

CHAPTER FOUR: OTHER VOICES SURROUNDING THOSE OF THE CO-RESEARCHERS

From a narrative social construction perspective, the stories that my co-researchers told and that I presented in Chapter Three were their own, and yet their stories were also caught up in socially constructed stories that they have lived out “in their personal lives” and the socially constructed stories “that are circulating in their cultures both their local culture and the larger culture” (Freedman & Combs 1996:16). These stories powerfully influenced my co-researchers’ choices about “what life events can be storied and how they can be storied” (Freedman & Combs 1996:43).

Thus, listening to other voices is imperative in order to understand the co-researchers’ stories better. My co-researchers and I have discussed many voices of literature and existing research on various issues surrounding remarried families and their adolescent children, and the voices of two high school teachers and pastors who were very close to the lives of my co-researchers. My co-researchers were adolescents who are going through one of the so-called developmental stages of the human life cycle (Carter & McGoldrick 1999:42). They have gone through the turmoil of parental divorce and are placed within a new set of circumstances, those of remarriage. Therefore, in order to present my co-researchers’ points of view in an alternative manner, through deconstructive methods, both on their life stage and on life in a remarried family, two pivotal themes studied by existing research were

scrutinized in our discussion, namely, the domain of adolescence and life in a remarried family.

4.1 BACKGROUND: ABOUT ADOLESCENTS

4.1.1 A constructed definition of adolescence

I used various dictionary definitions to construct a definition (see also Chapter One). The life stage of adolescence can be defined as a process or period of growth between childhood and maturity (*Webster's New Explorer Dictionary*). The adolescent is therefore a young person who is no longer a child, but who has not yet become an adult. The term adolescent also refers to the behaviour of young person (*Collins Cobuild Dictionary*). From this dictionary definition, one can infer that adolescence refers to immaturity while adulthood implies maturity, consequently, adolescents are as yet immature, but evolutionally moving towards being mature.

In the academic field, the foremost categorical term used to describe adolescents is "transitions". Adolescents are understood largely as being in a process of transition, and going through major bodily, emotional, sexual and spiritual changes (Kelly 2000:303; Carter & McGoldrick 1999:41). The ambiguous state of adolescence is the central developmental crisis to be dealt with during adolescence. Carter and McGoldrick (1999:38) summarize the characteristics of the period of adolescence as follows:

Adolescence (Approximate Ages: 13 or 14 to 21)-Looking for an

Identity: Continuing to Voice Authentic Opinions and Feelings in the Context of Societal, Parental, and Peer pressure to Conform to Age, Gender, and Stereotypes; Learning to Balance Caring about Self and Caring about Others

- Continue to deal with rapid bodily changes and cultural ideals of body image
- Increase emotional competence and self management
- Learn to handle one's sexual and aggressive impulses
- Develop one's sexual identity
- Increase physical coordination and physical skills
- Increase ability to think conceptually and mathematically and learn about the world
- Increase discipline for physical and intellectual work, sleep, sex, and social relationships
- Increase understanding of self in relation to peers, family and community
- Begin to develop ability to handle intimate physical and social relationships as well as increase ability to judge and handle complex social situations
- Increase ability to work collaboratively and individually

This descriptive and “expert” framework on adolescence is used as a measure for “normal” or “abnormal” and “healthy” or “unhealthy” teenagers. This conceptual framework is based on naturalist and evolutionary studies which

view human beings as mechanisms. As a result, this type of work provokes anxieties among adults about teenagers today (Watts 1993-1994:120). Moreover, it leads youth studies to focus overtly on what Kelly (2000:301) calls a “problematizing practice” whose purpose is “institutionalizing practice” (Kelly 2000:301) or governing a set of problems specific to the issues of population (Foucault 1991:87). Kelly (2000:306) argues that the phenomenon of youth studies based on a “problematizing practice” is “an artefact of both these diverse forms of expertise, and of attempts by expert systems to regulate the behaviors and dispositions of populations of youth, via the mobilization of the truths of youth produced by these forms of expertise”. For Rose and Miller, this practice is to control the lives of others in the name of what is normal, abnormal, healthy, unhealthy, virtuous, capable or beneficial (cited in Kelly 2003:168). This expertise framework has detrimental effects on individuals and populations of young people (Kelly 2003:167).

4.1.1.1 *Deconstructive views on adolescence*

Instead of a “problematizing practice of youth studies”, a growing movement of studies on adolescents uses a methodology focusing on the contextual. According to Wyn and White (1998:36),

[t]his means listening to young people. It also means putting what they say about their experiences into a wider interpretive context, a process that demands theoretical categorization and analysis. More than this, we think that youth research is inherently political. As such, assessing youth

problems is a matter of critically evaluating social institutions, of taking a holistic approach to the problems, and of being able to articulate a political vision which promotes forms of intervention that, for us, are informed by an emancipatory project.

