

**THE EXPERIENCE OF SINGLE-PARENTING AMONGST
DIVORCED WOMEN : AN EXPLORATORY STUDY**

DALENE DICKSON

B.A., H.D.E., B.Ed.

**Submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Education
in the Department of Educational Psychology
University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.**

November 1995

For Spicko

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to record my appreciation to the following:

Sincere thanks and gratitude to Jacqui de Haas whose supervision of this work was inspiring. Her professionalism, humour and gentle encouragement were greatly appreciated.

My thanks to Julie Dyall for typing this thesis so cheerfully and to Jill Houston-McMillan for her contribution.

Sincere appreciation to Don Beale for his interest and assistance.

To my sons, Rohan and James, for making parenting such an exciting and interesting experience for me and in that sense providing the initial stimulus for this study.

To my husband, Spicko, and Lucy, who were beside me throughout the research process.

Finally, special tribute to the seven single-parents who entrusted their 'stories' to me.

ABSTRACT

Single-parenting has become an increasingly common form of family life in South Africa and abroad. The overwhelming majority of single-parent families are headed by women. This exploratory study aims to reach a fuller understanding of the experience of single-parenting for divorced women.

An overview of literature was used to arrive at a broader appreciation of issues pertaining to marriage, the family, parenting, and marital dissolution. In addition, a qualitative method of inquiry, involving in-depth case study interviews with a small sample of single-parents, was employed to further this understanding by rooting it in subjective experience and in a South African context. Although predetermined variables limited the field, this was not a homogeneous group and the participants represented a range of views and experiences.

The findings suggest that many problems experienced by single-parents are not peculiar to the single-parent situation and are common to women in conventional nuclear families. There is evidence that single-parents perceive single-parenting to be potentially beneficial in terms of their own personal development. Contrary to what the literature suggests, this study indicates that for some, single-parenting is not viewed as a transient state with remarriage as a universal goal. For those interviewed, it is a family form in its own right; not necessarily a preferred form but one which encompasses special joys as well as problems.

The empirical material, derived from the multiple perspectives offered by the subjects interviewed, provides a poor basis for generalization but may be used to refine understanding and possibly modify old generalizations. It also leads to suggestions for further research which is necessary, particularly in the rapidly changing society in South Africa.

PREFACE

This thesis, unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text, is my own work.

**"... a woman must have money and a room
of her own ..."**

(Virginia Woolf, 1928)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	i
ABSTRACT	ii
PREFACE	iii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 RESEARCH TOPIC	1
1.2 AIM OF THE STUDY	2
1.3 SELECTION OF RESEARCH DESIGN	3
1.4 THE SCOPE OF THE STUDY	3
1.5 STRUCTURE OF CHAPTERS	4
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE OVERVIEW	6
SECTION A	6
2.1 THE FAMILY	6
2.1.1 Introduction	7
2.1.2 The nuclear family as an ideologically prescribed family form	7
2.1.3 Emergence of new family forms	8
2.1.4 The traditional nuclear family and the development of psychological health	10
2.1.5 Theoretical perspectives	12
2.1.5.1 Functionalism	12
2.1.5.2 Marxist theory	13
2.1.5.3 Feminist theories	13
2.1.6 Views of the family as haven or prison	14

2.2	PARENTING	21
2.2.1	Introduction	21
2.2.2	Dimensions of parenthood	22
2.2.3	Parenting styles	23
2.2.4	Ideal and Actual models of fit parenting	25
2.2.5	Parental fitness in the context of gender differences	30
2.2.6	Working mothers	31
2.2.7	General themes concerning child development and family relationships	32
2.3	DIVORCE	38
2.3.1	Introduction	38
2.3.2	Psychological tasks for adults	38
2.3.2.1	Rebuilding their own lives	38
2.3.2.2	Parenting children	40
2.3.3	Psychological tasks for children	40
2.3.4	The effects of divorce on children	41
2.3.5	The effect of children on parents	43
2.3.6	Problems in divorced and intact families	44
2.3.7	General themes regarding divorce	45
2.3.7.1	Children	45
2.3.7.2	Adults	46
2.3.7.3	Changes in parent-child relationships	47
SECTION B	49
2.4	DEFINITIONS AND OTHER TERMINOLOGY	49
2.4.1	Definitions	49
2.4.2	Terminology	50
2.4.3	Incidence of single-parenting	50
2.4.3.1	Countries abroad	51
2.4.3.2	South Africa	52

2.4.3.3	Incidence of single-parent families headed by women	53
2.4.4	Primary routes into single-parenthood	54
2.4.4.1	Widowhood	55
2.4.4.2	Unmarried motherhood	55
2.4.4.3	Divorce	56
2.4.5	Reasons for the rise in single-parenting	56
2.5	FUNCTIONS AND ORGANIZATION OF THE SINGLE-PARENT FAMILY	57
2.5.1	Parenting alone	57
2.5.2	Family structure	58
2.5.3	Roles	60
2.5.3.1	Parental roles	60
2.5.3.2	Changes in parent-child roles	60
2.5.3.3	Role models and gender identity	61
2.5.4	Authority and parenting styles	62
2.6	THE ECONOMIC SITUATION OF THE SINGLE-PARENT AND WORK	64
2.6.1	The economic situation	64
2.6.1.1	Effects of the economic situation	65
2.6.1.2	Socio-economic situation	67
2.6.1.3	Economic situation and personal well-being	67
2.6.2	Work	68
2.7	THE EFFECTS OF FATHER-ABSENCE ON THE ADJUSTMENT OF THE CHILD	70
2.7.1	Theories relating to single-parent family vulnerability	70
2.7.2	Father-absence	73
2.7.3	The relationship with the non-custodial parent	74
2.7.4	The child's adjustment	76

2.8	THE PSYCHOSOCIAL WORLD OF THE MOTHER	77
2.8.1	Status passage	78
2.8.2	The reality of parenting alone	80
2.8.3	Emotional and task overload	80
2.8.4	Emotions evoked	81
2.8.4.1	Guilt	81
2.8.4.2	Loneliness (and aloneness)	82
2.8.4.3	Depression	83
2.8.5	Sexual needs, dating, remarriage	84
2.8.6	Relationship with ex-spouse	86
2.8.7	Effects of children on divorced parents	87
2.8.8	The benefits of single-parenting for women	88
2.9	SOCIAL CENSURE AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS	89
2.9.1	Other kin	89
2.9.2	Stigmatization	90
2.9.3	Community resources and support systems	92
2.9.3.1	Schools	92
2.9.3.2	Other support systems	93
2.10	CONCLUDING COMMENTS	94
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY		97
SECTION A		97
3.1	THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS	97
3.1.1	Introduction	97
3.1.2	Historical perspective	100
3.1.3	The nature of qualitative research	102
3.1.4	Rationale for employing qualitative research methodology	104
3.1.5	The case against qualitative research	106

SECTION B	110
3.2 RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS	110
3.2.1 Introduction	110
3.2.2 Qualitative interviewing as a research tool	110
3.2.3 Role of the interviewer	111
3.2.4 Qualities of a successful qualitative interviewer	112
3.2.5 Areas of concern	113
3.2.6 Rationale for using the qualitative interview method	115
3.2.7 Procedure	116
3.2.7.1 Gathering background information	116
3.2.7.2 Exploring the feasibility of the study	117
3.2.7.3 Choosing the sample	118
3.2.7.4 Interview schedule	120
3.2.7.5 Interviewing the subjects	121
SECTION C	126
3.3 DATA ANALYSIS	126
3.3.1 Introduction	126
3.3.2 Transcribing of interviews	126
3.3.3 Interpretation	127
3.3.4 Analysis	128
3.3.5 Problems of analysis and reporting	131
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS	132
4.1 INTRODUCTION	132
4.2 DESCRIPTIONS OF WOMEN	133
4.2.1 Wilma	133
4.2.2 Phyllis	135
4.2.3 Cheryl	136

	PAGE
4.2.4	Catherine 138
4.2.5	Justine 140
4.2.6	Doreen 142
4.2.7	Melanie 143
4.3	BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS 145
4.4	MARITAL HISTORY 145
4.5	THE SITUATION AT HOME 148
4.6	THE WORK SITUATION 150
4.7	THE SOCIAL SITUATION 151
4.8	MAIN PROBLEMS ATTACHED TO SINGLE-PARENTING 154
4.9	BENEFITS ATTACHED TO SINGLE-PARENTING 160
4.10	ATTITUDES AND FEELINGS ABOUT THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE 162
4.11	COMMENTS ON REPORTING THE FINDINGS 166
CHAPTER 5:	DISCUSSION 168
5.1	DOMESTIC DIMENSION 168
5.1.1	Task and responsibility overload 168
5.1.2	Parenting style 170
5.2	THE ECONOMIC SITUATION 171
5.3	THE SOCIAL SITUATION 175
5.3.1	Stigmatization 175
5.3.2	Remarriage aspirations 177
5.4	EMOTIONAL DIMENSIONS 181
5.4.1	Emotional overload 181
5.4.2	Relationship with children 181
5.4.3	Loneliness 182

	PAGE
5.4.4	Sense of failure 1 83
5.4.5	Effect of children on parents 184
5.4.6	Personal growth 185
5.5	REFLECTING ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS 188
5.5.1	The sample 188
5.5.2	Selecting the data 191
5.5.3	Changes 192
5.5.4	Reflecting on self-as-instrument 195
5.6	THE WAY AHEAD 196
5.6.1	Major discrepancies in the findings 196
5.6.2	Other issues arising from the research process 198
5.6.2.1	Problematizing the single-parent family 198
5.6.2.2	Researching men 198
5.6.2.3	The South African context 199
5.6.2.4	The rôle of the school 200
CHAPTER 6:	CONCLUSION 202
REFERENCES 206
APPENDIX A:	LETTER TO SUBJECTS 215
APPENDIX B:	BIOGRAPHICAL INVENTORY 216

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

	PAGE
Table 1: International comparisons of divorce rates, nonmarital births, and single parenthood	51
Figure 1: Four main parenting styles	24
Figure 2: Ideal model of fit parenting showing the unique configuration which remains stable throughout childhood	27
Figure 3: Actual model, showing one example of multiple involvement but unclear boundaries between the various people responsible for parenting	28
Figure 4: Family dynamics diagram	59
Figure 5: Parental divorce and children's well-being	72

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with the choice of the research topic, the aim of the study, the selection of research design, the scope of the study and the structure of the chapters.

1.1 RESEARCH TOPIC

It was the school context which inspired the choice of single-parenting as an area of study. In her work as a school counsellor, the researcher became more aware of the increasing number of children whose homes did not fit into the "norm" of a two-parent, nuclear family, the conventional family form for the societal group from which the school drew its pupils.

The interest was initially focused on looking at the extent to which the needs of single-parents and their children differ in substance and degree from those of two-parent families.

The writer is aware, when referring to the societal "norm" of the two parent family that this is not the norm for much of the South African population. It is the norm for Westernized, urbanized people and for many writers from the United States and United Kingdom.

The focus in the literature had been primarily on the effects of marital dissolution and single-parenting on children. However, the researcher's own experience of parenting, its effects on her personal development as an individual, and the fact that the single-parent's situation was a largely neglected area of research were responsible for shifting the focus from the child to the parent. It was felt that in order to better understand the many children in our schools who come from single-parent homes, we need to reach a fuller understanding of their family lives and, in particular, of the people who head such families.

As a result of the overwhelming majority of single-parent families being headed by females, it was decided to restrict the study to mothers. In addition, the scope of the study imposed constraints. To explore the situation of women who came to single-parenting from all the primary routes (widowhood, marital disruption and unmarried parenthood) would be too ambitious and far-reaching. The focus was restricted to separated and divorced women.

1.2 AIM OF THE STUDY

The central aim of the study was to reach a greater understanding of women's perceptions of themselves as single-parents. The researcher's interest was in the consequences of single-parenting in a prevalently two-parent society and in the functioning and social identity of its adult members.

Some major questions arising from this core concern were:

- (a) How do women negotiate their status passage into single-parenthood?
- (b) What problems are peculiar to this alternative family form and which are similar in nature to those experienced by women in two-parent families?
- (c) Is single-parenting viewed as a transient state? How do women's perceptions of a "failed" marriage affect their aspirations or lack of aspirations to remarry? What are their perceptions of marriage?
- (d) In what ways, if any, do women feel personally empowered through the demands made of them as single-parents and through the possible freedom which such a situation offers?

The researcher at no stage set out to prove anything. This was an exploratory study and understanding and describing rather than explaining were the main purposes of the inquiry.

1.3 SELECTION OF RESEARCH DESIGN

The qualitative research methodology seemed to lend itself to this form of inquiry. It offered the flexibility which would allow maximum freedom for discovery. The researcher's aim was to describe and interpret experience as it is lived or felt. This entailed becoming a participant observer and a flexible instrument oneself, instead of being objective and detached as is the case in more positivist research paradigms.

The researcher is at heart a humanist and not a scientist. The required immersion in the world of the subject being researched, and the holistic, empirical and interpretive nature of qualitative research (see Ch.3) appealed to the researcher, whose training is geared to respecting interactive processes and the multiple realities and complexities of subjective experience.

The study was seen as a co-operative enterprise in which the subject joins the researcher in making an inquiry. The in-depth case study interview was chosen as the method which would best serve the exploratory and descriptive nature of this co-operative endeavour. Moreover, the freedom to interpret the material meant a narrative style could be employed, which suited the researcher's own style of writing.

1.4 THE SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The literature survey formed the foundation of the research. Most of the literature consulted in the overview emanates from the West and has a Eurocentric and middle-class bias. The researcher attempted to draw on as much South African research as possible and to root her discussions and interpretations in a South African context.

It became very clear, early on, that the area of interest encompassed far too many relevant and related categories and that a study such as this could never hope to do justice to them all. The researcher elected to focus on specific themes instead

of offering a superficial view of a great number of them. In doing so, she is mindful of having omitted important areas which would impact significantly on any full understanding of single-parenting. These include:

- ▶ the experience of single-parenting where the father is the custodial parent
- ▶ the perceptions of children concerning their experience of being raised in a single-parent family
- ▶ divorce-related laws and other legislation pertaining to women in the single-parent situation
- ▶ how single-parenting is experienced by those who come to it through other primary routes, for example, widowhood and unmarried parenting. The latter has taken on alarmingly high proportions in South Africa and has resounding and far-reaching implications for the future and nature of family life here.
- ▶ the issues of access, custody and joint-custody
- ▶ social services and suggestions for reform

As important as these would be in refining one's understanding of the single-parent phenomenon, they were beyond the scope of this study.

1.5 STRUCTURE OF CHAPTERS

The following represents a general framework within which the material is organized and structured:

Ch. 1 : An introduction to the study.

Ch. 2 : Literature overview: is divided into two main sections. Section A raises important issues relating to families, parenting and divorce which have bearing on the situation of the single-parent. Section B deals with major themes arising from the single-parent situation including: functions and organization; work and the economic situation; the effects of father-

absence on adjustment; the psychosocial world of the mother, social censure and support systems.

- Ch. 3 : Methodology: comprises three sections. Section A covers theoretical considerations such as an historical perspective; the nature of Qualitative Research; the rationale for employing it and criticisms of the methodology. Section B discusses the research instruments used, focusing on the in-depth case study interview method as the main research tool and method of data collection. Section C deals with the analysis and interpretation of data.
- Ch. 4 : Findings: this chapter reflects the major findings resulting from the interviews.
- Ch. 5 : Discussion: consists of three sections. Section A is a discussion in which certain themes arising from the literature and actual findings are analyzed and interpreted. Attention is focused on those findings which support the current literature and those which highlight possible inconsistencies and discrepancies. Section B is a reflection of the research process which includes a discussion of the sample group; the difficulties involved in selecting data; and some changes which the researcher, with hindsight, would have made. Section C suggests certain areas of study which, in the researcher's opinion, warrant further exploration and research.
- Ch. 6 : presents a brief summary of the main findings and offers some concluding comments.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE OVERVIEW

This chapter is divided into two sections:

Section A: raises important issues relating to families, parenting and divorce which have bearing on the situation of the single-parent.

Section B: deals specifically with aspects of the single-parent phenomenon.

The literature survey forms the foundation of this study. It serves several functions: it is used to stimulate theoretical sensitivity; it can be used as secondary sources of data; it stimulates questions; it can direct theoretical sampling and it can be used as supplementary validation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

SECTION A

2.1 THE FAMILY

The theoretical base outlined in this section is drawn from Western ideologies of the family. The perceptions arise from a predominantly Eurocentric context and the focus is almost exclusively on the 20th century. The term "traditional" refers to a Western perception of the nuclear family. It is acknowledged that "traditional" carries different connotations in different contexts, and, in particular, in an Afrocentric setting.

2.1.1 Introduction

The word "family" is extremely emotive, conjuring up images of love, warmth, security, comfort and protection. It has, particularly this century, been perceived

as the foundation of society and many of society's ills have been attributed to the failure of certain families to adhere to conventional values and patterns of behaviour. The solution to many problems in society is often seen to lie in the strengthening of the family unit. Indeed, community disapproval is often influential in maintaining a facade of conjugal unity in spite of tensions which may exist.

2.1.2 The nuclear family as an ideologically prescribed family form

The nuclear family refers to a unit consisting of spouses and their dependent children. Such a traditional family would comprise two parents, one of each sex, living as a separate entity where family tasks are divided between parents. In the industrialized Western world, this ideology of the patriarchal family has elevated the contemporary nuclear family, with a breadwinner husband and a full-time wife and mother, as the only legitimate and natural family form. Assumptions about traditional sex roles are well established in both society's attitudes towards and expectations of family life. Luepnitz (1982) cites Bruno Bettelheim who in 1956, in an article tellingly entitled "Fathers shouldn't try to be mothers", claimed:

The male physiology ... is not geared to infant care ... The relationship between father and child never was and cannot now be built principally around child-care experiences. It is built around a man's function in society: moral, economic, political (p.1).

It has been a common belief in the Western world that the traditional nuclear family is not only desirable but essential to the raising of healthy children. Most of our understanding of children's psychological, emotional and social development has been based on this kind of family. Elliot (1986) says:

Traditional family ideologies assert that the family is basically the same everywhere, arises out of fundamental biological or societal processes, and is the arrangement that can best provide the stable, intimate relationships necessary to the care and support of children and adults (p.1).

2.1.3 Emergence of new family forms

The tyranny of the myth of the happy nuclear family has, over the last few decades, partly been broken, mainly as the result of two historical developments: the rise in the rate of divorce and the change in the social organization of gender roles stimulated by the feminist movement. Prevalent assumptions about the family have been vigorously challenged.

Recently, the regulation of sexual and parental relationships has been questioned. Traditional values define sexual relationships, procreation and child-care as taking place within a family unit based on marriage and women's mothering, and the naturalness and moral superiority of "the family" are asserted. Elliot (1986) argues for the legitimation of different ways of ordering such relationships.

The cultural ideology which idealized maternal possibility and supported the fantasy of the perfect mother while at the same time isolating and marginalizing mothering has been robustly attacked in feminist writing (Barrett, 1980; Choderow, 1978; Dinnerstein, 1976; Gordon, 1990; Oakley, 1974, 1984; Ruddick, 1989).

New family forms have emerged which have led to changes in ideas about parental roles. Nurturant and authoritarian roles are merging and interchanging between the sexes.

This is not an entirely new phenomenon. It is possible that, even in more conventional families, the nurturant and authoritarian roles were sometimes reversed or interchangeable but were not acknowledged as such. Field (1991) explores this in his study of matrifocal families amongst the so-called Coloured community. It would seem that there can be a distinction between ideology and reality. These issues have become more explicit, though, more recently.

The alternative, non-traditional family forms include:

- ▶ single-parent families
- ▶ reconstituted families following divorce
- ▶ families where the father has prime responsibility for the child
- ▶ families who form part of communal groups
- ▶ same-sex couples

While society has in the past been reluctant to endorse any family form other than that which is ideologically prescribed, there is evidence of an increasing acceptance of such alternative family forms. Traditionally, women saw their identities as very much bound up in the roles of mother and wife, but these perceptions have changed, and many women and men now see parenthood as an option rather than a sociological imperative. Naomi Miller (1992) comments: "Thus, we are, paradoxically, being faced with a new social script in which some couples are choosing to remain childless and some singles are opting for parenthood" (p.195).

Closer to home, according to the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa (1984), a growing number of women are choosing to live outside of marital relationships. African women are increasingly questioning the value of the marriage relationship. It is suggested that one source of resistance to marriage may be the sexual division of labour which seems to be widely viewed as natural and immutable. Unmarried parenthood is escalating as, amongst the poor anyway, the birth of a child remains the only rite of passage or avenue to achieving adult status. According to Wilsworth (Second Carnegie Inquiry, 1984), other reasons for the rising illegitimacy rate are the costliness of the marriage undertaking, opposition from men to contraception and a desire to establish the fertility of the wife-to-be, and a lack of stigma attached to illegitimacy.

It is clear that the whole question of "motherhood" needs to be politicized for, to borrow a favourite feminist slogan, the personal is political. The contemporary

anti-family movements are part of a more general estrangement from the accepted social order, an element founded on visions of individual freedom and on beliefs in the "validity and desirability of a social life ordered, not by prescribed rules, but by the mutual negotiation of commitments" (Elliot, 1986, p.1).

What is also clear is that new family systems call for new challenges and solutions. In a provocative study of the influence of families on society, Miles (1994) concludes:

The only certainty about the modern family in the industrialized world is that with fewer than 25% of families now conforming to the pre-1960s model of family organization, it is less and less likely to consist of a breadwinning father, an economically inactive mother, and two children (p.83).

2.1.4 The traditional nuclear family and the development of psychological health

Schaffer (1992) investigates various research studies in order to ascertain whether the nuclear family structure is essential to the development of psychological health in children. The study by Eiduson, Kornfein, Zimmerman and Weisner in 1982 (in Lamb, 1982) deserves particular mention. In it, 200 children from four different backgrounds were researched; 50 from single-mother families, 50 from unmarried cohabiting couples, 50 from communal living groups and 50 from traditional two-parent nuclear families. The research examined the variety of different family life-styles covering a wide range of psychological functions. The subjects were followed up over a number of years.

The researchers found that the kind of lifestyle adopted by the families did not have systematic effects on any of the wide range of behaviour patterns and abilities assessed in the children.

In summing up the findings of the various research studies, Schaffer avers that there is no indication that departures from the conventional norm of family structure are necessarily harmful to children or that that norm must be

considered a necessary qualification to the development of psychologically healthy personalities. He adds that the non-traditional families may give rise to specific differences, for example, the greater likelihood of poverty amongst single-parent families, but these are secondary effects and are not inherent in these kinds of families as such.

Significantly, Schaffer cautions against generalizing from findings obtained in particular societies. Eiduson *et al.* (in Lamb, 1982) in their study, for instance, were looking only at white, Californian children from middle-class backgrounds.

The tolerance shown in some societies towards alternative parenting styles is greater than in others. Growing up in a non-conventional family may result in a degree of ostracism which could have implications for the person's psychological health. Prejudice and negative expectations from society can be a severe handicap as is illustrated in the study done by Fry and Addington (1984). This describes how teachers, social workers and other professionals made less favourable judgements about children when told they came from single-parent families (especially those headed by a father) than when told they were from intact two-parent families.

There is enough evidence to show that sound parent-child relationships can exist in a wide variety of social contexts that may differ markedly from the traditional nuclear family:

It is in fact the nature of children's interpersonal relationships that is the key factor in influencing the course of psychological development rather than family structures as such (Fry & Addington, 1984, p.192).

This important issue will be discussed more fully later in the context of parenting.

2.1.5 Theoretical perspectives

According to Elliot (1986), there are three major schools of thought which provide radically opposed descriptions, explanations and evaluations of contemporary ways of ordering sexual and parental relationships.

2.1.5.1 Functionalism

This theory emphasizes the importance of the nuclear family to the stability and continuity of society. Malinowski (cited in Thorne, 1982, p.27) based his claim that the family's universal function is the nurturing of children on the work he did in 1913 among Aboriginal Australians. The nuclear family and the sexual division of labour are seen as arrangements which meet certain societal needs. Parsons (in Barrett, 1980) differentiates between "expressive" family tasks (those that are nurturant and emotionally supportive) and "instrumental" tasks which are directed toward material goals. Although, in principle, it is possible for men and women to perform either set of tasks,

the bearing and early nursing of children establish a strong presumptive primacy of the relation of mother to the small child and this in turn establishes a presumption that the man, who is exempted from these biological functions, should specialise in the alternative instrumental direction (Elliot, 1986, p.99).

Parsons accepts and provides a justification for the sexual division of labour.

The functionalists' frame of reference is urban-industrial society and their starting point is the notion of society as an integrated whole with the family serving fundamental societal needs. Parsons

compares the features of the nuclear family system with the requirements of industrial production, argues that they fit and that the extended family system would be inconsistent with such a system of production (Harris, 1983, p.85).

The family is responsible for reproducing members of society and values which are generally shared. The functionalist models see co-operation and consensus rather than conflict and oppression as inherent in the system and they highlight

the positive aspects of family living. The functionalist is likely to cherish an image of the family as a "haven in a heartless world" (Lasch, 1977).

2.1.5.2 Marxist theory

The work of Engels, Seccombe and Beechey (in Harris, 1983) provides a radical alternative to functionalism. Marxist accounts of the family view the family as ultimately dependent upon the dominant mode of production for its form and existence. In addition, such theories stress the impact of dominant class interests on family structure and functioning.

The family is essential to capitalist industrial production in the sense that it reproduces labour power and socializes children into the values and class relations of capitalism. Contemporary Marxist theorizing sees women's positions as housewives and child-rearers as bringing about the subordination of women to men by rendering them dependent on the income of the male. This is the basis of male authority and female dependence.

The Marxist frame of reference is thus capitalism. Society is class divided and the family is structured by capitalist imperatives to reproduce a labour force. In highlighting class conflict and exploitation, Marxism provides a critical analysis of the family and society and lends strong support to demands for change.

2.1.5.3 Feminist theories

Within this perspective, women seek to redress the balance of viewing "man" as the "norm" against which all else is measured. Radical-feminist thought is fuelled by the relation of women to men and explains women's subordination in terms of that relation, emphasizing men's power over women rather than capitalist domination.

Feminists reject the functionalist viewpoint which operates from a belief in biological determinism, where gender is taken as a basic category of analysis.

The functionalist argument that the family is primarily an institution for nurturing young children is fundamentally flawed:

Because a social institution is observed to perform a necessary function does not mean either that the function would not be performed if the institution did not exist or that the function is responsible for the existence of the institution (Thorne, 1982, p.27).

The feminist perspective claims that social relationships in all societies are based on male domination and that gender divisions (not class divisions) constitute the basis of social life. Modern society is perceived as being patriarchal and the family, by extension, is shaped by patriarchal imperatives, and is therefore an institution which oppresses women. The feminist model highlights gender conflict and exploitation (of women and children) and challenges the belief that any specific arrangement is natural, biological or functional in a timeless way.

The feminist perspective has focused on women as individuals disembedded from the family and has reopened questions relating to the family, revealing far more complex relationships within family and other social formations than had previously been understood: "And all by asking one fundamental question ... and that is not only what do women do for the family, but what does the family do for women?" (Thorne, 1982, p.235). The feminist perspective echoes a call for a realistic appraisal of mothering, for an understanding that mothers have lives, needs and relationships apart from, interacting with, and sometimes even contradicting the tasks of motherhood.

2.1.6 Views of the family as haven or prison

The discussion in chapter 5 focuses on how single-parents experience their lives in such a family. Their perceptions of what it is to be a single-parent are closely linked to how they generally view the family unit: whether as a confining, oppressive environment, as a refuge and place of renewal, or as a combination of both. The extent to which the family unit restricts or fulfils needs will greatly influence the single-parent's assessment of the quality of her personal life.

2.1.6.1 Family as a haven

The pro-family movement appears to articulate and be driven by a number of causes: traditional fears about "permissiveness" becoming "decadence", a male backlash against feminist demands and attempts by the political Right to resolve problems like unemployment and state expenditure by sustaining ideas of the family as a unit of care.

For the functionalists, the nuclear family meets basic human needs and is seen as a refuge from a cold and inhospitable public world. Traditional family ideals have been given renewed legitimation through the theory of the family-as-a-haven.

Unlike the Marxist and Feminist approaches, the functionalist tradition is less concerned with a critical analysis of the family as a social institution: "It prevents us from considering whether the family may not simply have problems but may itself be a problem and whether radical change may be desirable" (Elliot, 1986, p.119).

In its thesis of the family-as-a-haven, it treats the family itself as a unified entity, insulated from society, and ignores the realities of power. Elliot maintains that central to this criticism are two notions:

- (a) There are discrepancies in the life situation and interests of families in different class positions and in the power they have to realise their interests. This comment is particularly apposite when examining the single-parent situation. (See Section B.)
- (b) Husband and wife, parents and children, are in different situations, have different interests and differential power.

If the family is a haven then one must ask: for whom is it a haven? The functionalists present a sentimental and romantic view which, in reality, seems

to serve the interests of those who have power and possibly oppresses those who do not.

2.1.6.2 Family as a prison

A contrary view is proffered by many who tend to see the family as more like a prison in terms of the way it oppresses, represses and confines.

- (a) The Marxist construction of the family as a psychologically supportive system, while similar to the functionalist perspective, extends the argument by suggesting that the family, by being a haven in a heartless world, actually helps to preserve the oppressive capitalist system and is therefore an instrument of such oppression. According to Harris (1983), the family "is a prime means of transmission of bourgeois ideology" (p.179).

This argument, like the functionalist one, again assumes that family life can be insulated from the tensions and contradictions that permeate the public world and it also obscures the inequalities which exist within the family.

- (b) An interesting contribution to the debate is made by Laing (1964, 1971) who contends that the family oppresses and represses individuality. He talks of the "transpersonal system of collusion" which is required to play "Happy Families" (p.99). His work focuses on the parent-child relationship and, in particular, deals with the power parents have to impose their meanings of the world on the child. While he acknowledges the potential warmth and protective nature of parental love, he claims it can also be suffocating and ultimately destructive. It can stifle true privacy and autonomy. Unlike the functionalists and Marxists, his concern is not with the relationship between the family and other social institutions, but rather with the shaping and structuring of the individual's identity. In the modern, isolated family there is an intensification of emotional

relationships which can result in individuality being absorbed by the family.

Morgan (in Harris, 1983), in a critique of Laing, raises three issues:

- (i) Laing claims that family bonds are paradoxically supportive as well as stifling, yet he addresses himself almost exclusively to its suffocating elements.
 - (ii) Laing's view of parent-child relationships suggests that socialization is directed from parent to child. Yet children do not just passively and compliantly receive parental definitions and interpretations. (See Chapter 5; The effects of children on parents.)
 - (iii) Laing fails to locate the family in a social context. He does not take cultural definitions of child-rearing practices into account nor does he consider links to other social institutions.
- (c) Feminists would no doubt agree that the family is a haven - for men. For women it can be a prison in which one is serving a life sentence. Elliot (1986) identifies three aspects of contemporary family life which are oppressive for women:
- (i) Its regulation of women's labour through the housewife role (Oakley, 1974). This limits their participation in paid work, severs them from opportunities for self-realization and makes them economically dependent on men: "Men thus have privileged access to, and control over, the public world and therefore control over women" (Elliot, 1986, p.127).
 - (ii) The control it gives men over women's sexuality and fertility. Conventionally, women's sexuality is restricted to heterosexual marriage, carrying with it the risk of pregnancy and motherhood. Ironically, it is also in the family where violence against women is

most tolerated. Ruddick (1989) talks of the "routine acts of domestic tyranny" (p.165).

- (iii) Its structuring of gender identities. Women can become imprisoned through the ideals of femininity and masculinity which locate women strictly in the private world of the family and men in the public world. According to Oakley (1974), implicit in the ideology of the nuclear family are beliefs in the "naturalness" of the sexual division of labour and in the importance of the mother-child relationship. These beliefs secure women's psychological identification with the domestic world. In addition, the belief that the family is particularly important as a system of affective relationships has the effect of privatizing the home and romanticizing marriage.

The mystique of motherhood can thus become an instrument of oppression. In addition, peers, the school, the law, media and other socializing agents other than the family, also contribute to constructing and reproducing gender identities. Within families, definitions of appropriate gender behaviour rely strongly on general social definitions. "Families are enmeshed in and responsive to the ideology of 'the family' as well as engaged in reproducing it" (Barrett, 1980, p.205).

The oppression of women is therefore centrally constructed within the family, ideologically and materially.

Oakley (1974) is not optimistic about the prospects of lifting such oppression, precisely because women's position in the family is founded on their maternity. Even if the housewife and wife roles are capable of change, the maternal role is not. The myth of motherhood asserts that "all women need to be mothers, all mothers need their children, all children need their mothers" (p.186). For feminists, the liberation of women is dependent on radical changes in familial arrangements. This would require,

amongst other things, seeing a woman as one member of the family instead of as the core of the family, a position which dominant assumptions and fantasies about mothering over the years have bestowed upon her and thereby trapped her.

Elliot (1986) raises four main criticisms of feminist critique of the family:

- (i) Where functionalists portray the family as wholly good, feminists depict it as wholly oppressive. This radical approach ignores the very real and pervasive appeal of motherhood and family life for many. Women, too, are most often portrayed as helpless, passive victims of patriarchy which denies their potential to make personal choices and to actively direct their lives.
- (ii) Feminism is charged with adopting an ambiguous stance, at once stressing the cultural variability and complexity in family patterns, yet, accounts of women's oppression suggest it is the same experience everywhere.
- (iii) Some writers, like Roberts (1984) and Harris (1983), have questioned the connection between the family, the sexual division of labour and patriarchal power. The conventional division of labour in communes and amongst unmarried couples suggests a structuring of gender relations which may not be altered by the abolition of the family.
- (iv) Finally, criticism is levelled at feminists for obscuring the important interaction between work and family. By viewing the family as the major location of women's oppression, there is the risk of separating the family from the wider political and economic structure.

2.1.6.3 Summary

In summary, the family-as-a-haven thesis tends to obscure the diverse ways in which family life may be experienced; it assumes that the family can be isolated and insulated from broader society, it does not seriously consider the reality of power being divested in some people and not others, and it tends to ignore the darker dimension of family life.

The school of thought which sees the family as imprisoning and oppressive also fails to recognize the diversity of family life and experience: it does not adequately link the family and wider society and in emphasizing the darker side of family life, it does not give sufficient attention to its widespread appeal. Hirst (cited in Elliot, 1986) raises the irrefutable point that the family is, after all, the product of a voluntary association between individuals who (usually) make the choice to marry and have children.

A theory which embodies images of both the haven-like and prison-like potentialities of the family would perhaps be more credible and accurate. This ambivalence is well articulated in the writing of Fletcher (1973) who, in his defence of the modern family, says:

The family is that group within which the most fundamental appreciation of human qualities and values takes place - "for better for worse": the qualities of truth and honesty, of falsehood and deceit; of kindness and sympathy, of indifference and cruelty; of co-operation and forbearance, of egotism and antagonism; of tolerance, justice and impartiality, of bias, dogmatism and obstinacy; of generous concern for the freedom and fulfilment of others, of the mean desire to dominate - whether in overt bullying or in psychologically more subtle ways (p.140).

This description stresses the family as the locus of affective relationships and the emotions expressed within such relationships can be both nourishing and destructive.

2.2 PARENTING

2.2.1 Introduction

The nature of children, parents and of parenting is not static but is subject to the sociohistorical context in which it is embedded. Modern society is in the process of fundamental change in a direction that is entirely new and uncharted. It is, for example, a society in which, for the first time in our history, marriage is freely terminable at any time. Up until the mid-1970s, Western theories relating to family systems, child development and parenting were all developed within the context of the two-parent, intact family. We are now witnessing family changes which are an integral part of the wider changes in society. These changes have far-reaching implications for parenting.

To look at just one major shift in emphasis:

John Locke's *tabula rasa* concept in the 17th century resulted in a belief in the complete malleability of children. It became common to closely link the child's psychological development to parental upbringing. It followed, then, that any mishap in the child's development must be due to adult action. This created a profound sense of guilt in parents about their children's development, and provided the psycho-epistemological grounds for making the careful nurturing of children a national priority.

At the heart of Neil Postman's work (1982), on the other hand, is a concern for childhood which has been negated by modern, Western trends, one of which is the rise of the narcissistic personality. He claims that this promotion of the goal of individual personal fulfilment and happiness has caused a drop in the commitment of adults to the nurturing of children. The strongest argument against divorce has always been its psychological effect on children: "It is now clear that more adults than ever do not regard this argument to be as compelling as their own need for psychological well-being" (p.138).

