

Understanding the Experiences of Social Workers in Rendering Social Work Services to Divorced Persons: A South African Lens



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ABSTRACT

The research literature extensively discusses the negative impact of divorce on an individual's well-being, yet there remains a limited understanding of their psychological adaptation. Although some individuals may find relief, divorce and the subsequent adjustment process are challenging for most. Therefore, this paper explored social workers' experiences in assisting divorced individuals to develop guidelines to enhance social work practice. The primary objective of this research study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the social work services provided to divorced individuals. The study employed a qualitative research approach characterised by an explorative, descriptive, and contextual research design. The sample encompassed 10 social workers from diverse organisations in the Gauteng province, South Africa, selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using Tesch's eight-step framework. Guba's model was employed for data verification. The findings illuminated that social workers provide generalist services, except for divorce cases, and concentrate on tending to children post-divorce. This includes addressing parental rights and responsibilities through mediation and formulating parenting plans. Although there are social workers who believe that the counselling services provided to divorced persons are helpful, most of them were not entirely satisfied and feel that they could do more by involving group work and community work methods of social work practice. Subsequent to the findings, the study presented actionable recommendations that would inform social welfare policies and social work practice.

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INTRODUCTION

The impact of divorce can often be severe and can last for a significant period, provided no solutions are found to deal with the post-divorce challenges.¹ In most instances, divorced persons experience depression, loneliness, anger, and other negative emotions that characterise the divorce transition, and they remain negatively affected for an extended period.² When divorced persons experience distress in one area of their lives, that distress may affect other areas of their lives and their overall wellness. Due to the negative experiences of divorce during the post-divorce phase, divorced persons mostly approach

¹ Sara Symoens et al., "Breaking up, Breaking Hearts? Characteristics of the Divorce Process and Well-Being after Divorce," *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 54, no. 3 (2013): 177–96.

² Pasqualina Perrig-Chiello, Sara Hutchison, and Davide Morselli, "Patterns of Psychological Adaptation to Divorce after a Long-Term Marriage," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 32, no. 3 (2015): 386–405.

therapists or counsellors, including social workers, seeking services that would enable them to cope with the aftermath of divorce.

Despite the negative effects of divorce on the well-being of divorced persons, as documented in the research literature, social work services to divorced persons remain a neglected research topic.³ Although there are several studies conducted on the topic of divorce, the researcher could not locate research articles that directly discuss and explore social work services for divorced persons. Instead, the articles that were found during the process of literature research focus on other areas of divorce, including how divorce affects women and children.

For this reason, the researcher embarked on this research project to explore the nature of social work services to divorced persons and develop recommendations that would inform social welfare policies and social work practice. The research problem for this study can be delineated as follows: *although there are studies conducted on various aspects of divorce, there is still a knowledge gap in the existing literature about the nature of social work services to divorced persons and the needs of divorced persons regarding social work services.* The implication, therefore, is that there is nothing documented regarding social work practice guidelines.

The broad research question for the intended study was posed as follows:

- *What is the nature of social work services rendered by social workers to divorced persons?*

To achieve the goals of this study, the following research objective was proposed:

- *To explore and describe the nature of social work services to divorced persons.*

This study explores the needs and challenges of divorced individuals in social work, aiming to improve service delivery and inform effective support strategies. The findings will assist social workers and guide policymakers in the Department of Social Development (DSD) to create better welfare policies, ultimately enhancing the well-being of divorced individuals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although divorce is not specified as one of the critical issues affecting families in the White Paper on Families, it remains one of the major challenges families and divorced persons face.⁴ The research emphasises the profound impact of divorce on the individuals who are divorced and their families.⁵ They argue that divorce can lead to significant emotional and psychological effects that extend beyond the immediate individuals involved. Additionally, it delves into the intricate dynamics in family systems during divorce, highlighting the strain and challenges that arise during this transition.⁶ Furthermore, they discuss how the composition of families undergoes substantial changes, contributing to the difficulties experienced by all family members during this time. Research asserts that divorce plays a pivotal role in the breakdown of the family unit.⁷ These insights collectively underscore the far-reaching effects of divorce, extending beyond the immediate individuals to impact the broader family structure.