In this way, the quantitative or popular beliefs as “truths” of adolescents are rejected, instead, a contextual narrative “truth” of youngsters is adopted, since we “reveal ourselves in every moment of interaction through the ongoing narratives that we maintain with others” (Lax 1992:71). A contextual narrative truth of self rejects any fixed self. Lax (1992:71) expounds this meaning as “the process of developing a story about one’s self that becomes the base of all identity and thus challenges any underlying concept of a unified or stable self”. Similarly, Madigan (1996:50) argues that a person’s identity can be viewed as a culturally manufactured and constituted self. Thus, it can be said that adolescence is considered as a social construction, rather than as a developmental truth or “expert” truth as advocated by naturalists and evolutionary theorists. Through a postmodern lens, Madigan (1996) sees adolescents’ identity and the stage of adolescence as culturally manufactured.

4.1.1.2 *The case of my co-researchers*

In respect of an identity as an adolescent, my co-researchers saw, not only themselves but also their peers, neither as problematic nor as fixed. In our group meetings, they described one another as multi-faceted beings. In their

own stories they are living out not only what they have been, but also anticipations of what they will be (Cattanach 2002:39). For instance, they did not attribute their emotional turmoil or misbehaviour to “adolescence” as a developmental stage in the human life cycle, but rather to how they interpret their experience as their chosen one (Dallos 1997:32).

My co-researcher, Dripping, commented on “experience that is your choice”. Also, she resisted the idea of categorizing somebody in an interview that “if someone puts you into a category, they don’t have self-esteem ‘cause [their] self-esteem is low, therefore they put you lower than they are ‘cause they want to be seen as low. So I don’t like to put people into a category. If you categorize someone, then they can’t be creative and activity, then you affect their relationship with other people...It restricts my thinking, deed a lot of stuff.”

4.2 BACKGROUND: THE MILIEU OF MEMBERS OF A REMARRIED FAMILY

4.2.1 Typological argument for remarried families

I mentioned earlier the harmfulness of attempts to categorize remarried families (see Chapter One, Section 1.3.1). However, it is helpful to know how traditional researchers categorize “the remarried family” for practitioners to see how absolutising studies of remarried families categorize, regardless of the real lives and voices of the family members.

Many researchers have argued that structurally there are several types of

remarried family. Among them, Wald (1981) categorizes 15 types of remarried family. His typology, which is overlapped when a remarried couple have children in common, is based on the criterion of the residence of children from the prior unions of both adults. Another example is the typology of Pasley and Ihinger-Tallman (1987), based on the presence or absence of children from either prior relationships or the present union of adult children and the residence of children from prior relationships. They identify eight types of remarried family. Clingempeel, Brand and Segal (1987) developed a system of nine types of remarried family, a structural taxonomy based on two variables: the presence or absence of children from prior relationships, and the residence of those children.

In categorizing, practitioners must consciously or unconsciously use some measurement, criterion or regulation, trying to place in it a family whose life is dynamic, diverse and always contextual. Therefore, it can be argued that categorizing is merely an attempt to manufacture social stereotypes and is to some degree a producer of prejudice.

4.2.2 Characteristics of remarried families in general

Before observing the milieu of remarried families, it is both critical and fundamental that one gets to know the characteristics of remarried families. The depiction of such attributes here is not intended to interpret or popularize understandings of other literature but it tries to be relatively factual in its outlook.

Firstly, at least one of the members of a remarried family has a minimum of two historical household narratives (Belovitch 1987:2; Ganong & Coleman 1988: 689; 1994:129), which could influence the current family life in one way or another. Secondly, at least one member has gone through losses and changes in terms of family life (Lewis 1985:16; Ganong & Coleman 1994:132; Schneller & Arditti 2004:24). Thirdly, a former marital relationship remains, either in actuality or in memory, to a greater or lesser degree (Ganong & Coleman 1994 134). Fourthly, a legal relationship between stepparents and stepchildren does not exist (Belovitch 1987:7; Cronje & Headton 1999:178; De’Ath 1992:78; Pink 1994:2). Stepparents basically have no legal status in relation to their stepchildren, in contrast to biological parents: for instance, they have no right to discipline, to consent to medical care or to access school records and no responsibility to support. Lastly, there is no consensus on a definitional name for remarried families. That does not mean there is no prescription for their lives. In the literature, there are many labels for remarried families; reconstituted, blended, reconstructed, reorganized, reformed, recycled, combined, step-, second-time around, merged and remarried families (Ganong & Coleman 1994: 1; Kelley 1996:535; Pink 1994:1).

4.2.3 Prejudice

Of all the factors surrounding remarried families and their children, the foremost is social prejudice. It is pervasive in the daily lives of remarried family members. As I shared in my remarriage story earlier, for instance, my sons and I have

been overwhelmed by prejudice in a church family and even from my niece. Through my own experience I am aware of the detrimental effects of prejudice with regard to the life of a remarried family. The life of a remarried family is caught up in prejudice and its various effects as set out below.

4.2.3.1 *The effect of prejudice on remarried family members*

According to some American reports, researchers have found that remarried families often tend to hide their status from others or they simply deny that they are remarried families, implying some awareness of a negative stereotype and their social distance in their community (Pasley 1987:34). According to Ganong and Coleman (1994:77), prejudice may interfere with appropriate socialization.

