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A Grounded Theory Exploration of Environmental, Societal, and Contextual Factors Affecting Adolescent Identity Development in Dysfunctional Families: A School Counselor's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study aimed to explore the environmental, societal, and contextual factors affecting adolescent identity development in dysfunctional families.

Methods and Materials: The research method of this study was grounded theory. The research population consisted of all school counselors in Tehran. A total of 10 school counselors (as key informants) were selected using purposive sampling in 2024 in Tehran. Data were collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Data analysis was performed using a constant comparison method.

Findings: Analysis of the interview content yielded 36 open codes, 12 axial codes, and 5 selective codes, including key challenges faced by dysfunctional families (feeling of insecurity, public rejection, and the tendency towards risky behaviors), contextual conditions (parental socioeconomic status, community resources, and parenting coping style), intervening factors (public judgmental attitudes and learned helplessness), strategies (creating new structures and excessive compensation), and consequences (confused identity and playing adult roles).

Conclusion: The challenges faced by dysfunctional families can influence adolescents' identity development processes in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, potentially leading to multiple issues. Thus, recognizing these challenges and providing effective intervention strategies for school counselors and families is crucial.

Keywords: School counselors, identity formation, dysfunctional families, context, adolescents

Introduction

The family is inherently the primary unit of society, providing the foundation for social influence and cohesion. This foundational structure comprises various aspects that play a pivotal role in shaping individuals and their interactions within larger communities. An individual's life is profoundly affected by the conditions of the family to which they belong. Children's behavior with others can often be attributed to the individuals they frequently interact with (Bautista, 2024).

A dysfunctional family is exposed to abusive behaviors and tends to overlook the roles of its members. In such families, problems and conflicts may give rise to inappropriate behaviors, and members might fail to fulfill their roles effectively (Ahmed Osman et al, 2024). Conflicts and tensions often exist between children and parents in these families, which can negatively impact family relationships and the emotional well-being of its members (Kurnia, 2019). Anxiety arises in families when one or more members neglect their responsibilities, potentially leading to family dysfunction and breakdown (Mirwani et al., 2022).

When family members fail to perform their duties, it disrupts family cohesion and order, affecting all members. The term dysfunction refers to the inability to perform activities effectively and systematically as expected (Jannah et al., 2023). Families perform eight educational, social, protective, emotional, religious, economic, recreational, and biological functions. When these functions are executed effectively, families are happy, members support one another, and they live harmoniously. Proper functionality of these roles enhances the quality of family life (Izzo et al., 2022).

Effective family roles enable problem-solving, mutual support, communication, and adaptability to challenges (Maulina & Amalia, 2019). Historically, the family serves as the cornerstone of human development and maintains social order. It acts as the primary system for instilling values and developing socialization in individuals (Van Eickels et al., 2022). Raising children in a family environment is critical for emotional development, imparting principles that will guide their lives (Barragán et al., 2021).

However, violent environments can threaten children's upbringing, leading to significant risks to family growth, such as abuse, parental absence, and addiction (Medrano-Sanchez et al., 2024).

In a rapidly globalizing world, the integration of fundamental processes, such as interpersonal relationships, has drastically altered adolescent behavior. However, these changes come with side effects, including flawed parenting styles that create vulnerabilities within the system (Medrano-Sanchez et al., 2024). The absence of effective policies to prevent violence and crime exacerbates these problems, directly impacting the development of future generations (Corrêa et al., 2021).

A dysfunctional family is characterized by lower levels of health, well-being, happiness, and positive influence compared to other families. Such families often face issues such as poor communication, frequent conflicts, lack of emotional support, and inability to resolve disputes (Abubakar & Alya, 2020), not to mention domestic violence (physical, sexual, and emotional), persistent substance abuse, poverty, high stress, family conflicts, and divorce. These issues can physically and psychologically harm children, hindering their development (Jannah et al., 2023).

Dysfunctional families negatively affect children's mental health due to ineffective parenting styles that create negative environments and neglect their mental well-being. Moreover, parental behaviors or conditions in dysfunctional families can impact a child's development, often leading to psychological issues (Masruroh & Ramdani, 2021). During adolescence, individuals face numerous challenges in shaping their identity. This process can either be supported or hindered by their family context (Sznitman et al., 2019).

