

A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experience of Hispanic Women with Paternal Abandonment and Their Conflict Skills

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Abstract

Divorce is a separation in the union of partners in marriage, and father abandonment is separation of the father from the child(ren). While father abandonment can be regularly experienced by child(ren) as a result of divorce, father abandonment can result from any reason a father is separated from the child(ren). In this study, the interest was to explore and investigate the lived experiences of women who had been abandoned by their fathers at a young age to better understand the relational outcomes and impacts they perceived on their lives. While divorce clearly has negative impacts on children, the focus of this study was to explore what impacts it specifically has on Hispanic females when they become adults, and when it is coupled with father abandonment. This study utilized phenomenological interviews to understand the lived experiences of Hispanic women who were abandoned by their fathers to explore their conflict management skills. This research was guided by the following research question: *What are the lived experiences of Hispanic women who were abandoned by their fathers before the age of seven?* This study included phenomenological interviews with twenty-five participants and used the theoretical framework of Attachment Theory, Social Constructivism, and Phenomenology to inform the findings. This research adds to the body of research on conflict analysis by giving this community of women a voice to share their unique perspectives. The findings provide unique insights, revelations, and perspectives from participants who experienced paternal abandonment which are not generalizable to the general population, but which may translate to helping others who relate to these individuals through their lived experiences. This research may help others gain a better understanding of father abandonment from the perspective of these Hispanic women based on how they perceived paternal abandonment and their conflict resolution skills.

Introduction

Paternal abandonment of Hispanic women was explored through phenomenological analysis. According to Boyd and Heller (2017), “People going through divorce often endure feelings of anger, guilt, shame, betrayal, loss, isolation, anxiety, sadness, and fear, as well as a multitude of experiences they may not even be aware of. Members of the couple may grieve the loss of a dream, and children typically experience a multitude of emotions as the family they once knew changes its structure and relationships” (p. 122). In fact, in families where parents are deemed as high conflict, children may develop an inclination to side with one parent and distance or alienate from the other parent, which may lead to an alienation of one parent (Boyd & Heller, 2017). In other cases, a parent may decide to depart from the family in order to avoid negative interactions

as they perceive that conflict is destructive for children to witness and this leads to parental abandonment (Boyd & Heller, 2017).

Paternal abandonment at a young age can have several effects on a child's self-esteem and intimacy as well as premature development, early sexual activity, and unstable relationships as adults (Comings et. al, 2002; Dennis, 1998; Krohn & Bogan, 2001; McGolerick, 2012). This is contrary to children who experience a stable environment when growing up (Comings et al., 2002). However, there are several factors that can influence a child's view of the world. Some of those factors include cultural beliefs, attitudes, and values. Therefore, whether a child can adjust to an event such as abandonment can depend on society's outlook on family, marriage, women's status, and children's rights (Kurdek, 1981). Furthermore, Stolberg, Complair, and Wells (1987) added that there are factors that can actually help in a child's development by placing an emphasis on the demands of having to learn new skills. For example, these authors point out that children often need to develop new social skills to create new relationships and communication skills to express their feelings while they also have to develop internal control skills given the lack of attention they received from their parents. Portes, Howell, Brown, Eichenberger, and Mas (1992) also added that the ability to develop new skills helps children interact effectively with parents and friends which then results in the ability to manage stress effectively.

The main purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain a better understanding of the perspectives of the Hispanic women in this study who have been abandoned by their fathers at youth to see what they revealed about their lived experiences. The overarching research question for this study was "What are the lived experiences of Hispanic women who were abandoned by their fathers before the age of seven?"

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Phenomenology is considered a theoretical framework as well as a methodological process for analysis, which guided this research. Phenomenology requires studying a small group of participants through in-depth interviews and prolonged engagement, so participants are able to share and reveal their lived experiences. Researchers utilizing this approach bracket their assumptions and experiences in order to uphold participants' authentic lived experiences with the goal of better understanding and discovering these lived experiences with others.

Phenomenology was first introduced by the German Mathematician, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and it has a strong philosophical component that honors the perspective and voice of participants (Creswell, 2007). In phenomenology, researchers explore the individual's lived experiences through unstructured interviews where participants are given the opportunity to share their perspectives and meanings. Participants are chosen because of their unique experiences with a phenomenon of interest with the forefront goals of discovery and understanding of participants' lived experiences.

Conflict

The current study focused on how conflict was described by participants as they shared their lived experiences. From a phenomenological framework, this study allowed participants to self-define and describe conflict in their own voices; however, past research yields vast notions and definitions of conflict and approaches to conflict. In order to identify conflict management

skills, one must first understand the meaning of conflict. Wilkin (2022, p. 3) argued “conflicts happen” and Hauss (2020, p. 9) argued that “conflict is a fact of life” and most definitions of conflict resonate with these sentiments that conflict is a natural part of life that involves differences in norms, values, beliefs, perceptions, and expectations. The most important aspect of conflict is that it involves human interaction and interdependence (Folger et al., 2009). Conflict is defined by how individuals behave with one another, particularly through the use of verbal and nonverbal communication. Communication is vital to interpersonal conflicts because communication can create conflict, communication reflects conflict, and communication is the source of positive or negative management of conflict (Hocker, 2007).

Jones and Brinkert (2008) defined a conflict style as a tendency or behavior for a specific conflict situation. They described a five-style conflict model, which includes: avoiding, accommodating, competing, compromising, and collaborating. Avoiding is expressed by not addressing conflict. This type of style shows very low concern for oneself and others. Accommodating is to accept the other person’s position or interest over yours. Competing is defined as seeing your interests or concerns as a priority over the other party’s interests or concerns. Compromising is where both parties give in a little in their interests and concerns. Last but not least, collaborating means that all the parties try to work together to meet all or most of their interests and positions (Jones & Brinkert, 2008). Knowing the five conflict styles is important in the process of analyzing how people respond and approach conflict. Wilkin (2022) shared that “we develop our conflict management styles early in life based on our families’ views of conflict, and that these styles can be difficult to change, even when they are not productive (p. 3). The aim of the current study was to discover how participants perceived conflict and understand how they perceived the origin of their conflict management skills and approaches from their lived experiences.

