SINGLE MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN AFTER DIVORCE:
A STUDY OF THOSE "WHO MAKE IT"

Abstract

The present study was conducted in Toronto, and explored the post-separation functioning of single mothers and their children. Fifty-seven women who have been separated for an average of 6.8 years were interviewed. There were 96 children involved. Although the majority of the mothers perceived the separation process as "negative" or "very negative" and the contribution of their ex-partners to the upbringing of their children as less than desirable, a larger number claimed that their children's school performance, relations with peers and relations with themselves were not negatively altered due to the marital break-down. The only negative aspect noted was the children's relationship with their fathers. No differences between male and female children were observed.

Overall, findings indicate that separation and divorce, contrary to popular beliefs, need not be a traumatic event and theoretical perspectives which predict negative effects should be revised in order to reflect the changing social realities.
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A Study of Those Who "Make It"

Introduction:

During the past two decades, soaring divorce rates have increasingly become an area of concern for social scholars, policy makers and lay persons alike. Even though 330.2 of every 1,000 marriages in Canada end in divorce, this figure still trails far behind Sweden (540.5), United States (505), Denmark (454.5), and Australia (430.6), (Statistics Canada, Vital Statistics, 1980, p. 32, Table 21). One reason why the Canadian figures are alarming is that, traditionally, Canada has had one of the lowest divorce rates among Western nations (Elkin, 1964). Since the 1968 Divorce Law Reform Act, divorce rates have sextupled, leading to the realization that divorce is no longer a "South of the border," affliction, but is quickly becoming a Canadian way of life.

A direct consequence of soaring divorce rates is an increasing number of children who lead at least a proportion of their dependent years in single-parent homes. According to recent findings, approximately 23% of divorcing couples have one, 21% have two and an additional 8% have three or more dependent children (Statistics Canada, Vital Statistics 1980). From these figures it can be concluded that at least 60,000 Canadian children every year experience divorce first hand. These figures do not include children from desertions, informal separations (which may or may not lead to a legal divorce), annulments and common-law breakups and therefore, underestimate the actual number of children who remain in single-parent families.

Canadian courts, in spite of emphasizing the "best interest of the child" in awarding custody, still show a positive bias toward the mother. Regardless of the sex of the parent who petitions for divorce, the majority of children remain under the custody of the female parent. In 1980, 78% of the mothers and 16% of the fathers obtained custody of their child(ren) (Calculated from Statistics Canada, Vital Statistics, 1980, p. 24, Table 15). Therefore, this study will focus on the adjustment of female-headed families after separation or divorce.

Aside from the functioning of the female parent, the purpose of this study is also to explore the effects of separation and divorce on the children of mother-led families in four areas: school adjustment and their relationship with peers, as well as the custodial and non-custodial parents. In addition, sex of the child will also be considered as a factor in terms of overall adjustment. Since the study is exploratory in nature, specific hypotheses were not formulated but previous research suggest that the adjustment of children would be a function of the custodial parents' adjustment and economic standing rather than a direct result of separation or divorce per se (For example, Ambert & Baker, 1984; Pett 1982a, 1982b).

Theoretical Perspective

Although there are numerous theories which contribute to the understanding of possible effects
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of marital breakdown on parents and their children, one of the most frequently utilized is the structural functional approach. In general, this approach predicts undesirable consequences of separation and divorce.

Structural functionalists look upon the family as one of the central institutions within the larger society. Aside from emphasizing the functions of the family within the society (such as regulation of sexual activity, reproduction, socialization of the young, protection, etc.), focus has also been placed upon the functions of the family members within the family unit itself, such as the division of labor in terms of the instrumental and affectional leadership. Structural change within the family is thus perceived as problematic not only for members of the family but also for the equilibrium of the society at large. Advocates of this approach (For example, Glasser & Navarre, 1965) argue that family disruption will be devastating for the members (especially the children) in at least four fundamental areas.

(1) Task Structure: According to the authors, "providing for the physical, emotional, and social needs of all the family members is a full-time job for two adults" (p. 100). Since females in general are less prepared for well-paying, prestigious jobs and since they are also the ones who most frequently retain the custody of the children, the lowered socioeconomic standard of the one-parent (especially female-headed) families will bear serious consequences for the adjustment of the children.

