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A bio-ecological interpretation of the relationship challenges in the context of the reconstituted family

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From an educational psychology perspective, family life – as a child's primary educational situation – is changing drastically as divorces increase worldwide. Various challenges to relationships accompany the restructuring of family systems after divorce. When remarriage occurs, children's shared membership of two family microsystems and the resultant complexity of the mesosystem cause the reconstituted family situation to come to differ radically from that of a nuclear family. The purpose of this article is to extend Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model in order to construct a deeper understanding of the relationship challenges in the context of the reconstituted family, specifically noting the importance of effective parenting at mesosystemic level. Data from two separate qualitative studies was interpreted, based on Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model, to form an integrated understanding of the complexity and influence of the mesosystem. The findings indicate that sound proximal interactive processes in the primary and secondary family microsystems depend on an effective mesosystem, and hence, on at least a functionally co-operative relationship between the biological parents after a divorce. Since the biological parents primarily control the effectiveness of the mesosystem, Bronfenbrenner's extended bio-ecological model can be fruitfully applied in all professions dealing with the contextual relationship challenges of reconstituted families.

Keywords: bio-ecological; divorce; divorced parent(s); reconstituted family

Introduction

Divorce constitutes a potentially destructive and devastating reality in society. Parents as well as their children generally find the experience of divorce overwhelming and traumatic (Peters & Ehrenberg, 2008). They feel the loss of relationships, dreams, opportunities and family members, as well as experiencing a drastic change in their place of residence, family identity and the routine of everyday life typical of an established family. Numerous children contending with such losses present with problems that affect their optimal development (Dunn, O'Connor & Cheng, 2005). The failure of professionals, as well as the immediate environment, to address their needs effectively, could impact on their social and career functioning in the long term.

Divorce frequently has a radical influence on the parents' relationship with each other. Many divorced parents have negative feelings towards their former spouse for a long time after the divorce, and feelings of bitterness and anger may persist in spite of remarriage (Fischer, De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2005). The research of Amato and Afifi (2006) shows that conflict between parents, before as well as after divorce, increases the risk of a variety of emotional and behavioural problems in children: if children feel trapped in continuous conflict between their parents, this leaves them with feelings of divided loyalties; since they would like to maintain a good relationship with both parents, they are inclined to act as intermediaries, but then again, they fear that a parent may interpret their intervention as disloyalty, which intensifies the feelings of being torn in two.

Divorced parents who have married new partners often have a lack of insight into the unique nature and composition of their constituted family (RF) as a unique type of family. Consequently, they may use the model of the nuclear family when establishing their RF (Sweeney, 2010). Though the parent may often feel excited about remarrying, many children seem to experience a remarriage as a personal threat, and are unwilling participants in the new RF. To the children, remarriage means an immediate expansion of their family with step-parents, step-grandparents, step-brothers and/or step-sisters, and perhaps eventually half-brothers and/or half-sisters. Children may also feel the loss of their single parent with whom they had forged a special bond, and feel jealous of the step-parent, who has come to take over their special place (Stoll, Arnaut, Fromme & Felker-Thayer, 2005). They often have fantasies about reconciliation between the biological parents, even after the new RF has been formed (Bigner, 1998). Dysfunctional family relationships are often fed by the antagonistic attitude of two step-family members towards one another (Baxter, Braithwaite & Bryant, 2006). Golish (2003) postulates that the children as well as the adults in the RF have feelings of being trapped between family members, for example if the step-parent or step-child discusses problems with the biological parent instead of resolving the problems directly among themselves.

The search for knowledge and a deeper understanding of the relationship dynamics in the RF has become an active field of research in the past decade, for example concerning parent-child relationships (King, 2007), joint parenting (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004), optimal communication in the RF (Halford, Nicholson & Sanders, 2007), aspects of conflict resolution in the unique context of the RF (Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007), and support for the resilience and utilisation of resilience among adolescents in the context of divorce and RFs (Theron & Dunn, 2010). Despite an increase in knowledge about the optimal functioning of RFs, gaps still occur, especially

when examining, from the perspective of a coherent theory, the complexity of relationship dynamics and optimal development. Sweeney (2010) believes that more qualitative research is required about the experiences, perceptions and reflections of each member of the RF so that this unique family unit can be optimally supported by way of parental counselling.

Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Model

An understanding of the complexity of the influences, interactions and interpersonal relationships in RFs that affect the dynamics of relationships and consequently children's optimal development, can be grounded in Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2001). This multidimensional systemic model of human development is based on the tenet that there are systems at different levels, namely as micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chronosystems. These systemic levels interact continuously with one another and contribute to the young individual's change, growth and development. What happens in one system or at one systemic level influences and is influenced by the other systems and systemic levels. The child's perception of the systemic environment is central to the child's interaction with his/her systemic environment, and therefore it guides or influences the child's conduct towards other people as members of the systemic environment (Swart & Pettipher, 2011).