Abandonment

Another key focus of this study was to better understand parental abandonment and its impacts. According to the Encyclopedia of Children’s Health (2012), Dennis (1998) and Condrell (2003), fathers abandon their children in different ways such as the following: through divorce, death, military duty, addictions, incarceration, and chronic physical or mental illness. Some are honorable such as when the father has to leave the family to serve his country, while others are often perceived as stigmatizing such as when the father has to leave due to incarceration or substance abuse. In general, children suffer from some degree of abandonment at one time or another, but a definite perceived paternal abandonment was the focus of this study. Goossen (2009) argued that the way a daughter loses her father has a significant impact on how she will view men in life. Specifically, girls who have little contact with their fathers have difficulties forming long-lasting relationships and this is related to negative parental attachment styles they experienced as youth. In contrast, daughters who were raised with their fathers growing up learned to better interact and form more lasting relationships with males because they had a male figure in the father-daughter relationship model. If the relationship or role model was positive, a girl would likely view males with confidence and trust. If the relationship or role model was negative, the girl would likely view males with doubt and fear (Goossen, 2009). The current study was interested in the lived experiences of women to investigate how their relationship with their fathers impacted their perspectives.

Paternal Abandonment and its Effects

Paternal abandonment and its perceived effects were deemed important topics to this study because it is necessary to understand the meaning of paternal abandonment and its implications. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2017) in 2017, there were 2.9 divorces for every 1,000 population, and in the state of Florida, there were 3.6 divorces for every 1,000 population. Even though divorce has played a significant role in marriage in the last decade, it is important to recognize that at times divorce can be a good outcome for a child's well-being. When conflict is pervasive in a marriage, divorce can provide a sense of respite to the child. In a high conflict household, when parents divorce, the child is often able to accept a single parent with a better attitude (Cui et al., 2010; Kalmijn, 2015). However, in instances when the father completely leaves the home and has no contact with the child, the most negative implications are experienced, and problems often surround the development of the child. Dennis (1998) and Krohn & Bogan (2001) defined an absent father as one who leaves and does not provide any explanations to the children as to why he is leaving the home and does not stay in contact with his children.

Methodology

Participants

In this research, 25 women of Hispanic descent who reside in South Florida were identified and interviewed. All 25 participants shared their lived experiences of what it was like growing up without a father and how this impacted their lives.

According to Moustakas (1994) the recommended number of participants should ideally be around 25 individuals who have experienced the phenomenon, so this recommendation was followed by including 25 in this study. Participants met the following criteria for participation in the study: all participants resided in South Florida, all participants were Hispanic women or of Hispanic descent. Specifically, seven were Colombian, five were Puerto Rican, four were Nicaraguan, two were Cuban, two were Cuban/Puerto Rican, one was Venezuelan, one was Peruvian, one participant was Dominican, one participant was Venezuelan/Colombian, and one participant was El Salvadorian. The age range of the participants was from 26 years to 39 years of age.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Twenty-Five Participants

Participants	Age	Origin	Career	Education	Type of Abandonment	Age Abandoned	Status	Children
1 Allison	33	Cuban	Accountant Administrator	Some College	Father left	2	Single	1
2 Barbara	39	Puerto Rican	Paralegal	Associate's Degree	Mom took her away	5	Single	No
3 Cassie	33	Nicaraguan	Program Manager	Bachelor's Degree	Divorce	3	In Relationship	No
4 Debbie	38	Puerto Rican	Investigator for FDA	Master's Degree	Divorce	5	Married	2
5 Estephania	38	Colombian	Investigator for FDA	Graduate School	Father left	1	Single	No
6 Fiona	30	Venezuelan/Colombian	Unemployed	Some College	Father left	3	Single	1

7	Georgette	29	Nicaraguan	Secretary	Bachelor's Degree	Dependency		In Relationship	No
8	Heather	34	Colombian	Hygienist	High School	Incarceration	Before Birth	Married	6
9	Isis	29	Puerto Rican	Referral Coordinator	Associate's Degree	Dependency	7	Married	2
10	Jessica	39	Nicaraguan	Registered Nurse	Master's Degree	Military	Birth	Married	
11	Katherine	26	Colombian	Sales Specialist	Associate's Degree	Father left	Birth	In Relationship	No
12	Lauren	28	Cuban/ Puerto Rican	Bartender	Some College	Father left	Before Birth	In Relationship	No
13	Maria	39	Cuban/ Puerto Rican	Unemployed	Bachelor's Degree	Divorce	5	Married	2
14	Nancy	27	Colombian	Switch Board Operator	Bachelor's Degree	Father left	Birth	Never been Married ¹	No
15	Oprah	30	Puerto Rican	Unemployed	Bachelor's Degree	Father left	6	In Relationship	No
16	Pepita	27	Nicaraguan	Clinical Research	Master's Degree	Divorce	3	Single	No
17	Quiana	26	Venezuelan	Real Estate Developer	Bachelor's Degree	Divorce	5	Single	No
18	Rosita	31	Cuban	Registered Mental Health	Master's Degree	Father left	6	Married	2
19	Sandra	30	Puerto Rican	Realtor	Bachelor's Degree	Father left	3	Single	No
20	Teresa	33	Peruvian	Student	Associate degree	Father left	3	Single	No
21	Ursula	28	El Salvadorian	Medical Assistant	Bachelor's Degree	Father left	Do Not Remember	Single	No
22	Viviana	37	Dominican	Government Studies	Associate's Degree	Dependency		Married	1
23	Wendy	38	Colombian	Professor	Master's Degree	Divorce	4	Married	2
24	Xiomara	27	Colombian	Stay-Home Mom	Associate's Degree	Divorce	4	In Relationship	4
25	Yesenia	34	Colombian	Manager	Some College	Father left	1 or 2	Married	3