(2) Communication Structure: Again, in this approach, parents are seen as the transmitters of the norms and values of the society to the children while simultaneously representing them in the adult world. The absence of a parent will likely create a void in the dual transmitting function of the remaining, over-burdened parent since his (or most likely her) participation will be limited in the adult world and thus lead to a structural distortion in the child(ren)'s development.

(3) Power Structure: In the one-parent family, children will perceive power as personal rather than consensual. The non-democratic way in which decisions are made and implemented are assumed to create a rigid conceptualization of power in the children's minds with no leeway for mediation and thus adversely affect the healthy development of children. For the remaining parent, making decisions on all aspects of daily living is also perceived as an insurmountable task.

(4) Affectional Structure: Finally, one-parent families are perceived as conducive to intensive relationships between children and the remaining parent who is more than likely to be over-burdened by constant emotional demands of children without having a safe outlet for his or her own needs. Also, it is suggested that in this emotionally charged atmosphere, the probability of a certain member becoming a scapegoat is heightened.

Numerous critiques of the structural functional models exist and thus will only be briefly introduced here (For example, see Baker, 1984; Clayton, 1975; Eshleman & Clarke, 1978; Goode,
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1982; Lamanna & Riedmann, 1985; Sprey, 1969). These criticisms center around the "taken for granted" functionality of one specific form of family (intact) and perceiving alternate forms as "deviations" or "oddities". Social systems, unlike physiological systems do not have a "norm" from which deviations can be easily measured and are not based upon cooperation, equilibrium seeking and consensus throughout their existence. By designating one form as "desirable", by implication, functionalists perceive all other forms as harmful to themselves as well as the society at large. The important point to be made is that the structural functional models, which have affected our perception of marital breakdown for decades, predict negative effects of divorce and separation on children of both sexes as well as the adults.

Review of the Literature

Studies which assess the effects of divorce on children abound in the United States, but are relatively few in Canada. However, the findings from both sources are often contradictory and a large number of studies are plagued by methodological weaknesses and disciplinary biases of the researcher (for an in-depth discussion, see Ambert, 1980). Most researchers start with the a priori assumption that divorce has disruptive effects on children. Therefore, the studies which show negative effects (For example, Ambert & Saucier, 1984; Burgess, 1970; Glasser & Navarre, 1965; Gould, 1968; Mueller & Pope, 1977; Pitts, 1964) are not surprising. More clinically oriented scholars begin with even less optimism and often start with children (or adults) who have been brought to the attention of (or sought help from) mental health facilities. These researchers have found children of divorce to be prone to a variety of problems: for example, depression (McDermott, 1970; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), antisocial behavior and delinquency (Glueck & Glueck, 1951; Whitehead, 1979), low self-esteem and feelings of rejection (Despert, 1962; Kaplan & Pokorny, 1971; McDermott, 1968; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1975, 1976), sexual misconduct (Hetherington, 1972; Landis, 1960, 1963), and lowered academic aspirations (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976).

Only a few published studies have found that divorce has no detrimental effects on children or that the initial effects are often not long lasting (Gardner, 1974; Nye, 1957; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Kurdek and Siesky (1980), after in-depth interviews with custodial parents and children of divorce conclude "that children acquired strengths and responsibilities in the course of adjusting to divorce highlights our contention that divorce need not be a traumatic experience for all children" (p. 99). Both Colletta (1983) and Ambert (1980) assert that the negative effects are often a function of economic difficulties female lone-parents experience and not divorce per se. This also appears to be supported by Pett (1982a, 1982b) since she observed that economic factors directly affect the parents' social adjustment and indirectly affect the children's social adjustment (through their impact on the custodial parent).

Bernard and Nesbitt (1981), after an assessment of the effects of divorce on children conclude that divorce is "an unreliable predictor of mental illness, achievement, delinquency, and emotional
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predisposition" (p. 40). In addition, they suggest that a "large majority of children of divorce continue to function, engage in healthy interpersonal relationships, and succeed in school" (p. 40).

