

Meaning-Making Processes in Adolescents After Experiencing Parental Divorce

Mariana. Nikolova¹, Daniel. Chen^{2*}

¹ Department of Family Counseling, New Bulgarian University, Sofia, Bulgaria

² Department of Psychology and Consulting, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

* Corresponding author email address: daniel.chen@psych.ubc.ca

Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Nikolova, M., & Chen, D. (2025). Meaning-Making Processes in Adolescents After Experiencing Parental Divorce. *Journal of Adolescent and Youth Psychological Studies*, 6(1), 127-135.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.jayps.6.1.14>



© 2025 the authors. Published by KMAN Publication Inc. (KMANPUB), Ontario, Canada. This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License.

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore the meaning-making processes of adolescents who have experienced parental divorce.

Methods and Materials: A qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach was employed to capture adolescents' lived experiences. The study included 24 adolescent participants aged 13 to 18 from various provinces in Canada who had experienced parental divorce within the past five years. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, and data collection was conducted using semi-structured in-depth interviews. Thematic saturation was achieved by the 24th interview. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis through NVivo software, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and central themes.

Findings: Analysis revealed four major themes: Emotional Navigation, Identity Reconstruction, Relational Shifts, and Meaning Construction. Adolescents initially experienced emotional confusion, sadness, and resentment, but some later developed emotional acceptance and resilience. They reported shifts in identity, including reevaluating family roles, trust, and future expectations. Relationships with parents, siblings, and peers were redefined, often marked by conflict, closeness, or detachment. Adolescents engaged in various cognitive strategies to make sense of the divorce, including narrative building, reframing, and philosophical reflection, which contributed to a renewed sense of self and outlook on future relationships.

Conclusion: Adolescents are active agents in processing parental divorce, engaging in complex meaning-making that influences their emotional well-being and developmental trajectory. These findings underscore the need for therapeutic and educational interventions that center adolescents' narratives and support reflective, adaptive meaning-making.

Keywords: Adolescents, parental divorce, meaning-making, identity development, qualitative research, narrative construction, emotional adjustment.

1. Introduction

Parental divorce represents one of the most disruptive events in a young person's developmental trajectory, carrying with it a cascade of emotional, relational, and psychological consequences that continue into adolescence and beyond. For many adolescents, divorce is not a discrete moment but an unfolding process that affects identity, security, and family belonging. While previous studies have consistently shown that adolescents in divorced families are at elevated risk for various psychosocial challenges—including depression, anxiety, aggression, and substance use—the mechanisms by which they interpret and ascribe meaning to these experiences remain less understood (Burt et al., 2008; Chase-Lansdale et al., 1995; Lansford et al., 2006; Tullius et al., 2021).

The impact of parental divorce on adolescents has been widely examined through a range of outcomes, from academic decline and behavioral disruption to emotional dysregulation and risky behaviors (Esmaeili et al., 2011; Forehand et al., 1990; Summers et al., 1998). Adolescents who have experienced parental divorce report higher rates of internalizing problems such as sadness, loneliness, and self-doubt, often accompanied by lower self-esteem and impaired coping mechanisms (Wang et al., 2019; Zhan et al., 2022). These internal experiences may persist for years after the divorce, especially when the familial environment remains unstable or conflictual. Research has shown that children from divorced families are more likely to develop problematic behaviors, such as alcohol use, aggression, and internet addiction, particularly when interparental conflict and poor communication are present (Dijk et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2008; Zakhour et al., 2021).

One of the key theoretical considerations in the divorce literature is how adolescents understand their changing environment and construct coherent narratives about their disrupted family structures. Meaning-making theory posits that individuals seek to integrate challenging life events into their existing beliefs, goals, and identity structures. When these events—like parental divorce—violate core assumptions about stability, love, or belonging, individuals must work to reconcile the discrepancy through reinterpretation and narrative reconstruction (Rejaän et al., 2022). Adolescents are in a particularly vulnerable stage for such processes: while they possess sufficient cognitive maturity to reflect on complex emotional dynamics, their social and emotional development is still underway, making them susceptible to fragmented or maladaptive meaning-

making. For instance, adolescents may internalize the divorce as a personal failure, view it as a predictor of future relationship instability, or reframe it as a catalyst for personal growth (Obeïd et al., 2021; Tay-Karapas et al., 2024).

