MORE THAN JUST MAKING IT: AN ANALYSIS OF FACTORS

THAT ENHANCE THE SOCIAL FUNCTIONING OF FEMALE SINGLE-PARENTS

AYSAN SEV'ER

MARION PIRIE

1990

We are grateful to the female single-parents who shared the details of their divorce process with us, and thank our three research assistants who meticulously recorded their experiences. Requests for prints may be sent to Aysan Sev'er, Scarborough Campus, University of Toronto, 1265 Military Trail, Scarborough, Ontario, Canada. M1C 1A4
ABSTRACT

This paper explores the post-divorce functioning of single female family heads. The main thesis here is that by reconceptualizing divorce as a social transition rather than as a crisis "event", we may develop models which address a broader spectrum of variables associated with divorce. The study utilized a correlational analysis of a number of variable clusters: socio-economic, marital, and network and their influence on perceived functioning. The major findings were that far from perceiving divorce in exclusively negative terms, many women in our sample also reported very positive aspects of post-divorce functioning, particularly around a newfound sense of self confidence, autonomy, and personal control. This finding has important implications for both researchers who may tend to circumscribe their view of divorce as an essentially negative process, and for practitioners who may be able to utilize this information in their counselling of post-divorce single mothers through recourse to reframing techniques, self esteem counselling, and group facilitation.
MORE THAN JUST MAKING IT: AN ANALYSIS OF FACTORS THAT ENHANCE THE
SOCIAL FUNCTIONING OF FEMALE SINGLE-PARENTS.

The western world is in the process of reconceptualizing the very nature of divorce and separation as a "social transition" rather than a "life crisis" (Hurley, 1987; Katz & Pesach, 1985). Over the years there has been an increasing destigmatization or "normalization" of marital disengagement due to the rise in divorce rates. Seen as a transition, divorce is perhaps most usefully conceptualized as a process which involves an ongoing negotiation of relationships between intimates. We further know that those negotiations take place not merely within the confines of the court or the post-divorce familial household, but within a myriad of social contexts.

This reconceptualization of divorce as a process, as a life transition, has brought to light two important factors; namely, a) that divorce is an inherently social process, and b) that the process of marital dissolution is not necessarily the stigmatizing, debilitating, event it was once thought to be. Indeed, separation from one's spouse can be as generative of personal growth and a renewed sense of personal efficacy as other individuation processes in the life cycle.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how those two factors, the inherent social nature of divorce and its potential generative (as distinct from debilitating) properties, are reflected in the post-divorce functioning of a selected group of female single-parents. The findings presented here will be of
interest not only to researchers, but to practitioners and counsellors working to understand and help female single-parents develop new modes of post-divorce functioning.

The Social Nature of Divorce

Divorce may be seen as an inherently social process in the following ways. As an outcome of divorce, social roles, connection to social institutions, and the social conventions dictating our manner of relating to others must be learned anew. On entering the divorce process one disengages old social ties while attempting to forge new ones. During this process, one's roles as a parent, worker, partner and mate are altered, dismantled and reconstructed. Ultimately, one reconstructs a new sense of self within this rapidly changing social world.

Transitions and transformations bring with them accompanying psychological adjustments, to be sure. And these adjustments, in turn, configure new social patterns of relating (Vaughan, 1986). The relationship between the psychological and the social aspects of divorce is unquestionably a dialectical one. Nevertheless, our point here is that the core stimuli which trigger this dialectical process are unqualifiedly social in nature, and the outcomes in terms of post-divorce functioning need to be seen in that light.

The Functionality/Dysfunctionality Debate in The Social Sciences

In the existing literature, however, divorce is rarely conceptualized as a distinctly social phenomenon which involves multi-dimensional social processes. The majority of research on
divorce tends still to invoke a "personal crisis" model where the parameters being investigated remain within the domain of psychological adjustment and physiological symptomatology of individual family members following marital break-up. Moreover, that emphasis on the negative attributes of divorce is by no means limited to the psychological literature.

Ever since Emile Durkheim (1951) first looked at the relationship between lack of social bonds, anomie, and suicide rates, many sociologists, like psychologists, have viewed divorce in essentially negative terms -- as disruptive not merely to individuals, but to society at large. Sociological studies of divorce -- particularly through reference to "social disorganization" models which cast divorce as essentially dysfunctional to society -- similarly emphasize the pathological side (see, for example, Goode, 1956; Weiss, 1979). Indeed, in much of the social science literature divorce and divorcees are often cast as aberrations from what are considered to be "the functional" and "the normative" forms of family life.

In the present paper, we attempt to respond to the gap in the current research on divorce by reinvigorating the perspective of divorce as a social process. We also argue that empowered social functioning is just as salient a part of the post-divorce experience as are painful readjustment processes so consistently pursued as the foci of much of the current literature. Our broader conceptualization of the post-divorce experience includes
empowerment and the probability of a positive perception of one's own functioning rather than individual crisis management.

In this paper, we explore relationships among factors which have been shown to correlate with post-divorce functioning of female single-parents, as perceived by the single-parents themselves. As stated above, unlike the majority of earlier studies which have approached divorce from crisis/pathology/disorganization orientations, we make no a priori assumptions about divorce as an essentially dysfunctional process for individuals, or for society at large.

The Choice of Subjects: Theoretical Justifications

At this point, some clarification of the focus on female single-parents is in order. In the current area of research, it is our contention that the existing literature does not attend closely enough to women's experience of divorce. In addition, there are broader pedagogical and practical reasons for pursuing this particular population. For one, when we refer to the "single parent family", we are largely speaking of a social unit where women are the primary caretakers. It is largely women and not men who have to cope with functioning as parents in post-divorce households and it is, therefore, largely women who represent the social category "single-parent".