To ensure the child's optimal development, all the participants in the respective systems ought to pursue effective patterns of interaction, called *proximal processes*, in Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model. To support development, the proximal processes have to be repetitive, face-to-face interactions of an increasingly complex nature, and should take place on a regular basis over an extensive period of time (Bronfenbrenner, 2001). The child's optimal development in the RF therefore depends on the quality and also the quantity of the proximal processes in both family microsystems. Since children are active participants in their own development and are not merely at the mercy of their own systemic environment or circumstances, the child's unique personal characteristics influence the proximal processes, and in this way, also his/her development. Personal characteristics include all behavioural intentions which elicit, encourage or discourage a response from other people, for example temperament, personality, attitude and particular needs (Bronfenbrenner, 2001). The personal characteristics of all the participants in the various microsystems therefore have a direct effect on one another. An examination of the unique relationship and interaction between the child and his/her systemic environment requires taking three types of personal characteristics into account, namely disposition, ecological resources and demand characteristics (Swart & Pettipher, 2011). Figure 1 represents the family microsystem of the nuclear family which is established when two adults enter into a first marriage. Apart from the microsystems of the school and peer group, the child's development takes place inside only one family microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

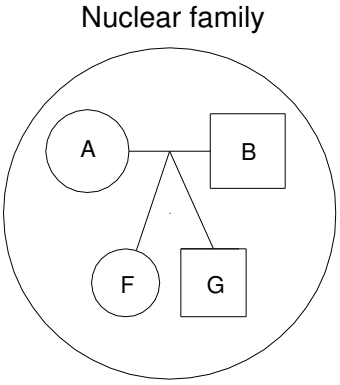

Figure 1 The nuclear family microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, according to Ebersohn, 2011)

We would argue however that Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model seems unable to provide for a fundamental understanding of the relationship dynamics in the context where the nuclear family was fragmented by divorce and a new family has been formed through remarriage (Ebersohn, 2006, 2011). Research (Ebersohn, 2006) has shown that the reconstitution of the family after divorce implies that – unlike in a nuclear family – the child's development, apart from microsystems including the school and peer group, now takes place in *two* family microsystems instead of one. Hence, interaction and reciprocal influencing occur in a more complex manner in the uniqueness of the RF(s), where the child is a full member of *two family microsystems.* Figure 2 illustrates a RF in accordance with Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model, as adapted by Ebersohn (2006).

Figure 2 indicates that the child's development takes place firstly in the family microsystem of the child and his/her biological parent (usually the mother) with whom the child resides permanently and who has parental rights and responsibilities (Republic of South Africa, 2005) in respect of the child. This family microsystem is called the child's *primary family microsystem*. Secondly, the child's development takes place in the family micro-system of the other biological parent (usually the father), who has joint parental responsibilities and rights over the child, but whom the child visits only periodically. This family microsystem is called the child's *secondary family microsystem*. The child is a full member of both

family systems. The initial family microsystem, into which the child was born, is portrayed in Figure 2 as a circle with broken lines: although the family microsystem broke down as a result of the parents' divorce, its continued influence on the child's development cannot be ignored or denied. The dotted lines in the primary and secondary family microsystems symbolise openness to interaction at mesosystemic level (ideally, of both family microsystems), which allows (or ought to allow) the child to move to and fro between them without tension.

Building on the extended framework explained above, Ebersohn (2011) in further research found evidence of exceptional complexity in the mesosystem, as well as the decisive influence of effective parenting at the mesosystemic level of RFs. As an orientation to the relationship dynamics in the context of RFs after divorce, the complexity of the relationships in, and the unique challenges of, the child's two family microsystems are explained schematically below. Then the methods and findings of the studies referred to (Ebersohn, 2006, 2011) are set out briefly, and discussed as a contribution of pivotal importance to the theory and praxis of counselling concerning the relationship dynamics of the RF after divorce.