Despite the persistent prevalence of divorce worldwide, it is important to note the complexities and implications associated with this phenomenon. Statistics indicate that half of all first marriages globally culminate in divorce, resulting in a myriad of economic, physical, and psychological challenges for those involved.⁸ This alarming trend highlights the significant impact of divorce on individuals and families across the globe.

³ Gary L Bowen and Todd M Jensen, "Late-Life Divorce and Postdivorce Adult Subjective Well-Being," *Journal of Family Issues* 38, no. 10 (2017): 1363–88.

⁴ Department of Social Development, *White Paper on Families* (Pretoria: Government Printers, 2013).

⁵ Michael G Lawler and Todd A Salzman, "Catholic Doctrine on Divorce and Remarriage: A Practical Theological Examination," *Theological Studies* 78, no. 2 (2017): 326–47.

⁶ Jack O. Balswick and Judith K. Balswick, *The Family: A Christian Perspective on the Contemporary Home*, 3rd ed. (USA: Baker Academic, 2007).

⁷ A. Hadad, "Challenges in Criminal Cases Related to Divorce in Women Referred to Family Courts: An Emerged Cognitive Study," *Advances in Environmental Biology* 9, no. 4 (2015): 493–96.

⁸ Hannah C Williamson et al., "Are Problems That Contribute to Divorce Present at the Start of Marriage, or Do They Emerge over Time?," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 33, no. 8 (2016): 1120–34.

Furthermore, while extensive research has shed light on the negative effects of divorce on an individual's well-being, there remains a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding the psychological adaptation of individuals to the experience of divorce.⁹ It is essential to acknowledge that while some individuals may experience a sense of relief following divorce, the process of divorce and the subsequent adjustment to a new way of life can be notably arduous for many individuals.¹⁰ High divorce rates worldwide emphasize the importance of examining the challenges and long-term emotional effects of divorce on those involved.

After a divorce, individuals enter a phase of adjustment that involves changes in relationships, routines, and roles. This process requires managing the stress of building an independent life while maintaining social support. Those with stronger support networks typically navigate these challenges more effectively. The significance of support, citing research based on the stress-buffering hypothesis, is underscored, indicating that heightened support levels yield positive outcomes, including reduced levels of psychological distress and fewer health complaints among divorcees.¹¹ Hence, providing support is vital in facilitating individuals' ability to effectively cope with the aftermath of divorce.

Factors Leading to Divorce

Various factors can lead to the dissolution of a marriage, and these can differ between couples. Key contributors include mismatched values, poor communication, inadequate conflict resolution, sexual incompatibility, infidelity, substance abuse, emotional or physical abuse, boredom, jealousy, and challenges related to parenthood, work, finances, family dynamics and health concerns.¹²

Furthermore, divorce may be instigated by relational challenges, encompassing communication barriers, time allocation, sexual intimacy, financial management, and household responsibilities experienced by married couples.¹³ A study conducted in Lesotho unveiled that individuals chose to terminate their marriages due to various factors, including the desire to safeguard their assets from a profligate spouse with mounting debts, infidelity, domestic violence, abuse of marital authority, abandonment, financial irresponsibility, lack of family support, disrespect, and physical and sexual abuse.¹⁴ Similarly, a study in Lagos, Nigeria, conducted by student counsellors, identified childlessness, financial instability, infidelity, and sexual incompatibility as prominent causes of divorce among couples in the Lagos metropolis.¹⁵

A study in South Africa identified key reasons for divorce, including differences in priorities, religious and cultural beliefs, financial issues, sexual incompatibility, addiction, social media use, infidelity, abuse, communication problems and divorce.¹⁶ While the specific reasons for divorce vary among individuals and couples, most of these reasons are rooted in the aforementioned sentiments.

Social Work Services to Divorced Persons

Social work supports divorced individuals by using casework, group work, and community work to promote their well-being help them reach their full potential and prevent dysfunction.¹⁷ This means that social work services aim to address the complex transactions between people and their environments.

⁹ Perrig-Chiello, Hutchison, and Morselli, "Patterns of Psychological Adaptation to Divorce after a Long-Term Marriage."

¹⁰ Leeni Hansson and Virve-Ines Laidmäe, "Surviving Divorce: Reconstruction of Divorce Experiences on the Pages of an Estonian Women's Magazine," *The Family Journal* 22, no. 1 (2014): 88–97.