Recent studies suggest that adolescents' post-divorce meaning-making is influenced by several mediating factors, including the quality of parent-child relationships, perceived parental support, custody arrangements, socioeconomic conditions, and exposure to interparental conflict (Jabbour et al., 2020; Tomčíková et al., 2009; Videon, 2002). Adolescents who feel emotionally abandoned or blamed by one parent may develop feelings of guilt, resentment, or mistrust that become central to their identity. Others may feel empowered or relieved by the end of a conflict-laden marriage and come to view the divorce as a necessary turning point. A large-scale Lebanese study found that adolescents from divorced families were more likely to exhibit signs of mental health distress—including depression, anxiety, and addictive behaviors—especially when family communication was poor and parental presence was inconsistent (Obeïd et al., 2021). These findings underscore the importance of listening to adolescents' personal interpretations of divorce rather than relying solely on observable behavioral outcomes.

Gender and cultural context also shape the meaning-making pathways available to adolescents. For example, research indicates that girls are more likely to experience internalizing symptoms, such as sadness or guilt, while boys are more prone to externalizing behaviors like aggression and defiance (Forehand et al., 1988; Yulaf & Semerci, 2019). Cultural attitudes toward divorce also influence adolescents' adjustment, particularly in communities where divorce carries social stigma or religious disapproval. In such contexts, adolescents may struggle with identity fragmentation and feelings of shame, further complicating their ability to construct a stable narrative around the event (Tomčíková et al., 2011; Yildirim, 2021). In contrast, adolescents in more socially progressive environments, where divorce is normalized or openly discussed, may have more resources for resilient adaptation and meaning reconstruction (Dijk et al., 2021).

Importantly, the adjustment process does not begin at the moment of divorce, but often well before, as parental conflict and instability gradually erode the adolescent's sense of security. Longitudinal data show that adolescents' mental health challenges tend to rise after the legal separation, not before, and persist well into young adulthood

(Tullius et al., 2021). This pattern indicates that it is not simply the legal rupture that causes harm, but the broader breakdown of familial structure, attachment bonds, and predictability. When these foundations are shaken, adolescents are forced to make sense of not only what happened, but also what it means for who they are and who they may become.

Narrative coherence is central to this meaning-making process. Adolescents engage in both internal dialogue and interpersonal storytelling to make sense of their experiences. They may craft personal narratives that attribute blame, justify behaviors, or seek redemption, often shaped by the narratives offered by their parents and broader social networks (Rejaän et al., 2022; Zhan et al., 2022). Those who are able to develop more integrated, reflective narratives tend to show better psychological outcomes. Conversely, fragmented, blame-heavy, or avoidant narratives can perpetuate emotional turmoil and relational difficulties. This finding supports the growing emphasis in intervention research on narrative-based and attachment-focused therapies that help adolescents integrate their family histories in constructive ways (Tay-Karapas et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the role of parenting after divorce is a critical determinant of adolescent outcomes. Studies emphasize that maternal functioning, parenting style, and emotional availability significantly affect how adolescents cope with divorce-related stress (Basson, 2015; Forehand et al., 1990). When parents remain emotionally attuned, supportive, and consistent in their caregiving roles, adolescents are more likely to experience the divorce as a manageable disruption rather than a psychological crisis. Conversely, when parents are preoccupied with their own distress or conflict with the other parent, adolescents may feel neglected or caught in the middle, leading to identity confusion and emotional withdrawal (Lansford et al., 2006; Summers et al., 1998).

As Tullius et al. note, the long-term effects of divorce are not inevitable but shaped by how adolescents internalize, process, and give meaning to what they have experienced (Tullius et al., 2021). Meaning-making, the active cognitive and emotional process by which individuals interpret significant life events, has emerged as a critical component of how adolescents adjust to family dissolution. This study explores the meaning-making processes of adolescents in post-divorce contexts, offering a qualitative perspective rooted in adolescents' subjective accounts.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore the meaning-making processes of adolescents who have experienced parental divorce. The goal was to understand the lived experiences and subjective interpretations of these adolescents in the aftermath of family separation. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance and depth of information. The final sample consisted of 24 adolescents between the ages of 13 and 18, all residing in various provinces of Canada, who had experienced the legal separation or divorce of their parents within the past five years. The inclusion criteria required that participants were willing to share their experiences and had sufficient verbal communication skills to articulate their thoughts during the interview process. Theoretical saturation was reached with the 24th participant, at which point no new themes or insights were emerging from the data.