The family is not an insulated entity and any look at parenting must therefore be seen against a background of the society in which it exists.

2.2.2 Dimensions of parenthood

Rutter (1975) identifies the following main roles which are performed by parents:

(a) The provision of emotional bonds and relationships

During the first few years of life, the child develops a series of attachments which serve as the basis for later relationships. The child who has failed to make stable relationships in early childhood may be socially disadvantaged later. Rutter stresses that these early childhood bonds are not the only important ones. Family relationships continue to exert significant influence on children's development even though they may differ in form and even function.

(b) The provision of a secure base¹

The close bonds help reduce a child's anxiety in new and stressful situations. From the security of the family base, the child feels empowered to explore a new environment. The insecure child tends to cling and is reluctant to venture further afield.

(c) The provision of models of behaviour

This involves the conscious attempt to model the behaviour of adults to whom they are attached. In addition, children unconsciously imitate in this process of identification. The implication is that a child's coping strategies will often reflect those he/she sees employed by his/her parents. The marital

1. The term "secure base" was used by Mary Ainsworth to describe an infant's use of mother as a secure base from which to explore (Barrett & Trevitt, 1991).

relationship is the most accessible model of a close relationship and this may well influence the way he/she conducts his/her own relationships later.

(d) *The provision of life experiences*

Parents, to a lesser or greater extent, offer opportunities, stimulation, and time² which can impede or hasten the child's intellectual, social and emotional development.

(e) *The provision of discipline*

Parents exercise selective encouragement and discouragement. The child learns right from wrong from what he/she is told (i.e. by precept) and by what he/she observes by watching parental behaviour (by percept). The child is most likely to respond positively when there is a congruence between these.

(f) *The provision of communication channels*

The child's development will be influenced by the extent to which there is ample opportunity for free communication (to articulate and experiment with feelings and attitudes), by the content of the communication and by the clarity of it. Ambiguous, conflicting communicative messages can be confusing and retard the process of development.

2.2.3 Parenting styles

Parenting styles are inextricably linked to the goals parents have for their children and to their developmental outcomes. Parental styles differ along two important dimensions:

2 On the question of time: Miles (1994, p.95) claims that "quality time" is an '80s invention. She maintains that the quality of the time spent with children increases in direct proportion to the amount of it. (However, this is a debatable point, beyond the scope of this discussion.)

- ▶ the degree and type of control parents exercise over children's behaviour;
- ▶ parents' responsiveness and involvement.

According to Kail and Wicks-Nelson (1993), there are four main parenting styles which are assumed although not necessarily rigidly or consistently (see Figure 1). The two dimensions of parenting are control and involvement. When they are combined, four distinct parental styles emerge. Often there is an overlapping, depending on the situation or the child. Children can elicit different responses from parents. (See later discussion on child effect on parents.)

		PARENTAL CONTROL	
		High	Low
PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT	High	Authoritative	Indulgent-Permissive
	Low	Authoritarian	Indifferent-Uninvolved

Figure 1: Four main parenting styles (Kail & Wicks-Nelson, 1993, p.292)

- Authoritarian or autocratic parents are strict and would strive for conformity, obedience, respect and dependency in children. There is not much give-and-take between parent and child as such parents are more concerned with their own demands than the child's needs or wishes.
- Authoritative parents would encourage self-reliance, assertiveness and independence in children. Although democratic in approach, such parents

still see a boundary between adult and child. They are firm but respect the needs and desires of the child and try to respond to these.

- (c) Indulgent-permissive parents tend to avoid conflicts with children and do not easily set parameters in terms of what is considered to be acceptable or appropriate behaviour. They place few demands or restrictions on them. These parents are influenced by their children's goals of self-gratification and are often over-involved in their lives.
- (d) Indifferent-uninvolved parents leave children to define their own goals and to rely on their own inner resources to fulfil them. They might fulfil minimal physical and emotional needs but maintain a psychological distance between themselves and their children. Such children are often neglected.

These styles have a resounding impact on the quality of the inter-personal relationships which will develop within the family. It is children's experience of these relationships which is crucial to their psychological development. (See later for a fuller discussion of this.)

2.2.4 Ideal and Actual models of fit parenting

The parenting styles mentioned briefly above imply that some people are better equipped to carry out parental duties and functions than others. Champion (1995) investigates the complexity of this. She suggests there are two models of fit parents implicit in the values of society and the criteria of those professionals involved in assessing parents.

The Ideal model represents the values that society and professionals ascribe to how they believe most "traditional" parents were and how many would wish all contemporary parents to be. The Actual model represents the emerging reality (see Champion, pp.271-276 for a more detailed analysis of these models).

In the Ideal model, the sanctity of the home and traditional family life was reinforced at every level by the state, the church, professionals and

psychoanalytical perspectives. The paternalism and values (like respect toward authority and duty to one's family and country) were seemingly reproduced at every level of main-stream life, producing a congruence between child, parent and society. Deviancy from the norm resulted in social ostracism or stigmatization. Mass conformity to a single model of family life could only be maintained as long as the dominant culture could remain homogeneous and sealed from other ways of being.

However, social, cultural, economic and technological trends and changes took effect. The Actual model was created in response. The media, for example, presented evidence of alternative ways of living and took over from the church in guiding public opinion about morality and values. People, raised under the ideology of the pursuit of personal happiness as a right, started questioning the validity of their own upbringing and it became acceptable (even therapeutic) to blame one's parents.³

According to Campion (1995), the Ideal is a fantasy yet a most powerful one "which informs most people's personal aspirations when embarking on parenthood or trying to cope with the consequences of the reality" (p.280).

The Actual model is more open, flexible, fluid, with fewer rules or boundaries. Children are no longer guaranteed the care of either one or both of their biological parents. A variety of individuals may now be involved in sharing the parenting roles.

The most obvious changes lie in who does the parenting, how many people, and in what relationship to each other and to the child. In the Ideal model (Figure 2),

3. Philip Larkin (1988) reflects this attitude in his poem "This Be The Verse" which attacks parental effect:

They fuck you up, your mum and dad
They may not mean to, but they do
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.

the job descriptions and boundaries between different roles are clearly defined. In the Actual model (Figure 3), the job may be shared at different stages in a wide variety of ways through childhood and amongst many different people but without a clear statement of the obligations or expectations of the different parties involved. The risk for many children is that aspects of the job may be neglected or done inadequately, either because no-one knows what they are meant to be doing or because they are unable to, as they lack the resources and/or skills.

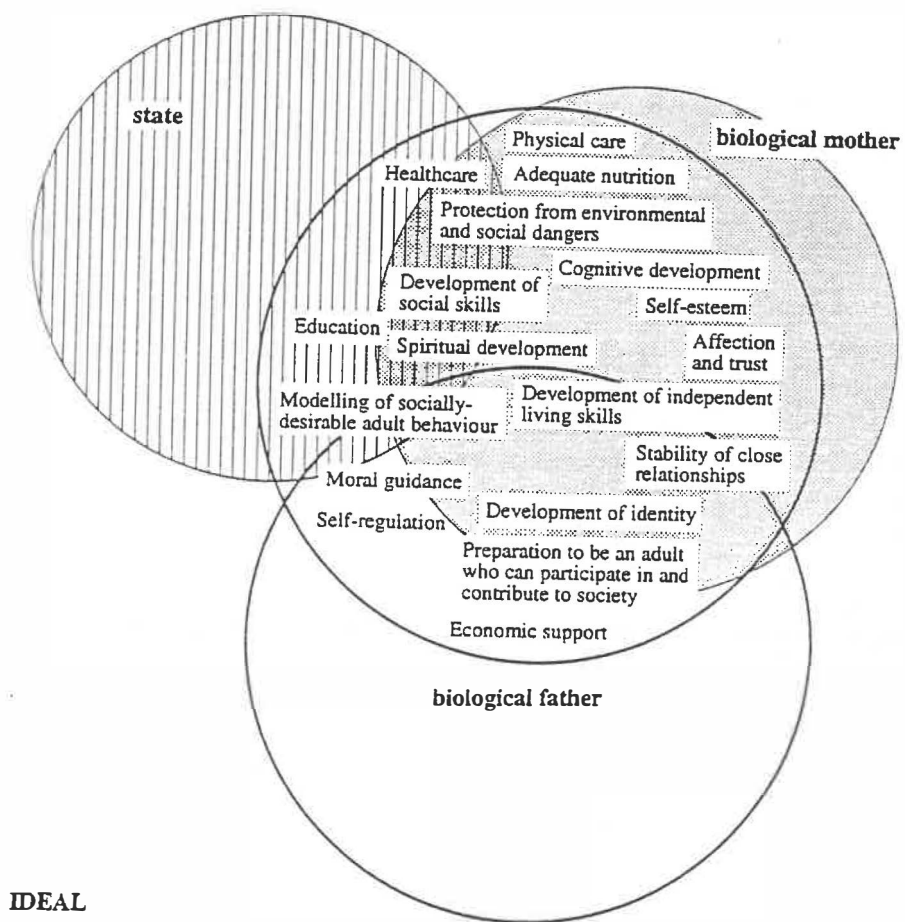


Figure 2: Ideal model of fit parenting, showing the unique configuration which remains stable throughout childhood (Campion, 1995, p.290)

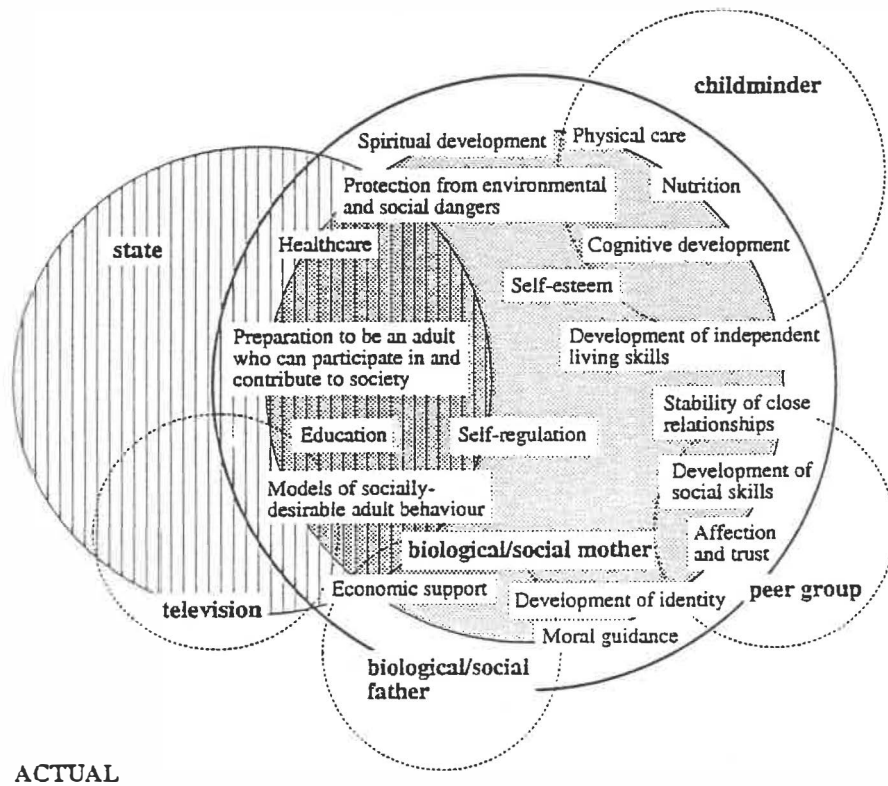


Figure 3: Actual model, showing one example of multiple involvement but unclear boundaries between the various people responsible for parenting (Campion, 1995, p. 291)

Campion (1995) identifies three main indicators of successful parenting:

- (i) *Self-esteem*: this is related to the feeling that as a parent you have a respected and accepted role as part of a wider group of people. In Western society, this heightened sense of self usually derives from one's employment: "As citizens, we have become valued for the jobs we hold, not for the families we nurture and guide" (Campion, 1995, p.283).
- (ii) *Support networks*: the importance of support from society is critical to producing children who value and who, in turn, are valued by others. The division between the world of work and the local community has eroded the traditional sources of such support. A greater opening up of the boundaries between work and family life is called for: "to turn the disintegration of the cohesion of family life into a new integration." (Campion, 1995, p. 283)
- (iii) *Socioeconomic status*: inadequate income affects the provision of basic physical child-care needs and is also instrumental in eroding emotional and psychological well-being for the parent and the child, as it signifies a lack of status and control.⁴ This problem requires a political solution but also involves greater consultation with marginalized parents who are doing the most important job of all:

In the absence of spiritual and moral convictions, this is the most powerful argument for supporting the job of parenting, raising its status and conditions so people can do it well (Campion, 1995, p.284).

These indicators illustrate Champion's contention that congruence between societal values and actual family lives still does not exist and, until it does, the potential benefits of the new model of parenting will not be fully realised.

4. Bruno Bettelheim (1987) coined the phrase "a good enough parent" (p. ix): one wonders if one can ever be "good enough" when you do not "have enough".

2.2.5 Parental fitness in the context of gender differences

Early views of child development based on the work of Freud and Bowlby (amongst others) support the notion that motherhood is natural and instinctual and that the mother-child relationship is a central element in the psychological health of the child. This led to a general assumption that women made better parents. (An assessment which, it is interesting to note, men do not seem to have contested too hotly over the years!) The conception that a mother is better suited than a father in the nurturing of the child strongly influenced the application of the tender age doctrine in custody decisions. This conception has also had the effect of placing great pressure on women to live up to society's expectations of what constitutes the "perfect mother".

Society's prejudice against fathers is examined by Fry and Addington (1984). They looked at the increasing number of disputed custody cases. Despite the father's greater participation in child-care, there remains the conviction that the mother is the "natural" parent and should be given priority. Fathers generally were considered unfit unless proven otherwise. One of their studies dealt with the expectations that people have as to parents' competence in raising children. It was found that respondents judged boys from intact families as most well-adjusted, happy and responsible, while boys from father-headed families were judged to be the least well-adjusted and the highest in terms of delinquency.

Various sources (Chess & Hertzig, 1992; Chess & Thomas, 1987; Rutter, 1975; Weiss, 1975) suggest that it is unlikely that sex-role segregation is fully accounted for biologically. Whatever sex differences do exist nowadays can be largely explained by social convention and the process of socialization rather than any innate propensity. Changes in families indicate that traditional role differences between the sexes are not immutably fixed but can be adapted to changing social circumstances.

From these writings it can be concluded that while femininity is no guarantee of parental fitness, masculinity should not be viewed as a disqualification. Very

little research has been done on the adequacy of men as opposed to women in bringing up children, but changes in family lifestyles after divorce have shown that the mother is not necessarily the fitter person to assume single-parent responsibility.

2.2.6 Working mothers

The enormous increase in female employment in the last few decades has been a significant feature of family life. This growth has been the result of greater educational opportunities for women, the availability of labour-saving devices in the home, the promotion of the principle of personal fulfilment, economic necessity and the rise of feminism. In South Africa, particularly amongst the disadvantaged, economic necessity is the major reason for women working. (See Chapter 5 for discussion of women as economic providers.)

Previously the assumption was that children of working mothers would only suffer ill-effects and would be deprived. Maternal employment implied maternal deprivation. New research has given credence to the possibility that there may be benefits and not just losses. Studies by Hock; Belsky and Rovine; and Schachter in Schaffer (1992) plus the work of Gordon (1990); Hetherington and Arasteh (1988); Matteson (1975); Popay, Rimmer and Rossiter (1983); and Weiss (1975) have led to the following findings:

- (a) On the whole the indications are that there are few differences, intellectual or social, between children of employed and unemployed mothers. Only with children under the age of one year are there risks of ill-effects and even these can be successfully ameliorated by suitable and stable substitute care.
- (b) The social behaviour and especially the development of independence are sometimes more advanced in children whose mothers work.

- (c) Provided the child has a sustained relationship with the mother, being cared for by others does not necessarily produce adverse effect and indeed may be an enriching experience.
- (d) It has been noted when observing working mothers and children that their interactions are often more intense, frequent and positive than those who are together all day. Consciously or unconsciously, working mothers seem to compensate for limited time together.
- (e) Finances are by no means the only "genuine" reason for working. The intellectual and social stimulation and rewards which arise from working may be essential for a woman's well-being:
 - It is now well known that the incidence of depression among mothers of young children, particularly in working-class families, is extremely high and that it is directly related to being housebound and having little access to external stimulation (Schaffer, 1992, p.140).
- (f) The dual role can place a strain on women. Support from home, relatives, child-minders is crucial. It is usually the absence of these that puts the well-being of the child (and mother) at risk. (This will be discussed further in Chapter 5.)

Research on maternal employment no longer relies on a simplistic cause and effect model. A mother's employment is embedded in a number of associated factors (e.g. reason for working, father's attitude, child's temperament, etc.) and current research attempts to do justice to the whole situation in which the employed mother and child find themselves.

2.2.7 General themes concerning child development and family relationships

Old notions of child development rested on assumptions of biological determinism, a belief in the fixed nature of human development with its critical periods (Piaget, Erikson and others), a dependence on events in the earliest years, and an insistence that acceptable parenting could only occur under certain

narrowly defined limits of family environment and by means of the "right" method of child-care.

These have been replaced by new, fresh, and more positive views of childhood, based on more recent child developmental research, which stress the flexibility, adaptability and resilience of both children and those entrusted to care for them.

The following have been identified by Schaffer (1992) as some of the most prominent emerging themes:

(a) *Children's experience of interpersonal relationships is crucial to their psychological development*

In order to grow healthily, children need harmony, consistency, affection, warmth, firmness and sensitivity. These are achieved through the quality of the child's relationships and not through influences like family structure. As research has shown, the type of family bears little relation to the child's adjustment. Intact families may be so conflict-ridden that they are destructive to the child's welfare. Good interpersonal relationships (or bad ones) are not the preserve of any one kind of family structure. Rutter (1972), in reassessing the concept of maternal deprivation, shifted the emphasis to the quality of the relationship rather than physical proximity, sex or kinship: "... the chief bond need not be with a biological parent, it need not be with the chief caretaker and it need not be with a female" (p.125).

(b) *Child rearing is a joint enterprise involving children as well as parents*

It is common to view a child's psychological development as the result of parental upbringing. However, parenting does not involve acting unilaterally on a passive being. It is a two-way process. Chess and Thomas (1987) use the term "goodness of fit", suggesting that parent-child interaction includes the effect that children have on parents: "Goodness of fit exists when the demands and expectations of the parents and other people important to the child's life are compatible with

the child's temperament, abilities and other characteristics" (p.56). The development of children's behavioural problems can usually be explained by the fit or lack of fit of the characteristics of both parties.

Child effect on parents stresses the interactional nature of parent-child relationships. Rutter (1975) points out that children with different temperaments elicit different responses and behaviours from those who interact with them.

Ambert (1992) cites Thorne who raises an additional pitfall of the parent-blaming ideology: "... it distorts children's experience of the world, denying their intentionality and capacity for action ..." (p.20).

The emphasis on interpersonal relationships is not therefore on what parents (or other caring adults) do to children but on what they do with them. What happens to a child is not only dependent on external events (such as treatment by other people) but is also determined by its own individuality.

(c) *Sensitivity to children's individuality is an essential ingredient of competent parenting*

To bring about the "fit" mentioned earlier, one needs to be sensitive to the child's individuality. An insensitive parent will tend to interpret most communications in the light of his or her own needs and wishes.

Some parents are more sensitive than others. There is no evidence that men are less responsive. The parents' own experience of childhood may be a determinant. There are suggestions that deprived children become depriving parents but such one-to-one correspondence is certainly not inevitable. Such a vicious circle can be broken, given the right conditions. A parent's insensitivity can also hinge on the particular child, some children being more difficult to parent than others (for example, premature infants):

Thus, parental insensitivity is not just some immutable characteristic of an individual's personality make-up; it is, rather, a feature describing a relationship of a particular parent and a particular child (Schaffer, 1992, p.226).

(d) *Children require consistency of care*

Consistency of behaviour is another parental characteristic vital to children's sound development. Research by Block (cited in Schaffer, 1992) shows that differences between two parents in child-rearing practices and values can be a strong force in bringing about maladjustment in children.

Divorce usually results in drastic changes for the child. However, Rutter (1972) maintains that separation and bond disruption are not synonymous. (More about this later in the section on divorce). What is important, is the child's security in knowing there is a parent (or surrogate parent) on whom he/she can depend, whose care and concern are unflinching and who provides a predictable environment in which the child can grow.

(e) *One of the most destructive influences on children is family discord*

It is the dual loyalty of the child who is emotionally attached to both parents which makes parental conflict and strife so painful and destructive. Drawing from the work of Burman and Reynolds (1986), Cox and Desforges (1987), Hetherington & Arasteh (1988), Ricci (1980), Wallerstein and Kelly (1980), and Wegscheider-Cruse (1994), one can conclude that it is not so much the event of a parent's separation as such that brings about adverse consequences for children as the hostility and tension that precede the separation. There was a time when the favourite explanation put forward for all kinds of pathologies was the "broken home". However, evidence proves that it is not the fact that two parents no longer live together that accounts for maladjustment, but rather the nature of the child's interpersonal relationships (see above

p.33). It is the breaking of relationships more than the breaking of a particular family structure that can have far-reaching effects.

- (f) *Multiple stressors or stress that endures over a long period of time rather than specific stress leads to psychopathology*

The reason why family discord is so potent a destructive force is that it tends to be enduring. A specific stress, like parental death, according to Rutter (1975), need not on its own lead to behavioural deviance. If such a stressful event is confined in time and if it occurs against a background of an otherwise stable family life, it is unlikely to exert an enduring negative influence on the child. This theory probably applies equally to adults, especially in the context of divorce, which will be examined more closely later.

- (g) *The effects of adverse experiences in early years are not irreversible*

The popular psychodynamic notion propounded by theorists like Bowlby and Freud was that what happens to children in their early years will leave permanent effects, as a result of the child's intense vulnerability and impressionability. There is now much evidence to show that early experiences are reversible given the right conditions. Bowlby himself made this theoretical shift as is evidenced in Bowlby (1990). Barrett and Trevitt (1991) concur that children with disturbed patterns of behaviour are not "beyond intervention" and that positive interventions can change behaviours in children and adults (p.38).

There is a danger of over-estimating the influence and power of the past. One is not inevitably damaged by negative early experience. The eventual outcome also hinges on subsequent events. However, Barrett and Trevitt (1991) caution against assuming that ill-effects can always be reversed and that the capacity for change is infinite. Particularly with older children, such change can be more difficult. This point has important significance when discussing adolescents and divorce later.

- (h) *Single-cause explanations are rarely appropriate for psychological events; multiple causation is the rule*

"'It all depends' may be an annoying phrase and it does not make good headlines, but it accurately reflects reality" (Schaffer, p.235): the effects of a particular experience depend not simply on the experience itself but also on the context in which it occurs. (A point which was raised earlier in the comments on working mothers.) For example, the impact of the loss of a father needs to be assessed in the light of several connected factors:

- ▶ the reason for the loss (death, divorce, etc.)
- ▶ the mother's reaction to the loss
- ▶ financial and other practical consequences for the family
- ▶ the availability of support from outside agencies.

We tend to want simple answers to complex questions. Yet research shows that simple answers are often simplistic answers. Simple cause-and-effect models tend to deny the complexities of life and are inadequate in explaining human behaviour.⁵ As Schaffer states: "... events occur in contexts and the conditions defining these contexts can exercise a powerful modulating effect on the eventual outcome" (p.235).

To summarize then, these theories of children's development highlight the flexibility of human nature and the resilience and adaptability of children. They suggest that healthy development can occur in a range of different family environments; that there are several "right" ways of raising a child; that effects of stressful experiences can be minimized by appropriate action; that isolated traumatic events do not necessarily lead to harmful consequences; and that an individual's personality does not have to be at the mercy of past experience.

5. This is precisely why a qualitative research approach was adopted in this thesis.

This acknowledgement of the multiple realities of experience invites a more balanced view of alternative ways of organizing families and parenting children.

2.3 DIVORCE

2.3.1 Introduction

In raising certain aspects of divorce which have direct bearing on the lives of those whom it affects, the researcher has drawn largely from the work of Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) who conducted extensive research on 131 children and adolescents from 60 families, together with their parents. The research was longitudinal, stretching over more than ten years, and interviewing was the primary research instrument used. What made this a particularly valuable source was that it focused not only on the child but also looked closely at the adults and the challenges which being divorced presented to them. In the light of this researcher's thesis, it was the adult's adjustment which was of focal interest although the child's responses would inevitably impact powerfully on the parent's experience.

2.3.2 Psychological tasks for adults

The two main tasks necessary for adults to accomplish are rebuilding their own lives and parenting their children after the divorce.

2.3.2.1 Rebuilding their own lives

This in itself involves a number of related tasks:

(a) *Ending the marriage*

The way in which a family separates in a divorce can have a great determining influence on the lives of everyone later. The challenge is to terminate the marriage as cleanly and painlessly as possible. Adults need to negotiate and conclude financial and child custody arrangements with "as much reality, morality, emotional stability and enlightened self-interest

as they can muster" (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989, p.278). If this task is achieved, it can ease the subsequent years considerably. Done poorly, it can generate years of anger and suffering for everyone.

(b) *Mourning the loss*

The length of the marriage can affect the difficulty and time involved in relinquishing it: "But even a brief marriage requires a proper burial, especially if there have been children" (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989, p.279). There is the need to acknowledge the loss and to mourn for the unfulfilled dreams and hopes before one can regain perspective.

(c) *Reclaiming oneself*

One needs to establish a new sense of identity as an individual who is no longer locked in partnership with another. Identity now comes from the ways each has chosen to be apart. Interestingly, the modern trend of a woman retaining her own name in marriage is perhaps symbolic of her desire to resist this fusion of identity.

(d) *Resolving or containing passions*

Feelings of anger, revenge, inadequacy can be ignited by subsequent events like the remarriage of one's ex-spouse or an awareness of financial inequity. There is the risk of such feelings consuming one and thereby arresting future growth.

(e) *Venturing forth again*

In order to regain confidence and to restore a sense of competence and self-worth, one needs to experiment with new behaviours, new relationships, new roles and new solutions to old problems.

(f) *Rebuilding*

This is the central psychological and social task which incorporates all the others. Finding post-divorce equanimity requires detaching from the old, familiar patterns and being receptive to the new: "... a person must allow the obligations, the memories, and the lessons of the past to co-exist peacefully with experiences in the present" (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989, p.281).

2.3.2.2 Parenting children

This requires an active involvement in rebuilding children's lives. Parents, in their behaviour and explanations need to reassure children that they have not been divorced from their parents' care and love. This means psychologically separating the child's needs from their own.

Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) identify different responses initially to divorce depending on the child's age and development (pp.283-285). Adolescents tend to react severely (Hetherington & Arasteh, 1988; McLanahan, 1994). They need the family structure to provide parameters for their own sexual and aggressive impulses. They need clear guidelines for moral behaviour. They worry intensely about the future and the possibility of repeating their parents' failures. The normal anxieties found in adolescence become heightened. Their parents' vulnerability and fallibility can be most disquieting and confusing.

Some adolescents respond by assuming more responsibility which can lead to greater inner strength and independence, but this premature maturity may also mean they forfeit vital aspects of their adolescent experience.

2.3.3 Psychological tasks for children

A number of sources (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1979; Ricci, 1980; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Weiss, 1975;) suggest that certain tasks need to be performed in addition to the normal developmental tasks of growing up:

- (a) Children need to understand why the divorce has happened and what it means.
- (b) They need to strategically withdraw from the "drama" of the divorce. Divorce tends to pull children back into the heart of the family and, especially for adolescents who need to be slowly detaching themselves, this can be cloying and stultifying. Children need to be encouraged to remain children and not pressured into assuming adult roles overnight.
- (c) The loss of the intact family and possibly of one parent needs to be confronted and dealt with.
- (d) They need to constructively channel the anger within them. This requires accepting the culpability of parents and recognizing their fallibility.
- (e) Children have to resolve feelings of guilt about the divorce and the role they may perceive themselves to have played in it.
- (f) They need to accept the permanence of the divorce.
- (g) The most central task, particularly for adolescents, is to restore their faith in loving relationships.

2.3.4 The effects of divorce on children

Research done by Hetherington and Arasteh (1988), Hetherington, Cox and Cox (1977), Hetherington *et al.*, 1979), Luepnitz (1982), Popay *et al.* (1983), Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989), Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) and Weiss (1975) identifies the following points where there is general agreement:

- (a) Divorce should not be construed as a single event happening at one particular point in time. A longitudinal perspective is necessary to ascertain the impact on children. The effects found depend on when, in the course of the total sequence, the family is studied. Earlier research results, therefore, tend to be misleading precisely because they investigated

children from divorced families irrespective of the stage of family dissolution.

- (b) The nature and severity of effects vary from one stage to another. The effects are most evident in the first year following the separation. Given the recuperative powers of children, they usually readjust with time. There is still uncertainty concerning the long-term effects of divorce and it is possible that they can resurface in adulthood.
- (c) Several factors impact on the child's process of adjustment: age, sex, nature of previous relationship with each parent, the custody and access arrangements, the quality of life in the single-parent family and the parent's remarriage. These dimensions result in a great variability in outcome.
- (d) The sex of the child deserves special mention:

In keeping with many other findings on children's reactions to stress, boys have been found to be more vulnerable to the divorce experience than girls. The effect on them at the time is greater and their eventual readjustment is generally slower than is the case with girls. Only in response to the mother's remarriage is this effect apparently reversed: girls are more likely to be adversely affected by this event whereas on boys it may produce beneficial effects (Schaffer, 1992, p.164).

This is supported by Hetherington *et al.* (1979), Kail and Wicks-Nelson (1993) and Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) who found that divorce was associated with more problems of social adjustment for boys than for girls.

- (e) Undoubtedly the most significant finding to emerge from this research refers to the powerful effect of the quality of family relationships, both before and after divorce. The presence of family conflict is the most potent influence on a child's adjustment.

This insight (echoed in 2.2.7) challenges the outdated yet cherished notion of "staying together for the sake of the kids". If parental conflict has a more pervasive and detrimental effect on children than the separation itself, then

perhaps, for some, divorce is a preferable alternative. The research shows that children in single-parent families which are free of conflict present fewer behavioural problems than children in intact but miserable families (Rutter, 1975; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Weiss, 1979).

Rutter (1972), in weighing out the possible effects of maternal separation and paternal separation, felt that both parents are important to a child's development. Which parent is more important for any child, differs with the child and with the situation: "It has not made much difference which parent the child got on well with as long as he got on well with one parent" (p.248).

2.3.5 The effect of children on parents

Child effect in divorce is a relatively new and unexamined approach in the research and it can complement the focus on the effect of divorce on children. Ambert (1992) suggests that parents generally are reluctant to admit that their children have or create problems and complaining about one's children is socially unacceptable. (This researcher would venture to suggest that this depends on the age of the child. While it is perhaps unacceptable to complain about younger children, it seems to be mandatory to complain about teenagers!) This attitude arises from society's construction of children as innocent, passive recipients and of parents as all powerful agents in their children's lives. Consequently, a complaining parent is viewed as a parent who has failed in his or her role and it is emotionally unbearable to be so judged.

Yet the interactional nature of parent-child relationships implies child effect on parents. If a child reacts negatively, at least in the short term, to his/her parent's divorce, his/her unhappiness or maladjustment is bound to impact on the parents. It is Ambert's contention that divorced people may more readily perceive and concede child effect. Because divorce is such a potent, marking passage in their lives, a watershed time, they are more likely to confront or re-evaluate some realities within a different perspective. Having experienced the "failure" of divorce, they may well be more open to a topic which is not usually

considered socially acceptable. On the other hand, it is possible that, precisely because of this taste of "failure", divorced parents may well be more guarded and defensive and shut themselves off from admitting other dimensions of "failure" within their children. The impulse might well be to resurrect, even exaggerate, the successes in other areas of their lives.

2.3.6 Problems in divorced and intact families

Luepnitz (1982) maintains that certain important problems that divorced families face are the very same problems that plague the "intact" family. They may differ in magnitude, but they are similar in nature.

(a) *Absent father*

In our society there are large numbers of people who work too much; men, in particular, whose attachment to their work has marginalized them as fathers. Luepnitz (1982) cites Christopher Lasch who asserts that the American family, although patriarchal, is essentially father-absent: "This observation is supported by a recent study that showed the average father spends only 12 minutes per day interacting with his children" (p.153). Lasch (1977) maintains that this father-absence "creates in the child a chronic fear of punishment; and although the threat loses its practical force through repeated deferral, it continues to reverberate in the child's fantasies" (p.188).

(b) *Overworked mother*

One of the results of this father-absence is that the mother, especially the unemployed mother, often turns to her children for emotional sustenance and fulfilment. "In structural language, one could say that the average family contains a peripheral father and an overinvolved mother" (Luepnitz, 1982, p.153). Nancy Choderow (1978) shows a profound concern with the fact of female-dominated child-care, which she feels can promote in children fears of maternal omnipotence and martyrdom and expectations of

women's unique self-sacrificing qualities. Matteson (1975) states: "The problem in the American home is not the absence of mother but her overwhelming presence" (p.334).

(c) *Isolation from the community*

The isolation of the nuclear family presents problems for its members because too much is expected from too few people (Laing, 1971). This results in stress and conflict within the family and also fear and suspicion of the outside world. The concentration of creative and emotional energies within the family can become repressive and oppressive:

Where public life is rootless, individualistic and bureaucratized and the family isolated and privatized, family relationships become claustrophobic and overcharged and so cannot in fact serve as a supportive counterbalance to the psychic strains of the public world (Elliot, 1986, p.126).

2.3.7 General themes regarding divorce

Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) submit various findings from their work, concerning the impact of divorce on children, adults, and on changes in parent-child relationships.

2.3.7.1 Children

- (a) Divorce is a debilitating and wrenching experience for many adults and almost all children. It is usually more devastating for children than for their parents.
- (b) The effects of divorce are often long-lasting. For children, divorce usually occurs during their formative years and it profoundly affects their view of themselves and of society: "While divorce can rescue a parent from an intolerable situation, it can fail to rescue the children" (Elliot, 1986, p.298).

- (c) Although many of the children studied agreed that their parents were wise to separate, they nevertheless felt they suffered from their parents' mistakes.
- (d) Many of the children emerged in young adulthood as compassionate, capable people. They were assisted by a combination of their own inner resources and supportive relationships with one or both parents, siblings and other relations and friends. However, almost half of the children in the study entered adulthood as fearful, underachieving, unconfident young people.
- (e) Although boys generally fared worse than girls, this disparity in overall adjustment eventually diminished.
- (f) Adolescence is a period of great risk for children in divorced families. An alarming number of adolescents felt physically and emotionally abandoned.
- (g) As the children entered young adulthood where they had to face the developmental task of establishing love and intimacy, they felt most vulnerable and felt they lacked the model for a loving, enduring and moral relationship between a man and a woman.

2.3.7.2 Adults

- (a) Divorce usually ends an unhappy chapter in adults' lives. Many individuals forged better, happier ways of life, not necessarily within a second marriage. According to Hafner (1993), women's post-divorce emotional adjustment is superior to that of men. This underlines the extent to which marriage sustains men's emotional well-being.
- (b) Some of the second marriages are happier. Adults seem to learn from earlier experiences and avoid repeating the same mistakes.

- (c) Many adults, especially women, grow significantly in terms of competence and self-esteem. Wegscheider-Cruse (1994) claims that self-esteem cannot co-exist with dependency and that divorce often signals a move towards autonomy: "Divorce often is simply the result of seeking validation outside of a marriage in which the desired level of approval has become increasingly unavailable" (p.25).
- (d) Recovery is not a given amongst adults. There is no evidence to support the assumption that all people recover psychologically.
- ✓ (e) Feelings of hurt, anger and humiliation can endure for many years after divorce.
- ✓ (f) Some adults are at greater risk; for example, women with young children, especially if driven into poverty by divorce, struggle to survive emotionally and physically.
- ✓ (g) Many older men and women coming out of long-term marriages face loneliness and anxiety. They often lean on their children, with ambivalent feelings, for support and companionship. Opportunities for work, stimulation, sex and marriage decline rapidly with age, particularly for women.
- (h) The high failure rate of second marriages is serious and often devastating as it reinforces (and resurrects) the first failure.

2.3.7.3 Changes in parent-child relationships

- (a) As in an intact family, the child's interpersonal relationships with parents who co-operate with each other remain crucial to healthy development. (See study by Camara & Resnick in Hetherington & Arasteh, 1988.)
- ✓ (b) Often the parents' self-esteem and parenting become diminished following a divorce. The parents' capacity to parent is usually restored within one to two years after divorce.