Research has shown that personal identity stability is higher in adulthood compared to adolescence, while ethnic identity stability is greater in mid-to-late adolescence than in early adolescence. Personal identity also develops during adulthood. Adolescents with a mature identity typically exhibit higher adaptability and positive personality traits, live in warm family environments, and perform well in school (Meeus, 2011).

The family serves as a significant protective factor and acts as an anchor for cultural identity. Persistent parental absence and family turmoil increase adolescents' vulnerability to mental health problems (Rabiau et al., 2019). Mental health problems are a major source of functional disability among youth worldwide.

Studies indicate that parental divorce, both emotional separation and legal divorce, increases the risk of psychological distress, depression, and behavioral problems in children and adolescents, making it a pressing public health challenge (Timonen et al., 2018).

Nuraida (2018) argues that divorce significantly impacts children, as they become victims of parental separation. Besides, children experience confusion due to being forced to choose between parents, with divorce leaving both joy and sorrow for them. When parents decide to divorce, children risk losing self-confidence and aspirations, becoming disenchanted and paranoid about life (Nuraida, 2018). Massa et al. (2020) showed that children from broken families tend to exhibit behaviors different from those of children in healthy families. These differences include being calm, stubborn, introverted, or oppositional toward parents as children from broken families do not receive adequate attention and affection from parents (Massa et al., 2020).

To more closely examine the process of identity formation in adolescents living in dysfunctional families, it seems necessary to examine the perspectives of experts and key informants, including school counselors, who have both the experience and the knowledge to help these adolescents. School counselors devote more time during the week to the problems of these adolescents, and adolescents mainly share their psychological and social problems with them in a safe environment. Therefore, by examining the experiences of school counselors, we can approach the process of identity formation in these adolescents from a different perspective. This study sought to explore the environmental, societal, and contextual factors affecting adolescent identity development in dysfunctional families from the perspective of school counselors.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

The study adopted a qualitative, grounded-theory approach. Grounded theory studies are not conducted to test hypotheses but to generate theories that directly capture and explain the processes, actions, or interactions related to real-world social phenomena (Holton, 2010). These studies often explore unfamiliar or inadequately reported social contexts. The theory evolves through a nuanced interplay between data collection and analysis. Data collection can involve extracting textual strands from interview transcripts, which researchers use to develop theories comprising a network of relationships, often organized around a core theme (Timonen et al., 2018). The data also include theoretical sensitivity derived from literature reviews, which shape the researcher's understanding of how collected data relate to theoretical categories.

Due to the exploratory nature of this study and its focus on the identity formation process in adolescents from dysfunctional families, grounded theory was deemed the most effective approach. Participants were selected from school counselors in Tehran in 2024. School counselors were selected as key informants because of their deep connection with students. Students referred them to them for academic, family, developmental, social, and psychological problems, and they had deep connections with adolescents who mainly came from dysfunctional families (including divorced families, parental addiction, parental legal problems, and dysfunctional families). Ten school counselors were selected as the participants voluntarily and interviews continued until data saturation was achieved.

Instrument

The data in this study were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, a common method in qualitative research, adaptable to various research contexts (Busetto et al., 2020). As a requirement to comply with ethical protocols, informed consent was obtained from the participants for recording or documenting interviews. All the interviews were conducted in Teheran in 2024 face to face at mutually convenient times prearranged by the participants. The interview questions were based on the first interview with the first participant, a female school counselor, 55 years old, with 25 years of experience. Then, the questions from the first interview were added to enrich the other interviews. The data reached theoretical saturation with interviews with 10 school counselors. The length of each interview was, on average, 45 to 60 minutes, and ultimately 546 minutes of interviews were collected.

The interview questions were framed to ensure participants' comprehension, and researchers rephrased the questions as needed for thorough responses. The questions asked in the interviews were as follows:

1. What is the identity of adolescents in dysfunctional families like?
2. How is the psycho-social process of adolescent identity shaped in dysfunctional families?

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using a constant comparison method. Data analysis in the grounded theory methodology involves three main stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, and data are analyzed systematically through the coding process (Strauss and Corbin, 2012). In the open coding phase, the researcher repeatedly listened to the interviews and transcribed their content into a Word file. In the axial coding phase, the researcher combined data segments and examined dimensions, characteristics, interactions, and outcomes related to the phenomenon in question, based on the nature of the extracted categories and their relationships. In the selective coding phase, the researcher sought to identify the core category that occurred most frequently in the data and was capable of connecting other categories.

