

**An exploration of how parental divorce/separation
may affect a child's internal world during
latency/middle childhood: A mixed methods design.**

Donia Heider

UCL

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Declaration

I, Donia Heider, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signature:



Date: September 8th, 2020

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Abstract

The primary aim of the current thesis was to gain an understanding of how divorce/separation is experienced by children during the period of latency/middle childhood. This was explored from three perspectives; firstly, from the child's perspective through the following investigations: (a) Children's caregiver/attachment representations were evaluated quantitatively using the Story Stem Assessment Profile (SSAP) and comparisons were made between children from separated ($n = 29$) and non-separated families ($n = 39$); (b) a topic-relevant story stem was developed to target the experience of parental separation and to inform the current thesis about children's internal representations post-divorce, whilst determining its psychometric robustness; and, (c) a projective qualitative measure was developed and administered to children from separated families ($n = 28$). Secondly, divorced co-parents in conflict ($n = 9$) completed The Parent Development Interview (PDI) which was analysed qualitatively to explore features of their reflective functioning (RF). The PDIs provided the current thesis with an indirect examination of the latency-age child's internal world post-divorce. Thirdly, Online Focus Groups (OFG) were conducted with schoolteachers ($n = 10$) and qualitatively analysed. This provided another perspective from a close attachment figure, in order to attain an indirect examination of the latency-age child's internal world post-divorce. The current thesis offers a preliminary foundation from which these multiple perspectives and their convergence with one another, demonstrate the need for future studies into the internal experience of latency-age children post-divorce.

Impact Statement

The current thesis provides researchers in child development/psychology, attachment, and divorce, with preliminary findings from which future studies can build upon, to continue exploring the impact of parental separation on children. Limitations, strengths, and suggestions for future work have been highlighted and discussed, allowing researchers an opportunity to remedy these in future studies.

Designing and carrying out ethical, non-intrusive studies with young children, particularly those with histories of trauma, abuse, instability, or who cannot advocate for themselves, can be challenging. In addition, designing and selecting measures to use with such populations can be equally challenging. Therefore, researchers can benefit from a new measure—a projective interview—whose development as a new research tool, is perceived to be one of the most beneficial contributions of the current thesis. It encompasses features of story stem measures, known to provide a safe and uninhibited window into a child’s internal world through fictional narratives, whilst also maintaining the direct interview approach, traditionally used with older children, adolescents, and adults. This measure is adaptable and its uses are expansive, making it a unique and useful tool for researchers.

In addition, a detailed outline for creating an Online Focus Group (OFG), provided in the current thesis, allows researchers the ability to adequately replicate this design for use in future work. The sense of anonymity the OFG affords its participants, makes it a modern and useful research tool for use with vulnerable populations all over the world, without restrictions of travel and/or time of day. Modifications in future uses can include language translation in real time to permit the inclusion of ethnically diverse participants within the same OFG, minimising

language barriers.

Clinicians and other support workers aiding children in post-divorce adjustment can benefit from the findings of the current thesis in their therapeutic work. They can utilise the projective interviews and the Story Stem Assessment Profile (SSAP) responses from children from separated families to further understand the internal experiences of children during latency/middle childhood. Moreover, support workers can utilise the current thesis' conclusions about the convergence of parent, teacher, and child perspectives, and how they impact and connect with each other. For instance, children's attachment behaviours post-divorce may be linked, and in reaction, to their parents' co-parenting styles, level of conflict, ability to mentalize about their child's experience(s), and/or their responsiveness towards their children.

In the context of family law, findings from the current thesis can raise awareness about the negative outcomes for children associated with the exclusion of their thoughts and wishes in divorce court proceedings and custody/visitation arrangements.

By publishing findings from the current thesis, the primary researcher aims to inform divorcing/divorced co-parents about the importance of considering and keeping their child(ren)'s experience in mind. Through collaboration with academic departments charged with the training and support of teachers in the UK, the current findings could also aid in demonstrating the need to be prepared with the relevant knowledge and tools required to effectively support children from separated families within schools.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Research has shown that parental divorce/separation (the terms ‘divorce’ and ‘separation’ will be used synonymously) can have deleterious effects on children’s psychological, behavioural, and emotional well-being (e.g., Amato, 2000; Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Amato & Keith, 1991; Cherlin et al., 1991; Clarke-Stewart et al., 2000; Cockett & Tripp, 2004; Corak, 2001; Escapa, 2017; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). However, researchers have also found that children can benefit following divorce when the marriage involved a high degree of conflict (e.g., Booth & Amato, 2001; Amato, Loomis & Booth, 1995; Morrison & Coiro, 1999; Stein, 2006).

Investigating the impact of divorce on children is challenging given the multiple risk factors for children and the complexity of divorce situations. Divorce can be better understood as a ‘process’, rather than a single event, which often involves pre-existing family conditions such as conflict, and/or other parenting difficulties, long before the couple officially separates and which may also continue after a parent departs from the home (e.g., Amato, 2000; Amato, 2010; Amato & Boyd, 2014; Sun & Li, 2002; Wallerstein, Lewis & Blakeslee, 2000).

Divorce can be particularly difficult for children during the developmental period of ‘latency’—a term coined by S. Freud (1905)—when they are still highly dependent upon their parents, aware of their relationship with them whilst at the same time, undergoing major cognitive and social developments, as well as developing their identity in relation to others (Franiack & Günter, 2010; Kalter & Rembar, 1981). This period is also referred to as ‘middle childhood’ or ‘primary school-age’ and ranges between 5 or 6 and 11 or 12 years of age (Del Giudice, 2018; Franiack & Günter, 2010). Divorce seems to occur more frequently in parents of this age group (Drake, 2008). There can be many variations between children’s development within

this group, as major social, emotional, and cognitive changes are taking place and continue to develop as age increases (Davies, 2010)

Attachment and psychoanalytic theories have helped explain how relationship patterns are transmitted from one generation to another and this is a largely unconscious process. So, it can be assumed that the divorced parental couple pattern is also transmitted to their children. Given the rise in divorce, the complexity of family situations and unconscious patterns, as well as the multiple risk factors of divorce for their children, it is important to understand more about children's experiences. Exploring the experiences of parents and teachers can help form a well-rounded picture of the latency-age child of divorce. Primary schoolteachers play a prominent role in the lives of latency-age children, due to the majority of their day being spent at school during this stage (Collins, 1984).

The current chapter will begin by presenting a context from which to examine what is known about the child's experience of divorce; this context will begin with an examination of the 'healthy parental couple', the couple in conflict pre-divorce and its breakdown, followed by an overview of co-parental dynamics post-divorce. Attachment and psychoanalytic theories will be drawn on in order to better understand these dynamics. An overview of the latency-age child and the developments that occur during this period will follow. An extensive summarisation of the empirical and theoretical findings on children of divorced/separated parents will be presented. This chapter will conclude with the study design, aim, and objectives of the current thesis.

1.1 Divorce: A brief background

1.1.1 Divorce: Incidence in the UK

The breakdown of the parental couple, resulting in divorce has increased considerably in prevalence since the 1970s within the Western world (Phillips, 1991; Stone, 1990). The increase in divorce has resulted in a general social and cultural acceptance of the single-parent household and the division of time between two houses for children of all ages (Stone, 1990). Today, hundreds of thousands of children in the United Kingdom experience the breakdown of the parental couple. It is estimated that 42% of all marriages end in divorce; in 2017 there were 101, 669 divorces in England and Wales (ONS, 2018).

It is important to note that these statistics do not take into consideration the married couples who are separated but who have not legally divorced, or unmarried couples that have separated. These additional populations may significantly increase these numbers, as opposite-sex cohabiting couple families are the second largest type of couple family in the UK, totaling 3.3 million families (ONS, 2016).

1.2 Theoretical perspectives on couple relationships

1.2.1 The couple and factors that lead to its break down

To fully understand the impact of divorce on children, it is important to initially consider the parents' couple dynamics prior to the event of separation. These dynamics can play a major role in how a child experiences and adjusts to divorce. Researchers have suggested that these 'pre-separation dynamics' may in fact be considered part of the divorce process as a whole (e.g., Amato, 2000).

Attachment and psychoanalytic theories will also be drawn upon to explore underlying motivations of why parents might come together as a couple and the unconscious dynamics that could be at play that might lead to their separation.

1.2.2 Attachment

Attachment theory posits that human beings and animals are born with a need to bond emotionally to a caregiver (Bowlby, 1969). This need is crucial to human survival from an evolutionary stand-point due to the young forming attachments to the older, more experienced individuals, ensuring security in terms of food, shelter, and protection from danger (Bowlby, 1969). “Attachment refers to an affectional tie that one person (or animal) forms to another specific individual. Attachment is thus discriminating and specific,” (Ainsworth, 1969, p. 2). Furthermore, attachments are durable and tend to remain strong even after adverse circumstances (Ainsworth, 1969).

1.2.3 The couple: An attachment theory perspective

Attachment theory proposes that the most common type of attachment bond formed in adulthood is between an individual and his/her romantic or marital partner (Feeney & Monin, 2008; Holmes, 2014). In a ‘healthy’ couple, each member of the couple operates within the relationship as an attachment figure for the other, maintaining a bidirectional attachment system (Fisher & Crandell, 1997). This bidirectional system is comprised of one couple member being in a ‘dependent position’ and the other being in the ‘depended on’ position, as well as freely oscillating between these two roles within the couple (Fisher & Crandell, 1997). Fisher and Crandell (1997) refer to this role-duality as being a unique dimension of the healthy, couple attachment relationship; however, Bowlby (1969) indicated that a son or daughter may step into the ‘depended-on’ position in the parent-child attachment relationship as well, when the parent is of old age and may be in the ‘dependent’ position.

1.2.4 The couple: A psychoanalytic perspective

The ‘British Object Relations’ psychoanalytic school of thought focuses on individuals and their ways of seeking objects (i.e., an internalised image of a significant other, usually a parent or romantic partner) with which they can establish meaningful relationships (Levite & Cohen, 2012). When romantic and intimate couple interactions begin, these patterns generally serve as an unconscious ideal of what to expect from people in the external world and activate one’s earliest object relations—the relationship with their caregiver/parent during infancy (Ludlam & Nyberg, 2007). The couple can often be an unconscious means of recreating the fantasy of the ‘good parent’ in the partner or within the couple as a whole (Yahm, 1984).

Ruszczynski (1993) and Levite and Cohen (2012) describe becoming part of a romantic relationship as a way of facing previously unresolved internal conflicts within earlier relationships; this creates a relationship between two individuals where each partner is projecting (i.e., expelling one’s own unacceptable, intolerable feelings and thoughts outwards onto someone else; thus, feelings are moved from the self to another in hopes of externalising internal conflict) their own internal object relationships onto the other and both are facilitating in keeping alive the hope of repairing and resolving these early internal conflicts mentioned above (Levite & Cohen, 2012). As a result of these unconscious projections, expectations of one another are already present to assist in repairing these earlier internal conflicts (Levite & Cohen, 2012). If these expectations are not met and frustrations arise due to the realisation that their unrealistic fantasised idealisations are unlikely to come true, the way in which a partner reacts to this realisation is what determines whether a romantic relationship can continue (Levite & Cohen, 2012). Couple members may

continue by negotiating and reorganising their expectations of one another and of the relationship itself (Levite & Cohen, 2012). When frustrations are tolerated, object relations theorists refer to this as an aspect of ‘mature object relations’ (Klein, 1986). As extrapolated from Klein’s (1959; 1986) earlier theories on the caregiver-child relationship, a romantic, lasting relationship between two individuals may also require that unconsciously projected expectations with an underlying wish to repair early object relations be abandoned once they prove to be unrealistic and disappointment occurs (Levite & Cohen, 2012). According to Levite and Cohen (2012), partners who use mature object relations, are able to, “build a balanced emotional system of intimacy and personal autonomy,” (p. 48). Adults who use mature object relations should be able to acknowledge their feelings, accept disappointments, and pull back their mutual projections and expectations (Levite & Cohen, 2012).

The Oedipus complex is of significance to the adult couple as well because during the Oedipus stage, the child learns meanings and patterns that are likely to influence all subsequent relationships (Morgan, 2005). The child learns something about being excluded and included within a relationship and that the relationship does not revolve around him/herself (Morgan, 2005). By tolerating and accepting the special connection between one’s parents during the Oedipus complex, the child takes into him/herself the parental couple as an internal object and has formulated a notion of acquiring his/her own sexual and romantic relationship later in life (Morgan, 2005).

1.2.5 The couple: Conclusions

The attachment theory and psychoanalytic schools of thought share their emphasis on the importance of early experiences in the formation of the internal world and that this, in turn, has an influential role in the formation of all future relationships. “The conscious aims and purposes of the union are later invaded by

hitherto latent dispositions to re-enact an intrapsychic pattern in the new setting of the marriage, which becomes to a varying extent a projection screen for such unresolved tensions in the individuals,” (Dicks, 1967, p. 30-31).

1.3 The couple in conflict: An attachment theory perspective

Attachment theory posits that relationship conflict and separation can be predicted by having a partner who is not a trustworthy attachment figure (i.e., an attachment figure who does not meet their partner’s attachment needs and who is unreliable or unavailable when sought) (Feeney & Monin, 2008). In some cases, having an untrustworthy partner is due to an inability to recognise, benefit from, or maintain a mutually beneficial relationship with a reliable and trustworthy attachment figure (Feeney & Monin, 2008). Differences between couple members’ internal working models (IWM), or representational models of attachment, from earlier life tend to underlie individual differences in attachment styles, which can predict relationship dynamics within the couple (Bowlby, 1969; Bowlby, 1979; Feeney & Monin, 2008; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Prior & Glaser, 2006).

1.3.1 The couple in conflict: A psychoanalytic perspective

An object relations perspective would suggest that the ability to tolerate unmet expectations or frustrations within the couple can lead to a long-lasting partnership between two individuals; whereas, an intolerance of these frustrations may lead to conflict within the couple or even divorce. When frustrations cannot be tolerated and result in greater conflict or separation, ‘primitive object relations’ are operating (theorised as the paranoid-schizoid position) (Klein, 1986; Fox, 2015; Kernberg, 1991; Levite & Cohen, 2012). A common way of relating primitively when in the paranoid-schizoid position is known as ‘splitting’; a way of organizing experiences by dividing them in two (e.g., love and hate) (Akhtar & Byrne, 1983; Klein, 1986).

Splitting serves to isolate the two emotions, or part objects, from one another and in early life this serves to protect the loving object (i.e., the ‘good parent’) in the infant’s mind from the dangerous hateful one (i.e., the ‘bad parent’), by keeping them apart (Klein, 1986). These primitive modes of relating later on in life are indicative of an inability to tolerate ambivalence—that is, the ability to tolerate and accept both feelings of love and hate for the same individual (Winnicott, 1963). By extrapolating from object relations theory, the divorce of a couple can be understood as being motivated by a loss of hope in the possibility of repairing the early, internal object-relational conflicts that both partners had unconsciously hoped to resolve in their relationship (Levite & Cohen, 2012).

1.3.2 When the couple breaks down

During and following couple breakdown and separation, re-ordering and reorganisation of family dynamics and relationships is inevitable (Marquardt, 2005). The most profound disturbances to both adults’ and children’s lives are said to occur within the first two years following divorce (Dowling & Barnes, 2000). Practically, this reorganisation can include a reformation of living arrangements, friendships, and kin relationships, as well as renegotiation of more practical aspects of one’s daily life such as employment, housing, bank accounts, schooling, and even cultural and/or religious traditions (Leonoff, 2015; Marquardt, 2005). Financial crises, educational concerns, psychological unrest, and drastic lifestyle changes are common adversities for separated families (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Feeney & Monin, 2008; Marquardt, 2005). Wallerstein, Lewis, and Rosenthal (2013) found that divorce was not, a ‘time-limited’ crisis and instead, “involved an extended period of transition and rebuilding during which mothers and children often struggle for years to gain or regain economic or emotional stability,” (p. 179).

The re-ordering of the aforementioned social and practical features of pre-separation family life can lead to feelings of resentment, an increase in stress levels, depression, anxiety, hostility, and anger for both co-parents following separation (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Boyan & Termini, 1999; Donner, 2006; Dowling & Barnes, 2000; Ehrenberg, Hunter & Elterman, 1996; Elrod, 2001; Feeney & Monin, 2008; Johnston, 2003; Levite & Cohen, 2012; Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007; Ramsey, 2001; Shmueli, 2005; Smith, 1999).

1.4 Post-divorce co-parenting

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the divorce process can be regression-inducing for the individuals involved; individuals begin to act in immature ways, which involve more states of mind previously used during childhood (Yahm, 1984).

People capable of sharing suddenly want it all and refuse to give an inch. Rational, logical minds suddenly behave irrationally and not in their own best interests. Previously caring people suddenly become hateful and filled with a wish for vengeance... These painful and potentially regressive feelings intrude on a person's ability to make rational adult decisions, follow through on plans, and understand and provide for the children (Yahm, 1984, p. 60).

Ex-couple members may be reverting back to an earlier way of coping and interacting—similar to the object relations notion of ‘primitive object relations’—within the relationship or towards their co-parent in an attempt to shield oneself from and defend against overwhelming feelings of pain, rejection, sadness, anxiety, guilt, panic, and/or shame that separation and loss can provoke (Levite & Cohen, 2008; Yahm, 1984). Jung (1983) also found ‘regressive libido’ present in individuals he treated who had an experience of disappointment in love or marriage. Wallerstein and Lewis (2007) stated that,

... Parenting seems to be profoundly stressed, and even potentially shattered, by severely disorganizing and unhappy life experiences, such as divorce. Divorce throws into high relief the emerging conflict between the divorcing parents' powerful desire to create a new life and a new relationship to replace the lost marriage and their need to maintain the caregiving psychic structure so

that their children can be minimally impacted (p. 455).

Furthermore, divorce paves the way for detaching from a person who was once a primary attachment figure (Feeney & Monin, 2008; Reibstein & Reibstein, 1998). However, detachment following couple breakdown may never be fully accomplished between co-parents who have children together (Baum, 2004; Feeney & Monin, 2008; Reibstein & Reibstein, 1998). This may be because although following divorce the partners become ex-partners they still both remain their children's parents (Baum, 2004). Baum (2004) also explains that when a couple separates, the individuals involved retain aspects of their previous roles as spouse and parent from a "two-parent household"; he termed these aspects as "role residuals" which maintain an individual's identity pre-separation, keeping it alive internally despite its external end. Research suggests that co-parents who are in post-separation conflict with one another could be continuing to maintain an internal, albeit different, relationship, which still serves to maintain some communication. This tends to prolong and complicate post-separation adjustment for all family members involved (Baum, 2006; Emery & Dillon, 1994; Weiss, 1976).

Detachment for couples who parent children together is challenging when intimate details of each individual's life are shared openly with the other in order to make arrangements for seeing/parenting children (e.g., health problems). There is also the added factor of shared intimate emotionality between ex-couple members towards their children, which can consist of joy and pride in their accomplishments and worry, sorrow, or pain about their struggles (Ainsworth, 1989; Reibstein & Reibstein, 1998).

Certain mental and emotional functions that parents demonstrate towards their children may become overshadowed or dormant during divorce due to the stress of relating post-separation. A parent's capacity to mentalize and reflect on their

children's emotional and mental states is a trait that may be hindered following separation and during conflicted relations between co-parents (Dowling & Barnes, 2000; Fonagy & Allison, 2012).

1.4.1 Co-parenting styles post-separation

Co-parents can be overwhelmed when trying to maintain a sense of stability following stressful changes in their lives. Dowling and Barnes (2000) name three common patterns of co-parenting post-separation: (1) Co-operative, (2) conflicted, and (3) disengaged. Researchers have found that conflicted co-parental relationships, whether pre- or post-separation, are a primary cause of behaviour problems, psychological unrest, and mental health problems for both the parents and their children (Amato & Cheadle, 2008; Amato & Keith, 1991; Sandler, Miles, Cookston & Braver, 2008; Dowling & Barnes, 2000; Emery, 1992; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Kim, 2011; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000). In many cases, co-parents enmeshed in conflict post-separation are seldom aware of the effects on their children (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007; Wallerstein, Lewis & Blakeslee, 2000). A co-operative co-parental relationship post-separation has been found to buffer some of the negative effects that separation may have on children (Emery & Forehand, 1996). Conversely, Marquardt (2005) found that whether couples had an amicable or an acrimonious divorce, there was no difference in the negative impact the separation had on children's educational attainment or level of marital success later on in life.

Mixed findings in this area may be due to the measures used to assess conflict, how conflict is being defined, and ways in which conflict is expressed post-divorce. Most researchers agree that conflict is most damaging for children when parents manipulate each other by drawing their child into arguments or when hostility and

rage are expressed openly to one another in front of children (Buchannon, Maccoby & Dornbusch, 1991; Johnston, 1994).

1.4.2 Divorced co-parents in conflict

It is estimated that 20% to 25% of post-divorce co-parents are in conflict with one another (Kelly, 2007); the term 'conflict' in this context represented frequent disagreements, poor communication, and the inability of either one or both co-parents to emotionally disengage from one another. Separated co-parents in conflict tend to focus their anger and hostility around their child(ren) (e.g., disagreements on upbringing, custody and visitation, religious/cultural beliefs, and holiday plans). It is possible that these disagreements and conflicted points of view existed prior to the dissolution of the couple and may have been the reasons for separation.

Bowlby (1963) stated,

...When separation is only temporary opportunity soon comes for the expression of the angry reproach felt toward the lost object. Once expressed, the affectionate components of the relationship can become active once more and, although anger and reproach may persist, they are constantly corrected and modified by the presence of the object and the positive feelings it arouses. In a situation of prolonged or permanent loss on the other hand, not only is opportunity to express anger and reproach missing but also the affectionate components of the relationship inevitably wane. As a result the anger and reproach, never directly expressed, fester, (p. 513).

Separated co-parents who are engaging in conflict a year or more post-separation may be angry and resentful due to an inability to express destructive feelings and are no longer provided with the affectionate components of the relationship which modify and correct their anger. Co-parents may also possess a fear of abandonment, loss, and of being devalued, which results in an inability to respect boundaries, as well as maladaptive emotional responses following the divorce (Saini, 2012).

Malcore et al.'s (2009) study explored possible precedents or predictors of continued conflict following divorce and found that communication between co-parents and the parents' perception of child welfare are factors likely to influence the degree of conflict between co-parents. Ehrenberg, Hunter, and Elterman (1996) found that personality traits such as empathy, narcissism, and child-centeredness all played an important role in how co-parents agreed or disagreed with one another post-separation. For instance, they found that co-parents who were 'child-centred' prior to the separation maintained non-conflicted post-separation relations with their co-parents and tried to focus on what their child needed (Ehrenberg, Hunter & Elterman, 1996). This may support the 'Selection Perspective' (i.e., Parents who already possess certain traits are *selected* out of marriage and may adjust poorly post-divorce); for instance, such traits may include being less child-oriented. However, individuals may *adopt* a narcissistic stance following separation, to protect and defend against their own interpersonal vulnerability; these parents may be more likely to neglect their child's needs for their own and promote their own self-worth, leading to an impediment of child-oriented parenting (Ehrenberg, Hunter & Elterman, 1996).

1.4.3 Co-parenting and parental alienation

One of the most destructive features of divorce for children is when they are drawn into parental disputes and conflict. One study found that latency-age children were used as 'passive weapons' in disputes between parents; or as messengers for parents who would not speak directly to one another; or targets of the fights; and/or used to collect information and 'spy' on one parent for the other (Johnston, Campbell & Mayes, 1985).

On some occasions, one parent is alienated by the other from the family dynamic and from the child. Primarily, it is non-resident fathers who often complain

of rejection and resistance from their children following the separation; some researchers suggest this is a result of parental alienation, usually by the resident parent (Gardner, 1998; Gardner, 2006; Johnston, 2003; Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007).

Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) has become a widely discussed phenomenon that can occur following divorce (Gardner, 1998; Gardner, 2006; Johnston, 2003). One parent vilifies the other (i.e., the ‘target parent’) and successfully convinces their child(ren) to view the ‘target parent’ in this negative way (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). The alienation of the ‘target parent’, and the obvious alignment of a child with one parent over the other, tends to perpetuate co-parental conflict and can negatively influence a child’s well-being and post-separation adjustment (Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011; Kelly & Johnston, 2001).

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the parental capacity to mentalize and reflect on their child(ren)’s emotional and mental states can be overshadowed by pre-occupations with and continuation of co-parental conflict (Dowling & Barnes, 2000; Fonagy & Allison, 2012).

1.5 Reflective functioning (RF)

Reflective functioning (RF) is the essential human capacity to understand behaviour in light of underlying mental states and intentions (Fonagy, Steele, Steele, Moran & Higgitt, 1991; Fonagy, Target, Steele, & Steele, 1998). Slade (2005) describes RF as an overt manifestation, in narrative, of an individual’s mentalizing capacity. Mentalization is the ability to understand one’s own and others’ behaviours in terms of the underlying mental states; it is a crucial human capacity, believed to be critical for affect regulation and successful social interactions and relationships (Fonagy et al., 1991). An individual’s ability to make sense of their own and others’ behaviours through an understanding of their mental states (i.e., intentions, emotions,

desires, wishes, and beliefs), and ability to use this understanding reflexively, is referred to as mentalization (Fonagy et al., 1991). Thus, this capacity is crucial to both spouses and their children—difficulty or success in perceiving behaviours in light of underlying mental states may aid or hinder adjustment to divorce. Co-parents' abilities to mentalize and reflect on one another's behaviours in light of mental states may reduce conflict; these abilities can also aid their children in adjusting successfully to the separation and encourage parenting in a child-centred way. However, mentalization studies suggest that during high-arousal and high-stress states, individuals may face imbalances in different dimensions of mentalization and/or revert to pre-mentalizing modes which can be more primitive, child-like, and hinder their reflective capacity (e.g., Fonagy & Bateman, 2019).

The Tavistock Relationship's (TR) model for Mentalization-Based Therapy for Parental Conflict - Parenting Together (MBT-PT) (Hertzmann & Abse, 2008) demonstrated how RF and mentalization are relevant to, and important in, the adjustment of divorce for both children and adults. Their model focuses on keeping the child 'alive' in the parents' minds, by actively encouraging parents to imagine what the internal experience may be for the child (Hertzmann et al., 2017). This approach does not only encourage and guide child-focused parenting, but co-parents in conflict may be discouraged from continuing their disputes so that they can restore old, or develop new, helpful parenting strategies (Hertzmann et al., 2017). MBT-PT aims to improve the following capacities:

- Mentalizing about the child's experience;
- Mentalizing about their post-divorce co-parenting relationship;

- Mentalizing about the way that unresolved characteristics of their former relationship interfere with co-operating and working together to address their child(ren)'s needs (Hertzmman et al., 2017).

Their model is the only one presently focused on the attributions and internal representations of the parents about each other, in order to decrease co-parental conflict (Hertzmman et al., 2017). The study they carried out in order to assess MBT-PT's feasibility (i.e., Hertzmman et al., 2017) is from which the current study utilised a sample of co-parents in conflict post-divorce, for assessment of parental RF and how it can inform the present study about children's internal worlds post-divorce (see Chapter 6). Their study and its relevance to the current thesis will be discussed in further detail in Sections 1.5.3, 1.11 and throughout Chapter 6.

1.5.1 Dimensions of mentalization

Four dimensions of mentalization have been identified (Fonagy & Luyten, 2009; Fonagy & Luyten, 2018; Lieberman, 2007).

- (1) *Automatic vs. controlled*: Controlled/explicit mentalizing requires an attentive, slow, and deliberate process, as well as reflection, and intention; it is usually verbal. Automatic/implicit mentalizing is faster and requires little effort, intention, or awareness.
- (2) *Self vs. other*: This is the capacity to mentalize about one's own or another's mental states. An imbalance can lead to difficulties in mentalization that may cause the individual to focus on one of the two or a hindrance in mentalizing about both.

- (3) *Internal vs. external*: External mentalization is based on external/physical features and ‘figuring out’ another’s internal state from what is already known about them, or what they look like, or do physically; internal mentalization would be based on internal features of self and others.
- (4) *Cognitive vs. affective*: Cognitive mentalization is the capacity to label, identify, and reason about mental states (in the self and in others). Affective mentalization is having the ability to understand the feeling of such states (in the self and in others). Heightened emotions can conflict with thoughtful reflection on mental states (Fonagy & Bateman, 2019).

Fonagy and Luyten (2018) suggest that the polarities described in these dimensions tend to work in balance with one another, and if one ‘end of the polarity’ dominates over the other then adequate mental-state understanding can fail. High stress and conflicts, which can occur pre- and post-divorce, may push co-parents away from thoughtful controlled mentalization and into using automatic mentalization more frequently. Modes of non-mentalization can exist when controlled mentalization is hindered and automatic mentalization becomes dominant (Luyten & Fonagy, 2015). In the context of divorced co-parents, one of their major shared networks has been severed and so this would be expected to impact the automatic vs. controlled dimension of mentalization (Luyten & Fonagy, 2015). “When people are emotional, not only does it become much harder or even impossible for them to concern themselves with the other person’s perspective; they can also be quick to make assumptions on the basis of flimsy observations. Individuals can also become convinced that their point of view is the only valid one and ignore everything they know about the other person except what is relevant to support their point of view,” (Fonagy & Bateman, 2019, p. 12).

1.5.2 Pre-mentalizing modes

Pre-mentalizing modes are non-mentalizing modes, which may have existed before individuals developed the ability to perceive behaviours in terms of their underlying mental states (e.g., during early life) or to hold others' experiences in mind (Fonagy & Bateman, 2019; Fonagy, Luyten & Bateman, 2015; Fonagy & Target, 1997). These may be utilised during states of high arousal and/or stress (Fonagy & Bateman, 2019; Fonagy, Luyten & Bateman, 2015; Fonagy & Target, 1997). The observation of these modes can also be very helpful in understanding why certain populations are unable to engage in reflection and are unable to successfully tease out the underlying mental states of self and others around them. Modes of pre-mentalization that tend to be accompanied with an immediate disorganised experience within one's 'experience of the self' are:

- (1) *The psychic equivalence mode*: Believing that one's own perspective is the only possible perspective; thoughts and feelings become extremely real and alternative perspectives are impossible to envision (Fonagy & Bateman, 2019; Fonagy, Luyten & Bateman, 2015).
- (2) *The teleological mode*: Behaviour that has an observable outcome is considered meaningful and physical actions are important in understanding mental states (e.g., touch is needed to show feelings of affection) (Fonagy & Bateman, 2019).
- (3) *The pretend mode* (i.e., 'hypermentalizing/pseudomentalizing'): Thoughts and feelings are disconnected from reality (Fonagy, Luyten & Bateman, 2015). Individuals depict an understanding of

mental states through language and speech but have very little true meaning or connection to reality (Fonagy & Bateman, 2019).

An individual's capacity to mentalize will change across different situations and can be dependent on their stress arousal level (Fonagy, Luyten & Bateman, 2015). During the divorce process, parents experience high stress arousal levels that can instigate the re-emergence of pre-mentalizing modes; whereas, in children these modes may still be the primary way of understanding others' behaviours and their own experience of self (Fonagy & Bateman, 2019). However, for children who are older and have developed the capacity to mentalize, pre-mentalizing modes may also be initiated during divorce.

1.5.3 RF in parenting

Parental RF is a parent's capacity to mentalize about their child's mental states, emotions, thoughts, and feelings and express this in narrative/verbally; it is the ability to express their perceptions that their children's behaviours derive from these mental states (Fonagy & Allison, 2012). Its role in parenting has been suggested to play a major part in the development of affect regulation, attachment models, and self-representations (Borelli, Compare, Snavely, & Decio, 2015; Fonagy & Allison, 2012; Fonagy & Target, 1997; Katznelson, 2014; Kelly, Slade & Grienberger, 2007; Slade, 2005; Slade, Grienberger, Bernbach, Levy & Locker, 2007).

Fonagy et al. (1991) state that the development of the reflective self is innately connected to the evolution of social understanding. Through a child's understanding of the reasons behind his/her caregivers' and siblings' actions, he/she is able to develop a representation of their own actions as also being motivated by mental states, desires, and wishes (Fonagy et al., 1991). RF develops from emotional

attunement (i.e., being aware and in sync with) by the caregiver in infancy and continues through empathic sensitivity and responding to the moods of others to the understanding of others' intentions (Fonagy et al., 1991).

Fonagy et al. (1991) found that parents who possess a predisposition to perceive relationships in terms of mental content allow for the normal growth of their child's mental function. This facilitates the ability of the parent to anticipate and act on the child's mental state and can lead to the development of secure attachment in the infant or child (Fonagy et al., 1991). Furthermore, a parent's own attachment history assists in this predisposition and assists in a parent's ability to develop meaningful mental representations (Fonagy et al., 1991). Parental RF and mentalization are regarded as principal mediators in children's affective regulation and attachment styles across the lifespan.

With regards to parental RF in the context of divorce, only one research group published studies looking at this (i.e., Hertzmann et al., 2016; Hertzmann et al., 2017; Target et al., 2017). Their qualitative inquiry using the Parent Development Interview (PDI) and a second semi-structured interview evaluating thoughts on therapeutic interventions and difficulties between divorced/separated co-parents in conflict, indicated three overarching themes: (a) Dealing with contact evokes extreme states of mind (Subordinate themes included: *A matter of life and death* and *winning and losing*); (b) when speaking of contact, the child is everywhere and nowhere (Subordinate themes included: *Preoccupation* and *child made to manage conflict*); and (c) the hardest thing about contact is dealing with my ex-partner (Subordinate themes included: *Sense of threat, contact dependent on the climate between parents, and difficult in ordinary parenting*) (Target et al., 2017).

1.6 The Latency-age child

1.6.1 Latency

Latency, originally described by Freud (1905), was theorised to start at 5 or 6 years of age and end by puberty. The ‘latency’ period of development is also currently referred to as ‘middle childhood’, theorised to be between ages 5 or 6 and 11 or 12 (Franiack & Günter, 2010). Differences in views about Freud’s description of latency revolve around the nature of the stage and what developments occur within it.

Youell (2008) described the nature of the latency-age child as being in a period,

...that plays a transitional role, like a ‘bridge’, between early childhood and adolescence (the beginning of early adulthood) and although it is of interest in being a point in child development with both a previous reference—to early childhood, and a later reference—to adolescence, the latency period is a subject that has not received sufficient attention in psychoanalysis in recent years (Franiack & Günter, 2010, p. 1).

This statement depicts the common misconception of the latency period. Freud (1905) coined the term ‘latency’ referring to the period as being one of ‘sexual latency’. According to Freud (1905), the sexual impulses were latent and repressed as other areas of the child’s mental and external life took precedence. Children, during this period, are thought to be undergoing the development of a superego (i.e., a theoretical construct of the mind responsible for one’s cultural and societal values and norms, usually instilled by one’s parents)—bombarded with societal, cultural, and parental norms, values, and rules (Franiack & Günter, 2010; Freud, 1905).

Psychoanalytic theory suggests that latency marks a period of ‘passing time’, following the partial resolution of the Oedipus complex, as well as the development of the superego (Franiack & Günter, 2010). Latency involves the strengthening of defences and repression, eventually bringing about cognitive and emotional development (Bornstein, 1951; Franiack & Günter, 2010; Freud, 1905). Knight

(2014) described latency as, “a period of fragmentation, fluidity, and changing self-states that influence gender and role identifications, sexual and aggressive drives and fantasies, and a sense of oneself in the world beyond the family,” (p. 219).

McClintock and Herdt (1996) argued against the idea of ‘sexual latency’ and posited that children between 6 and 11 years are experiencing a rise in sex hormones that comes from the maturing adrenal glands, known as ‘adrenarche’, which begin to mature between 6 to 8 years of age. They argued against the previously held notion of the final maturation of the testes/ovaries (i.e., ‘gonadarche’—‘menarche’ in girls and ‘spermarche’ in boys) as the biological basis for a child’s interest in sexuality (McClintock & Herdt, 1996). Rather, they proposed that it is adrenarche, which happens earlier than gonadarche, during middle childhood/latency. Gonadarche was previously understood as a ‘switch’ that initiated sexuality but this is now perceived as a sequence of events that begins in middle childhood/latency (e.g., attraction, fantasy, then behaviour) (McClintock & Herdt, 1996). Therefore, this contradicts the idea that this stage of development is sexually “latent”, as was originally theorised by Freud (1905).

Pubertal development can occur earlier in some children based on a number of factors, such as familial stress, mother-daughter conflict, divorce, father absence, life event-related stress, and parent-child emotional distance (See Kim et al., 1997 for a review of the literature). Some of the factors that can initiate early pubertal development, as well as how pubertal development is intricately linked with other areas of development during latency, will be discussed in Section 1.6.5.

Sexual and pubertal developments during latency indicate a few ways in which this stage can be very demanding (e.g., other ways include the development of independence from parental/caregiver figures and shifting attention onto those outside

the family home, whilst simultaneously developing cognitively through the attendance of school), as well as important for lifespan development overall.

Identifying and discussing such changes is important as any disruptions during this period, such as divorce, can hinder or halt such advancements. Continuity during latency is important and major disruptions during this stage can seriously hinder a child's developmental path (Bornstein, 1951).

Franiack and Günter (2010) stated that latency is far more exciting than previously theorised, as it is a crucial period for the transmission of cultural ideals and further identity formation. Children become more concerned with their own privacy and frequently engage in seeking answers to various questions, as new curiosities arise (Ohrenstein, 1986). Behaviourally, the latency-age child is concerned with the development and joining of peer groups; excelling and competing in school; learning about hierarchies and where they fit in them; and developing an identity amongst all of these new domains of life (Youell, 2008). There also appears to be a moving away from the family and developing one's own social world (Youell, 2008).

Although other stages of development, such as toddlerhood and adolescence, also present significant challenges, latency brings with it an intensification of on-going relationships with others outside the home (e.g., teachers and peers), and with these new relationships parental 'scaffolding' and guidance is needed (Collins, 1984; Davies, 2010). Its onset generally marks the beginning of the child's journey into school, which places new pressures on the child such as academic, social, and emotional pressure (Collins, 1984).

Major disruptions during this stage of development could interfere with the advancements that are taking place in the child's inner and outer worlds. For instance, divorce can distract the latency-age child from navigating new social relations,

emotional connections, and cognitive advancements successfully (Kalter & Rembar, 1981). During latency, children are coping with the healthy and normal developmental task of separating from their parents and establishing an identity that is separate from them, whilst still requiring adult scaffolding and guidance to accomplish this task; thus, if divorce is experienced during this stage, a vulnerability to separation-related difficulties may develop (Kalter & Rembar, 1981).

Other major disruptions can include parental death, absent parenting, and forced separation due to hospitalisation. These major life changes can include an element of loss and separation from attachment figures and like divorce, can disrupt and/or delay facets of development during latency.

For example, forced separation from one's parents can be one of the most distressing features of childhood hospitalisation (Melnyk, 2000). If a child receives a diagnosis of cancer for instance, this may result in prolonged hospitalisation, which could introduce changes to the family dynamic as a whole and to the members within it (Mavrides & Pao, 2014). Some common behavioural and emotional changes that may take place following prolonged hospitalisation include regression to an earlier state, sadness, separation anxiety, withdrawal, and social isolation (Melnyk, 2000). A qualitative study by Wilson et al. (2010), utilising hospitalised children's stories, demonstrated that children felt threatened by uncertain outcomes and wanted: Companionship, caregivers nearby, and/or to be at home. Mavrides and Pao (2014) explain that due to the significance of 'rules' during latency, a cancer diagnosis can be challenging because of the lack of detectable causes of most paediatric cancers; paediatric cancer patients can become confused and/or distressed. Furthermore, they are separated from their parents, peer groups, teachers, extra-curricular activities, and educational institutions; this can hinder development during latency due to the

important role such institutions/activities play during this stage (Abrams & Rauch, 2008).

There are similarities between forced separation and divorce with regards to the disruption and reorganisation experienced by the family and its members. For instance, during prolonged hospitalisation parents and children can become disorganised and face uncertainties; they can develop anxiety and depression; parents can also experience anger, guilt, shame, denial and sadness; families may also become financially unstable and move homes, while children within the family may change schools and separate from peers (Melnyk, 2000). However, Abrams and Rauch (2008) stated that during hospitalisation children may also develop strong connections to their medical team(s) and to other patients at the hospital. These relationships can be perceived as protective factors and can be likened to what children of divorce also experience (see Section 1.9). For instance, children from separated families may develop close relationships with their teachers when major changes are taking place at home (Resnick et al., 1997), akin to how paediatric cancer patients may develop close relationships with their health care providers. These findings are also relevant to the current thesis because ‘forced separation’ from significant attachment figures can cause a child to feel helpless, without control, and/or alone (Wilson et al., 2010), which are feelings/thoughts also expressed by latency-age children from separated families (e.g., Wiehe, 1985).

Moreover, as discussed in Section 1.8.8, divorce can be understood as a ‘loss’, in some ways comparable to parental death (Lohr et al., 1981). Younger latency-age children (e.g., before the age of 7) can find it challenging to understand the permanency of death and may require parents to enforce this reality (Schoen, Burgoyne & Schoen, 2004). Children in this early stage of latency may also engage in

‘magical thinking’ where they blame themselves for their parent’s death and/or feel that their thoughts may bring them back to life (Fry, 1995). Similarly, children from separated families also engage in this ‘magical thinking’ in which they blame themselves for the divorce and/or one parent’s departure from the home (e.g., Healy, Stewart & Copeland, 1993). Comparably, both children of divorce and those who experienced parental death may demonstrate a need to re-establish the ‘lost’ parent and maintain their relationship with them, for instance through fantasies (Burgner, 1985; Lohr et al., 1981). Thus, in these ways, latency-age children as a group may be impacted similarly in certain ways when a parental loss or departure is experienced.

Schoen, Burgoyne and Schoen (2004) pointed out that grief interventions for children during this stage of development should take into consideration their cognitive abilities. Their cognitive abilities (see Section 1.6.4) may not facilitate clear verbal expression in the same way that older children and/or adolescents may be able to express themselves. Therefore, play should be considered one of the most comfortable and age-appropriate methods to address their feelings and thoughts about loss (Schoen, Burgoyne & Schoen, 2004). As children advance through middle childhood, whilst in what Piaget (1964) termed the stage of ‘concrete operations’, they can begin to engage in logical thinking but are still unable to grasp abstract concepts. Therefore, parental death is at times perceived as a ‘permanent departure’ but the parent is thought to be living at a different location (Jarvis, 2017). Thus, a link can be made between how latency-age children in the ‘concrete operations’ stage perceive both divorce and parental death due to their cognitive abilities; both experiences can be perceived similarly due to the involvement of a permanent departure or separation from their parent, who may be imagined to still exist in the world in some form but separate to them (Jarvis, 2017).

Lastly, absent parenting—psychologically or physically—can also impact development during latency (e.g., Burgner, 1985; Clark, 2013; Gleitsmann, 2016). Botèro (2012) and Gleitsmann (2016) both described the physically absent father as being one who may have abandoned the mother before the birth of the child or could have been absent due to death or divorce. Clark (2013) described the physically absent father as one who did not reside with his child(ren) and is uninvolved financially, physically, emotionally and spiritually, and who has little contact with his child(ren).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, latency-age children undergo major developments to their superego and their conscience (i.e., containing parental and societal values, morals, and beliefs); therefore, paternal absence can hinder psychological, behavioural, and social developments (Eulo, 2009 as cited in Clark, 2013). Burgner's (1985) study involved clinical cases where a physically absent father, due to divorce in the first 5 years of life, led the latency-age children she treated to have issues with masculine or feminine identities. Specifically, boys did not have a consistent male role model to identify with, and girls demonstrated low self-esteem and dissatisfaction with their bodies (Burgner, 1985). However, none of the children she studied had reached adolescence and thus, she could not accurately predict what the outcome of their sexual identifications would be. Since latency brings with it the onset of school and interpersonal relationships outside of the family unit, with peers and teachers for instance, sexual identification and exploration may be a large component of this stage; if one parent, of either sex, is absent during this time, disruptions to sexual development can be experienced (Burgner, 1985). Moreover, the children she examined had experienced the absence during the 'oedipal phase' (i.e., approximately 3 years of age) but were studied in middle childhood (i.e.,

9 years of age); therefore, this could have influenced how the absent parent was perceived, as well as how the child interpreted the absence. Burgner (1985) pointed out that one young boy believed his parents' separation was his fault, due to his 'omnipotent and magical thinking' during the time when the absence was experienced.

Furthermore, Burgner (1985) then examined clinical interviews with adult patients who experienced an absent parent in childhood due to divorce. She found that an absent parent during the oedipal phase could lead to a distortion in the 'necessary' constant reorganisation of relationships in later childhood, adolescence, and adulthood,

...they are adhesively and ambivalently tied to the remaining primary object, and they seem to maintain a certain hopelessness about their adult capacities as partners and parents. A dimension of experience has been denied to them or distorted for them in childhood and, while analysis can go some way to offering them understanding of this deprivation, it cannot—predictably enough—make good the original damage (p. 319).

This study is relevant to the current thesis due to its particular emphasis on the absence of the father due to divorce/separation; however, Burgner (1985) specifically focused on what the impact of an absent father has on child development and later on in life, rather than any other aspects of divorce. However, one can infer that the topic of absent parenting is relevant to the understanding of how development during latency may be impacted if a divorce is experienced. This can be inferred because both resident and non-resident parents can at times be absent physically in divorce situations.

Furthermore, Gleitsmann (2016) defined the 'psychologically absent father' as one who is living with his child(ren) but does not take much interest in their lives and

may be emotionally detached from them. Gleitsmann (2016) described that when a son *perceives* his father as absent, the son can experience a world where he is in constant search for his missing/absent parent and develop a longing for an emotional connection with his father. Diamond (2007) emphasized the importance of a present father, who provides a ‘good enough’ holding environment for his son to explore his object relations and normal age-appropriate separation from his parents. This is akin to Winnicott’s (1961) concept of the ‘good enough mother’ that provides a ‘good enough’ and secure environment within which her child can develop his/her psyche. This is also in concordance with Bowlby’s (1973) concept of the Internal Working Model (IWM) (See Section 1.7.4), which is an internalisation of attachment bonds and aids in the development of a stable and secure sense of self and belief in the responsiveness of an attachment figure. This is further supported by Ainsworth’s (1969) concept of the ‘secure base’ (See Section 1.7.1); a responsive and attentive attachment figure providing a secure base for a child from which he/she can navigate and explore the world around them. Without the presence of the ‘good enough parent’, delays and disruptions to the ‘normal’ path of development can occur. Absent parenting, can therefore be linked to the concept of divorce, as divorce can lead to both psychologically and/or physically absent parenting from both resident parents (e.g., due to preoccupation with the separation, co-parental conflict, depression, anxiety, and/or moving homes, financial instability, and increased job hours, the resident parent can be *perceived* as absent by the child; e.g., Dowling & Barnes, 2000; Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007) and non-resident parents (e.g., Gleitsmann, 2016). It is therefore important to understand how divorce impacts parenting to further understand the latency-age child’s experience (see Section 1.4).

As previously mentioned, early familial stress and/or childhood life event stress (e.g., forced separation, parental death or divorce, prolonged hospitalisation, and absent parenting) can be associated with the onset of early puberty (Kim & Smith, 1998; Kim et al., 1997). Kim and Smith (1998) carried out a retrospective self-report survey with girls who experienced early menarche and their mothers. They found that early menarche was associated with more family stress, anxiousness, and depression between ages 7 to 11 (Kim & Smith, 1998). However, the researchers did not specify at what age 'early menarche' was defined as (Kim & Smith, 1998). Early pubertal development has also been associated with a decrease in parent-child closeness (Marceau et al., 2015). The 'developmental readiness hypothesis' posits that when puberty starts early, older children and adolescents may not be cognitively or emotionally prepared to adjust to the changes; puberty does not advance correspondingly to the cognitive and emotional developments of the child and thus, can lead to a higher risk of behavioural problems and more conflicted parent-child relationships (Marceau et al., 2015).

Social, cognitive, behavioural and pubertal developments during latency will be described in the subsequent sections.

1.6.2 Latency: Social development

During latency a major influence on the child's social development emerges at school. Although parents remain central to the development of their child, other adults and children outside the home begin to increase in importance (Davies, 2010).

Throughout the progression of latency, children begin to have more influences from outside the home, due to interaction with new social circles and new individuals (e.g., teachers, peer groups or sports teams) (Kerns & Brumariu, 2018). However, in order to engage with the social environment in active exploration, children require 'felt

security'; those who may sense that their attachment figures are unavailable or unresponsive, may withdraw from social interaction and feel insecure, thus, hindering their exploration of the social environment (Booth et al., 1994). Attachment security has been found to be an important predictor of social competence in latency (Booth et al., 1994). Booth et al. (1994) found that a lack of maternal sensitivity predicted externalising behaviour problems at 8 years of age. Maternal warmth was also significantly negatively correlated with externalising behaviours in children at age 8 (Booth et al., 1994). Due to the nature of cross-sectional research it is difficult to make inferences about whether mother's behaviour was in reaction to the child's externalising problems; or whether the child was reacting to mother's negative behaviour towards him/her; or the child was imitating social behaviour modelled by mother (Booth et al., 1994). Another limitation of their study was that their results were based on observations of children with 'unacquainted peers' and results may have been different if they were observed with peers who were familiar to them (Booth et al., 1994).

During divorce, there may be a few years of lifestyle changes and disorganisation for families (Amato & Cheadle, 2005). This can include periods of unresponsiveness and a lack of attentiveness from attachment figures as they are preoccupied with and navigating major changes to their daily lives. This links Booth et al.'s (1994) study with latency-age children's experiences of divorce because if parents are unresponsive to their child's attachment needs due to the process of divorce, aspects of their child's social development may be negatively impacted. Children's experiences of parental unresponsiveness and 'absent-parenting' during the divorce process can also influence how they respond to various play/narrative scenarios in research (e.g., representing caregivers as less responsive or projecting

their wishes of a warm caregiver), and how their attachment figures report on their behavioural/emotional adjustment (e.g., attachment figures may be unaware of children's psychosocial problems due to their lack of attentiveness to their needs in the home, and therefore, cannot accurately report them).

Furthermore, Wallerstein, Lewis and Rosenthal (2013) emphasised the notion that due to divorce being a 'process' and not a 'time-limited event', these issues can be ongoing for mothers and children, thus, possibly affecting social development during latency when maternal sensitivity, responsiveness, and warmth are vital for the successful completion of specific tasks throughout this stage.

These findings indicate that the social development of the child and their social engagement, relies heavily on security of attachment and maternal factors. This suggests that although greater autonomy may be felt in latency with the onset of schooling, it is a period where children are dependent upon the provision of adult scaffolding, availability, and responsiveness to successfully develop social competence. This further indicates the importance of consistency and stability of parent-child relationships and interactions, particularly during major life changes such as divorce.

1.6.3 Latency: Emotional development

A major emotional advancement for the latency-age child is their increasing ability to tolerate ambivalence—the capacity to acknowledge having two opposing feelings simultaneously (e.g., loving and hating the same person) (Davies, 2010). Usually, from six years of age and onwards, the child begins to develop a more objective point of view, realising that there can be multiple ways of perceiving a single situation (Davies, 2010). Around 10, a child begins to hold opposing points of view in mind at the same time, enhancing their ability to interact in social settings and

with peers and adults (Davies, 2010). For instance, Jambon and Smetana (2014) found that children's knowledge of others and their ability to incorporate different competing concerns simultaneously is what determines their ability to morally evaluate social situations/events and others' actions. Whereas, children under 7 are usually still engaging in egocentric thinking and find it difficult to see another's perspective (Piaget, 1964). This type of thinking may account for greater difficulty in coping with an event such as divorce, as this decision may be primarily belonging to another. However, as the child progresses through latency, they enter the 'concrete operations' stage, around 7 to 11/12 years of age, and develop more logical and objective thinking (Piaget, 1964). This emotional advancement is relevant to the topic of divorce and children's experience of it as it can aid researchers in understanding whether or not differences in age may be responsible for how children perceive and adjust to their parents' divorce. For instance, older children may be more able to take into account their parents' opposing views on the separation and/or living arrangements, as well as possessing the ability to perceive both the positives and negatives of the separation.

Another important advancement in the latency-age child's emotional development is the ability to think about experiences logically and coherently in order to reduce anxiety (Davies, 2010). Reality-testing is more accurate, thus, the latency-age child is less susceptible to fears of, and worries about, the unknown as much as a younger child may be; they may also be able to control or keep negative emotions hidden due to the development of 'effortful control' (Davies, 2010). This is relevant to the current thesis as it is a development that could aid in understanding whether or not younger children possess different internalisations than older children of their parents' separation and its meaning for their future. It could also aid in the

interpretation of responses of children in research studies examining age effects; this would be important because if older children engage in hiding negative emotions, perhaps their responses may ‘appear’ more adjusted and akin to community samples, than those of younger children who have not yet attained ‘effortful control’.

Children around 10 years old begin to understand that there may be both negative and positive aspects to a situation (Davies, 2010). During divorce, this understanding may be particularly important for a child undergoing distress, and trying to think more rationally about others’ perspectives and their parents’ reasons for pursuing the separation. Children in late latency may also be more able to tolerate the pain of grieving losses than younger children are, even if only for brief periods of time; the child’s increased ability to immerse him/herself in other activities to avoid thoughts about the loss, may aid in reducing and managing the intensity of painful feelings/thoughts, particularly during divorce (Webb, 2005). This development would also influence how older children’s responses are interpreted in research studies on divorce that take into account the effect of age; for instance, children with a developed ability to perceive the positive and negative aspects of a situation, may elicit responses that are well-adjusted and positive.

1.6.4 Latency: Cognitive development

There are many cognitive developments that take place during latency but the ones that are of particular relevance to the latency-age child’s experience of divorce are: The emergence of executive function (EF), verbal/non-verbal IQ, Theory of Mind (ToM) and mentalization (Davies, 2010). EF emerges in middle childhood and is the ability to think about how one is thinking and by extension, to use this analysis to solve problems (Kagan, 1984). EF is used as an umbrella term that encompasses the goal-oriented control functions of the prefrontal cortex (Best, Miller & Jones, 2009;

Gioia, Isquith, & Guy, 2001). Adult support helps shape the development of EF; without a secure base to operate from, adult scaffolding may not be available, and in the absence of adult scaffolding, the development of EF is suppressed or slowed down (Davies, 2010). Divorce can therefore be a hindrance to the development of EF if experienced during latency as a lack of adult support may be experienced. These cognitive advancements are closely linked to the social developments that take place during this period, namely, the onset of schooling. For instance, with the entry into school, children are exposed to a wider social setting, which begins to shape and contribute to cognitive advancements, such as language, reading, mathematics, and increased impulse control (Best, Miller & Jones, 2009). Therefore, even if divorce negatively impacts parents' ability to offer support and guidance to aid in the development of EF, adult scaffolding can be provided in the form of a teacher's consistent presence in the child's life. Thus, the entry into schooling can be a protective factor during latency and may aid in maintaining the adult scaffolding needed for this important cognitive development.

Verbal and non-verbal IQ are cognitive abilities that change in their capacity, as well as their relationship to one another, with increases in age (i.e., the correlation between verbal and non-verbal IQ becomes stronger with age) (Hoekstra, Bartels & Dorret, 2007). In a longitudinal study spanning ages 5 to 18, Hoekstra, Bartels and Dorret (2007) found that developments in non-verbal IQ appeared to be influenced by genetic factors and not the environment, an influence that becomes stronger with age. Depending on a child's verbal/non-verbal IQ, specific dilemmas presented to the child may be approached and addressed differently, therefore, impacting how younger versus older children compare within a study. This is relevant to the current thesis because changes in verbal/non-verbal IQ may be inherent in the large age range of

latency and can play a role in how children respond to various research tools, such as play/story-based measures. Therefore, these variables should be taken into consideration when interpreting findings on children from separated families during middle childhood. However, a noteworthy flaw in longitudinal cognitive research is the variation in measures used, thus, limiting the ability to ascertain with confidence that changes in cognitive abilities, or the lack thereof, are due to true developmental changes or due to inconsistency in measures.

Theory of Mind (ToM) concepts and mentalization are capacities that may be strengthened and/or altered during the progression through middle childhood/latency. ToM is the capacity to see oneself and others in terms of mental states including desires, emotions, beliefs, and intentions (Baron-Cohen et al., 1999; Wellman, Cross & Watson, 2001). Baron-Cohen et al. (1999) found that in ‘normally-developing’ children, using ‘faux pas’ (i.e., when an individual utters something that has an unintended negative consequence, typically without considering whether the individual receiving the utterance may not want to hear or know it) detection, 11-year-olds scored higher than children of 9 or 7 years of age, and 9-year-olds scored higher than 7-year-olds. Their significant finding of age effects on ToM concepts supported their argument that ToM advances with age (Baron-Cohen et al., 1999). Lecce et al. (2014) found that ToM was lower in children who were more isolated, lonely, and/or did not engage in frequent interactions with their peers; they postulated this might have been due to a lack of exposure to talking about mental states and/or a lack of motivation to understand others’ behaviours and their underlying meanings. From their findings, it can be assumed that with the progression through middle childhood/latency and frequent/prolonged contact with peers and teachers during the

school years, ToM increases in its capacity in socially engaged children, as they get older.

Mentalization is the ability to understand one's own and others' behaviours in terms of the underlying mental states and to use this understanding to make sense of emotional processes and others' behaviours, whilst also anticipating those behaviours (Fonagy & Target, 1998). Mentalization is believed to be critical for affect regulation, successful social interactions and relationships, and resilience (Fonagy et al., 1991; Fonagy et al., 1994). Fonagy and Target (2006) proposed a developmental model of mentalization, suggesting its development and strength can only be attained in relation to others and by being treated as having a mind. Furthermore, parental RF is a key element in developing this capacity in children (Ensink et al., 2015; Slade, 2005). Thus, it can be presumed that through other interpersonal relationships (e.g., with peers or teachers), children can strengthen, or develop mentalization (e.g., if development of mentalization is hindered due to traumatic home lives; Ensink et al., 2015), through new and diverse social interactions. As latency brings about the start of school, perhaps interactions with children from different ethnic backgrounds, religious beliefs, and/or different upbringings, can present the child with new opportunities to consider others' minds and experiences, thus, providing practice for mentalization learned prior to the onset of schooling. Furthermore, if mentalization was not developed to a sufficient degree prior to the start of schooling and earlier in life, due to inadequate or lacking parental RF, perhaps during latency upon entry into school, RF from others (i.e., a teacher or a friend's parent(s)) can promote the child's development of mentalization (Stein, 2006).

The attainment of mentalization can aid in adjustment to divorce. The younger the child is at the time of divorce, the less likely they are to be able to engage in

mentalization because mentalization is developed and enhanced through interpersonal relationships, potentially engaged in at school. However, if mentalization was sufficiently developed prior to the start of school, then age at divorce may be less relevant. This is applicable to the current thesis because a child's attainment of mentalization may aid in how they respond to specific dilemmas presented to them during the research process; this would impact their ability to address dilemmas and/or demonstrate their adjustment to divorce *via* the medium of assessment (e.g., through play or story-telling) due to their ability to mentalize about theirs and their parents' experiences. Therefore, their responses in research may present differently in comparison to a younger child who has not sufficiently developed the capacity to mentalize.

1.6.5 Latency: Pubertal development

Pubertal development can be associated with other areas of development during latency. For instance, the timing of the onset of puberty has been studied in relation to various areas of development within middle childhood and pre-adolescence (e.g., Marceau et al., 2015; Mensah et al., 2013), as well as what factors may be associated with early onset puberty (e.g., Kim & Smith, 1998). Rejection, conflict, and a lack of closeness with one's mother from birth to age 11 has been found to be associated with early onset puberty in girls (Kim & Smith, 1998). However, these findings were obtained from a small sample ($n = 28$) only consisting of girls; the limitations of retrospective (e.g., unreliable as it depends on individual memory, which can be subject to biases and error) and cross-sectional designs (e.g., challenges of identifying which variable preceded the other) also need to be taken into consideration when interpreting these results; and lastly, the authors pointed out that early onset puberty could have been due to genetics in some cases and not

environmental factors (i.e., early menarche in daughters was associated with early menarche in mothers) (Kim & Smith, 1998). This study is relevant to the current thesis as it highlights how unstable relationships with significant attachment figures, perhaps as a result of stressful life changes such as those instigated by divorce, can impact pubertal development during latency.

Mensah et al. (2013) examined whether children who experienced early onset puberty (i.e., between 8 and 9 years old) differed in their social and behavioural adjustment in earlier childhood, as well as during pubertal development. They found that both boys and girls who experienced early onset puberty exhibited poorer psychosocial adjustment during this period than those who had not entered puberty early (Mensah et al., 2013). These children also had a heightened risk for childhood behaviour and social adjustment problems as rated on a behavioural measure (The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire; SDQ; Goodman, 1997) and a measure of psychosocial adjustment (the Pediatric Quality of Life Inventory; PedsQL; Varni et al., 2003) (Mensah et al., 2013). Their measure of early onset puberty was administered when children were 8 to 9 years and consisted of adapted items from the parent-report Pubertal Development Scale (PDS; Peterson et al., 1988) (Mensah et al., 2013). This is considered a limitation of their study as the measure is based on parental observation of certain physical signs of puberty rather than direct physician ratings of children's pubertal status (Mensah et al., 2013). Parental observations may introduce biases and error into the study (Najman et al., 2000), and may have hindered the degree of reliability across ratings of early onset puberty.

Mensah et al. (2013) found that the SDQ total difficulties scores were strongly related across childhood. The researchers found that both girls and boys who experienced early puberty had poorer psychosocial adjustment consistently across

childhood; thus, children experiencing early puberty had more adjustment problems than their peers and some of these differences were evident in the preschool years. Their study may provide support for a ‘life course hypothesis’ suggesting that differences in pubertal timing and childhood adjustment may at least in part be a result of *both* genetic and environmental factors *early in life* (e.g., Mendle et al., 2009; Mustanski et al., 2004). These findings are relevant to the current thesis as early onset puberty falls within the age range of latency and therefore, demonstrates the various and important developments that are experienced by children in this stage. This study also demonstrates how pubertal factors can be closely associated with other major developmental areas at this time (e.g., social and emotional development) and how major life events/changes can impact those developments.

In relation to emotional development, Burnett et al. (2011) found that in girls aged 9 to 16 years, mixed-emotion understanding reporting (i.e., the ability to understand that a number of separate emotions may be elicited by a single event concurrently) increased between early and post-puberty for social emotion scenarios, with no relation to age. The researchers concluded that their novel finding provided evidence for the continued development of an understanding of mixed emotion across the period of puberty (Burnett et al., 2011). However, it should be noted that their study was only conducted with girls and their measurement of mixed emotion understanding was not validated (Burnett et al., 2011). Moreover, studies measuring puberty suffer from conceptual and methodological issues due to puberty being a process rather than a ‘one-time event’ and can extend over several years of development; it is therefore challenging to isolate when and what constitutes the ‘onset’ of puberty (Burnett et al., 2011). However, this study is relevant to the current thesis because it demonstrates that children may develop mixed-emotion

understanding based on their progression through puberty and factors related to the neuroanatomical reorganisation that takes place during puberty and adolescence (Burnett et al., 2011). This illustrates the importance of a child's position within puberty to his/her adjustment when experiencing a major life change such as divorce, as an awareness of mixed-emotions elicited by a single event can aid in adjustment. This is because the child may be better able to think about how parental separation may bring about both positive and negative emotions (e.g., feeling both sadness that one's parents are separating but happiness that marital conflict will end).

1.7 Attachment theory and the latency-age child

1.7.1 A secure base

Proximity-seeking behaviours (e.g., clinging, following, smiling) are believed to persist throughout life and are eventually transferred onto a primary attachment figure in adulthood (e.g., a romantic or marital partner) (Ainsworth, 1969; Feeney & Monin, 2008). The ways in which an attachment figure responds to these proximity-seeking behaviours, or instinctual responses, in infancy and childhood either contributes to or retracts from the development of a "secure base" in the external and internal worlds of the individual (Feeney & Monin, 2008). A 'secure base' can be understood as a platform (i.e., felt within the attachment bond to an attachment figure) for emotional recharging when needed but also serves as a base from which exploration and curiosity can occur and be fostered (Ainsworth, 1964; Ainsworth, 1967; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969).

1.7.2 Attachment categories

Attachment relationships have been classified into two categories known as "secure" attachment relationships and "insecure" attachment relationships (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978; Main & Solomon, 1986). "Insecure"

attachment relationships were further divided into three major “types”: Insecure-avoidant, Insecure-ambivalent/resistant, and Insecure-disorganised/disoriented; this third insecure subtype was added much later as some children did not “fit” into the previous classifications (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Main & Solomon, 1990). Secure attachment behaviours were found to involve less protest and crying during regular, everyday separations, as well as happy greetings upon reunion with the caregiver; infants categorised as securely attached also demonstrated confidence in their caregiver’s responsiveness and availability (Stayton & Ainsworth, 1973). Insecurely attached infants, on the other hand, display frequent protest and prolonged crying upon separations from the caregiver, as well as protest upon reunion with the caregiver and when the caregiver ceases physical contact (Stayton & Ainsworth, 1973). Although insecure attachments hamper exploration, they are considered suitable attachment styles for infants/individuals who are adapting to unresponsive or unavailable attachment figures (Stayton & Ainsworth, 1973; Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland & Carlson, 2008).

1.7.3 Attachment and child development

Latency-age children with secure attachments earlier in life benefit more from parental scaffolding and are supported in developing important cognitive and socio-emotional functions. Early parental influences continue to shape social development during latency because the child’s attachment history aids in remembering and retrieving previously internalised parental values and expectations (Davies, 2010). Those with foundations of secure attachment may have open communication with parents and a secure base to turn to for support when dealing with social issues/conflicts; those with insecure attachment histories may have developed poor

communication skills with parents and may be unsupported when dealing with stress (Davies, 2010).

Attachment is also important to the development of affect regulation (i.e., the ability to control and adjust one's emotions according to and during certain events/situations) (Fonagy & Target, 1997). Young infants and children develop an ability to relate to the world around them and their peers, through the development of an attachment relationship with their caregiver in the early stages of life (Bretherton, 1990; Feeney & Monin, 2008; Fonagy, Steele, Moran, Steele & Higgitt, 1993; Fonagy & Target, 1997). Due to the importance of an individual's attachment relationships early in life and their role in shaping all future relationships, it has been theorised that attachment styles possess an intergenerational component (Bretherton, 1990; Fonagy et al., 1993). Bretherton (1990) points out that if a parent/caregiver has a distorted, disorganised IWMs of attachment, they will interfere with their infant's ability to construct adequate, organised IWMs of interpersonal relationships; the same is true for a parent with organised, adequate representations of attachment. Therefore, this illustrates how attachment patterns can be transmitted across generations through patterns of behaviours closely linked with the attachment system.

During the latency years, it is hypothesised that parents remain a very important source of support, although there is a decline in the frequency of attachment seeking behaviours displayed by children of this age group (Kerns; 2008; Mayseless, 2005). Time spent away from the family also increases (e.g., in school or attending extra-curricular activities).

1.7.4 The Internal Working Model (IWM)

IWMs are a concept that Bowlby (1969) discussed as the internalising of an attachment bond. Bowlby believed the internal world to be, "a more or less accurate

reflection of what an individual has experienced recently or long ago in the external world...if a child sees his mother is a loving person, the chances are that his mother is a loving person. If he sees her as a very rejecting person, the chances are she is a very rejecting person,” (Bowlby, Figlio & Young, 1986, p. 43). As individuals begin to develop attachment bonds with those around them, they develop an internal model (or representation) of that relationship and attachment bond. IWMs can change over time as the individual is faced with new experiences or developmental disruptions (e.g., death, divorce, maltreatment, etc.).

The development of IWMs is essential to the development of a stable and secure sense of self and a belief in attachment figures being within reach when needed. IWMs represent a model that is a “work in progress” and is constantly being modified to suit environmental and individual changes. Bowlby (1973) proposed that IWMs are built of the world around the individual, with him/herself in it, and are developed based on the ways in which the individual perceives events, forecasts the future, and constructs his/her plans. These IWMs are very complex in their inclusion of several key features: (a) An idea of who attachment figures are, where they may be found, and how they are expected to respond; (b) an idea of how acceptable or unacceptable one is from the attachment figure’s point of view; and (c) one’s speculations of how accessible and responsive attachment figures are likely to be when the attachment system is activated. The structure of these models is what creates a sense of confidence, or a lack thereof, in an attachment figure’s availability (Bowlby, 1973). Bowlby (1973) stated, “a much-loved child may grow up to be not only confident of his parents’ affection but confident that everyone else will find him lovable too,” (p. 205).

An individual's IWMs are a means of being able to predict and interpret an attachment figure's behaviour and to plan responses; this is similar for caregiver-child relationships as well as those later in life (Bretherton, Ridgeway & Cassidy, 1990).

1.8 Children from separated families

1.8.1 Children from separated families: Incidence in the UK

Of all divorcing couples in England and Wales in 2013, 48% had at least one child in the household and 64% of these children were under 11 years of age (ONS, 2015).

1.8.2 Children from separated families: An overview

Extensive research has shown that divorce impacts those separating as well as their children (e.g., Amato, 2000; Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Amato & Cheadle, 2008; Amato & Keith, 1991; Cherlin, Furstenberg, Chase-Lansdale, Kiernan, Robins, Morrison & Teitler, 1991; Cockett & Tripp, 1994; Dowling & Barnes, 2000; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Feeney & Monin, 2008; DeSpelder & Strickland, 2009; Maccoby, 1992; Marquardt, 2005; Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007; Levite & Cohen, 2012; Rodgers & Pryor, 1998; Rose, 1992; Simons, 1996; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976; Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004; Wallerstein, Lewis & Rosenthal, 2013, etc.).

Researchers have primarily studied two facets of the effects of divorce on children: 'Internalising' and 'externalising' behaviours. Internalising behaviours can include emotional responses to the separation, such as anxiety, hostility, and anger (e.g., Kurdek, Blisk & Siesky, 1981; Spigelman, Spigelman & Englesson, 1991; Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976; Wyman, Cowen, Hightower & Pedro-Carroll, 1985); children's 'adjustment' post-divorce (e.g., Amato, 2001);

depression (e.g., Sands, Thompson & Gaysina, 2017); and IWMs and attachment representations (e.g., Page & Bretherton, 2001).

Research on externalising behaviours post-divorce focuses on examining links between divorce and children's anti-social behaviour (e.g., Farrington, 1987); educational achievement (e.g., Arkes, 2015; Escapa, 2017); 'problem behaviours', such as temper tantrums or restlessness (e.g., Stadelmann, Perren, Groeben & von Klitzing, 2010); suicide attempts (e.g., Thompson, Alonzo, Hu & Hasin, 2017); and truancy and bullying (e.g., Frost & Pakiz, 1990; Wallerstein, Lewis & Rosenthal, 2013).

Many researchers focus on the long-term effects of divorce on children and investigate this through retrospective designs that examine adult children of divorce (e.g., Hoffman & Ledford, 1996). Research looking at long-term effects of divorce has addressed mental health and emotional functioning (e.g., Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale & McRae, 1998; Guidubaldi & Perry, 1985); as well as marital, relationship, and family disruptions in adulthood (e.g., Fergusson, McLeod & Horwood, 2014; Feldhaus & Heintz-Martin, 2015); alcohol-dependence in adulthood (e.g., Thompson, Lizardi, Keyes & Hasin, 2008); and earnings and income in adulthood (e.g., Corak, 2001).

Research has also examined the father-child relationship and patterns in child-father contact (e.g., Baum, 2004; Forssell & Cater, 2015; Peters & Ehrenberg, 2008); and advocating for children's input with regards to decision-making during the post-divorce living arrangements (e.g., Maes, De Mol & Buysse, 2012; James & James, 1999; Cashmore & Parkinson, 2008; Timms, 2003).

Children of divorced parents have been studied at several stages of development and age groups, including infancy, pre-school, middle

childhood/latency, adolescence, young adulthood, and in middle-age. Studies on infants, young children, and latency-age children are less common, perhaps because these populations are less accessible due to their young age, ethical concerns, and/or the need to use more projective and semi-projective methodologies, which may not be viewed as reliable as measures used with older populations. The child's adjustment to, and experience of, parental divorce has become a necessary and interesting area of research since the widespread social acceptance and increasing prevalence of divorce throughout the world.

1.8.3 Divorce and its association with other risk factors

Although numerous studies demonstrate negative correlates of divorce on children (e.g., Amato, 2000; Amato, 2010; Amato & Boyd, 2014; Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004; Wallerstein, Lewis & Rosenthal, 2013), it is important to note that negative outcomes and symptomatology can be challenging to interpret and/or attribute causally to divorce. This is because divorce is associated with many risk factors. For example, due to several stressful changes post-divorce, divorced single mothers can develop depressive symptoms and begin to withdraw their attention from their children, thus, reducing their interactions with them (Wood, Repetti & Roesch, 2004). Goodman et al. (2011) concluded that in the cases of divorce, the effects of maternal depression on child outcomes is stronger perhaps due to external factors such as co-parental conflict, or it could be that having a non-depressed father present (i.e., in non-divorced families), helps reduce the impact of maternal depression by providing an alternative, possibly healthier, parenting style.