- CHILDREN
- (c) Since most children live with mothers after divorce, the single most important factor in the child's psychological development is the mental health of the mother and the quality of her parenting.
 - (d) Children often cling to a fantasy image of the absent parent, creating a phantom relationship with him (or her).
 - (e) Where the father is absent, the child's need for him continues and rises with greater intensity at adolescence. The nature of the father-child relationship and not the frequency of visiting is what most affects the child's psychological development.
 - (f) New and unfamiliar parent-child relationships can develop where the child is overburdened by responsibility for the parents' psychological welfare or by serving as an instrument of parental rage.
 - ✓ (g) There is the misconception that, because divorce is more common, it has become easier to bear: "But neither parents nor children find comfort in numbers" (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989, p.303). Although the stigma of divorce has been reduced, the pain of its victims is not assuaged.
 - (h) There has been a major shift in the attitudes of fathers, more of whom are attempting to maintain an active parenting role. There is also evidence of a greater willingness among women to permit this involvement.
 - ✓ (i) Economically, the impact of divorce on women and children remains a critical problem. Their standard of living is inevitably lower after divorce.

In conclusion, Wallerstein and Blakeslee's (1989) intensive study, although producing findings which are troubling and serious, also highlights guidelines which offer hope to those who are rebuilding new lives. They make it clear that the factors that are important to how well children adjust to divorce are the same factors that influence their level of adjustment in intact families. The optimal conditions for children of divorced parents occur when these parents are happy in their new lives, when they co-operate with each other, and when they

are involved with their children in healthy ways. The single most important factor for successful adjustment is a stable, loving relationship with both parents.

SECTION B

This section is divided into seven sub-sections, each dealing with a different theme arising from the single-parent situation:

1. Definitions and other terminology
2. Functions and organization of the single-parent family
3. Work and the economic situation
4. The effects of father-absence, on the child's adjustment
5. The psychosocial world of the mother
6. Social censure and support systems
7. Concluding comments

2.4 DEFINITIONS AND OTHER TERMINOLOGY

2.4.1 Definitions

The definition of a single-parent family, according to the 1974 Finer Report (in Popay *et al.*, 1983, p.7-8), is: "A father or mother living without a spouse (or not cohabiting) with his or her never-married dependent child or children aged either below 16 or 16-19 and undergoing full-time education".

This rather cumbersome description focuses on child-dependence and the presence in the home of only one parent. It excludes families with cohabiting parents and those where children are no longer dependent. Elliot (1986) claims it is an inadequate definition as it obscures important structural features of the single-parent family like the role the "absent" parent may continue to play in child-rearing, for example, in economic provision.

Fuchs (1980) cites Horowitz and Perdue's definition which is open to more flexible interpretation:

A single-parent family comprises one parent and one or more children. Simply stated there is one parent who fulfils the parenting role in contrast to most nuclear families in our society in which two people share parenting responsibilities to a greater or less degree (p.31).

This definition also stresses the absence of one of the parents.

For the purposes of this study, a single-parent generally refers to a male or female, unmarried or having been married, who is now separated, widowed or divorced, with a dependent child or children. It was decided, in the research to be described, to focus on the woman who was married, is now divorced or separated, and who is a custodial parent.

2.4.2 Terminology

In her reading, the researcher came across numerous terms to describe the single-parent situation, including:

- ▶ one-parent family
- ▶ lone-parent family
- ▶ solo-parent family
- ▶ sole-parent family
- ▶ single-handed family

In addition, terms such as "broken homes", "incomplete families" and "single-parent families" are often used interchangeably, though each of these may, in its exact context, apply to a different situation.

When citing the words from particular sources, the original terminology will be retained, but for the purposes of clarity and simplicity, the researcher will restrict herself to the terms "single-parent", "single-parenting", "single-parenthood", and "the single-parent family".

In order to avoid the tedium of "he/she", the word "he" has been used throughout the text to refer to both boys and girls. The true sex has been retained only when emphasizing the differences between the sexes.

2.4.3 Incidence of single-parenting

2.4.3.1 Countries abroad

Table 1 shows the increase in divorce rates, births to unmarried women and single-parent families in nine industrial countries. The divorce rates and births to unmarried women more than doubled in most countries between 1960 and 1990; in some places they increased fourfold. Single-parenthood also increased in nearly all of the countries between 1970 and the late 1980s. The United States has the highest prevalence of single-parent families.

Table 1: International comparisons of divorce rates, nonmarital births, and single parenthood (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994, p.138)

Country	Divorce rate		Percentage of all births to unmarried women		Percentage of families headed by single parents	
	1960	1990	1960	1990	1960	1988
United States	9	21	5	28	9	23
Canada	2	12	4	24	9	15
Denmark	6	13	8	46	17	20
France	3	8	6	30	9	12
Germany	4	8	6	11	8	14
Italy	1	2	2	6	NA	NA
The Netherlands	2	8	1	11	9	15
Sweden	5	12	11	47	9	13
United Kingdom	2	12	5	28	6	13

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1993; Constance Sorrentino, "The Changing Family in International Perspective", *Monthly Labor Review*, March 1990, pp.41-58 (in McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

Note: NA = Not available

Sedgbeer and Buchanan (1990), in their analysis of demographic trends, claim that, in Britain, one out of eight children live in single-parent families; in the United States of America, single-parent families accounted for 25% of all families, and Australian figures for 1986 show 14% of all families with children were single-parent families.

Miller (1992) asserts that the nuclear family only represented 26% of all households in the United States in 1990.⁶ It is clear from these figures that the nuclear family of one mother, one father plus 2.6 children is becoming archaic (Sedgbeer & Buchanan, 1990).

2.4.3.2 South Africa

The absence of current, reliable data to support the popular notion that one in three marriages end in divorce and that South Africa has one of the highest divorce rates in the world, has been a source of immense frustration for the researcher.

Statistical information from the 1992 Central Statistical Service regarding divorce is only available for Whites, Coloureds and Asians. The specific divorce rate which shows the number of divorces per 1000 married couples is 17.3 for Whites, 8.9 for Asians and 11.7 for Coloureds. As a barometer for assessing the incidence of single-parenting (which includes widowhood and unmarried parenthood) amongst the whole South African population, these figures are singularly unhelpful.

Burman and Fuchs (1986) state that, between 1978-1982, divorce rates for whites in South Africa increased by 47%:

The S.A. divorce rate has shown such a sharp upward trend over the past years that at least one section of the population - the white - appears to have one of the highest divorce rates in the world ... were

6. Donald Morris (*The Natal Witness*, Sept. 30, 1995), in an article entitled "The Collapse of the Family", comments wryly that the answer to this problem, which is already a crisis, is not simply preaching "family values". As the *Economist* notes, "American families are valued tremendously; so much that most people will soon have two of them."

existing divorce rates to remain the same, the probability was that one in 2.24 marriages would end in divorce (p.115).

The divorce figures for other sections of the population are less clear-cut. The official Coloured and Asian figures do not reflect the actual divorce rate among these population groups which contain many Hindus and Muslims who do not marry by civil law. Accurate statistics are impossible to obtain.

The position is exacerbated by the fact that African state-recognized divorces are not reflected in the official statistics. There is no nationwide register of customary unions and many non-customary law African marriages are not recognized either.

In a talk entitled "Reaction to family conflict and divorce" in 1989 (*Family Life Education*, 1990), Professor Donald mentioned the high incidence of family divorce in South Africa. Amongst Whites, 40-50% of marriages end in divorce of which 60-70% involve dependent children. Amongst Indians, Coloureds and Blacks, the percentages are even higher.

Unfortunately, the researcher has been unable to verify this information. It would seem that, while there is great concern about the apparently very high incidence of single-parenting in South Africa, and that this "fact" has been taken for granted, there are great gaps and inconsistencies in the information available, and in-depth research needs to be done to assess the exact magnitude of this phenomenon.

2.4.3.3 Incidence of single-parent families headed by women

The majority of single-parent families are headed by mothers. Popay *et al.* (1983) claim that eight out of nine single parents in the United Kingdom are mothers, and Champion (1995) says that, according to the 1992 Population Trends, about 90% of single-parent families are headed by women.

Weiss (1979) maintains, of those children living with a single-parent in the United States, 93% live with their mothers. Hetherington (1988) reports 87% of single-parent families headed by mothers, a figure echoed in Kennedy and King (1994).

There is no evidence that the situation is any different in South Africa. In fact, with the escalating incidence of unmarried parenthood (see 2.4.4.2), the figure is possibly higher.

The high proportion of mother-headed families is due to three factors:

- (a) Where the parent has died, most are fathers as women generally outlive men (Weiss, 1979).
- (b) By far the majority of children of divorced and separated parents live with mother (c.f. tender-age doctrine in custody cases).
- (c) Of those whose parents are not married, almost all live with mothers.

Where there is no father in the home, the responsibilities of the mother depend very much on her emotional, physical and mental ability to cope, the construction of the household, extra kin, and societal and environmental factors. Also of great significance are the economic, physical and psychological conditions before and after the event causing the single-parent status.

2.4.4 Primary routes into single-parenthood

Single-parenthood is a situation resulting from some critical event. It can result from the death of a parent, from legal marital dissolution in the case of divorce, from desertion or separation by consent, in the case of the separated, and from the decision of a mother to keep the child of premarital conception. Nowadays it can also result from adoption.

A single-parent situation can be created by the extended absence of a parent (for example, through prolonged illness), but this is not dealt with in this study.

A single-parent's reaction to her new status is largely affected by the nature of the crisis which caused the new situation. In the case of single-parent adoption (and sometimes in unwed parenthood), it is brought about by choice; in the case of widowhood, by unavoidable necessity; and with divorce and separation, it may be a choice to one parent and unavoidable to the other, or a mutual choice. The nature of the crisis-provoking event needs to be understood as a major contributory factor in the study of single-parenthood. The three primary routes into single-parenthood are discussed below.

2.4.4.1 Widowhood

Bowskill (1980) identifies two ways in which the death of a partner is distinct from loss through divorce: the finality of the separation and the support from society. Where divorce is reversible, death is irreversible. In a bereaved family the "absent" parent may continue to be a significant reference figure and is often idealized by the remaining spouse and children. (Weiss, 1979, talks about voting the absent parent's proxy.) Society's attitude also tends to be one of sympathy and support for the family. The economic and social position of the widowed, on the whole, tends to be better.

2.4.4.2 Unmarried motherhood

The researcher would like to point out that, while personally preferring the term "unmarried motherhood or parenthood", where sources cited use the term "illegitimacy", this usage has been retained. Burman and Preston-Whyte (1992) argue strongly that unmarried mothers and their children are the most disadvantaged group, both in South Africa and internationally. They suffer the greatest material deprivation, and the various forms of stigma under which they labour have further material and psychological effects not felt by other single-parents. The authors cite the most recent illegitimacy figures for Cape Town (the

most reliable in the country at present) as: 20% of all births for those classified as White, 44% for Coloureds, and virtually 70% for Africans. Such statistics clearly have major implications for the future of South African society "They indicate the entire pattern of the country's family structure is undergoing a radical - but largely unrecognized - change (Burman & Preston-Whyte, 1992, p.xiv).

2.4.4.3 Divorce

Weiss (1979) claims that the most common route to single-parenthood is divorce. This may be so in the United States, but in South Africa it is probably unmarried parenthood. Often divorce has a history of turbulence that has preceded such dissolution and it is this conflict which is so damaging to the child's (and parent's) social and psychological adjustment. Stigmatization can add to the divorced person's difficulties in that it creates problems of reputation, self-validation and the negotiation of a legitimate identity. The socio-economic situation of the divorced mother is usually considerably reduced. (See 2.6 for a detailed discussion of these issues.)

Each route to single-parenthood is accompanied by its own unique set of circumstances, experiences and changes in family life. Single-parents are not a homogeneous group. They are an extremely heterogeneous group and "there is no generalization that will fit all the diverse types of single-parents" (Chess & Thomas, 1987, p.329).

We need to guard against assuming that all single-parents share the same essential characteristics.

2.4.5 Reasons for the rise in single-parenting

McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) suggest that the main factors causing the growth of single-parent families, and mother-headed families in particular, are women's growing economic independence, and changes in social norms and values:

Once sex and child-rearing were "liberated" from marriage and once women could support themselves on their own, two of the most important rationales for marriage were gone (p.142-143).

In the 1960s, in the West, attitudes about individual freedom versus the importance of the family changed. The new ideology stressed personal freedom and self-fulfilment, and raised marriage expectations. Sasse (in *Family Life Education*, 1990), says:

The rising divorce rate does not indicate that more marriages are unhappy today. It simply reflects the fact that people are less willing to live in unhappy marriages. Marriage and family life have become so important a source of emotional satisfaction that few people put up with a marriage that doesn't provide it (p.272).

The high divorce rate is therefore a reflection of both the failure and success of marriage.

The reasons for the high incidence of single-parenting are diverse and complex (particularly in South Africa with the escalation in unmarried parenthood), and a full discussion of these is beyond the scope of this study. However, further comment on aspects of the single-parent situation which follows will throw light on this issue.

2.5 FUNCTIONS AND ORGANIZATION OF THE SINGLE-PARENT FAMILY

Over the past few decades, parental roles and functions in the single-parent family have been merging and changing. This has largely been the result of the increased participation of women in the public world. In addition, the taking over or complementing of many familial, socializing and nurturing tasks by external support systems, combined with a lessening of social censure, has made it easier for the single-parent family to function.

The single-parent family is expected to fulfil all but one of the same functions as two-parent families. There are parental, familial and societal obligations, (see 2.2.2), including satisfying basic needs, providing socialization and authority, placing its members in the larger community, and fulfilling emotional needs. The

dimension of procreation and the legitimizing of sexual expression are not, in the view of society, fulfilled in the single-parent family.

2.5.1 Parenting alone

Weiss (1979) maintains: "To be a single parent is to head a family that is often understaffed" (p.xi). Parenting alone is most demanding as it involves so many discrete tasks: activities involved with income production, home maintenance and child-care. Task and emotional overload are common problems experienced by single-parents who are almost always "on duty". There is often no other adult to share the responsibilities and stresses. A familiar refrain in much research has been the difficulty for the single-parent of not having a backup, of always having to respond, react and maximize available time.

2.5.2 Family structure

The absence of a second adult leads to the diminution of the hierarchical structure of two-parent families. The lack of adult support can mean diminished consistency of care and a lack of structure in the home: "The absence of another grown-up reflecting adult standards also leads many single-parents to adopt their kids' sense of order - something just short of chaos" (Kennedy & King, 1994, p.32).

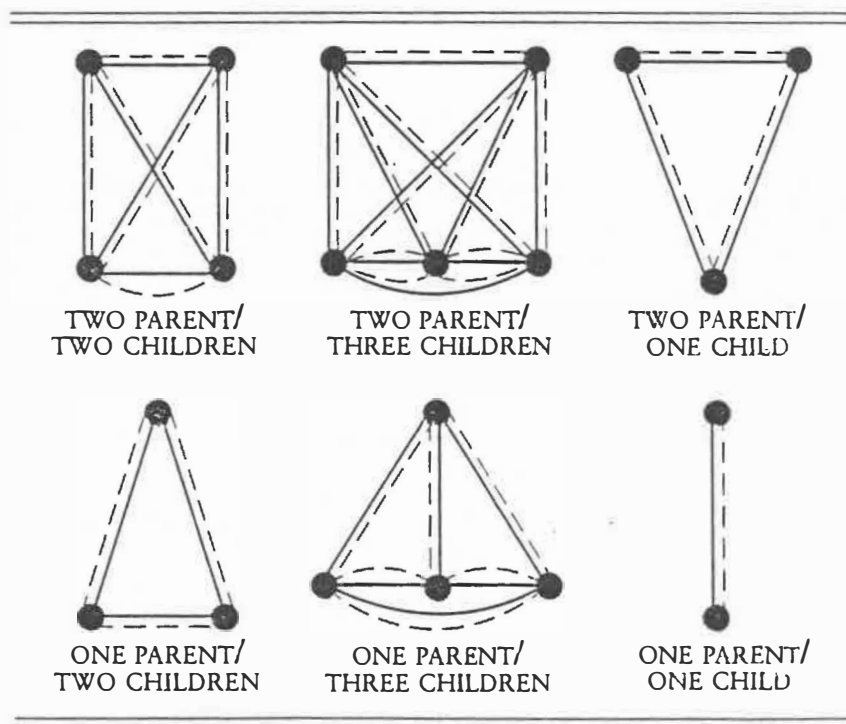
Children may seem undisturbed by a lack of routine but do benefit from the safety of a predictable schedule. Even when there is a structured routine, the single-parent is likely to be more stressed by unexpected but inevitable last-minute changes (for example, a sick child in the morning), precisely because of the more limited options in terms of making alternate plans.

Figure 4, a family dynamics diagram, shows that, with single-parenting, the number of relationships is reduced and the intensity of the relationship of children to parent is increased: "Families in square, triangular, or single-line configurations can function equally well, but they cannot function in the same ways" (Kennedy & King, 1994, p.22). It can become a problem when the single-parent carries the

expectations of the old family structure (a fantasy of the "square-shaped" household) and acts as if it still exists. There is the need to reframe and acknowledge the changed dynamics (Ricci, 1980; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

In two-parent families, children can turn from one parent to the other and thereby "let go" of one parent. In an intense one-on-one relationship (see Figure 4) it may be difficult for a child to experience intimacy with others. The single-parent family is obviously more vulnerable to becoming internally over-dependent (Bowskill, 1980; Laing, 1971). It is important that the child (and the parent) should be given a sense of his or her unique status as a separate person.

THE SINGLE-PARENT FAMILY



- 1) parent to child 1;
- 2) parent to child 2;
- 3) child 1 to parent;
- 4) child 2 to parent;
- 5) child 1 to child 2; and
- 6) child 2 to child 1.

Figure 4: Family dynamics diagram (from Kennedy & King, 1994, p.22)

However, the potential intensity of single-parenting can afford extra opportunities for communication. There is often more interactive dialogue in the single-parent home and children tend to be more verbal than children in a two-parent family (Campion, 1995; Weiss, 1975). McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) found that children of single-parent mothers talk to their mothers more than in two-parent families. This finding is consistent with the argument that single-mothers may rely on their children as confidants.

2.5.3 Roles

In the following comments, when referring to single-parent families, the researcher makes the assumption that such a family is not living with an extended family but is an entity on its own.

2.5.3.1 Parental roles

In a single-parent family, the parental echelon is no longer there to hold parents to their parental roles. For many this is a relief as it means one can escape the traps of sexist role-playing and one can review old ideas and patterns. This can result in increased self-reliance and self-esteem in both parent and children. For others, guilt about the single-parent situation sets in, and they feel the need to compensate or to play the dual role of mother and father.

The compulsion to protect the children from further suffering can lead to a life of self-denial and self-sacrifice: "Too many single mothers feel guilty when they have no cause to do so - and they make themselves sitting ducks to be manipulated by their children" (Bowskill, 1980, p.120).

2.5.3.2 Changes in parent-child roles

- (a) According to Weiss (1979), there is the risk of role-reversal taking place with children being supportive, nurturant or directing, and becoming care providers for parents. If such role-reversal is persistent it could be problematic for the psychological development of those involved.

- (b) It is also possible for there to be a shift from parent-child complementarity to a complementarity more appropriate to a husband-wife relationship. In such a situation, for example, a son could assume the role of "man of the house". "The shift is potentially more persistent because neither parent nor child may feel pressed to return to more usual parent-child understandings" (Weiss, 1979, p.88). Where the child is both the parent's companion and partner, the result can be an ambivalence about the child moving off into an independent life. It can also raise problems about familial leadership and relationships with other siblings.

While a single-parent may look to a child for parenting, or expect the child to take on an adult partnering role, this is a situation which can, according to Barrett & Trevitt (1991), also occur in two-parent families and is not peculiar to the single-parent situation.

- (c) If there is an only child, such a child becomes the sole recipient of this heightened parental investment (or resentment). A mother and only son easily develop aspects of the role complementarity of a marital relationship. A mother and only daughter can incur a competitive element (especially when the girl is adolescent) as they are both females living without a male.

2.5.3.3 Role models and gender identity

The single-parent cannot fill the responsibility of being the opposite sex parent. Mothers and fathers are not interchangeable parental figures. They serve purposes beyond the love which they provide in their caretaking roles. They also, by their own behaviour, display and teach what it is to fulfil that sex-role.

Miller (1992) cites Gilligan:

Relationships and particularly issues of dependency, are experienced differently by women and men ... For girls and women, issues of femininity or feminine identity do not depend on the achievement of separation from the mother or on the progress of individuation. Since masculinity is defined through separation while femininity is defined

through attachment, male gender identity is threatened by intimacy while female gender identity is threatened by separation (p.116).

Because women head the majority of single-parent families, the role model most in demand is male. Women are commonly parented by someone of their own gender. Rutter (1975) claims: "If the same-sexed parent is missing from the home, the child will lack an important model of sex-appropriate behaviour and the opportunity parents provide for same-sexed identification" (p.173). Fathers, or meaningful father figures, help children separate from mothers, a necessary step to becoming an autonomous adult.

Gordon (1990), in a study of feminist mothers, comments that women with older sons felt it was very difficult to influence them through example; unless they got positive, diverse images of men from men, it was hard for them to be influenced by their mothers. One of the tasks of the single-parent mother is clearly to resolve this internal conflict for boys by making available male role models for them against which they can set their identities.

This issue will be given more attention in the section on father-absence (2.7.2).

2.5.4 Authority and parenting styles

According to McLanahan and Sandefur (1994), who tend to adopt a conservative stance, the quality of parenting is "lower" in a single-parent family, largely because father-absence results in loss of parental resources. Rather than develop an authoritative style (firm discipline combined with warmth), some single-parents become overly permissive (too little discipline) while others become overly authoritarian (too little warmth). They maintain that, in a nuclear family, two parents can not only monitor the children but also monitor one another and ensure the other parent is behaving appropriately. The administering of punishment, for example, can be risky in a single-parent family as there is no other parent to adjudicate: "In short, the two-parent family structure creates a system of checks

and balances that both promotes parental responsibility and protects the child ..." (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994, p.28).

Parental authority and supervision are therefore likely to be weaker in a single-parent family since monitoring is much more difficult for one parent than for two who can share the responsibility and co-operate with each other.

Luepnitz (1982) takes a very different point of view in her study of authority in single-parent families. She found that, freed from their conventional sex roles, single-parent developed new styles:

These results suggest that mothers after divorce move in the direction of the conventional male role and that fathers adopt a more "womanly" style. This tendency suggests that parents of both sexes come to acquire a broader repertoire of responses after divorce - by internalizing the behaviour of the absent parent (p.82).

Campion (1995) questions the disciplining role of fathers in two-parent homes (as does Laing, 1971) and suggests that not many modern fathers make the time to fit in much firm and caring modelling after work. Even if they are present, she doubts whether they, rather than mothers, provide the required discipline:

As far as research into fathers is concerned it has until quite recently been focused purely in terms of what men do not do by being absent rather than what they do when they are present and how (p.213).

From the research done, it would seem that most parenting in single-parent families (especially with adolescents) takes on a partnership style. Obtaining the child's co-operation appears to be more crucial than obtaining his obedience. Decision-making tends to be shared as family roles and responsibilities are redefined. For adolescents, such negotiating skills can become a valuable asset. Where this democratic, inductive approach is successful, it fosters children's capabilities for maturity and they often seem to develop skills not possessed by their peers from two-parent homes.

There is also much evidence that being a single disciplinarian has its difficulties (Bowskill, 1980; Luepnitz, 1982; Matteson 1975):

- ▶ It takes personal stamina to perform this function continuously.
- ▶ The single-parent often feels like the "bad guy" which can be demoralizing (especially if the child keeps comparing the mother to the father).
- ▶ There is the need for another adult's opinion when an important decision has to be made.
- ▶ It might be easier on the child to have another parent acting as a buffer, to break the intensity of having one parent and not having two perspectives.

However, if the stress for the single mother is low then there is every indication that her parenting and disciplining can be every bit as effective (if not more so) than that exhibited in a two-parent family. (Study cited in Kennedy & King, 1994.)

Chess and Thomas (1987) claim that studies on styles of parenthood have often neglected the influence of the child on the parent. Their research says that there is no single style of parenthood that is best for all children: "There are many ways of being a good parent" (p.40).

2.6 THE ECONOMIC SITUATION OF THE SINGLE-PARENT AND WORK

2.6.1 The economic situation

Family disruption tends to lead to a loss of economic resources. The economic situation undoubtedly constitutes the severest problem common to single-parent families. Difficulties arising from insufficient income are often incorrectly ascribed to the single-parent status. For example, a child might be seen to be "neglected" because the parent is working over-time. The lack of time devoted to the child is not the result of having a single-parent but rather of having a "poor" single-parent who has to do extra work to make ends meet.

Mother-headed families are usually more disadvantaged than father-headed families. The economic status of divorced mothers is often compromised after divorce,

mainly because the total family income is usually not distributed equally when parents live apart (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Elliot (1986) maintains that single-mothers are of the poorest in society and says that poverty haunts one out of every three female-headed families in the United Kingdom. President Mandela (National Social Development Report, 1995) told the United Nations that as many as 30% of African households in South Africa are headed by women and the average per capita income (R243) is barely half of the average for all households (R468).

2.6.1.1 Effects of the economic situation

The vast majority of single-parents, being women, face many problems shared by all working women and especially working mothers. Circumstances peculiar to single-parenthood may exacerbate this situation.

The single-parent's reduced financial position can have traumatic concomitants, for, together with the possibility of decreased income, there is the probability of increased expenditure. These often result in stressful conditions:

- (a) *Housing problems.* The most striking material consequence after marital breakdown, is that only one partner can continue to occupy the family home. Snyman (1986) identified housing as one of the severest problems experienced by her respondents. Unacceptable housing arrangements often meant lack of space and privacy.
- (b) *Difficulties in co-ordinating work, domestic responsibilities and child-care.* Miller (1992) states that practical concerns of child-care remain a central issue facing the changing family today. Even the women's movement has not focused adequately on how to reconcile problems of mothers who must (or choose to) work and also care for their children. She accuses mainstream feminists of generally treating motherhood as something most women want to avoid.

The state (certainly in South Africa) fails to mediate the tension between women's roles as mothers and as workers and, in many cases, employers exploit this tension. Cock, Emdon and Klugman (Second Carnegie Report, 1984) investigated this tension in a sample of urban African women and identified the following points:

- ▶ Women are widely viewed by management as temporary and intermittent workers because of their childbearing and child-rearing roles and this is often used as a justification for not training or promoting women.
- ▶ The tension between women's roles as mothers and as workers surfaces in a hiatus in management policy where there is an absence of policy regarding maternity rights and leave.
- ▶ Although motherhood was central to management's perceptions of women, there is resistance to the practical implications of this, such as the provision of crèches in the workplace (see 2.6.2).

- (c) *Unsatisfactory maintenance payments.* The sums set down by the court are often inadequate; payments are not made timeously or regularly and, with the passage of time, as contact between spouses decreases, payment may stop entirely. Single-parents then often have to turn to welfare or their families to supplement earnings.

Luepnitz (1982) comments on the socialization process which runs deep and how it can result in women settling for insufficient child support. She cites Ahern and Bliss:

From childhood, a man is programmed for a life of financial responsibility. It is interwoven with his self-image and success-image ... In contrast, women perform the functions of consumption and household management ... They are taught that their roles are supportive and subject to the needs and desires of their families (p.73).

Women clearly need access to information that will help them negotiate a fairer settlement and manage money more confidently as a single-parents.

Van der Vliet (Second Carnegie Report, 1984) states:

Many single African women don't bother to try to get maintenance from ex-husbands, or the father of their children, their attitude being that it will be such trouble ... and the amount so little that it's not worth their while (p.2).

A further consideration may be the woman's desire to cut all ties with the father of her children.

2.6.1.2 Socio-economic situation

Research suggests that this material deprivation is particularly felt by those women from lower socio-economic groups. Moreover, Popay *et al.* (1983) add: "The difficulties of children from one-parent families are not on the whole peculiar to these children, but are common to children from low economic groups" (p.31).

2.6.1.3 Economic situation and personal well-being

McLanahan & Sandefur (1994) argue strongly that economic well-being is fundamental to all other forms of well-being. Self-esteem is more difficult to achieve and maintain when a person is dependent on other people or on the state for basic needs. Social success, too, is compromised by economic insecurity and dependence: "Thus, while money cannot buy happiness, the lack of money makes it much harder for a person to feel good about himself and to maintain good relationships with other people" (p.19). This argument is based on the premise that a single-mother's economic situation is always worse and so she will inevitably suffer from a diminished sense of self.

An interesting counter-argument can be made by examining the results of a South African study done amongst women in the Black townships of Grahamstown. Van der Vliet (Second Carnegie Report, 1984) found that an increasing number of divorced women were opting to remain single and, paradoxically, that many women phrased their decision in financial terms.

Remaining single offered the woman the chance of financial independence and freedom. In these women's experience, men were unwilling to contribute financially in marriage and they also constituted a drain on the women's own resources. The husband was thus seen as an economic liability. Remaining a single-parent was seen as a way of controlling one's fertility and therefore indirectly, one's economic position. Obbo (1981) sums up this thinking by saying that, if there is going to be poverty, being married certainly does not solve it.

2.6.2 Work

According to the National Social Development Report (1995), as much as 45% of South Africa's labour force is female.

The fact that single-parents generally have to work can in a sense be viewed in a positive light. Not having the option or choice of working because it is a self-evident necessity relieves mothers of the burden of guilt which often seems to plague their married counterparts. Some segments of society still tend to look with suspicion on the woman who elects to work, at the possible expense of her children's well-being. However, this is probably a very middle-class, predominantly White perception and does not pertain to the vast majority of working women.

Many divorced women are thrust into paid employment (some for the first time) and they suffer the same economic discrimination as women from dual-income families. They are discriminated against in their training, types and conditions of work, and the remuneration they receive. As single-parents they are frequently restricted in the number of hours they can work; overtime is usually not practicable; they are unlikely to be able to consider work that involves travelling far from home; they face real problems when children are ill or on holiday; and, finally, the task and emotional overload can undermine their efficiency which may result in demotion or unemployment.

There are, despite these odds, benefits attached to working mothers. For Matteson (1975), such women are more likely to stress independence-training in children.

They demonstrate, through their own lives, fewer traditional sex-role stereotypes and a more positive evaluation of women, plus the possible integration of both expressive and instrumental orientations.

Hafner (1993) provides a compelling anthropological explanation for the fact that, for so many women, work is much more than of economic value. The breakdown of the extended family and community life in the Western world has resulted in work becoming a primary source of companionship and friendship. Social mobility has detached people from their roots and separated them from their backgrounds; so, for many, unemployment means social isolation or at least loss of their support network.

Gordon (1990), in a study of feminist mothers, maintains that work bridges the gap between the private and public spheres. For many women, the meaning assigned to work is crucial in the construction of their own identities and lives, and in pursuing their societal interests. From paid employment they derive purpose, confidence, status and self-esteem; all this in a society which devalues the work of nurturing in the home. However, the study highlights the point that most women reveal a reluctance to orientate towards building a career.

This decision to stand back in career terms because of their children reinforces the idea that women see themselves as being primarily responsible for the private domain:

Work and motherhood combine into a complex balance sheet: on the one hand having children creates a strong sense of ambivalence about other activities women are involved in; on the other hand it also constitutes the solution to the ambivalence (Gordon, 1990, p.111).

Hafner (1993) suggests that many women have been placed in an impossible dilemma as a result of the superwoman syndrome, which requires that one fulfils not only men's image of the ideal wife and mother, but also men's image of the ideal man through the pursuit of one's career.

2.7 THE EFFECTS OF FATHER-ABSENCE ON THE ADJUSTMENT OF THE CHILD

In this sub-section the focus will be on theories relating to the potential vulnerability of single-parent families; father-absence, the relationship with the non-custodial parent, and the child's adjustment.

2.7.1 Theories relating to single-parent family vulnerability

Older accounts of single-parent families (in the 1950s and 1960s) attributed their vulnerability to the absence of a parent *per se*. This explanation was based on the functionalist presumption that both parents were essential to child-development and the absence of one parent was inherently and inevitably problematic. The lone variable of father-absence was linked to all sorts of problems, such as delinquency, underachievement and confused sexual identity. There is some recent research to support this basic premise:

Children who grow up in a household with only one biological parent are worse off, on average, than children who grow up in a household with both of their biological parents, regardless of the parents' race or educational background, regardless of whether the parents are married when the child is born, and regardless of whether the resident parent remarries (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994, p.1).

This argument rests on the conviction that the absence of a parent leads directly to diminished economic, parental and community resources which affect the well-being of the child.

Later research concluded that other factors like socio-economic status, characteristics of the mother and presence of other adults overshadowed the effects of father-absence *per se*. Nearly all researchers agreed that father-absence was related to poverty and poverty was related to a variety of psychosocial problems.

Burman and Preston-Whyte (1992) have cited a number of research studies which demonstrate that children growing up in single-parent families have lesser life-chances than those in two-parent families, when life-chances are measured by such indicators as future educational attainment, job expectations and marriage stability.

It is unclear from the research how far these reduced chances are due to material handicap and how far to the family situation itself.

Rutter (1971) found that the domestic turbulence preceding divorce was an important factor and that parental conflict was a more accurate predictor of children's maladjustment than the marital status of the parents. The Luepnitz (1982) study concurred with this as did the Chess and Thomas (1987) study, which confirmed that parental conflict in a child's life appeared to be of greater long-term harmful significance for the child than actual separation or divorce.

Wallerstein and Kelly's (1980) influential work claimed the child's developmental level was the best predictor of its particular response to the divorce. Divorce is an egregious experience for children, yet one should never ignore issues of coping and mastery. They found a child's school performance, after an initial drop, levelled out and did not continue to suffer. The two most important factors associated with a positive outcome were:

- (a) easy access to the non-custodial parent;
- (b) a post-divorce mother-father relationship that is relatively conflict free.

These results were corroborated by Hetherington and Arasteh (1988) and Hetherington *et al.* (1979), who also found that girls functioned better than boys, and this suggested that mothers are better able to relate to daughters than sons after divorce. Both the Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) and Hetherington *et al.* (1979) studies confirm the disturbing effects of divorce on children. They also say that children benefit from having an involved same-sex parent or parent surrogate in the home.

The study by Mahabeer (1992) amongst Indian children found there were no significant psychosocial differences between males and females from father-absent families. This goes against literature in which it is reported that boys respond more negatively to parental divorce. The divergent results can possibly be explained in terms of the different parenting styles and attitudes of Indian parents, "to whom

boys are the more preferred and privileged sex, especially in father-absent households" (p.410). In a culture that has traditionally placed greater emphasis on the role of boys than girls, it seems the more negative effects of father-absence on males, compared to females, tend to be alleviated.

A recent analysis by Amato and Keith (in Kail & Wicks-Nelson, 1993) looks at divorce and child development and concludes that children whose parents had divorced were less well off when compared on seven dimensions (see Figure 5). Shown here are the differences between children in intact families and children in single-parent families. In every case, children from single-parent families have poorer scores than children from intact families.

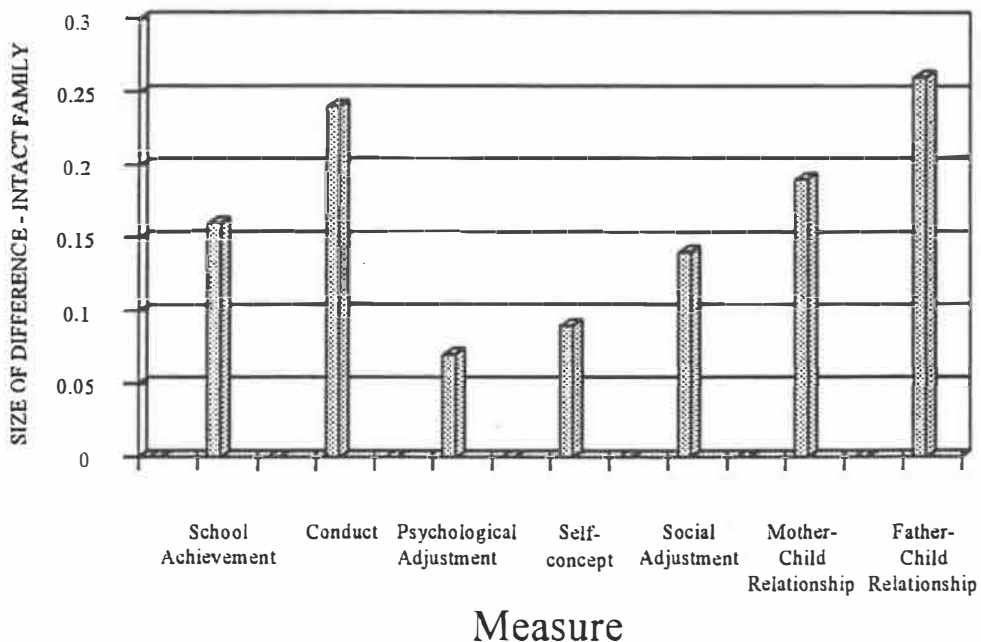


Figure 5: Parental divorce and children's well-being (from Kail & Wicks-Nelson, 1993, p.305)

2.7.2 Father-absence

In much of the literature, father-absence is referred to as "fatherlessness". This researcher chooses not to use this term as it bears the connotation of there being no father at all, which, in many single-parent situations, is not the case.