2.2. Data Collection

Data collection was conducted exclusively through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. An interview guide was developed based on preliminary literature and expert input, focusing on participants' perceptions, emotional responses, coping mechanisms, and personal meaning-making following their parents' divorce. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on the participant's location and preference. Each interview lasted between 45 to 75 minutes and was audio-recorded with the informed consent of the participants and their legal guardians. All interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy of data for analysis.

2.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis followed a thematic approach using NVivo software (version 12) to manage and code the qualitative data. Transcripts were carefully read multiple times to become familiar with the content, and initial codes were generated inductively. These codes were then grouped into broader categories and themes that reflected the core aspects of meaning-making in adolescents post-divorce. The process involved constant comparison across transcripts to identify recurring patterns, contradictions, and unique experiences. Throughout the analysis, reflexivity was maintained to account for researcher bias, and member

checks were conducted with selected participants to validate the interpretation of findings. This rigorous analytical process ensured credibility and trustworthiness in capturing the complexity of adolescents' meaning-making experiences.

3. Findings and Results

The study included 24 adolescent participants between the ages of 13 and 18 years old ($M = 15.6$), all of whom had experienced parental divorce within the past five years. The sample consisted of 14 females (58.3%) and 10 males

(41.7%), with participants residing across five provinces in Canada, including Ontario ($n = 8$), British Columbia ($n = 6$), Alberta ($n = 5$), Quebec ($n = 3$), and Nova Scotia ($n = 2$). Regarding family structure post-divorce, 15 adolescents (62.5%) lived primarily with their mothers, 5 (20.8%) with their fathers, and 4 (16.7%) in joint custody arrangements. In terms of time since the divorce, 9 participants (37.5%) had experienced the separation within the past two years, while the remaining 15 (62.5%) had lived in post-divorce circumstances for between two to five years. All participants were enrolled in secondary school at the time of the interviews.

Table 1

The Results of Coding Phases

| Category (Main Theme) | Subcategory | Concepts (Open Codes) |
|----------------------------|--|---|
| 1. Emotional Navigation | Confusion and Emotional Overload | Sudden mood swings, crying without reason, emotional shutdown, feeling overwhelmed, mental fatigue |
| | Grief and Loss | Missing the family unit, sense of abandonment, emotional emptiness, yearning for the past |
| | Anger and Resentment | Blaming one parent, anger at both parents, frustration with situation, irritability |
| | Coping with Sadness | Listening to music, writing in a journal, isolation, talking to friends, crying in private |
| | Emergence of Acceptance | Feeling at peace, understanding parental perspective, letting go, emotional growth, less reactive responses |
| 2. Identity Reconstruction | Lingering Emotional Uncertainty | Emotional numbness, fear of future relationships, recurring sadness, avoidance of feelings |
| | Moments of Relief | Feeling lighter, less tension at home, sense of freedom, reduced conflict-related anxiety |
| | Redefining Self | Who am I now?, redefining family identity, self-esteem fluctuations, seeking independence |
| | Questioning Belonging | Feeling displaced, choosing sides, not fitting in, dual household confusion |
| | Adjusting to New Family Roles | Acting as caretaker, becoming the 'emotional support', taking on adult tasks |
| 3. Relational Shifts | Personal Growth | Becoming more mature, learning resilience, increased self-awareness, developing empathy |
| | Value Reevaluation | Questioning marriage, skepticism about commitment, reevaluating trust, redefining family values |
| | Changes in Parent-Child Relationships | Feeling closer to one parent, reduced communication, emotional distance, fear of disappointing parent |
| | Sibling Dynamics | Becoming protective, bonding over shared pain, sibling rivalry, tension in responsibilities |
| | Peer Support and Influence | Sharing with trusted friends, comparing stories, peer advice, validation from friends |
| 4. Meaning Construction | Trust and Intimacy in Relationships | Difficulty trusting others, avoiding vulnerability, slow to open up, fear of abandonment |
| | Extended Family Role | Support from grandparents, pressure from relatives, conflicting narratives, feeling judged |
| | Searching for Reasons | Why did they divorce?, internalizing blame, seeking logic, confusion about cause |
| | Narrative Building | Creating a personal story, framing the experience, aligning facts with emotions |
| | Reframing the Divorce Experience | Viewing it as a life lesson, seeing positives, detaching from past pain |
| | Spiritual and Philosophical Reflection | Belief in fate, questioning fairness, growth through suffering, religious interpretation |
| | Future Outlook | Optimism about relationships, fear of commitment, cautious hope, desire for stability |

The analysis of interview data from 24 adolescents revealed four main themes that reflected the meaning-making processes following parental divorce: *Emotional*

Navigation, Identity Reconstruction, Relational Shifts, and Meaning Construction. Each theme comprised multiple

subcategories and related open codes, grounded in the adolescents' narratives. The results are detailed below.