Demographic studies show that approximately 50% of divorcing couples have children (Canada Year Book, 1990; Statistical Abstracts of the U.S., 1988). Courts still favour the female parent in custody decisions. In 1986 alone, women received the
custody of their children in 50% of the cases when their husbands petitioned for divorce. The rate was over 80% when women themselves were the petitioners (calculated from Statistics Canada, Vital Statistics, 1986). Children from desertions, informal separations, annulments, common-law break-ups and teenage pregnancies also contribute to the volume of female single-parent families although the latter are not reflected in divorce statistics. Similar trends may also be observed in the United States (Statistical Abstracts of the U.S., 1988). Therefore, when we speak of the "single-parent family" we are largely speaking of a social unit where the woman is the primary caretaker. Moreover that configuration is the fastest growing family form in North America. The phenomena currently studied thus represent the largest proportion of the primary social unit being investigated. However, it should be added that the observations and analyses generated here cannot be extrapolated to include those minority of single-parent households which are headed by males.

The findings generated in this study will be of interest to researchers investigating the social processes characterizing female headed single-parent households. These findings will also be of use to counsellors and practitioners working with that population of women. Relatedly, these findings will be of benefit to researchers concerned with children and divorce. Since the best predictor of children's adjustment to divorce is the adjustment of their custodial parents (Colletta, 1979; Hanson,
1986; Hurley, 1987), a study investigating the social functioning of the most representative custodial parent should provide some new insights for researchers interested in investigating the effects of divorce on the social functioning of children.

**Review of the Literature**

As mentioned earlier, there are few studies which explore positive indicators of health and wellbeing in the post-divorce family. There are exceptions, however, and these should be noted. Bernard & Nesbitt, (1981); Hanson, (1986); Johnson, (1986); Colletta, (1979); Desimone-Lois et al., (1979); Wallerstein & Kelly, (1980) and Whitehead, (1979), all take a much less restrictive and essentially negative view of divorce and their contribution to the field is estimable.

As Bernard and Nesbitt (1981) point out, studies which focus on physical or psychological trauma, start *a priori* from the assumption that divorce is a life event of crisis proportion which has unique capacities to harm people. Questions asked and observations reported focus on reduced esteem and increased professional help-seeking (Amato, 1988; Baker, 1983; Chiriboga et al., 1979), heightened anxiety, depression and loneliness (Menaghan & Lieberman, 1986; Radloff & Rae, 1979; Woodward et al., 1980), hospitalization (Gove, 1979; Bloom et al., 1978) and increased dependence on mental health services (Guttentag et al., 1980). And, as mentioned earlier, sociological studies which invoke a "social disorganization" perspective have contributed in no small measure to the negative image of divorce. Comparisons of
"broken homes" with "intact" families (Burchinal, 1964), for example, implicitly and explicitly convey the latter as the "normative, desirable" state. At the most extreme, Lester (1986) links divorce to homicide and suicide in adults.

Studies focusing on children also adopt the "divorce as crisis" mentality where attitudinal, emotional, and behavioural "problems" of children of marital dissolutions become the exclusive units of analysis. Some studies have even suggested links between divorce and promiscuity and delinquency in children (Glueck & Glueck, 1951; Furstenberg et al., 1987).

A further problem with research which focuses on crisis/post-divorce trauma/disorganization is that such studies sustain an unfortunate tautology. Researchers starting from the a priori assumption that divorce is inherently traumatic for all parties concerned predictably develop instruments which measure only the problematic aspects of the phenomena. The categories of observation originally derived from the research design are then imposed back on the phenomenon being investigated as an explanation for it. Essentially, what are, in effect, categories of observation are being given causal force. While it is impossible to observe the world tout court as Berger & Kellner (1970) remind us in their classic study of marriage and reality construction processes, neither may we generalize from selected categories of observation to the whole of a phenomenon as representing its essence.
In contrast, the orientation used here attempts to explore divorce without making any *a priori* assumptions about its inherent essence or fundamental nature. Instead, the current perspective focuses on the multi-dimensionality of divorce; namely, the social-structural factors accompanying the divorce process which might enhance (or curtail) the functioning of the divorced parents and their children. There are no "orienting" assumptions as to the emotional, psychological or physiological impact divorce will have on its participants.

In the present paper, we argue that divorce takes place within distinct social and economic contexts. Functioning of divorcees are seen as comprised of role, institutional, and relational adjustments involving other persons and institutions. The outcome of these processes involve accompanying psychological adjustments for all parties. An exclusive focus on physiological or psychological dimensions overlooks the powerful social and structural determinants (Baker, 1984). Moreover, exclusive emphasis on problems ignore the positive, problem-solving, new perception of the self emanating from this uncoupling (Vaughan, 1986). The present study attempts to investigate the links between perceptions of social functioning and social, structural and process variables.

**Factors Related to Social Functioning**

Social functioning of the single-parent is a difficult concept to define. Often, the concept is used interchangeably with coping, adapting, well-being and social adjustment. In the
present study, social functioning is used to refer to what could best be described as the subject's perceived level of satisfaction with her and that of her child(ren)'s post-divorce life. The operationalization of the concept of "functioning" was determined through reference to the interviewees' responses to both scaled and open-ended questions. This strategy will be discussed in more detail in the methodology section.

Attempts to understand the social functioning after divorce date back to Waller's (1967) work originally published in 1930s and Goode's (1956) study of divorced women in Detroit. These and most subsequent studies are problematic for the following reasons. First, a large number of exploratory studies choose their factors by intuition or convenience (for examples, see Menaghan & Lieberman, 1986; Pett, 1982). Although such findings provide a richness in descriptive detail, they rarely lead to the development of causal theoretical models. The problems pertaining to the exclusive emphasis on "maladjustment" and "pathology" that immediately follow divorce have already been discussed. A third and related problem has to do with the tendency to invoke artificial comparisons between divorced and separated persons with those who remain married. Such comparisons unintentionally but inevitably lead to conclusions about the "bliss" of marriage and the trauma of divorce. In sum, many of the research findings are extremely limited, if not overtly biased, in their articulation of divorce as an essentially negative process. Such
studies fail to provide a holistic picture of divorce as a multi-dimensional, and often generative life process.

