FACTORS THAT ENHANCE OR CURTAIL THE SOCIAL FUNCTIONING OF FEMALE SINGLE PARENTS
A Path Analysis
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Explained in this study of 57 women who have been divorced for 2 or more years are the factors enhancing or limiting the social functioning of these individuals. The path analysis identifies such factors as duration of marriage, number of children, involvement of ex-spouse, and family support as determinants of postdivorce adjustment.

Rising divorce rates in the Western world have led to reconceptualization of the very nature of divorce and separation. First of all, there is increasing destigmatization of divorce and the divorced in the eyes of society. Divorce is now being regarded more as a "social transition" than a "life crisis" (Katz & Preach, 1985). Rather than a stigmatizing event, divorce is more accurately seen as part of an ongoing process of negotiation of relationships between intimates. It is this reconceptualization of divorce that has brought to light its inherent social nature.

The social nature of divorce is evident in many forms. In divorce, social roles, connection to social institutions, and the social conventions dictating our manner of relating to others must be learned anew. We must disengage old social ties, while attempting to forge new ones. During this process, we restructure our roles as parents, workers, and partners. Ultimately, we reconstruct our sense of self. Such transitions bring accompanying psychological adjustments, which in turn will configure new social patterns of relating. Accordingly, the relationship between the psychological and the social

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aspects of divorce is unquestionably a dialectical one. But the core stimuli or triggers initiating this relationship are unqualifiedly social in nature.

In the existing literature, however, divorce is rarely conceptualized as a distinctly social phenomenon involving multidimensional social processes. The majority of research on divorce still invokes a "crisis" model where the parameters being investigated remain within the domain of psychological adjustment and physiological symptomatology of family members. Indeed, one of the unfortunate consequences of the crisis model is its uncompromising focus on the individual.

The purpose of this article is to respond to the gap in the research on divorce by reinvigorating two essential concepts: the perspective of divorce as a social process and the view that empowered social functioning is just as salient a part of the postdivorce experience as the pathologies so relentlessly pursued. In the current study, the emphasis is on the social nature of divorce which includes empowerment and positive adjustment rather than on individual crisis management. We propose a path-analytic model which incorporates clusters of social factors that are predicted to enhance or curtail the social functioning of female single parents as perceived by the single parents themselves.

At this point, some clarification of the focus on female single parents is in order. We feel that most existing literature overlooks women's experience of divorce. A focus on women's experience will add an important dimension to the existing knowledge. Moreover, there are empirical and practical reasons for pursuing this particular population. The main reason for this focus has to do with the fact that women, more than men, have to cope with functioning as parents in postdivorce households. Approximately half of divorcing couples have one or more children (Statistics Canada, Vital Statistics, 1986; U.S. Department of Commerce, 1988), and courts still favor the female parent in their 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, and teenage pregnancies also contribute to the volume of female single-parent families, although the latter are not reflected in divorce statistics. Similar trends are also observed in the United States (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1983; McLanahan & Booth, 1989).

Accordingly, when we speak of the single-parent family, we are largely speaking of a social unit where the woman is the primary caretaker, a configuration that is the fastest growing family form in North America.
phenomena investigated here, however, may not be generalizable to the small percentage of male-headed single-parent households.

As a related concern, it is hoped that the findings emanating from this study 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, 1977; Hanson, 1986), a study investigating the social functioning of the most representative custodial parent should provide some new insights for researchers interested in the effects of divorce on children.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As mentioned earlier, though divorce has been re-conceptualized as a “transition” which is largely social in nature, research in the area still problematizes divorce. In the existing literature, there are basically three types of studies that deal with divorce and its effects on women and children. The majority of these studies examine physiological and psychological post-divorce trauma or invoke a dysfunctionality debate. Only a few studies emphasize the social aspects of divorce, and even fewer adopt a model that looks for positive indicators of health and well-being in the postdivorce family. (Perceptions exist, such as Bernard & Neubri, 1981; Hanson, 1986; Johnson, 1986.)