Within the first theme, *Emotional Navigation*, adolescents reported experiencing *confusion and emotional overload* shortly after the divorce. Participants described this stage as marked by sudden mood swings and an inability to understand their emotions. One adolescent stated, "I didn't know why I was crying all the time, I just felt like something was breaking inside me." Others referred to the experience as feeling "mentally foggy" or "emotionally paralyzed." This emotional flood was often followed by an intense period of *grief and loss*, where adolescents described longing for the way their family used to be. One participant shared, "I kept hoping things would go back to normal, like before the fighting got bad." The sense of abandonment and loss was frequently described as a "hole" or "empty space" in their emotional world.

Adolescents also expressed *anger and resentment* directed at one or both parents. Many felt frustrated about being caught in the middle of their parents' conflict. "I hated them for a while," one participant admitted, "because they ruined everything." This anger was not always sustained but often coexisted with moments of affection or confusion. Simultaneously, many developed personal methods for *coping with sadness*, including listening to music, journaling, or withdrawing into solitude. "Writing helped," said one teen. "It was the only place I could say what I really felt." Others mentioned crying in secret or confiding in trusted friends.

With time, some adolescents described the *emergence of acceptance* in their emotional processing. They began to "understand why it happened" and described feeling "more at peace." One participant noted, "I realized my parents were just human. They made mistakes, but it doesn't mean they don't love me." However, this was not universal. A subset continued to struggle with *lingering emotional uncertainty*, describing persistent fear, numbness, or avoidance. "I still don't like talking about it," said one adolescent, "because it messes with my head." At the same time, others experienced *moments of relief*, particularly when post-divorce life brought reduced conflict or more personal freedom. "It's quieter now. Less yelling. I can breathe," one teen reflected.

The second major theme, *Identity Reconstruction*, involved adolescents reconfiguring their self-concept. Through *redefining self*, participants often questioned who they were in the new family dynamic. "I didn't know where I belonged anymore," said one youth. This was frequently tied to changes in family structure and routine. Adolescents

also experienced *questioning belonging*, particularly when navigating life between two households. "It felt like I had to be a different person with each parent," one participant explained. Others shared that they "didn't really fit in anywhere," especially during extended family gatherings.

A notable shift occurred in the area of *adjusting to new family roles*. Many adolescents assumed responsibilities beyond their years, such as caring for younger siblings or supporting an emotionally distraught parent. "I had to be the strong one," said one participant. "There was no one else." Some described this as empowering, while others felt burdened or resentful. Despite the challenges, many reflected on *personal growth*, reporting that the experience made them more resilient and empathetic. "I matured faster," one teen said. "I get people's pain more now."

Another important subcategory was *value reevaluation*. Participants began questioning core beliefs about love, trust, and family. "I don't know if I ever want to get married," remarked one adolescent. Others described reevaluating what they looked for in future relationships or developing a more critical view of romantic commitments. Some described this shift as disillusionment; others as a form of clarity.

The third major theme, *Relational Shifts*, captured changes in interpersonal dynamics. Under *changes in parent-child relationships*, many adolescents described a closer bond with one parent and emotional distance from the other. "Me and my mom became like best friends," one teen shared, "but I barely spoke to my dad for months." Others described being "caught in the middle," feeling pressure to take sides or fearing rejection. *Sibling dynamics* also shifted significantly. For some, the divorce brought siblings closer. "We had each other's backs," said one participant. Others experienced rivalry or tension due to changes in responsibilities or perceived favoritism.

In terms of *peer support and influence*, friendships became crucial sources of emotional expression and validation. Many relied on trusted friends to share their feelings or compare experiences. "My best friend's parents divorced too, so she just got it," one teen said. Peers were often seen as safe havens where adolescents could express confusion and pain without judgment. *Trust and intimacy in relationships* became difficult for several adolescents, who described being more guarded or skeptical. "It's hard to believe people won't leave," said one participant, referencing the fear of abandonment that lingered after the divorce.