The present study moves toward a more integrated model than has been proposed in the past. The components of the proposed model are derived from a comprehensive examination of the existing research which shows at least three clusters of factors to be related to post-divorce functioning. These are (1) Socioeconomic, (2) Marital, and (3) Social network related clusters.

The first cluster of variables is that of "Socioeconomic Status of the Female Single-Parent." This cluster consists of the subject's employment status, her educational attainment and the reported financial contribution of her ex-partner. The second cluster of variables consists of the duration of the marriage, the length of separation and the number of children under the subject's care. These constitute the "Marital" cluster. The subject's perceived support from her family, her friends and the non-financial contribution of the ex-partner to the upbringing of the children form the final cluster. That cluster is conceptualized as the "Social Networks". What follows is the rationale for the predicted relations among the individual variables in the clusters and the overall perception of the separation process, perceived change in the standard of living and the social functioning of self and children.

Socioeconomic Cluster

There is ample evidence to suggest that divorcing females experience economic hardships and downward social mobility
(Baker, 1984; Bane, 1976; Colletta, 1979; Devillier & Forsyth, 1988; Kinard & Reinherz, 1986; Katz & Pesach, 1985; Menaghan & Lieberman, 1986; Nichols-Casebolt, 1986; Pett & Vaughan-Cole, 1986). Moreover, economic hardship is most insidious for women who retain the custody of their children. According to recent figures, 48% of the female headed families are below the poverty line (Canada Year Book, 1990). In the U.S., female single-parents live in more destitute circumstances than two-parent families (Statistical Abstracts of U.S., 1988, Tables 695 and 701).

**Employment.** Currently, over 52% of Canadian women over 15 years of age are employed in the paid labour market. However, the majority of employed women work in the secretarial or service industries which generate relatively little income and few benefits (Labour Canada, 1986-87:48, Table II.) Moreover, the high percentage of women in the workforce does not negate the fact that those remaining in the home have little, if any, access to independent income. As Ambert (1980:124) reminds us, "many women have never been employed prior to separation, have either inappropriate skills or none at all, and do not even know how to go about looking for employment." Gainful employment is often seen as a buffer against economic hardships which follow divorce, and thus is seen as a positive influence in post-divorce functioning (Ambert & Baker, 1988; Menaghan & Lieberman, 1986; Pett, 1982; Rose & Price-Bonham, 1986).

**Education.** Women who are uneducated, who have few or outdated skills, and who have dropped out of the labour market
during their child-rearing years have the most difficult time as single-parents. Women who have higher levels of education, on the other hand, are likely to avoid the inevitable downward slide in lifestyle, as they are able to move into a more favourable labour market. Educated women are, therefore, expected to have a less difficult time after the change in their marital status than are women with low levels of education (Kinard & Reinherz, 1986; Tuzlak & Hillock, 1986).

**Ex-Partner's Contribution.** Female single-parents experience a dramatic drop in income after separation. This drop is partially the result of a labour market more favourable to men than to women and more favourable to those with skills, experience and seniority. Single mothers, on the whole, are lacking in the latter (Armstrong & Armstrong, 1982; Fox & Fox, 1987). An equally potent cause of poverty following divorce, however, is the reluctance of husbands to share the economic burden of their former families (Ambert, 1980; Baker, 1984). Nichols-Casebolt (1986), for example, claims that less than 60% of all families eligible for child support receive a legally enforceable award. The average award is $2,000 per year and only half of the awardees receive the full payment due them. Lamanna & Riedmann (1985) stress that the total child support payments amount to less than half of what it costs to maintain a single child at poverty level (also see Menaghan & Lieberman, 1986; Nichols-Casebolt, 1986; Pett, 1982; Pett & Vaughan-Cole, 1986).

**Marital Cluster**
Any number of marriage-related factors can potentially affect post-divorce functioning. The present focus, however, is on duration of marriage, length of separation, and number of children which have often been linked to functioning.

**Duration of marriage.** Goode (1956) once suggested that for younger people, the longer the marriage, the higher the trauma experienced after its dissolution. For older people, however, longer marriages did not seem to lead to a higher degree of maladjustment. One reason for this, as Goode suggests, is that after a long duration, the marriage may have become stale, and the attractions for remaining in it, therefore, few. Furthermore, as children mature and become independent, the rationale for remaining in an unsatisfactory union "for the sake of the children" is no longer a viable one. Other, more recent, studies, however, suggest the opposite: namely that older divorcees experience more disruption because of their reluctance to change their established social order. When one's marital status is "counternormative" for his/her age and sex, one's perception of the process and one's post-divorce functioning are expected to be more difficult (Chiriboga, 1982; Martin, 1976). In light of the latter findings, one would expect women who are coming out of a long marriage to perceive the separation process more negatively than women coming out of a shorter marriage. The way they perceive the separation process, in turn, will be linked to their functioning.
Length of separation. Studies that investigate the effects of time fall largely in the literature addressing psychological adjustment of children (Hetherington et al., 1977; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Findings indicate that negative effects peak during the first year and gradually decline thereafter. A few studies assessing the effects on the custodial parents themselves, reveal that the adjustment process takes approximately two years (Johnson, 1986; Katz & Pesach, 1985; Peterson & Zill, 1986). Accordingly, it may be deduced that the longer the length of separation, the less problematic the recall of the separation process, and the more likely that the parent will perceive her functioning as adequate.