¹¹ Meara H Faw, "Supporting the Supporter: Social Support and Physiological Stress among Caregivers of Children with Severe Disabilities," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 35, no. 2 (2018): 202–23.

¹² Mooney, Linda A., David Knox, and Caroline Schacht. *Understanding Social Problems*. 7th ed. USA: Thompson Wadsworth, 2011.

¹³ Nete Munk Nielsen et al., "Divorce and Risk of Hospital-Diagnosed Infectious Diseases," *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health* 42, no. 7 (2014): 705–11.

¹⁴ T. M. Ntimo-Makara, *Living with Divorce: Expectations and Contradictions within the Lesotho Socio-Cultural Context* (Addis Ababa: Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSRES), 2009).

¹⁵ S. O. Adetunji, "Student Causes of Divorce among Couples in Lagos Metropolis," *IFE Centre for Psychological Studies/Services* 20, no. 2 (2012): 113–18.

¹⁶ Bertus Preller, *Everyone's Guide to Divorce and Separation* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2013).

¹⁷ Weronika Gieniec and Beata Jurkiewicz, "Perception of People with Intellectual Disabilities by Residents of the Tarnów Region, Poland," *Health Promotion & Physical Activity* 24, no. 3 (December 20, 2023): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.55225/hppa.532>.

In addition to social work services provided to divorced persons through the social work methods of practice, social workers provide mediation and parenting plan services to divorced persons.¹⁸ Although social workers mostly provide mediation and parenting plan services before the completion of the divorce process, they also deal with post-divorce matters arising from the mediation and parenting plan.¹⁹ Mediation helps divorced parents resolve conflicts to prioritize their children's well-being.²⁰ However, a parenting plan is designed to guide parents in raising their children after divorce. A parenting plan is a carefully specified agreement about children's schedules and parents' decision-making.²¹

In social work, clear and comprehensive practice guidelines are crucial for addressing the challenges faced by divorced individuals. These guidelines provide essential recommendations for practitioners to ensure social work services meet the specific needs of divorced individuals.²²

Social workers turn out to help and assist divorced persons who present psychological concerns, and, as a result, divorced persons are more likely to reach out to them for assistance.²³ Social workers should be prepared to help divorced individuals make positive life changes through appropriate, needs-based services. Despite the negative effects of divorce on the well-being of divorced persons, as documented in the research literature, social work services to divorced persons remain a neglected research topic.²⁴

Although several studies have been conducted on the topic of divorce, the researcher could not locate research literature that directly discusses and explores social work services for divorced persons.²⁵ Research on divorce mainly covers its effects on women and children, with little focus on social work services for divorced individuals in South Africa.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Ecological Systems Perspective, hereafter referred to as the eco-systems perspective, was originally proposed by Bronfenbrenner and its interest is in understanding individuals in context.²⁶ The eco-systems perspective focuses on the contexts of individual existence and the interactions between individuals and social structures in understanding human development. It views humans as subsystems within larger systems, such as family and community, while emphasizing that changes in one part of the system impact the entire system.²⁷

The eco-systems perspective was adopted as a theoretical framework for this study because it provides a holistic understanding of the interrelationships between divorced persons and their environments, together with the impact of this relationship on them. Social workers use an ecosystem perspective to examine the relationships between divorced individuals and their environment. For instance, those who return to their family of origin may find it difficult to adapt, while the community may struggle to reintegrate them. This mutual strain can increase tension between the individuals and their surroundings. Social workers aim to understand these interactions and enhance relationships, helping divorced individuals adjust to life after divorce.

¹⁸ P. Schultz, "Fields of Social Work Practice," in *Introduction to Social Work in the South African Context*, ed. R. Schenck (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2015), 167–94.

¹⁹ Marcela Sotomayor-Peterson et al., "Shared Parenting, Parental Effort, and Life History Strategy: A Cross-Cultural Comparison," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 44, no. 4 (2013): 620–39.

²⁰ Emily M. Douglas, *Mending Broken Families: Social Policies for Divorced Families: How Effective Are They?* (New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

²¹ Robert E. Emery, *Renegotiating Family Relationships: Divorce, Custody, and Mediation*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 2012).