There is no consensus in recent research regarding the possible negative effects of father-absence on children.

Schaffer (1990) analyzes several research studies and, on this basis, questions whether a child's sex-role development is necessarily adversely affected by the absence of the father. He maintains that "... generalizations about the psychosexual development of children from single-parent homes are only too often simplistic and unjustified" (p.103). He makes two salient observations:

- (a) To compare single-parent children with two-parent children is crude and neglects the fact that the former may have plenty of contacts with other male figures, while some of the latter may hardly ever see their father. (See comments by Lasch under 2.3.6.) The assessment of actual contact with father-figures would form a much sounder basis for research.
- (b) The effects of father-absence depend on a number of conditions other than the absence itself. The impact of these conditions may well outweigh the influence of father-absence on its own. It is the context in which this experience occurs that is of vital importance.

It seems unlikely that imitation of and identification with a same-sex parent are as crucial as was thought:

A boy brought up by a single mother, for instance, may well develop masculinity simply because she treats him as a male; the quality is fostered because someone of influence over the child considers it important (Schaffer, 1990, p.104).

Where children are raised in a home where they are isolated from other adults, their vulnerability to the issue of father-absence would more likely be increased.

Moreover, society is changing and sex-roles are no longer as sharply divided as before. People tend to be more tolerant and flexible in their perceptions of masculinity and femininity. The qualities that parents promote in raising their children reflect these changing social values.

McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) raise a different and contrary viewpoint. They feel that single-parents may inadvertently encourage teenage sexual activity by acting as role models. The longitudinal study of mothers and daughters by Thornton (in McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994) looked at the influence of the family on premarital sexual attitudes and behaviour. Thornton found that it is mothers' post-divorce dating behaviour that shapes daughters' attitudes rather than the marital disruption itself. In addition, nonresident fathers may also act as role models for their sons and make it easier for young men to avoid their parental responsibilities: "A father who does not support his own children sends a message to his son (and daughter) that children are women's responsibility not men's" (p.37).

Generally, it seems that the vulnerability of children is not due to the single-parent situation *per se*, but rather to social and psychological circumstances connected with this situation. There is agreement among researchers that the paternal and maternal deprivation in the single-parent home is less likely to be more damaging to the child's development than interparental strife in the two-parent home (Rutter, 1971; Schaffer, 1990; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). While this suggests that the absence of a spouse in the single-parent family is not, at least theoretically, an overriding factor in the development of the child, there are opinions which are not as tolerant (for example, McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

2.7.3 The relationship with the non-custodial parent

There is disagreement amongst researchers on the possible benefits of maintaining close links with the non-custodial parent after divorce. It has been argued that, after separation, every effort should be made to maintain close, positive ties with the non-custodial parent for the sake of the children's psychological health (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

By not encouraging contact, the child may create a fantasy image of the absent parent: "One of the hardest things to cope with when you're a single-parent, is your child eulogising about their absent parent" (Sedgbeer & Buchanan, 1990, p.68). There is also the argument that, particularly for boys, this on-going relationship is essential, especially when it comes to the acceptance of authority which, in a mother-headed home, can be weakened (Ferreira, 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

According to Elliot (1986), British as well as American research has shown that contact between non-custodial parents and their children diminishes in frequency and regularity over time, may be particularly weakened by the remarriage of either parent, and is maintained into the child's adulthood only in a minority of cases:

Some of the custodial parents in these studies see contact with the absent parent as presenting the child with conflicts of affection and/or as inhibiting the burial of an unhappy marriage, and therefore discourage it; conversely continued friendliness between the parents seem to foster the absent parent-child bond (p.159).

Contact with the absent parent may not correlate with enhanced child well-being. The benefit of contact seems to depend on whether parents get along with each other. If the parents co-operate and the child does not feel torn in two directions, the contact may be beneficial. If the parents do not, contact may increase parents' opportunities to express hostile feelings and thereby harm the child.

An article by Healy (in Chess & Hertzog, 1992) focused specifically on children and their fathers after parental separation. Their findings suggest the futility of seeking simple answers to whether ongoing contact with fathers following divorce is beneficial or detrimental to children:

... all of our findings highlight the importance of attention to the psychological meaning for the child of each parent, and of the particular postseparation situation. It is clear that children's views of their parents and their families deserve further attention as factors mediating the impact of parents' actions (p.60).

2.7.4 The child's adjustment

The way we evaluate single-parenting depends on the alternative we have in mind. Amato and Keith (in Kail & Wicks-Nelson, 1993) suggest that there may be child-linked advantages to a single-parent situation.

Children may fare far better in a single-parent family than in a conflict-ridden two-parent family. A study by Forehand (in Hetherington & Arasteh, 1988) found parental conflict is related to independently assessed competence of adolescents.

The study by Raschke & Raschke (cited in Fuchs, 1980) focused on self-concept:

The findings lend support to the proposition that children are not adversely affected by living in a single-parent family, but that family conflict and/or parental unhappiness can be detrimental, at least to self-concept, which is also a measure of social and personal adjustment (p.18-19).

Clearly, the child's perceptions of the amount of conflict between parents after the separation are important. Those who judge the family to be happier and less conflictual tend to be more psychologically well-adjusted.

Children also differ greatly in their reactions to divorce. Hetherington *et al.* (1979) found that those who adjust well tend to come from homes in which there is a low level of parental conflict, little change in the economic situation, and co-operation between parents on issues like discipline. A study by Camara and Resnick (in Hetherington & Arasteh, 1988), investigating interparental conflict and co-operation, found that the degree of interparental co-operation and the conflict resolution styles used by each spouse to regulate disagreements are important factors in moderating children's post-divorce adjustment.

Children's adjustment to divorce is also closely related to their general adjustment as individuals. Many adverse effects of divorce on children are, furthermore, temporary. Most children have readjusted to the new situation within two years after the divorce (Kail & Wicks-Nelson, 1993).

Rutter (1975) maintains:

Although there are ill effects ... the effects are probably less uniform and less severe than is widely assumed. In general, the number of parents is probably less crucial to the child's development than the relationship and behaviour provided by whoever is present. Furthermore, family life is determined not only by the particular characteristics of the individual family members but also by the social circumstances and environment within which the family live (p.174).

In appraising the effects of father-absence on the adjustment of children, it would seem that the final outcome is dependent on innumerable factors, not least the unique personality of the individual child. Divorce is undoubtedly a traumatic and disillusioning experience for children, but recent research provides a more optimistic view of human development: "The emotionally traumatized child is not doomed, the parents' early mistakes are not irrevocable ..." (Thomas & Chess, 1980, p.112). In addition, irrespective of their circumstances, some children seem to be more vulnerable to life's vicissitudes, while others seem innately more resilient and better equipped to survive apparently unsurmountable odds.

2.8 THE PSYCHOSOCIAL WORLD OF THE MOTHER

This researcher found a paucity of serious literature which focused centrally on the position of the woman in the single-parent situation. Most reliable sources dealt with the effects of divorce particularly on children and on factors contributing to marital dissolution. What is handled, in depth, is how the single-parent status affects others. Very little research appears to have been done on what it means to be a woman alone and to be parenting alone.

It is perhaps cynical to suggest that this may be as a result of the vast majority of single-parent homes being mother-headed. Finchilescu (1995) argues that a gender bias in academic psychology manifests itself in research endeavour, that the tendency in research studies has been to investigate male subjects, and that the results are then argued to hold for both men and women. She cites various sources to contend further that

the manner in which development psychology has constructed childhood, masculinity, femininity, motherhood and education has been criticized for its androcentric and Eurocentric nature, and for the way it has assisted unfair social relations within the family ...(p.134).

More research, exploring the reality, experience and history of women, especially in the South African context, needs to be done to give full resonance to the phenomenon of single-parenting.

This sub-section looks at the following aspects of the woman's situation: status passage, parenting alone, emotional and task overload, emotions evoked, dating and remarriage, relationship with ex-spouse, effects of children on parents, and the benefits of single-parenting for women.

2.8.1 Status passage

A single-parent's reaction to her new status is largely affected by the nature of the crisis which caused the new situation. When a marriage dissolves, it necessitates a transition by the individual to a new status. The impacts and demands on the individual of new activities, routines, roles, relationships and identity may be considerable.

As has already been stated, single-parents do not make up a homogeneous group. Class, income, cultural constraints, ethnicity, housing and family constraints all affect the individual's adjustment and acceptance of her part in the status passage. In addition, the individual's level of expectation and the extent to which it may already have been integrated into the individual's self, affect her adjustment and social identity.

Fuchs (1980) cites Hart who maintains that there are no provisions comparable with those which often exist for easing the passage in status associated with other conditions of crisis, such as bereavement, unemployment or retirement. The single-parent is usually left to negotiate the status passage on her own without the

benefit of recognized or accepted rules or norms, and this often at a time when she is emotionally depleted.

While the single-parent is wrestling with her own painful adjustments, she is simultaneously attempting to help her children overcome their sense of loss and deprivation.

"Going it alone" (Weiss, 1979) means relinquishing some of the social, economic and emotional scaffolding on which the single-parent's self-definition had previously been built. A major trap for single-parents, according to Bowskill (1980), is not seeing themselves as separate and individual entities. The single-parent status can have the effect of strait-jacketing them into a solitary role of parent. Although they are fulfilling two primary parenting roles, those of breadwinner and child-carer, these are inextricably linked and can result in a child-centred, child-enclosed life where the parent adopts a compensatory philosophy of trying to make up to the children for the deprivations deriving from the dissolution of the marriage.

The self is often neglected in such an emotionally charged situation. There is the risk of becoming emotionally "short changed, if not actually bankrupt" (Kennedy & King, 1994, p.1). The real challenge for the single-parent is to be fully mother, provider, and individual - all this in a context of residual pain and, usually, reduced financial circumstances. This forging of a new identity (or reclaiming one that may have been lost in the turbulence of marriage) seems imperative for the health of the mother and her children: "The most important thing any parent can do for a child is to survive as a person; as a free individual - transcending all the domestic, social and work roles" (Bowskill, 1980, p.197).

It is tempting to fall into the trap of building your identity around your single-parent status. There can be a sense of "I've failed in my role as wife; I'm going to make sure I make a success of my role as parent". The risk here is that the single-parent can become isolated and fall out of the mainstream, rather than being a vital part of the community. This can be damaging to the rebuilding of self and self-esteem.

Weiss (1979) says single-parents often tend to idealize the romanticism of their new, greater responsibility to their children, even though they find these roles and responsibilities tedious. Because they have attached so much value to the importance of succeeding in their roles, the failures and disappointments they then experience can be acutely distressing.

2.8.2 The reality of parenting alone

There are several implications for this for the woman involved. Some of the major issues are:

- (a) The absence of a partner in child-care and household management can result in severe responsibility and task overload. Naturally this would depend on the extent to which the ex-husband had played an active role previously.
- (b) The absence of an established and socially legitimated sexual partner can mean a curtailment of the sexual freedom of the single person. The presence of children limits the single-parent's relationship with the opposite sex. Chester (in Elliot, 1986) notes that cultural stereotypes foster the beliefs that the divorced or separated mother is both sexually needy and sexually predatory. Derogatory stereotypes like "the merry widow" or "the gay divorcee" influence societal perceptions.
- (c) The absence of an age-peer in the home for adult companionship and of a social partner in a society where the unaccompanied person is not easily included in mixed gatherings can lead to a sense of loss of emotional intimacy.

2.8.3 Emotional and task overload

According to Snyman (1986), in a study of 300 single-parent families, this pressure of being "overloaded" is experienced particularly with regard to economic factors, unacceptable housing arrangements (resulting in lack of space and privacy, especially if one has to share a home), insecurity about the future and the possible necessity of placing children elsewhere.

The single-parent usually experiences a dramatic decline in the standard of living, particularly as a result of reduced or total loss of support of the absent spouse. Supportive factors that diminished or disappeared, thus implying a deterioration in lifestyle, were the assistance of the former spouse in the care and rearing of the children and with homemaking in general, the financial contribution of the former spouse, and general resources to meet crisis situations. The latter may have coincided with the need, particularly at the start of single-parenthood, to leave a familiar neighbourhood, comfortable living arrangements and familiar schools.

Insecurity about the future manifested itself mainly in a fear for the welfare of the children. "What is going to become of them?" was a frequently asked question by the respondents. In this study, in more than 20% of the families, one or more of the children had already been placed in foster care for financial reasons. Other anxieties about the future included possible crises such as unemployment and the rising cost of maintaining a home and raising a family.

McLanahan & Sandefur (1994) claim the difficulty of balancing the demands of work and family, of private and public worlds, often means the single-parent "has to choose between doing a good job at work and a good job at home" (p.135). This is an unenviable choice and can result in generalized functioning difficulties in both spheres. The fact that a single-parent is seldom "off duty" often makes unrealistic demands on her resources, especially if she is not part of a wider community which can share some of the personal load. (See 2.9.)

2.8.4 Emotions evoked

The most common emotions experienced by single-parents recorded in the research are feelings of guilt, loneliness and depression.

2.8.4.1 Guilt

Guilt can be viewed as a feeling of remorse arising from some wrongdoing or violation of a value. Guilt about the personal role one played in the marital

dissolution can have the effect of accepting an uneven property division (Luepnitz, 1982). It can also act as an impediment to forming new relationships. Single-parents often harbour guilty feelings, not only about the unsuccessful relationship culminating in the divorce but also, importantly, about depriving their children of a parent.

Kennedy & King (1994) point out that some single-parents go to extremes in not letting children do chores because they feel so guilty. They think the household will appear to be more "normal" if the children shoulder no responsibility. This desire to preserve and reproduce the previous *status quo* results in compensatory parenting which can be seriously detrimental to all members of the family.

2.8.4.2 Loneliness (and aloneness)

Feelings of loneliness arise out of:

- (a) social situations where women felt people thought less of them after discovering they were divorced (see 2.9.2);
- (b) decision-making situations where women felt they had no-one with whom to share responsibilities;
- (c) situations when women felt finances were a limiting factor.

Weiss (1979) sees loneliness as manifesting itself in feelings of inner insufficiency, anxiety and physical tension. He suggests the remedy for such loneliness is establishing a new attachment.

Elliot (1986) claims that loneliness is more of an issue for men than women post-divorce. This is confirmed by the findings of Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) and Luepnitz (1982). When subjects were asked to respond to a Rank-Stress Scale, in the latter study, men ranked loneliness as the most stressful factor while women ranked it in third place. (Money was, predictably, for women the most important stress factor.)

It seems that women more easily find alternate sources of support and intimacy within same-sex friendships. Perhaps too, their early sex-role socialization trains them to be more self-disclosing and relationship oriented.

The post-divorce support systems may be broader than the pre-divorce support systems. Many single-parents claim that, during the marriage, their spouse had been their support group. In contrast, the post-divorce support network includes family members, neighbours, the children themselves, siblings, singles' groups, colleagues, lovers, therapists, etc. However, Chester (1977) maintains that, because women have less power and standing in society than men, the lack of a spouse means the single-parent family is at a relative disadvantage in its dealings with the outside world.

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found that the absence of a comfortable, reliable social life created an on-going loneliness for many single-parents. The women had little control over initiating social engagements and had become disillusioned by their experience in the "singles" scene: "Many women perpetuated bitter interactions with their former spouses, perhaps, in part, to fill the emptiness in their lives" (p.193).

Chester (1977) distinguishes between loneliness and aloneness. He sees aloneness stemming from the single-parents' ambiguous status as "not-married-not-unmarried" people. This marginal status implies they confront the world on their own but not as single persons. Their social situation is full of ambiguities which place them outside the normal stream of family life.

2.8.4.3 Depression

The anger at her own plight is often directed inwards, causing feelings of powerlessness and helplessness.

The single-parent mother is usually granted custody. Fuchs (1980) argues that she then interprets this as investing her with authority and power, and assumes that

society will reinforce this impression of her. This is often not what occurs. She has the full responsibility but is unsure of her abilities, an uncertainty resulting partially from the damage to her self-concept, especially through feelings of rejection.

Unrealistic expectations (from herself and society) can be a major source of stress. In her effort to be the "perfect mother", she is driven to over-compensate for what she perceives as failure in other relationships. Depression is often the result of an inability to cope or to measure up to such expectations.

2.8.5 Sexual needs, dating, remarriage

In most of the literature, single-parenting is referred to as a transient state, with legitimate remarriage seen as an almost universal goal. Chester (1977) claims that single-parents are pressured into remarriage "... as the only normatively-sanctioned and institutionally-provided avenue of relief for their manifold (and at least partially-induced) problems" (p.159).

According to Cherlin (1981), in the United States, three out of every four divorced women remarry and about half of all remarriages take place within three years of divorce. (Data from the United States indicates that more than three out of seven remarriages are likely to end in divorce.)

In her study of 70 middle-class, White South African single-parents (male and female), Fuchs (1980) found that almost 90% of the sample wished to remarry and were actively engaged in pursuits which increased their likelihood of meeting potential marriage partners. This high percentage is possibly linked to the fact that the sample for this study was drawn from two single-parent associations. In the Snyman study (1986), only 20% of her sample had definite remarriage expectations.

The degree of aspiration to remarriage seems related to several factors:

- ▶ the degree of guilt felt by the parent about the loss of the spouse;
- ▶ whether remarriage is viewed as a solution to the single-parent's related problems;
- ▶ the result of societal pressure to conform;
- ▶ an instinctive reaction for the perpetuation of society.

Single-parents often find "starting again romantically" (Sedgbeer & Buchanan, 1990) stressful. Dating and parenting behaviours are regarded by many (especially children) as mutually exclusive. The negative reactions of children and society can make the single-parent's desire to separate her personal life and parental responsibility extremely difficult. Weiss (1979) raises the valid point that parents who are married need not consider how their children view their sexual lives. In this researcher's experience, most children see their parents as being sexually inactive!

Some single-parents cut themselves off from men altogether; to ensure infallible contraception, to prevent gossip, and to ingratiate themselves with other women (Bowskill, 1980). Another reason might be to avoid having to be accountable to one's children.

The dilemma for single-parents, though, is that they usually need emotional fortification beyond that provided by children. Kennedy and King (1994) assert that single-parents can look for inappropriate gratification from children, and children (especially adolescents) need a parent to have a life separate from theirs. If a child knows a parent's life has other dimensions, he is more able to pursue his own interests. Furthermore, children need models of sexual partners and, if the parent is denying herself "because of the kids", that parent is placing enormous guilt on the children on whose account an adult life has been sacrificed: "One of the greatest gifts we can give our children is the example of good relationships" (Sedgbeer & Buchanan, 1990, p.130).

Rutter (1975) contends that the single-parent family is disadvantaged in that, in it, children lack the opportunity of seeing how two adults live together in a close and harmonious relationship. This may affect their own marital relationships later.

2.8.6 Relationship with ex-spouse

Feelings between spouses are not necessarily cut with the severance of the marriage bond. The tension of dating and establishing other adult relationships may bring a yearning to return to the familiarity of the ex-spouse. Weiss (1975) cautions that the sense of continued connection to the former spouse may be submerged in the upset that follows the separation but can reassert itself.

The hurt of perceived failure and/or rejection can run deep and single-parents are prone to reacting defensively by denigrating the other parent. Kennedy and King (1994) draw attention to the pain which this can inflict on children. They seldom turn against one parent because of the wrathful words of the other. Instead, they turn the anger inward: "They learn to despise those parts of themselves that are like the other parent" (p.55).

In her attitude to her ex-spouse, the single-parent can signal the following messages to her children which, researchers claim, are important for the psychological health of all members of the family:

"He and I left each other. He didn't leave you."

"A bad husband can be a good father."

"You didn't make him leave and you can't make him return."

(Kennedy & King, 1994, pp.55-58)

A relationship with an ex-spouse which is co-operative and unhostile can be beneficial for the single-parent in terms of finances, providing a respite from child care, and providing a fellow parent who can be consulted on issues pertaining to the child. All parents have the need to discuss children and an interested ex-spouse is likely to be more responsive than outside agencies (Weiss, 1979).

2.8.7 Effects of children on divorced parents

Childless adults who divorce benefit from not having the two major causes of post-separation strife between ex-spouses: children and money (Hetherington & Arasteh, 1988). Children often bring economic dependence for one spouse with resulting conflicts and also tie spouses together at a time when they want to be free of each other. Children are the key determining factor in the relationship between ex-spouses, affecting and even controlling parents' lives.

In the study by Ambert (1992), it was found that most divorced adults with children were faced by far greater constraints than childless adults. It was more difficult to have a "successful" divorce as they had to overcome far more problems, emotionally, socially and financially. Divorced parents' freedom was severely curtailed and they had to deal with the emotional and behavioural upheavals in children within the first two years post-separation. The problems were especially acute for custodial parents (usually mothers) as they often suffered the backlash of poverty and neglect on the part of the absent parent.

Ambert (1992) records that there is generally "a well-ingrained reluctance to see children as social actors *vis-à-vis* oneself as a parent" (p.35) and that this ideology has even biased social research.

Single-parents' attitudes are clearly affected by the adjustment (or lack of adjustment) of their children, and their own rebuilding of self and self-definition is influenced by the temperament and other personal qualities of the child. Thomas and Chess (1980) point out how important the element of "goodness of fit" is. The psychological development of both the child and the parent will be strongly affected by the match or mismatch of their personal styles. Put bluntly, how children cope in a single-parent situation will impact greatly on how the single-parent copes - and *vice versa*.

Belsky (in Ambert, 1992) states: "... the competence that one's offspring evince, as both children and adults (and perhaps even as parents), is likely to figure prominently in many persons' final appraisals of their own lives" (p.45).

2.8.8 The benefits of single-parenting for women

An area which has, in this researcher's opinion, received little attention in the literature is the possible empowering effects of single-parenting for women, especially those who have come to single-parenting from a bad marriage. While one concedes that there are few child-linked advantages to being thrust into a single-parent family, many women, after divorce, undergo a metamorphosis into more confident, functioning people, whose sense of autonomy no longer depends on being involved with a man (Cherlin, 1981; Gordon, 1990, Thorne, 1982; Weiss, 1979).

According to Gordon (1990), several single-parents, while acknowledging the enormity of the responsibility and work involved, felt that it was in a sense easier to carry such responsibility themselves, than to try consistently to encourage somebody reluctant to do so, to share it. These women expressed a relief mentally in being in charge of themselves.

The study by Snyman (1986) identified the following as advantages of and positive factors concerning single-parenthood:

- (a) The opportunity to create new and more acceptable living arrangements.
- (b) A calmer atmosphere, free of tensions, which facilitated a more stable routine, better study opportunities for children, and greater consistency in the child-rearing milieu.
- (c) A deepening of relationships with children and a heightened sense of togetherness. Blechman and Manning (in Fuchs, 1980) argue:

In the two-parent family, to preserve the cohesiveness of the parental dyad, the parents maintain a barrier of emotional detachment between themselves and the children, whereas in the

single-parent family there is an emotional coalition between parent and children (p.81).

- (d) Far more personal freedom to pursue one's own interests and freedom to plan and put plans into operation.
- (e) The freedom to exercise authority and set rules without being undermined by the other parent.

Luepnitz (1982) raises an important benefit of single-parenting. Instead of closing ranks, single-parenthood has the potential to open the boundaries of the family as the need to reach outside for affirmation, support and stimulation increases dramatically. Popay *et al.* (1983) would support this view:

Many sociologists are coming to believe that the nuclear family at its most claustrophobic is a much less fortunate family structure than that of the lone parent who enters into the community and a form of extended family life (p.27).

Chester (1977) maintains that single-parents themselves are beginning to counter negative images of the single-parent family by depicting it as liberating men and women from conventional sex-role scripting and from the dependencies of marriage, thus providing scope for personal development.

2.9 SOCIAL CENSURE AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

This sub-section focuses on family kin, stigmatization, and community resources.

2.9.1 Other kin

Marital disruption and reconstruction alter the network of kinship ties. The role of extended kin can be dramatically changed. The loss of a parent weakens ties to that person's kin so that, for example, a grandparent/grandchild bond may be loosened.

George and Wilding (in Elliot, 1986) state: "The breakup of a marriage through divorce or separation not only divides the married partners; it also divides each of them from the other's relatives" (p.166).

However, links between single-parents and their own kin may be activated and strengthened and these can be important sources of support and may even provide partial substitutes for the absent parent. Kennedy and King (1994) stress the importance of extended families as they can provide a reliable back-up and their presence reassure the members of a single-parent family that not all their connections have been short-circuited and that they are integral parts of a greater whole.

Mahabeer (1992) cites numerous studies which show that social support systems offered by the extended family have a buffering effect on the negative aspects of father-absence.

Burman and Reynolds (1986) make the following observation:

As with the African family, marriage break-up is causing extended families to emerge among the whites too, but of a type different from that of Africans ... the main feature here is that it always includes one biological parent of the children and usually spans only two generations (p.135).

2.9.2 Stigmatization

The cause of single-parenthood greatly affects the attitudes of society and the legislation reflects this; for example, benefits are often provided for widows and orphans. The degree of societal opprobrium differs according to the cause of the single-parent situation. How society regards single-parents depends on how much they can be held responsible for their situation.

Stigma in this context may be seen as any type of discrimination or perceived loss of respect because of the single-parent status (Luepnitz, 1982).

The two principal stigmas in most societies are the stigma attached to the single-parent status itself, and the welfare stigma.⁷ Stigmatization is the result of deviating from the norm and public attitudes reflect a hierarchy of acceptability or legitimacy based on assumptions about "normal" family life (Popay *et al.*, 1983). Research suggests that, as single-parenting becomes an increasingly more common phenomenon, and the concerns of single-parenting are more likely to become concerns of all parents, social censure is likely to diminish (Chester, 1977; Kennedy & King, 1994).

Society's attitudes can certainly influence the self-image and experience of parents and children. Societal degree of prejudice seems more related to the level of the material deprivation of the various single-parent family forms. Probably because of their reduced incomes, more women than men experience discrimination. Over half of the men in the study by Luepnitz (1982) felt that being a single-parent had actually enhanced their social status. Single-fathers are perhaps more accepted by society and are admired for managing the home and rearing children. The single-mother is merely carrying out her expected role.

Campion (1995) feels that social stigma can have the effect of putting the single-parent under enormous pressure to be an exemplary mother, a pressure perhaps not experienced within the "respectability" of a destructive marriage where she feels less under scrutiny.

At present, society seems ambivalent about divorced women. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) suggest this ambivalence results in a general feeling that single-parenting is a regrettable but unavoidable feature of modern society. The stigma appears to be shifting, but it still exists.

7. An article in the *London Sunday Times* of July 1995 entitled "Tories target single mothers' benefits" states that nine billion pounds a year is paid in benefits to single-parents: "There is a strong feeling that we should no longer reward lone parenthood through the benefits system", one ministerial source is reported to have said.

2.9.3 Community resources and support systems

Research often views the single-parent family as a pathogenic family and has failed to focus on how positive family functioning and support systems in society can facilitate the development of social, emotional and intellectual competence in its members (Hetherington & Arasteh, 1988). Failure to adjust to divorce can be construed as being due to the lack of useful systems in the social environment as much as to individual inadequacy.

The single-parent family can easily become insulated and cocooned against the world. Social support systems can offer the single-parent a sense of community, connectedness and cohesion.

2.9.3.1 Schools

Schools, concerned as they are for the overall development of the child, are well placed to assist in this process. Cox and Desforges (1987) identify two important roles that schools can play:

- (i) They can offer support to the individual child who is adjusting to divorce. Teachers are in a prime position to observe behavioural changes and to give help. The school is important because it provides structure at a time when the major structure of the child's life, his family, is crumbling.
- (ii) They can bring their curriculum into line with modern life so that the education aims not only to assist pupils through the crises of childhood but also to manage their own adult and family lives successfully.

Significant, too, is the attitude of teachers and other professionals towards single-parents and children from these families. It is an indictment of the educational system that, in their comprehensive longitudinal study, Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) did not find the school to be particularly helpful in assisting in the children's adjustment after divorce. Ferri (in Popay *et al.*, 1983) suggested that "... much of the difference in educational performance

between children in one and two-parent families might be explained through the mediating effect of teacher-expectations of children" (p.83).

Mahabeer (1992) investigated this issue of teachers' perceptions amongst Indian children:

- ▶ children from widowed families were perceived more positively than those from divorced families on self-and school-adjustment.
- ▶ there are distinct differences in societal expectations and attitudes with greater social stigma attached to divorce:

There is greater sympathy reflected in the case of death which is regarded as an act of God and not a matter of personal choice. The negative connotations associated with divorce would be even more predominant in a community such as the Indian community where ... marriage has generally been regarded as sacred and therefore dissoluble (p.409).

2.9.3.2 Other support systems

Snyman's study (1986) identified certain needs amongst the single-parents interviewed which could be served by society. These were the most common ones raised:

- (a) The need for financial support with regard to housing; for example, subsidies or rent allowances. Also desired was assistance with legal costs, with educational expenditure (for example, a need for bursaries) and with medical costs. In addition, a plea was made for stricter control over enforcement of maintenance payments by the non-custodial parent.
- (b) The need for counselling services in order to discuss children's problems (preferably after hours); a place where children could go for counselling (without their parents); and also counselling on economic problems and legal matters.

- (c) The need for after-school centres and/or week-end hostels (many single-parents have week-end work). More and affordable day-care centres, school holiday centres and child-minding services were requested. The need was identified for a crisis child-care service, for example, when the child or parent is ill. Also requested was the need for more flexible and concessionary service conditions as well as a bigger variety of job-structure options; for example, part-time work, flexitime and home-based work.

Van der Vliet (Carnegie Report, 1984) raises the point that the failures of the system to provide adequate support structures are seen as the single-parent's failures: "Amongst South African blacks, for instance, should her children prove delinquent or unsuccessful, they are dismissed disparagingly as "the children of women" (p.3).

Morris (*The Natal Witness*, 1995) comments on the situation in Sweden where half the children are born to unmarried mothers:

But children in single-parent families don't slip into poverty. There are generous benefits including ample, parental leave and subsidized day care, and ferocious enforcement of child support. Only 6.8% of Swedish children live in homes with less than half the average income.

With alternative political and social priorities, families can look very different.

Divorce creates additional tasks for parents and children. According to many of the writers consulted, the achievement of these tasks clearly needs to be the joint responsibility of society, the individual and the family.

2.10 CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Much of the research done on single-parent families is methodologically flawed because of researcher bias that views anything short of the nuclear family as inevitably deficient. The search for heightened pathology among members of single-parent families has perhaps obscured the very real and unique contributions that may be made by adults socialized in well-functioning single-parent families.

For example, single-parent families have often learnt to acquire realistic attitudes about family life. By entering the world of personal responsibility and decision-making earlier, "the children of single-parents do stand a much better chance of coming to terms with the real world and learning what it is all about and how to handle it" (Bowskill, 1980, p.124).

The adults and children may be more self-sufficient and more tolerant of alternative lifestyles than adults in comparable two-parent families.

The single-parent family is, for many, not a substitute life or a holding pattern but a full life which encompasses special problems as well as special joys. Although we may hold to the belief that two parents are better than one, the single-parent family is clearly here to stay.

If we doggedly adhere to the principle that two parents are better than one, then we are close to echoing the blinkered chanting of the maxim in Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), "Four legs good, two legs bad", thereby limiting our potential to understand and imaginatively and creatively perceive alternate ways of structuring our society for the benefit of all its members. However we see single-parenthood, whether as a 20th century phenomenon or the choice of individual women, the effects of it will concern all of us.

Finally, Chess and Thomas (1980) remind us that single-parents make up a heterogeneous group. Single mothers come in many varied, different forms: old, young; economically stable, poor; relieved to be single, overwhelmingly depressed by it; in supportive communities or isolated and alone; temporarily single or long-term single. Some have children with whom they have a "goodness of fit", others bring out the worst in them; some children have an on-going relationship with their father, others have no contact whatsoever. The only thing they have in common is the absence of an ongoing partnership with another adult in the household where the children are being raised.

Campion (1995) asks what it is about two-parent homes that enables some children to do well in life. It has something to do with feeling secure, having good self-esteem, having stable emotional relationships and a stable home life with adequate material comforts: "All of these may be possible in a single-parent household" (p.215). In an earlier discussion (see 2.2.4), Campion identifies self-esteem, support networks and socio-economic status as main indicators of successful parenting. When these qualities are present in the home they may secure not only the well-being of the child but also that of the single-parent.

This chapter has provided a broad theoretical framework in which to explore the experience of single-parenting amongst divorced women. The following chapter deals with the methodology employed in the research involving a small group of single-parents. The findings from such research are reported in Chapter 4 and discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter is divided into three sections:

Section A: Theoretical considerations: dealing with a brief historical perspective, the nature of Qualitative Research, the rationale for employing this particular methodology in this study, and criticisms of the methodology.

Section B: Research instruments: dealing with the development of the in-depth case study interview method as the main research tool and as the main method of data collection.

Section C: Data analysis: describing the analysis and interpretation of data.

SECTION A

3.1 THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

3.1.1 Introduction

It is Stone's contention (in Kruger, 1988) that, in any scientific study, the phenomenon under investigation should be given priority, rather than a pre-established methodological approach. He cites Giorgi to support this. "The problem of methodology cannot be considered in isolation, but only within the context of the phenomenon to be investigated and the problem aspect of that phenomenon" (p.150).

This study is essentially exploratory, descriptive and interpretive in nature. The researcher started with questions, but without well-defined hypotheses or

interpretations and no predetermined methodology or decisions with regard to field techniques. A research design was sought which would best serve the needs of the area of interest and the aims intrinsic to it.

The researcher's questions, as such, were loosely framed: What is it like to be a woman and a parent on your own? What is special in the structure and functioning of single-parent life? How do women in such a situation feel about themselves and their lives? It was anticipated that the study would itself evoke more questions than it answers.

As with much hermeneutic research (Kellehear, 1993; Packer, 1989; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), there was no clear *modus operandi* when undertaking this qualitative research. The research questions, method of data collection and analysis, and the review of relevant literature developed concurrently, each informing the development of the others.

The relationship between theory and data in qualitative research is often formulated in terms of "grounded theory" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) where the conceptual elaboration of data is deferred. Theory is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it explores and theoretical reflection is delayed. In this process, data collection, analysis and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. In this particular study, what evolved was more a generation of categories rather than theory as such. These categories emerged from the data and provided a framework within which the researcher could cope with the unstructured complexity of social reality and so attempt to render it meaningful and manageable.

The central aim of the study was to reach a greater understanding of women's perceptions of themselves as single-parents. The aim was not to evaluate established hypotheses or to formulate a neat set of results but rather to suggest more useful ways of responding to single-parenthood. With regard to the uniqueness of individual experience, it was decided that a qualitative form of inquiry would be the most appropriate way to proceed as this method

highlights the descriptive nature of the work in contrast to the primarily quantitative emphasis of more positivist approaches. Understanding rather than explaining was the main purpose of the inquiry.

From the literature survey it became evident that, while much has been documented about the effects of marital disruption (and of divorce in particular) on children, there is little focus in research on the experience of single-parenting itself. The researcher's primary interest was in the consequences of single-parenting in a prevalently two-parent society and in the functioning and social identity of its adult members. The lack of research (especially in the South African context) led to some difficulty in terms of designing appropriate survey methods.

Qualitative and quantitative research are each appropriate to different kinds of research problems. The research issue determines which style of research is employed. The complexity and detail implicit in the issues of this study did not favour quantitative investigation.

What became clear was that a questionnaire/survey method would be totally inadequate and too inflexible to use as a research instrument, mainly as a result of the degree of structure which it imposes: "The degree to which observation is structured reflects the extent to which the researcher decides beforehand what is to be recorded" (Crus Guide, 1984, p.4). A questionnaire might well produce superficial data instead of the attention to rich and deep detail possible in qualitative research. Because this was an exploratory study, an unstructured or interview guide approach seemed to be most appropriate since it would offer the kind of flexibility needed to tease out ideas and important issues to pursue. These issues would not be confined to those which concerned the researcher but would include issues raised by the subjects involved. Stake (1995) describes the researcher's issues as "etic issues" and those that evolve through interaction as "emic issues" (p.20).