Cherlin (1991) found that children from separated families had more post-separation problems than those from non-separated families but that these differences

were present many years prior to the divorce. In their (1996) study, Amato and Booth supported this finding when they found issues within child-parent relationships as early as 8 to 12 years prior to the divorce. They found that low quality marriages (i.e., marriages characterised by interparental discord) were primarily responsible for these issues (Amato & Booth, 1996). Amato and Booth (1996) found that low quality in the marriage seemed to affect mother-child and father-child affection, suggesting that both parents' relationships with their children are susceptible to the negative effects of parental conflict. However, they found that divorce added to a decline in affection between father and child but not between mother and child (Amato & Booth, 1996). They concluded that the quality of marriage has both direct and indirect long-term consequences for parent-child affection, rather than event of divorce itself (Amato & Booth, 1996).

A child's age during divorce can be both a protective factor and a risk factor. For example, those who are younger may be more stressed and anxious about the departure of one parent from the home (Amato, 2000). The departure of a parent can be experienced more positively by an older child who has been more aware of the conflicts between parents prior to separation than a younger child might be (Amato, 2000). Thus, the separation can be experienced as a relief by an older child but may have a negative impact on younger children who lack strong memory or understanding of the context that has led to the separation. Due to their less developed socio-emotional skills, it may be more difficult for a younger child to process and understand divorce.

Amato and Anthony (2014) designed a 'child fixed effects model' to control for all time-invariant variables, meaning that each participant acted as their own control. Their study's design takes into consideration the difficulties of conducting a

‘true experiment’ (e.g., complete control and manipulation of variables and/or participants) on the effects of divorce on children and instead used national data sets to examine various outcomes. The outcomes measured were: Mathematics and reading scores, emotional and behavioural problems, classroom behaviour, peer relationships, self-control, self-esteem, internal locus of control, smoking, and educational aspirations. They also examined variations in child outcomes following divorce, using a standard error of measurement to distinguish between children who improved, declined, and remained unchanged following divorce, relative to the amount of measurement error (Amato & Anthony, 2014). Finally, the researchers also explored whether children’s adjustment depended on parents’ tendency to divorce using two hypotheses:

- (1) Marital separation may be harmful when the likelihood to separate is high; parents with low social, economic, and personal resources may be more likely to divorce and less able to help their children adjust;
- (2) Divorce can have deleterious outcomes when parents have a low likelihood to separate—divorce is particularly stressful when it occurs in social groups in which divorce is unlikely (Amato & Anthony, 2014).

The experimenters tested these hypotheses by estimating the probability of experiencing divorce for children in two-parent families and by examining interactions between subsequent divorce and the probability of divorce in predicting child outcomes (Amato & Anthony, 2014).

The researchers did not control for changes in household income, parent-child relationships, or interparental conflict, stating that this would have led to an undervaluing of a true divorce effect because, “divorce changes so many aspects in a child’s life, it is difficult to identify time-varying factors not affected by divorce,”

(Amato & Anthony, 2014, p. 8). Divorce was significantly associated with all outcomes listed above, measured in both data sets (Amato & Anthony, 2014). The results demonstrated that children who experienced divorce had more negative changes than positive ones but for all outcomes, the most common response to divorce was 'no change at all' (Amato & Anthony, 2014). The exploratory analysis from Amato and Anthony (2014) demonstrated that multiple factors were negatively associated with the probability of experiencing a divorce, including parents' education and belonging to the 'other non-White' racial group. Amato and Anthony (2014) assumed that parents with more social and economic resources were perhaps more able to protect their children from the negative effects of divorce. A major strength of their research was that all time-invariant variables were controlled using a child-fixed-effects model. However, they had a very small mean effect size across all outcomes (0.16 in the first data set and 0.17 in the second); however, their robust design showed some support for previous findings. The researchers indicated they did not include some time-varying controls (e.g., parent-child relationships or interparental conflict) so the estimated effects found may be overestimating the associations between divorce and child outcomes (Amato & Anthony, 2014). However, the researchers argued that the models in their study estimated the effects of divorce and not any preceding factors, such as conflict (Amato & Anthony, 2014). They explained that all divorces involved the departure of a parent from the home and this was the effect 'captured' in their statistical models (Amato & Anthony, 2014). They reported that divorce alters a wide variety of things in the lives of children, including, but not limited to, standard of living, exposure to conflict between parents, changes to living arrangements and alterations in the parent-child relationship. Thus, in order to

evaluate the true and total effect of divorce, these variables should not be controlled, as they are demonstrably impacted by divorce (Amato & Anthony, 2014).

1.8.4 Divorce as a 'process'

Amato's (2000) paper proposes the 'divorce-stress-adjustment perspective', which views marital dissolution as a process that begins while the couple resides with one another and ends long after the divorce is finalised. Within this process, there are various 'stressors', as well as subsequent adjustments; however, the degree and kind of adjustment depends on various protective/risk factors (Amato, 2000). "The uncoupling process typically sets into motion numerous events that people experience as stressful. These stressors, in turn, increase the risk of negative emotional, behavioural, and health outcomes for adults and children. The severity and duration of these negative outcomes varies from person to person, depending on the presence of a variety of moderating or protective factors," (Amato, 2000, p. 1271). From this perspective, the initial negative effects of divorce can be seen as beginning years before the final separation; for instance, when estranged couple members deny/avoid problems that arise within the marriage (Amato, 2000). Stressors for children include loss of contact with one parent, economic decline, or the continuation of conflict between co-parents; stressors for adults could include loss of emotional support and continuation of conflict with their co-parent (Amato, 2000). Protective factors include having proper resources to aid in adjustment (e.g., interpersonal resources such as personality traits that encourage resilience in the face of stress) as well as demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity, and culture) (Amato, 2000). Amato (2000) suggests that these stressors/protective factors either result in a short-term adjustment period (crisis model) or in a long-term adjustment period (chronic strain model).

The crisis model assumes that divorce represents a disturbance to which most individuals adjust eventually over time; factors like personal resources determine the speed of adjustment (Amato, 2000). The crisis model suggests that all individuals will return to a similar state of wellbeing prior to the beginning of the divorce process (Amato, 2000).

The chronic strain model assumes that being divorced involves constant strains such as economic difficulties and loneliness (Amato, 2000). These issues do not end, resulting in the negative effects of divorce continuing indefinitely across the lifespan (Amato, 2000). This model, unlike the crisis model, assumes that divorced individuals do not return to the same level of wellbeing they experienced earlier in the marriage (Amato, 2000). Amato (2000) concluded that the 'divorce-stress-adjustment perspective' suggests that the dissolution of marriage is a stressful experience for most people, although much of the stress may occur prior to the legal divorce.

Alternatively, Amato (2000) also discussed the 'selection perspective', proposing that 'poorly-adjusted' individuals are *selected* out of marriage due to challenging personal and social characteristics. These characteristics may predispose individuals to divorce and negative outcomes after the marriage/relationship ends (Amato, 2000). In contrast to the 'divorce-stress-adjustment perspective', where divorce leads to adjustment problems, adjustment problems lead to divorce in the 'selection perspective' (Amato, 2000). The 'selection perspective' also posits that children from separated families may exhibit problems because they have inherited traits from their parents; parents' personalities and genetically-transmitted predispositions lead to divorce, along with pre-existing problems in their offspring (Amato, 2000).

Some limitations to Amato's (2000) 'divorce-stress-adjustment perspective' include that the author developed the model by combining elements from many papers on stress and divorce. This was not as rigorous as creating a framework grounded in up-to-date, valid, and empirical data. Furthermore, the perceived genetically transmitted predispositions to divorce that Amato (2000) discussed could be due to intergenerational transmission through exposure/experience rather than genetic inheritance. In other words, a parent has particular traits and their children may grow up exposed to these traits and thus, become influenced by them through experience.

Salvatore et al. (2018) carried out a classic adoption design study using Swedish national registries and found that the risk of divorce in adoptees was related to biological parents' divorce but not to adoptive parents' divorce. They also extended this design and found that children resembled their 'not-lived with' fathers and their 'lived-with' mothers in their history of divorce, with stronger resemblance to mothers (Salvatore et al., 2018). The researchers stated that divorce resemblance between children and their 'not-lived with' fathers provided 'direct evidence' that genetic factors contributed to the intergenerational transmission of divorce (Salvatore et al., 2018). However, they concluded that the strong resemblance of 'lived with' mothers had provided 'indirect evidence' that the rearing environment contributed to this transmission above and beyond significant genetic influences (Salvatore et al., 2018).

In a persuasive argument by Amato (2010) about the idea of divorce as a process, its association with other risk factors, and what it means for research, he stated:

“...if one views divorce as a process that unfolds gradually rather than as a discrete event that happens on a specific day, then the troubled family relationships that often precede marital dissolution can be conceptualized as

part of the dissolution process...researchers can view marital discord either as a cause of divorce or as part of the divorce process, the question of what effects can be attributed to divorce is a theoretical rather than an empirical issue,” (p. 656).

Sun and Li (2002) conducted a rigorous longitudinal study, observing effects of divorce on children at four time points; two points before the ‘key event of divorce’ and two points after (i.e., spanning from 3 years before the divorce to 3 years after). They argued that marital disruption was an on-going process and aimed to measure child outcomes at 4 sequential time points (Sun & Li, 2002). However, the researchers hypothesised that as the process continued, the magnitude of the problems may change (Sun & Li, 2002). Their sample was representative in terms of socioeconomic status, geographic location and demographic characteristics; 9,524 eighth grade students in the US in 1988 were included (Sun & Li, 2002). Sun and Li (2002) used a number of quantitative measures to assess two major areas of children’s well-being over time:

(1) Educational achievement/aspiration (i.e., including students’ cognitive test scores in maths, science, reading and social studies), as well as educational aspiration, measured using self-reports asking one question about how far they thought they would get in school;

(2) Psychological wellbeing (i.e., ranking their agreement with statements regarding their self-esteem and measurements of their locus of control).

Children from divorced families scored lower than children from married families in all academic tests and educational aspiration at all time points (Sun & Li, 2002). Damage to self-esteem was evident at all time points except for one—the first time point post-divorce (Sun & Li, 2002). Taking gender and race into consideration,

some test score effects were reduced for children from divorced families but effects at each point were mostly maintained (Sun & Li, 2002). The researchers also found that effects on science, reading, and social studies performances were linear over time—they decreased at each advancement in time (Sun & Li, 2002). However, the effects on educational aspiration, self-esteem and locus of control followed a U-shaped pattern over time—they declined around the time of divorce and then inclined at later time points (Sun & Li, 2002). The researchers found that including social and financial resources mediated a modest to large portion of the detrimental effects on test scores 3 years before the divorce and accounted for a larger amount of effects at the other 3 time points (Sun & Li, 2002). The effects on self-esteem were reduced significantly when social resources were held constant (Sun & Li, 2002). Their analysis suggests that the negative impact of divorce at various time points was either partially or completely attributable to deficits in family resources at the time points outlined in their study (Sun & Li, 2002). Their results provide strong empirical support for the viewpoint that divorce affects children as a continuous process both before and after divorce (Sun & Li, 2002). The U-shaped pattern in the more subjective, self-report measures of wellbeing indicated that problems linked to wellbeing were related to the event of divorce (Sun & Li, 2002).

A limitation of their study was the inability to assess parental conflict prior to, during, and after the divorce; including an assessment of this variable could have provided further explanation of the effects of the divorce process on children's test and self-report scores (Sun & Li, 2002). Furthermore, the researchers did not assess the level of interaction between each parent and their child pre-, during, and post-divorce; this could have also explained some of the effects on test scores and psychological wellbeing (Sun & Li, 2002). The strengths of their study were its

duration and its rigorous design, including various time points both before and after divorce, thus, providing support for the argument that divorce is a process involving pre- and post-divorce factors (Sun & Li, 2002).

1.8.5 Divorce and children's attachment/caregiver representations

As previously mentioned, during the divorce process there may be an interruption to 'usual' parental functioning (Cockett & Tripp, 1994; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). Divorce-related stress experienced by parents frequently interferes with their capacity to respond adequately and consistently to their children's needs for safety and security (Page & Bretherton, 2001). An interruption to a parent's emotional and thoughtful awareness of their child's experience may leave a child of divorce vulnerable to being 'forgotten' and neglected during a time of high anxiety (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004).

During times of high stress, discomfort, or upset, a child's attachment system may be activated towards significant attachment figures in their lives. How these figures respond creates a sense of, or lack of, confidence in an attachment figure's availability (Bowlby, 1973). If parents' abilities and functions are dormant or hindered, a child's attachment behaviours may be ignored, as the attachment figure is temporarily unavailable. A child's needs for security and safety are left unattended to, leading to a further sense of insecurity and anxiety (Feeney & Monin, 2008; Page & Bretherton, 2001).

Page and Bretherton (2001) conducted an assessment of post-divorce children's IWMs and attachment representations using the Expanded Attachment Story Completion Task (ASCT-R) (Bretherton, Ridgeway & Cassidy, 1990), four stories from the MacArthur Story Stem Battery (MSSB; Bretherton, Oppenheim, Buchsbaum, Emde, & The MacArthur Narrative Group, 1990) and a fifth story by

Zahn-Waxler et al. (1994). Their study was conducted on 66 four and five year olds with the aim of understanding whether post-divorce children's fictional stories could predict relations with teachers and peers (Page & Bretherton, 2001). They found that 'mother-child' themes were more frequently enacted due to the 'mother' character holding the primary 'acting' role in the story stems (Page & Bretherton, 2001). However, they noted that many children, particularly boys, incorporated the father character in their stories (Page & Bretherton, 2001). They also suggested that enactments of empathy toward the father in the children's stories were perhaps provoked by feelings of responsibility for the father's well-being in the face of parental conflict (Page & Bretherton, 2001).

As part of this larger study, Page (2001) selected four children's story stem narratives to run a qualitative analysis on. These children were selected based on their ratings as 'low social competence' and 'high social competence' children; in their study, social competence referred to the quality of children's relationships with peers and teachers. Although Page (2001) described how the low-competence and high-competence stories were selected, it is unclear how these four children were selected for the final analysis as eight children reportedly fitted the criteria. The four children were made up of two who had scored low on social competence and two who had scored high (Page, 2001). The ages of the four participants included in this analysis were not provided, however, the sample of 66 they were selected from had a mean age of 56 months (Page, 2001). Social competence in this study was rated by teachers using teacher-report questionnaires (Page, 2001). Following his qualitative analysis of the four children's narrative stems (i.e., three stems from each child), Page (2001) found that the high-competence stories ended with positive resolutions focusing on emotional ties to others, communicating a sense of predictable stability; whereas, the

low-competence children left their stories either unresolved or “incongruously resolved”. Low-competence children presented parents as less responsive in their narratives; the child character required assistance, comfort or reassurance from parent figures (e.g., a story introducing a monster). The high-competence children enlisted the help of their parents more frequently and utilised them more consistently as nurturing positive role models (Page, 2001). Interestingly, Page’s (2001) qualitative analysis reported that children rated as highly competent demonstrated parental figures in their narratives as affectionate and understanding when attachment behavior was directed towards them within the narratives; conversely, low-competence children displayed violence or detachment of parental figures toward children’s attachment behaviour within their narratives. These findings demonstrate how variable attachment representations can be within a sample of post-divorce children.

Another study on post-divorce children examining attachment representations is a longitudinal study by Stadelmann et al. (2010). The researchers examined whether the effect of divorce on behavioural/emotional problems varied according to the level of family conflict; children’s parental representations were assessed on the MSSB (Stadelmann et al., 2010). A large sample of 187 five-year-old children from both separated and non-separated Swiss-German families were assessed at this age and one year later (Stadelmann et al., 2010). Both parents and teachers completed a measure to report on children’s emotional and behavioural problems at both time points using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997). Children were interviewed using the Berkeley Puppet Interview (BPI; Measelle, Ablow, Cowan & Cowan, 1998) to self-report on behavioural and emotional problems (Stadelmann et al., 2010). The researchers assessed group differences between separated and non-separated families and found that children from separated families

showed a significantly higher amount of emotional symptoms at six years old compared to children of non-separated families. At age five, children from separated families showed a significantly higher level of 'negative' parental representations in their play than non-separated children but no group differences were found at age six. Similar to Page's (2001) finding that within-group variations in attachment representations and constructs may exist for children from separated families, Stadelmann et al. (2010) found that a lack of negative parental representations (i.e., harsh, rejecting and ineffective behaviour of parent figures toward child figures within their narratives) in children from separated families may be a protective factor in their development following divorce. They concluded that the quality of internal representations of relationships in the face of divorce have a moderating impact on the development of conduct problems at an early stage of development (Stadelmann et al., 2010).

These studies are relevant due to their focus on attachment representations in children from divorced/separated families. They suggest that measures of children's attachment representations, as assessed by semi-projective tools, also highlight some of the internalising and externalising behaviours experienced by children from separated families, providing rich insight into their internal worlds.

1.8.6 Divorce and children's internalising behaviours

Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) asserted that children's close relationships with peers or couple dynamics displayed within the family home throughout childhood shape romantic partners in adolescence and later on in life. However, when a separation occurs between parents, the child ceases to experience the constant 'give and take' required in a relationship between two individuals. Within the child's

internal world, an image of their parent's choosing not to sustain their partnership may create a sense of despair, anxiety, and a lack of trust in others (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004).

A longitudinal 25-year long landmark study investigating the experience of divorce through the eyes of children, adolescents, and young adults paved the way for a greater understanding and a new outlook on the topic. The study, conducted by Judith Wallerstein and Julia Lewis in 1971, involved following 131 children from California for a period of 25 years post-divorce; participants were interviewed at five different time points (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). The participants were between the ages of 3 and 18 years old when the study began, and by the end were between 28 and 43 years of age (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). Participants were chosen from predominantly Caucasian, middle-class families in order to demonstrate the effects of divorce under the 'best of circumstances' (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). One of their most ground-breaking discoveries was their finding that divorce was a process rather than a 'time-limited crisis', with which researchers have subsequently agreed (e.g., Amato, 2000). Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) found that divorce was most disturbing for children's development during the first two years post-divorce; after this time children *tend* to return to their original developmental path. However, following the interviews with the child participants as adults, the researchers concluded that the experience of divorce rose to a 'crescendo' in adulthood (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004).

However, Wallerstein and Lewis's 1971 study was heavily criticised for not including a control group at its inception; for using qualitative methodology that could not be replicated in future studies; for offering therapeutic assistance in exchange for participation (as this may have only enticed parents who were already concerned about their child's well-being) (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004); and finally,

for not using a random sampling technique (Amato, 2003). Despite these criticisms, Wallerstein and Lewis's study was the first divorce study of its kind with regards to the wealth of data it collected and in its duration.

Research suggests young children can experience excessive worrying, sadness, depression, and fears of abandonment, whilst older children may experience more anger (e.g., Allison & Furstenberg, 1989; Hetherington, 1989; Hetherington & Elmore, 2003; Hoyt, Cowen, Pedro-Carroll & Gillis, 1990; Sands, Thompson & Gaysina, 2017).

1.8.7 Divorce and children's externalising behaviours

Upon their review of the literature, Hetherington and Elmore (2003) concluded that externalising behaviours appear to be the most researched effects of marital transitions on children. These include an increase in aggression, conduct disorders, decreases in self-regulation and social responsibility, and lower academic performance in comparison to those from intact families (Hetherington & Elmore, 2003). Other adverse effects include earlier sexual activity, teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, truancy, suicide attempt, dropping out of school, and involvement with antisocial peers (e.g., Amato, 2000; Amato & Keith, 1991; Bhrolcháin, Chappell, Diamond & Jameson, 2000; Jeynes, 2002; McLanahan, 1999; Thompson, Alonzo, Hu & Hasin, 2017; Wallerstein, Lewis & Rosenthal, 2013). Hetherington and Elmore (2003) reported that the literature seems to highly represent children from separated families in both 'multi-problem clusters' and in 'high competency' clusters. This may be due to gender differences in the adjustment to divorce (Hetherington & Elmore, 2003). For instance, girls from separated families, raised primarily by their mothers, are more likely to be well-adjusted and socially responsible (Hetherington & Elmore, 2003). However, these girls do still face issues of low self-esteem, anxiety, and

depression (Hetherington & Elmore, 2003). Emery (1982) found that divorce is more associated with externalising behaviour in boys and more internalising behaviours in girls during adolescence.

1.8.8 Divorce as a loss

According to past (e.g., Bowlby, 1977) and present researchers (e.g., DeSpelder & Strickland, 2009), the experience of parental “loss” can arise from a multitude of familial disruptions including divorce. Sometimes sudden changes in family dynamics, such as divorce and death can be indistinguishable to children causing them to feel that the relationship he/she was once so familiar with has changed significantly, with the future seeming uncertain and incomprehensible (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2009).

Furman (1981) suggested that some very young children perceive a long-term separation from a parent as a loss comparable to death; this was also evident in the Robertson and Robertson film, *Nine Days in a Residential Nursery*, where a pre-school aged boy was separated from his parents for 9 days. The young boy’s behaviour and emotional state were comparable to that of a child who had been bereaved of his parents. This video demonstrated the boy’s strong tie to the mother, as the father’s visitation did not ease the boy’s separation anxiety. However, parental and gender roles have changed; many fathers are now primary caregivers and attachment figures. In cases where the child no longer has regular contact with their non-resident parent—usually the father—the breaking of this affectional bond can lead to many psychological and emotional difficulties and disturbances for a child’s development (Bowlby, 1977).

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found the most common response for children of divorce was an inescapable sadness—through semi-structured clinical interviews, the

researchers found that the majority of the children in their study were openly grief-stricken. The children's internal worlds were painted with fantasies of deprivation and of the loss of things essential to continued life (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Lohr, Chethik, Press and Solyom (1981) found that during divorce, the child's ego struggles to deal with what is beyond the normal expected environment; each stage of development brings with it a new reality, and because there are many meanings of loss, which result from the child's emotional, cognitive and perceptual development, the child's lack of understanding of the meaning of loss will be augmented with fantasies determined by his stage of development.

Lohr et al. (1981) found that a “reunion wish” existed in children who have experienced parental divorce and those that experienced parental death. Through identification, acting out, or fantasies, there appeared to be a need to re-establish the lost object and continue the relationship with that object in both types of familial disruption. This is known as the “reconciliation fantasy” which refers to an idealized reinstatement of the previous relationship that once existed; children who continue to maintain a relationship with both parents after divorce still continue to express a wish for reconciliation to the previous family structure (Lohr et al, 1981). It seems as though the loss of a parent through divorce initiates feelings of confusion about what the loss means—especially if the parent is seen intermittently but cannot live with the child anymore.

1.8.9 Divorce and positive outcomes for children

Morrison and Coiro (1999) found that children benefited when high-conflict marriages were dissolved; their study assessed children between 4 and 9 years of age, over a period of three years, starting before the divorce. However, their measures were parent-report surveys, which did not include important details about the child's

length of exposure to conflict, nor did they include reports of the intensity of the conflict/quarrels that the parents engaged in. The self-report measures describing the conflict were only provided by the mother and thus may not be entirely reliable.

Booth and Amato (2001) conducted a study demonstrating that children who were removed from high-conflict marriages through divorce fared better than those who remained in them. Booth and Amato's (2001) two-part study consisted of one part which was a replication of two previous studies by Amato, Loomis and Booth (1995) and Jekielik (1998), and found that children benefited after the divorce of high-conflict parents but children who had experienced a divorce between low-conflict parents were negatively affected. The second study looked at characteristics of low-conflict marriages that ended in divorce (Booth & Amato, 2001). However, Booth and Amato's (2001) study involved adult children of divorce who ranged in age between 19 and 43 years old and was thus retrospective; retrospective data may be unreliable as it relies on individual memory, which can be susceptible to biases and error. Participants were interviewed via telephone at two time points (i.e., 1992 and 1997). Booth and Amato's (2001) measure of marital conflict was limited to four items (i.e., arguments over division of household labour, frequency of disagreements, frequency of serious quarrels in the past 2 months, and whether physical violence was involved). Other factors, which were not included, would have yielded a richer image of the type of marital conflict participants experienced; i.e. verbal and emotional abuse, such as insults, sarcasm, and criticism and the cause of the quarrels or disagreements. For instance, if quarrels or disagreements are initiated over the child's upbringing or issues relating to the child in general, a child's knowledge of this may elicit a great sense of guilt and self-blame, further negatively affecting their well-being and adjustment (Marquardt, 2005). Booth and Amato's (2001) study was more

comprehensive in their measure of child's well-being in comparison to Morrison and Coiro's (1999) study, which only investigated behaviour problems. Booth and Amato (2001) examined several factors including psychological well-being, support from kin, support from friends, the quality of intimate relationships, and the quality of relations with parents and educational achievement. Booth and Amato (2001) concluded that, "the weight of evidence suggests that most of the effects of divorce are moderated by the level of marital conflict that precedes divorce," (p. 210).

The strengths of Booth and Amato's (2001) study were:

- (1) A comprehensive and longitudinal design, conducted over the span of 17 years,
- (2) Being one of the first studies to examine divorce between low-conflict parents,
- (3) Including a wide range of outcomes,
- (4) Taking measurement error into account,
- (5) Considering several factors when measuring offspring's psychological wellbeing and giving a more complete picture of this outcome (i.e., self-reported satisfaction in their neighbourhood, career or job, house or apartment, friends, hobbies, family life outside of current marriage, and financial situation; they also used a self-esteem scale and a scale of psychological distress).

Their results indicated that offspring were worse off if their parents remained together whilst engaging in a high-conflict marriage or if their parents divorced following a low-conflict marriage (Booth & Amato, 2001). There was no evidence that events following divorce (e.g., changes in residence or school(s)) affected offspring's well-being and no association between post-divorce events and pre-

divorce conflict existed (Booth & Amato, 2001). Post-divorce conflict was not associated with offspring well-being (Booth & Amato, 2001). In sum, divorce appeared to be either harmful or beneficial to children, depending on whether it increased or decreased the amount of stress they were exposed to. In conclusion, the stress associated with parents who were constantly in conflict with one another likely exceeded the stress of living in a single-parent household (Booth & Amato, 2001).

1.8.10 Gender differences in children from separated families

Stadelmann et al. (2010) found gender differences in their sample of post-divorce children at age six; boys presented significantly more 'negative' representations in their play narratives as assessed using a story stem task. However, these gender differences at the younger age of five only showed a trend towards significance (Stadelmann et al., 2010).

Using a story stem measure, Page and Bretherton (2001) found boys incorporated the father character in their stories more than girls did. However, this may have been a flaw in the design of the story stem task as the stems always portrayed the mother as the 'acting' parent. Including both parents as acting characters, or leaving the choice open to the children, could have yielded more realistic results. The difference between boys' and girls' use of father-child themes may support Neubauer's (1960) proposition that when a parent is absent from the home, a child possesses fantasy objects that are either greatly idealized or very sadistic. The characteristics that the fantasized object manifests depend on the relation of the child's gender to the gender of the absent parent, as well as on the child's developmental demand during the time in which the loss occurred (Neubauer, 1960).

Stadelmann et al. (2010) and von Klitzing et al. (2000) found that young boys from divorced families tended to use more aggressive and negative themes in their

story stems than girls did; whereas, girls tended to have more coherent narratives. Boys may experience a greater decline in the quality of the home environment following separation than girls, due to the possibility of more interactions with their fathers before separation (Kelly & Emery, 2003). These interactions between father and son are decreased in quantity and quality post-separation; this may result in a less secure perspective of their father's availability (Emery, 1982; Mott, Kowaleski-Jones, & Menaghan, 1997).

1.8.11 Age differences in children from separated families

Several researchers and theorists have suggested that a child's response and their internalisation of divorce is linked with their age and stage of development (e.g., Amato, 2000; Cantrell, 1986; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976; Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Younger children may only have a vague sense of their family situation and may feel more frightened by a separation between their attachment figures; they may also react to parental conflict with high levels of anxiety and distress (Johnston, Campbell & Mayes, 1985; Hetherington, 1989; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Older children who have a more accurate perspective on the family dynamic may internalise the divorce differently (Cantrell, 1986). Older children tend to feel intense anger and express it more than young children from separated families do; the anger is usually directed at one parent (i.e., the parent whom they perceived to have initiated the divorce) (Cantrell, 1986; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976).

Wallerstein and Kelly (1976) and Kelly and Wallerstein (1976) explored early (7-8 year old) and late (9-10 year old) latency-age groups and their responses to divorce; they found common themes, such as anxiety, displayed by both groups. The early latency group communicated a wish for the restoration of their intact family;

there was also a strong sense of loss with regards to the departed father (Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976).

Furthermore, Wallerstein and Kelly (1976) found that around a quarter of the late latency participants were worried about being forgotten or abandoned by both parents. Children in this group also described feelings of loneliness and powerlessness in any important family decisions (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976). Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) concluded that younger children were more susceptible to the negative effects of divorce due to their inability to grasp the concept or to fully comprehend what is happening.

Lansford et al. (2006) found that children, who experienced divorce from the beginning of school to Grade 5 (i.e., Year 6 in the UK), exhibited more negative internalising and externalising effects than those from Grades 6 to 10 (i.e., Years 7 to 11 in the UK) did. However, children in the older grades faced more negative effects on their academic performance (Lansford et al., 2006). Howell, Portes and Brown (1997) found that younger children displayed less adjustment and lower self-esteem than the older children in their sample.

1.9 Divorce and other attachment figures in a child's life

1.9.1 Child-teacher relationships

A close and open child-teacher relationship can facilitate emotional and psychological development and well-being for children who are at-risk and facing difficulties in non-school-related domains of their life; it can help in academic achievement and foster further achievement in later years, and it can generate closer relations between the child and his/her peers at school (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Prinstein, La Greca, Vernberg & Silverman, 1996). A close and open child-teacher relationship has been characterised as lacking conflict and over-dependency on the

teacher (i.e., overreliance on the teacher as a source of support may result in a tentativeness to explore the environment and form friendships); open communication between teacher and child; as well as the teacher functioning as a secure base from which the child can explore the environment (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Although the child-teacher relationship has been regarded as playing a central role in child development, it has also been primarily studied in the context of facilitating academic achievement and social competence (e.g., Birch & Ladd, 1997; Howes & Hamilton, 1993).

Different individuals in children's lives offer unique types of social and emotional support, and although parents/caregivers tend to be the most significant attachment figures (e.g., Bush & Peterson, 2013), multiple sources of support are more beneficial than having only one (Prinstein et al., 1996). Teachers may provide a means of re-establishing stability and routine for children following traumatic events through a continuation of familiar roles (Vernberg & Vogel, 1993).

Some researchers have explored the efficacy of school programs to aid in children's adjustment post-divorce (e.g., Cantor, 1978; Goldman & King, 1985; Sanders & Riester, 1996; Stolberg & Mahler, 1994). Researchers emphasise that the school may be a prime location for such programs and therapeutic interventions (e.g., Cantor, 1978; Drake, 2008; Goldman & King, 1985) as it can be a source of nurturance and continuity for children from separated families; it may be a place where children express and engage in behaviours and emotions that are not otherwise expressed at home (Cantrell, 1986; Drake, 2008; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

1.9.2 Teachers' relationships with children from separated families

Sroufe (1983) found that when insecure relationships existed in the home, children demonstrated more insecure attachment behaviours in school. Some researchers have suggested that when insecure attachment relationships exist in the home with the primary caregiver(s), attachment to a teacher can compensate for the 'at-home' relationship (e.g., Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993). Resnick et al. (1997) concluded that a secure child-teacher relationship may be a protective force in the lives of children during times of distress and instability at home (e.g., during parental divorce), perhaps aiding in the child's post-divorce adjustment. As mentioned above, during times of upheaval, trauma, and/or drastic changes, a schoolteacher can become one of the only consistent adults in the child's life (Vernberg & Vogel, 1993). Children from separated families may bring their divorce-related problems, such as difficulties concentrating, anger, and regressive behaviours, to school with them (Kalter & Schreier, 2008).

The beneficial features of the child-teacher relationship in the lives of children from separated families, alongside the proximal and time-related closeness of the schoolteacher, suggest that teachers can provide a unique and valid perspective on how these children experience their parent's separation.

Alisic (2012) qualitatively examined teachers' perspectives on providing support to children who had faced traumatic events in their lives. She conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers who worked with children faced with various traumatic stressors and found that several teachers felt their role as academic educators was being overshadowed by a largely emotionally and socially supportive role (Alisic, 2012). Some found this new role extremely important whilst others felt their role should remain as an academic one; others found the role burdening and

difficult to cope with when it stirred up their own past traumas and experiences (Alisic, 2012). Finally, others doubted their capability to provide such support and wished for more support or ‘stepping in’ from mental health professionals (Alisic, 2012).

Daly (2009) points out that little attention is given to how schools behave towards post-divorce parents and even less is given to the non-resident parent. Perhaps this is due to unfamiliarity with the effects of divorce on children and how the inclusion of both parents in the child’s school life is important; Daly (2009) suggests this may be due to teachers being caught in the middle of opposing instructions from co-parents in conflict post-divorce.

1.9.3 Teachers’ experiences of children from separated families

Exploring teacher’s beliefs, perspectives, and experiences of children from parentally separated backgrounds is not an extensive field of study. However, a few studies have explored teachers’ beliefs and points of views on how children adjust post-separation, as well as how they view them as individuals and/or as a group. Øverland, Thorsen and Størksen (2012) conducted a study exploring the beliefs of teachers and daycare staff regarding children of divorce in Norway using a Q sort methodology. Q sort methodology is suitable for exploring subjective views on topics and utilizes both quantitative and qualitative methods (Brown, 1996; Øverland, Thorsen & Størksen, 2012). The results of the study demonstrated that teachers identified two viewpoints (i.e., one positive and one negative).

The first viewpoint revolved around problematic outcomes and an increased risk of adjustment problems; whereas, the second viewpoint focused more on the protective factors in children’s environments as well as the resiliency of children post-divorce (Øverland, Thorsen & Størksen, 2012). Participants who held the first

viewpoint believed that individual differences exist in children in their reactions to divorce and that some reactions are noticed more in those who face a crisis at home (Øverland, Thorsen & Størksen, 2012). Emotional responses experienced by participants who held this viewpoint included children becoming insecure, sad, crying easily, and having difficulty concentrating post-divorce (Øverland, Thorsen & Størksen, 2012). Children also expressed frustration during play and projects, which at times could lead to anger and acting out (Øverland, Thorsen & Størksen, 2012). These participants also found that the children from separated families clung to the adults in the daycare center more than those who were not from separated families (Øverland, Thorsen & Størksen, 2012).

Those who held the second viewpoint also pointed out that children reacted individually and depending on the parents' situation, children had different experiences and reactions (Øverland, Thorsen & Størksen, 2012). They too found children from separated families to be clingier, but that they adjusted well because their parents had 'good dialogue' and co-parented 'well together' (Øverland, Thorsen & Størksen, 2012).

All participants showed a concern for children from separated families, that all children cling more to adults post-divorce, and that children from separated families expressed emotions such as 'sorrow and sadness'. Furthermore, those who held viewpoint one had more personal experiences with divorce in their lives than those who held viewpoint two (Øverland, Thorsen & Størksen, 2012).

Øverland, Thorsen and Størksen's (2012) study benefited from consisting of several layers, both qualitative and quantitative, through initial focus groups with teachers to develop the Q sample then conducting the Q sorting and then conducting

in-depth follow-up interviews with teachers to better understand why they chose the statements they chose. However, the study was conducted with teachers, early childhood educators, and those who had no formal teaching training, thus resulting in diverse but inconsistent experiences. Furthermore, the study was conducted with daycare-aged children, who are developmentally immature in their verbal communication; this may explain why teachers in their study believed children “are not good at talking about divorce in the daycare center,” (Øverland, Thorsen & Størksen, 2012, p. 316).

Ball, Newman and Scheuren (1984) found that teachers’ ratings of how children ‘function’ within the school environment were based on stereotypes of children from divorced families. They asked teachers to evaluate how a child functioned on several school-related dimensions only on the basis of their parents’ marital status (i.e., married or divorced). They concluded that this social cue was enough for the teachers to evaluate the child of divorced parents significantly lower than the child of parents who are married. There also seemed to be an indication by these teachers that boys suffer more than girls from the ‘child of divorce’ stereotype.

Similar findings emerged in Guttman, Geva and Gefen’s (1988) study where two films were shown to teachers in Israel depicting a child from an intact family and a child from a divorced family; they were then asked to rate the child in each film on several dimensions including academic, emotional and social functioning. The researchers found that the knowledge of a child’s parents being divorced had an adverse effect on evaluations of that child’s academic, emotional, and social functioning (Guttman, Geva and Gefen, 1988). They also concluded that perhaps a child is, “judged less on the basis of his or her observed behavior and more on the

basis of preconceived stereotype-invoked expectations than are other children,” (p. 567).

However, these studies were conducted in the 1980s when marital breakdown was not as normalised as it is today, and it could have elicited negative stereotypes from society as to how members of a family function following divorce. It was also less prevalent than it is today, which may have resulted in an increase in teachers’ exposure to children from separated families and their understanding of its effects; this may have also led to a lessening of the negative stereotypes society holds surrounding it. However, a replication of Guttman, Geva and Gefen’s (1988) study was conducted by Guttman, Lazar and Karni (2008) and found that the stereotype by teachers persisted after nearly 20 years. Although these negative stereotypes persisted in this more recent study, when divorce had become much more common, the studies were conducted in an Israeli sample. This sample may carry cultural and religious attitudes towards children of divorce and of divorce in general, which are not present in other countries.

1.10 Conclusions

Although many studies show the relationship between divorce and the onset of various childhood and developmental problems (e.g., Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004), some studies demonstrate that divorce can be beneficial to children in certain circumstances, such as high-conflict marriages (e.g., Booth & Amato, 2001). However, literature looking at the negative impact of divorce is correlational in nature and thus, cannot *prove* that divorce *causes* children to develop problems (Amato & Boyd, 2014). Divorce tends to be associated with several risk factors and so it can be difficult to tease out which factors impact children prior to, during, and following the divorce process. Research suggests that divorce is a process and not a ‘time-limited’ event in children’s lives (Amato, 2000; Amato, 2010; Hetherington, Bridges & Insabella, 1998; Wallerstein, Lewis & Blakeslee, 2000; Wallerstein, Lewis, and Rosenthal, 2013). Thus, risk factors associated with divorce, such as parental conflict pre-and post-divorce, could be viewed as part of the overall divorce experience (Amato, 2010). Some researchers conclude that divorce does have a causal effect on children but that effect sizes from many studies may be exaggerating the degree of risk (Amato, 2010; Amato & Boyd, 2014). It is especially difficult to definitively determine whether a child’s quality of life has declined as a direct result of parental divorce. Conversely, in the rigorous Amato and Anthony (2014) problematic changes were found to be more common following divorce than were beneficial changes. However, they concluded that across all types of outcomes in their study, the most common response to divorce was no change (Amato & Anthony, 2014). In conclusion, creating a study that examines the effects and experience of ‘divorce’ can be particularly challenging.

1.11 Study rationale

Since its increase in prevalence and acceptance, dating back to the 1960s, divorce has generated widespread interest within psychological research (Phillips, 1991; Stone, 1990). However, studies on divorce have mainly focused on its negative impact on children due to a large body of data initially suggesting negative effects (e.g., Wallerstein & Lewis, 1971). In contrast, more recent research has suggested the complex nature of the effects of divorce on children and the challenge of disentangling pre-existing factors/effects from post-separation factors/effects (Amato, 2010). Moreover, recent studies on children's experiences of divorce and how divorce is represented within their internal world are limited. Gaining this insight is important in order to develop accurate and targeted ways of supporting children from divorced families clinically and from a parenting aspect. The experience of divorce during latency can be accompanied with particular challenges because of the many developments taking place in their cognitive, social, and emotional worlds.

It is also valuable to examine how other important attachment figures (e.g., schoolteachers and parents) think about children's experiences during divorce, as their perspective can provide much needed insight. However, without a rigorous longitudinal study, it is difficult to disentangle which effects are due to the divorce and which may have occurred due to risk factors associated with divorce and/or individual predisposition/personality traits present prior to the divorce. Through cross-sectional designs, it is not possible to gauge which phenomenon preceded the other. However, by designing a study that is primarily qualitative and maintaining the perspective that divorce is a process, the current thesis can initiate an exploration into the individual experience. Thus, this thesis will endeavour to provide an in-depth exploration of the experience of the divorce process for latency-age children, utilising

a mixed-methods design, whilst also including perspectives from other relevant attachment figures.

1.12 Aims and objectives

The overall aim of the current study is to add to the existing understanding of how the latency-age child experiences divorce. This will be attempted by exploring the latency-age child's experience in three different ways:

- (1) Directly from the perspectives of children from separated/divorced families;
- (2) From the experiences of divorced/separated co-parents;
- (3) Through teachers' perspectives on children from divorced/separated families.

The objectives of the current study are:

- a) To understand how the latency-age child experiences divorce/separation from their own perspective;
- b) To explore the views of co-parents, post-separation, about their child's adjustment, and assess parental RF in relation to the child, in order to better understand the latency-age child's experience of co-parenting and life at home;
- c) To explore teachers' perspectives on, and experiences with, children from divorced/separated families.

Chapter 2: Method development

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed description of the development of three measures used in Chapters 4, 5, and 7. These measures were conceptualised and developed to explore the overarching aim of the current study: **To gain an understanding of how the latency-age child experiences divorce**. They were developed to achieve two of the three objectives of the current thesis outlined in Section 1.12: **(1) To understand how the latency-age child experiences divorce/separation from their own perspective and (2) to explore teachers' perspectives on, and experiences with, children from divorced/separated families**. The latter being an indirect form of examining the overarching aim of the current study—gaining an understanding of how the latency-age child experiences divorce—achieved through extrapolation and co-construction of meaning by the primary researcher.

The first measure, used in Chapter 4, is a new story stem (i.e., the beginning of a story): *Dog Moving House* (DMH). It was created as an adjunct to a story stem measure (i.e., the Story Stem Assessment Profile; SSAP; Hodges, Hillman & Steele, 2007) used in published studies on topics such as adoption (e.g., Román et al., 2012; Steele et al., 2009), the impact of domestic violence on children (Thornton, 2014), and treatment outcomes for children of 'mother-infant' psychoanalytic treatment (Salomonsson, Sorjonen & Salomonsson, 2015). Although the DMH is a new story stem, a brief introduction to the SSAP measure will be provided in the following section, in order to provide context for the development of the DMH.

The second measure, used in Chapter 5, is a qualitative measure administered following the completion of the SSAP and the DMH stem: *The Mama Bear and Papa*

Bear Interview (MBPBI). The *MBPBI* was designed to aid the current study in gaining a richer and deeper look into the internal world of children who have experienced divorce. The *MBPBI* consists of a short story that is followed with a projective semi-structured interview.

The third method, created for use in Chapter 7 in order to achieve the third objective of the current thesis, was an Online Focus Group (OFG) interview schedule administered to teachers. The interview schedule was designed to use in an anonymous group discussion via an online chat platform. It was conceptualised and developed to aid in understanding the experience of the latency-age child of divorce and to learn more about their experience at school, indirectly from the perspectives of teachers.

This chapter contains three sections that correspond with the three measures described above. Each section will consist of the aim, conceptualisation, rationale, and development of the measure. To summarise, these measures are:

- (1) A new, topic-relevant story stem, DMH;
- (2) The MBPBI;
- (3) An OFG interview schedule.

2.2 The Story Stem Assessment Profile (SSAP)

2.2.1 The Story Stem Assessment Profile (SSAP): An overview

The SSAP is a semi-projective play narrative measure that uses story stems and play to assess internal attachment representations and caregiver representations. Seen through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, these representations are assumed to undergo defensive projection, involving the attribution of unacceptable or painful ideas, impulses, or feelings to another person (i.e., the fictional characters within the narratives) (Auchincloss & Samberg, 2012). Narrative play techniques were

developed to open a window into a child's internal world; this idea originates from the psychoanalytic tradition of regarding play as involving the symbolic representation of a child's unconscious life (e.g., Klein, 1921). Klein (1921) stated, "Just as associations to dream-elements lead to the uncovering of the latent content of the dream, so do the elements of children's play, which correspond to those associations," (p. 18) "It must further be remembered that children are still for the most part under the sway of the unconscious, whose language, as dreams and play show, is presentational and pictorial...children have a quite different attitude from adults to words," (p. 32). Story stem techniques were developed to access children's internal worlds because of their simple use of language; their use of play through toys and dolls; their evoking of fantasy through fictional scenarios and characters; and finally, through their openness to interpretation and inclusion of both verbal and non-verbal communication.

A semi-projective narrative measure reveals some of the defences employed by participants to make thinking about parts of reality that are too painful more tolerable (Hodges & Steele, 2000). Due to the measure's non-intrusive nature, it can be used with vulnerable populations. It is a tool that displaces a child from their real, lived experience and allows them to project these experiences and internal representations onto a safe, external fictional character, family, and/or story. The SSAP taps into how children resolve common, "everyday" conflicts and whether or not they seek comfort and/or support from significant 'others' in their life.

The SSAP utilises multiple 'beginnings' of stories that are accompanied by corresponding play-mobil toys and props. Each 'stem' depicts a particular conflict or dilemma and at a 'high point' in the stem, the child is invited to show and tell the interviewer what happens next (Hodges et al., 2003; Hodges et al., 2015). Story stems

allow children to express their representations of attachment figures in relation to themselves by utilising members in doll-play scenarios (Emde, Wolf & Oppenheim, 2003). Through feelings, thoughts, and wishes conveyed within each child's response to the stems, an idea of one's IWMs of attachment can be demonstrated.

2.2.2 SSAP: Rationale

The SSAP, although unpublished, was more suitable than other widely used published story stem measures for the current thesis due to the following primary reasons:

- (1) It is a semi-projective assessment that taps into the internal world of children;
- (2) Due to its incorporation of play and narratives, does not solely rely on language, thus, is well-suited for the samples in the current thesis;
- (3) Six of its seven stems include a father character.

A detailed discussion of these primary reasons will be presented in this section. In order to select one story stem measure over other well-established story stem techniques, the current researcher relied on specific criteria. For instance, the measure needed to incorporate both mother and father characters within the stems; the technique needed to be short enough in duration so that younger children, as well as some older children, could be accommodated in their limited ability to concentrate for long periods of time (Kortessluoma, Hentinen & Nikkonen, 2003).

With many story stem techniques and mediums of delivery available, it was important to select one most fitting the aforementioned criteria. Firstly, the MacArthur Story Stem Battery (MSSB; Bretherton, Oppenheim, Buchsbaum, Emde, & The MacArthur Narrative Group, 1990), the Manchester Child Attachment Story Test (MCAST; Green, Goldwyn & Stanley, 2000), and the Child Attachment Interview (CAI; Shmueli-Goetz, Target, Datta, & Fonagy, 2000; Target, Shmueli-

Goetz, Datta & Schneider, 2007) were considered. Computerised versions of story stem assessments that could reduce costs, as well as promote reliability across assessments and reduce human error, were also considered.

Minnis et al. (2006) developed a computerised MSSB (CMSSB) for use with children in foster care; the CMSSB showed good inter-rater reliability. However, it was not tested against the original MSSB and thus, required further research to distinguish it as either being a new measure altogether or simply a new means of delivering the original MSSB. The authors also speculated that perhaps this method of delivery could be more reliable than the original MSSB as the administration was standardised across participants—it is also a method that removes training of administrators. Minnis et al. (2010) also developed a computerised MCAST (CMCAST) that had good inter-rater reliability, good agreement with the MCAST and of the classifications, and was a more cost-effective delivery method than the original MCAST.

The primary rationale behind not selecting the MSSB or the MCAST for the current thesis, or their computerised versions, was that the father character was not specified in most of their stems. This was considered an important feature of any measure used with children from separated families as attachment representations of both parents within the stories was considered important when studying the break-up of the parental couple, as well as in the comparison group from intact families. The MSSB utilises the mother character as the primary acting parent in most of its 15 stems and the MCAST focuses specifically on the child and a particular attachment figure rather than both parents (O'Connor & Byrne, 2008). The SSAP, unlike the MCAST and MSSB, is a clinically conceived tool, which is reportedly more

appropriate and powerful to utilise with vulnerable populations (Hillman, 2011, unpublished).

Following extensive research and consultation with colleagues in the field, it was felt that a story stem technique was a preferable tool to less projective techniques such as direct interviews. The CAI, a non-displaced/non-projective interview inviting children to describe their real-life relationships with their primary caregivers, utilises a coding system based on the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George, Kaplan & Main, 1985) and the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978) (Shmueli-Goetz, Target, Fonagy & Datta, 2008). It invites children to reflect on their current attachment relationships and experiences (O'Connor & Byrne, 2008; Shmueli-Goetz, 2014). The CAI has been validated for use with 8 to 12 year olds but would have been unsuitable for younger participants due to its reliance on verbal communication (O'Connor & Byrne, 2007). Conversely, the SSAP allows younger children who are less verbally competent—and those who may feel anxious about putting their feelings into words and expressing perceptions of family roles—to express attachments and relationships both verbally and non-verbally (Hodges et al., 2003). Non-verbal communication is especially important, as memories that are not based on verbal memory can be expressed (Hodges et al., 2003).

The SSAP utilises a semi-projective approach through doll play, without direct questions about the child's real-life experiences, which may be more acceptable to parents of the current vulnerable sample. The current sample required an approach less likely to arouse distress or inhibitions. This is another reason, in addition to age, that a direct semi-structured interview schedule such as the CAI would not have been appropriate.

The shortened, 7 story version of the SSAP was used in the current study (the full version of the SSAP is made up of 13 stories) (Hillman, 2011, unpublished), and made use of both parents in all stems except for one (i.e., 'Mum's Headache'). The SSAP (Hodges, Hillman & Steele, 2007) is based on the MSSB and incorporates important features from multiple story stem techniques; the MSSB incorporates features from both the Attachment Story Completion Task (ASCT) (Bretherton, Ridgeway & Cassidy, 1990) and the Attachment Doll-play Interview (ADI) (Oppenheim, 1997).

The SSAP was designed for children between the ages of 4 - 8, but has been used with children as young as three years old (e.g., Román et al., 2012) and following consultation with one of the developers of the measure and supervisor of the current thesis, Dr. Saul Hillman (2014; personal communication), it was deemed appropriate for use with children within the primary school system, up to age 11. It has been used in both longitudinal and cross-section research studies with children up to the age of 10 in the 'Attachment and adoption' longitudinal research study collaboration between Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, Coram Family, and Great Ormond Street Hospital (Hillman, 2017, personal communication). The flexibility of the SSAP made it appealing for use with a broad age range such as the one used in the current thesis (i.e., 6 to 11) and also for use with two different samples (i.e., separated vs. non-separated).

2.3 Dog Moving House (DMH) story stem

2.3.1 DMH: Aim and conceptualisation

The aim in developing an additional stem was to create a dilemma/conflict that would allow the researcher to gain a richer and more targeted understanding of the experience of divorce, as well as how attachment/caregiver representations may look for children of this population. It was hypothesised that an additional stem specifically tapping into the experience of separation would create a more relevant assessment.

The establishment or removal of stems to adapt a particular story stem measure or battery to a topic of study or aim has been practiced by several researchers (e.g., Grych, Wachsmuth-Schlaefler, & Klockow, 2002) and more specifically for use with children of divorce (e.g., Page & Bretherton, 2001; see Sections 1.8.5 and 2.3.2 for a description of their study).

DMH is a new stem conceptualised and developed by the primary researcher, and the secondary supervisor of the current thesis, Dr. Saul Hillman, one of the developers of the SSAP. Although the SSAP would be suitable for the exploration of children's mental attachment representations of relationships (i.e., how significant others in external life are represented within the internal world), it did not possess a stem that addressed a situation of separation without reunion. For example, a story stem found in the full version of the SSAP ('Little Pig') describes a situation of a young pig being lost and separated from his family; the participant is then invited to show and tell the interviewer what happens next (Hodges et al., 2003). This stem is targeting a child's ability to resolve the conflict at hand (i.e., being lost and separated from one's family) by demonstrating mastery in devising a means of returning home (Hodges et al., 2015). The *Little Pig* stem aims to elicit a child's ability to maintain,

“organised functioning in the face of stress with the aim of resolving the difficulty,” (Hodges et al., 2015, p. 20) (e.g., demonstrating resourcefulness, persistence, and/or enlisting the help of others). However, the successful mastery of the situation would involve finding a means of reuniting with one’s family, rather than coping with a permanent separation from them.

Lost Dog was another stem considered for this study and was part of the MSSB. As there were stems from the MSSB utilised in the formulation of the SSAP (e.g., ‘spilled juice’ and ‘mum’s headache’), it was important to evaluate the MSSB for stems that may fit within the theme of divorce. *Lost Dog* involved a situation where a dog named *Barney* had been lost, but was reunited with the protagonist of the story (Emde, Wolf & Oppenheim, 2003). A stem without the prospect of reunion would have been more relevant to the experiences of the current sample, as parental divorce generally involves a permanent separation from, and a loss of access to, a specific caregiver (Page & Bretherton, 2001).

Although these stems were not suitable for the researcher’s aims, they demonstrated the effectiveness of utilising animal characters to explore sensitive topics in younger populations. Hodges et al. (2003) and Hillman (2011, unpublished) reported that it is safer and less inhibiting when animals are used; children’s representations may be more readily elicited when using animal characters/toys due to further displacement from the child’s reality. Hodges et al. (2003) found that for some vulnerable populations (e.g., maltreated children), even fictional human story characters can ‘hit too close to home’ and become anxiety provoking.

2.3.2 DMH: Rationale

As mentioned earlier, Page and Bretherton (1993; 2001) adapted an established story stem measure for use with a sample of children from separated

families. They accomplished this by combining the Attachment Story Completion Task (ASCT; Bretherton, Ridgeway & Cassidy, 1990) and the MacArthur Story Stem Battery (MSSB; Bretherton, Oppenheim, Buchsbaum, Emde, & the MacArthur Narrative Group, 1990). They depicted the mother and father story-characters as living in separated houses; they used pieces of felt to represent the separate locations of mother and father (Page & Bretherton, 2001). However, research suggests that children tend to feel inhibited when the characters or story themes are unambiguously identified with them (Bach, 1945; Hodges et al., 2003). Hodges et al. (2003) recommend using a 'standard' doll family rather than using one that mimics the child's own family structure, particularly with vulnerable populations.

Moreover, Page and Bretherton (2001) had initially planned to exclude a father figure from all of the stems before realising children of divorce adamantly insisted on including a father figure during pilot studies. Therefore, for the purposes of the present study, no changes were made to the original SSAP stems with regards to where each parent lived or their marital status nor were the father characters removed from any of the SSAP stems.

Lastly, in Page and Bretherton's (2001) paper, they explain that the father was used as the 'acting' parent (i.e., the primary parent in the stem) in only one of ten stems. They decided on this structure due to literature indicating low post-divorce father involvement (Bretherton & Page, 2001). However, this was not desirable for the purposes of the current thesis due to the highly variable nature of post-divorce living and visitation arrangements.

Due to the only adaptation to the stems in Page and Bretherton's (2001) study being that mother and father were shown to live in separate houses, the present researchers were compelled to include a more targeted element to the SSAP to elicit a

relevant yet displaced event that a young child of divorce may relate to (Emde, Wolf & Oppenheim, 2003). Thus, the utilisation of a stem involving an animal and the theme of separation, without reunion, was considered ethically and methodologically preferable.

2.3.3 DMH: Development.

The aforementioned MSSB story stem “Lost dog” provided a basis for the primary researcher to develop a similar stem utilising a dog named *Barney*. However, there would be no reunion sequence and the separation would be portrayed as final.

The theme of “moving to another house” was useful in this stem as it represented the culmination of divorce and one of the most significant changes in the child’s life during the process (Kelly & Wallerstein, 1978; Jacobson, 1978). *Barney* represented the departed or non-resident parent; through the use of a fictional child and their fictional pet dog, the participant would be invited to safely and openly explore feelings and thoughts surrounding the separation and departure of an attachment figure (i.e., a pet) through displacement (Hodges et al., 2003).

The father was omitted from DMH in order to allow the child to displace his/her representation of the father onto *Barney* the dog; fathers in the current study were the primary non-resident parents. Through the use of the fictional animal character, the participant would be free to explore an emotionally charged dilemma without the consequences that might accompany a real account of the issue. Hodges and Steele (2000) explicitly state, “it is very important that play creates an imaginary situation, that is not bound to reality but can take counterfactual, imaginary realities into account,” (p. 435). Thus, it was important for the current study to explore how a child of divorce reflected on the reality of their situation rather than reflecting a copy of their exact reality within the narrative (Hodges & Steele, 2000).

2.3.4 DMH: Adjustments

Following the development of DMH, it was decided that participants would be invited to name the dog rather than the interviewer introducing it as ‘*Barney*’. Unlike the MSSB, the SSAP invites children to name the main characters, specifically the protagonist and his/her sibling. It was decided it would be advantageous to follow this feature of the SSAP, as participants may feel more connected to the dog in the stem (See Appendix A for a transcript of the DMH stem).

2.4 *Mama Bear and Papa Bear Interview (MBPBI): Short story and interview schedule*

2.4.1 MBPBI: Aim and conceptualisation

“Interview data have the unique potential of providing rich and highly illuminating material about children’s perceptions of their lives, and there are interesting and innovative approaches to interview analysis,” (Greene & Hogan, 2005, p. 159). Kortessluoma, Hentinen and Nikkonen (2003) stated that interviews were quite a rare means of conducting research with children until recently. Gibson (2012) noted that when conducting an interview, or qualitative research with children, it is crucial to remember that children are still developing and demonstrate differences from adults in how they think, speak, and interact with others. Liamputtong (2007) cautioned that there are some situations where conventional qualitative methods will not work due to the vulnerable and sensitive nature of the topic/experience. It is therefore important to adapt to one’s sample and broach the use of alternative approaches (Liamputtong, 2007). Staying attuned to this information and recognising the need for more creative, innovative, and tailored methods for interviewing children, the following measure was conceptualised.

Its aim was to permit a qualitative and in-depth investigation of the latency-

age child's inner experience of divorce following the administration of the quantitative SSAP and DMH. The child's conscious and unconscious emotions, perceptions, and wishes, were the primary focus. Understanding a child's emotional processes regarding a particular event or sequence of events is a pivotal step in better understanding their appraisal or categorisation of the meaning of these events (Bretherton, Fritz, Zahn-Waxler & Ridgeway, 1986). Understanding these emotional processes is also important for researchers, in order to make sense of the motivations and guiding principles behind ensuing behaviours of children with divorced parents (Bretherton, Fritz, Zahn-Waxler & Ridgeway, 1986). Since cognitions and perceptions moderate the 'emotion system', it is crucial to understand their role in the child's internal world (Bretherton, Fritz, Zahn-Waxler & Ridgeway, 1986). Lastly, understanding how the child of divorce thinks about, and feels towards, their resident and non-resident parents and how they describe their way of "being" in their primary relationships may provide researchers with a vivid and transparent picture of the participant's experience (Slade, 2008).

2.4.2 MBPBI: Rationale

The short story and semi-structured interview methodology benefited the present study in several ways. Initially, the primary researcher had been inspired by a fellow MSc student's research method (Fitzgerald-Yao, 2010, unpublished) developed under the supervision of Dr. Saul Hillman at the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families. Following which, the primary researcher of the current thesis adapted this methodology for use within their own MSc dissertation, which explored the effects of divorce and parental death on adolescents ($n = 6$) (Heider, 2013, unpublished).

The measure used in Heider's (2013, unpublished) study was comprised of a short story that introduced a fictional character in a fictional situation similar to the sample group's circumstances, followed by a series of questions relating to the fictional character and their family. The questions concerned the character's thoughts, feelings, and wishes. This measure was tailored to the participants' age group (i.e., 12 to 16), developmental stage (i.e., pre-adolescence and adolescence), and to the participants' experience (i.e., bereavement or divorce).

The 'bereavement group' received a short story based upon the popular film, [REDACTED]. The 'divorce group' received a different short story based on the film and book series, [REDACTED]. Participants were then invited to participate in a semi-structured interview pertaining to the short story and the characters within it. Findings demonstrated the use of complex descriptions, explanations, and emotion language, and displacements of their own thoughts and feelings onto the characters depicted in the short stories (Heider, 2013, unpublished).

The rationale for selecting this methodology for use with the current sample and research topic was twofold. Firstly, the researcher wanted to make use of techniques and phenomena underlying semi-projective methodologies. Particularly, those that underlie story stem techniques and the work carried out by Dr. Jill Hodges and Dr. Saul Hillman (a supervisor on the current thesis) (See Hodges & Steele, 2000; Hodges, Steele, Hillman, Henderson, & Neil, 2000; Hodges et al., 2003) with maltreated and adopted children.

Secondly, the researcher wanted a more direct approach, similar to the CAI, but that would not involve questions about the child's own experiences, in order to avoid distress. It was important for the semi-structured interview to displace participants from their own painful experiences and invite them to project their own

thoughts, feelings, and wishes onto a fictional set of characters (i.e., similar to the theoretical motivations inherent in utilising semi-projective narrative assessments such as the SSAP mentioned above). This would provide a non-intrusive yet more direct way of approaching a vulnerable population, while also being appropriate for use with both younger and older children. Supporting this approach, Greene and Hogan (2005) explained that “to date, open-ended interviews have been shown to be the most effective way to find out about experiences of childhood because the flexible face-to-face format of this method allows the researcher to follow up on vague, confusing, even contradictory information, sensitively and systematically,” (p. 159).

The primary researcher examined numerous young children’s films, television programs, and fictional stories and yet faced immense difficulty in finding a popular, age-appropriate film or book that addressed the issue of parental divorce, and that could be used as the basis of an interview. This began to indicate a deeper issue inherent in the experience of divorce as it appeared to be less frequently addressed in young children’s literature and film. The issue of losing a parent to death appeared to be much more common in literature (e.g., ██████████) and in many classic and modern films (e.g., ██████████, ██████████, ██████████). Although this is an issue beyond the scope of the present study, it is noteworthy to acknowledge the deficit in bibliotherapy (i.e., the employment of books, media, television programs, etc. for therapeutic benefit) readily accessible and available to children of divorce (Pehrsson et al., 2007).

Following this obstacle, the primary researcher specifically for use with this sample created a short story. The short story would address the issue of divorce utilising an age-appropriate and displaced approach.

2.4.3 MBPBI (Version 1): Development

Several changes needed to be made to tailor and improve the methodology used in the primary researcher's MSc dissertation. Initially, a short story that addressed divorce was developed; following the principles outlined in the previous section on the additional stem, DMH, specifically, the enlistment of animal characters to encourage displacement and projection. The short story describes the separation—the terms 'divorce' and 'separation' were not used—of a young bear's parents, also referred to as 'mama bear' and 'papa bear'. The young bear's name is Molly and she is described as being seven years old. The parental bear characters assure their young bear cub that she has not done anything wrong and that although they once loved each other, they have decided to live in two different houses. It concludes with each parent giving the young bear a 'big bear hug' and kiss on the cheek. The interviewer then proceeds to ask the first question of the interview schedule. The interview schedule consisted of two versions: (a) Version 1 was the first story and interview schedule designed prior to piloting the methodology; and (b) Version 2 was the second story and interview schedule designed post-pilot interview due to adjustments that evidently needed to be made (see Appendices B and C the two versions, respectively); each version had two age-appropriate scripts.

2.4.4 MBPBI (Version 1): Pilot interview.

Following issues that arose with regards to the administration, reception, feedback, and response to the MBPBI measure by the first participant (i.e., Participant A), Participant A's response to the MBPBI had to be omitted from the overall dataset and utilised as a pilot interview. This initial interview enhanced the researcher's understanding of how to better tailor the MBPBI to this young, vulnerable sample and

how to ease the young participant into a discussion of a sensitive and perhaps distressing issue.

Participant A had asked to skip Q3, Q5, and Q6 (see Appendix B), which were perceived to be questions that would elicit rich and important data. Participant A also began to respond in first person rather than about Molly the bear; thus, removing the element of projection and displacement which in turn resulted in an increased level of distress. Finally, upon completion of the interview, Participant A began to cry hysterically. Participant A's mother was called into the room to assist in calming and comforting the young participant. Once Participant A had time to recover, she was invited to say why the interview was so distressing, if she felt comfortable in doing so. Participant A responded with, "I don't want to think about my mum and dad," and was then probed to explain whether or not this interview made her think about them and she replied, "yes".

Following this pilot interview, it was decided that the measure should be even more displaced from reality than previously planned. Although the use of animal characters encouraged displacement, perhaps the direct portrayal of parents, whether animal or human, living in two different homes was too painful for participants to bear. The story would need to utilise softer, less direct statements whilst maintaining the theme of divorce in order to continue to address the research question.

2.4.5 MBPBI (Version 2): Development.

The portrayal of Molly the bear and her parents was altered using more imaginative and less human-related words to substitute any distress-triggering terms. For example, the phrase 'different houses' was replaced with 'different forests'; using forests instead of houses was perceived as making the story more about animals and less obviously relatable to the real-life circumstances of the participants (see

Appendix C). The following subsections describe the various changes made to Version 1.

Gender. Accompanying changes in the language of the story and interview schedule, the protagonist was provided with two names denoting gender: ‘Billy’ or ‘Molly’. Version 1 maintained that the protagonist was female, however, this would not be suitable for use with male participants as this would perhaps result in a high degree of displacement and could lead to difficulty in identifying with the protagonist. Therefore, the gender of the protagonist would be matched to the gender of the participant.

Names were selected for the characters, unlike in the *SSAP* and the DMH stem, because the MBPBI required a higher level of displacement due to the story topic being more directly related to the participant’s own experience. By having pre-assigned names, the child may not feel that they are ‘familiar’ with the character, which may reduce inhibitions; whereas, in the story stem technique utilising dolls, the child is more in charge of the character’s names and thus, may find them more familiar as to some degree, they were his/her creation.

Age. The protagonist in Version 1 was described as being seven years of age, however this was seen as being too restrictive. Thus, the participant’s age was removed entirely from the story and was not alluded to in Version 2; this meant the age of the protagonist was left entirely up to the participant’s imagination.

The separation. The MBPB story-portion of the measure was adjusted to be less structured and less relatable to any one type of ‘separation’ experience. Research demonstrates that divorce is not a ‘time-limited crisis’ but rather a process, and its initiation, duration, and impact all vary between families and children (Hetherington, Bridges & Insabella, 1998; Wallerstein, Lewis & Blakeslee, 2000). The statement,

“Mummy bear and daddy bear explain to her that although they once loved each other, they are going to live in two different houses because sometimes things don’t work out between parents,” was replaced with, “Mama bear and papa bear explain to him/her that sometimes parents decide to live apart and that they are going to live in different forests now.” This was perceived to elicit a less personal and perhaps more general understanding of the dilemma that is taking place in the story by the participant.

2.5 The Online Focus Group (OFG)

2.5.1 Aim and conceptualisation

As highlighted in Section 1.9.1, primary schoolteachers play a significant role in the latency-age child’s development, residing within both their internal and external worlds as important attachment figures (e.g. Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Vernberg & Vogel, 1993). Teachers could be important contributors of information with unique, relevant perspectives on the experiences of children from separated/divorced families. As individuals who interact with and observe children on a daily basis, teachers may be able to provide a perspective that is different to that provided by parents or the children themselves. It was important to capture this perspective and experience with an in-depth and qualitative methodology. Semi-structured individual interviews were considered but were not used, in favour of using a more group-focused approach; this was appropriate due to the preference for a more interactive inquiry into the experiences of teachers. It was assumed that a focus group methodology might be more appropriate as Finch and Lewis (2003) state:

The group context of focus groups creates a process, which is in some important respects very different from an in-depth interview. Data are generated by interaction between group participants. Participants present their own views and experience, but they also hear from other people. They listen, reflect on what is said, and in the light of this consider their own standpoint further. Additional material is thus triggered in response to what they hear.

Participants ask questions of each other, seek clarification, comment on what they have heard and prompt others to reveal more. As the discussion progresses (backwards and forwards, round and round the group), individual response becomes sharpened and refined, and moves to a deeper and more considered level. (p. 171)

This quote demonstrates the interactive and unique structure that focus groups afford researchers and their participants. Focus groups are conducted multiple times to observe trends across time and participants (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Conducting multiple focus groups with each containing approximately four to six participants was selected as the most efficient and advantageous method of investigation for the current study. The OFG method was chosen instead of the classic, in-person design, as discussed below.

2.5.2 Rationale for selecting the OFG methodology

The OFG was considered an innovative focus group technique. Cost of travel, allocating a private space convenient for all participants, as well as factoring in time to transcribe, were obstacles eliminated by using the OFG method. Due to the type of population under study, a synchronous OFG methodology was selected to accommodate and include more participants. Synchronous refers to a session where all participants engage in a 'live session' and take part at the same time in real time; this method is usually done through chat rooms or online conferencing (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001; Rezabek, 2000). Teachers would not be available during school time and may not find it suitable to travel for an in-person focus group in the evenings or on weekends. Thus, a focus group carried out online was appropriate for this sample as it allowed participants to join at any time, from any location, and without the time or travel commitments involved with in-person methodologies.

From a global perspective, OFGs are generally suitable in circumstances where certain participants would be excluded due to location/distance, as well as due to mobility, and thus offers a wider range of individuals the ability to participate (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001; Coulson, 2015; Edmunds, 1999; Poynter, 2010). Furthermore, the OFG design provides participants with more anonymity than an in-person design, which may evoke confidence, security, and comfort in discussing matters that may otherwise be hidden or not communicated due to social pressures and awareness (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001; Coulson, 2015). This was useful for the current study, as the discussion would involve thinking about real examples of children within the context of the classroom/school and with relation to the self, surrounding a sensitive topic. This may have been difficult to engage in without the comfort and reassurance of the anonymity permitted by the OFG conducted within a virtual chat-room, within the comfort of one's own home, or any chosen location.

2.5.3 OFG: Development

The OFG interview questions were developed using the principles of in-person focus groups and the elements of semi-structured interviewing. The primary researcher would be the facilitator of the group discussion and would guide the participants' involvement within the overall conversation. Following consultation with both supervisors, the discussion questions were formulated. The discussion questions were required to be as open-ended as possible, with as many prompts and follow-up questions as necessary; this was important to facilitate an on-going, open, and free-flowing discussion between multiple individuals.

This innovative procedure utilising a virtual group discussion has been a topic of debate within the psychological research domain for some time (Coulson, 2015),

concerning what an OFG is, how it should be conducted, how many participants should be involved, and so forth. However, the present study aimed to clarify some of these questions by providing a detailed description of the steps taken to carry out an OFG that elicits rich and in-depth data via an online chat platform (See Section 7.2).

2.6 Conclusions

The current chapter demonstrated the aim, conceptualisation, rationale, and development of three original measures designed to achieve the overarching aim of the current study, namely, **to gain an understanding of how the latency-age child experiences divorce/separation**, both directly from children and indirectly through the perspectives of important attachment figures in their external world. The DMH and MBPBI measures were adjusted following their initial inception to better suit the needs of the present sample.

Through the development of DMH and the MBPBI, the primary researcher was able to gain a deeper understanding of the sensitive nature of the topic of divorce, as well as the usefulness of displacement and projection in measures administered with vulnerable populations.

Through the development of an OFG for use with schoolteachers, the researcher was able to develop an understanding of how to use the principles of qualitative research in settings that do not involve face-to-face interactions.

A detailed description of the administration, adjustments, and analysis methods for each method within this study—DMH, MBPBI, and the OFG—can be found in chapters 4, 5, and 7 respectively.

Chapter 3: A comparative study of the internal representations of attachment of children from separated and non-separated families.

3.1 Introduction

Story stem narratives and imaginative play can provide a window into a child's internal world. As described in Chapter 2, semi-projective story stem/play narrative techniques have become popular in the domain of exploring children's internal attachment/caregiver representations (Gaensbauer & Kelsay, 2008). These techniques utilise a brief verbal description of a scenario (i.e., the stem) and doll play, after which the child is asked to 'show and tell what happens next' (Gaensbauer & Kelsay, 2008).

The following sections will provide an overview on story stem measures, with a particular focus on the limited findings yielded from studies using these measures with children from separated families. Story stems will be discussed within an attachment framework, as among indirect measures of attachment, story stem techniques may be the most appropriate for children from vulnerable populations as a means of understanding their attachment/caregiver representations (see Section 1.8.5). A discussion of the impact that demographic and divorce-related variables, as well as externalising/internalising behaviours, may have on children's story stem responses and attachment will follow.

3.1.1 Story stems: An overview

Emde (2003) points out that story stem techniques which involve family members in doll-play scenarios can allow a child to express representations of attachment figures in relation to him/herself. Past research argued that there was a need to create assessments examining internal representations when assessing attachment in middle childhood (Main et al., 1985). Attachment assessments in middle childhood should target children's representations of the attachment

relationship and caregiver availability (Kerns, Schlegelmilch, Morgan & Abraham, 2005). Thus, the creation of narrative stem techniques has been important to the exploration of attachment/caregiver representations in middle childhood and pre-adolescence (Brumariu, Kerns & Seibert, 2012; Del Giudice, 2008; Kerns, Abraham, Schlegelmilch & Morgan, 2007). When incorporating a play element within a narrative measure, play can compensate for limitations in children's verbal capabilities to express their innermost feelings, thoughts, wishes, and experiences (Oppenheim & Waters, 1995). (Refer to Section 2.2 for a detailed description of story stem measures).