The rigor of the study was established by allocating sufficient time for data collection and analysis, establishing rapport with participants, immersing deeply in the data, conducting member and peer checks, narrowing down the literature review, consulting an external expert, documenting the research process meticulously, and comparing the findings with the results from similar studies.

Findings and Results

The participants in this study were 10 school counselors. Table 1 presents the demographic information of the participants, including participant code (to maintain confidentiality), age, gender, education, and job experience.

Table 1

The participants' demographic data

Participant code	Gender	Age	Education	Job experience (year)
1	Female	38	Master's in Clinical Psychology	10
2	Female	40	Ph.D. in Counseling	8
3	Female	43	Ph.D. in Educational Psychology	8
4	Male	38	Master's in Family Counseling	8
5	Female	55	Ph.D. in Counseling	25
6	Female	28	Master's in Clinical Psychology	5
7	Male	27	Master's in Psychology	5
8	Female	46	Bachelor's in Psychology	20
9	Male	49	Master's in Counseling	22
10	Female	40	Ph.D. in Counseling	15

The content analysis of interviews conducted with school counselors showed the 5 Selective codes including; key challenges faced by dysfunctional families, contextual conditions, intervening factors, strategies, and consequences affect adolescent identity development in dysfunctional families. Furthermore, 12 axial codes and 36 open codes were extracted, as presented in Table 2:

Table 2

Environmental, social, and contextual factors affecting adolescent identity development in dysfunctional families

Open codes (Themes)	Axial codes (Subcategories)	Selective codes (Categories)
Distrust in the opposite sex	Feeling of insecurity	Key challenges faced by dysfunctional families
Fear of remarriage		
Fear of abandonment		
Uncertainty about the future		
Social isolation	Public rejection	
Secrecy		
Changing perspectives and concerns		
Unhealthy sexual experiences	The tendency towards risky behaviors	

Smoking and alcohol consumption		
Running away from home		
Pity from others	Public judgmental attitudes	Intervening factors
Judgment of being from a single-parent family		
Labeling		
Feeling unloved	Learned helplessness	
Feelings of worthlessness		
Self-doubt		
Anger towards others		
Place of residence	Parental socioeconomic status	Contextual conditions
Parental job and education status		
Parental financial status		
Parental unawareness	Community resources	
Lack of school support		
Denial of divorce	Parenting coping style	
Anger and revenge toward the spouse		
Parental preoccupations with personal affairs		
Parental cooperation with children	Creating new structures	Strategies
Role modeling by a competent parent		
Parental agreement		
Over-responsibility of parents	Excessive compensation	
Child neglect		
Financial independence		
Ambiguity in gender identity	Confused identity	Consequences
Harm to values and goals		
Exploitation by others		
Early employment	Playing adult roles	
Early sexual maturity		

Key challenges faced by dysfunctional families

Some key challenges faced by dysfunctional families are feelings of insecurity, public rejection, and a tendency towards risky behaviors. According to participants, dysfunctional families, especially when parents' divorce, act as a shock to the family and its members.

Feeling of insecurity

One of the most significant challenges observed by dysfunctional families is the sense of insecurity and instability caused by distrust in the opposite sex, fear of remarriage, fear of abandonment, and ambiguity about the future. These feelings affect both adolescents and parents, leaving the family in a state of suspension.

"Why were they even born? Why did they bring them into this world if they can't get along? What will happen to their future? In my opinion, kids without a clear identity that can lead them to a secure future, are at a loss" (Participant #5).

Public rejection

One significant issue reported by the school counselors in this study is the public rejection experienced by both the adolescent and the single parent, leading to social isolation, secrecy, and shifts in priorities:

"I tried not to tell the school principal anything about the student's problems, such as their father being an addict, so they would treat them like the other kids" (Participant #2).

The tendency towards risky behaviors

A recurring concern with dysfunctional families is the adolescent's tendency toward risky behaviors marked by unsafe sexual experiences, smoking, alcohol consumption, and running away from home:

"Most of the time, children don't go home after school and instead skip school or run away as their parents are often divorced" (Participant #2).

Intervening Factors

The intervening factors include public judgmental attitudes and learned helplessness:

Public judgmental attitudes

The school counselors in this study frequently pointed to negative public judgments about single parents and children of divorce. This judgment often leads to isolation and rejection from people, especially pity from others, judgment about students with single parents, and labeling:

"One of the concerns is that they're not accepted as children with single parents. I experienced this issue and I had to advocate for students with single mothers to be accepted like others" (Participant #1).