Studies that focus on trauma start a v-i-t-o-r-i from the assumption that divorce is a life crisis which has unique capabilities to harm people (Bernard & Neubri, 1981). Questions asked and observations reported focus on reduced esteem and increased professional help seeking (Amato, 1988; Baker, 1983; Chiriboga, Cobo, Stein, & Roberts, 1979), heightened anxiety, depression, and loneliness (Menaghan & Lieberman, 1986; Woodward, Zabel, & DeCosta, 1980), hospitalization (Bloom, Asher, & White, 1976; Guttentag, Salasie, & Belo, 1980), and even homicide and suicide (Laster, 1986).

Studies on children also adopt the “divorce as crisis” mentality where antideaf, emotional, and behavioral “problems” of children of marital dis-solutions become the exclusive units of analysis. Some studies suggest links between divorce and promiscuity and delinquency in children (Fautenberg, Morgan, Moore, & Peterson, 1987; Gluck & Gluck, 1951).

A further problem with findings that focus on crisis and postdivorce trauma is that they sustain an unfortunate tautology. Researchers writing from this psychological/physiological/social disorganization perspective begin from the a priori assumption that divorce is inherently traumatic for all parties
concerned. They then develop instruments that measure only the problematic aspects of the phenomenon. The categories of observation derived from the research design are then imposed on the phenomenon being investigated as an explanation for it. While it is impossible to observe the world without observing it, as Berger and Kelner (1972) reminded us in their classic study of marriage and reality construction processes, we may not generalize from selected categories of observation to the whole of a phenomenon as representing its essence.

In contrast, the current study does not focus merely on the "downside" of divorce. Nor does it make any a priori assumptions about its inherent essence or fundamental nature. Instead, the present focus is on the multidimensionality of divorce, on the social structural factors accompanying the divorce process which might enhance or curtail the functioning of the female parents and their children. There are no "creating" assumptions as to the emotional, psychological, or physiological impact that divorce will have on its participants. Instead, divorce is seen to take place within a socioeconomic context with accompanying role, institutional, and relational adjustments which inherently subsume other players. However, it is our contention that the triggering events, the core processes involved, are social. Exclusive focus on negative dimensions overlooks these powerful social and structural determinants and ignores the positive, problem-solving, new perception of the self emanating from the uncoupling.

FACTORS RELATED TO SOCIAL FUNCTIONING

Social functioning of the single parent is difficult to define. Often, the concept is used interchangeably with coping, adapting, well-being, and social adjustment. In the present study, social functioning refers to what could best be described as the subject's perceived level of satisfaction with her own and her child(ren)'s postdivorce lives. Respondents were asked to rate their own and their child(ren)'s postdivorce lives on a scale ranging from "very unsatisfactory" to "very satisfactory." They were also encouraged to elaborate on their responses.

Attempts to understand the social functioning after divorce date back to Walder's (1967) work originally published in the 1930s and Goode's (1956) study of divorced women. What distinguishes the present study from the earlier ones is its attempt to overcome certain problems inherent in earlier studies, such as the exclusive emphasis on maladjustment and disorganization, as already discussed. A related problem has to do with the tendency to
invoke artificial comparisons between divorced and separated persons with those who remain married. Such comparisons, without intending to do so, inevitably lead to conclusions about the "bliss" of marriage and the trauma of divorce, a preconceived notion which the current study attempted to avoid. Furthermore, earlier studies pertaining to postdivorce functioning have not generated any sort of a standardized model. Rather, the factors believed to influence postdivorce functioning have been studied in relative isolation to one another. A comprehensive examination of the earlier findings, however, makes it possible to isolate at least three clusters of factors related to postdivorce functioning. These are the socioeconomic, marital, and social network clusters, which will be treated as independent variables in the proposed model.