Ely (1991) cites Lincoln and Guba as stating that one starts off as a researcher "... not knowing what is not known" (p.55). A research methodology was sought which would allow maximum freedom for discovery, one which would allow issues and questions to emerge without the strictures of a pre-determined structure imposed on it. An important consideration was not to apply any method that would treat the subjects of the research as objects. The researcher's guiding instrument, therefore, was to maintain an attitude of open-mindedness.

3.1.2 Historical perspective

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) outline the following phases in 20th century qualitative research:

- (a) *The Traditional Period*: begins in the early 1900s and continues until the First World War. During this time, qualitative researchers wrote "objective" accounts of field experiences that were reflective of the positivist paradigm.
- (b) *The Modernist Phase*: extended to the 1970s. Here social realism and naturalism are greatly valued. These researchers attempted rigorous qualitative studies of social processes, such as social control in the classroom. Studies of ethnicity and assimilation were common.
- (c) *Blurred Genres*: 1970-1986. Qualitative researchers drew on various paradigms, methods and strategies and adopted multi-theoretical frameworks to inform their inquiries. Applied qualitative research gained impetus. The boundaries between qualitative and quantitative research became blurred.
- (d) *Crisis of Representation*: A significant rupture occurred in the mid-1980s, with the writings of Marcus and Fischer, Turner and Bruner, Geertz, Clifford, amongst others (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.10). These writers made research more reflexive and questioned the issues of

gender, class and race. Reflexivity stressed that the scientific observer is an essential part of the setting, context or culture he or she is trying to understand and represent. This led to a greater self-criticism and self-reflection among qualitative researchers.

- (e) *The Fifth Moment*: The present. Theories are now read in narrative terms, what Van Maanen (in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.85) calls "tales of the field", and they will reflect the researcher's direct and personal engagement. There remains a preoccupation with the representation of the "other". The idea of the aloof, detached researcher has been abandoned, as have many established and preconceived values, theories and perspectives. Stress is placed on more action-oriented research and more social criticism and critique.

From this it becomes clear that over the past few decades a paradigm and methodological revolution has taken place in the social sciences. The positivist era, in which the claims of empirical scientific research were held to be absolute, has been eclipsed by the powerful thrust of qualitative research, which, although it has been around for centuries, has recently been reactivated by a new intellectual interest which sees social research as an impure art.

Qualitative research has become a field of inquiry in its own right. It is multi-disciplinary, having been used extensively in education, sociology, anthropology, psychology and social work, and it is also inherently multi-method in focus, drawing upon and utilizing the approaches, methods and techniques of ethnomethodology, phenomenology, hermeneutics, feminism, interviews, cultural studies and participant observation amongst others. Central to this innovative field of research is a commitment to study human experience from the ground up. Lévi-Strauss (cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 1994) maintains a qualitative researcher can be seen as a *bricoleur*, "a Jack of all trades or a kind of professional do-it-yourself person" (p.2). It is the opinion of this researcher that this is an unhelpful and unfortunate description as it implies a "master of

none" connotation which, in turn, lends weight to the criticism that qualitative research is a "soft" science, superficial and spurious in nature (see 3.1:5).

In striving to best describe and interpret the experiences and perspectives of other peoples and cultures, qualitative researchers have become disillusioned with the omniscient voice of science which silences too many other voices which need to be heard.

3.1.3 The nature of qualitative research

Stake (1995) maintains: "The function of research is not necessarily to map and conquer the world but to sophisticate the beholding of it" (p.43).

Qualitative research is directly concerned with experience as it is lived or felt. Its aim is to describe, not fix or judge. This implies experiential understanding involving an appreciation of the complexity of what Stake calls the "multiple realities" of human experience (p.12). The focus is on the detail and quality of an individual's experience, rather than the number of people who responded in a particular way.

In the field of cognitive development, the work of Piaget highlighted the value of attending to the way children perceived their own worlds. The assumption was that they may well have different perspectives and cognitive frameworks from those studying them. The qualitative researcher attempts to understand an experience by examining it through the eyes of individuals sharing that experience. Carl Rogers termed this empathic understanding. In examining an individual's experience the researcher becomes a participant observer. Sherman and Webb (1988) claim: "Qualitative research, then, has the aim of understanding experience as nearly as possible as its participants feel it or live it" (p.7).

One comes to qualitative research through the types of research questions one raises. These tend to be general and unspecific. They invite entry into another's

world of experience. It is ethically and academically unsound, therefore, when employing this approach, to impose our meanings of an event or experience on those whose insights and perceptions we seek to understand. In attempting to answer the kinds of research questions mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, one is engaged in procedures which involve both cognitive and affective processes that are inextricably linked. This research demands that the researcher be a flexible instrument; on the one hand, personally and subjectively involved in the engagement with another, and, on the other hand, constantly monitoring one's own behaviour closely in order to maintain the role of researcher. There exists a delicate balance between monitoring one's own thoughts and feelings and being sensitive to others'. The qualitative researcher, then, is not an objective and detached observer. One is both an insider and an outsider simultaneously. This immersion in two worlds makes qualitative research an exceptionally problematic task.

Ely (1991) draws on the work of Sherman and Webb to produce the following characteristics of this form of research:

1. Events can be understood adequately only if they are seen in context. Therefore, a qualitative researcher immerses her/himself in the setting.
2. The contexts of inquiry are not contrived; they are natural. Nothing is predefined or taken for granted.
3. Qualitative researchers want those who are studied to speak for themselves, to provide their perspectives in words and other actions. Therefore, qualitative research is an interactive process in which the persons studied teach the researcher about their lives.
4. Qualitative researchers attend to the experience as a whole, not as separate variables. The aim of qualitative research is to understand experience as unified.
5. Qualitative methods are appropriate to the above statements. There is no one general method.
6. For many qualitative researchers, the process entails appraisal of what is studied (Ely, 1991, p.4).

These characteristics highlight the importance of natural contexts, holistic and interactive approaches and a focus on process as well as content. Unlike in quantitative research, the role of the researcher would be a personal one and there would also be a distinction between knowledge discovered and knowledge constructed.

3.1.4 Rationale for employing qualitative research methodology

In attempting to reach a deeper understanding of women's perceptions of themselves as single-parents, the researcher selected a research paradigm in which subjective reality is pre-eminent. The women being researched would have stories to tell. The researcher then grapples with issues such as how best to preserve that form. Furthermore, the stories would be very different stories so the research methodology would need to be flexible enough to embrace this uniqueness while at the same time allowing for a method of analysis which could synthesize findings, extrapolate patterns, themes, inconsistencies and congruencies which emerged.

Three essential characteristics of qualitative research made it the most appropriate and desirable route to follow:

- (i) *It is holistic*. Its contextuality is well defined; it is case oriented; it does not favour reductionism; and it is relatively non-comparative in that it seeks to understand the subject involved rather than to understand how this subject differs from others. One of the most fundamental differences between quantitative and qualitative approaches seems to be the difference in searching for causes against searching for happenings. This researcher, in addressing the issues which framed the conceptual structure of her study, saw her task not as explaining why things are as they are, but rather as describing how things are at a particular place and time for particular people. A person's situation can have neither simple causes nor manifestations. Issues are not simple but are intimately linked to political,

social, historical and particularly personal contexts. Issues can therefore not be separated from the broader milieu.

The understanding of human experience is also far greater than a matter of causes and effects. Quantitative researchers often tend to treat the uniqueness of cases as "error", falling outside the system of scientific explanation. Qualitative research emphasizes the uniqueness of individual lives and experience.

- (ii) *It is empirical*: The researcher's understanding and insight arise out of experiential learning. This learning rests on what can be observed and includes the observations made by the subjects in the field. There is a dynamic interaction between researcher and those being researched. It is also empirical in the sense that it strives to be naturalistic and non-interventionist in nature with a preference for natural language description. This approach tries to endow the individual with a kind of dignity as a unique source of important information.

According to Bryman (1988), the potential of the attention to rich detail in qualitative research to policy-making and other "applied" contexts is gaining increasing recognition. He cites an interesting anecdote from Okely:

... in the 1983 general election [in the UK] the Conservative Party geared its campaign to the daily reactions of the floating voter in marginal seats ... These potential supporters were the subject of in-depth qualitative interviews several times a week. Feedback from these data was used within days to adjust the emphasis in campaign issues (p.104).

- (iii) *It is interpretive*: There is an emphasis on emic issues, those concerns and values in the behaviour and the language of the people studied. Qualitative research aims to establish an empathic understanding for the reader through description, trying to convey what experience itself would convey. Clifford Geertz (in Stake, 1995) calls this "thick description" (p.42). This subjective description assists in stimulating reflection in the reader.

Interpretation is not confined then (as is the case in various other methodologies) to the identification of variables, the development of instruments before data gathering and to analysis and interpretation for the report. The researcher is the interpreter, placed in the field to participate, observe, record and to constantly examine, refine and substantiate the meaning of what is happening. Initial research questions may be modified or even changed completely in this process which Stake calls "progressive focusing", a term borrowed from the work done by Malcolm Parlett and David Hamilton. The interpretive component of qualitative research is attuned to the fact that research is a researcher-subject interaction and it stresses the complexity of such interactions and thereby tries to preserve the different and even contradictory views of what is happening.

3.1.5 The case against qualitative research

Predictably, qualitative research has come in for strong criticism. The strident debate between the positivists and those favouring a qualitative approach is rooted in their philosophical differences about the nature of reality (Patton, 1987). Both scientists and non-scientists often hold strong opinions about what constitutes credible evidence. The detractors of qualitative research have expressed particular doubts about four characteristics of this style of research. The researcher discusses each of these four issues separately below, giving the detractors' criticisms and qualitative researchers' responses.

(i) *Qualitative inquiry is subjective*

For many, qualitative research is viewed as unscientific, or only exploratory or entirely personal and full of bias. The positivist resistance is based on the assumption that "truth" can transcend opinion and personal bias. Quantitative researchers rely on remote, inferential empirical materials. The empirical materials produced by the more personal, interpretive methods are seen as unreliable, impressionistic and subjective. Quantitative studies stress the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between

variables, not processes, and their researchers claim to adopt a value-free objectivist stance. The subjectivity of qualitative inquiry is seen as an assault on this tradition.

Qualitative researchers reject this value-free objectivist position which attempts to legislate one version of truth over another. Qualitative methods assume multiple perspectives and multiple "truths" depending on different points of view. It would seem that they are intent on finding ways to make texts meaningful beyond the artificial structures of conventional objectivity. Lincoln and Denzin (1994) assert:

We care less about our "objectivity" as scientists than we do about providing our readers with some powerful, propositional, tacit, intuitive, emotional, historical, poetic and empathic experience of the Other via the texts we write (p.582).

Out of the process of "thick description" arises a text's claim for its truth or verisimilitude. Furthermore, Stake (1995) defends the concept of subjectivity and sees it not as a failing but rather as an essential element of understanding: "The intent of qualitative researchers to promote a subjective research paradigm is a given" (p.45).

On the controversy surrounding the objectivity and subjectivity debate, Patton (1987) contends the numbers generated by quantitative research are no protection against bias and often merely disguise it: "All statistical data are based on someone's definition of what to measure and how to measure it" (p.166).

An interesting insight into the nature of subjectivity is made in an analogy with quantum physics. The physicist, Niels Bohr, was involved in the observation of the hydrogen atom. He discovered that the radiation he used to illuminate his object had the effect of altering the atom. Raney (in Grotstein, 1984) explains:

This finding had far-reaching significance: in the realm of subatomic particles, the observer alters the observed object through the very act of observation. One of the most important derivatives of this point is that, if the observer alters the object

by observing it, the very act of observation unifies and closely connects the observer and what is observed (pp.7-8).

This principle of subjectivity speaks directly to the transactional nature of the qualitative research process, where knowledge is constructed rather than objectively discovered.

(ii) *Its contributions to disciplined science are slow and tendentious*

The positive sciences (physics, chemistry, economics and psychology) are often seen as having made the greatest contributions to Western civilization. The critics of qualitative research are concerned about the lack of input that this research has had on social and political practice. While scientists search for universal laws and generalizations across time and space, qualitative research tends to focus on providing information that is fairly specific to one or a few programmes. It is seen as a "soft" science which produces more criticism than theory. The "realities" it produces are not absolute or fixed as in a positivistic paradigm, but are multiple, changing and transactional. As a field of inquiry, it seems to raise more new questions than provide answers.

Qualitative research is essentially interpretive work and its goal is the production of knowledge rather than solving practical problems. Where positivistic researchers are driven by principles of measurement, quantification and explanation, understanding is at the heart of naturalistic study. This understanding is more complex than a simple grasp of causes and effects. Many of the findings are philosophical and esoteric in nature and often suggest new areas of research rather than producing conclusive results. Unlike other methodologies, interpretation is not confined to explaining why things are as they are, but focuses on how things are. This emphasis on description rather than explanation perhaps accounts for the allegation that qualitative research makes less obvious contributions to the

field of disciplined science. The pursuit of tangible, practical goals (results) is not seen as necessarily more worthwhile than a refined understanding of a particular phenomenon which the qualitative method encourages. The knowledge produced is often seen as worthy for its own sake as much as for any extrinsic value it may have.

(iii) *The ethical risks are high*

Because qualitative studies are often personalistic studies, privacy is always at risk. Qualitative researchers are sometimes viewed as "investigative reporters" or even "voyeurists". While subjects' permission can (and should) be sought and conscientious attempts made to explain the nature of the research, some work involves covert observation. This has far-reaching ethical implications. Even when anonymity and confidentiality are assured, subjects may feel hurt or betrayed when findings appear in print: "We can't predict the consequences of publication" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.92).

Ultimately, each researcher will have to be accountable and responsible to himself in terms of personal integrity, as there is no consensus or unanimity as to what is public and private, and what constitutes harm to another individual. This researcher sees this dimension of qualitative research as being fraught with potential moral pitfalls, and in her own study has sought to explicate her own ethical dilemmas (see 3.3.2).

(iv) *The cost in time and money is substantial*

It is true that researching the phenomena studied by qualitative researchers usually take a great deal of time and can be very costly. The work is labour-intensive and tends to evolve along the way.

The researcher was mindful of the above criticisms and took them into consideration when electing to follow the qualitative route for her study. Despite

the difficulties which they present, the holistic, empirical and interpretive thrust of qualitative research made it seem worth pursuing.

SECTION B

3.2 RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

3.2.1 Introduction

In selecting research instruments which would be appropriate for this particular study, the researcher was guided by a desire for methodological congruity. The methods should be carefully chosen to match the principles articulated and the philosophical assumptions which underlie the research being planned. Essentially, this work was seen as a co-operative enterprise in which the subject joins the researcher in making an inquiry. The method chosen, which would best serve the exploratory, descriptive nature of this co-operative endeavour, was the in-depth case study interview. The traditional survey research interview with its emphasis on statistical patterns would be inadequate as an exploratory device and would not allow access to the wide range of information which was sought.

3.2.2 Qualitative interviewing as a research tool

Interviewing is more than gathering talk together. It is fundamentally a process of social interaction. The dynamic quality of this interaction can easily be lost as soon as it is collected. Whitehurst (in Powney & Watts, 1987) observes that it is "like catching rain in a bucket for later display. What you end up with is water, which is only a little like rain" (p.16). The challenge then, is to employ a method of interviewing that best captures this dynamic quality.

Kruger (1988) identifies three advantages of recorded interviews as a method of data collection:

- (i) they are more spontaneous than written reports.
- (ii) they allow feedback and clarification of confusing data.
- (iii) they allow the interviewer to remain as near as possible to the actual lived-experience.

Each interview is dependent on the skills of the interviewer and the willingness of the interviewee to participate. Ely (1991) suggests that the structure of a qualitative interview is shaped in the process. She says:

While some believe that the ethnographic interviewee can go in any direction, and that the interviewer is passive, nothing is further from reality. Actually, the interviewer knows the areas that need to be explored and sees to it that this occurs. It is how this is done that defines the difference between an ethnographic interview and others. The key is that the person interviewed is a full partner in the endeavour and often provides the surprising and useful directions not allowed by other, more researcher-centred interviews.

The tasks of an ethnographic interviewer include providing focus, observing, giving direction, being sensitive to clues given by participants, probing, questioning, listening, amalgamating statements, and generally being as involved as possible. At their most useful, ethnographic interviews are interwoven dances of questions and answers in which the researcher follows as well as leads (Ely, 1991, p.58).

This description stresses the unique character of the interview, where both individuals influence each other as they negotiate the structure and meanings created within the interaction. There is a relinquishing of control on behalf of the interviewer as he aims to gain insight into the perceptions of a particular person within a particular situation. The schedule is relatively unstructured from the interviewer's point of view. Powney and Watts (1987) see this more subtle, overt method of collecting data as the main characteristic of "informant interviews" which are distinguished from "respondent interviews" (p.17 - 18) which are structured primarily by the intentions of the researcher and where the purpose of the interview is to satisfy the researcher's questions. In informant interviews we seldom arrive at answers but often discover new questions to ask.

3.2.3 Role of the interviewer

In in-depth interviews one has to learn to trust oneself as a flexible instrument of observation. As the data base grows, the questions and issues shift and change in a cyclical process, and provide further direction for the study. It takes confidence in oneself as a participant observer to accept this mutability of questions as one plays the roles of both insider and outsider simultaneously. One is an intimate stranger, at once observing oneself and others and yet also being intensely involved in the action.

Wolcott (cited in Ely, 1991), claims:

We are ethnographic observers when we are attending to the cultural context of the behaviour we are engaging in or observing, and when we are looking for those mutually understood sets of expectations and explanations that enable us to interpret what is occurring and what meanings are probably being attributed by others present (p.44).

3.2.4 Qualities of a successful qualitative interviewer

Getting access to an interview is an easier task than getting a good interview. Qualitative research writings offer the following characteristics of a successful interviewer:

- (a) Intellectual flexibility as against a cognitive rigidity: the ability and willingness to remain open to the emerging data which may be unexpected or even unwelcomed. The notion of multiple realities requires a broadness of vision which can accommodate a range of viewpoints rather than merely one single perspective.
- (b) A flexibility of behaviour, particularly with regard to the planning and conducting of interviews. One should fit in with the needs of the subjects.
- (c) Accepting ambiguity: one does not start with a set of fixed hypotheses and there is on-going uncertainty as to what will be uncovered, revealed or learned.

- (d) Possessing a developed sense of empathy and the ability to see the humour in situations.
- (e) Accepting one's own emotions: cognition and affect make up the dual side of the research coin. Interviewing the qualitative way can never be a clinical, intellectual exercise alone.
- (f) The ability to take on "the other" without contamination. Ely (1991) talks of the concept of "bracketing":

Bracketing requires that we work to become aware of our own assumptions, feelings, and preconceptions, and then, that we strive to put them aside - to bracket them - in order to be open and receptive to what we are attempting to understand (p.50).

3.2.5 Areas of concern

(a) *Interview bias*

The most common criticism of this kind of interview is probably the issue of interviewer bias. According to Brenner (cited in Powney & Watts, 1987), "To want to interview without interviewer influence is a contradiction in terms" (p.37). Having no tightly scheduled order of questions allows the interviewer to shape the interview as it happens, in response to what is being said (or not being said). The interview itself and the interpretation of the interaction are potentially open to manipulation and distortion. The ability to "bracket" becomes, therefore, a necessary part of the process. The interviewer must be vigilant, constantly self-monitoring the extent to which he is guilty of imposing his categories onto the subjects. This issue of possible interview bias will be discussed further in 3.3.3.

(b) *Ethical considerations*

Linked to the above is the question of ethical considerations. The ethical stance of the researcher and the philosophical underpinnings of the

research methodology are of the utmost importance. While the qualitative interviewer is striving to be faithful to another's viewpoint, the transactional and interactive nature of the process means the researcher will inevitably affect the research setting. The interviewer brings to the interview personal characteristics, psychological and behavioural factors which can unintentionally influence the outcome. For example, interviewers can inadvertently give clues as to the kind of answers they would like to receive. It is the ethical obligation of the researcher to minimize the misrepresentations and misunderstandings which may arise.

(c) *Feelings of identification*

While one needs to establish good rapport, there is a danger of over-identifying with the subject. One needs to define and create boundaries between being close (so that there is an unthreatening freedom to disclose), and being too close (which may inhibit talk or even encourage a dependence in the subject). The impulse to take sides is often there and needs to be tempered by emotional disengagement. Naturally, one can also under-identify, which can result in alienating research subjects.

(d) *Questioning the validity of the subjects' responses*

It is, in this researcher's opinion, impossible to vouch for such validity. How can one assess the truthfulness or trustworthiness of data received in a single face-to-face interview? The subjects make some kind of judgement about the interviewer and about the kind of definition of themselves and their situation that they want to project: "It is a decision as to which layer of truth they will make accessible to the interviewer" (Powney & Watts, 1987, pp.44-45).

The subjects are often vulnerable and internal pressures, like not revealing ignorance or losing face, may affect their responses. Perhaps the most one can do is to conduct the interview in such a way that the subject's self-

esteem is left intact, and trust the research process to produce data which is real for that person at that time.

3.2.6 Rationale for using the qualitative interview method

The central data-gathering methods used by the researcher were the literature survey (see Chapter 2), and the in-depth case study interview.

The concept of self-as-instrument implied that the interviewer should be comfortable with the process and feel able to try to meet the demands of this method. It was the potentially vibrant interaction inherent in naturalistic research (and in interviewing, in particular) which appealed to the researcher, partly because of the researcher's own training and personality characteristics, but also because it seemed to be the only appropriate way of addressing the very open-ended research questions raised at the start.

The interviews can be seen as instrumental case studies as against intrinsic case studies and together they make up a collective case study. According to Stake (1995), an intrinsic case study demands an intrinsic interest in it. In other words, we are interested in it because we need to learn about that particular case and not because by studying it, we learn about other cases or about some general phenomenon. With instrumental case studies, we study an individual case in order to understand something else. The case study is instrumental to accomplishing something other than understanding that particular case. The researcher's primary interest in this research is in the experience of single-parenting as a phenomenon rather than in the experience of single-parenting for one particular person. Personal depictions are used to further the general understanding and grasp of the phenomenon.

3.2.7 Procedure

Carrying out the study involved (not strictly in chronological order) the following steps:

- ▶ Gathering background information.
- ▶ Exploring the feasibility of the study.
- ▶ Choosing the sample.
- ▶ Interview schedule.
- ▶ Interviewing the subjects.
- ▶ Analysis and interpretation of data. (This will be covered in Section C, 3.3.3 and 3.3.4).

3.2.7.1 Gathering background information

An intensive literature survey of books, reports, periodicals, articles and papers was undertaken to equip the writer with the background material necessary for a framework of reference, decision-making, and a method of approach to the study envisaged.

Information was sought about, amongst others:

- ▶ social research methodology
- ▶ effects of dissolution of family on interfamilial relationships
- ▶ incidence of single-parenting
- ▶ demographic trends
- ▶ changes in family structures and functions
- ▶ consequences of single-parenting in a predominantly two-parent society
- ▶ effects of children on parents
- ▶ feminist themes: the changing roles of women
- ▶ teachers' perceptions of children from single-parent families
- ▶ psychological and social implications of single-parenting
- ▶ parenting styles and dimensions of parenthood.

Most of the literature was obtained from the United Kingdom and America. The researcher was able to consult only a few available sources which looked at the single-parent phenomenon in the South African context.

3.2.7.2 Exploring the feasibility of the study

The overview of the literature showed that researchers had gathered information by personal interviews and questionnaires, but there was a stress on the delicacy of such investigation. The feasibility of this study depended on the co-operation of the subjects. Moreover, there would only be a single interview with each subject, which meant a one-off opportunity to interact productively and meaningfully.

A pilot study was conducted, which helped reassure the researcher of the feasibility of the study. It performed four important functions:

- (a) It served as a check that the structure and organization of the interview met the requirements of the research project.
- (b) It was a practical test of the logistics of the interview.
- (c) It provided an opportunity to practise the social interactive skills necessary.
- (d) The outcomes of the interview could be analyzed first. This allowed for the opportunity to modify practices.

Trying out the research instrument on someone who shared closely the characteristics of those who would make up the main study, proved to be an invaluable exercise. It provided direction and encouragement and gave the researcher the confidence to proceed.

The subject chosen was known to the researcher and was an articulate, thoughtful and verbal person. From this interview, the researcher had some

indication of the range of responses which could be expected. Indeed, the quality of this subject's responses was such that they have been included in the main body of the research.

3.2.7.3 Choosing the sample

This thesis is of necessity limited and the researcher has restricted herself to a small field of seven case studies, including the pilot study. The larger the number, the more likely it is that a respondent approach would be adopted, something the researcher wanted to avoid. The sample does not provide a base for statistical generalization, but raises a number of issues that are intrinsic to the single-parent situation.

In selecting the sample, consideration was given to choosing an appropriate representation of the range of views possibly relevant to the purpose of the research.

The subjects were all strangers to the researcher (except for the pilot study subject). It was felt that the ability to be true to the researcher's role could be impeded by personal knowledge of the subject.

(a) *Access*

Access to a couple of the subjects was made through contacting FAMSA and Lifeline, but the majority of subjects were reached through "a friend of a friend" sources. All of the subjects were local women which facilitated easier access in terms of making contact and setting up the interviews. Interestingly, all the women approached were willing to participate in the research. There were no refusals.

(b) *Composition*

The researcher started off with the intention of interviewing divorcees, widows and unmarried mothers, that is, covering the most common primary routes to single-parenthood. However, it soon became apparent that this would be too complex and disparate an undertaking. Added to this was the difficulty of finding candidates. It was decided to omit widows and unmarried mothers and to concentrate on divorcees and separated persons who would all have had the experience of having had a husband and father figure in the home.

Although race was not a major factor in the selection process, an attempt was made to have as representative a sample as possible in terms of socio-economic grouping. The final composition of the target group included four Whites, one Black, one Indian and one Coloured. Of these, there were two teachers, one housekeeper, one writer, one hairdresser, one secretary and one administrative director. Together they had parented 19 children (11 boys and 8 girls).

(c) *Criteria used in selection*

The following criteria were used in the selection of the subjects:

- (i) They were all mothers of one or more adolescents. The choice of adolescent children was the result of the researcher's own understanding of adolescent development. It was felt that this insight would be helpful in terms of normalizing problems which parents might be experiencing with their children instead of jumping to the tempting conclusion that the problems were the direct result of the mothers' single status.
- (ii) They were all working women. The researcher was particularly interested in how single-parents juggle the various roles they are called upon to perform. Besides, it would be unusual to find a non-working single-parent given the economic climate of today.

- (iii) They were all fluent in English to facilitate ease of communication within the interview itself.
- (iv) They had been divorced or separated for at least two years, the recognized recovery time (Ricci, 1980, p.67). This stipulation was included to obviate a "rawness" of experience.

Inevitably, the women all fell into an age range (from 34 - 52) as a result of the other variables.

3.2.7.4 Interview schedule

The nature of this study being exploratory and descriptive, it was necessary to use a research instrument sufficiently flexible to enable the area to be studied and fully explored. From the overview of literature and the pilot study, information was obtained about single-parenting and the problems peculiar to this situation.

The interview schedule employed was extremely loose in structure. Qualitative case study seldom proceeds as a survey with the same questions asked of each subject; rather, each subject is expected to have had unique experiences, special stories to tell. The researcher prepared a short list of issue-oriented categories which served as a framework for the interview. These categories were derived from the background information which had been collected mainly through the literature survey. These categories covered:

- (a) *Becoming a single-parent*: the marital history of the subject would provide a context in which to better understand the present situation.
- (b) *The single-parent at home*: issues like style of parenting, division of labour, relationships with children, would be raised here.

- (c) *The single-parent at work*: the special interest here was the benefits, other than financial, attached to working.
- (d) *The single-parent socially*: societal attitudes to single-parenting, social support systems, attitudes to forming new relationships, would be the focus here.
- (e) *The public/private role*: this would highlight the possible tensions between the personal and parental needs and demands made of the single-parent.
- (f) *Benefits and problems of single-parenting*: this category would invite responses to describe in what ways life has improved or been enriched by the single status and, conversely, what special problems make it difficult.
- (g) *Visions of the future*: etic issues suggested here include:
 - the prospect of remarriage
 - how single-parents see their lives once children have left home
 - expectations and hopes for the single-parent and her children
 - anxieties about the future

While these broad categories indicate some of the researcher's areas of interest, many emic issues emerged as a result of the interaction. These enriched the study enormously.

It is important to mention that each subject presented a different personal style. Some were intensely verbal, forthright and articulate, and needed very little prompting or probing of responses. Others were more guarded, more tentative and less eloquent, and required more stimuli from the interviewer.

3.2.7.5 Interviewing the subjects

(a) *Telephoning*

Initial entrée to the subjects was made by telephone. An explanation of the nature of the research was given and the confidentiality and anonymity of

participants assured. It was explained that after the interview the researcher had no wider responsibility in terms of the subjects. This was to alleviate any possibility of dependence in the subjects who might have been tempted to view the researcher as a counsellor or champion of their cause. The description of the research was made as broad as possible to alleviate the possibility of the subjects consciously or unconsciously changing their responses to defend their presentation of self or attempting to help the researcher.

Getting acquiescence for interviews proved to be an easier task than the researcher had envisaged. The women seemed pleased and flattered by the idea of being "researched", and there was clearly a need and willingness to talk.

(b) *Letter to subjects* (see Appendix A)

The telephone conversation was followed by a letter confirming the arranged time and place of interview and, again, providing an outline of the nature of the research. The letter was sent some time after the telephone call was made. This gave subjects sufficient time to reconsider their participation and it also served as a clear reminder of what had been discussed and agreed upon in the fairly informal telephone conversation. The letter also, hopefully, served the purpose of clarifying any misunderstandings and of imbuing the research with a formality and seriousness.

(c) *Venues and times*

The interviews were all conducted in the researcher's home at times which suited the subjects. Most interviews were scheduled for the late afternoon, evening or over a week-end. This was to accommodate the women who were all in full-time employment. Subjects were given the option of alternative venues, but all elected to come to the researcher's home, where

uninterrupted privacy was assured. The researcher organized transport where necessary. The interviews lasted between two and three hours each. There was no resentment at the length of interviews.

(d) *Recording of data*

The subjects' permission for tape recording the interviews was sought and, in all cases, willingly granted. It was felt that tape recording was less obtrusive than taking notes. One can maintain eye contact and observe other non-verbal behaviour. The more complex the information, the less the method should rely upon the interviewer's memory. Recording encourages the rapid flow of information and facilitates ease of interview procedure. The researcher found the tape recorder more distracting than the subjects did, becoming rather anxious lest the tape run out, or anticipating some technical disaster.

The main advantage of recording the data is linked to the danger of hearing what you want to hear rather than what is said. This can be picked up by listening to the tape later when the atmosphere is not as emotionally charged.

Sometimes most interesting material emerged when the tape recorder was switched off, after the "formal" interview. Over tea, many valuable additional insights were provided.

(e) *Conducting interviews*

- (i) One of the research instruments was a brief biographical inventory which was administered by the researcher prior to the interview proper (see Appendix B). This covered questions like the nature of the subject's work, the length of time as a single-parent, the number and ages of children, etc. Providing these biographical details seemed to have the effect of putting subjects at ease.

- (ii) The researcher is herself a school counsellor and found her professional skills helpful in striking rapport. She did not find that not being a single-parent herself was a barrier in winning the confidence of the subjects. In fact, it was perhaps an advantage in that the women were not competing in terms of experience. They were describing rather than comparing.
- (iii) Gaining access was an on-going process. The trust and co-operation between interviewer and subjects needed to be maintained. One needed to be vigilant and constantly monitor one's own participation. There is always the risk (and temptation) of upstaging the subject or revealing inconsistencies or contradictions in the data. Continuous sensitivity is needed to keep the subject's sense of self intact within an atmosphere which is unthreatening, open and receptive. The research stance adopted is therefore vital. There is a tenuousness and delicacy inherent in the role of being participant-observer, and a tension in the potential role conflicts which can occur.
- (iv) The researcher attempted to keep an open mind throughout the interview. This seemed the best defence against allowing literature and personal experience to impose blindfolds. Honey (1987) contends that the qualitative interview is guided by the principles of faith and scepticism; a willingness to listen openly, combined with a mistrust that what is said, does not necessarily reflect what is meant. The review of literature sometimes seemed to intrude in terms of one having preconceived ideas and making assumptions. It was at times difficult to hear because they were not saying what the researcher wanted them to say. There was a conscious effort made to "let go", to bracket, and to respond to what was happening instead of worrying about what should or could be happening.

- (v) What was gratifying about the qualitative interview was that it was a self-generating process. The researcher learned to trust herself as a flexible research instrument and grew in confidence as the interviews progressed.
 - (vi) Each interview was uniquely different. With some, only an initial trigger was necessary to release a flow of information from the subject. A few probes served to clarify or to provide more detail. With less verbal subjects, the interviewer provided more guidance in terms of possible issues to cover. Generally though, the women participating had their own stories to tell and seemed to welcome the opportunity to do so.
- (f) *Emotions evoked*

The researcher had to guard against the interviews becoming therapy sessions. The subject matter was understandably of a highly emotional nature. For many, there was the trauma of reliving a painful experience. While the researcher's motive for conducting the interviews was clear, for the subjects, its foundations and meanings may have been very different. It would seem that for some it served as a cathartic experience, affording the subject an opportunity for emotional release. The subjects, voluntarily and apparently candidly, unburdened themselves. The feelings evoked in the researcher (feelings of alienation, identification and over-identification) had to be constantly monitored so as not to allow them to cloud the issues or distort the interpretation of what was happening.

SECTION C

3.3 DATA ANALYSIS

3.3.1 Introduction

The body of empirical material from which interpretation and analysis would be made included both recorded and unrecorded data. The interview transcriptions plus the log kept by the researcher throughout the research process made up the recorded data. Unrecorded data included impressions, observations of non-verbal behaviour like body language, and an "accumulated knowledge of the subjects' meaning systems" (Powney & Watts, 1987, p.192). It was realized that not all the material would be used. At the time of data collection, the researcher did not know what information would assume importance and relevance. The information collected was not immediately available for interpretation and analysis, but required some processing. Field notes and interviews needed to be transcribed, edited and extended.

3.3.2 Transcribing of interviews

As soon as possible after each interview, the researcher prepared a verbatim transcript of the tape recording. This meant that the flavour of the subject's words could be retained. The actual process of transcribing was extremely time-consuming, but this was tempered by the feeling that the investigation was gaining impetus, that valuable information was being captured on paper, and that the researcher's familiarity with the growing body of data was increasing. Transcribing helped to recall the experience more vividly; it provided and expanded the details and often presented a fresh perspective on the material.

The researcher thought of having these transcripts checked by an outsider to ensure accuracy, but the intensely personal and confidential nature of the material dissuaded her. For the same reason, it was decided not to include full transcripts of the interviews in the research findings.

3.3.3 Interpretation

- (a) The most distinctive characteristic of qualitative inquiry is the emphasis on interpretation. The challenge for the researcher was to decide upon a method of translating the raw experiences (the interviews) into words which would effectively convey to the reader some sense of the meaning and substance of the multiple realities of the subjects who were interviewed. What was required was an imaginative interpretation of what was already vicarious experience. Kruger (1985) claims that uncovering or disclosing the meanings by which we live is the aim of all qualitative research in psychology. However, some meanings are very difficult to articulate and

... what cannot be turned into language, cannot attain scientific status. Therefore, a major part of the problem of doing science research using a truly human research method, is to find the words (p.156).

Stake (1995), drawing on the work of Frederick Erickson, states:

Given intense interaction of the researcher with persons in the field and elsewhere, given a constructivist orientation to knowledge ..., given the attention to participant intentionality and sense of self, however descriptive the report, the researcher ultimately comes to offer a personal view (p.42).

- (b) In offering a personal interpretation and in an attempt to be faithful to the viewpoint of "the other", the researcher was mindful of possible interview biases. The following points need to be considered:
- (i) The single-parent mothers' responses were the basis for the findings. No tests or questionnaires were applied to the children as to their adjustment, nor to their fathers. It is possibly in the nature of human beings to want to project a positive image - to exaggerate success and to minimize failure in oneself.
 - (ii) Most of the transcript material involved subjective, evaluative responses from the subjects. Besides the biographical data, the rest

is an evaluation of a situation by a subject. These interpretations are not controlled in any way.