Remarried women suffer more from these prejudices or stereotypes than men do. Even researchers produce stereotypes with their own prejudicial findings on remarried women, in search of a scientific method. Some common examples are the notions that remarried women are more apt to be involved in conflict and are poorly adjusted, that they are less contented with their relationships with their family members, that they show more negative behaviors toward stepchildren and the like (Ahrons & Wallisch 1987; Clingempeel & Segal 1986; Hobart 1987; Kurdek & Fine 1993; Santrock & Sitterle 1987).

Children within remarried families also suffer from social stereotypes, even within remarried families. One study in 1989 found that 15% of such families did

not list their new family child living with them as part of the family (Carter & McGoldrick 1999:421). Several studies have found that even school personnel, teachers and administrators treat children from remarried families more negatively than students from first married families (Carter & McGoldrick 1999:16). Some researchers in their statistical research deleteriously assert that the most problematic member in remarried family life is the child (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley 1987:63; Prinsloo 1993:41).

4.2.3.2 *Alternative findings*

There are many different findings in research that differ from the above negative findings. Although the data of some of the research reviewed here is not very recent, it is worth looking at alternative views on remarried families and their children. For instance, the establishment of step-relationships between stepchildren and stepparents can be positive (Parish & Dostal 1980). In terms of school behaviour, one study found no differences between children from biological and remarried families (Touliatos & Lindholm 1980). Regarding the social behaviour of children from a remarried family, these children can be more competent than those from a biological family (Santrock & Sitterle 1987). Well-being in a remarried family can be as good as in a biological family (White 1979).

Ganong and Coleman (1984:108) reject the pathological findings of some research. Instead, they strongly argue that stepchildren do “not differ from nuclear family children in peer relationships...delinquent behavior...

companions...school behavior...”. Most studies on the influence of remarriage on children’s social interaction suggest that children from a remarried family do not behave in any more problematic manner than other children do.

All the assertions and conclusions of the above research are based on cases from North America. However, I have assumed here that the findings would be similar in South Africa, if South African researchers used similar tools or methodologies to their North American counterparts. Based on their statistical data, interpreted from the perspective of what they want to see, researchers and practitioners need to consider that their outcomes may produce social prejudice and stereotypes.

4.2.3.3 *Producers of prejudice: stereotypes*

Prejudice is closely related to stereotypes, which are socially constructed ways of thinking of people, or a group’s beliefs whose power is functional. This is the basis for prejudice in general. Stereotypes tend to restrict one’s preferred and developmental stories and even distort one’s identity and notion of the self. Most stereotypes are negative and are apt to create social distance, so that they sustain themselves by constructing a person to perceive others and their behaviours in a way that reinforces the prejudice (Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman 1987:19).

Ganong and Coleman (1994:33-35) highlight the effects of stereotypes and

prejudice, which distort perceptions in a negative way, leading people to treat the stereotyped persons or groups less favourably. As a result, the people who have been stereotyped may go through inappropriate socialization. Secondly, prejudicial thoughts about a group of people may affect behaviours directed toward members of that group, so that they accept what their members do and think in such a way that the expected behaviour is drawn out. In this regard, on the basis of their therapeutic experience, Whitaker and Bumberry (1988:40) metaphorically address the notion that “we find theories that fit in with our biases. When we stumble onto an idea we like, we automatically run it through our computer. If it fits with our programming, we claim it. If not, we reject it as being wrong, or at least not useful”. In a similar manner, through prejudice people tend to decide who is wrong and who is right. This prejudice influences people’s thinking. Through it, people create social distance in socially constructed value systems (Visher & Visher 1979).

This created social distance allows people to fit into and maintain certain power relations with one and another. The basis for the maintenance of such a power relation is not necessarily to overwhelm the other side or other persons without power, but to govern norms, criteria, a dominant culture and knowledge to serve their distinctive power as such. The result, in reality, however, is that they enforce certain lifestyles on others to a greater or lesser degree (Foucault 1975; Lukes 1974; Dallos 1997; Freedman & Combs 2002; White & Epston 1990). This is an attempt to administer the lives of others in the light of a stereotyped conception of what is good, healthy, normal, virtuous, efficient or profitable

(Kelly 2003:168). From this perspective it can be argued that adolescents in a remarried family are understood as an “artefact of expert knowledge” and on the basis of it, “truths” about youths, their behaviours and dispositions are to be regulated (Kelly 2000:306).

In short, stereotypes not only produce individuals’ biases, but also social distance. They are sustained by power relations that allow someone to rule the lives of others. Needless to say, my co-researchers and I have been stereotyped, as adolescents in remarried families often are.

4.2.3.4 *Producers of prejudice: cultural myths*

Another “predator” interfering with the growth of members of remarried families is cultural myths. Culture can be understood as “socially transmitted or learned ideas, attitudes, traits of overt behavior and institutions” (Steward 1972 cited in Bernal & Alvarez 1983:34). This culture makes a skeleton of the flesh and blood of a person’s lifestyle, social behaviour and value systems.