Recruitment

The study commenced after approval was granted from the Internal Review Board (IRB) since this study involved human research and a sensitive topic of parental abandonment. There were three types of recruitment methods used to secure participants in this study as follows: social media, direct contact, and using snowballing or the chain technique, where according to Creswell (2007) participants identified people they knew who fit the requirements and who could provide rich information. A Facebook advertisement was created that specifically targeted the participants sought for this study. Recruitment was focused on South Florida with women between the ages of 25-40. Information was shared transparently so participants could determine whether they qualified to participate in the research study. A link then took them to a registration page that was created under Eventbrite. Participants provided information such as their name and contact details in this portal. Participants were then contacted by the researchers and those who agreed to participate met at a mutually agreed time and location to sign the informed consent and complete the interview. For those who were not able to meet in person, the informed consent form was signed electronically, and a telephone interview was conducted. A flyer was also created and was distributed to potentially interested participants or someone they knew who may

be interested. Flyers were also posted at different locations throughout several universities in the South Florida area. The flyer had a Facebook page link where they could go for more information or to register. If the participant met the researchers' criteria, then a brief research synopsis was given to the participant. Researchers set up appointments that were convenient for the participants to be interviewed for at least 45 minutes.

Phenomenology as the Methodological Approach

The researchers chose transcendental phenomenology as the most fitting qualitative method for this research because according to Creswell (2007), it has systematic steps for analyzing the data and guidelines for forming the textual and structural descriptions. The main components of the Transcendental Phenomenology approach include Epoche, Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction, and Imaginative Variation. Epoche is a Greek word that means to avoid judgment. Researchers need to avoid being judgmental in carrying assumptions or presuppositions about the phenomenon based on their past experiences. However, Epoche requires an openness to vantage points. In other words, Epoche is to remove the researcher's assumptions and judgments from research (Moustakas, 1994).

To discover the objective and subjective reality of the participants, the focal point of this study was the phenomenon of paternal abandonment. The objective reality was the participant's view of the phenomenon with no interpretation interjected from the researcher. The subjective reality was the interpretations that the participants got from their experiences. Together the objective and subjective realities showed a holistic picture that participants experienced through paternal abandonment. Researchers have to be mindful and reflective of their role in conducting phenomenology by allowing the participants to share their voices, interpretations, and meanings, which allow the essence of the phenomenon to be revealed. The researchers were well versed in the phenomenological method as they have been trained at the doctorate level in their education on this method and have conducted past research utilizing this approach. They applied the specific recommendations of the classic and popular phenomenological approach presented by Moustakas (1994) as will be reflected in the analysis.

The second component of Transcendental Phenomenology is Transcendental Phenomenological Reduction. In Reduction, content shared by the participant is perceived as new and fresh. The phenomenon is described in its totality with thoughts, feelings, sounds, colors, and shapes. Reduction is where textural descriptions and essences of the phenomenon are gathered (Moustakas, 1994). An example of Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction was used to capture what the participants were experiencing, feeling, and thinking as they talked about their experiences of paternal abandonment. Verbatim examples were extracted from participants examples, comments, and stories shared during their interviews. Once the textural descriptions were developed, that is, what the participants experienced; the last component of Transcendental Phenomenology involves Imaginative Variation. The focus of Imaginative Variation is to capture the structural essence of the experience. A description of how the participants experienced the phenomenon was shared. When both the textual and structural descriptions have been combined, then the overall essence of the experience is presented (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994), which is captured in the analysis of this study through the various themes and examples.

Role as a Researchers

According to Moustakas (1994), in *Transcendental Phenomenology*, bracketing is a very important process where the researchers must put aside their preconceived experiences and judgments in order to better understand the experiences of the participants in the study. The practice of being a reflective interviewer was essential to this process. Consistently checking in and curious questioning with participants were important methods to check for the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data collection. The researchers repeated back each participant's comments so that a shared coherent understanding of meaning was captured, and this was done throughout the interview process. This process allowed participants to share their thoughts and prevented any deviation of their own meaning making as they were allowed to amend, correct, or add to their meanings, which enabled confirmation of their meanings to ensure trustworthiness, verification, and clarification took place during and after the interviews.

Data Analysis

During the data analysis process there were eight steps that were followed by the researchers. *Step 1: Listing and Preliminary Grouping (Horizontalization)*: The first step in Moustakas' (1994) approach to transcendental phenomenological data analysis was that of horizontalization. In this step, the researchers went through the data, in this case, the interview transcriptions, and highlighted and circled all of the "significant statements" giving them all equal value. The criteria for this step was to reflect all the main ideas that surrounded describing the phenomenon. The goal in this stage was to reflect and document all the relevant statements. These statements or quotes presented the understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon. Along the margins of the paper, the researchers formulated the meaning of each statement that showed the horizons of the experiences and how those experiences were processed by the participant.

Step 2: Reduction and Elimination: In the reduction and elimination phase, the researchers focused on significant statements (horizons) that were unique and stood out. Then the horizon statements were organized into those that met the following requirements: a) Does the statement contain information essential to understanding the experience, and b) Can the researchers abstract and label the statement (Moustakas, 1994)? If the answers to these questions were yes, then it was a horizon of the experience. If the answers were no, then the statements were eliminated. The horizons that remained were the invariant constituents of the experience. During this step, the researchers reviewed the transcripts comprehensively and took notes for invariant constituents-that is for themes of the experience. Throughout the interviews, the participants were asked for accurate meanings, so trustworthiness would ensue in reporting the data.

Step 3: Clustering and Thematizing the Invariant Constituents: In this step, the horizons that remained, that is, the invariant constituents of the experience that resulted from the process of reduction and elimination were grouped into similar themes creating the "core themes of the experience." (Moustakas, 1994, p.121). Each participant was analyzed separate from the group in this analysis step to capture their own themes and patterns. When the themes were reduced into statements that captured the participant's experience, verbatim examples were provided to illustrate the theme. This stage was important in order to gather all the similar themes that

established patterns related to the experience of growing up without a father on the participant's conflict styles.