3.1.2 Story stems, attachment and divorce

During times of high stress and discomfort, a child's attachment system may be activated towards significant caregiving figures in their lives and the way in which these figures respond creates a sense of confidence, or a lack thereof, in an attachment figure's availability (Bowlby, 1973). Thus, it can be deduced that caregiver responsiveness is connected to, and can help shape a child's attachment system. This connection may indicate that the ways in which caregivers respond to children's attachment needs facilitate the development of their attachment system through their IWMs, which develop according to these experiences. Attachment theory posits, when attachment needs go unanswered and neglected for a long time, in order to cope a child may develop a new set of attachment expectations leading to insecure ways of relating (Feeney & Monin, 2008).

Limited empirical studies utilising story stems with children of divorce exist in the literature and were detailed in Section 1.8.5; to summarise, these were:

- Page and Bretherton's (2001; 2004) studies involved an assessment of post-divorce children's IWMs and attachment representations using

The Expanded Attachment Story Completion Task (ASCT-R) (Bretherton, Ridgeway et al., 1990), four stories from the MSSB (Bretherton, Oppenheim et al., 1990) and a fifth story by Zahn-Waxler et al. (1994).

- Stadelmann et al.'s (2010) study examined where the effect of divorce on behavioural/emotional problems varied according to the level of family conflict and children's parental representations using the MSSB (Stadelmann, Perren, Groeben & von Klitzing, 2010).

Presently, there are no studies on children from separated families implementing the measure used in the current study—the SSAP. Due to a limited number of studies having used any type of story stem measure with this population, this area of research within divorce literature remains in its infancy and findings are sparse. Although narrative stem research is lacking in this area, some story stem measures, including the SSAP, may be highly suitable. This is because divorce can be distressful and a sensitive experience to discuss directly with latency-age children. Due to their relatively young age, narrative stem measures—with their indirect approach and use of projection and displacement—may even be more suitable than other direct approaches (e.g., the CAI; Shmueli-Goetz, Target, Datta, & Fonagy, 2000; Target, Shmueli-Goetz, Datter & Schneider, 2007).

3.1.3 Demographic variables and attachment/caregiver representations

3.1.3.1 Age

Attachment patterns have been found to change with age; a decrease in the frequency and intensity of attachment behaviours directed towards attachment figures with increasing age has been reported (Kerns, Schlegelmilch, Morgan & Abraham, 2005). Age-related changes to attachment behaviours may be due to several factors.

For example, older children require less physical contact with an attachment figure (Bowlby, 1982), and thus may only need a phone call or text message to feel reassured that their attachment figure is present and “there” for them. Additionally, older children are more able to cope with dangers and this may contribute to their attachment system being activated less towards their caregivers (Marvin & Britner, 1999). Although older children may enact attachment behaviours less, they still need attachment figures available (Kerns, Schlegelmilch, Morgan & Abraham, 2005).

Main, Kaplan and Cassidy (1985) also postulated that children’s internal representations become more elaborate with age due to an improvement in verbal and memory capacities. Story stem responses can be impacted by age due to developments in narrative coherence, story-telling ability, verbal expression, and language (e.g., Hill et al., 2007; Warren, Oppenheim & Emde, 1996). For instance, Warren, Oppenheim and Emde (1996) found that narrative coherence was at a higher level for 4 and 5 year olds than for 3 year olds in their study, language was also more developed in the older children. Hill et al. (2007) found a significant correlation between verbal ability and age in their study looking at narrative responses in boys with disruptive behaviour problems (DBP). Specifically, they found that age was correlated with ‘story telling ability’ and thus, they included it as a covariate in their analyses. Furthermore, in the original validation study of the SSAP carried out by Hillman (unpublished, 2011), increases in age correlated significantly with an increase in the ‘Security’ construct on the SSAP; the oldest participant(s) in this sample was 8 years old. (See Sections 1.6.2 to 1.6.4 for a detailed description of the socio-emotional and cognitive developments that take place during middle childhood).

3.1.3.2 Gender

Some researchers argue that the investigation of gender differences in attachment patterns is lacking in attachment literature (e.g., Del Giudice, 2008, 2009; Granot & Maysel, 2001), possibly because most attachment research traditionally observed infants and very young children, where gender differences were not expected (Del Giudice, 2008). Del Giudice (2008) found that in middle childhood and pre-adolescence, (i.e., ages 7 to 11) insecure patterns of attachment became differentiated by gender. In his Italian sample of children aged 6 and 7, he found that males showed more avoidant patterns and females showed more ambivalent patterns (Del Giudice, 2008). These results were found using the MCAST, which assigns a child an overall attachment category (i.e., Secure, Avoidant, Ambivalent, and Disorganised) (Del Giudice, 2008).

In a study on divorce, boys were found to use the father character as the primary parent in their stories more frequently than girls did using a story stem task (Page & Bretherton, 2001). In another divorce study, Stadelmann et al. (2010) found gender differences in their sample at age six in terms of their 'negative' parental representations, with boys presenting significantly more of these in their play narratives using the MSSB. However, these gender differences at the younger age of 5 only showed a trend towards significance (Stadelmann et al., 2010). The researchers described 'negative' representations as encompassing, "harsh, punitive, rejecting, and ineffectual behavior of parental figures toward child figures," (Stadelmann et al., 2010, p. 97).

In the original SSAP validation study, girls showed significantly more 'secure' representations in their narratives, along with significantly higher mean scores on the construct 'Security' than boys (Hillman, unpublished, 2011). Hillman (unpublished,

2011) concluded that gender had a minimal impact on SSAP scores but that some significant differences between boys and girls in this sample remained; these differences were found in a full sample of non-clinical and maltreated children together.

3.1.4 Divorce-related variables and attachment/caregiver representations

3.1.4.1 Length of time since divorce

‘Length of time since divorce’ has been identified as an important variable in the adjustment of children post-divorce (Amato, 2000; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Studies have found that approximately two to three years following the initial ‘crisis’, pre-divorce functioning of children and adults generally returns (Amato, 2000; Booth & Amato, 1991; Kelly & Emery, 2003).

Conversely, in Wallerstein and Lewis’s (2004) 25-year follow-up of their landmark study on divorce, several negative effects had not receded for their participants even at 25 years post-divorce. They speculated this might have been due to new additions, losses, and separations following the divorce (e.g., step-parents, step-siblings, new break-ups, etc.) (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004).

3.1.4.2 Contact with father

The father (usually the non-resident parent in separated families) has come to be viewed as crucial in children’s development, particularly for young boys (Stewart et al., 1997). Amato (2000) suggests that the sudden departure of the father from the family home tends to intensify the distress children feel during divorce. It is important to note how variable each divorce experience can be and that other factors influence whether or not frequent contact with the father is beneficial to a child’s adjustment post-separation. For example, King and Heard (1999) point out that contact with father is associated with greater adjustment for children post-divorce *only* when the

mother was satisfied with his high level of involvement but if the mother was dissatisfied and angered by the high involvement, children adjusted poorly.

Hetherington and Kelly (2002) found that frequent father-child contact post-divorce was associated with better child adjustment when there were low levels of conflict between co-parents.

It is also important to note that the quality of the relationship between father and child is crucial to whether or not frequency of contact was beneficial for children (Amato, 2000). Stewart et al. (1997) found that younger children and boys in their study benefited more than girls or older children from frequent contact with father. When the father remained actively involved as a parent (e.g., helped with homework or provided authoritative parenting), children with close relationships with their father benefited from frequent contact with him and excelled academically (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). Amato and Gilbreth (1999) concluded, following a meta-analysis on non-resident fathers and children's well-being post-divorce, that the frequency of contact between fathers and children is not as important as what fathers do when they are with their children (e.g., not engaging in authoritative parenting or maintaining 'superficial' relationships with their children).

However, Amato (1993) found highly inconsistent findings on the benefits for children of frequent contact with non-resident fathers post-divorce, in his review of the literature on father-child contact post-divorce. He found that 15 studies demonstrated 'contact' with non-resident fathers as significantly and positively associated with children's wellbeing (Amato, 1993). On the other hand, another 17 studies in his review either found a negative effect of contact on children's well-being or no effect at all (Amato, 1993). He suggested that the inconsistency in findings, and consequential lack of support for the beneficial impact frequent father-child contact

may have for children's adjustment, may be due to the level of post-divorce conflict between co-parents; a high degree of conflict would possibly negate any beneficial effects of father-child contact post-divorce (Amato, 1993). This divorce-related variable was selected for analysis in the current study; although past findings on its impact post-divorce are inconsistent, it remains an important feature of the child's experience post-divorce.

3.1.4.3 Household income

Previous literature outlines the impact parental divorce has on household income and, in many cases, its significant decline for divorced mothers with children (e.g., Amato, 2000, 2010; Teachman & Paasch, 1994). One outcome of a decrease in income is the necessary relocation to a cheaper neighbourhood (Sirvanli-Ozen, 2005). A longitudinal study carried out in the UK by Fisher and Low (2015) used 15 years of data to study the economic consequences of divorce; they found that men's household incomes increased by 23% post-divorce when household size was controlled, whereas women's household incomes fell by 31%. Although some income recovery occurs for women, it is generally because of 're-partnering'; women who do not re-partner, who have children or who are in poor health post-divorce tend to have serious long-term economic consequences (Fisher & Low, 2015). They found that the majority of women in their study benefited from income recovery over time but that a large minority of women suffered a more persistent loss in household income even at 5 years post-divorce (Fisher & Low, 2015). They also concluded that income recovery post-separation did occur but can be less likely or slower for older women or women who have children residing with them (Fisher & Low, 2015).

More recently, de Vaus et al. (2017) supported Fisher and Low's (2015) findings in a cross-country longitudinal study on the economic consequences of

divorce carried out in six countries, including the UK. The researchers found that in the ‘short-term’ following divorce, women experienced a large decline in ‘equivalised household income’ (i.e., net household income adjusted for household composition) compared to pre-divorce levels (i.e., by 30% in the UK in the year following divorce) (de Vaus et al., 2017). The researchers found that although post-divorce household income levels recovered quickly for these women, at 5 years post-divorce they remained approximately 20% below what the researchers estimated their equivalised household income would have been had they continued in the marriages (de Vaus et al., 2017). They also concluded that divorce had a much greater negative impact on equivalised household incomes for women than for men in all the countries tested except Switzerland (de Vaus et al., 2017). These two large-scale, up-to-date studies are taken together as particularly relevant to the current study due to all participants in the current study having their mother as their resident parent.

On the other hand, research has also suggested that changes in household income due to divorce may be responsible for changes in psychological well-being of children (Sun & Li, 2002). Sun and Li (2002) found that the negative impact of divorce at various time points in their study were either partially or completely due to the declines in family resources at those time points (i.e., two time points before the divorce and two time points after, spanning the 3 years before divorce to 3 years after). In his reviews of the research on divorce at two different time periods, one decade apart, Amato (2000; 2010) pointed out that ‘declines in household income’ is a variable that appears to lower children’s well-being post-divorce. This could be for a number of reasons, some of which include:

- Moving to a new neighbourhood to reduce living costs, leading to a loss of

friendships, relatives, and community (South, Crowder & Trent, 1998);

- Changing schools can introduce further losses of attachment figures such as teachers and peers;
- Loss of daily routines, familiar places, and traditions (i.e., going to local community centers, religious institutions, playgrounds, shopping centres, etc.).

Unlike age and gender, household income is considered a ‘divorce-related variable’ and perceived to be a component of the overall ‘divorce process’. In their empirically robust study, Amato and Anthony (2014) also did not control for changes in household income and argued that if they had controlled for declines in household income, the true effect of divorce would have been undervalued. They argued that in order to evaluate the ‘true and total effect of divorce’, certain variables impacted by divorce should not be controlled, as they are evidently impacted by, and a component of, the divorce process (Amato & Anthony, 2014).

3.1.5 Internalising/externalising behaviours

Parent-report measures can be used alongside story stem measures to investigate links between children’s internal attachment representations and children’s psychopathology (i.e., internalising and externalising behaviours). Laible, Torquati and Ontai (2004) examined children’s perceptions of familial relationships and how these representations may guide their social behaviour. They found that children constructed models of relationships out of their early interactions with caregivers; children’s use of prosocial themes such as empathy and affection were predicted by ‘warm parenting’ as reported on a parenting scale, and harsh parenting seemed to predict more externalising behaviours (i.e., aggression, anger and egotistic and oppositional behaviour) as reported by teachers (Laible, Torquati & Ontai, 2004).

Warren, Oppenheim and Emde (1996) attempted to link psychopathology with internal representations elicited through story stems. They found behaviour problems to be correlated with distress and destructive themes in the play of 4 and 5 year olds using the MSSB (e.g., destructive themes included aggression such as a character being thrown at another character to cause pain) (Warren, Oppenheim & Emde, 1996). Von Klitzing et al. (2000) found that aggressive themes and incoherence in narratives of 5 year olds, using the MSSB, were correlated with more externalising behaviour problems than those who did not show these themes. Hill et al. (2007) found that young boys with DBP could be distinguished from the control group in their study, based on their elevated aggressive responses to ‘conflict-focussed’ story stems or low *intentionality* (i.e., the feature of mental states and events that makes up what they are about or directed at; Searle, 1983) to ‘distress-focussed’ stems (i.e., four stems retrieved from the MSSB; Bretherton, Oppenheim, Buchsbaum, Emde & The MacArthur Narrative Group, 1990). Their findings indicated that if a researcher/clinician were blind to whether or not children had DBP, they could identify which group the child belonged to by rating their story stem responses. Thus, a link between story stem responses and behavioural problems was established in their study; it should be noted that Hill et al., (2007) had controlled for verbal and story-telling abilities in their study. It is also noteworthy that their study only included boys, therefore, conclusions cannot be made regarding girls; also, their study was cross-sectional in nature and cannot indicate causality (Hill et al., 2007). The authors also stated that the ‘referred’ status of boys with conduct problems in their study was not representative of non-referred boys in the general population with conduct problems (Hill et al., 2007).

Warren, Oppenheim and Emde (1996) proposed that significant relationships

between themes in children's narratives/play with parent reports of behaviour problems may suggest that emotions and themes in children's narratives and play can convey valuable material about childhood problems.

3.1.6 Gap in the literature

The current review of the literature demonstrated that there is a limited amount of research on the attachment/caregiver representations, and the internal world of children from separated families during middle childhood. Studies utilising the story stem technique with this population are limited and those that exist were primarily carried out with young children aged 6 or under or with salient distressing features (e.g., Page & Bretherton, 2001; Stadelmann et al., 2010).

Another methodological issue in the studies conducted in this area is the relatively infrequent incorporation of the father in the story stem technique (e.g., Page & Bretherton, 2001); considering how common it may be to have frequent contact with one's father following divorce, and that the father can be the sole caregiver during overnight visits, it is critical for studies looking at attachment representations of children from separated families to incorporate the father in a salient way in their narrative stems. It is also important to note that Page and Bretherton's (2001) study did not include a control group, which could have generated informative comparisons between groups and potentially increased the robustness of their findings.

Furthermore, the story stem techniques used in these studies tend to classify children under one attachment category. An argument can be made for the need to incorporate different dimensions of attachment due to the highly variable nature of each child's response to different attachment figures and dilemmas (Main, 1995). The battery used in the current study was designed to accomplish this (i.e., this measure generates a profile based on different attachment constructs whose scores are based

on a number of themes generated across various stories presenting different dilemmas) (see Section 3.2.6). The themes elicited by this measure have to do with children's expectations of parent-child relationships, including those that are indicative of secure attachment (e.g., does the child display a need for protection/comfort, and if so, does the caregiver(s) respond to the need effectively) (Hodges et al., 2003). It also yields valuable information about other features of children's internal worlds, for instance, the regulation of aggression, and defense mechanisms like avoidance and/or denial (Hodges et al., 2003).

3.1.7 The current study

The current study aims to bridge the gap in the literature by using a story stem measure with a sample of latency-age children who have experienced divorce, whilst comparing them to a group of latency-age children from non-separated families. The story stem battery used in the current study provides four average scores corresponding to four attachment-based constructs (i.e., *Security*, *Insecurity*, *Disorganised*, and *Defensive/Avoidance*) instead of assigning a child to one primary attachment category. The variable name 'attachment/caregiver representations' will be synonymous with 'SSAP constructs' and the variable name 'internalising/externalising behaviours' or 'psychopathology' will be synonymous with the 'SDQ subscales', in the current thesis.

The first research question is exploratory and thus, is non-directional. Although relatively few story stem studies have been carried out with this population, the limited findings that do exist have demonstrated that children from separated families showed, for example, significantly higher levels of 'negative' parental representations in their play than children from non-separated families (e.g., Stadelmann et al., 2010). However, the current study takes a more open approach,

focused on whether or not a particular story stem measure, previously unused with this population, can succeed in identifying any differences between children from separated and non-separated families. Therefore, the key question of the current study is:

1. Are there differences in the attachment/caregiver representations of children from separated families and non-separated families as assessed using the current story stem measure?

The second research question of the current study was also exploratory and may indirectly present valuable information about the child's internal world through the perceptions of their parents:

2. Are there any differences in the internalising/externalising behaviours of children from separated and non-separated families as reported by a caregiver?

The third research question was also exploratory, carried out to examine the relationship between story stem responses generated by children and caregiver reports on children's psychopathology:

3. Are any internalising/externalising behaviours reported by caregivers related to attachment/caregiver representations of children from separated and non-separated families?

Addressing this question was perceived to provide insight into parent-child attachment and the child's internal world indirectly by extrapolating based on the presence, or lack thereof, of statistical relationships between children's narrative responses and caregivers' perspectives on their psychopathology. For instance, if a child is more 'secure' than 'defensive/avoidant', they may be more communicative

and open with their caregiver, and thus, a caregiver would report more accurately about their internalising/externalising behaviours, which would then lead to significant connections being made between the child's responses and the caregiver's reporting. In addition, a more secure parent-child relationship may also indicate a more available caregiver who is present and observant of a child's internalising/externalising behaviours and thus, would also lead to significant relationships between the two measures. The interpretation of the presence or absence of such relationships can aid in indirectly learning about the latency-age child's internal world post-divorce.

The fourth question considered demographic variables that were selected based on previous studies indicating that they may impact story stem responses and a child's adjustment post-divorce (e.g., Amato, 2000, 2010; Page & Bretherton, 2001; Stedelman et al., 2010). These variables were examined in both sample groups to attribute differences/similarities between groups to the experience of parental divorce with a degree of confidence:

4. Are the attachment/caregiver representations of children from separated/non-separated families affected by demographic variables such as age and gender?

A fifth research question, accounting for divorce-related variables shown in previous studies to have an impact on adjustment post-divorce (e.g., Amato, 2001; 2010) was:

5. Are the attachment/caregiver representations of children from separated families affected by variables closely connected to the experience of divorce, such as 'length of time since divorce', 'contact with father', and 'household income'?

The researcher formed hypotheses for these 5 questions, which are outlined below:

1. There will be differences in the 'attachment/caregiver representations' of children from separated and non-separated families as assessed using the current story stem measure.
2. There will be a difference in how caregivers from separated families and caregivers from non-separated families report their children's internalising/externalising behaviours.
3. There will be associations between the variables, 'attachment/caregiver representations' and 'internalising/externalising behaviours'.
4. Demographic variables, such as age and gender, will have an effect on children's attachment/caregiver representations.
5. Divorce-specific variables, such as 'length of time since divorce', 'contact with father', and 'household income' will influence SSAP constructs due to the complex and multifactorial nature of divorce.

3.2 Method

3.2.1 Planned sample size

As the current study uses a measure that has not been previously administered to children from separated families (i.e., the SSAP), previous empirical literature was not informative with regards to planning an appropriate sample size for the current study. However, Page and Bretherton's (2010) study described in Section 1.8.5 and 2.3.2, recruited 66 children from separated families but used a different story stem measure. In order to calculate the desired sample size for the current study, to achieve 80% statistical power (Lenth, 2001) and a medium effect of 0.5 (Cohen, 1988), G*POWER calculator was used to conduct a calculation of desired sample size. The calculation yielded a desired sample size of $n = 51$ for each group, or a pooled sample size of $N = 102$.

As described in further detail below, issues with recruitment greatly impacted the attainment of the desired sample size. The acquired sample size was: 29 children from separated families and 39 children from non-separated families, or a pooled sample size of $N = 68$. The difference between the desired pooled sample size and the acquired pooled sample size was $N = 34$ (i.e., the acquired pooled sample size was 66.7% of the desired pooled sample size).

3.2.2 Recruitment

Recruitment for the two samples in the current study began in May 2015 and concluded in February 2017. Initial criteria for the two sample groups (i.e., separated vs. non-separated) were set out for inclusion in the current study: (1) All participants were between 6 and 11 years of age; (2) all participants were fluent in English; (3) both males and females were required for both groups; (4) participants in the separated group only would have had no previous history of intensive therapeutic

intervention (this was to ensure that participants in the separated group had not received interventions that could alter their experience of divorce); (5) participants recruited for the separated group only would have experienced the divorce within the last 18 months; and (6) participants in the non-separated group only resided with both birth parents who are not separated/divorced. These criteria were adhered to during the first six months of recruitment, however, as recruitment proved to be significantly more difficult than previously expected, the criteria were altered. The only change made was to the length of time since the separation/divorce for the separated group; this was increased to ‘within the last five years’. This duration of time was decided upon due to the large number of participants whose parents were interested in joining the study that had experienced the separation within this time frame. It was speculated that this might be because a period of only 18 months post-separation was possibly too soon for families to feel ready to participate in psychological research of this nature, given how sensitive the event might still be for some participants.

Recruitment began by contacting approximately 100 organisations and schools within central and Greater London, as well as outside of Greater London (e.g., Windsor, Maidenhead, Reading, Bracknell, and Wokingham) (see Appendix D for list of organisations and schools).

Schools were also contacted via email using a pre-established tailored email, which offered a possible ‘feedback presentation’ to teachers/parents on the topic of study and the findings generated (see Appendix E). Of these, only two schools demonstrated interest and when followed up by telephone, were reluctant to contact potential participants’ caregivers with such a request.

Given this lack of success, alternative methods were employed. Initially, funding for compensation of participants within the separated group was requested

from the primary researcher's academic department at University College London (UCL); this was granted to the amount of £10 per participant. It was hypothesised that a small monetary incentive would encourage participation. This difference in compensation between the groups may have caused disparity between them.

The primary researcher posted ads to recruit both groups on the classified online ad website, *Gumtree*, as well as hardcopy postings in local libraries, universities, grocery store notice boards, café and restaurant notice boards, and in friends/colleagues' employment offices.

The primary researcher developed a secondary recruitment step which involved screening for participation *via* an online survey through the website *Survey Monkey*. Participants would be recruited for this screening survey *via Facebook Groups* (see Appendix F for list of *Facebook Groups*) and once they completed the survey, they were followed up with *via* email. Two screening surveys were created *via Survey Monkey* (see Appendix G) and a short description about the study and the survey was posted in over 300 Facebook Groups.

The follow up email for children from separated and non-separated families consisted of a detailed description of the primary researcher, the current study, the compensation offered, and finally, attached documents (i.e., Parent and Child Information Sheets and Proof of Ethical Approval from UCL) (See Appendices H, I, J, K, and L respectively).

Once participants expressed their interest in the study *via* email, they were called to further discuss the study. During this call, the following elements were decided/agreed upon: (1) Assessment time and date; (2) location (i.e., in their home or at the offices of the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families); (3) if they had any further questions regarding their child's participation.

3.2.3 Participant response rate

The total number of responses received through *Survey Monkey* and *Gumtree* was 113 for the separated group and 86 for the non-separated group. These overall figures included participants who were not eligible to participate, and were thus excluded from the study based on their responses to the *Survey Monkey* eligibility questions (or follow-up contact via email in the case of the 5 *Gumtree* respondents for the separated group). Respondents were excluded if they did not meet the inclusion criteria:

- (1) Did not reside in the UK
- (2) Did not have a child within the age range (i.e., 6 to 12)
- (3) Experienced long-term and on-going therapeutic intervention
- (4) Did not experience divorce within the designated timeframe (i.e., “within the last 5 years”)

In total, 61 respondents from the separated group did not meet the inclusion criteria and were excluded, and 14 respondents did not meet inclusion criteria and were excluded from the non-separated group.

The number of eligible respondents that were initially contacted *via* email was 52 for the separated group and 72 for the non-separated group. Following multiple correspondences between these eligible respondents and the researcher, 29 respondents dropped out from the separated group, and 42 dropped out from the non-separated group. Reasons that were given for attrition included:

- Respondent reluctant to involve child(ren) in an activity that could potentially distress them;
- Respondent feeling it was ‘too soon’;
- Worsening of home/work/life circumstances and thus, being unable to commit time to such a project;
- Respondent located too far for participation;
- Respondents unresponsive to emails and phone calls.

In total, 23 respondents (i.e., parents), yielding a total of 29 child participants in the separated group and 30 respondents (i.e., parents), yielding a total of 39 child participants in the non-separated group, were recruited via *Survey Monkey* and *Gumtree*.

Of the initial respondents, 54% of the separated group and 16% of the non-separated group were excluded. Of those that were eligible following exclusion, 56% of separated respondents and 58% of non-separated respondents were lost to attrition. In conclusion, the percentage of initial respondents that participated in the final study was 20% of separated respondents and 35% of non-separated respondents.

3.2.4 Participants

Table 3.1

Age, gender and ethnicity data for children from separated and non-separated families who participated in the current study.

	Non-separated	Separated
	<i>n</i> = 39	<i>n</i> = 29
Age (in years)	(<i>M/SD</i>) 7.49 / 1.50	(<i>M/SD</i>) 7.66 / 1.47
Gender (<i>n</i>)	(Males/Females) 21 / 18	(Males/Females) 18 / 11
Ethnicity (<i>n</i>)	(White/non-White) 28 / 11	(White/non-White) 20 / 9

Non-separated. As shown in Table 3.1, the non-separated group consisted of 39 children whose ages ranged from 6 to 11 years ($M = 7.49$, $SD = 1.50$). 53.8% of the sample consisted of males and 72% of participants were 'White'. The 'White' subgroup consisted of parents who identified their children as being White-British,

White-European, and White-Other. The remaining 28% of participants were made up of those who identified their children as being from a Mixed-Ethnic background.

Consent forms and parent-report measures were only completed by one primary parent participating in the study; this was the mother in all cases except one. The non-separated group was predominantly made up of White, high-earning couples, many of which consisted of at least one parent with a postgraduate degree. Specifically, 95% of parents had completed a postgraduate degree (e.g., Masters or Doctorate level degree). Parents of children in this group had been together for an average of 17 years during the time of the study ($SD = 4.90$, $n = 38$) and 77% of parents were legally married at the time of the study. Additionally, 35.9% of participating parents were employed full-time, whilst the remaining parents were made up of those employed part-time (30.8%), self-employed or worked free-lance (17.9%), students (2.6%), and homemakers (12.8%). 36% of parents of children in the non-separated group had a combined household income of more than £100,000 per annum.

Separated As shown in Table 3.1, the separated group consisted of 29 children whose ages ranged between 6 and 10 years ($M = 7.66$, $SD = 1.47$). 62.1% of the sample consisted of males and 69% of participants were 'White'. The remaining 31% of participants were made up of those who identified their children as being from a Mixed-Ethnic background, Latino/Hispanic, and Black-British/Afro-Caribbean. The entire sample maintained their primary residence with their mother (i.e., the resident parent). Data on contact with father was only collected on 27 participants (due to other participants' parents leaving the question blank) of which, nearly half see their father *once or twice a week* ($n = 13$). The other half was evenly split into seeing seeing father *'between three days a week to everyday'* ($n = 7$), and only on *'special*

occasions, once a month or less than once a month' ($n = 7$). The average length of time in years since these children experienced the separation/divorce was 1.83 years ($SD = 1.27$).

Consent forms and demographic questionnaires were completed by the resident parent (i.e., the mother in all cases). Mothers who took part in the current study ($n = 24$) had a mean age of 40.54 years ($SD = 5.16$). 87.5% of mothers had primary custody of their children whilst 12.5% maintained joint custody or had no formal arrangement with their co-parent. 66.7% of mothers were legally married to their co-parent pre-separation, however, only 26% were legally divorced during the time of the current study. The remaining mothers were separated and not living with their co-parent (74%). Additionally, 46% of mothers had completed some form of postgraduate degree or professional qualification (e.g., Masters or Doctoral degree) and 50% were employed full-time for wages. 42% of participants ($n = 10$) had a household income less than £20,000 at the time of the current study.

3.2.5 Measures

Demographic questionnaire.

The demographic questionnaire was developed by the primary researcher with the consultation of the supervisors of the current thesis and was informed by the Household Questionnaire, which is part of the UK Census 2011 (ONS, 2011). Questions were selected based on factors that were deemed most significant to the current study; for example, questions that involved the relevant variables mentioned above were included (e.g., age, ethnicity, educational attainment, etc.). Most items were presented in structured, multiple-choice format (e.g., “What is your current household income?”), whereas others were semi-structured and left open-ended (e.g., “Custody arrangement with Co-parent”). Two demographic questionnaires were

devised for use with either group (i.e., non-separated and separated). The non-separated demographic questionnaire did not include items pertaining specifically to separation such as, “length of time since separation”. The ‘separated’ and ‘non-separated’ demographic questionnaires can be viewed in Appendix M and Appendix N, respectively.

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997).

Several studies outlined in the literature demonstrate the importance of including methods that tap into both the internalising and externalising behaviours. The SDQ is a widely used 25-item parent-report questionnaire and is applicable to children/adolescents aged 4 to 16 years and can be completed by parents or teachers (Goodman, 1997). There are five subscales containing 5 items each: *Conduct problems, emotional symptoms, hyperactivity, peer relationships, and pro-social behaviour*. A total score for ‘behavioural problems’ is also calculated by summing all the dimensions’ scores excluding the pro-social behaviour score. The SDQ is used as a clinical and research tool to assess psychopathology as informed by the DSM-IV (Goodman, 2001). The extended, P4-16 version was used here (Goodman, 1999) (see Appendix O). This version contains additional ‘impact’ questions, which ask about ‘social impairment’ in four domains: *home life, friendships, classroom learning and leisure activities*. The ‘impact’ total score ranges from 0 to 10, with high scores indicating more problems. This direction of scoring is the same for the other problem scales but not for the ‘prosocial’ scale’, with low scores indicating more problems. Goodman (1999) points out that these domains are included as they are considered the main areas crucial to rating psychosocial disability using the World Health Organisation’s multi-axial classification of child and adolescent psychiatric disorders. If parents answer ‘no’ to the first question on the impact supplement (i.e., “do you

think the young person has difficulties in one or more of the following areas: emotions, concentration, behaviour, or being able to get along with other people.”) they are allowed to skip the succeeding questions (Goodman, 1999).

The internal consistency mean alpha for the various SDQ scales on the parent-report version was 0.70; test and retest reliability over two months for all of the subscales yielded correlations over the 0.70 range (Muris, Meesters & van den Berg, 2003). The SDQ also has high concurrent validity as measured through its correlations with other measures (e.g., a correlation coefficient of 0.70 between the SDQ total behaviour score and The Child Behaviour Checklist) (Muris, Meesters, & van den Berg, 2003). Finally, an ‘impact’ total score is included in the version used in the current study. Caregivers use a three-point likert scale for rating how much each item applies to their child (e.g., not true, somewhat true and certainly true) (Goodman, 2001).

The Story Stem Assessment Profile (SSAP; Hodges, Hillman & Steele, 2007)

The SSAP is a semi-projective narrative assessment tool utilising story stems to aid in the exploration of a child’s internal world. The version of the SSAP used in the current study is the shortened, 7-stem version (Hillman, 2011, unpublished) (see Appendix P for full 7-stem SSAP administration manual). This shortened version was selected for the current study, and not the longer 13-stem version (Hodges, Hillman & Steele, 2007), due to limitations including attention span of the participants, as described in Section 2.2.2.

Narration. Appendix P gives the wording of each stem, with photos of its prop and toy set-up, in the SSAP manual. Dr. Saul Hillman—both a supervisor on the current study and a developer of the SSAP tool, trained the researcher on the narration procedure. This training included wording for each stem, how to make certain sounds

and facial expressions (e.g., the crying sound in *Crying Outside* or the angry scowl in *Lost Keys*), as well as how to use the props/toys provided for the particular stem.

Following the interviewer's narration of each stem, the participant is invited to show and tell what happens next.

Prompts. All SSAP stems are accompanied by pre-established prompts that can be used in instances of avoidance of story themes/dilemmas, changing narrative parameters, and/or denying or altering affect within the stem (Hodges et al., 2015).

Each stem is accompanied by approximately 2-4 prompts. All prompts within the SSAP can only be used once and only at specific times within the participant's story to avoid leading the child, confounding the narrative, or becoming too intrusive.

Prompts are primarily used in situations where narrative cues are changed or absent from narratives; Emde, Wolf and Oppenheim (2003) point out that if a child elicits an appropriate resolution following the prompt, a greater certainty that she/he has grasped the main point of the story can be attained by the interviewer.

Coding. The coding of the SSAP involves the close reading of each narrative stem for each participant and then coding each narrative on a 3-point scale (Hodges et al., 2015): scores of 0 'not present', 1 'limited/moderate' presence, and 2 'definitely present'.

There are 38 codes (see Appendix Q), in five main categories in the SSAP manual: (1) *Engagement codes*, which include instances within the narrative where the participant's involvement with the story is obstructed, absent, or incongruent with the structure and plot of the stem; (2) *child representation codes*, which consists of codes pertaining to instances within the narrative where any child story character is represented in a multitude of ways; (3) *adult representation codes*, which includes codes where adult story characters are represented in a multitude of ways; (4) *child*

and adult representations, which is comprised of codes pertaining to representations of both child and adult, including aggression and sexual material codes; and finally (5) *disorganisation representations*, which includes codes involving characteristics of incoherent narratives, bizarre and catastrophic story lines, as well as shifts in characters from bad to good and vice versa (Hodges et al., 2015).

Following the coding of all SSAP narratives for both sample groups, each participant was assigned a score on four constructs of attachment in comparison with the mean score of a child from a community sample. However, within the current study, the ‘separated’ mean scores were evaluated against the mean scores of children from the ‘non-separated’ sample group, which served as the ‘community sample’ for the current study. During coding, the researcher was not blind to group membership (i.e., whether participants were from separated or non-separated families) but was blind to all other identifiers.

3.2.6 Coding training

The training program for coding the SSAP was completed by the primary researcher on four cases (i.e., four children) with 13 stories in each, generating 52 stories in total. Within each story, there were 38 codes. The primary researcher’s ratings were compared to an agreed set of standardised ratings from four senior trainers of the SSAP:

- Dr. Saul Hillman and Dr. Jill Hodges; both of whom are developers of the measure and the training program,
- Octavia Wilkinson and Gabrielle Lees; both of whom are Child and Adolescent Psychotherapists and have been involved in development of, and research with, the SSAP (Hillman, 2020, personal communication).

This was carried out in order to generate Intraclass Correlation Coefficients (ICCs). ICCs were calculated on the 38 individual codes within each of the 13 stories, for each of the 4 cases. This generated a total of 1064 codes, and ICCs were generated for each code, yielding 1064 ICCs. These ICCs were then averaged for each case (child) (i.e., ICCs for each code were averaged across all 13 stories), generating 152 final ICCs (38 for each of the 4 cases) (Hillman, 2020, personal communication). Inter-rater reliability was only calculated on the individual codes of the SSAP and not the SSAP constructs, as the constructs are amalgamations of the codes and thus, there were no separate ratings for the four constructs during training.

ICC estimates and their 95% confident intervals were calculated using SPSS statistical package version 25 (SPSS Inc, Chicago, IL) based on a single-rating, absolute-agreement, and a 2-way random-effects model (Koo & Li, 2016). A good degree of reliability (Koo & Li, 2016) was demonstrated with an overall average ICC of 0.75; its 95% confidence interval ranged between 0.67 and 0.81, meaning that there is a 95% chance that the true ICC value lies between these values.

The primary researcher was deemed capable of applying this coding system to the shortened version of the SSAP used in the current study (Hillman, unpublished, 2011). The primary researcher was trained to a high level of reliability (87% reliable on 3-way coding and 90% on 2-way coding); reaching a level higher than the gold standard that needs to be reached as part of the accreditation process (i.e., 85%). The 3-way coding examined agreement between actual scores (0, 1, 2) whilst the 2 way coding took into account the cruder binary measure of absence (0) versus presence (1s or 2s).

Constructs. The SSAP provides each child with a final mean score on four different constructs—*Security, Insecurity, Disorganised* and *Defensive/Avoidance*.

The first three, *Security*, *Insecurity*, and *Disorganised*, are formulated based on the well-known and researched attachment classifications; however, the fourth is not based on the insecure-avoidant classification. Instead, this construct pertains to a child's coping strategies when faced with various dilemmas within the SSAP stems. These constructs are a way of grouping individual scores to provide an overview of the child's responses to the story stems in terms of attachment.

Each SSAP construct is made up of a cluster of codes derived from 38 codes; see Appendix R for clusters of codes. Construct scores are calculated by summing the scores for relevant codes across the seven stories and then dividing by seven (Hillman & Hodges, 2016). Finally, the mean score on each of the four SSAP constructs creates an overall 'profile' (e.g., four mean scores corresponding to: (1) *Security*, (2) *Insecurity*, (3) *Disorganised*, and (4) *Defensive/Avoidance*), rather than a single attachment classification (e.g., *Secure*). This profile can be used in clinical settings alongside the individual codes and compared to norms across both clinical and non-clinical populations, for instance (Hillman, 2020, personal communication). In research settings, each participant's profile can be used in dissemination of results to inform caregivers of what the SSAP yielded regarding their child, for example. However, within the context of the current thesis and its research objectives, only the attachment construct mean scores, which encapsulate the detailed content of the individual codes, will be utilised empirically in subsequent investigations.

3.2.7 Validity and reliability

Hillman's (2011, unpublished) study evaluating the psychometric properties of the SSAP 13-stem version utilised an 'expert panel' of raters to determine the measure's 'face validity,' by determining whether or not they agreed with the author of the measure, on themes expected to exist in different populations within each story.

Internal consistency of the measure was also examined in order to see whether the codes and themes ‘performed’ similarly, or not, across the 7 different stems; if the measure was internally-reliable then a summary statistic could be created across the stories for each of the codes (Hillman, 2011, personal communication).

The initial test of the measure’s face validity showed that there was satisfactory statistical concordance between the raters on the relevance of all the codes; the exercise was able to confirm that SSAP coders were in agreement on how stories and codes were related to one another (Hillman, 2011, unpublished).

Cronbach’s Alpha scores for each of the 4 theoretically driven attachment constructs made up of relevant SSAP codes (for the 7-stem SSAP) (Hillman, 2019, personal communication) were:

- *Security*: $\alpha = .76$
- *Insecurity*: $\alpha = .64$
- *Disorganised*: $\alpha = .63$
- *Defensive/Avoidance* $\alpha = .51$

The current study found the following Cronbach’s Alpha scores for each of the four constructs making up the 7-stem SSAP:

- *Security*: $\alpha = .71$
- *Insecurity*: $\alpha = .13$
- *Disorganised*: $\alpha = .61$
- *Defensive/Avoidance*: $\alpha = .46$

Due to the *insecurity* scale having an extremely low Cronbach’s alpha score in the current study, it was removed from further analyses. Although the measure’s individual constructs were not considered highly internally consistent in a statistically ‘conventional’ sense, this may in fact be an indication of the SSAP’s unique ability to

tap into different codes, across different stories, within different populations (Hillman, 2011, unpublished). The commonly used cut-off for Cronbach's alpha is .75 or higher for a set of items to be considered a scale, whilst .60 and above is considered fair (Briggs & Cheek, 1988). Tavakol and Dennick (2011) advised against calculating Cronbach's Alpha for a measure as a whole that contains different constructs or concepts (e.g., like the SSAP). Due to the shortened SSAP having never been used with 'children of divorce' in previous research, Hillman (2018, personal communication) advised that from an exploratory perspective, as the stories are very different and different themes were likely to be much more relevant in certain stories, resulting in low alpha scores, it is appropriate to include and report weak alphas of between .45 and .60.

Some studies have also argued that when a measure is made up of different concepts, it should not be expected to give high alphas (Taber, 2018). Berger and Hänze (2015) obtained an alpha of .45 for a pre-test they were developing as part of a 'jigsaw learning method' and argued this was considered acceptable due to the number of different concepts within one test. Thus, for the purposes of the current study, the weaker alpha score of the *Defensive/Avoidance* construct was deemed acceptable for inclusion of the construct in further analyses and the other constructs' fair alpha scores were considered possible strengths of the measure.

3.2.8 Study design

Procedure. The primary researcher met with the participant and their caregiver in their home or at the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families. If the assessment took place at the participant's home, the caregiver was asked to provide a quiet space with a table and two chairs. They were also informed that the assessment would take 30 to 45 minutes, and the caregiver was provided with

parent-report questionnaires (i.e., the Demographic Questionnaire and the SDQ). The caregiver was also provided with a consent form to sign (see Appendix S), so was their child(ren) (see Appendix T and U).

Following this, the caregiver(s) generally left the room whilst the study took place, however a handful of parents opted to stay present. If this occurred, the primary researcher requested that they stay behind the child so the child minimally acknowledged their presence. However, if the study took place at the Centre ($n = 12$), as opposed to at home ($n = 56$), the caregiver and any younger siblings were asked to remain in the lobby whilst the child and the primary researcher engaged in the study in a private room allocated for the purposes of the current study. Of the 12 participants assessed at the Centre, 3 were from separated families and 9 were from non-separated families; of the 56 participants assessed at home, 26 were from separated families and 30 from non-separated families.

Set-up. Each participant was seated next to the researcher at a table large enough to allow for the spreading out of toys and props. As the SSAP administration is video-recorded to capture moments of non-verbal engagement utilising toys and props, a small *GoPro* sports camera was introduced to the child and placed at a distance from them on the table.

An oral introduction to the method was provided to the participant demonstrating how the method works and that there are no right or wrong answers. The introduction follows with the naming of the Playmobil characters that were used in all 7 SSAP stems. The participant was shown a family of four Playmobil characters that is made up of two siblings, a mother and a father. The gender of the siblings was determined according to the gender of the participant (e.g., male participants were given two male siblings). Similarly, the ethnicity of the Playmobil

toys (i.e., light skin-tone or dark skin-tone) was also determined based on the participant's skin-tone. A "friend" of the same gender as the participant was also needed for one of the stems (i.e., Mum's headache); this Playmobil character was put aside by the researcher for later use.

The participant was then asked who they wanted the older sibling to be (i.e., the protagonist in the stems); once they selected this Playmobil toy, they were then asked to name him/her and his/her sibling. Once this was complete, the researcher proceeded to set up the props for the initial stem, 'Crying Outside'. Once the appropriate props for the stem were set up, the stem was narrated.

3.2.9 Ethics

The UCL ethics committee granted ethical approval on several occasions due to various changes made to the recruitment process (outlined above). The initial application to the ethics committee took place in March 2015 and was approved upon first submission (See Appendix M).

3.2.10 Planned Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 (SPSS Inc., 2017). The homogeneity of variance between groups was assessed initially using t-tests and chi-square tests. The skewness of the distributions of the variables used to compare groups would also be determined and reported. Following which, the two sample groups (children from separated and non-separated families) were assessed for SSAP construct differences.

The two groups would then be assessed for SDQ subscale differences. As discussed in Section 3.1.7 this was an exploratory analysis, carried out to investigate separated caregivers' perspectives on their child(ren)'s behavioural/emotional symptoms and how they compare/contrast with reports by non-separated caregivers;

such a comparison can provide information about children's psychopathology following the experience of a divorce. The SDQ was then explored in relation to the SSAP in order to see whether a child's internal representations, as measured through the SSAP, were reflected in their psychopathology, as reported by a caregiver.

Lastly, demographic (i.e., age and gender) and divorce-related variables (i.e., length of time since separation, contact with father, and household income) were examined for any possible impact on SSAP attachment construct scores. These investigations were carried out to provide insight into whether or not they account for any observed variance (if any) between the groups' attachment construct scores. The variables, 'length of time since separation' and 'contact with father', were evaluated only in relation to the separated groups' attachment construct scores.

Due to the moderately high number of statistical analyses carried out in the current study (i.e., 25 independent samples tests and 51 individual correlations), an α of 0.01 was used to establish statistical significance. The lower α level aided in the reduction of a Type I error (i.e., rejecting the null hypothesis when it is true), and the likelihood of spurious findings. However, when reducing the chance of a Type I error, consideration should be given to the possibility of increasing the chance of a Type II error (i.e., accepting the null hypothesis when it is false) (Rothman, 1990).

3.3 Results

3.3.1 Evaluating homogeneity of variance between groups

In order to address the primary research question it was important to determine if any variables were differentiating the groups significantly; statistical tests were run on identified variables (i.e., 'gender', 'age', 'ethnicity', and 'household income'). For the purpose of this investigation, the 'household income' variable, with 10 categories, was collapsed into a two-point binary variable (i.e., 'less than £60, 000' and '£60, 001 or more'); the ethnicity variable with 5 categories was also collapsed into a two-point binary variable (i.e., 'white' and 'non-white').

The following demographic variables did not significantly differ between the separated and non-separated groups: 'Gender' ($\chi^2(1, N = 68) = 0.46, p = .498$), 'age' ($t(66) = 0.46, p = .822$) and 'ethnicity' ($\chi^2(1, N = 68) = 0.46, p = .498$). However, 'household income' was shown to be significantly different between the two groups; $\chi^2(1, N = 68) = 33.26, p < .001$ (see Table 3.2 for distribution of 'household income' across groups). This significant difference was expected between the two samples, as the 'separated' sample group reported the income of a one-parent household (i.e., the mother) and the 'intact' sample group reported income of a two-parent household; literature also suggests that divorced women tend to have lower incomes than married women (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007).

Table 3.2

Distribution of 'household income' across children from separated and non-separated families.

		Household income		Total
		£60,000 or less	£60,001 or more	
Separated	<i>n</i>	24	5	29
	% Within separated group	82.8%	17.2%	100%
Non-separated	<i>n</i>	5	34	39
	% Within non-separated group	12.8%	87.2%	100%

However, due to the close alignment between the two sample groups and the two categories of household income (i.e., 24 of 29 participants from the separated group belonged to the '£60,000 or less' category, whilst 34 of 39 participants from the non-separated group belonged to the '£60,001 or more' category), household income was also assessed for any impact on SSAP constructs in order to address the fifth research question of the current study, *Are the attachment/caregiver representations of children from separated families affected by demographic variables closely connected to the experience of divorce, such as 'length of time since divorce', 'contact with father', and 'household income'?* This was considered appropriate because previous research indicated that household income is a variable closely linked to the process of divorce and not a separate one such as gender or age; rather, this is a variable that may be altered due to the experience of divorce. It is important to assess if it has any impact on SSAP scores, as this could inform the current study as to whether the variance, if any, in SSAP scores between the two sample groups could be due to household income. This assessment will be carried out in Section 3.3.6.

3.3.2 Group Differences: Children from separated and non-separated families

It was demonstrated that the SSAP constructs and most SDQ subscales possessed skewed/non-normal distributions, thus, non-parametric tests were deemed appropriate for the following analyses (see Appendix AC for skewness statistics).

In order to address the primary research question of the current chapter, Mann-Whitney U tests were computed to determine if there were significant differences in SSAP construct scores (i.e., *Security*, *Disorganised*, and *Defensive/Avoidance*) between children from separated and non-separated families. Descriptive statistics for the SSAP constructs for both groups are presented in Table 3.3.

The results demonstrated that *Defensive/Avoidance* scores for children from separated families (*mean rank* = 43.57) were statistically significantly higher than for children from non-separated families (*mean rank* = 27.76), $U = 302.5$, $z = -3.28$, $p = .001$. This significant difference also had a large effect size according to Cohen (1988); Cohen's $d = 0.86$. *Security* and *Disorganised* scores for children from separated and non-separated families were not statistically significantly different (see Table 3.4).

Table 3.3

Descriptive statistics and mean ranks of SSAP constructs listed by sample group.

SSAP construct	Sample group	N	Mean	Standard	Median	Mean Rank
				Deviation		
Security	Separated	29	1.71	1.17	1.71	30.72
	Non-separated	39	2.12	1.17	2	37.31
Disorganised	Separated	29	1.15	1.07	1	35.53
	Non-separated	39	1.07	1.12	.71	33.73
Defensive/Avoidance	Separated	29	1.25	.64	1.14	43.57
	Non-separated	39	.78	.56	.57	27.76

Table 3.4

Mann-Whitney U test results of differences between children from separated and non-separated families on SSAP constructs.

	Security	Disorganised	Defensive/Avoidance
Mann-Whitney U	456	535.5	302.5
Z	-1.36	-.374	-3.28
Sig. (2-tailed)	.174	.709	.001

3.3.3 Caregiver-reported internalising/externalising behaviours

In order to address the **second** research question, differences between the sample groups on the SDQ subscales (as rated by caregivers) were examined. As the distributions were skewed (See Appendix AC), the appropriate test was the Mann-Whitney *U* test. SDQ scores for children from separated and non-separated families were not significantly statistically different for any of the subscales (see Tables 3.5 and 3.6).

Table 3.5

Descriptive statistics and mean ranks for SDQ subscales, listed by sample group.

SDQ Subscale	Sample Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Median	Mean Rank
Emotional Symptoms	Separated	29	2.79	2.38	2	36.9
	Non-Separated	39	2.21	2.00	2	32.72
Conduct Disorder	Separated	29	1.93	2.07	1	34.76
	Non-Separated	39	1.74	1.57	2	34.31
Hyperactivity	Separated	29	4.28	2.70	4	38.09
	Non-Separated	39	3.51	2.91	3	31.83
Peer Problems	Separated	29	1.59	1.66	1	37.4
	Non-Separated	39	1.28	1.92	1	32.35
Prosocial	Separated	29	8.48	1.64	9	35.31
	Non-Separated	39	8.23	2.02	9	33.9

Total Behavioural Problems	Separated	29	10.59	5.93	10	38.83
	Non-Separated	39	8.74	5.61	8	31.28
Impact	Separated	29	.38	2.32	<.01	34.79
	Non-Separated	39	<.01	2.36	<.01	34.28

Table 3.6

Mann-Whitney U test results of differences between separated and non-separated caregiver reported SDQ subscale scores.

	Emotional Symptoms	Conduct Disorder	Hyperactivity	Peer Problems	Prosocial	Total Behavioural Problems	Impact
Mann-Whitney U	50	56	46	48	54	44	56
Z	-.88	-.10	-1.30	-1.09	-.30	-1.56	-.14
Sig. (2-tailed)	.381	.924	.194	.276	.763	.118	.892

3.3.4 The relationship between the SSAP and the SDQ

Following the analysis reported in Table 3.6, the **third** question was addressed by identifying any significant relationships between SSAP constructs and SDQ subscale total scores.

Spearman's rho correlations were computed to assess the relationship between the SSAP and the SDQ for children from separated families and then for non-separated families. There were no statistically significant correlations between the 7 SDQ subscales (caregiver-reported) and the 3 SSAP constructs for children from separated families and non-separated families at α level = 0.01 (see Table 3.7).

Table 3.7

Spearman's rho correlation coefficients for relationships between SSAP constructs and SDQ subscales for children from separated families (n = 29).

	Emotional symptoms	Conduct Disorder	Hyperactivity	Peer problems	Prosocial	Total behavioural problems	Impact
Security	-.20	-.30	-.18	-.02	.06	-.28	-.19
Disorganised	-.12	.09	-.06	-.18	-.03	-.03	-.02
Defensive/Avoidance	.21	.18	.11	.05	-.05	.20	-.001

Note. * Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

Table 3.8

Spearman's rho correlation coefficients for relationships between SSAP constructs and SDQ subscales for children from non-separated families (n = 39).

	Emotional Symptoms	Conduct Disorder	Hyperactivity	Peer problems	Prosocial	Total behavioural problems	Impact
Security	-.19	-.16	-.28	-.06	.06	-.29	-.17
Disorganised	-.02	.33	.35	.04	-.07	.34	-.02
Defensive/Avoidance	-.08	.22	.23	-.20	-.10	.17	-.15

Note. * Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

3.3.5 Demographic variables and SSAP constructs

In order to address the **fourth** question, an assessment of whether or not there were any significant effects of the variables age and gender on SSAP construct scores for each group was carried out.

Age

Spearman's rho correlation coefficients were computed to determine the relationships between 3 SSAP constructs and age for children from separated families (See Appendix AD for descriptive statistics for both groups). An increase in 'age' was found to be statistically significantly associated with an increase in *Security* for children from separated families ($r_s(27) = 0.66, p < .001$); and with a decrease in *Defensive/Avoidance* scores ($r_s(27) = -0.53, p = 0.003$).

Spearman's rho correlation coefficients were also computed to assess the relationships between 3 SSAP constructs and age in the non-separated group. An increase in age was also found to be statistically significantly associated with an increase in *Security* ($r_s(37) = 0.42, p = 0.008$).

Gender

In order to assess any differences in SSAP constructs based on gender, Mann-Whitney *U* tests were run for the 3 SSAP constructs between boys and girls from separated families and then for non-separated families. No statistically significant differences, at α level = 0.01, were found between boys and girls from separated and non-separated families for the three constructs (See Appendix AD for descriptive statistics and results).

3.3.6 Divorce-related variables and SSAP constructs

Length of time since divorce

In order to address the **fifth** question, Spearman's rho correlation coefficients were computed to assess the relationships between 3 SSAP constructs and length of time (in years) since the divorce. There were no significant correlations between 'length of time since divorce' and any of the SSAP constructs (see Table 3.9) (See Appendix AD for descriptive statistics).

Table 3.9

Spearman's rho correlation coefficients for relationships between SSAP constructs and length of time since divorce in years (n = 29).

	Security	Disorganised	Defensive/Avoidance
Length of time since divorce (years)	-.15	-.01	.04

Note. * Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

Contact with father

As a component of addressing the fifth question, the variable ‘contact with father’ was also examined for its effects on SSAP construct scores. This variable was divided into three categories:

- (1) ‘Between 3 days a week to everyday’,
- (2) ‘One to two times a week’,
- (3) ‘Special occasions, once a month/less than once a month’.

The non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis H test was computed to evaluate if there were any differences between the three types of ‘contact with father’ listed above on any of the SSAP constructs. The mean ranks of the SSAP construct scores were not statistically significantly different between the three ‘types of contact with father’, for any of the three constructs (see Table 3.10) (see Appendix AD for descriptive statistics).

Table 3.10

Kruskal-Wallis H results for differences in SSAP construct scores between three ‘types of contact with father’ for children from separated families (n = 29).

	Security	Disorganised	Defensive/Avoidance
Kruskal-Wallis H	.56	.029	1.008
<i>df</i>	2	2	2
<i>p</i>	.756	.986	.604

Household income

As discussed in Section 3.1.4.3, household income can be considered as part of, or closely connected to, the process of divorce. In order to assess whether any of the variance between the two sample groups in SSAP construct scores was due to issues mediated by changes in household income (potentially a specific part of the divorce process), it was important to assess the impact of household income on SSAP

construct scores. Therefore, Mann-Whitney *U* tests were carried out on the SSAP constructs to assess any significant differences between the two categories of household income identified in Section 3.3.1 (see Tables 3.11 and 3.12 for results). No significant differences in SSAP constructs were found between the two categories of household income.

Table 3.11

Mean ranks for SSAP construct scores grouped by 'household income' category.

SSAP Construct	Household income category	<i>N</i>	Median	Mean Rank
Security	£60,000 or less	29	1.83	36.41
	£60,001 or more	39	1.67	33.08
Disorganised	£60,000 or less	29	1.17	35.88
	£60,001 or more	39	.67	33.47
Defensive/Avoidance	£60,000 or less	29	1	36.78
	£60,001 or more	39	.83	32.81

Table 3.12

*Mann-Whitney *U* test results of differences between the two categories of household income on attachment construct scores assessed using the SSAP.*

	Security	Disorganised	Defensive/ Avoidance
Mann-Whitney <i>U</i>	510	525.5	499.5
<i>Z</i>	-.70	-.50	-.822
Sig. (2-tailed)	.491	.619	.411

3.4 Discussion

The current findings demonstrated that a significant difference in ‘attachment/caregiver representations’ was found between children from separated and non-separated families. Specifically, the difference was in their scores in the *Defensive/Avoidance* SSAP construct. The use of *Defensive/Avoidance* themes/codes by children from separated families was also impacted by age, with older children having significantly lower *Defensive/Avoidance* mean scores than younger children. Internalising/externalising behaviours were not found to be significantly different between groups. Internalising/externalising behaviours were not significantly correlated with any SSAP constructs for children from both separated and non-separated families. Divorce-related variables such as ‘length of time since separation’ and ‘contact with father’ were not shown to have any significant bearing on SSAP constructs for children from separated families. Finally, ‘household income’, although significantly different between the two sample groups, did not yield statistically significant differences in SSAP scores between the two identified levels (i.e., £60,000 or less and £60,001 or more).

3.4.1 Group differences: Separated and non-separated families

The first hypothesis of the current study: **There will be differences in the ‘attachment/caregiver representations’ of children from separated and non-separated families as assessed using the current story stem measure**, was accepted. The separated group had significantly higher *Defensive/Avoidance* scores than the non-separated group; this finding also had a large effect size according to Cohen (1988).

The significant difference between the groups in their *Defensive/Avoidance* scores indicated that children from separated families used these strategies more in

their SSAP narratives than children from non-separated families. This finding is consistent with some literature showing that children from separated families tend to elicit more defensive/avoidant means of relating to others (e.g., Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). For instance, children from separated families may withdraw their attachment behaviours and needs from significant attachment figures if those figures are pre-occupied with divorce-related dilemmas (e.g., financial troubles, custody decisions, court proceedings, etc.) (Feeney & Monin, 2008). Parental duties can be hindered or even dormant during times of stress, particularly during couple conflict and break down (Cockett & Tripp, 1994). Thus, a defensive/avoidant attachment style is more frequently used in these children's stories due to real lived experiences where they may have been exposed to a rejecting, cold, or uninvolved caregiver (Del Giudice, 2009). When an unavailable attachment figure is experienced, children can begin to treat the caregiver as unavailable and tend to avoid asking for help or comfort when distressed—they establish an insecure-avoidant attachment pattern (Del Giudice, 2009). This is an adaptive strategy that allows children to cope with this type of attachment figure, as they fear that their signals of distress and attachment needs may instigate further rejection (Del Giudice, 2009). Feeney and Monin (2008) point out that due to the unavailability of an attachment figure, children's needs for security and safety are left unattended to and can lead to a further sense of insecurity and anxiety.

3.4.2 Internalising/externalising behaviours

The second hypothesis of the current study: **There will be a difference in how caregivers from separated families and caregivers from non-separated families report their children's internalising/externalising behaviours**, was rejected. No significant differences were found between the groups on caregiver reports of internalising/externalising behaviours. This finding was inconsistent with

previous research, which showed that children from separated families had significantly higher internalising/externalising behaviours than those from non-separated families as reported by their caregivers and teachers (e.g., Stadelmann et al., 2010). The finding of the current study could be due to a number of reasons, for instance, ‘social desirability bias’ (e.g., a parent’s tendency to respond in a manner that is viewed as favourable by others) in which parent-report measures may not be as reliable as measures directly completed by the child (Fisher, 1993; Maccoby & Maccoby, 1954). Separated parents in the current study may be hesitant to discuss their child’s symptoms and/or could be in denial of their severity or existence altogether. Another interpretation could be that children from separated families, who are defensive/avoidant in their relations with their attachment figures, might not communicate openly with them about their emotional/behavioural problems (Del Giudice, 2009).

Furthermore, the aforementioned preoccupied mental state of separated parents, along with their inability to think about and reflect on their child’s experience during times of lifestyle changes, high stress and high arousal may be contributing to a misinterpretation of their child’s behavioural/emotional symptoms and creating an inability to accurately report them on a parent-report measure. Mitcham-Smith and Henry (2007) stated that divorced co-parents who are in conflict, for instance, tend to be unaware of how their own behaviour is impacting their child. This ‘unawareness’ could contribute to a difficulty in thinking or talking about their child’s mental states during stressful times. However, assessing the accuracy of these speculative interpretations requires significant further study.

The third hypothesis: **There will be associations between the variables, ‘attachment/caregiver representations’ and ‘internalising/externalising**

behaviours', was rejected. No significant correlations were found between internalising/externalising behaviours, as rated by caregivers on the SDQ, and the SSAP constructs of children from separated and non-separated families at α level = 0.01. This finding did not support previous research, which showed more problem behaviours in children with insecure attachment styles as rated on story stem measures (e.g., Stadelmann et al., 2010).

Another reason for the absence of a significant association between the SDQ and SSAP could be as Emde (2003) pointed out, story stem techniques may be more advantageous for children with hidden experiences, as these may be experiences that parents are not able to concretely report. Thus, parent-report measures may not be accurately reporting the emotional/behavioural problems of children who are keeping their experiences and emotions hidden from their attachment figures. Furthermore, the aforementioned preoccupied mental state of separated parents, along with their inability to think about the child's experience during stressful life events, may also be contributing to a misinterpretation of their child's behavioural/emotional symptoms and also creating an inability to accurately report them.

Furthermore, in Hillman's (2011, unpublished) validation study of the 13-stem SSAP, a similar experiment was carried out and only one significant correlation between the SDQ subscales and SSAP constructs was found in the non-clinical sample (not in the clinical sample). Within the non-maltreated sample in Hillman's (2011, unpublished) study, as *Insecurity* increased, higher scores were reported on 'conduct disorder'. When Hillman (2011, unpublished) looked at all three samples (two non-clinical and one maltreated) as one heterogeneous sample, more significant correlations occurred between the SDQ and the SSAP. Hillman (2011, unpublished) suggested that perhaps in vulnerable populations, story stems do not provide a robust

validation for parent-reported behaviours as children in these situations may have less overt problems that are more likely to be presented in a play/narrative context.

Hill et al.'s (2007) study linking DBP in boys with their story stems may indicate that some confounding variables in the current study could be responsible for the absence of significant correlations between the SDQ and the SSAP narratives. For instance, Hill et al. (2007) controlled for verbal and story-telling abilities and thus, were able to ascertain whether or not the boys in their sample could respond to a story stem task at the level required to resolve the conflicts/dilemmas within it—as well as, whether story themes/constructs were significantly correlated with these variables. Perhaps younger children have lower verbal/story-telling abilities than older children in the current sample and this affected how parent-report measures correlated with the story stem completions overall. The accurate ‘matching’ of children’s narratives to their emotional/behavioural problems may have been challenging due to the absence of assessing verbal/story-telling abilities in the current study.

3.4.3 Demographic variables and SSAP constructs

The fourth hypothesis of the current study: **Demographic variables, such as age and gender, will have an effect on children’s attachment/caregiver representations**, was accepted with regards to ‘age’ but not ‘gender’.

Age

Age was found to have a statistically significant association with the constructs *Defensive/Avoidance* and *Security* for children from separated families but only with *Security* for children from non-separated families. As children’s ages increased in the separated group, *Defensive/Avoidance* scores decreased, and *Security* scores increased. This finding was inconsistent with Wallerstein and Lewis’s (2004)

study showing that as children from separated families got older, their fear of loss/separation impacted their romantic relationships. Perhaps, defensive/avoidant strategies are minimised in middle childhood but return upon entry into romantic relationships, triggering past memories and/or fears surrounding attachment, separation, and loss.

If data was collected on children's verbal/cognitive abilities in the current study, it may have aided in explaining these significant associations—particularly, the associations that were similar across groups (i.e., between *Security* and age). As children progress through latency, cognitive/verbal abilities are enhanced and become more sophisticated, resulting in more coherent narratives, which could be interpreted as more 'secure' (Gleason, 2005). Latency brings about several significant changes in the cognitive, social, and emotional areas of development that can impact children's story stem narratives (see Sections 1.6.2 - 1.6.4).

Hillman (2011, unpublished) carried out the original SSAP validation study, finding older children more 'secure'. Interestingly, verbal ability was found to differentiate his three samples (i.e., 2 non-clinical and 1 clinical; the clinical sample had lower verbal ability) and he entered the variable as a covariate in his subsequent analyses (Hillman, 2011, unpublished). Children with higher verbal abilities scored lower in *Insecurity*, showed adults as more aware and less rejecting, and were less likely to use avoidance in their narratives (Hillman, 2011, unpublished).

As described in Section 3.1.3.1, Hill et al.'s (2007) study found that verbal ability was significantly correlated with age and was entered as a covariate in further analyses looking at story stems and DBP in boys. Thus, assessing the level of these abilities may have aided in a more in-depth understanding of the significant associations observed in the current study. On the other hand, it is important to note

that the SSAP utilises play to compensate for limitations in children's verbal capabilities and to assist them in expressing their internal world (Oppenheim & Waters, 1995).

It is also important to note that if the associations were only due to socio-emotional changes in latency, and not related to divorce, the associations may have been similar for both sets of children. However, the relationship between age and the *Defensive/Avoidance* construct was only found in the separated group, and may have more to do with the experience of divorce at different stages in life. For instance, the relationship between age and *Defensive/Avoidance* in the separated group could be mediated by the building of resilience (i.e., the capacity to successfully adapt/adjust in circumstances usually associated with mental/emotional dysfunction; Stein et al., 2000) in older children. Resilience can be higher in children who are able to mentalize about others' actions (Stein, 2006) because the development of internal representations of self and others is facilitated (Fonagy & Target, 1997), and the magnitude of which a 'negative' behaviour is perceived may be lessened in individuals with the ability to tease out the underlying mental states of others (Slade, 2005; Stein, 2006). Perhaps, the more years spent in school engaging in pro-social interactions and developing warm interpersonal relationships leads to better outcomes when faced with drastic life changes. Sophisticated cognitive and intellectual abilities (e.g., understanding and tolerating ambivalence) continue to develop with the progression through latency, aiding in adjustment to divorce. Cognitive and emotional capacities that continue to develop throughout middle childhood can be in the form of:

-ToM concepts (Baron-Cohen et al., 1999; Devine & Hughes, 2013; Dumontheil et al., 2010); more advanced ToM concepts in older

children help in adjustment to divorce due to the ability to understand and consider their parents' decisions/desires and experiences.

-Perceiving good intentions behind 'negative behaviours', and tolerating ambivalence towards the same individual; (Davies, 2010; Jambon & Smetana, 2014); the ability to perceive actions/behaviours in this way can aid in reducing the shock, disappointment, and/or anger directed at their parents' choices during divorce.

Thus, such intellectual growth could support the ability to understand the meaning behind one's parents' decisions/behaviours and consider their perspective(s) (Dumontheil et al., 2010; Sameroff & Haith, 1996). An assessment examining both cognitive and verbal abilities could have been useful in the current study (e.g., The McCarthy Scales of Children's Abilities; McCarthy, 1972), as well as an assessment of ToM. Commonly used measures of ToM, such as the Strange Stories Task (Happé, 1994) and the Faux Pas test (Baron-Cohen et al., 1999) demonstrate questionable reliability and validity, particularly when administered to children between 7 and 13 years of age (See Hayward & Home, 2017 for a review of the psychometric properties of measures of ToM). However, the Silent Films Task could have been useful in the current study due to its evident robust psychometric properties when used with children in middle childhood (See Devine & Hughes, 2016).

Older children may also be more able to perceive attachment figures securely after divorce due to an advanced ability to cope with dangers to their attachment systems (Marvin & Britner, 1999). They may be better equipped to cope with the departure of one attachment figure from the home due to a lower need for physical closeness (Bowlby, 1982); a phone call/text message from their attachment figure

may be sufficient in times of need. Whilst progressing through middle childhood, children may spend longer periods of time away from their parents, want more autonomy from them, and parents have increasingly less influence on their environment (Kerns & Brumariu, 2016). They begin to have other stabilising relationships, for example, grandparents, teachers/peers, and friends' parents, all of whom can be turned to as the child grows older.

However, attachment theory suggests that 'stability' in attachment classification in 'normal' life circumstances is expected, whereas, changes to attachment classifications are expected when negative life events are experienced and caregivers' behaviours/responsiveness change (Bowlby, 1988). Within the context of divorce, Waters et al. (2000) found that the more 'stressful life events' individuals experienced from infancy to early adulthood (including divorce), the more likely they were to change attachment classifications. In their 20-year longitudinal study, they found that 66% of participants who were classified 'secure' at 12 months and 18 months of age using the Strange Situation Procedure (Ainsworth et al., 1978) were 'insecure' when assessed using the Berkeley Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George, Kaplan & Main, 1985) at 20 to 22 years of age (Waters et al., 2000). Whereas, those who were classified as 'insecure' infants were more likely to retain this classification on the AAI in adulthood than to change to a secure classification, if they experienced one or more stressful life event (Waters et al., 2000). The researchers hypothesised that a portion of these changes could be due to measurement error (e.g., the validity and reliability of the measures contributed to 10% error at each age) (Waters et al., 2000). In sum, it is challenging to determine why older children in the separated group possessed less *Defensive/Avoidance* themes in their stories than

younger children did, but it is evident that several factors need to be considered in future research to add to the understanding of this interesting finding.

Gender

There were no statistically significant differences between boys and girls from separated and non-separated families on the SSAP at α level = 0.01. The absence of a significant effect of gender on the SSAP constructs in both groups was not consistent with previous research on attachment, story stems, and divorce. In previous studies, boys have been found to be significantly more aggressive and adopt ‘fight or flight responses’ in their narratives, whilst girls tend to adopt the ‘tend and befriend’ approach in their stories (Taylor et al., 2000). In a large study of community samples from 10 different countries, Pierrehumbert et al. (2009) found that girls’ narratives were systematically more secure than those of boys from the same age group, regardless of cultural differences. Von Klitzing et al. (2000) also found that girls from a non-clinical sample were more coherent and less aggressive in their narratives using the MSSB. Researchers have also found more avoidant patterns in boys’ narratives and more ambivalent patterns in girls’ responses (Del Giudice, 2008; Granot and Mayseless, 2001).

According to Hillman’s (2011, unpublished) SSAP validation study, gender differences were found (i.e., girls showed more ‘secure’ themes than boys). However, this finding was on his full sample ($N = 206$), including both community and clinical samples (i.e., maltreated children) (Hillman, 2011, unpublished). In the current study, the effects of gender on the SSAP were examined separately in each group, decreasing the sample size, and perhaps minimising the impact gender had on SSAP constructs—as was found in the original SSAP validation study. True assessments of gender differences need to be sufficiently large enough to test interactions between

gender and the measure administered; an assessment of gender differences requires a sample size that is many times the sample size, in comparison to studies of main effects (i.e., $n = 29$ and $n = 39$ in the current sample), in order to possess adequate power (Rich-Edwards et al., 2018).

Finally, the fifth hypothesis: **Divorce-specific variables, such as ‘length of time since divorce’, ‘contact with father’, and ‘household income’ will influence SSAP constructs due to the complex and multifactorial nature of divorce**, was rejected.

Length of time since divorce

There was no effect of ‘length of time since divorce’, ‘contact with father’, or ‘household income’ on SSAP scores. Several studies have found that the reason post-divorce is a time for readjustment and returning to ‘normality’ for children is due to the settlement of parental conflict, court proceedings, financial crises, employment issues, and/or settling into a new home, neighbourhood or school (Amato, 2000). Therefore, as a variable in its own right, ‘length of time since divorce’ may not have a great impact on SSAP constructs; instead, other considerations following a shorter or longer length of time since divorce need to be considered.

Contact with father

The absence of a significant effect of the ‘amount of contact with father’ on the SSAP supports previous literature demonstrating that the quality of the father-child relationship needs to be considered when determining whether frequent contact with the father is beneficial/costly for the child (Amato, 2000). Past studies found that father-child contact, and its beneficial/costly effect on children from separated families, is moderated by the mother’s reaction to, and approval of it (King & Heard, 1999). In their meta-analysis on post-divorce father involvement, children’s

internalising/externalising behaviours, and academic achievement, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) concluded that ‘frequency’ of father-child contact was not significantly associated with child outcomes but ‘type’ of involvement and father’s ‘parenting style’ was more important (e.g., helping with homework or discussing interpersonal problems).

Household income

Finally, the current study did not find a significant effect of household income on the SSAP. ‘Household income’ in isolation did not influence SSAP scores significantly, perhaps because the two groups possessed significantly different household incomes it is arguable that there may still be a significant impact of household income on the SSAP mediated by other variables discussed below.

Previous literature outlines the impact of divorce on household income and its significant decline for divorced women and children (Teachman & Paasch, 1994). In his reviews of divorce research at two time periods, Amato (2000; 2010) found ‘declines in household income’ is a variable that lowers children’s well-being post-divorce. This could be due to: Moving neighbourhoods to decrease living expenses, leading to loss of friendships, relatives, and community (South, Crowder & Trent, 1998). Many variables are impacted by ‘household income’ and affect children’s adjustment post-divorce, and are beyond the scope of the current study but will be discussed within the context of these preliminary findings and future work in Section 3.4.6.

It is also important to consider that pre-divorce household income could result in marital dissolution and subsequent negative effects on women and children—rather than the divorce per se (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). For instance, Weaver and Schofield’s (2015) study included both pre- and post- divorce household incomes as

variables, 11 different time points (i.e., 24 months, 36 months, 54 months, Kindergarten, grades 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 and age 15) of data collection on children's internalising/externalising behaviours, and found that children from pre-divorce low income households had more externalising behaviour problems post-divorce. The researchers concluded that coming from a 'higher income' household pre-divorce can actually "buffer" children from the negative consequences of divorce (Weaver & Schofield, 2015).

