Behind the Eyes of Adolescents from Broken Families

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of adolescents from broken families. This utilized an in – depth interview to gather responses from six (6) participants who were within the range of 13 – 19 years old, enrolled in Junior or Senior High School, have parents who were formerly married but separated in a period of 5 - 10 years (during the child's early childhood to adolescence period based on Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Stages of Development), and live in a province in the Philippines. The following themes, family as an emotional system, emotional setbacks, changes in their interpersonal relationship, acts of rebellion, went through the stages of grief, friends as support system, faithfulness in God, and hopeful and moving forward were derived from the study. Children from broken families displayed emotional distress that affected different aspects of their lives, but despite this challenging reality of being part of broken families, the participants of this study remained hopeful about their future. Indeed, the love and support of their loved ones served as a motivating force for them to be optimistic in life.

Keywords— lived experiences, adolescents, broken families, family systems theory, five stages of grief

I. INTRODUCTION

Families are considered to be the child's first communal group in the society. They are regarded as a dynamic system since they do not live in isolation and they are part of a larger cluster (Saikia, 2017). A family plays a very important role in an individual's life may it be in terms of shaping the person's personality, beliefs, and capacity. Subsequently, an incident in the household can affect his or her whole well - being since the different foundations namely the moral, spiritual, emotional, psychological, and social development of a person stems from one's kin. Ideally, a child views family as those who bring comfort and warmth; however, if they can bring serious tolls in their domestic life such as parental separation, abuse among family members, and neglect, it will leave him or her to contemplate on how to cope with heartache, betrayal, uneasiness, or doubt. Given the circumstances, this allows the child to have a shattered belief of what a family is.

Dysfunction in the family occurs when conflict and misbehavior happen in the household regularly which results in neglected, abused, abandoned, manipulated, deprived, and isolated children. Likewise, children coming from broken homes tend to grow up emotionally scarred, as triggered by repeated trauma and pain inflicted by their parents' words and actions. These adverse childhood experiences and invisible scars can impact a person into adulthood. Consequently, changes in the family structure, as well as the dynamics in the household, are evident which

results to alterations in family roles and interactions. Children are the ones who suffer the most when their parents separate. Parents are expected to give proper care, support, and love to their children since they are considered to be the children's first environment and most significant people in their lives. Thus, children who are products of parental separation grow up as adolescents who are prone to delinquent and risky behaviors and substance use than those from intact families (Vanassche et al., 2013). These children are also reported to have a higher chance of dropping out of school, engaging in premarital sexual behaviors, acquiring depression, and among the others (Anderson, 2014). However, not all children with separated parents are at risk. Some evolved as achievers and lived with exuberance (Widyastuti, 2017).

Having separated parents is one of the causes of broken home which is an increasing and alarming trend happening in various parts of the world (Saikia, 2017). Statistically, Asia has a relatively lower percentage compared to Western countries. Over the years, various researches have been conducted to explain the rapid growth of marital disruption, which is the primary cause of a broken home. In the Philippines, it was specified by the Solicitor General's Office that there has been a distressing number of annulling marriages which is persisting every year. In 2010, 8,283 marriages were annulled in contrast to 2001 where only 4,520 were nullified (Tumangday, 2015).

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Despite the significant findings on parental separation and dysfunction in the family, very few studies have explored the lived experiences of children from broken homes.

In view of the current conditions, this study aims to explore the experiences of adolescents from broken families to acquire a better understanding and excavate immense knowledge on their insights and challenges as an individual. The substantial information gathered from this study may hopefully address pervasive concerns of the adolescents, parents and family members, school administrators, and mental health professionals such as psychologists and guidance counselors.

II.   METHODOLOGY

The researcher utilized the qualitative research design, specifically the phenomenological approach. A qualitative research pertains to the type of inquiry where the researcher tries to grasp claims based primarily on constructivist perspectives with the intention of creating themes from the data collected. A phenomenological study focuses on what the participants have in common as they experience as a specific phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The transcendental phenomenology approach aims to focus on the totality of experience by viewing both experience and behavior as a combined and inseparable relationship of the subject (Moustakas, 1994).