The role of *extended family* also emerged as complex. Some adolescents described supportive grandparents or aunts, while others encountered criticism or conflicting narratives. “My grandma blamed my mom and made me feel guilty for loving her,” one adolescent disclosed. These conflicting loyalties further complicated their emotional and social landscape.

The final theme, *Meaning Construction*, focused on how adolescents tried to make sense of their experience. In *searching for reasons*, participants often questioned why the divorce occurred and whether it was their fault. “I kept thinking maybe if I’d behaved better, they’d still be together,” one teen admitted. These internal dialogues reflected a deep need to impose order on a confusing situation. Through *narrative building*, adolescents crafted personal stories to understand their family’s transformation. These narratives helped integrate painful events into a coherent life story. “I tell myself it happened for a reason, even if I don’t know what it is yet,” said one participant.

Reframing the divorce experience allowed some adolescents to extract meaning or lessons from the event. “It taught me to be independent,” one explained, while another remarked, “Maybe it was better than watching them fight all the time.” *Spiritual and philosophical reflection* also surfaced, with participants invoking religious beliefs or philosophical perspectives. “Maybe God wanted me to grow,” said one adolescent. Others questioned the fairness of their situation, leading to existential contemplation.

Finally, the subcategory *future outlook* revealed both hope and hesitancy. Some adolescents expressed cautious optimism about future relationships and family life. “I still believe in love,” said one participant, “but I’m more careful now.” Others were wary, unsure whether stability was attainable. “I just want something different for my own kids,” one teen concluded.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the meaning-making processes among adolescents who experienced parental divorce, with findings organized into four major themes: Emotional Navigation, Identity Reconstruction, Relational Shifts, and Meaning Construction. Through semi-structured interviews with 24 adolescents in Canada, the study highlighted how adolescents actively interpret, reframe, and adapt to the psychological, relational, and existential dimensions of family dissolution. The results reveal both the emotional intensity of the experience and the complexity of personal

and social identity renegotiation, illustrating the need for nuanced understandings of adolescent adjustment in post-divorce contexts.

The first theme, Emotional Navigation, reflected adolescents' emotional trajectory from confusion and grief to acceptance and, in some cases, emotional growth. The early stages of parental divorce were marked by emotional overload, sadness, and resentment—emotions previously identified as core responses to parental separation (Forehand et al., 1988; Oldehinkel et al., 2008). Many participants described feeling overwhelmed and mentally “shut down” in the immediate aftermath of divorce, aligning with findings that early adolescence is a particularly sensitive developmental window where emotional regulation is vulnerable to disruption (Yulaf & Semerci, 2019). The co-occurrence of sadness, anger, and guilt has been well documented in prior studies, especially when adolescents struggle to understand or process the reasons behind the separation (Wang et al., 2019). However, the emergence of emotional acceptance over time among some participants echoes the suggestion that resilience and recovery are possible when adolescents can engage in reflective processing and gradually detach from conflictual family dynamics (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1995; Summers et al., 1998).

The second major theme, Identity Reconstruction, captured how adolescents reevaluated their self-perception, familial roles, and values in the wake of divorce. Participants often questioned their sense of belonging within their newly configured families and reported adopting adult-like responsibilities prematurely—a dynamic that has been described as “parentification” in previous literature (Forehand et al., 1990). These findings are consistent with research suggesting that adolescents in post-divorce households may feel compelled to stabilize their environment by taking on caregiving roles or emotional mediation (Lansford et al., 2006). The data also revealed adolescents' critical reflection on relational values such as trust, commitment, and love, supporting the work of Tay-Karapas et al., who emphasized the profound shifts in attachment expectations following family disruption (Tay-Karapas et al., 2024). Adolescents' personal growth through adversity—reported in this study as developing independence, empathy, and emotional insight—further aligns with Rejaän et al., who found that narrative coherence and personal reflection were strongly associated with improved psychosocial adjustment (Rejaän et al., 2022).