²² Jennifer J Shin, "Involving Stakeholders in the Development of Clinical Practice Guidelines," *Otolaryngology--Head and Neck Surgery* 150, no. 6 (2014): 907–9.

²³ B. K. Jackson, "Licensed Professional Counsellors' Perceptions of Pastoral Counselling in the African American Community," *Pastoral Care and Counselling* 69, no. 2 (2015): 85–101.

²⁴ Bowen and Jensen, "Late-Life Divorce and Postdivorce Adult Subjective Well-Being."

²⁵ Williamson et al., "Are Problems That Contribute to Divorce Present at the Start of Marriage, or Do They Emerge over Time?"

²⁶ Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Harvard university press, 1979).

²⁷ Johannah Sekudu, "The Helping Process in Social Work," in *Introduction to Social Work in the South African Context*, ed. R. Schenck (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2015), 81–107.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research approach was adopted for this study. In qualitative research, the emphasis is placed on insights, meanings, and interpretations.²⁸ This study used explorative, descriptive, and contextual research designs. In qualitative research, it's crucial to select a sample that offers valuable insights into people's experiences.²⁹ The study focused on social workers in Gauteng, South Africa, including those in the private sector, NGOs, government departments, and private practice, all registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professions.

The researcher purposefully selected 10 social workers who provide services to divorced individuals. Semi-structured interviews featuring open-ended questions were used to explore their experiences with social work services for this population. The emphasis in qualitative research is on the quality of data rather than the sample size.³⁰

It should be noted that 10 social workers who met the following criteria for inclusion were interviewed:

- The participants must be working as social workers either in the private sector, at an NGO, at a government department, or in private practice.
- The participants must have at least two years of working experience as social workers.
- The participants must have provided social work services to divorced persons since they started working as social workers.
- The participants must have received intake cases of divorced persons seeking social work services.
- The participants must be based in the Gauteng province, South Africa.
- The participants must be willing and available to participate in the study.

The researcher meticulously adhered to a comprehensive set of ethical considerations, including obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity of the data, managing the data with the utmost care, providing debriefing to participants, and prioritising beneficence throughout the study. For the data analysis, the researcher meticulously followed the eight steps of Tesch's approach, which involved systematically organizing and analysing the data to derive meaningful insights. Moreover, to ensure the findings' reliability and validity, the researcher conducted a rigorous process of comparing the findings with an independent coder's report during a consensus discussion, which the researcher's supervisor expertly facilitated. Additionally, Guba's model was utilised to verify the data and enhance the trustworthiness of the research findings. The model outlines four characteristics that ensure trustworthiness, namely truth-value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality

The findings will be presented in the upcoming section, reflecting the rich and detailed insights derived from the thorough data analysis process.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This section describes research findings as they emerged from the analysis of the data collected. The findings are presented below:

Social workers' accounts of the kind of social work services requested by and provided to divorced persons

In this study, social workers were asked to describe the types of social work services sought by divorced persons and what services are provided to divorced persons.

²⁸ Barbara Fawcett and Rosalie Pockett, *Turning Ideas into Research: Theory, Design, and Practice* (London: SAGE, 2015).

²⁹ David Nicholls, "Qualitative Research: Part Two-Methodologies," *International Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation* 16, no. 11 (2009): 586–92.

³⁰ Malcolm Carey, *Qualitative Research Skills for Social Work* (Burlington, NJ.: Ashgate, 2012).

Divorced persons do not request services related to personal issues

Several participants described divorced persons as not seeking social work services for their own personal issues, and this is highlighted by Wilson, Reneilwe, and Zodwa's statements below.

According to **Wilson**, divorced persons do not require social work services because they consider social workers as a last resort. He stated: *"Many people see social workers as a last resort for crises and mainly associate them with children's issues, overlooking their ability to offer personal support."*

Reneilwe also referred to divorced persons opting to seek assistance from psychologists other than social workers: *"I believe they are struggling and have given up. Many in the Black community prefer psychologists over social workers, seeing the latter as limited to marital issues."*

Zodwa had another explanation for why divorced persons do not seek social work services for themselves: *"Many fear judgment for their past marriages, which may keep them from seeking help due to societal stigma."*

Based on the information provided in the aforementioned excerpts, it becomes evident that participants lack definitive reasons for the reluctance of divorced individuals to seek social work services. Instead, they offered their subjective opinions on the matter. However, a common sentiment expressed by the participants is that society does not view social workers as resources capable of addressing divorce-related concerns beyond issues concerning the children of divorcing or divorced couples.

