, given I was not the expert on each participant's story. In line with Hydén (2014), this approach guided me in avoiding bias in what I heard during the interview and what was shared in the results.

My reflexive approach extended to consideration of the questions I asked participants and the decisions I made in overcoming any challenges I experienced during the study. I also had an ethical responsibility to convey participants' narratives without assigning meaning or determining how readers made sense of what was shared (Fine, 2017). Having lived through divorce myself, consideration required me to acknowledge any bias or assumptions regarding the participants and their unique experiences, or any influence of my own experience and interpretation, over the analysis of the participants' narrative (Salem, 2016; Waitere & Johnston, 2009). The data was, therefore, participant driven with reflexivity ensuring transparent acknowledgment of any influence or threat, my own preconceptions could have on data coding accuracy (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, the external review of questions (refer Section 3.6.1), critical self-reflection (refer Section 3.2.3 and Appendix O), and discussions about my coding and interpretations with a fellow post-graduate psychology

student and my Supervisor assisted with checking for any discrepancies in my approach that may introduce bias (Shaw, 2019).

In line with Smith et al's (2009) IPA quality criteria, an inductive approach during both the development of the interview schedule and throughout analysis, ensured participants' narratives were not influenced by interview questions or excerpt selection. As detailed in Section 3.5.1, participants were invited to review their transcripts and, later the Results section, for accuracy and transparency (see Appendix E). This ensured narrative was not only meaningful to the reader but an accurate construction of participants' realities (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All participants confirmed their comfort with the transcript and write-ups. This reflects the dual role, and idiographic approach, of an IPA researcher. The requirement to first facilitate the participant's interpretation of how they experienced the phenomenon and then, as the researcher, to make sense of the participant's interpretation (Shaw, 2019). As such, demonstrating Yardley's (2000) sensitivity to context, this approach facilitated the participants' stories to be heard in detail with evidence by way of participants' transcript extracts supporting my analytic interpretations (Smith et al., 2009).

My earlier justification of sampling decisions (see Section 3.3 and 3.4), together with detailing the data collection process and approach to analysing participants' narrative (see Section 3.7), aligns with Yardley's (2000) requirement for commitment and transparency. Reflexive journalling and, recording all decisions and changes in knowledge/understanding throughout the analytic and inductive procedure providing transparency while, also establishing trustworthiness of the information collected and demonstrating commitment to producing a credible research project (Shaw, 2019).

Reflexivity being a self-critical process, the audit trail adequately captured notes, changes to approach, key extracts and themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Shaw, 2019). For example, reflective exercises after the interview practice challenged me on how I should

manage silences during interviews and avoid the urge to disclose personal experiences or perspectives. Subsequently, despite my natural urge to fill silence with further questions or self-reflections, I waited out the silences giving the participant an opportunity to return to the topic. Where it was clear the participant had nothing further to add, follow-up questions were asked using the interview guide, often facilitating the participant's return to the topic from a different angle so that deeper insights were gathered (Smith et al., 2009). Personal disclosure is not advisable from an ethical perspective nor for the integrity of the research. It could influence participant's narrative in the form of response bias, such as wanting to agree with me and provide information they think I want to hear. Another challenge was giving up the control of the interview direction to the participant. There were several participant-led tangent conversations, however several times this naturally provided valuable and insightful detail I would not have otherwise heard. It also provided context to participants' lived experiences, a key element to the hermeneutic phenomenological element of IPA. Consequently, I became more confident at following the participant's lead, referring to the interview guide where possible to interweave questions into the conversation.

An understanding of IPA, particularly phenomenology and hermeneutic methodology, guided me in my approach to design and analysis (Smith et al., 2009). The coherent methodology of IPA suitable for a project of this size looking to explore participants' lived experiences. Prior to engaging in this thesis, I completed Massey University's Psychological Research: Principles of Design (175.738) to develop an understanding of qualitative research methods, particularly those using the phenomenological and hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Immersion in available literature about different qualitative methods including TA and IPA followed to assist me in developing an adequate understanding of how to approach my project and the methodological skills required to ensure a thorough data collection (Yardley, 2000). Key was appreciating how the study should adhere with the critical realism

approach to phenomenology, accepting participants' narrative as honest and accurate recollections from which I interpreted meaning. A thorough understanding of the Hermeneutic Circle concept, and how repeated immersion within participants' narratives facilitates knowledge-making, strengthened this approach. This sequentially met Yardley's coherence principle (2000).

Yardley (2000) suggests the duration of a qualitative study demonstrates a study's commitment and rigour. I deliberately took eighteen months to complete this study, permitting six months to contemplate and empathically explore the participants' narratives and my interpretations, fully immersing myself in the data (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Similarly, the impact and utility of my project findings was greatly considered before I arrived at my research question. It was hoped the insights gathered would enhance the conversation about the impact of divorce, illuminating new ways of understanding COD/ACDs' experiences and the complex interaction of factors that can mitigate negative outcomes for ACDs. The insights gathered regarding how to support COD and families navigating divorce, benefiting future ACD in turn.

Supervision by Dr Shepherd of the project as it developed further aided the project's validity and utility. As documented in my reflexive journals (refer Section 3.2.3), the outside perspective ensured my flexible application of validity criteria throughout my engagement with the process (Smith et al., 2009).

Section 4: Results

This section begins with a summary of the themes that emerged while exploring the lived experience of ten adult female ACD, and their relationship journeys (Table 2). An in-depth discussion of each theme follows accordingly, outlining the *"long marathon"* (Sabrina) that was the challenging journey towards a healthy and *"joyful"* (Amelia) long-term relationship. Themes will demonstrate how several participants moved from the initial difficulty of embarking on a relationship journey on the foundation of their parents' relationship models, through a series of ill-informed, *"unhealthy"* (Rebecca) relationships before, self-exploration provided understanding of who they were, what their parents' relationship difficulties meant for them and, how to live with/manage the confronting effects on their self-worth and approach to relationships.

Table 2

Summary of Themes

Theme	Theme headings	Sub-themes
One	Embarking on relationships from a position of not knowing how to do healthy relationships	1. An unhealthy start 2. Positioning my childhood experience within my relationship journey and the impact it had on how I engaged in my relationships a. I didn't know how to communicate b. My parents disappointed me
Two	Finding myself	1. Understanding who I was and why 2. Realising what I took into relationships

Three	Doing relationships differently	1. Breaking the chains 2. Choosing to be different 3. Doing the work a. Stop rushing into relationships b. Behaving differently in relationships

4.1 Theme 1: Embarking on Relationships from a Position of not Knowing how to do Healthy Relationships

This theme is about the difficulty participants experienced when embarking on their relationship journeys. In effect, the disadvantage of trying to engage in relationships on a foundation of capricious, and often traumatic, disharmonious relationship models. The lack of knowledge positioning participants in a state of bewilderment towards the idea of relationships. Beginning with participants' perceptions of their relationship journeys as a whole, this section focuses on the experiences that helped or hindered participants in understanding the phenomenon of relationships, particularly the difference between unhealthy and healthy relationships.

***4.1.1 An Unhealthy Start* |** "*I kind of carried that on until I sort of learned otherwise.*" (Sabrina)

As participants reflected on their overall relationship journeys, each shared an appreciation that relationships can be healthy or unhealthy based on a perception of how good, or harmful, a relationship was. Categorisation of relationships as healthy or unhealthy, was dichotomous, there was no middle ground. With participants' descriptions positioning their narrative within their overall perspective of their journeys, this section will explore what

the phenomenon of relationships initially meant for participants, illustrating the effect these perceptions had on their early relationship experiences.

Describing their early relationship journeys as "a *disaster*" (Amelia), *"turbulent,"* (Katrina) and, "*strenuous"* (Tamara), seven participants' journeys featured a successive series of *"unhealthy"* (Rebecca) relationships. As Amelia illustrated, she saw her relationships as anything but healthy.

> *<u>All</u> of my relationships were very unhealthy. Whether sometimes they were with people who were unhealthy for me. Other times I think I just was insecure and unhealthy and lost within myself. But, <u>all</u> of my relationships were [*pause*], they were never secure. They were never comfortable. I was never able to settle into them, [*pause*] to find myself or be myself in a relationship. I suppose I just, I just did not know how to have a healthy relationship. Or a healthy attachment with anybody.*
> (Amelia)

Participants' perceptions of a relationship were more than just the overall experience. Descriptions were broad and comprised of the person they were in the relationship, how they behaved within the relationship and, how the relationship made them feel. For example, Rebecca described an unhealthy relationship as one she did not feel comfortable or safe in, one of "*not feeling equal, feeling like you're walking on egg shells, like anything you say is going to set something off,"* (Rebecca).

Embarking on their relationship journeys was not easy for these participants and several identified with Amelia's earlier described struggle in attaining a *"healthy relationship"* (Amelia). For most, given knowledge and observations of how their parents had struggled with their own relationships and growing up without "*a lot of good examples of, of positive healthy relationships going on,"* (Rebecca) meant understanding *"how to <u>do</u> relationships,"* (Sabrina) was the hardest challenge.

I really couldn't pick them well; my ability to judge which men were safe was totally unreliable. (Sabrina)

For these participants, not knowing how to do relationships meant not knowing what made a relationship healthy or the factors required to experience a healthy relationship. This included not knowing where to start in seeking and maintaining a healthy relationship, who made for a *"suitable person for me,"* (Anna) how healthy relationships worked or, how to behave within a relationship. Furthermore, the seemingly insurmountable challenge of handling the different facets of a relationship, as seen in the relationship models around them as children, was overwhelming. Poignantly, Sabrina joyfully celebrated the achievement of finding herself in a healthy, long-term relationship after such a series of unhealthy relationships.

Like a really long marathon. It's fumbling in the dark trying to figure out how the heck to do relationships … how do they manage conflict? How can they have these secure relationships? And then finally feeling like I figured it out … Finding a needle in a haystack. I got one! (Sabrina)

As Sabrina told me, the confusion around how to do healthy relationships resulted in various misinformed approaches to engaging in relationships with others. While some participants ran towards relationships, hoping they would work it out as they went. Others avoided them. Either avoiding men altogether or deliberately engaging in relationships they knew had no future. For example, despite acknowledging their lack of knowledge regarding how to do relationships, six participant narratives were dominated by references to a *"desperate"* (Katrina) need to be in a relationship. A desire to *"have affection and solidify everything"* (Katrina) that was so strong, they were determined to make their relationships work whatever the cost.

*It was either requiring somebody, like, unfairly requiring somebody to just completely, like, validate me and make me feel safe and loved, or [*pause*] belittling or degrading myself to make somebody else to, to accommodate somebody else's bad behaviour, because I just wanted to be with someone so badly. (Amelia)*

So, I saw my parents just didn't work. I wanted to believe that I, I could make them all work and make them last … Like they definitely were the ones treating me badly. But, I didn't ever allow myself to leave even when I knew I should. (Katrina)

As Sabrina and Samantha described, motivation was often the result of misinterpreting what "love" was and seeing the experience of love as a relationship ideal. It was also an approach misinformed by what several thought *"relationships should look like,"* (Samantha).

I thought infatuation was so important because it was the opposite of what my parents had had. (Sabrina)

It was obsession! (Samantha)

The journey towards a healthy relationship was, therefore, not straightforward. It took time and *"a lot to get to that place,"* (Anna) with participants having to "figure it out" (Sabrina) to *"come home,"* (Katrina). "Home" being a relationship that is positive, healthy and *"joyful"* (Amelia). As such, "*learning and working out … what a healthy relationship look[ed] like"* (Rebecca), or how to just do relationships, required trial and error, either across multiple ill-fated relationships or within a single relationship. Participants learnt about relationships as they went.

It's been a pretty, urm. It's, it's been a development over the years … I'd say I've probably experienced most of my life, you know, mistakes, achievements, you know, sort of moral milestones with [fiancé] … our relationship journey would, I'd say, has, gone through phases. (Wendy)

For eight participants, this navigation of learning-by-doing was often at the cost of comfort, self-worth and, in some cases, safety. For example, in not knowing what a healthy relationship should be, the desire to be in a relationship and find stability after the breakdown of their family unit, constrained five participants in their ability to *"pick up on the red flags of how messed up"* (Rebecca) their early relationships were. As Sabrina and Katrina inadvertently identified, due to a covert vulnerability for being attracted to people or relationships that resembled their parents', the familiarity of what their partner gave them was regrettably enticing,

> *I learnt that he had a tendency to be controlling, manipulative and occasionally physically abusive. I tried to break up with him a few times, but he always knew how to draw me back!* (Sabrina)
>
> *[Boyfriend] was quite controlling, like he didn't let me, like talk to males or things like that. But, I just thought that that was, you know, how relationships were supposed to be. Like, lots of fighting, lots of turbulence … I think it's quite sad that I let myself get treated the same way that my, I watched my mum bring treated. I think it's, yeah, it makes me really sad that I let that happen.* (Katrina)

Moreover, acknowledging how misinformation informed a denial or vulnerability for engaging in unhealthy relationships, determination to be within a relationship was often the greatest motivator behind remaining within unhealthy relationships.

> *[Boyfriend] would get, like, these big angry outbursts and stuff like that. And I thought that was normal. And sort of that, that up and down very volatile type of, type of relationships that I'd sort of seen particularly early on with my stepdad. I thought that was very normal so, I didn't even question, it urm, or when it was happening to me. I didn't realise how concerned other people were around me. Looking back now, I don't know how much of that was just wilful, just wanting to stay in that relationship*

and how much of that was I just had no idea. I think probably a mixture of both. (Rebecca)

Yet, despite a desire or *"need"* (Amelia) to be in a relationship for fear of being *"left behind"* (Amelia), five participants also spoke of wanting to protect themselves from getting hurt. Something several saw as inevitable, given experience of their parents' relationships. This expectation saw them pursue relationships, yet either avoid relationships with the potential of an emotional attachment or *"self-sabotaging"* (Amelia) the relationship before the other person could end it. "*Trying to pick fights … because I didn't think that it would work out*," (Amelia).

As Katrina explained, the juxtaposition of needing to feel loved despite lacking the knowledge of how or why she should feel loved, while simultaneously fearing being vulnerable with someone enough that they could hurt you, was confusing. This only perpetuated the painful journey.

> *I wanted one [relationship] but, I was so scared about things going wrong, of losing someone that was so important to me that I then, I just picked people I knew that weren't wanting anything that would actually go anywhere … I wanted to feel loved in some way, even if I was too scared for it to actually be with someone that could properly hurt me. I would pick the guys that I knew wouldn't want to date me, I was like "ohh perfect, I know it's not going to go anywhere," but then when it didn't go anywhere, I would still be hurt.* (Katrina)

In contrast, illustrating the unique way each participant responded to the breakdown of their parents' relationship, avoiding emotionally connected relationships was fuelled by apprehension in a different way for Samantha and Annika. Struggling to understand why they approached relationships in the way they did, both were adamant it was not specifically a <u>fear</u> of getting hurt. Instead, avoidance of relationships was assuredly either, *"a protection*

of not letting myself get hurt by not getting too close," (Samantha) or for Annika, the determination to only commit to the right person and avoid the pain of experiencing a relationship with the wrong person. "*I can't be casual! There's something in my personality that's quite reluctant or protective. People are attracted to me and interested in me, but I was very reserved and reluctant," (Annika).*

For Annika, recognising her dad in potential suitors informed her what *"unsafe"* (Annika) was. Unsafe being unhealthy and insecure. Annika carefully considered her words as she explained how she avoided relationships until she found someone she knew would be a genuinely safe partner for her.

> *So, I really didn't want, I think [*pause*], I believe there's this type of man who's very charming, and quite controlling. I think those two things often go hand in hand and I think dad can be very charming ... [husband's brother] was interested in me. He was really charming and knew the moves, if you know what I mean, but [husband] wasn't like that. So, that created a sense of safety, I think. It didn't feel like [*pause*], it felt authentic. Authenticity and integrity feel like a safe person to me.* (Annika)

Participants' perceptions of healthy versus unhealthy relationships were also associated with the length, and frequency of their relationships. For example, Amelia perceived her succession of several relationships over a short period of time, as unhealthy. Eight participants detailed several relationships of varying length while two described a journey that featured just one relationship; the one they are in now. Overall, while most participants described their journey/approach to relationships as unhealthy, perceiving negative elements of their relationships as a reflection of their childhood experiences, Catherine saw her relationship journey as *"normal"* (Catherine) and healthy.

Self-identifying as a *"serial monogamist,"* Catherine experienced her pre-marriage relationships as a series *"of relatively long-term boyfriends, like my shortest-term boyfriend*

was, like, maybe seven or eight months … it wasn't, like, really, like, serious, serious stuff." Despite this, as with the other participants, a series of connections were made by Catherine between her experience of her parents' relationship and how she experienced her own relationships. The following subsection will explore these connections.

***4.1.2 Positioning my Childhood Experience Within my Relationship Journey and the Impact it had on how I Engaged in my Relationships* |** *"Divorce is not the trauma, it's the way adults are involved that causes trauma."* (Samantha)

While many participants were certain that the experience of their parents' relationships meant they did not initially know how to do relationships, their journeys saw them build a personal understanding of why they engaged in unhealthy relationships and the myths/beliefs that were holding them back. Yet, while participants' descriptions of the challenges they had to overcome started with reflections on their experience of parental divorce, it was not about what parental divorce as an event meant for them. For many the divorce was welcomed. Instead, it was about the overall experience of their parents' relationships; the experience of being a child observing various, often disordered or disturbing, interparent behaviours before and/or after the divorce.

> *The way they interacted with each other physically; I was always very angry when they weren't able to decide whether they were going to be together or when they weren't going to be together. I was so ecstatic about the divorce. An amazing day!* (Tamara)

> *Ninety percent of my memories are really, urm, bad. There was a lot of abuse in our household, infidelity, abandonment, there was just fights all the time, like aggressive fights.* (Wendy)

Effects here, were not just the norms that were *"ingrained"* (Katrina) in them through their parents' relationships, but also what they took from their observations and the effect of these understandings on how they engaged in relationships themselves.

> *There was A LOT of fighting. Yeah, a lot of yelling, a lot of quick to anger. They were either ignoring each other or they were having a go at each other. … My dad was violent before the divorce and my mother became a prostitute after the divorce. She'd tell us unpleasant stories of how men treated women. So, my perspective of men was that they were harmful. I didn't have any desire for a boyfriend or marriage.* (Sabrina)

> *I probably would be less particular about the people that I was with, or like making friends with, if I hadn't seen some of the stuff or heard some of the stuff that I did when I was younger. Maybe that would mean I would have an extra ten boyfriends instead of three! [*laughs*].* (Tamara)

Subsequently, participants identified two foundational components to their approach and engagement with relationships. One being the inaccurate blueprint for communicating and relating to others due to poor role modelling. The other being managing the disappointing realisation that their parents were not going to provide them with the environment they needed to develop a healthy approach to understanding themselves and the world around them. These key learnings are captured in the following subsubsections:

4.1.2.1 I didn't know how to communicate, due to a lack of role modelling of a healthy way to communicate and verbalise feelings and,

4.1.2.2 My parents disappointed me by their approach to marriage, divorce and their unfulfilled role as "parents".

4.1.2.1 I Didn't Know how to Communicate. For most participants, growing up in an environment overshadowed by their parents' dysfunctional or disharmonious relationship informed a distorted sense of what effective communication styles were. This blueprint for relationships was all they knew, *"that was my normal,"* (Samantha). Subsequently, as they started to experience the ebbs and flows of their relationship journeys, the effect this blueprint for relationships had on participants' ability to engage and connect with others raised a series of questions, particularly with regards to managing challenges.

> *Is this what we're supposed to be doing? Is this what it's, how this is supposed to be navigated?* (Samantha)

This lack of knowledge and confidence in *"how to have those conversations,"* (Katrina) and speak up either to defend themselves, or to initiate discussion when things did not feel right, furthered confusion. Participants did not know how to behave when relationships encountered challenges, often fearing the worst and assuming responsibility for the conflict when any interaction resembled their parents' interactions. Their sense of normal aligning with observations of their parents' unhealthy communication styles.

> *Lots of conflict, not knowing how to repair conflict or connect, urm, seeing outbursts of criticism or anger as normal ... I always struggled to manage relational ruptures and would do the classic avoidance dance of shutting off from my partner until they approached me apologetically. I didn't know how to remain in conflict, or how to apologise.* (Sabrina)

> *It took me a long time to realise that an argument didn't mean it was ending. Urm, so for a long time, we'd have an argument and I would get incredibly upset because I went from, I didn't put the dishes away to, I need to find a new life <u>now</u>! … [Husband] stops talking. And that's when I panic. I don't know what's happening. I*

assume if he's gone silent, he's given up. He's done. That's what my dad did to my mum; we close the door, we unplug the phones! (Samantha)

Experiencing unhealthy relationships in the same way they had seen their parents experience relationships was distressing. Yet, without knowing how best to handle the situation, discomfort took an emotional toll on both the participant and the relationship.

It was all pure emotion which led all my decisions … and then, because I wouldn't talk about it, it would just become something huge until I'd have a little breakdown about it 'cause it would be <u>all</u> I'd think about. (Katrina)

The metaphorical cost for participants was not just emotional. The internal conflict this discomfort triggered often resulted in an intense psychological and/or physical reaction, bringing additional challenges to the relationship experience. Particularly for the four participants who grew up observing parents being physically and/or verbally abusive. The experience of hopelessness seeing many resort to the behaviours acquired via their parents' role modelling.