3.4.4 Strengths

Initially, a major strength of the current study was the inclusion of a comparison group of children from non-separated families who were matched on particular variables with those from separated families.

Secondly, diverse subsamples of children were included from families who varied in latency ages (i.e., 6 to 11) and ethnicity. Although sample sizes were small, this variation may have still provided a more realistic image of how divorce impacts children's internal worlds within the UK. The current study also utilised displacement without increasing inhibitions and did not depict parents as separated in the stems, or excluded the father figure (i.e., as was done in previous attachment research on divorce; e.g., Page & Bretherton, 2001). The average length of time since the separation was under the two-year mark (i.e., when children from separated families are presumed to return to their pre-divorce functioning), generating findings that are relevant to when divorce is theorised to be the most difficult for children to adjust to (Amato, 2000).

The current study benefited from including a behavioural/emotional measure (i.e., SDQ) to identify any differences in psychopathology between children from separated and non-separated families. This was perceived as a way of supplementing

the assessment of internal attachment representations and of forming a well-rounded and in-depth study on children from separated families.

The current study also benefited from utilising a measure that has not been administered previously to children from separated families—enhancing the current divorce literature with novel findings on middle childhood.

3.4.5 Limitations

The current study suffered limitations of sample size, recruitment style, and variations within each group. Ideally, a larger comparison group would have included more diversity in ethnicity and age. However, it was expected that the variable ‘household income’ may have remained disproportionately distributed between groups even with a larger sample size, as its skewed distribution in the current study is most likely due to the circumstances of divorce (i.e., children from separated families commonly only have one ‘household income’ for the two years immediately following divorce, whereas those from non-separated families may reside in a two-parent income household). Compensation offered only to the separated group may have also caused disparity between the two groups, as the factors surrounding their involvement in the study could have been dependent upon this. If the appropriate funding were available, future work would ideally include equal compensation for both groups in order to keep the groups equal in recruitment style.

Another limitation was the recruitment style of both the non-separated and separated groups. Recruitment through online ads or *Facebook Groups* did not permit the recruitment of participants who did not have Internet/computer access, potentially excluding low-income respondents or those with limited technological accessibility/competences. Also, participants who showed an interest in the study also showed an interest in and/or concern about their child’s psychological well-being,

communicated verbally to the primary researcher. This could have created a more unique sample as it primarily contained parents who were more ‘aware’ of and involved in their child’s mental health, or involved children whose mental health was a concern.

As participants from separated families in the current study did not follow some trends found in previous studies (e.g., the absence of statistically significant gender differences in story stems) perhaps the participants recruited were unique due to the recruitment limitations listed above. Moreover, parents were able to volunteer at least one hour of their time, which can be difficult for single mothers who may not have the space in their homes to accommodate a researcher, or who may not have the financial means or time to travel to engage in research. Therefore, the current data was collected from a predominantly highly educated, working middle-class group and may not fully represent the “normative” population of divorced families in the UK (Nair & Murray, 2005).

The current study also suffered from the following limitations:

- Data was not gathered on verbal, story-telling, and/or cognitive abilities, which could have added valuable insights into the interpretation of the significant effect of age on the constructs *Security* and *Defensive/Avoidance*, as well as the significant difference between groups in *Defensive/Avoidance* scores.
- A measure of ToM was not included in the current study; its inclusion could have aided in interpreting the significant impact of age on the SSAP. ToM concepts have been shown to advance with age in previous studies (e.g., Devine & Hughes, 2013), therefore, children’s narratives in the separated group, in the current study, may be less

defensive and more secure due to advanced ToM concepts in older children. It would have been advantageous to match the groups on ToM capabilities, or to control for any significant differences in ToM between groups. This could have yielded a better understanding of the significant difference between groups in the *Defensive/Avoidance* construct.

- The current study gathered anecdotal data on the state of parental conflict and/or co-parenting styles between parents of participants (i.e., the type of co-parental relationship was verbally communicated in-person/by telephone), rather than using questionnaires/surveys to collect data on pre- and post-divorce co-parental conflict/relations.
- The current study could have benefited from including a measure of parental depression to account for the possible confounding impact of maternal depression on children's psychopathology and outcomes found in previous studies (e.g., Wood, Repetti & Roesch, 2004).
- Data was not gathered on pubertal development in either sample. Ideally, future studies on divorce would include a measure of pubertal development, especially those studies examining psychosocial adjustment and attachment (e.g., Burnett et al., 2011), in order to gauge whether results are due to the stage of development or to the experience of divorce, *or both*. However, Burnett et al., (2011) cautioned that it is not satisfactory to include parent-report measures of pubertal development and that direct physician reports are more empirically sound. This requirement was beyond the scope of the current study but would be a particularly useful addition in future

studies in this area.

- The primary researcher was aware of participants' group membership during the coding process; although the primary researcher was 'blind' to all other identifiers, this limitation could have caused biases in interpretations and subsequent coding of narratives (Karanicolas, Farrokhyar & Bhandari, 2010).

3.4.6 Future directions

The findings of the current study present a preliminary base from which further investigations using non-intrusive, semi-projective measures, to investigate attachment/caregiver representations of latency-age children from divorced families can be accomplished. The current literature involves studies predominantly with pre-school age children or adolescents and thus, more studies in middle childhood and pre-adolescence are needed. As Drake (2008) stated, school-age children make up the largest group of children affected by divorce. However, this study has begun to bridge this gap due to the importance of middle childhood on lifetime development and how parental divorce can impact this journey (Franiack & Günter, 2010).

Future studies should include both separated and non-separated families as this aids in understanding whether differences in attachment and psychopathology are due to divorce or to the particular stage of development. Story stem techniques are evolving and are a valuable tool for assessing attachment and parent-child relationships and the representations of these relationships during middle childhood and pre-adolescence. Future work can utilise this methodology in gaining a better understanding of how divorce affects children's internal worlds whilst reducing anxiety, distress, and inhibitions.

As mentioned above, the current study did not include measures of verbal,

cognitive, ToM abilities, and/or pubertal development, which future research can benefit from including. These variables can aid in understanding the effects of age and stage of development on narrative assessments, as well as differences between children from separated and non-separated families.

Finally, since a significant difference between the two samples in *Defensive/Avoidance* scores was found in the current study, it would be interesting to understand more about this difference in future work. Particularly, examining whether or not the lower household income of the separated group could be mediating other factors such as, maternal stress/depression, loss of friendships, loss of familiarity, and/or less contact with the resident parent. Data collection on the state of co-parental conflict pre- and post-divorce, as well as parental depression would also provide further insight into this variance (e.g., exploring whether or not co-parental conflict and/or parental depression contribute to *Defensive/Avoidance* themes in children's story stem completions, and whether or not the duration of conflict has an impact). These helpful inclusions in future research may be possible through a longitudinal design considering several pre- and post-divorce factors, and building upon these preliminary findings, in order to better understand how variables like household income and co-parental conflict play a role in the adjustment to divorce.

3.5 Conclusions

The current study examined differences/similarities in attachment/caregiver representations between children from separated and non-separated families, using the shortened 7-stem SSAP (Hillman, 2011, unpublished). This was examined in order to address the aim of the current thesis—gaining insight into the latency-age child’s internal world post-divorce. Children from separated families showed significantly more *Defensive/Avoidance* representations than children from non-separated families.

Children from separated families also showed a decrease in *Defensive/Avoidance* scores and an increase in *Security* scores with increasing age, however, this second relationship was found in both samples of children. The significant effect of age on *Security* found in both samples could be due to more ‘normative’ patterns of development and their impact on narrative/play assessments in general—not specific to divorce—such as enhancements in story-telling/verbal abilities (Davies, 2010); older children’s narratives may be more sophisticated, expressive and coherent (Gleason, 2005). Whereas, the decrease in *Defensive/Avoidance* themes with increases in age, found in the separated group, could indicate that age may be a protective ‘buffer’ for children from separated families; perhaps due to changes in attachment, ToM concepts, tolerating ambivalence, and the ability to perspective-take, that accompany increases in age (Devine & Hughes, 2013; Dumontheil et al., 2010; Jambon & Smetana, 2014; Kerns, 2008).

With regards to the ‘divorce-related’ variables (i.e., length of time since separation, contact with father, and household income) tested in the current study, no significant effects on the SSAP were found. These results support Amato’s (2000, 2010) argument that the experience of divorce for children is complex and it is

challenging to ascertain whether the experience of one parent moving from the home and separating from a significant attachment figure, is the most significant variable distinguishing the two samples on their *Defensive/Avoidance* scores.

In conclusion, latency-age children from separated families showed some significant differences in their narrative responses and internal attachment/caregiver representations when compared to children from non-separated families. These differences are important to understand further in relation to variables unaccounted for in the current study. However, future work can build upon these initial findings with further in-depth, longitudinal studies on the internal worlds of children from separated families.

Chapter 4: Exploring how a new topic-relevant story stem, *Dog Moving House*, could contribute to the study of latency-age children from separated families.

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will examine how a new ‘topic-relevant’ stem may aid in exploring the internal world, specifically, the attachment/caregiver representations of latency-age children from separated families. The current chapter will begin with an examination of previous studies that have implemented adaptations of story stems when attempting to target specific topics within a particular population. Attention will also be given to studies that have adapted a story stem measure to administer to children from separated families. This introduction will conclude with a description of the gap in the literature and how the current study aims to bridge this gap. The current study anticipates to indirectly address the primary objective of the current thesis: *To understand how the latency-age child experiences divorce from their own perspective*. This will be attempted through the development and administration of a new story stem that may tap into the internal world of latency-age children from separated families.

4.1.1 Story stem adaptations

Story stem adaptations are an accepted feature of story stem research as they can allow more engagement with children from various populations and with different needs. Childhood experiences vary greatly and it can be difficult to apply one pre-established battery of stems to different experiences. Previous story stem adaptations have included: Creating new stems, removing stems, and adapting well-established coding systems (e.g., Bretherton & Page, 2001, 2004; Grych, Wachsmuth-Schlaefler, & Klockow, 2002). Hillman (2011, unpublished) points out that although this increases the flexibility, applicability, and use of the story stem measure, the

reliability and validity of these measures may not always be established. Bretherton and Oppenheim (2003) also cautioned against researchers utilising new stems without piloting them, so that an appropriate script and placement/layout of props/toys is established before widespread use.

4.1.2 The use of ‘topic-relevant’ stems

Although story stem measures were developed initially as standard tools with specific protocols, scripts, and guidelines, there have been some researchers who explored the need to adapt existing systems to specific research aims or populations. At an elementary level, some story stem adaptations include alterations to the props/toys used in order to tailor the measure to specific cultures, and religious beliefs. For instance, the SSAP replaces pigs in the ‘Stamping Elephant’ stem if participants have strong Muslim or Jewish beliefs to make the stems more relatable (Hillman, 2011, unpublished; Hodges & Hillman, 2007). In other studies, the family members/figures have been adapted; for instance, Poehlmann (2005) assessed representations of attachment relationships of young children whose mothers were incarcerated utilising the Attachment Story Completion Task (ASCT; Bretherton, Ridgeway, et al., 1990) and used adult dolls to represent different family members matched to the relationship of the participant and their caregiver (e.g., grandmother, aunt, etc.). This was because the majority of her sample did not reside with a ‘parent’; they resided with another relative such as a grandmother (Poehlmann, 2005). However, this kind of adaptation does not endeavor to tap into the displaced experiences of the participants but rather encourages identification with the story stems and their characters. The adjustment of props/toys to suit the sample under study is similar to the guidelines utilised within the SSAP which incorporate the use

of the same gender of doll as the participant, or matching the doll family's skin colour to that of the participant's (Hodges et al., 2015; Hillman, 2011).

Langevin, Hébert and Cossette's (2015) study investigated affect regulation in a group of preschoolers who had experienced sexual abuse and a control group. They used eight stories from the MSSB for a range of emotions (e.g., sadness, fear, shame, joy); the researchers felt that an additional stem was needed to elicit *disappointment* for the purposes of their study. They created a stem showing a fun event/activity being cancelled; they also elaborated their coding system to specifically assess affect regulation, based on the narrative coding system of the Narrative Emotion Code and the MacArthur Group Coding system (Langevin, Hébert & Cossette, 2015). It is important to note that the researchers did not include details of how their new stem was developed, its validation, or results of the stem between groups and whether or not it tapped into this type of affect once used. Langevin, Hébert and Cossette (2015) reported that they did not find group differences using their adapted narrative measure.

In a study on parental conflict, Grych, Wachsmuth-Schlaefler, and Klockow (2002) used the MSSB to investigate maternal, self, and marital representations of children who experienced marital/parental conflict. The researchers developed three new stems to tap into interparental conflict as the original MSSB only included one (i.e., *Lost Keys*; a stem included in the SSAP) (Grych, Wachsmuth-Schlaefler & Klockow, 2002). By increasing the number of stems tapping into the topic under investigation, they believed they would generate more reliable data concerning children's expectations of conflict resolution. The three new stems showed the parents disagreeing about what to have for dinner, whose relatives to visit on an upcoming holiday, and how to punish the child for accidentally breaking a lamp (Grych,

Wachsmuth-Schlaefel & Klockow, 2002). They found significant group differences showing that children recruited from agencies supporting battered women elicited less positive maternal and self representations, escalation of interparental conflict, as well as more avoidance and less coherence in their narratives regarding family interactions, than those from a nonviolent community sample (Grych, Wachsmuth-Schlaefel & Klockow, 2002).

4.1.3 Divorce and story stem adaptations/variations

The only study to the current author's knowledge that evaluates children from separated families with a story stem adaptation is by Page and Bretherton (2001). Utilising their initial adaptation, they were able to generate additional studies (See Page, 2001; Page & Bretherton, 2004). The researchers used an adapted version of The Expanded Attachment Completion Task (ASCT-R) that presented the mother and father as living in two separated houses. However, the researchers pointed out that none of the stems actually contained divorce-related content (Page & Bretherton, 2001). Their adaptations did not encourage displacement, which could have increased distress and inhibitions in participants; in addition, their adapted coding system did not take into account that the father was the acting parent in only one of their stems. This is important because the researchers devised a coding system that used tallying themes within children's narratives separately for mother and father; however, since fathers were underrepresented in their stems, children may have focused more on mother throughout their narratives—confounding their coding system and results.

These previous studies illustrate the usefulness of tailoring story stem measures to specific populations to aid in addressing research questions. However, it is important to caution against the assumption that because a measure utilises themes, dilemmas or topics that are similar to the experiences of the population under study,

ensures its ability to tap into or yield new/significant findings about that population (e.g., Langevin, Hébert & Cossette, 2015 study).

4.1.4 The gap in the literature

The literature demonstrates that there are a limited number of studies utilising a topic-relevant story stem measure to investigate the internal representations of latency-age children from separated families (e.g., Page, 2001; Page & Bretherton, 2001, 2004). These studies primarily focus on pre-schoolers with relatively little attention given to latency and pre-adolescent children. The tailored story stem measure used by Page and Bretherton's (2001; 2004) with children from separated families did not utilise displacement from the participant's real experience of divorce as parents within the stems lived separately. Page and Bretherton (2001; 2004) did not use stems with divorce-related content/themes. The current study aims to bridge this gap by providing a group of latency-age children with a displaced story stem—anticipating that this will provide a feeling of security when narrating their stories—whilst also containing separation-relevant content.

4.1.5 The current study

The aims of the current study were to investigate some of the psychometric properties of a new topic-relevant story stem and through this process, investigate what it can add to the literature on the internal world of latency-age children from separated families.

By addressing the **first** research question of the current study, an examination of whether or not a topic-relevant stem added anything 'new' and different to the SSAP, or if it mirrored the stems within the battery, can be carried out. Any differences between the two versions of the SSAP (i.e., the original 7-stem version and an 8-stem version containing the new topic-relevant story stem) may be explained

by the addition of this novel stem. Therefore, the first research question is exploratory because the novel stem created for the current study has not been previously empirically tested. It may elicit different attachment/caregiver representations to the other stems in the SSAP battery as it includes a story of a *final* separation, without reunion, intended to tap into the experience of divorce, which the other SSAP stems do not involve. Thus, the first research question of the current study is:

1. *How does the addition of a new topic-relevant story stem tailored to the experience of separation behave in relation to the original 7-stem SSAP?*

The **second** research question aided in addressing both goals of the current study. Firstly, it focused on examining whether or not the new, topic-relevant stem was tapping into any attachment/caregiver representations that may be specific to the experience of divorce. Secondly, by addressing this question, the current study would also identify psychometric properties of this new stem:

2. *Does a story stem, tailored to the experience of separation without reunion, elicit differences between the responses of children from separated and non-separated families?*

The ‘homogeneity of variance’ analysis reported in Section 3.3.1 had identified that ‘household income’ was significantly uneven in the two sample groups. Thus, in the current study ‘household income’ would also be tested for its impact on the new stem, as was carried out in Chapter 3 between household income and the SSAP.

The **third** question aided in further exploring whether or not the new stem measured what it set out to measure (i.e., the attachment/caregiver representations of children from separated families) and whether or not it can add anything to the

literature on the internal world of latency-age children from separated families. This question was addressed through the use of another stem from the original SSAP battery—*Lost Keys*. Although, *Lost Keys* does not explicitly target the experience of ‘parental divorce,’ it attempts to target a child’s ability to resolve conflict, and display resilience in the face of it, by utilising his/her attachment/caregiver representations. This is within the context of ‘parental conflict’ and the dilemma within the stem was elicited by close attachment figures (i.e., parents). By using this stem as a comparison tool, the new stem can be examined for its ability to tap into children’s problem-solving skills and their resilience when faced with separation from a close attachment figure, which are tools rooted in their attachment/caregiver representations. Arguably, *Lost Keys* and the new topic-relevant stem are both targeting experiences closely related to parental divorce (i.e., conflict and separation) and both experiences tend to be part of a larger process that can make up the experience of, and adjustment to, divorce (see Amato, 2000, 2010). Thus, the question that would be addressed in both children from separated and non-separated families was:

3. How does a topic-relevant stem from the 7-stem SSAP (i.e., Lost Keys) compare to the new topic-relevant stem in terms of attachment/caregiver representations?

The researcher formed hypotheses for these research questions outlined below:

1. An 8-stem SSAP, including the new topic-relevant story stem, will elicit differences in attachment/caregiver representations when compared to the original 7-stem SSAP.

2. The new topic-relevant story stem will elicit different attachment/caregiver representations based on whether or not a child has experienced parental separation.
3. There will be similarities in attachment/caregiver representations in response to the new topic-relevant story stem and the established story stem, *Lost Keys*.

4.2 Method

4.2.1 Recruitment

The current sample is the one used in Chapter 3. The recruitment process and details of participants are described in Chapter 3. This ‘Method’ section will summarise the main features of the current study below.

4.2.2 Participants

Non-separated. The non-separated group consisted of 39 children whose ages ranged from 6 to 11 ($M = 7.49$, $SD = 1.50$). 53.8% of the sample consisted of males and 72% of participants were ‘White’.

Separated The separated group consisted of 29 children whose ages ranged between 6 and 10 ($M = 7.66$, $SD = 1.47$). 62.1% of the sample consisted of males and 69% of participants were ‘White’. The entire sample maintained their primary residence with their mother.

4.2.3 Procedure

Chapter 3 included details about location, tools, administration of the SSAP (completed before the administration of the new stem), and the administration of the demographic questionnaire. The procedure of administering the new stem will be outlined below.

4.2.4 Measures

4.2.4.1 Children’s representations

Story Stem Assessment Profile (SSAP; Hodges, Hillman & Steele, 2007)

Chapter 3 includes a description of the shortened 7-stem SSAP (Hillman, 2011, unpublished), which was used in the current chapter. The coding manual used in the current thesis was devised by Hodges et al. (2015).

Lost Keys (Hodges, Hillman & Steele, 2007) *Lost Keys* is the final stem of the 7-stem SSAP battery (Hillman, 2011, unpublished) and is a stem within the battery that can be relevant to children from separated families as it presents a conflict between parents (Block, Block & Morrison, 1981) (see Appendix Q for the full stem, characters, and props). The protagonist is faced with his/her parents in an argument about *Lost Keys* and is asked to show and tell what happens next. This stem aims to tap into a child's conflict resolution abilities as well as providing him/her with an opportunity to enact what happens about the *Lost Keys*. In order to accomplish this, children may need to utilise their internal representations of attachment (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001). This stem may provide researchers with an opportunity to better understand a child's experiences within their family home and how they may reflect on problems that arise between significant attachment figures in their lives. This stem was selected as the most relevant stem within the battery with regards to the current study topic, as a large majority of children in separated families have experienced pre- and post-separation parental conflict (Block, Block & Morrison, 1981; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Therefore, this stem was considered an adequate comparison tool for the new, topic-relevant stem and was used as such in the analyses to follow. If the new stem behaves in a similar or different way than *Lost Keys* this can inform the current study about the validity of the new stem.

Dog Moving House Stem (DMH). The DMH stem is a new topic-relevant stem developed for the current study. Its aim, conceptualisation, rationale, and development were described in detail in Chapter 2. The following sections provide details regarding its administration, materials, narration style, prompts, and coding.

Administration. In order not to hinder the structure and administration of the SSAP, the DMH stem was printed on a separate sheet from the SSAP manual and

introduced following the completion of the 7-stem *SSAP*. DMH follows the last stem of the 7-stem *SSAP* (*Lost Keys*). By introducing *DMH* following the completion of the *SSAP*, the participant may be more familiar with the protagonist, the family characters, and the interviewer. The participant may have established a certain level of rapport and comfort with the interviewer in order to be able to explore this sensitive theme.

Materials. Toys and props were needed for this stem due to its aim of incorporating both verbal and non-verbal storytelling. The props and toys used for DMH included:

- (a) A wooden brick symbolising the side of the house;
- (b) A Playmobil dog;
- (c) A Playmobil child representing the protagonist in the story in either a dark or light skin tone corresponding with the participant's skin tone;
- (d) A Playmobil mother, also in either a corresponding dark or light skin tone.

Items (a), (c), and (d) were included in the *SSAP* toy kit; however, following the development of this stem, the researcher purchased item (b) separately. The Playmobil dog was white with black spots and there was no indication if it was male or female. As the child chooses the name of the dog, there is no allusion to the dog's sex and this was considered suitable as it would leave the acknowledgement, or lack thereof, of sex to the participant. The dog was considered an adult due to the nature of the stem revolving around the concept of an important 'adult' attachment figure leaving the home (i.e., representing the non-resident parent departing from the family home during divorce); this was symbolised by referring to it as a 'dog', not a 'puppy'.

Narration of DMH. The participant is initially asked what he/she would like to name the dog and once a name is chosen, the interviewer begins narrating the stem (see Appendix A for the complete stem). Whilst narrating the stem, the interviewer shows the protagonist ‘playing’ with the dog (i.e., showing the two running after each other for approximately two seconds, then jumping up against each other twice and then wraps the protagonist’s arms around the dog). The dog is then removed (i.e., placed under the table or on the interviewer’s lap and out of the participant’s line of vision) and the interviewer continues narrating the stem, concluding with the dog moving to another house.

Following the interviewer’s narration of the story stem, the child is invited to show and tell the interviewer what happens next. No explanation as to why the dog has gone to live in another house is provided within the stem; this is to encourage the use of the child’s own imagination, meaning-making, and experience. This also leaves the stem less structured to allow a richer narrative from the child. Like the SSAP, DMH was video-recorded in order to capture moments of both verbal and non-verbal engagement with toys and props.

Prompts. Two prompts were developed for DMH, in order to encourage the child to consider the dilemma or conflict that has been raised within the stem. For instance, if there is no mention of either the dog or the conflict (i.e., the child being separated from his/her pet), the interviewer would then ask the child, “Did anyone say anything about (*name of dog*)?” or “What did (*child name*) do after hearing the news of (*name of dog*)?” These prompts were selected in order to prevent disengagement from or avoidance of the central story issue (Emde, Wolf & Oppenheim, 2003). As described in Chapter 3, all SSAP stems are accompanied by prompts that can be used in instances of avoidance of story themes/dilemmas, changing narrative parameters,

and/or denying or altering affect within the stem (Hodges et al., 2015). The abovementioned prompts were each only used once when necessary throughout the DMH stem.

Coding. The SSAP coding manual (Hodges et al., 2015) was used to code DMH. By applying this coding system, a greater understanding as to whether or not this new stem is a reliable and valid story stem for use with this population may be achieved. By utilising the same coding manual as the SSAP, comparisons between scores calculated for the new stem and the SSAP were made possible. This also permitted the examination of the DMH in relation to *Lost Keys*. The researcher was not blind to group membership during coding of narratives but was blind to all other identifiers. Refer to Section 3.2.6 for a detailed description of how coding and total scores were achieved using the SSAP coding manual (Hodges et al., 2015) (see Appendices Q and R for codes).

In order to achieve inter-rater reliability, a supervisor on the current study and developer of the SSAP measure, Dr. Saul Hillman, applied the SSAP coding system (Hodges et al., 2015) to the new stem on 20% of the stories from each of the groups. Dr. Saul Hillman was blind to group membership (i.e., whether participants belonged to the separated or non-separated sample groups) and all other identifiers. The 20% were randomly selected using the SPSS function “select cases”. Inter-rater agreement was high, with a percentage of 89.7% agreement across all 38 codes and across the sample of 24 DMH stories coded by the supervisor and primary researcher. The overall average Intraclass Correlational Coefficient (ICC) for the inter-rater reliability testing was 0.77, indicating good reliability, between Dr. Saul Hillman and the primary researcher on the current thesis. The specific form of ICC used in the calculation was as follows: The ‘model’ selection was 2-way random-effects model;

the ‘type’ selection was ‘single rater’; and the ‘definition’ selection was ‘absolute agreement’ (Koo & Li, 2016).

4.2.4.2 Parent-report measures

Demographic Questionnaire. Section 3.2.5 provided a description of the demographic questionnaire. Relevant demographic information was used in the current chapter (i.e., age, gender, household income, length of time since separation, and contact with father) to gain a better understanding of latency-age children from separated families and how DMH may or may not be influenced by these variables.

4.2.5 Ethics

The procedure for obtaining ethical approval for the current study was the same as the protocol described in Chapter 3, and was covered under the same approval granted by University College London (UCL).

4.2.6 Planned Analysis

Due to the relatively small sample size in each group and skewness statistics demonstrating deviations from normality for most of the constructs elicited by *Lost Keys* and DMH, non-parametric statistics were used to compare stems and groups (see Appendix AC for relevant skewness statistics).

In order to answer the first question of the current study, the 7-stem SSAP with and without the addition of the DMH stem was examined descriptively for differences/similarities in internal consistency (i.e., a visual inspection of whether or not the new stem was ‘pulling’ for similar codes to the other stems in the battery). This was accomplished by calculating Cronbach’s alpha scores for the two versions (i.e., Version A: 7-stem SSAP and Version B: 7-stem SSAP with DMH) and then reporting on any similarities/differences descriptively. The second component of

answering this question was by evaluating these two versions for statistically significant differences between constructs using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test.

In order to answer the second question, the attachment constructs elicited by DMH were analysed for statistically significant differences between groups using Mann-Whitney *U* tests. This analysis was also carried out on *Lost Keys*. Furthermore, as was done in Chapter 3, statistically significant differences in construct scores between the two levels of ‘household income’ outlined in Section 3.3.1, elicited by both DMH and *Lost Keys*, were tested using Mann-Whitney *U* tests.

In order to answer the last question, *Lost Keys* was examined in comparison to the DMH stem using Wilcoxon signed-rank tests. This was carried out to examine statistically significant differences in attachment scores between two stories that both focused on ‘divorce-related’ content, between both sample groups.

Due to the moderately low number of statistical analyses carried out in the current study (i.e., 9 paired samples tests and 12 independent samples tests), the risk of a Type I error is low, thus, an alpha of 0.05 will be used to establish statistical significance.

4.3 Results

4.3.1 Internal consistency: SSAP with and without DMH

In order to explore how the addition of a story stem specifically tailored to the experience of separation behaves in relation to the 7-stem SSAP, the internal consistency of the 7-stem SSAP was explored with and without DMH as an eighth stem (see Table 4.1). Table 4.1 presents Cronbach's alpha scores for the four attachment constructs across all seven stories in the SSAP and then across eight stories, including DMH.

Table 4.1

Cronbach's alpha scores for SSAP constructs across the 7-item SSAP without DMH (first column) and with DMH (second column).

Attachment constructs	Cronbach's Alpha (7 vs. 8 stems)	
Security	.710	.739
Insecurity	.134	.160
Disorganised	.607	.686
Defensive/Avoidance	.466	.434

Table 4.1 demonstrates that descriptively there were minimal differences between the two versions in terms of their Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the four attachment constructs. Cronbach's alphas for *Security* and *Disorganised* were fairly good across both versions; *Defensive/Avoidance* was fairly low across both versions; and *Insecurity* was very low across both versions. This approach of reporting descriptive differences/similarities in Cronbach's alpha coefficients between two versions of a measure (e.g., an online questionnaire vs. the equivalent questionnaire offline) has been carried out in previously published research (See Hewson & Charlton, 2005 and Riva, Teruzzi & Anolli, 2003).

Furthermore, the addition of the DMH stem did not appear to greatly change the internal consistency of the instrument when looking at the internal consistency

obtained for the other stories. This exercise was able to provide an initial descriptive analysis of how the two versions with and without DMH appear across the four constructs. The addition of DMH to the SSAP makes minimal differences to the alpha values suggesting that DMH is likely to tap into a similar range of codes/themes as the other 7 SSAP stems.

Similarly to Chapter 3, the *Insecurity* construct was not used in further analyses due to its extremely low Cronbach's alpha score ($\alpha = .16$) in the SSAP 8-stem version that included DMH.

4.3.2 Differences in attachment constructs between the SSAP with and without DMH

In order to examine DMH as a new stem, and to gauge whether it elicits similar construct scores as the original 7-stem SSAP (Version A), it was added as an eighth stem to the 7-stem SSAP (Version B) and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were computed between the two versions' attachment constructs.

There were no statistically significant differences between Versions A and B with regards to the constructs *Security* and *Defensive/Avoidance*; however, there was a statistically significant difference ($Mdn = -.05$) between Version A ($Mdn = 1$) and Version B ($Mdn = .88$), $z = 3.06$, $p = .002$ for the *Disorganised* construct, with a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.80$) (see Table 4.2 for descriptive statistics and Table 4.3 for Wilcoxon results).

Table 4.2

Descriptive statistics of constructs for Version A (without DMH) and Version B (with DMH).

Construct	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Median	Median difference
Security (Version A)	68	2.20	1.30	1.86	>.01
Security (Version B)	68	2.20	1.31	1.94	

Disorganised (Version A)	68	1.12	.85	1	-.05
Disorganised (Version B)	68	1.09	.88	.88	
Defensive/Avoidance (Version A)	68	.99	.60	.93	
Defensive/Avoidance (Version B)	68	1.03	.54	.94	> .01

Table 4.3

Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test results between Version A (Without DMH) and Version B (with DMH) for three constructs.

Construct	z	p
Security	.43	.664
Disorganised	-3.06	.002
Defensive/Avoidance	-1.24	.214

Based on the results displayed in Table 4.3, the addition of DMH significantly differentiated the *Disorganised* construct between the two versions, suggesting that DMH did not elicit *Disorganised* codes as often as the 7 stems in the SSAP.

4.3.3 Group differences: DMH

The separated and non-separated groups were assessed for differences in attachment constructs elicited by DMH. The descriptive statistics for each construct by group are presented in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4

Descriptive statistics for constructs for separated and non-separated children generated by DMH.

Attachment construct	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Median	Mean Rank
Security	Separated	29	2.55	3.05	2	32.83
	Non-separated	39	2.49	2.17	2	35.74
Disorganised	Separated	29	.76	1.33	<.01	34.72
	Non-separated	39	1.00	1.97	<.01	34.33
Defensive/Avoidance	Separated	29	1.34	1.17	1	35.21
	Non-separated	39	1.26	1.14	1	33.97

In order to assess whether any of the differences displayed in Table 4.4 were statistically significant, three Mann-Whitney *U* tests were computed (see Table 4.5).

Table 4.5

Mann-Whitney U test results of the significant differences between children from separated and non-separated families in constructs generated by DMH.

	Security	Disorganised	Defensive/Avoidance
Mann-Whitney <i>U</i>	517	559	545
<i>Z</i>	-.61	-.10	-.26
Sig. (2-tailed)	.540	.923	.792

No statistically significant differences were found between the two groups on any of the attachment constructs generated using DMH. Thus, DMH did not significantly differentiate the groups on any of the constructs.

It was established in Chapter 3 that ‘household income’ was significantly different between the groups; $\chi^2(1, N = 68) = 33.26, p < .001$. Due to this, household income was also assessed for its impact on DMH construct scores. Mann-Whitney *U* tests were computed to assess if there were significant differences in construct scores generated by DMH, between the two levels of ‘household income’. Table 4.6 demonstrates that no significant differences were found between the two levels of household income (£60, 000 or less and £60, 001 or more) on any of the constructs.

Table 4.6

Mann-Whitney U test results of the significant differences between two levels of ‘household income’ in constructs generated by DMH.

	Security	Disorganised	Defensive/Avoidance
Mann-Whitney <i>U</i>	553	518	551
<i>Z</i>	-.16	-.71	-.19
Sig. (2-tailed)	.874	.478	.852

4.3.4 Group differences: *Lost Keys*

In order to complete the comparison between DMH and the story within the SSAP that was most relevant to the current study, Mann-Whitney *U* tests were also

run between the two groups' construct scores elicited by *Lost Keys*. Descriptive statistics for each construct are displayed in Table 4.7, followed by the results of the Mann-Whitney *U* tests in Table 4.8.

Table 4.7

Descriptive statistics for constructs for children from separated and non-separated families generated by Lost Keys.

Attachment construct	Assigned Group	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Median	Mean rank
Security	Separated	29	1.07	1.41	<.01	35.74
	Non-separated	39	1.21	1.95	<.01	33.58
Disorganised	Separated	29	1.86	1.75	2	34.43
	Non-separated	39	1.87	1.69	2	34.55
Defensive/ Avoidance	Separated	29	1.48	1.12	1	39.84
	Non-separated	39	.97	1.11	1	30.53

Table 4.8

Mann-Whitney U test results of significant differences between children from separated and non-separated families in constructs generated by Lost Keys.

	Security	Disorganised	Defensive/Avoidance
Mann-Whitney <i>U</i>	529	563.5	410.5
<i>Z</i>	-.50	-.03	-2
Sig. (2-tailed)	.62	.980	.045

Table 4.8 illustrates that there were no statistically significant differences between children from separated and non-separated families in *Security* or *Disorganised* using *Lost Keys*. However, there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups in the *Defensive/Avoidance* construct, with a moderate effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.48$), according to Cohen (1988); this finding aligns with the statistically significant difference found between the two groups in *Defensive/Avoidance* scores found in Chapter 3 using the 7-stem SSAP.

Mann-Whitney *U* tests were also computed to assess if there was a significant

impact of the variable ‘household income’ on the construct scores elicited by *Lost Keys*. No significant difference was found between the two levels of household income (£60, 000 or less and £60, 001 or more) on any of the constructs generated by *Lost Keys* (see Table 4.9 for Mann-Whitney *U* test results).

Table 4.9

Mann-Whitney U test results of the significant differences between two levels of ‘household income’ in constructs generated by Lost Keys.

	Security	Disorganised	Defensive/Avoidance
Mann-Whitney <i>U</i>	492.5	507.5	447
<i>Z</i>	-1.02	-.74	-1.53
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.309	.461	.126

4.3.5 DMH and *Lost Keys*: Similarities and/or differences

In order to address research question (3) *Lost Keys* and DMH were compared using Wilcoxon signed-rank tests within each sample group. Descriptive data is presented in Table 4.10. Tables 4.11 and 4.12 show that scores in two of the constructs, *Security* and *Disorganised*, significantly differed between *Lost Keys* and DMH for both sample groups.

Children from separated families scored significantly lower ($Mdn = -2$) in *Security* when using *Lost Keys* ($Mdn = <.01$) than when using DMH ($Mdn = 2$); $z = 2.29$, $p = .022$; with a large effect size (Cohen’s $d = 0.94$). Whereas, they scored significantly lower ($Mdn = -1$) in *Disorganised* when using DMH ($Mdn = -1$) than when using *Lost Keys* ($Mdn = 2$); $z = -3.02$, $p = .003$; with a very large effect size (Cohen’s $d = 1.36$).

Children from non-separated families followed the same pattern, scoring significantly lower ($Mdn = -2$) in *Security* when using *Lost Keys* ($Mdn = <.01$) than when using DMH ($Mdn = <.01$); $z = 3.19$, $p = .001$; with a very large effect size

(Cohen's $d = 1.19$). They also scored significantly lower ($Mdn = -1$) in *Disorganised* when using DMH ($Mdn = <.01$) than when using *Lost Keys* ($Mdn = 2$); $z = -2.87$, $p = .004$; with a very large effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.04$).

There was no statistically significant difference ($Mdn = <.01$) in *Defensive/Avoidance* scores generated by *Lost Keys* ($Mdn = 1$) or DMH ($Mdn = 1$) for children from separated ($z = .52$, $p = .605$) and non-separated families ($z = -1.18$, $p = .239$) (See Tables 4.11 and 4.12 for Wilcoxon test results).

Table 4.10

Descriptive statistics for SSAP constructs, listed by stem and sample group.

Sample group		Mean	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>	Median	Median difference
Separated	Pair 1					
	Security (DMH)	2.55	29	3.05	2	-2
	Security (<i>Lost keys</i>)	1.07	29	1.41	<.01	
	Pair 2					
	Disorganised (DMH)	.76	29	1.33	<.01	-1
	Disorganised (<i>Lost keys</i>)	1.86	29	1.75	2	
Non-separated	Pair 3					
	Defensive/Avoidance (DMH)	1.34	29	1.17	1	<.01
	Defensive/Avoidance (<i>Lost keys</i>)	1.48	29	1.12	1	
	Pair 1					
	Security (DMH)	2.49	39	2.17	2	-2
	Security (<i>Lost keys</i>)	1.21	39	1.95	<.01	
Non-separated	Pair 2					
	Disorganised (DMH)	1.00	39	1.97	<.01	-1
	Disorganised (<i>Lost keys</i>)	1.87	39	1.69	2	
	Pair 3					
Defensive/Avoidance (DMH)	1.26	39	1.14	1	<.01	

Defensive/ Avoidance (Lost keys)	.97	39	1.11	1
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Table 4.11

Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test results between Lost Keys and DMH listed by construct, for children from separated families.

Construct	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>
Security	2.29	.022
Disorganised	-3.02	.003
Defensive/Avoidance	.52	.605

Table 4.12

Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test results between Lost Keys and DMH listed by construct, for children from non-separated families.

Construct	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>
Security	3.19	.001
Disorganised	-2.87	.004
Defensive/Avoidance	-1.18	.239

4.4 Discussion

The current study aimed to accomplish two goals, to explore some of the psychometric properties of the new topic-relevant stem, DMH, and to explore what it could add to the understanding of children's internal worlds from separated families. In order to accomplish the first aim, DMH was examined in addition to the SSAP and this new 8-stem version was compared to the original SSAP descriptively using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the 7-stem SSAP and the new 8-stem version were considered quite similar, descriptively, for the four constructs across all stories. This suggests that DMH was likely 'pulling' for similar themes to ones elicited by the other stories in the battery. It is important to consider that two of the constructs possessed quite low internal consistencies (i.e., *Insecurity* and *Defensive/Avoidance*); however, as was carried out in Chapter 3, the *Insecurity* construct was removed from all further analyses in the current chapter. Although the *Defensive/Avoidance* Cronbach's alpha was considered low, it was not removed from further analyses. This decision was reached by careful consideration of the measure and its diverse stories, which make up and contribute to the different constructs and its multi-dimensional nature—thus, due to the variable nature of the stems that make up the SSAP, the low internal consistency of *Defensive/Avoidance* was viewed as a possible strength of the measure and supported its ability to pull for different codes across different stories/dilemmas.

Furthermore, Wilcoxon signed-rank tests carried out between the original 7-stem SSAP and the new 8-stem version (i.e., including DMH), showed one statistically significant difference between the two versions (i.e., the construct *Disorganised* was significantly different between the two versions, with a large effect size). This assessment was carried out in order to see whether the addition of DMH

had any bearing on how the full set of stories were behaving and tapping into the constructs. This aided in informing the current study about the new stem's internal consistency.

In order to accomplish the second aim, examining whether or not any statistically significant differences existed between the DMH narratives of children from separated and non-separated families was important. However, unlike the SSAP, which significantly differentiated the two groups on the construct *Defensive/Avoidance* in Chapter 3, DMH did not differentiate the two groups on any of the constructs. However, a statistically significant difference was found between children from separated and non-separated families' *Defensive/Avoidance* scores within their *Lost Keys* narratives. Specifically, *Lost Keys* narratives by children from separated families had statistically significantly higher *Defensive/Avoidance* codes than *Lost Keys* narratives by children from non-separated families. This finding presented valuable information about the child's internal world post-divorce; a stem about parental conflict distinguished children based on their experience of divorce in a more significant way than a stem about 'separation' did.

Finally, Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were computed between DMH and *Lost Keys* on the three constructs, for each sample group, and showed statistically significant differences. Specifically, significant differences were found for two of the constructs (i.e., *Security* and *Disorganised*) between *Lost Keys* and DMH for children from separated and non-separated families. The statistically significant differences between the two stems' construct scores in *Security* and *Disorganised* within each group were similar between groups.

The following sections will provide an in-depth discussion and interpretation of these results and will conclude with a summary of the current study's strengths,

limitations, and future directions.

4.4.1 Internal consistency: SSAP with and without DMH

The first hypothesis of the current chapter: **An 8-stem SSAP, including the new topic-relevant story stem, will elicit differences in attachment/caregiver representations when compared to the original 7-stem SSAP**, was tested by carrying out two separate analyses. Initially, the differences in the internal consistencies of each construct between the two versions were descriptively analysed. The version of the SSAP with DMH (Version B) appeared to have Cronbach's alpha scores comparable to the original SSAP's (Version A) Cronbach's alpha scores.

The alpha scores for both versions indicated that with and without DMH, the two versions were similar to one another in a descriptive sense. Though this was a descriptive exercise, the attachment constructs were similarly coherent in terms of internal consistency between the two versions, suggesting that DMH and the SSAP 7-stem battery were eliciting a similar range of themes/codes. This is speculated to be primarily due to DMH's development being based closely on principles of the SSAP. Perhaps, its structure and style closely resembling the rest of the stems in the battery may have resulted in it being internally consistent with the rest of the stems in the battery.

4.4.2 Differences in SSAP constructs between Version A and Version B

The first hypothesis was also tested by running non-parametric tests on the data to determine whether or not any significant differences existed between Version A and Version B, with regards to the constructs. This analysis demonstrated that the first hypothesis was not upheld in terms of internal consistency due to the alphas being comparable but it was accepted in terms of construct scores. The results of the Wilcoxon signed-rank tests indicated that the two versions did statistically

significantly differ on the *Disorganised* construct. The construct *Disorganised* is made up of 7 codes (see Appendix R) including an inability to end a narrative (i.e., ‘no closure’) as well as violent/aggressive and/or bizarre themes.

Based on the descriptive data, Version B was eliciting *Disorganised* codes less than Version A was. Perhaps the stem did not allow children the opportunity to utilise these codes in their narratives, due to the scenario it depicted, and that DMH lowered the overall *Disorganised* construct score. DMH did not tap into this specific construct as much as the other stems in the battery and this could have been due to the order in which it was administered—for instance, decreasing the likelihood of using the code ‘no closure’ for example (i.e., an inability to provide the narrative with an ending). The 7-stem SSAP generally took participants approximately 30 minutes to complete and for some young children this can be difficult due to shorter attention spans. Davies (2010) indicated that attention is a skill that is acquired throughout middle childhood, as the child grows older. Children could have been rushing or eager to complete the task once they reached the 8th stem—DMH.

DMH was administered following *Lost Keys*, a stem that discusses parental conflict, which may be a sensitive topic/scenario for children from separated families. Perhaps *Lost Keys* heightened children’s inhibitions and thus, they were unable to engage in a story about another sensitive issue related to their experience.

Lastly, DMH may be the most relatable stem to children from separated families and perhaps raised their inhibitions, despite its use of displacement. The other stems in the SSAP may have been more suitable at eliciting less inhibited responses, as they do not raise the issue of separation from an attachment figure without reunion.

In sum, the first hypothesis of the current chapter was partly accepted. Further inquiry into these interpretations is required to confirm whether or not the scenario depicted in DMH, the order in which it was administered, and/or its close link to participants' experiences, may have reduced their use of *Disorganised* themes when completing the stem.

4.4.3 Group differences: DMH and *Lost Keys*

The second hypothesis of the current chapter: **The new topic-relevant story stem will elicit different attachment/caregiver representations based on whether or not a child has experienced parental separation**, was rejected. The results indicated that there were no statistically significant differences found between the two groups on any of the constructs (i.e., *Security*, *Disorganised*, and *Defensive/Avoidance*) elicited by DMH. One reason for this may be that children from separated families were more inhibited when faced with a story tapping into an experience that may be too similar to their own experience with divorce. Hodges et al. (2003) suggested that it can be unhelpful in narrative/play measures to replicate the participant's family and that for some children this can be anxiety provoking. Although a dog is used as the 'attachment figure' in DMH this may still have triggered representations of parental figures leaving the home in their external world.

Conversely, children from separated families are more familiar with the experience of separation and having an attachment figure leave the home and thus, may be better equipped than children from non-separated families with emotional and behavioural tools to cope with this type of dilemma. Perhaps the children's coping mechanisms used during past separations from their attachment figure are being activated when DMH is administered. Some studies show that following the two-year period post-divorce, children maintain resilience, despite interfering emotions, and

tend to return to their pre-divorce state of functioning and development (Garnezy, 1991; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). The descriptive data showed that children from separated families had higher mean scores in *Security* than those from non-separated families. Perhaps, past experiences and coping mechanisms learned from such experiences may account for their ability to respond more securely to a permanent separation dilemma than children who have not experienced this.

With regards to *Lost Keys*, a statistically significant difference was found between the groups in *Defensive/Avoidance* scores; children from separated families utilised more *Defensive/Avoidance* themes than children from non-separated families in response to *Lost Keys*. This is similar to Chapter 3's finding of the significant difference between the groups on the same construct using the SSAP. As would be expected, this significant finding indicated that *Lost Keys* is behaving similarly to the 7-stem SSAP (i.e., the measure from which it was obtained). Since *Lost Keys* taps into a sensitive topic (i.e., parental conflict), perhaps children from separated families are more inclined to avoid or defend against resolving such a dilemma/story and resort to using codes from the *Defensive/Avoidance* cluster more frequently than with the DMH. Children from separated families, who are entrenched in conflict, tend to adjust more poorly than those who are not faced with such conflict; poor adjustment may lead to higher inhibitions and shutting down when faced with such dilemmas (Emery, 1982; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). As quantitative data on co-parental conflict was not collected in the current study, it is difficult to determine why *Lost Keys* elicited this response; thus, this significant finding would require further inquiry in future research.

Finally, household income was identified as a 'divorce-related variable' in Chapter 3 and was also found to be significantly different between the two sample

groups. Thus, an exploratory analysis was carried out to determine if there were any significant differences between the two levels of household income, identified in Chapter 3, on any of the constructs generated by DMH and *Lost Keys*. There were no statistically significant differences between the two levels of household income on any of the constructs for either stem. This could perhaps signify the lack of impact of ‘household income’ on its own and that it may not be useful to look at the impact of household income in isolation. Previous research (e.g., South, Crowder & Trent, 1998) has suggested that the ‘detrimental’ effect of declines in household income for children’s psychological well-being post-divorce precedes several other drastic changes (e.g., moving to poorer communities, loss of friendships, teachers, and other attachment figures). Therefore, following up on these preliminary findings would be an important step in future studies examining the impact of divorce as a process. Perhaps, ‘household income’ mediates other variables that promote or hinder adjustment post-divorce (Amato, 2000, 2010; de Vaus et al., 2017; Fisher & Low, 2015).

4.4.4 DMH and *Lost Keys*: Similarities and/or differences

The third hypothesis of the current chapter: **There will be similarities in attachment/caregiver representations in response to the new topic-relevant story stem and the established story stem, *Lost Keys***, was rejected. Initially, a statistically significant difference between the two stems in *Defensive/Avoidance* was not found in either group. However, children from both groups elicited significant differences between their DMH and *Lost Keys* narratives with regards to the constructs *Security* and *Disorganised*. Children from separated and non-separated families scored higher in *Security* using DMH than with *Lost Keys* and scored lower in *Disorganised* using DMH than with *Lost Keys*.

Interestingly, both children from separated and non-separated families presented with statistically significant differences on the same constructs in a *similar* direction (i.e., lower *Disorganised* scores generated by DMH than by *Lost Keys* and higher *Security* scores generated by DMH than by *Lost Keys*). These findings may indicate that regardless of the experience of divorce, there may be something more challenging to address in a stem about ‘parental conflict’ than there is in a ‘separation’ stem.

4.4.5 Strengths

The current study is the first to our knowledge to administer a separation-related stem, without reunion, to a sample of children from divorced/separated families. This is a strength because it can pave the way for future studies to acknowledge the importance of topic-relevant story stems, which attempt to tap into the phenomena under study and can increase the flexibility, and applicability of story stem measures.

The current study created a displaced way for children from separated families to express their internal world through narrative. Particularly, by examining representations displaced onto a different kind of attachment figure—a pet; Hodges et al. (2003) suggested that this was the goal of story stem measures and that by using animals, the child is provided with an even further step of displacement to encourage narrative expression and even enjoyment of the measure. The DMH stem, mirroring semi-projective measures such as the SSAP, utilised an animal character to investigate a sensitive topic with a vulnerable population.

Although higher internal consistency is more desirable to claim a degree of reliability, it could be identified as a strength of the current study that the SSAP, with and without DMH, did not possess very high internal consistencies and thus, may

support the multidimensional design of the story stem measure and its ability to tap into various codes using a diverse set of scenarios/dilemmas.

4.4.6 Limitations

The current study suffered from similar drawbacks as Chapter 3, including a small sample size and issues with recruitment methodology. As mentioned in Section 3.4.5, measures of ‘pre- and post-co-parental conflict’, maternal depression, verbal/story-telling ability, pubertal development, and/or cognitive/intellectual abilities, would have been useful in the interpretation of the findings of the current study as well (Refer to Section 3.4.5 for a discussion of these limitations). The primary researcher was not blind to group membership when coding the DMH narratives and this could have caused biases in interpretations and the subsequent coding of the DMH (Karanicolas, Farrokhyar & Bhandari, 2010). According to Karanicolas, Farrokhyar and Bhandari (2010), since Dr. Saul Hillman was blind to group membership during the coding of a randomly-selected sample of DMH narratives and reached a good level of agreement with the primary researcher, biases could be reduced.

The current study did not pilot DMH prior to its administration—this was due to recruitment issues and the resulting small sample size and necessity to include all data in the final study. This missing component of the development of a new stem may perhaps be closely linked with the recruitment strategy and could have been remedied by recruiting a larger sample.

Although separation from a pet was used to decrease inhibitions and was perceived as a strength of the current study, it can also be viewed as a limitation as it may have made the characters and the stem *too* displaced/unrelatable from the experience of divorce.

Lastly, similarities in internal consistencies reported for the 7- and 8-stem versions may indicate that DMH did not add anything unique or new to the battery.

4.4.7 Future directions

Future directions can include the development of stems tapping into common conflicts/dilemmas children of divorce face, pre- and post-divorce (e.g., parental conflict, parental alienation of the other parent, having less contact with the non-resident parent, facing an unavailable parent, moving house/schools, etc.); and piloting these first. As mentioned in Chapter 3, it would also be useful to incorporate measures of verbal and story-telling abilities in order to gauge whether or not children are able to address the dilemma or verbalise their responses through narrative. Stems in future divorce studies could be more displaced (e.g., depicting the experience of divorce but utilising an animal family as opposed to a human family).

Future researchers can collect information about children's experiences with parental conflict post-divorce as well as collecting data on the non-separated group's experience with parental conflict. The significant difference between the groups on *Lost Keys* may indicate a need for future stems to include more 'divorce-relevant' features, rather than just the event of separation—for example, parental conflict, switching schools, and visitation arrangements.

Lastly, creating a tailored coding system and removing some of the codes from the original SSAP coding manual that may not be relevant to adapted stems could be useful (e.g., codes involving siblings could have been removed in the current study, as a sibling was not introduced in the DMH stem).

4.5 Conclusions

The current study examined the differences in attachment constructs and representations, using a new topic-relevant story stem, between children from separated and non-separated families. Responses to DMH were compared to both the 7-stem SSAP (Hillman, 2011, unpublished) as well as to one specific stem from the SSAP, *Lost Keys*, depicting a scenario of parental conflict. The internal consistency of the 7-stem SSAP with and without DMH was looked at descriptively. There appeared to be little difference between both versions. These results may suggest that although DMH proposed a new dilemma (i.e., separation from an attachment figure without reunion), not presented in the SSAP, it behaved quite similarly to the 7-stem SSAP. However, a statistically significant difference was found between the two versions of the SSAP in the *Disorganised* construct. This difference could have been due to a number of factors, some of which included the scenario not being conducive to eliciting *Disorganised* codes as much as the other stems in the battery; and/or the order in which it was administered (i.e., following *Lost Keys*) causing increased inhibitions or disengagement due to shorter attentions spans.

No significant differences were found between the two groups of children on DMH story stems, on any of the three attachment constructs. In contrast, one significant difference was found between the two groups using *Lost Keys*; namely, their *Defensive/Avoidance* scores were significantly different. This finding was not surprising as the same significant difference was found between the groups using the 7-stem SSAP (i.e., the measure from which *Lost Keys* was obtained) in Chapter 3. However, this significant finding could indicate a necessary improvement in the creation of ‘divorce-relevant’ story stems in future work, and the need to include scenarios depicting ‘parental conflict’ for instance. Such inclusions may elicit

attachment/caregiver representations indicative of, and specific to, the internal experience of divorce for children from separated families.

Significant differences did exist between children's responses to the DMH in comparison to *Lost Keys* but were similar between groups. In sum, children from separated and non-separated families demonstrated more secure responses to DMH than *Lost Keys* and more disorganised responses to *Lost Keys* than to DMH. This could suggest that for children from both types of families, a stem involving separation elicits more secure responses than a stem involving parental conflict. Together, these findings provide valuable insights into the impact that parental conflict can have on children's internal worlds, in comparison to the experience of separation from an attachment figure (even for children from separated families); this was achieved whilst also evaluating a new story stem's ability to tap into this complex experience.

Chapter 5: A qualitative inquiry: The underlying features of the internal worlds of latency-age children from separated families assessed using a projective technique.

5.1 Introduction

The current study involves an in-depth, qualitative analysis of the underlying features of the internal worlds of latency-age children from separated families. The displaced internal representations of children were analysed qualitatively in order to capture their unique experiences and to explore them through a closer lens. Hughes (2016) suggested that mixed methods studies provide a more well-rounded picture of the phenomenon under study. Thus, the present study will provide a qualitative component to the current thesis in its examination of how latency-age children experience divorce.

This introductory section will provide an overview of the qualitative literature on children from separated families and the methodologies used to achieve these findings.

5.1.1 The internal world

According to Winnicott (1988) the term ‘inner world’ can refer to an individual’s unconscious and conscious thoughts, feelings, wishes, and beliefs.

Winnicott (1988) stated that,

...The inner world can be examined as a thing in itself, though of course in life the inner world of a person is all the time subject to changes according to the events in the external relationships of that person, and according to the instinctual impulses that reach climax, or that only partially succeed, or that quite fail to reach gratification. The inner world comes to have a stability of its own, but changes in it are related to the experiences of the whole self in external relationships. Unsatisfactory experiences lead to the existence and the strengthening of things or forces felt to be bad within, (p. 84).

This quote illustrates the constant changes that take place in the internal world

as outer ‘forces’ change in the external world. Similarly, Sandler and Rosenblatt (1962) describe the *representational world* as akin to a, “...radar or television screen providing meaningful information upon which action can be based,” (p. 136). This quote describes how the internal world, by fluctuating to suit changes in the external world, can direct future activities and relationships.

5.1.2 Qualitative measures used with children from separated families

Verbal, non-projective, semi-structured interviews, such as the CAI (Shmueli-Goetz, Target, Datta, & Fonagy, 2000; Target, Shmueli-Goetz, Datter & Schneider, 2007), are commonly used with children during middle childhood and adolescence (See Section 2.3.1 for a description of the CAI). However, past researchers viewed children as lacking the verbal skills, memory, or competency needed to develop narratives/responses to convey their experiences (Faux, Walsh & Deatrck, 1988). Thus, young children were not interviewed directly and their caregivers, teachers, or clinicians were recruited instead. However, parent-report measures are now perceived as not being wholly accurate and there is consensus that children’s representations should be studied directly (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999).

Although, it is now more accepted that children are the best informants on their own experiences (Faux, Walsh & Deatrck, 1988; Irwin & Johnson, 2005; Kirk, 2007), direct semi-structured interviews may not be the only method used to achieve this. Direct interviews may be more useful when completed by a trusted psychotherapist than by a researcher unfamiliar to the child; this relationship may foster a safer and more secure environment (e.g., Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976). Behavioural observation techniques, projective drawings, play, narrative measures, and other ‘projective/semi-projective’ techniques have also been used to study the

internal world (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999). When conducting research with young children from a vulnerable population, it can be more appropriate to use a measure incorporating displacement from the child's lived experience (Hodges & Steele, 2000; Hodges et al., 2003). For instance, Rollins (2005) argued that the use of drawings is a more age-appropriate communication tool in qualitative research with young children. She found that if interpreted alongside observational and interview data, children's drawings enhance the data by allowing children to communicate thoughts and responses that may have been too painful to communicate verbally through an interview (Rollins, 2005). It can be extrapolated that at times, direct/objective measures can hinder a young participant's ability to communicate painful/traumatic experiences.

Story stem measures (detailed in Chapter 2 and used in Chapters 3 and 4) are 'semi-projective' measures that use displacement onto fictional doll families and animals. They have also been used with children from separated families in past research (e.g., Page & Bretherton, 2001). Chapter 3 demonstrated that the SSAP (a story stem measure) was successfully administered to a group of children from separated families. In addition to the quantitative findings yielded in Chapter 3, a qualitative inquiry was deemed appropriate to garner rich, open, and in-depth discussion about children's internal worlds post-divorce.

A projective semi-structured interview may also be useful in exploring the internal world of latency-age children. Porr et al. (2011) and Branthwaite (2002) described projective techniques as offering a way of accessing hidden material using 'imagery'; and facilitate expression of subconscious thoughts that bypass cognition and socially-acceptable responses, onto 'neutral or ambiguous images'. Linzey (1959) developed five types of projective techniques; one in which there is an 'imagery'

component, she described as an ‘expressive technique’. She outlined that in using this technique, participants respond to a stimulus (e.g., a fictional story) using self-expression (e.g., through responses to an interview about the fictional story) (Linzey, 1959). This could aid a child in describing an experience akin to the experience under study, portrayed by a fictional family, which is followed with a projective semi-structured interview. To my knowledge, this method has not been documented in the literature but has been utilised in two MSc projects conducted at the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families and UCL (Fitzgerald Yao, 2010, unpublished; Heider, 2013, unpublished). This is similar to a story stem measure because it aims to create a safe and displaced space for the participant to displace their own internal world onto fictional characters; however, it also possesses features of a qualitative semi-structured interview (See Section 2.4 for description of the conceptualisation and development of this methodology). Whilst using principles of projective techniques, the interview does not ask about the participant’s experience directly but rather, about the fictional character’s experience. This can aid the researcher in interpreting the discussion that is generated by each question, qualitatively, by deducing what parts of the child’s responses may be displacements of their own internal world. This can allow children to be less inhibited than when engaging in a semi-structured interview such as the CAI, which asks about their real experiences with attachment figures (Shmueli-Goetz, Target, Datta & Fonagy, 2000). This type of inquiry can add to the information gathered in Chapters 3 and 4, and provide a deeper analysis of the child’s internal world post-divorce; it can supplement valuable information that may be lost or difficult to attain through systematic, objective, and methodical processes.

5.1.3 Qualitative studies with children from separated families: An overview

Bagshaw (2007) used telephone interviews with children from separated families to inform future therapeutic interventions for them using a child's perspective. Bagshaw (2007) found that children had worries and fears about the future, feelings of guilt, shame and sadness, as well as a strong disposition about wanting the right to have input into decisions about their parents' separation. However, Bagshaw (2007) used a structured questionnaire *via* telephone, which may have inhibited children's spontaneous responses and natural mode of communication.

Wallerstein and Kelly (1976) published several qualitative studies on latency-age children from separated families; two of these studies were separated based on the stage of latency (i.e., early and late latency). Their data was collected through direct interviews with their latency-age clinical patients, yielding a wealth of information on how latency-age children internalised the separation and loss of the parental unit. Although strictly verbal, non-projective interviews with young children are not as commonly used today, Wallerstein and Kelly (1976) had developed a high degree of rapport with these participants, as they were their on-going clinical patients. This is a factor that contributed to the openness and comfort the participants may have felt when sharing their experiences following divorce.

Across both papers, Kelly and Wallerstein (1976) and Wallerstein and Kelly (1976) found common themes displayed by latency-age children from separated families. For instance, anxieties and worries were prevalent 'symptoms' in both groups (Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976). Kelly & Wallerstein (1976) found the most common response for children of divorce in early latency (7 - 8 years old) was an 'inescapable' sadness and the majority of children were openly grief-stricken. Boys and girls demonstrated a fear that the protective family structure

was lost and there was no safe place left for them to escape to (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976). A wish for restoration of their intact family was commonly expressed amongst the sample; there was also a strong sense of loss with regards to the departed father (Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976).

In the older latency group (9 - 10 years old), Wallerstein and Kelly (1976) found 'anger' as the most distinguishing emotion between this group and the younger group. The anger was usually directed at one parent but sometimes at both; children were commonly angry with the parent whom they perceived to have initiated the divorce (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976). Furthermore, Wallerstein and Kelly (1976) found that around a quarter of these participants were worried about being forgotten or abandoned by both parents. Children in late latency described feelings of loneliness and powerlessness during important family decisions (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976) (See Section 1.8.11 for a description of their study).

The aforementioned studies may tentatively suggest that direct, semi-structured interviews may be useful when the researcher is familiar to the participant and has generated a degree of rapport with them. Semi-projective methods, such as Page's (2001) qualitative study, where children were given a story stem measure and a small number of them were analysed qualitatively (see Section 1.8.5 for a description), may be more appropriate when the researcher is less familiar with the participant and requires a less intrusive and distressing approach.

5.1.4 The gap in the literature

There appears to be no studies, to our knowledge, using 'displaced', non-direct semi-structured interviews to obtain a rich in-depth exploration of a child's experience and internal world. Although Kelly and Wallerstein (1976) and Wallerstein and Kelly (1976) were able to use direct interviews with latency-age

children from separated families, due to their familiarity with the participants as their on-going patients, such an approach may be highly intrusive and distressing when conducted by a researcher unfamiliar to the participants. Therefore, implementing creative, innovative techniques to interview vulnerable populations can provide a displaced discussion that is uninhibited and perhaps, access to the internal world.

5.1.5 Current Study

The current study involves the administration of a newly developed fictional story about animal characters, followed by a unique approach to the semi-structured interview process that utilises displacement techniques. The responses to this interview will be analysed qualitatively to address the primary research question of the current study (1): ***What are the underlying features of latency-age children's internal worlds post-divorce, using a projective semi-structured interview?***

These underlying features will be explored in-depth using qualitative analysis techniques with the aim of uncovering the less overt features about children's internal worlds through their projected representations onto fictional characters. Through displacement, latency-age children may feel more comfortable and less inhibited when thinking about a fictional character's experience similar to, yet displaced from their own (Hodges et al., 2003) (See Section 2.4.2 for the rationale behind using projective techniques to reduce inhibitions).

5.2 Method

5.2.1 Design

The current study design was formulated to tap into the internal world and inner representations of children from separated families through an in-depth, rich qualitative analysis. The measure was developed by the primary researcher with the consultation of the supervisors of the current thesis (See Sections 2.4.3 to 2.4.5). A description of this measure and its administration format will be provided in the following sections.

5.2.2 Recruitment

See Section 3.2.2 for a detailed outline of the recruitment structure for the sample of participants from separated families used in the current study.

5.2.3 Participants

The sample of participants from separated families used in the current study consisted of 28 children whose ages ranged between 6 and 10 ($M = 7.66$, $SD = 1.47$). An additional participant, interviewed prior to the sample of 28, was used as the pilot study. 62.1% of the sample consisted of males and 69% of participants were 'White'. The entire sample maintained their primary residence with their mother (i.e., the resident parent) (See Section 3.2.4 for full demographics of the current sample).

5.2.4 Procedure

See Chapter 3 for a description of the procedure of carrying out the larger study with the participant and their caregiver (e.g., location, preceding measures, duration, recording tools, etc.). The specific procedure of administering the qualitative measure used in the current study will be outlined below.

5.2.5 Measures

Mama Bear and Papa Bear Interview (MBPBI) The MBPBI is a semi-structured, projective interview schedule which utilises a fictional story plot and bear characters to tap into the child's internal world; the story is followed by a series of questions about the character's thoughts, feelings, and wishes (see Appendix C). See Section 2.4 for a complete synthesis of how the story and interview schedule was developed and modified to its final version used in the current study.

Administration An ethical and educational introduction is initially provided (see Appendix C). The MBPBI was audio-recorded using an iPhone application called *Voice Memos*; the child was informed of this at the start of the interview. Following the introduction the participant is invited to answer "yes" or "no" to the question "Does this sound okay to you?" and following a positive response, the short story is read aloud to the participant. Semi-structured interviews can be tailored to individual participant needs (Wilkinson, Joffe & Yardley, 2004), whilst still presenting the participants with the same questions. For instance, some of the 'character labels' within the story and the questions that followed were altered depending on the age of the participant. For example, with younger participants (e.g., 6 - 8 years), the terms 'mama', 'mummy' and 'daddy' were used, whereas with older children (e.g., 9 - 10), 'mum' and 'dad' were used.

Following the completion of the interview *Voice Memos* was stopped and the child was told they had concluded their participation in the study; the child was given £10 in compensation.

5.2.6 Validity and reliability

The interviews were conducted in real-life settings and thus, promoted high ecological validity (Willig, 2008). However, conducting interviews in real-life

settings such as the participant's home may also compromise reliability across interviews. For instance, parents may have been present during some interviews ($n = 6$) whereas they may have not been during others ($n = 22$). This may have introduced confounding variables and differentiated participants' responses from one another; for example, some participants may have been comfortable with the support and familiarity their parents provided them during the interview whereas, others may have felt more inhibited due to their caregiver being present. However, qualitative research is less concerned with the establishment of reliability, as its goal is not to measure a particular phenomenon across a large number of participants but rather to focus on each individual experience within a small to moderate-sized sample (Willig, 2008).

Furthermore, through the use of a pilot study ($n = 1$), the researcher was able to pinpoint which questions were not clear or misunderstood; this helped maintain validity in answering the questions.

Reflexivity was established through the researcher's note-taking on each participant following each interview to scrutinize one's role as well as the research process. The researcher reflected on her own thoughts/interpretations with both supervisors at different time points throughout the duration of her PhD candidacy. This allowed her to remain reflexive and open to other interpretations, thus reducing biases.

5.2.7 Intersubjective agreement

Dr. Saul Hillman, a supervisor on the current thesis, used thematic analysis to code four interviews selected at random using SPSS. This was done in order to decrease chances of bias or high subjectivity and to achieve intersubjective agreement (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010). Following the analysis of the four interviews, the supervisor found similar themes to the primary researcher.

5.2.8 Ethics

The current design was submitted for ethical approval from the UCL Ethics Committee along with the first submission outlined in Chapter 3. The MBPBI received ethical approval upon its first submission due to its projective nature. When the interview was modified, a second version was submitted to the committee and was also approved upon first submission. The current design administered the same confidentiality agreements and assent forms as in Chapters 3 and 4.

5.2.9 Planned analysis

Thematic Analysis Thematic analysis (TA) is not theoretically bound, unlike other qualitative methods (e.g., grounded theory), which makes it a flexible research tool and can provide a rich and detailed account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). TA is a tool for identifying, analysing, and reporting themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Another benefit of TA is that it is a method that can be both reflective of reality and a tool for delving deeper under the surface of reality (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-phase guide. The six phases are: (1) familiarising oneself with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; (6) producing the report. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe TA as a constant moving back and forth between the entire data set, the coded extracts, and the analysis of the data that is being produced.

The whole sample of interviews was included in the analysis due to its overall moderate size ($n = 28$), whilst small enough to permit an in-depth TA. Moreover, due to the young age of participants, some interviews/narratives did not possess lengthy, rich responses. The entire sample was needed to account for these shorter responses,

often generated by younger children (Gibson, 2012). The experience of divorce is highly variable in its manifestation within each family and a larger range of interviews/narratives was needed to establish a more accurate and all-encompassing snapshot of how divorce affects latency-age children's internal worlds. Baker, Edwards and Doidge (2012) advise seeking out larger participant pools when groups or subpopulations are apparent within the sample and when it is likely that members of these groups have varied perceptions. The divorce participant pool includes a range of variables including visitation arrangements with the non-resident parent, exposure to co-parental conflict, involvement in court proceedings/mediation, and exposure to pre-divorce domestic violence, and so forth. Thus, in the present sample, it was essential to include all 28 interviews in the TA to ensure the variety of experiences and voices were accounted for and heard.

Joffe (2012) strongly advises against using a small sample size as is generally used in other forms of qualitative analysis; sufficient numbers are needed in TA to distinguish and categorise patterns and themes within the dataset as a whole and across sub-groups. In order to supplement the TA of a larger dataset, computer assisted data coding and analysis is most appropriate (Joffe, 2012). A mechanical aid can enhance the analysis process by ensuring a systematic procedure is used (Joffe, 2012). Computer assisted data analysis permits patterns of codes, links between codes, sequencing (i.e., how one code relates to another in terms of its order/sequence of occurrence) and co-occurrence (i.e., when certain codes occur alongside one another) to be reported, resulting in a rigorous TA and providing a 'balanced' view of the dataset (Joffe, 2012).

In order to ensure the abovementioned criteria were adhered to, the qualitative analysis computer software program ATLAS.ti 7.0 (Muhr, 2004) was used to complete the TA in the current study.

Atlas.ti

The primary researcher was trained at UCL on the use of Atlas.ti to carry out a TA. Atlas.ti was accessed remotely through UCL via the primary researcher's laptop where all MBPBI data was imported. Following administration of the measure, verbatim transcription of the data, and an initial close reading of the transcripts, the primary researcher was familiar with the data. Following this, sentences within the interviews were highlighted in Atlas.ti and then coded; these highlighted sentences formed 'quotes' in Atlas.ti, which could be referred to later on during the writing up phase. Once these initial codes were generated, Atlas.ti provided a chart of all the codes and the frequency of which each was used throughout the dataset. This allowed the primary researcher to locate and identify codes that were more consistent throughout the data, across participants. 'Code families' were created, corresponding to the concept of subordinate themes, then grouped into overarching themes, otherwise referred to as 'super families' in Atlas.ti. The primary researcher also manually mapped out some of these themes in writing to generate a greater understanding and clearer image of how the codes fit together and/or overlapped with one another. Examples of themes were easily accessible through Atlas.ti's 'quotes' function, generating a large list of quotes fitting under smaller codes belonging to each of the 'families'.

5.3 Presentation of findings

Following the 6-phase procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2011), the data was categorised into three overarching themes: (1) **A wish for/lack of control**; (2) **pervasive sense of loss**; and lastly, (3) **worries and fears**. All overarching themes were then further categorised into subordinate themes (See Table 5.1).

Table 5.1

Overarching themes and their subordinate themes as yielded through a thematic analysis of 28 MBPBIs.

Overarching themes	Subordinate themes		
A wish for/lack of control	Reunion wish <i>n</i> = 23*	A desire for/lack of knowledge <i>n</i> = 13	
Pervasive sense of loss	Sadness <i>n</i> = 22	Anger <i>n</i> = 9	--
Worries and fears	Fear of the unknown <i>n</i> = 14	Fear of change <i>n</i> = 13	Preoccupation with and fear of losing resources <i>n</i> = 13

**Note.* Frequencies of participants out of *n* = 28 who demonstrated the following themes, included in each cell.

5.3.1 Overarching theme: A wish for/lack of control

This overarching theme was twofold: (1) Instances when participants desired control over their circumstances, life events, and significant individuals within their world; (2) and contrastingly, when participants conveyed a lack of control over their surroundings, as well as a sense of helplessness to change their present and/or future. This overarching theme consisted of instances where participants demonstrated wishes, fantasies, and imaginary scenarios in their responses, characterised by having control over others' thoughts, actions, and beliefs, as well as control over how events

unfolded around them. At times this theme also included instances where participants conveyed a sense of lacking control over their circumstances, environment, or significant others. This theme was evident within a majority of the MBPBIs for both males and females ($n = 18$). Specific questions, for instance, “If Molly/Billy the bear had three wishes, what do you think he/she would wish for?” was one which often elicited responses falling under this theme and its subordinate themes.