This research on the adolescents from broken families utilized the purposive sampling method. Moustakas (1994) stated that 3 – 7 participants are sufficient in conducting a phenomenological research. Participants were gathered based on the following inclusion criteria formulated: (1) within the range of 13 – 19 years old; (2) must be enrolled in Junior or Senior High School; (3) parents must be married but separated or annulled in a period of 5 - 10 years (during the child's early childhood to adolescence period based on Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Stages of Development); (5) lives in a province in the Philippines.

The researcher utilized a semi - structured interview guide as the primary data gathering instrument for the in-depth interview to understand the lived experiences of adolescents from broken families which generated the following information:

Part I: demographic profile

Part II: participant's experiences of being in a broken home

Part I consisted of the psychosocial profile of the participants. It included the participants' age, grade level, localization, classification of school, and socioeconomic status.

Part II entailed the participant's personal experiences of being in a broken home. The semi – structured interview guide was comprised of ten questions which answered the following: causes of parental separation, effects experienced by the adolescent, familial relationship, and coping strategies.

Three experts with post graduate degrees in the area of study validated and modified the instrument by removing unnecessary items and made sure that it gave more insight and connotation to the study being conducted.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Pandey & Patnaik, 2014, the trustworthiness of qualitative research can be addressed using the following criteria: (a) credibility (in preference to internal validity); (b) transferability (in preference to external validity); (c) dependability (in preference to reliability) and; (d) confirmability (in preference to objectivity).

In gathering and analyzing the data, the researcher used Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological approach because it has systematic steps in the data analysis procedure and guidelines for assembling the textual and structural descriptions. The following procedural steps were followed:

The researcher identified first the possible participants for the study. Given the nature of the study, purposive sampling technique was used. Next, possible participants were given letters of consent and parental assent to acquire their approval as participants of the study. In addition, the purpose, objectives, and expected benefits from the study were also explained.

Upon obtaining the participant's consent to partake in the research, a schedule for the interview was arranged depending on his or her availability. The interviews were recorded through audiotape with permission from the participants. The researcher spent ample time to be with them and wrote down important details. Each interview lasted for one (1) to two (2) hours per visit. The researcher made verbal and non-verbal observations as well, all throughout the research process. All information presented were taken seriously, thus, the researcher verified it with the participants until saturation of data, which is repetition of the same information all over again during the follow up interviews, was reached. Lastly, participants' lived experiences were analyzed, major themes were identified, and then a framework that was created.

Since this study is purely qualitative in nature and sought to explore the lived experience of adolescents from broken families, their stories were analyzed using

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Moustakas' phenomenological approach. The first person reports of life experiences are what make phenomenological research valid. The principles adopted by this phenomenological research are epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation and synthesis.

The researcher secured the anonymity of the participants by removing all biographical identifiers and utilized pseudonyms during the course of the research. Likewise, she held all information strictly confidential. She ensured the protection of all participants from potentially harmful consequences that might affect them as a result of their participation.

III. RESULTS, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

The following themes were derived from the study: family as an emotional system, emotional setbacks, changes in their interpersonal relationship, acts of rebellion, went through the stages of grief, friends as support system, faithfulness in God, and hopeful and moving forward.

Families are considered to be a child's first communal group in the society. They play a very important role in an individual may it be in shaping the person's personality, beliefs, and capacity. All of the six participants shared a common theme in assessing family as a system of emotionally interconnected individuals. They believed that what makes up a family is love, support, and guidance. Bowen's Theory highlights family as a unit who use systems to describe complex interactions. Thus, the family members are interconnected with each other emotionally (Haefner, 2014). Hence, in one's most cherished and valued relationships, he or she may seek recognition, acceptance, understanding, support, and guidance. Emotional intimacy runs deep as it paves the way for the person to experience ultimate relationship security and satisfaction. This is considered as important because it serves as an adhesive which holds relationships together.