The research conducted shed light on the fact that divorced individuals expressed a need for counselling, as they did not receive this form of support from the legal representatives handling their cases.³¹ This revelation prompts the question of whether divorced individuals are aware of the option to seek and receive counselling services from social workers. If not, it implies that social work services tailored to meet the needs of divorced individuals are not effectively promoted or made known to this demographic.

Social workers inform individuals about available services and help them access resources from NGOs and government agencies. They raise awareness for divorced individuals through community campaigns and media, promoting their support effectively.³²

Assistance regarding children

In this study, social workers observed that divorced individuals mainly seek social work assistance for their children. Two participants did not specify the services they provide but highlighted that divorced persons primarily seek help related to their children, as illustrated by Wilson and Zodwa's comments.

When asked about the issues mainly raised by divorced persons, **Wilson** responded that the issues generally concerned the children: *"The focus will be on children and the impacts of divorce, including coping strategies."*

Zodwa responded as follows: *"I cannot believe I still see clients, a couple whose divorce was finalized in 2015. They come to me with various issues related to their children rather than themselves."*

The study found that divorced parents often seek social work support for their children's issues rather than their own, aligning with findings that many take their kids to counseling to cope with divorce challenges.³³ Prioritizing their children's well-being in social work services highlights the importance of addressing children's needs during parental divorce and providing the necessary support to help them cope and adjust.

Supporting divorced individuals also means addressing their children's needs. Successfully renegotiating the parental relationship after divorce is crucial for resolving conflicts and promoting the family's well-being.³⁴ This highlights the strong concern divorced parents have for their children's welfare and their tendency to seek social work services for better outcomes.

³¹ Ntimo-Makara, *Living with Divorce: Expectations and Contradictions within the Lesotho Socio-Cultural Context*.

³² Zastrow, Charles H. *Social Work with Groups: A Comprehensive Worktext*. 9th ed. USA: Brooks/Cole, 2015.

³³ J., M. Pybis et al., "The Nature of Emotional Support and Counselling Provision for People with Sight Loss in the United Kingdom," *British Journal of Visual Impairment* 34, no. 2 (2016): 169–78.

³⁴ Emery, *Renegotiating Family Relationships: Divorce, Custody, and Mediation*.

Assistance with the financial situation

Participants noted that divorced individuals frequently seek help with their finances, a point emphasized by the following:

Simpson referred to divorced persons seeking social work services regarding their financial situation: “...Clients typically seek help for financial issues after divorce, often without mentioning their status.”

Kim also referred to the financial issues of divorced persons and added issues about their social adjustment: “Post-divorce, the focus turns to financial stability, with many struggling to return to their previous status and facing adjustment challenges.”

Petunia also described the financial situation leading to divorced persons seeking social work services: “The unemployed father pays child maintenance, but the mother claims it's insufficient and alleges court bias.”

Divorced individuals often seek financial assistance, mainly for child maintenance. Some use this as a way to punish ex-spouses. Participants expressed strong concerns about declining financial stability post-divorce.³⁵ Divorce often results in financial changes, such as moving to cheaper housing and losing possessions, leading to a decline in the standard of living and various challenges.³⁶

Social workers' opinions on whether they should provide services to divorced persons

This study's social workers believed they should provide services to divorced persons.

Linda expressed the need for social workers to deal with divorced persons as follows:

“Social workers are vital for mediating divorce disputes, especially when children are involved.”

Mashego was definite about social workers providing services to divorced persons: “Divorce is challenging, so divorced individuals should seek counselling, including individual therapy.”

Renelwe echoed this: “I believe they should, as divorce is traumatic. Internalized issues often impact future relationships.”

Simpson was also firmly convinced that social workers should work with divorced persons: “Divorce complicates family counselling and restoration efforts.”