An example of how this overarching theme was conveyed in participants’ responses was when a participant demonstrated a wish for superpowers:

To fly...and to (pauses) um (long pause) be like...um...look through stuff...like um...I, so like I can see through that wall. (104D, 88-90, 7 y/o).

Furthermore, participants also demonstrated their wish to be in control of the decisions their parents made. For instance, one boy replied to the question, “Billy wants to speak to his parents some more about them living in different forests, what do you think he might say to them?” with:

Why, why do you have to do this? Why can't you just be friends? And be (coughs) and stay in the same forest? ...why can't I just live with you together so then you're nice and you can get, and if you stay together longer, you'll get to know each other longer and if you know each other longer you'll, you'll, if, you'll learn to be kinder to each other longer, for, for, about ten years...(102D, 26, 7 y/o)

Conversely, participants demonstrated a lack of control over their parents' decisions/actions. For example, one participant provided the following description of how Billy the bear might feel when confronted with the news of his parents’ separation:

Mmm...excited...um...because...because um every time they keep on arguing, he gets annoyed and they wake up and then he tries to say 'stop' but then the parents keep on arguing and then it gets louder and louder until every single animal hears it. (125D, 04-08, 8 y/o)

When asked what Billy would want his parents to say back to him about their separation, the same boy replied:

C: Sorry

I: He wants them to say sorry?

C: Yeah.

I: Why do you think he wants them to say 'sorry'?

C: ...because that means they'll just, they'll just like...listen to him...they won't argue ever again... (125D, 16-20, 8 y/o)

Another boy stated one of Billy's three wishes would be:

...to stop them from arguing...(110D, 63, 6 y/o)

These examples may be demonstrating a lack of being heard and thus, a lack of control over situations surrounding them within their environment. Another participant threatened parents with punishment if they did not listen to Billy the bear, which conveys a sense of parenting/controlling his parents:

...the little bear would say 'stop arguing or you'll be, or you'll go to jail!' (123D, 28, 6 y/o)

The subordinate themes, which make up this overarching theme, are: 'Reunion wish' and 'a desire for/lack of knowledge'. These subordinate themes will be described below with examples of how they were presented in the data.

5.3.2 Subordinate theme: Reunion wish

Participants frequently showed a desire for the story family/parental couple to be reunited, as a wish or as an actual sequence within their responses/stories. This reunion took the form of the departed parent returning home; living peacefully with one another again or anew; or having the entire family reunited.

An example of how the reunion wish was expressed by participants, as well as how it fits under the overarching theme 'a wish for/lack of control', is when a participant was asked what he thought Billy the bear thought about at night before bed, he responded with:

They're going to live together for three more years! (In a babyish, excited voice) (Inaudible) that means they'll actually listen to me completely for once (lower muffled voice). Yes! (102D, 34, 7 y/o)

This statement depicts a 'reunion wish', as well as displaying how 'a wish for/lack of control' is communicated through his expressed sense of 'hope' that his 'wants' would be recognised and listened to. This wish was also expressed in MBPBI mostly when answering the final question regarding the character's three wishes. A few of these examples are presented here:

Maybe he wished so he, he could, they could be together...he wanted to stay with them uh forever. (108D, 59, 6 y/o)

Them to get back together and for them to be happy again and to do lots of stuff together (115D, 46, 10 y/o)

Um his parents to get back together um for things to be better and uh like they all, they would separate again (116D, 46, 10 y/o)

These statements convey a wish for one's parents to be reunited but to also be reunited as a family unit. This wish was communicated at other times too, particularly when children were asked what the protagonist might want to hear back from his/her parents regarding questions/comments they had about the separation. For example, two participants responded with:

We'll, we'll have a try at being together...just for like, three years (102D, 32, 7 y/o)

Well, maybe we might...still love each other...well he really like...wants them to still love each other (126D, 18-24, 7 y/o)

In other instances participants explicitly communicated a need for the story parents to stay together:

He might say to them, 'please can you stay together? Please! Please!' (107D, 12, 6 y/o)

Another participant communicated that two parents were better than one and that each parent brought something different/unique to the family dynamic. Two of his responses are presented here:

... Maybe like I want you to come back to the same forest cos um like while you're doing the cooking I could, I could play with my dad. And also in the, in the garden it's like, I don't want to play with my, on my own I want to play with um my father and my mother too. And then like, he could say like so I want you to come back to the same forest...Cos um like he's lonely, there's only one bear in the house for him to play with and um when his mum or dad is doing the cooking or some work he has to play with himself, no other people. (112D, 04, 09, 8 y/o)

These examples may be illustrating the participant's own wish to have both parents present and that having only one may not be as good as having two. He also communicates a sense that whilst one parent engages in a task around the house, the other parent is free to engage the child.

5.3.3 Subordinate theme: A desire for/lack of knowledge

A desire for knowledge was a pervasive theme throughout the participants' interview responses (see Table 5.1). This was often delivered in the form of a curiosity about the reasons surrounding the separation, which conversely could indicate a lack of knowledge surrounding the separation and issues, which may be of concern to these participants. It also coincides with a sense of helplessness and loss of control due to being 'kept in the dark' about what is going on or perhaps about not being an adult.

Curiosity about the reasons behind the separation was evident throughout MBPBI responses to the question participants were asked regarding what they thought Billy/Molly the bear would say to or ask his/her parents following the news of their separation. One girl responded with the following statement/question:

Maybe he feels, he feels like uh why are they moving and like what might, what might their new home be like and would like he ever be able to sleep with one, one another again and, or would he just like switch between houses everyday... (112D, 04, 8 y/o)

Another boy was perhaps demonstrating his own lack of knowledge and awareness due to his young age, as well as seemingly a sense of helplessness, in the following response:

Ummm...I think Billy might have been really upset because he isn't, because he might be a bit younger and he doesn't really um well...I'm trying to think of how to explain it...um...he doesn't really understand why...they're splitting up and he might be really young...cos I was quite young when my mum and dad split up (129D, 04, 9 y/o)

When the interviewer invited the participant to elaborate on why being young would have made Billy the bear more upset, the participant responded:

...well when you're young...um...it's harder to understand why your parents do things like that because I didn't really understand when my mum and dad did...so...he just didn't understand why they did it (129D, 10, 9 y/o)

Another girl demonstrated her lack of understanding by asking:

But why do you want to live in different forests, because I thought you liked each other? (120D, 10, 8 y/o)

This response may demonstrate that children from separated families are deprived of knowledge about what is going on around them, which at times seems to be absent from their internal and external worlds. Their craving for information may be stemming from a lack of knowledge about their parent's separation and the environmental changes taking place. They may not understand why things are changing and the uncertainty becomes frightening.

5.3.4 Overarching theme: Pervasive sense of loss

This overarching theme consisted of participants' projected emotional responses to the separation of the fictional parents onto the protagonist of the story (i.e., Molly or Billy the bear). These emotional responses consisted of sadness and

anger, all of which seemed to revolve around an overarching sense of loss. This sense of loss refers to losing the parental unit/couple, as well as perhaps a loss of the family dynamic the story character once knew. This sense of loss was pervasive in its consistent emergence within responses and was evident within almost all of the 28 interviews, and at multiple points throughout each interview.

5.3.5 Subordinate theme: Sadness

This was the most frequently used theme throughout the MBPBIs, with 22 participants displaying it. Sadness is difficult to define but within the current analysis it represented instances when participants explicitly verbally expressed it within their responses. Other terms were also used such as “upset” and “miserable”. Sadness was also coded when participants described instances of ‘crying’. Sadness was an emotion that participants linked directly to the protagonist and how he/she would feel following the news of his/her parents’ separation; however, there were also instances where sadness was an emotion the protagonist would feel *for* his/her mother or father in the story due to their circumstances. For example, one boy explained how the protagonist, Billy the bear, would feel towards his mama bear now that his parents are separating:

He might feel sad for mama bear being so angry all the time (104D, 56, 7 y/o)

Another girl provided a vivid response depicting how intense the feeling of sadness can be at times:

...she would be so upset that she might wet her bed and um...she of course, she won't want her parents to separate (120D, 20, 8 y/o)

This participant’s response may be portraying how upsetting the idea of the bear’s parents separating may be for the young cub; perhaps leading to the sadness being manifested somatically through wetting the bed. Another boy describes his

sadness about his father departing from the home; perhaps also demonstrating the idea presented earlier in the previous theme of two parents being better than one:

He feels quite sad cos um...then cos papa bear's like really fun to play with and he can do barbeques, he can do barbeques but um his mother might take a long time to learn how to do them and he won't have barbeques for a long time and he might never go into the other forest that papa bear is in (112D, 18, 8 y/o)

This quote also demonstrates the co-occurrence of various themes within the current analysis. For instance, these responses of sadness and a sense of loss coincide with the themes of control and reunion. The participant seems to be pining for the parents in the story to be together to avoid a loss he may be experiencing, generating a deep sense of sadness. There is also an underlying theme of having no control over the separation and the dynamics that will follow, like missing out on barbeques due to his mother not being able to conduct them. Another example of this overlap between the themes is when one participant states the following in response to the same question above:

Sad because he likes his papa bear, because he's so funny and he's talented and he's good at everything...so he decides to live with his daddy (125D, 28, 8 y/o)

The overlap here exists between the themes of sadness and a wish for control. The protagonist is sad about his papa bear living in a separate forest so he is able to alleviate his sadness by controlling where he lives—it's *his* decision. In response to the same question, two other children replied:

He will feel miserable and sad...I can't think of anything else (107D, 32, 6 y/o)

Um sad because...the...daddy bear might be...very kind and played with her a lot when she's lonely or something...might be very nice to her (121D, 40, 10 y/o)

One female participant responded to the question, “How do you think she’ll feel/think about her parents living in separate forests now?”:

She might feel really sad because she might really love her parents (121D, 12, 10 y/o)

Another girl provided a detailed response as to why the protagonist might feel upset, again linking this to a need for control over her post-separation living arrangements:

She might feel really upset that her parents are splitting up and getting divorced, if they were married um and then um and she might, and then, um and then if her parents ask her if, if she has to have a choice to live with one of them then she’ll probably, then she’d have to choose someone and she wouldn’t know um who to choose. And she’ll be like, can’t I live with one of you and the other week I could live with the other one of you? (114D, 05, 9 y/o)

Participants also described a feeling of sadness stemming from the story parents’ dislike for one another:

She might feel hurt, um upset because her mummy and daddy don’t like each other (105D, 21, 6 y/o)

The following excerpt may demonstrate the pervasive sense of loss described earlier which may also be eliciting sadness in this participant’s response and internal world:

*I: And later that night, Billy climbs into his den to go to sleep, what kinds of things might he think about at night?
C: Um he might think um like would they both come up to read me a story but, but he might like know they wouldn’t cos there was only one coming up and it was like um like cos his dad, if he used to do the actions and the mum read the story, then the mum would just read the story or she would do the actions and read the story but have to pause in every word; so he’s feeling quite like um sad that uh there’s only one person to read him a book (112D, 15, 8 y/o)*

5.3.6 Subordinate theme: Anger

Anger was another emotional response coded within participants’ MBPBIs.

Anger tended to be explicitly stated in response to various questions asking how the

protagonist might feel towards his mama or papa bear, or about their separation in general. The theme of anger also seemed to stem from a sense of loss, particularly of the departed parent. Anger was only coded in one female participant's interview and was resolved soon after:

I: And how do you think Molly will feel um towards mama bear now?

C: Quite angry at first but then...once she gets to know like what's happened then she'll understand (115D, 34-35, 10 y/o)

Thus, anger was predominantly a code found in male participants' interviews and was not as quickly 'resolved' as in the above example. At times anger was an emotion directly related to the father not living in the family home anymore:

I: How do you think Billy might feel towards mama bear now?

C: Um...cross.

I: Cross? Why do you think he'd feel like that?

C: Cos they...aren't living together anymore and he won't, he maybe won't be able to see his dad. (117D, 28-31, 8 y/o)

Another participant tried to make sense of why Billy the bear would feel angry:

I: How do you think Billy might feel towards mama bear now?

C: Um maybe uh like he might be a bit angry sometimes because uh...like because you know...uh I don't know but he might feel like angry or you know sad about why, why his parents done this?

I: Why do you think he might be angry at her?

C: Um like he might have like quite a lot of feelings going on. He might feel stressed and stuff (116D, 32-35, 10 y/o)

Another child described his anger implicitly through aggression towards his parents:

You have been a bad mum and dad and hit them and hit them in the face...You guys [parents] are the worst (123D, 14, 20, 6 y/o)

It is important to note that this participant had a particularly aggressive interview with several incoherent response sequences. He expressed quite a bit of aggression and anger in the measures preceding the MBPBI, as well as being physically aggressive towards the primary researcher and the recording devices used.

5.3.7 Overarching theme: Worries and fears

This category encompasses instances where participants labelled Molly/Billy the bear's feelings as involving anxieties, worries, and fears. Some of these instances included fears of: A new family, abandonment, being forgotten, being kidnapped, catastrophic events, loneliness, less contact with one parent, losing resources, losing both parents, monsters, not being loved, and simply a fear of a new life. There seemed to be worries revolving around what the future held for Molly/Billy the bear. This theme encompassed a wide range of fears, which have been categorised under three subordinate themes: Fear of the unknown, fear of change, and preoccupation with and fear of losing resources. Within participants' responses there were references to fears/anxieties and worries about their future and their parents' futures. There were also fears regarding changes and fantasised scenarios that may take place due to divorce.

5.3.8 Subordinate theme: Fear of the unknown

This theme encompassed instances where participants conveyed a sense of fear, anxiety or worry about the unknown future. Participants demonstrated this in many ways, usually by describing a worry that Molly/Billy the bear may have following the separation. These could include fears of being abandoned or being in danger, as participants wondered what a divorce might mean for them and their place within the family unit. Other examples included participants expressing a fear of where they may live and whether or not they will still see their non-resident parent.

When one girl was asked what she thought Molly the bear might think about at night, her response consisted of several themes previously mentioned (e.g., sadness, control, knowledge), along with the theme of worry/anxiety and the current theme, fear of the unknown.

C: Um she might be really worried and...and then she might be thinking why is all of this happening to me and yeah...

I: And what might be the reasons she has thoughts at night?

C: Um (makes a buzzing sound) because she doesn't actually know why her parents are splitting up (114D, 27-31, 9 y/o)

Similarly, this overlap of themes was also seen when these participants expressed worries/anxieties they believed the protagonists might feel:

Um (pauses) uh maybe he'll have like some nightmares because bad things are going on and uh, like, uh I said, uh, he, like, you know he might think like who's he gonna stay with? Yeah...um maybe he can't like keep, keep it off his mind because it's something quite important... (116D, 19-21, 10 y/o)

C: Very sad (pauses) and (pauses) maybe a bit scared of what might happen and scared if she will see her dad anymore or mum or whoever she doesn't live with. For example, if she lived with her dad she might not see her mum anymore, but if she lived with her mum she wouldn't be able to see her dad. That's what she might think...and she might be scared and sad at the same time (109D, 20-22, 9 y/o)

Another participant demonstrated a fear and worry about Billy being alone:

He feels sad and worried and he feels that he's going to be worried and lonely (122D, 25, 7 y/o)

As mentioned above, some of the participants expressed a fear of being left behind, abandoned, not being loved, losing both parents, or being 'separated' from as well. Examples of these responses are displayed below:

I: OK later that night Billy climbs into his den to go to sleep, what kinds of things might he think about at night?

C: Um...how his parents are gonna split up and what the new house might be like? And he might be a bit scared of not having his mum and dad around every night (129D, 25-26, 9 y/o)

Another participant expressed a fear of being 'split' and perhaps being left by his resident parent as well. This depicts the current theme through a fear of abandonment, due to abandonment being a possible outcome of the parental

separation within the participant's internal world. Their future is uncertain, and thus elicits worries and anxieties about the unknown:

C: Uh (pauses) maybe he's...he's gonna think that he might split as well...

I: He might split?

C: Yeah from his family... (108D, 47-50, 6 y/o)

I: You said he'd feel sad about mama bear, so why do you think he'd feel sad about mama bear?

C: Because she's, because she might, because she might leave that forest too when he sleeps (123D, 53-54, 6 y/o)

In a more catastrophic response, one child expressed this fear of being abandoned through a fear of the parents being unaware:

And she might, and she might be sad because...someone might take her, someone might steal her and her mum and dad don't know (121D, 06, 10 y/o)

5.3.9 Subordinate theme: Fear of change

Fear of change took many forms in participants' responses. For example, change could refer to post-separation living arrangements, having one parent instead of two, or losing the 'preferred parent'. Participants demonstrated a worry that the relationship and dynamic they once knew would be different. One girl described her fear of a new family in the following responses:

...she might not see any one of her parents and (pauses) basically (pauses) never be able to meet them or hug them or whatever. And her mum or dad or whoever she's living with might have a girlfriend and get married again and whatever...one of you, whoever lives in another forest, could actually get married to another bear and leave me and if they walked to this forest, I wouldn't show my face to them and I could see them hugging another little cub bear or something (109D, 08, 10, 9 y/o)

These responses may symbolise her fear of a new family, as well as a fear of being replaced by another small bear cub. Her responses are powerful in their expressiveness as they clearly convey a sense of worry and fear about the future of her parents and her own future within their worlds. When another participants was

asked how she thought things would be between Molly the bear and her parents now that they will live in different forests, she responded with:

...um not very good and very different...and very different because her father might have done stuff like um telling funny stories and chasing her about and stuff...(120D, 38-42, 8 y/o)

Another female participant responded:

It might be a little bit different with not their dad because the mum might do other things than the dad...the mother might not do things like the dad bear does...(121D, 51-56, 10 y/o)

A worry/fear of change was expressed in the following participants'

responses:

C: Well she might feel sad because she might really, really like the forest that she's in and her friends might be still living there and staying there and maybe she...and maybe it's somewhere where she, where there's big cubs...and no one to play with and she gets really scared (121D, 04, 10 y/o)

When asked how participants think Billy/Molly may feel about their mama or papa bear post-separation, they replied with the following responses:

*C: Mm...really sad? And really worried because he's only got one parent left
I: Why do you think he'd be worried about that?*

C: So um because he can...he, he, he doesn't have um...two people to protect him (126D, 33-36, 7 y/o)

C: Um confused and worried. Um...like maybe he doesn't know what's going on and you know like um...he...like maybe he wants to see his dad and worried he won't see him again (116D, 31-32, 10 y/o)

These responses may demonstrate participants' worries about losing contact with one of their parents. This worry may illustrate their fear of change as they may begin to realise that they cannot foresee the future or how their relationship with their dad will be like.

5.3.10 Subordinate theme: Preoccupation with and fear of losing resources

Interestingly, several participants demonstrated a fear of losing resources essential to life and survival. Such resources included food, water, and safety. Several

of these resources were feared to be lost when the 'papa' bear was no longer around. Perhaps this demonstrated a need for the father in the household as a protective figure who aided in the provision of food and water. At times this fear was due to a loss of two parents in general. Other times, this fear was due to the perception that the bear cub was helpless and if abandoned could not fend for itself. For example one male participant demonstrated this fear through the following reply:

C: Um...of one of them leaving, of both of them, both leaving and abandon him...he would be very lonely and not be able to eat or drink anything because he doesn't know how to hunt

I: Ok and what might be the reasons he has those thoughts at night?

C: Because...because...he doesn't want to get killed cos he's only little and he's only a cub so he can't protect himself or survive in the night....(122D, 16-20, 7 y/o)

One female participant provided the following response, perhaps demonstrating that having one parent may mean a loss of safety/protection that she felt existed when two 'adults' were in the home:

C: Yeah because she might, cos when her...the...the adult bears were...were together sleeping, she felt safe but she might have a new room...and she might feel like it's different to her old one (121D, 32, 10 y/o)

Other participants demonstrated this fear through the following replies, which related to the abovementioned idea that perhaps the father is the provider and protector of the family:

I: How do you think Billy feels about papa bear now that he will be living in a different forest?

C: Sad because papa bear was the defender of the family so without him Billy has to defend himself and look, take care of himself (106D, 25, 8 y/o)

I: OK so how do you think Billy feels about papa bear now that he will be living in a different forest?

C: Mm...really sad? And really worried because he's only got one parent left.

I: Why do you think he'd be worried about that?

C: So um because he can...he, he, he doesn't have um...two people to protect him (126D, 33-36, 7 y/o)

When one girl was asked how she might feel about mama bear post-separation, the participant replied:

She might feel...she might feel...like...a little bit safe...not as safe as she was before...(121D, 46, 10 y/o)

When another girl was asked how things might be with Molly and her parents post-separation, she replied with:

C: Well (pauses) pretty different and...harder.

I: Why do you think they will be different and harder?

C: Because...because it would be harder because if mother bear wouldn't be there then they wouldn't collect as much fruit and if the papa bear wasn't there they wouldn't collect as much fish (109D, 28, 9 y/o)

The following response was in reply to the question, “what do you think Billy might think about at night?”:

He might think that he'll have no one to feed him, no one to take care of him from the bully bears or cubs (106D, 23, 8 y/o)

When asked how Billy may feel about papa bear now that he will be living in a different forest, one male participant responded with:

C: Sad. Scared because maybe mummy bear will not be enough strong to fight (103D, 56, 6 y/o)

On the other hand, there were times when a wish for a bigger house or more food was expressed in some of the participants' responses. These responses came in reply to the question of what the bear cub's three wishes might be:

C: (short pauses) If I would say three wishes and I was a cub, I'd say for his mum and dad to come back with him um a massive bear mansion and...a unlimited supply of food and uh bodyguards to go with that last wish (106D, 61-63, 8 y/o)

C: Uh...that he'd have infinite food and water so...he [Billy the bear] wouldn't need to go hunting at night ... (122D, 38, 7 y/o)

These responses may be demonstrating a preoccupation with resources such as food, shelter, and protection.

5.4 Discussion

The current study explored the internal worlds of latency-aged children post-divorce. The specific research question the current study set out to answer was: *What are the underlying features of latency-age children's internal worlds post-divorce, using a projective semi-structured interview?* In order to achieve this, the *MBPBI* developed by the primary researcher, was administered to a sample of 28 latency-aged participants comprised of both boys and girls, from separated families. Following data collection and transcription, an in-depth TA of the interviews using *Atlas.ti* revealed several themes. A discussion of the themes that were found is presented below.

5.4.1 Thematic analysis

In this study, three overarching themes and several corresponding subordinate themes were found:

- (1) 'A wish for/lack of control' evidenced through a 'reunion wish' and 'a desire for/lack of knowledge';
- (2) 'Pervasive sense of loss' evidenced through 'sadness' and 'anger';
- (3) 'Worries and fears' evidenced through 'fear of the unknown', 'fear of change', and 'preoccupation with and fear of losing resources'.

Gender differences were only prevalent in the subordinate theme of 'anger'; it was predominantly present in boys' responses. Some themes were related to and overlapped with one another; for example, children who demonstrated sadness, tended to also demonstrate worry/anxiety, fear of change, a wish for/lack of control, and reunion fantasies. This may suggest that themes cannot be interpreted in isolation and may be better understood as contributing to and co-occurring with one another.

Although responses are in relation to the protagonist of the MBPB story, the objective of a projective semi-structured interview is to allow young children to relate

their own experiences to that of a fictional, animal character. Thus, participants' responses in the current study may be projections of their own internal world and can reveal some important information about the experiences of latency-age children from separated families.

5.4.2 A wish for/lack of control

The overarching theme 'a wish for/lack of control' was expressed throughout a majority of participants' responses concerning their feelings and beliefs that the bear cub was not in control of the parents' decision, actions, or living circumstances. Previous research has indicated a feeling of helplessness in children from separated families, stemming from their lack of control over the events unfolding around them (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976). This theme is consistent with Wallerstein and Kelly's (1976) latency-age participants who communicated feelings of powerlessness and helplessness in engaging in family decisions. Other studies demonstrated that children's post-divorce adjustment is enhanced when they are involved in the decision-making post-divorce (e.g., Neale, 2002). Perhaps having a sense of control over where they live or how often they see their parent(s) can satisfy their wish for control and can aid in lessening their feelings of lacking control. Participants in the current study displayed both fantasised scenarios of being in control, being powerful, or even parenting/punishing the parents in the story. Perhaps fantasising about having power and control can compensate for the lack of power and control in their external world.

This overarching theme contains subordinate themes such as 'reunion wish', which embodied the desire of participants to have their parents back together and for the family unit to return to its former dynamic. This subordinate theme falls under this overarching theme due to its close alignment with a wish for/lack of control and may

represent the overarching theme through this type of fantasy or wish. Secondly, the meaning of the subordinate theme ‘a desire for/lack of knowledge’ is twofold; a desire for knowledge, which in many ways stems from a lack of knowledge. When participants expressed wanting and/or lacking knowledge, they may have been left feeling powerless with no control over their lives and circumstances. This may illustrate how ‘a wish for/lack of control’ is threaded throughout this subordinate theme as well. However, this subordinate theme is concerned with the desire for and lack of information in particular, given to children during divorce—which perhaps when withheld from them, leaves them feeling without control/power over their circumstances.

5.4.3 Reunion wish

Wishing to reunite one’s parents post-separation or being reunited as a family, as well as imagining them reconciling with one another, has been found in previous studies on children of divorce. For instance, Lohr et al. (1981) found that a “reunion wish” existed in children who had experienced parental divorce; through identification, acting out, or fantasies, there appeared to be a need to re-establish the ‘lost parent’ and continue the relationship with that parent. Lohr et al. (1981) referred to this as the “reconciliation fantasy” which represents an idealized reinstatement of the previous relationship that once existed; interestingly, children who continue to maintain a relationship with both parents after divorce still continue to express a wish for reconciliation to the previous family dynamic. Perhaps this indicates something that may be on-going for children of divorce and may not be easily relinquished. Perhaps keeping this wish/fantasy alive in the child’s internal world offers a sense of control over their parents’ decision to separate and the events which follow; it may keep them together in their internal world and provide the latency-age child with a

world where he/she does get what he/she desires (i.e., eliciting a sense of power and omnipotence).

Kelly and Wallerstein (1976) and Wallerstein and Kelly (1976) found that the children in their study harboured reconciliation wishes; younger latency-age children communicated wishes for reconciliation, which were more intense and enduring than older latency-aged children. Kelly and Wallerstein (1976) pointed out these wishes may have functioned as a sort of 'denial', which endured in order to defend against their painful realities.

Using the *Children's Beliefs About the Parental Divorce Scale* (CBAPS; Kurdek & Berg, 1987), Jennings and Howe (2001) found that two thirds of their sample of children wished their parents would reunite. However, these children also responded to the same questionnaire with the belief that this reunion, regardless of the wish for it, would never happen (Jennings & Howe, 2001).

5.4.4 A desire for/lack of knowledge

A lack of knowledge may contribute to the feeling of having no control, which may lead to a search for knowledge and understanding. Thus, through this cycle one can begin to make sense of the child's internal world following divorce.

Previous researchers on the topic of divorce suggest that when children are not informed, their attempts to cope with the separation are further complicated; not being included in discussions about post-separation proceedings can leave children struggling alone with what all of it means (Dunn et al., 2001). When parents provide adequate explanations to their children through honest and open dialogue, children feel respected and involved, leading to a satisfaction of their curiosity and desire of knowledge (Neale, 2002).

5.4.5 Pervasive sense of loss

A pervasive sense of loss permeated throughout participants' responses and was manifested by feelings of sadness and expressions of anger. As mentioned above, the themes are linked in several ways. Initially, this pervasive sense of loss may be preceded by a lack of control or may be kept alive through children's fantasies of parental reunion/reconciliation, demonstrating how this overarching theme and the previous overarching theme converge. Children indicated this sense of loss implicitly through their feelings of sadness and anger and explicitly through their acute awareness that the bear cub's old life was permanently changed and in some ways, permanently lost.

This overarching theme is consistent with Wallerstein and Kelly's (1980) finding that children from separated families had internal worlds described as being painted with fantasies of deprivation and of the 'loss of things essential to continued life'. Harvey and Fine (2011) suggested that children's feelings of loss may be the strongest during holiday times due to the realisation of their split family and/or conflict that may occur between co-parents; they also pointed out that a child's divided loyalties could play a role in feelings of loss. Garber (1992) theorised that a child of divorce not only mourns an absent parent but also, the previous family dynamic when parents were together. In order to mourn the pre-divorce family, the child would need to let go of the image and the fantasy of the intact family, as it may never exist again (Garber, 1992).

5.4.6 Sadness

Previous researchers have found that the most common response for children of divorce was an ‘inescapable sadness’ and feelings of grief (e.g., Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Thus, it is not surprising that the most frequently coded theme in the current dataset was ‘sadness’. Bornstein (1951) and Wallerstein and Kelly (1976) pointed out that continuity during latency is very important and major disruptions during this stage can seriously hinder a child’s developmental path. Thus, divorce may be a disruption, which during latency can ignite a deep sense of loss leading to sadness and halting one’s developmental path for some time.

Kelly and Wallerstein (1976) found in their early latency sample, their ego-structure is less able to make use of denial in order to reduce the pain that is felt following divorce. Furthermore, they found that children of a young age were not able to sublimate their sadness into other activities in order to cope with such grief (Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976). Perhaps the current sample consistently displayed this theme due to their young age and inability to cope with such a loss, especially when confronted with a fictional character undergoing a similar experience.

5.4.7 Anger

Although this was the least coded theme of all the ones included in the current analysis, it was important to report that it was primarily seen in responses from boys in the sample. This made it the only code that seemed to be differentiated by gender. Interestingly, only one female participant displayed anger and she quickly resolved it within her response. This finding is consistent with previous qualitative findings, which found boys from divorced families expressed anger more than girls did and particularly directed it at their mother (Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976).

Von Klitzing et al. (2000) found that girls' narratives, from a non-clinical sample, contained less aggressive themes than boys' narratives. Stadelmann et al.'s (2010) study on divorce found gender differences in their sample of post-divorce children at age six in terms of their 'negative' parental representations with boys presenting significantly more in their play narratives as assessed on the MSSB. 'Negative' representations referred to, "harsh, punitive, rejecting, and ineffectual behavior of parental figures toward child figures," (Stadelmann et al., 2010, p. 97). Potegal and Archer (2004) found young girls consciously suppressed their anger at around age 4 or 5 and by about age 7 or 8, whereas boys expressed anger more frequently. Therefore, the findings of the current study seem to be consistent with previous gender differences found in the expression of anger within the divorce literature and within community samples.

5.4.8 Worries and fears

When children are coping with a stressful and perhaps frightening experience, their attachment system becomes activated; if parents' attentiveness and responsiveness is delayed or absent, a child's attachment behaviours may be ignored. A child's need for security may be unattended to, leading to a further sense of insecurity and anxiety (Feeney & Monin, 2008; Page & Bretherton, 2001). Within the child's internal world, an image of their parent choosing not to sustain their partnership may create a sense of despair, anxiety, and a lack of trust in others (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). Wallerstein and Kelly (1976) and Kelly and Wallerstein (1976) found fear and anxiety commonplace in the responses of their latency-age sample from separated families. Wyman et al. (1985) also found in their sample of 9 - 12 year olds that children from divorced families had higher anxiety levels than those from intact families. Also, Hoyt et al. (1990), using parent-report, self-report, and

teacher-report questionnaires, found that children in the third grade from separated families were reported as having higher levels of anxiety than the control group.

Children in the current sample displayed several anxieties and fears stemming from a story pertaining to divorce. Perhaps the divorce ‘shook their world’ as Kelly and Wallerstein’s (1976) suggested was the case in their sample, and when confronted with a similar scenario in the MBPBI, projected their experience onto the fictional characters.

5.4.9 Fear of the unknown

Previous studies are limited in their investigation of fears such as those found in the current study, however, findings do exist on the ‘fear of abandonment’ children from separated families can experience. Wolchik et al. (2002) found that a fear of abandonment consistently predicted internalising problems as evaluated using the *Child Behaviour Check List* (CBCL; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) reported by both mothers and children post-divorce. Kurdek and Berg (1987) also found that ‘fear of abandonment’ was significantly related to children’s reports of anxiety. Kurdek and Berg (1987) stated, “Because separation involves one parent moving out of the house, extensive contact with that parent may be lost. Some children may believe that they will eventually lose contact with the residential parent as well, which may lead to excessive dependency and obsessive thoughts and fears about such loss,” (p. 713). Discussed earlier, Bagshaw (2007) found some children were fearful of losing contact with their non-resident parent once they left the home. One child feared her father kidnapping her and her siblings from school to take them away from their mother; this child had witnessed parental violence and heard her father threaten her mother (Bagshaw, 2007).

Interestingly, children did not present worries/anxieties consistent with the

psychoanalytic theory that proposed that if parental divorce occurred during a child's Oedipal years, their guilt, shame, and anxiety about their supposed Oedipal victory would lead to a suppression of their aggression, particularly for boys (Kalter & Rembar, 1981). Their fantasies of being the ones to blame for one parent leaving the home, especially if they were of the same gender, could leave them feeling victorious or on the other hand, extremely guilty and anxious. Only two boys from the current sample ($n = 28$) expressed a sense of relief about the divorce due to: (1) 'Less noise' following a reduction in their parents' arguments and, (2) the father being an alcoholic and 'always eating his snacks'. However, these responses were not consistent with Kalter and Rembar's (1981) findings from coded outpatient evaluations of children of divorce seen for psychiatric evaluation; boys were found in their study to suppress their aggression and any feelings of relief because of immense guilt when their father left the home during the Oedipal phase. The incongruence between the current findings and previous ones could be due to a number of factors; for example, in the current study one of these boys had a step-father and perhaps this played a protective role in how the child interpreted the departure of his biological father from the home. Another reason could be that their guilt and shame was being expressed in a more aggressive way to shield themselves from the painful reality of their Oedipal victory and the departure of their father. These two responses within the current study are important to note, as they demonstrated 'positive' feelings towards the experience of divorce—in their situations, divorce had instigated the end of inter-parental discord and/or distance from an unreliable caregiver, and the end of any consequential disruption of that discord within the child's daily life and to their development. Several studies have demonstrated that children from divorced families, who had high levels of marital conflict, were better off than children who remained

with married parents with high levels of marital conflict (e.g., Amato et al., 1995; Amato & Keith, 1991). There appears to be a large consensus in the literature that inter-parental conflict is detrimental to children's development and psychological adjustment regardless of parents' marital status (Bernardini & Jenkins, 2002).

5.4.10 Fear of change

As mentioned by several researchers (e.g., Amato, 2000; Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), children from separated families face several changes in the two years following the separation, and this period of change can be longer or shorter in different situations. It is noteworthy that the change most frequently mentioned by participants in the current study as being frightening, was a change to the dynamic between the child and his/her parents.

5.4.11 Preoccupation with and fear of losing resources

This subordinate theme was interesting as only a very limited number of past studies focused on children's anxieties regarding this topic post-divorce. Kelly and Wallerstein (1976) found a similar theme in their clinical interviews, which they labelled as 'feelings of deprivation'. The researchers found that children had fantasies of deprivation conveyed as feelings of loss or insatiable hunger whilst others were preoccupied with having new and fancier material belongings (Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976). Wallerstein and Kelly (2008) also noted a fear of being left hungry observed in children's play during their landmark study. Interestingly, in the current study there was also a preoccupation with having/wanting resources such as food or bigger houses. One theory could be that the preoccupation with food may have been due to the nature of the protagonist being a bear, as bears in children's media and literature, are sometimes depicted as being profusely hungry and pre-occupied with food (e.g., *Winnie the Pooh's* obsession with honey). However, it may also be a projection of the

participant's internal world since Kelly and Wallerstein (1976) found a similar theme yielded by a non-projective, direct clinical interview.

The fear of losing resources and a preoccupation with resources, may have to do with the loss of resources experienced by many families following divorce. For instance, Fisher and Low (2015) found that women with children post-divorce, experienced a significant drop in household income that could become a long-term issue. Amato (2000) suggested that a series of difficult events follow divorce including moving homes, switching schools, less contact with one parent, financial crises and often a lessening of the child's standard of living due to moving to neighbourhoods with fewer community resources. The average post-divorce household income for the 28 participants in the current study was below £20, 000 (i.e., below the UK national average), which may indicate that the fear of losing resources in their responses was representative of what participants may have observed about their own parents' fears, worries, and real losses.

5.4.12 Strengths

The current study benefited from several things, including sample size; a larger sample size allowed shorter responses to be augmented by the longer, richer responses. It aided in qualitatively understanding the varied experiences of divorce, across many participants, and being able to make insightful interpretations about them and formulate connections between them. Due to the experience of divorce being highly varied, complex, and multifaceted (Amato, 2010), it was important to include as many responses as possible to obtain a clear and in-depth look into what this experience has been like for each of the 28 participants.

One of the most valuable features of the current study is that it utilised displacement and projection within a semi-structured interview tailored to the specific

experience under investigation. This is a novel procedure and method, only used in two Masters-level dissertations (Fitzgerald-Yao, 2010; Heider, 2013), which has been successful and unique in exploring a sensitive topic such as divorce, with a young and vulnerable population. Previous studies have either relied on narrative/play assessments, which at times are not tailored specifically to the experience being studied, or semi-structured direct interviews, which do not displace the child from a painful experience. Therefore, because the preliminary findings of the current study support the successful administration of this novel methodology, future research can benefit from modifying the initial story presented and the structure of the interview to suit any population under study.

5.4.13 Limitations

Initially, a limitation of the current study was that there were several more male participants than females. Thus, it may be difficult to determine whether both genders would have displayed the same themes or whether a predominantly male sample is responsible for the emergence of such themes.

Secondly, using one type of animal—in this case a bear—may have conveyed a different response than if it was a puppy or a kitten. Some responses may have been linked to the type of animal the children were responding about. Although the current researcher anticipated that using a larger sample size for conducting qualitative analysis would be a strength, some qualitative researchers may argue this was a weakness (e.g., Sandelowski, 1996). Conducting a qualitative analysis on smaller samples can sometimes provide a closer, more in-depth look at each individual experience.

5.4.14 Future directions

Future work can benefit from incorporating fictional stories in their semi-structured interviews with different populations to maximise participants' comfort and their ability to safely displace their internal representations and experiences onto a fictional character. Although narrative-stem measures utilise projection and displacement, many are targeted at understanding attachment styles/categories and do not target the topic under study within each stem in their battery. Thus, this new combination of fictional story and 'projective' semi-structured interview may complement quantitative studies using story-stem measures as a qualitative adjunct to enhance and enrich studies on the experiences of sensitive/vulnerable populations. This new measure could also be used on its own, as a qualitative methodology to yield rich, in-depth data about a specific population and/or topic of study. Furthermore, the use of 'projective' semi-structured interviews may allow an even more direct approach—whilst adhering to ethical considerations and remaining 'indirect'—to assessing children's internal worlds than other current methodologies in this area of study.

5.5 Conclusions

The current study involved an in-depth qualitative analysis on latency-age children from separated families through their responses to a unique projective semi-structured interview. Through the aforementioned comparisons between the current study's findings and the findings of previous studies on latency-age children from separated families, particularly those that utilised non-projective, direct clinical interviews, many similarities were discovered. Therefore, if through the use of a projective *indirect* measure, responses were conveyed which were consistent with some of the findings from *direct* interviews (e.g., Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004), perhaps the MBPBI was successful in tapping into participants' experiences without being intrusive or promoting distress. By utilising this type of measure with children from separated families, whilst maintaining minimal distress, more measures of this kind could be established to administer to other vulnerable populations. By reducing distress, participants from vulnerable populations may feel less inhibited and more comfortable in providing researchers with a glimpse into their own internal world.

Chapter 6: Divorced co-parents in conflict and their capacity for reflective functioning in relation to their child.

6.1 Introduction

Parental separation does not only impact the adults separating but evidently, their children as well (e.g., Amato, 2000; Amato, 2010; Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Amato & Cheadle, 2008; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; DeSpelder & Strickland, 2009; Maccoby, 1992; Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007; Levite & Cohen, 2012; Sun & Li, 2002). Examining the impact of separation on parents can help in understanding how children might be affected; exploring parental capacities to think about children can help in understanding how children may be experienced within the separation. During the divorce process, parental abilities and functions can be affected due to high levels of stress, and become overshadowed due to preoccupation with feelings of resentment, hostility, blame, and/or worries about finances and changes in living arrangements (Donner, 2006; Levite & Cohen, 2012). One such capacity that may be affected is the ability to mentalize about and reflect on their child(ren)'s experience (Fonagy & Allison, 2012). The view that divorce is a long and complex process involving many family members, as well as individuals outside the family (e.g., parents, children, schoolteachers, siblings, etc.), has been proposed throughout this thesis. The divorce process consists of many factors, which may arise before, during, and/or following the legal/official separation. Divorce often involves pre-existing family dynamics and/or conflicts, as well as parenting difficulties that may arise before the couple officially separates; these conflicts may also continue after a parent departs from the home (Amato, 2000; Amato, 2010; Amato & Boyd, 2014; Sun & Li, 2002; Wallerstein, Lewis & Blakeslee, 2000). Conflict can be one of the

most deleterious characteristics of divorce for children, particularly if it has not been resolved post-divorce (Amato, 2000).

The present study included the perspectives of parents who are in conflict post-divorce, in order to gain insight into the complexity of the divorce process. From this insight, the child's internal experience, which may be adequately/inadequately reflected upon by their close attachment figures can also be explored.

The following sections will provide theoretical underpinnings of conflict between co-parents post-divorce; along with the impact such dynamics may have on children, the parental couple, and the family overall. This review will conclude with the gap in the literature and the questions the current study will aim to address.

6.1.1 The parental couple in conflict and breakdown

It is important to understand the build up of conflict prior to separation and how this may lead to the breakdown of the parental couple in order gain a fuller picture of how divorce impacts the family. Attachment theory posits that differences between couple members' IWMs from earlier life underlie individual differences in attachment styles, which tend to predict relationship dynamics within the couple (Bowlby, 1969; 1979; Feeney & Monin, 2008; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Prior & Glaser, 2006). Levite and Cohen (2012) propose a Kleinian perspective on the couple in conflict; this perspective holds that an inability to tolerate unmet expectations or frustrations within the couple can lead to conflict within the couple or even divorce. Researchers suggest that post-divorce proceedings can involve a reordering of social, financial, and other practical aspects of one's life—for both adults and children (e.g., Dowling & Barnes, 2000; Leonoff, 2015; Marquardt, 2005). This reordering and at times, major lifestyle changes, can lead to feelings of resentment, an increase in stress levels, depression, anxiety, hostility, and anger for both co-parents following

separation (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Boyan & Termini, 1999; Donner, 2006; Dowling & Barnes, 2000; Ehrenberg, 1996; Elrod, 2001; Feeney & Monin, 2008; Johnston, 2003; Levite & Cohen, 2012; Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007; Ramsey, 2001; Shmueli, 2005; Smith, 1999). A more detailed discussion of the literature on the parental couple in conflict pre-divorce leading to its breakdown is in Sections 1.3.1 to 1.3.2.

6.1.2 Parental conflict post-divorce

Researchers have found that conflicted co-parental relationships post-divorce are a primary cause of behaviour problems, psychological unrest, and mental health problems for both parents and their children (Amato & Cheadle, 2008; Amato & Keith, 1991; Sandler, Miles, Cookston & Braver, 2008; Dowling & Barnes, 2000; Emery, 1992; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Kim, 2011; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000). Divorced co-parents that are in conflict with one another may be characterised by an inability to communicate in a civil manner; engaging in prolonged battles about parenting; hostility; and are uncooperative and unresponsive to regular solutions and/or interventions as part of parent counselling (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). An understanding of why conflict is persistent for some co-parents following separation is important in order to explore how this entrenchment in conflict may be negatively impacting them as parents. Research suggests that some co-parents who are in post-divorce conflict may be maintaining an internal relationship with one another (Baum, 2006). Although the relationship is different, it may still serve to preserve communication with one another, which tends to prolong and complicate post-divorce adjustment for all family members (Baum, 2006; Emery & Dillon, 1994; Weiss, 1976). See Section 1.3 for a discussion of co-parents in conflict.

6.1.3 The couple in conflict post-divorce and its impact on the child

Co-parenting can be difficult under stressful circumstances and particularly when conflict is rife between both parents. There appears to be consensus amongst researchers regarding the acute and long-term negative impact co-parental conflict post-divorce has on children (e.g., Baker, 2001; Clarke-Stewart et al., 2000; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Frankiel, 1994; Furman, 1974; Kim, 2011; Lohr et al., 1981; Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007; Neubauer, 1960; Wallerstein, 1983; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Worden, 1996). Separated co-parents in conflict can manifest their anger and hostility onto matters surrounding their child(ren); this may involve disagreements on upbringing, custody, visitation arrangements, religious/cultural beliefs and traditions, and holiday plans. This can sometimes lead to children being “caught in the middle” of co-parents’ disputes, which can be very destructive for children (Johnston, Campbell & Mayes, 1985). Amato and Boyd (2014) in their review of the literature on divorce and child well-being concluded that marital breakdown is usually preceded and followed by a high level of conflict between co-parents. Children ‘caught in the middle’ of this conflict can be recruited into the conflict and made to pick sides (Amato & Boyd, 2014). Section 1.4 provides a description of how co-parental conflict post-divorce can impact children.

6.1.4 Mentalization

Mentalization is the fundamental capacity to understand one’s own and others’ behaviours and intentions, in terms of mental states—feelings, desires, thoughts, wishes, attitudes, and goals (Fonagy et al., 1991; Luyten & Fonagy, 2015). The ability to mentalize is critical for the development of affect regulation, social and interpersonal relationships, and secure attachment and representations, for both parents and their offspring (Fonagy & Target, 1997). Parents who find it difficult to

understand their co-parent's behaviours/intentions, and at times their children's behaviours/intentions, in light of underlying mental states may contribute to the ongoing conflict. Moreover, divorced co-parents' ability to adequately mentalize and reflect on their child's behaviours in light of mental states can assist their children in adjustment to the separation and engage in a parenting style that is more child-centred.

Mentalization can be understood as having four dimensions and is not a unidimensional characteristic, including:

- (1) Automatic vs. controlled mentalizing,
- (2) Mentalizing about the self and others,
- (3) Mentalizing based on external vs. internal features of self and others,
- (4) Cognitive vs. affective mentalizing (Luyten & Fonagy, 2015).

These dimensions can aid in understanding how individuals mentalize and where weaknesses or strengths may lie with regards to this capacity, thus providing a basis for building mentalization profiles (Luyten & Fonagy, 2015). Furthermore, modes of non-mentalization can exist when controlled mentalization is hindered and automatic mentalization takes its place (Luyten & Fonagy, 2015).

These include:

- (1) The psychic equivalence mode: When inner reality and outer reality become equivalent and there is intolerance of differing views,
- (2) The teleological mode: Focusing exclusively on the external,
- (3) The pretend mode: Pseudomentalizing (e.g., *appearing* to be highly reflective when in fact the individual may only be *portraying* an image of themselves as reflective), which can emerge due to thoughts and feelings being disassociated from the external world (Luyten & Fonagy, 2015).

The dimensions and modes of mentalization described above were detailed in Sections 1.5.1 and 1.5.2. To summarise, the capacity to mentalize adequately about the self and others can change across different circumstances and life experiences, as stress levels rise and fall (Fonagy, Luyten & Bateman, 2015); thus, divorced parents can experience high stress levels and pre-mentalizing modes may re-emerge. For instance, a co-parent may ignore insightful information they previously knew about their former spouse's internal world; this may be due to a hindrance to thoughtful reflection during times of heightened emotions (Fonagy & Bateman, 2019). Thus, the co-parent may be focused on the external actions of their former spouse, indicating the pre-mentalizing 'teleological mode' is dominant (Fonagy & Bateman, 2019). Furthermore, affective mentalizing may also be more dominant in divorce circumstances than cognitive mentalizing, as co-parents are engaged in aroused emotional states with one another, as well as having to adjust to one of their major shared networks being severed.

6.1.5 Parental RF

Slade (2005) described RF as an overt manifestation, in narrative, of an individual's mentalizing capacity. Thus, parental RF is the capacity of a parent to overtly manifest mentalization about their child's experience and to understand their behaviours in terms of the mental states from which they may be derived (Fonagy & Allison, 2012). Its role in parenting has been suggested to play a large part in the development of affect regulation, attachment models, and self-representations (Borelli, Compare, Snively, & Decio, 2015; Fonagy & Allison, 2012; Fonagy & Target, 1997; Katznelson, 2014; Kelly, Slade & Grienenberger, 2007; Slade, 2005; Slade et al., 2005).

Hertzmann et al. (2016), Hertzmann et al. (2017), and Target et al. (2017) reported quantitative/qualitative findings from a Randomised Control Trial (RCT) on divorced co-parents in conflict and RF—from which the current study was derived. Their qualitative findings indicated three overarching themes:

- (a) Dealing with contact evokes extreme states of mind (Subordinate themes included: *A matter of life and death* and *winning and losing*);
- (b) When speaking of contact, the child is everywhere and nowhere (Subordinate themes included: *Preoccupation* and *child made to manage conflict*);
- (c) The hardest thing about contact is dealing with my ex-partner (Subordinate themes included: *Sense of threat, contact dependent on the climate between parents, and difficulty in ordinary parenting*) (Hertzmann et al., 2016; Hertzmann et al., 2017; Target et al., 2017).

6.1.6 “Conflict” defined in the current study

Divorced co-parents that are considered in conflict with one another may be characterised by an inability to communicate in a civil manner; engaging in prolonged battles about parenting; hostility; and are uncooperative and unresponsive to regular solutions and/or interventions as part of parent counselling (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007).

6.1.7 The gap in the literature

Large gaps in the literature on parental RF within the topic of divorce and more specifically, of divorced co-parents in conflict, were found. The studies from which the current study sample and methodology are derived (i.e., Hertzmann et al., 2016; Hertzmann et al., 2017; Target et al., 2017) currently represent the only published papers using a measure of RF with divorced parents. Furthermore, there is a

gap in the literature with regards to studies utilising findings on parental RF post-divorce to deduce meaning about the internal experiences of children from separated families.

6.1.8 The current study

The current chapter will present a close examination of individual qualitative interviews from a sample of divorced parents who are in conflict with their co-parents, the primary objective of which is to identify factors that may characterise low or absent parental RF. The research question the current study aims to address is:

(1) What are the experiences of divorced parents who are in conflict with their co-parents and unable to adequately mentalize about and reflect on their child(ren)'s experience?

This question will be addressed through a qualitative analysis of individual in-depth interviews, selected based on the presence of low RF. By gaining an understanding of the parental experience and the features of their interviews that may hinder the ability to mentalize about and reflect on their child(ren)'s experiences, the second objective of the current thesis can be addressed (i.e., **To explore the views of co-parents, post-separation, about their child's adjustment, and assess parental RF in relation to the child, in order to better understand the latency-age child's experience of co-parenting and life at home**). Addressing this research question can indirectly reveal important information about the internal worlds of children from separated families; the primary researcher will use extrapolation to interpret meaning about children's internal worlds and experiences.

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, a control group was not included (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Lloyd-Jones, 2003); exploring and describing the

individual experiences, as well as how they can inform the current thesis about the child's internal world was the primary focus.

6.2 Methods

6.2.1 The larger study: Tavistock Relationship's (TR) Randomised Control Trial (RCT)

This study uses data from the RCT conducted by TR, evaluating the efficacy of two types of interventions: Mentalization-Based Therapy for Parental Conflict-‘Parenting Together’ (MBT-PT; Hertzmann & Abse, 2008; Nyberg & Hertzmann, 2014; Hertzmann et al., 2016) and a Parents’ Group (PG).

6.2.2 Ethics

TR achieved ethical approval through:

- (1) TR for clinical ethics approval as providers of the service,
- (2) University College London’s (UCL) Research Ethics Committee for external approval as a research proposal.

6.2.3 Recruitment

See the published study by Hertzmann et al. (2016) for the recruitment and procedural details of the larger RCT from which data for the current study was derived.

6.2.4 Participants

The sample used in the current study was made up of 10 heterosexual pairs and one same sex pair of women. The mean age of the sample was 46 ($SD = 5.7$); with mothers averaging an age of 44.5 ($SD = 5.2$) and fathers averaging an age of 47.8 ($SD = 6$). The sample ($n = 22$) was predominantly White-British ($n = 12$). The remainder of the sample was made up of Black-British/Caribbean ($n = 2$), Asian-British ($n = 2$), mixed background ($n = 2$), any other white background ($n = 2$), White-Irish ($n = 1$) and, mixed white and black African ($n = 1$). The mean age of the child identified as being ‘of concern’ for each pair of co-parents, and focused on in

the PDI on which RF was scored, was 9 years of age ($SD= 3.4$). Co-parenting pairs had been separated an average of 4.73 years ($SD= 2.1$).

In 9 out of 11 pairs of co-parents, the biological mother's home was the primary residence for the child(ren). In the remaining two pairs, one had a shared residence arrangement and for the other, the father's home was the child's primary residence. 78.6% of non-resident parents had regular contact with their child(ren). Regular contact was measured by participants' answering "yes" or "no" to a question of whether or not they maintained regular contact with their child. However, the term "regular contact" was not defined in the question and participants did not specify visitation frequencies in their reports.

6.2.5 Measures

Parent Development Interview (PDI; Aber, Slade, Berger, Bresgi, & Kaplan, 1985)

The PDI is a 45-item semi-structured interview intended to examine a participant's capacity for parental RF (Aber et al., 1985). It is used to examine a parent's representation of their child, themselves as parents, and their relationship with their child (Aber et al., 1985). The interview attempts to tap into parents' understanding of their child's behaviour, mental states, and feelings, and asks parents to provide real life examples of charged interpersonal moments (Slade, 2005). The revised PDI-F (Slade, Aber, Berger, Bresgi & Kaplan, 2010) was used in the current study and was created for use with parents in conflict with the agreement of the original authors (see Appendix V).

This PDI-F version is less focused than previous versions on the age of the child and can be used with parents whose children vary in age (e.g., from infancy through to early adolescence). This version of the PDI also aims at assessing RF across a range of domains: In relation to the child, one's own parents, and the self.

The PDI-F is a 27-item semi-structured interview, consisting of five main sections: (A) View of the child; (B) View of the relationship; (C) Affective experience of parenting; (D) Parent's family history; (E) Separation/Loss; and finally, (F) Looking behind and looking ahead. The interview is made up of 'demand' and 'permit' questions. Demand questions (e.g., "In the last few times you have seen your child, can you describe a time when you and your child felt really connected?") refer to questions whose scores are to be included in the final score, whereas permit questions (e.g., "What do you like most about your child?") should not contribute to a participant's final score unless the score is above a 4 (i.e., a score which is at an ordinary RF or higher, and hence might raise an otherwise low overall score). Demand questions are used to pull at different parental reflective capacities and the ability to maintain a representation of the child's experience; in the example of the demand question above, a means of evaluating the parent's understanding of their own and their child's internal experience at times of heightened affective arousal is demonstrated (Slade, 2005).

6.2.6 Procedure

Administration PDIs were administered by the RCT project manager or by one of two experienced clinicians, all three of whom were trained in interview techniques and study protocol (Hertzmann et al., 2016).

Coding The primary researcher of the current thesis attended an intensive, four-day training workshop in RF scoring (Slade et al., 2005) on the PDI at the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families in 2014 and was certified as reliable. The primary researcher, along with two MSc students and one graduate, transcribed the 22 PDIs verbatim.

The PDI coding system works on a 9-point scale, ranging from 0 to 9, where 0 is bizarre or hostile and 9 being the highest RF score one can receive. Each question receives a score, as does the overall interview; the overall score is not an average of all the scores but rather a score that reflects the interview as a whole.

6.2.7 Validity and reliability

In order to promote validity in qualitative research, reflexivity was maintained to ensure that the researcher was able to repeatedly review their role in the study (Willig, 2008). Reflexivity was achieved by keeping a reflective journal which allowed the researcher to review if any descriptions or reflections were misleading or biased, and to enable a retrospective outlook on the study. Willig (2008) suggests that reflexivity discourages impositions of meaning by the researcher and thus, promotes validity in qualitative research.

The primary researcher of the current thesis and the secondary supervisor used the technique of triangulation through multiple analyses to ensure reliability. This technique utilises more than one perspective when analysing and interpreting data so that researchers can compare the themes and interpretations they found in order to decrease chances of bias or high subjectivity, otherwise known as intersubjective agreement (Gillespie & Cornish, 2009). Thus, two low-scoring interviews were selected randomly and were analysed by both the researcher and supervisor independently of one another using thematic analysis. The emergent themes were similar and in agreement between researcher and supervisor following the guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

6.2.8 Planned Analysis

Parental RF In order to explore the primary research question of the current study, the 22 PDIs were coded and total scores for RF were calculated. This analysis

informed the selection of the lowest-scoring, least reflective PDIs for the qualitative analysis.

Thematic analysis (TA) In order to qualitatively address and explore both research questions of the current study, TA was used following Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-phase model. The six phases are: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; (6) producing the report. A benefit of TA is that it can be both reflective of the participant's subjective reality and as a tool for delving deeper under the surface of this reality (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

6.3 Presentation of findings

Findings are presented below, initiated by a descriptive account of the sample's mentalizing capacity as measured through RF using the PDI-F.

6.3.1 Parental RF

The mean RF score for the sample was 3.91 ($SD = 1.31$). Several participants ($n = 9$) scored below '4' on the PDI. A score of 3 was considered the cut-off point for possessing low RF, in line with the RF coding manual (Slade et al., 2005). These 9 participants were comprised of five males and four females (see Table 6.1) and were selected for the thematic analysis.

Table 6.1

Demographic overview of the sample selected for thematic analysis ($n=9$).

Participant Name/no.	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Gender of child discussed	Age of child discussed (years)	Duration of separation/divorce (years)	Total RF score on the PDI
Bart ¹	Male	44	White-British	Female	9	5	3
Maria	Female	41	White-European	Male	9	5	2
Moe	Male	41	Mixed: White and Black African	Male	12	5	2
Kiran	Male	47	Asian-British: Indian	Female	9	7	3
Ashley	Female	37	Black-British: Caribbean	Male	10	8	3
Joe	Male	51	White-British	Male	3	3	2
Janice	Female	47	White: Any other white	Male	3	3	3

¹ All names have been changed to ensure participant anonymity.

			background				
Mike	Male	49	White-British	Male	10	3	3
Rita	Female	46	White: Any other white background	Male	10	3	3

Note. The participant, gender, age, ethnicity, gender/age of child spoken about, duration of separation, and TRF score are presented.

6.3.2 Thematic analysis

The data was grouped under three overarching themes: (1) **The missing child**, (2) **villainisation**, and (3) **self as victim**. All overarching themes were then further categorised into subordinate themes (See Table 6.2).

Table 6.2

Overarching and subordinate themes yielded through a thematic analysis of the 9 lowest scoring PDIs and number of participants who demonstrated each theme.

Overarching Themes	Subordinate themes		
The missing child	Difficulty talking about the child <i>n</i> = 9	Not acknowledging child's mental states as their own <i>n</i> = 5	Exaggerated sense of optimism <i>n</i> = 4
Villainisation	Accusations of manipulation towards co-parent <i>n</i> = 4	Hostility towards co-parent <i>n</i> = 7	—
Self as victim	Helplessness <i>n</i> = 4	Desire for sympathy <i>n</i> = 5	—

6.3.3 Overarching Theme: The missing child

This overarching theme encompasses instances of evasiveness by co-parents to describe, elaborate, and/or acknowledge their child's mental states. This theme was

apparent in most ($n = 8$) participants. There was an inability to or difficulty in holding the child in mind throughout the interview; a lack of acknowledging the child's mental states as his/her own; and finally, a sense of exaggerated optimism and even avoidance, specifically regarding their child's well-being and functioning.

6.3.4 Subordinate Theme: Difficulty talking about the child

Verbal and nonverbal cues indicated a struggle in discussing the child's mental states. This was shown through very brief responses, shutting down instead of elaborating and/or a lack of recall, which might all be showing a difficulty in teasing out mental states within the child. Responses where the child is discussed in a vague or general manner may also lead to the sense that the child is missing from the response. For example, when Bart describes how a certain event felt for him and his child:

Probably when I picked them up again on Monday, you know, they're both happy to see me, she's happy to see me...um, generally, she's you know, contented, you know, I'm glad to see her, she's glad to see me... It's nice, it's connection (Bart, 4.111)

The reader does not get an in-depth sense of how Bart's experience may have felt for him or his child, perhaps due to not using complex mental state language. His response is succinct and vague.

In Maria's interview, when she is asked to consider difficult mental states, she avoids expressing this. For example, when asked to think of a time when she and her child did not feel connected, she replied:

Um, try to think... [Long pause] No, I can't think of anything (Maria, 4.141)

A similar response is elicited when she is asked to consider a time when her child may have felt rejected:

Rejected? Um no, I don't think so. He hasn't felt this way, rejected. No, no, never. No (Maria, 7.219)

This response is different as it is not demonstrating an explicit avoidance of discussing a mental state but rather portrays to the reader that it is not possible for her child to feel this way. Maria may have used the words ‘never’ and the repeated use of ‘no’ to demonstrate that such an emotion felt by her child would be difficult to discuss. Similarly, in Ashley’s interview, she seems unable to discuss her child’s mental state regarding difficult life circumstances:

Definitely think so. I guess he, you know, just feels like he’s in the middle of a fight and he feels like, I don’t know. He probably feels like, I don’t know (Ashley, 9.367).

This response was given when Ashley was asked to consider how her co-parenting relationship might affect her child’s development and personality. This was echoed in Kiran’s interview, where he seems to avoid discussing his child’s emotional and mental states regarding a different, yet seemingly difficult experience. For example, when describing what his child felt during times of separation from him, he stated:

I think, I don’t really know to be honest. I don’t really know what’s really under there. (Kiran, 13.537).

The reader is left with a sense that the child’s mental state is ‘missing’ or cannot be reflected upon. Similarly, in Joe’s response to a question regarding how his child felt when he (Joe) feels angry:

...I mean anger exists in the world for him to occasionally experience someone being angry. I wouldn’t think that’s damaging. Um how it makes him feel? My answer is... I don’t know. Whether that counts as answer, I don’t know. (Joe, 12.446-449)

When Rita was asked to choose three adjectives to describe her relationship with her son she responded with:

Uhh I donno, um...(pause) it’s not something that you think about it, you know, every day. (Rita, 5.129)

Finally, Moe demonstrated this subordinate theme with vague responses. For instance, instead of considering characteristics of his child that he may dislike, he avoided offering a more personal response:

I would say I like everything about him. He's a good boy. He's a very good boy... (Moe, 4.132).

This statement may demonstrate Moe's reluctance at expressing his 'dislikes' of his child and thus, may lead to a less personal image of his child. Moe does not expand on what he means by 'good' and in what ways his child is 'good'; it leaves the reader wondering and keeping negative feelings/characteristics of the child hidden.

6.3.5 Subordinate Theme: Not acknowledging child's mental states as their own

A lack of acknowledging the child's mental states as their own appeared in several interviews ($n = 5$). This was demonstrated by an attribution of their child's mental states or emotions to others and at times, by doubting the individuality and independence of their child's thoughts. For female participants who displayed this theme, their child was portrayed as an extension of themselves and that their beliefs are their child's as well, whereas two of the male participants believed their child's mental states belonged to others. An example of the latter was explicitly verbalised in Kiran's response:

...the anger she is expressing feels like it's not her own. (Kiran, 7.298)

This is elicited again when Kiran states,

...she's expressing things she's heard from her mum and the environment around her. (Kiran, 7.301).

Kiran was explicitly stating that he did not believe his child's mental states are her own but rather are his ex-partner's.

Maria believed that her child feels her emotions and that her child's emotions are linked to hers. This may cause the child's own feelings to be overshadowed by her own rather than being significant in her response:

I had a feeling that night that I wanted to talk to [name of child] for, I don't know I had a feeling....when I phoned him, he was not happy...I think he could feel my worries... (Maria, 4.113).

Maria attributed her child's feelings of unhappiness to her own initial feeling of worry. The child's own feelings were 'missing' as she does not consider that he may be unhappy due to other reasons; she presumed that he was unhappy because she was worried. Thus, she may be viewing her child's feelings as an extension of her own.

In Bart's interview, this subordinate theme presents itself when he appears to be sure that his daughter's wants/desires only exist because of others' similar feelings:

...she only wants it because they've got it (Bart, 5.129).

6.3.6 Subordinate theme: Exaggerated sense of optimism

Participants' responses ($n = 4$) also embodied optimism and positivity, even when asked about difficult emotions or circumstances. For instance, examples of difficulties in parenting were sometimes evaded, giving a sense that there are no negatives. This elicited a perception of the child's experience, particularly if negative, as 'missing' in responses. At times, these optimistic and positive responses may be revealing a defense mechanism at work such as denial that something could be 'negative' or less favourable. For example, when Maria was asked about how her relationship with her ex-spouse affected her child's development and personality, she responded with an answer that seemed to positivise a negative event:

... Our conflict will help the children definitely 100% to improve personality and strengthen their characters. (Maria, 5.155)

This type of response was echoed in Janice's answer to a question about whether any experiences in her child's life have been a setback for him:

...maybe it's not a bad thing for a child to see the parent...parents having sort of minor arguments sometimes, if they then get on, he sees that they get on and get on okay afterwards...actually kind of healthy cos then they know it's okay to have arguments or to disagree. You know otherwise they can grow up being scared of conflict cos they have never seen it. (Janice, 17.707-712)

Although Janice and her co-parent were referred to this study because of their prolonged conflict with one another and an inability to agree on matters concerning their child, she explained that the conflict they are experiencing may be good for their child in the long-term.

Moe's interview also contained instances of perhaps a distorted hopefulness about situations, which may be different than reality:

Well, for me to get angry as being a father, no because I accepted this since day one...I am happy to be a father, I'm really happy to be a father...well everyone gets angry but not that often with [name of child] (Moe, 8.326). To be honest I have no difficulties in being a parent at all...having [name of child] is to be honest, it didn't give me any difficulties...I get tired physically, but in my head I am fine. I'm relaxed. (Moe, 7.303)

These two extracts from Moe's interview may show denial of some of the more negative aspects of parenting. He seemed to prevent any negativity from showing.

In Ashley's interview, a similar example of this theme emerged when she described how proud she was of being a mother. The child's experience was 'missing' as she described her positive parenting skills and perhaps a sense of exaggerated optimism:

...how I am as a mother, and what I implement and what I do on a daily basis, like I said, the proof is in the pudding...the skills that I use in life, I put that into my parenting...but I must say I am so proud of myself for that...even [name of child] says it to me he's like, 'I'm so lucky to have a mum like you.' (Ashley, 17.720)

From Ashley's response, the reader does not get a sense of what her and her child's *actual* experience may be.

6.3.7 Overarching theme: Villainisation

For the male participants, villainisation of their co-parent appeared to be a common theme. Two ways of communicating this theme were used by participants: *Accusing the co-parent of manipulation* and *hostility towards the co-parent*. Female participants also showed this overarching theme in their interviews but particularly through the second subordinate theme. Villainisation involved blaming the co-parent for controlling and manipulating their child's perception of them, or expressing intense hostility toward their co-parent—in both cases portraying their co-parent as a villain.

6.3.8 Subordinate theme: Accusations of manipulation towards co-parent

This theme included moments where only male participants ($n = 4$) demonstrated blame towards their co-parent for manipulating, controlling, and distancing their child from them. In some cases, participants conveyed a sense that their co-parent altered their child's perception of them and/or that their co-parent may be in control of their child's behaviours and mental states. Although this may be slightly similar to the aforementioned subordinate theme, 'lack of acknowledging child's mental states as their own', this differs in its focus on the co-parent's mental state rather than the child's mental state.

An instance of this was portrayed in Kiran's interview when he seemed to believe that his child was under the control of his co-parent:

...after I had that conversation with [name of co-parent] about this, [name of child] was lovely as pie on the phone to my mother the very next week. So the turnaround is instant. So I kind of feel that [name of child] is a puppet on a string (Kiran, 7.267).

In this statement, Kiran accused his co-parent of controlling his child as though she were a ‘puppet on a string’. In another explicit statement, Kiran communicated this feeling again:

So she’s actually being a mouthpiece so that makes me very angry because I feel she’s being manipulated (Kiran, 8.331)

Similarly, in Moe’s interview, he accused his co-parent of manipulating his child:

The son has to follow the father, and that’s what he said to his mum last time and she, and she tried to twist it to, to the core...when we separated his mom twisted it, she made me look like I am the most horrible person on earth... (Moe, 6.235, 253)

... She was hiding his phone, and she was trying everything to make him forget about me (Moe, 13.542)

In those two examples, Moe accused his co-parent of trying to manipulate or turn his child against him and that she tried to make his child forget him.

Bart also alluded to this theme, stating his daughter may be reacting on his co-parent’s desires rather than her own:

She was upset, she wanted me to stay but she knew that her mum wanted me to go...she feels difficult to say could you stay a bit more because her mum’s there, she’s thinking that upsets her (Bart, 11.316).

In this example, Bart seemed to be indicating that his daughter’s desires and wants are under the control of her mother. Perhaps he felt she was unable to act upon her desires and express herself due to the power of her mother’s mental states and feelings towards him.

6.3.9 Subordinate theme: Hostility towards co-parent

Participants communicated hostile remarks about their co-parent throughout their responses. Perhaps through negative and hostile remarks, another attempt was made to depict their co-parent as the antagonist. Female participants ($n = 2$), hostility

towards their co-parent was less aggressive in language and resembled criticism. For male participants ($n = 5$), hostility was communicated through ‘name-calling’ (e.g., liar); and through passive-aggressive means (e.g., through sarcasm or mocking). An example of the former may be found in Moe’s statements about his co-parent:

Everyone knows how much she lie, and she keeps going! She’s got no limits... (Moe, 13.561)

...she tried to make my page as dark as she could for me just to lose my rights over my son (Moe, 7.271).

In these extracts, Moe seemed to ‘villainise’ his co-parent through his hostility towards her.

Similarly, Kiran demonstrated his hostility when he likened his co-parent’s behaviour to an animal:

Then I thought, this is almost an animal level for her, she can’t control this, that she’s behaving this way. Because it’s so clearly a ridiculous thing to do (Kiran, 13.570).

Examples demonstrating the less explicit side of this subordinate theme can also be read in Moe’s interview:

...She bought him a cat, and for her, every time she divorce someone, if she has a child with him, she would buy the child a cat...you know entertain them in the house with the cat, she thinks that they will forget their parents (Moe, 13.543).

Hostility towards his co-parent was demonstrated through his ‘mocking’ tone. With the sarcastic statement, ‘she thinks that they will forget their parents,’ he showed his disapproval of the mental states behind her actions.

In female interviews, hostility towards their co-parents’ behaviours/mental states was less aggressive with responses such as:

...I know that my...my ex will ask them you know, question like how I can win mum’s heart?...I mean he could maybe say in another way...I feel like he use them. (Rita, 7.200-203)

[Name of co-parent] is really unreliable and won't stick to contact arrangements. Even though we arranged something together...there have been a few times now where I've arranged something and he says he'll look after [name of child] and then he will just leave and leave me in the lurch. (Janice, 2.31-41)

6.3.10 Overarching theme: Self as victim

By portraying oneself as a victim, the participants seemed to communicate a sense of helplessness and a desire for sympathy; this overarching theme was portrayed differently by females and males. For instance, female interviews involved a creation of an image of oneself as overworked and sacrificial; whereas male interviews involved a sense of mistreatment or feeling defeated and 'accepting' of less favourable outcomes.

6.3.11 Subordinate theme: Helplessness

Helplessness was portrayed more in male interviews ($n = 4$) with an emphasis on being the 'victim' of mistreatment and feeling defeated. This subordinate theme pertains to the participants' expressions of feeling helpless to circumstances surrounding their contact arrangements with their child, interactions with their co-parent, and a feeling of being a victim of isolation and an inability to change this. An example of this was expressed by Kiran:

I only drop off one day which Wednesday morning, and [name of co-parent] for the last few months has taken to turning up at the same time. Which I think is quite undermining and I've not said anything about it, but I kind of think there's no point, I might as well drop her off at her mum's and she can drop her off if she wants to (Kiran, 5.203).

This example conveys his sense of defeat in the remark, 'I kind of think there's no point,' whilst accepting it, 'she can drop her off if she wants to'. Once again, Kiran showed this in the following excerpt:

...people get reacquainted with their kids when they're 18 as adults or maybe not at all. But I was ready for it, I felt, the first session that I came here, I said, 'I feel like I'm in training for that to happen.' (Kiran, 8.344)

Although he found the arrangement dissatisfying he showed his defeat when he stated, ‘I feel like I’m in training for that to happen,’ and ‘I was ready for it.’

Similarly, Moe demonstrated a sense of being a victim during a situation where his son was pulled away from him:

...she [co-parent] took [name of child] away from me and put him in the car and didn't even let him like, kiss me or hug me. For god's sake, I'm his father. (Moe, 6.225).