Having very different experiences for the both of us in how we were brought up and how we came together, how we were responding to situations and navigating our relationship was also very different … I was quite, eh, I had a, I had a really bad temper. I was quite an angry person, a broken person, urm, from the, you know, environment that I grew up in … reactive, I was always reactive. I always had a temper, and I was always quite violent with [fiancé]. I wasn't a person that would communicate or discuss the situation. I'd just start throwing things around. (Wendy)

I get quite anxious now when I hear people yelling; whenever I hear it, I'll kind of just feel like a kind of, like, a heaviness in my chest … yelling definitely makes me feel quite anxious. I've got quite bad social anxiety and so, I think I was always kind of, I think having any kind of hard conversations is really difficult for me. (Katrina)

Difficulty in communicating not only stemmed from observing parents' relationships and their modelling of verbalising how something felt. It was also a result of the relationship participants experienced with their parents. Participants' candid descriptions acknowledged levels of emotional suppression developed in response to growing up in environments where emotions were dismissed. Particularly for Tamara, who saw more physical than verbal interactions between her parents.

> *There was a long time there that I didn't cry. It's not that I didn't show my emotions but, I wasn't able to show my emotions. I didn't cry, I didn't, there was just either angry or sad but nothing else … There was a lot of unresolved feelings because I wasn't able to communicate, because my parents didn't communicate with me and so, I wasn't able to communicate with somebody, namely them, to express, especially my feelings of them being together and not together.* (Tamara)

> *It was not a very emotion friendly household. I knew that I was loved … but it was showing emotion, you just kind of, it made everybody feel very uncomfortable I think when emotions were shown. It just felt like there was no room for us to have, to feel … I stopped trusting how I felt. I couldn't trust what I was feeling because you shouldn't be feeling!* (Rebecca)

> *I didn't know how to have those kinds of conversations. I, I was too scared to bring up those kinds of things. My dad, whenever I'd be upset of something, he would tell me that I was, I was too sensitive, or I need to calm down. Even if I was talking to him without yelling. I think that's kind of why I started getting a bit more like yelling more when I was younger. Because I felt like I wasn't ever heard when I was speaking calmly. That was why things would always end up so much bigger in my head because I wouldn't bring it up because I was, like, "oh, I'm just being too sensitive, I'm just being dramatic, keep it to yourself."* (Katrina)

For five participants, changes to relationships with their parents, and internalising discomforts, resulted in the development of a conflict-averse approach. As several explained, communication was about prioritising harmony for fear of the retribution they had experienced personally or observed in their parents' behaviours. Again, since they did not know how to safely speak-up or challenge a situation, the inability to communicate their needs/desires/discomfort was something they did not even realise they struggled with until later.

> *Not wanting to frustrate dad and not wanting to be judged by dad, and I suppose not wanting to be outcast by him because he cut my mum off so quickly … It's not a conscious thing, or like, "Oh, I can't bring this up," or, "I can't bring that up." It's like, it's not in my nature to do so. It's something I've probably only realised over the last few months. It's like a part of me just switched off.* (Amelia)

> *I think what's the point of having a voice here? It's going to open a can of worms. It's going to be too painful.* (Annika)

Conflict-averse approaches were described in different ways. For example, Katrina described how a fear of upsetting her partner informed her inability to communicate assertively in her relationships.

> *I think, like, because of all that, I felt, like, I had to be, like, way more reassuring. Like, I thought [partner] would think that I was grouchy and stuff. So, any time stuff would happen, I'd be constantly reassuring him, and he'd be, like, "I don't think you're doing anything wrong, you don't need to keep doing this."* (Katrina)

Sharing similar examples of assuming responsibility for any real or imagined difficulties within her relationship, for Wendy, fears of the infidelity she saw in her parents' relationship, together with their violent communication style, fuelled a seemingly unfounded

physical response to any suspicious behaviour by her fiancé. Wendy did not know how to verbalise her discomfort. She only knew how to voice it physically.

> *I did have those fears that, that it could happen to anyone. You know, that no one was really safe. I mean, like, having a child and staying home, you know, while he went out, and still being really young, there was that, there was a lot of potential for those things [affairs] to happen. So, that sort of charged me even more to be so reactive, yeah, and aggressive.* (Wendy)

For Anna, while her parents had a seemingly compatible relationship for most of her childhood before they separated, her recollection of the change in dynamics near the end of her parents' relationship is one she believes informs her conflict-averse nature.

> *I think I'm actually quite conflict-averse, which is probably why I stayed in my relationship longer than I should and why I tried to fix things. Any time he raised his voice or did anything violent was just like, I don't want a part of this. I don't think, like, I [*pause*], mum and dad didn't fight heaps in front of you towards the end, but enough that you knew. I remember the empty drawers and the, the carnage scene. Like, that was quite strong.* (Anna)

In contrast to how the traumatic experience of parents navigating conflict informed several participants' communication difficulties, Catherine identified difficulties communicating during conflict, for different reasons. She had not seen her parents argue, and therefore, did not know how to handle conversations that became overly emotional or fraught.

> *I don't like conflict and so I will just withdraw. I just don't. It's, it's , it doesn't get you anywhere … My mum and dad never fought so, I didn't grow, you know? So, mum and dad were always reasonably good at being calm. Like, both of them could get het*

up about stuff. But, you know, keeping, you know, keeping a kind of a calm little head. (Catherine)

Acknowledging how developing and maintaining healthy communication styles was an ongoing, almost indefinable destination, Catherine's approach to conflict did not mean navigating challenges with her husband was any easier than for other participants with more traumatic parental relationship experiences.

We haven't nailed it. I don't know. So, I just, I try to keep things as, sort of diffused as possible. It's been a long relationship, but I still don't know what, what the right answer is. (Catherine)

Establishing the connection between participants' experiences of parental disharmony and, disharmony within their own relationships, was a poignant turning point for several participants. Another connection participants made was between the disappointment, and subsequent resentment, they felt towards their parents and how this informed their self-worth. As I will discuss next, the experience of disappointment and the subsequent negative outcome on their self-worth, with regards to their expectations and trust in others, was worse than the event of their parents' divorce.

4.1.2.2 My Parents Disappointed me. While each participant's experience of their parents' relationship was unique to their family's circumstances, a poignant and frequent explanation behind why they struggled with relationships was the effect of feeling let down by their parents, *"over and over again"* (Tamara). For seven of the participants this was mainly inferred as disappointment in the lack of support provided by their parents as people they looked to for reassurance or validation during *"scary times"* (Katrina). However, for Tamara and Wendy, the greatest impact was the disappointment, and shocking realisation, before the divorce, that their parents were not providing them, or their siblings, with the solid and secure environment they knew other children received. The suggestion being their

parents, in accordance with the assumed meaning of "parents" as people who should unconditionally ensure a safe and warm environment for their children, failed to meet the basic requirements of parents.

> *And it was in those instances of the abuse and bad behaviour to our mother and the on and off relationship (she kept taking him back) that I really saw his true colours and that I really was, like, "this, my dad isn't, like, not really," [*PAUSE*]. The older I got, the more I realised what kind of person he was … every time he came back, that made me angry again, knowing she would put, put her children in a position where it felt like that [safety] might not be possible.* (Tamara)

Especially for Wendy, experience of her parents' relationship was in line with relationships one would expect to only see in movies.

> *It wasn't healthy at all. It was sort of, I don't know if you've seen the movie* Once Were Warriors? *Very much like that! Yeah, after the divorce my parents were still fighting over us, so we just became pawns. Obviously, that's typically what happens in a relationship that's still toxic. So, we were still toyed with and yo-yo'd around, and yeah, and it sort of never got better.* (Wendy)

The announcement of divorce therefore, marked a stage, rather than the beginning, in many participants' overall experience of their parents' relationship and the framework/set of expectations it provided for their relationship journey. As the following extracts illustrate, participants voiced disappointment with their parents for failing to be considerate in how their children experienced their relationship breakdown and; failing to provide the support, or *"safe space"* (Samantha) needed for participants to accurately comprehend what was happening and why. Furthermore, once changes started to occur, the lack of support participants received from immediate family was isolating, particularly for those without siblings.

*I wouldn't get any answers! Your whole life is crumbling, and you just don't understand why [*crying*], I was just so sad; I was so upset about the whole thing. Yeah, I think, not understanding what was really happening … I think I was, I was just struggling with how to process emotions.* (Katrina)

My dad just didn't see it and didn't address it and didn't accommodate that, <u>any</u> of it, for me. He didn't maybe recognise that it was a massive change for me … feeling so weird that she [stepmother] was standing in our kitchen and my mum wasn't, and … a lot for me to take on. I didn't have a safe, or healthy, or whatever, place to share. I just didn't have anyone in my dad's house. (Amelia)

Understanding why they made the decisions they did doesn't erase the, the way it made me feel … kind of all of the upheaval that went along with that, then mum's second marriage was stressful and hectic … a lot of resentment! (Rebecca)

Where the separation was unexpected, the speed at which things changed meant little time for participants to fully comprehend what was happening and what that meant for them. The lack of support and clarity made the situation worse. Subsequently, recollections of how it felt to experience the different stages of a family unit breaking down, unstable family environments, or parents *"difficulties translating to the child's difficulty"* (Samantha) without support or consideration, evoked feelings of emotional and vehement frustration. Participants' sinister choice of words demonstrating how indelible the impact of this experience was.

Someone has chosen to sever themselves from you, or somehow, you've been discarded deliberately, but we're all just gonna pretend that everything's fine because there's no corpse in the room. They just go, "ohhh, pack your bag, off you go, Dad's here!" (Annika)

Just because you've explained that mummy and daddy are breaking up, like, what does that mean? (Sabrina)

For Anna, feelings of disappointment with her family during the period immediately after the divorce had a dramatic impact on her initial approach to relationships. She told me how, seeking stability in response to losing her family unit, her desires for a normal relationship so strong, she was blindly swept away into an unhealthy relationship.

My parents are still navigating this break up and my siblings and we're kind of, you know, the equilibrium hadn't quite settled properly and, and his family had it all together. Quite functional. I liked his family, so I feel, really, I didn't see some of the things that weren't that healthy until after. I was in the motion of the book. (Anna)

This outcome reiterated by Samantha who explained her consecutive, unsafe relationships being a result of *"latching onto relationships"* due to the lack of *"home base,"* (Samantha). Subsequently, take aways were not just from their parents' relationship before the divorce, but also the experience post-divorce. The behaviours participants' observed, particularly where parents had struggled to manage their own response to the end of their marriage, influencing participant's perceptions of their parents and the concept of relationships or marriage. As such, illustrating further disappointment.

I think my parents made the right decision to divorce, I'm just not sure of their decisions after that. It all happened so fast. My difficulties have come from that; the choices of the adults around me after. I had all these preconceived notions about what it [marriage] was because after the divorce it was chaos, chaos. You have the chaos. (Rebecca)

They still had a lot of baggage of their own that they never even addressed even to this day. They never addressed it. She [mum] never broke those chains, those chains, she, she continued that abuse. (Wendy)

In particular, Samantha described how she felt her mental health as a child deteriorated and *"was as bad as it was because my mum lost the plot"* and failed to seek help after her marriage ended.

> *She should have found a way to deal with it without having put it on me. Any time I spent with my dad, the phone was ringing off the hook. She was threatening suicide, it was on me to make sure my mum didn't die! She needed help, and she chose not to need it! If she had gone and found that help then, maybe I wouldn't have been the one who'd taken the brunt of that … I assume there's a trauma block put in; I've no idea what happened.* (Samantha)

Despite the negative experiences, participants took several positive aspects from this time in their lives. For example, for Samantha who had described her mother's emotional and psychological response to the end of her marriage, the strength of her father and his ongoing provision of support to her has been invaluable. Their *"healthy, normal relationship … he's always been comforting, always talked me through what's happening, what I can do,"* (Samantha) providing her an example of a healthy and positive relationship. Similarly, in contrast to several other participants where divorce resulted in fractious parental relationships and discordant family events, Catherine and Rebecca proudly exclaimed their gratitude for how their parents role modelled salvaging an amicable relationship despite the breakdown of their marriage. Their narrative suggesting their parents' post-divorce relationships met their expectations and needs of their parents to *"be parents … I feel extraordinarily grateful to them because they were able to, like, they were best, they were really good friends. They remained good friends,* (Catherine).

> *Utter lack of animosity, never malicious, never any tension as far as I could tell, always really civil. They communicated relatively well as well. They made sure that we never saw them arguing. That side of their relationship and kind of the*

relationship with us, they handled really well, I think. I've always been really appreciative of that. (Rebecca)

Subsequently, while reflections illustrated participants' frustrations towards their parents, for most participants, exploring what their parents' relationship difficulties meant for them provided an opportunity to learn and explore how this informed who they were. As the next theme will describe, embarking on the exploration of what participants had learnt from their parents and how this informed their sense of self, and in turn their self-worth, marked a turning point for several participants.

4.2. Theme 2: Finding Myself

This theme focuses on the self-exploration participants engaged with in further understanding who they were, why, and how this informed their approach to relationships. Primarily, this theme is about moving from a state of confusion about how to do relationships, towards a growing, pragmatic understanding of how parental relationship difficulties and parent-child relationships informed participants' approaches to relationships. A process of realisation participants identified as a vital step towards recovery of their self-worth and their subsequent shift towards living with, and managing, the confronting effects their childhood experiences had on their approach to/engagement with relationships. The following subsections explore the journey participants took towards identifying the behaviours within themselves they needed to change before they could experience the healthy relationships they deserved.

4.2.1 Understanding who I was and why | *"Working out my own safety, who I was."* (Samantha)

As previously illustrated, an essential theme behind participants' reasonings for their struggle with practising healthy relationships was not just experiencing the breakdown of their family unit, but also the impact the different facets of their parents' relationships had on

their own relationship skills and sense of self. For example, parents' unpredictable, often traumatic, conflict-fuelled relationships and/or the broken parent-child relationship. Internalising the meaning of these events at the time provided a starting point for the diminished self-worth participants later identified.

> *You just don't feel that meaningful because everyone's fine when you're not there … Maybe I concluded that I'm not here, everyone's fine without me. Therefore maybe, I'm not important?* (Annika)

Identifying what elements participants took from these experiences into their own relationships was an essential stage to exploring participants' sense of self and subsequent understanding of the factors they needed to address in order to recover a diminished self-worth. As the following extracts demonstrate, several participants were clear on the elements that made their parents' relationships unhealthy.

> *They were either ignoring each other or they were having a go at each other. (Sabrina)*
>
> *Like, I thought my parents were trying to kill each other a lot of the time. They had a, a very passionate, toxic love.* (Wendy)
>
> *Definitely NOT joyful. (Amelia)*

Yet, these experiences held different meanings and outcomes for each participant. For example, while none of the participants identified with being a COD/ACD specifically, for some their perception of vulnerability was something they believed to be different from others because of what they had experienced. Wendy's *"ugly"* and Tamara's *"traumatic"* experiences felt uniquely extreme to them in comparison to what they understand as normal childhood experiences. Their "*worst nightmare that anyone could ever live really. Well, that I lived,"* (Wendy) seen to explain their inability to connect and feel comfortable in being emotionally vulnerable with others.

> *I am not comfortable in getting vulnerable with people and, because of that, I'm a lot of, like, I'm, my vulnerability levels, and other people's vulnerability levels are not the same … because I think that way I deter myself from letting those people get close, that degree of, urm, connection that I have with [boyfriend] puts him up there compared to all the other people.* (Tamara)

Tamara attributed her hesitancy to emotionally connect with others and subsequent ability to easily *"cut people off, I'm not as sympathetic as they would like me to be because of the situations I've been in myself,"* to the disappointment she experienced as a child. Particularly with her dad and his treatment of her during her parents' relationship.

> *I'd definitely say my dad had a very huge role to play in the confidence that I lacked. The confidence in myself dropped more because he was more verbally abusive towards me … hindered my ability to make connections and put a lot of self-doubt in me.* (Tamara)

As Sabrina explained, growing up in an environment observing parents vulnerability as, *"scary because it was just so emotional and dysregulated,"* (Sabina) there was a need for several participants to develop a façade of resilience and impenetrability. *"To be more of the listener or the helper or the* <u>*strong*</u> *one,"* as opposed to the *"sad, stressed, lonely"* (Sabrina) person they witnessed, and felt so strongly upset for, in their parents. *"I didn't wish that on her,"* (Sabrina). These experiences informed participants discomfort or avoidance to being vulnerable with others.

> *A lot of my guards and things will be because my mum losing the plot was huge. Without that trauma, my relationships would have been very different.* (Samantha)

Similarly, while Wendy believed a lack of childhood inhibited her overall ability to connect with herself emotionally, six participants echoed Tamara's description of the powerful negative impact relationships with their father had on their self-worth and,

subsequent relationships with others. As Annika told me, she still cannot let herself be vulnerable with her dad because of his emotional outbursts.

> *I feel totally powerless around my dad, so, you know, I feel emotional now! I feel like I can't have a voice, even now if I'm defending somebody else, I feel like he would turn on me. As a child, he'd pushed me to tell him things about how I was feeling, and I would cave, and then I'd really regret it. And just, it's just really vulnerable so, and I feel probably quite quickly, powerless.* (Annika)

> *I felt quite unheard by dad or quite unvalidated … resentful and upset that he didn't understand how much I was hurting. He was only worried about what he wanted. (Amelia)*

These experiences triggered a long-term battle as several participants grappled with the idea of getting emotionally close with anyone enough to be vulnerable or to feel love. For some, reservation was a result of not feeling good enough to be loved, not feeling the self-worth or confidence. A struggle that for two participants, continues today.

> *Whenever I'm being loved, I'm learning how to receive love. I think that was probably, sadly, possibly, maybe a lifelong journey. Even in my marriage now, I think I find it really hard to feel loved. When [husband] says he loves me or I'm really hot or whatever, I'm just like, I'm just not feeling it. So, I just kind of disassociate from it somehow. Yeah, I think it's more like disbelief or disconnection. It's not that I'm not loved, I just don't feel loved … Yes, I do find it hard to connect to it; I'm not really a participant in it!* (Annika).

> *I don't have anyone really that close to me to be honest and, I actually, like, admittedly, I feel sort of the same way with my children sometimes. I don't feel connected like I want to be, like not deeply connected.* (Wendy)

Particularly for those where the announcement of their parents' separation was unexpected, divorce did not mean a positive end to a difficult home life like it had for others; *"best day ever!" (*Tamara). Instead, it led to a feeling of shame or "*less value because we weren't with my dad. We were just worth less than other families because it was just my mum and I,*" (Amelia).

> *Even though it was, it was good for me, I remember when it first happened, I was, I didn't know how to tell my friends, I felt really ashamed. I was really embarrassed or ashamed that that was happening … you still feel torn between, who do I stay loyal to or, you know, just what do I do?* (Catherine)

Subsequently, while growing up observing parents in unhealthy relationships meant for many participants a lack of positive examples of being emotionally close with others, for a couple of participants, understanding who they were and why, meant understanding how the change in their family situation impacted how they saw themselves. For Amelia, exploring this part of her story was a vital stage to understanding the factors that contributed to her diminished self-worth.

> *Maybe if my parents had worked it out, and I was more comfortable in my own home with my dad because my parents were still together then, I wouldn't necessarily have gone looking so much for [*pause*] romantic attachment all the time. I wouldn't have just placed so much emphasis on it and so much of my own value on what another, on what a man thought of me.* (Amelia)

Like Amelia, participants' self-worth and questioning their ability to maintain a relationship was subtly reflected in narrative from those whose parents' marriage had been disrupted by infidelity. Participants acknowledged an unproportionate sense of responsibility for their parents' relationship and/or their own.

I do remember feeling sort of responsible. I felt like a piece of my, I felt like I was a part of my mum and so, when my mum was rejected, I was rejected! (Amelia)

If you want to stay with someone, you're always thinking about how to make sure that happens and to avoid the alternative. (Catherine)

I just thought that, that was on me and that I was the reason. Like, there's something wrong with me. (Tamara)

Realising the extent that motivation to be in relationships was informed by their self-worth was another critical turning point in participants' journeys. Particularly where being in a relationship provided validation and a sense of feeling normal; a desire some found hard to resist. Here, Amelia and Samantha illustrated how their self-worth initially corresponded with their relationship status. For example, for Amelia being in a relationship meant acceptance. It meant not feeling like the outcast she experienced when her dad left her mum.

My worth was very dependent on whether or not I had a boyfriend. And, I didn't feel right without one. Almost a feeling that I'd be alone forever … yeah, just wanting and needing to have a boyfriend. I used to look at people who were married and think "they've got it together, they're grown up". It was like the mark of a "together" person. (Amelia)

For a long time, I think being in relationships made me normal. I was looking for the same things as other girls. (Samanatha)

As the interviews evolved, each participant described the experience of realising who they were and the influences behind their relationships which they could address.

I get really excited, urm, when I figure out the possible cause of what I'm feeling or what's going on, like the reason why my relationship, relationships are the way they are? Like, when I'm speaking with my partner or, like, the reasons behind my dad being the person that, not that I look up to, but is very influential in my life, you

know? Yeah, and I'm always excited, I like learning about myself … learn about myself and that my parents weren't able to heal from their trauma the same way I have been able to. (Tamara)

The next subsection will explore the shift in participants' journeys towards managing the effects of their sense of self and self-worth on their approach to relationships. The confronting stage of taking responsibility for the elements participants took into their relationships which influenced the level to which their relationships were unhealthy.

***4.2.2 Realising What I Took into Relationships* | *"A healing journey is never linear."* (Wendy)**

A successive turning point for most participants was realising that their challenges to understanding *"how to do healthy relationships"* (Sabrina) often stemmed from misinformed beliefs acquired through the observation of their parents' relationships. Inaccurate perceptions of how they should behave, or their place in a relationship.