Aside from the debate concerning the effects of divorce and separation on children, there is controversy over sex differences in terms of effects. Examining families in which one parent had a psychiatric disorder, Rutter (1970) found that "discord and disruption in the home were consistently and strongly associated with antisocial disorder in boys, but not in girls." (p. 169). The author claims that this observation also holds true in marital disruption since "broken homes' were associated with antisocial disorder in boys, but not girls" (p. 169). Discussing civilian reactions to air raids, mortality following bereavement and studies of foster children, Rutter (1970) highlights the possibility that boys (and men) are "more vulnerable" (p. 175) and favors the argument that girls' disorders might have a genetic component whereas boys' disorders are predominantly a function of environmental factors.

Kalter (1977) also found that boys living in single parent homes as well as boys in reconstituted families show more aggression and problems with the law than boys from intact families. However, girls living in single parent or reconstituted families were observed to have a wider range of problems such as aggression, sexual promiscuity, drug use and problems with school performance.

In a recent article, Francke (1984a) claims that "boys tend to take the failure of their parents' marriages harder than girls, take longer to adjust and show far more disruptions in behaviour" (p. 166).

Whitehead (1979) suggests that one reason studies have shown sex differences, particularly ones which find that boys experience more negative effects, is that the behavior exhibited by males is different from females. Whitehead's (1979) findings indicate that male children of divorced couples tend to act-out, whereas female children withdraw. Therefore, teachers and physicians, for example, tend to identify boys as disturbed more often than girls. Aside from suggesting the reasons for observed sex differences, Whitehead (1979) argues that children of divorce fare better than children who remain in families experiencing continuous marital discord.

Since most of our understanding of the process and effects of divorce is based upon studies that utilize negatively skewed samples (those who seek help from mental health agencies, those who are in counseling, children having problems at school or with the law, etc.), our overall perception remains gloomy. The current study, unlike many others, addressed female parents who were not associated with mental health agencies or social services.
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Methodology

The sampling procedure of the current study was snowball in nature. Students who were taking courses at Glendon College (York University) and their friends were interviewed. The sample consisted of 57 mothers who were either separated or divorced for at least one year and who had retained custody of their child(ren). Participants were assured of their anonymity both at the beginning and the end of the interviews.

A questionnaire which consisted of an array of topics found to be problematic for single mothers and their children after a separation or divorce was developed. Apart from demographic questions, a series of questions was asked about the socioeconomic changes that have taken place since the separation, the emotional aura of the split-up, responsibility and blame processes, perceived contribution of different factors to the break-up, emotional and financial support, division of assets and the perceived effects of the break-up on children's school performance, relationship with parents and peers. The majority of the questions were designed as closed format, on a five-point Likert-type scale. For the questions which required a yes/no answer, the participants were encouraged to elaborate. The last four questions were open-ended. The interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. This particular report deals only with the responses to the closed format questions.

Description of Sample

Subjects

Subjects' mean age at the time of the interviews was 37.9 years and at the time of separation was 31.1 years. On average, the couples were married for 9.5 years and separated for an average of 6.8 years.

Almost one-half (43.8%) of the subjects had some university education or a university degree. An additional 22.9% had completed courses or obtained a certificate from a community college, while 31.6% of the subjects had at least attended or completed high school. Just one subject had only completed elementary school.

In terms of employment, 57.9% of the subjects had full-time jobs, 12.3% were employed part-time with the remainder (29.8%) stating no employment.

Of the 57 women, 35.1% defined their marital status as separated, 33.3% as divorced, 14% as remarried and 12.2% common-law. Three subjects (5.3%) have reconstituted their original marriages.
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Ex-Partners

The general characteristics of the ex-partners as stated by the subjects of the study are as follows. The average age of the ex-partner at the time of the study was 41 years and at the time of the separation was 34.3 years.

In terms of educational attainment of the ex-partners, 38.6% had either attended or completed a university degree with an additional 19.3% having taken courses or obtained a certificate from a community college. One-third of the ex-spouses had attended or completed high school with the remaining 8.8% attending or completing elementary school.

The marital status of the ex-spouses at the time of the study was reported to be 33.9% separated, 17.9% divorced, 30% remarried, and 12.5% common-law. Some respondents did not know the current marital status of their ex-partners.