Step 4: Final Identification of the Invariant Constituents and Themes: This step is the validation of the process. It required the researchers to analyze the invariant constituents and themes against the participant's transcripts to make sure that the resulting themes were correctly expressed. During this step, the researchers reviewed all the transcripts to validate if the statements expressed the themes and descriptions of the experience accurately. The researchers clustered all the themes of the participants except for the idiosyncratic themes which were experienced by one or two participants. If a particular theme was experienced by three or more participants, then it became a core theme of the composite group. This study used all the transcripts from the interviews to code verbatim examples of each participant's experience. The authors of this research served as the double coders who analyzed the data and generated and labeled the final themes, but participants offered solid information during the interviews that led to the themes identified by the researchers.

Step 5: Individual Textual Description Individual: Next, the textual descriptions of the participant's experiences were developed. In this case, it represented what each participant experienced. With the descriptions, verbatim examples were extracted from the participant's interview transcripts to illustrate and support the themes.

Step 6: Individual Structural Description: Individual textual descriptions of the experiences were developed. In this step, the researchers identified how each participant experienced the phenomenon by using the participant's verbatim statements.

Step 7: Participant Textural-Structural Description: This step combined everything together. The researchers created a combined description of the what, of the textual descriptions, and the how, of the structural descriptions by incorporating the invariant constituents and the themes.

Step 8: Composite Group Description: The last step of Moustakas' (1994) eight-step analysis of phenomenological data was the construction of a composite group themes with descriptions of the experiences of all twenty-five research participants in terms of overlaps and shared themes of the group. These group composite themes were supported by a rich description that included the essence and meanings of each participant's experiences that supported the theme. The findings are presented with the individual and group findings of the lived experiences in alignment with Moustakis (1994) and his recommendations.

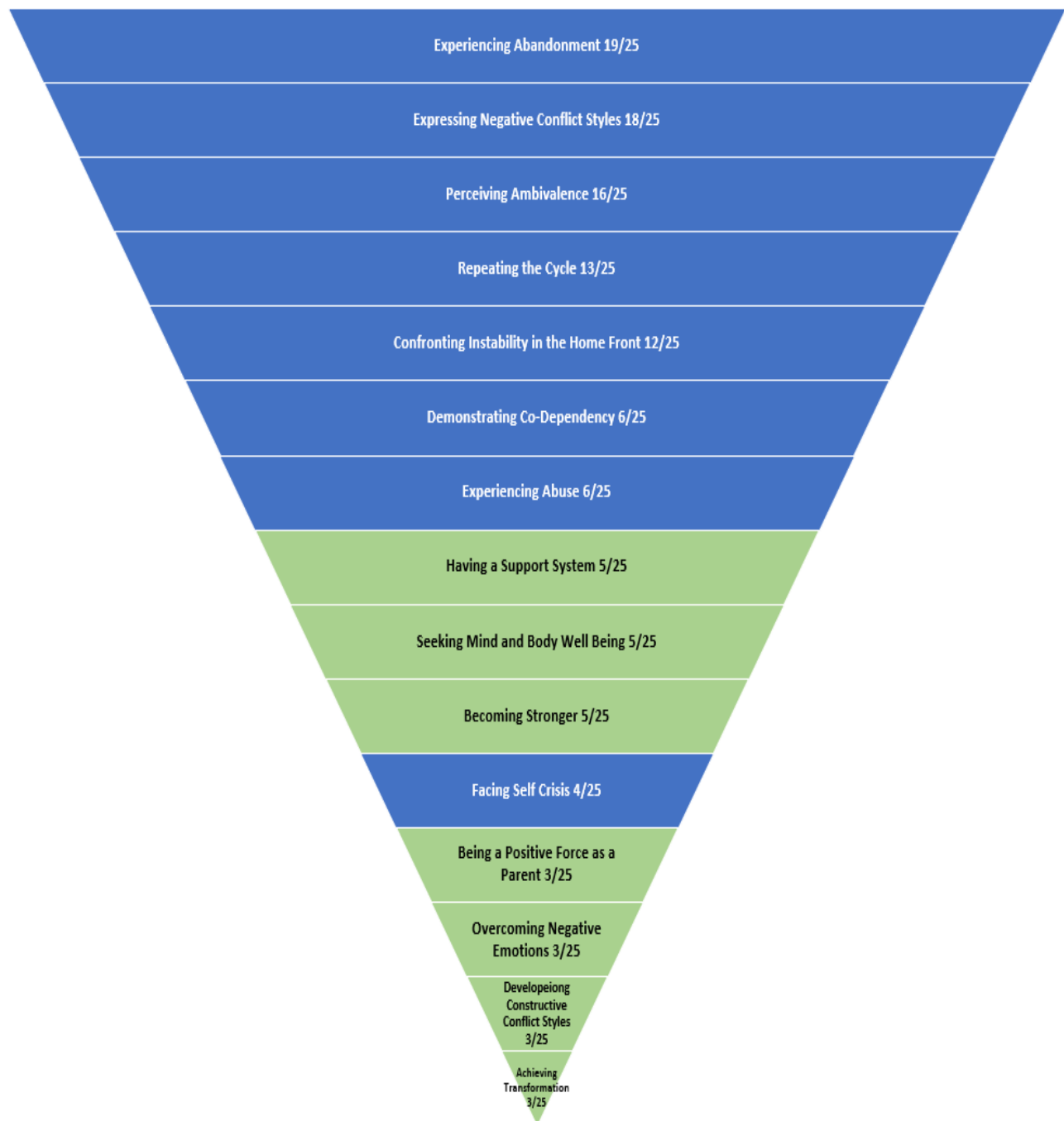
Findings

Based on the scope and constraints of reporting all the data of this research, Step Eight of the Composite Group will be the focus of the findings which present a comprehensive summary of the collective perceptions surrounding the lived experience of this unique group of Hispanic women who shared their perspectives of father abandonment and how abandonment impacted their conflict skills. The main overarching research question of this study was to understand and discover the experiences of Hispanic women who were abandoned by their fathers before the age of seven and explore their conflict management skills. The findings revealed dialectical themes that were contradictory, yet that co-existed in the tension. Women described one theme as a sense of negative impact on their lives from paternal abandonment, yet another theme emerged that described a sense of positive impact on their lives from living through the struggles of not having a father in their lives. At the end of the study, for some of the participants, the findings