Number of children. Presence of children is often perceived as a complicating factor in post-divorce functioning (Hurley, 1987; Kinard & Reinherz, 1986; Pett, 1982; Rose & Price-Bonham, 1986). Glasser and Navarre (1965), for example, claim that the emotionally charged affectional structure of the single-parent families will overburden the lone parent. We may assume, then, that the higher the number of children, the greater the likelihood of intensified emotional, economic and time demands on the parent, and thus a negative perception of the separation process as relating to these intensified demands. Perceived separation process, however, will be positively related to post-divorce functioning (see, for example, Ambert, 1980; Raschke, 1977; Weiss, 1979).
Until recently, positive effects of social networks have often been underexplored by sociologists and psychologists alike. As Bohannan (1971) points out, one of the detrimental stages of divorce involves the restructuring of the patterns of relationships -- the social networks -- that have existed during the marriage.

**Family and Friends.** Existing literature shows that having a strong social support system in the form of family and friends has a positive influence on post-divorce functioning. Menaghan & Lieberman (1986) have shown increased depression after divorce to be associated with a lack of close, confiding relationships. Gladow & Ray (1986), for example, found that the presence of family members and friends reduced isolation and loneliness, and increased the happiness and well-being of single-parents. Along similar lines, Hanson (1986) observed that single-parents with supportive networks enjoyed better mental and physical health (see also Alwin et al., 1985; Pocs, 1989, Ch. 13; Tietjen, 1985).

For female single heads of families, acquiring a supportive network is often difficult. Women are likely to experience a disjunction in their pre-divorce relationships, particularly with other married couples. The divorced woman is often perceived as a threat by both married women (competition) and men (negative influence for their wives; Katz & Pesach, 1985). Indeed, as Ambert points out, (1980:153) "[D]ivorced persons are either increasingly excluded by their old circle of married friends or else slowly exclude themselves as they come to feel more and more
out of place." Given these findings, we expect that those who receive support from their network of family and friends will perceive the separation process more positively. We also expect this group to have a higher perception of functioning in their social roles.

**Support from the Ex-partner.** The North American divorce processes, especially the legal and economic issues that surround divorce are, by nature, adversarial. Adversarial and conflictual relationships at the level of primary group functioning -- that is, among the divorcing spouses -- cannot help but be conditioned by these larger institutional settings. Traditional divorce laws which are based upon "fault" cannot but aggravate hostile feelings and general trauma of the actors in the divorce process (Granger, 1987; Weitzman & Dixon, 1986). Furthermore, since it is women who are granted custody of their children in the majority of court cases, it is women who are necessarily subject to even greater hostility than the spousal dissolution process alone engenders.

The adversarial nature of divorce has had unfortunate implications for children, as well. Engaged as their parents are in their own hostilities, children are either ignored, or, more often than not, treated as pawns in their parent's struggles. However, Bohannan (1971) in his analysis of co-parental divorce suggests that if the couple can avoid in-fights, and if the non-custodial parent is allowed to participate in the upbringing of
children, the separation process and the post-divorce functioning will be smoother.

**The Present Study**

The present study is an attempt to develop a model of social functioning of female single-parents based upon the socio-economic, marital and network related clusters, as discussed above. The goal is to provide a conceptual framework explaining why some divorced women function as individuals and as parents more effectively than some other divorced women. Such a "within-group" comparison allows the study of female single-parents as a legitimate form of the family, without making the implicit or explicit assumption that they should be compared against the yardstick of presumably "better adjusted" intact families. In the present study, we avoid comparing female single-headed families with any artificially constructed "ideal-type" of family form.

The literature review suggests that the variables comprising the socioeconomic cluster will be positively related to the perceived post-divorce standard of living. Furthermore, it is predicted that all the variables in the marriage and network clusters, with the exception of length of time since separation, will be positively related to the perceived nature of the separation process. In turn, we predict that both perceived standard of living after divorce and perceived nature of the separation process to be positively correlated with the perceived functioning of the self and children.
The crucial variables being measured in this model, namely, social functioning of the self, perceived functioning of the child(ren), perceived change in standard of living and perception of the divorce process, were all measured through self reports. It is important, at this point, to provide some justification for our choice of these subjective measures.

First of all, it is instructive to recall the words of Thomas & Thomas (1928) who, in their classic justification of qualitative measures stated: "If men (sic) define situations as real they are real in their consequences." Secondly, a commitment to a feminist methodology is foremost in the construction of the present research design.

Many feminists argue that the true voice of women, the essence of women's experience, has been embedded in a traditionally "male" oeuvre. This "oeuvre" or orientation to research is reflected in a commitment to scientific objectivity, neutrality, and a "pure" positivistic tradition of social research (Stanley & Wise, 1985: 21; Eichler, 1985; McCormack, 1987; Baumrind, 1980; Roberts, 1981). As the field of social research has, at least until recently, been dominated by males, the equation linking "male research" with objectivity and social distance, is an obvious one. In fact, many feminist scholars argue that the very instruments designed as "objective" do nothing more than reinforce a male dominated worldview which fetishizes the rational, measurable, neutral and objective. Feminist scholars feel that the dominant paradigms contain a
pervasive male bias characterized by objectivity, scientific "neutrality" and a hierarchical, distanced, essentially authoritative relationship between the "Researcher/Expert" and "His" subjects. Researchers which rely exclusively or even very strongly on objective measures are felt to be identified with this predominantly "male" mode of analysis. Such modes of analysis, it is felt, necessarily inhibit an understanding of women's experiences.

As a response, the "preferred epistemology" in feminist methodology has been characteristically phenomenological, drawing more and more on subjective experiences of women (McCormack, 1987). A feminist orientation to research grounds its focus in women's experiences, using these experiences as an indicator of the "reality" against which hypotheses are tested (Harding, 1986:6-7). Hence many feminists find research which relies strictly on objective measures, not merely pedagogically incorrect, but politically inappropriate, as well.