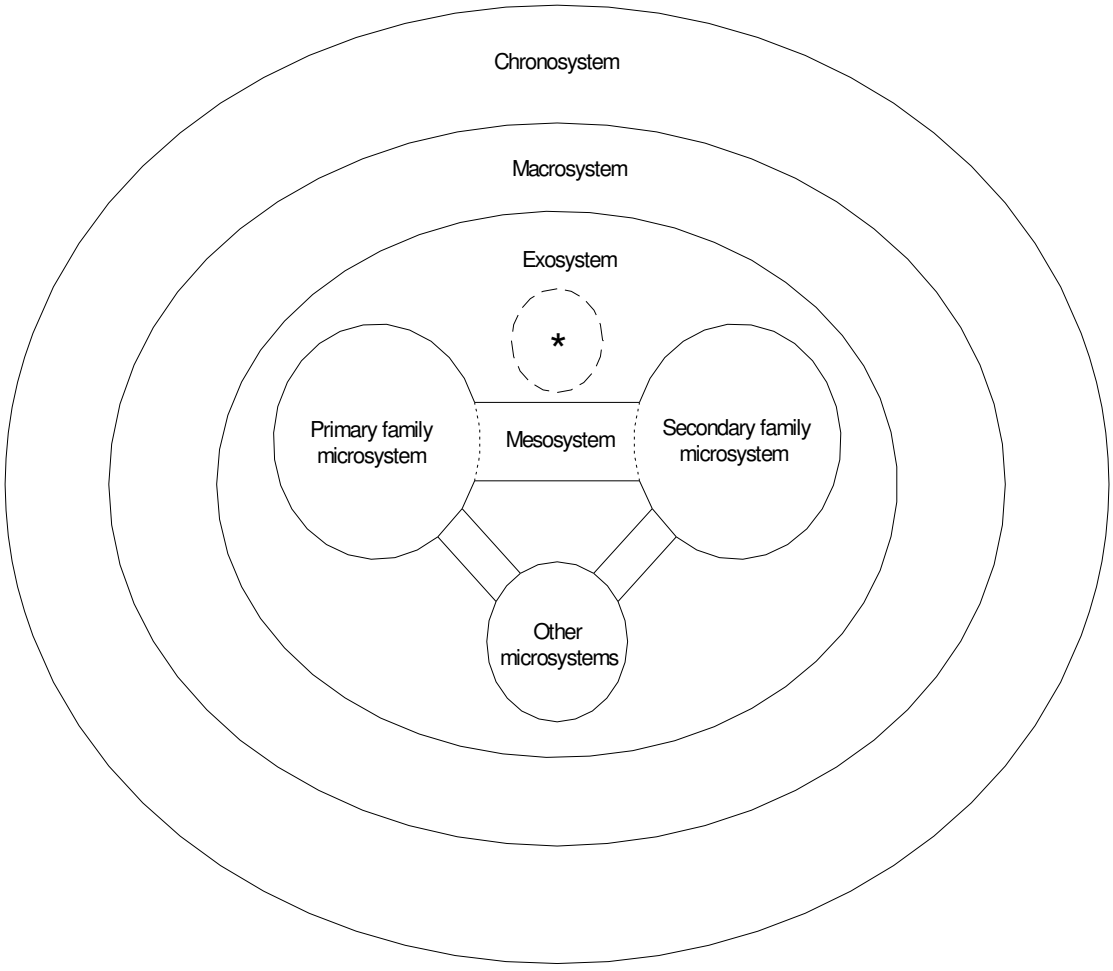

Figure 2 The bio-ecological model of a reconstituted family (Ebersohn, 2006)

Reconstitution of a Family after Divorce

Unlike the nuclear family, the RF is built on a complex foundation and the family members are linked by ties of the past and also of the present (Ebersohn & Bouwer, 2013). When, after her divorce, former Spouse A marries a new spouse C, but former Spouse B does not remarry, the child's developmental context will change as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 shows that the children F and G, of former Spouses A and B, develop in the primary family microsystem of Mother A's RF (the children's permanent place of residence), and have acquired a stepfather C, and step-siblings H and I

(indicated by broken lines, since they are visiting children). Children F and G also develop in the secondary family microsystem of the single-parent family of Father B, who has equal rights and responsibilities for his children (indicated here by broken lines since they are visiting children). Former Spouse B pays maintenance for his children's care and they visit him during weekends and holidays. The dotted lines in the two family microsystems symbolise the openness to interaction at mesosystemic level (ideally, from both family microsystems), which allows (or ought to allow) Children F and G to move to and fro between the family systems without tension. Spouse C's children, H and I, often come to visit during weekends and holidays. Spouse C (stepfather) acts towards Children F and G as a caregiver and authority figure in the primary family microsystem, but without any legal power.