Joe demonstrated his inability to change his relationship with his child and his role as a father in the following excerpt:

...we might go on holiday together and she [mother] gets very stressed and she will start bossing me around and things like that and I don't really see why it's necessary to get that stressed. So we [child and father] don't do things together...we're there and it makes me feel useless when we don't connect...when he's very clingy to his mum and then it's difficult to get him away from her so that she can get on with getting dressed and to get ready to do the things she needs to do, or we need to do. So I feel a bit useless is the word. (Joe, 8.303-309)

6.3.12 Subordinate theme: Desire for sympathy

This subordinate theme was elicited by participants ($n = 5$) by painting an image of themselves as victims. At times this was communicated through listing/describing the more challenging parts of their circumstances. Participants described instances of mistreatment or unfairness in their situations. For example, Kiran described two instances where he felt he was treated unfairly:

...because my experience, where I wasn't really allowed to express—I was allowed to express things but it was kind of irrelevant because I was never going to get listened to and a lot of it was just denied or, or ignored (Kiran, 10.428).

Last year my dad died so I couldn't come to [name of child]'s birthday because it was the funeral and I was making arrangements. The year before that, I was just ostracized so in other words; other parents were included more than I was (Kiran, 14.573).

These statements portray his experiences as being unfair and challenging. Kiran could have been attempting to elicit a sympathetic response from the interviewer.

Mike also portrayed himself as the victim of his divorce process, in the following excerpt:

...after two and a half years I still question you know, her reasons, why did she do it and all these things and in a way, hope that maybe we'll come back together again. Maybe she will kind of come to the senses, you understand? And think 'well that man wasn't whatever I made him out'...According to her there will never, I mean, we will never go back together. (Mike, 17-18.485-492)

Females tended to communicate a desire for sympathy by portraying their lives as unfair, difficult, and as being overloaded with responsibility. Ashley demonstrated this below:

I guess there are times when you know, it would be nice if someone would, it would be nice if someone could just take the load....Sometimes I do feel like, it would be nice if I didn't feel like I had this mountain I had to take on...like I said I had a business, I had a life, I had everything and then this happened [referring to the separation], the world turned upside down...And so there is still a big rubble that needs to be cleaned up...I'm not the person who I used to be, you know the business woman suited and booted and all of the rest of it...I am so overwhelmed with all of the rubble that's being cleaned up...(Ashley, 12.488)

In this rich passage, Ashley explained the reality of her present circumstances but tells her story in a way that may elicit a response of sympathy. Ashley may have also been trying to evoke a sense of sympathy by describing her sacrifice and 'suffering' during and following the divorce:

I always said I wouldn't be one of those women who put everything and everyone before herself. Meanwhile, she's just been dragged through the mud and at the end of it, she just gets left with nothing (Ashley, 16.703).

In Janice's interview there were several responses where she described herself as a victim of the difficulties of being a single mother and communicated a sense of

needing help. She discussed how her co-parent consistently 'leave her in the lurch' and was unreliable:

My friend with a free ticket invited me...[Name of child] woke up in a bit of a bad mood, [father] woke up in a bit of a bad mood, [name of child] said to [father] 'go away daddy', so [father] ...left. And I couldn't go, I was crying, I was like what, what are you punishing me for?...do I just have to accept that the responsibility's all on my shoulders and [father] is never actually going to pull anything like his weight...he might just freak out over something you know, minor, and just completely drop me and not care about my life or my arrangements, which I find deeply unfair. (Janice, 2.48-63)

6.4 Discussion

The current study addressed the following research question:

(1) What are the experiences of divorced parents who are in conflict with their co-parents and unable to adequately mentalize about and reflect on their child(ren)'s experience?

In order to address this question, 9 out of 22 PDIs were selected, due to their low RF scores, and analysed using TA. This discussion will engage with the key themes that emerged from the interviews and secondly, offer extrapolation of meaning to accomplish the second objective of the current thesis—i.e., to explore the views of co-parents, post-separation, about their child's adjustment, and assess parental RF in relation to the child, in order to better understand the latency-age child's experience of co-parenting and life at home.

6.4.1 Parental RF

Nearly half (9 participants) of the sample of co-parents ($n = 22$) scored lower than 4, suggesting that many parents did not demonstrate an ordinary RF capacity found in high-functioning 'normal' samples (Slade et al., 2005). An interview falling below the score of 5 suggests a poorer ability to make explicit links between behaviours and the impact on them by mental states (Slade et al., 2005). Slade et al. (2005) pointed out that, "scores under 5 indicate either negative, absent or low (and not fully realized) RF, whereas scores of 5 and above indicate clear evidence of mentalizing capacities," (p. 288-289). Overall scores at this level normally involve some evidence of consideration of mental states throughout the interview but generally only to an elementary degree (Slade et al., 2005).

According to Midgley and Vrouva (2012), non-mentalizing and deficits in RF can arise due to several variables that take place during familial disputes or during

separations within the family. For instance, Midgley and Vrouva (2012) theorised that within a situation where one family member is unavailable for mentalizing within the family system, other family members may demonstrate extreme non-mentalizing efforts by assuming a position that attacks mentalization. Midgley and Vrouva (2012) describe such efforts as possibly generating further arousal within the family unit that is incompatible with mentalization (i.e., losing the ability to engage in 'controlled' mentalization due to high arousal) and can lead to further non-mentalizing cycles. Midgley and Vrouva (2012) also proposed that a parent may misuse a child's mental state as a weapon during marital battles and during times of spousal conflict.

6.4.2 Thematic analysis

In this study, three overarching themes emerged from the 9 low-scoring PDIs—'the missing child' evidenced through *difficulty talking about the child*, not *acknowledging the child's mental states as their own*, and an *exaggerated sense of optimism*; 'villainisation' as evidenced through *accusations of manipulation towards co-parent* and *hostility towards the co-parent*; and 'self as victim' as evidenced through feelings of *helplessness* and *a desire for sympathy*.

Some themes converged with others, particularly those engaging in talk of manipulation were also likely to engage in talk of their child's mental states as belonging to others. Also, those who demonstrated these themes were more likely to show instances of hostility towards their co-parent and participants, who depicted their co-parents as villains, also depicted themselves as victims. These themes cannot be fully distinguished from one another and thus, could be viewed as overlapping and contributing to one another. Indeed, it appeared that the overarching themes in the current study represented three areas of the participants' lives—the self, the child, and the co-parent.

Target et al.'s (2017) study conducted on the full sample of 22, reported findings from the PDI interviews used in the current study, and on another qualitative interview (Midgley et al., 2013) designed to explore parents' perceptions and experiences of the difficulties they were having with their co-parent, as well as their views on treatment interventions. Due to the inclusion of another interview in the larger RCT study, not used in the current study, their qualitative findings differed slightly from the ones reported here. However, many similarities existed and are thus, supportive of the findings of the TA conducted here; these will be discussed in relation to the overarching and subordinate themes throughout the following sections.

6.4.3 The missing child

This overarching theme emerged in most of the interviews and involved the child being missing from the conversation or conveying the child's experience and mental state as being avoided, forgotten, or left out of responses. Referring back to states of high arousal, when 'controlled' mentalizing is disrupted, and 'automatic' mentalizing is dominant, Fonagy and Allison (2012) pointed out the difficulty in considering a child's experience and mental state during such times. This high arousal and pressure could lead to a loss in the capacity to think about the thoughts and feelings of others—even if those individuals were once highly-mentalizing (Fonagy & Allison, 2012).

Target et al. (2017) reported a similar overarching theme called 'child as everywhere and nowhere'. The theme 'the missing child' resembled their theme in that it also described instances where participants were highly preoccupied with their own entrenched conflict and having it dominate their lives, leaving no room for the child in their minds (Target et al., 2017). Their theme also encompassed subordinate

themes similar to those reported under the theme of ‘the missing child’; this will be discussed below.

6.4.4 Difficulty talking about the child

Divorced co-parents in conflict avoided or found the subject of their child’s emotional and mental well-being post-divorce difficult to reflect on. This difficulty may be due to feelings of guilt arising from a decrease in effective and attentive parenting or due to a decrease in involvement with the child post-divorce (Amato, 2000). Mitcham-Smith and Henry (2007) stated that divorced co-parents in conflict tend to be unaware of how their own behaviour is impacting their child; this unawareness may be contributing to their inability or difficulty in thinking/talking about their child’s mental states during stressful times.

Vague answers, which may have served to avoid complex or ambivalent thinking, were also employed. Levite and Cohen (2012) found that co-parents in conflict may find it difficult to express a range of feelings or bear any ambivalence or ambiguity. Thus, the overarching theme of ‘the missing child’ may be highlighting a more global problem for parents who have been entrenched in conflict. These co-parents may face the risk of the relationship between their child and either one of them wearing away (Ramsey, 2001). This wearing away of the relationship between the child and parent may contribute to a lack of connection with their child's mental states and may lead to difficulty in mentalizing about their child.

Target et al. (2017) described a subordinate theme called ‘preoccupation’ which encompassed instances where co-parents could not remain focused on their children when responding to questions about them. This included instances where their communication vividly demonstrated preoccupation with their own experiences and difficulties so that their responses would be incoherent (Target et al., 2017). For

instance, when describing their child's experience, they would discuss their own or the interviewer found it difficult to distinguish between their child's experience and their own experience (Target et al., 2017). These findings are encouraging as a different research group, using the whole sample and more material, found themes similar to those in the current analysis.

6.4.5 Not acknowledging child's mental states as their own

This subordinate theme included instances where parents attributed their child's mental states to others or to themselves—in both cases, there was a lack of acknowledgement of the child's mental states as being their own. High-conflict divorce may present a multitude of difficulties for the non-resident parent, namely, containing one's suspicions, fears, or even accusations that their child is under the control of another (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Although this ties into another subordinate theme (i.e., accusations of manipulation), this theme is concerned with the child's mental states whereas the subordinate theme 'accusations of manipulation' concerns the co-parent. Male participants tended to attribute their child's mental states to others due to their children's reluctance to visit them post-divorce, while others were accused of aligning themselves with one parent against the other. Johnston (1993) found that when divorce is acrimonious, children have high rates of aligning themselves with one parent over the other. This may contribute to why some participants in the current study felt that their child's feelings, thoughts, and behaviours were not their own—children may have formed an alliance with one parent against the other and have genuine feelings of not wanting to visit the non-resident parent (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Johnston, Walters, and Olesen (2008) provided some evidence that participants' attributions of their children's mental states not being their own may be warranted. They suggest that children can be under the

influence of a bitter parent and therefore have developed genuine feelings of rejection towards the other parent (Johnston, Walters & Olesen, 2008). Thus, when Kiran suggested that he felt his child's anger was 'not her own', he may have been trying to suggest that her anger was her mother's. This falls in line with the literature regarding 'children who refuse visitation' (Johnston, 1993) as well as literature on the lack of ambivalence prevalent in children who have aligned themselves with one parent over the other (Jaffe, Thakar & Piron, 2017). In extreme cases of a child rejecting one parent, Johnston, Walter and Olesen (2008) found that the child expressed anger, dislike, denigration, coupled with a refusal of visiting the father or his family. Their study found that fathers were more likely to experience this refusal from their children than mothers were (Johnston, Walter & Olesen, 2008). On the other hand, Kruk (2011) found an equal distribution between fathers and mothers being alienated and doing the alienation. Previous literature has found that the more children were enmeshed in ongoing disputes between parents post-divorce, the more likely they were to 'choose sides', get caught in the middle, or be used as weapons (Johnston, Kline & Tschann, 1989; Levite & Cohen, 2012; Johnston, Walter & Olesen, 2008, Johnston, 2003, Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Maria, Ashley, and Moe demonstrated a different link between the child's mental states and to whom they belonged. Some alluded to the idea that their child's mental states were linked to their own, as if almost an extension of themselves. This is also supported by previous findings demonstrating divorced co-parents in conflict as being in a state of narcissism that leads to feeling that one's child is simply an extension of themselves (Donner, 2006). It has been proposed that narcissistic parents find it difficult to perceive their child's thoughts and feelings as different from their

own—especially with regards to the child’s feelings towards the other parent (Donner, 2006).

Finally, this theme was also supported in Target et al.’s (2017) findings that demonstrated co-parents, at times, felt that their child was being influenced by the other parent and wished their child was old enough to make their own decisions about communication and contact. These findings fell under Target et al.’s (2017) subordinate theme of ‘winning and losing’, which was part of the overarching theme ‘extreme states of mind’. The examples retrieved from the PDIs to support the themes in the current study and those in Target et al.’s (2017) study are similar and portray a similar accusation of children’s decisions and thoughts as not being their own and being induced by another. Target et al. (2017) also reported that parents attributed their child’s refusal to see them as something to do with their ex-partner’s influence in their theme ‘contact dependent on the climate between parents’.

6.4.6 Exaggerated sense of optimism

This subordinate theme portrays an inability to penetrate the participant’s and the child’s internal world. The participant engages in a kind of defence or buffer against facing reality. According to Siegel and Langford (1998), those who are involved in high conflict divorce cases may be individuals with more defensive personality types. This may provide some support for the finding of the current study that this state of ‘optimism’ or ‘positivity’ may be false. Perhaps through this exaggerated portrayal of positivity in their situation, the reality of the difficulties or stress associated with it are denied or kept ‘hidden’. Donner (2006) suggests that in some instances exaggerated optimism, which can be representing a denial of the child’s mental wellbeing, is a way of attributing any difficulties they do possess to the other parent. They may portray that everything is ‘fine’ with regards to ‘their’

relationship with the child and ‘their’ role in his/her life, but recognize harm and difficulty in their child as arising because of the other parent (Donner, 2006). This is interesting as some of the participants’ responses appeared to include a denial that any negative impact on the child may have been an outcome of their circumstances or conflicted relations with their co-parent. As mentioned earlier, this may be an avoidance or denial of reality in order to prevent painful or difficult feelings from arising within oneself. Donner (2006) described a case where a father could not acknowledge his own involvement in the suffering or turmoil the child underwent during times of conflict with his co-parent, perhaps due to the pain this acknowledgment may cause him.

This theme was not mirrored in Target et al.’s (2017) study, which could be due to a difference in research questions and goals. Target et al.’s (2017) study was, “aimed at examining parents’ experiences of contact arrangements post-separation,” (p. 218) and thus, would not have included themes that did not relate to contact and their research questions.

6.4.7 Villainisation

This overarching theme included the participant’s communications of hostility towards their co-parent as well as accusations of manipulation towards the co-parent. A similar theme was also frequently reported in Target et al.’s (2017) findings, due to parents feeling a ‘sense of threat’. Some parents described a sense of being bullied by their co-parent (Target et al., 2017)—which ties into the theme of ‘self as victim’. Target et al.’s (2017) findings also provided support for the current theme by describing their own account of some of the responses to the PDI as involving a sense of threat and fear about what the other parent could do.

6.4.8 Accusations of manipulation towards co-parent

In cases where participants accused their co-parent of manipulating their child—particularly the fathers in the current study (i.e., Moe, Bart and Kiran)—the participant may be warranted in their accusations according to a large body of literature on the topic, otherwise known as Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) (Gardner, 1985). PAS is the alienation of the child by one parent from the other; this is usually accomplished by degrading the ‘target’ parent (i.e., the victim of PAS) in the eyes of the child by the other parent (Gardner, 1985). Gardner (1985, 2002) refers to PAS as a common disorder, which is increasing in many divorce and separation cases, particularly those involving conflict between co-parents. The findings of the current study may support this ‘syndrome’ as Moe, Kiran, and Bart complained of their child being manipulated, controlled, or aligned with their co-parent; in Moe’s instance he complains of his former spouse ‘twisting’ the story to make him look ‘bad’ to his child. In the cases of Kiran and Bart, explicit accusations were not made but they insinuated that their child might be manipulated by their co-parent to share their beliefs, thoughts, or decisions. For example, when Kiran refers to his daughter as a ‘puppet on a string’ or when Bart refers to his child as not expressing what she wants because it may ‘upset’ her mother. Indeed, this finding links with the aforementioned subordinate theme of ‘not acknowledging the child’s mental states as their own,’ which may also be linked to PAS. Gardner (1985) described children who have experienced PAS as exhibiting an obsession with hating one parent or engaging in criticism of the ‘target’ parent. Although PAS has gained strong recognition in both the legal and psychological fields, Kelly and Johnston (2001) disagree that alienating behaviour from a parent is in fact a precursor for the alienation of a child from its—in most cases—non-resident parent. Rather than focusing on the alienating parent, Kelly

and Johnston (2001) reformulate this focus onto, what they refer to as the ‘alienated child’. The alienated child, as defined by Kelly and Johnston (2001) is one who demonstrates...

...freely and persistently, unreasonable negative feelings and beliefs toward a parent that are significantly disproportionate to the child’s actual experience with that parent. From this viewpoint, the pernicious behaviors of a “programming” parent are no longer the starting point. Rather, the problem of the alienated child begins with a primary focus on the child, his or her observable behaviors, and parent-child relationships (p. 251).

This perspective may also shed some light on the subordinate theme ‘lack of acknowledging child’s feelings as their own’. Thus, the mental states and emotions, which some participants did not believe were their child’s, may in fact be feelings resonating within the child, irrespective of co-parents’ feelings and mental states. However, the literature is divided on whether the mental states exist in the child due to their own beliefs and conclusions or due to the co-parent’s manipulation and control. Jaffe, Thakkar and Piron (2017) found that children undergoing PAS tend to ‘deny ambivalence’ and see things as ‘black or white’; Gardner (1998) points out that this denial of ambivalence feels familiar to children and decreases their feelings of uncertainty. This means that children undergoing PAS tend to perceive the alienating parent as all good and their alienated parent as all bad, regardless of previously close relations with the alienated parent or loyalty to them. However, due to the divided nature of the research on whether alienation from one parent stems from the child or the parent, further research is needed to help in unravelling the underlying reasons behind such accusations of manipulation.

Furthermore, a clinical case presented by Levite and Cohen (2012) provided an instance of a father accusing his former spouse of ‘brain-washing’ their children to turn against him; he expressed fears that his former spouse would manipulate the therapist against him just as she did with others. Neff and Cooper (2004) attribute

these forms of extreme negative behaviours and thoughts, of high-conflict divorcing parents, to personality disorders.

Target et al. (2017) specifically mentioned manipulation as an accusation co-parents held towards their ex-partners, “Parents frequently suggested that their ex-partner was acting with deliberate ill intent towards them including manipulating or poisoning the child’s thoughts against them,” (p. 232). This supports the findings of the current study. Target et al.’s (2017) theme ‘contact dependent on the climate between parents’ described instances when fathers felt mothers were turning their child(ren) against them because of the child(ren)’s refusal to see them. Accusations of manipulation may be an important contributor to the hindrance of RF and further research within the context of conflictual divorces may be warranted.

6.4.9 Hostility towards co-parent

This theme coincides with what many divorced individuals in conflict have shown in previous studies. In one case study, each co-parent blamed the other for the divorce; they used negative descriptive language to refer to one another (e.g., unreasonable, unstable, crazy, frightening and manipulative) (Levite & Cohen, 2012). High levels of hostility, rage, and terror seem to characterise those in conflictual separations—thus, hindering the possibility for change (Levite & Cohen, 2012). The literature is generally in consensus regarding hostility as being a prominent feature in high-conflict divorce cases and that it contributes to the cycle of conflict (e.g., Amato, 2000; Arendell, 1992; Johnston, 1994; Maccoby, 1992; Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007; Levite & Cohen, 2012; Donner, 2006; Walker, 1993; Johnston, Walerton & Olesen, 2005).

According to Levite and Cohen (2012) partners may want to destroy each other internally and externally, yet hate is a means of preserving the partner as an

internal object. Through cycles of hostility and blame, mentalization may be hindered or used erratically because of high levels of stress associated with the ongoing conflict (Fonagy & Allison, 2012). It becomes increasingly difficult to engage in parental RF due to the ongoing hatred one parent possesses for the other (Fonagy & Allison, 2012). Engaging in explicit mentalization, which requires cognitive and conscious effort (Fonagy and Luyten, 2009) may be increasingly difficult when one's mind is occupied with hostility, blame, and anxiety due to fears of manipulation.

Hostility towards one's co-parent is evident throughout all of the themes reported in the Target et al. (2017) study and is a common thread in many of the issues co-parents face with regards to their preoccupation, fear, guilt, and shame. For instance, Target et al. (2017) reported that due to the hostility and anger co-parents felt towards their co-parents, they are sometimes unable to contain it in front of their child(ren) and thus, end up feeling guilt and shame. However, hostility was not labeled as a theme on its own in Target et al.'s (2017) study.

6.4.10 Self as victim

'Self as victim' included expressions of helplessness and a desire for sympathy. Mothers portrayed their desire for sympathy through expressions of being overworked, needing help, and as carrying most of the responsibility post-divorce.

The theme of 'self as victim' was also present in Target et al.'s (2017) study but differently; it was described under their theme of 'sense of threat'. Although their theme was consistent with 'villainisation' in the current study, it was also similar to the current theme of 'self as victim'. This is because their description of 'sense of threat' encapsulated both the victim and the villain; for example, Target et al. (2017) outlined that the, "Parents viewed their ex-partner as a twofold danger—to themselves and to the child," (p. 231). This statement could represent both feelings of falling

victim to the dangers their ex-partner presents, as well as feeling that their ex-partner is a villain.

6.4.11 Helplessness

Gardner (1999) described the parent who is alienated by the other as a 'victim'; thus, when Kiran described his feelings of being 'ostracized' he may have perceived himself as the victim of his co-parent's alienation of him. Kiran may have demonstrated this victimisation through his helplessness and need for sympathy when he described his feelings of defeat and acceptance of his circumstances. Donner (2006) named 'helplessness' and despair as common feelings associated with divorced/separated parents in conflict. When losing their child and/or partner they may feel helpless and incapable of salvaging the relationship with someone so close (Donner, 2006). Johnston (1994) also described divorced co-parents as feeling a sense of helplessness with regards to the life changes associated with divorce. Helplessness due to an inability to change a distant relationship that developed between the participant and his/her child (e.g., in the case of Kiran) may cause them to shut down or detach themselves emotionally from their child, in order to rid themselves of the sense of defeat and inability to change their circumstances. By detaching themselves emotionally, they may bring their attempts to mentalize about their child's experience to a halt, making it easier for them to cope with this sense of loss.

In Arendell's (1992) investigation, he found that fathers in particular demonstrated a portrayal of themselves as the 'emotional victims of divorce'. They attempted to show this victimisation through their accounts of feeling isolated in the divorce process by their co-parent and their children; by claiming that they must contain their hurt despite being repeatedly 'beat down' by their co-parents; and

finally, by giving up and detaching themselves from the child altogether (Arendell, 1992, p. 580).

6.4.12 Desire for sympathy

Another factor that may have contributed to a participant's sense of victimisation was their need for sympathy. Participants communicated this through explaining how difficult, and at times isolating, their experience of being a divorced co-parent can be. Ashley demonstrated this through her passage describing how difficult her life has become following the separation; how she was 'dragged through the mud' and how she was left with 'nothing'. Similarly, in Janice's case when she described how she must carry all the responsibility by herself and how unfair it was when she had to cancel or miss out on leisure activities.

Perhaps expressing helplessness and a need for sympathy may have been a means of maintaining one's role as a victim in order to place the blame of the ongoing conflict between him/her and their co-parent away from oneself.

6.4.13 Dimensions of mentalization and modes of non-mentalizing

The previously mentioned dimensions of mentalization, as well as the non-mentalizing modes, will be discussed with reference to this sample of low RF PDIs. Initially, due to the co-parents being in a high state of arousal because of the ongoing conflict, hostility, anger, and preoccupation with their co-parent, 'automatic' mentalizing may be dominant, whilst their use of 'controlled' mentalizing may be overshadowed (Luyten & Fonagy, 2015). This could account for the child being 'missing' in their responses. One assumption could be that the conflict is 'pushing' the parent away from controlled mentalization about their co-parent and/or child.

A common by-product of divorce in a majority of cases (Amato, 2000) is that a major shared network has been severed (i.e., the parental couple, extended family,

mutual friends, etc.) and this could impact the dimension of mentalization identified as ‘self versus others’. When a shared network does not exist between individuals, it can weaken their ability to understand each other’s intentions and behaviours in terms of underlying mental states (Luyten & Fonagy, 2015).

In addition to this, participants in the current study appeared to be engaging less in ‘cognitive mentalization’ evidenced by an inability to ‘perspective-take’ with their co-parent or child. For instance, one male participant stated, “...She [his co-parent] bought him a cat, and for her, every time she divorce someone, if she has a child with him, she would buy the child a cat...you know entertain them in the house with the cat, she thinks that they will forget their parents,” (Moe, 13.543). This statement demonstrated that there was no attempt to tease out the underlying wishes or goals of his co-parent when she engaged in this behaviour. The participant did not appear to be mentalizing in a controlled way, nor was he trying to think about his co-parent’s actions in a cognitive way – for instance, interpreting the underlying meaning behind her behaviours or considering an alternate perspective.

This links to another dimension of mentalization, shown in the PDIs, involving the tendency to mentalize about others by only interpreting the external. This is the understanding of others’ intentions/behaviours through their exterior (i.e., their facial expressions, tone of voice, etc.) rather than their internal world (Luyten & Fonagy, 2015). This may have resulted in the lack of empathy or understanding of the ‘other’s’ perspective that was prevalent in the PDIs, and may have reduced compassionate understanding—which can lead to higher arousal and preoccupation with the co-parent, and less parental RF. Without this kind of mentalization, it is speculated that the conflict would continue as a result of a lack of mutual compassionate and empathetic understanding.

6.4.14 Parental RF and the internal world of latency-age children from separated families

Research shows that through the process of intergenerational transmission, much can be transferred from parents to their children, such as attachment (e.g., Main, Kaplan & Cassidy, 1985), internalising behaviours (Reck, Nonnenmacher, Zietlow, 2016), and parenting practices (i.e., studied across three generations; Van IJzendoorn, 1992). From a psychoanalytic perspective, early experiences with significant objects are carried forward and repeated in future relationships (Freud, 1914). Attachment theory states that the transmission of patterns of relating across generations is carried on by an individual's IWMs (Bowlby, 1969; Bowlby, 1979). Within the context of intergenerational transmission and by extrapolating, the current study proposes that the themes found in parents' low-RF PDIs can reveal valuable information about their children's internal worlds.

For instance, the overarching theme of 'the missing child' paints a picture of a parent who is unable to mentalize about their child's internal world—thus, their child's experience seems absent from the minds of their closest attachment figures. This absence could indicate an internal world that is being forgotten and whose needs are being unmet. In Chapter 3 of the current thesis, it was found that children from separated families demonstrated significantly more *Defensive/Avoidance* themes in their play narratives than children from non-separated families. This may be an outcome of divorced co-parents finding it challenging to think about how their children are feeling and/or thinking, as shown in the current chapter. Children with caregivers who are cold, withdrawn, or resistant can develop insecure attachment styles later in life leading them to avoid the development of close interpersonal relationships (Sirvanli-Ozen, 2005). The subordinate themes under 'the missing child'

are indicative of an avoidance to consider and acknowledge the child's mental states. Research shows that during times of high stress and arousal, mentalization and RF capacities are hindered or absent altogether and this can lead to an unavailable caregiver (Midgley and Vrouva, 2012). The child's internal world may be painted with representations of caregivers who are unavailable, absent, and/or preoccupied—therefore, unresponsive and unsupportive to their needs of comfort/guidance during drastic life changes such as divorce.

'Villainisation' is one of the most relevant themes in the current study to the concept of 'intergenerational transmission', as divorced parents displayed outward expressions of anger, hate, jealousy, and negative opinions of the child's other parent. Previous studies demonstrated that internalising disorders such as anxiety and depression could be transmitted from mothers to their children (e.g., Starr et al., 2014). Violence and abuse are also traits that can be passed on from one generation to the next (e.g., Zeanah & Zeanah, 1989). Thus, a parent's outward expression of anger and dislike of their co-parent may also be internalised by their child(ren) and re-enacted in future relationships. From an attachment theory perspective, incidents that made up the theme of 'villainisation' in the current study may impact and alter the IWMs of these children, leaving them with aggressive and hostile attachment/caregiver representations.

Furthermore, the detachment from one's children to defend against painful emotions (i.e., shown in the subordinate theme 'helplessness') could lead to the child developing a more insecure way of relating with that particular parent or in future interpersonal relationships. A significant attachment figure shutting themselves off emotionally or physically from their child because of feelings of helplessness about their situation post-divorce can significantly disrupt that relationship. An important

point about this kind of parenting is that it can also impact the child's parenting practices later in life with their future children (Van IJzendoorn, 1992). Main, Kaplan and Cassidy (1985) postulated that parents who were more sensitive to their infants' signals, most likely received a high level of responsiveness from their own parents as children, in comparison to those who were 'rejected' or treated with ambivalence. This is because the 'responded-to' children can become parents who are better able to take into account their child's perspectives and not feel threatened by signs of anxiety in their children (Main, Kaplan & Cassidy, 1985).

Moreover, unavailable caregivers who are pre-occupied with conflict and are not exhibiting RF, tend to not be modelling such traits—thus, halting the development of these functions in their children. Research suggests that mentalization by parents promotes the development of these capacities and affect regulation in offspring (e.g., Fonagy & Allison, 2012; Fonagy & Target, 1997). This could suggest that these children's mentalization capacities are also hindered and without them, they may find it difficult to take their parents' perspectives into account and tolerate any ambivalence they may feel towards them during the divorce process. This point can also be understood within the context of the findings in Chapter 5 of the current study—children felt out of control and without knowledge about their situations, whilst some were angry, others felt anxious and fearful of what their future might look like. Without the ability to take into account other perspectives and make sense of opposing points of view, feelings of helplessness, ambivalence, anger, and anxiety can arise (Davies, 2010).

6.4.15 Strengths

The current study benefited from a unique approach to understanding how divorced co-parents in conflict may be thinking about their child(ren) and reflecting

upon their experiences, as well as what this process may reveal about children's internal worlds post-divorce. This study was unique in its approach to understanding how divorce affects co-parents and provided an indirect appreciation of the child's internal experience. This study also benefited from utilising an in-depth, validated and reliable parent interview, which permitted both fathers and mothers to participate.

6.4.16 Limitations

The current study suffered from a few limitations, initially, some words and phrases used in the PDI were incomprehensible to participants who were not native English speakers. For instance, the questions requiring the participant to consider a time they felt 'connected' with their child or when the participant was asked if they felt any experiences in their child's life had been a 'setback' for them. These terms were difficult for participants whose native tongue was not English. Therefore, there is some speculation about whether the non-native English speaking participants ($n = 3$) fully understood these questions. There should also be a consideration of whether or not their answers may have been more expressive and more reflective if the questions were asked in their native language or if different English terms were used.

Secondly, due to the circumstances by which participants were included in this study—i.e., divorced parents who are in conflict with one another—their use of 'social desirability bias' (i.e., responding in a way that is viewed favourably by the interviewer) may be relatively high compared to other samples (Fisher, 1993). This could have also contributed to the theme 'desire for sympathy'—this theme, at times, manifested through the participant appealing to the interviewer and trying to demonstrate to him/her the 'direness' of their situation. It may be possible that participants presented themselves as victims and demonstrated a need to gain

sympathy from the interviewer in order to appear as the more 'desirable/committed parent'.

Finally, the primary researcher's interpretations of the PDIs and their indication about the latency-age child's internal world post-divorce can be viewed as a limitation due to its subjective nature. However, due to the qualitative nature of the current study, the primary researcher can be perceived as the 'co-constructor of meaning' and an integral part of the interpretation of the data (Morrow, 2005). In addition, the primary researcher was grounded in previous literature to aid in the prevention of researcher biases because an understanding of multiple ways of viewing the phenomenon under study was attained (Morrow, 2005).

6.4.17 Directions for future research

Future research studies on parental RF in divorced/separated parents could examine larger sample sizes as well as include a control group of participants who have not been in prolonged conflict, mediation, or disputes over their child(ren). Comparing these two kinds of divorced co-parents would be valuable in assessing whether or not findings distinguished parents in the current study from the wider pool of divorced co-parents. RF contributes to healthy child development patterns and plays a major role in how children engage in all future relationships, as well as how they adjust post-divorce. Therefore, it is an important topic to investigate in parents who are undergoing drastic and at times, stressful, life changes such as separations from their co-parent; as well as understanding whether or not RF is affected in divorces where prolonged conflict does not exist (i.e., lower state of arousal).

6.5 Conclusions

Findings from the current study may present an initial step in understanding the RF capacity of divorced parents in conflict. A thematic analysis conducted on nine low-scoring PDIs resulted in the formulation of three overarching themes: ‘The missing child’, ‘villainisation’, and ‘self as victim’. These three overarching themes may be a preliminary step in exploring why some co-parents in conflict post-divorce have low parental RF capacities and may find it difficult to mentalize about their child(ren)’s experience and mental states. The overarching themes may have been representative of three prominent features of the participants’ lives: The child, the co-parent, and the self. The connectedness between themes and the areas they represent in the participants’ lives may indicate that factors underlying and contributing to low parental RF during times of high stress, separation and loss, are multifaceted and complex.

Target et al.’s (2017) report described a thematic analysis carried out on the PDIs used in the current sample, as well as on an additional qualitative interview evaluating parents’ experiences of contact arrangements and therapeutic outcomes. The similarities of their results to the current study’s findings provided support for the current research. However, differences that existed between the two studies could be attributed to a number of variables. One of these variables was discussed above and pertained to the two studies’ research questions and goals. A second, yet very important variable that differentiates the two studies and presumably their findings, is that Target et al. (2017) carried out the study on another qualitative interview, in addition to the PDI. Finally, a third variable is that Target et al. (2017) conducted the thematic analysis on all 22 interviews, which would have included some average and higher scoring interviews, whereas the current study only conducted the thematic

analysis on 9 of the PDIs and these were selected based on being the lowest RF scores within the sample.

Finally, the current study provided an in-depth qualitative interpretation of the current findings on low RF PDIs and what they can reveal about children's internal worlds. This discussion included past literature on intergenerational transmission, as well as connections to findings in previous chapters of the current thesis and published literature. The connections made between parental RF studied in the current chapter and children's internal worlds, including attachment/caregiver representations studied in previous chapters, may paint a more robust picture of how latency-age children experience the divorce process and how this connects to the important attachment figures in their external world.

Chapter 7: Primary schoolteachers' experiences and perceptions of children from separated families.

7.1 Introduction

The current chapter involves the study of primary schoolteachers in the UK and their experiences with, and perceptions of, children from separated families. Given the amount of time schoolteachers spend with latency-age children and the importance of their role in children's learning and development, the child-teacher relationship is considered a significant relationship (Daniels & Meece, 2008; Howes & Matheson, 1992; Goossens & Van IJzendoorn, 1990; Pianta, 2006; Van IJzendoorn, Sagi & Lambermon, 1992). Teachers are often well-informed witnesses of children's experiences post-divorce. Thus, the goal of the current study is to explore schoolteachers' perspectives on how children experience parental divorce and utilise a psychoanalytic framework to carry out an indirect study of the child's internal world post-divorce.

7.1.1 Teaching children from separated families

Teachers can play a pivotal role during times of stress and trauma in children's lives. For example, a study by Vernberg and Vogel (1993) indicated that when insecure attachment relationships existed at home with primary caregivers, attachment to a teacher could compensate for insecure relationships. The authors explained that during times of upheaval, trauma, and/or drastic changes, a schoolteacher can be the only constant attachment figure in the child's life (Vernberg & Vogel, 1993) (see Sections 1.9.2 and 1.9.3).

The study of teachers' beliefs, perspectives, and experiences of children from separated families has become a niche area within divorce literature. Some studies have investigated teachers' facilitation of supportive environments for children and

children's experiences at school post-divorce (e.g., Øverland, Thorsen & Størksen, 2012). These studies illustrated the importance of the teacher's role in the life of the child of divorce, providing everyday support and attention. The research indicated that teachers were aware of the child's emotional needs during and following divorce, which was a protective buffer during stressful times.

7.1.2 Gap in the literature

Despite the important role schoolteachers play in latency-age children's development and their awareness of children's emotional needs during divorce, there is little research into how teachers perceive children's experiences from separated families. Previous research focused on teachers' 'expectations' of children from separated families academically (e.g., Ball, Newman & Scheuren, 1984) or their ratings of children's behavioural/emotional problems (e.g., Stadelmann, Perren, Groeben & von Klitzing, 2010). Research studies investigating how teachers perceive children's experiences, who are from separated families, remain very limited (e.g., Øverland, Thorsen and Størksen, 2012).

7.1.3 Current study

The research question (1) the current study will address is: ***How do schoolteachers perceive children's experiences from separated families, and what do these perceptions reveal about the latency-age child's internal world post-divorce?*** In addressing this question, the current thesis will attempt to gain an important perspective on children's experiences post-divorce and explore the third objective of the current thesis (i.e., To explore teachers' perspectives on and experiences with children from divorced/separated families). By investigating the perspectives of schoolteachers, an indirect yet important window into children's internal worlds may be achieved.

This research question will encompass teachers' perspectives on:

- (1) The child's experience of divorce,
- (2) The challenges children may face whilst at school,
- (3) Their interactions with children from separated families,
- (4) The support offered by teachers,
- (5) Teachers' views on which factors affect children's adjustment.

A qualitative methodology was used to explore these points, as this was likely to yield an in-depth engagement with the topic. An Online Focus Group (OFG) interview schedule was developed incorporating the topics mentioned above to generate semi-structured questions, which helped prompt relevant answers.

7.2 Method

7.2.1 Recruitment

The current study utilised a similar methodology for participant recruitment as used in Chapters 3 to 5 (i.e., through the social media platform ‘Facebook’ and the classifieds website ‘Gumtree’). ‘Facebook’ was utilised due to its large number of ‘Groups’ for teachers in the UK; ‘Groups’ is an application on ‘Facebook’ which allows members of the website to connect with one another based on common interests or life circumstances. ‘Gumtree’ was also used to advertise the study due to its high volume of visitors. A brief advertisement was posted on both websites outlining the study and inviting teachers in the UK to participate. Through ‘Facebook’, the advertisement was posted to individual ‘Groups’ for teachers in the UK.

Those who expressed an interest in the study were asked questions by the primary researcher *via* email to identify their eligibility for participation and were sent information sheets (see Appendix W); inclusion criteria involved being current teachers within the primary school system in the UK and being fluent in English. Participants also needed access to a computer and the Internet. Once deemed eligible, a group of 4 to 6 participants were emailed with several dates and times to participate in a focus group and once a date/time was agreed upon they were sent an ‘instructional’ email describing how to join the ‘chat room’ to engage in the OFG (see Appendix X).

The instructional email contained a pseudonym for participants to use during the OFG in order to maintain anonymity, a consent form (see Appendix Y), and a reminder that they would receive the invitation to join the chat via a link on the scheduled date of the OFG.

7.2.2 Participants

Participants recruited for the current study were primary schoolteachers in the UK. There were a total of three OFGs with 3 to 4 participants in each. The details of the participants and their demographic data are presented in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1

OFG participant demographic information organised by OFG number.

OFG no.	Name	Gender	Age	Role(s)	Teaching experience (in years)
1	Lulu ²	Female	32	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special Education Needs (SEN) teacher for children with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) • Worked in all year groups in primary school • Resource base for children with speech and communication difficulties 	8
	Sarah	Female	27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary schoolteacher working with Upper Key Stage 2 • Mainly working with 10-11 year olds 	5
	Ricky	Male	25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newly qualified primary schoolteacher (NQT) with experience teaching Key Stage 2 	1
2	Fran	Female	33	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Year 4 class teacher 	6
	Ruby	Female	25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supply teacher in primary school 	4
	Melissa	Female	55	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deputy head teacher • Previously worked as a class teacher and assistant head teacher 	14

² All names have been changed to ensure participant anonymity.

3	Sam	Male	22	• Class teacher at a primary special academy	2
	Julie	Female	26	• Primary academy teacher • Teaching students/NQT mentor • Writing co-ordinator for the school • Alternate year experiences with Key stage 1 and 2	5
	Liz	Female	31	• Year 6 class teacher • English co-ordinator	6
	Amelia	Female	30	• Leading assessment in Early Years • Leading children with high learning potential (HLP)	5

There were five additional participants who had shown interest in the study by replying to the advertisements posted online. However, once emailed with further information about the study, they did not respond. These participants were contacted a second time by email and when no response was received they were not contacted again. Two more participants had shown an interest and responded to the communications by email; these two participants had also agreed to participate at a specific time and date. On the day of these focus groups, the aforementioned participants did not enter the chat room and did not participate.

7.2.3 Location

The OFG took place in a virtual chat room through the website ‘Chatzy’. ‘Chatzy’ offers the confidential and private creation of virtual ‘rooms’ where the initiator invites individuals to join via email through a personalised link. Individuals are not able to access or view the room without an invitation by the primary researcher. Once participants click on the link, they are invited to enter the alias provided to them in their ‘instructional email’ and proceed to enter the ‘room’.

7.2.4 Measures

Online focus group (OFG) A qualitative measure—an OFG interview schedule—was developed by the primary researcher of the current thesis under the

supervision of Dr. Saul Hillman and Prof. Mary Target. The aim, development, and rationale for using an OFG methodology were described in Section 2.5.

Rapport. Participants in an OFG generally do not know each other or meet in person prior to the OFG (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001; Mann & Stewart, 2003). Therefore, it is important to establish rapport prior to the OFG in order to ensure participants' comfort when answering questions. Mann and Stewart (2003) pointed out that establishing rapport in an online interviewing structure can be a difficult task. However, establishing trust by being as open as possible about the purpose and processes of the current research as well as sharing information about oneself can aid in developing rapport online (Mann & Stewart, 2003). Due to several emails sent back and forth in communication with participants prior to the OFG, the participants had already been in contact with the primary researcher prior to the chat. This may have generated some sense of familiarity with the researcher and the topic of study.

Furthermore, once participants had all joined the chat room they were provided with a set of 'ground rules' and ethical considerations, which covered the maintenance of anonymity/confidentiality as well as the duration of the focus group (see Appendix Z). This initial step to the group discussion is a necessity in any type of focus group to encourage individuals to communicate and respond to one another in a respectful and secure environment (Mann & Stewart, 2000; Wilkinson, 2003). The researcher then provided the group with an icebreaker question; this type of question is crucial at the beginning of a focus group and is one that eases participants into the discussion and introduces them to one another (Brennan, 2013). The icebreaker was: "I'd like to go around the group and hear a little bit about you. It would be great if each of you could just state your age, gender, if you've had any other roles in the

school and how long you've been a primary schoolteacher. This would also help me out with some of the demographic information for the overall study. Why don't we start with _____?"

Once participants had answered the question, the researcher proceeded with an introduction (see Appendix AA). The researcher's own introduction included research aims and interests, the reason for inviting the participants to the focus group and its purpose, as well as asking if anyone had any questions before proceeding. Participants were then provided with the first OFG question.

OFG questions. The researcher kept a *Microsoft Word* document open in a separate window containing the questions; and copied and pasted the questions directly into the chat platform, making it easier to modify and/or tailor questions according to participants' language abilities, point in discussion, and/or when speeding up or slowing down the discussion as needed.

The interview schedule consisted of nine semi-structured questions and several prompts and/or discussion points alongside each question (see Appendix AB). In line with qualitative interviewing principles, the initial question was open-ended in order to "open up" the discussion for the group (Greene & Hogan, 2005). The first question was, "During your role as a teacher, what have you thought and/or felt about the experiences of children from separated/divorced families?"

Prompts. Prompts were essential due to the subjective nature of questioning various individuals at once. At times, participants may not respond to a particular question or may be overshadowed and interrupted by others within the group (Woodyatt, Finneran & Stephenson, 2016). Prompts promote further discussion within the group at times where brief answers are provided (Brennen, 2013). An example of a prompt used in the OFG was, "Can you give any examples from your

past experiences?” (See Appendix AB for OFG interview schedule). This prompt was useful as some participants may not have known that it was acceptable to provide real-life examples or may not readily reflect on their own experiences.

Ending the OFG Wilkinson (2003) emphasised the importance of a structured ending to the focus group prepared by the researcher prior to the focus group’s initiation. The primary researcher had prepared a statement initiating the ‘closing’ of the focus group whilst providing participants with an opportunity to add anything further. Anyone who wanted to be debriefed on the results of the study was welcomed to get in touch with the researcher *via* email to express their interest.

7.2.5 Planned analysis

Following the completion of each OFG, the transcript of the discussion was downloaded directly to the researcher’s hard drive, removing the step of verbatim transcription involved in face-to-face focus groups. Following this, transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) 6-step model of Thematic Analysis (TA). Due to the small number of OFGs conducted in the present study, the primary researcher carried out the TA by hand. The primary researcher read the transcripts twice before highlighting initial codes; following this, preliminary codes were grouped under broader themes using sticky notes. Important quotes illustrating the themes were highlighted and written down in a notebook. Sticky notes were then rearranged to fit together if any broad themes seemed similar. Finally, themes were given names and defined within the written report.

7.2.6 Ethics

The current study design was submitted to the ethics committee at UCL for approval prior to recruitment, as an additional amendment to the current thesis. The UCL Ethics Committee approved this amendment upon its first submission.

7.3 Presentation of findings

Upon completion of the TA, the data was categorised into the following overarching/subordinate themes: (1) **Positive impact of co-operative post-divorce parenting**, (2) **Heterogeneity of children of divorce**, (3) **Child's dependence on teacher**, and (4) **Loss of the school-age child**. Overarching themes were then further categorised into subordinate themes (see Table 7.2).

Table 7.2

Overarching themes and coordinating subordinate themes yielded through Braun and Clarke's (2011) 6-phase procedure to thematic analysis.

Overarching themes	Subordinate themes		
Positive impact of co-operative post-divorce parenting	—	—	—
Heterogeneity of children of divorce	—	—	—
Child's dependence on the teacher	Teacher as a constant	Teacher as a support system	—
Loss of the school-age child	A thrust into adulthood	Academic achievement lagging behind	Behavioural and emotional shifts

7.3.1 Overarching theme: Positive impact of co-operative post-divorce parenting

All participants consistently demonstrated this overarching theme across the three OFGs. This theme embodied instances where teachers explained a child's greatest challenges or setbacks as being due to their home life and their parents' relationship with one another. This theme included instances where schoolteachers explained a child's positive adjustment as being due to their parents' co-operative style of co-parenting and home life in general.

Julie's response displayed the positives and negatives of post-divorce parenting:

Flexibility of both parents helps them to adjust—for example I have separated parents who attend parents' evening together, attend sports day together etc and it creates a more stable environment. The biggest factor that hinders them would be being used as a weapon in the 'fight' against each other, especially those parents who try to point score (even with me, their child's class teacher!) (Julie, 10-11.489-492, 500-503)

Another teacher suggested that co-parenting arrangements for visitation and their new relationships could hinder or help a child post-divorce:

For example, a child who sees his father every fortnight really misses him and feels incomplete without being with him all the time...However, I have some children who are not impacted and do not feel they have lost something due to the consistent figure of a boyfriend or girlfriend of their parent...I do believe this is impacted upon the parent's attitudes towards the situation too (Sam, 6-7.297-308)

Fran explained how parents could be a major help or hindrance in how their child adjusted as observed in school:

...the parents' behaviour and handling of it is the biggest factor in my opinion. If they are ok with it and handle it well then the child has a role model to follow. (Fran, 14.643-646)

Moreover, Liz explained how parents helped or hindered in her vivid example from a past experience with a child from a separated family:

Sometimes I have seen splits result in emotional challenge for the children, but not in all cases. It seems to depend on how the parents handle it. (Liz, 3.136-138)

Fran also provided a vivid response describing the impact parents often have on how their children adjusted and coped with the separation:

I think parents often do not realise the impact they have. If they tell children "nothing will change, just that mum and dad don't love each other anymore." Yet they then move out/change schools/ rant about the ex-partner/ don't attend parents evenings together etc. etc. The child will no longer believe them when they say "don't worry!" (Fran, 10.442-447)

In the above examples, participants described children's negative experiences as being tied with their parents' negative and destructive behaviour whilst also counteracting this with children who have had positive outcomes post-separation due to more supportive and stable environments created by parents.

7.3.2 Overarching theme: Heterogeneity of children of divorce

Teachers did not generalise or group all children from separated families into a single category or identify them as having a similar set of emotions, reactions, or mental states. Rather, teachers strongly emphasised that children from separated families varied a great deal from each other. These individual variations included factors such as age, gender, circumstance, and previous history. Participants seemed to make this point throughout the discussion in order to explain how variable the experience of divorce can be and how at times this made answering some questions in the OFG difficult. For instance, when asked what participants may have thought or felt about the experiences of children from separated families, Liz responded with:

For some children, their parents' divorce has seemed like a blessing if we knew they fought a lot and home life was unstable. For some kids, it has worked really well as the war zone has gone away and some have been really happy to split their lives. (Liz, 2.88-92) For others, I've seen their parents' split really affect them emotionally—like pretty stoic boys in tears. I've also seen kids really struggle to manage practically—not being able to keep on top of where their reading book/PE kit/[homework] is because they're not settled in a routine. (Liz, 3.108-112)

One participant illuminated this theme in her response to whether or not the emotional/psychological state of children from separated families differed between them as a group:

I think they are all different purely because each situation is different...maybe older children are more aware of the situation so able to deal with it better. Also I think in general girls are more able to voice their feelings and make people aware of what they need than boys. Younger children I think will adjust better in a normal separation where both parents agree on how to parent. (Lulu, 6.270-271, 7.283-284, 301-302)

Furthermore, Melissa explicitly stated how varied such experiences could be:

There are very different experiences for these children and there can be no 'one fits all' description of them. Some breakups are of benefit to the children obviously, and others are so damaging. (Melissa, 3.116-118)

One participant brought her own experience into her response when describing the differences between reactions, as well as how parental behaviour can influence such differences:

I've seen such different reactions from children and often it has been how the parents handle it. I am a child of divorce so going through it myself I felt I was understanding of the situation and was able to help both parents and children with helping the child cope with the changes. (Ruby, 3.135-139)

7.3.3 Overarching theme: Child's dependence on the teacher

All participants across the three focus groups demonstrated how important they believed their role as a teacher was to children from separated families. This 'importance' could be separated into two subordinate themes: *The teacher as a constant* and *the teacher as a support system*. These two subordinate themes provided an inside perspective into how teachers interact with children from separated families, how they view their role in their lives, as well as how they may cope with children's difficult experiences.

7.3.4 Subordinate theme: Teacher as a constant

Several participants through explicit and implicit responses elicited this theme in the three OFGs. Some of the more latent responses included instances when teachers revealed their own mental states and experiences when this 'constant' role was interrupted. For example, a teacher mentioned feeling guilty whenever she was absent from school:

I echo the comment before that I always feel guilty about being off (Sarah, 10.435-436)

Ruby explicitly pointed out how sometimes she felt closest to children from separated families:

I have the closest relationship to these children as they often see you as their constant (Ruby, 11.469-471)

In another dialogue between three participants in Focus Group 2, there was agreement about their role as consistent figures in the lives of children from separated families:

Yeah. They know every day they are going to see you. Which is more than what they see their parent (Ruby, 11.490-491)

And they know that you will treat them as you always have (Melissa)

And our behaviour is consistent - we have rules and we stick to them. We don't let them down (Fran, 12.499-500)

Amelia discussed the attachment that is formed towards the teacher and the school by children from separated families and how this can upset them when it was altered or came to an end:

Some children become more "attached" to their teachers and school as it is seen as stable environment. They tend to like the consistency of rules and routines. I had a child who get upset every Friday afternoon and end of term. (Amelia, 5.246-248, 6.253-254)

Sarah explained her role as 'a constant' in the lives of children from separated families in a rich excerpt:

I think that a [big] challenge is the change they face and not knowing what is going to happen at home - we in a sense become their constant for a while. We are the thing that stays the same for the children and that fear of the unknown is the challenge that the children face. I really do feel from experience that we are a secure constant for a lot of children. I think those on occasion those who have been through a separation become more dependent on you. They rely on you being there and a lot of the time you can be an outlet, eventually, for their problems. I have a child who has just left school and struggled with the separation of his parents which was over 7 years ago and he lashed out at me as he knew that I would still be there the next day and that I was the one who wouldn't fail him in a way...Part of me wants to take them home and give them that stability and it makes me want to get back to school to see them and give them that routine back. (Sarah, 8.347, 9.361-362, 378-379, 383-384,

391-392, 9-10.399-403)

Fran also explained a situation where a young boy relied on her as his 'constant':

...they are very affected by leaving teachers/end of year etc. My young carer [child of divorce caring for their dependent parent] was definitely incredibly sad saying goodbye to me and I'm sure it's because I'm his constant. (Fran, 13.545-548)

7.3.5 Subordinate theme: Teacher as a support system

Although this theme closely tied in with the previous subordinate theme, rather than focusing on the frequency of contact, it encompassed the quality and kind of support teachers offer. Teachers described how at times their roles demanded more emotional and academic support towards children from separated families than those from intact ones. Participants also spoke about this type of support as being very important to children from separated families, as it is not always readily available at home. For instance, in the second OFG, Liz provided a long response describing how important she perceived her supportive role was for a child from a separated family:

Sometimes, if it has been a trauma for them. Sometimes you have to step in to mediate situations for them, or give up, say, some of your lunchtime if you tell a child you know is upset that they can come in and use the classroom as a calm-down space or that they can come and talk to you. Or sometimes they might need extra support academically, if they are distracted or if the parents are struggling to find time to support with [homework], reading, etc. (Liz, 9.403-412)

Fran pointed out the demanding nature of the support required for children from separated families versus those from intact ones:

The children going through separation/divorce definitely need more support. They need extra attention and care/love in my opinion. (Fran, 13.576-578)

Julie mentioned how much more support she provided children from separated families as opposed to other children in the classroom:

I sometimes feel like I end up giving them more attention whether I intended to or not. For example, when they open up about something from home that is concerning them, I spend time counselling them through it in a way most children in my class would not need. (Julie, 8.381-385)

One participant in the first OFG discussed her feelings and thoughts about children from separated families:

I find it really upsetting as all you want to do is help so sometimes it can begin to affect you... you feel for them and want to make their life easier and better where you can. (Sarah, 5-6.224-228)

Lulu gave an example of a child from a separated family who relied on her support so much that his anxiety was heightened during times of separation from her:

I have a difficult situation at the moment where mum is absent and the [child] due to his difficulties has become very attached to me. The week before summer holidays has been very unsettled for him as he was so anxious about not seeing me for so long. Children rely on us and project their emotions on to us if they need to. (Lulu, 10.405-407, 412-414, 424-425)

Three participants pointed out their frustrations with their role of ‘educator’ being overshadowed by all the other supportive roles they offered to both children and parents from separated families; they also pointed out how even when an external specialist was available, children did not trust him/her and would rather have the teacher as their support system:

Pastoral care and emotional wellbeing are really vital aspects of our role. (Fran, 20.884-885)

We has [sic] someone like that at our school but kids in my class didn't respond as they didn't trust her. They wanted me. (Ruby, 20-21.887-890)

7.3.6 Overarching theme: Loss of the school-age child

This theme encompassed instances in the OFGs when teachers described children as being *thrust into adulthood*, when their *academic achievement lagged behind*, and when there were *behavioural and emotional shifts*, which accompanied

divorce. These three subordinate themes formulated this overarching theme and represented the ‘loss’ of the school-age child post-divorce. Teachers described occasions when the divorce was beneficial for children, whilst placing a large emphasis on the children who appeared to lose a former life post-divorce.

7.3.7 Subordinate theme: A thrust into adulthood

This theme emerged from teachers’ many descriptions of how children from separated families took on roles ‘beyond their years’ or were more frequently exposed to circumstances which were not age-appropriate. Teachers believed the age-inappropriate circumstances might have caused the young children to age faster and mature at a speedier rate than children from intact families.

Fran explicitly stated that divorce could be a loss for children:

I don't doubt there is a transition period and a feeling of loss if one parent moves out of the family home. (Fran, 14, 642)

Sam described an example of a child who ‘identified’ with his mother post-divorce, although the teacher described this level of maturity in a positive way, it may not be a positive developmental step:

... when the child in question was told about the split, he responded with "as long as we have money for the mortgage and bills, with a house, we will be fine". I believe this to be a grown up thought about the situation :) [happy face] (Sam, 6.275-282)

In Lulu’s response, young children from separated families were perceived to adopt ‘adult-like’ responsibilities, which they did not have prior to the divorce:

I think children can become more independent, if there are young siblings they may become very protective. (Lulu, 6.249-250)

Sarah added to the above statement by describing how much more mature children from separated families may need to become in order to support their family or resident parent:

They can become a lot more mature too as they feel they have to do something to help their parent left or to support the family. (Sarah, 6.254-256)

In an explicit statement, Melissa metaphorically described the push into adulthood that some of the children face:

Depending on the parenting skills, some children are catapulted into the adult world and they are just not ready for it... Increased responsibility; caring for siblings; worrying about money (Melissa, 7.272-274, 283-284)

In a vivid real-life example of a young boy in her classroom, Fran described a boy who became a 'young carer':

A young lad in my current class has been identified as a young carer (even though he doesn't really need to be) but his mother does not cope well when separated from boyfriends (yearly occurrence) so he has to go shopping for cat food when it's forgotten or 'energy drinks when she can't get up'... it's quite shocking actually. (Fran, 7.306-311)

Ruby summarised why she thought some children were 'thrust into adulthood' and why it may be a result of divorce:

...it forces them to mature quicker as they are dealing with something quiet [sic] adult. (Ruby, 5.189-190)

7.3.8 Subordinate theme: Academic achievement lagging behind

Nearly half of the teachers emphasised that children from separated families required more academic help and at times lagged behind the rest. Teachers perceived this 'lagging behind' to be due to the problems at home and their preoccupation with them. According to teachers' examples, some reasons for the decrease in academic interest are:

- (1) Lack of concentration,
- (2) Increased instability,
- (3) A loss of focus on educational assignments and discussions.

For instance, Liz pointed out:

Sometimes they might need extra support academically, if they are distracted or if the parents are struggling to find time to support with [homework], reading, etc. (Liz, 9.410-412) I've also seen kids really struggle to manage practically—not being able to keep on top of where their reading book/PE kit/[homework] is because they're not settled in a routine. (Liz, 3.109-112)

Julie provided an example of how it can be difficult to focus on academic work:

Today he did not want to work with talk partner or complete our Science activity, he sat and played with cars on the carpet (we are in year 4) (Julie, 9.436-438)

In Focus Group 2, Fran also found that children from separated families or those experiencing the divorce process tended to lose focus on education. She described her experience:

I have found that children going through separations often have a period of adjustment (naturally) but that they almost always academically suffer. They are more distracted, less focused or motivated and so there is a period of no improvement and often grades/levels slip. (Fran, 3.122-130)
I am a child of divorced parents too and it had a very negative effect on my schooling. (Fran, 4.174-175)

Melissa pointed out that when she raised an issue about a child's behaviour with a parent she discovered that a divorce was underway:

You do see a distance/deterioration in concentration/behaviour and find out when you talk to parents. (Melissa, 5.192-194)

Melissa also described an example of a young girl in her classroom that had been unable to continue learning:

Poor little girl. She has developed a terrible tic and is often unable to learn at all due to preoccupation. Its [sic] quite tragic. (Melissa, 8.354-357)

7.3.9 Subordinate theme: Behavioural and emotional shifts

On several occasions throughout the OFGs, teachers described children changing behaviourally and emotionally following divorce. This subordinate theme focuses on the most common emotional/behavioural responses by children from separated families that participants in the current study identified and found

distinguished these children from those from intact families. Some of the emotions/behaviours included withdrawal, clinginess, anger, and worry.

In the third OFG, Liz illustrated this subordinate theme with a real-life example:

One of the boys in our last year's Year 6 was a bit of a lad who cried like a baby about his parents' split, but [to be honest] ... The child was very stressed out. (Liz, 3.136-143)

In this excerpt, Liz described a boy who was 'a bit of a lad', perhaps meaning he previously hid his emotions but when he experienced his parents' divorce, his demeanor changed and he began behaving 'like a baby'. She explained:

Well, if a child has found the break up of their parents' relationship really shocking/traumatic and it's really shaken up the way they see themselves and everything else... I think they struggle with their self-image and relating to others. I can see why, if everything they've known and relied on has changed/gone. (Liz, 7.341-346)

Fran commented on a symptom she noticed in one of the children in her classroom:

General irritability, I'm thinking of a girl a few years ago. She became a real stickler for rules and would complain endlessly if her friends didn't stick to the game rules. I guess she needed structure and something secure in what she was doing. (Fran, 7.290-295)

When asked about the emotional/psychological effects of divorce on children, Fran answered:

It's the change of behaviour I notice most - some would not have been aggressive before, or sensitive (Fran, 6.260-261)

Several participants noted that gender and age differences existed. This was the only theme in which gender differences were identified by the participants and were felt to be important to them as they distinguished the emotional reactions of boys and girls from separated families. This is illustrated in the examples below:

In particular, the boys require their own space and prefer to sit on the bench

outside my room for a few minutes to calm down and the girls rely on their friends for advice. (Sam, 9.449-452)

Another participant described a difference between boys and girls from separated families:

I mainly notice the distancing (subconsciously I think), aggression (mainly in boys) and also the over-sensitivity and nit-picking with games/rules. Often complaining in girls mainly, that so-and-so isn't her best friend anymore and being very upset over a tiny dispute - perhaps seeing it as the end of a friendship rather than a tiff. (Fran, 13.516-518, 559-562)

When asked why she perceived this difference existed in girls and boys from separated families, Fran responded:

Boys, tend to just have shorter fuses I think when going through divorce. (Fran, 13.571-572)

Melissa described the situation of one boy who acted out aggressively and was emotionally affected by the instability of his home life post-divorce:

We currently have a little boy, joined us last term Y1. Face of an angel! He is sooo [sic] aggressive towards other children. Punches them in the face/stomach. Really challenging - but he wrote about feelings. Broadly speaking, he wrote that when you don't have a home you are nothing (when I don't have a home I'm nothing)...He had been homeless with mum, living in hostels etc. So sad. (Melissa, 9.398-406)

Julie described a different case where a young boy turned his aggression and anger inwards onto himself:

The child has actively spoken to me about their parents 'not living together' and that he thinks it's 'really sad'. He is now in year 4 and has previously self harmed in the form of biting himself and hitting himself in response to stresses (Julie, 2.95-102)

As mentioned above, participants also observed withdrawal and distancing:

I usually notice children going through separations often become very distant. They seem more daydreamy [sic] in class and whilst they still play with their peers, I noted in 2 children this year that they both 'lagged behind' a bit in games and even in conversations. (Fran, 5.198-202)

The withdrawal seemed to be related to a preoccupation with the divorce and worry/anxiety:

I had one child who would space out and just say he is worrying about his mum, not school (Ruby, 5.204-205)

Liz mentioned the state of worry/anxiety that post-divorce children can sometimes experience in school:

Sometimes I think children feel they've lost something. When a parent has a new relationship, and [especially] if that comes with children, I think children can feel or worry they've lost that parent's time/attention/love/affection - they feel a bit put out and abandoned. (Liz, 7.312-317)

7.4 Discussion

The current study explored primary schoolteachers' perceptions of children from separated families. An in-depth TA was applied to the OFG transcripts and is discussed below. Since the child-teacher relationship can be a significant attachment relationship during latency (Daniels & Meece, 2008; Pianta, 2006), interpretations utilising a psychoanalytic framework were used to extrapolate meaning about the child's internal world from schoolteachers' responses in the current study.

7.4.1 Children's internal worlds expressed through teachers' counter-transference

Counter-transference is a psychoanalytic concept, which refers to a state that arises in an individual unconsciously, as a result of someone else's influence on their unconscious feelings (Freud, 1910). Heimann (1950) suggested that counter-transference in psychoanalysis is a patient's creation and, "*is an instrument of research* into the 'patient's unconscious processes'," (p. 81). From this definition, teachers' experiences and perceptions of children from separated families can be viewed as *instruments of research* into children's internal worlds post-divorce (i.e., teachers' perceptions can be indicative of counter-transference processes between children and teachers). For instance, when teachers in the current study described feeling guilty about leaving their pupils due to illness or wanting to comfort and shield them from pain, this may have been indicative of the child's projected needs for a stable, protective object to help them through a difficult time. The concept of 'counter-transference' is used throughout the current discussion to add a layer of interpretation about children's internal worlds based on teachers' interviews.

7.4.2 Positive impact of co-operative post-divorce parenting

The first overarching theme of the current study was the 'positive impact of co-operative post-divorce parenting'. This theme encompassed examples of co-

operative post-divorce parenting and how the absence of it impacted children. Teachers pointed out that parents who exposed their children to their conflicts, used their child as a 'pawn', did not prioritise them over co-parental issues, and tended to have children who were not well-adjusted post-divorce. Teachers found this to be a great hindrance and challenge for children from separated families; past and present research also supports exposure to co-parental conflict during and post-divorce, as having negative effects on children's adjustment and wellbeing (e.g., Barumandzadeh, Martin-Lebrun, Barumandzadeh & Poussin, 2016; Johnston, 1994; Roth, Harkins & Eng, 2014). Teachers in the current study pointed out that using children in conflicts as pawns was destructive; researchers have found this to be even more destructive than exposure to conflict on its own (Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbusch, 1991).

Difficulties within children's internal worlds may exist due to on-going conflicts between co-parents and their pre-occupation with one another; with significant attachment figures pre-occupied, children may begin to develop caregiver representations that are unavailable and inattentive. In addition, co-parents who are in conflict post-divorce may be engaging in lower RF, as was found in Chapter 6.

Furthermore, teachers in the Øverland, Thorsen and Størksen (2012) study expressed that children whose parents had 'good dialogue' and who co-parented well together, adjusted 'well'. Øverland, Thorsen and Størksen (2012) found that teachers who believed children adjusted 'well' to divorce expressed that the ways in which children reacted was still dependent on the parents' situation.

Previous research on children's adjustment post-divorce also focused on the co-parental relationship post-divorce and how it affects children's wellbeing and adjustment. Amato, Kane and James (2011) suggested that children's adjustment is facilitated by co-parents being positively involved in their child's life through the

maintenance of a co-operative co-parental relationship. One study which explored the adjustment of older children (i.e., 11 and 12 year olds) and another exploring adult children of divorce retrospectively, also concluded that co-parental conflict led to low confidence and self-esteem, and poor relations with non-resident parents (Barumandzadeh et al., 2016; Roth, Harkins & Eng, 2014).

In their review, Kelly and Emery (2003) concluded that, “living in the custody of a competent, adequately functioning parent is a protective factor associated with positive outcomes in children,” (p. 356). Johnston (1995) also concluded that one of the best predictors of children’s adjustment post-separation was the psychological wellbeing and adjustment of the resident parent and the type of parenting they provided. It has also been reported that low parental conflict post-separation was a protective factor for children from separated families (Kelly & Emery, 2003).

However, a few precautions should be highlighted before drawing conclusions from these studies, such as how ‘conflict’ was defined and measured, as well as the inconsistency of such measures/definitions between studies. Another limitation of these studies is their cross-sectional design, which makes it impossible to infer which variable preceded the other—researchers can only conclude that a relationship exists between variables (Sandler et al., 2012). Sandler et al. (2012) suggested that parenting occurs within the context of a dynamic system and that multiple factors may be affecting child adjustment and wellbeing.

7.4.3 Heterogeneity of children of divorce

This overarching theme embodied how factors in the child’s home life could be manifested and acted upon differently by children at school. For instance, teachers pointed out that some separations were a ‘blessing’ for children, whereas others were devastating and difficult to come to terms with. This finding demonstrates how each

experience of divorce is complex and involves many factors that determine how children adjust (Amato, 2000, 2010).

Gender and age differences were also discussed in the OFGs—particularly, boys were more aggressive than girls. Stadelmann et al.'s (2010) study also found that boys elicited more aggressive and negative representations than girls did using a narrative stem measure; however, the researchers did not compare this difference to differences between girls and boys within the non-separated group in order to understand if it was divorce-related. Hetherington, Cox and Cox (1979) examined play and the social interaction of children post-divorce and found that boys from separated families were more verbally and physically aggressive than boys from non-divorced families at two months and one year post-divorce. However, at two years post-divorce, these boys were less physically aggressive than boys from non-divorced families but remained more verbally aggressive (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1979). They also found that boys from both separated and non-separated families demonstrated more hostile, angry, and threatening affect than girls did (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1979). Lansford et al. (2012) found that boys from a community sample reported being more physically aggressive than girls within nine countries around the world (i.e., China, Colombia, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, the Philippines, Sweden, Thailand, and the US). Perhaps these findings demonstrate a more global result that boys may be more aggressive than girls, whether or not parental divorce has been experienced.

With regards to age differences, a teacher in the current study suggested that older children were better able to deal with the separation due to their maturity levels, whilst other teachers found younger children better able to cope due to their immaturity and lack of awareness or understanding of the concept of divorce. Previous research has demonstrated that a child's age can play an important role in

how divorce affects their emotional and behavioural responses. For instance, Wallerstein and Kelly (1976) found that 9 and 10 year olds exhibited more anger—usually directed at the resident parent—than younger children did (i.e., 7 and 8 year olds).

Some teachers in the current study stated how different each case was and that they could not comment on the experience overall; they found it easier to pinpoint particular incidents in their classrooms in order to answer discussion questions in the OFG. This high degree of individual variation may explain some of the variation in psychological research on the topic of divorce. For instance, some researchers (e.g., Wallerstein, Lewis and Blakeslee, 2000) concluded that the nature of divorce and the loss of one parent from the home is enough to negatively impact a child; whereas, other researchers found the way in which the separation was dealt with and post-divorce events/circumstances are what negatively/positively impact a child (Amato, 2000, 2010; Kelly & Emery, 2003). Amato's (2000) divorce-stress-adjustment perspective posits that divorce is a lengthy process rather than a discrete event, which sets in motion many events which children can find stressful. However, the duration and degree to which negative outcomes elicited by these stressful events are felt can vary from person to person based on several protective and moderating factors mentioned above.

There is a large amount of individual variation and it should be advised that drawing conclusions on how divorce affects children as an entire group might be challenging. However, continuing to explore the influence of divorce on specific subsamples within the overall 'divorce pool' (e.g., those exposed to conflict vs. those who are not) may yield more accurate and useful results. Perhaps this approach to divorce research could decrease discrepancies between findings, as well as provide a

greater understanding of how divorce affects children when exposed to particular circumstances; this may also lead to clearer actions for support for children from separated families.

7.4.4 Child's dependence on the teacher

Participants across all three OFGs were confident in the centrality of their role in the lives of children who had experienced divorce. The role of the teacher was perceived by participants as being important to children from separated families due to their consistent physical presence in the children's lives, along with being a support system. The important role of teachers in children's lives has been previously researched and is suggested to be a central facilitator of social and academic development (e.g., Goossens & Van IJzendoorn, 1990; Van IJzendoorn, Sagi & Lambermon, 1992; Howes & Matheson, 1992; Pianta, 2006; Daniels & Meece, 2008), as well as integral to emotional and psychological support and functioning (e.g., Alisic, 2012; Birch & Ladd, 1997).

This particular theme indicates several factors about the latency-age child's internal world. Initially, during latency children are more drawn to rules, clear structures, and consistency (Youell, 2008). When a consistent attachment figure is not present in the home, which may occur post-divorce, latency-age children may turn to the next available adult in their life for consistency, structure, and 'boundary-setting'. Furthermore, the consistency that teachers may provide for children from separated families can aid in their adjustment post-divorce due to the formation of secure attachment/caregiver representations even when insecure ones may have been formed during the divorce process. Thus, children's internal worlds may be positively affected by the presence of a consistent, supportive attachment figure external to the primary caregivers.

7.4.5 Teacher as a constant

Teachers in the current study felt responsible for being present everyday for children who relied on them for emotional support and consistency. Participants in the OFG mentioned even feeling guilty when they were not present due to illness or when term ended. Their feelings of guilt and responsibility could be responses to attachment needs displayed by the children who required more attention and responsiveness due to a lack thereof at home. Research on teacher-child attachment has also shown that strong attachment bonds between children and teachers can exist and that these relationships are central to development in several ways (e.g., Goossens & Van IJzendoorn, 1990):

- (1) The facilitation of emotional and psychological development (Vernberg & Vogel, 1993);
- (2) Academic achievement (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001);
- (3) Social interaction with peers (Le, Schaack & Setodji, 2015).

Researchers have suggested that both the school, and the rapport built between children and their teachers, creates an environment ideal for facilitating positive change in children from separated families (e.g., Cantor, 1978). Due to the close, social environment typically fostered within the classroom, being a teacher may involve more of a personal element than most other professions (Pianta, Hamre & Stuhlman, 2003).

Previous research showed that discontinuity and disruption of the teacher-child relationship in early schooling might be detrimental to a child's reliance on, or likeability of the teacher, which can lead to poor outcomes for academic success and peer relations later on in life (Le, Schaack & Setodji, 2015; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Vernberg & Vogel, 1993). Vernberg and Vogel (1993) found that following

traumatic events, a teacher's consistent and familiar role in the child's life could aid in re-establishing stability for them. Furthermore, in Mahony et al.'s (2015) study, teachers strived to maintain consistency in their routines, rules, and expectations of children from separated families in order to foster a supportive environment.

7.4.6 Teacher as a support system

Researchers have often suggested that relationships with adults who are significant in children's lives can play a central role in their psychological development.

The key qualities of these relationships appear to be related to the ability or skill of the adult to read the child's emotional and social signals accurately, respond contingently based on these signals (e.g., to follow the child's lead), convey acceptance and emotional warmth, offer assistance as necessary, model regulated behavior, and enact appropriate structures and limits for the child's behavior. These qualities determine that relationship's affordance value (Pianta, Hamre & Stuhlman, 2003, p. 204).