- (iii) Also relevant is the fallibility of human recollections of the past, particularly where recollections are related to areas of stress. In these instances, additional bias may set in.
- (iv) The subject's perception of the interviewer and the interviewer's perception of the subject are other sources of bias.
- (v) Observation can never be objective because observation comes out of what the observer selects to see and chooses to deem important. The task is to try not to let one's interpretation be too distorted by one's own subjectivities. Although one will never be entirely free of biases, through conscious introspection one can become more self-aware. Packer (1989) argues that researchers need to attend to resistances within themselves while interpreting material: "An interpreter's emotions must not be shrugged off as a personal and subjective attitude, but acknowledged as a helpful way of understanding an interaction" (p.109).

Despite bias, the face-to-face interview seems the only adequate instrument to measure significant memories of the past, feelings about, and attitudes to the present, and visions and plans for the future.

3.3.4 Analysis

The methodology evolved with the collection and growing familiarity with the data. In the analysis, the researcher attempted to explicate and uncover the meanings embedded within the raw data. Throughout the process, the research questions were kept in mind.

The researcher employed a thematic analysis to impose some order and meaning on the material and to present findings gleaned from the interviews. The following steps were taken:

- (a) A thorough reading and re-reading of the transcripts for a sense of the whole. Saran (in Powney & Watts, 1987) talks about this immersion in facts as being fundamental to the imaginative leaps researchers make in developing their explanations. The reading of responses and opinions about specific issues gave a "feel" of what was being said and provided a context for the emergence of specific meanings and themes later on. At this stage, a note was made of potential categories that could be used to group the responses in a subsequent stage of the analysis.
- (b) The researcher set out to construct distinctive descriptions of major elements of what was said by teasing out a set of categories. These categories were identified and represented units of meaning. These broad categories were then broken down further into a series of sub-sections. In this way, all the responses to a particular issue were grouped together. This process served to identify the key issues being raised by the subjects. The themes arose out of the coded data. The interpretation of this material was driven by the research questions originally posed. The effort to uncover patterns, themes and categories is a creative process that requires making carefully considered judgements about what is really significant and meaningful in the data:

Since qualitative analysts do not have statistical tests to tell them when an observation or pattern is significant, they must rely on their own intelligence, experience, and judgement (Patton, 1987, p.154).

- (c) The most demanding and creative task was to search for meanings; to perceive interconnections and associations in the data; to compare findings for commonalities or patterns, differences and unique happenings. The researcher tried to consciously employ a triangulation strategy, seeking convergence, inconsistency and contradiction. However, difficulty was experienced with trying to triangulate. The stronger one's belief in

constructed reality, the more difficult it is to triangulate any complex observation or interpretation. There were multiple perspectives and views that needed to be represented and there was no simple way to establish "the best view". At the same time, one needs to constantly test the veracity of one's interpretations. This requires sensitivity and a healthy scepticism. Reflective practice is essential. The problem is to establish meaning. We can so easily assume the meaning is one thing, but then additional observations give us grounds for revising our interpretation.

- (d) The researcher identified potential quotes which could be used as vignettes in the presentation. These extracts from the transcripts are devices which are useful for bringing the text alive, of allowing the subject to make salient points; in other words, of providing meaning, cohesion and colour. According to Ely (1991), "they serve also to counter the danger of overabstracting by anchoring the findings firmly in the field that gave rise to them" (p.155).
- (e) In the analysis of such an exploratory study of single cases, it became apparent that the empirical material was a poor basis for generalization. In quantitative research, one finds a predisposition towards large and random samples and the generalizations which result tend to be context-free. In this study, the sample is small and the human behaviour which is explored is heavily mediated by the context in which it occurs. Cronbach (1980) argues for reasonable extrapolations rather than generalizations in such a few, information-rich cases. Such extrapolations connote that one has gone beyond the narrow confines of the data and represent modest speculations on the likely applicability of findings to other situations under similar, but not identical, conditions. Findings can more likely be seen as characteristic of, or as pertinent to, the subjects interviewed. However, people can learn much that is general from single cases and certain responses and problems do come up again and again. What occurs is that understanding becomes refined and so it seems valid to use this as a basis for modifying old generalizations.

- (f) Through progressive focusing (discussed in Section A), assertions or extrapolations (rather than generalizations) can be made from the observations and interpretations. As the researcher gains in understanding, the etic and emic issues can be restated as assertions, albeit tentative ones.
- (g) The writing used in the final presentation is reminiscent of an interpretive realist style where experience and meaning are filtered through the researcher's eyes. (Ely *et al.*, 1994)

3.3.5 Problems of analysis and reporting

The main problem seems to arise from the very fact that the analysis and reporting represent "filtered" versions of the empirical material. Selecting some information inevitably means other details and responses have been omitted. The criteria for inclusion and omission depend on how the researcher chooses to interpret the data.

Even if one did provide the full transcripts of the interviews, this would still represent an incomplete record. What was said in interview does not necessarily give access to the participants' perceptions as they had articulated them at the time. It seems necessary therefore for the interviewer to supplement his "reading" of the interview, to describe more fully what actually occurred. Hull (cited in Powney & Watts, 1987) refers to this as the interviewer's own "black market" of understandings. It is "black market" because there is no public access to the material. The interviewer interprets in the light of his "accumulated knowledge of the participants' meaning systems" (p.192). Such information remains private and can not be easily substantiated or authenticated. The interviewer's interpretations are contingent on his own unique understanding of the interaction which occurred.

In the final analysis, the reader must trust the integrity of the researcher.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Powney and Watts (1987) maintain that the research report "is the interviewer's story of the interviewee's story ... In the end, the best an interviewer can hope for is insight into the respondent's favourite self-image" (p.193).

As an introduction to the findings emanating from the in-depth interviews with the seven women, the researcher presents a brief cameo of each subject in the hope that this will shed some light, for the reader, on the "favourite self-image" as understood by the researcher.

These depictions are unashamedly subjective in nature. They are the interpretations of the researcher, expressed in her words except when citing original comments. They represent a crystallized picture of how the researcher read and interpreted the subjects' experience of their own situations.

Careful consideration was given to preserving the confidentiality and anonymity of the women involved. At one stage it was thought advisable to present these depictions to the women and request their permission to use them. However, on reflection, the researcher felt that anonymity had been ensured initially and the subjects had given consent to use the material at the researcher's discretion. It was felt that there was nothing in the descriptions which could possibly identify or incriminate them and there was the risk of the original interpretation being distorted or diluted if open to alteration by the subjects. If they had a vetting role, it would be tantamount to a form of censorship and would possibly invalidate the original perception. Such problems attached to 'respondent validation' are discussed fully in Bryman (1988).

These then are the interviewer's condensed stories of the interviewee's stories, abridged "tales of the field".

The names of the subjects have been changed to protect their anonymity.

4.2 DESCRIPTIONS OF WOMEN

4.2.1 Wilma

"Education always comes first. Pregnancy disturbs this."

Wilma can't remember a time when she wasn't working. She has always been the main provider for her large family. She sees herself as having kept things going throughout a long and tempestuous marriage: "He was nothing when we started off. He did not even have a teaspoon." She felt exploited and resented the inequality which characterized their relationship.

Wilma regards education as being of paramount importance. She believes that education can free you and uplift you. More than anything she is driven by a desire to provide opportunities for herself and her children to secure the knowledge and the qualifications which are necessary to "be better" and to "live better". The passion of, and commitment to, this aspiration ran counter to the attitudes of the community in which she lived. Her ex-husband and his family felt threatened and angered by the single-mindedness with which she pursued these goals. They turned on her: "Because you're playing big. You think you're better." Their marriage eventually dissolved and she moved away with her children.

Wilma derives immense personal satisfaction and pride from the knowledge that she has been largely successful in striving to further the education of all the members of her family. Against all financial odds, all her children who have completed school have had the benefit of tertiary education. She herself still

studies by correspondence to acquire yet another qualification which she feels will complement the work she is doing.

Being a single-parent has been spiritually and emotionally fulfilling for her: "To be quiet makes life easier." She welcomes her independence and is grateful that she is no longer dominated by the dictates of a man. She does not miss being married as she feels strongly that her progress as a person was frustrated and impeded by it: "My husband tried to keep me back." Wilma relies heavily on the church for social contact and support. Her colleagues at work also play a significant role in her life.

It is quite apparent that her greatest source of joy is her children who are her closest companions and who, through their own lives, create meaning and resonance in her own. She would not describe herself as a happy person. Life is too fraught with worries for this. Even though she is better off financially now than when she had to "sponsor" her husband, it is an on-going struggle to meet her own self-imposed expectations for her family. There is a deep and resigned acceptance in her that this is the path she has chosen to follow. She clings resolutely to the belief that education will one day liberate them all and lighten their loads.

Wilma nurtures ambivalent feelings about the present. She is convinced that she has been strengthened by living outside of the marriage, yet she can't shake off the hurt which the community's reaction has inflicted on her. In their eyes, she is responsible for the fact that her ex-husband has wasted away his life. His salvation lay in her hands. Although he initiated the divorce, she is still perceived as being to blame for having abandoned him. It is clear that this reproach rests heavily with her.

4.2.2 Phyllis

"I wasn't pushed into marriage but I had no option"

Cultural and family pressures were largely responsible for the marriage which Phyllis entered at a young age. Her husband was older, more sophisticated and worldly. Despite this, he was an unreliable provider and, contrary to the expectations of the community, Phyllis worked from the start. Financial problems continued unabated throughout the marriage.

As a young wife, Phyllis felt she was treated like an innocent child, who was put on a pedestal and was viewed as "untouchable". She seemed caught in a dichotomous situation: on the one hand she was the breadwinner yet, on the other hand, she felt muzzled and impotent in terms of asserting herself as a person. She felt that, within the rigorous constraints of her marriage, she would never be able to grow up.

She became increasingly dissatisfied and more acutely aware of the deficiencies within her marriage. Religious conflicts and interfamilial tensions served to exacerbate her position.

When she initiated the divorce, Phyllis' action was met with intense resistance and disapprobation. The social censure was fierce and sustained. After a long and anguished legal battle, she secured the divorce, but only when she relinquished custody of the children. Although she is not their custodial parent, the children have remained with her and she continues to provide financially: "As long as I don't ask for money, he won't ask for the children."

Central to Phyllis' life is her work. She harbours no guilt about the demanding and time-consuming nature of it: "I've always worked. I don't think I could do any better if I wasn't working." Other than the obvious financial rewards, through her work she feels validated as a person. Her employment affords her many opportunities for social interaction with people who treat her as a mature

adult with a great deal to offer. In her workplace she has discovered a camaraderie, an irresistible lightness of living and a trustworthy support system.

Essentially, Phyllis feels her single-parent status has given her the freedom in which to shed her role of dependent "child" and to experience new dimensions of being a woman for the first time. She had no regrets about the dissolution of her marriage even though at the time it seemed somewhat reckless and certainly was an unprecedented course of action. She is convinced of her own emotional and spiritual growth and wears her new-found independence with pride. She revels in making her own decisions and in assuming greater responsibility for herself and her children. She had tired of having to seek permission to buy things, do things, give voice to things. Most importantly, she no longer has to fit other people's definitions of herself. She likes the person she has learned to become.

Reflecting on her present situation, Phyllis is anxious about her financial position which is precarious and leaves her feeling disquietingly vulnerable. She admits that single-parenting has implied accepting a lower standard of living and she finds this "material inferiority" distressing and shameful. Her real fear is that if something should happen to her, for example illness, there would be no other sources to tap and she and her children would be left virtually destitute. It would seem that the price of "going solo" is an exacting one.

4.2.3 Cheryl

"So I'd say, if a woman needs to do it, trust that you can do it, without destroying everything."

Cheryl, a disarmingly frank and verbal person, dates her questioning of her relationship with her ex-husband to a "major" birthday - which he forgot. From then on, she was aware of a growing discontent in herself. She is quick to explain that the termination of her marriage (which she initiated), although inevitable if she was ever going to work out her own destiny, went against all

her ideals and principles. She never wanted to rupture the family but the drive to "discover" herself was defiantly strong. She had always felt "different" and there had never been a channel to acknowledge this difference.

In her personal journey, her marriage became a casualty. Cheryl has been on her own with her children for some years now. She has maintained a good relationship with her ex-husband whose role in their children's lives remains positive and sustaining.

Severed from the familiarity of both the patterns and constraints of marriage, Cheryl has had the freedom to pursue the introspective course she had felt was necessary in order to make sense of her inner turmoil. She sees it as a spiritual journey which involved having to confront, and attempting to resolve, various ambiguities and conflicting forces within her. She left the marital home because "I felt like my soul was dying". Getting divorced was the first step in a self-imposed rescue operation.

Cheryl turned to professional counselling, family, friends and especially reading, for support, impetus and nourishment. She feels she has since become more mindful and less fearful. She had felt paralysed in her marriage, trapped in a situation where she was involuntarily playing games according to other people's rules. She welcomed the opportunity to redefine herself and her relationship with her children. In her own "reconstruction and development" programme, she has fiercely defended her right (and the rights of her children) to be all that she (and they) can be. It has not been an easy ride, and has clearly taken its toll on her personally, yet the changes and insights which she sought have come and are real and these appear to have made the lonely struggle worthwhile.

Cheryl has grappled with issues like control, guilt, personal responsibility, sexuality, honesty and societal attitudes. It seems as if her grasp of such issues was crucial to her understanding of herself. Furthermore, she contends that they were unlikely to have been resolved while she was married. She needed to validate herself as a person and this meant taking herself to places where she

could learn, rather than staying fixed in a place where she felt powerless to recreate meanings. Her marriage reaffirmed her role as victim. She neglected herself because she lacked personal validity and an integrated sense of self. Her need was to live alone without some other figure against whom she set her identity. The learning, she claims, has come and it has been mature, creative and valuable, but at the same time, excruciatingly painful - "watershed stuff".

Being a woman on her own and a single-parent has meant finding a stillness within her: "It's quieter, less tumultuous." She has managed to put structure and self-discipline into her life and is better able to control the passionate drive which she perceives as being potentially so destructive. For her children she has tried to create an environment which stresses their own inner resources as their greatest gift.

Cheryl has some regret about her choice of leaving. She realises now the enormity of her decision and how it has impacted on others. She regrets that others became victims of her own journey but, at the same time, the journey itself has brought growth, insights and a tolerance not only to herself but also to those who have been fellow-travellers.

4.2.4 Catherine

"I'm not resentful. Tired yes, but not resentful."

By the time Catherine's husband left the marital home, they were already leading separate lives. What feeling there had been initially had become eroded by years of deception and financial strain. The point was reached where Catherine felt she had outlived her usefulness in his eyes.

Although vulnerable at the time of the divorce, it was the aftermath, involving the attitude of a cherished member of her family to her divorce, which broke her confidence and shattered her sense of self. This "betrayal" clearly still wounds

her, years later, but, in terms of self-esteem, she has grown enormously. She sees herself now as a survivor and not a victim of an unhappy relationship.

Catherine's account of her present life is liberally peppered with humour, perceptive insight and down-to-earth pragmatism. She does see divorce as "a public statement of failure" but maintains this failure is preferable to a bad marriage. A mother of two children, she is driven by the desire to provide a secure and loving home in which they will have the opportunities needed to grow and blossom. Her one deep regret is that they aren't exposed to a model to see how adult relationships should or should not be conducted. She married late and never looked on children as being "her due", so they remain a bonus and a special blessing in her life. She seems to view parenting as a privileged responsibility.

Since her divorce she has journeyed far on her own personal voyage of self-discovery. Along the way she has valued the support and encouragement of friends. Her single status seems to have facilitated the deepening of these friendships.

It is her thoughtful nature, unflinching honesty and penetrating intelligence which have led her to accept rather than resist certain realities in her life. She feels a stronger person now than when she was locked in an empty marriage. She sees herself as having emerged a wiser person but not necessarily a better one. This wisdom, devoid of cynicism but strengthened by a light wryness, is striking and underlies most of her thinking. She appreciates that her life is more secure, that there is less tension and uncertainty: "I don't feel things are out of control." There is no doubt in her mind that she and her children are better off in the present situation. However, in her inimitably balanced manner of looking at things, she is quick to add that it is still a "broken home". It is not intact and no amount of love, attention and care can compensate for this.

Catherine was herself a child of a warm, successful marriage and her desire to offer her children something equally as nourishing lies at the heart of the

sadness she sometimes feels. Her regret is for a failed relationship. The divorce, however, was inevitable and necessary and has provided greater opportunities for self-expression and the freedom to create new meanings for herself and her life.

4.2.5 Justine

"... because your kids are always more important than any relationship - in the future and now."

Justine's husband's work commitments involved a great deal of travelling. He was, in her eyes, an "absent" husband and father. When he did return home, his perfectionist nature and habit of withdrawing imposed pressure on her, to the extent that she eventually preferred it when he was away. Feelings of isolation and worthlessness filled her: "I felt I could never measure up." He seemed to have eclipsed her on every level - in his career, socially and intellectually. The decision to terminate the marriage was a mutual one.

Central to Justine's life is her parenting of their children. The indifference she felt towards their father only increased the flow of emotional energy channelled into their lives. She concedes that her life is one of self-sacrifice and self-denial and yet she is unresentful and accepting of this. Her primary desire is to try to compensate for any possible lack that her divorce may have created for them. She recognizes that she may well be doing more than she should in her unflinching efforts to "take the strain off them". Her devotion to her children (and previously to her ex-husband) appears to be the barometer by which she has always measured her own value as a person. However, as they have grown and claimed independence for themselves, she is starting to reassess and question her own right to assert herself as an individual. This has proved to be a disquieting and uncomfortable process for it seems fraught with contradictory feelings of guilt on the one hand, and a quest for self-actualization on the other.

A gentle, unassuming person, Justine speaks tentatively about her own dreams, yet on the subject of her family she becomes animated and expansive. Her life is extraordinarily busy, catering mainly to the needs of others. She quite obviously thrives on "making someone else's life better" and thereby feeling needed and useful. Her children amuse her and bring a frivolity and lightness into her life. She is intent on preserving a "normal" upbringing for them and, to this end, is conscientious about not allowing her problems to become theirs.

Although she feels the divorce could have been avoided and, ideally, should have been, she is more at peace with herself now. She values her new freedom to be the person she wants to be. There is far less tension and uncertainty in her world now that she has real choices and options. Previously, she used to do only what she thought her husband wanted her to do.

It is early days yet, but in the few years she has been on her own, she has started (somewhat hesitatingly and nervously) to experiment with new possibilities. In terms of the divorce settlement, she has been left financially secure yet she has taken a job outside of the home, and even though her children resented its intrusion in their lives, she has tasted the joy of outside affirmation and fully realises the benefits to herself as a person. She has made inroads socially and established a few rich friendships: "I'm not lonely now. The only time I felt lonely was when I was married". The brief relationship she struck up with someone recently has been less successful largely due to her sensitivity to the attitude of her children.

It seems she has invested so much in them, shared so much with them, that their well-being and feelings would always be a top priority for her. She would be reluctant to embrace anything which would jeopardize this: "A mother never wants to lose her children. Why let it go down the tubes because you want to live with a guy that they don't like?"

4.2.6 Doreen

"What I regret is the simplicity of my life which has gone."

Doreen, mother of two teenagers, has been "going it alone" for just over two years. Her marriage had deteriorated steadily over many years and she had remained in it mainly out of a sense of duty, moral obligation and what she called "middle-class ethics". She initiated the separation but was unprepared for her own personal collapse which ensued. She felt worthless and confused, particularly as her feelings towards her ex-husband were (and remain) ambivalent. On one hand she fears him and his power over her and on the other hand she feels she could "get hooked in" again as he exudes charm.

Doreen is a no-nonsense, straight-talking, articulate woman who has clearly, through her work, reading and experience of personal counselling, reached new levels of self-awareness and understanding of her situation. Her relationship with her children is sound and affords her immense joy and pride. She appears to have regained confidence in herself and attributes this largely to the encouragement and support she has received from colleagues, friends and family.

Underlying her breezy manner is a whimsical sadness. Evident is a regret and grief for a marriage which she feels could possibly have been salvaged. She feels partly responsible for this and sees her own passivity as a person as an important contributory factor. She allowed things to happen and offered only feeble resistance. She has now grown and developed into an assertive, confident person and seems to have shed many of her earlier self-doubts, insecurities and her sense of impotence. Being on her own has facilitated this development: "I either had to lose or fight". On reflection, she realises she had previously allowed others (especially her ex-husband) to define who she was. It was through breaking from her husband that she found the impetus and strength to break from others who had been imposing their meanings on the nature of her

life. The end of her marriage provided the catalyst which set her free in many other ways.

Even though there is a residue of regret and feeling, she prefers the more buoyant Doreen who has emerged. Life has become far more demanding and complex. She has had to go out and do things, "sell" herself, take responsibility for her chosen world and, through this experiential learning, she has healed and become wiser. She sometimes rues the loss of innocence and naivety which can never be recaptured. She knows too much now, about the nature of relationships but mainly about herself.

Doreen attaches a great deal of importance to the beginnings and endings in life events. She realises that a lot of her pain has come from not tying up the ends. For a long time there had been no closure in her relationship with her ex-husband. She consciously worked on it for she felt while there was still this "hangover of feeling", she would not fully be able to move on, unfettered and unhindered. It would appear that she is now moving forward, purposefully and less tentatively.

4.2.7 Melanie

"It's safer being on your own."

Melanie has been alone with her children for a long time. During this time she has had virtually no contact with her husband from whom she is estranged. Although she wanted a divorce, she never pressed the matter because her husband threatened her if she ever went to court. He has contributed nothing to the support of the children.

Melanie's marriage was one of intense violence exacerbated by her husband's excessive use of alcohol and drugs. They lived in a violent neighbourhood where overt physical aggression provided the "entertainment of the day". Shortly after the birth of her second child, Melanie's husband disappeared. She has remained in their home.

A softly-spoken, timid woman, Melanie says she was sad when he left but also happy as she lived in fear of him. What troubles her the most is the repetition of patterns. She was an orphan, one of nine children, and of her eight sisters, only one has had a good marriage. Her concern is for her children who might repeat the pattern of a broken home. She senses that there is an inevitability about this. She would have liked to have offered her children an alternative to emulate.

Despite this desire to present an intact family, she feels both she and her children are infinitely better off now. She says she had to change as a person when she was married. She learned how to be hard. In her years as a single-parent she has rediscovered the softer, gentler person she used to be. At the same time, she values the independence and freedom implicit in being on her own. She makes her own rules and decisions. She makes mistakes but they are her mistakes and she can take responsibility for them. Most of all, her life is relatively peaceful and predictable. She no longer fears for the safety of herself and her children. "When you hear kids outside screaming 'Don't hit my mother!' then you think, 'Thank God I'm out of that situation'."

Melanie is a devoutly religious woman whose faith seems to have nourished her through the years of hardship and deprivation. She claims that it is through the bible that she has known "the right way." She has not found the church itself to be particularly supportive or helpful. Since being on her own, she has been "allowed" to strengthen her personal relationship with God and it is this that has guided her in her roles as worker and mother.

Hers is a fairly solitary existence except for the daily interaction with her children who are her main source of companionship. She has become quietly confident and self-sufficient and does not rely on others for creating meaning in her life. She still lives in the violent neighbourhood (finances preclude her from moving), but she has learned to journey inwards for personal sustenance and feels she has achieved a great deal in terms of peace of mind and spiritual growth.

THE FINDINGS

In the findings which follow, important themes emerging from the overview of literature and the interviews themselves will be highlighted. Responses will be summarized without the researcher's comments, and followed by excerpts from the original interactions with the women involved. Comments on some of the results and linkages to the earlier chapters will be made in Chapter 5.

4.3 BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Of the seven subjects interviewed, six were divorced and one was separated. The latter has been separated for over nine years and has had virtually no contact with her husband during this time. All the subjects had only been married once. Of those divorced, one has been divorced for two years, one for three years, three for four years, and one for six years.

The ages of the subjects range from 34 to 52 years. Their educational qualifications range from Standard 7 to those with postgraduate degrees.

Altogether they parent 19 children, whose ages range from 9 - 26 years. Eleven are boys and eight girls.

4.4 MARITAL HISTORY

(a) *Factors contributing to marital dissolution*

All but one of the subjects identified inner discontent as a contributory factor. Many described a sense of self which had become submerged in the relationship.

"I was nothing but the packhorse at the end. I'd have got out earlier for myself ... because of the kids I put up with it."

"Why did I leave? It was to rescue myself ... there's always been a sense that there's much, much more and if there's no-one to share that with ..."

Lack of communication was a central problem for all the subjects.

"I didn't think he'd walk out but things were past redemption. He'd refuse to discuss anything."

"I wasn't allowed to talk about my feelings ... He only ever wanted to hear good news."

Four subjects cited the ex-husband's excessive drinking as a factor, and five his infidelity. One saw her own infidelity as an attempt to elicit a response from him.

"I remember reading that women confess to affairs either out of guilt or revenge. I did it out of revenge. I wanted him to react, to feel something or show something."

For four subjects, the ex-spouse's work or lack of work were important issues, either because the nature of his work made him an "absent husband and father" or his lack of success in his work placed great emotional and financial strains on the family.

Only one woman was the victim of physical violence.

"And when he gets aggressive, nobody helps you. They all just stand and look ... Once he tried to stab me. He couldn't open the knife. It was too old or rusty." (laughs).

(b) ***Atmosphere in the home***

Four described the atmosphere prior to the separation as hostile, tense and acrimonious.

"He would get home drunk in a fighting mood and just want to argue ... We would communicate then!"

In other cases, the interactions in the home were marked by indifference and a businesslike coolness.

(c) ***Initiating the separation***

The separation was the result of a mutual decision in three instances; two initiated the divorce themselves and in two cases the husband did.

(d) ***Counselling***

Four of the women received counselling prior to, during or after the divorce. None of the husbands did.

"I tried to persuade him to go with me. He refused ... I put myself in therapy and a few months later, I left him."

(e) ***Perception of husband as a father***

One of the subjects saw him as an "absent-father" as he was seldom at home as a result of his work commitments. The separated woman's husband had deserted and never reappeared. The others all viewed their ex-husbands as good fathers - to greater or lesser degrees.

"I've never been able to fault him as a father. We have parented equally all along .. Their father is central to them. He's there ... in our conversation and in our plans."

"He was a wonderful father when the kids were young ... He doesn't like being challenged ... but he was never abusive, cruel or unkind. If he hurt them, it was 'cos he was forgetful."

"He is a very good father provided it's convenient ... He offers a very reasoned and acceptable morality which he himself doesn't practise ..."

4.5 THE SITUATION AT HOME

(a) *Role of mother*

When asked in what ways their roles as parents had changed, not one subject felt there had been any real adjustments in terms of the nature of their responsibilities. All seven felt they had been "doing it all" before the separation and were continuing to do so.

"I've always carried the can ... I knew how to do things. Mow lawns. Fix things. Oh ... I had to learn how to fill in a tax form ... I just knew what it would mean being on my own and I welcomed it with open arms."

"I've consciously tried not to blur the roles of mother and father ... I've always done everything at home. There are no great changes. My impact is the same. I always mended the toys, put up the shelves, etc. I disciplined."

One subject, however, has found her role as sole disciplinarian a difficult one and felt her husband had been more effective.

"I used to say 'I'll tell your father' and they were scared of him ..."

(b) *Parenting style*

Two subjects described their parenting as "strict";

"This is my house and my rules. They must fit in."

two as bordering on the "permissive";

"I'm too soft. My kids can walk all over me ... If they need something, I will bend over backwards for them."

and the others felt conscious attempts were made to be "democratic" and to encourage joint decision-making:

"There's maximum freedom and space to be an individual."

"I explain: if we do this, these are the consequences ... If we can't all agree, we have to vote."

Five claimed they were very open in their relationships with their children and that they were extremely "verbal" families.

"The older they've got, the more I've shared with them. My boys and I talk a lot. We've covered sexuality fairly comprehensively ... I bought a Playboy magazine ... discussed what I find offensive as a woman and what they find attractive ..."

(c) ***Financial management***

All seven women said their children were acutely aware of the financial situation and were encouraged to be involved in the budgeting. In two cases a child helped supplement the income by doing week-end work.

"She gets R25 ... that's her money. But if things are tight and we haven't got meat or anything, she uses her money. It keeps us going."

(d) ***Household chores***

Three mothers said their children "helped a lot" in the home.

"They're not graciously co-operative but they do it. I don't want them to be leeches"

"Of course they work in the home. I don't always want to be working for children."

"They need to realise that things don't just happen by magic ... they must pull their weight and not create more work for others."

Three claimed they "helped a bit" and one did not expect her children to assist at all.

"They wouldn't work in the garden or home. If I asked them to, they'd say: 'How much will you pay me?'"

4.6 THE WORK SITUATION

(a) ***Choice of working***

Six of the seven women have to work for financial reasons. All six were working prior to the separation. Five would choose to work anyway.

"Through my work ... I now realise I'm competent, creative and marketable ... I never knew this before. We're conditioned to be self-effacing."

"I would always choose to work. Being at work I forget about home things."

(b) ***Positive aspect of work***

Five of the subjects appreciate the immense support from work colleagues and four say work provides "informal counselling" whenever they have problems. Five identify the workplace as an invaluable source of self-confidence and self-esteem.

"If I didn't have the identity acquired through work, I would also be weaker at home. It all ties up together very strongly."

(c) ***Negative feelings***

Two report feelings of discrimination at work, but say these result from being women rather than being single-parents.

(d) ***Guilt***

Only one woman felt guilty about working. She was the same woman who did not have to work financially.

"When I wasn't home early, they weren't eating properly. And they complained. So there was guilt."

The other six felt no guilt whatsoever.

"Guilty about working? No. I feel I should be home more for the rest. Not for the children!"

"I don't feel guilty 'cos there's nothing I can do about it."

"Working provides a good role model for my children. They must know about the real world ..."

(e) **Studying**

Three of the seven subjects were involved in studying by correspondence to further their qualifications.

"I work until late at night. In a way I have more time now ..."

4.7 THE SOCIAL SITUATION

(a) **Dating**

Three of the subjects had not dated at all;

"I have no wish to get involved with anyone. I have had opportunities but I don't want to make another mistake and I don't want to subject the children to any unnecessary stresses or strains."

two were at present in a relationship;

"I have a boyfriend - divorced. He's totally different from my ex-husband. He's not like most men I've known ... he's much more liberated. I don't feel like a child with him."

and two had been in a relationship previously.

"I met a guy ... in fact, we fell in love ... He was very nice but they [children] didn't see him as I saw him. They were very rude to him."

(b) ***Sexual needs***

Two subjects found their single status problematic in terms of sexual needs.

"The whole sexual thing has always been a huge issue for me ... I can't deny that. So long as I had a lover, I was woman. I defined myself in that context."

"I found it very difficult to have sex for the first time after I got divorced, with another man. Very difficult. It was almost a betrayal. I just cried and cried and cried. Maybe this was a turning-point - the final goodbye."

For four of the women, it was not an issue at all.

"Someone once asked me ... 'how do you cope sexually?' I said: 'Doll, there's nothing like tiredness!'"

(c) ***Attitude of children to dating***

Two subjects said their children were accepting and five maintained their children either were, or would be, fiercely anti.

"My kids are terrified of losing me ... They saw what happened when their father fell in love ... it becomes exclusive."

"My children are not keen on another daddy. My daughter said she'd move out. But I'm not geared for any of that stuff ..."

(d) ***Kinds of socializing***

Only one woman had joined a single's club and a single's support group. Two others had "tried out" such a support group but found it an "agony session" and an "all-men-are-bastards" forum and did not go back.

The majority socialized with friends and two recorded the importance of their church as an agency for socialization. Three women identified their children as their chief source of companionship.

"I rely on my children for company. I enjoy being with them. They cheer me up."

(e) **Stigma**

Four of the subjects felt they were stigmatized by being divorced. Those who felt the sting of such stigma said:

"I feel it when there are functions - at school or weddings. I have to go alone. I feel very out of things ..."

"Stigma? Oh yes. Especially within the children ... their friends' attitudes. It does worry them but they don't really talk about it."

"Men think you're creeping up the wall for sex ... I ended up wearing my wedding ring. It was easier ..."

Two of the women experienced stigma related to society's tendency to value what "looks good", and to ascribe a problem of any kind to the fact of the divorce: "Schools and teachers are particularly bad ..." and "... my set-up might not look good but it's fairly sound."

Amongst the comments of those who felt little, if any, social censure:

"It's very common to be a single-parent in my community. Society doesn't treat me as not normal. A lot of us are in the same boat - some floating, others sinking ..."

"I anticipated censure but I've not bought into it ... I've lived with a firm belief that people mostly know nothing about anything ... so they weren't in a position to judge."

4.8 MAIN PROBLEMS ATTACHED TO SINGLE-PARENTING

(a) *Problems related to children*

(i) Child's academic adjustment

Most of the subjects' children appeared to be coping very well academically. A number of them commented on their sound work habits and the fact that they were responsible, motivated students who needed little prompting from their mothers. In three instances, the children were extremely high achievers academically.

Two women expressed anxiety about a child's performance but in both cases they felt it was not linked to their single-parent status. There had been a history of low-achievement in the children.

"I don't know if she's slow-minded but she's repeated two years. She's always battled."

(ii) Child's adjustment socially

Five of the subjects were concerned about the social adjustment of at least one of their children.

"I worry about her because her best friend already has a child. I tell her she can't visit a woman. Her friend is her age but she's got a child so she's not a child any more ... I'm scared of that. You can go out in the wrong company and you can fall pregnant."

"Socially, he's had some appalling friends ..."

Most of the children's social adjustment "problems" seemed to arise from their adolescent passage.

(iii) Emotional adjustment and attitude to mothers

Some of the mothers reported an ease of relationship with some children while with others, there was not the same "goodness of fit". The personal characteristics of a child had an effect on the mother's response to the child.

Four of the mothers identified difficulties in their relationships with a child.

"It's a very complex relationship ... she never wants to make things easier ... She loves her father and I did a terrible thing to her ... [by leaving him]. She had so little family life ... I think she knows I understand her but I'm also the one who destroyed something very important to her. So I think ... within her there's a huge conflict, ambivalence. She needs me desperately, loves me and hates me for what I did."

"He's very bright ... wilful ... manipulative ... He sees in every situation what is best for him and will act accordingly. I battle with this ... He's tricky. Not directly because of the divorce - he's always been tricky. From birth ... I'm the worst parent to the child who needs me more."

(iv) Children's attitude to fathers

Four said their children had positive relationships with their fathers.

"They love him, they think he's clever ... They think he's wonderful 'cos he's told them he is!"

"They have a healthy relationship with their father. They are very undamaged by the divorce ... There's no real difference for them."

"They have re-established their relationship with him. They hero-worship him in a way ... But they understand how his drinking affected our relationship. And they are very critical of his girlfriend."

One subject's children had no contact with their father at all and two felt the relationship that existed was negative.

"My children don't see him much. When he sees them, he wants money. 'I grew you up so you must now pay back my money.' My daughters feel he treated them badly ... my son is confused."

"They are very resentful ... they feel he doesn't care. But they do need a father in their lives."

(v) Problem of son assuming "man of the house" role

Five of the women had sons. Of these, two saw this issue as an important and complex problem.

"My eldest son ... since he was 12 he has taken on a tremendous responsibility ... he has been the man of the house. He took on the fatherly role. He's very protective to me ... I worry about it ... He and I do the finances. He can't sleep if we don't have enough money ... It's very comforting in one way but he's missing out on a lot. He can't 'hang loose'. He's very mature and serious and sensible. It's taking its toll. He has anorexia - a psychological problem. He feels the only thing he can really control is his weight. It's very frustrating when he won't eat my food ..."

"I have consciously tried to make him feel more like my son and less like my protector ... He had to grow up too quickly ... I was very concerned in many areas - even physically. There was a lot of touching ... so I started pushing him to one side."

(vi) Absence of male role models

Most mothers felt there were several substitute male role models amongst friends, male teachers and family members plus the on-going relationships which many of the children had with their fathers. Only one expressed concern:

"I think they miss a father ... they used to love their father. They need a father figure - there are no uncles, grandfathers. Only me and a granny. This is bad for their development ..."

(b) ***Problems related to parents***(i) Task, responsibility and emotional overload

All the subjects found tiredness a real problem. This was the direct result of having no let-up in their parental roles. The physical demands are exacting, but more enervating is having to respond emotionally all the time.

"It's damn hard work ... When they do go away, it's magic. I don't miss them. It's such a relief not to have to respond. The weight of responsibility rests heavily ... If anything happens to them, I have to live with it."