Separation during school age years may have a great impact in the child's life as it can affect the socioemotional aspect and overall well-being of the individual. Psychological disturbances may be evident during the separation but in other cases, it manifests when they get older. These individuals tend to be vulnerable emotionally as they face the dreaded consequences of the separation. The school age years is a critical stage of rapid development. Some studies have indicated that children between 6 – 12 years old are more affected by the separation than those who are older (Desrosiers, Cardin, & Belleau, 2013). Consequently, these children are very egocentric and are still in a magical thinking. In this age group, they may hold on a wish that their parents will get back together since

they believe that they are responsible for their parents' separation and reconciliation. Separation may create insecurity as well which might possibly serve as a hindrance and threat to the child's development.

Significant changes were vividly seen before and after the separation. For some, they have difficulty establishing secure attachments with either one of their parents, siblings, relatives, and other people whereas for others, they formed a closer bond with the most important people in their lives. Changes in the interpersonal relationship generate anxiety. Bowen believes that too much closeness or distance significantly affects the level of anxiety brought by the external stress and sensitivities (Haefner, 2014). Although an emotional cutoff happens, triangling provided a detour as the child seeks for the support of another parent. Nevertheless, it was also believed that risky behaviors engaged by these adolescents can be counteracted by the warmth and emotional connectedness of a family.

Rebellion serves as a triggering response to a hostile situation. A child who witnessed his or her parents' painful divorce is more likely to involve in risky and negative behaviors such as engaging in vices such as alcohol, tobacco, and drugs, running away from home, and cutting classes. Adolescence is an age of exploration and experimentation. Alcohol, tobacco, and drugs are very powerful substances in which adolescents are inclined to try (Haley et al., 2018). Needless to say, parental divorce has been known to increase the risk of alcohol and drug dependence in one way or another as the use of these substances has indicated a dysfunctional family system (Jackson et al., 2016; Swarbooi, 2013). The structure of a family definitely affected the individual's development as those who have separated parents tend to display misconduct and delinquent behavior and they are also prone to smoke cigarettes, use illicit drugs, and consume large amounts of alcohol (Loke & Mak, 2013).

Parental separation can be traumatic for a child and it is indeed rare for a person to never undergo the stages of grief. Separation does not only occur to the parents but to the child as well. The grief cycle does not specifically follow a significant pattern as they may interchange depending on how the person copes. Correspondingly, one moves through recovery at his or her own pace like for example, experiencing depression before anger or skipping a stage of bargaining and straight to acceptance. These situations show that each person experiences his or her own emotional journey as they process, struggle, and adjust to whatever changes happens to the family. Grief takes place when the individual experiences emotional trauma or suffering and it usually occurs when someone or something

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essential to that individual's life has been taken away (Smith, 2012). Furthermore, a person displays five reactions in response to a crisis situation which are popularly known as DABDA and these are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and lastly, acceptance (Holland & Neimeyer, 2010).

Friends serve as a strong support system for adolescents. At some point in one's life, he or she experiences unpleasant circumstance that makes them feel a variety of emotions such as frustration, sadness, anger, and among the others. Additionally, being with peers provides the adolescents an open, supportive, and rewarding pace which helps in managing an emotional turbulence happening in one's life. These individuals seem to cope better with them rather than adults. Adolescence is considered to be a period of social latency and these individuals tend to spend more time with friends. Furthermore, peers do not only play a substantial role in shaping and affirming one's identity but they are also essential in such a way that they aid in helping them cope life stressors and protecting them from psychological distress (Camara, Bacigalupe, & Padilla, 2013).

Despite the heartaches caused by the separation which could have easily led these adolescents away from God, they turned to Him for comfort and healing. Praying to God gave them strength to shy away from the pain and overcome every struggle that comes in their way. The literature suggests that parental separation predicts a decline of giving importance to faith and religion (Ueker & Ellison, 2012). In contrast, the participants of this study appear to have a heightened faith in God since they entrust in Him their lives. These adolescents chose to look on the brighter side of life. They believe that there is no problem too big which they cannot solve with God's grace and guidance.

Although parental separation is considered to be one of the most stressful life events for both parents and children, moving forward will always be a choice. One may experience traumatic events in life which may hinder him or her on becoming his or her full potential but life does not stop there. These adolescents have the drive to succeed in their chosen careers and most dream to give their family a better life ahead. Filipinos are known for being culturally independent and self – reliant. They tend to focus more on positive and productive actions rather than dwelling on certain incidents since they have the capacity to bounce back and recover (Docena, 2015). Being resilient does not mean that the individual does not experience distress and difficulties but rather, he or she remains headstrong despite the traumatic events. Just like the participants, they continue to believe that they will succeed in life, may it be in terms of career or family.