We agree in principal that the discovery of the voices of women, reflecting a uniquely female experience, should be an essential goal of any research project aimed at understanding and bettering the lives of women. For that reason we chose to operationalize the above mentioned variables as subjective perceptions. Given the essentially negative biases in the literature, we felt it especially important to acquire a sense of how divorce was experienced and interpreted by women themselves.
At the same time, we feel that quantitative research need not necessarily be restricted to objective measures. As researchers who are genuinely interested in the issues that pertain to women, we feel that quantitative research which itself attempts to measure women's experience is both a politically appropriate and a methodologically valuable component of feminist research. It is for the latter reason that we chose to ask the women we interviewed to rate their subjective perceptions on five point scales, along with providing them with open ended opportunities to elaborate on their responses. The model we test is anchored on objective ratings of their subjective experiences. Our interpretation of the findings, however, uses both the quantitative and the qualitative responses in the attempt to understand these women's experiences. In that endeavour, we believe that this effort provides a unique and timely contribution to the field.

Methods

Selection of the Sample

Sixty-seven participants were recruited through a snow-ball strategy. The only criteria for selection were: 1. that the women were separated or divorced for two or more years; and 2. that they had custody of at least one of their children. Trained research assistants contacted the female parent by phone and explained the purpose of the study. Those who agreed to participate were interviewed at a time and place most convenient
for them (the interviews took place largely in the respondents' homes or places of work).

**Operationalization of variables**

In the socio-economic cluster, employment (full-time versus part-time/not employed), and education (elementary/high versus college/university) are measured dichotomously. Ex-partner's financial contribution is measured through the perception of women, on a five-point scale, with "very little" versus "a lot" as end-points.

In the marital cluster, duration of marriage, length of separation and number of children were measured in actual numbers. In the network cluster, support from family and support from friends were measured dichotomously (yes/no). The ex-partner's emotional involvement with children was measured through aggregating the subject's perception of the father's contribution to childcare in terms of leisure, school activities and the emotional needs of the child(ren). Each of these variables was measured on a five-point scale. The end points were identified as "very little" versus "a lot".

The perceived post-divorce functioning of the female parent was measured through both scaled and open-ended questions. The scaled question was: "Since your separation, how would you describe the change in your personal life?" Participants indicated their responses on a five-point scale with end-points marked as "very unsatisfactory" to "very satisfactory". In addition, we asked our respondents three open-ended questions.
which stated "Please elaborate on the most negative aspects of your separation," "Please elaborate on the most positive aspects of your separation," and "If you were to go through the same process again, what would you do differently?"

The questions pertaining to the children's functioning consisted of scaled as well as open-ended questions. The former was worded as: "Since your separation, how would you describe the change in your child(ren)'s lives in the following dimensions?" The dimensions were "Relationship with peers," "Relationship with mother," and "School related performance." Responses were on five-point scales with identified end-points as "very satisfactory" and "very unsatisfactory." For the quantitative analyses, we aggregated the perception of the child(ren)'s functioning into a single score. The two open-ended questions were worded as: "Do you think that your children are disadvantaged in someway to have a single-parent?" and "Do you consider yourself to be more or less tolerant with your children since your separation?" Table one summarizes the clusters, variables and their levels as well as the applicable means gathered from the scaled questions.

Results

Sample Characteristics

At the time of interviews, respondents were 45.4 years old (sd=8.1). Their average ages at marriage and separation were 21.3 and 31.3 years respectively (sd= 3.7 and 7.6). The mean duration
of marriage was ten years (sd=6.4) while the mean length of separation was 9.3 (sd=4.9). On average, the respondents had 1.8 (sd=0.8) children.

Twenty-seven (40%) respondents had full-time jobs whereas 40 (60%) were employed part-time or not employed. The majority (41=61%) were currently attending, or had attended or completed college or university. The remaining 26 (39%) had attended or completed high school.

Findings

Few respondents recalled anything in the nature of a severe reduction in their standard of living after separation (X=3.0, sd=1.3). However, despite the absence of a negative recollection of lifestyle change, almost all the subjects recalled the separation process as "unpleasant" or "very unpleasant" (X=2.0, sd=1.0). Most of the respondents perceived their own functioning and the functioning of their children as adequate (X=3.2, sd=1.0 and X=3.0, sd=1.2, respectively). In other words, the women in this sample recalled the actual process of divorce as unpleasant, but saw the closely related aspect of social functioning, which one would assume to have been similarly recalled as negative, as relatively positive.

Table 2 shows the observed relationships among variables in the socioeconomic cluster with perceived standard of living. In addition, the correlations between the marriage and network clusters with the perception of the separation process are also displayed.
Effects of the socio-economic cluster. According to the proposed model, education, employment and ex-partner's financial contribution in the socio-economic cluster, is expected to positively relate to perceived standard of living. The results in Table 2 are contrary to our predictions. Neither education nor the employment status of the subject influenced her perceived post-divorce standard of living. More interestingly, ex-partners' financial contribution after divorce was significant but in the opposite direction of the prediction. That is, when financial contributions received from the ex-partner were perceived as high, the change in the standard of living was perceived more negatively (p<.01). We will have occasion to return to this unexpected finding.

Effects of the dissolved marriage and network clusters. Two of the three variables in the marriage cluster (length of separation/ number of children) showed the predicted effects on the perception of the separation process. The longer the length of separation, the more positive the subjects were likely to recall the separation process (p<.05). Also as expected, subjects with fewer children recalled the process as more pleasant (p<.05). On the other hand, only one of the network variables (support from family) paralleled the anticipated nature of the relationship with the perception of the separation process (p<.01). Ex-partners' involvement with children, contrary to
expectations, had **significant negative effects** on the perception of the process (p<.05).

Table 3 provides the Pearson correlations among perceived standard of living after divorce, perceived divorce process and the perceived post-divorce functioning of self and the child(ren). As expected, perceived standard of living is positively and significantly related to functioning of the self (p<.05) and child(ren) (p<.01). Perception of the separation process is positively and significantly related to only the perceived functioning of the self.