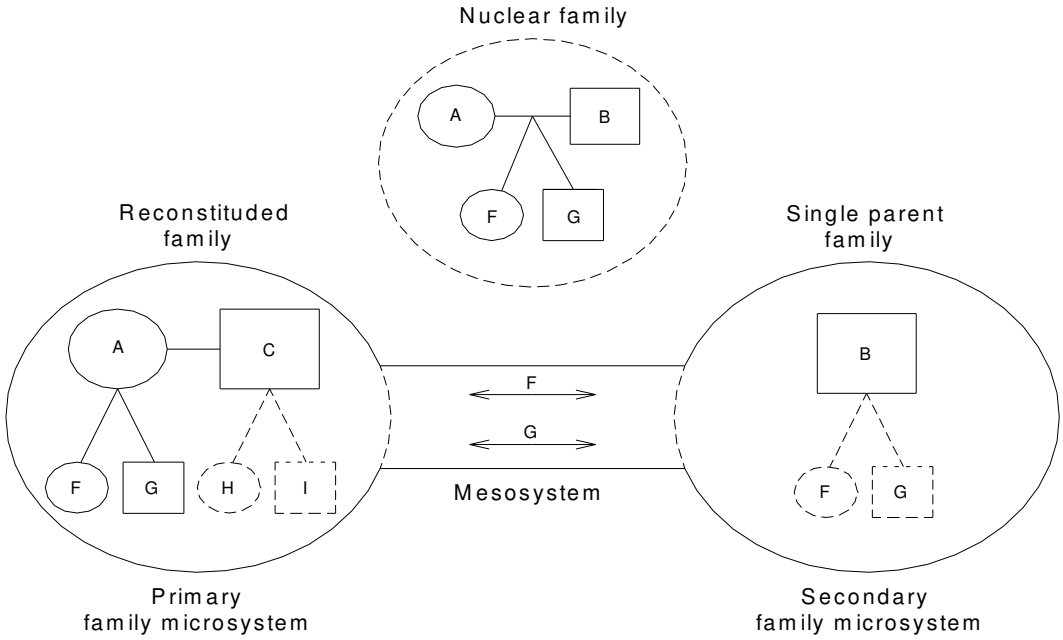

Figure 3 The primary and secondary family microsystems of the children of divorced Spouses A and B, where only Spouse A remarried (Ebersohn, 2011)

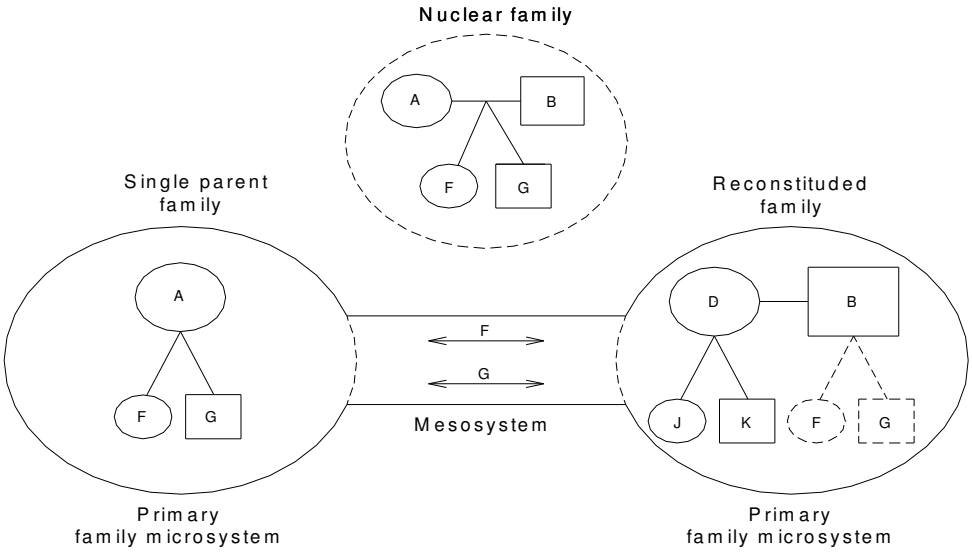

Figure 4 The primary and secondary family microsystems of the children of divorced Spouses A en B, where only Spouse B remarried (Ebersohn, 2011)

When former Spouse B marries a new spouse D after the divorce, but former Spouse A does not remarry, the developmental context of the children will be as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4 indicates that the children, F and G, of former Spouses A and B develop in the primary family microsystem of the single-parent family of Mother A (the children's permanent place of residence) as well as in the secondary family microsystem (indicated by broken lines, as visiting children) of Father B's RF and they have acquired a stepmother D and step-siblings, J and K. Spouse D's children, J and K, live permanently with their biological mother, and visit their biological father during weekends and holidays. Former Spouse B (who has equal parental rights and responsibilities for his children) pays maintenance for his children's care and they visit him during weekends and holidays. Children F and G therefore move to and fro between their two family microsystems by way of the interaction between the family microsystems at mesosystemic level. Spouse D (stepmother) acts towards children F and G as a caregiver and authority figure, but without any legal power.

When former Spouses A and B both remarry, the children's family microsystems contain various new patterns of interaction, as represented in Figure 5.