Throughout the history of the family, a mythical belief that the biological nuclear family life is an unalterable standard has pervaded many forms of family life. Within this myth, all non-nuclear family lives, especially those of remarried families, have often been excluded and stigmatized (Jones 2003:228).

Culture produces, for example, normative roles, orders and rules for family

members and rituals, values, life styles of the family which are regarded as being applicable to any other type of family and to other situations. At an institutional level, this agenda is crucial in the disparate treatment of remarried families in court systems, schools, churches and the media. At an individual level, this cultural myth is insidious in regarding a remarried family as inferior (Jones 2003:1). In these prevailing but outdated cultural beliefs, there are many negative factors that reflect on remarried families in society.

- *Cultural myths: propagated by dictionary terminology*

A vehicle of a negative attitude affecting remarried families in society is dictionaries, as most dictionaries do not contain the term “remarried” or “stepfamily”. *Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (Pasley 1987:20) defines a stepchild as “one that fails to receive proper care or attention”. The implication of the dictionary definition is a myth: it implies that biological families are inherently better supportive and optimal environments for children to dwell in. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) describes a “stepmother” as “one who becomes a mother to an orphan”. According to Cherlin (2002:466), the prefix “step -” in Old English referred to a family relationship caused by death. Thus, the original meaning of “stepchild” was “orphan”. The common usage of the word “stepmother” was a woman who had married a man who had lost his wife through death.

This dictionary definition reinforces a cultural myth and a negative view of remarried families. It carries pejorative connotations such as inferiority,

neglect, problems and victimization. This problematic dictionary definition may influence people's narrations of their daily lives, which consist of spoken and written language.

- *Cultural myths: propagated via children's literature*

In one way or another, children's literature makes a significant contribution to underpinning the cultural myth. One of the main saturated stereotype manufacturers in literature is fairy tales such as *Cinderella*, *Hänsel and Gretel*, and *Snow White*. According to Pasley and Ihinger-Tallman (1987:22), these tales are well-known as favourite children's stories in various versions, told and read for centuries throughout Asia, Europe, Africa and Latin America. They describe almost all of the stepmother characters as evil, and the wicked stepmother tortures the stepchild. The stepchild is mostly depicted as good and she or he finally triumphs over the stepmother. This popular portrayal infects children's perceptions and rouses unacceptable feelings about their stepmother. Rather than actual experiences, these fairy tales are typically the first producers of the steprelationship for young children, whose perception would be constructed towards stereotypes about such relationships (Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman 1987:23).

More dangerously, today, these stereotyped steprelationships are perpetuated via the media: films, home videos and family sitcoms on television. Jones's (2003:230) observation on this problem is insightful. He says:

Ironically, other more positive stepfamily myths may be just as insidious and problematic. As television programming began to reflect more diverse families, the idealized nuclear family story such as *Ozzie and Harriet* was replaced by equally romanticized versions of the stepfamily story. Programmes like *Brady Bunch* and *Eight is Enough* helped to popularize the term ‘blended family’ and the notions of instant family and instant love. These simplistic visions of ‘one big happy family’ are hazardous to remarriage because they create unrealistically high expectations that are likely to result in frustration and disappointment.

Several discourses on remarried families’ lives have emerged in professional literature: role ambiguity (Felker et al. 2002:126; Jones 2003:232; Kelley 1996: 541; Pink 1994:3), family structural or boundary ambiguity (Ganong & Coleman 1994:63; Ihinger-Tallman 1987:54; Prinsloo 1993:45), custody issues (De’Ath 1992:79; Jones 2003:232; Ihinger-Tallman 1987:79), the notion that the biggest problem or the biggest victims are children (Ihinger-Tallman 1987:63; Prinsloo 1993:41), and the assumption that being a stepmother is harder than being a stepfather (Cherlin 2002:465; Clingempeel & Segal 1986).

- *Deconstructing the literature*

Although this notion is not supported by evidence from existing research, the myth that the biological family is inherently better, and creates a better

environment for children (Hansen & Falicov 1983:9), has been sustained and maintained by children's literature, which popularizes distorted images of remarried families and manufactures stereotypes. The manufactured stereotypes result in social distance (Pasley 1987:34). More specifically, though, they play a great role in interfering with appropriate socialization for a common family position (Ganong & Coleman 1994:77). In addition, members of the remarried family may not feel interconnected with one another.

Nevertheless, as fairy tales strongly affect children's construction of their perceptions, children can create their own fairy tales, allowing themselves to imagine other alternative constructions of life which can be in their hands (Allanson 2002:63). In doing this, they can help themselves to connect, make sense of, and go forth in their future beings. The issue of whether this created story or imaginative work is real or imaginary is not significant from a narrative social constructionist perspective (Lamarque & Olsen 1994:225). For that reason, a story "can be 'real' or 'imaginary' without loss of its power...the sequence of its sentences rather than the truth or falsity of any of those sentences, is what determines its overall configuration of plot...indispensable to a story's significance and to the mode of mental organization in terms of which it is grasped" (Dallos 1997: 64). In short, even though the old-fashioned fairy tales storied by other people can serve as a producer of social prejudice on remarried families, a new kind of fairy tale created by the family through their own imagination can provide a new

direction for the family itself.