Children

From the dissolved relationships, there were 96 dependent children (50 females & 46 males) who were under the care of their mothers (an average of 1.7 children per mother). Three of the mothers had children from more recent relationships (two males and four females), but these children were excluded from the analysis. Of the 57 women interviewed, 43.8% had one child, 45.6% two, 8.7% three and 1.7% (1 subject) had four children. The mean age of the children (N = 93) was 8.24 years.

As can be seen from the above sample characteristics, the subjects approximate the "average Canadian divorce profile." However there are some characteristics that are contrary to the general Canadian averages.

First, in terms of the couples themselves, we can see that the males are 3.2 years older than their wives at marriage which is slightly higher than the current 2.6 years difference for all Canada (Statistics Canada, Vital Statistics 1980, p. 2, Table 1). In terms of years married, the present sample remained married for 9.5 years while the average Canadian marriage lasts 12.5 years (Statistics Canada, Vital Statistics 1980, p. 2, Table 1).²

The differences between our respondents and their ex-partners in terms of present marital status, employment and education are as follows. In our sample, the separated and common-law categories for both sexes were almost identical, but the divorced and remarried categories were very different. While almost twice as many females reported to be divorced (17% versus 33%), twice as many males were reported to be remarried (30% versus 14%). The proneness to re-marriage among divorced males is also reflected in Canadian statistics. (Statistics Canada, Vital Statistics 1980, p. 6-8, Table 4).
Another area where our sample differed from the Canadian population is employment status. Whereas 51.6% of the adult female population in Canada work (Armstrong, 1984, p. 202), our sample's labor participation was higher (57.9% full-time and 12.3% part-time). The deviation of the employment status of the ex-partners from the Canadian statistics is more pronounced. All ex-spouses were claimed to have full-time jobs while the male participation rate in the labor force is 76.9% (Armstrong, 1984, p. 202).

Finally, level of education is an area where the ex-partners and the subjects not only differed from each other, but they also differed from the Canadian averages. In our sample, the females have slightly more university education (43.8% versus 38.6%) and community college experience (22.9% versus 19.3%) than the males. Hiller (1976, p. 63) reports that 9.8% of the Canadian population over 15 years of age have university education or a university degree while 43.8% of our sample fell into this category. This difference is probably an artifact of the employed sampling technique, since most of the subjects came from a university setting.

In relation to the children, it was previously stated that there were 1.7 children per mother, which is almost twice the Canadian average for divorcing couples. In 1980, the mean number of dependent children per divorced families in Canada was .96 (Statistics Canada, Vital Statistics 1980, p. 26, Table 17). However, since .96 children per family includes all divorces, approximately half of which do not involve children, our sample approximates the divorcing couples who do have children.

In sum then, it appears that our sample fits reasonably well into the Canadian profile of single mothers with dependent children except for educational attainment and employment status, which have been attributed to the employed sampling technique.

Results

The following results pertain to the process of marital breakdown, the subsequent changes that took place in the single-parent's and their children's lives.

In terms of who initiated the separation, 48% of the subjects claimed that they had initiated the separation whereas 37.5% said that the separation process was initiated by the ex-partner. The remainder (14.2%) stated that the separation was a mutual decision. Although most women reported to have initiated the separation themselves, a large percentage (57.9%) thought that their ex-spouses' actions were responsible for the breakdown of their marriages. Only 22.8% claimed that the responsibility was theirs and an additional 10.5% perceived the responsibility for the breakdown as mutual. A few women (8.7%) blamed a third party.
Regardless of who had initiated the separation and who was responsible for the breakdown, two thirds (66.6%) of the respondents recalled that the separation process was either negative or very negative. Only six women (10.5%) stated that the separation had taken place in a positive atmosphere.

Among the causes for marital breakdown, extramarital relationships (42.1%), extended family obligations (36.8%), sexual problems (19.3%), occupational problems (working late, etc.:14%), social problems (choice of friends, frequency of social gatherings, etc.:14%), differences in child rearing (14%), and financial problems (8.7%) were considered as most crucial. During the break-up, 10.5% of the women claimed that they have received emotional support from their children, 31.5% from family and 33.3% from friends. The number of women who has sought help from self-help groups or professionals was small (3.5% and 7% respectively).