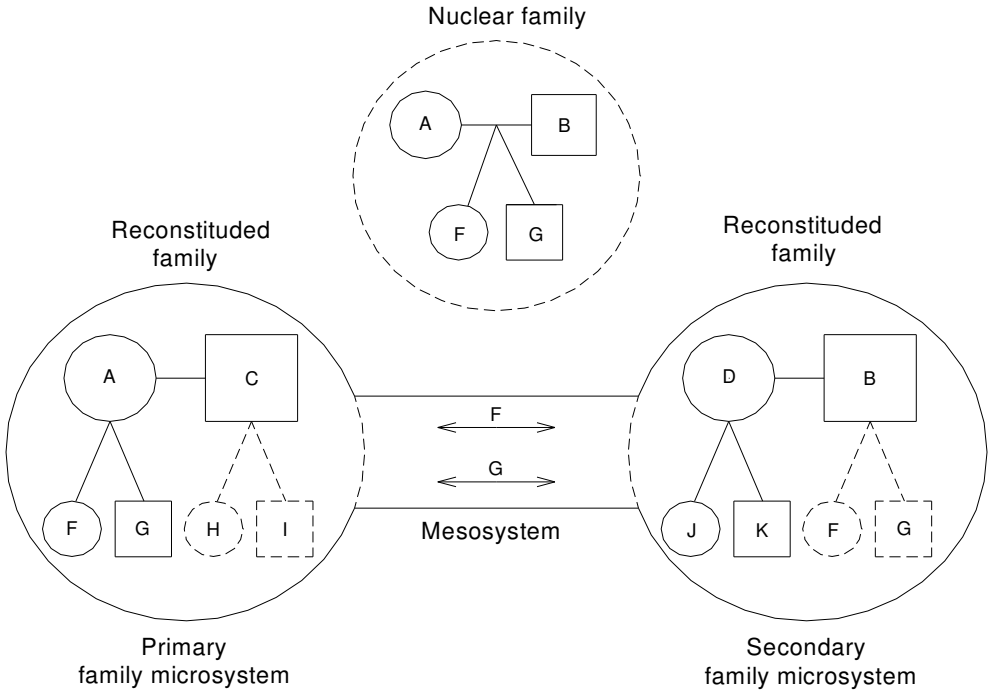

Figure 5 The primary and secondary family micro systems of the children of divorced Spouses A en B, where both spouses remarried (Ebersohn, 2011)

According to Figure 5, the RF of Spouses A and C form the primary family microsystem and the permanent place of residence of the children F and G of former Spouses A and B. Therefore they have acquired a stepfather C and step-siblings H and I. Their step-siblings do not live permanently in this primary family microsystem, but often visit over weekends and holidays, as represented by broken lines. The RF of Spouses B and D form the secondary family microsystem of Children F and G and there they have acquired a stepmother D and step-siblings J and K. Spouse D's children live permanently with their biological mother in the secondary family microsystem of Children F and G, and visit their biological father during weekends and holidays. Former Spouse B (who has equal parental rights and responsibilities for his children) pays maintenance for their care and they visit him during weekends and holidays. Children F and G move to and fro between their two family microsystems by way of the interaction between the family microsystems at mesosystemic level. Spouses C (stepfather) and D (stepmother) act as caregivers and authority figures towards children F and G of former Spouses A and B, but without any legal power.

In such case that Spouses A and C conceive a child, then there will be further changes in the primary family microsystem of the children of former Spouses A and B, as shown in Figure 6.

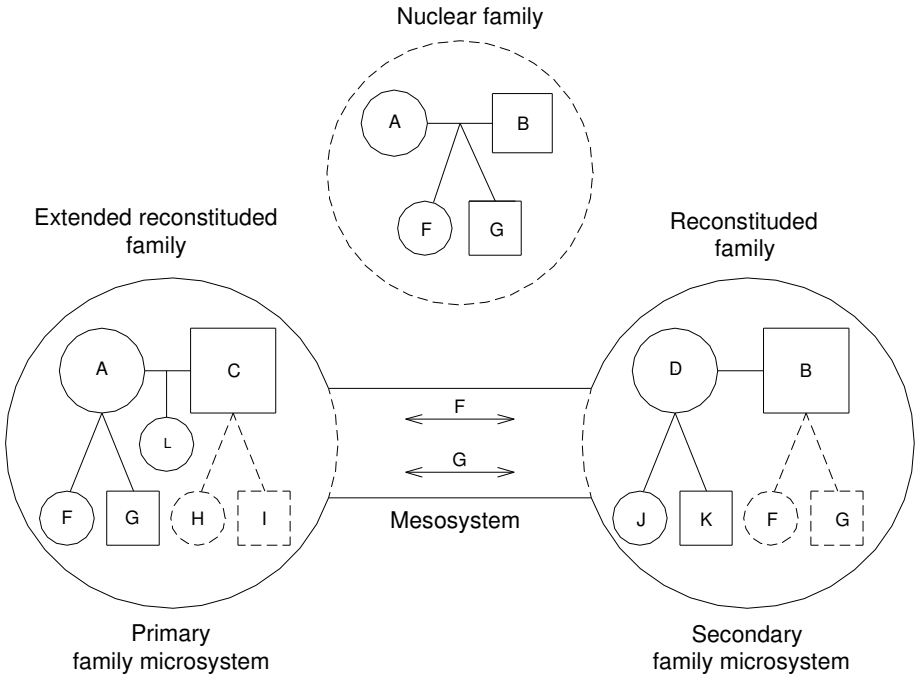

Figure 6 The primary and secondary family microsystems of the children of divorced Spouses A and B where both spouses remarried and Spouse A has an extended RF (Ebersohn, 2011)

Figure 6 shows that Children F and G then develop in the primary family microsystem of an extended RF, consisting of their biological Mother A, Stepfather C, Step-siblings H and I (who do not live permanently in the primary family microsystem, but come to visit periodically), and Half-sibling L, who develops in a nuclear unit within the RF and is a permanent member of the family microsystem.