I think I assumed that, that I would never be enough for them [boyfriends]. Or that, there was, there was some, there was always going to be something deficient in me that someone would find. (Rebecca)

A perception of you meet your spouse's need, like whether that's sex or whatever … not a lot of connection, intimacy and enjoyment. (Sabrina)

Over time, realisation *"it didn't have to be this way,"* (Sabrina) progressed to recognising that, to experience healthy relationships, participants needed to change certain innate behaviours/beliefs. *"It pushed me to kind of go on a journey of how to do that better"* (Sabrina). As such, there were *"lightbulb moment[s],"* (Sabrina) where participants realised the meanings they took from their parents' relationship influenced who they were within their own relationships. Subsequently, several participants realised their unhealthy approaches to relationships were informed by the inaccurate perceptions of their self-worth and/or

relationship ideals developed in response to observing their parents' relationships. Furthermore, reflections by several participants identified comparable behaviours/expectations developed in response to similar parent relationship models. Particularly where infidelity featured.

> *I think I had a lot of trust issues because my dad had cheated on my mum, I thought that that was a kind of normal thing that would happen … I always was worried I was going to be, like, broken up with randomly without knowing it was happening, or I'd find out that he cheated on me or something like that.* (Katrina)

As Amelia told me, she realised her approach and experience of relationships was informed by knowledge of her father's infidelity but primarily, experiencing her father prioritising his needs over her and her mother's. She recounted a prominent memory of overhearing her father advising a recently divorced male friend to "*just go for it, you've got to do what makes you happy, you've gotta think about you!"* (Amelia). Illustrating the impression these words left on her, Amelia told me, *"I took from that, that, seeking and having a spousal relationship was <u>more</u> important than children ... makes you the most happy, the most important relationship you should focus on ... to bring you the most joy,"* (Amelia). Together with this notifying Amelia *"I didn't bring him the most joy,"* (Amelia) she explained how this informed her self-worth and, subsequently, her prioritisation of others' needs over her own, in order to maintain the relationship.

> *I was always worried that they were going to leave me all the time. I was so incredibly insecure in my attachments, like, even with my friends actually, not just my romantic relationships, with my friends as well. Yeah, I felt like I had to have something to give to be worth having.* (Amelia)

As Amelia went on to describe, while she later realised *"intimacy is important, but that's not why we are together,"* (Amelia) exploration saw her realise how she associated her self-

worth, and experience of validation, with the level to which she believed she met her partner's needs, for example how frequently they were intimate. This saw Amelia assume a sense of responsibility for the relationship's longevity, doing all she could to maintain the relationship regardless of how unhealthy it was.

> *I would always have it in my mind, like I'd be counting the days in between. Not because necessarily I felt like I was missing out, but because I was like "ohhh, I can't make them go too long,"* (Amelia)

Katrina further elaborated on the connection between misinformed beliefs and parent infidelity. Describing how it felt to be an ACD experiencing infidelity in her own relationship, Katrina told me how this, together with knowledge of her father's infidelities informed her subsequent approach to relationships.

> *It's so hard for me to really build so much trust in someone that, when it's broken, it's, I feel like it, it crushes me a little bit ... When [boyfriend] cheated on me, it made me feel kind of like the feelings I felt when I found out my dad had cheated. It kind of pushed in my head like the reasons why I was so scared to enter proper relationships. I was like, "<u>this</u> is why!"* (Katrina)

Subsequently, Katrina's current long-term partner *"had to deal, at the beginning of our relationship, with a lot of trust issues that had nothing to do with him ... he's never been like, secretive or like sneaky about anything!"* (Katrina). In contrast, Catherine, whose parents experienced a seemingly happy relationship prior to their divorce, did not feel her father's infidelity impacted her.

> *It just becomes part of the, the fabric of, you know, of your life or sort of thing. Just accepting, not dwelling on it. It's certainly not something that I felt was a big presence in my life. It didn't sort of scar me in that regard. I didn't think that all guys were gonna cheat or anything like that.* (Catherine)

Despite this, Catherine recognised how the knowledge that even healthy relationships can break down, sits at the back of her mind. Something she believes non-ACD do not have to manage. She wondered if this was perhaps one of the biggest impacts for her of her parents' separation.

> *I basically said to [husband] "look, I have come from parents who divorced. So, when we're having difficulties and, if we're not resolving it, that makes me really worried that, that's what's going to happen to us and, I don't want that to happen." And he was like, "oh, well, I don't think about that!" "Well, that's probably because your parents stayed together, because, it's, it's always in the back of my mind. Always." And it was quite eye opening for me. That's always what I'm trying to avoid and he's never thinking about it* [*laughs*]. (Catherine)

For Rebecca, exploration behind her approach to relationships and need of reassurance, saw her attribute her *"people pleaser tendency to be selfless to the point of harm"* (Rebecca) behaviours, to the internalisation of *"abandonment kind of feelings"* (Rebecca) during her mum's second marriage and, observations of *"mum felt a little insecure in the relationship, but I also think he felt a little bit insecure so, there was a lot of reassurance going on,"* (Rebecca). Rebecca believed these experiences informed her self-worth and subsequently, her early fears that she would lose a partner if she did not prioritise his needs over her own.

> *I think because I shoved down a lot and was trying to please so many other people, I didn't really think about myself and who I was. I was whoever everybody else needed me to be. It wasn't about what I wanted, it was about what he wanted.* (Rebecca)

During this stage of their journey, several participants became aware that their approach to relationships and/or choice of a partner, *"was just replaying that same relationship from person to person, over and over,"* (Amelia). Subsequently, realisation that

their approach to relationships was connected with their parents' relationships, came early for some. For others, realisation took several relationship experiences. Once the *"lightbulb"* (Sabrina) moment happened however, realisations were enough to motivate participants to address the situation within themselves. Sabrina had a lot to say about this pivotal point in her journey,

> *I hated being single [*laughs*] and I refused that, I refused to be in an unhealthy relationship. I didn't want an unhealthy relationship … and I had this understanding that it could be different. I just didn't know what different looked like … I realised if I didn't do something different, I was going to be one of those statistics you know? And not necessarily in suicide or anything like that, but in depression or in, yeah, difficult relationships or, you know, kind of like, after things ended with [boyfriend], realising like, "hold on, like, ok yeah, he was a jerk, but, but why did I stay for so long? What was it about me that stayed in that?" If I don't change, I'm just going to carry this pattern on.* (Sabrina)

Establishing what could change and how, took participants a while to work through. Particularly for those who had experienced a traumatic and inconsistent childhood due to their parents' relationship.

> *It's different for everyone; a healing journey is never linear. You're always two steps forward, ten steps back, five steps forward, eight steps back. It takes time and patience I guess with yourself, but others as well … it's mostly about identifying what you want for yourself … it's not quick to be able to look into those traumatic experiences and unpack that all. It does take a lifetime to heal, I think.* (Wendy)

Laughing at herself for how long she took to realise how embedded the unhealthy behaviours were in her approach to relationships, Tamara described the pain she had experienced during her relationship journey prior to reaching this stage.

*I do have a, like, I do tend to push people away when I'm upset or really, anything, any inconvenience, and I've, the first thing I go to is being "okay, cool, I'm going to drop them." Like, I don't want to and that's probably because of my parents [*laughs*]. Realising that, like the things that I've gone through are in the past and I've had to talk about those things to be able to get over those things and <u>really</u> be self-aware and recognise. Otherwise my current relationship probably wouldn't be the way it is. (Tamara)*

Both Anna and Catherine were very clear in the importance of ACD identifying and challenging what they take into their relationships from their parents. Strongly arguing ACD must move beyond their parents' relationship difficulties and avoid using it as an excuse for their own unhealthy relationships.

You can either let that ruminate and impact the quality of your life, or you can acknowledge what happened, and then think about what do you need to do to move through the motions. It doesn't define who I am. But, I still have to do some work from time to time if I want to, if I can see that there is something impacting, because it's not easy to step outside and think, "ohh, I think I'm doing this because it was impacted by that." (Anna)

You kind of got to <u>own</u> some of the bad choices that you make. I think the healthiest is where you're kind of always reflecting on, "okay, well, this, you know, this is how my past and my experience informs how I'm reacting now," and I'm also, you know, like there's obviously, a little bit wired to sort of react in certain ways but, like, I'm a great believer in you can always, you know, you can always be a better person. (Catherine)

Taking time to reflect on the similarities between their parents and their own relationships, subsequently became participants' greatest learning tool. A framework for what an unhealthy relationship looked like.

> *It showed me the kind of person that I, I shouldn't be with. I think it showed me more about what I should have than what I shouldn't, I think. I think, aye? Yeah. I think it's taught me a lot about what I need to realise isn't right for me.* (Katrina)

> *I lost myself. I didn't do anything for myself. I saw a lot of my mum and dad's relationship in my last relationship and I didn't want to bring that here in my current relationship.* (Tamara)

In essence for most participants, understanding what held them back from experiencing healthy relationships and calling out things about themselves they needed to change, was difficult. However, having spent their relationship journeys struggling to understand how to do relationships, and later processing the realisation of how their parents' approach to relationships influenced their own approach and experiences, the hardest challenge was yet to come. Subsequently, as I will discuss in the next section, while the process of reflection and realisation became participants' catalyst for approaching their relationship journeys differently, making changes was a personal choice participants had to make themselves. An action that required them to be in a certain space, one that facilitated an improved self-worth and permitted them *"free to be me,"* (Amelia).

4.3 Theme 3: Doing Relationships Differently

Over time, ongoing reflection on what participants brought from their parents' relationship into their own, and separating their self-worth from their parents' marriage, saw participants experience a form of growth within their approach to relationships. This included developing the strength and self-worth to identify where changes could be made, and then actually making them. A concept many referred to as *"breaking the chains"* (Wendy). This theme explored this concept and other motivations behind participants' efforts to *"do things differently,"* (Rebecca) together with details of the key changes made by participants that they attributed their current healthy relationships to.

4.3.1 Breaking the Chains | "*I don't want to become them.*" (Wendy)

For five participants a key motivator to doing relationships differently was becoming parents, or the thought of becoming parents. At this point, several became intensely aware of how experiences can transcend generations.

> *I'm going to make sure that I'm not repeating the same things that my mum, my nana, my grandma, all those other women in my life had done, likely without the information that they needed to be making the right choices, I think, or right choices, right choices in my eyes. Yeah, because otherwise, if you just sweep it under and it just sits there, it doesn't get dealt with.* (Rebecca)

> *It's very, very damaging having to hear all the ugly things that had really nothing to do with us as children but had everything to do with their relationship entirely. I don't want my children to go through what I went through.* (Wendy)

Subsequently, not wanting to repeat their parents' mistakes was a strong motivator for working through challenges and doing relationships differently.

> *If you want to be different from your parents, you have to do something different. You can't just hope that it'll all turn out alright!* (Sabrina)

> *You don't want to be what you were afraid of; I don't want to become them.* (Wendy)

Reflections of their parents also installed a determination to never walk away, as some felt their parents did,

> *Relationships are something you work on. It's not just magic and rainbows and unicorns … walking away from a relationship with children involved is, is an unkind thing to do … I actually suspect that walking away would be really difficult for me.* (Annika)

> *It's a much bigger decision than I think a lot of people realise, with lifelong ramifications. If you're wanting to separate just because you don't like each other*

very much, because you've been together for a really long time and things have got a bit dysfunctional then that, that's, that's a solvable problem, you know? It's hard work but, you can resolve that. (Catherine)

For others, experiencing parenthood showed them how little they were to blame for their own parents' difficulties.

The way that I was parented and to see that a lot of it actually had nothing to do with me, because the mistakes that I make have got <u>*nothing*</u> *to do with my kids and everything to do with me!* (Amelia)

As Amelia explained, becoming a mum therefore informed a new sense of self, *"a sense of worthiness,"* (Amelia) she had not experienced before. The experience was a catalyst for the change in self-worth Amelia needed to address her unhealthy approaches to relationships. However, the decision to prioritise herself in relationships and feeling comfortable with this change was not easy. *"When I left the kids' dad, I probably prioritised myself too much … I felt quite rubbishy and I felt quite [*pause*] guilty,"* (Amelia). While it took time, Amelia was proud to tell me she did, however find a way. That, "*nobody else in my life now prioritises themselves, [*pause*], their own happiness, above my needs,"* (Amelia).

Echoing the challenge Amelia experienced when trying to change her approach to relationships, Annika fears *"my children won't have felt I've done right by them, or feel I ruined their lives,"* (Annika) despite the changes she has implemented to protect her children from having similar childhood experiences as her. Both Amelia and Annika's narrative demonstrating how guilt/concern accompanies an ongoing evaluation of their actions for potentially hurting their children in the way they experienced. Similarly, the pressure Wendy felt to *"break the chains,"* (Wendy) together with overcoming the obstacles she perceived within herself to be different from her parents, has been overwhelming. Bringing its own challenges or risks to her current relationship.

> *I think because it's such a, a strong, prominent fear in my mind, in the front of my mind, I think I prematurely try and call it quits. And so, I think, I can be a bit, bit too premature about it, because it's, it does, it really does scare me to become my parents.* (Wendy)

Despite this, and while not foremost in their minds, participants identified and acknowledged several positive influences of healthy relationships they observed during their early years. "*Just little bits over time,"* (Sabrina) they had purposefully *"looked for, to see what healthy looked like,"* (Samantha) in parents' second marriages, parents-in-laws and friends. Experiences ranged from "*just hearing the way [friend's mum] talked about her marriage, seeing the way they dealt with some things,"* (Sabrina) to "*my parents having a healthier relationship [since the divorce] probably, definitely helps seeing them being able to, to talk without all the tension as well,"* (Katrina). The more unusual participants found the behaviour in comparison to their perceived relationship norms, the more benefit it offered.

> *So weird for me, seeing them [brother and his girlfriend] like, not yelling, just sorted it out and then be happy again and continue with their day without it ruining everyone's day. Growing up watching them was very, very, very, <u>very</u> beneficial for me.* (Katrina)

Even though several participants did not know how to have a "healthy" relationship, these observations showed them that healthy relationships were possible. That *"other relationships have difficulties too, whereas before I used to think the difficulty was the end,"* (Samantha). *"Tipping the balance on that seesaw around,"* (Annika) these examples and realisations that they are not their parents, consequently informed participants' confidence in their ability to make a change.

I thought, they're just two people that didn't work out together. It doesn't mean that solid, happy marriages don't exist and, it doesn't mean that I can't be within one of them, and I can't make one of them work! (Amelia)

Consequently, many identified with Amelia's realisation that shifted her thinking away from expecting she would never have a healthy relationship towards considering that they could, that *"there was a future"* (Samantha), and that they could be different. That they could choose to change, but that it would take work.

4.3.2 Choosing to be Different **|** *"I decided I wasn't gonna be the person I was."* (Katrina)

Realising the need to take responsibility for who they were in their relationships, and the need to address how the overall experience of their parents' relationships affected their own journey, was not easy. Particularly once participant's realised the perpetuation of unhealthy relationships in their journey could not be blamed purely on their parents. That, in order to progress forward, they needed to change their own unhealthy approaches.

*I told myself, if I'm going to have a relationship again, then it needs to be, [*pause*], I need to do the work because there's always two sides to the story, right? And there's always a little bit ... there's elements that are in my behaviour that are not, that I don't want to repeat, that are not okay. So, that's why I went and got that counselling.* (Anna)

Seeking support was something several participants spoke of, often in response to the realisation that their parents' challenges may have come from their not dealing with difficulties themselves, *"because it's what my mum didn't do,"* (Samantha). Or, as Tamara suggested, because support may be more available now than it was to previous generations,

I do feel like I've put effort into, and been able to put effort into, myself; the friends that I do have, these are things that we talk about, like we're able to talk about these

> *things and I'm, not that I know, but I would probably say that those are <u>not</u> things that my mum and her friends could speak about.* (Tamara)
>
> *Like, I, I would know that if, that if I was going in that direction, I'd be like, okay, that is not good, I need to go and see, I need to go to some therapy. (Catherine)*

Similarly, three participants acknowledged frameworks they had learnt through work or study *"really changed how I managed some things,"* (Sabrina). Several also shared various titles of self-help books they had found helpful, *"almost none focused on divorce … but, self-care, trauma and all that difficult stuff,"* (Annika). These resources helping participants close knowledge gaps on how to do healthy relationships and how to *"grow as a human,"* (Annika).

Subsequently, while most participants' relationships evolved out of their experience of parental disharmony, continuing unhealthy behaviours and not correcting their unhealthy thinking, was something they saw as a choice. A choice to want to challenge and change the unhealthy behaviours/beliefs they had learnt from their parents. As such, taking responsibility for elements they could change themselves was the common catalyst several felt set them apart from other ACD. Their words here in explanation for why not every ACD manages to experience healthy relationships; "*I did the work that not everybody I think would be, you know, be able to recognise and to see,"* (Amelia).

> *It involves a lot of grieving … a whole lot of hard work and determination. Recognising when I'm wrong. And recognising that, actually, yeah, I was part of the problem. Just the relationship skills, being able to just fully accept my partner rather than wanting to change them or thinking that they're the problem. I was very good at being in control. I was very good at having an opinion. I felt like, you know, whoever I was dating wasn't doing a good enough job or whatever, and that caused a huge*

amount of conflict, and it always left me feeling anxious and unhappy and the guy feeling disrespected. (Sabrina)

For some, choice had not been something they initially felt was afforded them. Subsequently, *"having a choice,"* (Amelia) returned thoughts to the need for self-worth and therefore acceptance of the life they deserved.

*I felt like I didn't have a choice. I needed, I needed my relationships before ... but I choose to be here because I want to be here, it's somewhere that I want to be. It's a choice to be happy … It's not [*pause*] feeling that I've got no other choice.* (Amelia)

Similarly, Anna described making the choice to forgive herself for her failed first long-term relationship as a poignant moment that helped her move forward. As such, Anna shifted her thinking about her journey. Acknowledging why she had rushed into what was an unhealthy relationship, Anna now consciously chooses to be happy in her relationships.

It took a lot to get to that place for me but, I know that once, once it becomes so unstable that actually, no, I don't have to stay here. Dad always said, "everyone deserves to be happy, so figure out what that choice is." So like, dad's second marriage, he was really happy, you know? And so, I think that's really been quite pivotal in my relationship with [husband] particularly, is that, you know, you make decisions along your life and, while the marriage belief is that it's forever, you know, I was 18 and I was a baby, and I had a lot of circumstances happening in my life that I hadn't processed, probably, probably very well and so, actually you can be happy! (Anna)

Therefore, while participants recognised they were part of the problem, understanding the specifics and being prepared to make the necessary changes required a desire to want to do the hard work. Timing here was important.

You only come to discover these things when you're ready, when you're ready to recognise it. When you're ready to face it. When you're ready to see those problems and want solutions. It's not a journey that I think ever has an end game. There is no end game for this sort of healing, it takes a long time, and it takes a lot of patience. (Wendy)

An outside person can't really tell someone else's wisdom. I feel you've got to actually come to it when you're ready. (Annika)

As four participants described, it was not until they *"felt safe"* (Samantha) in their relationships that clarity presented itself. This started with recognising they were with the right person.

And I remember at the point where he looked at me, 'cause he's got bright blue eyes and he was holding [child] off to the left of the c-section table. I remember that moment sort of going, "I'm safe ... Right, yeah. I'm good!" (Samantha).

Sometimes, you know, you only have certain tools in your toolkit that you've been given. You don't know anything else. But, when someone else comes along and teaches you "well, no, there is something else that you can be and there is a better way to respond and to parent, and to be a better person," then that's, you know, what, that's what I choose. I choose to be better, and I choose to try and, you know, overcome those, those barriers. (Wendy)

It is important to note that changes were not always about addressing negative behaviours, but unhealthy perspectives that had been *"ingrained"* (Katrina) in participants during their parents' relationship. Influencing the relationship norms that several participants thought were required of them in a relationship, such as dispelling the previously discussed beliefs about what was required to keep partners happy and maintain relationships (see Section 4.2.2).

*A deep understanding that you're not responsible for other people's feelings, which is different to being considerate of other people, I think. But that kind of, that feeling of responsibility and, not needing to people please. And knowing that who you are is enough, and that's absolutely fine. (*Rebecca*)*

Yet, as Wendy emotionally shared with me, she found being in this situation perpetually confronting. Grieving for the childhood she believes she lost, and the self-talk she gives herself to help her move forward, is a constant battle.

*You just don't get that time back you know, to be young and free and innocent [*crying*]. So, that's been probably the hardest thing … You just have to try and find that peace within yourself and not make excuses but, for your own sake, try and forgive, I guess … I can recognise that I'm not a healthy person and I have not come from a healthy background, and you know, I can see that and so, but I don't want to <u>be</u> that!* (Wendy)

***4.3.3 Doing the Work* |** *"Finding Joy."* (Amelia)

Doing things differently took a lot of work. The unhealthy behaviours/beliefs so embedded they cast a shadow over any rationalisation participants gave when explaining how their current relationship is positively different from previous relationships. For example, initially several participants attributed current relationship success to their partners/fiancés/husbands; the *"luck"* (Samantha) of finding the right person to experience a healthy and *"stable"* (Samantha) relationship with.

I think when you have a positive influence or when you have someone who can put up with you, I guess, and forgive you over and over again, you sort of become softer. I could have quite easily ended up in an abusive relationship myself because of the type of person I am … he could have just left but if he can have faith in that and, and trust that I have that in me, then, you know, why not at least try? Like I <u>did</u> want those

> *things, but I didn't, urm, I guess I didn't try hard enough to copy that behaviour. I sort of had my own wiring that was so toxic that it took me a while to just mature out of it really.* (Wendy)

Yet, one by one, participants acknowledged the work they put in, owning the outcome as their achievement, not just their partners.

> *I've grown and I've realised, like, how I should be treated and what I deserve ... It's knowing that, like, I'm not gonna be judged for doing it. So therefore, like I had that kind of self-assurance that I can do what I want, like what I need to do.* (Katrina)

Emotionally acknowledging the difficult journey she continues to pursue towards being healthier in her relationship, Wendy also recognised positive change was not just a result of efforts by her fiancé. Instead, it was a result of recognising she was worth the change.