"I get up 1½ hours before the kids and break the back of the chores then ... But I'm getting a bit tired of cleaning. I used to have a maid but I've had to cut down. I do everything myself now."

"What I find difficult is juggling all the components of my life. I have a lot of people making demands on my life somehow. My children's demands, I'm most comfortable with these."

"I'm not always strong. But as a single-parent you've got to be. There's no-one to take over your weakness ..."

For many the presence of another adult provided a welcome "distraction" and "balance" in their lives.

(ii) Sense of failure

Five of the seven women expressed a sense of personal failure.

"There is definitely a sense of failure. I felt it within the marriage and then a divorce makes it very public ... that never goes away. You live with that ... It's a failure - but better than a bad marriage."

"I feel at the moment if I wasn't doing the maid's work, I could be a better parent ... And then there's the fact that the marriage failed ... you're always reliving your past. Why did it happen? Was it a good thing?"

"I see it as a broken home. Brings back my childhood days. Maybe it's 'cos I come from a broken home. It's a pattern repeating. This fills me with sadness."

(iii) Financial situation

While finances featured prominently as one of the main problems, two of the subjects felt they were "not in need" and "coping adequately". However, in both cases they were living very modestly and frugally. One woman said she was financially more secure now.

Of those who said they were struggling financially, three felt they were economically worse off than when they were married. This reduced economic situation meant less in terms of domestic help, holidays, "treats", social activities, etc.

"My only real problem is financial. I am better off in every other respect."

"He said to me: 'You'll never leave me. I can barely support one family; how the hell will we support two?' It was like throwing down the gauntlet. I felt: I will never stay anywhere for money. I will find a way."

Two expressed feelings of self-consciousness and inferiority concerning their living conditions. There was a reluctance to invite friends home as the home was "dingy and small". Another felt the need for more space: "It's not good that we all sleep in the same room".

(iv) Loneliness

Only one of the subjects expressed any feelings of loneliness in their present situations.

"Ja, there is times when I get lonely. Especially when you see couples walking ..."

The rest felt their lives were too full for loneliness to set in.

"Lonely? I'm too busy. I don't find enough time to do all the chores let alone to be lonely."

"The only loneliness I felt was when I was married. ... I had no friends then."

A number expressed the fact that they had more time to focus on themselves now and that they valued their own company.

(v) Attitude of family to divorce and present single-parent status

Four of the women felt strongly that the negative attitudes of family members had further complicated their own adjustment.

"Her attitude was the biggest betrayal and has affected me the most ... She made me feel I'd failed in every kind of way ... I was unacceptable and riddled with weakness ... I was castigated."

"My parents gave me no support during my divorce. They supported my husband all the way. They felt I should have lived with the problems ... till I die ... And his mother really came between us ... he was too weak with her."

"I'm the first person in the history of our family to get divorced. My family saw it as a failure - I shared this feeling."

"The reaction of his family still hurts me ... the community blames me. Says I am irresponsible for leaving ... I want to leave this neighbourhood. I don't want to see my husband and his family. So they can't tell stories about me ..."

(vi) Conflict between parental and personal role

Most of the subjects are accepting of the demands of their situation and accept that their lives basically cater to the needs of their children. Three asserted their own right to personal fulfilment and expressed the desire to devote more time to themselves.

"Kids' needs and tastes don't dominate - they're entitled to a childhood and a happy one - but things don't all revolve around them. I'm entitled to fun too ..."

"I have an acute sense of being used - it comes in waves ... All the way I've claimed my right to do what I want and I won't be a slave to them at all ..."

"You give, give, give, and then ... you realise you need to get something back. I no longer feel guilty about doing things for myself."

4.9 BENEFITS ATTACHED TO SINGLE-PARENTING

(a) *Friendships*

Five of the subjects maintained that their relationships with other adults (and particularly women) had increased and deepened and served as a valuable source of support and companionship.

"I never used to have friends. He wouldn't like it."

"I'm the confidant of many of my friends ... once my marriage crashed, many of them started speaking out ... I'm not a lesbian but I enjoy the company of women enormously; they're interesting and usually sensitive. They fulfil many needs ... I've become much closer to my women friends. Not divorced friends. Women friends. A big advantage is they can always come to me 'cos I'm always there!"

"I have formed friendships with women unlike before. The change in social attitudes has released all friendships to be more demonstrative and caring."

Two of the women discovered their friends were their husbands' friends and they have forged new relationships with other divorced women who "don't cause friction by being jealous."

(b) ***Reclaiming oneself***

Three women felt they had become the people they used to be before the destruction of their marriage.

"Being married, I learned to be hard. I had to be. Now I'm discovering the softer part of me ... the person I really am."

"I'm probably now where I was before I got married which was a pretty solid place to be."

"Before I got married, I was a very confident, out-going person. ... While I was married, I used to hide from things ... He kept telling me I was stupid and ugly ... Now I feel I'm getting back to where I was long ago."

(c) ***Atmosphere in the home***

Five welcomed the more relaxed, pleasant atmosphere in the home. All five felt this contributed to closer relationships with their children.

"There is less tension, conflict and uncertainty in my life. There is a better routine ... we all know what's going on."

"There came a stage in my marriage where I didn't even want to answer the 'phone. Who is this? What has he done? What do they want? ... I feel so much more secure - even financially."

"Things are calm now and I have a better relationship with my children 'cos I don't have to spend time on a husband."

(d) ***Personal growth***

All seven women felt they had developed into stronger people as a result of their experiences. Although they were not necessarily happier people, they felt they had all benefited in different ways, and to different extents, from the following factors:

- (i) having no constraints on their self-development
- (ii) not being undermined by the other parent

- (iii) not being dominated, nagged or dictated to
- (iv) setting their own rules and becoming more assertive
- (v) enjoying a greater freedom and independence
- (vi) feeling more like an adult than a dependant

"When I make mistakes now, they're my mistakes ... and I don't have to keep apologizing ... there's no-one else telling you how useless you are all the time."

"I like this freedom. I feel I've grown up. I make my own decisions and I take responsibility for them. I've made a few bad ones but also some really good ones!"

"My self-esteem is more buoyant now. I can still feel there's a residue though ... When I have a knock, I can slip down quite easily ... but I can now pull myself together again."

"I am infinitely better off. I'm more at peace. I know what I want. I know where I'm going..."

"I feel more in control of my life ... I'm better off ... One of the most erosive things in my marriage was that I never knew what was going on on any one level - not financially, emotionally ... I could never depend on him. I can now depend on myself more."

4.10 ATTITUDES AND FEELINGS ABOUT THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

(a) *Feelings of bitterness and resentment*

Four women claimed that they had nursed feelings of resentment in the past about their predicament, but no longer did. Three said they had never felt resentful.

(b) *Attitude to divorce*

Two women had mixed feelings about getting divorced;

"I like the idea of a long-term relationship that lasts. I'm very sad we didn't grow together."

four felt partially responsible for it;

"I think now it could have been avoided."

"The relationship possibly could have been salvaged but if it had been, I wouldn't be where I am now."

and five did not regret the divorce at all:

"I regret an unhappy marriage not the divorce."

"I definitely do not regret the divorce. It freed me ..."

"I don't regret being separated. How can I regret it? We are all better off."

(c) ***Relationship with the ex-spouse***

Only one subject reported having a good relationship with her ex-spouse. She has consciously encouraged his participation in their children's lives.

"I would never want to jeopardize or damage their relationship with him ... they do not idealize him ... there's a greater acceptance of who he is. We have all learned to be more tolerant."

Two of the women's relationship with the ex-spouse is non-existent and the other four have ambivalent feelings. While the latter recognize the importance of the father's role in their children's lives, they themselves do not welcome the on-going contact.

"As far as I'm concerned, I'd be happy if he snuffed it ... it would be easier for me. But not for the children ..."

All but one of the subjects openly admit to making disparaging remarks about their ex-spouses. Three of these admit that this is particularly painful for the children. The woman who has consciously not maligned her ex-husband says:

"But by the same token, if they have come to a realization about him and it's accurate, I will say, 'Yes, that is so'. I feel if the children's judgement is right, they must know it's right ..."

(d) **Marriage aspirations**

Two women expressed ambivalence towards the prospect of remarriage.

"I've been frightened off ... I'm not sure if I'd want to ... but I don't want to get old and lonely."

"I don't know about remarriage. I'd probably stay involved with someone ... I'm like that. But I don't see myself easily settling down with someone."

The remaining five were not cherishing hopes or thoughts of remarrying.

"Get married again? For what? Never!"

"I have no wish to marry again. I don't think it would be nice to have another husband. There is nothing as nice as a good marriage but a nice, loving, stable husband? You might have to kiss a lot of frogs ...!"

"I wouldn't mind a relationship but not marriage. There's the fear of failure plus I'll lose my maintenance."

(e) **Children's acceptance of divorce**

Five women maintained that their children had accepted the permanence of the separation between their parents. The other two were less sure.

"I suspect they feel we should still be together. They don't verbalize this but they certainly have not accepted any male in my life graciously."

(f) ***Fears for and feelings about the future***(i) Fears

Four women felt anxious about their children leaving home; two were concerned about their daughters falling pregnant; three expressed mainly financial insecurities; and two worried about their children repeating the divorce pattern.

"I fear that they have no model of a good adult relationship ... how will this affect them later?"

"I tell them ... you must look after yourself ... you must never have sex before marriage ... I'm a bit frightened for them ... I fear maybe they'll go through what I've been through."

"I'm anxious about when they leave. Boys generally break loose from their mothers. My ex-husband is an exception! But mainly, I worry about money. I've got no savings account, no medical aid, no pension fund. What if something happens to me?"

(ii) General feelings about the future

These tend to be optimistic in nature

"I'm not worried about my children's future ... so long as they have their education. I pray to God for this ..."

"I don't have any fears for myself. If I'm still in the church, I'll get more involved. Maybe I'll go on a date then!"

"As far as my future goes, I'll probably study further. Go for maximum stimulation."

"Roll on retirement! I just hope I will have equipped my children well enough to cope ... life will be hard for them in South Africa. They'll have to live by their wits ... All they'll have is what they have in themselves ... Like all of us, I suppose ..."

4.11 COMMENTS ON REPORTING THE FINDINGS

The researcher is very aware that these findings are not a full and true record of the dynamic interaction of the interviews. The interviewer, as participant observer, is not a "sponge" absorbing the subjects' interpretations. The findings selected and reported here represent and exhibit a focus of interest which may not be essential to the subjects' viewpoint. A great deal of data has been omitted:

Access to a world of fleeting, overlapping, contradictory, murky, incoherent realities demands selective attention from the fieldworker. For everything that is noticed a multitude of other things go unseen; for everything that is written down a multitude of other things are forgotten. Great parts of the real world experienced by the participant observer, probably the greater part, is selected out (Ball in Bryman, 1988, p.73).

However, a focus is essential, for to try to include everything would mean to risk losing the reader in the sheer volume of the presentation. Patton (1987) cautions against this: "The agony of omitting on the part of the researcher is matched only by the readers' agony in having to read those things that were not omitted - but should have been" (p.163).

In considering what to omit, a decision had to be made about how much description to include. Patton (1987) suggests that description needs to be balanced by analysis and interpretation. One needs description to allow for understanding of the analysis, and sufficient analysis to promote understanding of the interpretations presented.

In addition, when deciding on what to omit, the researcher was guided by the relative credibility of the findings. Some patterns appeared to be weak or not strongly supported by the data.

Generally, the findings selected and reported represented, in the opinion of the researcher, the multiple realities and the richness and complexities of the experiences of the women interviewed.

The feasibility of being able to perceive as others perceive, is problematic. In the next chapter an attempt is made to interpret these findings in the light of the researcher's own accumulated set of meanings and understandings.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This chapter comprises three sections:

1. A discussion, linking the findings to the overview of literature.
2. Reflecting on the research process.
3. The way ahead: suggestions for future research.

In this discussion, certain themes which arise from the literature and the actual findings will be analyzed and interpreted. The researcher will be attempting to look for patterns, linkages, commonalities and discrepancies in these specific categories. The sheer volume of the material precludes one from commenting on all the findings. Attention will be focused on those findings which seem to support the current literature and those which highlight possible inconsistencies and differences in experience. The discussion covers domestic, economic, social and emotional dimensions of the single-parent situation.

5.1 DOMESTIC DIMENSION

5.1.1 Task and responsibility overload

It would appear that the findings in this research are consistent with the literature (see Chapter 2) in the sense that all the subjects felt burdened by the demands made of them in terms of household management and child-care. In only two instances was there any outside domestic help (for financial reasons) and this help was part-time.

However, the subjects did not find, as the literature suggests, that their single-parent status had brought about dramatic change regarding their domestic responsibilities. Such a change would obviously depend on the extent to which the ex-husband had played an active role previously.

The subjects interviewed maintained that they, by and large, had been "doing it all" before and that the absence of a partner did not make much difference to the volume of the daily responsibilities they were now required to perform. It would seem that their ex-spouses had not assisted significantly in the rearing of children and with home-making in general. The evidence from this research is that the woman's role within the home did not change dramatically.

The subjects did not record much change in the kinds of tasks they performed as single-parents. Contrary to the literature, there does not seem to have been a clear division of domestic responsibilities in terms of conventionally male and female tasks while they were married. Other than the fact that the man assumed the role of provider (even though in some cases the woman was the breadwinner), the woman took charge of most other activities. These included being responsible for the finances, decision-making with regard to the children and home maintenance.

The continuity of responsibilities possibly accounts for the fact that the women were generally accepting and not resentful of the task-load they bore. On the whole, they had not experienced much support and sharing of domestic responsibilities previously and, as a result, found their present situation, while exacting and enervating, a familiar and not vastly different one.

It would possibly require far more of an adjustment for the single-parent father who might be called upon to assume new and unfamiliar responsibilities, particularly if he is without support from others. This might also account for the fact that single-parent fathers tend to remarry sooner and more often than their female counterparts.

Most of the sample in this research encouraged their children to share in the domestic chores which seems to have had the effect of easing their personal loads and engendering a sense of "partnership" and co-operation in the home.

The literature makes much of the parental/personal conflict which single-parents experience (see 2.8.1). Only one of the subjects seemed to have locked herself into a child-enclosed life in which she strove to compensate for the deprivations which she saw as emanating from the dissolution of her marriage. The majority seem to have consciously worked at rebuilding a separate and individual identity and in many cases felt they had more time now to devote to themselves and to pursuing their own interests. They had not assumed the role of parental martyr. The fact that three of the seven were studying further perhaps supports this. A number of the single-parents felt they had more time and could give their children (and themselves) undivided attention without having to juggle with the often conflicting demands of a husband and children.

5.1.2 Parenting style

Consistent with the research, these findings suggest that most parenting in single-parent families (especially with adolescents) takes on a partnership style (see 2.5.3.3). It is not clear whether this is attributable to the fact that, being adolescent, the children are more amenable to and capable of joint decision-making, discussion and negotiation; or whether the absence of the parental echelon lends itself more to this democratic style of parenting.

A number of the subjects felt more empowered as parents once freed from their conventional roles of wife and mother (see 2.5.4) as they no longer felt undermined by the other parent, did not feel they had to defer to him, and did not have to constantly cajole him into sharing the parental duties. The potentially oppressive nature of a patriarchal home had, in some cases, lifted and been replaced by a more relaxed atmosphere in which co-operation rather than obedience was emphasized.

It would be inaccurate to portray these women as passive and powerless victims of patriarchal oppression while they were married. Their reality of married family life seems far more nuanced and ambiguous. Their situation seemed paradoxical in that they were powerless in some ways yet were thrust into a position of

dominance within the family. They had immense control and influence over the practical, moral and emotional aspects of family life but this "power" was enmeshed within a domestic milieu, and so remained a form of patriarchy.

The efficacy of the single-parent's parenting and discipline is clearly related to the degree of stress in her life. When she feels "in control" of her life she is more able to "keep control" and to "share control". This is no doubt equally so in a two-parent family, but the difference is that there are two people to absorb the everyday tensions and the chances are that when one is "down", the other can "take over". The women in this sample identified this relentlessness as a problem and a drain on their resources. The democratic style of parenting took on more of an authoritative or permissive hue during stressful periods. In one case, the single-parent made use of her older children to assist in the parenting and disciplining of younger children.

The literature cautions against the single-parent expecting the child to take on an adult partnering role, resulting in the "man of the house" syndrome. (See 2.5.3.2). This was a very real problem for two of the subjects in this research. They claimed the shift from a parent-child complementarity to a husband-wife understanding can occur easily and needs to be monitored carefully. At the time, this relationship seems to meet the needs of those involved. The child needs to protect and help and the mother needs to be protected and helped. However, this can adversely affect the adjustment and development of both parties. The risk of this happening is particularly high with male adolescents.

5.2 THE ECONOMIC SITUATION

The findings concur to a great extent with the statements that the economic situation constitutes the severest problem common to single-parents and that the economic status of divorced mothers is often compromised after divorce. (See 2.6.1.)

Single-parent women are usually more vulnerable to poverty because the majority lack the protective factor of the more typical two-parent family, a "breadwinner" who is earning the higher male wage, given the persisting gender inequalities of the workplace.

However, the situation of the women interviewed was not as critical as the literature suggests. Finances featured prominently as one of the main problems for all the subjects but only three felt they were economically worse off than when they were married. In one instance, the woman felt financially more secure. In her case her ex-husband was seen as an economic liability in that he was constantly in debt and she had to use her own resources to "bail" him out. She expressed relief at being able to control the allocation of money and in always knowing the extent and nature of money owed. Her economic independence has clearly influenced her general sense of well-being.

It is possible that for most of the women their financial situation had been a problem even while they were married. These women faced problems shared by many married women and were not peculiar to single-parents. The conventional expectation of the man providing adequately had clearly not been realised within the marriages of many of these women (see 5.3.2 for discussion on unrealised expectations).

For the women whose financial situation had worsened since divorce, the main contributory factor seems to have been lack of monetary support from the ex-spouse. This resulted in needs being greater than the available resources.

Child support was not forthcoming at all in two cases and was paid irregularly and untimely in the other. The amount which was paid, when it was paid, was unrealistically low. The two women who had received no financial support felt reluctant to press for it, mainly because it would indirectly bestow power on their ex-spouses. The perception was that, if they were paying the wife, then they had a claim on her and the children. This perception included the possibility of the man constituting a drain on the woman's own financial resources. These

women had no confidence in their ex-husband's ability or willingness to assume responsibility and felt they valued their own independence more than the possible financial contributions he might, after lengthy and painful wrangle, be forced to make. In their experience, remedies for non-payment take a great deal of time and are often fruitless. These sentiments are consistent with the findings by Van der Vliet (1984).

All but one of the women had been working prior to the separation and they had been working most of their married lives. They had, in four instances, worked to supplement their husband's income and, in two cases, they constituted the breadwinner role.

Five of the six who had been working (and continue to work) would choose to work even if it were financially unnecessary. In a society where parenting and domestic work are undervalued, paid work offers opportunities for developing self-esteem and confidence. Work was viewed by most of the subjects as a way of bridging the gap between a fairly insulated, tight private world and the public sphere. The meaning assigned to paid work is crucial in the construction of their own identities and lives (see 2.6.2).

The only woman who felt guilty about working was the one who did not have to work for financial reasons. It would appear that taking away the choice removes much of the guilt one may feel. If you have no option but to work, you are less likely to torment yourself with thoughts of what implications this may have for others.

Contrary to the research (see 2.8.3), these women did not seem to experience great difficulty in balancing the demands of work and family but the fact that they had adolescent children probably accounted for this. There was not the need for child-minding services, for example. (Research shows that it is the lack of child-care which is the real barrier to single-parents finding work and transcending poverty.) Most of the women seem to have established support networks which could be called upon to assist in a crisis situation.

The choice between doing a good job at work or at home did not seem to present itself. Generally they felt they were able to function effectively in both spheres despite the tiredness implicit in this juggling of roles.

An important factor in such functioning is the role played by the wider community. These single-parents seemed to fully acknowledge and recognize their need for support and were not hesitant to articulate such needs and to accept assistance from others. A number of them seem to have embraced the community as a form of extended family life. This is not in keeping with the theory that single-parents are often reluctant to ask for help as this would be an admission of not coping and would confirm their status as victims and not survivors.

The women interviewed seemed to feel enriched as well as stretched by juggling occupational and domestic responsibilities. They generally did not seem to shy away from the unrelenting demands and, in some cases, felt invigorated by the challenges of the role combination. There was a sense for this researcher that, by concurrently playing different life roles, the women were more likely to escape from the worst aspects of any one role.

While the majority of the women were coping financially, albeit with difficulty, many raised anxieties about the future. This is in accordance with research findings (see 2.8.3). This insecurity about the future involved possible crises such as unemployment, inflation and medical emergencies. Three of the women were without any form of insurance or medical aid. Women do seem to need access to information that will help them negotiate a fairer settlement at the time of separation.

Research suggests a strong link between economic and personal well-being (see 2.6.1.3). In this sample, such a connection is less easy to make. Of the women interviewed, the two who presented as the least integrated and adjusted single-parents were the two who were the most and least financially secure. Quite clearly, numerous other factors came into play in affecting the overall experience

of the single-parent, including the personal characteristics of the individual herself.

5.3 THE SOCIAL SITUATION

5.3.1 Stigmatization

Research (see 2.9.1) points out the inevitability of marital disruption altering the network of kinship ties but suggests that links between the single-parent and their own kin are often activated and strengthened. This was not so for many of the subjects in this study.

While research highlights the possible negative attitudes of society in general towards single-parents, a persistent finding emerging from this research has been the high degree of opprobrium coming from members of the immediate family of the subjects. A number felt that telling parents and family was like confessing to some social disease. Divorce is seen by some as a frontal attack on the sacred institution of marriage and the family.

It would appear from the personal accounts of the women that this form of stigmatization or perceived loss of respect has been the most painful to bear. This form of censure was experienced by four of the women to a great extent, and with others it took on a more diluted form in that there was lack of support from some family members rather than any active discriminatory attitude.

Apparently while the stigma of the single-parent status may be decreasing in society (as the incidence of single-parenting increases), it is still deeply ingrained in those who are personally affected by it. There seems to be a general tolerance towards single-parenting as a social phenomenon which is not exercised very generously when it touches one's inner circle. There is the suggestion that some people may pay lip-service to the acceptability of this change in family structure. Many of the women expressed feelings of sadness and hurt at having been castigated and made to feel inferior and shamed by those closest to them. These

negative attitudes undoubtedly affected the single-parents' sense of self and exacerbated the difficulties of adjusting to their new status. In some cases, these negative attitudes changed with time. In others, they have persisted.

Social censure was experienced by some of the women in terms of sexual attitudes towards them. A few felt vulnerable to stereotyped visions of them as sexually needy and predatory and often felt more comfortable in social settings which comprised people "in the same boat", where they found more tolerance, understanding and empathy.

Others tended to withdraw socially so as not to be seen as threatening to others. This was particularly felt in the immediate aftermath of the separation. It is possible that some of these interpretations made by the women were themselves stereotyped and perhaps imagined responses based on their own expectations and value judgements of how people would react to them. One subject felt strongly that a divorced woman is viewed either as a harridan who left her partner for no good reason, or as a hapless creature whom anyone in their right mind would leave!

Each individual's perception of what it means to be divorced or a single-parent must in turn colour what they read into situations. One woman admitted to giving out "mixed messages" socially and sexually mainly because she was confused about her own feelings concerning her new and unprepared-for situation.

Overall, it would seem from this research that family censure was a more debilitating and widespread phenomenon than the censure coming from society in general.

5.3.2 Remarriage aspirations

One of the findings which deviated profoundly from the overview of literature was in the area of remarriage aspiration. According to much of the literature, single-parenting is viewed (by society and single-parents alike) as a transient state with remarriage seen as an almost universal goal (see Chapter 2).

Of the seven women interviewed, five expressed no wish to remarry (now or in the future), and the other two were ambivalent in their feelings. There are several possible reasons for this and the following comments are offered tentatively as the researcher is aware of the complexity of such an issue and would not want to suggest that a simplistic cause and effect model could explain this discrepancy in the findings.

- (a) With the growing incidence and perceived acceptance of single-parenting, there is less pressure to conform to the "norm".
- (b) In all cases, these women perceived their present situation to be preferable, in terms of the quality of life, to when they were married. There is perhaps a reluctance to commit to another relationship which may be a repeat of a "bad" pattern. In other words, marriage was not seen as an obviously desirable alternative to the present situation.
- (c) While the literature suggests that many single-parents see remarriage as an escape from an intolerable or difficult situation in which they are not coping, the lack of expressed aspiration to remarry, in this study, may well reflect the extent to which these women are coping and managing their lives.
- (d) The subjects generally did not see any obvious benefits in remarrying. In many cases, they were no worse off financially and they felt they were infinitely better off in terms of self-esteem and friendships and in their relationships with their children. They seemed to greatly value and prize their new freedom and independence.

- (e) One possible reason to want to remarry would be to provide a surrogate father for children. These women's children were all adolescent (and older) and most of them had on-going relationships with their fathers.
- (f) Their children's attitudes might well impact on their own feelings about remarriage. Most of the women said their children were, or would very likely be, resistant to their remarrying. The mothers' concern for the children's equilibrium and approval may override their own personal feelings.
- (g) Perhaps the degree of aspiration to remarriage is linked to one's own perception of one's remarriage prospects. It is maybe not coincidental that the two women who professed ambivalence about remarrying were the two youngest. It is human to want to "save face" and to be seen to be directing one's own life.
- (h) It might also be that it is "early days" for some of these women and that the separation experience is still too raw to entertain thoughts (or desires) of remarriage.

Whatever the rationale behind it, the fact is that for the majority, single-parenting is, at present anyway, not seen as a transient state, a holding pattern or a substitute life. There is an acceptance of their situation as a permanent state and, when asked to project into the future, most of them still saw themselves as on their own.

Although a number of the women expressed regret that their children did not have a model of a successful relationship to emulate, remarriage was never raised as a possible solution to this. While some envisaged being in a relationship in the future (or were in one at present), others seem to have found what they would value in a marriage (companionship, intimacy, support, validation) in other avenues of their lives and within other kinds of relationships. The rich and deep friendships made as a result of being single-parents was an issue raised by several of the subjects (see 5.4.3 for more detail).

The literature suggests that remarriage is often viewed as a means of alleviating the very pressing problems experienced by single-parents. What this implies is that there are expectations of marriage which, when fulfilled, would considerably lighten the load carried by the single-parent. It is the researcher's opinion that the women interviewed for this study would generally not see remarriage as a solution to their problems and it is this knowledge of unfulfilled expectations which, in some measure, discourages them from contemplating remarriage.

Research by Ziehl (1994) elucidates this argument. In her work on single-parent women in middle-class societies and those in disadvantaged communities, and drawing from South African studies like Van der Vliet (see 2.6.1.3), she found that both sets of women experienced a great discrepancy between their expectations of marriage and the outcome. Women have certain expectations of marriage and of men, and single-parenthood becomes a more viable option when the chances of these expectations being realised are minimal.

The expectations tend to differ in the different socio-economic groups. Middle-class women, who have access to their own economic resources, focus more on the non-material aspects of marriage. Contemporary marriage promises much more than economic security (love, respect, companionship, self-actualization, etc.), and as women have begun to share in the economic provider role, there has been the expectation of greater gender equality within marriage. However, studies by Hiller and Philliber (1989), Zinn and Eitzen (1990) and Maconacie (1992) cited in Ziehl (1994) show that the entry of married women into the paid labour force has not much affected the behaviour of husbands: the patterns of sexual division of labour do not vary by social class, race or ethnicity. So middle-class women who enter marriage valuing an ideal of egalitarianism will be disappointed:

... in single-parent families, one person performs both the economic provider and the domestic role; since this is already a reality for many middle-class women, the difference between marriage ... and remaining single ... is not that great (Ziehl, 1994, pp.46-47).

The expectations of women in the more disadvantaged communities are couched in terms of traditional family ideology. Ziehl (1994) cites Wilson who shows a relation of statistical co-variance between the rate of male unemployment and the rise of single-parent families. Reasons given by Black women in South Africa for remaining single concern not only the issue of their husband's ability to provide economically but also the attitudes and behaviour of men regarding the distribution of economic resources within the family (see 2.6.1.3). It is because men do not behave in a manner consonant with the expectations of family ideology that marriage is rejected.

Middle-class women who expect the domestic and child-rearing load to be shared are likely to be as disillusioned as their less advantaged counterparts who expect their husbands to provide for them financially. The desires may be different but in both cases, the behaviour of men does not meet the ideals of women.

Returning to the sample of women in this research, the main problems identified by these women in their single-parent situation were task, responsibility, emotional overload, and problems arising from the financial situation. Since these were clearly problems which all of them experienced while they were married (to a greater and lesser extent), it can be argued that they may well not look to remarriage as a panacea for alleviating them.

For the women, and there were a number in this study, who expected more out of a permanent relationship than economic security and a sharing of domestic responsibilities, there was also a deep sense of unfulfilled expectations. It would seem, judging by their stories, that, in many ways, they were better able to explore these avenues of self-growth outside the constraints of an unsuccessful marriage.

5.4 EMOTIONAL DIMENSIONS

5.4.1 Emotional overload

In keeping with the literature, all the subjects found the emotional demands of becoming a single-parent and of single-parenting itself relentless and enervating (see 2.5).

While the women interviewed had few practical adjustments to make as single-parents, the emotional impact, particularly in the time immediately following the dissolution of the marriage, was great. Outside of the "protected" and socially sanctioned circle of marriage, the feelings of disorientation and powerlessness can be frightening. In many instances, the women felt their personal worlds disintegrating. One woman commented: "If marriages are made in heaven, separation comes straight out of hell".

With single-parenting the number of relationships is reduced and the intensity of the relationship of children to parent is increased. The single-parent is constantly required to respond and, often not having a back-up, this means there is no let-up. It was apparent that those who coped better with this emotional drain were those who were in other relationships and friendships with adults with whom they could replenish their emotional resources.

However, this potential emotional intensity can afford extra opportunities for communication and most of the subjects reported a high level of interactive dialogue in their homes.

5.4.2 Relationship with children

Most subjects commented on having established a closer relationship with their children since becoming single-parents. This concurs with the literature (see 2.8.8). This perceived deepening of relationships and heightened sense of togetherness could be the result of a number of factors:

- (i) There is an emotional coalition between parent and children which is unlikely to exist in a two-parent family where the cohesiveness of the parental dyad is preserved. Single-parenting allows the possibility of a special synthesis, a reciprocal love and support which is rare in parent-child relationships.
- (ii) The single-parent family is more vulnerable to becoming internally dependent.
- (iii) The single-parent may look to her children for emotional succour and companionship , and may rely on them as confidants.
- (iv) It could also be, in the case of these women, that their children were older and, as adolescents, responded more verbally and emotionally.

5.4.3 Loneliness

Much of the literature identifies loneliness as a commonly evoked emotion in single-parents (see 2.8.4.2). The findings of this research do not reflect this. Only one of the subjects expressed occasional feelings of loneliness.

The responses from the subjects suggest they viewed loneliness as either meaning "without company" or "without things to do". In these respects, they were not lonely. Their lives were very full - of activities, duties, responsibilities, but also of opportunities for social interaction. The post-divorce support network may be broader, facilitating such interaction. In addition, women's socialization perhaps conditions them to be more self-disclosing and relationship-oriented, thereby equipping them to make use of the social opportunities available.

Certainly the deepening of friendships was a dominant motif in the accounts of the women. A number expressed having felt loneliness and friendlessness within their marriages. Many had welcomed the new freedom in which to connect with other adults (mainly women) and these relationships served as a valuable source of support and companionship. Women seem to experience a heightened

strength, generosity and companionship with each other. Within marriage, some women felt restricted to one, often unsustaining, adult relationship and many have found friendship to be a great rediscovery as a renewable resource.

Being lonely and being alone are not synonymous, as Chester (1977) points out. While the subjects did not feel lonely, their marginal status as they confront the world on their own, not as single persons, but as no-longer married women with children, does carry with it ambiguities and tensions peculiar to the single-parent situation.

5.4.4 Sense of failure

The majority of women expressed a sense of personal failure arising from the dissolution of the marriage and linked to the overwhelming parental demands made of them. This is consistent with the literature (see 2.8.4.3) but in this sample seems to have emerged as a bigger issue than acknowledged in the research previously done. A possible explanation for this is the high degree of family censure experienced by these subjects.

The sense of failure was felt particularly in the time immediately following the separation. Social conditioning seems to encourage people to see the disruption of a marriage - even a bad marriage - as a failure: a failure of love to endure; a failure to "stick it out"; a failure of will or strength. A separation challenges the ideological "happy-ever-after" ending. A number of the women internalized this and felt divorce meant the surrendering of self-respect and respect from others.

As the single-parents achieved a sense of detachment from the marriage and the old way of living, this sense of personal failure seemed to fade.

5.4.5 Effect of children on parents

Ambert (1992) contends that divorced people may more readily perceive and concede child effect (see 2.8.7). There is support for this in these findings.

The single-parents' attitudes to themselves as parents and as individuals are clearly influenced by the adjustment (or lack of adjustment) of their children. The single-parent's appraisal of self is inextricably linked to the competence and well-being perceived in the child. Most of the parents judged most of their children to be coping well and, by extension, felt they were also "doing O.K." Those who expressed diffidence and anxieties about their personal situations tended to be the same parents who had children who were presenting developmental and/or adjustment problems.

An overwhelmingly important consideration for all the mothers interviewed was the well-being of their children. It is unclear how to account for the force of this maternal commitment; to what extent it has biological bases and to what extent it is socially imposed. What is clear is that it exists.

In most cases the women seemed reassured that the new family situation had not adversely affected the child in any enduring or permanent way. In the light of this knowledge, they seemed better able to judge their own situations and themselves more favourably and generously.

Furthermore, parental effectiveness often depends on the individual child and the responses which the personal qualities of the child evoke in the parent. Where there is "goodness of fit", the adjustment process for both parent and child is eased and facilitated. In the interviews, the women spoke openly about this match or mismatch between them and their children and, in most cases, saw their children, by virtue of their uniqueness, as active participants in the parent-child relationship, exerting considerable effect on the outcome.

How children treat parents deeply affects the parent's own sense of well-being. All the subjects, even those with difficult relationships with a child, felt enriched and blessed by the respect, kindness, concern and understanding given by their children. Many felt their children lightened their lives by their optimism, developed sense of fun and resilience.

In the same way as the children greatly affect the parents, the parents' own adjustment and acceptance of their situation contribute to the child's overall adjustment. The impression gained from these interviews is that single-parenting was not presented to the children by the parents as a terrible tragedy which might one day develop a happy ending, but rather as an alternative form of family life which, while perhaps regrettable, could be a positive and strengthening experience for all its members. Healy (see 2.7.3) reminds us of the possible mediating effects of children's views of their parents. If the children perceive their parents to be "better off", they are more likely to reach a greater acceptance of the situation.

5.4.6 Personal growth

The literature acknowledges the potential for personal growth in single-parents but by far the greatest emphasis in the research consulted is on all the possible pitfalls of this situation (see 2.8.8). Finchilescu (1995) (see 2.8) comments on the implications of androcentric research. Perhaps there is a reluctance to research the positive dimensions of single-parenthood lest this be perceived as threatening to the position of the nuclear family which, although becoming increasingly obsolete, is still seen as the "natural" and socially endorsed family unit in the urbanized, Western world.

The findings in this study tend to counter the overwhelmingly negative images depicted in much of the literature. For those who have come to single-parenting from an unsuccessful or destructive marriage (and this was the position for the subjects in this research), the single-parent status seems to offer a myriad of opportunities to either reclaim or discover oneself as an individual. All the

subjects, while mindful of the hardships implicit in the situation, felt they were infinitely better off and had developed into stronger people who felt more empowered to face the challenges which lay ahead.

The compensations linked to being on one's own included the following:

- (a) Being able to regain control over one's own life. For many, life had become secure and predictable.
- (b) Gaining in self-confidence; becoming more centred, focused and disciplined, allowing one to reach out with greater deftness and certainty towards the next stage of life.
- (c) Finding inner strength through having to be resourceful and finding creative ways of making life valuable again.
- (d) Being freed from a crippling and enervating dependence on another person and becoming independent and self-reliant. The nuclear family expectation of a woman relying and depending on a man is a notion which, judging from these accounts, either is unfulfilled, or, if fulfilled, is detrimental to the growth of the dependant. Not having someone to depend on is at once frightening but can also be reinforcing.
- (e) Becoming a whole person instead of operating as half of a couple. As half of a couple, one has to continually compromise and possibly suppress one's own individuality. In the process of becoming single-parents, many women seem to have found a state of mind and lifestyle that is more comfortable and suited to them. Many feel they have achieved some quite unexpected goals since approaching life in a more self-determined way.