Participants acknowledged the need for services for divorced individuals, emphasizing that counselling aids in mediation regarding property and child support while minimizing conflict.³⁷

One participant suggested that social workers should help divorced individuals address their emotional baggage before they enter new relationships, as many quickly move on and often experience failures in these new connections. Relationships based on neediness and vulnerability are typically unstable.³⁸ Participants noted that social work services are vital in helping divorced individuals cope with challenges before starting new relationships.

Social workers' descriptions of the needs of divorced persons

The social workers were asked to describe the needs of divorced persons and their storylines ranged from counselling to financial assistance.

Counselling

Most social workers supported the idea that divorced persons need counselling. The above extracts reflect the participants' views that counselling would be ideal in enabling divorced persons to deal with the aftermath of divorce.

Kim explained it as follows: “Many struggle with divorce; seeking non-judgmental therapy is essential, as friends and family may offer unhelpful opinions.”

Mashego also emphasised the need for counselling: “Counselling should help individuals cope after divorce and support co-parenting with effective parenting plans.”

³⁵ David Knox and Caroline Schacht, *Choices in Relationships: An Introduction to Marriage and Family*, 10th ed. (USA: Wadsworth, 2010).

³⁶ Emery, *Renegotiating Family Relationships: Divorce, Custody, and Mediation*.

³⁷ Alexander Wezel et al., “Challenges and Action Points to Amplify Agroecology in Europe,” *Sustainability* 10, no. 5 (May 16, 2018): 1598, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su10051598>.

³⁸ Donald. Cullington, *Breaking Up Blues: A Guide to Survival and Growth* (London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2008).

Wilson supported Mashego's opinion: *"Divorce causes trauma, requiring support for both parents and their affected children."*

The excerpts highlight a shared view among participants that counselling is vital for helping divorced individuals manage the complexities of life post-divorce. The authors emphasize that counselling provides support by focusing on individuals' strengths and personal assets.³⁹ Furthermore, Sekudu emphasises that counselling empowers divorced individuals to cultivate a fresh perspective, enabling them to harness their newfound knowledge and skills to effectively address present and future challenges.⁴⁰ This counselling process facilitates developing coping strategies to manage the various obstacles that arise in their lives.

Social workers support individuals through divorce by enhancing self-awareness and providing counselling to help them cope with negative emotions.

Financial assistance

Participants highlighted the need for financial assistance.

Tsholofelo highlighted that divorced persons need some sort of financial assistance or financial advice: *"Divorce can bring financial challenges; seek guidance for independence."*

Nomsa spoke about material and financial needs: *"After a divorce, housing and financial support are crucial, as one partner may withhold both."*

The participants emphasize that divorced individuals often require financial assistance and face hardships due to reduced earnings. After divorce, many experience a significant decline in income, resulting in a lower standard of living and increased economic challenges.⁴¹ This confirms that the greatest difficulty experienced by divorced persons is a lack of economic resources. Adding to that, struggling from day to day to meet basic needs leads to additional odds in coping with a variety of life problems, including divorce. Participants in this study reported that divorced persons need financial assistance.⁴²

Social workers' descriptions of when and to whom they refer divorced persons

The social workers were asked to describe when they refer divorced persons to other resources and to whom. Their responses are given in three different referrals, namely that they refer them to psychologists, a social worker in private practice, or the DSD and/or NGOs.

Refer to a Psychologist

Kim explained how divorced persons may be referred to a psychologist for long-term therapy:

"I offer short-term counselling and referrals for long-term therapy, covering both internal and external support."

Petunia also spoke of referring divorced persons to psychologists: *"We refer patients to psychologists for anger management."*

Reneilwe mentioned referring to a psychologist and some clients for play therapy: *"I refer sexual abuse cases to educational psychologists and play therapists, involving psychiatrists only when needed."*

Participants in this study report that they refer divorced persons to psychologists for further intervention. This relates to the assertion that to serve clients effectively, social workers rely heavily on other professionals from other disciplines, including psychologists. Psychologists are counted among those whose formal role is to help people manage the distressing problems of life.⁴³ Additionally, the core competencies of psychologists, as defined by the Professional Board for Psychology of the HPCSA, are psychological assessment, psychological intervention, and expertise in referral.⁴⁴

³⁹ Jaana Laitinen, Johanna Ruusuvaori, and Aija Logren, "Self-Reflective Talk in Group Counselling," *Discourse Studies* 19, no. 4 (2017): 422–40.