--------------------------------------------

**Discussion and Implications**

Before discussing the broad implications of the findings, we feel it important to comment on certain limitations of this study. Let us begin with reference to our sample. Respondents were recruited from a metropolitan Canadian city, through a snow-ball technique. We, therefore, cannot know how these female single-parents approximate single-parents in general. In addition, by interviewing women who have been separated for two or more years, we forced them to recall a past event, namely their post-separation standard of living and the process of separation itself. The period of time that has elapsed between the time of the interviews and the actual separation may well have compromised the "accuracy" of recall. At the same time, however, by focusing on women who have been separated or divorced for some time, we hope to have avoided any potential in our
subjects to over-dramatize the "negative" aspects of divorce. This potential presumably would be greater among those subjects who have just recently gone through a marital dissolution. Indeed, it may be that studies which are carried out shortly after separations partially account for the overemphasis on the negative aspects of divorce that predominate in the literature.

Finally, the preliminary model proposed here awaits more sensitive measures of the variables that form the clusters. Input from other actors in the divorce process, such as the child(ren) and the ex-partner, and even social service agents, might elaborate on or explain some of the anomalies characterizing the present findings. Limitations notwithstanding, however, the findings presented here (more perhaps because, rather than in spite of their paradoxical nature) are illustrative of the complexities of the divorce process as perceived by female heads of families.

The most salient finding of the study pertains to the negative relationship between the ex-partner's contribution and the perceived standard of living after divorce (p<.01) as well as the perceived divorce process (p<.05). These findings are puzzling indeed, since the review of earlier findings led us to predict just the opposite. We predicted that the greater the perceived financial input of the ex-spouse, the more positive will be the standard of living following divorce. Likewise, our model proposed that the more positive the non-monetary
contribution of the ex-spouse, the more positive will be the perceived divorce process itself.

One possible explanation to the observed anomaly could be that the female parents' perceptions of the divorce process are coloured by the resentment they still feel toward the ex-partner, regardless of his level of contribution. It may also be that non-custodial parents actually serve as "agitators" in the lives of the female-headed families by providing different opportunities for the child(ren) or imposing different sets of expectations through their contact. As a closing remark, one interviewee mentioned "I have trouble serving hamburger-helper, the b... buys [her daughter] banana-splits and fancy toys."

A very different explanation is suggested by the more clinically oriented family literature. In an illuminating essay on the psychosocial dimensions of the marital process, Hess & Handel (1983) point out that all couples must negotiate separateness and connectedness within and without marriage. How we come together without feeling embedded, without feeling that our identities are consumed by the other is a major task facing every couple in an "intact" marriage. How we remain "separate" individuals, with a distinct self identity, and sense of autonomy is also part of this process. When divorce occurs, this process -- always oscillating within intact marriages -- takes a new and violent turn where separateness becomes the fulcrum of new processes of identity formation. How to feel separate, yet whole, alone yet loved, is one of the major difficulties facing new
divorcees. We need a ballast to distance ourselves from a relationship where we no longer are able to secure our identities and our feelings of self-worth and safety. Often this emotional ballast takes the form of projecting negative characteristics onto the divorcing spouse, or the "intact" relationship of which he was the intimate other. The mirror image of this process may or may not hold true for male divorcees. For example, in her controversial assertions about the differential moral development of men and women, Gilligan (1982:169) argues that women are decidedly more "relationship oriented" than men. "[For] many women, the threat of disruption of an affiliation is perceived not just as a loss of a relationship but as something closer to a total loss of self." For men, separation, not merging of the self is the developmental norm. For men, the post-separation process is presumably smoother.

Paul Bohannan (1971, 1985) refers to the shift in the foci of separateness versus merging by using a slightly different conceptual framework. "Letting Go" at the symbolic level is one of the most painful processes of what he calls the "psychic" divorce. Bohannan argues that psychic divorce means needing to separate oneself from the personality and influence of the other spouse: being able to become whole, complete, and autonomous without the other. In divorce, we need to learn to live without someone to lean on, without someone who needs a special kind of support, without someone to blame our difficulties on. Each of us, Bohannan maintains, must regain or renew a dependence on the
self, a process which might be particularly difficult for women. And to complete this process, we must disengage not merely physically, or structurally, but mentally and emotionally, from our intimate other. This process, the most difficult stage of divorce, occurs often over a considerable period of time, and involves much angst and soul searching (Bohannan, 1971:61). Again, according to Bohannan, some never reach this stage.

Psychic divorce cannot but be made more difficult when visitation is frequent, especially when the divorcing spouse is accommodating in providing financial contributions. If, in divorce, we need to foster the kind of mental image of our relationship which will allow us to distance ourselves from what once was the paradoxical image of the generous spouse, even the "good father" will compromise this symbolic distancing process in painful ways. To facilitate psychic distance, physical distance may not be enough. Indeed, divorcing spouses may need to foster an artificially negative image of the spouse to complete the psychic divorce process. If psychic distance is a key process facilitating post divorce functioning, this paradox is understandable. In other words, the fact that respondents who recalled the spousal involvements as relatively positive were equally likely to perceive the divorce process itself and the post-divorce standard of living, as negative may be the product of a necessary psychic distancing process. Indeed, the observed incongruity may reflect the universal need to provide a kind of cognitive buffer against the pain of separation. And, in point of
fact, our findings imply that the more accommodating the spouse, the greater the cognitive dissonance surrounding the process of separation, and accordingly, the greater the tendency to impute negative connotations to that process and to the lifestyle changes immediately accompanying it.