Learned helplessness

The participants in this study reported that failure in life and learned helplessness are frequent issues experienced by adolescents in dysfunctional families. These issues often lead to feeling unloved, worthlessness, self-doubt, and anger toward others:

"These kids often feel like a burden, with all the misfortune in their lives. They usually don't have a positive outlook on themselves or reality" (Participant 6)

Contextual conditions

Contextual factors affecting adolescent identity development in dysfunctional families include parents' socioeconomic status, community resources, and parental coping styles:

Parents' socioeconomic status

A major contextual factor contributing to challenges in dysfunctional families is the parents' socioeconomic status including the family's living conditions, parental job and education, and financial standing:

"The parents' economic conditions, the neighborhood they live in, and the kind of people around them make a big difference. Whether it's the father, mother, or both creating instability, the economic level is significant" (Participant #4).

Community resources

Parental unawareness and inadequate support from schools and educational institutions were highlighted as significant community challenges faced by dysfunctional families:

"Children believe that their parents don't understand anything. They are unaware of many issues such as the internet or new technologies, creating a gap between parents and adolescents" (Participant 3).

Parental coping styles

Parental coping strategies can exacerbate challenges faced by dysfunctional families. Such coping strategies include denial of divorce, anger, and revenge toward the spouse, and parental preoccupations with personal affairs:

"Parents' failure to accept divorce worsens things. The more a parent can come to terms with it, the more they can

practice self-care. But often, they're overwhelmed by their pain" (Participant #9).

Strategies

The participants reported that the strategies adopted in dysfunctional families to cope with challenges include creating a new structure and excessive compensation:

Creating a new structure

Due to the absence of one parent, families often need to adopt new structures by cooperating with the child, modeling by a competent parent, and coordination between parents:

"Without a proper role model, kids learn from inappropriate behaviors, which shapes their personality" (Participant #2).

Excessive compensation

Many parents adopt excessive compensatory strategies, including over-responsibility, neglecting the child, and granting financial independence prematurely:

"Too much neglect or too much involvement leads to an identity crisis. Everyone's caught up in their problems" (Participant #4).

Consequences

The consequences of challenges faced by dysfunctional families included confused identity and taking on adult roles:

Confused identity

One critical outcome is identity confusion, including ambiguity in gender identity, harm to values and goals, and exploitation by others:

"Children from dysfunctional families get into relationships too early and depend on others financially, leading to exploitation. Teens shouldn't have to trade behavior for basic needs. Their parents give them money, so they have to do something to earn money. Girls aged 14 to 16 are very slim fit and they are very attractive for sexually addicted men who show up here and there" (Participant #3).

Taking on adult roles

Another consequence of challenges faced by dysfunctional families is adolescents taking on adult roles prematurely including early employment and early sexual maturity:

"Adolescents are exposed to adult experiences far earlier than they should be because of parental neglect and family instability" (Participant #2).