show a positive transformation in their conflict management skills that went from destructive to constructive outcomes. This transformation was reflected in various stages for some individuals in that the transformation occurred later in life and for others it was earlier in life as a part of their coping mechanism. The transformation was perceived most often in the majority when participants learned from their actions or consequences from their actions and took efforts to improve their conflict resolution skills in an intentional and deliberative manner. That is, transformation was more likely after they perceived their destructive conflict style and reformed it by changing their approach and/or learning a new constructive skill.

After completing the data analysis of each individual with their own set of themes, the data was next approached with the twenty-five participants by comparing the transcripts of each participant to the group, there were a total of fifteen group composite themes that were discovered from this study of which eight surrounded negative themes and seven surrounded positive themes. The eight group composite themes that were revealed and described as negative impacts are as follows: 1) Experiencing Abandonment, 2) Experiencing Abuse, 3) Facing Self Crisis, 4) Confronting Instability in the Home Front, 5) Perceiving Ambivalence, 6) Repeating the Cycle, 7) Demonstrating Co-Dependency and 8) Expressing Negative Conflict Styles. In addition, there were seven group composite themes that reflected a positive impact on the participant's lives as follows: 1) Having a Support System, 2) Seeking Mind and Body Well Being, 3) Becoming Strong, 4) Being a Positive Force as a Parent, 5) Overcoming Negative Emotions, 6) Developing Constructive Conflict Styles and 7) Achieving Transformation. Figure 1 below illustrates the findings of the study of both positive and negative themes that emerged and were generated by participants while they shared their lived experiences surrounding paternal abandonment as youth.

Figure 1: Interpretative Perceptions of Hispanic Women on Paternal Abandonment, is a representation of the interpretive perception of Hispanic women on paternal abandonment. The number next to each theme reflects the number of women who supported the theme out of the total number of women. The number out of 25 reveals how strong each theme was with this group of women as higher the number reflected a more robust theme and the lower the number reflected a less referenced theme.



Legend
Negative Feelings
Positive Feelings

Figure 1: Interpretative Perceptions of Hispanic Women on Paternal Abandonment

Discussion

Negative Impacts

Theme 1: Experiencing Abandonment

Experiencing abandonment is an overarching finding and theme that incorporates negative emotions such as anger, sadness, fear, loneliness, hurt, resentment, depression, and a lack of attachment and bonding towards their fathers; questioning self; and experiencing negative perceptions (Dennis, 1998). Paternal abandonment was perceived by the participants to cause the experience of struggles throughout their life span. Of all the themes that developed from this study, abandonment was experienced by 19 out of the 25 participants. When participants were asked to share their experience of what it was like growing up without a father, most participants described feelings of anger.

“At the beginning I was mad, upset and kind like I need to hate this person for what he did.” (Participant 3)

“I used to be angry. I was a very angry person, and I always blamed my father and my mother both of my parents for the way I was growing up.” (Participant 8)

According to Williams and Williams (1993), anger is a component of harmful hostility. About 20% of the general population carries high levels of hostility that could be dangerous to their overall health and wellbeing (cite needed— locate more recent cite). Hostile people experience more conflict than non-hostile people (cite needed). This rationale explains why these participants reacted to conflict the way they did. Often times participants questioned themselves as to why their fathers had left them. There was a lot of self-blame reflected as part of their shared experiences. They believed that their father leaving was their fault. In some cases, father raised other siblings from other marriages which made the participants feel it was their fault why father did not stay: “Why not me?” There were many negative perceptions the participants developed from the experiences they had of being abandoned. One main perception that kept arising from their shared experiences was that of resentment. Participants felt resentful towards their mothers and fathers for the way in which they were raised. Most participants not only had to experience abandonment from their fathers but also experience abandonment from their mothers. When the father left the home, the mother had to take on more responsibility to care for the children, which in return left them in the care of a family member or alone. When one is young, it is difficult to understand why mother and father are not at home, creating a sense of detachment and resentment. In return, participants reported feeling the symptoms of depression and wondering how their lives would have been if father would have never left them.

Theme 2: Experiencing Abuse

Aside from all the negative emotions, perceptions, and questioning, the participants also experienced abuse. According to the Florida Statutes (2022a), abuse of a child is defined as “Intentional infliction of physical or mental injury upon a child.” When asked, why do you think you experience conflict the way you do, these participants stated that it was because of the abuse that they experienced when they were young. Six out of 25 stated that it was because of the lack of protection and abuse they experienced. They blamed the fact that their father was not

home to protect them, therefore they were left vulnerable to suffer abuse from others. In most cases, the abuse was caused by someone close to the family. For the other participants, there were signs of abuse through various channels such as molestation and rape.

“When I was a child, I was actually raped by my father’s family member.”

(Participant 15)

Theme 3: Facing Self Crisis

Of the 6 participants who experienced abuse, 4 experienced self-crises. Not only were the participants being abused by others, but they were abusing themselves as well. For some, there were suicide attempts, for others it was alcohol and drug dependency.

“I tried to attempt suicide when I was 9, when I was 17 and when I was 29.”

(Participant 2)

King (2016) stated that alcoholism can be caused by environmental influences, or it could be a biological pattern. In this study, there were a few participants who experienced paternal abandonment because their fathers were alcoholics which made them emotionally absent from the home. For others, alcohol, as well as drugs, were used as an escape route to help cope with the negative feelings. Participants felt they had lived through so much already that they were tired of life and wanted to end the pain.