⁴⁰ Sekudu, "The Helping Process in Social Work."

⁴¹ Linda A. Mooney, David Knox, and Caroline Schacht, *Understanding Social Problems*, 7th ed. (USA: Thompson Wadsworth, 2011).

⁴² Mary P. Van Hook, *Social Work Practice with Families: A Resiliency-Based Approach*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Lyceum Books, 2014).

⁴³ Antoinette Lombard, "The Impact of Social Welfare Policies on Social Development in South Africa: An NGO Perspective," *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 43, no. 4 (June 27, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.15270/43-4-260>.

⁴⁴ Sekudu, "The Helping Process in Social Work."

Refer to a social worker in private practice

Petunia mentioned that some divorced persons are referred to a social worker in private practice: “*We refer clients to a local social worker with their approval.*”

Social workers in private practice provide clinical services such as psychotherapy, couple’s counselling, and family therapy.⁴⁵ Apart from counselling, social workers in private practice are involved in childcare matters, for example, working with mediation and parenting plans, while others provide full-time training sessions at companies, addressing staff development and skills training for personal development, and presenting conflict and anger management courses.⁴⁶ This means that social workers in private practice are responsible for service delivery, including services to divorced persons.

Refer to the Department of Social Development and/or NGOs

Nomsa explained that certain cases are referred: “*We refer clients to Child Welfare and Social Development for access or custody issues, as we do not handle statutory work.*”

Simpson explained that he does not undertake formal referrals but informs divorced persons where to go: “*I refer maintenance cases to the appropriate agencies for assistance.*”

Nomsa and Simpson both highlighted the practice of referring divorced individuals to either the Department of Social Development (DSD) or non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The DSD serves as a focal point for initiatives aimed at bolstering family life and providing support to families in South Africa.⁴⁷ The range of services offered by the DSD encompasses prevention programmes, rehabilitation, protection programmes, ongoing care, mental health support, and addiction services. Conversely, NGOs are perceived to have social workers specialising in diverse areas, including working with children, youth, the elderly, cases of substance abuse, street children, disabled individuals, and families, including those impacted by divorce.⁴⁸

Furthermore, the participants in this study indicated that they sometimes direct divorced individuals to the DSD or NGOs for further intervention, in line with the assertion that practitioners often refer clients to agencies with specialised skills.⁴⁹ This practice underscores the importance of tailored support and expertise in addressing the complex needs of divorced individuals in the social welfare and support system.

DISCUSSION

Social work services tailored specifically for divorced individuals are not currently a specialised discipline in South Africa. Consequently, many social workers function as generalist practitioners. These generalist social work practitioners employ a diverse range of prevention and intervention methods in their work with individuals, families, and groups, to foster physical, emotional, and social well-being.⁵⁰ Essentially, generalist social work practice is oriented towards enhancing clients' well-being, including divorced individuals. This implies that a generalist social work practitioner operates in the parameters of various fields of social work services.

Participants felt that divorced individuals don’t seek social work services because society underestimates their role in divorce matters, except for child-related issues. This suggests a lack of awareness about available counselling services, highlighting the need for social workers to promote their support effectively.⁵¹

Participants noted that divorced parents mainly seek social work services for their children, highlighting the importance of collaboration to address the impact of divorce, as children's needs differ

⁴⁵ Jessica M. Rosenberg, *Working in Social Work: The Real-World Guide to Practice Settings* (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2009).

⁴⁶ Sekudu, “The Helping Process in Social Work.”

⁴⁷ Department of Social Development, *White Paper on Families*.

⁴⁸ Sekudu, “The Helping Process in Social Work.”

⁴⁹ Philip R Popple and Leslie Leighninger, *Social Work, Social Welfare, and American Society*, 7th ed. (Boston, Massachusetts: Allyn & Bacon Publishers, 2008).

⁵⁰ Elizabeth A. Segal, Karen E. Gerdes, and Sue Steiner, *An Introduction to the Profession of Social Work: Becoming a Change Agent*, 4th ed. (San Francisco, CA. : Brooks/Cole (Cengage Learning), 2013).