Figure 1

The paradigmatic model extracted from the interviews with the participants
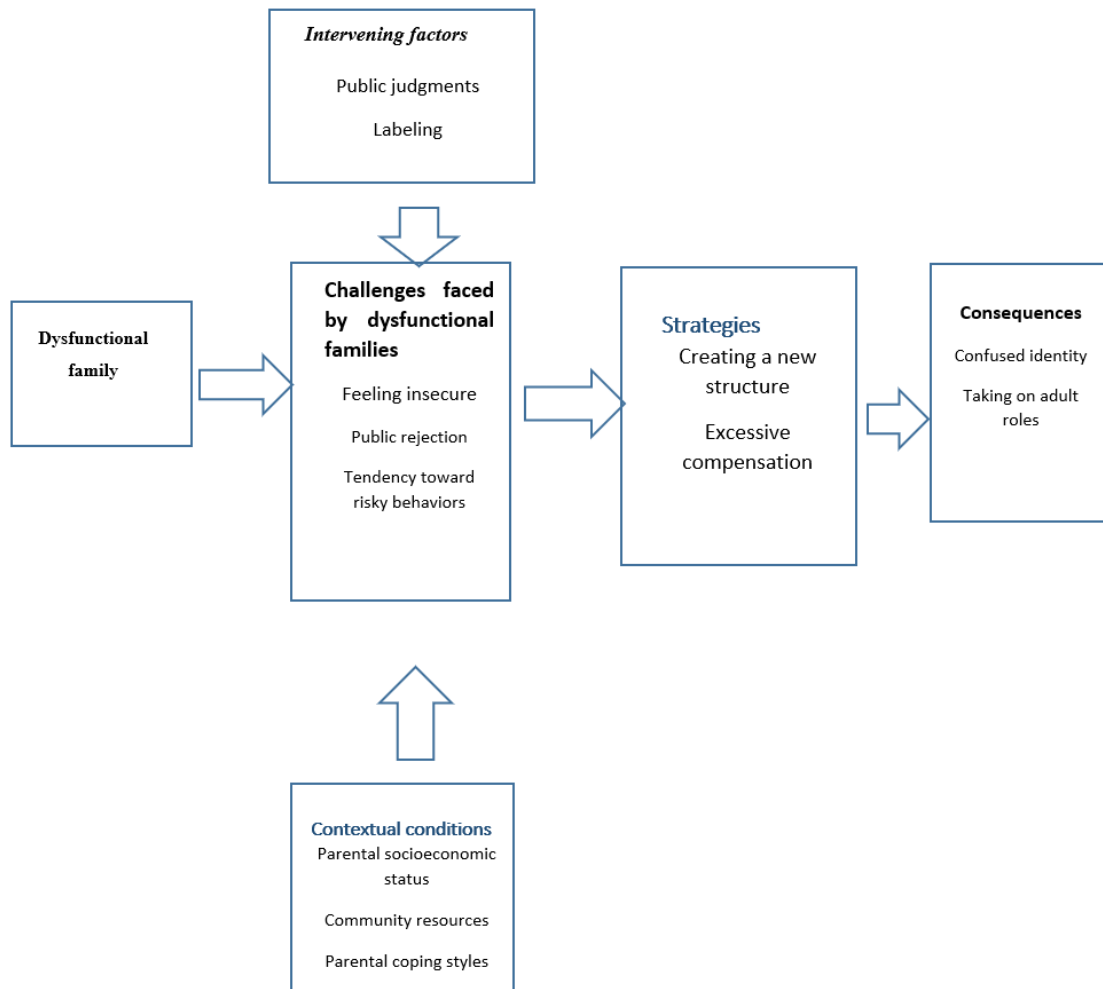
Discussion and Conclusion

The results revealed 36 open codes, 12 axial codes, and 5 selective codes, including key challenges faced by dysfunctional families (feeling of insecurity, public rejection, and the tendency towards risky behaviors), contextual conditions (parental socioeconomic status, community resources, and parenting coping style), intervening factors (public judgmental attitudes and learned helplessness), strategies (creating new structures and excessive compensation), and consequences (confused identity and playing adult roles).

The family environment and the way parents interact with each other and their children can play an important role in the development of fear of the future in individuals. Adverse family conditions, such as divorce, can directly and indirectly affect the severity of this fear. Parental divorce, as one of the most stressful events in children's lives, can cause serious emotional and psychological harm and, consequently, intensify their fear of the future and uncertainty about it.

Children in such family conditions may experience feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and depression, which can pave the way for the formation of fear of the future. During adolescence, individuals face many challenges in forming their identities. This process can be supported or hindered by the family context (Sznitman et al., 2019).

The formation of adolescent identity depends on factors such as family solidarity, family adaptation, and parent-child relationships, along with communication problems between them (Boor Boor et al., 2021; Yablonska, 2013).

Indeed, the family is a key protective factor and can play a major role as an anchor for cultural identity. A constant lack of parental presence and family conflicts increase the risk of adolescents' vulnerability to mental health issues (Rabiau, 2020). Parental divorce can convey feelings of insecurity and instability to children or adolescents. These problems may lead to difficulties in accepting sexual identity and self-concept. Conflicts, disputes, and continuous tension between parents destroy the atmosphere of peace and security in the family. In such an environment, children feel unsafe and vulnerable, which can negatively impact the formation of their sexual identity. Family environments full of conflict not only exacerbate existing disorders but also create new mental health problems in adolescents (Medrano-Sanchez et al., 2024).