“I was drinking a lot; I was taking medication at the time for anxiety and depression. I was just in a really, really terrible place.” (Participant 12)

Theme 4: Confronting Instability in the Home Front

Another struggle that 12 out of the 25 participants had in common was confronting instability on the home front. For the participants, paternal abandonment led to financial challenges in the home. Mother now had to work two or three jobs to provide for them and their siblings.

“My mom and I were alone and struggled financially very much.” (Participant 10)

The literature shows how economic consequences are greater for women than for men following divorce (Amato, 2010; Bryan, 1999; Duffy, Thomas, & Trayner, 2002). In a study conducted by Bianchi and colleagues (year of study needed), they found that following divorce, mothers had a 36% decline in the standard of living, whereas men had a 28% increase. Such a difference showed how divorced women reported having more financial difficulties such as not being able to pay bills. A cause for such difference is that women usually do not have a steady work history and experience more wage and employment discrimination compared to men (cite needed). Another instability in the home front had to do with how these women were exposed to cheating and substance abuse at a very young age. They heard from mother how she got cheated on by father or heard how mother cheated on father. Most fathers had drinking problems which caused their marriages to end leaving the home and the children.

“My understanding was like when they separated, it was because he cheated, left her for another woman and I used to blame myself.” (Participant 8)

According to the Encyclopedia of Children’s Health (2012), Dennis (1998), and Condrell (2003) fathers abandon their children in different ways: through divorce, death, military duty, addictions, incarceration, and chronic physical or mental illness. In this research, the main reasons for paternal abandonment was due to divorce, military, and addictions. Furthermore, the

Florida Statutes (2022b) add that abandonment occurs when the person responsible for the child's welfare does not provide support or communication with the child resulting in a willful rejection of parental obligations.

Theme 5: Perceiving Ambivalence

Just as there was a lot of instability in the home, 16 out of the 25 participants perceived ambivalence, and inconsistency. According to Abascal (2012) ambivalence is another word for inconsistent. Someone who is unpredictable and does not put the other person's needs first. According to Abascal (2012), ambivalence is one of the three relationship patterns under the attachment theory. There were three types of ambivalence: Ambivalence with their fathers, ambivalence in relationships, and anxious attachment. Many times, the participants found themselves waiting for their fathers to pick them up, to call them or simply to be there for them. These experiences brought them a lack of trust. They figured if their fathers did it to them, anyone else could also do it.

"My father said he was going to pick me up but he didn't and I waited for him and it never happened." (Participant 2)

"You learn not to trust. You think everybody is going to do the same thing again. So trust issues a lot. The things that affected me the most with others was trust. If my father did it to me, why wouldn't a stranger perfectly do it again?" (Participant 10)

Their paternal abandonment put insecurity and uncertainty into their lives. They felt that they needed acceptance from males causing them to be heartbroken when those needs were not met. Participants had high expectations of their significant others and were heartbroken when those expectations were broken. The participants had in mind the type of men they wanted in their lives. They looked for men with principles, who could offer stability and commitment. However, none of the men had those qualities to offer. Therefore, they ended the relationship. They found themselves jumping from relationship to relationship. The Literature stated that those who experience an ambivalent childhood would display an anxious attachment style as adults. That was the case for these participants.

Theme 6: Repeating the Cycle

Glenn and Kramer (1987) stated that 'intergenerational transmission of divorce,' is when children from divorced homes are more likely to repeat the cycle of divorcing themselves when adults. 13 out of 25 participants experienced repeating the cycle. The men they were intimate with were broken just as they were. They also showed signs of being cheaters and abusive. The participants all shared that they were attracted to a type of man, a broken man. All these signs and conditions resulted in the participants getting tired, falling out of love, and ending their relationships.

"I had a tendency of picking men that were beautifully tragic you know and they had, there were a lot of things that were in parallel to what they were doing or what they were about, it was completely running parallel to what my father was like." (Participant 2)

Theme 7: Demonstrating Co-Dependency

Six out of the twenty-five participants shared experiences of co-dependency. They relied completely on their significant other, giving them control over them. In some instances, they shared the fact that they were attracted to men who were just as broken as they were. Co-dependency is another factor of attachment theory. Co-dependent individuals are those who depend on others because they feel they cannot survive on their own (Abascal, 2012).

"I think for my first relationship I was so young and I didn't have a father and he was like that hero like that person like taking me out of the situation that I was in. So I think that definitely was influenced by not having a father. I saw him as not a father figure but I saw him as a person taking me out and rescuing me. Ironically enough he became the parental figure in our relationship." (Participant 5)

Participants entirely relied on their significant others and created situations where they wanted to be in exaggerated close intimate relationships. This created a big problem for the participants as they wished to have all their needs met but instead, it created a cycle of unhappiness and deprivation.

Theme 8: Expressing Negative Conflict Styles

All the abandonment experiences that create negative emotions, perceptions, abuse, instability, ambivalence, and co-dependency made 18 out of the 25 participants develop negative conflict styles. The participants experienced destructive conflict behaviors because they did not know any better. They reflected what they saw others doing, in this case through social learning.

"I see how my mom deals with conflict; I see that I do the same." (Participant 3)

"I grew up with watching my mom in conflict. So that's how she dealt with it, So I picked it up and that's how I dealt with conflict which was screaming and being trying to be the best, the loudest person being right." (Participant 5)

The main two destructive conflict behaviors were either aggressiveness or avoidant/dismissive. As noted earlier, Jones and Brinkert (2008) defined a conflict style as a tendency or behavior expressed when addressing conflict. They described a five-style conflict model, which includes: avoiding, accommodating, competing, compromising, and collaborating. In this study avoidance and aggressiveness were the two conflict styles that were used as defense mechanisms in order to prevent hurt. According to King (2016), aggression refers to a social behavior where an individual's main goal is to harm someone either verbally or physically. There are many reasons why an individual may display aggressiveness in this study frustration, and social learning were the two main causes of aggression. First, when they felt that they could not get their point across or felt misunderstood, it created a sense of frustration that turned into aggressiveness. Second, they learned how to become aggressive by observing their mothers. They observed their mothers engage in aggressive actions, therefore, they learned to do the same. Some individuals who experience frustration can also become passive (King, 2016). The other destructive conflict behavior expressed by the participants in this study was that of being avoidant/dismissive. Rather than being aggressive, participants were passive by becoming avoidant/dismissive. They did not speak up, they locked themselves in a room or slept to let time pass by. After a while, they would come out as if nothing had happened. The cycle of behaviors continued every time they were faced with a conflict.