⁵¹ Charles H. Zastrow, *Social Work with Groups: A Comprehensive Worktext*, 9th ed. (San Francisco, CA. : Brooks/Cole (Cengage Learning), 2015).

significantly from adults.⁵² Therefore, social workers offering services to children of divorced parents should recognise this distinction and apply the appropriate expertise and skills when working with children.

Notably, social workers in private practice are clinicians and many of them develop a specialised practice niche.⁵³ In addition to their professional duties, they also have the added responsibility of social work administration, including billing clients and keeping records of their income and expenditure, and need to be members of an association, such as the South African Association for Social Workers in Private Practice (SAASWIPP), or the National Association for Social Workers (NASW) to avoid isolation.⁵⁴

Participants also believed that social work services are critical to the entire family and not only the divorced persons. Family life services are particularly important for them because divorce affects everyone in the family. As reported, social work has long been dealing with problems related to family life and family relationships.⁵⁵ Social workers provide family life services through family therapy or family intervention. In other words, interactions between families and their environments determine how family members, including divorced persons, adapt to the stresses in their environments.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings in this study have contributed to understanding social workers' experiences working with divorced persons. The implications are as follows:

- Counselling services for divorced individuals should be easily accessible. While many social workers currently offer limited mediation and parenting plan services, it is essential to also provide dedicated counselling. These services should address both pre- and post-divorce experiences, helping individuals develop problem-solving skills to cope with divorce challenges. Counselling can be offered individually or in therapeutic groups until the social worker, and the client agree that the individual's well-being has improved.
- Mediation and parenting plan services should prioritize the children's best interests and encourage cooperation between divorced parents. It's important that these services consider the relationships between parents and their children to enhance overall well-being. A follow-up plan should be established to ensure the child's needs remain the focus while promoting a collaborative approach to parenting without compromising their welfare.
- Social work services for divorced individuals should involve other family members, including children, as divorce affects the entire family. Including these members in counselling can improve relationships and contribute to everyone's well-being. However, children should not be present during adult interviews, as their understanding of divorce differs; they often blame themselves for their parents' separation.
- Social work services for divorced individuals should be provided continuously and long-term. Given the trauma and challenges associated with divorce, these services aim to help them cope and ultimately feel empowered to start anew in their lives.
- The DSD should create a program to improve social work services for divorced individuals. Managers and social workers across sectors should receive training to ensure effective implementation.
- Social workers should collaborate with professionals such as family counsellors, psychologists, and lawyers who provide services to divorced individuals. This teamwork enhances their understanding of available resources and keeps them updated on new developments. Moreover, there is a need to establish a specialized field focused on social work services for divorced persons.

⁵² Emery, *Renegotiating Family Relationships: Divorce, Custody, and Mediation*.

⁵³ Rosenberg, Jessica M. *Working in Social Work: The Real-World Guide to Practice Settings*. New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2009.

⁵⁴ Sekudu, "The Helping Process in Social Work."

⁵⁵ Jane, Boylan and Gillian Allan, "Family Disruption and Relationship Breakdown," in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Work*, ed. Martin Davies, 3rd ed. (United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 11–17.

CONCLUSION

The researcher believes that participants helped clarify the social work services available to divorced individuals. Many sought assistance for issues related to their children and finances, while some did not seek help for personal matters. Given the trauma of divorce and its impact, social work services are essential for coping with the stress and potential negative outcomes of this life transition. Divorce presents significant emotional, financial, and social challenges, yet social workers often play a limited role. Establishing a specialized branch of social work to support divorced individuals could more effectively address these issues. Those going through a divorce face emotional struggles such as grief, loss, and anxiety about the future. Social workers trained in these areas can provide essential support, helping clients process their feelings and adjust to new realities. Practical challenges, including co-parenting arrangements and legal matters, further complicate the process. Specialized social workers can guide clients through these complexities, ensuring their rights and needs are effectively addressed. Divorce can also lead to social isolation and stigma. A focused approach in social work could foster community support by connecting individuals with resources and support groups that understand their circumstances. Creating a specialized area in social work for divorced individuals is essential to address their emotional, practical, and social challenges, ultimately enhancing their well-being.

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