The first cluster in the model is that of "socioeconomic status of the female single parent." This cluster consists of the subject's employment status, her education, and the reported financial contribution of her ex-partner. The socioeconomic status cluster is expected to determine the subject's perception of her postdivorce standard of living. The second cluster of casual variables, the family cluster, consists of the duration of the marriage, the length of separation, and the number of children under the subject's care. This cluster is hypothesized to influence the respondent's perception of the separation process. The subject's perceived support from her family and friends and the nonfinancial contribution of the ex-partner to the upbringing of the children forms the final cluster (social networks). The network cluster is also hypothesized to influence the subject's perception of the separation process. What follows is the theoretical rationale behind this model.

**Socioeconomic Cluster**

There is ample evidence to suggest that divorcing females experience economic hardships and downward social mobility (Baker, 1984; Devillier & Forysth, 1988; Katz & Pesach, 1985; Kinard & Reinzer, 1986; Menaghan & Lieberman, 1986; Nichols-Casebolt, 1986). 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 (Statistics Canada, Canada Year Book, 1988, Table 5.31). In the United States, female single parents live under similar destitute circumstances (McLanahan & Booth, 1989; U.S. Department of Commerce, 1988, Tables 695, 701).
Employment. Currently, over 52% of Canadian women over 15 years of age are employed in the paid labor market. However, most work in the secretarial or service industries which generate relatively little income and few benefits (Labour Canada, 1986-1987, Table 2). Moreover, the high percentage of women in the work force does not negate the fact that those remaining in the home have little, if any, access to independent income. As Avotn (1988) reminded 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" (p. 124). Gainful employment is often seen as a buffer against economic hardships which follow divorce and thus is seen as a positive correlate of postdivorce functioning (Baker, 1984; Menaghan & Lieberman, 1986; Pett, 1982; Rose & Price-Bonham, 1986).

Education. Women who are uneducated and have few or outdated skills are the hardest hit among single parents. Women who have higher levels of education, on the other hand, are likely to avoid a downward slide and are expected to have an easier time after the change in their marital status (Kimmel & Reinherz, 1986; Tuzlak & Hillock, 1986).

Ex-partner’s contribution. The dramatic drop in income after separation that is experienced by female parents is partially due to remitting an already sex-stratified labor market with limited skills, experience, or seniority (Fox & Fox, 1987; McLanahan & Booth, 1989). 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, 1983; Baker, 1984). Nichols-Casebolt (1986), for example, claimed that less than 60% of all families eligible for child support receive a legally enforceable award and only half of the award winners receive the full payment due them (also see McLanahan & Booth, 1989; Menaghan & Lieberman, 1986; Pett & Vaughan-Cole, 1986).

MARRIAGE CLUSTER

Any number of marriage-related factors can affect postdivorce functioning. The present focus, however, is on duration of marriage, length of separation, and number of children.

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. Goode suggested that after a long duration, the marriage may have become stale and the attractions for remaining in it, therefore, few. More recent studies, however, suggested that older divorces experience more disruption because of their reluctance to change their established social order. When one’s marital status is “unusual” for his or her age and sex, one’s perception of the process and thus one’s postdivorce functioning are expected to be more difficult (Chiriboga et al., 1982; Martin, 1976). In light of the latter findings, we predicted a negative relationship between marital duration and the perception of the separation process, whereas the separation process itself is expected to be positively linked to social functioning.

Length of separation. Studies that investigate the effects of time are mostly in the area of psychological adjustment of children (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1977; Waierstein & Kelly, 1980). Findings indicate that negative effects peak during the first year and gradually decline thereafter. A few studies assessing the effects on custodial parents themselves revealed that the adjustment process takes approximately 2 years (Johnson, 1986; Katz & Petach, 1985; Peterson & Zill, 1986). Accordingly, the longer the length of separation, the less problematic we expected the perception of the separation process to be 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 (Kinard & Reinhart, 1986; McLanahan & Adams, 1989; Rose & Price-Bonham, 1986). It is argued that the emotionally charged lives of the single-parent families will overburden the lone parent. We predicted, then, that the higher the number of children, the greater the likelihood of intensified emotional, economic, and time demands on the parent and a greater likelihood of problems in the separation process. Perceived separation process, however, would be positively related to postdivorce functioning (see, e.g., Ambert, 1989; Raschke, 1977).