"I tend to retreat. Like I tend to like not engage with anybody just keep to myself...I'm careless, I don't care about the person or the situation." (Participant 15)

Positive Impacts

Theme 1: Having a Support System

Another aspect of this study was the positive impact of paternal abandonment. The literature review stated that the way in which a child develops and behaves has to do with their environment and social support, which was the case for 5 out of the 25 participants in this study. Boyd and Heller (2017) describe the ages and stages of development that impact children along with the bond and attachment they have with their family and support systems will have lasting impacts in their lives. Boyd and Heller (2017) stated, “Families who work ...with each other and professionals to create a most amicable circumstance ...can and do emerge as resilient) (p. 127). A study conducted by Hayashi and Strickland (1998) showed that coming from a single-parent home can actually have a positive outcome on a child’s life. Coming from a single home teaches individuals to be more sensitive to problems and to have more commitment to solving those problems. Under the attachment theory, the attachment figure does not necessarily need to be formed with the biological mother and father but instead, it can be done with other parental figures. This was exactly the case for the participants who shared that even though they experienced a rough childhood, they also had a support system that became parental figures such as their mothers, other family members, friends, and work that they could count on for guidance when needed.

“My mother left when I was 5 so I was raised by my grandmother and basically my uncles were around.....If I needed anything I would go to my grandmother. Umm asked my uncles if I needed let’s say guidance in school.” (Participant 3)

Theme 2: Seeking Mind and Body Well Being

Our bodies and minds are connected (cite). The mind and the body impact each other interchangeably. For example, the mind influences the body’s health and the body influences the mind as well (King, 2016). Five out of the twenty-five participants were able to seek some type of intervention to help them overcome all the traumas they suffered as young girls due to paternal abandonment. According to King (2016), therapies are used to relieve suffering.

“I went to therapy to try to get over it, which I did.” (Participant 8)

Whether it was through therapy, counseling, or spirituality, participants shared that they needed this type of support system in order to help them cope and understand why their fathers left them and how to move on with life. Religious faith is related to a healthy lifestyle (King, 2016).

“For me, it was my faith. You know I’m Catholic, leaning on God especially at times where I felt so alone was very helpful for me you know.”

Becoming active in a religious community can be a very effective means of helping achieve a more positive outlook in life. By joining a religious group, an individual creates bonds with people who share the same ideas, values, and traditions (King, 2016; Williams & Williams, 1993). This was the case for the participants in this study who felt that the practice of prayer improved their physical health. The help of a support community made it easier for them to believe and trust in something and someone especially after their trust had been destroyed by their own fathers.

Theme 3: Becoming Stronger

One common theme that 5 out of the 25 participants had, was that of becoming stronger. They had other choices but decided to be successful instead. These participants were able to turn their negative experiences into positive ones. These participants wanted to prove to themselves that they could do it on their own and that they did not need a father in order to be successful. They went on to get their master's degrees and obtain leadership jobs with the government or as owners of their own companies.

"I think it's made me very strong. I've had to actually confront things on my own and deal with things alone. So I think not having a father has made me a very strong woman, a very strong person, a very strong character." (Participant 25)

Theme 4: Being a Positive Force as a Parent

For 3 out of the 25 participants, their children were one of the biggest reasons why they made an effort to change their lifestyles. They wanted to be a positive force as a parent to their children. They were intentional in their parenting efforts and they wanted to create a stable environment for their kids.

"A good parent of course. You know through those trials you can become a better parent because you know exactly what it sounds like and you won't do that to your children. You know you want to be a better parent and you raise more healthier, more stable children." (Participant 13)

Theme 5: Overcoming Negative Emotions

Three out of the twenty-five participants understood that they had to forgive and overcome all the negative emotions they had in order to get closure.

"I'm not really so angry anymore. So I look at my father and me, we had our closure and a lot of women that were abandoned by their fathers don't have that closure." (Participant 8)

As Williams and Williams (1993) stated, "for many.... long term anger with no forgiveness is deadly." (p. 161). Participants were able to understand that they had nothing to do with their father's decision to abandon them. The negative emotions they had cooped inside were causing more harm than anything else. Therefore, they knew they had to forgive and by doing so it gave them the ability to have closure and release the anger they felt.

"I forgave my father and I did, I did forgive him and we had a somewhat relationship until I lost contact." (Participant 8)

Theme 6: Developing Constructive Conflict Styles

Three out of the twenty-five participants were able to achieve constructive conflict styles by analyzing their past conflict styles and learning what not to do. Based on Jones and Brinkert (2008), part of the five-style conflict model there are several constructive conflict styles that include accommodating, compromising, and collaborating. In accommodating, one is able to accept the other person's position or interest over yours. In compromising, both parties give in their interests and concerns. Finally in collaborating, all the parties try to work together to meet

everyone's interests and concerns. In this case for instance, they knew they had to stop being aggressive.

"In my twenties you would be seeing me yelling to get my point across, to be louder than the other person. But now in my thirties, through just life experience and relationships....calmer, more thinking before I speak but still assertive."

(Participant 5)

Rather than yelling and wanting to be the controller, they listened and reflected on what was being said. For others, rather than avoiding the problem, they began to talk and communicate more effectively. This was in keeping with a compromising and accommodating conflict style as described by Jones & Brinkert (2008). Participants described that change was necessary and learning to cooperate and work with each other as a partner in supporting peace was necessary. Accommodating was not giving in but learning to let things pass and defuse conflict so that not all things have to blow out of proportion.