Rutter (1972) and Fletcher (1973), amongst others, stress the importance of the family as the locus of affective relationships. Perhaps it is in this area that the single-parents interviewed in this study experienced their most profound growth. Freed from the conflict, tension and uncertainty of an unhealthy marriage, they

have been better positioned and empowered to build sound and rich relationships - with their children and with themselves, and this has enabled at least some of them to reach out to the broader community and establish worthwhile relationships with others.

The evidence of personal growth in the findings is not to minimize or make light of the harsh realities which confront the average single-parent. Quite clearly, single-parenting can be daunting, but then, so is parenthood. Father-absence can raise real problems but then, these may also be experienced in a two-parent family where the father may be physically present.

The way these women come to assess their present situation and how they view their personal development are set against the background of their marriage experience. How they view their marriage and the person they were in that marriage will strongly colour their perception of themselves in their present situation. It is this history and the way in which they have unravelled the pain of separation and overcome feelings of guilt, futility and failure, which account largely for the favourite (and in most cases, favourable) self-image presented now.

Schaffer (1992) (see 2.2.7) warns of the danger of looking for single-cause explanations for psychological events. The effects of a particular experience depend not simply on the experience itself but also on the context in which it occurs. These women's positive responses to single-parenthood are the result of multiple factors and their claims to personal self-growth are closely linked to the negative responses they experienced while married. Quite telling is the finding that not one of the women regretted the divorce.

It would be simplistic, irresponsible and inaccurate to say that the single-parent status empowers women and generates personal growth. However, the findings strongly suggest that for these particular women, given their unique histories and unique contexts, that has been their experience.

5.5 REFLECTING ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS

5.5.1 The sample

The subjects for this research were not hand-picked or specially selected in any way. Certain criteria were established early on by the researcher (see Chapter 3) and the group that emerged at the end was a random group, mainly the result of referrals from people. Only one of the sample was known to the researcher (the pilot subject). The women were not selected on the basis of any personal, educational, emotional or psychological qualities which they may have possessed. They were selected because they were working single-parents with adolescent children, who were willing to be interviewed.

In the light of the above, what struck the researcher was the overall quality and competence of all the women in the sample. The following were prominent features which emerged in interview:

- (a) The women were uninhibited, open and honest in their responses. They seemed comfortable about disclosing information about themselves and their experiences and often volunteered material of a personal kind to clarify an issue. They did not shy away from sensitive topics and did not balk at any subjects raised.
- (b) In most cases they were exceptionally eloquent and verbal and were able to articulate their feelings clearly and unambiguously.
- (c) They all seemed genuinely interested in the research process, and were at all times willing and co-operative participants.
- (d) Particularly impressive was the quality of the responses. Most women seemed to have given their situation a great deal of thought and their comments and reflections were unexpectedly (for the researcher) balanced. They did not present themselves as stoical martyrs. They did not use the interview as a forum for castigating those who had done them ill; nor were their responses typically emotional in nature. They were well-

considered, thoughtful and surprisingly fair when it came to any apportioning of blame. Their words reflected deep thought and commitment to what they perceived as being true.

- (e) They did not, on the whole, present themselves as victims. They were not helpless, passive recipients of a "raw deal". Divorce and single-parenting were not, generally, something which had happened to them or been thrust upon them. In two instances, they had initiated the divorce, and in three, it had been a mutual decision. In most cases, then, they had been actively engaged in making choices (albeit painful ones) for themselves.
- (f) From their descriptions of their married family life it became clear that they were pivotal in terms of raising children and managing the home. In a sense most of them described matrifocal families. Their role was crucial and their position dominant. This dominance, however, was exercised within the patriarchal constraints of the nuclear family. Yet it does perhaps explain how the transition to single-parenthood was, in some respects, not such an adjustment.
- (g) All expressed feelings of some form of oppression within an unhappy marriage and all claim they are in a better situation outside of marriage.
- (h) The researcher had deliberately not sought subjects who had been divorced for less than two years which is the generally accepted recovery time (Ricci, 1980). This seems to have been wise in that most of the women were able to reflect on the past in a philosophical, relatively unemotional, candid, resigned, accepting and even humorous way. This was not always the case and when subjects gave vent to their feelings of hurt or sadness, it seemed to afford them some cathartic release which did not affect the flow of the interview. Interviewing shortly after a divorce, however, would probably result in more raw feeling and possibly a less balanced appraisal of the situation.

- (i) The level of optimism and positive input about their present situations, as gleaned in the interviews, is possibly a gauge of their personal recovery.

When transcribing the interviews and upon reading and re-reading them, the researcher felt the content fairly accurately reflected the depth and quality of the interactions with the subjects. Certainly the willingness to disclose and the fact that the subjects had given their particular situations so much thought made the task of the interviewer to interpret their experiences that much easier.

That the subjects were so competent as interviewees and were generally so positive about their present predicaments could be the result of pure chance, or perhaps it is linked to the fact that they were so willing to be interviewed in the first place. None of them needed cajoling or encouragement when first approached. Maybe their sense of being in control and coping well is a factor, in that they felt able to deal with a "post-mortem" situation because they no longer felt so vulnerable.

There are three comments concerning the generally positive attitude of the subjects which need to be made:

- (i) It is possible that in some cases the subjects were presenting a brave front and were emphasizing the perceived benefits and virtues of single-parenthood. It is human nature to want to project a positive image; to exaggerate success and to minimize failure in oneself. There is no way of knowing if this in fact occurred. One can only trust that the research process has produced data which is real for that person at that time.
- (ii) In all cases, the children were living with the mother (six of the seven had been granted custody). This could in part explain why the divorce and state of single-parenthood may not have been such an overwhelming crisis for them. The interviewer definitely got the impression that losing the marital partner was less of a trauma than coping with being a single-parent, but that losing their children would have been inconceivable.

- (iii) The researcher was aware that, had all the subjects been drawn from FAMSA, Lifeline or a single's support group, the sample would possibly have been more representative of more needy women and they may well have presented differently.

5.5.2 Selecting the data

The recorded findings in Chapter 4 represent only a chapter in the stories told by the subjects. They are the result of a careful selection process which proved to be an extremely demanding and exacting task for the researcher.

The challenge at the time of interview was to remain open to the emerging data, to "bracket" when necessary, and to accommodate the notion of multiple realities. At times, the researcher's own assumptions and preconceived ideas intruded. To illustrate from one interview: when probing about the sharing of domestic tasks, the researcher asked whether the children were responsible for tidying and cleaning their own rooms. The subject seemed taken aback and then explained that they all lived in one room and the children slept in the same bed.

The challenge, when it came to the analysis and interpretation of data, was to remain faithful to the subject's viewpoint and to strive not to impose one's own meanings. In searching for meaning, perceiving interconnections and associations in the data, comparing findings for patterns and inconsistencies, the researcher had to discard certain material and concentrate on selected themes. This was particularly agonizing considering the richness of the data received. Selecting some information inevitably meant other details, responses and issues were being omitted. The researcher learnt to be more ruthless as she gained in confidence and got clearer direction as to how she would interpret the findings. The researcher was guided by the need to present as representative a sample of the diverse views offered, as possible.

The process of selection implies that the final interpretation can never be objective. (This is discussed in Ch. 3). The observation arises out of what the observer selects to see and chooses to deem important: "The critical reader is forced to ponder whether the researcher has selected only those fragments of data which support his argument" (Silverman in Bryman, 1988, p.143). However, in offering a personal and subjective interpretation, the researcher was mindful of possible interview biases and was guided by the need to remain as true to the subject's interpretation as possible. In this respect, for example, the inconsistencies and contradictions which emerged from some of the subjects' responses have been deliberately included in the findings in this study. They add flavour and nuance, as they highlight the complexities and ambiguities implicit in personal experiences and more especially in attempting to describe such experience to another.

5.5.3 Changes

With hindsight, there are a few changes which the researcher would have effected:

- (a) The tape recording of the interviews proved to be an unnecessary distraction and source of tension for the interviewer. This was largely owing to the interviewer being unfamiliar with the equipment and anticipating problems. In addition, the changing of cassettes often interrupted the flow of the interview, became an obtrusive reminder to the subjects that they were being recorded, and, on occasions, seemed to occur at a particularly poignant or sensitive moment, disturbing the emotional intensity of it. Longer-running cassette tapes would alleviate some of these irritations.
- (b) A short follow-up interview or even telephone conversation with the subjects would have been useful. It was only once the interviewer had sifted through the material that she discovered certain emic issues which had been raised during the interview by some subjects, and which had not been touched on by others. It would have been enlightening to check

these out with the other participants. The original agreement with the subjects had not included any follow-up and the researcher was reluctant to change the "ground rules".

- (c) Although the venue did not obviously cause discomfort for the subjects, perhaps a more neutral venue would have been advisable. Being in the researcher's home may have unconsciously affected the subjects' interpretation of the interviewer and the interview situation, and may have been a possible source of bias.
- (d) By far the most important change to be considered concerns the issue of triangulation. A certain insecurity and unease developed as one became more aware of the limited generality of collecting data from seven case studies that may have been influenced by the particular emphases and predispositions of the researcher. Two possibilities are suggested to provide for greater reliability of the major themes extracted from the findings.
 - (i) There would perhaps be more confidence in the findings when these are derived from more than one method of investigation. By using more than one research instrument to measure the main variables in a study, the researcher's claims for the validity of conclusions are enhanced if they can be shown to provide mutual confirmation.

It was intended during this study to employ a conventional survey approach in the form of a questionnaire to test findings, to confirm observations, and to see if patterns of relationships held up. This questionnaire would have covered the major themes arising from the findings (see Chapter 6 for summary) and would have been distributed to the women attending a Single-Parent Course run by the local university. Unfortunately, time constraints prevented this course from being set up.

Much research supports this strategy of methodological triangulation (Jick, 1979; Simon, 1985; Bryman, 1988). It is possible to fuse and integrate both qualitative and quantitative methods within a single study:

It heightens qualitative methods to their deserved prominence and, at the same time, demonstrates that quantitative methods can and should be utilized in complementary fashion (Jick, 1979, p.146).

In the case of this study it would have been possible to conduct a predominantly qualitative study adding some survey evidence relating to people who were not accessible through the focal method. It is regrettable that time prevented such a triangulation exercise as it may have added weight to the findings which, without it, may be viewed as untypical, anecdotal or idiosyncratic.

The researcher was initially resistant to more "objective" psychological measures but now feels some such inclusion would have promoted productive research. The qualitative approach provides rich data about the views and interpretations of single-parents, but added information would, self-evidently, have provided a fuller picture.

- (ii) It might also have been useful to use a co-researcher to independently analyze the data. Kruger (1985) claims: "The truth needs a third as a witness" (p.157). The involvement of another would have provided mutual support and such a person would have been able to check and compare findings. An added advantage would have been that, not having been immersed in the research process, a co-researcher would have been a more neutral, impartial evaluator not predisposed toward certain findings ahead of time.

5.5.4 Reflecting on self-as-instrument

At the outset the researcher was conscious of the limitations of her role as "insider". Bryman (1988) warns of the danger of losing one's awareness of being a researcher and becoming seduced by the participants' perspective. Oakley (1984), drawing on her research on becoming a mother, describes this experience of "going native". This researcher did not experience this as a problem and felt she was able to maintain sufficient detachment to remain "researcher" and not become "co-conspirator". The fact that only one interview was conducted, and that for a prearranged length of time, probably contributed to this.

Not being a divorced single-parent herself did not seem to interfere with the interaction within the interview. It was not raised as an issue by any of the subjects. What did assist the researcher significantly in terms of confidence-building was her own experience as a parent and her professional skills in counselling. She felt comfortable in the interview situation and could relate to the topics under discussion.

One complicating factor in this research was that there were not many examples of substantial, high-quality evaluations employing qualitative methods in the literature consulted. At times the researcher felt she was breaking new ground and covering relatively uncharted territory; this increased her own feelings of doubt and insecurity.

Although reservations about employing a solely qualitative approach in this research have been expressed (in terms of seeking validation for the findings), the researcher remains committed to this form of inquiry. It is unlikely that the richness, depth and complexity of the data attained in this study could have been procured by going the quantitative route. Conveying individual experiences in the language and style of the subjects adds to this sense of richness. This detail and nuance of meaning would have been virtually impossible to capture

in a widespread survey instrument. Although a small sample, the material arising from it provides a vivid portrayal of a sector of social life.

A final comment concerns the actual writing up of the research. Finchilescu (1995) discusses research as a co-operative venture, and points out that the recognition that it is not possible for a researcher to be completely objective has promoted greater reflexivity in conducting and reporting research: "Researchers are encouraged to take more responsibility for what they say (by, for instance, using the first person mode in their writing) and to explicitly state their value position" p.136).

This researcher would endorse these sentiments. The conventional academic use of an impersonal third person appeared to be clumsy and unnecessarily formal and had the effect of detaching oneself from an engagement which had been essentially intensely personal in nature.

5.6 THE WAY AHEAD

In considering areas of study which could further illuminate some of the important issues which arise from this research, the following are suggested as areas which, in the opinion of the researcher, remain largely unexplored and require closer scrutiny.

5.6.1 Major discrepancies in the findings

Although the empirical material from such a small sample can not provide an adequate base for generalization, much can be learned that has general applicability from such case studies, and where certain problems or experiences repeat themselves, this can be used to refine one's understanding and perhaps, thereby, modify old generalizations.

The following discrepancies arose which need to be tested on other samples in an attempt to triangulate:

- (a) Women's roles do not change much when they become single-parents. In marriage they often provide economically, raise children and manage the domestic household. This is continued in the single-parent family. The need to juggle and balance these roles occurs in both two-parent and single-parent families. Mothers and single-parents are not a homogeneous group. Some will cope better than others.
- (b) The link which research makes between economic and personal well-being is not necessarily that strong. There is evidence that many women require much more from a marriage than economic security. Family life is viewed as a potentially important source of emotional satisfaction. Moreover, single-parent mothers are not necessarily worse off financially when they become single-parents.
- (c) It would be short-sighted to view women as passive victims within marriage. They often assume a dominant role yet this dominance often exists within the constraints of a wider form of patriarchy. Single-parents are often on their own out of choice. The rising divorce rate may reflect that people are less willing to live in empty or unhappy marriages.
- (d) Family censure was identified as a more debilitating and widespread phenomenon than general social censure
- (e) While the literature identified loneliness as a key emotion felt by single-parents, this was not experienced by the sample. Embracing the wider community as a form of extended family may account for this discrepancy.
- (f) The relatively unresearched area of child effect was perceived as an important contributory factor to the self-esteem and well-being of the single-parent. (It would be interesting to compare divorced childless women with single-parents).
- (g) Equally unexplored is the dimension of personal growth experienced by women on their own. Further research would maybe elucidate why it is

that a number of women feel more able to develop as individuals on their own rather than within a permanent relationship.

- (h) The area in which there was the most striking discrepancy was that concerning remarriage aspirations. In the opinion of the researcher, this is a key issue as it raises crucial questions about the future of single-parenting and the future of marriages generally. By answering the question, "Why don't women want to remarry?" one would be addressing the most fundamental issues concerning the family, marriage and marriage expectations.

5.6.2 Other issues arising from the research process

5.6.2.1 Problematizing the single-parent family

In her work, Ziehl (1994) makes the valid point that single-parent families represent an important area of sociological inquiry, not only because they represent an "alternative family form" but also because they can teach us about the nature of conventional nuclear families. What are seen as typical problems experienced by single-parent families are in fact an indictment of what is happening in so-called "normal" nuclear families as well as the pervasiveness of the ideology which is based on this family form.

She cautions against the pathologization of single-parent families. Researchers need to eschew the tendency to "problematize" the single-parent family, for this impedes an understanding of family life in general.

The nuclear family is the "yardstick" in urban/Westernized society against which alternative family structures are measured and judged. To enhance our understanding, it may be more useful to "problematize" the nuclear family instead of its elevation in the literature and segments of society as naturally given and socially and morally desirable in a timeless way.

5.6.2.2 Researching men

Ziehl (1994) also contends that the common thread linking single-parent families are the expectations women have of marriage and the fact that the behaviour of men does not meet these ideals. She suggests that the way to reach a better understanding of single-parent families would be to focus one's research efforts on men rather than on women as has commonly been the case.

This is an interesting and provocative challenge. This researcher focused on women as they comprise over 90% of single-parents, but if the main reason why they are single-parents (and in many cases, have elected to be single-parents) is the behaviour of men, then that would more than justify a shift of focus.

There is also the need to research the lot of the small percentage of male single-parents and to look at other types of single-parent families, for example, widowed and never married.

5.6.2.3 The South African context

The researcher found a paucity of literature which addressed the very complex situation in this country. There is no such thing as a typical South African family, let alone an ideal one. There are many South African families, constituted and dissolved according to a variety of marriage and divorce systems.

The literature that there is often exacerbates the complexity by using terms interchangeably and inaccurately; for example, female-headed household and single-parent family. In the former case, the parenting role is not necessarily confined to one person, especially in Black South African households.

To understand the phenomenon of single-parenting, research is needed to explain and describe the precarious position of the modern African marriage and family life. It would seem that it is in a state of limbo, in that it neither belongs to the modern nor to the traditional. Modernism/urbanization have greatly eroded

traditionalism and, in addition, poverty seems to have eroded the strength of the Black family. The most recent, alarmingly high figures for unmarried parenthood (see 2.4.4.2) suggest that the welfare system in South Africa has failed to address this issue of widespread deprivation.

At this time in our history, while the rights of women and children are receiving fresh and renewed consideration as our new constitution is being drawn up, there is the hope that the whole process of reproduction and parenting, previously undervalued in our society, will be addressed through the transformation of a new family law.

Sachs (1990), looking at the family in a democratic South Africa, maintains the challenge is to work out how to strengthen the family and, at the same time, weaken patriarchy. If this is what is required, it would seem to be a daunting task facing us all.

5.6.2.4 The role of the school

The final area of research proposed to further the understanding of the single-parent experience is that of the school. The researcher, herself a teacher, has been disheartened by the negligible impact which the literature suggests the school as a major social agency has made. The school serves as the second most important influence on the child, after the family, and when the family structure crumbles, one would expect it to be a potent mediating and modifying force. (This could be more so in boarding schools.)

It is possible that the schools are not active agents because they, by and large, are ignorant of the nature and needs of the single-parent family and of the dramatic increase of its incidence in our society.

The following suggestions are made:

- (a) Teachers' training should include more courses in alternative family forms. Professionals should, in addition, go into the schools to educate. It has been shown that teacher's perceptions are influenced by knowledge of a child's family situation. Information and education can shape understanding and social attitudes.
- (b) Public assistance and public acceptance go hand-in-hand. Community services could be operated from the school, encouraging interaction and co-operation. For example, after-school day-care could be provided and located in the school. This would prevent single-parents and their children from being overtly isolated, as the children of working two-parent families would also participate.
- (c) Snyman's (1986) study identified the pressing need for counselling services at hours which would make them available to working parents. The school would be well suited, geographically and professionally, to reach out to all families and to offer such a service (e.g. parent support groups, group parent counselling).

This chapter has attempted to highlight the major findings from the research and to indicate where they are consistent with or discrepant from the literature consulted. "Assertions" made resulting from the findings are offered tentatively, as the researcher was conscious, throughout the research process, of the danger of drawing more from the findings than such a small sample perhaps warrants. To what extent this descriptive and interpretive material is applicable to other single-parents, is a matter for further and later study.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This chapter presents a brief summary of the major findings and some concluding remarks.

The major findings arising from the research indicate that some of the problems, and the main problems, experienced by single-parents are similar to those faced by women generally in two-parent families. These include:

- (a) Task, relationship and emotional overload: The degree to which this is experienced depends on the role played by the husband (or ex-husband) in lightening and sharing this load. By and large, this dimension of single-parenting, while being onerous and burdensome, was not a new experience, as all the subjects maintained they had been carrying this load even while married, and in most cases doing it single-handedly.
- (b) Working: All but one of the subjects had been working for the duration of their married lives. Single-parenting did not force any of them into working. The problems involved in balancing work and family commitments, then, were also not peculiar to single-parenting although being on one's own may exacerbate the situation.
- (c) All the single-parents experienced financial problems but most of them had done so even while married. In these cases, the financial tensions had continued but not necessarily increased. One felt economically more secure since her divorce.

These problems, experienced now by the subjects, had all been experienced to a greater or lesser extent while they were married, and they constitute the main areas of difficulty for the single-parents now. It seems apposite to point this out, for to assess the position of the single-parent we need to compare it to her

previous situation. The way we evaluate single-parenthood depends on the alternative we have in mind.

Much of the literature tends to view single-parenthood as a disadvantaged state because it is being measured against the alternative of a "happy", two-parent nuclear family which is Westernized, urbanized society's "norm"; something which is often not the reality for its members. While the literature acknowledges that domestic and emotional overload, juggling work and domestic responsibilities, and financial problems are issues intrinsic to single-parenting, it often neglects to acknowledge these as problems for many women in two-parent families as well.

From the findings, certain problems, peculiar to the single-parent state, arise:

- (a) Social censure (particularly in the form of sexual attitudes) is experienced, but, as single-parenting as a phenomenon increases, this social censure seems to be decreasing, and its impact on the individual seems to depend to a large extent on the vulnerability of that individual. The influence of the immediate family is viewed in the literature as a generally positive and supportive force whereas the findings of this study suggest that it is often negative and debilitating. The erosive effect of such family censure possibly accounts for the pronounced sense of failure experienced by many of the subjects, particularly in the time immediately following the separation.
- (b) Consistent with the literature is the sense of aloneness which the marginal status of being a single-parent brings. However, the feelings of loneliness, which the literature suggests are pervasive amongst single-parents, were not experienced by this sample.

Developing a closer relationship with children, establishing new and deeper friendships; becoming more actively involved in the wider community and having more time to pursue one's own interests are all positive aspects of single-

parenting which are raised in the literature and supported by the experiences of the women interviewed in this research.

The potential for personal growth is alluded to in the literature but not discussed in detail. The women in this study identified a number of personal compensations to being single-parents and saw their own individual growth as the most positive feature of their present situations. In most cases they recognized a clear link between their own sense of well-being and that of their children's.

Most of the literature views single-parenthood as a transient state. This perception did not emerge in these findings. The single-parents generally did not aspire to remarriage, and did not view their single-parent status as a temporary one. Nor did they perceive their families to be "pretend" families or "incomplete" in any way. They were different families, but this difference did not necessarily imply deficiency.

The writer is mindful of exercising caution about generalizing as a result of the findings from so small and disparate a group. The findings reflect the multiple realities of particular individual experiences, given their unique histories and social contexts. These experiences are not, and could never be, fully representative of single-parents *per se*, yet the degree of homogeneity which exists in the findings suggests that some of the themes which arise may articulate experiences and feelings common to many single-parents.

The central aim of the study was to reach a fuller understanding of women's perceptions of themselves as single-parents in a predominantly two-parent society. In the light of the research, it would appear that, for the single-parents in this study, their "favourite self-image" is a generally positive one.

For them, the single-parent family can, at times, be a prison (see Chapter 2, Section A) in terms of being restricted by child-rearing and domestic responsibilities; it can be a refuge, in the sense that it is the locus of affective

relationships; but importantly, freed from the tensions, conventional roles and possible oppression of an unsuccessful marriage, it can also be a place in which one can be personally strengthened and empowered to face life's challenges and vicissitudes as a more independent person.

The single-parents in this study do not perceive single-parenthood as being preferable to marriage. What they have discovered is that it is infinitely preferable to the marriages which they had. The benefits and opportunities open to them now did not present themselves while they were married.

The single-parent family is for many, a full life which encompasses special problems as well as special joys:

It would be useful to give clearer recognition to the 1-parent family as a family in its own right - not a preferred form, but nevertheless one that exists and functions and represents something other than mere absence of true familiness. We need to take account of its strengths as well as its weaknesses; of the characteristics it shares with 2-parent families as well as its differences; of ways in which it copes with its undeniable difficulties; and of ways in which the community supports or undermines its coping capacity (Miller, 1992, p.207).

Single-parenthood is clearly here to stay and is increasing as an alternative form of family life. It has become apparent through this research that, for it to afford its members maximum benefit, it should be viewed by society as an issue of variance rather than deviance.

REFERENCES

- Ambert, A-M. (1992). *The effect of children on parents*. New York: The Haworth Press.
- Barrett, M. (1980). *Women's oppression today: Problems in Marxist feminist analysis*. London: Verso Editions and NLB.
- Barrett, M. & Trevitt, J. (1991). *Attachment behaviour and the schoolchild*. London: Routledge.
- Bettelheim, B. (1987). *A good enough parent*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.
- Bowlby, J. (1990). *A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bowskill, D. (1980). *Single parents*. London: Future Publications Ltd.
- Burman, S. & Reynolds, P. (1986). *Growing up in a divided society*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Burman, S. & Preston-Whyte, E. (Ed.) (1992). *Questionable issue: Illegitimacy in South Africa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Bryman, A. (1988). *Quantity and quality in social research*. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Campion, M. (1995). *Who's fit to be a parent?* London: Routledge.
- Cherlin, A. (1981). *Marriage, divorce, remarriage*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Chess, S. & Thomas, A. (1987). *Know your child*. New York: Basic Books.
- Chess, S. & Hertzog, M. (Ed.) (1992). *Annual progress in child psychiatry and child development 1991*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

- Chester, R. (1977). *Equalities and inequalities in family life*. London: Academic Press.
- Choderow, N. (1978). *The reproduction of mothering*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cock, J., Emdon, E. & Klugman, B. (1984). Child care and the working mother: A sociological investigation of a sample of urban African women. *Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa: Conference Papers*, Vol. 15, Cape Town.
- Cox, K. & Desforges, M. (1987). *Divorce and the school*. London: Methuen & Co.
- Cronbach, L.J. (1980). *Toward reform of program evaluation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Crosby, F. (1991). *Juggling: The unexpected advantages of balancing career and home for women and their families*. New York: The Free Press.
- Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (Eds). (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Dinnerstein, D. (1976). *The mermaid and the minotaur*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Elliot, F. (1986). *The family: Change or continuity?* London: The Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Ely, M., Anzul, M., Friedman, T., Garner, D. & McCormack Steinmetz, A. (1991). *Doing qualitative research: Circles within circles*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Family Life Education* (1990). Natal Education Department.

- Ferreira, W. (1994). The parent-adolescent relationship in the realisation of educational authority - an empirical perspective. *Educare* 23 (1), 59-68.
- Field, S. (1991). "Sy is die baas van die huis": Women's position in the Coloured working class family. *Agenda*, 9, 60-67.
- Finchilescu, G. (1995). Setting the frame: Gender and psychology. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 25 (3), 132-137.
- Fletcher, R. (1973). *The family and marriage in Britain* (3rd ed.). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Fry, P. & Addington, J. (1984). Professionals' negative expectations of boys from father-headed single-parent families: Implications for the training of child-care professionals. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 2, 185-194.
- Fuchs, J. (1980). *One-parent families: Some social implications of lone-parenthood*. Unpublished Masters Thesis. Cape Town: University of Cape Town.
- Gay, L. (1981). *Educational research: Competencies for analysis and application* (2nd ed.). Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co.
- Glassner, B. & Moreno, D. (Eds) (1989). *The qualitative-quantitative distinction in the social sciences*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Gordon, R. (1987). *Interviewing: Strategy, techniques and tactics* (4th ed.). Chicago: The Dorsey Press.
- Gordon, T. (1990). *Feminist mothers*. New York: New York University Press.
- Grotstein, J.S. (1984). The higher implication of Langs' contributions. In Raney, J. (Ed.). *Listening and interpreting: The challenge of the work of Robert Langs*. New York: Jason Aronson.

- Hafner, J. (1993). *The end of marriage: Why monogamy isn't working*. London: Random House.
- Harris, C. (1983). *The family and industrial society*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Hetherington, E.M. & Arasteh, J. (Ed.) (1988). *Impact of divorce, single parenting and stepparenting on children*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Hetherington, E.M., Cox, M. & Cox, R. (1977). Beyond father absence: Conceptualization of effects of divorce. In Hetherington, E.M. & Parke, R., *Contemporary readings in child psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill Inc.
- Hetherington, E.M., Cox, M. & Cox, R. (1979). The development of children in mother-headed families. In Reiss, D. & Hoffman, H. (Eds) *The American Family*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Honey, M.A. (1987). The interview as text: Hermeneutics considered as a model for analysing the clinically informed research interview. *Human Development*, 30, 69-82.
- Jick, T.D. (1979). Mixing qualitative and quantitative methods: Triangulation in action. In Van Maanen (Ed.). *Qualitative methodology*. California: Sage Publications.
- Kail, R. & Wicks-Nelson, R. (1993). *Developmental psychology* (5th ed.). New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Keith, H. & Bradley, D. (1991). *Becoming single*. London: Simon & Schuster Ltd.
- Kellehear, A. (1993). *The unobtrusive researcher: A guide to methods*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Kennedy, M. & King, J. (1994). *The single parent family*. New York: Crown Publishers.

- Kruger, D. (1985). Psychoanalysis, existential phenomenology and qualitative research in psychology. In B.F. Nel, R. Singh & W.M. Venter (Eds). *Focus on quality: Selected proceedings of a conference on qualitative methodology in the social sciences*. University of Durban-Westville: Institute for Social and Economic Research.
- Kruger, D. (1988). *An introduction to phenomenological psychology*. Cape Town: Juta.
- Laing, R.D. (1971). *The politics of the family and other essays*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Laing, R.D. & Esterson, A. (1964). *Sanity, madness and the family*, Vol. 1. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Lamb, M.E. (Ed.) (1982). *Non-traditional families: Parenting and child development*. New Jersey: Erlbaum.
- Larkin, P. (1988). *Collected poems*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Lasch, C. (1977). *Haven in a heartless world: The family besieged*. New York: Basic Books.
- Luepnitz, D. (1982). *Child custody: A study of families after divorce*. Toronto: D.C. Heath & Co.
- Mahabeer, M. (1992). Teachers' perceptions of psychosocial adjustment of Indian children from intact and father-absent families. *South African Journal of Education*, 12 (4), 406-410.
- Matteson, D. (1975). *Adolescence today: Sex roles and the search for identity*. Illinois: The Dorsey Press.
- McLanahan, S. & Sandefur, G. (1994). *Growing up with a single parent*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- McNeil, G. (Ed.) (1994). *Soul providers: Writings by single parents*. London: Virago Press.
- Miles, R. (1994). *The children we deserve: Love and hate in the making of the family*. London: Harper Collins.
- Miller, N. (1992). *Single parents by choice: A growing trend in family life*. London: Plenum Press.
- Morgan, P. (1995). *Farewell to the family?: Public policy and family breakdown in Britain and the U.S.A.* London: IEA Health and Welfare Unit.
- Morris, D. (1995). The collapse of the family. Article in *The Natal Witness*, 30 Sept.
- Nel, B.F., Singh, R. & Venter, W.M. (Eds) (1985). *Focus on quality: Selected proceedings of a conference on qualitative research methodology in the social sciences*. University of Durban-Westville: Institute for Social and Economic Research.
- Noller, P. & Callan, V. (1991). *The adolescent in the family*. London: Routledge.
- Oakley, A. (1974). *Housewife*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Oakley, A. (1984). *Taking it like a woman*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Obbo, C. (1981). *African women: Their struggle for economic independence*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Orwell, G. (1945). *Animal farm*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Packer, M.J. (1989). Tracing the hermeneutic circle: Articulating an ontical study of moral conflicts. In M.J. Packer and R.B. Addison (Eds). *Entering the circle: Hermeneutic investigation in psychology*. New York: State University of New York Press.

- Patton, M.Q. (1987). *How to use qualitative methods in evaluation*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.
- Popay, J., Rimmer, J. & Rossiter, C. (1983). *One parent families*. London: Study Commission on the Family.
- Postman, N. (1982). *The disappearance of childhood*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Powney, J. & Watts, M. (1987). *Interviewing in educational research*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Ricci, I. (1980). *Mom's house, dad's house: Making shared custody work*. New York: Macmillan.
- Roberts, E. (1984). *A woman's place: An oral history of working-class women. 1890-1940*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Ruddick, S. (1989). *Maternal thinking: Towards a politics of peace*. London: The Women's Press.
- Rutter, M. (1972). *Maternal deprivation reassessed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Rutter, M. (1975). *Helping troubled children*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Sachs, A. (1990). Transforming family law. *Agenda*, 8, 35-42.
- Savells, J. & Cross, L. (Eds) (1978). *The changing family: Making way for tomorrow*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Schaffer, H.R. (1992). *Making decisions about children: Psychological questions and answers*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa: Conference papers* (1984). Vol. 15. Labour. Cape Town.
- Sedgbeer, S. & Buchanan, C. (1990). *The single parent's survival guide: How to "go it alone" successfully*. Wellingborough: Thorsons Publishers Ltd.

- Sherman, R. & Webb, R. (1988). *Qualitative research in education: Focus and methods*. London: Falmer Press.
- Small, M.B. (1994). *The hermeneutic process of dream interpretation*. Unpublished Master of Social Science thesis. University of Natal.
- Snyman, I. (1986). *Enkelouerskap in Pretoria: Probleemdimensies, stutfaktore en die behoefte aan gemeenskapsfasiliteite by 300 enkelouergesinne*. Pretoria: Raad vir Geesteswetenskaplike Navorsing.
- Sono, T. (Ed.) (1994). *African family and marriage under stress*. Pretoria: Centre for Development Analysis.
- Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Stone, S. (1984). *Crus guide 6. Interviews*. Sheffield: British Library Board.
- Stone, S. & Harris, C. (1984). *Crus guide 2. Basic social research techniques*. Sheffield: British Library Board.
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. London: Sage Publications.
- Tesch, R. (1990). *Qualitative research: Analysis types and software tools*. New York: The Falmer Press.
- Thomas, A. & Chess, S. (1980). *The dynamics of psychological development*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Thorne, B. (1982). *Rethinking the family: Some feminist questions*. New York: Longman.
- Van der Vliet, V. (1984). Staying single: A strategy against poverty. *Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa: Conference papers*. Vol. 15. Cape Town.

- Wallerstein, J. & Blakeslee, S. (1989). *Second chances: Men, women and children a decade after divorce*. New York: Ticknor & Fields.
- Wallerstein, J. & Kelly, J. (1980). *Surviving the breakup: How children and parents cope with divorce*. New York: Basic Books.
- Wegscheider-Cruse, S. (1994). *Life after divorce*. Florida: Health Communications, Inc.
- Weiss, R. (1975). *Marital separation*. New York: Basic Books.
- Weiss, R. (1979). *Going it alone: The family life and social situation of the single parent*. New York: Basic Books.
- Woolf, V. (1928). *A room of one's own*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Ziehl, S. (1994). Single parent families. *Agenda*, 22, 41-47.

APPENDIX A

143 Villiers Drive
Clarendon
PIETERMARITZBURG
3201

March 1995

Dear

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research project on single-parenting. The findings from these interviews with a number of widowed and divorced women will form an important part of the research required for my Master's degree in Education. The focus of this thesis is on the experience of single-parenting on the parent herself and less on the children involved although the child's experience will necessarily affect the parent. I think it is important to mention that I am not setting out to prove anything in this research but rather to reach a greater understanding of the situation. There are therefore no right or wrong answers or responses.

As agreed in our telephone call, the interview with you will take place at my home on at p.m. and I anticipate that it will be about 2 hours long (allowing time for refreshments.) I will first need to record certain biographical information (e.g. : number and ages of children; the nature of your employment; the duration of being a single parent) and then the rest of the interview will be conducted in a fairly informal, conversational way during which I may pose certain questions to elicit your response to particular issues which seem relevant. Please do not feel that you have to discuss anything with which you don't feel comfortable. The interview itself will be taped (by me) so that I can concentrate on what you are saying and later return to transcribe the details. Be assured that all material shared with me will be treated in the strictest confidence. At no stage will my sources be revealed and your anonymity in the final thesis is guaranteed.

The following are the particular areas I am interested in exploring with you. While there may be similarities in the various experiences of single-parenting, I fully appreciate the uniqueness of each individual's experience.

- 1. Becoming a single parent : marital and separation history.*
- 2. The single parent at home.*
- 3. The single parent at work.*
- 4. The single parent socially.*
- 5. Benefits and problems of living alone and raising children alone.*
- 6. Thoughts and feelings about the future.*

I thank you again for your willingness and co-operation in what I think is a worthwhile area of study. If you are interested, I will be happy to pass on a copy of the findings of the study to you.

I look forward to meeting with you.

Yours sincerely