Relational Shifts, the third core theme, described how adolescents redefined relationships with parents, siblings, peers, and extended family. Many participants reported a strengthened bond with one parent alongside a deteriorated or more distant relationship with the other, a pattern consistently observed in prior research (Tullius et al., 2021; Videon, 2002). In some cases, parental loyalty conflicts created emotional strain and identity confusion, particularly when adolescents were expected to mediate between feuding parents. The shifting dynamic with siblings was also noted, with some participants reporting increased emotional closeness due to shared experiences of distress, while others described new sources of conflict stemming from unequal caregiving responsibilities or perceived favoritism. These findings support those of Dijk et al., who emphasized how family structure changes influence the emotional bonds among siblings and peers (Dijk et al., 2021).

Moreover, peer relationships emerged as a significant source of emotional validation and identity negotiation. Participants who had friends with similar divorce experiences often felt more understood and less isolated. This mirrors findings from Zakhour et al., who noted that peer affiliation can buffer against the development of aggression and hostility in adolescents navigating parental separation (Zakhour et al., 2021). However, trust and intimacy in peer and romantic relationships remained difficult for many participants. The reluctance to engage emotionally, fear of abandonment, and skepticism toward long-term commitment resonate with existing findings on how early attachment ruptures can generalize into broader relational mistrust (Thompson et al., 2008). Additionally, some participants reported experiencing negative messaging from extended family members, particularly when relatives blamed one parent or reinforced polarizing narratives. This adds complexity to previous findings by Obeid et al., who highlighted the role of extended family in shaping adolescents' coping capacity and psychological outcomes (Obeid et al., 2021).

The final theme, Meaning Construction, demonstrated adolescents' efforts to understand and integrate the divorce into their broader life story. Participants engaged in a range of cognitive strategies, including seeking reasons for the divorce, reframing the experience as a lesson, and reflecting on philosophical or spiritual meanings. The tendency to internalize blame in early stages of the process reflects longstanding findings that adolescents may perceive themselves as contributors to family instability (Esmaeili et al., 2011; Forehand et al., 1988). However, many

participants eventually arrived at narratives that emphasized self-growth, resilience, and a sense of closure. These results parallel the work of Rejaän et al., who emphasized that adolescents who construct coherent, less self-blaming narratives are more likely to experience positive long-term outcomes (Rejaän et al., 2022). Similarly, the development of future-oriented thinking—whether hopeful or cautious—supports earlier conclusions by Chase-Lansdale et al. that adolescents' beliefs about their own futures are shaped significantly by how they interpret their parents' relationship history (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1995).

This study also revealed the role of cultural and societal factors in shaping adolescents' interpretations of divorce. Although Canada provides relatively progressive social and legal frameworks around divorce, adolescents still reported feeling societal pressure or judgment, especially when navigating extended family or community expectations. These cultural influences have been explored in cross-cultural studies such as those by Tomčíková et al., who found that adolescents in stigmatizing social environments reported higher rates of psychological distress and maladaptive coping, including substance use and emotional suppression (Tomčíková et al., 2009; Tomčíková et al., 2011). Furthermore, adolescents' efforts to incorporate spiritual or philosophical reflection into their meaning-making echo findings by Zhan et al., who emphasized the role of emotion regulation and belief systems in protecting mental health following parental separation (Zhan et al., 2022).

Taken together, these findings reinforce a developmental understanding of adolescents as active, meaning-making agents in the context of family disruption. Rather than being passive recipients of emotional trauma, adolescents demonstrated a variety of cognitive and relational strategies to cope, adapt, and grow in the aftermath of divorce. The diversity of responses—from grief and guilt to resilience and reframing—illustrates the importance of capturing subjective experiences through qualitative methods. These nuanced insights support the increasing shift in adolescent mental health literature toward person-centered, narrative-based models of psychological support (Jabbour et al., 2020; Tay-Karapas et al., 2024).

5. Limitations & Suggestions

Despite the richness of the data, this study is not without limitations. First, the sample was limited to 24 adolescents from Canada, which may limit the generalizability of

findings to other cultural or national contexts. While regional variation within Canada was considered, broader diversity in terms of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and religious background was not fully explored. Second, the data collection relied solely on semi-structured interviews, which, although effective for eliciting subjective experiences, are also subject to memory bias and social desirability effects. Adolescents may have filtered their responses based on how they wished to present themselves or their families. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the study captures meaning-making at a single point in time. Given that meaning-making is an evolving process, longitudinal research would provide greater insight into how narratives shift over the years. Finally, the absence of triangulated data sources—such as input from parents, teachers, or mental health professionals—limits the ability to contextualize adolescents' self-reports within their broader relational environments.