Each individual has an ideal perspective of what a family is. It is commonly believed that a family should be composed of a father, mother, and children, and what holds them together is the love, guidance, and support for each other. This connotation is easily shattered by dissolution of marriage either through annulment or separation, mostly caused by extramarital affairs. Moreover, parental separation negatively impacts a family as it causes serious distress and various adverse effects mostly to children. It paves the way for an increase in risky behaviors and delinquency such as engaging in vices, running away from home, among others. Academic, behavioral, and emotional problems are evident among the adolescents as well.

Peers play an essential role in the adolescents' life mainly acting as a social and emotional support during crises situations. Although for some, they are unable to express their feelings due to the development of the lack of trust because of the separation of their parents despite the availability of their support system. These adolescents may have incurred hardships and trials but it did not stop them from dreaming and pursuing their goals in life. Some may have fell off the track and questioned God but later on, they renewed their faith and trusted Him in everything.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the significant findings of the study, the following conclusions are made:

(1.) Most of the participants whose parents have separated during their school-age years engaged in vices such as smoking, drinking, and drugs. Two participants reported an incident of running away from home. Rebellion may have occurred during their adolescence period because they were not able to understand well and express their inner sentiments when the separation happened. (2.) Parents have been assumed to lack influence over the adolescent since the parental influence lessens as the child enters the adolescent stage due to increasing influence of peers and due to young people spending less time at home. Peers commonly served as the cornerstone and support system of these adolescents with dysfunctional families. (3.) The separation either strengthened or diffused the closeness of their relationship with various people such as their parents, siblings, relatives, friends, and other people respectively. (4.) The adolescents all went through the stages of grief namely denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, but doesn't necessarily mean they followed the order consequently. (5.) Most of the participants stated that hanging out with their friends and praying gave them a peace of mind. These had helped them cope very well in life. (6.) Although these adolescents have experienced hardships in life, they never

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gave up on their dreams and aspirations and continued to stay positive and chose to move forward.

Children from broken families display emotional distress that affected different aspects of their lives. But despite this challenging reality of being part of broken families, the participants of this study remained hopeful about their future. Indeed, the love and support of their loved ones (friends, parent/s, siblings, and significant others) served as a motivating force for them to be optimistic in life. This is the ultimate truth that most children who are from broken families experience.

Based on the findings, implications, and conclusions of the study, the following are recommended:

Adolescents with Broken Families may participate in the guidance related programs and interventions designed for them. These may help them cope well with their daily struggles in life. Likewise, they are encouraged to seek professional help from a psychologist to succor them in understanding their emotional states and aid them in developing positive coping strategies. They are also urged to cultivate a strong support network among their families and peers.

Parents of the Adolescents, even though separated, should make an effort to fulfill their roles for their children's welfare. If they can no longer be together in one roof, the least that they can do is to practice positive co-parenting by having a mutual agreement on how to take care and foster healthy, happy, loving, successful, and mindful children.

Peers serve as a strong support group so it is highly encouraged that they continue to influence each other positively by engaging with worthwhile activities that may help them develop their interpersonal and intrapersonal skills such that they will focus on enhancing their abilities in becoming a productive person.

Psychologists. This study may provide the mental health professionals a starting point in giving therapeutic interventions that will help adolescents and their family members cope with their family situation better.

Guidance Counselors. Guidance counselors may be recommended to design programs which are deemed appropriate to help these adolescents rebuild their self-concept and passion for life through optimistic practices.

School Administrators are considered as an essential element of the school organization. Given the results of this study, they may be strongly recommended to support the guidance related programs and interventions for these adolescents.

Future Researchers. This study may serve as a threshold for the future researchers who may want to study about the adolescents from broken families. Since this study only focused on those with separated parents, they may opt for individuals who were also neglected and abused. Future researchers may gather participants from a different age group (i.e. Millennials) in the light of a different perspective.

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