- *The case of my co-researchers*

All my co-researchers assumed that fairy tales might have influenced children's conceptions of steprelationships, but, by contrast, for themselves they did not feel that their attitudes towards their stepfathers had been affected by these stories. In particular, the relationship between Dripping (my co-researcher's chosen name) and her stepfather was close. Interestingly, when she had difficulty, she often chose her stepfather as her conversational partner instead of her biological father, even though she loves her biological father very much. She said, "...[I] told [him] a lot of things...he just listened to me and I just talked and talked...sat on his legs, like a little girl. I mean teenagers don't do that but I did. He was warm towards me." According to her, her stepfather also enjoyed his conversation with his stepdaughter, and she said: "He thought that he's getting married [to] my mom, but also getting married [to] me as well".

Light (my other co-researcher's chosen name) seemed to have a negative assumption about his current stepfather, but it was unclear whether his negative feeling towards his current stepfather was caused by his previous stepfather or was as an overt reflection of his emotional attachment to his biological father. Apart from his assumption, his imaginative work creating his own fairy tale via his storytelling enabled him to find a new direction for his relationships with his stepfather and his biological father. He repeatedly

said: “I just need to talk to him...trust him...I just have to talk to him”, and with regard to his biological father: “Well, I need forgiveness. I need, pray, ask God, forgive me for the anger I had and then I ask myself to forgive my dad, I think I’d better I have to forgive my father.” The both cases, Light and Dripping are living in a “storying culture” to “construct [their] life” (Paré 1995:13), rather than simply being caught up in a “storied culture” which constructs their lives for them.

4.2.3.5 *Producers of prejudice: Attachment theory*

When one examines social discourses on remarried family issues, one notes that attachment theory (Emery 1999) has provided crucial leverage to support stereotyping children in remarried families who have gone through phases of separation at least once. The term “attachment” refers to the emotional tie holding together the relationship between a parent and a child. Attachment theorists argue that experiences of poor attachment result in various problems in children’s development. They propose that attachment in a primary relationship has a great influence on children’s behaviour, internal work, and social development, and that that subsequently affects their relationships with others (McCune, Dipane de Fireoved & Fleck 1994; Meins 1997). McCune *et al.* (1994:163) state that when children feel that they receive appropriate acceptance and interactions from their primary relationships, they feel freed of an emotional burden and tend to go forward in their development.

According to Hudd (2002:177) (a play therapist using social constructionism),

experiences of abandonment, rejection, low self-esteem and a sense of isolation are frequently found in stories of children with disorganized and insecure attachment. Research on the antisocial behaviour of children produced outcomes showing how strongly the issue of attachment relates to antisocial behaviour and relationship problems such as aggression and avoiding relationships with others (Hudd 2002:152).

Carter and McGoldrick (1999:419) believe that children from remarried families “never give up” their attachment to their first relationship, “no matter how negative the relationship with that parent was or is”. They observe that children, especially those who have lost a parent through death, tend to obstruct their new relationships by referring to a previous relationship. Carter and McGoldrick (1999:422) identify this as “ghosts”. They say that “...ghosts can be even more powerful” than the need to acculturate to a new family relationship. The quality of the relationship between a person and that person’s ghosts, primary caregivers, plays a great role in her or his subsequent close relations. This unfinished relationship strongly ties into the problems in children’s attachment in new relationships. The issue of attachment of children in a remarried family generates problems not only in their relationship with others but also in the family. These problems can enable a remarried family to immobilize its members (Freedman *et al.* 1997:3).

- *Deconstruction of the issue of emotional attachment*

Attachment theory is primarily based on the propositions of evolutionary psychological models (Tomlinson 1997:109), whose view on human

behaviour and actions is individualistic and that of a natural process (Gergen 1994). By contrast, from a narrative social constructionist perspective, human behaviour and actions are seen as products of social interchange and of being immersed in interdependency (Gergen 1994:186). Gergen (1994:187) argues that to “understand an action is indeed to place it within a context of preceding and subsequent events”. In this sense, it is almost conclusive that children’s emotional attachment can be seen as a phenomenon of a given culture in a context. Tomlinson’s (1997:114) cultural perspective on the attachment issue is remarkable in that it “is obviously true that attachment is not the only relationship or facet of development which plays a role in the growth of the child. Other elements such as peer relationships, religion, art, and the rituals of the particular culture all contribute to the shaping of the individual world of the child. ...Attachment theory can only account for [the] quality of relationships, and not [their] strength”.