NETWORK CLUSTER

Until recently, positive effects of social networks have often been ignored. As Bohannan (1971) pointed out, however, one of the detrimental stages of divorce involves the restructuring of the patterns of relationships that existed during the marriage.
Family and friends. A number of studies show that having a strong social support system in the form of family and friends has a positive influence on postdivorce functioning. Menaghan and Lieberman (1986) associated increased depression after divorce with a lack of close, confiding relationships. Gladow and Ray (1986) also found that close networks reduced isolation and loneliness and increased the well-being of single parents. Among similar lines, Hanson (1986) observed that single parents with supportive networks enjoyed better mental and physical health (see also Alwin, Converse, & Marini, 1985; Tietjen, 1985).

For female heads of families, acquiring a supportive network is difficult. Women often experience a disjunction in the predivorce 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 & Posach, 1985). Indeed, as Ambert (1980) pointed out, “Divorced 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” (p. 153). Therefore, we predicted that those who receive support from their network of family and friends will perceive the separation process more positively and thus will better function in their social roles.

Support from the ex-partner. The stereotypical picture of the ex-husband is rarely one of the supporting spouse, and there is some evidence to support that stereotype. The North American divorce processes, especially those that surround legal and economic issues, are adversarial and add to the strained relations among the divorcing spouses. Traditional divorce laws which are based on “fault” cannot but aggravate hostile feelings among actors in the divorce process (Weitzman & Dixon, 1990). These adversarial practices have had unfortunate implications for children, as well. Engaged as their parents are in their own hostilities, children are either ignored or treated as pawns in their parents’ struggles. However, Bohannon (1971) in his analysis of co-parental divorce suggested that if the couple can avoid infights, the separation process and the postdivorce functioning will be smoother.

THE PRESENT STUDY MODEL

The present study proposes a path-analytic model of social functioning of female single parents based on the discussed socioeconomic, marriage, and
network clusters. These clusters are hypothesized to influence postdivorce functioning through two mediating factors: standard of living and the perception of the separation process. While the proposed model does not exhaust all potential influences, it is our belief that it still can lead to more conceptual clarity than can studies which test for isolated variables. Moreover, the model attempts to explain why some divorced women function as individuals and as parents more effectively than some other divorced women. Such a within-group comparison avoids the implicit or explicit assumption that they should be compared against the yardstick of presumably "better adjusted" intact families.

In the model, the socioeconomic cluster consists of the subject's employment, education, and the reported financial contribution of the noncustodial parent. These are treated as externally independent (exogenous) variables. Perceived postdivorce standard of living, which is argued to be influenced by the socioeconomic variables, is treated as a mediating (endogenous) variable.

The variables constituting the marriage cluster (duration of marriage, length of separation, and number of children), and the network cluster (support from family and friends and involvement of the noncustodial parent with the upbringing of children) are similarly treated as exogenous variables. The perception of the divorce process is treated as a mediating variable since it is expected to be influenced by the variables in the marriage and network clusters. The two mediating variables of the model—perceived change in the standard of living and perception of the divorce process—are in turn hypothesized to influence the subject's perception of the level of her own and her child(ren)'s postdivorce functioning.

The choice of measuring the crucial variables of the model (perceived functioning of the self and children), perceived change in standard of living, and perceived divorce process as self-reports was based on a political principle. Feminism has always argued that the voice of women has been embodied in a reified scientific objectivity within the excessively positivistic traditions of male-dominated social research (Eichner, 1985; McCormack, 1987; Stanley & Wise, 1985). Many feminist scholars argue that the very instruments designed as "objective" do nothing more than reinforce a male-dominated worldview that treats the rational, measurable, neutral, and objective in a fetishlike manner. As a response, the vast majority of feminist researchers' unqualifiedly and uncompromisingly reject any form of quantitative research as politically inappropriate. We agree in principle that the discovery of voice of women, reflecting a uniquely female experience,
should be an essential goal of any research project aimed at understanding the lives of women. For that reason, we felt it especially important to gain a sense of how social functioning was perceived by the subjects themselves.