The RF configurations in Figures 3-6 illustrate the potentially disintegrative reality of divorce. Our research (Ebersohn & Bouwer, 2013) brought to light, however, that the RF can equally well be a mosaic of positive relationships and optimal development, provided that the mesosystem is effective; in other words, if there is at least a functionally co-operative relationship between the former spouses. The exposition of the studies given below focuses on the mesosystemic implications of the relationship between the biological parents after divorce. Therefore, methodological description is kept at a minimum and the outcomes with regard to the particular research questions of each are not elucidated.

The research: Studies A & B

Methodological overview

Both studies (Ebersohn, 2006, 2011) were qualitative, and carried out according to the interpretive research paradigm. As research design, multiple case studies created room both times for examining the context of more than one RF in its uniqueness. In both studies, the participants were selected by purposeful sampling. Various data collection methods, indicated per study, and observation were used in triangulation to obtain rich, trustworthy and comparable data. Field notes and reflective journaling were maintained throughout. The research-ethical and psychologically ethical principles according to which the studies were conducted included informed consent from all the parties concerned the participants' voluntary and safe participation, confidentiality and anonymity. The quality assurance criteria of credibility, trustworthiness and appropriateness were ensured in both studies (for details, please see Ebersohn, 2006, 2011).

Study A

Method

The study (Ebersohn, 2006), undertaken within the asset-based approach, was guided by the research question: *how does the biological father after divorce develop and maintain his parental (child-rearing) relationship with his non-resident young child?* The participants were three Afrikaans-speaking biological fathers in RFs, whose young child/ren were non-resident. Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with each father over a period of eight weeks, to obtain a detailed picture of the given father's experiences, perceptions and views, in his attempts to maintain a parental relationship with his non-resident child/ ren. The interviews were directed at identifying and

mobilising the father's assets and strengths so as to reach an understanding of the potential for an on-going child-rearing relationship.

The first interview focused purely on narration of types of incidents where the father had been involved with his non-resident young child/ren, followed by preliminary analysis of the interview data to draw up a semi-structured schedule for the next interview. The second session focused on identifying and mobilising the assets relating to the father's child-rearing relationship with his non-resident young child/ren. The third interview focused once again on purely narrating types of incidents that had occurred since the second interview, in which the biological father had engaged with his non-resident young child/ren. A two-stage data analysis was done for each case study. In the first stage, a thematic micro-analysis was done per interview and the themes that emerged were identified. The second stage was a meta-analysis of the three interviews per case study. Intra-comparisons were made such that each theme could be analysed in terms of the discussion about it, taking careful account of the fact that the questions posed and attempts to identify assets had gradually influenced the contents of the themes that the fathers presented.

Factual context of the RFs

The RF of Father A (FA) had been formed three years before. He had two children from his previous marriage, a son of 10 years and a daughter of 16 years, who lived with their mother and her co-habitation partner. FA's new wife had two sons, aged 15 and 17 years, from her previous marriage. The younger son was a resident child of FA's RF, but the older son lived with his biological father. FA's RF, as his children's secondary family microsystem, was found to be supportive, loving and accepting, with a positive influence on their mutual relationships and interactions. FA maintained a conscientious, sustained and active involvement, particularly with his son, which contributed to positive proximal interaction and ensured a predominantly constructive child-rearing process, also in the secondary family microsystem. FA appeared to acknowledge his former wife and accommodate her as co-parent in their children's upbringing. Yet her negative feelings as well as personal conflicts between them meant that co-operative parenting did not always materialise at mesosystemic level, limiting FA's engagement in the upbringing of his children.

The RF of Father B (FB) had been formed four years before. He had two children from his previous marriage, a son of seven years, and a daughter of 14 years. FB's son lived with his mother, but his daughter lived in FB's RF. FB's new wife had one daughter, aged 12 years, from her previous marriage, who was also a resident child of this RF. FB's RF could be regarded as structured. Routine, rules and an emphasis on independence played an important role and had a healthy influence on the family relationships. The parents in this RF formed a close unit, decided jointly on their children's upbringing and accepted each other's child/ren. The proximal interactions between FB and his non-resident son took place on a regular basis, and seemed to be predominantly spontaneous and positive, of an informal nature, and aimed at developing a relationship of trust between them. Feelings of bitterness and grievance towards FB's previous wife about the settlement agreement, however, appeared to have given rise to a negative relationship between the biological parents, and they tended not to acknowledge and accommodate each other as co-parents. Consequently, feelings of frustration and powerlessness did occasionally hamper proximal interaction between FB and his non-resident child.