Pianta, Hamre and Stuhlman (2003) suggested that when teachers emotionally supported children in school and showed an interest in their lives, they were enabling children to feel comfortable and secure at school.

An important and unique feature of the participants involved in the current study is that half of them ($n = 5$) had personal experiences with divorce (i.e., four participants were adult children of divorce and one teacher was divorced, whose son was now a child of divorce). These participants may have had different perspectives on children from separated families than participants who had not experienced divorce. This may have also affected what kind of participants were involved in the current study due to these participants having a higher interest in psychological research or divorce than those who did not have personal experiences with the study topic (see Section 7.4.12). Kesner (2000) found that teachers' representations of

attachment relationships with their own parents affected the attachment relationships they formed with children in their classrooms. “Beyond a global relational style, teachers bring with them experiences, thoughts, and feelings that lead to specific styles of relating to certain types of children,” (Pianta, Hamre, Stuhlman, 2003, p. 208).

Mahony et al. (2015) used focus groups and grounded theory analysis with teachers and found that the construction of emotional support for children from separated families took precedence over academic support; they explained this was because a child facing emotional troubles would find it extremely difficult to learn. Furthermore, 95% of teachers in their study mentioned constructing emotional support for children undergoing these circumstances; this involved promoting self-esteem, using inclusive language, and promoting social inclusion (Mahony et al., 2015).

Another interesting feature of teachers’ responses in the current study was that they supported children from separated families by holding their experiences in mind. They engaged in RF when discussing children’s behaviours, through identification and recognition of the painful mental states that underlie them. An example of this is when Liz described a child’s behaviour as being like a baby’s (i.e., “cried like a baby”) and qualified this behaviour by pointing out that because of his parents’ inability to be ‘civil’ with one another he was very ‘stressed out’. In this example, Liz’s reflection on the child’s situation demonstrated that his internal experience might have been one of regressing to an infantile state due to feelings of vulnerability and communicating this state through crying rather than through language.

Furthermore, teachers in the current study shared their desire for taking some of these children home and providing them with the stability they felt they needed;

this discussion point may involve an expression of ‘counter-transference’ in response to the children’s needs which are perhaps being projected onto them. This finding demonstrates how children’s internal worlds may be changing post-divorce. For instance, if a teacher felt that a child desperately needed stability post-divorce and wished she/he could provide it for them, perhaps these children possessed models of attachment that were insecure and attachment needs that were unmet. This informs the current study of the internal state of some latency-age children post-divorce, and how important close attachment figures such as teachers can be for their successful adjustment post-divorce; close, stable relationships with their teachers could also be important for the re-construction of positive attachment representations (if these were negatively impacted during the divorce process) and for continued adjustment/coping.

It is important to note that it became evident throughout the OFGs that teachers in the UK do not receive special support, training, or guidance on how to cope with and support children from separated families—despite the largest number of children from separated families being within the primary-school age group. For example, when asked whether or not participants had received such training or guidance during their journey to becoming a teacher in the UK, most respondents claimed that this was never offered to them. Two participants pointed out that although they received some support on how to handle ‘loss and bereavement’ and other sensitive issues, they were never specifically trained or advised on how to support children from separated families.

7.4.7 Loss of the school-age child

Parental separation can at times be internalised as a loss; a loss of the parental couple, a loss of a way of life, a loss of familiarity and routine, a loss of one parent from the home (i.e., the non-resident parent), or a loss of resources, family members,

and friends (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2008). Teachers in the current study were asked whether or not they felt the separation was a loss for children. They expressed their perceptions about how it can be a loss for some children but not for others (e.g., those whose parents were involved in domestic abuse). Participants also noted that the loss of further relationships was difficult for children from separated families. Kelly and Emery (2003) pointed out this was a further loss for children from separated families as their losses continued even after the initial separation. For example, they may continue to face separations from extended family, friends, non-resident parents, and new family members/partners (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Hetherington and Kelly (2002) also suggested that bringing new partners into the lives of children from separated families could be most stressful and difficult if they are introduced shortly after the separation took place.

7.4.8 A thrust into adulthood

This subordinate theme emerged several times within the interviews and at times was not always recognised as a loss. For instance, Sam (a teacher in the current study) perceived the child's age-inappropriate concerns with his mother's financial issues as a positive development post-divorce. However, beneath this level of 'maturity' and perhaps 'empathising' with his mother's worries/problems, there seemed to be a loss of the type of worries a child of his age would typically be concerned with.

In several of their follow-up interviews, Wallerstein, Lewis and Blakeslee (2000) retrospectively found that several adult children of divorce had no desire to be parents themselves due to the fact that they did not know what it was to be a child following their parents' divorce. They presented their childhood as being abruptly

stopped and never regained (Wallerstein, Lewis & Blakeslee, 2000).

Duffy (1982) explained that children of divorce may need to develop ‘pseudo-maturity’ to adequately sympathise with their parents’ needs. Weiss (1979) suggested, “this earlier maturity may display itself as an unusual ability to understand adults’ perspectives and to relate to adults, or as a sense of self-reliance more appropriate to an older child, or as unusual responsibility” (p. 98). Weiss (1979) explained this type of maturity as adaptive and a necessity for the child from a one-parent household. He suggested that within a one-parent household where the single parent has a full-time job and is parenting multiple children, the parent might find it a necessity to share responsibility with the children.

7.4.9 Academic achievement lagging behind

Teachers in the current study described instances where children’s academic performance was negatively impacted post-divorce and/or instances of distraction, loss of concentration, and difficulty focusing during lessons. The teachers in the Øverland, Thorsen and Størksen (2012) study also reported children from separated families facing difficulties in concentration. The majority of teachers in the Mahony et al. (2015) study spoke about constructing academic support for children who are from separated families. Specifically, they described needing to modify their expectations and tailor activities/assignments for particular children and being more lenient with children from separated families who did not complete their homework or forgot their reading book at home (Mahony et al., 2015).

Although this finding was not directly linked to a child’s internal experience, it can reflect some of the struggles and conflicts going on within the child’s internal world. For instance, lagging behind academically can be linked to several of the other themes within the current study such as ‘a thrust into adulthood’ or the ‘positive

impact of co-parenting post-divorce'. Children who are preoccupied with providing care to their own caregivers may not be able to retain the ability to focus academically, or may not have the 'adult scaffolding' needed at home to complete homework/assignments or study for tests. Also, children whose co-parents are in conflict may be pre-occupied and distressed, or consumed with feelings of sadness and unable to find the mental space to consume academic knowledge. These interpretations of how academic achievement/failure could inform the current study about a child's internal world would require extensive further inquiry.

7.4.10 Behavioural and emotional shifts

This theme is connected to the theme of 'teacher as a constant' in the child's life, as teachers appear to be in a position to observe subtle and/or obvious changes in emotion and behaviour. This theme also closely ties in with the theme of 'child's dependence on the teacher' because this dependence may be allowing children to openly express their emotions to their teachers or in their presence. Teachers in the current study expressed children's emotional responses to divorce as involving withdrawal, clinginess, anger, and worry. Teachers particularly pointed out that boys were more aggressive in their behaviours and angrier in their emotional expression than girls were. A teacher in the current study described a boy who engaged in self-harm, perhaps due to turning his anger and aggression inwards onto himself. A. Freud (1966) described this as a unique form of displacement where the self becomes the target of one's pain and anger; this is usually an attempt at containing and protecting oneself against painful feelings and thoughts. Several teachers in the current study also noted distancing, daydreaming, and withdrawal that children showed within the classroom.

Previous research suggests that there may be an increase in children's

behaviour problems post-divorce that are above pre-divorce levels (Morrison & Coiro, 1999). Teachers in the Øverland, Thorsen & Størksen (2012) study also perceived a change in behaviour and in the reactions of children from separated families. They described children engaging in more extreme reactions to various situations such as tantrums, becoming easily frustrated during play, and generally acting out more (Øverland, Thorsen & Størksen, 2012). They observed children from separated families expressing emotions such as ‘sorrow and sadness’; the children cried easily, became withdrawn and more insecure than those from intact families (Øverland, Thorsen & Størksen, 2012). Teachers in the Mahony et al. (2015) study also emphasised the behavioural support they offered children from separated families due to inappropriate externalising behaviours they displayed during playtime, such as physically fighting with others.

Behavioural/emotional shifts in children post-divorce can also inform the current study about children’s internal worlds. Perhaps children displaying anger are coping with a lack of control over family dynamics and decisions taking place during/post-divorce. Perhaps their needs were going unmet by unavailable/pre-occupied caregivers who are in conflict like the participants in Chapter 6 of the current study. Children who are daydreaming or distant in class may be preoccupied with events happening in the home or with changes that are going on in their external world and worries/thoughts about how to adjust and adapt to them in their internal world, as was demonstrated by the participants in Chapter 5 of the current study. The internal world is a ‘work in progress’ and is constantly shifting and adjusting to events and individuals in the child’s external world (Winnicott, 1988); thus, when drastic life changes such as divorce occur, children’s internal worlds may be undergoing major adjustments which are then reflected through their outward erratic,

hostile, distant and/or distracted behavioural and emotional displays (Waters et al., 2000).

7.4.11 Strengths

The current study benefited from a non-intrusive, inclusive, and innovative design. Through an online platform, participants were afforded more flexibility in where, when, and how they participated—thus, making the current study inclusive of participants regardless of location within the country. It was also inclusive due to its allowance of participating in the evening, which at times was more convenient for those with families and full-time careers.

Another strength of the current study was that it provided participants with a high degree of anonymity because participants could not see each other or the researcher. They were also provided with aliases to participate in the discussion, allowing their discussions to remain confidential and contributions anonymous, throughout. A high degree of anonymity and confidentiality is perceived as a strength of the current study as it may have increased comfort, openness in communication, and engagement in discussions about sensitive topics.

The current study benefited from adding to a small field of research examining how teachers perceive the experiences of children from separated families during latency. It provided a unique view of how children from separated families experience and adjust to divorce in an environment they are familiar with and in the presence of an adult attachment figure outside the family. Arguably, latency-age children from separated families may spend more time during term-time in school and with teachers than with their non-resident parent, and at times, than with their resident parent (e.g., in cases where the resident parent works multiple jobs). Thus, teachers' perspectives on the experiences of children from separated families are a crucial component of the

current thesis on latency-age children post-divorce. Finally, a major strength of the current study was the use of a psychoanalytic framework to interpret findings and co-construct meaning. These interpretations made it possible to make inferences about the post-divorce latency-age child's internal world based on teachers' perspectives.

7.4.12 Limitations

In the OFG, non-verbal cues such as tone of voice and facial expressions were unobservable. Another limitation was that several participants were children of divorce themselves and this may have confounded the data on how 'primary schoolteachers' in the UK perceive the experiences of children from separated families. The type of population that the current study topic attracted may be a particular subset of teachers who were interested in the topic for personal reasons or due to an interest in psychological research in general.

Finally, similarly to Chapter 6, the current study relied on the primary researcher's interpretation of teachers' perspectives to deduce meaning about the latency-age child's internal world. This was accomplished through extrapolation, which can be a subjective means of deducing meaning from the current findings. However, in qualitative analyses subjectivity is expected and the primary researcher acts as a 'co-constructor of meaning' (Morrow, 2005). As in Chapter 6, the primary researcher was grounded in previous literature to aid in the prevention of researcher biases due to gaining an understanding of multiple ways of viewing the phenomenon under study (Morrow, 2005).

7.4.13 Future directions

Future research could benefit from conducting in-person focus groups with teachers on the same topic with an aim of gauging whether differences/similarities exist between the classic, in-person design and the modern, online design presented

here. Another focus could be on how teachers from divorced and non-divorced families compare with one another in how they interact, support, and perceive children from separated families. Due to the novelty of this research area, it would be valuable to conduct semi-structured one-to-one interviews with schoolteachers as focus groups may not always allow enough space/time for each experience to be elaborated on and discussed in great detail.

7.5 Conclusions

The current study set out to address the question, *How do schoolteachers perceive children's experiences from separated families, and what do these perceptions reveal about the latency-age child's internal world post-divorce?* This question was addressed by conducting three small OFGs with schoolteachers from the UK. Participants were interviewed about their experiences of children from separated families and the type of role(s) they played in supporting them at school. Several important themes emerged describing how children from separated families experienced the separation as perceived by schoolteachers. The ways in which teachers facilitated support were discussed and this aided in gaining an understanding of the needs and wants that may be projected by children from separated families onto teachers. The themes discussed in this chapter suggest that teachers are avid observers of the children they teach and that they tend to create and facilitate a supportive environment for those who need it most. They also demonstrated that there is a certain degree of concern for these children and how their parents' are supporting them outside of school. From the current findings, it appears that teachers are important adults in the lives of latency-age children and particularly when children have experienced divorce; they can be consistent and supportive attachment figures. Moreover, their experiences of children from separated families provided the current study with the ability to co-construct meaning about the latency-age child's internal world and how it may be impacted post-divorce. In conclusion, teachers can play a fundamental role in emotionally and behaviourally connecting with children from separated families, assisting in the regulation of their internalising/externalising behaviours, and providing them with a supportive and consistent environment.

Chapter 8: Summary and conclusions

8.1 Introduction

The investigation into the effects of divorce on children has been extensive within different areas in the field of Psychology, such as attachment and child development, as well as in individual and family counselling and support work. Assessing how children experience and adjust to divorce tends to drive this research, as well as investigating which factors may be protective or deleterious to children's adjustment (e.g., Amato, 2000, 2010). A large amount of empirical work demonstrating the negative effects of divorce on children exists in the literature (e.g., Frost & Pakiz, 1990; Jeynes, 2002; Stadelmann, Perren, Groeben & von Klitzing, 2010; Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004; Wallerstein, Lewis & Rosenthal, 2013). Latency-age children (also referred to as the stage of middle childhood) appear to be the largest age group affected by parental divorce (Drake, 2008). However, these studies are limited in their exploration of children's internal experiences and the few studies that have focused on children's internal worlds are out-dated (e.g., Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976); also, previous studies on this topic administered measures that could raise children's inhibitions, which may have resulted in decreasing the researchers' abilities to attain in-depth/accurate accounts of such experiences (e.g., Page & Bretherton, 2001). A smaller number of studies have focused on positive outcomes of divorce for children (e.g. Booth & Amato, 2001; Morrison & Coiro, 1999); these studies tend to highlight benefits for children following the dissolution of conflicted marriages.

Research into externalising behaviours of children from separated families is well-documented (e.g., Hetherington & Elmore, 2003). Previous research into

parents' and teachers' perspectives on children's internalising/externalising behaviours post-divorce utilise quantitative questionnaires, which do not usually permit open and rich discussion (e.g. Stadelmann, Perren, Groeben & Von Klitzing, 2010). There is little research into parents' ability to hold their child(ren)'s experience of the divorce in mind and be able to reflect on it—only one research group has published studies on this topic to date (i.e., Hertzmann et al., 2016; Hertzmann et al., 2017; Target et al., 2017). A limited number of studies exist in the literature regarding what teachers' perspectives of children of divorce are and what such perspectives can add to the current knowledge base about divorce and support offered to children (e.g., Øverland, Thorsen and Størksen, 2012). However, the studies that do exist on teachers' perspectives of children of divorce do not attempt to make connections between such perspectives and what they can reveal about the child's inner experience.

Therefore, the current thesis attempted to address these gaps in the literature by exploring the latency-age child's experience of divorce from the perspective of the child directly, and from perspectives of parents and teachers, indirectly. By carrying out the studies in the current thesis, and by exploring the differences/similarities and connections between these multiple perspectives, a deeper understanding of the child's internal world post-divorce was achieved. In order to explore children's and teachers' perspectives on the experience of divorce, three original measures were developed:

- (1) A new topic-relevant story stem targeting the experience of a permanent separation (i.e., DMH; see Chapter 4);
- (2) A qualitative, projective semi-structured interview targeting children's experiences of divorce (MBPBI; see Chapter 5);

(3) An OFG was developed to target primary schoolteachers' perceptions and experiences of children from separated families (see Chapter 7).

In order to contribute to a very limited pool of knowledge on the divorced parent's capacity to hold their child(ren) in mind, mentalize about, and reflect on their experiences, the PDI (Aber, Slade, Berger, Bresgi, & Kaplan, 1985) was used in Chapter 6.

By targeting these three perspectives, this thesis has contributed to the current knowledge base regarding how latency-age children are impacted by divorce in the following ways:

- (1) It has demonstrated that indirect methods, such as semi-projective story stems and projective semi-structured interviews, as well as extrapolation from perspectives of significant attachment figures, can facilitate the exploration of children's internal worlds. In sum, children who might otherwise defend against and avoid talking about their experiences, or who find it too distressing or sensitive in nature to discuss, were able to describe and explore their thoughts and feelings when in the context of fictional stories and characters.
- (2) It added a new and projective measure to the field of psychological research (i.e., the MBPBI) to use with vulnerable populations and in the investigation of sensitive topics. The style of the MBPBI can be applied and modified to suit many populations and topics of research, making it a flexible research tool.
- (3) By providing a clear description of how an OFG was conceptualised, developed, and carried out, another means of accessing hard-to-reach populations has been made available. The OFG is also a flexible research tool that can be modified and tailored to suit both individual and group interviews;

it can be applied to a variety of research topics and with participants who are less likely to openly speak about their experiences in person or in front of other individuals—and who may feel more comfortable communicating anonymously from behind a screen.

(4) It has expanded on previous research and theoretical propositions by providing an updated empirical examination of the experience of children from separated families, by encompassing three relevant and important perspectives—the self, the parent, and the teacher. By trying to understand the child’s experience from these different stances and by extrapolating meaning about children’s internal worlds from significant attachment figures connected to that world, a well-rounded picture of the latency-age child’s internal world was presented, contributing to the field of knowledge on divorce in several ways:

- (a) Previous *theoretical* perspectives (e.g., Feeney & Monin, 2008) are supported through *empirical* findings;
- (b) Quantitative and qualitative findings in the current thesis provided support for out-dated qualitative findings (e.g., Wallerstein & Kelly, 2004);
- (c) Further inquiry into how projective and online methodologies can aid in studying vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations in an ethical way was initiated;
- (d) The positive or negative impact that the post-parenting dynamic and relationship (e.g., co-operative vs. conflicted co-parenting) can have on children’s adjustment was recognised;

(e) The important role parents and teachers play in the child's internal world and how this can aid or challenge adjustment post-divorce was presented.

(5) The attachment/caregiver representations of children from separated families yielded through a semi-projective story stem methodology were interpreted in a contextual way by comparing them to a group of children from non-separated families. This also contributed a better understanding of how certain demographic variables (e.g., age and gender) affect children's representations from separated families in comparison to those from non-separated ones.

8.2 Hypothesis testing

The current thesis contained two empirical quantitative studies:

Study 1: The study of the attachment/caregiver representations of latency age children from separated families, in comparison to children from non-separated families, using a semi-projective story stem assessment (i.e., SSAP; Hodges, Hillman & Steele, 2007).

Study 2: The study of the internal world of children from separated families using a new topic-relevant story stem (i.e., DMH), as well as assessing how it performed this task psychometrically.

Study 1:

In the first study, **five** hypotheses were tested and are discussed here. The first hypothesis: **There will be differences in the 'attachment/caregiver representations' of children from separated and non-separated families as assessed using the current story stem measure**, was accepted. Children from separated families had significantly higher *Defensive/Avoidance* scores than children from non-separated families. This initial hypothesis reflected the overall aim of the current thesis due to its focus being on whether or not differences existed in the

internal worlds of children from separated and non-separated families. This finding falls in line with past studies demonstrating *Defensive/Avoidance* attachment behaviours/strategies found in children of divorce in comparison with those from intact families (e.g. Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004).

The second and third hypotheses related to the internalising/externalising behaviours of children from separated and non-separated families. The reason both groups were tested for psychopathology was for the purposes of comparison to further the understanding of any distinguishing features of the experience of divorce. However, the second hypothesis: **There will be a difference in how caregivers from separated families and caregivers from non-separated families report their children's internalising/externalising behaviours**, was rejected. This could demonstrate that children from separated and non-separated families were not significantly distinguishable in terms of internalising/externalising behaviours. On the other hand, it may have demonstrated that parent-report measures may be prone to biases, and/or difficult to engage with when caregiver(s) have undergone, or are still undergoing, stressful life events (Fisher, 1993; Maccoby & Maccoby, 1954). Lastly, there may have been several confounding variables that could have been controlled prior to carrying out this comparison to yield more precise results (e.g., story-telling and verbal abilities; these variables were detailed in Section 3.4.2).

The third hypothesis: **There will be associations between the variables, 'attachment/caregiver representations' and 'internalising/externalising behaviours'**, was rejected. Stadelmann et al. (2010) had found significant associations between 'conduct problems' and negative caregiver representations, and between positive caregiver representations and 'prosocial behaviour' using the SDQ and the MSSB with children of divorce—but only at 5 years of age and not when

tested a year later. Other researchers have also shown that children from separated families exhibit more internalising/externalising problems than children from non-separated families (e.g., Amato, 2000, 2010).

Hillman (2011, unpublished) suggested that story stems do not provide a robust validation for parent-reported behaviours in vulnerable populations as these children may have less overt problems that are more likely to be presented in a play/narrative context. This could tie in with the abovementioned biases and difficulties that parents may face when filling out such reports due to the sensitive nature of the experience their child has undergone. For example, parents who are enduring financial problems, conflicted co-parental relations, and/or depression, may be mentally, and at times physically, unavailable and withdrawn from their children (Wood, Repetti & Roesch, 2004). Due to this unavailability, children may find it difficult to confide in, or communicate with, their parent(s) when experiencing emotional or behavioural problems—thus, this may deflate the results of a parent-report measure on such behaviours. Parents from non-separated families may be more available to discuss behavioural and emotional problems, as they may not be as pre-occupied with the issues that separated parents are confronted with (Donner, 2006; Levite & Cohen, 2012).

It is also important to note that the absence of an association could be due to not controlling certain confounders, such as verbal ability, ToM, parental depression and co-parental conflict—all of which may be impacting how parents relate to their children in the current thesis, how children complete narrative tasks, and could help better understand this finding. For instance, Hill et al. (2007) found that conduct problems were associated with narrative completions in boys with DBP. However, the researchers had taken both verbal and story-telling abilities into account; both of

which demonstrated significant associations with elements of their narrative assessments, and story-telling ability was significantly associated with age, thus, both were controlled in further analyses carried out in their study.

Finally, the last two hypotheses were: **Demographic variables, such as age and gender, will have an effect on children's attachment/caregiver representations**, (accepted) and **Divorce-specific variables, such as 'length of time since divorce', 'contact with father', and 'household income' will influence SSAP constructs due to the complex and multifactorial nature of divorce**, (rejected).

'Age' had a significant relationship with SSAP scores for both groups (Detailed discussion of this finding in Section 3.4.3 and in 8.4.2), whilst 'gender' did not have a significant relationship with SSAP scores for either group. As was discussed in Section 3.4.3, a considerably larger sample size in each group would have been needed to determine true gender effects/differences in SSAP constructs; thus, it was not surprising that significant differences between boys and girls on SSAP constructs were not found in either group.

The rejection of the fifth hypothesis demonstrated that the identified divorce-related variables in the current thesis had no impact on children's attachment/caregiver representations assessed using the SSAP. Perhaps the variables 'length of time since divorce', 'contact with father', and 'household income', were not influential in isolation and may only impact attachment/caregiver representations and narrative responses when studied as interacting with and/or mediating other variables (e.g., frequent contact with the non-resident parent may be a hindrance if co-parents are in high conflict; or a longer duration of time passing since the divorce may have a positive impact if children are no longer experiencing inter-marital conflict).

Household income was considered a 'divorce-related' variable in the current thesis and was tested for its impact on SSAP construct scores because it was significantly different between the two sample groups. No significant differences were found between the two levels of 'household income', identified in the current thesis (i.e., £60,000 or less and £60,001 or more), on SSAP constructs. The absence of an impact may suggest that 'household income' also cannot be analysed in isolation. For instance, researchers have demonstrated that several moderating factors play a role in how a low socio-economic status (SES) can impact children's mental health (e.g., cognitive stimulation and parenting styles) (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). In their large review of the literature on SES and child development, Bradley and Corwyn (2002) found that low SES children had less access to recreational and learning materials that stimulate cognitive growth, which can lower their academic achievement and increase behavioural maladjustment later in life. Furthermore, low SES parents were found less likely to engage their children in rich conversations, and were also less likely to read to their children and monitor the amount of time their children watched TV, providing fewer learning opportunities, leading to lower school performance and withdrawal behaviours (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). These effects could be due to external factors that are impacted by a decline in household income, such as moving to a poorer neighbourhood, severed ties with friends/relatives, changing schools, parental depression, and/or parental pre-occupation with financial/job-related issues (Amato, 2000, 2010). In their longitudinal study of divorce effects on children, Sun and Li (2002) found that the negative impact divorce had at various time points was mostly or at least partially due to deficits in family resources. It is also important to note that low pre-divorce income could have had an impact on the dissolution of the parental relationship and on child outcomes. For

instance, children from low-income households pre-divorce have been found to have more externalising symptoms post-divorce (Weaver & Schofield, 2015). In sum, ‘household income’ is a variable that impacts and/or is impacted by divorce, and can play a significant role in child adjustment/outcomes.

Study 2

In the second quantitative study, the first hypothesis: **An 8-stem SSAP, including the new topic-relevant story stem, will elicit differences in attachment/caregiver representations when compared to the original 7-stem SSAP**, was partly accepted. DMH was added to the SSAP to create a version with 8 stems and was descriptively assessed for similarities/differences in internal consistencies to the 7-stem SSAP—appearing quite similar. However, when tested using non-parametric statistical tests, the 8-stem version demonstrated a statistically significant difference to the 7-stem SSAP in the construct *Disorganised*. This indicated that unlike the other stems in the battery, DMH was not eliciting *Disorganised* themes in the same way or to the same extent that the other stems were. The primary researcher hypothesised that this could have been due to the order in which it was administered (i.e., being the final stem after a 30-45 minute assessment and thus, challenging to engage with, leading to narratives less likely to consist of *Disorganised* codes such as *no closure*, where a child avoids ‘closing’ their narrative and keeps narrating for much longer than expected); or perhaps another issue with its ‘order of administration’ is that it was presented after ‘Lost Keys’, a stem that could have raised children’s inhibitions due to its portrayal of parental conflict.

The second hypothesis of the study in Chapter 4: **The new topic-relevant story stem will elicit different attachment/caregiver representations based on**

whether or not a child has experienced parental separation, was rejected. DMH did not significantly distinguish the two samples in terms of attachment constructs and thus, did not appear to distinguish the groups based on the experience of divorce. However, *Lost Keys* (also tested for its ability to discriminate between the two samples) was found to elicit significant differences between the two groups—in *Defensive/Avoidance*. This was not surprising as it was retrieved from the SSAP battery, which also significantly differentiated the two sample groups on this construct in Chapter 3 of the current thesis. This was an interesting result though, as it indicated that a stem about parental conflict generated more *Defensive/Avoidant* strategies in children from separated families than those from non-separated families. This difference may signify the difficulty in addressing parental conflict for children from separated families and perhaps, children from non-separated families were less defensive/avoidant of such a dilemma due to adequate parental modeling of conflict resolution in their own families, or due to a lack of exposure to parental conflict and thus, did not find it distressing/painful and did not require defending against such emotions. However, it should be noted that the significant difference between the groups on the construct *Defensive/Avoidance* generated by *Lost Keys* had a moderate effect size.

The third hypothesis: **There will be similarities in attachment/caregiver representations in response to the new topic-relevant story stem and the established story stem, *Lost Keys***, was rejected. In sum, within group differences were found between the responses to DMH and *Lost Keys* but these differences were similar between groups. Children in both groups children responded more securely to DMH than to *Lost Keys* and more *Disorganised* to *Lost Keys* than to DMH. These significant within-group differences also had very large effect sizes. These findings

may indicate that regardless of the experience of divorce, there may be something more challenging to address in a stem about ‘parental conflict’ than there is in a ‘separation’ stem. This conclusion supports previous researchers’ findings on the variables that are more deleterious for children post-divorce, such as co-parental conflict, rather than the actual act of separating (e.g., Amato, 2000, 2010; Emery, 1988; Kelly & Emery, 2003).

The overall aim of the current thesis was accomplished through the completion of the studies presented in Chapters 3 and 4; the differing perspectives of children from separated and non-separated families were collected and analysed quantitatively. These findings, and their implications, will be discussed further within the context of previous literature and the qualitative findings carried out in the current thesis in the following sections.

8.3 Methodological implications

8.3.1 Development of original measures

There were five empirical studies carried out within the current thesis, three of which required the development of tailored and innovative methodologies (i.e., the studies carried out in Chapters 4, 5 and 7). The rationale and development of these methodologies will be presented below with reference to the context within which they were developed.

Dog Moving House (DMH)

DMH was created in order to ‘tap into’ a specific topic of interest—the childhood experience of separation from a close attachment figure (i.e., when one parent departs from the home). It was developed by the primary researcher of the current thesis with the collaboration of Dr. Saul Hillman, a supervisor of the current

thesis and one of the developers of the SSAP (Hodges, Hillman & Steele, 2007). This stem was devised as a means of accessing children's IWMs of attachment when faced with a dilemma/conflict pertaining to separation from an attachment figure without reunion. A pet dog represented the attachment figure in the stem; the dog moves to a new house and is now separated from the child character in the stem. The stem is left at a high point when the dog moves out of the home and the researcher invites the participant to show and tell what happens next.

The 'hidden' yet main objective of DMH was to elicit a response from the participant about their experience of parental divorce and not the portrayed separation from a dog. In order to assess if this was achieved, psychometric properties were evaluated.

The DMH was based on the SSAP's principles and follows previous researchers' adaptations, removals, and additions of story stems to target their own research questions or populations under investigation (e.g., Grych, Wachsmuth-Schaefer, & Klockow, 2002; Page & Bretherton, 2001). The DMH was administered to children from both separated and non-separated families in order to attribute children's responses from separated families to the experience of divorce and not another variable, such as children's stage of development. Since DMH was not able to distinguish between children from separated and non-separated families in terms of their attachment/caregiver representations, perhaps it was not a stem that elicited themes and attachment behaviours that were particularly relevant to the experience of parental divorce. The DMH may have inhibited participants due to the scenario of a separation, or it may have been 'too' displaced from their own experience and not relatable (i.e., due to the use of a dog). If it was too distant of a scenario from their

own experiences, perhaps *Defensive/Avoidance* strategies were not employed, as they were not needed in this case to defend against a painful scenario of separation.

Although its psychometric properties were not robust, this exercise aided in demonstrating how stems can be modified for use with children from separated families, whilst trying to present a scenario displaced from the child's own experience. Methodological issues were inherent within the DMH stem, however, it demonstrated how future studies could tailor instruments to sensitive topics such as divorce. The development and use of the DMH in the current thesis encourages future work in this direction by contributing its rationale, development, procedure, and a discussion of its shortcomings, in order to aid in future attempts to modify/create story stems that are targeted to the experience of divorce.

Mama Bear and Papa Bear Interview (MBPBI)

An extensive review of the literature suggested that a qualitative semi-structured, projective interview using a fictional story had not been previously developed; this led the primary researcher of the current thesis to develop such a measure. The new measure was named the 'Mama Bear and Papa Bear Interview' (MBPBI).

MBPBI adopted elements from both a direct interview measure such as the CAI (Target, Shmueli-Goetz, & Fonagy, 2000; Target, Fonagy, & Shmueli-Goetz, 2003) and principal components of story stem measures, such as the SSAP. The MBPBI was able to target the experience of divorce by representing divorce through a fictional bear family and story, read aloud to the participants. The story was then followed with a semi-structured, age-appropriate interview asking about the fictional character's thoughts, wishes, beliefs, and experiences. Animal characters were used

instead of human ones to encourage displacement, particularly with vulnerable populations (Hodges, Steele, Hillman & Henderson, 2003).

Creating and using this measure in the current thesis presented a preliminary exploration of its use with a vulnerable population. This contributed a non-distressing, projective qualitative measure to the current pool of measures used with children from separated families and from other vulnerable populations. It will allow researchers, by providing a means of investigating topics that may have otherwise been deemed unethical to approach *via* traditional methods (e.g., direct interviews), to access vulnerable populations without the ethical dilemmas that can be inherent in such research designs (e.g., ensuring questions are non-intrusive). A step-by-step description of its development and procedure is also outlined in the current thesis (see Chapter 5), which encourages future replications and use with other samples.

The Online Focus Group (OFG)

As mentioned previously, the OFG is a measure that can be adapted and tailored to a number of topics and with varying numbers of participants. Due to the rise in the use of the Internet, online chat platforms, and messaging applications in recent decades, a qualitative online measure may be more accessible, safe, and comfortable for participants discussing topics that are not discussed as readily within in-person designs. The OFG methodology has not been thoroughly described in past work, particularly within psychological research, with regards to its format and administration (Coulson, 2010). Therefore, the current thesis attempted to address this gap by providing a detailed description of the development and practical administrative features of the OFG methodology in Chapters 2 and 7.

The OFG—which eliminated participants' travel time, cost, and transcription time (i.e., verbatim transcripts were easily downloaded following the completion of

the OFG)—was also a methodology that allowed participants from all over the UK to participate. This inclusive feature of the OFG increased the diversity of the experiences and participants involved in a study (Poynter, 2010). The OFG created in the current thesis contributed a new and innovative design for the investigation of sensitive issues with participants who may be inaccessible, as well as those who may prefer anonymity when discussing sensitive subjects.

8.4 Theoretical implications

8.4.1 The attachment/caregiver representations of children from separated families

The current thesis established some significant differences between the attachment/caregiver representations of children from separated and non-separated families. For instance, children from separated families showed significantly more *Defensive/Avoidance* themes in their SSAP responses than children from non-separated families did. The *Defensive/Avoidance* construct encompasses a cluster of ‘codes’ that determines if a child’s narrative presents defensive or avoidant features (e.g., ending the narrative prematurely or avoiding the resolution of a dilemma within the stem). This finding was important as previous *theoretical* viewpoints on the attachment systems of children from separated families indicated a trend towards utilising defensive/avoidant attachment behaviours to adapt to preoccupied, unavailable, post-divorce parent(s) (Feeney & Monin, 2008). This significant finding offered preliminary empirical support for such theories, and also supported out-dated qualitative findings from direct, non-projective, clinical interviews that found similar distinctions in attachment styles between children from divorced and intact families (e.g., Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004).

When measuring the differences in attachment constructs using DMH, the same significant difference between the groups on the construct *Defensive/Avoidance*

was not found. However, *Lost Keys* significantly differentiated the groups in *Defensive/Avoidance* scores; this may indicate that a stem about parental conflict may have been more ‘raw’ than DMH for children from separated families than those from intact ones, who may not experience the same degree of conflict between their non-divorced parents.

Moreover, both groups displayed significantly more *Disorganised* themes using *Lost Keys* and more *Security* themes using DMH. Taken together, these findings support previous researchers’ arguments regarding parental conflict pre- and post-divorce as being more detrimental to children’s adjustment post-divorce than the actual act of divorce, or one parent departing from the home (e.g., Amato, 2000, 2010; Emery, 1988; Kelly & Emery, 2003).

8.4.2 Latency and attachment/caregiver representations

In Chapter 3, older children from separated families possessed less ‘Defensive/Avoidant’ responses in their narratives than younger children; additionally, older children from both separated and non-separated families had narratives characterised with more ‘Secure’ responses than younger children did from either group (See Section 3.4.3 for a detailed discussion of these significant findings).

Children over the age of 7 or 8 begin to develop the ability to tolerate ambivalence and understand opposing perspectives (Davies, 2010). In addition to this, attachment theory posits that older children need less physical contact than younger children (Bowlby, 1982). Therefore, perhaps children who are older who no longer “see” their non-resident parent everyday can have their attachment needs met through text messages or phone calls.

The similar impact of age on *Security* in both groups may indicate a ‘normal/global’ pattern within narrative assessments and could be due to

developments in ‘narrative-telling ability’ common within the latency period, irrespective of the experience of divorce (Gleason, 2005). Gleason (2005) points out that the developments in narrative ability, which take place during the school-age years, can include: Age-related increases in the length, overall structure, problem-solving aspects, and high-point analysis of children’s narratives. In high-point analysis, the narrative builds up to a ‘high point’, which is then resolved; however, this is primarily a feature of older children’s narratives (Gleason, 2005). Children who are about four years of age tend to use a ‘leap frog’ style of narrative, where the narrator jumps from one event to another and leaves out key information, thus creating an incoherent narrative (Gleason, 2005). This is important to consider when assessing story stem narratives of younger children in general, as the overall story stem design relies on a child understanding that there is a ‘high point’ involving a dilemma that requires resolution. Thus, an inherent issue with this style of measurement may be that younger children who have not yet developed this narrative ability and understanding would not provide a resolution to such a dilemma and could instead engage in this ‘leap frog’ style of narrating.

Latency is a stage involving major developments cognitively, emotionally, and behaviourally and these advancements impact how children narrate, resolve problems, engage in play, utilise and express both verbal and non-verbal language, as well as understand different points of view and tolerate ambivalences (Baron-Cohen et al., 1999; Davies, 2010; Devine & Hughes, 2013; Dumontheil et al., 2010; Gleason, 2005; Jambon & Smetana, 2014; Sameroff & Haith, 1996). The study in Chapter 3 did not account for these variations, namely, collecting data from participants on their verbal/story-telling abilities and/or cognitive/intellectual capabilities. Thus, it is challenging to draw conclusions and distinguish which factors are influencing the

effect of age (e.g., ToM, cognitive/intellectual maturity, narrative coherence due to language developments, and/or internalisations of parental divorce differing with age). However, these preliminary findings demonstrate a need for future work to disentangle these possible influencing factors and dissect whether or not age may be a protective buffer against the negative effects of divorce.

8.4.3 Children's worries, fears, and vulnerabilities post-divorce

Chapter 5 yielded qualitative findings *via* the MBPBI that highlighted the emotional and mental states of children from separated families, two years post-divorce (on average). These findings contributed to the current literature by providing a window into their internal world. Children expressed emotions such as sadness and, more often for boys, anger. They also communicated their fears and worries regarding the future and the current state of their life. Moreover, they expressed a sense of having no control over their lives or the decisions being made about them, and at times they felt they were missing key information about their parents' separation and were seeking more knowledge to perhaps feel more in control.

These themes portrayed the vulnerability and isolation children from separated families may experience—this information also bridges the knowledge gap in several ways. Generally, in the past, children were left out of divorce proceedings and unable to contribute their wants/needs post-divorce (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2008). However, the current thesis aimed to provide an up-to-date understanding of children's experiences post-divorce and what their internal world may look like; therefore, the current thesis illuminates the independence and control children in the current thesis desired, concerning their own lives and the decisions their gatekeepers make for them. This could lead to a shift in thinking about how children fit within divorce and how they themselves think about their role in the family and in society.

8.4.4 Divorced parents' difficulties in holding their child's experience in mind

Divorced parents' ability to hold their child(ren)'s experience in mind refers to their ability to mentalize about this experience in a supportive way. RF, the verbal expression of mentalization, was assessed using PDIs (Aber, Slade, Berger, Bresgi, & Kaplan, 1985). Participants in this experiment were from a particular subset of the overall divorce pool of parents, as they had been entrenched in conflict with one another for more than a year post-divorce. The PDI yielded a less than 'average' mean score on RF (i.e., less than 5) in the sample of divorced parents used in the current thesis.

Furthermore, the lowest scoring PDIs were qualitatively analysed and findings were compared to the limited number of studies on the RF of divorced parents carried out by the research group who gathered the PDI data used in this thesis (i.e., Hertzmann et al., 2016; Hertzmann et al., 2017; Target et al., 2017). Their qualitative findings based partly on different interview material were mostly mirrored in the qualitative findings of the current thesis. Those that differed between the two were most likely due to the two studies' aims and research questions, as well as the other research group's inclusion of responses to a second qualitative interview in the qualitative analysis. Their study also looked at the entirety of the sample whilst the current study only looked at the 'lowest scoring' PDIs.

Divorced parents' difficulties in mentalizing about their child(ren) throughout the PDIs contributed to the field of knowledge as they may have been demonstrating that the post-divorce co-parental dynamic plays an important role in the negative effects experienced by children. Particularly, by not being held in mind and having their experiences reflected upon, this may have led to feeling 'forgotten' or detached from their caregiver(s). The current thesis also utilised extrapolation to deduce

meaning from the PDIs about children's internal worlds. From the PDIs in Chapter 6, the researcher was able to make valuable interpretations about the states of the internal worlds of their children. For example, from the theme 'the missing child', it appeared that children might have been adjusting to an unresponsive and/or emotionally unavailable caregiver. By being unavailable, appropriate adult-scaffolding during times of high stress or major life changes is absent, and thus, insecure IWMs of attachment/caregivers may begin to form (Bowlby, 1969; Bowlby, 1979; Main et al., 1985). Furthermore, from the theory of intergenerational transmission, one can hypothesise that the themes of 'villainisation, 'self as victim' and the subthemes of 'hostility' and 'accusations of manipulation', may negatively influence children's traits, caregiver representations, and ways of relating to others whom they are in close relations with in the present and future (Sirvanli-Ozen, 2005). Intergenerational transmission of parenting styles is also possible and if divorced co-parents in conflict are overtly modelling 'hostility' and 'accusations of manipulation' about the child's other parent, children may be internalising these modes of relating and developing internalising/externalising problems (Starr et al., 2014). Lastly, without modelling appropriate RF, children may not be able to internalise these traits themselves, regulate their affect, and/or begin to lack in mentalization capabilities, thus, repeating patterns exhibited by their parents (Fonagy & Target, 1997).

8.4.5 School teachers as children's support systems post-divorce

The current thesis demonstrated that schoolteachers viewed their function in the lives of children from separated families as more than just 'educators'. The qualitative findings obtained from the OFG yielded rich responses about children's experiences from separated families, which were primarily based on children's behaviours, outward emotional displays, and verbal communications/expressions.

These findings demonstrated that the teachers viewed themselves, at times, as the only ‘constant’ in the children’s lives and as their support system. They illustrated their importance in the lives of these children by describing instances where children confided in them about their feelings and/or about how they were coping with their parents’ divorce. They also emphasised that because of the often-turbulent environment within the home, the school and the teachers became the only consistent objects in the children’s lives. Teachers in the current study took this role seriously and at times felt they could not be absent from school, or even became emotionally-affected when separating from the children for short periods of time (i.e., feelings of guilt).

Teachers in the current study also emphasised the importance of co-operative co-parenting dynamics post-divorce and that they tended to promote resilience and positive outcomes for children from separated families. For instance, when co-parents would refuse to come to ‘parents evening’ together, or when parents actively involved children in their conflicts and/or openly displayed it in front of them, children did worse academically or became visibly emotionally distressed in school.

Teachers also discussed the ‘thrust into adulthood’ that they believed many children from separated families experienced. Children became carers for their resident/non-resident parent and seemed to internalise their parents’ worries and fears. These discussion points indicated that the deleterious effects of divorce on latency-age children are complex and generally intertwined with how the parent(s) of the child is behaving/internalising the event and the degree of post-divorce conflict—a common finding in the divorce literature (e.g., Amato, 2000, 2010; Emery, 1988). The successful and positive adjustment of children post-divorce can be dependent upon their parents’ ability to co-operatively co-parent (e.g., handle the divorce in a mature,

positive way) and on the consistent positive child-teacher relationship that is experienced at school.

As was carried out in Chapter 6 with parents, teachers' perspectives also informed the current study about the child's internal world indirectly. Through qualitative interpretation and extrapolation, the current study utilised a psychoanalytic framework (namely, the theory of counter-transference) to theorise what teachers' perspectives may signify about children's internal experiences. For instance, when teachers in the current study described feelings of guilt about being absent from school, perhaps they were responding to an internal need within the child to be comforted and protected, or their need for consistency and stability, which was projected outwards onto the teacher. This aided in supporting the argument that the three perspectives examined in the current thesis (i.e., children, parents, and teachers) converge in children's lives post-divorce and impact how children of divorce cope with and experience the process.

8.4.6 A convergence of perspectives on children's experiences of divorce

The current thesis highlights that different perspectives on, and interpretations of, the experiences of children from separated families can converge in several ways. Firstly, attachment theory proposed that parental unavailability and preoccupation can encourage insecure attachment behaviours in offspring, as well as feelings of anxiety and helplessness (e.g., Main et al., 1985); whilst empirically, Feeney and Monin (2008) demonstrated that children from separated families can develop defensive attachment behaviours to adapt to unresponsive and unavailable parents post-divorce. Therefore, it is not surprising that parents in Chapter 6 in the current study (unrelated to the children in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of the current thesis) were pre-occupied, as well as portrayed their child(ren) as 'missing' in their interviews—whilst children in

Chapters 3 and 4 of the current thesis demonstrated *Defensive/Avoidance* strategies significantly more than children from intact families. In Chapter 5, children from separated families displayed helplessness, anxiety, and worry in their responses. In sum, the connections between these findings in the current thesis demonstrate that valuable information can be extrapolated about children's internal worlds from parents' perspectives and that through quantitative and qualitative findings, popular theories in attachment can be supported.

In Chapter 7 of the current thesis, schoolteachers' responses to the OFG also illuminated how the conflicted co-parenting relationship can hinder a child's adjustment post-divorce. They emphasised that when parents got along and were unified in their co-parenting following stressful life events, children adjusted better and had less emotional/behavioural problems in school. Thus, teachers in Chapter 7, (unrelated to the children or parents Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 of the current thesis) outlined the importance of a strong co-parental alliance and provided support for the findings in Chapter 3 (i.e., *Defensive/Avoidance* strategies may arise due to preoccupied parents who are not engaging in co-operative co-parenting), Chapter 4 (i.e., Due to its focus on parental conflict, *Lost Keys* was more indicative of *Defensive/Avoidance* strategies for children from separated families—rather than the separation-based stem DMH), and Chapter 6 (i.e., Co-parents in conflict demonstrated a lack of mental space to think/reflect about their child's state of mind due to uncooperative co-parenting dynamics). Teachers also demonstrated that if relations were conflicted, co-parents were distracted from their responsibilities to their children (i.e., becoming less responsive and child-centred in their parenting), perhaps leading to a child using defensive/avoidant strategies.

Finally, the parents' and teachers' responses generated in Chapters 6 and 7, respectively, also converged with the qualitative findings from children in Chapter 5. Children in Chapter 5 demonstrated *via* the MBPBI that divorce could be a scary and worrisome experience when they were left with no control over decisions concerning them and/or when they were not provided with adequate knowledge about the circumstances surrounding the separation. Divorce was sometimes accompanied with feelings of sadness and at times, anger. These findings demonstrated the importance of the co-parental alliance and the quality of co-parenting post-divorce as children can feel vulnerable and 'left out' regarding matters concerning their living situations and what the future holds for them; perhaps, also feeling 'forgotten' about or absent from their parents' minds (as was evident in divorced co-parents' PDI responses in Chapter 6).

Teachers in the current thesis also demonstrated their awareness and experience of these themes when they highlighted their role as a 'support system' and 'constant' in the lives of children from separated families. By being children's support systems and 'constants', they were providing them with consistency and a means of expressing their thoughts and feelings to a safe attachment figure. Therefore, whilst children expressed their vulnerabilities and fears post-divorce, teachers were demonstrating the importance of maintaining their supportive role in the children's lives and trying to understand the underlying mental states behind their behaviours (i.e., holding the child's experience in mind)—highlighting the interchange between the two perspectives.

8.5 Strengths

The current thesis benefited from bringing together three perspectives through both quantitative and qualitative methods. Retrieving information about the

experience of divorce directly from the child is a primary strength of the current thesis. The current thesis also included an indirect study of the latency-age child's internal world from multiple perspectives of important attachment figures (i.e., parents and teachers). By examining the perspectives of important attachment figures and their convergence with one another and with the perspectives of children, the current thesis provides a strong base from which to draw preliminary conclusions about how divorce may affect children's internal worlds.

Another strength of the current thesis is Chapter 7's use and description of the development of an OFG. This is considered a strength because the conceptualisation, rationale, and development of this new methodology was detailed clearly—the lack of which is a common criticism of the methodology and its place in psychological research (Coulson, 2010). Components such as location, time, development of questions, and online platforms that facilitated its administration were provided within the current thesis (see Section 2.5). By providing this detailed description in Chapter 2, the current thesis offered a way of replicating an OFG in future studies, which can be used with various populations and research topics.

The current thesis also benefited from the creation of a new, topic-relevant story stem in an attempt to access the internal representations of attachment/caregiver relationships of a sample of children from separated families. However, the new stem did not appear to discriminate between children from separated and non-separated families. Despite this, the development of the new stem remains a strength because it contributed an initial exploration into the development and adaptation of stems to use with children from separated families. Story stem adaptations for use with this population have only been previously carried out by Page and Bretherton (2001; 2004). However, their adaptations did not include *new* stems that involved divorce-

related scenarios. Perhaps the current thesis will encourage future researchers to incorporate such adaptations when targeting this type of experience and attempt to remedy the issues with DMH outlined in Chapter 4.

Furthermore, Chapter 3 was the first study in which the SSAP was administered to children from divorced families; although the MSSB and modifications of it have been used with this population in the past (e.g., Page & Bretherton, 2001; 2004; Stadelmann, Perren, Groeben and von Klitzing, 2010). The result of this application with children from separated families has added new empirical findings demonstrating children from divorced families as significantly more defensive/avoidant than children from non-separated families. However, several confounding variables were not taken into account in Chapter 3, the assessment of which may have altered this significant finding (Discussed further in Section 8.6).

A significant effect of age on the use of defensive/avoidant strategies in a narrative stem measure is also an important finding of the current thesis. The current thesis provides a base from which future research can disentangle what the variable 'age' may be related to and what moderating/mediating variables are most significant in decreasing older children's use of *Defensive/Avoidance* strategies and increasing their use of secure strategies in their narrative completions.

Finally, a major strength of the current thesis is the creation and use of the MBPBI with children from divorced families. This new and unique measure is an important contribution to psychological research with vulnerable populations and encourages future researchers to utilise projective, 'fictional' stories and questions about these fictional stories to access the internal worlds of individuals from such populations. This interview provided an alternative to direct interviews and the inability to use them with very young children or very vulnerable populations. This

measure can be highly adaptable and flexible which makes it extremely useful in the field of psychological research, as experiences vary from group to group and between individuals. Arguably, the current thesis provided a more direct approach to assessing children's conscious/unconscious thoughts, feelings, and wishes, than play/narrative measures, yet a more displaced approach than direct interviews such as the CAI; therefore, the MBPBI is a novel and helpful addition to the psychological field of research.

8.6 Limitations

Several limitations existed in the current thesis, and the studies conducted within it, that will be discussed here. These, for the most part, pertained to the recruitment strategy and sample size. Recruitment was a major challenge in the current thesis due to:

- (1) The sensitive nature of the topic,
- (2) The young age of the participants used in Chapters 2 to 5,
- (3) A lack of funding to compensate participants in the non-separated group and primary schoolteachers,
- (4) Difficulty creating a relationship with an educational institution (e.g., a primary school) from which recruitment could have been carried out randomly in larger numbers.

Both children from separated and non-separated families were recruited through *Facebook Groups* and *Gumtree*; this method of recruitment may have attracted highly motivated individuals who were particularly interested in psychological research, who had access to the Internet, and/or who were regular users of these websites.

Participants who were recruited for the community sample of non-separated families may have not been representative of the community due to the aforementioned

variables; participants who were from separated families may have also been a subset of the overall divorced/separated pool of participants considering that they had the time, space, and availability to participate in psychological research. As a result, the sample sizes used in Chapters 3 and 4 for quantitative inquiry were modest; this was due to difficulties in recruitment outlined above. The two samples of children from separated and non-separated families were matched on several variables but one significantly differed between the groups—household income. The significant difference between the groups' household incomes was most likely a feature of research with children from separated families and was due to their belonging to a one-parent income household, whereas those from non-separated families most likely reside in a dual-income household—this feature is expected to persist even with larger samples.

The studies in Chapters 3 and 4 could have benefited from using reliable, validated techniques to collect data on the degree of conflict between co-parents, maternal depression, and their current and past co-parenting styles. As outlined in Chapter 3's limitations, these variables may have confounded the data due to the literature's support of their impact on child outcomes (e.g., Amato, 2000, 2010; Amato & Cheadle, 2008; Sandler, Miles, Cookston & Braver, 2008; Dowling & Barnes, 2000; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Kim, 2011; Wood, Repetti & Roesch, 2004). The collection of data on children's cognitive/verbal, storytelling, ToM abilities, and perhaps a measure of pubertal development, would have also been useful to include in Chapters 3 and 4. The inclusion of these variables could have aided in interpreting the significant effects of age, as well as the difference between the two groups in *Defensive/Avoidance* scores found in Chapter 3 (e.g., The groups were not matched on these variables). Without this data, it was not possible to

determine if these variables played important roles in how age impacted attachment representations and the narratives of children from divorced families overall.

Children recruited in Chapters 2 to 5 were not related to the parents or teachers recruited in Chapters 6 and 7; although this may be perceived as a limitation, arguably, the lack of relation between participants strengthened the findings of the current thesis as findings from unrelated participants converged with, and provided support for, each other. With regards to the sample in Chapter 6, it was not possible to recruit parents' children due to the ethical regulations set on the larger RCT conducted by the TR. Parents in Chapter 6 were already under a great deal of distress and it was deemed inappropriate, and perhaps additionally distressing, to request their child's participation in research. Due to their inability to agree with one another on matters concerning their children, it would have been unethical to introduce another matter to agree/disagree on (i.e., The participation of their child in psychological research).

With regards to the limitations of Chapter 4, Bretherton and Oppenheim (2003) strongly advised piloting any adaptations to story stem measures prior to administering them, however, the current thesis did not pilot the DMH. It would have been very useful to initially evaluate its capability to target separation-related themes and have the opportunity to adjust it accordingly. However, due to the aforementioned limitations in recruitment, it was difficult to do so and thus, all DMH narratives were included in the final analyses.

DMH's ability to uniquely target the experience of parental divorce was not accomplished. This could have been due to the scenario depicted in the stem being too similar to the lived experiences of the participants and thus, increased inhibitions. On the other hand, this could have been due to the scenario of owning a pet dog being too

displaced from their real lived experience of divorce and therefore it did not target representations and/or conscious/unconscious thoughts and feelings about divorce. In summary, the DMH did not appear to target what it was designed to, and may require further adjustments to specifically tap into the experience of divorce.

Lastly, the primary researcher was not blind to whether a participant belonged to the separated or non-separated group, in Chapters 3 and 4, which could have led to biases during the interpretation and coding of narratives (Karanicolas, Farrokhyar & Bhandari, 2010). In order to reduce biases, the secondary supervisor of the current thesis—who was blind to group membership—coded a randomly selected subset of DMH narratives, in order to achieve inter-rater reliability and thus, reduced biases in Chapter 4 (Karanicolas, Farrokhyar & Bhandari, 2010).

8.7 Future directions

Future studies investigating the effects of divorce on children in middle childhood could benefit from recruitment through schools. This would increase the sample sizes and promote the diversity of the groups and matching of demographic variables between them. Studies exploring teachers' perspectives on children from separated families could also benefit from this recruitment approach as a more diverse sample of teachers could be interviewed.

The assessments mentioned throughout the limitation sections of the current thesis (e.g., narrative/verbal ability, ToM, co-parenting styles, pre- and post-divorce conflict, pubertal development, and parental depression), are recommended for inclusion in future work to aid in further understanding the significant effect of age on attachment/caregiver representation and the difference between the two samples in the construct *Defensive/Avoidance*.

Future work would also benefit from the development and validation of stems that target the experience of divorce. The findings in Chapter 5 indicated that using animal characters that undergo a similar experience to the participant, did not inhibit their expression and projection of their internal world, nor did it raise inhibitions. Perhaps future studies could benefit from developing stems where the entire family of characters are animals, rather than in the DMH where the departed attachment figure is a pet, belonging to a human character (i.e., the child in the story).

Although DMH's psychometric properties were not robust, an important finding emerged regarding *Lost Keys* (i.e., a stem about parental conflict) and its ability to distinguish between children from separated and non-separated families with regards to their attachment/caregiver representations. Perhaps, future adaptations to story stems could include a component of parental conflict, along with other divorce-related variables, when targeting the topic of divorce. The experience of divorce in middle childhood is complex and requires further inquiry into the development/adaptation of story stems to tap into these complex experiences. The methods used within the current thesis lay a foundation for future researchers to modify and adapt measures for use with children from separated families.

The absence of associations between psychopathology and children's attachment constructs in the current thesis did not support what previous research has shown about attachment patterns and externalising/internalising behaviours for children from separated and non-separated families. This could be due to confounding variables unaccounted for in the current thesis described in Section 8.2. Therefore, future studies examining divorce and its impact during latency would greatly benefit from the assessment of, and/or controlling of possible confounding variables.

8.8 Conclusions

By utilising both quantitative and qualitative measures, the current thesis attempted to delve into the internal world of children from separated families and add to the current literature on the effects of divorce on children in middle childhood. Although the effects of divorce on children's adjustment, internalising/externalising behaviours, and social development have been well-documented, in-depth exploration into children's internal worlds is lacking, and the research that does exist (e.g., Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004) is out-dated. Therefore, the current thesis aimed to provide an updated, mixed-methodology research project exploring the internal world of latency age children who have experienced parental divorce. The current thesis also provided context for understanding children's internal worlds by including perspectives of important attachment figures to the latency-age child (i.e., parents and teachers). Although the parents and teachers were unrelated to the child participants in the current thesis, their perspectives still supported, and at times provided the context for, children's ways of relating to attachment figures and their unconscious/conscious thoughts, feelings, and wishes post-divorce.

Children from separated families seemed to use more defensive/avoidant ways of relating to attachment figures, which could stem from the preoccupied state of mind of their parent(s) post-divorce—particularly when unified co-parenting relations do not exist. Children from separated families may turn to adults outside the home (e.g. teachers) for support and comfort, who begin to serve as consistent and available attachment figures for them during turbulent and distressful life events and transitions. The current thesis has also demonstrated that children from separated families undergo several emotional and behavioural changes as perceived by their teachers and themselves. Qualitatively, both children and teachers demonstrated that

post-divorce adjustment, or lack thereof, involves emotions such as sadness and anger—outward expressions could also include aggression. Feeling worried and lacking control are also features of children's internal worlds post-divorce. These worries revolve around their parents' separation and their family's living circumstances in general. Their wish for control seems to stem from being left out of important decisions involving their living arrangements, visitation schedules, and about the separation. By gaining this preliminary understanding of a child's internal world and how it is affected by divorce, the current thesis was able to contribute an updated and in-depth look into the lives of children from separated families to the current literature.

Parents may have previously been perceived in psychological research as the best informants of their children's experiences, however, the current thesis raised the question of whether divorced/separated parents may represent a subset of parents who prefer to appear socially desirable than report honestly about their children's behaviours and emotions. Discrepancies between parent-reported symptoms and children's own narratives in the current thesis, demonstrated that at times, parents might be underreporting their children's negative symptoms. This can indicate a greater issue with parent-report measures administered to parents' of children who are undergoing experiences such as divorce. However, as mentioned throughout the current thesis, it is important for future studies to assess and/or control possible confounding variables such as ToM, parental depression, co-parental pre- and post-divorce conflict, and verbal/story-telling ability in order to learn more about the absence of associations between the SDQ and SSAP found in the current thesis.

This research has added to our knowledge of children from separated families during middle childhood and provided an exploration of their internal world; it has

also provided an initial understanding of how attachment figures in their life hold their experience in mind and how this can reflect their inner world. The current thesis has also presented new questions and directions for future work in this area, whilst providing new methodologies for researchers studying latency-age children from separated families and other vulnerable populations.

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Appendix A: *Dog moving house* (DMH)

Additional stem (DMH)

Props and characters: In this story we will need the dog, mum, child 1 and side of house.

In this story, (Child 1) loves her pet dog (Dog 1).

She always plays with (Dog 1) (*show Child 1 and dog playing, then take dog and child 1 away*) but one day after school she came home

(bring child around to the side of the house, and then walks towards mum when she's back from school) and asked her mum,

“Can I play with (Dog 1)?”

MUM: “I’m afraid not (Child 1) (Dog 1) has gone to live in another house.” Can you show and tell me what happens now?

PROMPTS:

If there’s no mention of either the dog or the conflict: ‘Did anyone say anything about Dog 1? What did Child 1 do after hearing the news of

Dog 1?’

Appendix B: Mama Bear and Papa Bear Interview (Version 1)

Divorce Interview: Molly the bear (6-8 y/o)

Intro: I am going to ask you 6 questions about a character in a story I am going to describe for you. Most of the questions are about the character's thoughts, feelings, and wishes. I will be recording this interview so that I can remember what we've said here today. There are absolutely no right or wrong answers and if something isn't clear, please ask me to explain it. If you don't want to answer a question please feel free to ask me to skip it or move on at any time. If at any time you want to stop the interview or take a short break please feel free to interrupt me and let me know. Sometimes I might be looking down at the page to look at the questions but I am still listening to everything you say. Does this sound okay with you?

Okay, I'm going to tell you a short story about a little bear named Molly and then ask you some questions about her. Molly is 7 years old and lives with her mummy bear and daddy bear. One day, mummy bear and daddy bear asked her to sit and have a chat with them. They told her that they loved her very much and that she hadn't done anything wrong. Mummy bear and daddy bear explain to her that although they once loved each other, they are going to live in two different houses because sometimes things don't work out between parents. They give her each a big bear hug and kiss on the cheek.

1. What do you think Molly may feel or think at first when she hears this news?
(Prompt: Can you give me some examples?)
2. Why do you think Molly may have these feelings or thoughts? *(Prompt: Can you tell me a bit more?)*
3. Molly wants to speak to them some more about their separation; what do you think she might say to them? What do you think she would want to hear back from them? *(Prompt: Can you give me some examples?)*
4. Later that night Molly gets into bed, what kinds of things might she think about at night? *(Prompts: Can you give me an example? Why do you think she may have these thoughts?)*
5. How do you think Molly feels about daddy bear now that he will be living in a different house and not seeing him as much as she used to? *(Prompt: Can you give me an example of what she might be feeling towards him/towards mummy bear?)*
6. Every now and then Molly thinks about her parents separating from each other. Do you think Molly feels things will be different now between her and her parents and if so, how? *(Prompt: Any examples? Why do you think they may be different/the same?)*
7. If Molly was granted three wishes, what do you think she'd wish for? *(NOTE: If child can't think of any, ask for just one wish).*

Divorce Interview: Molly the bear (9-11 y/o)

Intro: I am going to ask you 6 questions about a character in a story I will describe to you. Most of the questions are about the character's thoughts, feelings, and wishes. I will be recording this interview so that I can remember what we've said here today. There are absolutely no right or wrong answers and if something isn't clear, please ask me to explain it. If you don't want to answer a question please feel free to ask me to skip it or move on at any time. If at any time you want to stop the interview or take a short break please feel free to interrupt me and let me know. Sometimes I might be looking down at the page to look at the questions but I am still listening to everything you say. Does this sound okay with you?

Okay, I'm going to tell you a short story about a bear named Molly and ask you a few questions about her. Molly is 7 years old and lives with her mum and dad. One day, her parents asked her to sit and have a chat with them. They told her that they loved her very much and that she had done nothing wrong. Her mum and dad explain to her that although they once loved each other, they are going to live in two different houses because sometimes things don't work out between parents. They each give her a big bear hug and kiss on the cheek.

1. What do you think Molly may feel or think at first when she hears this news? *(Prompt: Can you give me some examples?)*
2. Why do you think Molly may have these feelings or thoughts? *(Prompt: Can you tell me a bit more?)*
3. Molly wants to speak to them some more about their separation; what do you think she might say to them? What do you think she would want to hear back from them? *(Prompt: Can you give me some examples?)*
4. Later that night Molly gets into bed, what kinds of things might she think about at night? *(Prompts: Can you give me an example? Why do you think she may have these thoughts?)*
5. How do you think Molly feels about daddy bear now that he will be living in a different house and not seeing him as much as she used to? *(Prompt: Can you give me an example of what she might be feeling towards him/towards mummy bear?)*
6. Every now and then Molly thinks about her parents separating from each other. Do you think Molly feels things will be different now between her and her parents and if so, how? *(Prompt: Any examples? Why do you think they may be different/the same?)*
7. If Molly was granted three wishes, what do you think she'd wish for? *(NOTE: If child can't think of any, ask for just one wish).*

Appendix C: Mama Bear and Paper Bear Interview (MBPBI) (Version 2)

Divorce Interview: Molly the bear (6-8 y/o)

Intro: I am going to ask you a few questions about a character in a story that I will describe to you. Most of the questions are about the character's thoughts, feelings, and wishes. I will be recording this interview so that I can remember what we've said here today. There are absolutely no right or wrong answers and if something isn't clear, please ask me to explain it. If you don't want to answer a question, just ask me to skip it or move on at any time. If you want to stop or take a short break please feel free to interrupt me and let me know. Sometimes I might be looking down at the page to look at the questions but I am still listening to everything you say. Does this sound okay to you?

Okay, I'm going to tell you a short story about a little bear named Billy/Molly and then ask you some questions about him/her. Billy/Molly is a small cub and lives with his/her mama bear and papa bear deep in the forest. One day, mama bear and papa bear asked him/her to sit and have a chat with them. They told him/her that they loved him/her very much and that he/she hadn't done anything wrong. Mama bear and papa bear explain to him/her that sometimes parents decide to live apart and that they are going to live in different forests now. They each give him/her a big bear hug and kiss on the cheek.

8. What do you think Billy/Molly the bear may feel or think when he/she first hears this news? *(Prompt: Can you say a little bit more or give me some/more examples?)*
9. What may be the reasons Billy/Molly has these feelings or thoughts? *(Prompt: Can you tell me/explain a bit more?)*
10. Billy/Molly wants to speak to them some more about them living in different forests; what do you think he/she might say to them? **(Prompt: Do you think he/she would ask them anything? Follow with...if no: what makes you think he/she wouldn't ask anything? If yes, what kinds of questions would he/she ask? Prompt: Can you give me an example?)**
11. What kinds of things do you think he/she might want to hear back from them? *(Prompt: What makes you think he'll/she'll want to hear that back from them? Can you give me an example?)*
12. Later that night, Billy/Molly climbs into his/her den to go to sleep, what kinds of things might he/she think about at night? *(Prompts: Can you give me an example?)*
13. What may be the reasons he/she has these thoughts? *(Prompt: Can you say a little bit more?)*

14. How do you think Billy/Molly feels about papa bear now that he will be living in a different forest? (*Prompt: Can you tell me a little bit more about that? Can you give me an example?*)
15. How do you think Billy/Molly might feel about mama bear now? (*Prompt: Can you tell me a little bit more about that? Can you give me an example?*)
16. Every now and then Billy/Molly thinks about his/her mama and papa living apart from each other. How might Billy/Molly think things will be between him/her and his/her parents now? (*Prompt: Do you think things will be the same/different? Any examples? What makes you think they may be different/the same?*)
17. The next day, as Billy/Molly was sitting by the river, a forest fairy landed on his/her shoulder and granted him/her three wishes, what do you think he/she wished for? (*NOTE: If child can't think of any, ask for just one wish.*)

Qualitative Interview (D): Molly the bear (9-11 y/o)

Intro: I am going to ask you a few questions about a character in a story that I will describe to you. Most of the questions are about the character's thoughts, feelings, and wishes. I will be recording this interview so that I can remember what we've said here today. There are absolutely no right or wrong answers and if something isn't clear, please ask me to explain it. If you don't want to answer a question, just ask me to skip it or move on at any time. If you want to stop or take a short break please feel free to interrupt me and let me know. Sometimes I might be looking down at the page to look at the questions but I am still listening to everything you say. Does this sound okay to you?

Okay, I'm going to tell you a short story about a bear named Billy/Molly and then ask you some questions about him/her. Billy/Molly is a young cub and lives with him/her mama and papa deep in the forest. One day, mama bear and papa bear asked him/her to sit and have a chat with them. They told him/her that they loved him/her very much and that he/she hadn't done anything wrong. Then they explained to Billy/Molly that sometimes parents decide to live apart and that they are going to live in different forests now. They each give him/her a big hug and kiss on the cheek.

18. What do you think Billy/Molly may feel or think when he/she first hears this news? (*Prompt: Can you say a little bit more or give me some/more examples?*)
19. What may be the reasons Billy/Molly has these feelings or thoughts? (*Prompt: Can you tell me/explain a bit more?*)
20. Billy/Molly wants to speak to them some more about them living in different forests; what do you think he/she might say to them? (**Prompt: Do you think he/she would ask them anything? Follow with...if no: what makes you think he/she wouldn't ask anything? If yes, what**

kinds of questions would he/she ask? *Prompt: Can you give me an example?*

21. What kinds of things do you think he/she might want to hear back from them? *(Prompt: What makes you think he'll/she'll want to hear that back from them? Can you give me an example?)*
22. Later that night, Billy/Molly climbs into his/her den to go to sleep, what kinds of things might he/she think about at night? *(Prompts: Can you give me an example?)*
23. What may be the reasons he/she has these thoughts? *(Prompt: Can you say a little bit more?)*
24. How do you think Billy/Molly feels about papa bear now that he will be living in a different forest? *(Prompt: Why? Can you give me an example?)*
25. How do you think Billy/Molly might feel about mama bear now? *(Prompt: Why? Can you give me an example? Can you say a little more?)*
26. Every now and then Billy/Molly thinks about his/her mama and papa living apart from each other. How might Billy/Molly think things will be between him/her and his/her parents now? *(Prompt: Do you think things will be the same/different? Any examples? What makes you think they may be different/the same?)*
27. The next day, as Billy/Molly was sitting by the river, a forest fairy landed on his/her shoulder and granted him/her three wishes, what do you think he/she wished for? *(NOTE: If child can't think of any, ask for just one wish).*

Appendix D: List of organisations and schools contacted for recruitment

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List of Schools

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Appendix E: Email template sent to primary schools for participation

Dear Sir/Madam,

I hope you don't mind me contacting you. My name is Donia Heider, and I am a fourth year PhD student at University College London (UCL) and the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families.

I am currently studying how we can learn about children's thoughts and feelings through a play/narrative task. I am interested in children aged between 6 and 11 years who live with both birth parents.

I would be very interested in recruiting children within your school. The study is not intrusive at all and simply involves children engaging in a narrative activity which is focused on external fictional characters. The activity involves the child being given the beginning of a story and asked to carry it on using figures (playmobil), props, toys, and his/her own words. This project has been approved by the Ethics Board at UCL and the researcher has piloted the study on volunteers prior to its start date.

I am emailing you today to request your assistance in recruiting a small number of children for this sample (approx. 10). Some organisations and schools have facilitated access to potential participants by requesting permission from parents to be contacted by myself. Another method used in the past has been to send home a newsletter or information sheet with children for parents to read. Alternatively, you may have such means to do this electronically. Following this, you will not have to be further involved if you do not wish to be nor does the study need to take place at the school if you cannot accommodate this. We tend to do the research in family's homes. However, I would be more than happy to give you a phone call, or come by, and discuss this further at your earliest convenience. We are keen to complete this research in the coming month.

If you are able to assist with this project, I would be very happy to offer in return a workshop on a psychologically orientated topic for teachers at your school. And of course, we would feed back about this particular study which we are carrying out across a number of schools and organisations.

Thank you sincerely for your time and I look forward to hearing back from you soon. We hope you may be able to support this invaluable piece of research that will hopefully further our understanding of children's experiences of separation and loss.

Appendix F: Facebook Groups

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Appendix G: Survey monkey questionnaires for separated and non-separated groups

Survey Monkey – Separated sample

This survey is to determine you and your child's eligibility to take part in a PhD study being conducted by researchers at University College London (UCL) and The Anna Freud Centre. This questionnaire will take no longer than 5-8 minutes to complete; upon its completion you will be contacted via e-mail with further information if you are eligible to participate in the study. It is very important that you respond to this follow-up email as it will confirm your place in the study.

The study aims to gain a better understanding of the school-age child's inner world following parental divorce/separation during childhood, with the objective of gaining insight into their conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings. By gaining this knowledge, a clearer picture of the child's inner world and experience may be achieved in order to enhance therapy, support networks, and future research. This project will also assist counsellors, educators, and parents/guardians in gaining a better understanding of childhood experiences arising from parental separations.

We would like to thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey.

1. At what email address would you like to be contacted?

2. Please enter your name:

3. Do you live in the United Kingdom?

Yes

No

4. Have you been separated/divorced from your partner/spouse?

Yes

No

5. Have you been separated/divorced within the last THREE years?

Yes

No

Not applicable to me

6. Do you have children?

Yes

No

7. Are any of your children between 6 and 11 years of age?

Yes

No

Not applicable to me

8. Has your child(s), aged between 6 and 11, received therapeutic intervention three times or more since the separation/divorce?

Yes
No
Not applicable to me

9. What is your age?

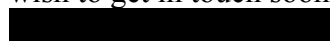
18 to 24
25 to 34
35 to 44
45 to 54
55 to 64
65 to 74
75 or older

10. Are you male or female?

Male
Female

Thank you for filling out our survey.