In support of our preference for subjective perceptions, it is instructive to recall the words of Thomas and Thomas (1928), who stated that "if [women] define situations as real they are real in their consequences" (p. 572). At the same time, we reserve judgment on the absolutism of the qualitative versus quantitative debate. 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 respondents to rate their perceptions on five-point scales, along with providing them with open-ended opportunities to elaborate on their responses. The path model we test is anchored on such objective ratings. Our interpretation of the findings, however, uses both the quantitative and the qualitative responses in the attempt to understand these women's experiences.

METHOD

SAMPLE SELECTION

A snowball strategy was used to recruit 67 participants, the only criteria for selection being that (a) the women were separated or divorced for 2 or more years and (b) they had custody of at least one of their children. Women were contacted by phone and those who agreed to participate were interviewed at a time and place most convenient for them (mostly respondents' homes or places of work).

OPERATIONALIZATION OF VARIABLES

In the socioeconomic cluster, employment (full-time vs. part-time/not employed) and education (elementary/high school vs. college/university) were measured dichotomously. The ex-partner's financial contribution was measured on a five-point scale, with "very little" versus "a lot" as end points.

In the marriage 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.
Table 1: Clusters, Variables of Interest, and Levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster/variable</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Mean</th>
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<td>Independent variables</td>
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<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>Full time, part time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Elementary/high school, college/university</td>
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<tr>
<td>En partner's financial</td>
<td>5-point scale (1 = very little, 5 = a lot)</td>
<td>2.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>contribution</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital-related</td>
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<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>10.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Length of separation</td>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>9.3</td>
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<td>Number of children</td>
<td>Actual</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social network</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friend support</td>
<td>Yes, no</td>
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<tr>
<td>En partner's involvement with children</td>
<td>5-point scale (1 = very little, 5 = a lot)</td>
<td>2.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dependent variables</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perception of standard of living</td>
<td>5-point scale (1 = much worse, 5 = much better)</td>
<td>3.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perception of separation process</td>
<td>5-point scale (1 = very negative, 5 = very positive)</td>
<td>2.0</td>
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<td>Functioning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>5-point scale (1 = very unsatisfactory, 5 = very satisfactory)</td>
<td>3.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child(ren)</td>
<td>6-point scale (1 = very unsatisfactory, 5 = very satisfactory)</td>
<td>3.0</td>
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(yes/no). The ex-partners’ emotional involvement with his children was measured through aggregating the subject’s perception of the father’s contribution 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, with “very little” versus “a lot” as end points.

The mediating variables of the model—perception of standard of living and the separation process—as well as the two dependent variables—functioning of the self and child(ren)—were each measured on five-point scales with identified end points. Table 1 summarizes the clusters, variables within the clusters, and their levels, as well as the means, where applicable.
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 10 years (SD = 6.4), while the mean length of separation was 9.3 years (SD = 4.9). On average, the respondents had 1.8 (SD = 0.8) children (see Table 1).

Of the respondents, 27 (40%) had full-time jobs, while 40 (60%) were employed part time or not employed. The majority (41, or 61%) had attended or completed college or university. The remaining 26 (39%) had attended or completed high school.

FINDINGS

Few respondents recalled a severe reduction in their standard of living after separation ($\bar{X} = 3.00$, SD = 1.3). Despite the absence of a negative re-creation of life-style change, almost all women recalled the separation process as unpleasant ($\bar{X} = 2.00$, SD = 1.0). Most perceived their own functioning and the functioning of their children as positive ($\bar{X} = 3.20$, SD = 1.0 and $\bar{X} = 3.00$, SD = 1.2, respectively). In other words, the women in this sample recalled the actual process of divorce as unpleasant but saw their social functioning as relatively positive. The probabilities associated with the standardized regression coefficients of the path analysis can be seen in Figure 1.