> *You sort of see your self-worth, you sort of start to say, "Okay, if this person can put up with me and forgive me, they must see something that I don't," because, when you sort of start seeing the world as an ugly place and no one to trust ... and then there's this one person who's, who sees something, [*crying*] you see something in you that, that you didn't ever believe was there ... to be forgiving of yourself. He's willing to help me work through it, so it's yeah, definitely contributed to me wanting more for myself and me wanting to be better and me wanting to become the person that I know I can be.* (Wendy)

For Wendy, and seven other participants, change was therefore a result of feeling validated in their current relationships. Feeling respected and valued, *"he would never hurt me deliberately,"* (Annika). As emotionally shared by Tamara, recognition of how validation made her feel had an impact on who she became in her relationships. Putting right the damage caused by the experience of disappointment in her parents.

> *A lot of the things that you know your parents say when you're younger really stick … I've been able to reflect and realise that those emotions were coming from a place of hurt, yeah. And a place of, yeah, feelings of needing validation and that kind of thing that I wasn't able to get with my relationship with my parents … because [boyfriend] was able to give me that patience, I was able to kind of reflect in that moment, like, "oh well, he's listening" and, you know, which is, I probably, wasn't able to do that previously, because I didn't have that communication … helps, like, better understand yourself and your emotions, and that kind of thing.* (Tamara)

> *It was really empowering for me. It was kind of the moment where I went, "ah, I don't need constant reassurance in this relationship because this relationship is solid!" I realised that I know I can say anything and raise anything and talk about the weird and wonderful things that are going on inside my head and it's only been met with understanding and support. I can be more confident in expressing when things maybe aren't so great … able to communicate that need.* (Rebecca)

> *Like, now I'm not being yelled at by anyone, maybe I'm kind of understanding that I don't need to be … Everyone else I had been with before, I wasn't, like, a priority, I was more, like, an afterthought. But, he always made it quite clear that I was. Like, if we have problems, it's spoken about, like, calmly, it's nothing like the yelling matches or anything like that I used to have. He never says things just specifically to hurt me, which I think previously I let people do.* (Katrina)

Acknowledging the place they had reached in their relationship journeys, and the exploration work that had been engaged with, particularly the subsequent motivation to experience relationships that were different from their parents' relationships and their own relationship difficulties, participants descriptions of the changes they made fitted within two groups: (1)

how they approached their relationships and, (2) how they behaved within relationships. I will discuss this next.

4.3.3.1 Stop Rushing into Relationships. The following extracts illustrate differences participants made in their approach and how their current relationships evolved via *"a different trajectory"* (Rebecca) than previous relationships. For four participants this followed the realisation discussed earlier (see Section 4.2.1), where they rushed into relationships for the wrong reasons, since being in a relationship validated their self-worth. Subsequently, approaches moved away from *"need[ing] to have a relationship,"* (Amelia) to a determination to *"get to know each other without being physically near each other,"* (Rebecca). Shifting towards relationships based on friendship, not lust, was key.

> *I made sure that we were friends. That was something that was really big for me. I just needed to know that we were compatible because my parents were not compatible. They were <u>not</u> friends. Your spouse should be your friend.* (Amelia)
>
> *Unlike the other relationships where I got into a relationship based on nothing ... It was quite, it was a strong friendship behind it ... whatever bond we had and, whatever stubbornness we had, was enough for us at some level, you know, to stay together and work through any challenges.* (Samantha)

Sabrina's description of how it felt to do things differently, and consequently experience relationships differently, echoed sentiments of several participants. Guided by friends advice, Sabrina trusted herself to explore a relationship that did not bring the *"overwhelming infatuation"* or *"chemistry,"* (Sabrina) she previously associated with "love" or a "healthy" partner. Her experience with her now husband was, therefore, very different.

> *... and it came differently. Like, instead of being this wonderful, overwhelming emotion of infatuation, it was the sense of warmth and trust. It was like a lightbulb suddenly went on, and all my previous relationships made sense.* (Sabrina)

4.3.3.2 Behaving Differently within Relationships. For eight participants, changes focused on adjusting their communication and how they approached or reacted during conflict with *"patience, not reactive or emotionally charged; learning to listen more,"* (Wendy). Learning to be open about how things affect them. For example, for Anna, patience with herself and the situation included *"doing a debrief,"* (Anna) once the conversation settled as opposed to *"during the meltdown,"* (Anna). For Rebecca, it also meant accepting change as *"an ongoing process,"* (Rebecca) that requires acknowledging how much she has improved instead of continually focusing on *"the next thing. Stopping, and looking back,"* (Rebecca).

How participants engaged in their relationships often changed due to their boosted self-worth giving them confidence to challenge their behaviours. Particularly those informed by the previously discussed resentment for their parents (Section 4.1.2.2) and a desire to be better parents (Section 4.3.1).

> *My journey was actually learning how to be vulnerable. I told myself, I couldn't keep storming out every time things got difficult. That's what my parents did and it destroyed my family. I had to learn how to stay. I began to practice staying in the room during a conflict and actually talking things through. (Sabrina)*
>
> *I've become a lot more level headed. I think I used to be way, way more emotional. I think I'm still emotionally driven but I now also think a bit more logically where I used to not at all.* (Katrina)

For several participants changes included developing a resistance to the urge to *"run from them"* (Samantha) or, *"self-sabotage"* (Amelia) relationships when facing difficult conversations or wanting to test their assumption that *"it wouldn't work out"* (Amelia) and belief that *"things don't last"* (Samantha); *"relationships always have an expiry date,"* (Wendy). Change in response to experiencing the outcome of staying and working things

through, of trusting the partnerships they have with their partners/fiancé/husbands and, choosing to be vulnerable. For example, while Samantha knows the decision to stay or leave her marriage is her choice, feeling *"safe"* (Samantha) with her husband informed a determination to stay in her marriage and move away from the *"superficial ... I was there but not there, a flight risk,"* (Samantha) approach she had taken to relationships. Including at the start of her marriage.

In addition, while the eight participants who experienced a primarily difficult relationship journey, made different changes to how they were in relationships, for these participants there was a particular reference to recognising and accepting they should not feel alone in relationships. For most, that meant deserving to feel *"more equal"* (Anna) and what that looked like. As several participants explained to me, acceptance involved an acknowledgment that their relationship journey had been held back by their not permitting themselves to be part of a team. Of needing others, yet understanding how to feel comfortable in being vulnerable with others and recognising when they were looking for the wrong things in a relationship. For example, as Amelia described, she no longer experiences validation by just being in a relationship. Instead, she knows and affirms her self-worth within herself and the partnership she experiences within her marriage,

> *Knowing my worth is knowing I deserve to be happy in my own right, for no other reason than, just being me. I don't have to achieve anything. I don't have to appease anybody. I'm just me. And, I'm allowed to be happy and, and, I deserve to be happy. And, I don't need anybody else to validate that.* (Amelia)

In essence, participants realised healthy relationships involve an element of interdependence. That there are two people, a partnership, in a healthy relationship where they recognise their needs "*in a relationship are also as important as the other person's needs,"* (Rebecca). Neither do participants feel alone in taking responsibility for the relationship being healthy.

Instead both parties look at "*how they can always, like, be better, always improving,"* (Anna) themselves.

> *I always felt like I was taking on more of a male type of role in my life because I felt, and then that made me feel like, I didn't need them. Like, I probably didn't want them either, but mostly that I didn't need them because I filled that role for myself. Yet, I would definitely say now that connection is probably something that I need.* (Tamara)

> *That me being there is as much important for holding his things as it is for him holding mine and I'm sort of able to almost do that. Which took some self-esteem because it meant that I had to be important enough to hold that and hold that space for him … that feeling of safety.* (Samantha)

For four participants, the joy of *"coming home"* (Katrina) to a healthy long-term relationship and being in a healthy relationship where *"he just feels like home,"* (Sabrina) was particularly clear. Their language and emotions conveying just how hard the journey had been.

> *Just sad, like, sad that I had to go through ALL those relationships to figure it out, you know? Urm, yeah. But also really, really, proud and kind of stunned that I got there in the end [*laughs*]. I had this goal in mind. I had this dream in mind and, and it ended up being better than I could have ever asked for. Really cool!* (Sabrina)

> *Like, I have someone, and I've been able to confide things that I didn't know that I needed to confide in somebody.* (Amelia)

In summary, because of how their parents interacted with each other and managed their relationship difficulties, most of these participants experienced childhood environments that felt emotionally and/or physically unsafe. These experiences created an ill-informed foundation to their relationship journeys which participants felt were not as immediately

apparent as they could have been, had they experienced a healthier example of adult relationships.

Recovering from the effects of experiencing parental disharmony and divorce was therefore not an easy journey, but promisingly, despite the long marathon, these female ACD created a narrative that illustrated how long-term, healthy relationships are possible. That while the ebbs and flows of their journeys were not linear, self-awareness assisted them in breaking any intergenerational chain of unhealthy relationships. Subsequently, by recognising and being open to environments that promoted self-acceptance, self-worth and growth, and in turn, identifying and taking responsibility for what needed to change, they each managed to get there!

As the next section will discuss, these lived experiences of transitioning from unhealthy relationships informed by confusion and isolation to healthy relationships informed by realisation and change within, offers context to previous research findings. Participant narrative providing explanations behind the factors that inform unhealthy relationship behaviours and place ACD at risk of unhealthy relationship journeys. Narrative also offers hope for positive change, illustrating the potential generational shift between ACD to heal from their journeys and experience healthy relationships.

Section 5: Discussion

This study explored the lived experience of ten female ACD (18 to 45 years olds) and their relationship journeys. Findings from semi-structured interviews were captured within three themes, (1) Embarking on relationships from a position of not knowing how to do healthy relationships, (2) Finding myself, and (3) Doing relationships differently. After summarising the journeys captured within these themes, this section will discuss the findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical models. This will be followed by considerations for the wellbeing of young people who experience parental disharmony/divorce, together with a discussion of this study's limitations, future research considerations, and concluding comments.

5.1 Summary of Findings

The emergent themes of this study reflect the participants narrative about the experience of their parents' relationships pre- and post- divorce and their journey towards their current long-term relationship. Positioning participants' experiences within their journeys, this study offers context to existing findings with descriptive insights into the experience of being an ACD. Principally, the life experience detail that explains how ACD can be at risk of experiencing successive unhealthy relationships. Yet also, in making sense of the meaning they associate with the phenomenon of their parents' relationship, how ACD can acquire an understanding that guides them through changes that facilitate healthy relationships.

Participants' relationship journeys were captured within three themes, beginning with the meanings participants associated with their journeys and childhood experiences. As such, Theme 1, 'Embarking on relationships from a position of not knowing how to do healthy relationships' introduced us to the key difficulties participants experienced while embarking on their relationship journey. Supported by subthemes: 'An unhealthy start' and, 'Positioning

my childhood experience within my relationship journey', this theme acknowledged the embodied description of unhealthy relationship behaviours and the relationship-course trajectory often associated with being an ACD (Amato, 1996; Amato & Patterson, 2017; Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2005; Kelly, 2000; Pope & Mueller, 1976; Roper et al., 2020).

Within Theme 1, participants' narratives identified two inhibiting factors behind their relationship struggles: (i) 'I didn't know how to communicate' and (ii) 'My parents disappointed me'. These invaluably illustrated outcomes of the confusion participants experienced when observing their parents' capricious relationships and their perceived isolation when processing the changes commanded by the loss of the family unit. Describing how they believed their relationship journeys were informed by their parents' relationships and the environment that accompanied these relationships, narrative highlighted the impact of not just what participants learnt, but what several believed they did not learn. Their unhealthy journeys often attributed to the latter.

Participants' perception of the long-term impacts from their parents' relationship and the environments forced upon them was further put into context in Theme 2, 'Finding myself' and the theme's respective subthemes, 'Understanding who I was and why' and 'Realising what I took into relationships'. Providing explanations behind participants' unhealthy approaches to relationships, this theme positioned a diminished self-worth within the unhealthy behaviours participants' took into their own relationships. Here participants described their turning points, the moments of realisation that answers to their questions lay within themselves, not their parents' relationship.

Finally, building on the self-reflection participants engaged with during Theme 2, Theme 3 'Doing relationships differently' provided detail into alternative experiences for ACD. Illustrated across three subthemes, participants' ability to 'break the chains', 'choose to be different' and, 'do the work' was described, along with the ongoing effort required to

understand themselves and address their unhealthy relationship behaviours. With participants' key changes addressing the interconnection between their communication difficulties and diminished self-worth, the following subsections will discuss outcomes for participants of being left wanting for a supportive and consistent environment that facilitated learning of positive and effective communication strategies and secure, healthy approaches to relationships.

5.2 Findings in Relation to Existing Literature and Theoretical Models

Participants' narratives acknowledged Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1969/1982) and Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT) (1986), while providing context to research attributing female ACDs' interpersonal deficits with COD's internalisation of discomfort during their parents' relationship difficulties (Charvat et al., 2023; Kunz, 2001). Discussing the positioning of theoretical models and existing research within participants' experiences, this section will discuss the contextual insights that participants' narratives offer.

5.2.1 Communication Difficulties

A prime concern raised by participants as the basis for their unhealthy relationship journeys, was the perception they lacked the knowledge for how to approach and effectively communicate within relationships. Social Learning is frequently considered in explanation of the internalisation and replication of negative and/or positive communication behaviours between generations, with ACD lacking the skills required to build emotional connections and maintain healthy relationships (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2005; Lee, 1995; Mullett & Stolberg, 2002; VanLear, 1992). Considering this, participants believed the lack of positive communication examples provided by interparent relationships left them wanting for answers they had to find themselves. Instead of learning poor communication strategies, narrative illustrated how negative reinforcement through observing parents' unhealthy relationships and/or, neglected parent-child relationships, resulted in suppressed emotions and a

diminished self-worth (Bandura, 1986). As I will discuss, this formed the foundation behind several participants' communication difficulties and unhealthy responses to negative experiences within their relationships. Facing into or raising disagreements a key challenge. Yet, what was invaluable was the detail participants provided in explanation for how it felt to lack positive communication skills and attempt to acquire them with each consecutive relationship.

Research traditionally attributes ACDs' ineffective approaches to resolving/managing conflict to their repeating the negative communication styles observed within the home (D'Onofrio et al., 2007). This, however, was only strongly felt by one participant; Wendy. Remembering nothing positive about her parents' relationship, Wendy recounted several examples of learnt violent behaviours she initially resorted to during disagreements. In line with SLT, her conflict resolution style modelled her parents' styles (Bandura et al., 1961). However, most participants explained their unhealthy behaviours as a reaction to not knowing how to effectively respond to conflict (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002). The more verbal and physical their parents' conflict or the more disharmonious and/or incompatible they perceived their parents' relationship, the more limited participants perceived their positive communication resources, and subsequently the more reserved their response during conflict. Furthermore, the more questions participants had regarding how to experience healthy relationships, the more uncomfortable their relationship journeys were. Participants demonstrating that, even as children they knew their parents' communication was unhealthy, however the lack of healthy examples provided meant they did not know how to effectively communicate.

Subsequently, while some participants found they could react strongly, and in ways that mimicked their parents' behaviours when they felt threatened in a relationship, and/or when interactions with their partner triggered traumatic memories of their parents'

relationship difficulties, several described using appeasement to minimise conflict. Attributing their difficulties to a discomfort with challenging unacceptable behaviour and a desire to facilitate prompt resolution due to their inadequate knowledge of effective conflict resolution strategies. Participants' descriptions of using appeasement demonstrating how poor communication skills can perpetuate ACDs' unhealthy relationships (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002).

Furthermore, explaining how ACD learn maladaptive coping mechanisms, several participants attributed their suppression of emotions and conflict avoidance to their parents' interactions with them before/after the divorce. Participants as children learnt to suppress their emotions to appease a parent and avoid the ramifications of upsetting or disappointing them. The outcome of this approach, and removal of any discomfort, negatively reinforced efforts despite the negative impact on sense of self from not being able to validate their emotions. Importantly, these examples provide insight into the factors that inform ACDs' suppression of emotions, contributing to their difficulties in raising disagreements (Fergusson & Horwood, 2001).

Relatedly, over half of the participants attributed a low self-worth to their father-daughter relationship and/or parents' disregard and invalidation of their emotions during the separation/divorce, further suggesting an association between ACDs' communication difficulties and diminished self-worth. The experience of isolation while working through the confusion regarding parents' relationship difficulties added to the complexity of their communication challenges (van Schaick & Stolberg, 2001). For example, Amelia attributed her diminished self-worth to the perceived abandonment by her father and the belief he prioritised his needs over hers. ACDs have been found to use emotional suppression either to withdraw from conflict or for fear that voicing discomfort would trigger the end of their relationship (VanLear, 1992; Whitton et al., 2008). Similarly, Amelia described prioritising

partners' needs over her own to maintain the relationship and validation she experienced from being in a relationship. Unfortunately, demonstrating how having inadequate knowledge can jeopardise relationships, these unhealthy approaches perpetuated Amelia's diminished self-worth and sense of self within the relationship; inhibiting her comfort and trust in the relationship's stability.

Alternatively, other participants associated their difficulties with the memory of repeatedly sensing parental disharmony or tension. For example, Anna who defined herself as conflict-averse, described rarely seeing her parents disagree. Her father always walked away before anything could be discussed. Anna only sensed disharmony between her parents near to the separation. Rebecca similarly described seeing her parents use reassurance to placate each other and avoid conflict. Rebecca defined herself as a people-pleaser, using appeasement to mitigate any discomfort. Considering the association of ACDs' poor communication skills with observations of violent parental conflict, these participants' distrust in their ability to effectively manage disagreements, suggests a lack of observed interparent communication can also impede development of positive communication strategies (Story et al., 2004).

Furthermore, for several participants, motivation to use emotional suppression in childhood/adolescence was negatively reinforced (Bandura, 1986). For example, Rebecca's learning of pacification and emotional suppression from her parents informed the perfectionist tendencies she used to gain her parents' attention. Failure to gain this attention negatively reinforced Rebecca's attempts; the young Rebecca believing she had to be more perfect and appease them further to receive recognition for managing the disruptive post-divorce changes she was enduring. This approach continued into her adult relationships with an increasing concern about her worthiness and subsequent need for reassurance.

In summary, participants' narrative supports findings that ACD relationships are equally at risk by limited role models of positive communication behaviours as they are by exposure to negative behaviours (Amato, 1996). As participants described, often a result of parents' insufficient knowledge towards effectively voicing discomfort or facing disputes within a relationship; an intergenerational transmission of inadequate knowledge (Charvat et al., 2023). These participants believed their difficulties developed in response to the insecure and unsupportive environment they experienced their parents' relationship in. As I will discuss next, an environment that, if more emotionally supportive, and therefore conducive to effectively processing events, would have mitigated the severity of participants' relationship struggles.

5.2.2 Positioning Absence of Emotional Support Within CODs' Environments and ACDs' Journeys

The level to which ACD experience unhealthy relationships can correlate with ACD's perception of emotional maltreatment during their parents' relationship (Sun et al., 2021). Similarly, a key connecting factor that emerged during participants' descriptions of disappointment with their parents, and the level to which they perceived an absence of emotional support from their parents (hereafter referred to as 'AEPS') both during and after the divorce, was the association of AEPS-related trauma with their relationship journeys. The more traumatic and consistent the perceived emotional unavailability of parents and their invalidation of participants' needs during distressing events, such as parental conflict/interparent difficulties, the more tumultuous and unhealthy participants' descriptions of their relationship journeys. Considering these parent factors, findings explained how childhood experiences impact ACDs' sense of safety within their environment, and subsequently their self-worth (Bowlby, 1988; Wallerstein, 1987); participants' emotional development and opportunity for healthy relationships inhibited by these experiences.

Furthermore, and as I will discuss, explaining ACDs' insecure/unhealthy relationship behaviours as a learnt defence, participants' narratives invaluably illustrated the negative outcome of environments that fail to provide opportunities for children to safely experiment with expressing themselves, and subsequently learn effective, healthy strategies for responding to others' behaviour (Amato, 1986; Bowlby, 1969/1982).

While four participants experienced violence within their parents' relationship, descriptions of parents' inability to effectively resolve conflict were prominent throughout participants' narratives. In line with Bowen's Intergenerational-Transmission Process Theory (1978) and Johnson et al. (2001), the longer participants experienced parental conflict prior to the divorce, the lower quality their relationships. However, while literature often attributes ACD relationship difficulties to the level they were exposed to parents' inability to effectively resolve conflict (Whitton et al., 2008), participants' narratives provided insights into the factors involved. The meanings they took away as children having a particular influence on why this exposure was so detrimental. For example, while repeated exposure to parental conflict is traumatic (Amato, 1986), the trauma of feeling unsafe within parents' relationships was not just about physical safety or the threat of experiencing physically and verbally violent environments. As hinted by Dunlop and Burns (1995), it was also about emotional safety. Safety threatened by events such as the disruption that infidelity brought to their world, the "*chaos"* (Rebecca) of abrupt and fast changes forced upon them and/or the isolation of having nowhere "*safe or healthy"* (Amelia) to experience and process the emotions induced by what participants saw/sensed/heard. Parents' unavailability here shaping participants' internal working models of attachment (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Subsequently, in line with Evans and Bloom (1997), a central factor for many participants was not just the exposure to unhealthy relationship behaviours and/or inappropriate detail of interparent difficulties; the greater influence was the level to which participants felt their

parents considered their needs. Parents' lack of consideration for participants as children, informing their self-worth. For example, as captured by D'Onofrio et al. (2007), several participants believed their parents were so distracted by their relationship struggles and their subsequent *"navigation"* (Anna) of the relationship breakdown and new lives, they failed to notice the impact it had on their children. The lack of value participants felt their parents placed on their needs more detrimental than the breakdown of their family unit. Participants felt forgotten and unimportant.