"I try to make the person see my point of view to reason, and I also see his point of view. So now I would say that we will be talking to each other more." (Participant 3).

Theme 7: Achieving Transformation

According to Augsburger (1992), in order for the transformation to take place in conflict, participants had to create change in the following two areas: attitudes and behaviors.

Transforming attitudes: changing negative perceptions. participants had to learn what not to do and change their lifestyles. For most participants, they had to unlearn what they learned through social learning. All the negative perceptions about relationships had to be unlearned.

"I don't use substances today to numb the pain because I got other coping skills. Now I have really good meaningful relationships that are based on reciprocity and you know I have really good people in my life." (Participant 2)

Transforming behavior: participants went from being aggressive or avoidant to being collaborative. The transformation took place when the participants changed from a weak self to a stronger self. Participants seek transformation through various means such as seeking mind and body well-being, whether it was through counseling or seeking help from spirituality and faith. Participants knew they had to make changes in their lives because they wanted to be examples for their children and families. Lastly, they had to close that chapter in their lives through forgiveness and closure and once that took place, they were able to move on. For most women, they felt they were successful women with careers and families. They felt they had reached their potential once they felt the transformation in their lives.

"I came a long way in personal development, thank God." (Participant 6)

In summary, the findings support the literature review in that for these participants, paternal abandonment in fact had negative impacts on children and on their development. However, despite all the difficulties, for some of these participants, they were resilient to the divorce and were able to adapt. These findings support what Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (1999), stated that the effects of divorce are not all negative. When a child moves from a conflicting, abusive, and neglecting family to a calmer one, they show fewer problems following divorce, particularly this is true for girls who may develop into competent individuals with fewer behavior problems. It is important to acknowledge the fact that more negative themes emerged compared to positive themes for this particular group of participants. However, for the positive themes, some of the

commonalities that the participants shared were that those who experienced a positive impact were happily married, had children and had an advanced education at the time of the interviews. In reference to conflict, it was the way in which the participants perceived conflict and the support they received that defined how they reacted to it. Even though there were more negative impacts on the participants' lives, there were meaningful support systems that contributed to the participant's success in conflict management.

Limitations of the Study

The findings suggest that more emphasis should be put on conflict management skills for women who have experienced paternal abandonment. The first limitation of this research comes from the literature review. There is a lack of research on women who have been abandoned by their fathers and how they manage conflict, so this study serves as an impetus to garner further studies in this area. A more in-depth study needs to be conducted to identify how women manage conflict effectively. A second limitation comes from the eligibility criteria. The research utilized a very specific population of participants. The boundaries of the study were limited to only women between the ages of 25 and 40 who experienced abandonment by their fathers before the age of seven and live in one area of Florida. The study was also based on the assumption that the participants were honest about meeting the criteria for this research. Since sampling was used to identify 25 eligible women participants, the group is not intended to be a representation of the general population of women who had been abandoned by their fathers, so future research should follow with a quantitative focus so generalizations to the population can be made. Another limitation of this research is that there may be other influence characteristics and variables involved in how these women experience abandonment that may not have been shown in this particular study given its specific narrow scope. The results of this study suggest that continuing to examine paternal abandonment is an important topic for researchers to expand on in future research. Future research can be done as a quantitative study in order to grasp a large scale of themes and to see if, in fact, those themes would correlate with the ones from this study. Lastly, as discussed in the literature review, there are different forms of paternal abandonment, for example, divorce, dependency, incarceration, military, or death, and every form is unique and experienced differently. Therefore, future studies can focus on each form of abandonment and a quantitative study can investigate and assess the conflict styles that are revealed. The scope of this qualitative study was focused specifically on revealing the lived experiences of participants through rich descriptions of their perspectives to render a better understanding and discovery into their experiences of the phenomena of father abandonment.

Contribution of the Study

This study investigated how Hispanic women who were abandoned by their fathers dealt with conflict utilizing a phenomenology approach. The contribution of this study is that it broadens the field of conflict analysis and resolution research in that it explored the conflict skills and approaches that exist among women who were abandoned by their fathers. The phenomenological interviews revealed the lived experiences of Hispanic women's perspectives of paternal abandonment, which supports a more holistic understanding and discovery into the phenomena of paternal abandonment for this unique set of participants. Conflict resolution

approaches may be integrated to support families who face the challenges of parental abandonment such as narrative mediation that can be used as a platform to get fathers and daughters to come up with cooperative alternative stories that might open a space for promise and hope for a better future and restorative relationship. This study may help professionals in human service fields as well as professionals in human resource management, psychology and counseling, social services, and marriage/family therapy by providing people with a better understanding of this phenomenon from the perspectives of individuals who have directly experienced father abandonment. This study may also give professionals an impetus to design school-based programs/trainings and/or therapeutic interventions for girls who display abandonment issues. This research may encourage professionals to create formal educational classes for mothers who have children who have been abandoned by their fathers. Professionals may profit from training that centers on the impact of divorce on youth at different developmental ages and conflict resolution approaches. Lastly, educators and practitioners (therapists, psychologists, counselors, and educators. Etc.) might benefit from more integrated training opportunities where they can exchange practice and knowledge to better understand and assist this population to improve their human condition and relationships.

Conclusion

This study filled in gaps in the research on paternal abandonment in Hispanic women and the perceived impact it has on conflict management skills. This study used phenomenology to obtain rich descriptions of the participants' lived experiences. This study allowed participants to express their perspectives and experiences with their own voices, which yielded very unique insights into their realities and meanings. Participants revealed that paternal abandonment generates many negative outcomes such as pain, disappointment, hurt and more, yet participants expressed that great levels of personal development surround healing from negative feelings, emotions, and hurt. The study illustrated that the lived experiences of these women not only involved negative experiences, but these women also expressed positive transformation in their lives with how they approach conflict and relationships. This illustrated the remarkable strength and resilience of these women; however, these positive themes should not overshadow the negative impacts that are worth investigating and addressing in further research.

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