The RF of Father C (FC) had been formed five years before. He had two daughters, aged six and 10 years, from his previous marriage. Both daughters lived with their mother and stepfather. FC's new spouse did not yet have any children. FC's RF can be described as disorganised and having a tense atmosphere. The family did not seem to have close ties with one another and various uncertainties as well as conflicts occurred, for example during the visits of the non-resident children. The parents showed a lack of insight into the unique nature and composition of their RF, which contributed to unrealistic expectations of the relationships between family members. Expectations which did not materialise contributed to disappointment, frustration, criticism and feelings of failure, negatively affecting the proximal processes. FC appeared to have brought unresolved feelings of loss, accompanied by guilty feelings from his previous marriage, into the situation, which seemed to have a negative effect on interactions between him and his children. Ill-feeling about their former marriage indeed seemed to figure reciprocally in the relationship between the biological parents, leading to parallel parenting instead of co-operative parenting.

Study B

Method

The study (Ebersohn, 2011) was directed by the research question: *how do the middle-adolescent children of divorced parents continue to utilise their inherent resilience characteristics to develop optimally, in the process of their movement between the two family microsystems of their RFs, in spite of an often dysfunctional relationship between their biological parents at mesosystemic level?* The participants were four Afrikaans-speaking middle-adolescents aged 14 to 16 years, two boys and two girls, whose biological parents had both remarried.

To ensure that a reasonable degree of adjustment had been achieved between the parents and the child in the RFs, the inclusion criterion was that the RFs of both biological parents of the participant must have existed for at least two years.

Four unstructured narrative conversations, which also included informal conversation, and a narrative technique, the Facilitating Articulation & Competence of Emotions (FACE) instrument (Lötter, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c), were carried out with each participant over an average period of four months. After the data analysis, a fifth conversation (and in one case also a sixth) was held to check and supplement data that did not seem clear. The data were analysed per case to retain the unique nuances of the themes identified for utilising resilience, in terms of their context. A distinction was drawn between the participant's narrative perspective (subjective verbalisation of events and emotional experiences) and the researcher's analysis of the participant's perspective of his/her narrative. The focus was on exploring the unique relationships and interactions between each participant and the members of his/her respective family microsystems, to determine who deliberately *chose and carried out* effective coping strategies to deal with problematic circumstances in moving between the two family microsystems.

Factual context of the RFs

The nuclear family of Adolescent A (AA) (14 years old when the narrative sessions began), had consisted until three years previously, of his mother, father, elder brother, younger brother, and himself. His primary family microsystem (with his mother) had arisen as an RF soon after the divorce. His secondary family microsystem originated from an extra-marital relationship before the divorce. Since the divorce, AA had been exposed at mesosystemic level to persistent conflict between his biological parents. AA visited his secondary family microsystem only at irregular intervals.

The nuclear family of Adolescent B (AB) (15 years old when the narrative sessions began), consisting of his mother, father, elder sister and himself, had ended in divorce when he was four years old. His primary family microsystem (with his mother) had been created as a RF soon after the divorce. His secondary family microsystem had arisen from a single-parent family for three years, and for the past eight years had been an RF. At a mesosystemic level, AB had, from the outset, experienced sustained, positive interaction and active parenting from his biological parents after their divorce, and he had been functioning actively in both family microsystems. AB went to live permanently with his father, of his own volition, and with the consent of both family microsystems, in the time between the fourth and fifth session of the data collection.

The nuclear family of Adolescent C (AC) (15 years old when the narrative sessions began), had consisted of her mother, father, half-sister from her father's previous marriage, elder brother, younger sister, and herself. Her parents had divorced when she was six years old. The present RFs of both parents had arisen from a history of varying relationships. Her primary family microsystem (with her mother) had fluctuated from a single-parent family for two years to a RF (one year), again to a single-parent family (two years), and then to the present RF of the past three years. Her secondary family microsystem had fluctuated from a RF (two years) to a single-parent family (three years), and then to the present RF of the past five years. At mesosystemic level, AC had been exposed continuously to negative interaction between her biological parents ever since the divorce, although she eventually functioned actively in both family systems for the past five years.

The nuclear family of Adolescent D (AD) (15 years old when the narrative sessions began) had consisted of her mother, father, elder half-brother from her mother's previous marriage, and herself. Her parents had divorced when she was five years old. Her primary family microsystem (with her mother) had arisen as an RF soon after the divorce. Her secondary family microsystem had taken the form of an extended single-parent family with her father and grandmother for eight years, a reconstituted extended family for three months after her father's remarriage and, finally, when her grandmother moved home, an RF. At mesosystemic level, AD had been continuously exposed to conflict between her biological parents ever since the divorce. At the time of the research AD had virtually no contact with her secondary family microsystem.