The speed participants felt their parents expected them to adapt to parental separation, new living arrangements and/or parents' new relationships was confronting. Changes were so fast, often during the first year post-separation, and for some, so unexpected the lack of consultation or validation of their feelings and/or their incomprehension for what was happening and why, exasperated the perceived speed with which things were changing, the perception of AEPS and, the confusion that ensued. For example, several believed their parents assumed if they still had access to one or both parents, they would be okay. Instead, participants felt alone and "*discarded deliberately"* (Annika), forced to adapt to the *"choices"* (Rebecca) parents made for them, without adequate explanation. Subsequently, insufficient opportunities for participants to feel heard and validated, yet also receive clarification about what was happening, was a key reason participants gave for their unhealthy journeys and inaccurate understandings about relationships. In illustration, Amelia's aforementioned feeling of rejection by her father, was furthered by his prompt relationship with a new woman. In line with Wallerstein (1987), Amelia believed her father's disregard of her unanswered questions informed her poor sense of self. The lack of consideration and poor support Amelia perceived inhibiting any positive mediation that her strong mother-daughter relationship may have had on her relationships (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Mustonen et al., 2011).

Several also described developing mistrust in one or both parents before the divorce, especially where they were the eldest sibling. The pressure to take care of the emotional needs of themselves, and others, and processing *"something so big, when you're so small"* (Amelia), further illustrating the experience of AEPS. Subsequently, the impact of participants experiencing unsafe and *"ugly"* (Wendy), stressful environments without nurturing support and guidance emphasised the isolation COD experience. Participants' difficult journeys attributed to having no option but to internally process emotions and understand the world around them alone (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2000). Such descriptions provided insight into the internalisation typically seen in female COD. Particularly, the factors that can inform negative cognitive appraisals and subsequent misinformed perceptions about why parents' relationships have broken down and what is required to have, and maintain, a healthy relationship (D'Onofrio et al., 2007; Zill et al., 1993).

While alluding to factors that could mitigate negative ACD relationship experiences, the different journeys described by participants also offered insight into how perceptions of AEPS and feelings of isolation can influence ACDs' relationship decisions (Conway et al., 2003). For example, Anna, an adolescent at the time, did not feel her home environment was one where she could safely work through her emotions in response to her parents' separation. As Anna described, with her parents and siblings absorbed with processing their own adjustment, Anna was motivated to seek supportive and validating relationships away from her family. Sadly however, Anna did not realise until later how unhealthy these replacement relationships were.

Low-stress divorces can assist in reducing the negative impacts of divorce, particularly children's externalisation/internalisation behaviours during and immediately after divorce (Amato & Booth, 1991; Brand et al., 2017). While Catherine experienced a sense of shame when her parents separated, she was the only participant who did not describe a

journey negatively impacted by the experience of her parents' relationship. Subsequently, comparing Catherine's narrative with other participants provides insights into how an AEPS during dramatic changes, may influence ACD's relationship journeys. For example, in contrast to Anna, while Catherine was a similar age when her parents separated, she described a secure relationship with both parents. Proactively apprehending Catherine's need for information and validation, her mother took the time to talk Catherine through her motivations for pursing the divorce, providing Catherine opportunities to ask questions and express her feelings (D'Onofrio et al., 2007). Her parents also ensured post-divorce changes, including subsequent relationships, happened slowly. While parental divorce during adolescence has been found to be the age most at risk for future relationship health, aligning with Johnson et al. (2001), Catherine's narrative demonstrated how parents' healthy communication styles and role modelling of effective coping mechanisms can mediate the interaction of age during parental divorce on the quality of ACD relationships (Bandura, 1986).

As Erikson's Stages of Development Theory (SDT) would suggest, both Catherine and Anna experiencing parental divorce during adolescence (12 to 18 years old) aligns with the theory's fifth stage (1968); a period where adolescents develop a sense of self and personal identity. While adolescence marks a time where individuals explore and experiment with relationships outside the home, in comparison to Catherine, the stress of Anna's parents' separation and associated isolation experienced within an environment that could not support/validate her through processing the developmental changes she was experiencing, further explains Anna's emotional isolation and subsequent engagement with unhealthy relationships (Erikson, 1968; Hetherington, 2003).

From a different theoretical perspective, with children's first primary relationship being with their parents, it is this relationship that teaches children how to validate

themselves and realise their self-worth (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Lai & Carr, 2018). Subsequently, whether participants' home environments felt unsafe/scary from early childhood, or whether it became unsafe closer to parental separation, several participant relationships illustrated the negative outcome of inconsistent primary care on their attachment styes (Ainsworth et al., 1978). The meanings participants made of events informing their approach to, and behaviour within, relationships (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Furthermore, in line with Christensen and Brooks (2001), the younger participants were when exposed to interparent difficulties, the greater their own difficulties.

Subsequently, participants' hesitation towards or; anxiety or avoidance within relationships, increased with the level of parental-conflict observed and/or perception of abandonment or disregard (Bowlby, 1969/1982). For example, where participants such as Rebecca perceived abandonment and inconsistent caring environments from which to receive validation and develop self-worth in childhood, unhealthy approaches to relationships were informed by an unhealthy desire for validation; an insecure-anxious attachment style (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Kunz, 2001). These participants found they sought relationships for the wrong reasons, and anticipating rejection, behaved in ways they felt necessary to maintain the relationship and perpetuate the feeling of validation it provided (van Schaick & Stolberg, 2001).

Alternatively, narrative by participants such as Tamara and Wendy described behaviours that would be defined as insecure-avoidant. Their independent nature and distant emotional availability attributed to their parents' dismissal of their emotions and disregard of their need for emotional support while managing the traumatic environment their parents' violent relationship created (Bowlby, 1969/1982). In explanation of her cautious approach to relationships, Tamara described her early bond with her father being destroyed during middle-childhood (and before the divorce) both by her realisation that his behaviour towards

her mother was unacceptable and his requirement for Tamara to suppress emotions during her parents' violent on/off again relationship. Like participants with similar experiences, a desire to connect with others conflicted with Tamara's difficulty in experiencing an interdependent relationship with her partner. Her independent approach to relationships, a result of the requirement in childhood to suppress emotions and manage alone (Bowlby, 1969/1982; van Schaick & Stolberg, 2001).

Emphasising children's capacity to experience disappointment with their caregivers at a young age, most participants who described unhealthy relationship journeys were five- to seven-years-old when they started to perceive an AEPS. At this age, children have not developed the cognitive ability and social-emotional development necessary to understand the abstract concepts of parents' disharmonious relationships or to manage emotions. Lacking an ability for abstract thinking, they are also not developmentally old enough to separate their parents' difficulties from themselves (Piaget, 1936). Yet, repeatedly experiencing unhealthy interparent exchanges or perpetually sensing disharmony saw several participants replace their innocent and ideological view of their parents with feelings of mistrust and confusion. In line with Erikson's SDT (1968), participants' narratives highlighted children's vulnerability for experiencing conflict between previous understandings of who they could and couldn't trust, while further illustrating the effect of COD internalising discomfort and/or engaging with negative appraisals when trying to understand parents' relationships and reasons behind the divorce (Evans & Bloom, 1997).

Describing early relationships where they avoided emotional connection, several participants also recognised they *"switched off"* (Amelia) certain emotions to appear stronger and less emotionally unsettled than they were. This seen in response to pressure from parents' relationships to grow up faster than they were (Roper et al., 2020). Again, often without the cognitive maturity to accurately comprehend and process the environment around

them (Piaget, 1936). Erikson's SDT (1968) explains the impact on children's development when they are forced to grow up faster than their developmental stage allows. These experiences overburdening the child with emotional tasks they are not ready for. Children who are not developmentally old enough to rationalise what they see within a logical context, can end up inaccurately assessing the meaning of their parents' interpersonal exchanges. This can also result in unhealthy approaches to relationships due to a lack of knowledge for how to safely relate to others; parents' emotional unavailability and aforementioned pressures on the child, correlating with ACDs negative interpersonal relationship skills and preconceptions towards relationships (Bandura, 1986; Sinclair & Nelson, 1998; Story et al., 2004).

Relatedly, in comparison to non-ACD, ACD often report avoiding relationships, their experiences of parental divorce informing an expectation that their own relationships will fail. Therefore, ACD display higher levels of distrust (Christensen & Brooks, 2001; Conway et al., 2003). Again, being participants' first relationship experience, parental and interparent relationship experiences informed their *"normal"* (Rebecca) and the benchmarks they set for others or expectations of themselves. Subsequently, the more exposure to conflict participants experienced, and the less they felt considered by their parents with regards to what they were exposed to, or how their concerns and needs were validated, the more participants anticipated relationships would deteriorate over time or, they assumed people would fail them (Morrison et al., 2017). This was regardless of how healthy the relationship was. Consequently, as with Tamara and Wendy, several found it hard to be vulnerable and emotionally connect with others. Alternatively, other participants described rushing towards relationships, yet then sabotaging them in apprehension of partners ending their relationship, or having an irreversible escape plan should things feel overwhelmingly threatening. For all participants insufficient confidence in being able to trust and effectively communicate with people was informed by parents' inconsistent and unpredictable relationships, yet also in the

relationship they experienced with their parents themselves (Bandura, 1986; Christensen & Brooks, 2001; Conway et al., 2003). For example, Catherine's experience of a positive relationship between her parents throughout their relationship gave her hope and an awareness that relationships take work. In contrast, others such as Sabrina, Wendy and Tamara, who experienced repeatedly traumatic parental conflict, diminished parent-child relationships and few positive relationship examples outside the home, knew nothing other than relationships do not work. As their narrative suggested, their experience gave them little hope in their relationship abilities, which together with their parent-child relationships, added to the challenge, informing their need to be self-reliant and apprehensive towards trusting others (Amato, 1986; Cui & Fincham, 2010). Subsequently, the higher on the spectrum the experience of parental conflict and lack of feeling valued or prioritised by their parents, the harder participants' journeys were towards healthy long-term relationships. Notably, Samantha's experience was within the central part of the spectrum. While she experienced a traumatic childhood observing her mother's response to the divorce, she also observed a positive relationship in her father's second marriage (Yu & Adler-Baeder, 2007). Furthermore, her relationship with her father perhaps informed Samantha she had something worth giving. Subsequently, while Samantha described a journey informed by a need to protect herself, once she experienced a form of safety in her husband, and his ability to be the father she had experienced, she started to practice a more positive relationship with him.

Such narrative demonstrated how ACDs' perceptions of behaviours within relationships can be informed and negatively reinforced by their different observations and experiences (Bandura, 1986; Christensen & Brooks, 2001). However, despite research associating ACDs' higher levels of insecure behaviour than non-ACD with a fear of repeating parents' unhealthy relationship mistakes (Crowell et al., 2009; Morrison et al., 2017), every participant strongly denied their behaviours were influenced by fears of experiencing similar

relationship difficulties as their parents (Bandura, 1986; Evans & Bloom, 1997). Providing vital illuminating detail, with participants' attribution of behaviours to insufficient opportunities to learn effective ways to express emotions and respond to others, narrative returns this discussion to the outcome of an AEPS and the experience of invalidation during childhood. For example, Wendy's violent reaction to her partner seeming to disregard her concerns or needs, and Tamara's hesitancy to emotionally connect and/or prematurely sever relationships as soon as they had hurt her, reflected a learnt response developed when internally processing similar feelings of invalidation or disregard during childhood. A defence mechanism developed unconsciously to protect themselves from discomfort during similar situations. These childhood experiences informed participants' perception they would not be heard and subsequently served as a foundation to their perceived inability to *"have those conversations"* (Sabrina). The more participants felt disregarded/dismissed within their adult relationship, the more they anticipated others would inevitably let them down or hurt them. Reflecting a triadic interaction of behaviour, personal and environmental factors, this often triggered, and explained, participant's use of unhealthy responses within their initially unhealthy journeys (Bandura, 1986).

While participants' narratives provided insights into how experiences of unhealthy parent relationships can place ACD at risk of experiencing unhealthy relationships themselves, narrative also provided insight into factors that can assist ACD in overcoming, and healing from, their experiences. I will discuss this next.

5.2.3 Realisation and Transformation away from the Unhealthy Relationship Trajectory

Several words were repeated throughout participants' narratives. Poignantly, words such as, home and safe/safety; two words connecting the environment that facilitate positive emotional development. A safe environment within which to grow and flourish (Piaget, 1936). The level this was not provided to participants positively correlated with the level of

emotional and/or physical neglect they experienced. Subsequently, for several participants, returning home was a destination. They sought a relationship that felt like the home they knew they deserved, not the environments they had experienced as children or during early relationships. It was not until participants felt safe that they started to experience home.

It is here participants provided insight into how their journeys differ from the ill-fated relationships existing literature would imply (Amato & Patterson, 2017); the potential for ACD to identify and change seemingly innate and ingrained unhealthy relationship behaviours for more positive and healthy ones. Prominent factors behind participants' transformations included identifying and addressing the behaviours within themselves that needed to change; primarily taking responsibility for their contribution to their unhealthy journeys, yet also meeting a partner who facilitated environments that supported participants in choosing to engage with relationships differently. While each participant's journey was different, preventing the identification of a one-size-fits-all formula for mitigating the impact of being an ACD, as I will discuss, narratives provided invaluable insights into ACDs' relationship journey experiences and overcoming the negative challenges an absence of emotional support from their parents (AEPS) can induce.

ACD who have experienced parental divorce prior to 18-years of age are often thought unable to differentiate between their parents' relationship challenges and their own. Failing to see divorce as avoidable with negative expectations about marriage/long-term relationships due to assumptions they will experience unhealthy relationships like their parents (Reed et al., 2016). In contrast, these participants were able to later differentiate their parents' relationship difficulties from their own, despite experiencing divorce prior to turning 18-years-old. Furthermore, while ACD between 19- and 29-years of age have been thought less self-aware than non-ACD as a result of their experiences, most participants were in their early to mid-twenties when they started to recognise their approaches to relationships were

unhealthy (Johnson et al., 2001). Realisation that changes within themselves were required demonstrated an immense level of self-awareness and a positive sense of self, separate from their parents' difficulties and influences.

For most participants, self-exploration and identification of the unhealthy behaviours and self-worth they needed to change, often came in tandem with the realisation their parents' unhealthy relationships evolved from not having the skills to reflect on, recognise and challenge the foundations behind their relationship difficulties. Furthermore, illustrating self-awareness and challenging the perception by literature and theoretical models that intergenerational influences are overpowering (Amato & Patterson, 2017; Bandura, 1986), participants' curiosity and desire to understand why they were experiencing unhealthy relationships was something several participants believed their parents, and parents before them, had not done. Similarly, with their seeking external support/professional guidance. As participants identified, these findings suggest a generational shift in the ability for ACD to heal and resolve their relationship journeys. Furthermore, while previous research has acknowledged ACD can use knowledge of their parents' history to put their own relationships into perspective (Cartwright & McDowell, 2008), in positioning their parents' childhoods and relationships within their own journeys, participants illustrated an invaluable transition from associating parents' unhealthy relationships with their own difficulties, to assuming responsibility for the factors that perpetuated their unhealthy journeys.

In addition to narrative describing ACDs' self-awareness and honesty with themselves increasing with age, participants' suggestions that turning points in their self-worth and sense of self included learning/growth through different, more positive experiences also illustrated how ACDs' self-awareness can improve with positive, emotionally supportive environments. Consistent and safe environments that fostered development of open communication and resolved the unhealthy journeys shaped by earlier experiences of confusion and isolation. For

example, several described journeys benefiting from experiencing a relationship with someone who had compassionate goals for their wellbeing. ACD who have experienced AEPS and challenging parent relationships have benefited from relationships based on a mutual desire to support each other's wellbeing (Sun et al., 2021). In illustration, for several participants, environments conducive to making positive change came in the form of a partner who had experienced alternative home environments with more healthy examples of "*responding to situations and navigating"* (Wendy) relationships differently. Although these differences were initially overwhelming, particularly to those who had experienced extremely violent/disharmonious parent relationships, findings suggest that experiencing partner's different, and more effective, approaches to relationships can facilitate the positive learning environment several ACD lack during childhood (Bandura, 1986). As these participants described, reassurance they could learn alternative and more effective communication and relationship strategies assisted with the *"unpacking"* (Wendy) of the influence their childhood experiences had had. It also helped mitigate the potential for the relationship to decline over time, as several had experienced earlier in their journey when partnered with people who had similarly unhealthy approaches to relationships.

ACD's struggle with forming close relationships in early adulthood is often attributed to a fear of rejection or the unresolved conflict between identity and role confusion during adolescence (Bowlby, 1988; Erikson, 1968). However, while this may have initially held participants back, with each experience of mutual care and trust they experienced within their current relationship, participants experienced an increased comfort in being open and vulnerable with their partner. Interestingly, several participants initially justified their long-term, healthy relationships to their partners. However, this might be explained by their journeys improving through a combination of an enhanced self-worth and their partners' behaviour facilitating a secure environment that emulates the value and respect for

participants, several had not previously experienced. A combination of factors that facilitated a secure environment conducive to positive change.

This research also illustrated how an enhanced self-worth, self-actualisation and experiences that challenge the fundamental perception of self that is acquired through unhealthy parent relationships and parent-child relationships, can interrupt an ACDs' unhealthy journey trajectory (Rogers, 1951). That, while external examples of healthy relationships helped some participants challenge what informed their self-worth, it was only within positive environments and/or in response to self-reflections that participants were able to start making changes (Gately & Schwebel, 1991). Each successive change further strengthening their self-worth, yet also assisting them in further addressing the unhealthy communication and relationship strategies holding them back.

Challenging their initial internal working model towards relationships, several also benefited from developing a self-worth that was validated from within, and building a more positive perception of who they were and what they were worth (Bowlby, 1969/1982). The timing for this change was different for each participant. For example, Amelia described building her self-worth via her parenting experience; learning she was not her parents and that her value should come from within rather than her relationships. Subsequently, Amelia practiced expressing her needs/desires and ensured her relationship with her now husband was built on friendship rather than a focus on prioritising his intimacy needs. Alternatively, for Samantha and Wendy, improvement came within their current relationship, their self-worth grew with improved feelings of safety and trust that their partner supported them. Utilising these experiences to further understand and validate themselves therefore saw most participants develop more secure relationship behaviours, fostering more healthier relationships (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Hudson et al., 2020). Subsequently, each participant described experiencing a cumulative sense of safety and reciprocal relationship with their

current partner, an ability and confidence to *"be me"* (Amelia), and an experience Erikson (1968) would attribute to the successful navigation of intimacy versus isolation most non-ACD experience earlier in life. Examples illustrating the outcome of positive environments informing participants' improved sense of efficacy in making the required changes, which incentivised by a desire to experience healthy relationships, assisted participants in addressing their unhealthy behaviours to engage with their relationships differently (Bandura, 1986).

In summary, with participants' experience of parents' relationships seen to only hinder their development of healthy behaviours, their progression delayed until they were at an age old enough to explore their own behaviours and the foundations behind them, this research provides insights into the environments that facilitate healing from the disruption and disappointment ACD experience in childhood. An ability for ACD to reach "*the same destination [as non-ACD], but it took me longer and required more effort on my part"* (Katrina). The next section will discuss the considerations this research recommends for the wellbeing of young people when experiencing these sorts of events.

5.3 Considerations for the Wellbeing of Young People Experiencing Unhealthy Parent Relationships/Divorce

Parent relationship difficulties and divorce happen, however when parents are emotionally distracted or fail to support children with the safe/secure environment required, children are left with insufficient guiderails to support their appraisals of life's events (Brand et al., 2017). Relatedly, this study emphasised how traumatic, unhealthy parent relationships can be for children regardless of the behaviours they observe. That any repeated experience of negative emotions within environments that do not feel safe and/or where emotional needs are consistently unmet or dismissed, can inform unhealthy approaches to relationships. As Sabrina paraphrased Ryan North, "Our brains are wired for connection, trauma rewires them

for protection, [hence] relationships are difficult for wounded people," (North, 2025, February 17).

Acknowledging the experiences that informed participants' relationship difficulties, and leaning on participants' narratives, this section discusses considerations for parents that could aid favourable environments for children's growth regardless of their parents' relationship status. Considerations focused on the provision of environments that validate children's emotional needs while acknowledging their developmental immaturity.

5.3.1 Role modelling Effective Communication

Relationships are not easy, yet disagreements that avoid negative or aggressive exchanges are opportunities to teach children effective communication strategies (Morrison et al., 2017). While frequent, heated arguments can be perceived as threatening to children, as this research illustrated, failure to provide children examples of constructive discussions can also inhibit their development. Subsequently, positive approaches include demonstrating and explaining to children the value of showing respect to each other by practicing non-judgemental listening, avoiding interrupting or using toxic language; of focusing on objective facts and validating the other person's emotions (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Implementing healthy communication boundaries before and after separation will also support children's sense of security with each parent (Kang & Ganong, 2020). For example, holding fraught conversations away from children and not undermining other parent's characteristics by sharing details of *"how they feel towards their significant other,"* (Rebecca).

5.3.2 Anticipating Children's Emotions

Participants often described environments that invalidated their need to express themselves in response to events. In contrast, parents should facilitate development of healthy interpersonal skills by providing a reliable "*safe space,"* (Amelia) that acknowledges and enables children's progression through stages of emotional development (Bowlby, 1988;

Erikson, 1950; Piaget, 1936). This includes anticipating and permitting children to have numerous "*emotions, especially if they're so young they'll not understand what's happening,"* (Katrina); understanding these emotions within the broad context of the children's environments. Ultimately, this requires *"healthy relationships with both parents,"* (Katrina) even if the interparent relationship has deteriorated (Pruett et al., 2016). Relationships that permit the children opportunities to be themselves and experiment with emotional expression and regulation.