Future studies should aim to explore meaning-making processes across different cultural settings and among more diverse adolescent populations. Including participants from varied ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds would enrich the understanding of how cultural narratives influence meaning construction. Longitudinal qualitative studies could capture the evolving nature of adolescents' interpretations over time, especially through key life transitions such as the move to adulthood, forming romantic relationships, or becoming parents themselves. Furthermore, integrating multiple data sources—including observations, parental perspectives, and school performance—would enable more comprehensive insight into how adolescents' narratives relate to their functioning across domains. Comparative studies between adolescents experiencing parental divorce and those experiencing parental death or other forms of family disruption could also illuminate differences and similarities in meaning-making trajectories.

Practitioners working with adolescents from divorced families should prioritize creating safe, open environments where young people can explore and narrate their experiences without fear of judgment. Therapeutic approaches should incorporate narrative-based and emotion-focused techniques that empower adolescents to construct coherent and self-compassionate understandings of their family transitions. Educators and school counselors should be trained to recognize the diverse emotional responses adolescents may exhibit following divorce and should offer consistent support rather than assuming behavioral indicators always reflect externalizing disorders.

Community programs should provide platforms for peer connection, especially for adolescents who may feel isolated or stigmatized due to their family structure. Lastly, parents themselves should be supported in developing cooperative co-parenting strategies and maintaining open, age-appropriate communication with their children to reduce confusion and prevent emotional triangulation.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who cooperated in carrying out this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

References

- Basson, W. (2015). EVALUATION AND EXPLORATION OF THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF THE "HELPING DIVORCED PARENTS TO BENEFIT ADOLESCENT CHILDREN" PROGRAMME. *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development*, 27(1), 45-64. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2415-5829/777>
- Burt, S. A., Barnes, A. R., McGue, M., & Iacono, W. G. (2008). Parental Divorce and Adolescent Delinquency: Ruling Out the Impact of Common Genes. *Developmental Psychology*, 44(6), 1668-1677. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0013477>
- Chase-Lansdale, P. L., Cherlin, A. J., & Kiernan, K. (1995). The Long-Term Effects of Parental Divorce on the Mental Health of Young Adults: A Developmental Perspective. *Child development*, 66(6), 1614. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1131900>