Thus, emotional attachments to previous relationships are not a decisive element that accounts for children’s behaviour and deeds, but it is merely a construct of a culture which is manufactured throughout a social and historical interpretive process. One of the causes of children’s broken attachments is their parental divorce. This event cannot be a static fact because it has taken place in the past, but repeatedly goes through a personal interpretive process. For instance, Schneller and Arditti (2004:28) clearly argue that “divorce serves as [a] context and catalyst for the

interpretive process. Overall, without consideration of cultural differences and socially constructed views on children in the remarried family researchers and theorists can restrict their developmental behaviours and social actions and create uniformity of children as “Problematizing Studies of Youth”.

- *The case of my co-researchers*

Although all my co-researchers had been broken-hearted owing to their parents’ divorce, their emotional bonds with ex-relationships and their interpretations of the divorce process were different. They had in common that they used their sorrow towards enhancing their future stories. As Schneller and Arditti (2004:27) suggested, one outcome of divorce is that it provides an incentive for individual growth and reevaluating relationships.

- *Light*

As a consequence of Light’s emotional attachment to his biological father, he has tended to avoid pursuing a relationship with other people, and to distrust them somewhat. His emotional attachment has had a very strong impact on his life in a number of different ways. For instance, he started smoking when he did not receive attention from his biological father. He did not want to grow closer to other people. His girlfriend, whom I spoke to as well, has several times mentioned that he attributes his misbehaviour, smoking or being angry, to his situation in a remarried family. I assume that her interpretation was not actually based on what he said, but was what he

attributed his “darkness” to, to his family status, in his own interpretation.

- *Dripping*

Her heart-breaking event took place when she was two years old. However, she felt that this event had not influenced her emotional development so much, because, firstly, she was too young to internalize it in her emotional world, and, secondly, her mother has replaced her biological father.

In order to explain their behaviour and reaction to the broken relationship, one can say that obviously the forms of emotional attachment put forward by those kinds of theory did not suit either case. Instead, in the light of narrative social constructionism, their reaction to the divorce situation is accurately explained in that its meaning may be constructed by language, in terms of the explanations they create, by social interaction with others, and by the cultural meanings of divorce that have influenced their thinking and perceptions (Schneller & Arditti 2004:27). Simply put, emotional attachment is a form of interpretation, social construction and meta-narrative (Dallos 1997:170).

More importantly, the proposition of attachment theory, whose agenda is to put children coming from divorce into a specific category, is never as great as the capacity of my beloved co-researchers to manipulate and incorporate the sorrowful experience into their maturity and future being. These manifestations of their being mature and growing in their perspectives are the point of view on meaning of pain and love expressed by Dripping, and the fact that Light was

willing to forgive without any expectation of a response from his father.

Therefore, whereas attachment theory's proposition as a professional discourse looks at children pathologically emerging from a separation with their first caregivers, narrative social constructionism attempts to see them here and now as they are, and their potential future, through imaginative work. In the case of my co-researchers, they suffered from their parental divorce to a greater or lesser degree, but simultaneously, they have the ability to mobilize their strengths for the family and their future.

4.2.3.6 *Producers of prejudice: the community around my co-researchers*

As I explained earlier, we, my co-researchers and I, were also interested in listening to other people around us. Hence, I interviewed two more people, teachers, because of my limited ability to conduct an interview. In this section, I will just introduce (in point form) their experiences, in their workplace, of children from remarried families.

4.2.3.7 *Teacher One*

- *Description of the interviewee*

- He is a principal of a high school and a pastor in a church.
- He has served as a teacher, pastor and psychologist for 20 years.
- He has two sons, both of which are teenagers.
- He is very gentle, an organized talker and developmental thinker.

- He has heartfelt compassion toward his students.

- *Semi-structured themes*

- About children: His experience with children in remarried families was quite positive in a bigger picture.
- About negative views of existing research: He rejected views such as that children from remarried families are more violent, aggressive, misbehaved, disturbing and defective in the learning stage. He does not agree with such research, and thinks that children's behaviour has to be clarified case by case, and especially with children from divorced and remarried families.
- His view in detail: Adolescents in remarried families have at least two different pivotal underlying worlds (two family structures). They are struggling to adapt to both structures. This view is similar to that of the other teacher and existing research. As a result, they are forced to build at least two identities, two rooms; values, thoughts, worldviews, lifestyles and the like. Under such circumstances, they are required to enhance their skills of adaptation. He thinks the impact of the parents' divorce and remarriage on children is different experience.

- *Anecdotal experiences*

- Intimacy and coffee: One boy he taught when he was a young teacher was in Grade 10. The boy had gone through trauma owing to his

parents' divorce and remarriage. He had fallen into depression and had been rebellious for a long time. However, he finally overcame his difficulty through his activity, such as sports and exercise, and proved to be a great help to the teacher.

- The teacher established a strong bond of intimacy with the boy, in which he positioned himself as an older brother, father and teacher to him. He always opened his door to the boy whenever he wanted to come over and have coffee and a casual chat. He even checked his school report card. Now the boy is around 35 years old, and happy with his own family. The teacher still keeps in touch with him.