5.3.3 Parents as Emotional Resources and Avoiding Assumptions

Positive parent-child relationships were difficult for participants where parents as supportive resources were unavailable from middle childhood or; deteriorated post-divorce due to distraction by new relationships or parents' raw emotions/adjustments. Subsequently, *"putting the child's best interests first,"* (Rebecca), parents should collaborate to ensure children experience equally supportive environments when with either parent. This includes addressing the disruptive nature that parental conflict/relationship difficulties and divorce brings to children, separating the interparent relationship from their parent-child relationship and ensuring changes happen at a pace that permits children adequate time to adjust.

"Changes are a big deal" (Rebecca) for children and divorce forces several changes on them. They deserve age-appropriate explanations. This also requires *"being on the same page together; talking about and making decisions as a family,"* (Catherine). For example, regardless of good intentions, children may not feel comfortable with custody arrangements or new partners. Subsequently, in line with Lee (1995), rather than assume a child is okay, parents should regularly check in with children *"to make sure they're okay, if they need anything"* (Rebecca) when they are with each parent. Checking children feel comfortable and addressing any confusion while ensuring custody arrangements meet children's

preferences, validates their experience of upheaval while allowing each parent to understand and meet their children's needs.

"Little people don't necessarily know what their feelings are. They can't identify them or might not think to speak about them because they might not wanna upset anybody else," (Amelia). This does not mean they are not struggling with what is happening. Subsequently, *"offers to be heard,"* (Amelia) and environments that assist children in safely exploring and labelling what they are feeling, are important. For example, open, respectful and empathetic communication that acknowledges children's emotions without judgement or dismissal of ambivalent emotions. Such models of emotional validation help children feel heard while reinforcing their sense of self and positive self-worth. This also helps increase children's confidence in their ability to validate emotions and needs, thus helping develop effective communication strategies (Bowlby, 1988).

Parents are often unaware of how their relationships affect their children or the level of stress placed upon them (Carr, 2016). Subsequently, taking the children's perspective, rather than parents hearing from the parents' perspective, will assist parents in realising what children understand about how events are affecting them. Furthermore, sincerely encouraging children to ask questions, and answering them in a way that provides clarity, will validate experiences and concerns, while also guiding children through accurate appraisals of their sense of self within their parents' relationship (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2005). For example, assisting children in gaining accurate understandings of interparent conflict as their parents' problem, not theirs, will help them separate their self-worth from their parents' relationship. Reciprocally, these discussions can also improve parent-child relationships (Dunsmore et al., 2012).

5.3.4 External Resources

Psychoeducation via therapy can help children develop a greater sense of control in how events affect them (Wolchik et al., 2002). Both Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Narrative Therapy have proven effective in supporting children through the effects of divorce, particularly in managing stress from the numerous changes divorce forces upon them and solving interpersonal conflict difficulties (Hamby, 2018). While some participants found counselling helpful later in life, when younger, several participants struggled to understand what they needed from counselling, and subsequently did not pursue further sessions. Children are unlikely to "*really understand what's happening,"* (Katrina) both around them, but also, emotionally within themselves, since they are still learning their emotions and how to understand them within the context of their experiences (Piaget, 1936). Therefore, sending children to therapy without talking them through what it is for and how it works, or even if they want it, may be counterproductive. As Anna's experience illustrated, children are also working through their own developmental demands, especially through adolescence (Erikson, 1950; Piaget, 1936) and may misunderstand therapy as punishment. Being patient with children as they build their understanding of the supportive resources available and identify what they want out of the resources is important. As is use of age-appropriate language that is comprehensible by the child.

From a therapeutic perspective, children who have been discouraged from expressing their emotions or whose parents have not validated their emotions and needs may not feel safe discussing their emotional experiences. Therapists will need to work patiently to assist these children in building confidence while developing the communication skills to effectively explore their emotions and work through the effects of emotional distress on their internalised/externalised behaviour (Hamby, 2018).

Alternatively, in-school programmes could assist COD with seeking answers to questions about experiencing healthy relationships with therapists more in touch with children's use of language. For example, while it has been discontinued, ACC's *Mates & Dates* programme (ACC, 2022) supported Aotearoa adolescents in developing the skills and knowledge to experience healthy relationships based on respect. Similar offerings at schools, or through school counselling may be more effective than private therapy.

Relatedly, this study provides insights into the language ACD use when exploring lived experiences. Drawing on narrative from such qualitative studies will guide therapists in the language they use when supporting COD/ACDs. Helping COD/ACD identify alternative approaches to unhealthy relationship models by using language that connects with, and is positioned within, their understandings of experiences. Essentially, while some participants' transformations were aided by an educated understanding of psychological theories, such as attachment behaviours (Bowlby, 1969/1982) and healthy relationship models such as those described by Gottman and Silver (1999), for most participants change came by identifying and understanding what they didn't know, as something their parents didn't teach them. For example, Sabrina did not seek to address her attachment behaviours. Instead she strove to experience healthier relationships. Similarly, for Amelia change came by using her own words to identify her challenges and learn healthier approaches from other environments or relationships away from her parents.

With interparent conflict and separation/divorce difficult for all parties, it is also important parents seek support with managing the effects of their divorce and/or mental health to ensure their *"difficulty doesn't translate to the child's"* (Samantha). For several participants, watching parents manage emotions was especially concerning. Parent-training courses, psychoeducation and therapy can assist with family communication and parents being responsive to children's needs particularly where co-parent alliance is difficult

(Gladding, 2014; Pruett & Barker, 2010). Seeking support also endorses asking for support to children; showing them it is okay to ask for help. Resources could help parents learn how to model finding solutions and effective coping strategies to their children, further role modelling effective communication strategies and emotional regulation (Bandura, 1986).

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

It is important to note some of the limitations of this project. Firstly, while various communications assisted in building rapport, all conversations were via video conference (Hydén, 2014). As experienced here, virtual interviews can risk disruptions that threaten or interrupt participants' trains of thought and narratives. The researcher is also under pressure to notice unspoken communication/distress. While participants' voiced comfort when sharing their experiences, face-to-face interviews would help eliminate distractions, as would reminding participants to choose private locations (King & Bailey-Rodriguez, 2019).

Participants' mental health also affected two participants' abilities to concentrate and/or separate the impacts of their ACD-experiences on their current relationship from their mental health. Results relied on participants' judgements as to whether narrative was an accurate recall or impacted by their current mental health. While screening participants could help exclude negative impacts, participants understood much of their mental health was a result of experiencing parental relationship difficulties and their insights were therefore relevant. A more experienced interviewer/researcher may have added beneficial insights to analysis given known mental health difficulties of some ACD (Carr, 2016; Smith et al., 2009).

The sample size of ten meant analysis would not cover all perceptions of Aotearoa female ACD. Furthermore, acknowledging Aotearoa's culturally diverse heritage, while one participant identified as Māori and another as Māori-Pasifika, more participants identifying with these ethnicities would facilitate a deeper understanding of social-cultural contexts

within ACDs' interpretative processes (Sandfield, 2006). Notably, these two participants ascribed elements of their diminished self-worth and sense of self to broken relationships with their Māori and Māori-Pasifika parent. Both participants were still discovering how this affected their relationships and the interview time available was deemed insufficient to sensitively explore this further. However, given the multifaceted relationship between Māori cultural identity and their psychological wellbeing, future studies could investigate the relationship between a disconnect with cultural heritage and ACDs' relationship journeys (Durie, 1997). Findings may reveal cultural insights previously not captured by existing Aotearoa divorce-related research thus further broadening applicability.

Furthermore, while recruitment efforts assisted in acquiring a population from different sources, all participants had completed different forms of tertiary education. Four had also studied psychology. Despite homogenous samples being preferable for IPA, these participants may have been more insightful into their journeys than those from a more educationally diverse group. It may also explain the suggested generational shift participants demonstrated in identifying the changes they needed to implement to experience healthy relationships. Subsequently, exploring experiences of ACD from different backgrounds, geographic locations and ethnicities would broaden applicability of findings and insights. In turn, helping therapists better support Aotearoa children experiencing parental relationship difficulties/divorce and ACD struggling to experience healthy relationships.

Acknowledging how inaccurate appraisals in childhood affected participants' experiences, more is required to understand the questions COD have and the information their developmental maturity can comprehend. Ethically approved research involving children capturing thoughts and concerns via emotion journaling could provide invaluable insights, while also mitigating issues created by relying on ACDs' memory retrieval about events many years passed.

Several participants described their journeys as mirroring the initial relationships of non-ACD. Yet in contrast to non-ACD, these participants believed they engaged with more unhealthy relationships and due to the complex obstacles they had to overcome, took longer to experience healthy relationships. Subsequently, replicating this study with different cohorts, such as female non-ACD, male ACD and non-ACD, and exploring perceptions of their relationship journeys and any context their parents' relationships offer, would expand understandings of the factors influencing Aotearoa children's perceptions and experiences of relationships.

Lastly, acknowledging the divergence between quantitative research results attributed to participants' different understandings of a word, and a lack of opportunity for participants to elaborate within Likert Scales, this study demonstrated the value of qualitative research methods for holistic understandings of the human experience (Johnson et al., 2001). For example, participants' understandings and/or personal meanings behind the words they used were clarified during this study's interviews. Interviewing participants twice also provided opportunities to seek further detail/clarification while permitting participants opportunities to further reflect on their thoughts between interviews, offering insights that may have not been captured in just one interview. Collectively, this helped capture participants' experiences with depth and accuracy. For example, several participants described healthy relationships as feeling like *"home"* (Sabrina). Instead of referring to a tangible object/residence, "home" positioned participants' current relationships as their journey's destination. It reflected experiences they had not had previously; environments that accepted them without criticism or judgement. Without opportunities to seek clarification, the meaning behind "home" and illustrations of the discomfort/traumatic disruption participants experienced during childhood and within their relationship journeys, would have been missed. Subsequently, the depth of insights afforded by IPA and this study's capturing of narrative, demonstrated the importance

of using qualitative research methods to explore psychological phenomenon. Using qualitative or a mix of qualitative and quantitative research methods is therefore recommended for future exploration within this space.

5.5 Conclusion

The focus on ACD is often on the behaviours that align with theories explaining the development of unhealthy relationship behaviours and the ITD. While participants' narratives acknowledged the association between ACD and the trajectory of unhealthy relationships that this focus characterises, this study highlighted the factors that inform the development and expression of unhealthy behaviours. Primarily, the negative cognitive appraisals COD engage with that, reinforced by an absence of emotional support from their parents (AEPS), results in misperceptions that form the foundation for ACDs' approach to, and engagement within, relationships.

This study also illustrated how critical self-reflection and pursuit of informed, alternative environments can interrupt ACDs' unhealthy relationship journeys. Participants moved from isolation and confusion to realisation, agency and positive self-worth. The key to improvement included curiosity and desire or, openness to change, friendship ahead of intimacy, validation of self from within, yet also validation of emotional needs and experiences by supportive others.

To conclude, children need to know they'll be supported and kept safe when their world is changing. While some participants' experiences of parental behaviour could be professionally recognised as the Adverse Childhood Experience of severe emotional neglect (Carr, 2016), participants' descriptions of factors involved in AEPS illustrated the complex and subjective levels of trauma that emotional absence, within the context of parental divorce, can induce. This study acknowledges parental emotional absence can be unintentionally afflicted on children within the phenomenon of disharmonious interparent

relationships (Boney, 2002). Subsequently, while participants accepted their parents as individuals who unintentionally made mistakes, their primary message was the need for parents to always consider how innocent and sensitive children's perceptions are. Particularly given children's insufficient developmental maturity to manage change and perceived threats to safety alone.

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Appendix A: Information Sheet

Exploring the Lived Experience of Being a Female, Adult Child-of-Divorce and the Influence this Experience has on the Adult Child's own Interpersonal (romantic) Relationships

Researcher(s) Introduction

My name is Leontine Van Manen-Esdaile, and I am a postgraduate student in the Masters of Arts (Psychology Endorsement) programme at Massey University. Part of my postgraduate qualification involves completing a research project. The aim of this research is to explore the experience of parental divorce and the post-divorce romantic relationship experience female, children of divorce have as an adult within Aotearoa, New Zealand.

Project Description and Invitation

- The objective of this study is to gather insights into the positive approaches parents can apply when transitioning through separation and the factors that could facilitate a healthy adjustment for children of divorce, specifically in their approach as adults to their own interpersonal (romantic) relationships
- In turn, this project will provide insights into female children's experience of divorce within Aotearoa New Zealand, and the influence this experience has on their own relationships in adulthood. Findings from this project will help inform support services for children and families navigating divorce/parental separation.
- You are invited to participate in this study, exploring your experience of how being a child of divorce influences your own experience of romantic relationships.

Participant Identification and Recruitment

- Recruitment will be via word of mouth, snowballing, and advertisements through Massey University post-graduate community groups and, personal community membership. Interested participants will be invited to contact me directly for more information. This will be provided via a verbal discussion and information sheet. Pre-interview meetings will be arranged for information to be reviewed and the interview schedule discussed. All questions or requests for amendments to the questions, will be discussed during this initial meeting.
- This study welcomes people living in Aotearoa New Zealand who identify as female; who are between the ages of 23 and 45 years old and; who are either in a long-term relationship (over 5 years) or are married. Participants must have been raised in Aotearoa New Zealand and, experienced the start of their parents' divorce/separation before they turned 18 years of age.

- This project looks to interview up to 10 participants. The analysis of the data collected will be completed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method which recommends between 6 and 10 participants.
- Participants will be given a $40 petrol or supermarket voucher as an acknowledgement for their time and contribution to this study.
- Participants may experience some distress as a result of revisiting and sharing events relating to their parents' separation/divorce and any reflection on their relationship history.

Project Procedures

- Participants will be invited to attend two interviews of up to one hour each in length, with scheduled breaks. Subsequent questions will be used to promote two-way discussion and facilitate further exploration of the topic raised during the initial open-ended questions. Interview questions will be peer reviewed by a known individual to me as the researcher, who has lived experience with parental divorce and long-term relationships to receive feedback and maintain research integrity.
- Prior to the first interview, participants will be asked to share a timeline of their relationship history. This will provide participants the opportunity to reflect on their parent's divorce and their own relationships, giving thought to any significant moments.
- In total, it is expected this will require participants give approximately three hours to the research project. This will be explained during recruitment.
- During the interviews, participants will be asked about their experience of parental divorce and their subsequent romantic relationships as an adult. The researcher is interested in what participants have taken from this experience.
- The option of pausing/skipping questions or stopping the interviews will be offered should participants become uncomfortable or distressed during the interviews. A follow-up check-in phone call will also be offered together with details of national/regional organisations who can provide support and/or counselling to the participant. Providing the option to attend interviews via video conferencing from a location comfortable to the participant will also support their need for comfort and minimise feelings of intrusion.

Data Management

- Analysis will look to provide a detailed account of specific themes within the information (the data) shared by participants. The data will be reviewed for any themes related to the participants' experience of relationships in adulthood and coded without considering themes from previously discussed research.
- Where it will provide context to the discussion of the data collated and themes identified, some narrative from the participant/s interviews may be shared within the written report. Inclusion of any narrative will be shared with the participants prior to publication. Participants will therefore be consulted for their approval and correction of any inaccuracies or misdescription. Participants will have two weeks to provide changes or request withdrawal of any narrative from the report.
- To protect confidentiality, any photos shared by the participants will not be retained by me as the researcher. Instead, the participant's description and narrative will be captured in the audio recording.
- At the close of my analysis, transcriptions and reports will be shared with the participants to give them an opportunity to check the accuracy of what the research has captured.

- Any information identifying participants will be kept confidential, and all data will be anonymised
- While a master list of names will be held using a password-protected document, transcripts will have all identifiers removed with participants given pseudonyms. The master list will be destroyed once research is completed.

Participant's Rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- Decline to answer any particular question/s;
- Withdraw from the study within two weeks of the last interview;
- Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- Provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- Be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.
- Ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.

Project Contacts

- Researcher: Leontine Van Manen-Esdaile,
- Supervisor: Associate Professor Matthew Shepherd, 09-213-6094
- Please do not hesitate to contact me (Leontine) to discuss further or raise any questions you have about the project.

Compulsory Statements

1. <u>MUHEC APPLICATIONS</u>

Committee Approval Statement

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, Application OM2 24/18. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact the Chairperson, Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, email humanethics2@massey.ac.nz.

Exploring the Lived Experience of Being a Female, Adult Child-of-Divorce and the Influence this Experience has on the Adult Child's own Interpersonal (romantic) Relationships

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW OUTLINE FOR PARTICIPANTS INFORMATION PRIOR TO CONSENTING TO TAKING PART

My name is Leontine Van Manen-Esdaile, and I am a postgraduate student in the Masters of Arts (Psychology Endorsement) programme at Massey University. As you know, part of my postgraduate qualification involves doing a research project. The aim of this research is to explore the experience of parental divorce and the post-divorce relationship experience as a female adult who experienced parental divorce as a child within Aotearoa, New Zealand.

During these interviews, I will ask you about your experience of your parents' divorce and your subsequent romantic relationships as an adult. I am interested in your opinions and what you feel you have taken from this experience. I am here to learn from you. There are no right or wrong answers.

These discussions will be split between two interviews which will each take approximately 60 minutes. You can stop at any time if you are feeling uncomfortable or you would like to take a break. You can also choose to not answer a question you are uncomfortable discussing.

Your interview will be audio-recorded, transcribed and then this data will be analysed. I will invite you later on to review the transcription and make any corrections or withdraw comments you no longer wish to be shared. You can withdraw any commentary up to two weeks after the interview.

Below is the outline of interview topics we will discuss. If there is anything you would like clarified, or ask me about prior to giving consent to participate, please feel free to get in touch via [redacted] or [redacted].

INTERVIEW ONE

Today I would like to ask you some questions about your experience of your parent's separation/divorce and your relationship history since.

Section 1: Framing relationship experience

- Discussing how you would describe your relationship journey over time
- Discussing how you would describe a long-term relationship
- Discussing your experience of your relationship with your current partner

Section 2: Family life and experience of parental divorce

- Discussing family life for you growing up
- Discussing your parents' relationship as you experienced it

Section 3: Timeline reflections

Before coming to this interview, you will be asked to construct a timeline, starting from when you first experienced your parent's relationship difficulties/separation/divorce until the current date and; to highlight any key points/significant moments throughout your experience of your parent's divorce and your own experiences with intimate/romantic relationships. You can bring in (or show) other mementos (photos or other items) to help explain what was happening to you at different moments in time. In this section we will look at your timeline together and explore how you experienced different points.

Note: The timeline can depict whatever is important to you. This could be key transitions or significant events (i.e. your parent's announcement of their wish to separate, your relationship history, etcetera) and key supports and services (both helpful or unhelpful) you experienced during and after the separation/divorce. We are unlikely to get through all of the timeline in this session. We will decide when to finish for this session and where you would like to start for the second interview.

<u>INTERVIEW TWO</u>

Section 3: Timeline reflections (continued)

We will finish off discussing your timeline here and any reflections you may have. We will then discuss your overall experience across the timeline and any experiences you draw on today.

Section 4: Overall insights into your experience of being a child of divorce *[Opportunity for participant to share final reflections]*

- Discussing how you would describe the experience of being a 'child of divorce?

- Discussing what you feel is useful for parents going through separation/divorce to know about the experiences their children may be going through and supporting their children?

Appendix B: Consent Form

Exploring the Lived Experience of Being a Female, Adult Child-of-Divorce and the Influence this Experience has on the Adult Child's own Interpersonal (romantic) Relationships

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I have read and understood the consent form/information sheet provided to me. I have had the details of the study explained to me. Any questions I have had have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study and I understand participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time up until two weeks after the second interview.

1. I agree/do not agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.
2. I agree/do not agree to the interview being audio recorded for transcription and the content used for analysis, final thesis and results presentation (all identifiers will be removed/replaced with a pseudonym).
3. I agree/do not agree for a copy of my drawn timeline to be photographed by the researcher and used in the analysis, final thesis and results presentation (all identifying material will be removed).
4. I wish/do not wish to review my transcript following transcription
5. I wish/do not wish to have a summary of the project results emailed to me
6. I wish/do not wish to have my recordings returned to me.

Declaration by Participant:

I [print full name] hereby consent to take part in this study.

Signature: Date:

Please provide the following information if you are comfortable to do so:

Age:

Gender:

Note: This project is open to people who identify as female– if you would like to define yourself further within this identity (e.g., Cis or trans) please say so here.

Ethnicity (please indicate which applies)

	European
	Māori
	Pacific
	Asian
	MELAA (Middle Eastern, Latin American and African)
	Other

Please describe:

This information will be used by the Researcher (Leontine Van Manen-Esdaile) to contact you and will be kept confidential:

Contact number:

Email address:

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Exploring the Lived Experience of Being a Female, Adult Child-of-Divorce and the Influence this Experience has on the Adult Child's own Interpersonal (romantic) Relationships

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Greeting/opening

My name is Leontine Van Manen-Esdaile, and I am a postgraduate student in the Masters of Arts (Psychology Endorsement) programme at Massey University. As you know, part of my postgraduate qualification involves doing a research project. The aim of this research is to explore the experience of parental divorce and the post-divorce relationship experience as a female adult who experienced parental divorce as a child within Aotearoa, New Zealand. During these interviews, I will ask you about your experience of your parents' divorce and your subsequent romantic relationships as an adult. I am interested in what you feel you have taken from this experience.

Today I would like to ask you some questions about your experience of your parent's separation/divorce and your relationship history since. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes, but you can stop at any time if you are feeling uncomfortable or you would like to take a break. You can also choose to not answer a question you are uncomfortable discussing. Your interview will be audio-recorded, transcribed and then this data will be analysed. I will invite you later to review the transcription and make any corrections or withdraw comments you no longer wish to be shared.