The following responses illustrate the paradoxical nature of the psychic divorce. In response to the open-ended question asking subjects to elaborate on the positive aspects of divorce, many women expressed such positive feelings as "... my life is my own. I am free."; "Growing! learning about people and about myself. Making my own decisions"; "Became a person again"; "Peace of mind and independence." As Gilligan (1982:130) observes, however, "women's self-development continues to raise the spectre of selfishness." In our respondents, therefore, loss was also a predominant theme. Here, they reported "feeling left out", "feeling very lonely", "fear of being alone" and "fear of not knowing what was ahead of me". Clearly, feelings were extreme and ambivalent, and a reasonably high degree of cognitive dissonance seemed to be a key characteristic of the meaning systems surrounding the divorce process for these respondents. These observations become even more important in light of the fact that these women were separated, on the average, nine years.

The negative impact of the respondents' perception of their ex-husband's financial help on the recalled standard of living reflected a similar pattern. On the one hand, it could be that ex-partner's help comes only when the standard of living of the
family is extremely low in the first place. In other words, the women who receive the most help might also be the ones who are the most deprived in relation to the standard of living they have previously enjoyed. On the other hand, any contribution on the part of the ex-spouse is bound to create a certain level of cognitive dissonance which, in and of itself, will cause tension. If attaining "separateness" is crucial, as is suggested in the literature discussed previously, and if women have difficulty in achieving separateness as Gilligan (1982) suggests, the responses which impute negative connotations to the positive contributions of the spouse become understandable. Our respondents were trying to maintain the psychic distance necessary to help them renew their identity as single persons.

A second crucial finding in the current study pertains to the effects of the perceived separation process on the perceived functioning of the self. In spite of recalling separation process as inherently negative, women who perceived the process as less unpleasant were also more likely to be reasonably satisfied with their post-divorce level of functioning. However, perception of the separation process was not related to the perceived functioning of children. This anomaly could be due to the fact that children's post-divorce functioning is directly related to their custodial parent's post-divorce functioning, regardless of the latter's perception of the process. In fact, in the present findings, children's perceived functioning was positively and
significantly related to the perceived functioning of the self (p<.01).

Perceived standard of living did show the expected effects on both the perceived functioning of the self and child(ren). This is a positive finding indeed and supports the original premise that social-structural determinants will have an overriding influence on the post-divorce functioning of female single-parents. Indeed, the current results suggest that female single-parents, like all other parents, need to perceive their standard of living as acceptable to achieve a positive view about their own as well as their child(ren)'s functioning within the larger social system.

Despite the paradoxes mentioned above, the crucial findings here attend to the surprisingly positive themes expressed by many of our subjects. Of the 67 responses to the question which asked "What was the most positive aspect of your separation?", 37 or 55% of the subjects responded that a renewed sense of autonomy, self confidence, self control, and personal growth were positive aspects. (The other major theme characterizing these responses was the theme of "relief" where 22% of the respondents provided answers which indicated that the most positive aspect of their divorce was a relief from the pain of living in an unhappy situation.)

Responses which were indicative of the generative/renewed sense of control theme were characterized as follows: "Being in charge of my life"; As mentioned before, "My life is my own, I am
free!"; "I realized I was a much stronger person"; "Finding out that I'm able to survive and do a lot of things under stress"; and, perhaps most telling of all, one respondent indicated that in gaining a new "selfhood" and sense of "independence" through divorce, she "became a person again."

These are important findings for those of us used to seeing divorce as an essentially despairing, debilitating process and it is important that we attempt to place these findings within a tentative model. Seen as a life transition, divorce may be enlikened to earlier individuation processes in the life cycle. Recalling Gilligan's (1982) work, we can understand that any dissolution process with an intimate other, for women, may imitate the separation processes young women experience when individuating from their families of origin. And for women, individuation is a uniquely painful experience, but one, as Gilligan argues, potentially generative of personal growth, and a healthy quality of egocentrism, as well.

Gilligan argues that for women, the threat of disruption is often perceived as a total loss of self. But that loss of selfhood is also generative of an opportunity to gain a renewed sense of personal efficacy, of our own strengths, and, indeed, our own appreciation of becoming fully in control, and fully autonomous human beings. When divorce is seen as a life transition, we may utilize Gilligan's model to understand marital dissolution as a potentially generative transitional process of social development, with at least the potential for a positive
outcome. By ourselves reframing divorce as a transition mirroring for many women an earlier developmental process, we may be better able, as researchers and practitioners, to provide new paradigms, insights and interventions. These data demonstrate an innate strength and "will to empowerment" as social "potentials" in every woman entering the divorce process, although it goes without saying that neither author is "prescribing" divorce as a route to personal growth and autonomy.

**Strategies for Intervention**

According to Jurg Willi (1984), there is what he refers to as an "odium of moralism" still attached to the province of divorce counselling. Willi claims that many therapists, including himself, find it very difficult to have positive feelings about couples' therapy that ends in divorce process. That being the case, the therapist/counsellor working with post-divorce single mothers may similarly adopt a preconceived attitude of despair, if not a resigned moral judgment, with regard to the potential of their clients to lead normal and efficacious lives.

In one of the classic and early books on a feminist psychology of women, Jean Baker Miller decries such an attitude. She claims that "for women today, power may (and we would add "must") be defined as 'the capacity to implement'" (Baker Miller, 1976:116). What Baker Miller was talking about was the will to be efficacious that resides, however repressed, in the psyche of every woman. She went on to say that a major task for women is the recognition and eventual implementation of these abilities
and sensibilities. The task of the therapist/counsellor is to bring those abilities and sensibilities, the innate will to be efficacious, to fruition in every woman. Our findings suggest that "will" that recognition and eventual celebration of a new and more autonomous self, may indeed be embedded in the psyche of the majority of women. Counsellors would be well advised to tap that resource while rejecting any tendency to see divorce as an unqualifiedly despairing process for women.

These findings, we feel, are most instructive for those practitioners running support groups for post-divorce single mothers, where individual empowerment and the will to self determination through the group process is a central goal. Self esteem counselling through reframing techniques is, we believe, a highly advisable strategy, given the fact that so many of the women in this sample expressed a potential for personal growth. To become empowered, female divorcees in particular, need to be encouraged to draw on their resources, recognize their will to empowerment, and draw on the strength and support of the group to move through the individuation processes divorce inevitably engenders.