As far as financial help at the time of separation was concerned, 57.9% said that ex-partners helped, whereas financial support from family (36.8%), government agencies (includes scholarships: 31.5%), and friends (8.7%) was lower. Of the 57 subjects, 31.5% claimed a rise in their standard of living after the separation and 33.3% claimed no change. The remaining women (35%) mentioned a slight decline in their standard of living following the separation.

Currently, the majority of the women perceived the ex-partners’ contribution to the upbringing of their children as much less than desirable. In fact, 49.1% claimed very little or no financial contribution, 68.5% claimed no contribution in terms of the educational development of their children. Over half of the subjects (59.6%) claimed no help from ex-partners to children's leisure and recreational needs and 81.7% stated no contribution from the ex-partners to children's emotional needs and development. In spite of the perceived lack of involvement of the majority of fathers, only 21% of the women claimed that the separation process had had any negative effects on their children. Interestingly, 57.9% stated that their children would not have been any different if they had remained in the intact family. One-fifth (21%) of the women felt that the calm atmosphere after the separation was actually beneficial for their children, while 50% claimed that they have become more tolerant toward their children after the separation (only 5.5% stated a decline). Children's performance at school, relationships with peers, mother and father since the separation are depicted in Table 1.

As Table 1 indicates, the vast majority (67%) of mothers perceived no change in their children's school performance or their relationship with peers after the separation. In fact, 13% of the mothers claimed that the children improved in their school work and 9% claimed that the children's relationship with their peers improved following the separation. Only 20% of the mothers felt that their children's school work declined and 19% stated that their relationship with the peers was not
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as good. As far as the post-separation relationship with the parents is concerned, 43% of the women said that their relationship with their children stayed the same and 37% of the women claimed that the children's relationship with the father showed no change. An additional 40% of the women claimed better relationships with their children since the separation while 23% of the women perceived that the children had better relationships with their fathers. Only 17% of the women felt that the relationship with their children was not as good as prior to the separation. Forty percent of the women perceived a deterioration of the relationship between the children and their fathers. On a five-point scale, the mother's ratings of the children's current relationship with the mother and the father are significantly different (correlated t(86) = 3.702, p<.001 two-tailed).

The data were analyzed for sex differences. As far as the school performance was concerned, there were no differences (M = 3.143 for both groups). In terms of peer relations, relationship with the father and mother, there were slight differences between the two sexes, but none of these differences reached a level of significance (Peer: t(86) = -.553, p<.20; Father: t(85) = -1.245, p<.20; Mother: t(87) = -.621, p<.20).

Discussion

The 57 women interviewed for this study were those who had kept their children after a separation.

An important aspect of this study which should be addressed here is that the subjects of the study were highly educated women, the majority of whom were able to retain their standard of living after a separation. In this sense, the sample of the study deviates from the general population of female-headed families most of which have a subsistence level close to or below the poverty line. Therefore, although the results of the study are not generalizable to all female-headed families, it is this deviation that makes the current results intriguing in themselves.

In the present study, almost half of the subjects (48.2%) claimed that they initiated the separation while the majority (57.9%) was certain that the ex-partners were responsible for the breakdown of the marriage. In this regard, our findings closely parallel earlier observations (Ambert, 1980; Ambert & Baker, 1984; Goode, 1956). One explanation of this phenomenon was provided by Goode (1956) almost three decades ago. He stated, "in our society the husband more frequently than the wife will engage in behavior whose function, if not intent, whose result, if not aim, is to force the other spouse to ask for the divorce first" (p. 135). Our study seems to support Goode's (1956) assertion.

In terms of the stated causes for the breakdown, it was found that more so than any other, extramarital relations (42.1%) and extended family obligations (36.8%) were salient. Earlier studies indicate economic problems to be one of the most detrimental factors in marital dissolution (Blood & Wolfe, 1960). In Ambert's (1980) terms, "poverty can, directly or insidiously, attack family life
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and either destroy relationships or prevent them from ever taking a strong hold" (p. 70). In the current study, very few women (8.7%) mentioned financial problems among the causes for their marriage breakdown. This is not surprising since the subjects were able to avoid a decline in their standard of living after the separation. Our sample appears to be representative of only a privileged minority of the mostly impoverished female-headed families.