Family disturbances, such as parental divorce, parental conflicts, and parental addiction, can significantly impact the social pressure and social acceptance of children. These family problems often lead to social labeling and negative biases toward these children and adolescents. Parental divorce, as a major family disruption, can lead to discrimination and negative social judgments about children of divorce. Family stressors, such as marital conflict, are a risk factor in child development (Porter & Dyer, 2017). Marital conflict relates to adjustment issues including psychological traits, behavioral problems, academic ability, and school adaptation of children at different ages (Parker, 2014; Yeon & Choi, 2020). Studies have demonstrated that conflicts can also be associated with problem behaviors in family members, including alcohol, drugs, or other substance use issues (Choo & Shek, 2013; Fish et al., 2015).

Research findings have also suggested that perceived marital conflict by mothers affects the self-esteem, happiness, and school-related behaviors of children (Yeon & Choi, 2020). Studies on the impact of family financial conditions on identity processing among adolescents have shown how family financial standing influences adolescent identity processes (Vosylis et al., 2021). Adolescence is a period of significant changes in terms of physical, cultural, cognitive, and psychological development. Studies have shown that non-violent and violent delinquent behaviors increase in late adolescence (ages 17 to 18) (Doherty et al., 2008).

Attachment issues with parents, excessive parental control, weak relationships with parents, poor supervision, ineffective problem-solving patterns, contradictory parental control, family instability, poverty, and lack of financial resources are among the family factors associated with delinquency (Moitra and Mukherjee, 2012). Several persons have influenced the social identity of participants, including peers, parents, school, community members, and the group teacher (Parker, 2014). A study conducted at the University of Oakland in 2020 found that dysfunctional families have high levels of disorganization and confusion. Family chaos includes a lack of structure, order, and predictability in daily activities and interactions (Marsh et al., 2020).

Taking responsibility within the family is an important signal of adulthood and a developmental task through which adolescents gain a sense of competence and control (Cooney & Mortimer, 1999). By giving more responsibilities to youth, parents convey the message that they trust them to perform tasks typically assigned to adults. Studies have indicated that young adults who have more responsibilities within the family are more likely to define themselves as adults compared to those with fewer responsibilities (Benson & Furstenberg Jr, 2006). Accordingly, larger family responsibilities in adolescence are expected to predict perceived adulthood.

Parental divorce can transfer feelings of insecurity and instability to children or adolescents. These conditions may result in problems related to accepting their sexual identity and self-concept. Constant conflict, disputes, and tension between parents destroy the calm and secure family atmosphere. In such an environment, children feel unsafe and vulnerable, which can negatively impact the formation of their sexual identity. Proximity and conflict should also be intermediaries for the impact of family structure on perceived adulthood, and the effects of parent-adolescent conflicts on the formation of adult identity may differ based on gender. Studies have consistently shown that healthy families, particularly single-parent and divorced stepfamilies, have higher levels of conflict and separation between parents and children compared to intact families (Hanson et al., 1996).

Role ambiguity in stepfamilies creates issues related to the legitimacy and authority of parental figures (Buchanan et al., 1996; Peterson & Hann, 1999). Zagefka et al. (2021) stated that conflict, misbehavior, neglect, or abuse regularly emerge in dysfunctional families. Therefore, it is not surprising that children raised in such families may deviate from socially accepted behavior (Zagefka et al., 2021).

This study was conducted with some limitations. First, this small-scale study was conducted using a qualitative grounded-theory approach. Second, the study was carried out on school counselors residing in Tehran, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other cities and rural areas.

The present study examined environmental, societal, and contextual factors affecting adolescent identity development in dysfunctional families from the perspective of school counselors as key informants. These challenges can influence the identity formation process of adolescents in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, creating a foundation for multiple problems to arise. Hence, identifying these challenges and offering effective intervention strategies by professionals is crucial. This in-depth study focused on the experiences of individuals who grew up in dysfunctional families, providing a better understanding of various aspects, including how these individuals perceive the world and their experiences, how they interact with others and the people in their lives, the strategies they use to manage problems and challenges, and their personal growth and development during periods of chaos and distress. The findings from the interviews with adolescents provide an accurate picture of the challenges and problems present in dysfunctional families. This picture includes insights into the inherent issues within such family structures. Family bonds are recognized as a significant and foundational factor that greatly impacts individuals' lives. Besides, problems such as parental separation, family conflicts, and weak intra-family communication are highlighted. Family conflicts and living in a dysfunctional family can disrupt the development of children and adolescents in all aspects of life, leaving long-lasting effects for years to come.

Acknowledgments

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.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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