Effects of the socioeconomic cluster. According to the proposed model, the cluster's variables education, employment, and ex-partner's financial contribution are expected to positively affect postdivorce standard of living.

In turn, standard of living as a mediating factor is expected to positively determine the perceived functioning of the female parent and her children. As Figure 1 shows, the results support only the latter part of the argument. As expected, standard of living significantly and positively affected the perceived functioning of self ($p = .05$) as well as children ($p = .01$). Contrary to predictions, however, neither education nor the employment status of the subject influenced her perceived standard of living. More interestingly, the ex-partner's financial contribution after divorce was significant but in the
Figure 1: Probabilities associated with the standardized path coefficients.

Note. (* indicates a finding opposite to the one predicted.

opposite direction of the prediction. That is, when financial contributions were perceived as high, the change in the standard of living was perceived more negatively.

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 effect on the perception of the separation process. However, only one of the network variables (support from family) paralleled
the anticipated nature of its influence. Contrary to expectations, the ex-partner’s involvement with his children had significant negative effects on the perceived separation process (p = .03). Also contrary to predictions, the perceived separation process showed no effects on functioning of the women or their child(ren).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Before the implications of the findings are discussed, it is important to highlight the limitations of the present study. First, our respondents were recruited from a metropolitan city, through a snowball technique. We cannot know how these female single parents approximate single parents in general. Finally, as with any attempt to develop a theoretical model, refinement is required and awaits future testing of its premises. Limitations notwithstanding, however, the findings presented here (more perhaps because, rather than in spite, of their paradoxical nature) are illustrative of the potential of the path-analytic model for understanding the complexities of the divorce process.

The most salient finding of the study pertains to the negative effects of the ex-partner’s contribution, both in terms of the perceived standard of living after divorce (p = .01) and the perceived divorce process (p = .03). These findings are puzzling, indeed, because the model predicted just the opposite responses. We predicted that the greater the satisfaction with the ex-spouse’s financial as well as nonmonetary contribution, the more positive will be the perceived standard of living and the divorce process itself.

One possible explanation could be that the female parent’s perception of the divorce process is colored by the resentment she still feels toward the ex-partner, regardless of his level of contribution. It may also be that noncustodial parents actually serve as agents by inducing their child(ren) (Hetherington et al., 1977). As one interviewee mentioned, “I have trouble serving Hamburger Helper, the b__ boys [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 and Handel (1983) pointed out that all couples must negotiate separateness and connectedness within and without marriage. Togetherness without feeling embedded, without feeling that one’s identity is consumed by the other is a major task facing couples in an “intact” marriage. How one remains separate with a distinct self-identity and autonomy is also part of this process (Vaughan, 1986). When divorce occurs, this oscillating process
within intact marriages takes a violent turn where separateness becomes the
frokem of identity formation. How to feel separate, yet whole is one of the
major difficulties facing new divorcees. They need a ballast to distance them-
theselves from the past relationship. Often, this emotional ballast takes the form
of projecting negative characteristics onto the divorcing spouse or the “in-
tact” relationship of which he was the intimate other (the mirror image is
probably true for divorceds).

Bohannan (1971, 1985) referred to the same process using a slightly
different conceptual framework: the “psychic” divorce. He argued that
psychic divorce means to separate oneself from the personality and influence
of the other spouse and being able to become whole, complete, and autonom-
ous without the other. Each of us, Bohannan maintained, must regain a
dependence on the self. And to complete this process, we must disengage not
merely physically, or structurally, but mentally and emotionally with our
intimate other. This process, he most difficult stage of divorce, occurs often
over a considerable period of time, and involves much angst and soul
searching (Bohannan, 1971, p. 61).