One theme that emerged from the interviews was the lack of involvement of the ex-partners with the upbringing of the children. In fact, 49.1% of the women claimed that the fathers' monetary contribution was very little or none at all whereas a larger percentage (68.5%) complained about the lack of involvement with the children's educational development. The concern expressed by the majority of women (81.7%) was the fathers' passivity in terms of the children's emotional needs. In spite of these problems the mothers still felt very self assured of their children's well-being within the female-headed family environment. As Ambert (1980) argues "when economic conditions are more favourable ... [the mother's] relationship with her children is likely to be close and rewarding" (p. 147). Referring to women similar to the subjects of this study, Ambert (1980) suggests that "women who have children and are very involved in their work may find, after divorce, that they have more time to devote to both as well as to themselves" (p. 149). The reported increase in tolerance here may therefore be just another implication of the increased time for self and the children for this specific group.

The children of the present sample of women seem to have adjusted well after the separation and divorce. Very few mothers reported a decline in the school performance (20%), relations with peers (9%) or in the mother-child relationship (17%). Our findings suggest that 80% or more of the children are functioning just as well or better than the pre-separation period. The only area which seems to show a decline is the children's relationship with their fathers (40%). This could be the result of a variety of reasons such as problems with access, distance between the fathers' and the children's residences, the new relationships and commitments of over 40% of the fathers, and unfulfilling and artificial environments in which the fathers have an opportunity to see their children (Epstein, 1974; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), or simply due to the bias of the mother's perception. What needs to be pointed out is the fact that the majority of children seem to retain meaningful relationships with their mothers. As Pett (1982a) argues, the most important factor related to children's post-divorce adjustment could be the positive relationship with the custodial parent, which in this case, can explain the lack of problems of the children of our subjects.

An interesting finding of the current study was the lack of differences between the male and female children with regard to post-divorce school performance, peer relations and relations with both the custodial and non-custodial parents. This finding seems contradictory to earlier findings by Rutter (1970), Wolkind and Rutter (1973), Francke (1983a, 1983b) and Biller (1970) which show significantly more negative effects of divorce on boys. Whitehead (1979), questioning the link between parental discord and maladjustment in male children, concludes that both girls and boys are as likely to be negatively affected by separation and divorce although the effects take the form
of antisocial behavior in boys and withdrawal in girls. In the present study, although no direct questions about antisocial behavior or withdrawal were asked, none of the mothers mentioned such behavior during open-ended questions and their ratings on school performance, relationship with peers, mother and father. The ratings were primarily "the same" or "better."

Summary and Conclusions

By utilizing a snowball sampling technique, 57 women from the Metropolitan Toronto area who were separated or divorced for at least one year and had custody of their child(ren) were interviewed. The findings indicate that the 96 children of the subjects were functioning well in their school, had good relationships with their peers and their mothers. A little less than half of the mothers reported a decline in their children's relationship with the father. There were no significant differences between the female and male children in any of the four categories of interest, which is contrary to earlier findings.

Before the overall implications of the current observations can be discussed, some of the difficulties in generalizability should be re-highlighted. The subjects of the current study did not experience a sharp decline in their standard of living after the marital breakdown.

Secondly, the current results are solely based upon mothers' perceptions and recollections. Of course it would have been more desirable if the fathers, school teachers and especially the children themselves were also included in the study in order to obtain a more accurate picture. In our study, these additional sources of information are not present and thus both the lack of negative effects and the lack of sex differences must be evaluated with caution.

On the other hand, what adds considerable confidence to our results is the earlier finding that parents and children significantly agree with one another in their responses pertaining to the latter (Pett, 1982a). If this is the case, our finding of "no significance" is significant indeed.