- Acceptance: Two boys (A and B) of four brothers still have difficulty because of the turmoil they experienced during childhood, whereas the other two brothers (C and D) are well. After each parent got remarried, the two boys (A and B) wanted to visit their biological mother, but unfortunately, they were rejected, as their mother only wanted to see the other two (C and D). By contrast, their current mother has striven for them to feel at home where she lived with them, emphasizing that it was their real home. She has given them emotional confidence. As a result, the other two brothers (C and D), thankfully, have adapted to their life very well, but the two boys (A and B) did not.

The teacher did not know why the result is different in the four boys but

just assumed that the two boys (A and B) experienced a lack of acceptance by their biological mother and that this may be the main cause for them.

● *His advice*

- Let children plan their own time.
- Opportunity: He thinks that the structure of a remarried family by its very nature gives opportunities to its children to cultivate more diverse identities and personalities.
- Influential role within the family: children in the remarried family have a great role within that family, so he advises them “don’t choose just one family as an ultimate one”.
- In this, they can cultivate their leadership and life survival skills because they have to enhance how to adopt the two structures of their family.
- Don’t be shaken: disappointment is everywhere. Keep being on your right track whenever trouble invades into life.

4.2.3.8 *Teacher Two*

● *Description of the interviewee*

- She is one of my church members.
- She has two children, one is a teen, the other is a young adult.
- She has served as a teacher for 26 years and has been in teenager ministry for eight years.

- She gets tired of paperwork of her school, but enjoys teaching and meeting children.
 - She said many children who have problems want to talk with her rather than other teachers in her school. She thinks the reason why this is so, is that she is a Christian.
 - She is a passionate speaker.
- *Semi-structured themes*
- About children: Her experience of children from the remarried family is that they are for more disturbed than children from biological families.
 - About the negative views of existing research: She said children from remarried families were “definitely” more problematic and misbehaved than children from first married families. They were emotionally disturbed. She used the words “definitely” and “I am quite sure” many times.
 - Her view in detail
She mentioned insecurity: adolescents in remarried families require love (intimacy), and there is lack of interrelation. She pointed out financial problem: children’s moving from a private school to a public school was a sign of their parents’ financial difficulty. Because of changing schools, they feel a lack of self-esteem which affects their attitudes towards schoolmates in a new school. They feel that they have no right to have a

say. They lack confidence and a sense of comfort, but have a sense of responsibility for the family. They face disruptive situations: a weekly meeting with the other parent and different discipline from two families. The children have a feeling of power: they believe that they are able to change their biological parents' relationship to the past. They feel guilty because they think they were the main cause of their parents' divorce. There is a tendency that when they successfully overcome their problems within the family that they show more maturity than others.

- *Anecdotal experiences*

One girl loved her stepfather much more than her biological father because the stepfather totally accepted her, whereas her memory of her biological father was always a bad one. A boy in a divorce situation was nervous and sometimes even shaking, striving to bring change into his family, but soon becoming frustrated. However, some time later, he successfully overcame this, through concentrating on his schoolwork, which was a strategy that she recommended. She said that today, almost a quarter of the children in her class are from remarried families and divorced parents. She knows the demographics from the school's personal files which, in the beginning of the first school term, "have to be filled in", including a section on the marital status on the parent(s).

- *Her advice*

- Adopt a do-able role: don't think of yourself as the trigger of the parental divorce which has already taken place and which was out of your hands.

Instead, position yourself as a supplier of your family's happiness.

- Concentrate on schoolwork, rather than concern yourself with your parents' conflict.

4.2.3.9 *Our reflection upon the teachers' views*

In my co-researchers and my understanding, the first teacher may see that all adolescents have gone through a certain stage and developmental phase in the human life cycle to a greater or lesser degree, regardless of whether they are in the remarried family or a biological family. Therefore, he believes that the actions and behaviour of adolescents cannot be judged in terms of their family status. We agreed with his view of our situation and advice. Also, we believed that not only adolescents, but all human beings need intimacy and a feeling of acceptance. His way of treating his student in his coffee story was very favourable.

My personal opinion regarding the second teacher's thinking was that she seemed to have read books dealing with remarried families: her view on its children was almost the same as the findings of some existing research. One of us said: "Yeah, I agree with her 'absolutely' as she said, 'definitely', (laugh)...not every case is the same though, like us...".

From what she said, we could extract one political issue as a manufacturer of prejudice, that is the student file. We assumed that it might affect teachers'

attitude towards their students, creating preconceptions about their students.

In general, we accepted the teachers' opinions and views and advice. One positive confirmation of our research assisted by them was the fact that we have many opportunities to weave different threads of possibility into the multiple fabric of our life. Also, we could see that not everyone predicates our actions, behaviours and capacities as a pathological affirmation of the statistical findings of some existing research.

4.3 BACKGROUND: CONSULTING WITH THE BIBLE

Consulting with the Bible for this study is inevitable, because all my co-researchers have a Christian background. In the view of social constructionists, their cultural and personal backgrounds would influence their lives and interpretations of their experiences. Thus, investigating aspects of the Bible on the issue of remarriage (which today usually involves a divorce dispute) is decisive for my co-researchers and their remarried families. The values received from religious assumptions on family life imply that the life of a remarried family can either be restricted or sustained. In order to study biblical aspects of the issue of remarriage, this section deals with biblical aspects of divorce as well.