- Dijk, R. v., Valk, I. E. v. d., Vossen, H. G. M., Branje, S., & Deković, M. (2021). Problematic Internet Use in Adolescents From Divorced Families: The Role of Family Factors and Adolescents' Self-Esteem. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 18(7), 3385. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18073385>
- Esmaili, N. S., Juhari, R., & Mansor, M. (2011). Post-Divorce Parental Conflict, Economic Hardship and Academic Achievement Among Adolescents of Divorced Families. *Asian Social Science*, 7(12). <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v7n12p119>
- Forehand, R., McCombs, A., Long, N. J., Brody, G. H., & Fauber, R. (1988). Early Adolescent Adjustment to Recent Parental Divorce: The Role of Interparental Conflict and Adolescent Sex as Mediating Variables. *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology*, 56(4), 624-627. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-006x.56.4.624>
- Forehand, R., Thomas, A. M., Wierson, M., Brody, G. H., & Fauber, R. (1990). Role of Maternal Functioning and Parenting Skills in Adolescent Functioning Following Parental Divorce. *Journal of abnormal psychology*, 99(3), 278-283. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-843x.99.3.278>
- Jabbour, N., Rached, V. A., Haddad, C., Salameh, P., Sacre, H., Hallit, R., Soufia, M., Obeid, S., & Hallit, S. (2020). Association Between Parental Separation and Addictions in Adolescents: Results of a National Lebanese Study. *BMC public health*, 20(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-09108-3>
- Lansford, J. E., Malone, P. S., Castellino, D. R., Dodge, K. A., Pettit, G. S., & Bates, J. E. (2006). Trajectories of Internalizing, Externalizing, and Grades for Children Who Have and Have Not Experienced Their Parents' Divorce or Separation. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20(2), 292-301. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.20.2.292>
- Obeid, S., Karaki, G. A., Haddad, C., Sacre, H., Soufia, M., Hallit, R., Salameh, P., & Hallit, S. (2021). Association Between Parental Divorce and Mental Health Outcomes Among Lebanese Adolescents: Results of a National Study. *BMC pediatrics*, 21(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12887-021-02926-3>
- Oldehinkel, A. J., Ormel, J., Veenstra, R., Winter, A. F. d., & Verhulst, F. C. (2008). Parental Divorce and Offspring Depressive Symptoms: Dutch Developmental Trends During Early Adolescence. *Journal of marriage and family*, 70(2), 284-293. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2008.00481.x>
- Rejaän, Z., Valk, I. E. v. d., Schrama, W., Aalst, I. v., Chen, A., Christina, G. J. d. B., Houtkamp, J. M., & Branje, S. (2022). Adolescents' Post-Divorce Sense of Belonging. *European Psychologist*, 27(4), 277-290. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000444>
- Summers, P., Forehand, R., Armistead, L., & Tannenbaum, L. (1998). Parental Divorce During Early Adolescence in Caucasian Families: The Role of Family Process Variables in Predicting the Long-Term Consequences for Early Adult Psychosocial Adjustment. *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology*, 66(2), 327-336. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-006x.66.2.327>
- Tay-Karapas, K., Guzmán-González, M., Gómez, F., Comino, P., Salaberria, K., & Bahamondes, J. (2024). An Attachment-Based Pilot Program to Promote Adolescent Adjustment to Parental Divorce. *Child and adolescent psychiatry and mental health*, 18(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13034-024-00729-9>
- Thompson, R. G., Lizardi, D., Keyes, K. M., & Hasin, D. S. (2008). Childhood or Adolescent Parental Divorce/Separation, Parental History of Alcohol Problems, and Offspring Lifetime Alcohol Dependence. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 98(3), 264-269. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2008.06.011>
- Tomčíková, Z., Gecková, A. M., Orosová, O., Dijk, J. P. v., & Reijneveld, S. A. (2009). Parental Divorce and Adolescent Drunkenness: Role of Socioeconomic Position, Psychological Well-Being and Social Support. *European Addiction Research*, 15(4), 202-208. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000231883>
- Tomčíková, Z., Gecková, A. M., Reijneveld, S. A., & Dijk, J. P. v. (2011). Parental Divorce, Adolescents' Feelings Toward Parents and Drunkenness in Adolescents. *European Addiction Research*, 17(3), 113-118. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000323280>
- Tullius, J. M., Marlou, L. A. d. K., Almansa, J., & Reijneveld, S. A. (2021). Adolescents' Mental Health Problems Increase After Parental Divorce, Not Before, and Persist Until Adulthood: A Longitudinal TRAILS Study. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 31(6), 969-978. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-020-01715-0>
- Videon, T. M. (2002). The Effects of Parent-Adolescent Relationships and Parental Separation on Adolescent Well-Being. *Journal of marriage and family*, 64(2), 489-503. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2002.00489.x>
- Wang, L., Zhang, Y., Yin, H., Zhang, Z., Tao, Y., Ye, X., Chen, L., Feng, Y., & Liu, Y. (2019). The Effects of Parental Relationships, and Gender and Grade Differences on Depressive Disorder in Chinese Adolescents: The Evidence From Multiple Cross-Sectional Surveys (1999–2016). *China Population and Development Studies*, 3(1), 37-52. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42379-019-00033-6>
- Yildirim, O. (2021). Divorce, Loss and Grief: An Overview of Their Effect on Children and Adolescents and Theoretical Framework. *Sosyal Bilimler Ve Eğitim Dergisi*, 4(2), 297-308. <https://doi.org/10.53047/josse.945281>
- Yulaf, Y., & Semerci, Z. B. (2019). Comparison of Psychiatric Disorders Between Children With a History of Parental Divorce and Parental Death. *Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences*(0), 1. <https://doi.org/10.5455/pbs.20181112085809>
- Zakhour, M., Haddad, C., Salameh, P., Hanna, L. A., Sacre, H., Hallit, R., Soufia, M., Obeid, S., & Hallit, S. (2021). Association Between Parental Divorce and Anger, Aggression, and Hostility in Adolescents: Results of a National Lebanese Study. *Journal of Family Issues*, 44(3), 587-609. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513x211054468>
- Zhan, C., Mao, Z., Zhao, X., & Shi, J. (2022). Association Between Parents' Relationship, Emotion-Regulation Strategies, and Psychotic-Like Experiences in Adolescents. *Children*, 9(6), 815. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children9060815>