Ultimately, the data here demonstrate that despite the pain of divorce, despite the fear of isolation, despite the bitter feelings left in the wake of separation, the majority of women in our sample also experienced a new and vital sense of independence, autonomy, and self confidence. It is our belief that practitioners can usefully build on the concept of divorce
as a life transition which, for women, mirrors an earlier, 'normal' developmental stage which then, like now, was both painful and generative. That process of self discovery and renewed personal autonomy, is most powerfully fostered through new affiliations which mirror for the client her changing sense of self. In other words, the community most appropriate for self discovery should be comprised of peers whose concerns and own self journeys closely approximate each other and for whom emerging identities is a central concern.

A support group for women can provide that essential community where self development can be fruitfully realized. Armed with this recognition, as practitioners, we may be able to a) ourselves reframe divorce as a generative process, and hence bring our new insights into the therapeutic process, and, b) draw more heavily on the strength of peer group dynamics to foster the journey towards self determination for newly divorced single mothers.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, we submit that the strength of the current study rests in its presentation of conceptual and methodological innovations in the following areas. First, the model presented here takes into account the essential social nature of divorce -- a reconceptualization which focuses on the probability of positive post-divorce functioning. That latter emphasis stands in contradistinction to many other models which approach divorce as an essentially negative event, both for individuals, and society at large. Second, we have articulated the ongoing necessity in the social sciences to recognize the legitimacy of a feminist
methodology, and in that, we have attempted to develop a something of a rapprochement between the use of subjective measures and quantitative designs which traditionally utilize objective indicators. Finally, we have hopefully alerted both researchers and practitioners alike to women's will to self determination, to their self healing powers as they proceed through what was once believed to be an essentially despairing and debilitating "crisis".

No claims as to the generalizability of our results were made; none were intended. Rather, in this study we have tried to develop a more integrated approach to understanding post-divorce functioning; an approach which is sensitive to the multi-dimensionality of the variables -- structural, social, and process oriented -- that characterize the phenomenon under investigation. In that enterprise we hope to have provided a greater insight into some of the inevitable paradoxes that characterize divorce, as well as the more positive outcomes of this increasingly "normalized" life transition. It is our contention that this finding alone will open a wide range of questions to be addressed through future researchers.
REFERENCES


James, W. Principles of Psychology. (1950[1890]). New York: Dover.


Endnotes

1. The obvious exception is Bohannan's early study "The Six Stations of Divorce" (in Bohannan, 1971). That paper has remained relatively unchanged in its republication in a more recently edited version, "All the Happy Families" (in Bohannan, 1985).

2. Here, a distinction is made between "single" and "lone" parents. In Canada, the designation of "single" parent is usually reserved for individuals who have never established a co-parental relationship while "lone" parents refer to those who have been left alone through death or divorce. However, to our knowledge, no such differentiation is made in U.S. research and we have chosen the designation "single" parents to refer to separated or divorced women.

3. See Thomas and Thomas (1928:572). Although these authors are credited with this oft-cited phrase, it should be recalled that it was William James (1950 [1890]) who first addressed the relationship between perception and reality in a systematic way (see especially his chapter on "Perceptions and Reality."

Table 1. Clusters, variables of interest and levels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CLUSTER</th>
<th>VARIABLE</th>
<th>LEVEL</th>
<th>MEANS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(EXOGENOUS)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOCIOECONOMIC</td>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Part-time/Unemployed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Elementary/High Sc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ex-Part.</td>
<td>College/University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Financial Cont.</td>
<td>Five point scale</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1=Very little</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5=A lot</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MARRIAGE RELATED</td>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Length of sep.</td>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of child.</td>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOCIAL NETWORKS</td>
<td>Family Support</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friend Support</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ex-Part.</td>
<td>Involvement with Children</td>
<td>Five-point scale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1=Very little</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5=A lot</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functioning (Self)</td>
<td>Five-point scale</td>
<td>1=Very unsatisfactory</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5=Very satisfactory</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functioning (Children)</td>
<td>Five point scale</td>
<td>1=Very unsatisfactory</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5=Very satisfactory</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Probabilities associated with variables in the socioeconomic, marriage related and network clusters with perceived standard of living and the perceived nature of the separation process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOCIOECONOMIC CLUSTER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Standard of Living</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MARRIAGE CLUSTER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Duration</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Separation Process</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NETWORK CLUSTER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family Support (Perceived)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Separation Process</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^{a*} = p < .05; ^{**} = p < .01$
Table 3. Probabilities associated with perceived standard of living and perceived nature of the separation process and perceived functioning of self and child(ren).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERCEIVED STANDARD OF LIVING</th>
<th>SEPARATION PROCESS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived (self) Functioning</td>
<td>r = +.23 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived (child) Functioning</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a* = p<.05; ** = p<.01


2. Here a distinction is made between "single" and "lone" parents. In Canada, the designation of "single" parent is usually reserved for individuals who have never established a co-parental relationship while "lone" parents refer to those who have been left alone through death or divorce. However, to our knowledge, no such differentiation is made in U.S. research and we have chosen the designation "single" parents to refer to the population who have left a co-parental relationship.

3. See, Thomas, W.I. and Dorothy S. Thomas, *The Child in America*, New York: Knopf, 1928, p. 572. Although these authors are credited with this oft-cited phrase, it should be recalled that it was William James who first addressed the relationship between perception and reality in a systematic way. See, James, William, *Principles of Psychology*, New York: Dover, (1950; 1890), especially his chapter entitled, "Perceptions of Reality."

4. See especially McCormack, Thelma, "Feminism and the New Crisis in Methodology" (1987) and the contributors to the Stanley and Wise collection (1985) for excellent discussions on the politics of a feminist methodology.