I am here to learn from you and your experiences. There are no right or wrong answers. I want to understand the meaning of your experience – what it meant for you then, and now. Your opinions and experiences are what I am interested in.

Before we begin, is there anything you would like clarified, or ask me about? Are you comfortable with us proceeding?

Notes for interviewer on probing responses:

- *What are your thoughts about that?*
- *What exactly do you mean when you say [that]*
- *You said you felt …. [or] you mentioned [x] … can you talk me through that?*
- *Are you saying that [seeking clarification]*
- *How did you conceive this perception?*
- *How did you feel/think then? And now?*
- *Tell me more about what you took from that experience / how did it make you feel? What meaning did you/ do you associate with that experience?*

INTERVIEW ONE

Introductory questions/getting to know the participant:

- Can you tell me a little about yourself?
  [Probing questions include:
    - How do you spend your day?
    - Who do you spend your day with?
    - How long have you been in your current relationship?
    - How did you meet [name]?]
    - How long has it been since your parent's separated?

Section 1: Framing relationship experience

Before we look at your timeline and the specifics of your experience, can you give me an overall sense of what your journey has been like since your parents' divorce/separation?

- How would you describe your relationship journey over time?
- From your experience, how would you describe a long-term relationship? What does a [insert word participant used for initial question/positive or long-term] relationship mean to you? How do you conceptualise it? And what do you think helps make a [insert word participant used/positive or long-term] relationship?
  - How did you conceive this perception?
- Can you tell me about your relationship with [NAME/your husband/partner]
  [Exploring participant's perception of current relationship and how they navigate the relationship including managing conflict/challenges]
  [Probing questions:
  - What does this relationship mean to you?
  - Can you recall a time where you've navigated a challenge in this relationship (conflict/differences and how it was managed)
    - Walk me through it
    - I'm curious if there was a point here, or at other times, where you've had a "ah-ha" moment about how you approach these situations?
      - Perhaps a turning point for you in how you navigate your relationship?
        - What's influenced that "ah-ha" moment or turning point do you think?
        - Can you think of an example of how this relationship is different from previous relationships you've had or others' relationships that you know?
          - How/why is it different do you think?
          - I'm wondering if your relationship experience here reminds you of anything you experienced

earlier in your life? [such as experience of parent's divorce/relationship – perhaps an example of an influence on your approach to navigating relationships? Can you think of other examples?]

[Exploring: Possible experience of managing challenges/conflict; communication; expectations of a relationship and of partner; perception of a positive/long-term relationship/marriage/commitment]

Section 2: Family life and experience of parental divorce

[Exploring experience of divorce and the experience as an influence on participant's relationships. For example, positive or negative outcomes of divorce or, the impact of the divorce, or, outcome of changes to their experience as an adult. Examples could include parent-child relationships, observing/experiencing parents' relationship with each other and their approach to managing conflict/communication/coping with stress]

- Tell me about family life for you growing up
  [Exploring: What "family life" means to the individual and the experiences they associate with their 'childhood', permitting insight into the placement the participant puts their parents' divorce in their childhood timeline.]
- Tell me about your parents' relationship [Asking participant to describe relationship]
  [Exploring: Positive or negative interactions they remember (either observing, hearing or, sensing) and which remain more prominent in their recollection – be that with parents, between parents or, with siblings].
    - Could you share any memories of relationships and interactions within your family prior to separation?
    - How did that change during or after the divorce? *[Exploring any turning points or specific memories that stand out for participant, e.g. thoughts, feelings, perceptions of experience or observations of physical affection/communication/conflict/relationship with parents and siblings]*
        - What was communicated with you about this here?
        - How did that make you feel?
        - How did you respond? (thoughts, behaviours, actions)
        - What thoughts did you have about that at the time?
    - I'm wondering if there's a specific memory of you have from this time?
        - How did you feel/think then?
        - How do you feel about that now?
    - What stands out for you from your experience of your parents' relationship?
        - Walk me through this experience
            - How did you feel? What did you think at the time?
                - What meanings did you take from this?
            - Talk me through any specific elements of this experience that stand out to you? Or, anything here that you feel has influenced you / impacted you?

- Perhaps when you look at your own experiences of relationships?
- Can you think of an example of how this experience has informed your own experience [of relationships]?

[Exploring experience that demonstrates an influence of participant's parents' relationship or family life as a child, on their own relationship experiences]

At 0.30 minutes into interview: Pause for a five minute break.

Section 3: Timeline reflections

Before coming to today's interview, you were asked to construct a timeline, starting from when you first experienced your parent's relationship difficulties/separation/divorce until the current date and; to highlight any key points/significant moments throughout your experience of your parent's divorce and your own experiences with intimate/romantic relationships. You could also bring in (or show) other mementos (photos or other items) to help explain what was happening to you at different moments in time.

Let's look at your timeline together. You can choose to start at any point on the timeline – perhaps a point that reflects a situation that was specifically poignant for you. If you have any photos/mementos you selected to talk to, feel free to share these and describe them with me here.

Note: The timeline could depict key transitions or significant events (i.e. your parent's announcement of their wish to separate, changes to living situations, relationship history) and key supports and services (both helpful or unhelpful) you experienced during and after the separation/divorce. We are unlikely to get through all of the timeline in this session, we will decide when to finish for this session and where you would like to start for the second interview.

- Can you talk me through any thoughts you had when you were constructing your timeline?
  [Exploring participant's lived experience of relationships – how they see the different relationship experiences and what they reflected on most such as length, difficulties, outcomes. This as an alternative approach to exploring what participant took out of their parents' marriage. This facilitates an opportunity for participant to reflect on their relationships and any connection with how they managed their experience as a child whose parents divorced/how they experience their own romantic relationships]

  Researcher and Participant to go through any poignant timepoint/photo using the following points as questions/prompts:

- I'm wondering if there were any turning points for you during your journey? [explore feelings, meanings, perceptions, or thoughts at the time, and how they look at that experience now]

- Can you tell me about what is happening at this point on the timeline?
  [Probing questions include:
    - Tell me about this time-point/memento – what is happening (who, what, where)?
    - Why is this important? / Why did you pick this time-point/image?
    - How does it relate to your experience of your parent's separation/divorce or your own relationship history/experience?
      [Exploring how timepoint/experience contributed to or detracted from participant's experience after their parents separated and any connection with their own approach/experience to relationships]
    - How did you work through this situation? Walk me through it (feelings, thoughts, meanings you took from it, influence on you)
        - Why do you think you responded in this way?
        - Did this experience have any lasting impact upon you do you think? If so, how?
        - Did a key person or support agency play a role here?

At 0.55 minutes into interview: The interview is coming to an end. Before we finish:

- Is there anything else you would like to add/comment on?
- Is there anything we've not yet discussed that you feel is important to talk about?
- How are you feeling?/How did you find that? *[offer 'Support services available in New Zealand' resource sheet at base of this document should participant seem distressed]*
- If these conversations bring up anything for you, these resources may be useful or you may have a support service you already have been aware of prior *[distribute 'Support services available in New Zealand' resource sheet at base of this document].*
- Rapport building wrap up for example, enquire about what participant is doing for the rest of the day.

Closing

Thank you so much, and I look forward to seeing you again to finish the timeline. Please feel free to add to your timeline before the next interview.

I will be in touch in one week to check in and see that you are ok. If you have any questions at all before or after that, please feel free to email me (█████████████) or call me (██████). Thanks again.

Turn audio-recording off.

SECOND INTERVIEW

Welcome the participant back. Check in if there was anything they wanted to add, clarify, discuss from the first interview and that they're comfortable to continue.

Section 3: Timeline reflections (continued)

Finish off the timeline (if not completed) with the questions above. Noting: At 0.30 minutes into interview to pause for a five minute break.

Over-view of timeline:

- Having reflected on your experience of your parents' relationship during the last interview, I'm wondering if you had any reflections since we last caught up? *[Giving complete control of discussion direction to participant with opportunity to weave in questions below accordingly]*
- Now that we have gone over all the points on the timeline I want you to look at everything that is written and tell me about your thoughts about your overall experience and journey:
  - What do you feel you have taken away from your experience of your parent's relationship and divorce? How do you view the experience?
  - How do you look at your parents' divorce today now you're [married/in a long-term relationship]?
    [Exploring for possible positive impacts experience has had on participant]
  - What stands out for you? [walk me through it]
    [Exploring participant's interpretation of relationship for potential influences on participant's own relationship experience/approaches]
    - What do you feel was the most influential aspect of this experience?
    - Perhaps when you look at your own experiences of relationships
    - Can you think of an example of how this experience has informed your own experience [of relationships]? Perhaps, an influence on your thoughts, beliefs or expectations?
  - Can you give me an example of how you feel this has influenced your experience during adulthood? On your approach to things during adulthood?
    - What makes you think this? What are your thoughts about that?

    [Exploring significant approaches participant has taken into their own intimate relationships that are in response to their experience of their parent's relationship/divorce]
  - Can you tell me about the support you received during and after your parents' separation/divorce? What was the most helpful? Can you think of an example of how you've drawn on that support since?
    [Exploring: Mitigating environmental, cultural, etc factors that influenced experience and long-term impact; could be GP, counselling, friendships, style of communication by parents]
  - Can you recall a time where you've thought of your experience as a child of divorce?

- *[If some aspects alluded to in interview/s but not fully discussed, can explore them here with:]*
  You haven't spoken about … as yet. I'd be interested to know if that was a factor for you and your experience of relationships today?
  - Relationship with parent/s during and after the separation, and now
  - Relationship with siblings since the divorce
  - Feelings about relationship with parents and siblings including physical demonstrations of affection and time spent together
  - Discipline and overall involvement of parent/s in day-to-day life after the divorce
  - How the separation/divorce affected how you felt towards your parents if at all, and if that changed over time (if so, why do you think?)
- What, if any, has been the most significant challenge for you in navigating intimate/romantic relationships and your adulthood experience?

Section 4: Overall insights into participant's experience of being a child of divorce
[Opportunity for participant to share final reflections]

- How would you describe the experience of being a 'child of divorce?
- What is useful for parents going through separation/divorce to know about the experiences their children may be going through and supporting their children?

The interview is coming to an end. Before we finish:

- Is there anything else you would like to add/comment on or that you feel is important to discuss?
- Once these interviews have been transcribed you will have a chance to look at the transcript and make changes, should you choose to. You'll also have the opportunity to withdraw anything you're not comfortable being shared.
- How are you feeling?/How did you find that? *[offer 'Support services available in New Zealand' resource sheet at base of this document should participant seem distressed]*
- If these conversations bring up anything for you, these resources may be useful or you may have a support service you already have been aware of prior *[distribute 'Support services available in New Zealand' resource sheet at base of this document].*

Closing

Thank you so much for you time today, I really appreciate it. I hope that you enjoyed our time together. I will email you a transcript of our interview in the coming few days and you will have two weeks to make any changes to it. I will be in touch in one week to check in and see that you are ok. If you have any questions at all, please feel free to email me ( ) or call me ( ). Thanks again.

Turn audio-recording off.

Appendix D: Support Services Information Sheet for Participants

Support Services Available in Aotearoa New Zealand

The resources below may be useful should you have been affected by any of the topics discussed during our interviews or, you experience any discomfort on reflection of our conversations.

Skylight:

Specialise in supporting people of all ages throughout New Zealand who are facing a tough situation, including grief, loss or trauma.

https://www.skylight.org.nz/pages/contact

Free community support groups via the Mental Health Foundation:

https://mentalhealth.org.nz/groups

Private Counselling support directory of services available regarding relationships, family and parenting, marriage, and divorce:

https://healthpages.co.nz/directory/categories/counselling-relationships-family-parenting-marriage-divorce

The Purapura Whetu Trust

A no cost kaupapa Māori health, wellbeing, and social service provider.

https://www.pw.maori.nz/blog/

Appendix E: Authority for the Release of Transcripts

Exploring the Lived Experience of Being a Female, Adult Child-of-Divorce and the Influence this Experience has on the Adult Child's own Interpersonal (romantic) Relationships

AUTHORITY FOR THE RELEASE OF TRANSCRIPTS

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript of the interview(s) conducted with me.

I agree that the edited transcript and extracts from this may be used in reports and publications arising from the research.

Signature: .... **Date:** ....

Full Name - printed ....

Appendix F: Participant Recruitment Advertisement

Being a female, adult child-of-divorce within New Zealand: What did you take away from your parent's divorce/separation?

Are you an adult (between 23 and 45 years old), female, whose parents divorced/separated before they were 18 years old? Are you married or been in your current relationship for at least five years? If so, you are invited to participate in this study, exploring your experience of how being a child of divorce influences your own experience of romantic relationships.

Why participate?

Your participation will be important to advancing our understanding of this area. It is my hope that this project will provide insights into the experience of divorce by female children within Aotearoa New Zealand and the influence this experience has on their own relationships in adulthood. It is hoped findings from this project will help inform support services for children and families navigating divorce/parental separation.

If you take part, you will be given a $40 petrol or supermarket voucher as an acknowledgement for your time and contribution to this study.

Who can take part?

This study welcomes people who identify as female, live in Aotearoa New Zealand, are between 23 and 45 years old and, either in a long-term relationship (over five years) or, are married. Participants must have been raised in Aotearoa New Zealand and, experienced the start of their parents' divorce/separation before they turned 18 years.

When and where?

Two in-person interviews (face-to-face or via Zoom/Teams) will take place in a private meeting room, at a location and time convenient to you. Interviews will each last approximately 60 minutes. Any information identifying you will be kept confidential, and your data will be anonymised.

How to get involved

If you would like to know more, please don't hesitate to contact me. I would love to chat about this research project, answer any questions you may have and, send you more detailed information via the project information sheet.

Student researcher: Leontine Van Manen-Esdaile

Contact details: Leontine.VanManen-Esdaile.1@uni.massey.ac.nz

Appendix G: Protocols for Interviewing Participants who Identify as Māori

Exploring the Lived Experience of Being a Female, Adult Child-of-Divorce and the Influence this Experience has on the Adult Child's own Interpersonal (romantic) Relationships

Tēnā koutou

I tae ahau I Ingarangi ki Aotearoa I te tau kotahi mano iwa rau iwa tekau ma ono.

Ko Ngāti Huguenots te iwi.

Ko Esdaile, ko Van Manen ngā hāpu.

Ko Karaitiana tōku hāhi.

Nō Parani, nō Hōrana hoki ōku tīpuna.

Kei Te Whanganui-a-Tara tōku kāinga.

He tohu paerua ākonga hinengaro ahau.

Ko Leontine tōku ingoa.

Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa.

Although this research will not focus on Māori as a group, every effort will be made to ensure the approach to this research will be biculturally appropriate, recognising and upholding the Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Treaty of Waitangi) principles (protection, participant, and partnership) including giving Māori the opportunity to participate should they wish. The researcher acknowledges their responsibility here to uphold the manākitanga (cultural and social responsibility) to treat all participants with respect and dignity. As such, tikanga principles including Whakapapa, Tika, Mana and Manaakitanga will be observed as per Te Ara Tika guidelines. Subsequently, in addition to the general approach taken with participants noted in this project's documentation and ethics application (including informed consent, confidentiality, data management, information sheet and interview guide), the below will be followed should a participant identify, and wish to participate, as Māori.

Note: Throughout this process, the researcher will receive cultural supervision to ensure Māori values and cultural practices are observed, minimising the event of harm caused to the participant or their whanau. Supervision here will be provided by Dr Matthew Shepherd, Ngāti Tama. Dr Shepherd has experience working with Māori research participants and has also published in this area. However, if knowledge here is deemed insufficient, additional cultural supervision will be sought to ensure no harm.

Ethical engagement with Māori participants and their whanau will include discussion of the following as detailed in the information sheet and specific notes below:

- Research topic and key research questions (see Interview questions for participants information at base of Information Sheet document)
- Aims of the project
- Level of Māori involvement in the project
- Resources that will ensure Māori are supported in their involvement with the project
- Methodology and methods
- Analysis of data and information
- Dissemination of findings and any formal publication of results
- Processes for protecting information and participants
- Ownership of raw data/information
- Storage and destruction of information
- Process with regards to participant's withdrawal of information and transcript correction, together with resolution process

Recruitment

- Every effort will be made to extend invitations to participate in this research to all participants regardless of ethnicity. As such, advertisements shared on social communities, such as the Massey University Post-Graduate community, will be clear that all individuals who meet the selection criteria, are invited to apply. Using open community groups such as the Massey University Post-Graduate community will ensure the advertisement is shared with a culturally diverse audience, that is, not a monocultural community group, for example, British expats living in New Zealand.
- Ensuring the Māori participant's and collective rights are respected and protected, all applicants registering their interest in participation will receive a copy of the Information Sheet and this Protocol Guide for input from the participant and their whanau. The document "Information Sheet" includes "Interview questions for participants information" which will also be made available. The researcher will ensure that adequate time is given for the participant to consult with their whanau on their participation and the proposed topics for discussion in the interview, achieving collective informed consent. A hui will be offered for whanau to meet with the researcher at a location comfortable to them. During the hui, the researcher will answer any questions and facilitate the opportunity for whanau to provide input into the interview guide and process. The researcher's cultural supervisor will provide guidance in adhering to cultural protocols and tikanga, attending initial hui if researcher requires.
- Clarification will be given to the participant and their whanau about the objectives of the project, who will have access to the results, ownership of information collected and, how results will benefit Māori. Specifically, in discussion of the research objective and approach (meaningful consultation), the researcher will work with the participant to ensure there are tangible, reciprocal benefits that can be realised for their community. For example, sharing insights acquired from a child of divorce who identifies as Māori with those supporting Māori families navigating the phenomenon of divorce within a Māori worldview.
- A koha will be offered to the participant in acknowledgement of their time and effort to participate and their sharing of knowledge and/or any hospitality extended by tangata

whenua to the researcher. The participant and whanau will be consulted on the koha that will be most appropriate for their community in line with their cultural norms.

Methodology

- The researcher acknowledges that, subject to confidentiality boundaries, the participant's whanau and members of their community may wish to review the interview guide and transcript.
- Where needed, the interview length will be increased, splitting the interviews across the appropriate number of sessions for the participant and their support person to feel comfortable. This will remove the pressure to rush in sharing their lived experience.
- All participants in this project will be invited to construct a timeline of their relationship history since their parents' separation/divorce. Acknowledging that some Māori have a cultural preference for intimate research methods of engagement, the researcher here will offer to assist in capturing the participant's timeline with the individual should they not be comfortable completing this alone. Here the researcher will act as scribe only to ensure no unconscious bias is captured by the researcher.
- Acknowledging the aroha ki te tangata value and, given some Māori have a higher rate of mobility, the researcher will offer to either meet with the participant via a virtual/video conference platform or, to travel to an agreed location to meet with the participant and their support person accordingly. The initial meeting will be face-to-face where possible, in acknowledgment of the cultural value, he kanohi kitea.
- Prior to the first interview, time will be spent building whakawhanaungatanga/relationships and rapport with the participant and their whanau to convey sincerity and respect for their worldview, tikanga and cultural values while also building trust. This is important given the sensitivity of the information and experiences that will be discussed. On first meeting, the researcher will introduce themselves with their pepeha, conveying their whakapapa and sharing information about themselves [Note: The researcher is of Dutch and French dissent, and raised in England. Subsequently, the preference here is to share their pepeha instead of a traditional mihi]. Throughout all interactions, the researcher will check their pronunciation of any te reo Māori or names to avoid mispronunciation or showing disrespect. The initial hui will be used as an opportunity to create a safe space for the participant and their whānau. The researcher will introduce their supervisor if present and his role, to remove feelings of vulnerability. Dr Shepherd will introduce himself accordingly here.

Interview process

- The participant will be invited to bring a support person with them to all interviews and discussions with the researcher.
- The participant will be invited to open and close each hui with a karakia. Note: Alternatively, one of the attending whanau or support person may wish to do so.
- While the researcher will conduct the interview in English, the participant will have the choice of responding in either Māori or English. Given the researcher cannot speak te reo Māori to a conversational level, a Māori interpreter will be invited to assist with conducting the interview in te reo Māori should this be the participant's/whanau desire.
- To avoid unintentionally disempowering the participant and their whanau, interviews will be in full discussion and partnership with the participant; the participant will know

that they are the expert in this situation and the researcher will make a conscious effort to actively listen rather than rush in with questions during all korero. The researcher is the learner here and this is a collaborative process, as underpinned by the manaaki ki te tangata cultural value. Control of the conversation will therefore be given to the participant and the researcher will ensure they permit participants the time they need to find a space from which to share their experiences.

- Culturally appropriate support resources will be offered to the participant and whanau should anyone become distressed. This includes provision of contact details for the Purapura Whetu Trust, a no cost kaupapa Māori health, wellbeing and social service provider (https://www.pw.maori.nz)
- At the close of each hui, cultural protocols will inform the conclusion of each session, and the final gathering. Every effort will be made to ensure the participant and their whanau understand the next and final steps and, that the researcher has fully understood the participant and their whanau wishes.

Accountability

- The researcher will recognise and acknowledge the participant as the "owner" of the information. The researcher is, therefore, accountable to the participant/s and their community.
- The participant will be invited to share their understanding within a Māori world view, without imposition of or, in comparison to Western assumptions and world view. That is, every effort will be made to legitimise the Māori way of life as the norm within the context of the participant's experience. For example, the researcher will make every effort to consider the whole person, as opposed to the participant as a child of divorce; they will accept that the participant may reflect on their lived experience as an experience felt by their broader whanau, rather than just them as an individual. How the participant talks through their approach to relationships and the impact of their parents' divorce could, therefore, be described differently than how a non-Māori participant may do.
- Participants will be invited to review the recorded and transcribed interviews for accuracy. The researcher will ensure the participant is given enough time should they wish to consult whanau and their broader community on the use of their interview content.
- The researcher will acknowledge their insider status as a child of divorce and take caution (kia tupato) to be suitably reflective of their status here as an insider and researcher. Similarly, the researcher will be conscious of not flaunting their knowledge (kaua e mahaki) – they will be generous with sharing their knowledge without being arrogant or being impatient with the participant who may struggle to feel comfortable sharing their knowledge and experience, or wish to consult with whanau prior to sharing deeper details.