The often observed negative effects of separation and divorce both by clinically and systems oriented researchers have helped to preserve the myth that "divorce has inordinate powers to hurt people regardless of the mental health and maturity of the adults and children involved" (Bernard & Nesbitt, 1981, p. 40). No statistics are available on the men and women who remain in undesirable unions in order to prevent their children from the well popularized negative effects of marital breakdown although there is evidence that remaining in unhappy but intact homes is more destructive than living with a single-parent (Whitehead, 1979). There are also no available statistics on children who are brought up without behavioral and/or emotional problems by capable lone-parents. Due to the impact of the negative predictions of the structural-functional approaches or clinical ones, we often seek (and find) adverse effects of separation on adults as well as children and therefore reinforce the status quo which emphasizes one form of family as most desirable: the intact nuclear family.
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According to the structuralist approach, the absence of a parent is expected to have a shattering effect on children, since the absence of one of the parents (usually the father), is perceived as a disruption in the task, power, affection and communication structures of the system with severe consequences for its functioning. What the systems approach seems to ignore is that some intact families are non-functional, and lone-parent families are also systems with established adaptation, goal attainment, integration and pattern maintenance strategies. Although the transition from the former to the latter may be difficult, the outcome will undoubtedly depend on who the male, the female and the children are, regardless of the type of system. Some new systems can and do become as strong or stronger than their "intact" predecessors.

The present sample of well functioning female-headed families is an example to the point. The findings indicate that divorce and separation need not be a traumatic event and thus support findings by Kurdek and Siesky (1980), Pett (1982a), Bernard and Nesbitt (1981) and Desimone-Luis, O'Mahoney and Hunt (1979). Theoretical orientations that fail to take into account the economic characteristics that surround divorce often make assertions that confound the effects of sheer deprivation (which might be just as devastating for intact families) with psychological effects of the break-up. Such perspectives also directly or indirectly help preserve the status quo in which the intact family (no matter how flimsy) is revered while ever growing numbers of single-parent homes are viewed with suspicion if not fear. In terms of predicting and explaining the effects of separation and divorce, new theories need to be developed in order to reflect the quickly changing social realities. Far ahead of her time, Mead once said:

As things are, we insist that the most flimsy, ill conceived and unsuitable mating be treated as a sanctified life-long choice. At the same time, we insist that every divorce, however much it is dictated by every consideration for the welfare of parents and children, be regarded as a failure and be listed as an index of social disorder along with suicide, homicide, narcotic addiction, alcoholism and crime. By insisting upon these views of divorce, we debar ourselves from developing appropriate institutions for protecting children from an unrealistic dependence on a situation of life-long marriage between their parents. (In Bohannan, 1971, p. 124)

Although these words were written over half a century ago, our emphasis is still on the negative effects of divorce which is reinforced through observations from people who have trouble coping. A more positive approach will be to expand our understanding of single parent families by concentrating not only on those who face problems, but also on those who function well. Only through such a shift in our thinking will we gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon which is here to stay and suggest strategies which will increase the proportion of those “who make it.” For example, young children can be taught that traditional marriages are not the only acceptable form of meaningful relationships, marriages rarely parallel the fairy tales where people live "happily ever after." Both boys and girls can be socialized to seek self-fulfillment without lifelong dependence on a significant other, pursue interests, higher education and occupational skills which will protect them from economic, psychological or social devastation if their family situation
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drastically changes. This refocusing should also take place in court practices where the care of children will be perceived as an equally shared responsibility of both parents, not something contingent upon the continuation of the intact family or the assignment of the custody to the female parent, by default.

The suggested changes can only occur if we conquer the "divorceaphobia" that exists in our society, and give due attention (and respect) to those "who make it."
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**Footnotes**

1 We would like to thank Drs. Robert James, Benjamin Schlesinger and Howard Irving for their generous comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Also, we are grateful to the single mothers for sharing their experiences with us and acknowledge the dedication of the students who carried out the interviews. Requests for reprints should be sent to Aysan Tuzlak, Department of Sociology, Scarborough College, 1265 Military Trail, Scarborough, Ontario, Canada, M1C-14A.

2 It should be noted that the means appearing in Statistics Canada represent the ages at the time of "decree absolute." Couples remain separated for a few years before petitioning for divorce and the decree after petitioning takes more than a year (Ambert, 1980, p. 35))

3 Since the contribution of each of these factors to the marital breakdown was inquired separately, percentages given above do not equal to 100%.

**Table 1**

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<td>40%</td>
<td>23%</td>
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<td>8</td>
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</tr>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS</td>
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<td>87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Items are condensed from a five-point scale.