Findings

From a bio-ecological perspective, the greatest challenge to child-rearing relationships and the utilisation of resilience in the context of the RF after divorce appears to be the complexity and reciprocal influencing of the two family microsystems. In Study A, only one associated theme emerged from the data, namely *the father's relationship with his former wife*. The way in which the father attempted to maintain the relationship with his non-resident child was undeniably influenced at mesosystemic level between the RFs, by the interaction of the biological parents. It seems clear from Study A that *the proximal processes in the child's secondary family microsystem were influenced, whether positively or negatively, by their mesosystemic articulation with the primary family microsystem.*

In Study B, two factors appeared to contribute to promoting or restricting the adolescent participants' utilisation of resilience: their own conscious

decisions about the utilisation of their resilience characteristics (a process they had control over), and the influence of the relationship between their biological parents at mesosystemic level (a factor they had little or no control over). The mesosystem in the developmental context of only one of the four participants, namely AB, appeared to function effectively. The interaction of AB's two family microsystems was positively maintained from the outset by the biological parents' sustained, positive parenting and functional communication relationship, which in turn contributed to promoting the proximal processes among the family members in both family systems. In the unique development context of AB's RF circumstances, the *choices* that he made regarding his utilisation of his resilience characteristics were apparently not only *guided* by a complex course of conscious and subconscious thought processes, but were in fact also positively *influenced* by the effective mesosystem. The converse was equally clear and consistent in the case studies of AA, AC and AD. Study B therefore suggests that *the effectiveness, or not, of the mesosystem as a cohesive, reciprocal and/or responsive dynamic, strongly influences the utilisation of the resilience of the middle-adolescent children of divorced parents.*

Discussion

The findings and insights obtained from the two studies set out here seem not only to confirm various premises concerning the relationship dynamics in the context of the RF after divorce, but especially to build further on their theoretical foundation. Irrespective of whether the father's child-rearing challenges (Study A) or the child's development challenges (Study B) have to be addressed, there can be no other point of departure than a systemic theoretical framework. During divorce and the reconstitution of a family, the child inevitably becomes a full member of two family microsystems. Shared membership of two family microsystems and the complexity of the mesosystem due to influences from the former nuclear family system, cause the systemic family situation in which the child's upbringing has to be accomplished after divorce to differ radically from a nuclear family system. Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2001) view is endorsed, where children are *active participants* in their own development and are not merely at the mercy of their systemic environment. The finding that proximal interactive processes in the primary and secondary family microsystems are promoted by an effective mesosystem, therefore, at least a functionally co-operative relationship between the biological parents, does imply however that a child depends at least partly on the mesosystem.

Parents divorce as spouses, but never as parents. The *biological parents* are the primary participants in the mesosystem of the RFs, who thus influence the proximal interactions in both of the child's family microsystems. Our findings in this study confirm the statement of Beaudry, Boisvert, Simard, Parent and Blais (2004), that the relationship between former spouses who enter into second marriages (a factor over which the child has no control) plays an important role in the development of their children. Former spouses often use their children to display hostility towards one another, for example by sabotaging arrangements for visits to these secondary family microsystem (Weaver & Coleman, 2010), which could have a negative effect on the child's proximal processes in the secondary family microsystem (Ebersohn, 2006). Involving children in their parents' conflict may also have a strong effect on their emotional wellbeing. Persistent conflict contributes to the child's ineffectual handling of difficult family circumstances in his/her shared family micro-systems (Ebersohn & Bouwer, 2013). Sarrazin and Cyr (2007) postulate that children who experience sustained positive parenting after divorce, adapt more easily to the changed circumstances than children who are constantly exposed to conflict between their biological parents. Communication between former spouses therefore plays a significant role in successful parenting in the new RFs. This implies that divorced biological parents, who maintain an effective communication relationship and constructively continue their parenting jointly in spite of their divorce, contribute significantly to their children's emotional wellbeing. Sobelewski and King (2005) observe, however, that such high-quality parenting is not very common.

The small scale of the research, involving only three participants in Study A and four participants in Study B from one societal context, namely that of Afrikaans-speaking whites, is admittedly severely limiting. The findings cannot be applied to RF situations in other cultures. Moreover, a more complete picture of the dynamics of interaction patterns in the respective family microsystems could have been obtained if the children in Study A and the parents in Study B had also participated in the studies. The restricted duration of the data-gathering process also meant that the sessions, which followed fairly shortly on from one another, could often only reflect insights at a rational level, and could not as yet yield evidence of consistent actions. Nevertheless, the findings and insights from these studies do seem to contribute substantively to grounding the approach regarding the influence and consequences of divorce and the reconstitution of families.

Divorce is indeed a potentially destructive reality in society, but this research has shown that the RF is also capable of buoying positive relationships and optimal development. It therefore

seems valid to submit that the extension of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model may be used fruitfully to afford divorced parents, as well as their children, insight into the context-bound relationship challenges of their unique, RF situation. In the broken family society of the present day, it is imperative to look at the big picture of relationships in order to find effective ways of supporting RFs. If divorced biological parents could be guided to continue their parenting effectively at mesosystemic level, in spite of the conflicts that lead to divorce, they might, with this knowledge and insight into the importance of an effective mesosystem, succeed to a greater extent in maintaining proximal interaction patterns with their children.

In conclusion, the outcome of the research has important implications for accountable and effective training and practice in all the professions that are directly and indirectly concerned with divorce, such as educational psychology, law, pastoral counselling and social care, and teaching.

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