Distribution of research findings

- Recognising Māori participants as partners in their research and upholding respect for their cultural knowledge and traditions, the researcher will work with the participant and their whanau to ensure research findings are distributed in accordance with their wishes and comfort levels. The researcher will consider collective welfare and

ownership of information by whānau, hāpu and iwi to ensure research is appropriately disseminated.

- Resources will be utilised to ascertain any actions required to protect Māori/hapu/iwi intellectual and cultural property rights in relation to the research findings. Similarly, cultural resources will be utilised to assist in identifying any key issues associated with the dissemination, reporting and retention of the information gathered during the research process. These strategies will be discussed with participants and their whanau during consultation (see recruitment) and noted accordingly.

Appendix H: Timeline Example 1

1996 parents separate

1998 Dad remarried my step mum

- I remember her telling me I was part of the package when she married my dad and its something that hurt and sticks with me
- I remember feeling sad for my mum

1999 my mum got breast cancer

2003 I had my first teenage relationship with xxx, which lasted around 1 year

2004- had a boyfriend named xxx, lost virginity to him and stayed together 3 months

2004-2006 had a boyfriend named xxx (much older than me)

2006- 2008 I had several boyfriends

- Very promiscuous

2008 I moved in with my then boyfriend xxx

2009 we broke up

2010 I moved to Taranaki with my boyfriend xxx

- it was a very unhealthy relationship

2010 I had my first son xxx

2013 I had my second son xxx

2014 xxx and I separated

- It was a nasty separation

2015 I began a relationship with xxx which lasted 6 months

2015-2016 I dated a lot

2016 I met my current husband xxx

2020 we were married

- Looking back I felt a big change in my self-esteem after our wedding, I felt safe in our relationship in a way I had never felt before.

2022 we had our daughter xxx.

Note: For anonymity I have removed any identifiers and replaced with xxx.

Appendix I: Timeline Example 2

*Parents married when I was 6months old in 1998.

*There was a lot of trauma experienced when I was growing up and I don't remember a lot of what happened.

*Between the ages of 5-7 (2003-2005), my siblings are young and a pivotal time as this was when a lot of abuse occurred. The two most memorable would have been; A huge fight that occurred one night where my mother was verbally and physical abused. When this happened I relocated my siblings to the other end of the house. The other was when my nana condoned these actions and had a verbal altercation with my mother. These were pivotal because before this I was super close worth my father and our relationship deteriorated from this point forward.

*Between the ages of 8-11 (2006-2009), my mother and father had an on and off relationship. This was super difficult for me as I wasn't able to comprehend why my mother would think of going back to my father. During this time I found that my temper changed as well as my behaviour. When my father was around I would act out and this was reflected in my school reports. This was also reflected in my relationship with my friends.

*At 12 (2010) another pivotal moment was when another argument occurred. This was important as it was the first time I stood against my father. My siblings joined (felt like solidarity) and our relationships grew closer.

During the ages of 10-12 I was in various relationships one of which was pretty serious and lasted 12 months.

*At 14 (2012), was when I had my second serious relationship. We were together for almost 2 years. I am not sure if it was because of my age or seeing my parents but I definitely wanted it to be much longer term. A pivotal point in this relationship was when I lost my virginity. It seemed like a rather important spectacle for most but I definitely didn't see it that way.

*Around the age of 16 is when my parents finally filed for divorce. I was extremely happy about it actually.

*At around 17 (2015), I got into another serious relationship. This also last around the 2 year mark. This relationship was unhealthy unfortunately and I ended up seeing a lot of my father in this person. A pivotal moment in this relationship was when we had broken up (we did this often) this particular time my family had let me know how the view said partner. They didn't have great things to say either.

*At 21, I got into another relationship. I am still with this partner. It hasn't been until now that I have realised I have very limited close friends in my life. Throughout school I never recognized myself as being popular but have been told otherwise. I didn't feel like I was pushing people away then but did have a specific group of people I would hangout with and no one else. This continued throughout my high school years until I moved high schools in 2015 (aged 17). At this school I didn't bother to make new relationships very often and by year 13 (2016), I barely even attended. In my adult life I realise (actually recently) that I segregate the people I know and keep most of these groups apart from family and close

friends as acquaintance, work colleagues, or friends if my partners and never really build relationships with them.

Appendix J: Timeline Example 3

Timeline

Earliest childhood • Dad sleeps downstairs, Mum sleeps upstairs
• Memories of arguing?
• No memories of them both in the same memory visual frame (i.e. near each other)

Approx 5/6yrs old • We move house. Dad lives elsewhere, Mum + sisters & me live up the road from previous house.
• Sometimes Dad babysits at Mums house (didn't last long). • Shared custody. 12 days 2 days & half of all school hols. 1 week/1 week or 3wk/3wk.

9 Years old • Mum remarries. → we move to a big house.

? (10/11 yrs old?) • Dad remarries, slowly moves further away but shared care arrangement continues.

Supports: Church, Youth Group, My sisters.

Ages 14-18 Various boys from church/connections of my sisters ask me out /send me love letters/ take me to balls etc. I have a few crushes but refuse relationships.

Age 18-20 Left home - move to big city to study. As above (hostel) several people make some kind of advance but I refuse them / or we go out for a bit and things don't progress. Meet my husband this year.

Age 19 working holiday overseas in NZ summer.

Y2 uni Flatting. Crush on husband - see each other in town/at church.

Y3 Uni Age 20 start going out w husband.

end Y3 - Move overseas for advanced study long distance r/ship overseas study cut short due to pandemic.

Uni Y4 aged 22 engaged

Age 22/23 Married

Age 24/25 Moved overseas 4 yrs - Miscarried. (complications)

Age 29 Move home, pregnant, 1st child.

Age 30 Move overseas 1 year.

30s 2 more children, set up own business

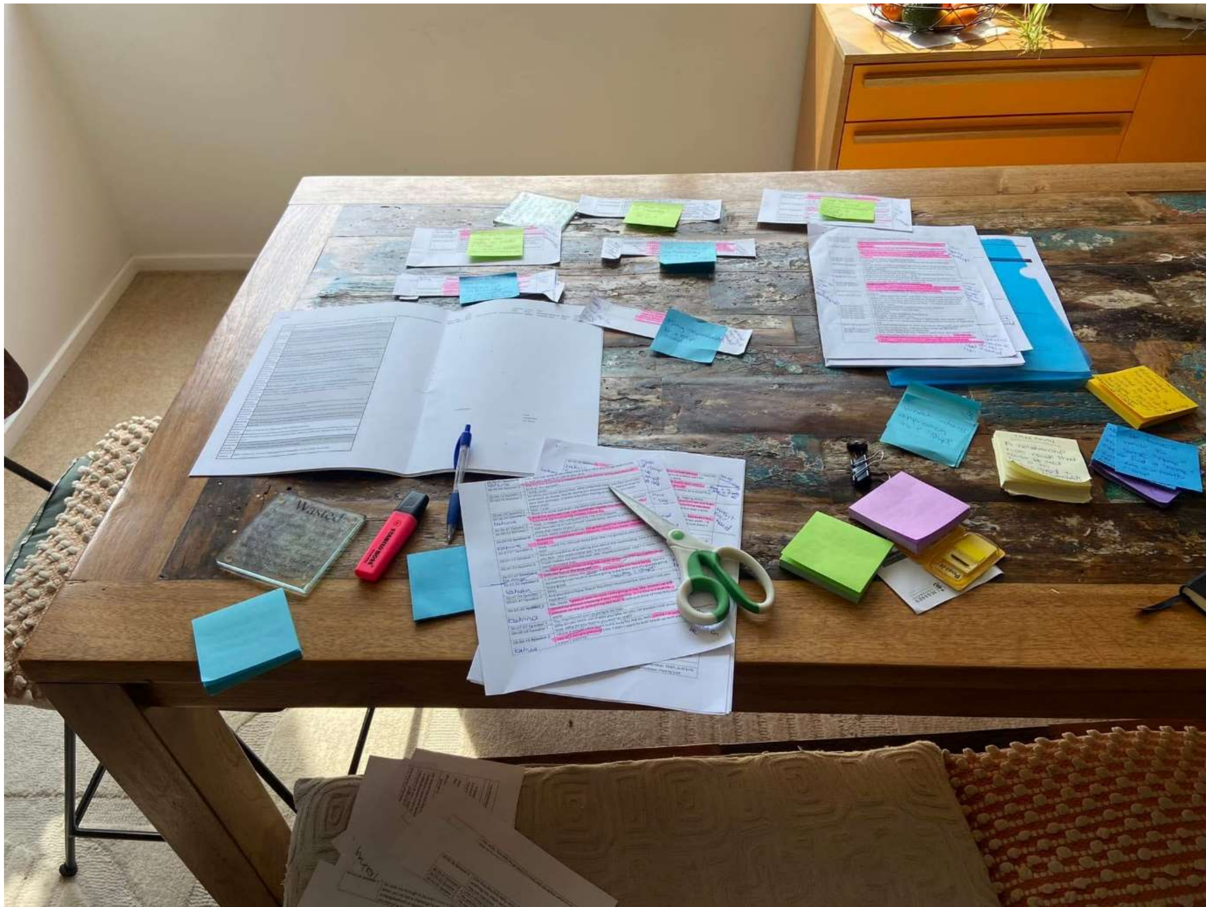
40s Begin Postgraduate study

Appendix K: Exploratory Notes (Excerpt)

00:41:36 Amelia	Thinking that I wouldn't hear him and him saying "you've just got to go for it, you've got to do what makes you happy. Because one day your kids will grow up and move out. You've gotta think about you" or something along those lines. And I remember that sticking with me and, and in a sense as an adult, I mean, he's right. We all deserve to follow our happiness and try to balance the two things, but [PAUSE]	Memorable – means something to her even now Acknowledges his actions, adult to adult yet (at, 42.11) still doesn't accept how it hurt her as a child?
00:41:57 Amelia	I remember even then kind of getting it and feeling a bit resentful.	Memorable point of realising dad put himself before her
00:42:01 Leontine	For him?	
00:42:03 Amelia	Like towards my dad.	
00:42:07 Amelia	Like thinking you know you I, I [PAUSE].	[finding the words / processing understanding?]
00:42:11 Amelia	… resentful and upset that he didn't understand how much I was hurting because of what he had done and like how much my mum was hurting because of what he had done and because he was only worried about what he wanted.	Resentful - blame on dad for the situation vs saw mum, and perhaps her, as his victim. Foundation for unhealthy relationship perception? What else informed her approach to relationships?
00:42:24 Leontine	Sounds like it hurt a lot?	
00:42:28 Amelia	Yes.	
00:42:30 Amelia	Yes, definitely. Yeah. That's I've never thought of it like that. He did prioritise himself a lot. That's him. Yeah.	Memorable experience of a man prioritising themselves over her [Example of meaning-making – fusing horizons of understanding]
00:42:46 Leontine	You know, so "follow your happiness". When it comes to a relationship. What did you take from that?	
00:43:12 Amelia	[PAUSE] I think like, I took from that, that your spousal relationship, seeking one and having one,	Informed her belief of what relationships should be

	was more important than your children and was the thing that could make you the most happy.	
00:43:23 Amelia	That was the most important relationship. It was the one that you should focus on, and the one that would bring you the most joy.	Joy
00:43:29 Amelia	And maybe that, I didn't bring him the most joy.	Questioned her value to her dad – perhaps start of informing her of her value to men?

Appendix L: Photo of Manually Sorting Experiental Statements (Paper-Based Review)



Appendix M: Personal Experiential Themes (Excerpt)

Transcript quote	Theme	Personal experiential statement	Interpretation	Notes	Code
All of my relationships were very unhealthy it. Whether, sometimes they were with people who were unh ealthy for me. Other times I think I just was insecure and unhealthy and lost within myself But, all of my relationships were [PAUSE]	Getting started ... my early relationship journey was full of unhealthy relationships	I didn't know how to choose someone who was healthy for me	I was desperate to have a relationship no matter what	Insecure, uncomfortable, unhealthy attachment	Relationship journey
It's, it's work. We're committed. We, we work to make sure that we're, we're on the same page and we're fulfilling each other. But I do think somewhere along the line like. It was just luck to find someone, yeah. Yeah. Do you know what I mean? Like, love and relationships are work, but I think I got lucky to meet someone that just is who he is. And I am who I am. And we just. click and fit together	Healthy relationships take work	Being in a healthy relationship is joyful	Relationships take work but requires the right timing - meeting the right person at a time that you're right for each other		Healthy relationship
Find myself or be myself in a relationship. I suppose I just, I just did not know how to have a healthy relationship. Or a healthy attachment with anybody.	I didn't know how to do healthy	I didn't know how to 'be' or relate to others in a healthy way	It takes time to learn how to have a healthy relationship	Didn't know how to have a healthy relationship	Relationship journey
[breath/pause] I want to say everything, but not in a healthy way that I need him to fulfil myself but, I cannot understand, like I I cannot comprehend what my life would be like without him. It's like we're one person in a sense. . Like like a shadow but in a good way.	Learning what healthy relationships are	There are two of us in this relationship	Husband aligns with who she is - they're more as one than she was able to be with previous partners / healthy relationships are a partnership betweeen two people	Clear in how she experiences her relationship with her husband / Would feel incomplete without husband	Two people
Urm, absolutely *disastrous* until I meet my husband. (referenced promiscuous in timeline)	My early relationships were not healthy.	Getting here was a journey - it doesn't happen naturally - I didn't know how to have a healthy relatioship	Relationship journey was a disaster until she met her husband	There was a journey to get where she is today / Getting here was a journey - it doesn't happen naturally - I didn't know how to have a healthy relatioship	Journey description
They were never secure. They were never comfortable. I was never able to settle into them.	My early relationships were not healthy.	I was uncomfortable in my early relationships because they were unhealthy	Unhealthy relationships feel insecure	An unhealthy relationship is insecure, uncomfortable, unhealthy attachment	Perception of unhealthy relationships
It's being yourself with someone else watching. Like in a good way. I don't know. Yeah. Like, yeah.	There are healthy and unhealthy relationships	Over time I realised, healthy relationships are relationships you can be yourself in	Healthy relationships are about freedom to be you	Found herself along the way and gives herself permission to be herself in relationships	Healthy relationship
I think that's the key difference in my ... There's different characteristics about my husband, right, that are different than other relationships. But the key difference to, I suppose, who I am and my relationship with my husband to any other relationship I've had previously, is I'm just myself and he's just watching it. Like, I'm just Yeah. Comfy and loved for who I am. Comfortable and yeah.	There are healthy and unhealthy relationships	I learnt how to 'do' healthy relationships and what that should feel like	The journey she's been on has put her in a place that she is able to have a healthy relationship with her husband which she couldn't have with previous partners	She is different in this relationship than in previous relationships	Relationship journey
Maybe my grandmother, my maternal grandmother's relationship with my maternal grandfather.	There are healthy and unhealthy relationships	I learnt how to do healthy via others	I knew healthy relationships were possible	Maternal grandparent's relationship had an influence	External influences
Specific roles that they did around the house, but I don't ever remember thinking, oh, she has to do that because she's a woman or he's just doing that because he's a man. I really feel like everything that they did was an attempt to compliment and support one another. And I think that [Husband] and I are sort of like that too.	There are healthy and unhealthy relationships	I learnt how to do healthy via others	I knew healthy relationships were possible	Saw her maternal parents compliment each other - they work together because they want to.	External influences
I just always remember [PAUSE] feeling like my mum annoyed my dad and my dad was grumpy. Or frustrated	There are healthy and unhealthy relationships	My parents didn't have a healthy relationship	Empathetically experienced her parent's unhealthy relationship "always remember feeling"	Parents didn't make each other happy	Positioning experience within own relationship journey

Appendix N: Group Experiential Themes (Excerpt)

1. Embarking on relationships from a position of not knowing how to *do* healthy

Relationships are either healthy or unhealthy …

Unhealthy relationships are not comfortable

> *Not feeling equal, feeling like you're walking on egg shells, like anything you say is going to set something off.* (Rebecca)

Unhealthy relationships feel insecure

> *They were never secure. They were never comfortable. I was never able to settle into them.* (Amelia)

Healthy relationships are where the two people work through problems without affecting others

> *So weird for me, seeing them like, not yelling, just sorted it out and then be happy again and continue with their day without it ruining everyone's day.* (Katrina)

… getting started – my early relationships were not healthy

I didn't know the ingredients to a healthy relationship

> *I didn't really know what makes a nice person. You know, what makes a suitable person for me. (Anna)*

I did not know how to 'do' healthy at the start of my journey and chose the wrong people

> *All of my relationships were very unhealthy. Whether sometimes they were with people who were unhealthy for me. Other times I think I just was insecure and unhealthy and lost within myself.* (Amelia)

I had to be 'in' a relationship no matter what

> *Having a long-term relationship was always important to me. I always felt like I wanted to have a partner.* (Amelia)

I did not think further than the desire to be in a relationship

> *I didn't really know what makes a nice person. You know, what makes a suitable person for me. So, I would say that like, out of all of them, they were all kinds of incidental like, kind of casually, it happened and it just, off it went without any real deep thinking about long longevity.* (Anna)

My desire to be in a relationship meant I stayed in unhealthy relationships

> *Like they definitely were the ones treating me badly. But, I didn't ever allow myself to leave even when I knew I should.* (Katrina)

I don't know why I stayed in unhealthy relationships but I didn't leave them, they left me

> *I don't know how much of that was just wilful, just wanting to stay in that relationship and how much of that was I just had no idea. I think probably a mixture of both.* (Rebecca)

I was scared of being in a relationship

> *There's just that underlying kind of, I don't know, what it is, avoidance? Or whatever is there.* (Sabrina)

I thought all relationships would hurt you so I ran from them

> *Protection of not letting myself get hurt by not getting too close.* (Samantha).

I didn't want to get hurt – I strove to protect myself until I felt safe

> *There's something in my personality that's quite reluctant or protective.* (Annika)

I didn't want to experience being in an unhealthy relationship so I just avoided relationships

> *I wanted one but, I was so scared about things going wrong* (Katrina)

Positioning my childhood experience within my relationship journey: The myths/norms my parents taught me

I thought unhealthy behaviours were normal, I didn't see them as unhealthy

> *My first boyfriend, he would get like this big angry outbursts and stuff like that. And I thought that was normal.* (Rebecca)

I didn't know what healthy communication (or debate?) looked like

> *It took me a long time to realise that an argument didn't mean it was ending.* (Samantha)

I didn't know how to communicate in a healthy way

> *I was reactive. I was always reactive. I always had a temper, and I was always quite violent.* (Wendy)

I didn't know how to communicate or discuss discomfort in a healthy way

> *Lots of conflict, not knowing how to repair conflict, urm, seeing outbursts of criticism or anger as normal.* (Sabrina)

Appendix O: Reflexive Journal (Excerpt)

Erikson's Identity vs Confusion life stage – Who am I? – had to work on surviving! when needing to focus on surviving

3/8/24 Lo = ↓ confidence ↓ fidelity ↓ independence

It is hard not to see bits of my journey + outcomes in the journey I'm exploring w/ my participants. There's a connection there. On a positive note, it helps me empathise and support these strong women in sharing – and each have commented on how safe the space I create for them feels. There's a unity.

Reflecting on Sabrina's second interview I'm also left wondering on the impact that post-divorce changes have on a person's ability to experience + safely navigate key stages in development. For eg, Sabrina's mum leaving @ 15yrs + Sabrina's experience of relationship struggles after this. How @ 15yo she was required to 'adult' and focus on survival + managing her mother's choices. As opposed to experiencing and having opportunities to be unconsciously vulnerable in relationships w/ friends. The abrupt change in life circumstances inhibiting her experience of this vital opportunity or sandpit to experiment and develop key relationship + interpersonal skills. As a result, Sabrina was faced w/ relationships not knowing how to navigate them, how to be present in them w/out focusing on the end goal the destination, the outcome of each interaction!

And this makes me think of my experience as a 15yo and the abrupt life change of my stepfather leaving + the sudden need for me to focus my energy on surviving, not being vulnerable and being conscious of who I trusted. All my interactions w/ anyone after that point were done so w/ caution and consciously watching, preempting and assessing how I was / behaved / was perceived by others in order to continue towards my destination. Even if the end goal wasn't clear.

Appendix P: Researcher's Background and Qualifications

I have a Bachelor of Arts and a Post Graduate Diploma of Arts, both majoring in Psychology, from Massey University. I am familiar with the Code of Ethics for Psychologists working in Aotearoa New Zealand and, the Massey Code of Ethics for human participants together with the Te Ara Tika guidelines.

I have over ten years' experience of interviewing candidates for job applications, together with over 15 years' experience providing forms of counselling to individuals both as a volunteer of a 'Speak-Up Liaison Support Group' at a well-known financial provider, and as a Volunteer Clinician for the mental health crisis management support lines, Youthline and Shout. Clients at Youthline and Shout are regularly under the age of 25 years. To manage these roles, I have received training in the use of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and interviewing skills. My undergraduate papers such as Counselling Principles and Practice (209.250) together with cultural safety and training in Te Tiriti o Waitangi as part of my Post Graduate Clinical Psychology papers (including Professional Practice in Psychology [175.730] and Psychological Research: Principles of Design [175.738] with a focus on Kaupapa Māori research and; Advanced Psychology of Women [175.720] with Massey University provide transferable skills . These skills include working with vulnerable/distressed individuals, empathetic listening, interviewing without leading answers and respecting/adhering to confidentiality and informed consent requirements.