Psychic divorce can be more difficult when visitation is frequent, espe-
cially when the ex-spouse is accommodating and contributing. If in divorce
we need to distance ourselves from what once was, the paradoxical image of the
generous spouse, even of the “good father” will compromise this 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 process (Voughan, 1986). If
psychic distance is a key process facilitating postdivorce functioning, the
paradox we observed is understandable. In other words, the incongruity
between positive spousal involvements and the negative perception of the
divorce process itself and the postdivorce standard of living may be the
product of this psychic distancing process. Indeed, our findings show that the
more accommodating the spouse, the graver was the tendency to impute
negative connotations to the separation process and to the life-style changes
immediately accompanying it.

The following responses further illustrate the paradoxical nature of the
psychic divorce. In response to an open-ended question about the positive
aspects of divorce, many women expressed such 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”; and “peace of mind and
independence.” Yet at the same time, loss was a predominant theme in many
responses regarding the negative aspects. Here, respondents reported “feelin-
g left out,” “feeling very lonely,” “fear of being alone,” and “fear of not
knowing what was ahead of me.” Clearly, feelings were ambivalent, and a reasonably high degree of cognitive dissonance seemed to be a key characteristic of the meaning systems surrounding the divorce process. If retaining “separateness” is crucial, as is suggested in the aforementioned literature, the responses which impede negative connotations to the positive contributions of the spouse become understandable as attempts to maintain this psychic distance. These observations are even more intriguing in light of the fact that these women were separated, on average, 9 years.

A second important finding pertains to the lack of effects of the perceived separation process (which was mostly negative) on either the perceived functioning of the self or the children. In spite of the recalled separations as inherently negative, these women were reasonably satisfied with their post-divorce level of functioning. This anomaly could be due to the fact that the utilized measure did not produce enough of a variation: Almost all women recalled the process as negative. We suggest that future studies use more sensitive measures of the separation process.

Perceived standard of living did show the expected effects. This is a positive finding, indeed, and supports the original premise that social structural determinants are crucial to the postdivorce functioning of female single parents. Indeed, the current results suggest that female single parents, like all other parents, need an acceptable standard of living to achieve a positive view about their own as well as their child(ren)’s functioning.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, the strength of the current study rests in its theoretical and methodological innovations in the following areas. First, we presented a predictive model which takes into account the social nature of divorce, and second, we attempted to develop a rapprochement between the stated goals of feminist research and the strength of quantitative models.

No claims as to generalizability of the specific results were made; none were intended. Rather, we tried to develop a more integrated approach to understanding postdivorce functioning, an approach which is sensitive to the multidimensionality of the structural, psychosocial, and process-oriented variables that characterize the phenomenon of postdivorce functioning. In that enterprise, we hope to have provided a greater insight into some of the inevitable paradoxes that characterize divorce, one example being the ex-partner’s perceived negative role in the process.
Finally, we tried to emphasize the potential growth for women that divorce latentiy engenders. By not invoking traditional comparisons with intact families, with their attendant prior assumptions about trauma and dysfunctionality in divorce, we tried to tap a more empowering dimension of women’s lives. Indeed, in celebration of the strength of female divordee, our subjects demonstrated that however distressing the separation process, their sense of their own ability to function was uncompromised. This is clearly an empowering vision of the female divorced and their child(ren).

In sum, it is our position that the spirit of reaching a better understanding of complex issues calls for a spirited approach to theoretical and methodological innovation. We hope that this study and the model discussed has provided a rudimentary but innovative blueprint for further investigation.

NOTES

1. The obvious exception is Bohannan’s early study, “The Six Stages of Divorce” (in Bohannan, 1975). This study 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 “one” parent. In Canada, the designation “single” parent is usually reserved for individuals who have never established a sexual relationship, while “one” parent refers 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 thus chose the designation “single” parent to refer to separated or divorced women.


4. Although three authors are credited with this often-quoted phrase, it should be recalled that it was William James (1895-1915) who first addressed the relationship between perception and reality in a systematic way (see especially his chapter on “Pecuniaries and Reality”).

REFERENCES


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