If you are eligible, you will be notified by email by a researcher within 1-2 days and further information will be given to you. It is very important that you respond to the e-mail as this will confirm your place in the study. Should you have any questions or wish to get in touch sooner, please send any correspondence to



Survey Monkey – Non-separated sample

This survey is to determine you and your child's eligibility to take part in a PhD study being conducted by researchers at University College London (UCL) and The Anna Freud Centre. This questionnaire will take no longer than 5 minutes to complete; upon its completion you will be contacted via e-mail with further information if you are eligible to participate in the study. It is very important that you respond to this follow-up email as it will confirm your place in the study.

The study aims to gain a better understanding of the school-age child's inner world following parental divorce/separation during childhood, with the objective of gaining insight into their conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings. In order to understand these experiences it is also essential to study them in conjunction with understanding experiences by those who have not undergone parental separation/divorce. Therefore, we are presently recruiting participants from both one-parent and two-parent families.

By gaining this knowledge, a clearer picture of the child's inner world and experience may be achieved in order to enhance therapy, support networks, and future research. This project will also assist counsellors, educators, and parents/guardians in gaining a better understanding of childhood experiences arising from parental separations.

We would like to thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey.

1. Please enter the phone number or email address at which you can be contacted.

2. Please enter your name:

3. Do you live in the United Kingdom?

- Yes
 No

4. Have you been separated/divorced from your partner/spouse?

- Yes
 No

5. Are you and your partner/spouse the biological parents of your child(s)?

- Yes
 No
 I don't have children

6. Are any of your children between 6 and 11 years of age?

- Yes
 No
 Not applicable to me

7. Do you, your child, and your child's other biological parent reside in the same household?

- Yes
 No
 Not applicable to me


8. Is your child fluent in the English language?

- Yes
 No
 Not applicable to me

9. What is your age?

- 18 to 24
- 25 to 34
- 35 to 44
- 45 to 54
- 55 to 64
- 65 to 74
- 75 or older

Thank you for filling out our survey.

If you are eligible you will be notified by email by a researcher within 1-2 days and further information will be given to you. It is very important that you respond to the email as this will confirm your place in the study. Should you have any questions or wish to get in touch sooner, please send any correspondence to 

Appendix H: Parent information sheet (separated group)

PARENT/GUARDIAN INFORMATION SHEET

This project is being conducted by PhD researcher Donia Heider, under the supervision of Prof. Mary Target, Dr. Saul Hillman, and Dr. Alejandra Perez.

Aims of the Project

This study aims to explore the school-age child's inner world following divorce/separation, with the objective of gaining a better understanding of their conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings.

Through acquiring this knowledge, a clearer picture of the child's inner world and experience may be achieved in order to enhance therapy, support networks, and future research.

Why is this study taking place?

The study is being conducted as a part of a PhD level thesis project. Its purpose is to allow a student to submit an original piece of empirical research with relevance to psychoanalytic concepts. This project will also assist counsellors, educators, and parents/guardians in gaining a better understanding of childhood experiences arising from parental separation.

What will be involved?

The estimated time involved in having your child participate is between 45-60 minutes. This time slot will involve a well-established narrative and play-based measure known as the Story Stem Assessment Profile (SSAP), and a brief interview; tailored toward the specific life event and age-group being explored. Questions will be age-appropriate and non-intrusive through the use of stories and children's movies. The SSAP utilises story-telling and creativity by the child with the collaboration of the researcher through props, toys, and their own words. For instance, the child may be given the beginning of a story such as, "Betty has a show-and-tell day at school and decides to bring her favourite toy with her. When she gets to school, she realises she has forgotten her toy at home. Can you show and tell me what happens next?" This is the "high point" of the story when the child would take over using props and toys to tell, in their own words and actions, what happens next in the story. Your child will not be asked to directly express their own personal experience; however, through the use of stories, narratives, and displacement, a glimpse into the child's inner world may be achieved.

The session will be audio and video-recorded due to the interactive nature of the study, audio/video-recording is necessary to ensure the child's stories—whether verbal or non-verbal—are captured in their original and unique form. Participants will be assigned code numbers to maintain anonymity and all other identifiers (e.g. locations, names, countries, etc.) will be changed. Following this, interview transcripts/recordings will be kept in password-protected computer files with the

original list of participant names kept separate. The original video/audio recordings will be destroyed after two years.

Lastly, on the day of the study, you will be asked to complete three brief questionnaires reporting your family's demographic information and exploring how you think your child(s) is thinking/feeling, as well as any major life events that may have taken place in your child's life within the last 18 months. This task should take approximately 10 minutes to complete. At the beginning of the study protocol on the day the study will be carried out, you will be provided with £10 per child, as compensation for your time and effort.

What are we asking you to do?

If you have any questions or simply require more information regarding this study, you are invited to contact the primary researcher or any of the supervisors through the contact methods listed below. Following this, if you would like your child to participate in this study, we would like you to contact us via email or telephone to let us know you would like to have your child participate. We will then set a date to meet, at which time, you and your child will be provided with consent forms to sign and date and return to us. The study protocol can then take place at the location you choose to meet.

Who will carry out the interview?

The primary researcher, Donia Heider, will be carrying out the study protocol.

Who will have access to the information you provide?

The supervisors listed above and the primary researcher will have access to the information you provide but this will be kept on password-protected audio/video files and once transcribed and analysed, paper copies will be placed in a securely locked cabinet. If any relevant parties (e.g., schools, support workers, etc.) request access to data, you will be notified and permission must be granted from you to do so. Participant name(s) will be changed and real names will be kept separate from the data files to ensure anonymity.

What do you do if you change your mind?

Your child is free at any point, before, during, or after the study to withdraw participation with absolutely no prejudice or consequences. His/her participation is entirely voluntary and he/she may change their mind at any time. In addition, after the interview is complete and the data is collected, he/she is still able to request that their information not be used in our study.

Will there be any feedback about the findings?

At your request, we can provide you and your child with feedback on our findings and the conclusions drawn from the study upon its completion.

Where will the study take place?

The study will take place at the offices of the Anna Freud Centre located in Hampstead, NW3 5SU; and if you request an interview to take place in the comfort of your home this would be permissible as well.

Who do you speak to if a problem arises?

If you or your child do not feel comfortable discussing a problem or issue with the researcher, or should any difficulties arise as a result of your child's involvement in this study, you and your child are encouraged to contact Dr. Alejandra Perez at the Anna Freud Centre (contact details below).

Who are the people involved with this project?

Researcher: Donia Heider (PhD Researcher)

Location: UCL & the Anna Freud Centre

Contact Details: [REDACTED]

Principle Supervisor: Prof. Mary Target

Occupation: Psychoanalyst and clinical psychologist, Professor of Psychoanalysis at UCL, Director of the Psychoanalysis Unit, and Director of the MSc in Theoretical Psychoanalytic Studies and the Doctorate in Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy

Location: University College London (UCL)

Contact Details: [REDACTED]

Secondary Supervisor: Dr. Saul Hillman

Occupation: Therapist, researcher, and supervisor

Location: The Anna Freud Centre

Contact Details: [REDACTED]

Research Consultant: Dr. Alejandra Perez

Occupation: Psychoanalyst, program director, and course tutor

Location: The Anna Freud Centre

Contact Details: [REDACTED]

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet, we look forward to hearing from you soon to answer any further questions you may have.

Appendix I: Parent information sheet (non-separated group)

PARENT/GUARDIAN INFORMATION SHEET

This project is being conducted by PhD researcher Donia Heider, under the supervision of Prof. Mary Target, Dr. Saul Hillman, and Dr. Alejandra Perez.

Aims of the Project

This study aims to explore the school-age child's responses to a story-telling task, with the objective of gaining a better understanding of their conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings.

Through acquiring this knowledge, a clearer picture of the child's inner world and experience may be achieved in order to understand how the school-age child creates stories and narratives.

Why is this study taking place?

The study is being conducted as a part of a PhD level thesis project. Its purpose is to allow a student to submit an original piece of empirical research with relevance to psychoanalytic concepts. This project will also assist counsellors, educators, and parents/guardians in gaining a better understanding of childhood experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

What will be involved?

The estimated time involved in participation in this study for each participant is roughly 30-60 mins. This time slot will involve a well-established narrative and play-based measure known as the Story Stem Assessment Profile (SSAP), tailored toward the age-group of participation. The SSAP utilises story-telling and creativity by the child with the collaboration of the researcher through props, toys, and their own words. For instance, the child may be given the beginning of a story such as, "Betty has a show-and-tell day at school and decides to bring her favourite toy with her. When she gets to school, she realises she has forgotten her toy at home. Can you show and tell me what happens next?" This is the "high point" of the story when the child would take over using props and toys to tell, in their own words and actions, what happens next in the story. Your child will not be asked to directly express their own personal experience; however, through the use of stories, narratives, and displacement, a glimpse into the child's inner world may be achieved.

The session will be audio and video-recorded due to the interactive nature of the study, video/audio-recording is necessary to ensure the child's narratives—whether verbal or physical—are captured in their original and unique form. Video/audio recordings will then be transcribed verbatim. Participants will be assigned code numbers to maintain anonymity and all other identifiers will be (e.g. locations, names, countries, etc.) will be changed to pseudonyms. Following this, the interview data will be kept in password-protected computer files with the original list of participant

names kept separate. The original video/audio recordings will be destroyed after two years.

Lastly, on the day of the study, you will be asked to complete three brief questionnaires reporting your family's demographic information and exploring how you think your child(s) is thinking/feeling, as well as any major life events that may have taken place in your child's life within the last 18 months. This task should take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

What are we asking you to do?

If you have any questions or simply require more information regarding this study, you are invited to contact the primary researcher or any of the supervisors through the contact methods listed below. Following this, if you would like your child to participate in this study, we would like you to contact us via email or telephone to let us know you would like to have your child participate. We will then set a date to meet, at which time, you and your child will be provided with consent forms to sign and date and return to us. The study protocol can then take place at the location you choose to meet.

Who will carry out the interview?

The primary researcher, Donia Heider, will be carrying out the study protocol.

Who will have access to the information you provide?

The supervisors listed above and the primary researcher will have access to the information you provide but this will be kept on password-protected audio/video files and once transcribed and analysed, paper copies will be placed in a securely locked cabinet. If any relevant parties (e.g., schools, support workers, etc.) request access to data, you will be notified and permission must be granted from you to do so. Participant name(s) will be changed and real names will be kept separate from the data files to ensure anonymity.

What do you do if you change your mind?

Your child is free at any point, before, during, or after the study to withdraw participation with absolutely no prejudice or consequences. His/her participation is entirely voluntary and he/she may change their mind at any time. In addition, after the interview is complete and the data is collected, he/she is still able to request that their information not be used in our study.

Will there be any feedback about the findings?

At your request, we can provide you and your child with feedback on our findings and the conclusions drawn from the study upon its completion.

Where will the study take place?

The study will take place at the offices of the Anna Freud Centre located in Hampstead, NW3 5SU; OR if you request an interview to take place in the comfort of your home this would be permissible as well.

Who do you speak to if a problem arises?

If you or your child do not feel comfortable discussing a problem or issue with the researcher, or should any difficulties arise as a result of your child's involvement in this study, you and your child are encouraged to contact Dr. Alejandra Perez at the Anna Freud Centre (contact details below).

Who are the people involved with this project?

Researcher: Donia Heider (PhD Researcher)

Location: UCL & the Anna Freud Centre

Contact Details: [REDACTED]

Principle Supervisor: Prof. Mary Target

Occupation: Psychoanalyst and clinical psychologist, Professor of Psychoanalysis at UCL, Director of the Psychoanalysis Unit, and Director of the MSc in Theoretical Psychoanalytic Studies and the Doctorate in Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy

Location: University College London (UCL)

Contact Details: [REDACTED]

Secondary Supervisor: Dr. Saul Hillman

Occupation: Therapist, researcher, and supervisor

Location: The Anna Freud Centre

Contact Details: [REDACTED]

Research Consultant: Dr. Alejandra Perez

Occupation: Psychoanalyst, program director, and course tutor

Location: The Anna Freud Centre

Contact Details: [REDACTED]

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet, we look forward to hearing from you soon to answer any further questions you may have.

Appendix J: Child information sheet (non-separated group)

Hello you!



Caring for young minds

Anna Freud
Centre



Are you between 6
and 11 years old?

Would you like to be
a part of a study
about you and other
children?

We are trying to learn all about you, so I would like to ask you for some of your time to create a few stories with me! We will use toys and our words to make these stories. You can stop at any

time or take a break whenever you like!
This may take between 30-45 minutes to
finish. If you have any questions, please
feel free to ask me!

Does this sound okay to you?

Researcher: Donia Heider

Supervisors: Prof. Mary Target, Dr. Saul Hillman, Dr. Alejandra Perez

University College London

Appendix K: Child information sheet (separated group)



Hello you!

Caring for young minds

Anna Freud
Centre



Are you between 6 and
11 years old?

Would you like to be a
part of a study about
you and other
children?

We are trying to learn all about you and how you've been feeling lately! I would like to ask you for some of your time to make up a few stories with me! After that, I'm going to ask you a few questions about a character in a story.

You can stop at any time or take a break whenever you like! This may take between 30-60 minutes to finish. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask me!

Does this sound okay to you?

Researcher: Donia Heider

Supervisors: Prof. Mary Target, Dr. Saul Hillman, Dr. Alejandra Perez

University College London

Appendix L: UCL ethics approval letter



UCL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE ACADEMIC SERVICES

17 April 2015

Professor Mary Target Research Department of Clinical, Educational and Health Psychology UCL

Dear Professor Target

Notification of Ethical Approval Project ID: 0389/008: How divorce and bereavement may affect a child's inner world

I am pleased to confirm in my capacity as Chair of the UCL Research Ethics Committee (REC) that your study has been approved by the UCL REC for the duration of the project i.e. until April 2016.

Approval is subject to the following conditions:

1. You must seek Chair's approval for proposed amendments to the research for which this approval has been given. Ethical approval is specific to this project and must not be treated as applicable to research of a similar nature. Each research project is reviewed separately and if there are significant changes to the research protocol you should seek confirmation of continued ethical approval by completing the 'Amendment Approval Request Form':
2. It is your responsibility to report to the Committee any unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risks to participants or others. Both non-serious and serious adverse events must be reported. Reporting Non-Serious Adverse Events For non-serious adverse events you will need to inform Helen Dougal, Ethics Committee Administrator (ethics@ucl.ac.uk), within ten days of an adverse incident occurring and provide a full written report that should include any amendments to the participant information sheet and study protocol. The Chair or Vice-Chair of the Ethics Committee will confirm that the incident is non-serious and report to the

Committee at the next meeting. The final view of the Committee will be communicated to you. Reporting Serious Adverse Events The Ethics Committee should be notified of all serious adverse events via the Ethics Committee Administrator immediately the incident occurs. Where the adverse incident is unexpected and serious, the Chair or Vice-Chair will decide whether the study should be terminated pending the opinion of an independent expert. The adverse event will be considered at the next Committee meeting and a decision will be made on the need to change the information leaflet and/or study protocol.

On completion of the research you must submit a brief report (a maximum of two sides of A4) of your findings/concluding comments to the Committee, which includes in particular issues relating to the ethical implications of the research.

With best wishes for the research.



Yours sincerely



Professor John Foreman

Chair of the UCL Research Ethics Committee

Cc: Donia Heider, Applicant Professor Peter Fonagy

Academic Service, 2 Taviton Street, University College London Gower Street London
WC1E 6BT Tel: [REDACTED] Email:
ethics@ucl.ac.uk <http://ethics.grad.ucl.ac.uk/>

Appendix M: Demographic questionnaire (separated group)***Demographic Questionnaire***

NOTE: *This questionnaire is entirely voluntary and you may feel free to leave any questions blank which you do not wish to answer. Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.*

The following section is about your child:

1. Participant ID: _____
2. Please circle one for child's gender:
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
3. Birthday (DD/MM/YYYY): _____
4. Year group: _____
5. Ethnicity: _____
6. Religious/spiritual belief or faith: _____
7. Native language: _____
8. Number of siblings & order (e.g. youngest, eldest, middle, only child): _____
9. Does your child have regular contact with your co-parent? (Please circle one)
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
10. If yes, how often? (Please circle one)
 - a) Everyday
 - b) 5-6 days a week
 - c) 3-4 days a week
 - d) 1-2 days a weeks
 - e) Once a week
 - f) Once a month
 - g) Less than once a month
 - h) Only on special occasions (e.g. Birthdays, Christmas, etc.)
 - i) Never
 - j) Other (Please specify) _____

The following section is about you and your co-parent:

11. Your age: _____

12. Please circle one for your gender:

a. Female

b. Male

13. Ethnicity: _____ / Co-parent's ethnicity: _____

14. Length of time since separation (Years & months format): _____

15. Custody arrangement with co-parent: _____

Please answer the following questions by circling *one* option.

16. Which best describes your legal marital or same-sex civil partnership status BEFORE separating (in relation to your co-parent)?

- a) Married
- b) In a registered same-sex civil partnership
- c) In a committed relationship
- d) In a committed relationship and cohabiting
- e) Engaged
- f) Casually dating
- g) Never dated

17. Which best describes your CURRENT legal marital or same-sex civil partnership status (in relation to your co-parent)?

- a) Divorced
- b) Separated but not divorced (living separately)
- c) Separated but not divorced (living together)

18. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? *If currently enrolled, highest degree received.*

- a) No schooling
- b) Completed primary school
- c) O levels / CSEs / GCSEs (any grades) or Equivalent
- d) Vocational qualifications (NVQ, GNVQ, BTEC, Apprenticeship)
- e) A Level/AS Levels, Secondary school Certificate, Progression/Advanced Diploma
- f) Undergraduate Degree (for example BA, BSc)
- g) Postgraduate degree (for example MA, PhD, PGCE)
- h) Professional qualifications (e.g. teaching, nursing, accountancy)
- i) Doctorate degree
- j) Foreign qualifications
- k) Other (please specify): _____

19. What is your current employment status?

- a) Employed for wages (full-time)
- b) Employed for wages (part-time)
- c) Self-employed or freelance
- d) Out of work for more than 1 year
- e) Out of work for less than 1 year
- f) Studying
- g) Retired
- h) Unable to work
- i) A homemaker
- j) Other (please specify) _____

20. What was your household income per annum BEFORE the separation/divorce?

- a) Less than £20,000
- b) £20,001-30,000
- c) £30,001-40,000
- d) £40,001-50,000
- e) £50,001-60,000
- f) £60,001-70,000
- g) £70,001-80,000
- h) £80,001-90,000
- i) £90,001-100,000
- j) More than £100,000

21. What is your household income per annum CURRENTLY?

- a) Less than £20,000
- b) £20,001-30,000
- c) £30,001-40,000
- d) £40,001-50,000
- e) £50,001-60,000
- f) £60,001-70,000
- g) £70,001-80,000
- h) £80,001-90,000
- i) £90,001-100,000
- j) More than £100,000

Appendix N: Demographic questionnaire (non-separated group)

Demographic Questionnaire

NOTE: *This questionnaire is entirely voluntary and you may feel free to leave any questions blank which you do not wish to answer. Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.*

The following section is about your child:

1. Participant ID: _____
2. Please circle one for child's gender:
 - a) Female
 - b) Male
3. Birthday (DD/MM/YYYY): _____
4. Year group: _____
5. Ethnicity: _____
6. Religious/spiritual belief or faith: _____
7. Native language: _____
8. Number of siblings & order (e.g. youngest, eldest, middle, only child):

9. Does your child have regular contact with both guardians/parents? (Please circle one)
 - a) Yes
 - b) No

The following section is about you and your co-parent:

10. Your age: _____
11. Your co-parent's age: _____
12. Please circle one for your gender:
 - a. Female
 - b. Male

13. Ethnicity: _____
14. Co-parent's ethnicity: _____
15. How long have you been involved with your co-parent? _____

Please answer the following questions by circling *one* option.

16. Which best describes your current legal marital or same-sex civil partnership status?
- a) Married
 - b) In a registered same-sex civil partnership
 - c) In a relationship
 - d) In a relationship and cohabiting
 - e) Not in a relationship and cohabiting
 - f) Engaged
 - g) Casually dating
17. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? *If currently enrolled, highest degree received.*
- a) No schooling
 - b) Completed primary school
 - c) O levels / CSEs / GCSEs (any grades) or Equivalents
 - d) Vocational qualifications (NVQ, GNVQ, BTEC, Apprenticeship)
 - e) A Level/AS Levels, Secondary school Certificate, Progression/Advanced Diploma
 - f) Undergraduate Degree (for example BA, BSc)
 - g) Postgraduate degree (for example MA, PhD, PGCE)
 - h) Professional qualifications (e.g. teaching, nursing, accountancy)
 - i) Doctorate degree
 - j) Foreign qualifications
 - k) Other (please specify): _____
18. What is the highest degree or level of school your co-parent has completed? *If currently enrolled, highest degree received.*
- a) No schooling
 - b) Completed primary school
 - c) O levels / CSEs / GCSEs (any grades) or Equivalents
 - d) Vocational qualifications (NVQ, GNVQ, BTEC, Apprenticeship)
 - e) A Level/AS Levels, Secondary school Certificate, Progression/Advanced Diploma
 - f) Undergraduate Degree (for example BA, BSc)
 - g) Postgraduate degree (for example MA, PhD, PGCE)
 - h) Professional qualifications (e.g. teaching, nursing, accountancy)
 - i) Doctorate degree
 - j) Foreign qualifications
 - k) Other (please specify): _____
19. What is your current employment status?

- a) Employed for wages (full-time)
- b) Employed for wages (part-time)
- c) Self-employed or freelance
- d) Out of work for more than 1 year
- e) Out of work for less than 1 year
- f) Studying
- g) Retired
- h) Unable to work
- i) A homemaker
- j) Other (please specify) _____

20. What is your co-parent's current employment status?

- a) Employed for wages (full-time)
- b) Employed for wages (part-time)
- c) Self-employed or freelance
- d) Out of work for more than 1 year
- e) Out of work for less than 1 year
- f) Studying
- g) Retired
- h) Unable to work
- i) A homemaker
- j) Other (please specify) _____

21. What is your household income per annum?

- a) Less than £20,000
- b) £20,001-30,000
- c) £30,001-40,000
- d) £40,001-50,000
- e) £50,001-60,000
- f) £60,001-70,000
- g) £70,001-80,000
- h) £80,001-90,000
- i) £90,001-100,000
- j) More than £100,000

Appendix O: Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

P 4-17

For each item, please mark the box for Not True, Somewhat True or Certainly True. It would help us if you answered all items as best you can even if you are not absolutely certain or the item seems daft! Please give your answers on the basis of the child's behaviour over the last six months.

Child's Name

Male/Female

Date of Birth.....

	Not True	Somewhat True	Certainly True
Considerate of other people's feelings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Restless, overactive, cannot stay still for long	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Often complains of headaches, stomach-aches or sickness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Shares readily with other children (treats, toys, pencils etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Often has temper tantrums or hot tempers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Rather solitary, tends to play alone	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Generally obedient, usually does what adults request	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Many worries, often seems worried	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Helpful if someone is hurt, upset or feeling ill	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Constantly fidgeting or squirming	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Has at least one good friend	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Often fights with other children or bullies them	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Often unhappy, down-hearted or tearful	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Generally liked by other children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Easily distracted, concentration wanders	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Nervous or clingy in new situations, easily loses confidence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Kind to younger children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Often lies or cheats	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Picked on or bullied by other children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Often volunteers to help others (parents, teachers, other children)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Thinks things out before acting	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Steals from home, school or elsewhere	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gets on better with adults than with other children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Many fears, easily scared	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sees tasks through to the end, good attention span	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Do you have any other comments or concerns?

Please turn over - there are a few more questions on the other side

Overall, do you think that your child has difficulties in one or more of the following areas: emotions, concentration, behaviour or being able to get on with other people?

No	Yes- minor difficulties	Yes- definite difficulties	Yes- severe difficulties
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you have answered "Yes", please answer the following questions about these difficulties:

• How long have these difficulties been present?

Less than a month	1-5 months	6-12 months	Over a year
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

• Do the difficulties upset or distress your child?

Not at all	Only a little	Quite a lot	A great deal
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

• Do the difficulties interfere with your child's everyday life in the following areas?

	Not at all	Only a little	Quite a lot	A great deal
HOME LIFE	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
FRIENDSHIPS	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
CLASSROOM LEARNING	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
LEISURE ACTIVITIES	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

• Do the difficulties put a burden on you or the family as a whole?

Not at all	Only a little	Quite a lot	A great deal
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Signature

Date

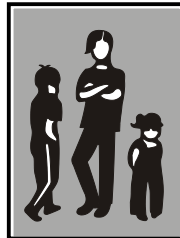
Mother/Father/Other (please specify):

Thank you very much for your help

Appendix P: Story Stem Assessment Profile (SSAP)

Protocol for Story Stem Assessment Profile (SSAP) Version A

The Anna Freud Centre/
Great Ormond Street Hospital



4 GUIDELINES FOR ADMINISTRATION

In the protocol, every time Child 1, Child 2 or Child 3 is referred to, this must be replaced with the name(s) that the child wants to use (or in some cases you decide to use at the beginning).

Child 1 = older brother/sister, protagonist

Child 2 = younger brother/sister

Child 3 = same sex friend

The prompts for each narrative should be adhered to. In some stories (Mum's Headache, Three's a Crowd), the prompts are more of an intervention in the child's narrative, and need to come as soon as he or she seems to have ignored the stem constraint. All other prompts should be used after you feel it is clear that the child has avoided or ignored the constraint. .

Children may use one or more defensive avoidance manoeuvre which you may need to confront.

- If the child fails to engage at the start, repeat/paraphrase stem
- If the child disengages before the end, attempt to bring them back in by asking them what happened

- If the child changes a constraint (e.g. the elephant is good or the mum doesn't have a headache), challenge them immediately with what really takes place in the stem
- If the child avoids dealing with the stem, then attempt to rein them back in.

All prompts must only be used once

5 GENERAL NOTES ON ADMINISTRATION

1 In terms of setting stories up, the interviewer should feel free to get the child to cooperate, especially in the stories involving more props (e.g. Bathroom shelf, spilled juice). The child should also be involved in the clearing away of props between stories.

2 The interviewer must use his/her discretion for closing a child's narratives. Where appropriate, an interviewer should ask 'is that the end of the story?' or 'does anything else happen?', but only once a story seems to have been resolved, or if the child is very stuck or distressed.

3 Non-directive prompts should be used at the interviewer's discretion for clarification. If anything seems unclear or a child is predominantly relating the story non-verbally using actions rather than words, the interviewer should ask 'what is happening here?'.

4 For transcription purposes, the interviewer should try to repeat a child's narrative as s/he tells the story, especially if the child's diction is poor. Try to repeat sentences/segments rather than short phrases or else it will interrupt the flow.

Introduction

Let me tell you a bit about what we are going to do. I am going to tell you the first bit of a story and I want you to tell me what happens next.

So, I'll start off the story and after that, it's your story and you show me and tell me what happens next.

For this story, we've got a little story about this little girl/boy, what shall we call her/him?

Here is little sister/brother, what's her/his name?

(Note: if the child has difficulty naming the children, the interviewer should give them names – Susan/George [older siblings], Jane/Bob [younger siblings])

And here's a mum and dad.

STORY 1 - Crying Outside

Characters: Child 1, Child 2, mum, dad

Props: Sofa, Side of house, TV

Layout: All 4 characters sitting on sofa

So, here is (Child 1) and s/he lived in a house with his/her mum and his/her dad, brother/sister. One day they were all sitting in their house and this little boy/girl

(Child 1) went out and she went right round the back of the house - we cannot see him/her anymore but now listen (MAKE CRYING SOUNDS).

Now, show and tell me what happens next?

Prompts

If child does say s/he is crying but does not elaborate, then say ‘what happened?’

If child does not say s/he is crying, then say ‘What’s that noise? What is happening?’

If no adult does anything in the story, then ask ‘do the mummy and daddy know s/he has gone?’

Link to next story

Now, in this next story, we need the people, but we also need the animals, so help me get the animals out. (Ask child to help set up the animals - set out animals in their groups).

STORY 2 - Stamping Elephant

Characters: Elephant, all the animals, Child 1, Child 2, mum, dad

Props: Side of house

Layout: Same as for last story with family sitting on the ground (backs to the side of the house)

The people are having a picnic in the garden and all the animals are there too. And there’s a big elephant (bring elephant onto table). The elephant sometimes gets fierce and it goes stamp, stamp, stamp (showing elephant stamping). The children and the animals get a bit scared of the elephant when it is going stamp, stamp, stamp (repeat the action).

Show me and tell me what happens now in the story?

Prompts

If the child makes the elephant good immediately, then say

- ‘I thought the elephant was fierce ’
- ‘I thought the children were scared of the elephant’.

If the child makes the elephant good later in the story, then use the same prompts above.

Link to next story

We don’t need the animals now, so would you help me put them away (put animals away in bag). In the next story, we just need the people.

STORY 3 - Picture from School

Characters: Child 1, Child 2, mum, dad

Props: Sofa, Side of House, piece of paper
Layout: Mum, dad and Child 2 sitting on sofa at home.
 Child 1 is separate (at school)

So, here's Mum and dad and Child 2 are at home and Child 1 is at school (show Child 1 separate).

And he/she was at school and s/he has made a really good drawing.

And s/he thought – 'this is a really good drawing I've made. I'm going to take this home when I get home from school'.

So, then school ended and s/he took her/his picture and went home, it was just round the corner - and s/he knocked at the door.

Show me and tell me what happens now?

Prompts

If no mention of picture, then ask 'What about his/her picture?'

If nothing happens, then ask 'Does anyone say anything about his/her picture?' 'What do they say/do?'

Link to next story

Now, for the next story, the whole family are at home. (Set up home with side of house.) They are going to be sitting in the dining room, so you can help me put the family round the table. They are going to have some juice. (Interviewer gets out table, chairs, cups and jug and together with child sets up table.)

STORY 4 - Spilled Juice

Characters: Mum, Dad, Child 1, Child 2

Props: Table, chairs, cups, jug

Layout: Four characters sitting on chairs around the table, each with a cup on the table

For this story, the family is thirsty and they are going to have some juice.

They are all sitting around the table drinking their juice when Child 1 gets up and reaches across the table (demonstrate Child 1 doing this) and 'Uh, oh, s/he spilled the juice all over the floor' (make Child 1 knock jug off table so it can be seen by the child).

Now, can you show me and tell what happens now?

Prompts

If nothing is done about the juice, ask 'what happens about Child 1 spilling the juice?' 'Who cleans up?'

Link to next story

For the next story, we don't need dad and Child 2. (Interviewer gets the child to help put the table and chairs away.)

(As the interviewer sets up the story, s/he says 'here's the couch, here's the TV, etc.')

STORY 5 - Mum's Headache

Characters: Mum, Child 1, Child 3 (same-sex friend)

Props: Couch/sofa, smaller sofa chair, television, side of house

Layout: Mum and Child 1 on sofa watching TV. Smaller chair next to sofa.
(Interviewer has Child 3 ready in hand)

For this story, mum and Child 1 are sitting on the couch watching TV

(Mum turns to Child 1.)

MUM: 'Oh, Child 1, I have such a headache! I just have to turn this TV off and go and lie down.'

So, mum gets up and turn the TV off (make a clicking noise to indicate it is off).

MUM: 'Child 1, can you find something quiet to do for a while?'

CHILD 1: 'OK, mum, I'll read a book.'

So, mum is lying down on the couch (put her there) whilst Child 1 is sitting in his/her chair (put Child 1 on chair) reading his/her book.

Then, there's a ring at the door (make a doorbell noise) and Child 1 goes to answer it (move Child 1 towards side of house) where Child 3 (friend) has appeared.

Look, it's Child 1's friend Child 3.

CHILD 3: 'Hey, Child 1, there's this really good TV show on, can I come in and watch it with you?'

Show me and tell me what happens now?

Prompts

If Child 1 does not turn on TV, Child 3 should say 'Oh come on! I know you'll really like it!'

If Child 1 does turn on TV, have mum wake up and say 'Oh! I have such a headache!'

Each prompt can be used once if necessary.

Link to next story

For the next story, we are going to be in the kitchen. (The interviewer gets the child to help set up the kitchen - table and stove etc.).

STORY 6 - Burnt Hand

Characters: Mum, Dad, Child 1, Child 2
Props: Stove, table, chairs, pan
Layout: Daddy and Child 2 at table on chairs; Mummy and Child 1 at stove/cooker (with Child 2 on left in front of cooker)

For this story, the family are in the kitchen. Now, mummy and Child 1 are at the stove (pointing at them). Mummy is making dinner for everyone. Daddy and Child 2 (pointing at them) are sitting at the table.

MUM: 'We're going to have a really good supper but it's not quite ready yet. Don't get too close to the stove.'

CHILD 1: 'Mmmmmmm, that looks good. I don't want to wait. I want some now.'

(Show Child 1 leaning over and knocking the pan off the stove onto the floor.)

CHILD 1: 'Ow! I've burnt my hand! It hurts!'

Now, can you show and tell me what happens now?

Prompts

If no mention of burnt hand, then ask 'What about his/her hand?'

If no one helps the child, ask 'what about Child 1's hand?'

If still there is no response, then say 'S/he got burnt, does anyone do anything about his/her burnt hand?'

If no mention of the food on the floor, then say, 'What happened about the spilled food?'

Link to next story

Now, we don't need the kitchen stuff so let's put that away. We just need mum, dad and Child 1.

STORY 7 - Lost Keys

Characters: Mum, Dad, Child 1
Props: None
Layout: Mum and dad facing each other. Child 1 approaching them (equidistant from both).

Child 1 comes into the room and sees Mum and Dad looking at each other like this. Look at my face (interviewer does an angry scowl).

MUM (angrily): 'You lost my keys!'

DAD (angrily): 'I did not!'

MUM: 'Yes, you did, you always lose my keys!'

DAD: 'Well, I did not lose them this time.'

Can you show and tell me what happens now?

Prompts

If child does not refer to the keys, 'What happened about the keys?'

If child does not enact end or resolution of conflict, then ask 'What is going to happen about mum and dad's argument?'

Link to next story

Now, we are going to be in the bathroom. (The interviewer set up the bathroom with the child's assistance saying 'here's the bathroom shelf, here's the basin.')

Full set of materials for Story Stems

It is critical that all characters, animals and props are roughly in scale with one another, so you would not have huge animals towering over small playmobil figures, nor would you have furniture which is either too small or large for the playmobil figures.

Characters: 1 x Mother
 1 x Father
 1 x male (neighbour)
 3 x female child
 3 x male child

- In addition to a set of white characters, it is advisable to have a set of dolls of another ethnic group (e.g. Afro-caribbean).
- Do not use the playmobile babies. The sibling and friend child characters should be the same size as one another.

Animals: Pigs (ie. including 3-4 adults and 2-3 piglets)
 Lions/Tigers (3-4 adults and 2 plus cubs)
 Camels (2 large camels, 1 small)
 Cows (3-4 large cows, 1-2 calves)
 1 x crocodile
 1 x large elephant with tusks (trunk down)

If working with orthodox Muslim or Jewish children, the interviewer may feel it necessary to replace the pigs with sheep.

Props: 1 x wooden brick (approx. 10 cm long, 5 cm wide and 2.5 cm deep) to use as side of house, garden fence or bed.

1 x sofa (larger enough for 4 family members to sit on)

1 x armchair

1 x television

1 x dining room table

4 x chairs/stool (for use with table)

1 x cooker

1 x jug *

4 x cups/beakers *

1 x frying pan

1 x football (we use a ball of blue tack)

1 x bathroom shelves/cabinet

1 x wash hand basin

1 x small piece of paper (square)

* These can be made from play dough, fimo or plasticen

Appendix Q: SSAP code categories

A Engagement codes

1. No engagement (with story task)
2. Disengagement
3. Initial aversion
4. No closure
5. Premature foreclosure
6. Changing narrative constraints
7. Avoidance within narrative frame
8. Denial/distortion of affect
9. Neutralisation/diversion anxiety

B Child representation codes

10. Child seeks help, comfort
11. Sibling/peers help, comfort
12. Realistic active mastery
13. Acknowledge child distress
14. Child endangered
15. Child injured/dead
16. Excessive compliance
17. Child parents/controls
18. Self blame

C Adult representation codes

19. Adult provides comfort
20. Adult provides help, protection
21. Adult shows affection/praise
22. Acknowledge adult distress
23. Limit setting
24. Physical punishment
25. Adults unaware
26. Adults actively reject
27. Adult injured/dead

D Child and adult representations

28. Child shows aggression
29. Adult shows aggression
30. Coherent aggression
31. Extreme aggression
32. Throwing away/out
33. Sexual material
34. Pleasurable domestic life

E Disorganisation representations

35. Catastrophic fantasy
36. Bizarre/atypical responses
37. Bad <-> good shift
38. Magic/omnipotence

Appendix R: SSAP code clusters

'Security' is made up of the following individual codes:

Child Seeks Help, Siblings/Peers Help, Realistic Active Mastery, Acknowledge Child Distress, Adult Provides help, Adult provides comfort, Adult affectionate,, Acknowledge Adult distress, Limit setting, Pleasurable representations of domestic life

'Insecurity' is is made up of the following individual codes:

Child Endangered, Child Injured/Dead, Excessive Compliance, Self Blame, Adult unaware, Adult actively rejects, Adult injured/dead, Throwing Away

'Disorganisation' is made up of the following individual codes:

No Closure, Child parents /controls, Extreme aggression, Catastrophic fantasy, Bad to good shift, Bizarre/ atypical material, Magic/omnipotence

'Defensive/Avoidance' is made up of the following individual codes:

No engagement, disengagement, initial aversion, premature foreclosure, changes narrative constraints, avoidance within narrative frame, neutralisation, denies distress

Appendix S: Parent/Guardian consent form (both groups)



Parent/Guardian Consent Form

Researcher: Donia Heider, PhD Researcher/Student

Principle Supervisor: Prof. Mary Target

Secondary Supervisor: Dr. Saul Hillman

Research Consultant: Dr. Alejandra Perez

Committee [0389/008]

This study has been approved by the UCL Research Ethics

Dear parent(s)/guardian(s),

Thank you for allowing your child to take part in this research study. The person in charge of organising the study must explain the project to you before you agree to take part. If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet provided to you or from the explanation given to you, please ask the researcher before you decide to participate. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

The **benefits** your child will gain by participating in this study may include:

- Freedom to express his/her thoughts, feelings, memories and experiences
- Recognising that others are interested in hearing his/her thoughts, feelings, memories, and experiences
- Acknowledging that others may value their experience and their story

The **risks** your child may endure by participating in this study may include:

- Distress arising due to speaking about some topics of a sensitive nature (e.g., separation, loss)

Your child's participation in this study is completely voluntary and confidential. He/she may withdraw from the study at any time at your request or their own. Even upon completion of the study, you may still choose to have their information fully discarded. All audio and video files will be password-protected and all paper files will be kept in a securely locked cabinet with access restricted only to the administrators and organisers of the study. In order to ensure your child's anonymity, real names will be changed and real names will not be attached or kept with the paper or audio/video files.

I, _____, understand that if I decide at any time during the research that I no longer want my child(s) to participate in this project, I can notify the researcher(s) involved and have him/her/them withdrawn from it immediately without prejudice or consequence. I have also received £10 per child as compensation for participation in this research study.

I, _____, consent to the processing of my child's personal information for the purpose of this research study. I understand that such information

will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998.

Parent/Guardian Statement

I _____ agree that the research project named above has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree to allow my child to take part in the study. I have read both the notes written above and the Information Sheet provided, and understand what the research study involves.

Signed: _____ **Date:**

Researcher's Statement

I _____ confirm that I have carefully explained the purpose of the study to the participant and outlined any reasonably foreseeable risks or benefits (where applicable).

Signed: _____ **Date:**

Appendix T: Assent form (non-separated group)



Participant Consent Form

Hello there! My name is Donia and I'm doing a project to learn more about you! I'd really like to spend some time making up stories with you using toys and our own words! It's up to you if you want to join in on my project, all you have to do is circle **YES or **NO** Our talk will be **PRIVATE** and if you don't want to answer any of my questions or make up any stories with me, that's okay too and you can tell me at any time if you want to **STOP** -- you don't even have to tell me why!**

If you would you like to take part in my project and you understand that you can stop whenever you like:

Please write your *NAME* here:

Date: _____

THANK YOU! 😊





Appendix U: Assent form (separated group)

Participant Consent Form

Hello there! My name is Donia and I'm doing a project to learn more about you! I'd really like to spend some time making up stories with you using toys and our own words! I'd also like to ask you a few questions about a character in a story I will describe to you. It's up to you if you want to join in on my project, all you have to do is circle **YES** or **NO** Our talk will be **PRIVATE** and if you don't want to answer any of my questions or make up any stories with me, that's okay too and you can tell me at any time if you want to **STOP** -- you don't even have to tell me why!

If you would you like to take part in my project and you understand that you can stop whenever you like:

Please write your NAME here:

Date: _____

THANK YOU! 😊



Appendix V: PDI-F Version

Revised PDI -F

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REVISED PDI-F**PARENT DEVELOPMENT INTERVIEW
REVISED**

Arietta Slade
J. Lawrence Aber
Brenda Berger
Ivan Bresgi
Merryle Kaplan

June, 2010

(November 2012 – this version for use with Parents in Conflict with permission granted)

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Revised PDI -F

PARENT DEVELOPMENT INTERVIEW REVISED for use with Parents in Conflict

The Parent Development Interview - Revised is copyrighted, and is not to be adapted, shortened, renamed, or incorporated into other interviews. If this interview is to be used in contexts where changes must be made to accommodate a given population, permission for such modifications must be obtained in writing from the authors of the instrument. In whatever context it is used, it must always be identified by its full name, and full credit be given to its authors. This interview should not be given without training. While the sections below provide guidelines for interview administration, interviews may well be uncodable if not properly administered.

READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS CAREFULLY, AND REVIEW THEM FROM TIME TO TIME ONCE YOU'VE BEGUN ADMINISTERING THE INTERVIEW

Introduction to the PDI-F

This is full length revised version of the Parent Development Interview (Aber, Slade, Berger, Bresgi, & Kaplan, 1985). There were two versions of the original interview, one for use with parents of infants, the other for use with parents of toddlers. The original interview versions, as well as this revision, are aimed at assessing parental representations of the child and of the parent-child relationship. They are not meant to be used to assess attachment classification of the adult or of the child. We have used this interview to code parental reflective function; it can also be used to assess the quality of parental representations along a range of relevant developmental/clinical dimensions. This version has been adapted for use with Parents in Conflict.

This revised version has been developed for several reasons. First, the original version was tied specifically to the infant and toddler stages of development; the current interview is less age-specific, and can be used with parents whose children range in age from infancy through early adolescence. It is important to note that if parental responses to specific age-related developmental tasks are required, then questions relevant to these domains will have to be added by individual researchers. Second, we have found in our 15-year experience with this interview that some of the questions are less useful than others in pulling for a range of responses and descriptions. Some were poorly worded, some were redundant, some rarely pulled for more than surface descriptions, etc. Therefore, this new version incorporates our experience of coding more than 500 interviews, and represents a more streamlined focused assessment of the relevant dimensions of parental representations. Finally, this revision reflects the need within our research group to create an interview that allows for the assessment of reflective functioning across a range of domains: in relation to the child, one's own parents, and the self. Up until now, these dimensions were necessarily assessed using different interviews (the PDI, the Adult Attachment Interview, and the Object Relations Inventory, for instance), which - from a research standpoint - creates redundancy and an overabundance of data.

Thus, in order to redress these difficulties and to collect the data that we felt was critical to our research examination of reflective functioning, we have revised the interview in such a way that it allows us to assess not only parental representations of the child, but a parent's capacity to reflect upon aspects of his childhood experience and his self development as well. To do this, we have adopted four of the questions from the Adult Attachment Interview (George, Kaplan, & Main, 1996); these questions are those designated by Fonagy, Target, Steele, and Steele (1998) as demand questions, and are directly tied to the assessment of reflective functioning. One question from the Working Model of the Child Interview is also included (Zeanah, Benoit, Barton, Regan, & Hirschberg, 1994), because it too pulls specifically for reflective functioning. This interview cannot be used to

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assess the quality of adult attachment representations. The classification of adult attachment requires administration and scoring of the complete AAI according to the well-established guidelines and principles developed by Mary Main, Erik Hesse, and Ruth Goldwyn.

Instructions to Interviewers

These instructions refer to the use of the PDI-R in a research setting. Obviously, if the interview is to be given in a clinical setting, the procedures will be modified somewhat, although the basic instructions should remain unchanged. Also this version is for Parents in Conflict and has been adapted with Arietta Slade's permission.

A. Before parent Arrives

It is very important that the parent knows that the interview will be conducted without the child present, so that other arrangements are made for the child. When the parent arrives, make sure all the materials are ready and that the equipment works (seems obvious, but it is surprising how often data are lost to equipment failures!).

B. Introducing the Interview

Begin by endeavoring to put the parent at ease; the tone, from the outset, should be friendly and relaxed. Describe the basic features of the interview: It is approx 1 1/2 hour in length, it has 27 questions (rather than the usual 40), covering a number of themes: parent's view of child and of their relationship with child their view of themselves as parents, their view of the emotional upheavals and joys inherent in parenting, their notion of the ways they have changed as a parent over the course of their child's life. You should also let them know that you will be asking them about some of their own childhood experiences as well.

Describe the interview in a conversational tone. The aim here is to give them an idea of the kinds of questions they will be asked, doing so in a relaxed manner. Assure them there are no "right" or "wrong" answers - that you are interested in their thoughts and feelings about what parenting is like for them. Do not go overboard here. If they seem comfortable with the kind of introduction you are providing, do not feel you have to provide more information. Remind them they are free to refuse to answer any question (although we do not expect they will want to).

After you have introduced and described the interview, ask parents if they have any questions or concerns about the interview before you get started. Be sure to encourage parents to ask any questions they wish then or during the interview if something should occur to them.

Truly pause and genuinely ask for and wait for questions from interviewee and listen for any concerns.

C. The Interview – General Comments

Begin by letting the parent know you will be asking a series of already prepared questions which have to be asked in a particular order. Let them know that you know that the nature of this format may mean that they get asked about something you will have already discussed, but that there are methodological reasons for following the same order with each parent, and you hope they will bear with any redundancies. By the same token, let them know the questions may sometimes seem irrelevant or foreign to them.

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Let them know that because the interview is a long one, there may be times when you the interviewer will feel it necessary to speed them up. This kind of warning lets them know both that if you speed up it is not for lack of interest and lets them know in a subtle way that there are limits on how long their answers can be (i.e., not to go on and on for the first few questions when there will be 35 more).

Introduce new sections. When you tell the parent about the interview at the outset, you will be indicating that the interview has a number of sections. During the interview, introduce each section with comments like "Now we're going to shift gears" or "Now we're going to turn to the next section." If you wish, you may describe in a word or two what the section is exploring, but it is probably best to stay with the general kinds of comments indicated above.

D. Administering the Interview

Ask questions as they are written, except in situations where the same probe is asked repeatedly, and you want to rephrase it slightly so that the interview sounds natural. On the questions that ask the parents to provide a memory or an example for an adjective (#A1 and #B1), you can rephrase the question so as to make sure they understand the meaning (i.e., you said your child was loving, can you think of a time that would illustrate that? Can you think of a time when she was loving?) You want to sound natural and conversational, but you do need to be consistent with the interview. So be careful when you reword that you don't change the meaning, and try to do this as little as possible. Reliability (i.e., the comparability of interviews across interviewers) depends on interviewers' adopting similar styles of interviewing, and to their adherence to the questions and probes as written. It is fine to contextualize, or to use preambles appropriate to the parent (i.e., "I know we talked about this before, but..."). These kinds of remarks help the parent get to the question while leaving the questions themselves standardized. But also do avoid sounding like a robot reading the questions!

Standard probes must be asked. In other words, if it says "Probe if necessary" you need only probe if the question has not been answered, in which case you say something like, "Tell me more about it" or "How did your child feel", etc. The areas to be probed are indicated on the interview itself. Any probe instructions that are not followed by the proviso "if necessary" must be asked.

Obviously, learn the child's name right away. The interview should be conducted in a conversational tone; you should have the interview nearly memorized, so that you are not glued to the materials and can maintain eye contact with the parent and insert comments, probes, etc., in an entirely natural manner. This is really important, because we are asking about difficult and complex issues and the parent should feel you are available and interested. This is essentially a semi-structured interview, and should be conducted in such a way as to make the parent maximally comfortable and responsive. These are difficult questions and touch upon powerful emotional issues; the more relaxed and unthreatened the parent feels, the more likely they are to be open and forthcoming.

It is very important to conduct the interview in such a way as not to interfere with the parent's particular style of responding. You need to let them know you hear them without saying too much or leading them on. For instance, some parents are very guarded and limited in their responses. It is critical not to push such individuals too much; this will make them angry and even less forthcoming. Also, if you try too hard to get them to open up, you are intervening in a way that will affect their natural patterns of responsiveness. Similarly, if a parent is vague and disorganized, it is very important to avoid the temptation to try to organize them. It is not your job to get them to make sense (which you won't be able to do anyway); it is your job to create a receptive atmosphere, so

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Revised PDI-F

that they will communicate to you as fully as they are able. Just keep in mind that your job is to hear them as they are.

The most common interviewer errors are to probe too much, or too little, either of which can make coding very difficult. Probing too much can arise for a variety of reasons, but the two most common are 1) getting enmeshed with a parent and trying to sort out a chaotic story, and 2) conducting a "clinical" interview, probing for unconscious material and the like. The first problem, enmeshment, is relatively easy to recognize because the interview goes on too long, and the interviewer finds him or herself drowning in details and continually trying to get things straight. At this point, less probing is more. The tendency of clinicians to turn the PDI into a true clinical interview also leads to too much probing. In clinical interviewing, we are working with the individual to get them to articulate diffuse, complex, and sometimes hidden meanings. We are not after "meaning" in that sense, on the PDI. Do not supply words for them, do not say things like "What I think you really mean to say is...", do not summarize "when I think about all this together I wonder whether...". Keep your clinical voice silent; this does not mean you shouldn't listen clinically, but it does mean you keep that line of thinking to yourself. You are really just trying to hear the story the way they tell it. Probes are meant to clarify the story, not reveal its other layers.

Probing too little usually occurs when a subject is herself defended and resistant in some way, and subtly puts the interviewer off. In these circumstances, the interviewer often feels like she is being intrusive, bothering the subject, and that the kindest thing she can do is finish the interview fast. You certainly don't want to bug the subject any more than you have to, but if you find yourself rushing and uncomfortable, try to slow down and stick to the interview. If it is really difficult, probe selectively. In these cases, it is better to probe generally ("can you tell me more?" than to probe feelings ("and how did that make you feel?"). Probing too little also occurs when the interviewer does not follow up simple, unelaborated answers. For instance, if a mother gives a sparse answer (which often happens when subjects are not especially comfortable with language and verbal communication), you can feel very free to ask them to tell you more, to invite them to flesh out the story. One sentence answers are very difficult, if not impossible, to code. But some subjects really need permission and encouragement to express themselves in this context, in which case you want to do the things you do with any person who is hesitant encourage them and convey your interest in questions and full non-verbal engagement. Do not hesitate, ever, to ask questions that answer questions you have about an actual life event; any unclarity you feel is going to be just as vexing to the person coding the interview. Remember to always try to read your subject and adjust yourself to their comfort level, to the extent that you get scorable and developed answers. Remember too that most parents start off slow, and that your encouragement at a slow beginning will reinforce their warming up to the task.

E. Debriefing the Parent After the Interview

After the interview is completed, again inquire if the parent has any questions about the interview or any other concerns that may have arisen during the course of the interview. Be sure to encourage the parent to raise even the slightest concern, and give them a way to reach you if they have any questions or feelings that they would like to discuss with you in the weeks after their meeting with you. This rarely happens, but sometimes parents do have very strong feelings during the course of the interview, and they should be given a way to process these feelings with you if need be.

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PARENT DEVELOPMENT INTERVIEW-REVISED

A. View of the Child.

Today we're going to be talking about you and your child. We'll begin by talking about your child and your relationship, and then a little about your own experience as a child. Let's start off by your telling me a little bit about your family - who lives in your family? How many children do you have? What are their ages? (Here you want to know how many children, ages, including those living outside the home, parents, other adults living in home. Include some detail of the divorce, residency of the children, contact arrangements, multiple moves etc. If atypical rearing situation (foster care) history of foster placements, who have been primary caregivers, etc. Get some of the detail of that just to create a context for understanding the interview.)

1. I'd like to begin by getting a sense of the kind of person your child is...so, could you get us started by choosing 3 adjectives that describe your child. (Pause while they list the adjectives.) Now let's go back over each adjective. Does an incident or memory come to mind with respect to ____? (Go through and get a specific memory for each adjective.)
2. In an average week, what would you describe as his/her favorite things to do, his/her favorite times?
3. And the times or things he has most trouble with?
4. What do you like most about your child?
5. What do you like least about your child?

B. View of the Relationship

1. I'd like you to choose 3 adjectives that you feel reflect the relationship between you and your child. (Pause while they list adjectives.) Now, let's go back over each adjective. Does an incident or memory come to mind with respect to ____? (Go through and get a specific memory for each adjective.)
2. In the last few times you have seen your child, can you describe a time when you and your child felt really connected? (Probe if necessary: Can you tell me more about the incident? How did you feel? How do you think your child felt?)
3. Now, describe a time in the last few occasions you have seen each other when you and your child did not feel really connected. (Probe if necessary: Can you tell me more about that incident? How did you feel? How do you think your child felt?)
4. Do you think your relationship with your child is affecting his/her development or personality? (If say Yes but doesn't elaborate ask in what ways? If say No, ask what do you think is affecting your child's development or personality?)
5. Do you think your relationship with your child's other parent is affecting your child's development or personality? (If says Yes but doesn't elaborate, ask in what ways? If says No, ask what do you think is affecting your child's development or personality?)

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C. Affective Experience of Parenting

1. What gives you the most joy in being a parent?
2. What gives you the most pain or difficulty in being a parent?
3. When you worry about your child, what do you find yourself worrying most about?
4. Tell me about a time recently when you felt really angry as a parent. (Probe, if necessary: Can you tell me a little bit more about the situation?)
 - a. What kind of effect do these feelings have on your child?
5. Tell me about a time recently when you felt really guilty as a parent. (Probe, if necessary: Can you tell me a little bit more about that situation?) Why do you think that it made you feel guilty?)
 - a. What kind of effect do these feelings have on your child?
6. Tell me about a time recently when you felt you really needed someone to take care of you. (Probe, if necessary: What kinds of situations make you feel this way? How do you handle your needy feelings?)
 - a. What kind of effect do these feelings have on your child?
7. When your child is upset, what does he/she do? How does that make you feel? What do you do?
8. Do you think your child ever feels rejected?

D. Parent's Family History

Now I'd like to ask you a few questions about your own parents, and about how your childhood experiences might have affected your feelings about parenting.....

1. How do you think your experiences being parented affect your experience of being a parent now?
2. How do you want to be like and unlike your mother as a parent?
3. How about your father?
4. How are you like and unlike your mother as a parent?
5. How about your father?

E. Separation/Loss

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1. Now, I'd like you to think of a time when you and your child were separated. Can you describe that to me? How do you think it affected your child? What kind of effect did it have on you? Note: If the parent describes something other than a recent (i.e. within one year) separation, repeat the question asking for a more recent.
2. Has there ever been a time in your child's life where you felt as if you were losing him/her just a little bit? What did that feel like for you?
3. Do you think there are experiences in your child's life that you feel have been a setback for him/her?

F. Looking Behind, Looking Ahead

1. Your child is X years old already now. If you had the experience to do it all over again, what would you change? What wouldn't you change?

Anything else you would like to add? Thank you very much.

Appendix W: Online Focus Group (OFG) participant information sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

This project is being conducted by PhD researcher Donia Heider, under the supervision of Prof. Mary Target, Dr. Saul Hillman, and Dr. Alejandra Perez.

Aims of the Project

This study aims to explore primary-school teachers' views about how children experience divorce/separation.

Through acquiring this knowledge, a clearer picture of the primary-school age child's inner world and experience with regards to divorce/separation may be achieved. This knowledge can further inform how support is offered within the school system; it may also help inform support offered at home.

Why is this study taking place?

The study is being conducted as a part of a PhD level thesis project. Its purpose is to allow a student to submit an original piece of empirical research. This project will also assist educators, counsellors, researchers, and parents/guardians in gaining a better understanding of childhood experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

What will be involved?

The estimated time involved in participation in this study for each participant is roughly 45-60 minutes. This time slot will involve an online group discussion, also known as an 'Online Focus Group', between primary-school teachers who have had some experience of teaching and being around children of divorce/separation within their classroom. The primary researcher will facilitate this discussion and will present the group with a set of questions relevant to the research aims. Throughout the online discussion, teachers will be asked to speak freely amongst one another while attempting to answer the discussion points presented to them by the primary researcher. The session will be a forum-based discussion. This would take place in the comfort of your home by logging onto the forum from your own computer, at a pre-agreed upon time for all participants. The online discussion transcript will then be downloaded onto the researcher's computer and will be kept safe in a password-protected file, with all original names kept separate; the transcript will be destroyed after two years. All participants will have unique usernames assigned to them to maintain anonymity during the online discussion.

What are we asking you to do?

If you have any questions or simply require more information regarding this study, you are invited to contact the primary researcher or any of the supervisors through the contact methods listed below. Following this, if you would like to participate in this study, we would like you to contact us via email or telephone to let us know you would like to participate. We will then set a date to meet, at which time, you will be

provided with a consent form to sign and date and return to us. The study protocol will take place at a pre-determined time and date convenient for all teachers involved.

Who will carry out the focus group?

The primary researcher, Donia Heider, will be carrying out the study protocol.

Who will have access to the information you provide?

The supervisors listed above and the primary researcher will have access to the information you provide but this will be kept on password-protected audio/video files and once transcribed and analysed, paper copies will be placed in a securely locked cabinet. If any relevant parties (e.g., schools) request access to the data, or if you wish to be provided with a summary of the findings, all participants in the group will be notified and permission by the group must be granted to do so. Participant name(s) will be changed and real names will be kept separate from the data files to ensure anonymity.

What do you do if you change your mind?

You are free at any point, before, during, or after the study to withdraw participation with absolutely no prejudice or consequences. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you may change your mind at any time. In addition, after the focus group is complete and the data is collected, you are still able to request that your information not be used in our study.

Will there be any feedback about the findings?

At your request, we can provide you with feedback on our findings and the conclusions drawn from the study upon its completion.

Where will the study take place?

The online focus group will involve logging into a forum platform from your own computer at any location you choose. This would occur at a pre-assigned time and date convenient for all participants involved.

Who do you speak to if a problem arises?

If you do not feel comfortable discussing a problem or issue with the researcher, or should any difficulties arise as a result of your involvement in this study, you are encouraged to contact Dr. Saul Hillman at the Anna Freud Centre (contact details below).

Who are the people involved with this project?

Researcher: Donia Heider (PhD Researcher)

Location: UCL & the Anna Freud Centre

Contact Details [REDACTED]

Principle Supervisor: Prof. Mary Target

Occupation: Psychoanalyst and clinical psychologist, Professor of Psychoanalysis at UCL, Director of the Psychoanalysis Unit, and Director of the MSc in Theoretical Psychoanalytic Studies and the Doctorate in Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy

Location: University College London (UCL)

Contact Details: [REDACTED]

Secondary Supervisor: Dr. Saul Hillman

Occupation: Therapist, researcher, and supervisor

Location: The Anna Freud Centre

Contact Details: [REDACTED]

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet, we look forward to hearing from you soon to answer any further questions you may have.

Appendix X: Instructional email for the OFG

Dear Sir/Madam,

Thank you for your email! We are going to go ahead with (date/time).

So this is how it will work:

1. You will receive an invitation from me by (specified time) on (specified date) asking you to follow a link to the virtual chat room. (It can go to your Junk/Spam folder so please check there if you cannot find it in your inbox at that time)

2. When you click on the link, a window will open where you're asked to create an "alias"; please enter the name: (assigned alias) –this maintains anonymity and confidentiality in the group

4. You will now be in the chat room and be able to send messages to all of us. I will start the group off with some questions and you can speak freely and openly with all members in the group.

5. There is a consent form attached to this email please either print/sign/scan and email back to me or use an online signature, or if you cannot do either of those options, simply type your information right onto the sheet and email back! Thank you!

If you have any questions please don't hesitate to ask me! Just in case you would like to text/iMessage me for any reason my number is (primary researcher's mobile number). I look forward to chatting with you!

Appendix Y: OFG participant consent form



Participant Consent Form

Researcher: Donia Heider, PhD Researcher/Student

Principle Supervisor: Prof. Mary Target

Secondary Supervisor: Dr. Saul Hillman

Research Consultant: Dr. Alejandra Perez

This study has been approved by the UCL Research Ethics Committee [0389/008]

Dear Participant,

Thank you for taking the time to take part in this research study. The person in charge of organising the study must explain the project to you before you agree to take part. If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet provided to you or from the explanation given to you, please ask the researcher before you decide to participate. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

The **benefits** you will gain by participating in this study may include:

- Freedom to express your thoughts, feelings, memories, and experiences
- Recognising that others are interested in hearing your thoughts, feelings, memories, and experiences
- Acknowledging that others may value your experience and your story
- Contributing to knowledge, support, and research on a sensitive, yet crucial, topic affecting countless primary-school children in the UK and the world

The **risks** you may endure by participating in this study may include:

- Distress arising due to speaking about some topics of a sensitive nature (e.g., separation)

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and confidential. You may withdraw from the study at any time at your request. Even upon completion of the study, you may still choose to have your information fully discarded. All audio and video files will be password-protected and all paper files will be kept in a securely locked cabinet with access restricted only to the administrators and organisers of the study. In order to ensure your anonymity, real names will be changed and real names will not be attached or kept with the paper or audio/video files.

I, _____, understand that if I decide at any time during the research that I no longer want to participate in this project, I can notify the researcher(s) involved and be withdrawn from it immediately without prejudice or consequence.

I, _____, consent to the processing of my personal information for the purpose of this research study. I understand that such information

will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998.

Parent/Guardian Statement

I _____ agree that the research project named above has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree to take part in the study. I have read both the notes written above and the Information Sheet provided, and understand what the research study involves.

Signed: _____ **Date:** _____

Researcher's Statement

I _____ confirm that I have carefully explained the purpose of the study to the participant and outlined any reasonably foreseeable risks or benefits (where applicable).

Signed: _____ **Date:** _____

Appendix Z: OFG introduction and ground rules

Hey everyone, thanks for volunteering to be a part of this focus group! Just a few ground rules for the purposes of the discussion and in order to ensure it flows as smoothly as possible: (1) Please don't share anything we discuss here today with anyone outside the chat room (this is to maintain the confidentiality of the group) (2) Please do not say your real name in the group; we will refer to each other using our usernames (this is to ensure anonymity of the group) (3) Everyone will get a chance to join the discussion and before moving on to the next question, I will ask if everyone is ready to move on or if anyone has anything else they'd like to say (4) Lastly, please remember this is an informal group discussion so the conversation can flow openly and freely between all of you and myself; you can step in at any time if you have something you would like to say or debate with someone else in the group; however, everyone should be heard and treated with respect within the group discussion. The discussion will take approximately 45 minutes.

You are free to leave the chat room at any time as your time here is completely voluntary. You are able to withdraw at any time without consequence or prejudice. You are also able to withdraw from the study even after this group chat here today. If this all sounds okay with you please say "yes" and we can begin.

Appendix AA: Researcher's introduction in the OFG

Great thanks everyone, it's a pleasure to "meet" you! My name is _____ and I'm a Canadian third year PhD student at UCL in London, UK, studying the effects of divorce/separation on children. You are here today because you have known a child (or more) from a divorced/separated family within your school/classroom environment. Teachers play a major role in children's lives during the primary school years and are around them for long periods of the day. Thus, it is crucial to understand how the experience of divorce/separation in these young children is thought about/perceived by yourselves. This is the purpose of this group discussion and the questions will revolve around this topic. Please feel free to answer each question as thoroughly as you can and as openly/freely as you feel best fits. I am very interested in your thoughts, feelings, and views on this topic and would love to hear everything you have to say about it. Does anyone have any questions about this?

Appendix AB: OFG Interview schedule

1. During your role as a teacher, what have you thought and/or felt about the experiences of children from divorced/separated families? (**Probe: Probe: Can you give any examples from your past experiences? Follow with: Do you tend to notice/know if a child is going through a parental separation/divorce? If so, how?**)
2. What do you see as the emotional/psychological state of children from divorced/separated families? (**Follow with: How about in comparison with other children their age? How much do they differ amongst themselves? If there are a lot of differences, what do you think accounts for them?**)
3. Do you think the divorce/separation is experienced as a loss by the child? (**Follow with: If yes, how? If no, why not? Do you think this may differ between children? How so?**)
4. What may be the greatest challenge for children in such a situation? (**Probe: Can you say a little more?**)
5. How do children of divorce/separation interact with you in comparison to children who have not experienced it? How about with other children? (**probe: Are there any differences, similarities, if so how?**)
6. Have you felt that children of divorce/separation require different/more support from yourselves than those who have not? (*This question can open up to why they may have needed support, why they think they may have not needed it, etc.*)
7. If you could say anything to separating/divorcing parents about their child's experience, what would you say?
8. Are there any factors seem to help or hinder a child accepting and adjusting to separation? (**Probe: Can you say a little more?**)
9. During your journey to becoming a primary-school teacher or during your current or past jobs at primary schools, have you ever received specific training/guidance on how to support children of divorce?

Appendix AC: Skewness Statistics

SDQ Subscale (Non-separated sample)	Skewness
SDQ Emotional symptoms	.72
SDQ Conduct Disorder	.41
SDQ Hyperactivity	.47
SDQ Peer Problems	2.5
SDQ Prosocial	-1.49
SDQ Total Behavioural Problems	1.19
SDQ Impact	2.72

SDQ Subscale (Separated sample)	Skewness
SDQ Emotional Symptoms	1.13
SDQ Conduct Disorder	2.23
SDQ Hyperactivity	.44
SDQ Peer Problems	.92
SDQ Prosocial	-1.27
SDQ Total Behavioural Problems	.85
SDQ Impact	-1.90

SSAP Construct (Non-separated sample)	Skewness
Security	0.47
Disorganised	1.81
Defensive/Avoidance	1.33

SSAP Construct (Separated sample)	Skewness
Security	0.22
Disorganised	1.03
Defensive/Avoidance	0.36

DMH and Lost Keys constructs (Separated sample)	Skewness
--	-----------------

Security (Lost Keys)	1.34
Disorganised (Lost Keys)	0.53
Defensive/Avoidance (Lost Keys)	0.37
Security (DMH)	1.26
Disorganised (DMH)	1.96
Defensive/Avoidance (DMH)	0.69

DMH and Lost Keys constructs (Non-separated sample)	Skewness
Security (Lost Keys)	1.39
Disorganised (Lost Keys)	0.70
Defensive/Avoidance (Lost Keys)	1.14
Security (DMH)	1.16
Disorganised (DMH)	2.23
Defensive/Avoidance (DMH)	0.47

Appendix AD: Chapter 3 demographic and divorce-related variables

1. 'Age' and the SSAP

Descriptive statistics for SSAP constructs by each age (in years), separated by sample group.

SSAP construct	Age (in years)	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median
<i>Non-separated group</i>					
Security	6	15	1.50	1	1.29
	7	6	2.48	.87	2.16
	8	8	2.36	.80	2.43
	9	5	1.83	.91	2
	10	4	3.21	1.65	3.29
	11	1	4.57	.	4.57
Disorganised	6	15	1.03	1.01	0.71
	7	6	1.16	0.59	1.22
	8	8	0.63	0.71	.43
	9	5	2.57	1.74	2.14
	10	4	0.32	0.41	0.22
	11	1	0.29	.	0.29
Defensive/Avoidance	6	15	0.98	0.63	.86
	7	6	0.87	0.75	0.47
	8	8	0.54	0.32	0.50
	9	5	0.72	0.48	0.43
	10	4	0.57	0.42	0.58
	11	1	0.43	.	0.43

<i>Separated group</i>					
Security	6	9	0.79	0.79	0.67
	7	5	1.46	0.67	1.43
	8	7	2.00	1.39	2.43
	9	3	2.19	0.58	1.86
	10	5	2.91	0.83	3.00
Disorganised	6	9	1.46	1.19	1.43
	7	5	0.63	0.85	0.29
	8	7	1.22	1.05	1.14
	9	3	1.86	1.55	1.43
	10	5	0.6	0.48	0.57
Defensive/Avoidance	6	9	1.77	0.58	1.57
	7	5	1.11	0.45	1.00
	8	7	1.12	0.38	1.14
	9	3	1.19	0.93	1.14
	10	5	0.69	0.53	0.57

2. 'Gender' and the SSAP

Descriptive statistics for SSAP constructs by each gender, separated by sample group.

SSAP construct	Gender	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median	Mean Rank
<i>Non-separated group</i>						
Security	Boys	21	1.70	.90	1.86	16.21
	Girls	18	2.62	1.28	2.86	24.42
Disorganised	Boys	21	1.19	1	1.14	21.90
	Girls	18	.93	1.27	.57	17.78
Defensive/Avoidance	Boys	21	.84	.55	.57	22.14
	Girls	18	.71	.59	.43	17.50
<i>Separated group</i>						
Security	Boys	18	1.43	1.15	1.22	12.81
	Girls	11	2.17	1.09	1.86	18.59
Disorganised	Boys	18	1.29	1.12	1.43	16
	Girls	11	.94	.98	.57	13.36
Defensive/Avoidance	Boys	18	1.40	.58	1.14	16.36
	Girls	11	1.05	.71	1.14	12.77

Mann-Whitney U tests computed to assess significant differences between boys and girls from non-separated families on SSAP constructs.

	Security	Disorganised	Defensive/Avoidance
<i>U</i>	109.5	149	144
<i>Z</i>	-2.24	-1.13	-1.289
Sig. (2-tailed)	.025	.258	.197

Mann-Whitney U tests computed to assess significant differences between boys and girls from separated families on SSAP constructs.

	Security	Disorganised	Defensive/Avoidance
<i>U</i>	.14 59.5	81	74.5
<i>Z</i>	-1.78	-.82	-1.11
Sig. (2-tailed)	.075	.414	.269

3. 'Length of time since divorce' and SSAP constructs (descriptive statistics)

Descriptive statistics for SSAP constructs based on 'length of time since the separation' in years (N = 29).

Length of time since divorce (in years)	<i>n</i>		Security	Disorganised	Defensive/Avoidance
.33	2	Mean	2.07	1.50	.86
		<i>SD</i>	1.51	.51	.61
		Median	2.07	1.50	.86
.50	3	Mean	1.95	1.01	1.38
		<i>SD</i>	1.57	1.65	.30
		Median	2.71	.29	1.30
.58	2	Mean	2.72	.65	.36
		<i>SD</i>	1.82	.50	.50
		Median	2.72	.65	.36
.58	2	Mean	.34	2.93	2.47
		<i>SD</i>	.47	1.32	.05
		Median	.34	2.93	2.47
1	2	Mean	2.93	.72	.93
		<i>SD</i>	.01	.60	.30
		Median	2.93	.72	.93
1.50	4	Mean	2	.96	1.29

		<i>SD</i>	1.61	.96	.78
		Median	2.07	1	1
1.83	1	Mean	.71	.14	1.86
		<i>SD</i>	.	.	.
		Median	.71	.14	1.86
2	3	Mean	1.19	1.14	1.05
		<i>SD</i>	1.50	.50	.66
		Median	.71	1.43	1.43
2.50	1	Mean	.71	<.01	1.57
		<i>SD</i>	.	.	.
		Median	.71	<.01	1.57
2.66	1	Mean	2.14	.29	1.43
		<i>SD</i>	.	.	.
		Median	2.14	.29	1.43
2.83	1	Mean	1.71	.60	.57
		<i>SD</i>	.	.	.
		Median	1.71	.60	.57
3	4	Mean	1.14	1.90	1.54
		<i>SD</i>	.54	1.40	.63
		Median	1.07	1.80	1.57
3.17	1	Mean	1.86	2	1
		<i>SD</i>	.	.	.
		Median	1.86	2	1
4.83	2	Mean	2.15	.43	1.07
		<i>SD</i>	.40	.20	.01
		Median	2.1450	.43	1.07

4. 'Contact with father' and SSAP constructs (Descriptive statistics)

Descriptive statistics for SSAP constructs based on 'contact with father' (N = 27).

Contact with father		Security	Disorganised	Defensive/Avoidance
Between 3 days a week and everyday (<i>n</i> = 7)	Mean	1.61	1.23	1.54
	<i>SD</i>	.98	1.30	.80
	Median	1.71	.57	1.14
	Mean Rank	13.29	14.43	16.29

One to two times a week ($n = 13$)	Mean	1.54	1.10	1.21
	<i>SD</i>	1.20	.92	.53
	Median	1	1.14	1.29
	Mean Rank	13.35	13.81	13.81
<hr/>				
Special occasions, once a month, and less than once a month ($n = 7$)	Mean	2.08	1.14	1.10
	<i>SD</i>	1.51	1.31	.77
	Median	2.14	.57	1
	Mean Rank	15.93	13.93	12.07
<hr/>				