Is remarriage really a biblically permissible option for believers, or does it constitute living in adultery while the previous partner is still alive? What do the

Scriptures say about remarriage?

As understood by the Bible, remarriage is a fulfilment of God's grace for both "the failure of [those] who dropped the ball" or "the lost who lost their spouse from death" (Ellisen 1977:71). Cornes (1993:86-87) interprets Genesis 2: 18, 17: 2 to argue that the "Old Testament is not at all positive about being single and ...a prolonged single life is disaster in the eyes of the Old Testament and early Jewish thinkers".

The Bible preserves the notion that God's intention for marriage is that of a permanent union of His children. However, because of the "hardness of men's hearts", Jesus (Matthew 19:8) said that the Bible confirms permission for divorce and remarriage on two conditions: first, Matthew 19: 9 seems to indicate that unchastity, *porneia*, is a condition of divorce, and second, 1 Corinthians 7: 15 seems to make an exception in the case of a mixed marriage between a believer and a non-believer (Keener 1991:67). Thus, it is possible to draw the conclusion from those conditions that both Jesus and Paul reluctantly permitted divorce within these difficult circumstances. It is permission rather than prescription (Atkinson 1981:102) in a particular situation. Divorced believers, therefore, are not under bondage, rather, they are free and have the right to choose to remarry. I do not mean, of course, that permission to remarry is meant to encourage divorce, but I mean that remarriage is an option for life after divorce.

However, then, one difficult situation in terms of modern society and pastoral ministry arises, in that divorce and remarriage in Christianity today do not only result from unchastity and religious mixed marriages but are also caused by personality, economic situation, or lifestyle. Are those kinds of divorce a sin? If so, should divorced people be forbidden to remarry? Are there any other opportunities to remarry for such divorced believers? The answer is yes, there are.

Literally, the Hebrew word *na'af* in Exodus 20:14 is not identified merely as “adultery” in the criminal sense. Rather, it refers to the irregularity of sexual relations outside (Atkinson 1981:102) the *hāyâh le* “one-flesh”, the marriage covenant of God. This implies that the purpose of a human sexual relationship is to fulfil a uniting purpose of expressing and deepening personal communion between married partners and, moreover, building a family (Atkinson 1981: 103). Another literal reference is *erwat dabar*, “some indecency” in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. It does not merely mean adultery nor premarital or suspected adultery. It refers to a certain embarrassment caused to the husband by the wife’s public behaviour (Atkinson 1981:103). Jesus extends its meaning to the inner meaning of adultery, including any unfaithfulness. The Greek word *porneia* in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 indicates the meaning of betrothal or intercourse (Atkinson 1981:115; Keener 1991:302). A suggestion is that *porneia* means “something offensive to the eyes of God” which is the same meaning of *erwat dabar* “some indecency” (Atkinson 1981:117). Consequently, it is conclusive regarding *porneia* to be an exposition of the *erwat dabar*, “some indecency” through the

words of Jesus. Overall, the term *porneia* is broader than just the crime of adultery. In Jesus' time, public legislation regulating divorce was needed, and Jesus allowed divorce to those whose spouse was unfaithful, displayed some indecency and threatened to break the marriage covenant, "one flesh".

Briefly, although a couple may "drop the ball" due to their sinful nature and the hardness of their hearts, God gives them room for their redemption through their genuine repentance. As the statistics on the failure rate of remarriage show, like success, failure has a tendency to become habitual. Thus, to avoid that, authentic repentance along with a repentant act is indispensable for remarriage. In sequence, the remarriage constitutes a new life (Ellisen 1977:75) and a new family as a result of God's forgiveness, helping to build a successful body of Christ. Remarriage is not a sin. It is possible and necessary for vulnerable human beings, thanks to God's grace, caring for broken-hearted people and fulfilling their social, physical and spiritual needs.

4.4 CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this postmodern era, one growing phenomenon with regard to the types of family form is remarried families. However, as a result of family lives that are commercialized and normalized, its lifestyle is treated as strange and even somewhat distorted or denounced in the name of normality and universality. The dominant "predators" bearing down on the life of remarried family members are social stereotypes and modernist meta-narratives. Its adolescents carry a

burden of at least four imperative social and religious discourses: the adolescence discourse (focusing on the developmental phases of the human life cycle), the remarried family discourse (pronouncing its instability), the divorce discourse (a cause of emotional turmoil), and a religious instruction discourse (Christian principles).

Nevertheless, my co-researchers stand in opposition to these “predators”. They presented their point of view on remarried family life and shared how they have rewoven the fabric of their lives. Also, through our conversation, I could not find any struggle among my co-researchers regarding their received religious values on the life of their remarried family. Especially Light indirectly revealed the importance of faith. With these outcomes, we attempted to integrate our knowledge with other perspectives on issues regarding remarried families and their.